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ON ENVIRONMENTAL AND WATER PROBLEMS

Working Group of Senior Governmental Officials  
"Environment for Europe"

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**SOME ENVIRONMENT-RELATED PROBLEMS OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS**

Note by the secretariat 1/

1. The issue of human settlements was specifically mentioned in the Lucerne Ministerial Declaration among the possible topics to be considered at the next Ministerial Conference in Bulgaria. The present note describes the characteristics of human settlements in the context of sustainability in the UN/ECE region and some of its problems.

CURRENT SITUATION

2. Past policies and actions on human settlements development have caused environmental damage. Environmental degradation occurred when those who took decisions did not know how to use resources efficiently or underestimated the cost of environmental damage to society. Some problems in human settlements are associated with slow economic development, and in this case the challenge is to increase wealth and ensure its equitable distribution and promote greater access to the necessary resources and technologies. However, many other problems are exacerbated by economic growth, e.g. those resulting from the use of fossil fuels in urban areas and from water and soil pollution.

3. Given present lifestyles and production and consumption patterns, cities are at the hear of various environmental problems. These cannot be solved without urban ecological restructuring and a change in attitude to urban issues. Only with the cooperation of different urban planning disciplines

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1/ Prepared to facilitate the discussions at the first session of the Working Group.

would it be possible to attempt the necessary solutions. The objective of ecological urban restructuring is to adapt urban development and structures to the requirements of ecological compatibility on a societal-industrial scale.

4. Applying ecological principles to urban planning and management requires clear and practical strategies. These strategies have to be developed on the basis of evaluative research on interdisciplinary urban projects. Once formulated, they may generate new practical projects on different scales from neighbourhood to urban region.

5. With the growing number and complexity of environmental regulations, implementation has become a major concern for Governments. In implementing an urban environment policy it is important to consider the organizational hierarchy, the management and the coordination and allocation of functions. Administrative responsibility for the urban environment should be established far down the administrative chain and rest as close to the ultimate user groups as possible.

6. The recent revival of interest in environmental issues has brought together disparate areas that previously made little or no contact, for instance urban form and energy consumption, or nature, sociability, and economic development. This convergence has produced a number of sustainable policy approaches, leading for instance to the compact city. However, such policies raise a series of questions, the answers to which are often contradictory. Therefore, new practical steps should be taken to improve the environmental characteristics of town centres and their outskirts, to preserve urban continuity, and to rediscover the meaning of urban structure on the outskirts of towns. An urban fabric that can evolve and undergo change is thus desirable. This will lead to attractive, liveable suburbs in tune with the sustainability goal.

7. Urban planning often focuses on policy formulation, the regulation of human activities, and the spatial allocation of land uses, without explicitly addressing the shape and structure of the city. However, many decisions are made daily about the physical shape and structure of individual buildings, parks, streets, etc. Land use and the environment are interrelated in significant and complex ways at a variety of spatial and temporal levels. Up to now the technological approach to flow management primarily tended to seek solutions in facilities like power plants, waste dumps and sewerage treatment plants. Urban development is not possible without these. Nevertheless, these functions should be designed so as to have an overall positive effect on the city and not only solve a sectorial problem.

8. Taking the above considerations into account, the UN/ECE Committee on Human Settlements, at its fifty-third session in September 1992, decided to strengthen its efforts to promote sustainable development. In doing so, the Committee will facilitate and assist the promotion of human settlements programmes and policies from the point of view of social, economic and environmental soundness and sustainability, with the preparation of guidelines for sustainable human settlements planning and management. These guidelines will reflect the collective experience and views of UN/ECE member countries, and will:

- (a) Provide for the further promotion of sustainable human settlements;
- (b) Promote the concept of sustainable development, seen essentially as a balance between environmental, social and economic objectives in urban planning and management;
- (c) Assist Governments in formulating their goals for sustainable development in human settlements and propose alternative means to attain them;
- (d) Take into account the interaction between societal and environmental trends and objectives for sustainable development, as well as resource management and other long-term concerns;
- (e) Be an attempt to widen the methods of impact assessment to take sustainable human settlements development into account;
- (f) Have a strong transition component.

It should stress the economic and social aspects of sustainability, as well the importance of legal, organizational, property ownership and management issues, and take into account developments in the housing supply and international credit markets.

#### SOME UNRESOLVED PROBLEMS

9. It is clear that in UN/ECE countries there is no single public policy or programme for the improvement of the urban environment. Policies to control the variety of sectoral activities which impact upon urban environment are implemented as problems occur or when it is judged to be politically or technically opportune to deal with them. These initiatives are seldom sufficiently coordinated. The result is that, in many instances, optimum environmental impacts are not achieved nor taken account of at the local, national or international level.

10. The major challenge for urban environmental policies is to effectively combine the multitude of sectoral policies which impact upon the quality of life of city dwellers and the ecological balance of cities. Policies should aim at providing good opportunities for open-air recreation, preserving the landscape and cultural values and helping to achieve the goals of social development and well-being. At the same time it is necessary to lessen the town's impact on the natural environment by reducing energy consumption, polluting discharges and noise, and by avoiding reductions in biologically important resources of land. Other priority areas are renewing older parts of the towns, strengthening the identity and sense of community in local environments, and protecting the residential and central areas of towns against through traffic. Dealing with the problem of congested roads or streets and/or with a lack of public transport facilities calls for the recognition of the functional and financial interdependence between the various modes of transport in a city and the need to use policy instruments which reduce levels of pollution and congestion.

11. Urban areas can never be regarded as self-contained entities, as they need to interact economically, socially and environmentally with other areas as a condition for their vitality and growth. The challenge is to obtain a better understanding of these relationships and in particular to act upon the improved knowledge of environmental interactions to foster optimum economic

growth and improvements in the quality of life. To date there has been little achievement in including information about the depletion of environmental resources in everyday decisions on consumption and investment. Cities should be used as urban observatories that systematically give early notice of specific social, environmental and economic problems before they take on national or international proportions.

12. Achieving sustainable human settlements would require substantive steps by the UN/ECE countries to develop, adopt and implement relevant strategies and policies. Some of these medium and long-term goals of sustainable development strategies, and their integration into overall human settlements development policies, may be achieved through an action programme, with a special emphasis on countries in transition, aimed at promoting the exchange of information and experience through workshops, training activities and technical assistance.