

Welcome Remarks
by Ms. Gwi Yeop Son, DCO Regional Director for Europe and CIS

Regional Dialogue
“Strengthening transport connectivity in the SPECA region and beyond in the era of COVID-19”

via videoconference
10:00 (CET), 29 September 2020

I. Welcome & Greetings!

- Dear UN Under Secretary-General Ms. Olga Algayerova!
- Your Excellency Mr. Rashid Meredov, Deputy Chairman and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan!
- Distinguished Ministers and representatives of participating countries!
- Dear colleagues!

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to the **Regional Dialogue on strengthening transport connectivity in the SPECA region and beyond in the era of Covid-19**.

Let me express my appreciation to the Executive Secretary of the **UN Economic Commission for Europe** for her leadership in organizing this important dialogue.

Let me also thank the **representatives of the Governments that are taking** part today as well as the colleagues from the **Office of the UN High Representative for landlocked, least developed and small island states**, UNESCAP and the **IFIs** who have agreed to be part of this Dialogue.

II. Socio-economic impact of Covid-19 pandemic in Europe and Central Asia

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit the global economy hard – the worst since the great depression of 1930s. Most of the countries are either in recession or under depression. The countries in Europe and Central Asia are no exception, experiencing the steep decline in domestic demand, supply disruptions from fractured global and regional supply chains, and general risk aversion in financial markets. They are facing double whammy as landlocked countries with upended trade, transport and distribution. **The World Bank has forecasted the regional economy to contract by 4.7% in 2020.**

But even in the covid era, there are silver linings and opportunities to build back better.

For instance, countries participating in the **SPECA programme took swift actions to prevent and contain the spread of Covid-19 pandemic** and introduced comprehensive measures to mitigate its socio-economic impact. All the countries participating in today’s Dialogue have adopted or are in the process of developing **national Socio-Economic Response Plans** to the pandemic **in line with the UN framework for immediate socio-economic response** and are working together with the UN system, IFIs and other development partners on implementation of such plans. These action plans focus on addressing the twin threats of lives and livelihoods and reducing vulnerabilities of the most vulnerable.

Safeguarding uninterrupted supply chains through sustainable international transport and transit corridors is like preventing economic heart attacks. Protecting supplies and chains for domestic markets is like blocking artery to the heart. Establishing seamless and smooth flow of goods will reduce costs, stimulate demand and revitalize the economy. The UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 has stressed on the importance of improving connectivity and lowering transaction and transport costs to get the blood pump again regularly so that the economy can bounce back.

III. Transport connectivity issues in landlocked countries and the pandemic

A silver lining in the covid era is the solidarity, unity and coordination of the international community. Initial lockdowns and border closures imposed by countries to mitigate and contain the spread of the pandemic have **caused serious disruptions of supply chains, particularly severely for the landlocked countries like the SPECA countries.**

As the practice shows, **landlocked countries have to pay more than double what coastal countries incur** and spend double time compared to transit countries to export and import their goods. For instance, landlocked countries spend 89.75 hours to import and border compliance compared to 53.09 hours for the world or 55.39 hours for the middle income countries. High trade costs erode the competitive edge of landlocked countries resulting in an enormous negative impact on their overall sustainable development. The pandemic has once again exposed these vulnerabilities, especially in the SPECA countries.

Over the past years the countries of the region have actively been **promoting regional transport corridors**, investing in infrastructure and simplification of procedures.

The joint statement adopted following the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia held in November 2019 in Tashkent confirms the intention to continue active cooperation in the formation of effective regional transport corridors. The key outcome is a proposal to establish a Regional Council for Transport Communications of the Central Asian countries.

Turkmenistan has been particularly active in promoting transport connectivity at global and regional levels. Notably, in response to the pandemic, Turkmenistan has initiated a draft Resolution of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly on the issue of *ensuring stable international transportation during emergency situations*.

Despite the progress achieved, the subregion continues to suffer from high transport costs and low transport connectivity levels due to its geographic terrain, shortages in the transport infrastructure coverage and operational weakness in freight transport operations. Actively engaging with the private sector in further streamlining trade and transportation procedures will be key in this regard.

IV. Response to pandemic - opportunity to build back better and more sustainable

Dear colleagues,

As highlighted in the UN Secretary-General's Report **Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19** – quote “*While we deal with the crisis, we must use the opportunity to recover better and build sustainable societies. We already know what we need to do. It is laid out in the global road map for the future - the 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals*”.

Today's dialogue presents an excellent platform to exchange experiences on transport and supply chain disruptions at the peak of recent lockdowns and the actions the countries have been taking to overcome these challenges.

It also helps coordinate our actions towards a more sustainable recovery in SPECA countries, particularly on transport connectivity agenda to ultimately better serve the people.

The United Nations platforms offer a number of practical instruments that could be used by participating countries to **build back better on transport connectivity agenda** in the region, including the *ratification of UN transport conventions by all the countries* to better harmonize transport regulations, standards and transit procedures, as well as the *implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action for landlocked countries (2014-2024)*, to make transport connectivity in the region resilient to any future shocks.

The countries can also build on joint initiatives put forward in collaboration with the UN, such as the *Ashgabat Initiative on Reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations legal instruments, norms, standards and recommendations while bolstering connectivity in the SPECA region* (of Nov 2019), which provides practical recommendations on addressing such issues.

And most importantly, ensuring the resilience of *transport systems, transit and connectivity is instrumental to achieving a number of SDGs*, including the SDGs 1 on poverty alleviation, 2 on food security, 3 on health, 8 on decent work and 9 on infrastructure because the transport connectivity is the key pre-requisite for the sustainability and cost effectiveness of value chains, essential for the economies as blood vessels for a human body.

What does building back better the regional transport system look like? It is resilient to shocks with safe means of transport and infrastructure, efficient with less costs through the digitization of existing processes and procedures, greener and innovative with new technologies for low emission and effective by empowering the vulnerable.

V. UN Reform – the UN system is united to support the countries

Dear participants,

The reform of the UN development system launched in 2019 by the UN Secretary-General is designed to best position the United Nations to deliver on humanity's boldest agenda: the sustainable development goals.

It calls for a **coherent and effective UN system** support tailored to the needs of members states in achieving the SDGs.

The Regional Dialogue we are opening today is a result of united efforts by different arms of the UN development system.

It brings together not only the Government representatives, but also unites the UN Resident Coordinators in participating countries, Regional Development coordination office, two regional economic commissions – UNECE and UNESCAP, as well as the Office of the UN High Representative for landlocked, least developed and small island states, to offer a coordinated and coherent assistance to the participating countries in advancing their transport connectivity agenda.

I am delighted to note that this dialogue is a continuation of a number of regional initiatives supported by the UN in Central Asia and beyond, for example on prevention of violent extremism, counter-terrorism strategy, regional environmental cooperation, regional aid for trade initiative and others.

I have only 6 weeks ago assumed the Regional Director post of the UN Development Coordination Office in Europe and Central Asia. What an honor and privilege for me to start my assignment with such an important topic of regional integration with a united and coordinated front of the whole development system.

VI. Looking ahead

I would like to finish with a quote from the UN Secretary-General Mr. Guterres, - *“In the face of such an unprecedented situation in recent history, the creativity of the response must match the unique nature of the crisis – and the magnitude of the response must match its scale. No country will be able to exit this crisis alone”*.

I would invite the participating countries to use the SPECA platform and to continue discussing the transport connectivity initiatives in the given format on regular basis.

The UN Development coordination office at regional level and the Resident Coordinator system at country level stand ready to support the Governments in SPECA region in improving the transport connectivity and thus better regional integration to achieve the SDGs by all countries. Let’s embark on a decade of action with unity, solidarity and humanity.

Thank you!