



2010 SPECA ECONOMIC FORUM

“STRENGTHENING REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: A CONTRIBUTION TO LONG-TERM STABILITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF AFGHANISTAN”

(Palais des Nations, Geneva, 18-19 October 2010)

ANNOTATED PROVISIONAL PROGRAMME

ABOUT SPECA

The UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia was established in 1998 by the Tashkent Declaration, signed by the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and the Executive Secretaries of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan joined it later. The Programme, jointly supported by UNECE and ESCAP, covers six thematic areas: water and energy, transport and border crossing, trade, statistics, knowledge-based development and gender and economy. The objective of SPECA is to strengthen the human and institutional capacity of its member countries and to promote subregional cooperation. Offering a neutral UN umbrella, relevant international legal instruments and norms of which the UNECE is a custodian and the in-house expertise of the two Regional Commissions, SPECA is able to effectively address complicated and often politically sensitive issues of regional cooperation.

BACKGROUND

At the 4th session of the SPECA Governing Council on 13 November 2009 in Bishkek, the representative of Afghanistan spoke about the need for closer economic cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan as an important contribution to the long-term stabilization and reconstruction of the latter. He underlined the importance of improved transport and trade links, increased exports of gas and electricity to Afghanistan and proposed to Central Asian partners to exchange ideas and jointly address shared challenges. These ideas received favourable reaction from other participants of the 4th session of the SPECA Governing Council.

The London Conference on Afghanistan held in January 2010 underlined the importance of launching a civilian surge. It welcomed a number of recent initiatives aimed at supporting neighbouring and regional partners to work constructively together and emphasized the necessity to develop trans-regional trade and transit, including work on infrastructure as well as further progress on energy, power transmission lines and transport infrastructure. Priorities announced by the Government of Afghanistan included accelerated progress on agriculture and infrastructure.

High-level officials and experts are putting increasing emphasis on the need to focus on longer-term, more sustainable, growth-generating projects if the international community wants to achieve real stability in Afghanistan. Economic growth would facilitate reconciliation and confidence building by providing a realistic perspective to the people of Afghanistan through gradually improving living conditions and job creation to communities impoverished by three decades of war.

The UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia has the potential to substantially contribute to the achievement of the above objectives. The 2010 SPECA Economic Forum will examine how strengthened regional cooperation in Central Asia could more effectively contribute to achieving long-term stability in Afghanistan.

MAIN OBJECTIVES

- Promoting dialogue between policymakers from Central Asia and Afghanistan with the participation of high-level international partners on how strengthened regional cooperation would contribute to the security, stability and development of the broader region.
- Encouraging the international development community to discuss and possibly adopt a broader approach to the stabilization of Afghanistan.
- Enabling a multi-stakeholder dialogue with the participation of the business sector on emerging business and investment opportunities in the broader region.
- Discussing possible steps towards a closer Afghan involvement in the work of Central Asian regional organizations and bodies.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Identifying shared security and economic interests of the Central Asian countries and Afghanistan in order to strengthen the political will of Governments to overcome existing bilateral disputes and expand mutually advantageous regional cooperation.
- Identifying opportunities for cross-border projects that support stabilization efforts in Afghanistan.
- Informing the international business community about investment opportunities in Central Asia that serve the stabilization of Afghanistan.
- Facilitating the involvement of Afghanistan in the work of Central Asian regional organizations to promote dialogue, build the capacity of Afghan experts and prevent conflict over shared resources.

In addition to high-level representatives of SPECA member countries, participants will include decision-makers and experts with first-hand experience from the field with a good understanding of challenges and possible solutions. The Forum will be open to representatives of the Governments of UN member States, international and regional organizations, international financial institutions and other members of the development community. Holding the Forum in Geneva will facilitate broader participation of the private sector and the academic community.

In accordance with established practice, the Economic Forum will take place immediately prior to the session of the SPECA Governing Council (Geneva, 19 October 2010) which would allow senior policymakers from SPECA member countries to consider how the results of the Forum could be better integrated in practical activities of the Programme.

ANNOTATED PROVISIONAL PROGRAMME

1. Setting the scene: A comprehensive approach to stability based on shared security and economic interests of Afghanistan and Central Asia

The Forum is to highlight the close inter-linkage between the security, stability and prosperity of Afghanistan and Central Asia. Topics to be discussed could include the spill-over of security challenges, like religious extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal migration and other forms of organized crime, the strong interest of Central Asian countries in a stable Afghanistan, the significant resources Central Asia could offer to support the stabilization and reconstruction process, and the perspective of Central Asia and Afghanistan becoming important economic partners, which would help generate sustainable economic growth in Afghanistan and economically benefit the Central Asian States. It could also be discussed how shared security and economic interests among Central Asian States and Afghanistan can be more effectively translated into joint action supported by the international community.

2. Exploring opportunities for strengthening economic cooperation

a) Trade and investment

A key step towards realizing the full potential for economic cooperation would be the strengthening of trade and investment links among Central Asian countries and Afghanistan, including progress towards a functioning regional market. Topics to be discussed could include steps that are necessary to realize the full potential for trade and economic cooperation, including the removal of non-tariff barriers to trade, harmonization of customs procedures and standards for the electronic transmission of trade-related data. The discussion could also cover necessary steps to improve the investment climate in the region, in particular opportunities for investment in Central Asia that would contribute to the economic stabilization and development of Afghanistan too.

b) Infrastructure

Improved regional economic cooperation would provide a more solid basis for the development and financing of trans-border infrastructure projects. Further development of north-south transport corridors to ports in the Indian Ocean would generate significant income from transit, improve market access for Afghan goods and facilitate exports to Afghanistan from Central Asia and neighbouring regions. Topics to be discussed could include the development of energy and transport infrastructure, including through public-private partnerships, easier border-crossing, more effective transport facilitation measures and better roadside services.

c) Joint management of shared resources

Afghanistan and several Central Asian countries share important water resources. Water scarcity and water quality, as well as increasing demand for energy, are central developmental challenges for the broader region. Topics to be discussed could include joint management of shared resources, first of all water in view of plans to expand irrigated areas and develop hydropower in Afghanistan, the participation of Afghanistan in the work of regional organizations dealing with water, energy and environmental issues, the necessity for regular dialogue and building the capacity of Afghan experts.

3. The role of SPECA: A framework for political consultations, capacity and institution-building

SPECA is playing an increasingly active role in promoting regional cooperation in Central Asia, putting emphasis on capacity and institution building and other forms of technical cooperation. Five years of its membership in the Programme clearly revealed that Afghanistan could considerably enhance its capacity to take full advantage of economic cooperation with Central Asia. Topics to be discussed could include specially targeted capacity-building programmes within the SPECA to enable the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the private sector to take full advantage of the assistance offered by the Programme. Participants could discuss strengthened coordination and cooperation between SPECA (providing the “software” for regional cooperation) and other members of the development community (providing the “hardware” in the form of infrastructural investment), in particular the CAREC group.
