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Statement

by

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Executive Secretary

of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

at

**UNECE Centres of Excellence Signing Ceremony
(Construction Scotland Innovation Centre)**

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Construction Scotland Innovation Centre

Hamilton, Scotland

Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Colleagues,

Good morning. It is a real pleasure for me to join you today to sign the MOUs that we have developed with your respective organizations. I am pleased to note that there are many more under development. By coming together in the context of COP 26, we highlight the significance of our partnership.

I have just arrived from a breakfast meeting with Lord Norman Foster and the US Special Advisor on Climate Change, John Kerry, as well as the mayors of many key cities around the world to talk about the post-COVID city. A special welcome also to the ministers who have joined us today, some by video. We take this as a good sign for the growing political visibility of this initiative. The built environment finally has migrated to the top of the agenda!

Buildings and the built environment must be the highest priority for action by communities and by countries to deliver not only the Paris Agreement, but also the whole 2030 Agenda. Buildings are critical across all the sustainable development goals. The goals go beyond decarbonization, though decarbonization is the most urgent as the climate crisis is existential. In fact, when we succeed with this initiative, we will have made a major step in breaking the historic link between development and carbon emissions.

Buildings and the built environment are a critical but thus far under-exploited opportunity for delivering on sustainability and development. Failure to seize this opportunity will lock in a built environment that intensifies the climate crisis and undermines efforts for globally shared and basic quality of life. Citizens and their governments grapple with the consequences of high energy prices. Reliability and affordability remain priorities for energy markets, and those priorities are not subordinated to climate change objectives. Keeping the lights on remains the number one priority. But we must achieve both, address the existential threat of climate change while delivering reliable and affordable energy services.

As economies emerge from the COVID 19 pandemic, too often we seem to revert to old patterns of economic and energy activity. In some quarters, rather than building back better, we hear calls to increase supply, whether for oil or for increased power generation from coal-fired power plants. Indeed, the current energy crisis is making the path to a sustainable energy future more difficult, but it remains doable. We must set a new course: We have called on countries to deliver high performance buildings, to reduce losses of methane, and to work to carbon neutrality while remaining agnostic and pragmatic on technology choices.

I have observed previously that it was 10 past midnight on the climate change doomsday clock. Today I can say that we are at 30 minutes past midnight! We are falling farther behind, and we are way beyond late in acting seriously. We have witnessed extraordinary weather events over this past year, with floods, fires, violent storms, and energy disruptions. The costs and the stresses of mitigation would have been so much lower had we reacted when the first warnings were issued in the late 1970s. Now we face a much steeper and harder climb, and every day we delay it gets that much harder.

The COVID pandemic has brought new urgency. It has put in stark relief the dangers of poverty for equitable outcomes and social cohesion. The pandemic has highlighted the benefits of truly collaborative approaches among nations and communities.

These accumulated developments demand an immediate focus on the built environment.

Achieving high performance in the built environment requires political leaders to recognize that buildings deliver so much. Often, we think about energy and energy access, and those are clearly important. But “high performance” addresses the dynamics of the relationship between buildings and health, and poverty, and safety, and hunger. It embraces education, gender equity, justice, and social equity. Given the reach of the built environment, we can mention water and sanitation, oceans, and ecosystems.

The discussions about post-COVID recovery turn on national economies and issues of social cohesion. Getting the built environment right brings affordability, decent work and economic growth, infrastructure, industry, innovation, and resilience.

There is a tension between comprehensive, strategic, long-term action in the built environment and the urgency of the climate crisis. There is a near-term imperative to curtail emissions of greenhouse gases to a “sustainable carbon budget”.

The built environment must play its role starting immediately.

Embodied carbon along with operational carbon resulting from the energy used in the built environment represents 40% of the carbon challenge and must be 40% of the solution. These investments also represent a great opportunity to address inequities, improve quality of life at least cost, and bring humanity into balance with the natural environment.

If we get buildings right, we can deliver so much very quickly. We are not just talking about energy and climate action, we are also talking about resilience, which means affordability and the ability to face major events like heat, cold, wind, and natural disasters. By addressing indoor and outdoor air pollution we are improving both health and comfort.

The critical factor underlying UNECE’s high performance buildings initiative is its community focus. Delivering tangible outcomes at community level but on a global scale is necessary if the world is to face its climate and development challenges. This will be possible only with the engagement of and action by community actors. Our expert community is working to elaborate effective and comprehensive approaches to deliver the premises of our initiative. We are working to develop a United Nations protocol on high performance buildings, and we are counting on contributions from all participants in the high performance buildings initiative, all of you in fact, to ensure that the protocol is effective and applied globally.

On behalf of UNECE, I would like to thank you for your support and your engagement. We look forward to working with you drive this global movement to deliver tangible outcomes.
