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## Regional perspective of sustainable development

The Third Regional Implementation Meeting on Sustainable Development (28-29 January) provided a valuable regional input to the global discussions on sustainable development and highlighted the regional perspective in the areas of agriculture, land management, desertification and drought.

Delegates, representing Governments, intergovernmental organizations, UN agencies, and civil society organizations, generally agreed that agriculture and rural development had an important role to play in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the commitments of the UNECE region to achieve the internationally agreed development goals.

### Organic farming

The importance of promoting education and a science-based approach to sustainable agriculture was recognized. Organic farming was emphasized as a contributor to maintaining landscape natural features, sustaining biodiversity and quality of both groundwater and surface water, and protecting against water and wind erosion, especially in mountain and arid areas.

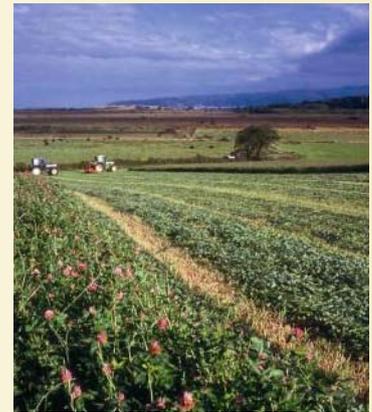
A significant part of the discussion was devoted to bio-energy production and associated risks – assessing bio-energy issues from a variety of angles including food competition and food security aspects, to create a set of criteria and policies that could keep a balance between supply of food and energy.

### Drought and desertification

As both developed and developing countries of the UNECE region are affected by desertification, land degradation and drought, this issue also triggered active discussions. Water scarcity and droughts have been increasing in both intensity and frequency in recent years affecting countries at different levels. The 10-Year Strategic Plan and Framework to Enhance the Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (2008-2018) was highlighted as an essential tool for achieving progress in this area. The need to develop common targets and indicators to monitor progress in the scientific, environmental and socio-economic aspects of desertification and drought was stressed.

### Challenges for Africa

A separate session was dedicated to Africa. The representative of the Economic Commission for Africa highlighted the specific challenges and needs of the African region in the above areas. As most African economies continue to rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources for a significant share of GDP, national food needs, employment, and export revenue, the need for a



## Trade facilitation in Azerbaijan

On 18 January 2008, UNECE organized, together with the Foreign Ministry and Customs of Azerbaijan, a [Seminar on Trade Facilitation and the World Trade Organization \(WTO\)](#), following a request by Mr Mamad-Kuliev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chief WTO negotiator, to concentrate more capacity building activities on the accession to WTO of the countries of the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA).

### No hurry

Azerbaijan is not in a hurry to finalize its accession to WTO, unlike some CIS countries which acceded to the organization earlier. One of the issues the country has put on the table is a request to be recognized as a developing country, rather than transition economy (and benefit from certain special provisions) – an old debate in the WTO, as some developing countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, have much higher per capita income than such transition economies as Kyrgyzstan or Moldova. Not all WTO members, however, agree with Azerbaijan's request.

At the same time, Azerbaijan is willing to develop more cooperation among the countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan in their drive to accede to the



*Not an official record - For information only*



continued

substantial transformation of the African rural sector was underlined. It

was also recognized that drought and desertification are at the heart of development challenges in Africa and merit urgent attention in policies and actions at various levels.

### Overarching objectives

There was also a general recognition that all thematic issues have to be considered in the context of the overarching objectives of sustainable development: eradicating poverty, changing unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, and protecting the natural resource base for economic and social development.

The main conclusions of the Meeting in the form of a Chair's summary will serve as an input for global discussions of the progress achieved in the priority areas in all regions at the forthcoming 16th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (May in New York). ❖

See also <http://www.unece.org/env/SustainableDevelopment/welcome.htm>.

## Trade facilitation (continued)

WTO. It proposes to create an informal forum to exchange experiences among the SPECA countries, with support from UNECE and UNESCAP and harmonize their positions, reflecting their common interests. Such regional cooperation and common positions are often the modus operandi in the WTO negotiations.

Many organizations, such as the United States Agency for International Development, have provided general assistance on legislative reforms in the WTO accession, so the Azeri diplomacy asked UNECE to concentrate on its area of expertise – trade facilitation and the possible new WTO Agreement on trade facilitation.

### Self-assessment exercise

The seminar involved participants from Customs, ministries of foreign affairs, finance, agriculture, transport, health, border police, and others. They were interested in the implications for their country of developments of the WTO negotiations on a new agreement – in case it joins WTO before the completion of the Doha Round and a possible adoption of a trade facilitation agreement, or after them. The UNECE and WTO experts at the seminar insisted that the Azeri Government should take very seriously the self-assessment exercise of their capacity to implement the trade facilitation measures discussed in the WTO negotiations for the new agreement, notably using the UNECE self-assessment tool/questionnaire, because it will give them an informed position on their needs and requirements, for example for technical assistance.

### Establishing a Single Window

Participants were very interested in the discussions on the Single Window. Further explanation of the essential concepts and demonstrations of best practice examples will be of great value for Azerbaijan. Azeri Customs noted their conviction that after the governmental decision to establish a Single Window, the most logical step would be to select Customs as the lead agency, but there is as yet no decision to that effect. UNECE and UNESCAP will organize another seminar for the SPECA countries in Baku, dedicated to the Single Window, most probably in early May. ❖

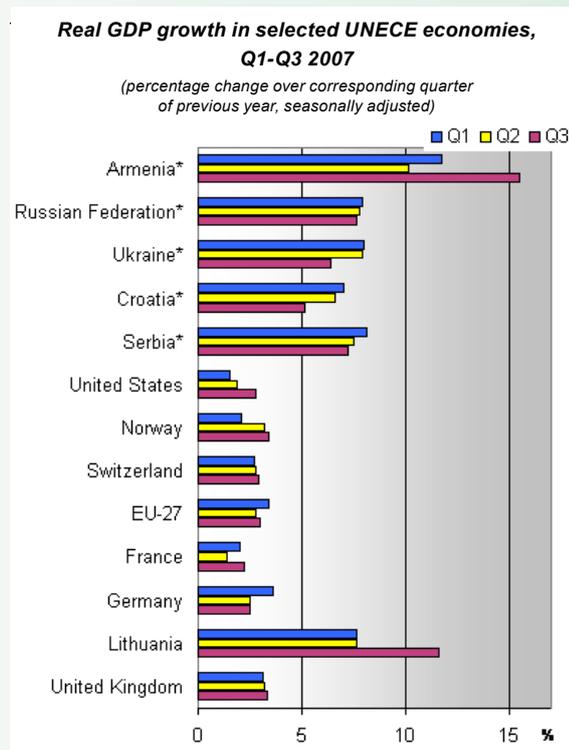
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## GDP growth in UNECE countries remained steady through September 2007

GDP data for the third quarter of 2007 were recently released by many UNECE countries. For most of them, the figures indicate steady real GDP growth in the course of the first nine months of 2007. However, available preliminary estimates for the fourth quarter suggest a slowdown in a number of countries and the outlook is much more uncertain for 2008.

The quarterly year-on-year real GDP change varied, reflecting the heterogeneity of the region. The emerging CIS and South-East European economies, backed by increasing consumer spending, expanding investment activity and strong external demand, reported year-on-year growth rates in the range of 5% to 15%. Similar growth was also reported for a number of the East European EU member States, led in the third quarter by Lithuania (trade and agriculture contributed the most in the latter).

Year-on-year growth in the range of 2.2-3.3% was registered in the third quarter in the three largest EU economies (Germany, France and the United Kingdom). In the United States, the real GDP growth accelerated in the third quarter, reflecting primarily a rise in exports. Similar short-term trends were observed for the EFTA countries – Norway and Switzerland.



Source: UNECE Statistical database ([www.unece.org/stats/data](http://www.unece.org/stats/data)), Eurostat and national statistics

\*Not seasonally adjusted.