

Opening Address to CLGE GA

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Honorary FIG President

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Dear CLGE Colleagues,

It has been a long time since we last met physically, since during this past year we have been unable to hold any person-to-person events.

So, it is with great pleasure to welcome you today, some of you being physically here in Greece, and some others being present only virtually. I am also very happy to know that you are all well and safe.

I thank you very much for your kind invitation and I congratulate you for the excellent organization. My special thanks to Michalis Kalogiannakis.

I recall that in 2017 and 2018 during major events while we were talking about the benefits of urbanization and globalization, we were considering opportunities and how the new disruptive technologies and tools were accelerating the shift to the digitalization of our society.

Until then it had been a common and long-established public understanding that medicine had improved significantly and that humanity had managed to overcome problems caused by pandemics that once killed large numbers of people, and which had thus influenced history and the future of many cities. Since that development in the history of medicine, and for several years since, research in infectious diseases has

lost its institutional urgency. As a result, rapid and dense urbanization became more and more a global trend for several decades and has been considered as the tool to deal with poverty which would lead us to economic growth for all.

However, with the emergence of the COVID-19 virus it has become obvious that the significant social and economic benefits of the urbanization and globalization era may be accompanied by a globalized threat and risk, something we had not expected. This deadly virus struck fast and hard and without warning and all countries, even the most developed, have proved to be unprepared.

Governments are urgently exploring short- and long-term actions on how to sustain a resilient economic and social activity while keeping their people safe, but also on how to deal with post-COVID-19 challenges; it is anticipated that the pandemic will have a continuing multidimensional impact.

Thus, during the last seven months, thanks to the existing infrastructure, almost all of us turned to digital. Very quickly we have managed to do almost all our activities in all sectors from a distance e.g., administration, education, science and conferences, commerce and shopping, entertaining, even medicine... and, we have then realized that it was not actually technology that caused disruptive changes in our lives, but the disease itself. Meanwhile technology has helped many sectors of the economy to keep moving.

The COVID-19 pandemic is threatening cities and settlements all over the world, endangering not only public health but also the economy and the structure of society, forcing us apart as we try to slow the spread of the virus. However, we - as

individuals - are still finding ways to help each other, inspiring and showing appreciation for those in the front lines helping our communities, keeping in touch with family members wherever they may be, and most importantly, helping the poorest and most vulnerable, those least able to respond.

Until there is a vaccine or cure, social distancing, a digital economy and other measures of that type may periodically slow the spread of the virus enough to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed.

However, neither do these measures constitute a solution to the problem, nor are they applicable to all groups of society. And this is important.

Therefore, surveyors like many other professionals, are seeking solutions considering how we, as experts, can do more. How can we support governments to do successfully at a larger scale, what we as individuals do at our normal scale? More specifically, how can surveyors, as geospatial and land professionals, provide appropriate tools that will support governments in their efforts to be more efficient in dealing with disaster and in empowering those most vulnerable, increasing recognition of disease and pandemics? “Who” and more importantly “where” are the most vulnerable, those with greatest exposure to any pandemic?

As with any natural disaster, the way countries and communities prepare in advance for a damaging event makes all the difference for a successful, long-term resilience and recovery. Decision-making for such preparation must be evidence-based; therefore, availability of reliable and affordable geospatial data in a timely manner is crucial. This

is at the center of surveyors' professional skills, interests and activities and I am sure that CLGE will prioritize this issue in its agenda to contribute to this global joint effort and share the European experience and knowledge in this field.

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that in many countries in our region residents of informal settlements who live and work in the informal sector with substandard hygienic and housing conditions, no stable income, no health care, security, savings, or access to credit are among those most affected. Allowing substandard conditions in informal settlements is not only a threat to residents of informal constructions, but to the general population as well.

In this respect, allow me to mention that the newly published UNECE publication, "Guidelines for Formalization of Informal Constructions," prepared jointly with FIG, may be useful to facilitate a global planning process to support many states that face the challenge of construction informality in developing fit-for-purpose policies while preparing for a post-COVID era.

According to UNECE, the benefits deriving from formalizing informal constructions could contribute to economic recovery by integration into land markets with clear ownership titles and registration. Security of tenure and rights to ownership of land and property provide access to credit, as Hernando deSoto pointed out to us 20 years ago in his book, "The Mystery of Capital." Environmental planning, construction, and utility-provision improvements can be initiated to a standard by which people can live in adequate and healthy homes to the benefit of all. UNECE has already developed an

action plan for promoting the implementation of these guidelines.

Having said all that, this was my message to you today, I would like to wish you all a pleasant and fruitful meeting and to make one more wish that our roads will cross again soon and until then please remain active and please be safe.

Have a good day my friends! Thank you again.