

## **UNECE Aarhus Convention**

### **Tenth meeting of the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-Making**

Tuesday, 11 October, 10.00–11.20 a.m. CET

**Agenda item 5:** Public participation in decision-making on urban development/cities

#### **Statement by Robert Lewis-Lettington**

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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Decision-making in environmental, territorial, and urban development is complex by nature. It has evolved over the years from various projects, interventions, and policy decisions. Although the collective work of multiple stakeholders – public, private, and community – the quality and outcomes are varied. Decision-making today increasingly reflects the need to recognise participation as both a right to be part of the process and a right to influence the outcome.

National, regional and local administrations have established sophisticated urban development systems that are meant to ensure the compliance of urban development with basic design, environmental and social quality standards and to connect each of these with the other. Urban contexts can be particularly challenging to effective public participation. Urban environments have the most complex social and cultural situations and, in many instances, the most complex challenges.

The Geneva Declaration on Environmental Democracy for Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient Development stresses the need for transparency, public participation and safeguarding the rule of law in this complex multi-level and multi-sectoral setting. It furthermore emphasizes the supporting role of education, training, capacity building, policy dialogues, building consensus and partnerships.

Research conducted by UN-Habitat indicates that governments that have achieved more successful results in influencing urban projects towards sustainability, are the ones who have not only promoted public participation but have mobilized a much wider range of governance approaches. These include: hard and soft-power instruments in the areas of analysis, monitoring, information, advocacy, storytelling, evaluation, guidance, incentive and control, technical assistance, community participation and on-site experimentation.

Achieving meaningful results for urban environmental sustainability requires not only public participation, but a shared commitment to delivering high-quality projects. It requires a change of mindset across the actors and institutions that together shape territorial development and cities. Cities that have achieved impressive results are those who have worked hard to create a widely- shared culture of quality. But such a leap forward is comprised of many small steps,

encompassed in numerous decisions associated with the development of individual plans, projects and spaces. It requires long-term commitment – well beyond the duration of many political mandate – and short-term action.

For processes to be truly participatory, they should reflect the requirement for “active, free and meaningful” participation under the **United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development**. This involves transparent decision-making whereby individuals affected by administrative decisions are allowed and encouraged to know not only the basic facts and figures, but also the mechanisms and processes behind such administrative transactions. It is the duty of civil servants, managers and trustees to act visibly, predictably and understandably. The right to information is a pre-requisite for meaningful participation in the different functions of society.

In the urban context, the **New Urban Agenda**, also emphasizes the participation of all urban residents in urban governance by encouraging collaboration among local governments, communities, civil societies and the private sector in infrastructure and basic services provision as well as urban and territorial policy and planning processes.

In 2015, UN-Habitat’s Governing Council adopted the **International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning**, as a source of inspiration and a compass for decision makers and urban professionals. The Guidelines have become a global reference framework to promote more compact, socially inclusive, better integrated and connected cities and territories, that foster sustainable urban development and are resilient to climate change. The Guidelines highlight the linkages between urban and territorial planning and inclusive public participation in decision-making.

The range of **innovative governance strategies for urban design** was more recently exemplified by UN-Habitat’s “**Urban Maestro**” initiative, which has explored how the soft, non-regulatory powers of the state can shape decisions that help deliver better-designed places, mainly in the European context.

These Guidelines and research have become even more relevant in the context of the global pandemic and the climate change crisis. Participatory processes for spatial planning and the use of **new technologies** have explored new avenues to exercise public rights. This has mitigated the impact of the reduced freedom of assembly and movement, which were put in place to respond to COVID-19. Alternative tools and processes have strengthened the participation of stakeholders, including vulnerable groups. Innovative approaches such as gaming and on-line toolboxes have been applied to the co-design of community spaces, which have been especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

UN-Habitat has developed an action-oriented toolbox called **Our City Plans** to support improved and more integrated participatory planning processes. Its digital version was launched at the World Urban Form 11 in Katowice in June this year, enabling national and local governments to

customise their own planning processes, by automatically prioritising and organising their activities, depending on their vision, budget and time constraints. Since its launch, more than 100 national and local governments and over 12,000 users have been able to move ahead with the elaboration and approval of **participatory planning processes**, as well as the formulation and construction of social and physical infrastructure projects. This has resulted in new employment opportunities, contributing to the ongoing socio-economic recovery, while promoting transparency and effective and inclusive public participation. **Our City Plans** represents an opportunity for governments, communities, private sector and academia to build more inclusive and sustainable planning processes and **achieve SDG 11.3**, building direct participation structures of civil society in **urban planning and management that operate democratically**.

This is complemented by the **UN-Habitat, Urban Law Module of the Law and Climate Change Toolkit**. This is an online and open database developed through a partnership between UN-Habitat, the UN Climate Change secretariat, the UN Environment Programme, and the Commonwealth Secretariat, to provide a global resource to help countries to put in place the legal frameworks necessary for effective domestic implementation of the Paris Agreement and their nationally determined contributions (NDCs). The toolkit advocates for robust public participation, especially for vulnerable populations, as this leads to more ambitious and transformative national and local climate governance.

UN-Habitat is also developing a toolkit on “**Enabling Meaningful Public Participation in Spatial Planning**” which will contain best practices of participatory planning from selected countries. The Guide demonstrates that participatory planning not only increases community accountability and ownership of the development process, but also strengthens democracy helping to counteract polarization and reducing inequalities and social tensions.

In relation to the **impacts of spatial planning and large-scale infrastructure on ecosystems and people’s health and well-being**, it has become critical to fully consider environmental and social concerns from the outset in plans, programmes and projects. UN-Habitat has recently adopted its **Environmental and Social Safeguards System 3.0**, for which an agency-wide capacity development exercise is being rolled out.

In this regard, we are committed to integrating the principles of **ecosystem services and nature-based solutions** in newly developed infrastructure and spatial plans, and we seek innovation in how green infrastructure is designed, developed, financed and maintained.

UN-Habitat has recently applied the above approaches, in several **cities in the UNECE region**, including Lisbon, Madrid, Pristina, Minsk, Gävle, Sandviken, Khorog and Yakutsk. Forums and discussions such as this are essential if we are to establish and maintain public participation in decision making according to common principles and objectives. Without reflection, there is little consistency or sustainability.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are looking forward to contributing to the localization of the Geneva Declaration, as we further promote innovative governance strategies in spatial planning, including transparency and effective and inclusive public participation.

Thank you for your attention.

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**For further details:**

New Urban Agenda <https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>

International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning  
<https://unhabitat.org/international-guidelines-on-urban-and-territorial-planning>

Our City Plans  
<https://ourcityplans.unhabitat.org/>

UN-Habitat, Urban Law Module of the Law and Climate Change Toolkit  
<https://climatelawtoolkit.org/>

2021 UN-Habitat Report on Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future  
<https://unhabitat.org/cities-and-pandemics-towards-a-more-just-green-and-healthy-future-0>

2021 Guide on Leveraging Multi-Level Governance for Health Equity <https://unhabitat.org/a-guide-leveraging-multi-level-governance-approaches-to-promote-health-equity>

New Governance Strategies for Urban Design  
[www.urbanmaestro.org](http://www.urbanmaestro.org)  
(See conclusive publication here [https://urbanmaestro.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/urban-maestro\\_new-governance-strategies-for-urban-design.pdf](https://urbanmaestro.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/urban-maestro_new-governance-strategies-for-urban-design.pdf))

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