



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
18 July 2019

Original: English

Economic Commission for Europe

Committee on Housing and Land Management

Eightieth session

Geneva, 2-4 October 2019

Item 2(c) of the provisional agenda

Review of the implementation of the programme of work 2018-2019:

Sustainable urban development and smart sustainable cities

Summary of discussions from the Day of Cities and related recommendations

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The ECE held its sixty-eighth Commission Session on 9 and 10 April 2019 with the overall theme of “Smart Sustainable Cities”. A Day of Cities was organised on 8 April, featuring two roundtables of mayors and deputy mayors.

This document presents a summary of the discussions led at the Day of Cities, including information on attendance, discussions, and opportunities for the way forward in building upon the outcomes of this event.

The Committee will be invited to take note of the information presented and endorse the recommendation.



I. Introduction

1. With the proportion of urban population estimated to reach two-thirds of humanity by 2050, rapid urbanization is increasingly recognized as one of the major challenges of our times. This is reflected in the attention given to urban issues in key global and regional agreements, including the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, especially SDG11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; the New Urban Agenda; and the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing, among others.
2. Sustainable urban development and smart cities also represent an important aspect of the Committee's programme of work (ECE/HBP/2017/7). At the ECE level, the establishment of the Nexuses on Smart Sustainable Cities and Sustainable Mobility and Smart Connectivity represents a notable attempt to mobilize inter-divisional expertise and support the cities of the ECE member States to incorporate best urban sustainability practices.
3. To strengthen the cooperation and showcase the work of the Nexuses, this year's ECE sixty-eight Commission Session was held under the overall theme of "Smart Sustainable Cities". The Session was preceded by the Day of Cities, which featured two roundtables where mayors and deputy mayors from ECE member States presented best practices from their cities, described challenges encountered in trying to make their cities smarter and more sustainable, and elaborated their vision for the future of urban sustainability in the region. The discussion was continued during the Commission Session's high-level segment, where member States further deliberated on how to harness smart sustainable cities as drivers for sustainable development in the ECE region. Building upon discussions led both at the Day of Cities and the Commission Session, the Russian Federation proposed that the Committee on Housing and Land Management explores "the possibility of establishing a forum of Mayors" (See E/2019/37; E/ECE/1488 paragraph 38).
4. The Bureau met on 6 June in Lyon to discuss possible options and provide recommendations for the Committee to take action.
5. This paper summarises the discussions from the Day of Cities, identifies key trends, needs and challenges to smart sustainable urban development in the region. It also reflects on, based on the evaluation forms given to the participants, how to take forward the discussion on sustainable urban development at this policy-making level. Finally, addressing the request of the Bureau, the paper ends with recommendations to establish a Steering Committee that would provide an input and organize an annual Forum of Mayors under the current Committee of Housing and Land Management.

II. Background information and attendance

6. The Day of Cities was envisioned and organized as an interdivisional effort, building upon synergies and cooperation of the teams which constitute the Nexus on Smart Sustainable Cities and the Nexus on Sustainable Mobility and Smart Connectivity. In the early stages of preparations for the event, member States were invited to nominate cities with notable urban practices, after which the Secretariat approached the selected cities with an official invitation. Efforts were made to ensure geographical and gender balance of invited participants; to this end, the Secretariat worked to secure at least one nominated city per ECE member State and paid due attention to ensure gender equality vis-à-vis invited participants. Over 150 mayors from 56 ECE member States received an invitation to participate; out of whom more than 50 mayors and deputy mayors attended the event, including representatives from Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, France, Republic of North Macedonia, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, Portugal, the Russian Federation, San Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the UK, and Ukraine. In instances when no mayor or deputy from an ECE member State was available, the Secretariat invited prominent experts from government-affiliated bodies or notable universities from that country to brief the attendees.

7. The event featured two roundtables, and all participants were given the opportunity to select their preferred roundtable and topic. The first roundtable, which took place on the morning of 8 April, was themed “Improving the quality of life of urban inhabitants”. During this roundtable, the mayors were invited to discuss smart tools for more sustainable environment, increased resilience to disasters and climate change; as well as affordable and healthy housing, improving the access to basic services for vulnerable populations and sustainable infrastructure. The second roundtable, taking place in the afternoon, was themed “Improving the efficiency and competitiveness of urban operations and services”. This roundtable accommodated a discussion on smart tools for road safety and sustainable urban mobility, the desired infrastructure for cities of the future; and policy instruments needed to improve the efficiency and competitiveness of urban services. Participants’ speeches were followed by a Q&A session and the audience was given the opportunity to enquire about any specific projects or initiatives mentioned. The speeches are available online¹.

III. Summary of the discussions at the Day of Cities and the Commission Session

8. Mayors’ speeches at the Day of Cities highlighted many similarities in approaches to sustainable urban development in the region; but also some deep-seated differences with respect to what is taken as a priority for action and to the degree to which national governments are working with cities to address these priorities.

9. A number of participating mayors identified the access to sustainable, adequate and affordable housing as a policy priority. The recurring themes in their speeches included the emphasis on coming up with new forms of housing management; giving more control over development of the housing stock to local authorities; and the need to create a structure of incentives to stimulate the shift from housing policies oriented at increasing housing ownership towards ensuring accessible rental housing. Many participants demonstrated familiarity with the Committee’s work on affordable housing and the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing, although this varied significantly throughout the region.

10. Participants also reflected on the urban dimension of the existing global trend of rising inequalities; in particular, how this affects the access to affordable housing, basic services and green infrastructure. They stressed that reducing inequalities must be at the centre of all efforts towards genuine sustainable urban development; and that consideration of potential impact of urban projects on the existing inequalities must be incorporated into early planning stages of such projects. The expansion of green urban areas, both in terms of their number and accessibility to wider public, was identified by many participants as important goal, in addition to better regulatory mechanisms for air pollution and municipal waste. Concrete policies for food sustainability and integrated waste management system were also presented, and their implications for urban sustainability reiterated.

11. Climate change was identified as one of the key issues requiring inter-government and inter-city cooperation. In addition to a call for tapping into different sources of expertise on climate change mitigation and adaptation, the participants highlighted the potential of bottom-up approaches to combating climate change; for instance, by experimenting with new forms of citizen participation in meeting carbon-neutrality goals. Increasing energy efficiency of residential buildings, which are known to be a significant contributor to carbon emissions, as well as improving the existing regulations in the construction industry and encouraging the use of local, more environment-friendly materials, were flagged up as important steps in the right direction.

12. A common challenge identified by city leaders was the access to funding for smart sustainable urban development. The participating mayors described in detail the financial constraints they are facing and explained how they often turn to creative means of funding

¹ <https://www.unece.org/housing/dayofcities.html>

small-scale projects, such as crowdfunding. They also expressed an interest in being introduced to concrete examples of the potential offered by public-private partnerships and innovative financial mechanisms more generally.

13. Sustainable urban mobility was flagged as a major challenge for medium-sized and large cities. The initiatives to bring down the number of cars and encourage a shift towards electric cars and more environmentally friendly means of transport, were described as essential for achieving this aim. Full digitalization of urban services, widely available WiFi for urban residents, and concrete steps towards improving urban infrastructure and increasing its resilience to climate change, were cited as some of the ongoing efforts towards harnessing innovative technologies in order to increase the quality of life of urban inhabitants and urban services alike.

14. The participants also underlined the importance of data-based policy making and accordingly, of having the adequate tools for measuring progress towards making cities smarter and more sustainable. They noted that the initiatives such as United 4 Smart Sustainable Cities, and its flagship product, the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are very welcome in this regard. Among speakers there were several representatives of cities that applied the KPIs and were keen to share their experience with other participants.

15. At the end of the meeting, the speakers were presented with an evaluation form, and out of 50 mayors and deputy mayors who attended and 33 who spoke at the event, 27 completed this form. The main conclusions drawn from the form include mayors expressing a strong preference for similar meetings of mayors in the future and an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing discussion on urban sustainability; the need for a stronger inclusion of urban stakeholders at the international level, as well as strengthening the relationship between national and local governments towards achieving urban-related SDGs (see Annex).

16. All participants observed that current level of urbanization and other challenges, including climate change and air pollution, cannot be addressed by national governments alone; and that stronger involvement at the local level and inter-city cooperation is becoming increasingly necessary. They commended the ECE for organising Day of Cities, noting that more of these should take place; and observed that the ECE is uniquely well positioned to mediate between national and local governments when it comes to the implementation of urban SDGs and should translate this opportunity into concrete action.

17. At the Sixty-eighth Commission Session which took place on 9 and 10 of April, the delegates were briefed on the outcome from the Day of Cities by Ms. Elena Szolgayova, the Chair of the Committee and Ms. Ingvild Gundersen Little, National Coordinator, the Norwegian WHO Healthy Cities Network. In the subsequent discussions at the Commission Session, the Russian Federation supported the continuation of city-related work. In this regard, the Russian Federation proposed that ECE should continue its support to the work of Cities and local authorities to further facilitate the exchange of experience and discuss solutions to address challenges to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in urban areas and requested that the Committee on Housing and Land Management explores “the possibility of establishing a forum of Mayors”.

IV. Recommendations

18. The Bureau of the Committee considered the outcome of the discussions at the Day of Cities and the Commission Session and agreed on the need to enhance the work of the Committee in support of local authorities/mayors, building on the success of the Day of Cities. The Bureau met on 6 June in Lyon, France, and discussed possible options. The Bureau is recommending the following for the consideration of the Committee at its eightieth session:

(a) To dedicate one of the three days of the Committee session to discussions on, and the participation of, local authorities, in particular mayors, following a similar format to the Day of Cities. The “Forum of Mayors” will be organized on the first day of the Committee session and focus on a specific thematic issue related to sustainable urban development, housing and land management.

(b) The Forum will be held in 2020 and 2021. An assessment of the meeting format, based on parameters agreed upon by the Committee Bureau, will be presented at the Committee session in 2022 to decide whether to continue with the format, changing format (e.g. organizing the Forum back to back with other UNECE events and meetings) or discontinue the meeting.

(c) The Forum will transmit its recommendations on how to address the challenges that local authorities/governments face in achieving sustainable urban development, housing and land management in the context to better assist the Committee in its activities in the ECE region to the Committee;

(d) Recommendations of the Forum relevant to other ECE bodies will be forwarded by the Committee to the relevant body for information and possible consideration (e.g. Sustainable Energy Committee, Inland Transport Committee, etc.).

(e) The Forum will be supported by a small steering committee composed of interested bureau members, selected local authorities and experts based on the thematic session of the Forum and invited by the Secretariat. The steering committee will communicate mainly via electronic means. The functions of the Steering committee would be to assist the secretariat with:

- (i) the identification of the topic to be covered by the Forum
- (ii) the identification of relevant cases to present at the Forum
- (iii) advise on substantive matters related to the Forum discussion and review background documents prepared by the secretariat in support of the discussions, if any.

(f) An assessment of its results and functions will be presented to the Committee session in 2022 for its consideration and possible extension or format change.

Annex

Evaluation Form Summary and Analysis

1. At the end of the meeting, an evaluation form was distributed to the mayors and deputies who were actively participating at the event, to assess their experience of the Day of Cities and examine if there is an interest in having similar meetings in the future and what these should look like.

2. Out of 50 mayors and deputy mayors attended and 33 who spoke at the event, 27 completed the evaluation form, including representatives from Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, the UK, and Ukraine. Based on the evaluation forms completed, 100 per cent of participants stated that they found the Day of Cities useful and that similar meetings of mayors and key urban authorities are desirable in the future.

3. Regarding the *perceived usefulness* of the meeting, the participants appreciated the plethora of useful information and an exposure to different urban realities, which they felt were useful in coming up with ideas for innovative urban policies. They also praised the UNECE for recognizing the importance of cities for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and noted that the UN should use its position to promote better cooperation and implementation of urban policies at the local level. The respondents also welcomed the opportunity for networking amongst their peers and recognized in it a chance to establish cooperation and scale up their capacities for action.

(a) Recurrent responses

4. A chance to learn more about different urban realities in the same region, shared challenges and opportunities;

5. Good mix of smaller and larger cities, but further discussion needs to acknowledge different challenges that affect cities on a different scale;

6. Felling of belonging and opportunities to build alliances and network with peers.

7. The respondents were also asked to identify *the issues future meetings of this kind should focus on*. This is where the responses were most varied, highlighting the diversity of priorities in respective cities and different policy imperatives. Among the issues raised, several mayors identified as important sustainable urban transport, including introduction of incentives to reduce the number of cars, introducing electric cars and sustainable infrastructure, as well as smart tools for improving public services. Other respondents underlined the importance of considering business perspective on urban development, as well as the examples of effective public-private partnerships. Finally, the respondents called for paying adequate attention to human-centred urban development by, for instance, linking spending on infrastructure to socio-economic and gender inequalities, and focus on citizen participation and inclusiveness as well as thinking of future inhabitants and therefore, adequately planning cities for the future.

(b) Recurrent responses

8. Focus on the regulations and restrictions in the sphere of urban mobility; as well as on human-centred urban development;

9. Focus on the concrete role of cities in achieving the SDGs and how they can contribute;

10. Focus on city governance, citizen participation but also the relationship between federal and local levels.

11. Finally, the mayors were asked to identify *concrete improvements that could be made to make such meetings more useful for them*. A recurrent theme in the respondents' answers was allowing PowerPoint presentations to effectively visualise problems and solutions in

their cities; but also allowing them more time to speak and ensuring good time-keeping. 12. Another popular suggestion was ensuring a proper discussion takes place, not just presentations, and for this, small breakout groups of mayors were identified as a good way forward. Finally, respondents noted that in addition to more time, due consideration should be given to concrete ongoing projects in cities.

(c) Recurrent responses

12. Allow participants to use PowerPoints;
13. Make sure a discussion takes place, not just speeches, and build thematic groups for mayors;
14. Presentations and speaking points should be available after meetings, and well as other informal opportunities to network with peers.

(d) Voices from participants

15. *“It is very positive that the UNECE recognizes the cities’ role when it comes to implementing the SDGS.”*
 16. *“[This] is one of the rare occasions where the UN puts cities at the epicentre of public discourse and political decisions. There should be more of these.”*
 17. *“A great opportunity to exchange the experiences and good practices with other mayors. It is useful to hear smart solutions for the [2030] Agenda for Sustainable Development, and it is also an opportunity to connect cities and establish the cooperation in order to scale up their capacities.”*
 18. *“We should have some smart solutions how to convince the government that we are dealing with different problems than they are.”*
 19. *“It is interesting to hear experiences from other cities facing similar problems we have in our own cities.”*
 20. *“[Mayors’] speeches have shown that we have quite similar challenges (and even solutions) all over Europe and at least in a part of Asia. The feeling that we are [in this] together motivates to achieve our goals even [more] determinately. It is also important to get new ideas from other’s examples.”*
-