

Message by the Government Spokesman, Mr Stefanos Stefanou, at the opening ceremony of the Conference on «Inclusive and Sustainable Capital Cities»

(To be read by Dr Eleonora Gavrielides, Director of Press and information Office)

I am very pleased to welcome you to Cyprus and I wish you all a pleasant and fruitful stay.

Sustainable development, as a concept, derives from the 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development and is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

This cannot fail but bring to mind the, by now axiomatic, dictum: “We do not inherit the world from our ancestors: we borrow it from our children”. A maxim difficult not to identify with.

Coherent urban strategies need to recognize the inter-dependence of economic, social and environmental measures and the danger of addressing each in isolation. Issues such as housing, health, transport, employment, education, training, environmental improvement, crime reduction and good design are closely interlinked.

Policies and programmes need to be formulated in such a way so that they can deliver a balanced outcome in achieving sustainable economic growth, tackling social exclusion, enhancing (rather than suppressing) diversity, and improving the quality of urban life.

When referring to Nicosia specifically, it is fair to say that the city was not destined for partition by its social history. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Cyprus’ turbulent political history has resulted in the partition of Nicosia, to some extent from the early sixties and more tragically and completely as a result of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. The city was partitioned forcibly and artificially, to serve shortsighted political aims that have nothing to do with serving its inhabitants. Fear and misunderstandings acquired a physical reality.

How did it happen? What is the logic of violent urban partition along ethnic lines, what does it cost and why did the city succumb to it?

Nicosia was divided into Greek and Turkish sectors on either side of a buffer zone which came to be known as the Green Line as a result of a spate of intercommunal troubles in the early sixties but more drastically since Cyprus' invasion by Turkey and the occupation of nearly a third of the territory in 1974. The Turkish invasion has had *inter alia* the consequence of the displacement of nearly 200.000 people from the occupied areas, which amounted to about one third of the population of the island at the time. This had dramatic effects in relation to regional imbalances with the sudden and massive influx of people to the areas that were not occupied.

The communal and physical division of Nicosia obviously affected its economic and living conditions and thus it's potential for natural growth. The Green Line splits the city into two from east to west running through the centre core. Once in place, the barrier separating the two parts became a major factor in the urban pathology of Nicosia.

The Nicosia buffer zone is an unnatural boundary forced on the city arbitrarily. Despite numerous efforts for cooperation, the two parts of Nicosia by and large have been developing independently. This has had the very unfortunate consequence that the city centre has been downgraded from being a thriving residential and commercial area to being a rather disadvantaged part of town. The pressures from this division are compounded by the familiar pressures that beset inner cities everywhere. Cheaper housing favours concentration of low income immigrant groups and their inability to pay higher rents perpetuates a vicious circle because the housing they rent is not regularly or properly maintained. Also concentration impedes integration. It is a familiar story everywhere but it is, nonetheless, one that merits serious thought and creative solutions.

I believe that the current situation has created numerous but not unsurpassable problems for contemporary Nicosia. That is why, in recent years, our efforts have been targeted at reversing this trend of abandoning the inner city to its own devices through well thought

out revitalization schemes for the areas near the green line. We also aim to bring about conditions that are compatible with a future reunification of the city. We aim at removing barriers of every kind and replacing them with opportunities for cooperation based on dialogue and cultural exchange among all groups.

On this note, I would like to add that we are well aware that we cannot implement successful strategies without considering ways of meeting the needs of the residents. Moreover, we are aware that we cannot meet the needs of people without transparent governance at every level.

Transparent decision-making procedures, the participation of representatives of various social and political bodies, dialogue, monitoring, and public accountability all put a check on arbitrary decisions with aims that may have little to do with the common good.

There is no doubt that the development of cities is complex; there are many centres of power and many stakeholders and the dynamics of development and under-development are too complicated to be dealt with successfully by any one authority. More players with their own networks, different approaches, and complementary competencies are necessary if we are to achieve the balance required for effectiveness. Therefore, we must focus on best practices that have been tried and tested before in other cities. We need an exchange of opinions on the basis of experience. We need to reinforce our effectiveness at all levels and to support the authorities charged with the task of protecting citizens' rights and ultimately their future.

Implementing the above-mentioned suggestions requires inventiveness, flexibility, the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and respond to new challenges. Moreover, it is essential that our initiatives do not make life difficult by encouraging bureaucracy and the shirking of responsibility, but, on the contrary, that they improve quality, speed and effectiveness.

Dear friends,

I believe we must give our full support to creative intensity rather than give in to despair, inequality or conflict. Our actions should provide opportunities for all urban residents to achieve their full potential regardless of gender, age, race or physical ability thus empowering our communities and their sustainability.

The Conference beginning this evening is an excellent opportunity to exchange ideas and to acquire knowledge on a matter that affects not only our own lives but also those of the future generations to a very great extent.