

**Regional Dialogue**  
**Strengthening transport connectivity in the**  
**SPECA region and beyond in the era of COVID-19**  
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Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The COVID-19 pandemic is changing the face of development in Asia and the Pacific. During this pandemic, the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States continue to suffer much from low levels of transport connectivity.

The pandemic has a stronger negative impact to the countries that are part of the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia, all of which are landlocked. The reduced demand, increasing operational restrictions and many other challenges arising from the pandemic raises costs and delayed cross-border operations due to COVID-19 lockdown and closures.

SPECA countries are tirelessly working to explore inclusive and sustainable solutions in overcoming the ever-growing health and economic crisis since early 2020. Amidst great disruptions of transport, trade and human mobility, SPECA countries took a swift and pragmatic action to overcome these challenges.

Building around ESCAP's agreements and modalities to foster pathways for regional connectivity such as the Asian Highway Network and Trans-Asian Railway Network, meaningful efforts were made by the SPECA governments to preserve cross-border trade and transport connectivity during the COVID-19 crisis along various connectivity routes. They maintained a significant part of their land borders open for freight; have implemented special trade and transport facilitation measures, helping a smoother movement of essential goods and, in some cases, of general freight.

The most notable phenomenon was that freight transport proceeded with very limited interruptions along the Trans-Asian Railway Network and rail has

become an even more vital link in international trade preventing full dismantling of the supply chains in SPECA region and beyond.

SPECA countries also introduced measures to employ ICT and digital solutions to maintain transport and trade operations during the pandemic. Digitization of services is now at the fore front of providing contactless solutions and electronic platforms for maintaining transport operation along the regional supply chains. It plays a crucial role in international transport, where, so far, the uptake of new technologies was much slower than in other transport sectors. These efforts have been ensuring seamless integration of various frameworks to facilitate cross-border connectivity.

The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has taught us some important lessons on the way forward in shaping the future of sustainable connectivity in SPECA region. With the established regional collaborative mechanisms on transport cooperation along the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway Network, member States can stimulate the development of post-pandemic smart, resilient and more environmentally sustainable transport. During our meeting today, our technical team from ESCAP will share the insights and lessons learned from a series of regional meetings and country consultations which took place since the beginning of the pandemic.

Ladies and gentlemen:

These unprecedented times call on for building back better by ensuing sustainable partnerships. I echo the growing call to strengthening sustainable regional cooperation and promoting seamless transport and trade in the context of COVID-19 recovery strategies in SPECA region.

I trust that this regional conversation will give us concrete ideas and proposals on how we can build back better and shift to more resilient and sustainable transport systems in SPECA countries. I also look forward to your views on how the UN agencies present here today can support our countries in this transformation.

Our close cooperation with UNECE, UN-OHRLLS, UNODC, and global and regional financial institutions must grow even stronger and this joint initiative is an important step towards that goal.

Bring together public service needs with private sector innovation and financing capabilities. Set up connectivity infrastructure that meets the needs of citizens and businesses. All these issues and your suggestions will be

further discussed at SPECA Economic Forum “Regional Cooperation to Support Socioeconomic Recovery in the Wake of COVID-19” to be held on 18 and 19 November 2020 in virtual mode under the chairmanship of Kyrgyzstan.

I would like to express my gratitude to Ms. Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary, UNECE, and the Government of Turkmenistan for co-hosting this important meeting.

I wish you fruitful discussions and meaningful results of this meeting.

Thank you.