

## *UNECE Symposium on Social Housing*

### *Housing for the disadvantaged*

The housing needs of the socially vulnerable and disadvantaged are a cornerstone of the work of UNECE's Committee on Human Settlements. Poverty and the social exclusion of vulnerable population groups are becoming an increasing social and political challenge. At the same time, continuously tightening public resources and the process of economic transformation, in particular in the countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and South-eastern Europe, pose considerable challenges to the provision of affordable housing. In many of these countries, the increasing reliance on market forces has not been sufficient to compensate for the decline of the role of the state in the housing sector. For this reason, the housing needs of the poor and vulnerable are often not adequately addressed. The availability of affordable housing, however, is crucial for an individual's well-being as well as for ensuring a social cohesive society. It is also an important factor for economic productivity: affordable housing is a prerequisite for labour mobility and an essential part of the creation of a policy environment conducive to enterprise formation and job creation.

Realising this, countries are increasingly searching for ways to effectively and efficiently address the housing concerns of those most in need, and the provision of social housing is an important tool to achieve this. There is a wealth of experience in social housing available in the UNECE region from which countries can mutually benefit. To facilitate the sharing of experience, the Committee on Human Settlements decided to draw up guidelines on social housing to serve the exchange of know-how on social housing policies and practices and facilitate policymakers' choices through well-documented information on these policies and practices.

### *Guidelines on social housing*

The International Symposium on Social Housing held in Vienna from 28 to 30 November 2004 marks another cornerstone in UNECE's undertakings in the field of housing policy. Already in 2002, the Committee on Human Settlement had decided to prepare guidelines on social housing. An international task force was established and in September 2003 began work on the social housing guidelines on the basis of the topics identified by the workshop's participants.

In a period where traditional housing support systems have fallen apart in many of the UNECE countries in transition, the availability of guiding criteria for the provision of housing to the socially disadvantaged has become a matter of urgency for policymakers. At the same time,

increasing budgetary constraints have forced many Western European countries to rethink their methods of social housing provision. The guidelines on social housing address the institutional, legal and financial frameworks for social housing as well as the experience made with social housing design. They analyse the role of social housing policies for society at large. In particular, they aim at extending comprehensive and well-researched information on the different instruments available for the financing and provision of social housing in order to facilitate the decision-making process of policymakers. How to build up a social housing stock, how to ensure financing in a period of budgetary constraints, how to use social housing for promoting social cohesion and inclusion, and how to develop and apply appropriate legal and institutional instruments – these are only some of the questions the guidelines aim to address.

### *Structure of the Symposium and major areas of the guidelines*

The Vienna Symposium 2004 at last offered an opportunity to present the draft guidelines, to discuss them with experts from the 55 UNECE member states and to enrich the compendium with examples of best practice. To ensure that the UNECE guidelines will be of true value to policymakers throughout the region, they were scrutinised by all major actors of the social housing sphere: social housing landlords, developers and housing associations as well as members of international and non-governmental organisations, who all contributed their input before adoption of the guidelines by the UNECE Committee on Human Settlements. The conference therefore provided a platform for delegates and experts from across the ECE region to contribute to an international dialogue on social housing.

The structure of the debate at the symposium followed the main areas addressed by the guidelines on social housing:

- Housing policy goals
- History of social housing
- Institutional responsibilities at different levels
- Legal responsibilities at different levels
- Social housing and the market
- Financing systems
- Social and functional mix in housing areas
- Quality and standards of social housing

### *Findings*

Some of the key recommendations of the Vienna Symposium are:

- not to limit the role of social housing to the provision of affordable housing to those in need of it. Social housing should be treated as an important tool to prevent social segregation and promote socially cohesive societies;
- to develop a clear strategy for social housing which signals to all housing market participants the planned approach, the state's role in supporting it, and what is required from each participant to make this strategy work;
- to develop social housing within the framework of a city's overall urban planning to avoid diffuse or mono-functional urban areas.