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UNECE ministers tackle pressing urban challenges at meeting in Geneva



Urban areas throughout the UNECE region are under strain. In West European countries, economic changes and unemployment have led to urban segregation and the emergence of deprived neighbourhoods. Residents of such neighbourhoods have limited access to public and private services, and they often feel that their personal security and safety is threatened. Tightening public budgets have resulted in less investment in housing. In a number of countries, social tensions last year led to protest and unrest.

In countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) and South-Eastern Europe (SEE), the move to a market-based economy has meant that the state withdrew from the housing sector. After mass privatization of the housing stock, in many countries today the bulk of high-rise buildings are located in an administrative “no-man’s land”, with no one feeling real ownership. Weak institutional, legal and financial frameworks and deficient management of the multi-family housing stock – which accounts for 60 to 80 per cent of total housing stock – have aggravated the situation. Basic rules of urban planning are often neglected, and there is a decline

in housing conditions, infrastructure and social services.

Against this background, UNECE ministers of housing, spatial planning and land management met in Geneva on 19 September to discuss the significant challenges confronting urban areas in many countries. The meeting took place under

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the auspices of the Committee on Housing and Land Management and the chairship of Ms. Maria Antonia Trujillo Rincon, Minister of Housing of Spain (Chairperson), and Mr. Laszlo Borbely, Delegate Minister for Public Works and Territorial Planning of Romania (Vice-Chairperson).

Debates in the two panel discussions focused on questions crucial for future urban development: What can be done to alleviate social and economic exclusion? How can housing policy, urban planning and land administration help in tackling these challenges? Which legal and institutional changes have proved most

effective? How can management and maintenance of the multi-family housing stock be improved? Ministers and deputy ministers, representatives from around 40 countries, and international and non-governmental organizations, including UN-Habitat Deputy Executive Director Ms. I. Bjork-Klevby, participated in the debate.

The meeting adopted a Ministerial Declaration on Social and Economic Challenges in Distressed Urban Areas in the UNECE Region. The Declaration reaffirms the goals and challenges of the UNECE Strategy for a Sustainable Quality of Life in Human Settlements in the Twenty-First Century, which was adopted at the Ministerial Meeting in 2000. Ministers committed themselves to contributing to social cohesion, development of affordable housing, effective management of multi-family housing estates and the achievement of good practices in land administration and spatial planning. It was also stressed that urban development needs to be integrated with other policy areas like education, employment, health and transport. The decisions taken will guide the Committee’s work in the next five years. (See Abstracts of the Ministerial Declaration next page)

Azerbaijan joins UNECE Convention on Carriage of Goods

On 18 September 2006, Azerbaijan deposited with the UN Secretary-General an instrument of accession to the UNECE Convention on the Contract for the International Carriage of Goods by Road (CMR). This brings the total number of States Parties to the CMR to 50. The CMR will enter into force for Azerbaijan on 17 December 2006.

The CMR Convention fixes the conditions for the contract for the carriage of goods by

road between the forwarder and the carrier. In particular, it provides for the use of the consignment note and establishes the conditions for liability, for example in the case of loss of the goods or delays.

In the framework of the UNECE Working Party on Road Transport (SC.1), Governments are currently negotiating an additional Protocol to the CMR, which would allow the use of electronic consignment notes in international road transport.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the CMR, which was signed in Geneva on 19 May 1956 and entered into force on 2 July 1961.

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UNECE Ministerial Declaration on Social and Economic Challenges in Distressed Urban Areas

We, ministers and heads of delegation attending the sixty-seventh session of the UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management in Geneva on 19 September 2006,

(i) Reconfirm that the goals and challenges contained in the UNECE Strategy for a Sustainable Quality of Life in Human Settlements in the Twenty-First Century continue to be the basis for future programmes of work of the UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management. This involves effective urban planning and management; the promotion of neighbourhood regeneration (mainly through integrated urban renewal programmes); the refurbishment of the multi-family housing stock; the promotion of access to affordable and adequate housing, infrastructure, facilities and public spaces; and thereby the sustainable improvement of the quality of life for all in the UNECE region;

(ii) Commit ourselves to contributing to social inclusion, through affordable housing development, taking into account the policy recommendations of the UNECE as contained in the Country Profiles on the

Housing Sector, the Guidelines on Social Housing (2006) and other relevant UN recommendations agreed to by the UNECE member States; and through integrating housing policy with other policies, notably those in the areas of land administration, employment, migration, education and gender equality;

(iii) Support UNECE work on the implementation of housing finance policies for affordable housing, taking into account the UNECE publication Housing Finance Systems for Countries in Transition (2005);

(iv) Stress that the issue of effective management of large multi-family housing estates should be further addressed by the UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management, taking into consideration the need for governments to develop integrated strategies. This entails maintenance, refurbishment, energy saving, rational consumption of land and water, waste management, urban management, neighbourhood improvement, supporting the implementation of the UNECE Guidelines on Condominium Ownership of Housing for Countries in Transition (2003) and continuing work in this area;

(v) Support UNECE land management activities aimed at sustainable spatial planning, including issues related to illegal and unregulated construction, informal settlements, land reform and access to land for the poor, and a functioning real estate market through development of cadastral and land registration systems and modernization of spatial planning systems, noting that spatial planning at all relevant levels is crucial for achieving sustainable urban development;

(vi) Emphasize the importance of continuing the exchange of experiences regarding arrangements for public/private partnerships in the housing and land management sectors on the basis of transparent agreements for sharing risks and benefits, as well as the utilization of multi-sector skills and finance to serve the interests of the public and in particular disadvantaged groups within the population; and

(vii) Decide to convene the next high-level meeting in five years' time in order to assess progress in the implementation of the above commitments.

Facts and figures Remittances by far exceed FDI inflows in low-income UNECE economies

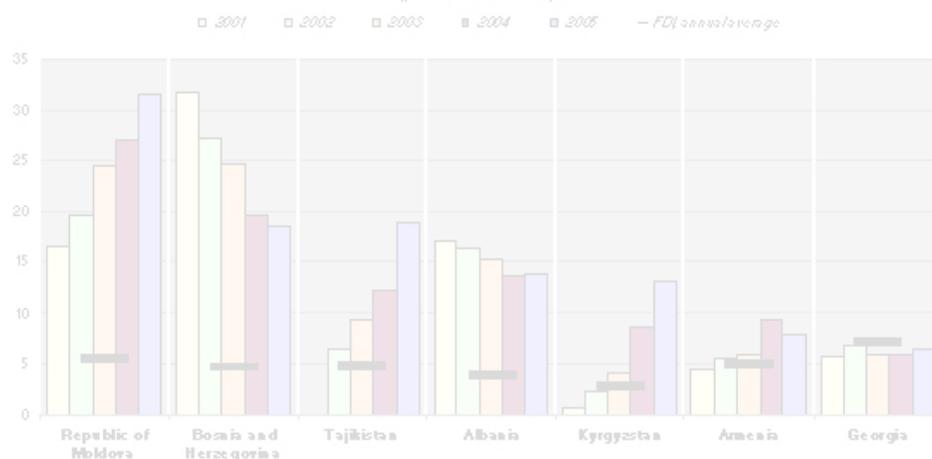
Accounting for 10 to 30 per cent of GDP, remittances are an increasingly important source of household income in many low-income south-east European and CIS countries. Although primarily used for

consumption and partly responsible for rapidly rising imports, remittances in many small and poor countries that lack foreign investment may also be an important source of external capital helping to finance

small businesses. This is probably true for the countries in this sample, where, except for Georgia, remittance inflows exceed foreign direct investment (FDI) by a wide margin.

Migrants' Remittances and FDI, 2001-2005

(per cent of GDP)



Source: UNECE Statistical database, IMF Balance of Payments Statistics and national statistics.

Note: FDI, annual average refers to inflows in 2001-2005 in relation to GDP. Migrants' remittances include compensation of employees abroad, worker's remittances and migrants' transfers and refer to inflows through the official banking system only. Please note that the exact scale of remittances is difficult to estimate, as many transfers are also made through informal channels. Also, in mid-2005 Tajikistan introduced methodological changes in recording remittances and reclassified a substantial part of them as export revenues (revised remittances to GDP ratio dropped from 21 to 12 per cent in 2004).

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