

Your Excellencies, Madam Chair, distinguished participants, guests and colleagues. Thank you for the invitation to address you today.

Preparing this Regional Action Plan has been one of the most important, challenging and significant piece of work I have been entrusted to undertake. The Action Plan is founded on *Transforming our World, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the 17 SDGs and targets that gave birth to, as well as the *New Urban Agenda* which followed on from Habitat III in 2016.

Rightly, the Plan puts SDG 11 (*Sustainable Cities and Communities*) front and centre whilst recognising from Agenda 2030 the '*integrated and indivisible*' nature of the SDGs providing a common language for a coherent approach to multilateral action across a broad and universal policy agenda.

I would like to pay tribute to the outstanding and challenging work undertaken by the Secretary General and UN-Habitat in moving quickly in 2020 to produce the *Policy Briefs* and, more recently, the excellent *Cities and Pandemics: Towards a more just, green and healthy future*. These have provided the evidence and established the imperatives upon which to build the Plan.

It must have been harrowing but necessary to write the words "*COVID-19 is unlike any other health crisis in 75 years of the United Nations*" that as a consequence "*has reversed hard won gains against SDG targets with severe impacts on existing infrastructure and services*".

As a scholar and practitioner, I am grateful for direct and unadorned words: "*The pre-pandemic status quo should be avoided*" and "*the pandemic does not change the New Urban Agenda, it merely makes it even more urgent*".

The Plan cites the unwelcome but clear evidence assembled by the OECD and others that "*the Covid-19 pandemic has severely disrupted construction ...and seriously hurt the housing sector*".

As the COVID-19 pandemic wore on and its impacts became better understood, it was clear that human societies, whether in developing, converging or developed economies, faced not one but three conjoined emergencies: the pandemic itself, climate change and yawning inequalities in affordable housing with each emergency potentially compounding the effects of the others in respect of human health, social cohesion, environmental integrity and economic vitality.

The other important body of work that the Plan is built upon is, of course, the UN *Geneva Charter on Sustainable Housing* now supported by the *Housing 2030 Research* published yesterday.

All of this work acted as progenitors of the principles upon which to build the Plan enabling three new principles:

- *Cities are central to building back better*
- *Cities cannot flourish without well-functioning housing systems, and*
- *Housing, mobility, environment and economy are interrelated and require integrated responses.*

These have been added to the 4 principles from the Geneva Charter:

- *Environmental protection;*
- *Economic effectiveness;*
- *Social inclusion and participation; and*
- *Cultural adequacy*

Using all this work to tell the story of the Plan has provoked an insight into what Sir Isaac Newton may have meant when he talked about *standing on the shoulders of giants* provoking a giddy sense of responsibility to produce a concise and compelling message through the Action Plan.

In this way, and through extensive consultation, the team was able to formulate the two policy areas laid before you today:

- **A: CITIES, NEIGHBOURHOODS, HOMES & RURAL LIFE**
- **B: SUSTAINABLE HOUSING & HOMES**

In the Plan these policy areas are supported by a series of *goals, targets and actions*. Policy area A focuses on:

- *coordinated international, national, sub-national and local action related to the vertical integration of the SDGs;*
- *city-wide integrated action; and*
- *sustainable neighbourhoods and local life.*

Policy Area B is predicated on the implementation of the Geneva Charter and the excellent *Housing 2030* evidence-based research launched yesterday under headings of *governance, land policy, finance & funding, and climate neutral housing* and may I here pay tribute to the colleagues and authors of that work and to Ms Julie Lawson for her enthusiastic and generous collaboration.

The team is honoured that the significance of the Action Plan has caught the eye of the eminent architect and urbanist Lord Foster of Thamesbank and president of the Norman Foster Foundation who has generously brought the Plan to life in a series of beautiful drawings that you have seen in the exhibition yesterday.

Yesterday, Mr Lettington from UN-Habitat when speaking on behalf of Her Excellency Ms Maimunah Mohd Sharif indicated that UN-Habitat consider the Regional Action Plan you have before you today, to be a model of cooperation that they hope will be adopted by the other Economic Commissions – well done UNECE and the *Committee of Urban Development, Housing and Land Management*.

Finally, may I stress the that the title, *Life and Place in the UNECE*, is a gentle reminder to us all that our work is, in no small part, intended to better the lives of our people and the places they inhabit.

Yesterday and today there has been much talk of vision – it's very important – for *where there is no vision the people perish*, but we must also act at the practical level. This Regional Action Plan is a bridge between vision and practice – and as the Executive Secretary Ms Algayerova said yesterday said, it is but the start.

Excellencies, it has been an honour to work with the partnership of UNECE, UN-Habitat and Housing 2030 to help bring about the Regional Action Plan and I humbly commend it for your attention today so that we all may contribute hope and action towards a better 2030. Thank you.