Key messages for the International Forum on Green Silk Road, 17-18 November 2017, Fuzhou, China

The world economy landscape is changing, presenting both opportunities and challenges. China’s grand infrastructure plan “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) could potentially boost development and significantly increase the level of regional cooperation in Central Asia as a key region for the Initiative. The five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) have responded positively to be involved in the plans for the land component of the OBOR initiative. The implementation of the OBOR Initiative and decisions on infrastructure development—including the type of infrastructure and technology—will have positive impacts on socio-economic development of recipient states and creates some challenges at the same time.

The biggest challenge for the countries is the infrastructure development, while, however, safeguarding the natural environment for future generations. In particular, transport and energy supply systems may contaminate water sources and lead to air pollution that contributes to global warming. These externalities must be considered in the overall costs and benefits of investment projects. Population growth, rapid urbanization, consumption patterns—these are just few factors accompanying the economic growth and driving increased demand for water, energy, land and other biological resources. The OBOR Initiative will cause similar effect and cause additional competition over limited natural resources.

On the other hand, the OBOR initiative could positively influence institutional reforms promoting Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems Nexus to ensure that new regional infrastructure is resource efficient, low-carbon and climate-resilient, thus preventing future spending on climate mitigation and adaptation as well as public health and other social needs. In this regard, developing countries need expertise and financial, technological and methodological support to improve national legislation policies and practices towards multi-sectoral decision making and investment planning.

It’s already clear that the traditional Chinese model of foreign investment will be used for implementation the OBOR Initiative, with most of the money remaining in the Chinese companies carrying out the work and ethnic Chinese workers completing it. At the early beginning, it is very important to ensure that the investments would follow environmental and social safeguard standards and be monitored by stakeholders in beneficiary-countries. Strategic environmental assessment (SEA), Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in transboundary context and Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Nexus approach must be introduced as obligatory tools for development of all investment projects.

The new blueprint of regional and international cooperation should be formed on the balance and synergy between Chinese investment models, country’s economic development needs, commitments under Multilateral Environmental Agreements and nationally agreed UN Sustainable Development Goals, as well as under the Regional programme and action plan ASBP and REAP. The urge for clear coordination of actions, enhanced synergy and eventually the sustainability and impact of different water and environment related activities in this regard is very high.

Discussions among resource partners and executing agencies on 5 May 2017 in Geneva pointed the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC) as an organization experienced in facilitation dialogues on water and environment in Central Asia. Currently, CAREC promotes formalization of the Process on the environment for Central Asia and its regular regional dialogue platform. Additionally, it supports development of the multi-sectoral enabling environment to facilitate sustainable and climate-resilient investments for increased water, energy, and food security in Central Asia. These platforms can be effective for dialogues on OBOR Initiative as well.