

ESCAP

United Nations Economic and Social  
Commission for Asia and the Pacific



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United Nations Economic  
Commission for Europe

**United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA)**

**2020 SPECA ECONOMIC FORUM**

*“Regional Cooperation to Support Socioeconomic Recovery in the Wake of COVID-19”*

**18-19 November 2020 (virtual modality)**

**DRAFT BISHKEK DECLARATION**

**“STRENGTHENING REGIONAL COOPERATION TO SUPPORT SOCIOECONOMIC  
RECOVERY IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19”**

We, the high-level representatives of the countries participating in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA),

Having met on 18-20 November 2020 in a virtual format, on the 15<sup>th</sup> session of the SPECA Governing Council and the 2020 SPECA Economic Forum,

Considering the need for innovative measures to rebuild more resilient, efficient and safe societies in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, enhancing sustainable trade and transit, including more attention to building a circular economy,

Taking into account the discussions and listening to the views of the participants on the agenda of the 2020 SPECA Economic Forum, having developed recommendations for an integrated approach that meets urgent economic, social and environmental challenges,

Adopt the following Declaration:

We reaffirm the commitment to regional cooperation and stress the importance for the SPECA participating countries to:

1. Strengthen regional cooperation in the areas of trade, transport and digital connectivity to support inclusive and sustainable recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic through:
  - Regional integration and cooperation, reinforcing transport connectivity, international transport, information and communications technology infrastructure, as well as international trade facilitation, which are among the priorities for action in the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries;

- Regional cooperation to facilitate trade, transport and digital connectivity, which are important to restore and build more resilience of supply chains, as well as maintain and enhance trade and economic relations within the region and with major trading partners;
  - Continued commitment of the participating countries to SPECA as a relevant platform for knowledge sharing and exchange of best practices to strengthen cooperation among the Governments of SPECA participating countries, relevant stakeholders and development partners, notably for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which has come under strain as a result of the pandemic;
  - Mobilization of efforts to implement the recommendations of the Ashgabat Initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport, using United Nations legal norms, standards and best practice recommendations for trade and transport facilitation, understanding that the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted existing structural problems in trade and transport procedures and regulations and made the implementation of the Ashgabat Initiative even more pertinent now. In this sense, the implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy and Principles of Sustainable Trade should be considered a priority, looking forward to enhanced work on the circular economy, which is particularly important for the SPECA subregion.
2. Continue efforts to accede to and effectively implement UN transport-related legal instruments and other conventions and agreements dealing with trade and transport facilitation. These agreements, for which ESCAP and UNECE can provide support and advice, include legal instruments listed in Annex II of the Ashgabat Initiative:
- SPECA participating countries are encouraged to fully implement the conclusions of the Regional Dialogue on Strengthening transport connectivity in the SPECA subregion and beyond in the era of COVID-19 and take advantage of these regional measures to facilitate trade and transport activities;
  - SPECA participating countries are encouraged to utilize regional transport cooperation within the SPECA Working Group on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity to support regional transport connectivity, mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and cooperate in developing the SPECA Transport Connectivity Strategy.
3. Enhance seamless digital connectivity and assess e-resilience readiness of digital networks, in particular:

- Develop and update national policies and action plans to realize the digital potential of the countries for sustainable economic transformation;
  - As recommended by the ESCAP Committee on Information and Communications Technology and Science, Technology and Innovation at its third session, support the work of the drafting committee that will develop an action plan for advancing implementation of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative in its second phase 2022-2026 and continue efforts under the 2019-2022 Master Plan;
  - Embrace digitalization as a key factor for economic transformation and driver of sustainable development. In this regard, SPECA participating countries should scale-up the sharing of good practices and technical expertise within the programme of work of the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development to create an enabling policy environment under the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development;
  - Embrace digital technologies for sustainable transformation strategies to ensure no one is left behind in the efforts for recovery from the COVID-19 crisis;
  - Develop and update national policies and action plans for digital transformation through multistakeholder consultations at the interface of the ICT, energy, trade and transport sectors, involving the private sector, civil society, academia and development partners. To this end, SPECA participating countries will support ongoing research related to the identification of smart corridors and a portal on cross-sectoral infrastructure projects;
  - Taking into account the priority of multimodality, digitalization and interoperability, develop and participate in pilot projects to standardize digital multimodal transport data and document exchange, using the UN/CEFACT standards, and starting from key documents accompanying goods in various modes of transport in the region: road, rail, inland waterways, air and maritime transport in the Caspian, as well as eTIR for transit. Explore ways of financing these activities through partnership arrangements.
4. Enhance fiscal resources and mobilize additional financial resources to support economic recovery and meet large investment needs to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.
- SPECA participating countries could increase their fiscal space by gradually phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, improving tax administration through adoption of digital technologies, introducing taxes that help reduce income inequalities and carbon emissions, and reorienting public spending towards inclusive and green development. As an immediate step, SPECA participating countries could actively engage in global initiatives on debt service relief;

- Mobilizing additional financial resources from the private sector to promote inclusive and sustainable development to address the current funding gap. Among others, SPECA participating countries could further explore innovative public-private partnership (PPP) initiatives to enhance transport connectivity, introduce green bank lending practices, issue diaspora bonds to enhance the benefit from significant remittance inflows, and create dedicated funds;
  - SPECA participating countries could strengthen regional cooperation on fiscal policies and financing for development policies. One such area is tax cooperation to reduce illicit financial flows, profit shifting by multilateral firms and offshore evasion by wealthy individuals. Regional dialogues also help facilitate the implementation of cross-border investment projects.
5. Recognize that a more integrated approach for structural economic transformation is needed for building back better with a view to implement the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Structural economic transformation is a priority for action in the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries that has made limited progress as indicated in the outcomes of the midterm review, emphasizing the importance to accelerate efforts in this aspect;
  - An integrated approach considering the implementation of the SDGs can provide countries with a relevant framework for longer term socio-economic recovery efforts;
  - The SDG Drivers' Framework and the proposed steps to identify potential drivers that can accelerate progress towards the achievement of the SDGs can be used by SPECA participating countries in their efforts to build back better after the pandemic.
6. Build on and enhance the network of SPECA Thematic Working Groups as the organizational and knowledge hub of regional cooperation in the SPECA thematic areas and build further synergies with the UN Resident Coordinator and Country Team system as the third UN pillar in support of SPECA using the excellent experience of cooperation during the 2020 SPECA Economic Forum.