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The Twelfth Session of the Working Party on Land Administration

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests, Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the Twelfth Session of the Working Party on Land Administration of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, both for those of you here in the room with us in Geneva and for those joining remotely. Thank you for your presence at this important event.

This session was initially planned to take place in Valetta, Malta, on the invitation of the Ministry of Social Accommodation of Malta. Unfortunately, due to the unpredictability of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related difficulties on travel and event organization, we were unable to have it take place there. I'm sure you will all agree that we wish we could have some Maltese sunshine today! I use this opportunity to thank the Government of Malta and personally the Minister His Excellency Mr. Roderick Galdes, for the offer to host this session and the commitment to cooperate. Minister Galdes, I greatly look forward to your presentation and I hope we will be able to hold another UNECE meeting in Malta after this pandemic is over.

This session is **taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic** which affected our lives in many ways. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already complex issues of shrinking land resources, land degradation, and conflicts over use of land. Land administration authorities work hard to ensure the accurate administration of real property units and the consequent documentation of private, public and company-specific buildings and land units. In addition, they also work to inform the public about rights of ownership and services.

In light of the above, this session of the WPLA will focus on role of **land administration and management during the COVID-19 pandemic and will discuss how the work of the registries and cadastres changed and how they could support governments and stakeholders to recover better**. Sustainable land administration systems **support preparedness planning** for disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, across rural, peri-urban, and urban areas by providing resources and tools to national, regional and city governments and basic service providers.

The impact of COVID-19 has been devastating around the world. In response, countries have put in place emergency measures to help their inhabitants manage and recover from the pandemic and to boost the economy once the lockdown restrictions can ease. Many economies do not have the financial ability to implement broad recovery programmes, as the revenues from key economic sectors have collapsed, expenditures to respond to the pandemic have escalated rapidly, and capital outflows have increased.

In addition, there are potential impacts of COVID-19 on land tenure. For example, there may be more distressed sales of property and land or evictions as a result of job loss or the need for quick money to care for sick family members. Evidence suggests women bear a disproportionate burden as they may lose their rights to land and property with the death of a male property owner in the family, as in some countries women are often not included on the property title.

One area often overlooked is the strengthening of land and property markets. In the UNECE region, according to the Survey on Land Administration Systems, only 74% of member States have registered more than 80% of their land area. While some countries have reached considerable progress in such areas also thanks to digitalization and transparency of land administration, others are working to improve coverage and speed of registration. Research has shown that secure property rights

and effective land and property markets are cornerstones of an efficient, productive economy.

Thus, land and property markets are indispensable for an economic recovery, and if designed well, they also linked to the pillars of an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient recovery. Property rights give confidence to invest in land, allow private companies to borrow—using land as a collateral—to expand job opportunities, and enable governments to collect property taxes. This is an important source of revenue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed the vulnerability of paper-based land administration systems and makes a case for ICT-based and fit-for-purpose land administration. While the use of technology can strengthen land administration services and land governance institutions, it is not a panacea—a digital divide, digital illiteracy, and the use of technology to benefit those who can work the digital system are important concerns that we need to continue to take into account.

These issues were discussed in the UNECE-FAO webinar series¹ “Land Administration during the COVID-19 pandemic” held over the last few months and whose summary and reflections will be presented to you later this afternoon. At a time of urgency, speed is of the essence. That is why new digital technologies also have a key role to play. Technologies such as drone mapping, 3D cadastres, and blockchain will help speed up implementation of cadastre mapping, more transparent land and property registration systems, and improved services for citizens.

Dear colleagues,

¹ “Accelerated Digitalisation: The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Land Administration sector” (22 March); “COVID-19 and Property Markets: How is the pandemic affecting property markets in the UNECE region?” (15 April); and “NSDI, geospatial data and technology: The role of geospatial and cadastre agencies in the COVID-19 pandemic response” (11 May)

We need to recover better. The approach must focus on achieving a **resilient, inclusive and sustainable recovery** in a world transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Land administration and management must be considered as part of post-COVID recovery programmes. Not only can the economic benefits be enormous, but it's an important part of making the recovery inclusive, sustainable and resilient. Countries cannot lose the opportunity to leverage land for their rapid sustainable recovery.

The important role of the Working Party as a think tank will be even more important as the UN and its Member States are working towards land administration and management for an inclusive, resilient, and sustainable COVID-19 recovery. Achieving sound and efficient land administration in the ECE region is the ultimate goal of this Working Party and a crucial component of the global agenda towards implementing Agenda 2030 and the New Urban Agenda and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Join us in working with all our partners to ensure that we implement, review, and monitor the land related SDGs and the New Urban Agenda – and most importantly that we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and recover better a more **inclusive, safe, resilience and sustainable world**.

Thank you and my best wishes for a successful session.