

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

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...UNECE works for your housing

While some UNECE countries have accumulated a wide range of experience with socially oriented housing programmes and spatial planning practices, disadvantaged and deteriorating neighbourhoods are still developing everywhere. Christina von Schweinichen, Team Leader of the Policy Review Team and Deputy Director of the UNECE Environment, Housing and Land Management Division, introduces the UNECE's activities in policy guidance, condominium management, housing finance, land administration and social housing.



You are responsible for different policy areas, but focusing on your housing and land management responsibilities, what do you do?

One of the primary responsibilities of the Housing and Land Management subprogramme is the housing and land administration reviews. These are two separate exercises carried out on a voluntary basis, which means that countries request that we conduct a review.

For example, with the housing reviews, we examine a country's current housing situation by looking at a number of factors including if appropriate housing legislation is in place, if there are housing renewal programmes, if the condition of current housing is acceptable, and if social housing is provided. We also look at the structure of the

institutional set-up. After this assessment, experts prepare their recommendations.

Once the report is issued, we follow up with countries to try and assist them with the implementation phase. We ask countries to establish priorities because they cannot put all of the recommendations in place at once. If countries wish to receive assistance, the UNECE provides them with experts and engages in discussions and provides advice on how to make further progress on specific issues that the countries have identified as priorities.

With the housing reviews, do you focus on specific regions of the UNECE?

At present, a lot of our efforts are geared towards countries in transition. However many of these countries feel that "the market" is the solution to their housing problems and that

the Government role can be reduced in the housing sector. Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that and the provision of housing, especially social housing for the most disadvantaged, is not taken care of by market forces.

But really, there is a double problem. First of all, because housing has been privatized, owners haven't learned their rights or their duties. They need to be organized in housing associations, to learn the rules and procedures of how such associations are run, and to learn who carries out which duty. And secondly, in the absence of these associations to manage the housing stock, the quality of housing has significantly deteriorated and now there are beginning to be serious problems.

As a side note, in Western Europe privatization of the public housing stock has also been occurring. However, in this region privatization is less problematic because there are alternative ways to ensure the provision of housing to low income people, such as public-private partnerships, state provided subsidies, or tax incentives.

What do you mean by real problems with the quality of housing?

I mean physical problems like dangerous housing with unstable structures, with roofs collapsing for example. And because it is privatized the State often does not step in.

What is a housing review? How does it start?

Firstly, the Minister requests a housing policy review, and then the Committee on Housing and Land Management endorses

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the request or decides the order of priority if more than one country is requesting a study. Once that is in place, the secretariat organizes a fact-finding visit to the country where we establish contacts with the minister and identify the country's successful housing policies as well as the challenges it faces. In addition, we contact the international organizations working in this area to try begin working with them.

After a number of weeks, we come back to the country with a group of experts who have received detailed information, collected from many sources, on the issues we want to address in the review. Each expert focuses on one of the main topics related to the chapters of the review identified in the initial mission and agreed with the host country. These experts are either provided in-kind by member countries or hired by UNECE.

The mission with the team of experts lasts about one week. One or two UNECE staff members lead the group in order to help facilitate meetings between experts and various organizations in the host country, including NGOs, other ministries, associations, international organizations, and financial institutions. We are also available to coordinate experts and to discuss with them the contents of the review as well as possible recommendations.

After the mission, experts return to their countries to write their chapter. The secretariat is usually responsible for harmonizing the final text and the recommendations, and once the final draft is ready, the report is sent to the host country. We don't have a peer review process, we present our report to the Committee and there is a discussion on the report and its findings, but not in the form of a peer review.

Do the land management reviews work in a similar way?

Yes, the process I explained above is, in general terms, the same for the land management reviews. The only difference is that these are not published, but are in the form of a UN document. Both documents, the land and housing reviews, are available on the Internet.

If a country does not like the recommendations made in the review, what happens?

This has not really happened. The countries have asked for the review and experts try to be very pragmatic and never recommend steps that are too ambitious or that the country could never implement. In some instances, if a country has an issue with one of the recommendations, we discuss it and try to work out a better solution, but we are reluctant to change the gist of the recommendation. But it is important to take into account the host country's point of view.

What is the UNECE secretariat's main function in this whole process of publishing reviews?

The secretariat services the whole process; we provide tools to governments to facilitate the decision making process. This entails a broad array of activities including providing advice, identifying problems and working through viable solutions, assisting with drafting of chapters, and verifying that the information is correct and reliable. We also ensure that the final product is in a satisfactory format both for the reviewed country and for the Committee.

How long does one of these reviews take?

From the time of the minister's request to publication, the process takes one year. Since the last review, we are trying to shorten this period to 6 months.

What happens when the review is completed?

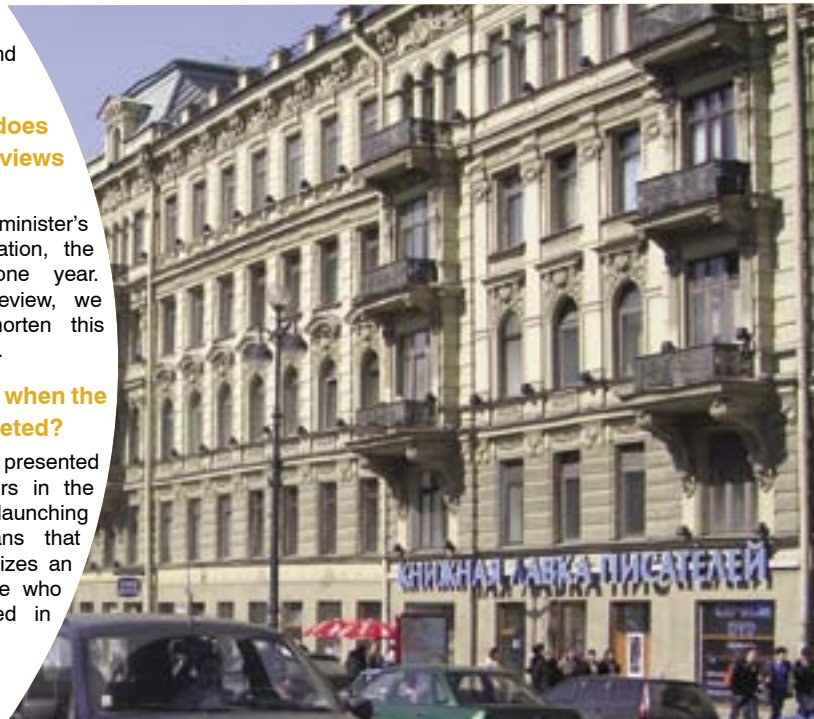
The review is presented to the stakeholders in the country with a launching event. This means that the ministry organizes an event for everyone who has been involved in

preparing the study as well as those who will be involved in the implementation of the recommendations. This event informs everyone that the report has come out and that work should start with the implementation phase. It is also crucial for creating a sense of ownership and for maintaining momentum to keep stakeholders committed to participate in the implementation phase.

Are there common or recurring themes that arise in the housing reviews?

Yes, there are recurrent themes. Most of the countries lack a comprehensive policy framework. In some cases, legislation is already in place but it is not implemented. At other times, only incomplete legislation exists and it needs to be improved. And in many countries the housing departments are very small and the staff must juggle a number of tasks, such as writing legislation, managing existing housing in the private sector, issuing permits, etc.

Secondly, many of these countries often tackle the housing issues in a fragmented way, without a comprehensive perspective on how to deal with the housing sector as



a whole. There are a number of different policy areas and actors within the housing sector, including social housing, new housing, existing housing stock, the private sector, public sector. And while it is not easy to deal with all these components at once, it is crucial to have a sector-wide view with a comprehensive strategy.

Lastly, it is also important that Governments consider the housing sector as an income generator that contributes to the nation's economic stability. Of course, some investment is involved, but it is a long-term process. Today, many governments don't invest in housing and, since they have privatised the property that previously belonged to the State, they have no property to rent out to generate revenue.

What happens if the minister who requests the housing review leaves his post before the review is completed?

The housing review is not addressed to one minister or government in power, it is addressed to the country. This means that if there is a change in government the recommendations should still be valid.

How many reviews have there been so far? And have there been any positive results?

There have been 10 so far, all carried out in the transition countries, and we have definitely seen some good results. For instance, Romania had success with a small pilot project that allocated public owned apartments to young couples and rented them out at a low price. These apartments, which were renovated by the local government, stood out from the privately owned decayed housing. These renovated houses attracted positive attention from the neighbours and the government is now in the process of trying to expand the pilot project in order to improve the living conditions of more citizens in the area. This was a very good example of how a government could work on a small scale, with low expenditures, but also be highly visible.

A lot of your work focuses on the countries in transition. Do you do any work with the developed countries of the UNECE, and what issues do you work on?

Of course, all other members countries participate in meetings, provide their expertise, and best practices. The topics vary from the maintenance of multi-family housing stock, to urban renewal, to social housing and spatial planning as well as land administration.

In the next 3 months or so, what are the main tasks you hope to accomplish with regard to housing and land management?

We are organizing a High Level Meeting in September and we are hoping to receive renewed support for the work on housing, planning, and land administration. The competition from other organizations in the region is strong. Nevertheless, member countries feel that UNECE has a lot to contribute, especially in the areas that I have discussed today. We received great support from member countries during the reform. Now that the reform is complete, work needs to continue and there is the need to deliver good and useful products.

For more information:

www.unece.org/hlm/welcome.html

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