

**Economic and Social Council**Distr.: General  
25 September 2025

Original: English

---

**Economic Commission for Europe**

Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management

**Eighty-sixth session**

Geneva, 8–10 October 2025

Item 2 of the provisional agenda

**Ministerial meeting on housing affordability and sustainability****The inception, advocacy and impact of the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing (2015–2025)****Note by a Geneva UN Charter Centre of Excellence on Smart Sustainable Cities***Summary*

This information document has been prepared by the Geneva UN Charter Centre of Excellence on Smart Sustainable Cities, hosted by the Glasgow School of Art (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).<sup>1/</sup>

The document is a chronological review of the 2015 Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing, tracing its origins, advocacy and influence on housing and urban policy across the ECE region and beyond. It highlights the Charter's four core principles (environmental protection; economic effectiveness; social inclusion and participation; and cultural adequacy) and shows how they informed research, action plans and policies that guided resilient, affordable, and inclusive housing amid shocks, including the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Committee may wish to comment and take note of the document.

---

<sup>1/</sup> This paper has been prepared by Prof. Brian Evans PhD, Professor of Urbanism & Landscape, Glasgow School of Art, UK and Director of the Glasgow Urban Laboratory, a Geneva UN Charter Centre of Excellence on Smart Sustainable Cities.

## Introduction

1. This paper documents a chronological review of *the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing (the Charter)* with an accompanying analytical and summative commentary. The paper covers the period from 2005 to 2025 in three parts describing three phases of work. The first deals with the intense interest and need for housing policy and practice across the territory of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE – *the Commission*). This widespread interest generated support for the creation of a shared policy and an impetus for its intent. The second deals with the implementation and delivery of that intent through a programme of advocacy over a 10-year period from 2015 to 2025. The third considers the impact and international reach of *the Charter* in terms of its mission within the ECE and throughout its member States and concludes with insights and conclusions that are both retrospective and prospective.<sup>1</sup> The paper begins with a review of background and context.

### Genesis of a mission: *Journey towards a Charter*

2. The Regional Commissions of the United Nations were established between 1947 and 1973. The European Commission for Europe (ECE), established in 1947, has, as its central mission, the promotion of the pan-European economic integration of its 56 Member States and the well-being of the Region's population.<sup>2</sup> The initial imperative for ECE was the reconstruction of Europe following the Second World War. To implement this mission, the ECE established a number of Committees dealing with specific portfolios that had ministerial oversight from member states, their own Bureaux and Secretariat, and support from senior civil servants, senior professional figures, and international experts.<sup>3</sup> The Committees develop, monitor and review initiatives and programmes for betterment, in support of, and in service to, the member States. Given the importance of living to the human habitat and of housing to the reconstruction of Europe, the ECE established the Committee on Housing and Land Management (*the Committee*) in 1947.<sup>4</sup>

3. A clear and substantive challenge for the ECE and the Committee during the first decades of its operation was the assembly of knowledge, and dissemination of concise and deliverable insights in best practice to support member States in the provision of a sufficient supply of housing for their populations during the period of reconstruction. There was recognition that land ownership and its tenure, and the affordability and financing of development are interlinked strands of policy and practice that influence housing and its delivery. The Committee therefore formed a Working Party on Land Administration and a Real Estate Management Group.<sup>5</sup>

4. In most member States across Europe, a principal challenge was the provision of housing quickly and economically in the period of reconstruction, economic and demographic growth and technological development of the post-war years. To achieve these aims, economists, planners and architects turned to the architectural theories and urban planning concepts promoted by the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) and the ideas of its leading protagonists including the architect and city planner Charles-Édouard Jeanneret. Known by the soubriquet Le Corbusier developed theories for the Plan Voisin (neighbourhood plan) that envisaged residential towers in open landscapes in response to economic and social conditions.

5. Often constructed rapidly, with a shortage of quality materials and an absence of the local services anticipated by the principles of the concept, these neighbourhood projects created a problematic legacy for cities that by the 1970s and 1980s required refurbishment programmes or more often demolition and reconstruction. This was prevalent across the territory of the ECE. In the United States of America, it resulted in the demolition of major housing projects and across Eastern and Western Europe created a challenge that is still being overcome today. Whatever the nomenclature for these towers, blocks and neighbourhoods in different countries, they are all the manifestation of a universal failure of a shared typology across the ECE region.

6. UN-Habitat enjoys a continuous and mutually supportive working partnership with the ECE (and all of the Regional Commissions). One of UN-Habitat's most significant missions is

the Vicennial Global Conference on the Human Habitat (or Habitat I), the first of which took place in Vancouver in 1976. This followed the World Expo in Montréal in 1967 that staged, to international acclaim, Habitat '67, the renowned housing exhibit designed by the architect Moshe Safdie. This innovative project provided a focus for expressions of concern about housing policy and design internationally.

7. Safdie's work and the first Habitat in Vancouver opened enquiry about the methods of urban development at the time and stimulated discussion on urban planning by early thinkers such as Kevin Lynch from MIT, Gordon Cullen from the United Kingdom and the American urbanist and writer Jane Jacobs, who observed that "*cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.*"<sup>6</sup> By the 1980s, reconstruction of cities and housing supply gave way to regeneration that, by the 1990s, became a pre-occupation with a post-industrial future for cities.

## The Charter: 1 - Inception

8. A second Habitat conference was held in Istanbul in 1996 that continued the global discussion of the human habitat as the living ecosystem and stimulated thinking within ECE that led to the adoption in 2001 of the *ECE Strategy for a Sustainable Quality of Life in Human Settlements in the 21st Century (Strategy 2001)*.<sup>7</sup>

9. Strategy 2001 had "*a particular emphasis on issues of common interest and concern for all countries of the ECE region ... and reflects the experiences, needs and approaches shaped by five decades of cooperation within the ECE Committee on Human Settlements*". To improve the quality of life in ECE member states, "*the Committee assumed (UN) responsibility to promote cooperation between central governments, local authorities, the business community and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)*". The Committee strengthened its cooperation with the housing and urban management networks.<sup>8</sup> Strategy 2001 put housing policy and improving quality of life at the heart of the strategy through five key challenges. Housing was put at the front and centre of the strategy's delivery in *Challenge 4: Promoting market reform in the housing and urban sector*.

10. Understanding transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system in many member states, Strategy 2001 recognised that "*the housing sector is an integral part of a market economy*", and that "*there is ... a need for countries (in transition) to provide decent housing and social protection for needy households*".<sup>9</sup> Housing became an economic and a social objective. The Committee resolved to embrace the eight principles of Strategy 2001 setting the agenda for its work through:

- a) **Assistance to governments** ...national agencies and institutions to evaluate ... housing policies ...to eliminate bottlenecks in the ... sector and establish long-term strategies.
- b) **Facilitation of** ... legal, economic and institutional conditions for public and private investments in the housing sector ... for immediate action.
- c) **Building up** ... management and planning capabilities in municipalities within ... public administration reform.
- d) **Advisory assistance** to national authorities ... on spatial planning institutional structure (and) developing ... instruments for spatial planning, local transport; (land ownership) and taxation.
- e) **Support in** ... housing policies and programmes (directed to) ... socially deprived population groups (for provision of) adequate housing.
- f) **Assistance** in reforming spatial and urban planning legislation.
- g) **Preparation of practical guidelines** and recommendations on legislation, organization, financing and management of housing (developments);
- h) **Exchange of experience** ... in ... the banking sector (on) lending for housing (loans and the mortgage market).<sup>10</sup>

11. The adoption and implementation of Strategy 2001 led to a period of intense activity in subsequent years throughout the ECE community that was hosted by member states and supported by the Committee Secretariat through a programme of workshops, missions, study

tours and conferences on specific topics (e.g. *Housing Management*, Moscow and *Organisational Capacity Building*, Edinburgh both in 2003).<sup>11</sup> These were reported on, discussed and reviewed at the annual sessions of the Committee.

12. Two events in Prague (2003) and Vienna (2004) put a central focus on social housing and were key to the genesis of *the Charter* by producing significant and well-received documentation.<sup>12</sup> These events, were discussed in detail at the 64<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> sessions of the Committee.<sup>13</sup> The former session published the seminal paper *Social/Affordable Housing – A New Challenge For The ECE Countries* and established a *Task Force on Social Housing* to be chaired by Dr. Wolfgang Förster, City of Vienna.<sup>14</sup> The latter session considered and endorsed the publication of *Guidelines on Social Housing Principles and Examples* (published 2006).<sup>15</sup>

13. It is important to record in passing that the Committee was also active with several simultaneous initiatives that complemented its work on housing, as an example a series of conferences on Urban and Regional Research (e.g. 9<sup>th</sup> in Leeds, UK, 2002 and 10<sup>th</sup> in Bratislava, Slovakia, 2006).<sup>16</sup>

14. Following the 66<sup>th</sup> Committee session in 2005, the Bureau and Secretariat pursued a period of refinement and testing of the guidelines with member states that included several international workshops and informal negotiation sessions within the Committee about the framing, wording, editorial and status of the nascent charter.<sup>17</sup>

15. In anticipation of the preparation of *the charter*, the Committee developed a *Strategy for Sustainable Housing and Land Management in the ECE region for the period 2014-2020* adopted by the Ministerial Meeting on Housing and Land Management in 2013 in Geneva.<sup>18</sup>

16. The period of refinement coincided with the great financial crash of 2008. The recession it provoked ended in 2009, but economic frailty persisted. The crisis resulted in a lasting reduction to the size and structure of economies, with slow growth and lingering effects on public finances and household incomes. The crisis caused mass job losses, home foreclosures, permanent structural damage to many economies and a heightened awareness throughout the global community lack of affordability in housing supply impedes the delivery of housing policy.<sup>19</sup>

17. Persistence and commitment prevailed and in 2015, *the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing* was adopted and published. It is an admirably clear and concise document founded on four core principles:

- (i) **Environmental protection:** Housing should be planned, constructed and used in a way that minimizes environmental impact and promotes environmental sustainability.
- (ii) **Economic effectiveness:** Housing is, and has been, an influential sector in national economies. Housing should be both a sustainable element in a vibrant economy as well as a sector for meeting people's needs.
- (iii) **Social inclusion and participation:** Housing policy and debate should be advanced with an enhanced emphasis on engaged and negotiated civic involvement, social inclusiveness, public health, transparency, and a concern for ethical processes.
- (iv) **Cultural adequacy:** Housing policy should take into consideration questions of cultural identity, value, and emotional wellbeing.

18. These are summarized here and documented in full within *the Charter* document. They bear rereading for the continuity of message, hope and commitment they represent, and the ambition and leadership displayed by the authors in delivering a consensual text that was capable of formal adoption by *the Committee*.

## The Charter: 2 – Advocacy

19. Publication of *the Charter* coincided with the Paris Agreement, the publication of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and the preparation for Habitat III.<sup>20</sup> This presented a challenge on resources and coordination, but conversely, the adopted and published *Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing* provided an opportunity to align definitions, policy and action. The Bureau and Secretariat were, with the Committee's support, able to embark on a programme of dissemination, consultation and alignment in a further round of workshops, missions, study tours and conferences working in partnership with member states and, significantly, their cities.

*“A century ago, one in ten people lived in urban areas. By 2050 almost three-quarters of the world's population will call urban areas home. This is the Century of the city”*<sup>21</sup> and *“Our struggle for Global Sustainability will be won or lost in cities”*<sup>22</sup>

20. For the ECE and *the Committee*, the preparation for Habitat III and the dissemination and development of action contingent on *the Charter* became entwined. It was appropriate to do, and it was also essential because the underlying driver for Habitat III was a shift in emphasis in the human habitat and the need for and a development of a new consensus in urban thinking and planning (the New Urban Agenda).<sup>23</sup>

21. Following the adoption of *the Charter* in 2015, one of the principal issues to be addressed by the Committee was preparation of the Regional Report on Cities in the ECE territory undertaken in partnership with UN-Habitat. The UNECE Regional Report for Habitat III, subtitled *Towards a city-focused, people-centred and integrated approach to the New Urban Agenda*, was completed and submitted in evidence to Habitat III.

22. The report concluded that there has been a trend towards urbanization throughout the region since 1996 (Habitat II), particularly in North America, with more than 80 per cent of the populations living in cities, slightly less in the pan-European region. There is a parallel trend towards urban concentration, with a very substantial part of the urban population concentrated into clusters of successful cities, most prevalent in North America (>70% concentrated into 10 “super-city” regions).

23. Beyond these principal urban clusters, smaller and remoter cities are less attractive to incoming investment and migration because they lack the economic advantages and opportunities prevalent in the super-city clusters, and they face the double jeopardy of losing their young economically active population to the successful urban clusters. The dynamics of ageing and migration fuel this disparity, as do the effects of the knowledge economy and the digital revolution.

24. There is a trend throughout the region to urban sprawl – land usage per capita in the region is almost double the global average. Resolving the inverse relationship between density and sprawl is likely to be an issue in the coming decades. The trends from the last 20 years show sequences of city cycles documented in the report:

- a) **The urban concentration cycle:** with “super-cities” able to maximize the opportunities of the knowledge economy and the digital revolution through higher education and proximity to similar cities. Short-range transportation has reinforced the links between, and the critical mass of, these city clusters, to the detriment of more isolated cities.
- b) **The demographic cycle:** An ageing population creates economic opportunities for migrants in successful city clusters with further challenges for isolated cities, where lack of economic opportunity means they are less attractive to workers leading to the attrition of the economically active indigenous population who seek employment in successful city clusters.
- c) **The shrinking city:** Outmigration from cities leads to a reduction in the city's tax base. This in turn causes vacancies in land and buildings and leads to legacy infrastructure at a scale beyond the city's ability to sustain it.

- d) **The sprawling city:** Demand for new forms of development at the edge of the city competes with functions at the urban core. This in turn results in a dysfunctional transport system dependent on the car and, when cities are located close to one another, causes merging of the urban areas.
- e) **The industrial city:** The industrial economy reshaped cities and regions through development and redevelopment, to produce lifestyles and forms that differed from agrarian and mercantile economies. Manufacturing reorganized access to materials and markets, created and controlled transport networks, attracted large numbers of workers to cities, and set up rigid routines of work reflected in the patterns of spatial and social organization.
- f) **The knowledge city:** The knowledge economy has new conditions of economic production, social requirements and cultural institutions. Knowledge as a productive capacity has no spatial requirements beyond clusters around universities, science parks and cultural quarters. This encourages the dynamics of agglomeration economies, and has led to the re-emergence of “place” – the city of streets, squares, stations and neighbourhoods, supported by an “experience economy” of cafes, restaurants, cinemas, galleries, cultural venues and shopping centres.
- g) **The compact city:** Knowledge economies, based in part around universities, lead to an effective labour market that, in turn, supports a dense form of development with a range of employment, residential, cultural and retail uses. This form and mix of use in the city support an integrated and effective public transport system and the efficient delivery of public services.<sup>24</sup>

25. The compact city offers the chance, as an instrument of national and metropolitan governance, to address the opportunities offered by the knowledge and digital economies. It is equally applicable to concentrated clusters of cities and to individual, smaller and more remote cities. The Regional Report concluded that, for the ECE region, the twenty-first century needs to become the *Century of the Compact, Resilient and Integrated City*.

26. Following Habitat III, the findings of the report were adopted, published in 2017 and included in Geneva Ministerial Declaration on Sustainable Housing and Urban Development of November 2017. The Regional Report gave expression to the trends and typology of cities within the UNECE region that in turn might differentiate the nature and intensity of the housing challenges faced by cities across the region. The *New Urban Agenda (NUA)* is a subject that the Secretariat has returned to in regional meetings over time.<sup>25</sup> The *NUA* was adopted at Habitat III, and its vision and core principles and commitments are widely supported, but the document itself is a dense text of pledges. The illustrated handbook, published in 2020, makes the text more accessible and easier to explain, but there remains a challenge in ‘grounding’ the *NUA* within individual member states and focusing the language at the city and metropolitan level where action to fulfil its promise is most pressing.<sup>26</sup>

27. In this narrative of the *Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing*, this may seem like a digression. It is however relevant for two reasons: (i) it helps countries to understand the type of housing they may need to consider in their cities, and (ii) it explains why the name of the Committee was changed to *Urban Development, Housing and Land Management* producing a guide to *People-smart Sustainable Cities* in 2021.<sup>27</sup>

28. Housing that is affordable, accessible and sustainable, rightly remained a continuing priority for the ECE. Two major international conferences organised around the delivery of *the Charter* sought to advance this core mission.

29. *The Vienna Conference on Sustainable Housing: “Promoting access to affordable and decent housing through the implementation of the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing”* (Vienna, 12-13 April 2018) was an international event with a diverse range of international speakers and delegates. The conference produced the Vienna Message “*Quality Living for All: On Access to Adequate, Affordable and Decent Housing*” adopted by the conference and transmitted to the UNECE. The message reiterating the principles of *the Charter* and the importance of pursuing the Agenda 2030, the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda pledging support for developing effective policies and actions to be developed and realised at all levels supported by international cooperation, to contribute to sustainable

development in the region. It also pledged support for the establishment of *Geneva UN Charter Centres of Excellence* across the region.<sup>28</sup>

30. The Vienna Conference was followed in 2019 by *The Glasgow Conference on City Living* (Glasgow, 11-19 September 2019) organised along similar lines – bringing the Committee Bureau and Secretariat to the city and its communities was a key element of both events. This conference also produced The Glasgow Message “*Living in the City: On Adequate and Affordable Housing as the Basis of Living Well*” that was also adopted by the conference and transmitted to the UNECE<sup>29</sup> and after the conference produced the film “*Living in Glasgow – A journey to 2030*”.<sup>30</sup> The film records the transformation of the city’s social and affordable housing, its learning from Vienna, the support it gains from *the Charter* and its steadfast commitment to better standards in, use of land for, and investment in social and affordable housing.

31. In parallel, the sequence of conferences and workshops continued throughout the ECE region in New York, Lyon, Prague, Geneva, Valetta, Moscow.<sup>31</sup>

32. This ‘advocacy’ phase, like the ‘inception’ phase before it, was also disrupted by a major global event with equally profound, but distinctly different effects. In 2020/21, the COVID-19 pandemic ceased all non-essential travel, public meetings were forbidden, work migrated online, and anxiety was widespread. It also landed at a critical time for the UNECE Housing initiative founded on *the Charter*: Work had been underway with the #Housing 2030 research project in partnership by UNECE, UN-Habitat and Housing Europe.

33. The #Housing 2030 research is an extensive body of funded research that, in the face of the pandemic, managed to have an extensive programme of engagement including a podcast series and its own website.<sup>32</sup> The analysis and research is thorough and well-documented with compelling evidence and clear policy propositions supported by a group of international experts.

34. The research is directed to the shaping of more resilient housing systems to ensure that decent homes and neighbourhoods are affordable, safe and accessible, through implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, meeting the Paris Agreement on climate change, and realising the *Right to Adequate Housing*. It finds on the *Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing*, and recommends that governments, the private sector and civil society take a more purposeful role in shaping housing systems to deliver outcomes that serve both human and natural habitats.

35. The research findings envisage that reforming housing systems will be necessary to overcome challenges with affordability and inclusion, caused through the operation and interaction of land, investment and labour markets. The work recognises that housing outcomes differ between countries, cities and even neighbourhoods and that policy tools need to be designed and adapted to address local conditions and quite complex causal processes.

36. The evidence is substantive and translated into policy in four key areas (Figure 1):

- (i) good governance
- (ii) good investment policies
- (iii) good land policies
- (iv) climate-neutral housing investment

37. This section dealing with advocacy and dissemination of the Charter and work developed from its adoption, closes with two actions from the early part of this decade: The preparation of the Regional Action Plan 2030, and its presentation to COP26. The first considers how *the Charter*, the Regional Report, the #Housing 2030 Research and the Secretary General/UN–Habitat briefs dealing with the aftermath of the pandemic were brought together in the regional action plan for 2030. *Place and Life in the ECE – A Regional Action Plan 2030: Tackling challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, climate and housing emergencies in region, city, neighbourhood and homes* was produced in response to mandate from the 81<sup>st</sup> Session of *the Committee* in 2020.<sup>33</sup> The report’s analysis studied the interactions

between areas of congruence among these different initiatives and put together policy principles based in the *UN COVID-19 policy guidelines* and the policies of the *Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing*:

From UN COVID-19 policy guidelines:

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

From the Geneva UN Charter, the principles of:

- Environmental protection.
- Economic effectiveness.
- Social inclusion and participation.
- Cultural adequacy.

GOVERNANCE TOOLS	Strategic frameworks		Institutions and capacity-building
	Multi-level governance		Setting and monitoring housing standards
	Evidence		Supervision
	Dedicated social and affordable housing providers		Tenant and owner-occupier involvement frameworks
FINANCE AND INVESTMENT TOOLS	Regulating financial institutions	Non-profit provision of social and affordable housing	Subsidizing rents
	Rent setting, indexation and regulation	Microfinancing	Using household savings
	Public loan, grants and purposeful investment	Interest rate subsidies	Loan guarantees and insurance
	Special-purpose intermediaries	Shared equity and costs schemes	Revolving funds for investment in affordable housing
	Taxation to guide investment		
LAND POLICY TOOLS	Public land banking		Public land leasing
	Land readjustment		Land value capture
	City and neighbourhood planning		
	Land-use regulation and inclusionary zoning		
	Land value taxation		
CLIMATE-NEUTRALITY TOOLS	Energy performance-related building regulations		Regulating the urban environment for energy efficiency
	Non-regulatory climate policy initiatives		Financial incentives
	Awareness-raising and training		

Figure 1: #Housing 2030 Policy Guidance

38. These were synthesised into two policy areas with goals for the *Regional Action Plan* to support member States in the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis through the sharing of examples and good practices in facilitating investments and promoting the “building better” approach (Figure 2):

Policy Area A: Cities, Neighbourhoods, Homes and Rural Life:

- (i) *Coordinated national, sub-national and local action through multi-level governance and strategic plans and frameworks*
- (ii) *City-wide and integrated action*
- (iii) *Sustainable neighbourhoods and local living environments*

Policy Area B: Sustainable Housing and Homes:

- (i) *Governance*
- (ii) *Land Policy*
- (iii) *Finance & Funding*
- (iv) *Climate neutral housing*

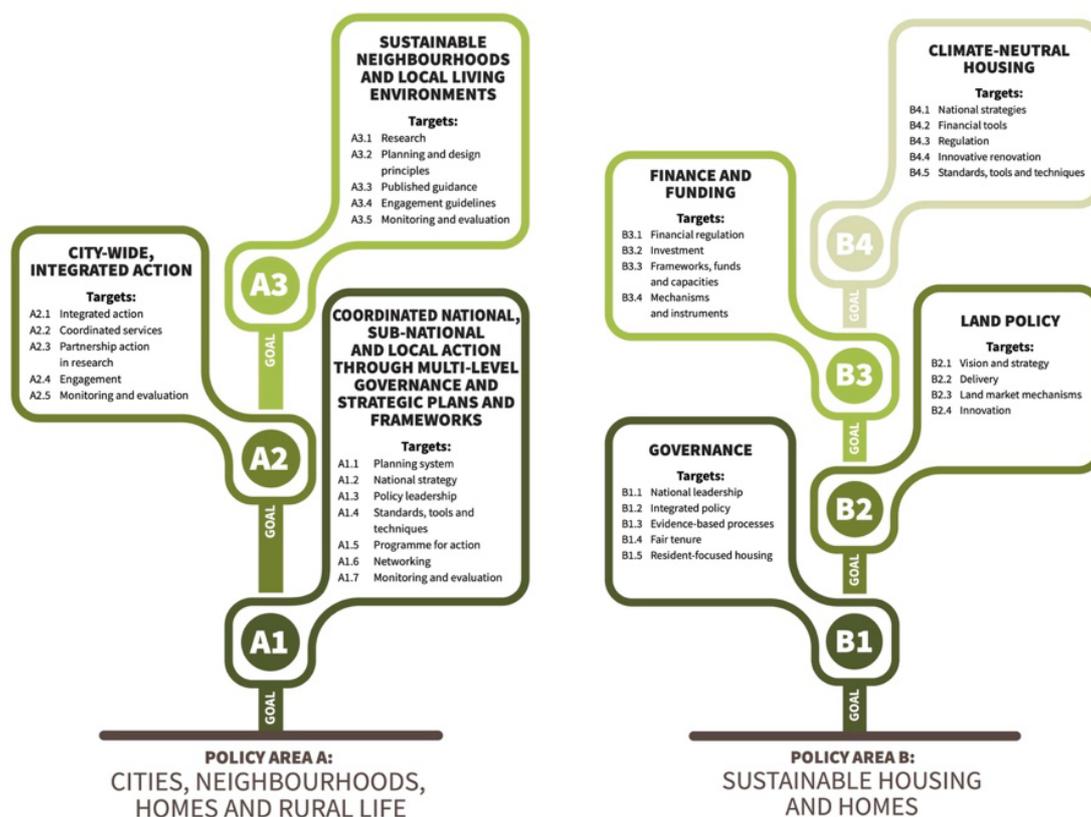


Figure 2: The Policy and Goals of the UNECE Regional Plan 2030

39. The *Regional Action Plan* was endorsed at the *UNECE Ministerial Meeting on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management* at the 82<sup>nd</sup> session of the Committee on Housing, Urban Development and Land Management (Geneva, 6-8 October 2021) and presented at UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow 2021 together with other UNECE events including the climate breakfast with USA Special Envoy John Kerry and UNECE Adviser Lord Norman Foster.<sup>34</sup>

40. In recent years, *the Committee* has developed two innovative initiatives designed to bring closer contact, communication and collaboration between the strategic and the local and enhance multi-level cooperation and exchange:

- The *UN Forum of Mayors*, a United Nations body, that enhances coherence and complementarity between the local, regional and global levels in addressing common challenges related to sustainable urban development and governance, contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. The Forum is a vehicle for collaboration and exchange of good among mayors and dialogue among cities, member States and relevant international organisations.<sup>35</sup>
- The *Geneva UN Charter Centres of Excellence* that support the Committee in the implementation of the *Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing* through dissemination of information through publications, media, national and local events, an organizing capacity building and networking activities. The Centres work at national and/or international level on topics covered by the Charter collecting and disseminating best practice, research, support, and training in housing, sustainable smart cities, urban development, and land management.<sup>36</sup>

41. The initiatives since the adoption of *the Charter* in 2015 were brought together and reaffirmed at the 83<sup>rd</sup> session of the Committee (Geneva, 4-6 October 2023) that incorporated

them into, and then adopted, the *San Marino Declaration* that provides the most recent statement of the Committee's thinking on urban development, housing and land management:

- a) Sustainable and inclusive urbanization require creative solutions for ensuring that homes, buildings, urban infrastructures and cities become increasingly more sustainable, safe, healthy, socially inclusive, culturally sensitive, climate-neutral and circular.
- b) Urban design and architecture, by virtue of shaping homes, buildings, urban infrastructures and cities, should become an integral part of the much-needed creative solutions for sustainable and inclusive urbanization and for addressing development challenges caused by population growth and demographic shifts.
- c) Mayors and civic leaders, architects, engineers, urban planners, designers, surveyors, and building managers, the creative driving force of urban transformation, hold the key to a more sustainable and inclusive urban future.

42. In a deliberate echoing of the wording of the Agenda 2030, the San Marino Declaration states, “*that every city, urban infrastructure and building should be designed in line with (eleven) **integrated and indivisible** Principles for Sustainable and Inclusive Urban Design and Architecture*”.<sup>37</sup> This is a world away from the architectural theories and urban planning concepts of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), but resonates strongly with legacy of Jane Jacobs that “*cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.*”

### **The Charter 3 – Impact**

43. “*When you take responsibility for a specific something it's possible you might get somewhere, because too often there is someone else who needs to sort out the issue*”.<sup>38</sup> The impact of work is normally measured quantitatively and qualitatively. Typical measures include the number of times the work is cited in research, in policy development, and in the media.

44. It is difficult to assemble precise figures for *the Charter*. But inferences may be drawn from this chronological review. One metric of impact of work is referred to as ‘reach’ in the sense of the audiences that the work has reached. With the Charter, it's reach has been international – and arguably global – across the governments of the 56 UNECE member States as well as the other Regional Commissions, UN agencies, and international bodies including the EU, WHO and the OECD.

45. Awareness and use of *the Charter* have reached the local level in sub-national regions, metropolitan areas and cities. The work has been studied, noted and applied across networks of cities, city regions and metropolitan areas. Numbers are difficult to assess meaningfully and assemble retrospectively. It would be possible to enumerate the number of committee meetings and, between them, the conferences, workshops, symposia and seminars that have seen *the Charter* discussed, debated, worked with, and disseminated.

46. A simple review of the chronology of events and insight into the diversity of delegates takes the number over ten years into many thousands, but attempting to quantify the number by a contrived methodology could be misleading. It is probably more relevant to reflect on how many of those involved have been reassured in what they do, been inspired to act differently, and to take on and work to implement *the Charter's* principles. The genesis, advocacy and dissemination of *the Charter* represents a remarkable consistency and persistence of approach, belief in the work and leadership in a field dedicated to make a difference that is felt at the granular level, in local neighbourhoods and in the quality of people's lives.

47. A review of citations in research and professional journals and in published formal and social media would be possible but requires input from marketing professionals to assemble

the data and exemplification would be easier, if required, by a systematic examination of the UNECE press, social media and committee archives.

48. In the two City Conferences of Vienna and Glasgow, the Secretariat and Bureau members together with international and local speakers, considered the work in context, reached a wide audience, saw the evidence on the ground and met with local people and then joined with the conference delegates to feedback messages of support to *the Committee*. The *Committee* archive shows, these are not isolated occurrences. The legacy of *the Charter* is clear, not only in the development of housing policy and action for better lives, but in extending into wider city policy across the territory of the UNECE.

49. Perhaps the greatest legacy of *the Charter* is that it has been sufficiently robust to act as a foundation platform in the development of the Committee's work in social and affordable housing that led on to the *#Housing 2030 research*, to *Place and Life, the UNECE Regional Action Plan 2030*, to *UNFCCC COP26* in 2021, the International Social Housing Festival in Helsinki 2022, and the San Marino Declaration 2023 (Figure 3).



Figure 3: The Geneva UN Charter for Sustainable Housing within the policy context of Agenda 2030, the Secretary General's COVID-19 policy briefs, the #Housing 2030 research and the UNECE Regional Action Plan 2030

50. This work combined with the Committee's innovations at a more local level through the establishment of the *Forum of Mayors* and the network of *Geneva UN Charter Centres* has given the work a granularity that is invaluable in terms of delivering on the aim to achieve greater awareness and delivery of social and affordable housing.

51. Several countries and international bodies have declared a housing emergency. This is a global risk caused by demographic change, climate change, failure of markets and changing social patterns and occupancy. The work and the challenge for the Committee does not lessen.

52. When work began on assembling the evidence for *the Charter*, it was possible, if not simple, to approach housing in isolation but unforeseen global events such as the financial crash and the COVID-19 pandemic, and international tensions mean that housing must be approached, not only as a sector in its own right, but as part of an overarching systems approach to the delivery of the ambition of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. The rapid onset of artificial intelligence may make this easier or it may not. As is always the case with new technologies there is a choice for society to make.

53. It could perhaps be argued that the work of *the Charter* has been done, its fundamental principles aims and policies are increasingly seen as mainstream. Its effects are felt in work

that has been prepared for this meeting of the Committee dealing with affordability on one hand and the possibilities of multilevel governance on the other.

54. Next year there may be a reflection on the *New Urban Agenda* at the midpoint of the HABITAT cycle. The *New Urban Agenda* is a book of pledges and a ready reckoner of what we should be doing but there remains a challenge in ‘grounding’ the *NUA* within individual member states and focusing the language at the city and metropolitan level where action is most pressing.

## Conclusions

55. This paper has reviewed the evolution and development of housing policy in the work of the *UNECE Committee for Urban Development, Housing and Land Management*. The adoption of the *Geneva UN Geneva Charter on Social Housing in 2015* has been used a pivotal moment in the work, when tracking trends and issues became synthesised and codified into a policy formulation for intentional intervention in pursuit of better quality of housing for people’s lives. The well maintained and curated public archive means that it has been possible to track the development of core ideas overtime as they became refined and were able to be structured into a coherent charter proposition for social housing across the region with its 56 member States.

56. One of the benefits of a longitude review of a topic is the opportunity to reflect on significant events that attract great interest when they occur but subsequently have subtle effects that still exert a profound impact overtime. In this paper, it has been possible to review how this policy has performed and how it has interacted with wider global UN developments. It has been possible to track formulation of an approach that became formalised and used as an instrument of policy.

57. The public archive of the Committee’s work has provided a clear and navigable record of the inception, evolution, adoption and application of *the Charter*. It has been possible to track the effect of world events on the Committee’s work – some that have been planned and beneficial with a positive effect such as the global conferences on the human habitat procured by UN-Habitat. Others have been unforeseen – the financial crash of 2008–2012 and the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–21 – have affected delivery in the first quarter of the 21st century.

58. The paper uses the *Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing* as a pivotal event in the Committee’s mission. The Charter has provided a document with clear principles for many (national governments, NGOs, international agencies, city governments, researchers and practitioners) that is accessible, forward looking, and non-threatening in tone. Through the dedicated and continuing work of the *Committee Bureau*, key individuals and supporters (e.g. Housing Europe, The European Federation of Cooperative Social Housing, etc) the Charter has convinced and inspired many to join and support the effort. A key to this success is that ECE has never castigated “entities” for what they have done wrong, but rather invited, supported, helped and encouraged them to think about what might be possible and what they might achieve. This is a resolutely positive approach to prospective action.

59. The Charter has already assured a legacy; this paper has documented how it has influenced downstream and significant work but remains a current and valued reference document with purpose and legacy. The Charter’s significance remains current even if the passage of time and our current zeitgeist warrant its updating. It is clear enough to have people keep sight of its central core mission that the purpose of housing is to provide shelter for people, that is affordable, sustainable and secure. It has had the support of the changing diets of ministers, three Executive Secretaries and their teams and numerous professionals dedicated to improvement of the lived quality of people’s lives and the quality of their homes. This is not a claim that could be made for many documents.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> The research for this paper is based on a systematic review of the public archive of the work of the UNECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management accessible here the author's experience.
- <sup>2</sup> See: <https://unece.org/mission>
- <sup>3</sup> See: <https://unece.org/>
- <sup>4</sup> See: <https://unece.org/housing/committee>.
- <sup>5</sup> The Working Party on Land Administration is a subsidiary body to the Committee. Established in 1996, it supports and promotes security of tenure, improving and creating more effective land registries and promoting sustainable land use policies. The Real Estate Market Advisory Group (REM) is a multi-stakeholder group of experts that advises both the Committee and the Working Party on all of the issues within their mandate and, in particular, on adequate, energy-efficient and affordable housing, housing finance, sustainable urban development, smart cities and cities financing, registration and property valuation, land markets and land administration.
- <sup>6</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 236. Quoted by numerous sources including for example Project for Public Spaces, accessed September 1, 2025, <https://www.pps.org/article/jjacobs-2>
- <sup>7</sup> ECE Strategy for a Sustainable Quality of Life in Human Settlements in the 21st Century <https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/documents/Publications/sust.life.21st.century.pdf>
- <sup>8</sup> ECE Strategy for a Sustainable Quality of Life in Human Settlements in the 21st Century <https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/documents/Publications/sust.life.21st.century.pdf>, page 1
- <sup>9</sup> “in transition” is bracketed here because this need has been shown to be no less demanding in the developed countries of North America and Western Europe as much as it is in Central and Eastern European countries.
- <sup>10</sup> This is a summary by the author of the eight principles for Strategy 2001 set out as points (a)–(h) on page 14.
- <sup>11</sup> Management Problems with Housing Stock, Moscow, 2003 <https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/prgm/hmm/condominiums/condoprogr.moscow.pdf>  
Organisational Sustainability and Capacity Building, Edinburgh 2003 <https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/documents/2003/hbp/wp.7/hbp.wp.7.2003.5.e.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> Prague: <https://unece.org/info/events/event/348383>  
<https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/prgm/hmm/social%20housing/soc.hou.proceedings2003.pdf>  
Vienna: <https://unece.org/info/Housing-and-Land-Management/events/349557>  
[https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/prgm/hmm/social%20housing/2004\\_vienna/documentation/UNECE\\_Report\\_FIN.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/prgm/hmm/social%20housing/2004_vienna/documentation/UNECE_Report_FIN.pdf)
- In addition to the final report of the event itself, the Vienna Symposium produced a series of documents that formulated the draft content for subsequent guideline documents:
- Chapter 1: Historical Development Of Social Housing (PDF)
- Chapter 2: The Role Of Social Housing In Housing Policies (PDF)
- Chapter 3: The Institutional Framework (PDF)
- Chapter 4: The Legal Framework - First Draft (PDF)
- Chapter 5: The Macro-Economic Framework (PDF)
- Chapter 6: Financing Of Social Housing (PDF)
- Chapter 7: Social Cohesion (PDF)
- Chapter 8: Social Housing Design (Pdf)
- Chapter 9: Pilot Projects And Research I Social Housing (PDF)
- <sup>13</sup> 64<sup>th</sup> Committee Session: <https://unece.org/info/events/event/349546>  
66<sup>th</sup> Committee session: <https://unece.org/info/events/event/349576>
- <sup>14</sup> Social/Affordable Housing – A New Challenge for the ECE Countries HBP/2002/3 8 July 2002 <https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/documents/2002/hbp/hbp.2002.3.e.pdf>

---

Report On The Sixty-Fourth Session ECE/HBP/129, Task Force for the preparation of guidelines on social housing, page 8: <https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/documents/2003/ece/hbp/ece.hbp.129.e.pdf>

- <sup>15</sup> Guidelines on Social Housing Principles and Examples ECE/HBP/137 <https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/documents/2006/ece/hbp/ECE.HBP.137.pdf> and Report on the 66<sup>th</sup> Session ECE/HBP/136 page 7 para 36 [https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/documents/2005/ECE/hbp/ECE\\_HBP\\_136.e.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/documents/2005/ECE/hbp/ECE_HBP_136.e.pdf)
- <sup>16</sup> Sustainable and Liveable Cities, Leeds 2002: <https://unece.org/info/events/event/349539> Sharing Responsibility for Our Region: Redefining the Public Interest for Territorial Development, Bratislava, <https://unece.org/info/events/event/349579>
- <sup>17</sup> The refinement process concluded with an informal negotiating session in Geneva in 2014, <https://unece.org/info/events/event/349360> that resolved outstanding issues ahead of the 75th Session of the Committee in 2014 with a clear resolution on how to proceed: document ECE/HBP/2014/2 [https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/documents/2014/ECE\\_HBP\\_2014\\_2.pdf](https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/documents/2014/ECE_HBP_2014_2.pdf).
- <sup>18</sup> <https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/documents/Publications/sust.hsng.strategy.pdf>
- <sup>19</sup> See for example: Weinberg, Jonas. The Great Recession and Its Aftermath; <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great-recession-and-its-aftermath>
- <sup>20</sup> The Paris Agreement: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>. Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (New York: UN General Assembly A/RES/70/1, 2015), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/291/89/pdf/n1529189.pdf>. Priorities for HABITAT III in the UNECE region: Side event to the First Session of the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Housing and Urban Development [https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/prgm/other/side\\_event/HABITAT\\_III/side\\_event\\_agenda\\_HABITAT\\_III\\_Conference.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/prgm/other/side_event/HABITAT_III/side_event_agenda_HABITAT_III_Conference.pdf)
- <sup>21</sup> Neal R. Peirce, Curtis W. Johnson and Farley M. Peters, Century of the City: No Time to Lose (New York: The Rockefeller Foundation, 2008), 7.
- <sup>22</sup> Former UN Secretary General Ban-ki Moon developed by his successor Antonio Guterres as “Cities are where the climate battle will largely be won or lost”
- <sup>23</sup> Dr. Joan Clos, appointed Secretary General of Habitat-III, set as the mission for the event to work towards a consensus in urban thinking described as the New Urban Agenda.
- <sup>24</sup> Chapter 6 summary and conclusions from the UNECE Regional Report.
- <sup>25</sup> See for example Regional issues and shared challenges shaping the New Urban Agenda <https://unece.org/info/events/event/348846>
- <sup>26</sup> The NUA text: <https://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-English.pdf>  
The NUA illustrated handbook: <https://observatorio2030.com/sites/default/files/2021-01/The%20new%20urban%20agenda%20illustrated.pdf>
- <sup>27</sup> Smart Sustainable Cities and the publication people-smart Sustainable Cities <https://unece.org/housing/smart-sustainable-cities> [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/SSC%20nexus\\_web\\_opt\\_ENG\\_0.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/SSC%20nexus_web_opt_ENG_0.pdf)
- <sup>28</sup> Vienna Conference on Sustainable Housing: "Promoting access to affordable and decent housing through the implementation of the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing" <https://unece.org/info/events/event/17862> The Vienna message is at:

[https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/Meetings/2018/04\\_12/Documentation/Message\\_of\\_the\\_Vienna\\_Conference\\_12\\_April\\_2018.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/Meetings/2018/04_12/Documentation/Message_of_the_Vienna_Conference_12_April_2018.pdf)

- <sup>29</sup> UNECE Conference on City Living – Glasgow; <https://unece.org/info/events/event/17800>  
The Glasgow message is at [https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/Meetings/2019/09\\_12-13\\_Glasgow\\_Conference/Glasgow\\_Message.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/Meetings/2019/09_12-13_Glasgow_Conference/Glasgow_Message.pdf)
- <sup>30</sup> “Living in Glasgow – A journey to 2030” available at <https://radar.gsa.ac.uk/8099/>
- <sup>31</sup> New York (2018): Adequate, Safe and Affordable Housing as a Pillar for Sustainable Development; <https://unece.org/info/events/event/17883>
- Lyon (2019): European High-level Roundtable on Housing: Bridging the Gap in Affordable Housing; <https://unece.org/info/events/event/17795>
- Prague (2019): International Conference "Affordable Housing in the 21st Century"; <https://unece.org/info/events/event/17798>
- Geneva (2020): (Hybrid) Panel discussion “Improving housing affordability in the UNECE Region”; <https://unece.org/info/events/event/348410>
- Valetta (2021): (Online) workshop “Towards Sustainable Homes and Neighbourhoods in the Mediterranean Region: Reflecting on Malta’s potential”; <https://unece.org/info/events/event/348409>
- Moscow (2021): (Online) UNECE Subregional Workshop: Policies for housing affordability in Russia and CIS; <https://unece.org/info/events/event/353358>
- <sup>32</sup> <https://unece.org/housing-and-land-management/publications/housing2030-study-e>; Document: [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/Housing2030%20study\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/Housing2030%20study_E_web.pdf); #Housing 2030 website: [www.housing2030.org](http://www.housing2030.org)
- <sup>33</sup> 82<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Committee and UNECE Ministerial Meeting; <https://unece.org/info/events/event/351392>  
Place and Life Document: [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/ECE\\_HBP\\_2021\\_2-E.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/ECE_HBP_2021_2-E.pdf)
- <sup>34</sup> Only together with cities can we reach climate goals, John Kerry, Norman Foster and Mayors at COP26 with UNECE; <https://unece.org/climate-change/press/only-together-cities-can-we-reach-climate-goals-stress-john-kerry-norman>  
UNECE/Glasgow Climate Breakfast John Kerry/Norman Foster:  
Collaborative UN Event: <https://unece.org/housing/events/unfccc-cop26-collaborative-un-system>
- <sup>35</sup> The UNECE Forum of Mayors: <https://unece.org/forumofmayors>
- <sup>36</sup> Geneva UN Charter Centres of Excellence <https://unece.org/housing/charter-centres>
- <sup>37</sup> 83<sup>rd</sup> session of the UNECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management; <https://unece.org/info/events/event/364158>  
San Marino Declaration Document ECE/HBP/2022/2: [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/ECE\\_HBP\\_2022\\_2\\_REV-E.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/ECE_HBP_2022_2_REV-E.pdf)
- <sup>38</sup> This quotation is from the author, poet and farmer Wendell Berry who is quoting the environmentalist Paul Kingsnorth. One of the central themes of Berry’s writing is turning advocacy into action. As Berry himself puts it “too often there is someone else who needs to sort out the issue”. In this this quotation, therefore, Berry calls on us all take responsibility for a small “something” in order to get “somewhere”. *How the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing inspired practical steps to promote sustainable housing at regional, national and local levels* <https://radar.gsa.ac.uk/5924/>