



**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL PROGRAMME FOR THE ECONOMIES OF CENTRAL
ASIA (SPECA)**

**Expert group meeting on SPECA
(Almaty, Kazakhstan, 11-12 June 2018)**

REPORT

I. Recommendations

1. The following recommendations of the Expert group meeting on strengthening the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) are brought to the attention of the Governing Council of the SPECA for its consideration and possible action:

Focal Points

(1) Nominate national focal points for SPECA.

Identity of SPECA

(2) Consider substituting “Platform” for “Programme” in the name of SPECA and focus SPECA on policy dialogue (away from project management), to be reflected in the revised Terms of Reference of SPECA.

Web site

(3) Consider developing a joint Web site on which both the United Nations Regional Commissions and SPECA countries can upload documents in English and Russian. UNECE has had the responsibility for the Web site maintaining it as an archive, and the Web site can build on this experience. It is essential to focus on the content. The decisions can be made at the next session of the Governing Council in September 2018.

Partnerships

(4) Further develop cooperation and partnerships with relevant organizations, development banks and initiatives (the United Nations Country teams, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and their relevant activities, the International Think Tank for Land-Locked Developing Countries in Mongolia, the *Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan* (RECCA), the Istanbul Process, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), the Eurasian Economic Commission, the Eurasian Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, and the Economic Cooperation Organization), having in mind the following:

(a) The partnerships should be focused on content;

- (b) Through cooperation, the SPECA countries can reinforce their collective position *vis a vis* development partners;
- (c) Private sector partnerships should be developed in a step-by-step approach: first invite trade representatives, chambers of commerce and other business associations to meetings, then create a business community network, then eventually consider organizing investment forums;
- (d) Develop academic/research partnerships, for example in support of the information portal and the thematic working groups;
- (e) National focal points and countries chairing thematic working groups should consider more effective ways to cooperate with presidential/national research think tanks, as appropriate; and
- (f) Engage business, research and other civil society partners.

Thematic Working Groups

- (5) Regarding the Thematic Working Groups:
 - (a) SPECA should support implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets, that are “regional – cross border” in their nature. In compliance with this criterion, the Thematic Working Groups on Water, Energy and Environment; on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity; and on Trade should be maintained;
 - (b) SPECA participating countries should take the responsibility for organizing their activities, in cooperation with the ESCAP Subregional Office for North and Central Asia (SONCA), ESCAP and UNECE. Meetings of these thematic working groups should take place preferably before the annual Governing Council sessions, so that their reports can be submitted, together with policy recommendations, in a timely manner;
 - (c) The Thematic working groups on Knowledge-based Development (KBD), Statistics, and Gender and Economy, should formulate at their next sessions, with support from UNECE and ESCAP, where regional coordination is needed in relationship to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in their areas. It is necessary to look into the possibility for ad hoc working groups (task forces) on concrete topics, such as an innovation strategy (currently under consideration) or disaster management. Each country should review the necessity to continue work of these thematic working groups or reform them in a more flexible arrangement through time-bound, issue-focused, result-oriented task forces;
 - (d) Another criterion for the maintenance of thematic working groups and ad hoc task forces should be correspondence to the mandates of the two supporting United Nations Regional Commissions. All activities of UNECE and ESCAP supporting cross-border cooperation in the SPECA region should be included in the SPECA framework; and
 - (e) Focal points should be nominated for each working group (area of work).

Governing Council and Economic Forums

- (6) Look for ways to make the Governing Council more effective:
- (a) Reporting practices should be streamlined. Re-focus reporting from description of activities to focus on results, achievements and exchange of experiences, which can be reported to the Governing Council;
 - (b) Focus SPECA work on policy-level discussions on a limited number of issues at every Forum and Governing Council;
 - (c) Look for ways to raise the level of country representatives;
 - (d) Policy discussions should be defined by the countries;
 - (e) Research for each Forum would be necessary, and tasks should be formulated well in advance; and
 - (f) Consider which relevant high-level initiatives in the region could be supported through SPECA, considering that the decision to establish SPECA and on its priority areas of activities were made by Presidents.

Financing

- (7) The participants from the SPECA countries are invited to explore with their Governments possibilities for financing and in-kind contributions to the SPECA operational budget.
- (8) Look for support from the countries as indicated in the Terms of Reference of SPECA.
- (9) Explore with Kazakhstan possibilities for support under the arrangements of the United Nations hub in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Secretariat

- (10) Re-establish the joint ESCAP-UNECE SPECA Office in Almaty within the ESCAP SONCA office.
- (11) Explore possibilities for hosting the secretariat of SPECA under the United Nations building in Almaty.
- (12) Explore possibilities to support the SPECA secretariat virtually or through staff/staff time contributions to the SPECA activities.

2. Immediate follow-up actions by the country representatives are to:
- Send the details of their nominated national focal points to the ESCAP SONCA office (toda@un.org; palymbetova@un.org) by 1 August 2018;
 - Review and send comments back by 1 August 2018 on the report of this Expert Group Meeting, which will be sent out by 2 July 2018;
 - and
 - Review and comment on the proposed updated Terms of Reference of SPECA by 1 August 2018 (draft to be sent by 2 July 2018).

II. Proceedings

A. Introduction

Background

3. The twelfth session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), held on 6 December 2017 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, noted “with satisfaction the summary report on the SPECA evaluation and strengthening its role as a mechanism for cooperation in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in line with the Ganja Declaration adopted by the eleventh session of the SPECA Governing Council in 2016”, and decided to submit the final evaluation report to an expert group meeting in preparation for the twentieth anniversary of the SPECA. In line with this decision, the UNECE and ESCAP secretariats organized an Expert Group Meeting on 11-12 June 2018 in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Participants

4. Representatives of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the Deputy Executive Secretaries of UNECE and ESCAP and invited experts participated in the Expert Group Meeting.

Opening session

5. Mr. Kairat Torebayev from the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Mr. Hongjoo Hahm, Deputy Executive Secretary of ESCAP, and Mr. Andrey Vasilyev, Deputy Executive Secretary of UNECE, opened and moderated the Expert Group Meeting. Kazakhstan noted the importance of SPECA and its thematic areas for regional cooperation and stressed the need for the SPECA countries to speak with one voice on the issues concerned. ESCAP and UNECE stressed the need to strengthen the countries’ ownership of SPECA; adopt an actionable list of recommendations on how to reinvigorate SPECA; identify partnerships; define the structure of the programme and the role of the UN organizations; and identify sources of financing. The future orientation of SPECA will reflect the 2015 Governing Council decision to make it a platform for the implementation of regional in character SDGs.

B. Session I: Evaluation of SPECA

6. Following an introductory presentation by Ms. Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, ESCAP consultant, who had conducted external evaluation on the Programme, the Expert group meeting discussed the following questions (1) What should be the identity and value-added of SPECA in the era of SDGs; (2) Review and revision of the Terms of Reference of SPECA; and (3) What can be the relationship of SPECA to other regional cooperation initiatives and organizations, including the Belt and Road Initiative, Eurasian Economic Union, Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Programme, etc.

7. SPECA needs to be transformed to be a platform for attaining the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In this light, some participants in the Expert group meeting supported the proposal to substitute “Platform” for “Programme” in the name of SPECA.

8. Realigning the focus of SPECA with specific and cross-border Sustainable Development Goals, as identified by the Thematic Working Groups in a 2017 scoping study, was proposed by the representatives from Afghanistan and Azerbaijan. The relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals selected by the SPECA Thematic Working

Groups in the 2017 study needs to be emphasized to make the working groups more result-oriented.

9. Research is crucial given the changing geopolitical environment in this subregion. Collaboration with the International Think Tank for Landlocked Developing Countries in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, as well as the network of presidential/national research think tanks, presented at the meeting, was proposed and supported by the Expert group meeting.

10. Cooperation with relevant regional platforms, as well as business, research and other civil society partners, were proposed. The representative from Afghanistan proposed a partnership with the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA), including the organization of a RECCA/SPECA joint investment and research forums, as well as cooperation with the Istanbul process. The following organizations were proposed for enhanced or possible cooperation; the United Nations Country Teams, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and their relevant activities, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), the Eurasian Economic Commission, the Eurasian Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, and the Economic Cooperation Organization.

11. Selection criteria for partnerships were proposed as follows: (1) the partnerships should be focused on content; (2) through cooperation, the SPECA participating countries can reinforce their collective position *vis a vis* development partners; (3) private sector partnerships should be developed in a step-by-step approach: first invite trade representatives, chambers of commerce and other business associations to meetings, then create a business community network, then eventually consider organizing investment forums; (4) develop academic/research partnerships, for example in support of the information portal and the thematic working groups; (5) national focal points and countries chairing thematic working groups should consider more effective ways to cooperate with presidential/national research think tanks, as appropriate; and (6) engage business, research and other civil society partners.

C. Session II: Strengthening the Efficiency of SPECA

12. The Expert group meeting discussed the following questions: (1) How can the Thematic Working Groups become more relevant?; (2) How can the SPECA (Governing Council, Economic Forum and secretariat) be restructured to become more effective, efficient and relevant?; and (3) How should the Regional Commissions and the rest of the United Nations system align themselves to better support SPECA?

13. The activities of the Thematic Working Groups need to be aligned with the selected “regional – cross border” Sustainable Development Goals and focused on results - to develop policy recommendations for consideration by the Governing Council. Several participants noted that the thematic working groups and activities under SPECA should be made more flexible (not just bureaucratic meetings) and look for new, result-oriented forms of activities, inviting research institutes to define what the key topics will be on demand from the countries, yet keeping them feasible for the SPECA setting. Uzbekistan suggested to be more concrete on the preparations for each meeting; set up concrete goals before each working group for 2-3 years in advance, and focus on *ad hoc* thematic meetings, without making decisions binding for each country.

14. In this light, a proposal was made to maintain the Thematic Working Groups on Water, Energy and Environment, on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity, and on Trade.

15. The Expert group meeting agreed that each country should review the necessity to continue work of the Thematic Working Groups on Knowledge-Based Development, on Statistics, and on Gender and Economy or reform them into more flexible arrangements, such as time-bound, issue-focused and result-oriented task forces. These Thematic Working Groups were invited to (1) formulate at their next sessions with support from UNECE and ESCAP where regional coordination is needed in their respective areas; and (2) propose concrete topics on which ad hoc Thematic working groups, or task forces, can continue to work.

16. The Expert group meeting confirmed that existing and new Thematic Working Groups and ad hoc task forces should work in areas that correspond to the mandates of UNECE and ESCAP.

17. The representative from Kazakhstan proposed that each Chairperson of the sessions of the SPECA Thematic Working Groups shall be responsible for reporting the outcome of their respective meeting to the Governing Council and co-chairmanship shall be established between the chairing country and the country hosting a meeting.

18. The Expert group meeting recommended the Governing Council to (1) streamline and re-focus reporting practices from a just description of activities to a showcase of results and achievements through activities; (2) focus the work of SPECA to policy-level discussion on selected issues at every Forum and Governing Council session; (3) look for ways to raise the level of country representation; and (4) consider which recent high-level initiatives in the subregion could be supported through SPECA in light of its Terms of Reference.

19. Representatives from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan supported the idea to re-nominate national focal points, to enhance national and SPECA-wide coordination. The focal points shall be tasked to facilitate coordination among relevant ministries at the national level, as well as among SPECA participating countries and the two Regional Commissions. SPECA participating countries shall nominate focal point(s), at the working level and at the coordinator level, to ESCAP Subregional Office for North and Central Asia before the Governing Council of SPECA, scheduled on 21 September 2018. The Office shall disseminate the list of national focal points in due course.

20. In addition, the Expert group meeting suggested the nomination of national focal points for each working group, or area of work, of SPECA.

21. The countries supported the idea to re-establish the joint ESCAP-UNECE SPECA Office in Almaty, within SONCA. Kazakhstan suggested to explore possibilities to host a secretariat of SPECA under the UN hub established by Kazakhstan in Almaty. The Expert group meeting urged the SPECA participating countries to explore possibilities to support the SPECA secretariat virtually or through staff or staff time contributions to the SPECA activities.

22. The representative from Kyrgyzstan proposed the establishment of a joint Web site on which both the United Nations Regional Commissions and SPECA participating countries can upload documents in English and Russian, built on the existing SPECA Web site managed by UNECE. It was noted that the question of resources needed for the maintenance of this Web site need to be discussed further.

23. The representative from Azerbaijan proposed biannual or annual evaluation of the impact of SPECA.

D. Session III “SPECA Financing”

24. The representative from Kazakhstan proposed that the sending countries should finance their participants’ travel to SPECA-related meetings and the host country should cover the venue, hospitality and other organization costs as indicated in the Terms of Reference of SPECA: “the expenses should be borne by the Governments of the participating countries, the UNECE and ESCAP shall provide financial support, within their available resources”.

25. Given that SPECA has less adequate resources, representatives were invited to explore with their Governments possibilities for financing and in-kind contributions to the SPECA operation budget. The representative from Kazakhstan shall explore with his Government possibilities for support under the arrangements of the United Nations hub in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

E. Other matters

26. There were no issues to be raised.

F. Consideration of the draft report of the Expert group meeting

27. The Expert group meeting considered and adopted the recommendations.

G. Closing session

28. The Chairperson of the meeting, the Deputy Executive Secretary of UNECE and the Deputy Executive Secretary of ESCAP thanked all participants for intensive and productive discussion and closed the meeting.
