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Keynote address

by

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Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at the

Urban Breakfast

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Palais de Nations, Room VIII

(15 minutes)

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor to speak on behalf of UNECE at this Urban Breakfast as part of our celebrations for World Habitat Day. Thanks to UN-Habitat for co-organizing this event and thanks to our extended UN family in Geneva, who will have the opportunity to share their valuable experiences here.

The purpose of World Habitat Day is to reflect on the state of our towns and cities, and on the basic human right to adequate shelter. On this day, we remind the world that together, we have the responsibility, but also the power to shape the future of our cities and towns.

The theme for World Habitat Day this year is **Housing Policies: Affordable Homes**. Since the financial crisis, there has been a sharp decline in access to affordable, decent and healthy housing. This exacerbates social inequality and segregation in urban space. The UNECE study highlighted that at least 100 million low and middle-income people in the region spend more than 40% of their disposable income on accommodation. This limits resources for other basic needs, such as food, health, clothing and transportation. As people's ability to meet other material needs decreases due to high housing costs, the risk of poverty and homelessness increases.

During the financial crisis, unemployment rose, incomes fell, and households cut back on non-essential and discretionary spending in order to meet mortgage and living expenses. The crisis has changed how housing systems operate, while markedly increasing the need for social and affordable housing. Even in the countries with a significant tradition of, and funding for, social housing, waiting lists have reached historical highs. Moreover, the housing need has diversified in groups traditionally considered vulnerable, such as the low and no income population, refugees and the homeless. Additional categories of the population are now in

need of affordable housing, such as the elderly, the young, key workers and middle-income households.

National and local governments need to respond to these needs by securing necessary housing provisions, adjusting to the new dynamics of the housing markets, and meeting new aspirations including energy efficiency. Given the complexities, an integrated approach is necessary to ensure access to affordable, decent and healthy housing. This is possible through:

- i. comprehensive national and local urban and housing policies,
- ii. transparent registration of land and properties,
- iii. effective housing finance mechanisms and,
- iv. active involvement of all relevant stakeholders, especially cities and homeowner associations.

Countries need to step up their efforts in cooperation with international organisations, private sector and academia, in order to support innovative research and development, capacity building, training and outreach activities.

Last year, UNECE and UN-Habitat prepared the Habitat III Regional Report on Sustainable Housing and Urban Development, as a contribution to the Habitat III Conference in Quito. According to this report, by 2050, almost three quarters (66%) of the world's population will live in urban areas. This will be the Century of the City. A large proportion of UNECE citizens currently live in cities – ranging from less than 50% in Central Asia and up to more than 80% in North America and Western Europe. The urban population is growing, albeit slowly. High levels of urbanization present serious challenges for sustainable development and the reduction of carbon emissions. All of these factors can erode quality of life if not addressed.

UNECE, in cooperation with member States, and partners is working tirelessly to ensure access to affordable, decent and healthy housing for all. The UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management (CHLM) and the Working Party on Land Administration (WPLA) serve as intergovernmental platforms for policy dialogue. They have a mandate to compile, disseminate and exchange information and experiences on housing, urban development and

land administration policies. UNECE also works on standards in the areas of energy, environment and transport, and promotes national frameworks for innovation, which are indispensable for the development of smart cities. Further, the CHLM and WPLA work with the private sector, academia and local authorities through the Real Estate Markets Advisory Board.

Our programme on housing and urban development benefits from a key voluntary agreement that our member States endorsed in 2015: the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing. The Charter is based on the principles of environmental protection, economic effectiveness, social inclusion, participation, and cultural adequacy. It shows the commitment of UNECE member States to improve access to adequate, affordable, good quality, healthy and secure housing and utility services, with particular attention to young people and vulnerable groups, and provides a framework for building smarter and more sustainable cities.

To promote effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the New Urban Agenda and the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing, Geneva UN Charter Centres on Sustainable Housing have been established in Albania and Estonia. They promote advisory services, capacity-building and dissemination activities at national and regional levels and foster exchange of experiences and best practices on sustainable housing and urban development. Other centres are about to open in Prague and Glasgow, with preparations ongoing for the establishment of Charter Centers in Armenia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

We are looking forward to more Centres joining the regional network. I am very glad that these are being established jointly with governments, local authorities, and academia as well as with support of our partner organisations, such as UNDP offices in countries with transition economies.

To support the implementation of the key global agreements, UNECE also supports:

- national reviews of housing, urban development and land management policies and practices through the preparation of **Country Profiles on Housing and Land Management**;

- Studies on adequate, affordable and sustainable housing, such as **Social Housing in the UNECE region**, as well as fora on housing finance and access to lending markets;
- the preparation of **National Action Plans on Sustainable Housing, Urban Development and Land Management** based on the recommendations from the Country Profiles;
- reviews at city level through the development of **smart sustainable city profiles; and**
- **the promotion of energy efficiency standards in buildings through a Joint Task Force, peer learning and capacity-building jointly with partners in government, the private sector and academia.**

UNECE has a long history of cooperation with UN-Habitat on strengthening national capacities for sustainable housing and urban development policies. We are committed to strengthening this cooperation and play a key role in the implementation as well as regional follow-up and review of the New Urban Agenda and the relevant SDGs. The Report of the High Level Independent Panel to Assess and Enhance Effectiveness of UN-Habitat recommends UN-Habitat to strengthen partnerships with the UN Regional Commissions, in order to facilitate the local agenda intrinsic to the New Urban Agenda. It also proposes relocating and aligning UN-Habitat offices so that UN-Habitat has access to enhanced research and analysis on regional issues to support its work. Meanwhile, the Secretary General's reform report recommends that the Regional Commissions should "provide world class analysis and knowledge on region-wide priorities, innovations, financing for development and transboundary issues" at the regional level.

I am very glad that the UNECE has extensive cooperation with its partner organisations, UN agencies and other international organisations. The active participation of many partners here is a strong demonstration of this.

This year, the UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management will celebrate its 70th anniversary. I invite you to attend the Ministerial Meeting on Housing and Land Management on 9 November at the Palais des Nations.

Finally, I invite you to the presentation of the exhibition “Geneva: The Habitats Within” and lunchtime reception, today from 1:30pm - 2:30pm in the Passerelle, here on the third floor. The exhibition highlights the importance of a habitat as a crucial element to one’s identity. It is co-organized by UNECE, UN Habitat, UNOG and the Perception Change Project to celebrate World Habitat Day and the 70th Anniversary of the Committee.

I wish all of us a dynamic and fruitful dialogue. I hope this event will help us build upon our partnerships with UN, the private sector, academia and local authorities, in our regions and around the globe, towards a common aim.

Let us work together to make cities smarter, more sustainable, and more livable with the highest quality of life possible.

Thank you.