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**Talking Points**

**by**

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**United Nations Under-Secretary-General**

**Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**at the**

**UNECE Regional Online Workshop**

**Housing governance to support housing affordability**

**23 February 2021 at 14:00**

Your Excellency Minister Vizjak,

Your Excellency Ms. Ayşe Asya,

Dear colleagues,

It is my privilege to welcome you to this Regional Online Workshop “*Housing governance to support housing affordability*”. I would like to express my gratitude to the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning of Slovenia for co-organizing this important event with UNECE.

I would also like to express a special thanks to our Partners who supported the organization of this event: Housing Europe, UN-Habitat and the Union for the Mediterranean.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of responding to the challenges of housing affordability, particularly for vulnerable groups. Staying at home has been one of the most effective ways of limiting the spread of the virus. However, housing in our region remains inadequate and quality housing is quite often unaffordable.

Improving housing affordability is currently one of the most important policy challenges that countries and cities in the UNECE region face. The various aspects of this challenge include:

- an undersupply of affordable housing,
- a continuous increase in urban rent-prices,
- low-quality housing and urban infrastructure,
- limited access to land for housing construction and renovation, and
- rising urban poverty and homelessness.

Ensuring housing affordability has long been a priority of the UNECE. In 2015, UNECE endorsed **the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing** to support member States as they seek to ensure access to decent, adequate, affordable and healthy housing for all.

The housing issue has been discussed on several occasions at the Ministerial level. This year, UNECE will organize a Ministerial Meeting on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management. It will take place on 6-8 October 2021 in Geneva and will focus on “Affordable, adequate, and resilient housing in liveable cities, including cities which face extreme weather conditions”.

The Ministerial Meeting will support **the regional exchange of experiences and good practices** for promoting access to decent, adequate, affordable and healthy housing as part of the countries’ responses to, and recovery plans for, the COVID-19 pandemic. It will discuss the ways in which governments can accelerate their achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on SDG11 and its Target 11.1. *on safe and affordable housing*; and how they can contribute to the implementation of innovative practices to “build back better” in the housing sector.

Ministers from 56 UNECE member States will share their views on the housing affordability challenges facing their countries, and on the progress made by their governments in addressing those challenges over the last ten years.

During the Ministerial Meeting we will also hear about the study “#Housing2030: Improving Housing Affordability in the UNECE Region” which is being developed by UNECE, in cooperation with Housing Europe and UN-Habitat.

This study aims to:

- i. Explore housing affordability challenges and existing policy instruments for improving housing affordability in the UNECE region;
- ii. Facilitate the exchange and dissemination of “good practices” in improving housing affordability among countries and cities of the UNECE region; and
- iii. Identify needs of policy-makers to further develop and implement policies addressing housing affordability.

The study explores the following four topics: Housing governance and regulation; Access to finance and funding; Access and availability of land for housing construction; and Climate-neutral housing construction and renovation.

The Housing Ministerial Meeting is also expected to endorse a regional action plan for the UNECE region “#Housing 2030: promoting sustainable housing as part of the recovery and rebuilding plans after the COVID-19 pandemic”. The Regional Action Plan will support Governments in their recovery from the COVID-19 crisis through the sharing of examples and good practices in facilitating investments and promoting the “building better” approach; and proposing approaches on how they can rebuild in a way that increases the resilience of homes to disasters, creates more affordable and healthier homes, and reduces homelessness and inequality.

I believe that today’s workshop will be an important milestone in the process of preparation for the UNECE Housing Ministerial Meeting. Furthermore, we will have an opportunity today to hear about the progress on the development of the #Housing2030 study on housing affordability and the draft regional action plan on housing.

If there is only one lesson to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is that cities have, and can, adapt rapidly to changing situations. The rapid change of our urban reality is possible, behavioural patterns can be adapted, and humans can stand in unprecedented solidarity for a common cause.

I would like conclude by recalling the words of the renowned architect Lord Norman Foster. He opened the First UN Forum of Mayors convened by the UNECE in October 2020 by saying: *“historical precedent shows that the cities have the opportunity to be transformed to being safer, more beautiful, quieter, cleaner, healthier – greener in the most literal sense. ... There are trends that already exist, and the pandemic is accelerating and magnifying them. Those trends are towards less space for cars and more space for people. So, the potential is through mobility, through changing work patterns, through new roles for industry and culture to transform the city for the better”*.

While COVID-19 continues to be catastrophic, it also offers a chance to transform our cities and homes, and create a new normal: a normal that benefits all people and our planet.