UNECE		UNESCAP
United Nations Economic		United Nations Economic and Social
Commission for Europe		Commission for Asia and the Pacific

SPECIAL PROGRAMME FOR THE ECONOMIES OF CENTRAL ASIA (SPECA)

Inaugural Session of the SPECA Project Working Group on ICT for Development

5-6 December 2005
Baku, Azerbaijan

REPORT

1.   The participants of the International Conference on Strengthening Sub-regional Economic Cooperation in Central Asia and the Future Role of SPECA, held in Astana (Kazakhstan) from 25 to 27 May 2005, underlined the high potential of SPECA as an important mechanism to support the integration of its member countries into the world economy and achieving the Millennium Development Goals through economic and environmental cooperation. The participants of the Conference welcomed the initiative of the United Nations Secretary-General to strengthen the Programme, as well as the reform proposals jointly elaborated by UNECE and UNESCAP aimed at achieving the goals of SPECA. This inauguration session of the SPECA Project Working Group on Information and Communication Technologies for Development (PWG on ICT) is a follow-up of the Astana Conference at which this Group was established.

2.   The session was attended by national delegations from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, representatives from UN Regional Commissions (UNECE and UNESCAP), and a representative from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) as well as a representative from the business sector.

3.   The session adopted Terms of Reference (TOR) (Annex I), Programme of Work for 2006 (Annex II) and conclusions and recommendations as below.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.   The session elected Azerbaijan as its co-chair. It noted that in accordance with the decision of the Special Session of the SPECA Regional Advisory Committee (Astana, 27 May 2005), another co-chair country could be elected in due course.

5.   The session took note the decisions of the International Conference on Strengthening Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation and the Future Role of SPECA, and of the SPECA Regional Advisory Committee (Astana, 25-27 May 2005) to establish the SPECA Project Working Group on ICT for Development.

6.   The session noted that ICT had great potential for economic, social and sustainable development of countries and the region. It also recognized the importance of narrowing the digital divide within the SPECA countries, among the SPECA countries, and with the rest of the world. The challenge was to ensure that the countries, communities and peoples harness the potential of

ICT to promote sustainable socio-economic development, improve the quality of life, and achieve the Millennium Development Goals. The transformation of the digital divide into digital opportunity had therefore, become key to bringing the benefits of ICT to all.

7.   The session studied the presentations about the current situation of ICT in each participating country. It noted that the majority of SPECA countries had already significantly improved their ICT capacities, which was evident from the recent status of the increased number of Internet users and other ICT indicators. The meeting therefore fully acknowledged that it was time to discuss and cope with issues on ICT for development and to move to ensure implementation and follow-up of the outcomes and commitments reached during the WSIS process, the Asia-Pacific Conference on the WSIS held in Teheran in May-June 2005 and the outcome of the Bishkek Conference on Information Society and Regional Cooperation in Information and Communication Technologies for Development held in Bishkek in November 2004.

8.   The session noted the information presented by some of the participants that harmful contents over the Internet acted as an impediment to broad public acceptance of using ICT as a tool for development. The meeting agreed that it would be important to monitor global developments on this issue.

9.   The session noted that public-private-partnerships (PPP) played a crucial role in promoting ICT for development and in narrowing the digital divide. It recognized the need for elaboration and adoption, as a matter of priority, of comprehensive, forward-looking and sustainable national ICT strategies and ICT-related sectoral strategies as an integral part of national plans for development and poverty reduction.

10.   The session also noted that strengthening cooperation and partnerships among and within the countries played an important role in ICT for development. In this regard, it requested the UNECE, UNESCAP and members of the SPECA Project Working Group on ICT for Development to work together in developing relevant capacity-building activities.

11.   This work should include networking of ICT policymakers and other stakeholders working in and for the SPECA subregion, aiming at narrowing the digital divide and building knowledge-based economies. The representatives of the SPECA member countries agreed to create a network of SPECA ICT policymakers.

12.   In this context, the participants underlined the importance of cooperation among member countries within the SPECA region on ICT for development issues.

13.   The session expressed appreciation to the UNECE and UNESCAP for initiating the implementation of the ICT policymaking project for SPECA countries. The meeting welcomed the proposal of Kyrgyzstan to host a meeting on capacity-building in ICT policymaking, to be held as part of project activities in May/early June 2006.

14.   The session supported the projects included in the SPECA work plan at the Astana Conference. It was agreed that these projects could be further elaborated and refined as practical experience is gained in their implementation.

15.	The session expressed interest in developing a project on using ICTs for the modernization of postal systems. Both UNECE and UNESCAP will explore how this new proposal could be implemented, including the possibility of addressing related issues in the course of implementation of the project on community access points, already included in the Project Working Group (PWG) work plan. In addition, consultations will be conducted with other international organizations, such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and Universal Postal Union (UPU) as well as potential donors. The delegation of Azerbaijan expressed its willingness to share its experience gained with a similar project currently being implemented in Azerbaijan with World Bank funding.

16.	The session requested UNECE and UNESCAP to use the information provided in the replies to the questionnaires circulated at the meeting to assess specific requirements for future capacity-building activities to be implemented with the framework of the PWG.

17.	The session welcomed with appreciation the initiative of the Azerbaijani Government to establish a regional e-Government training centre in support of SPECA and agreed that such a centre could be used for organizing capacity-building activities.

18.	The session acknowledged the importance of working in collaboration with other SPECA thematic PWGs, such as, water and energy, transport, trade and gender, as ICT is a cross-cutting issue. It expressed its willingness to contribute to the work of other relevant PWGs.

19.	The session noted with appreciation the information on the establishment of a SPECA network of Economic Research Institutions and agreed that this network, once established, could provide a contribution to its work.

20.	The session noted with understanding the information received from the Ministry of Communications of Afghanistan explaining their inability to attend the inaugural session of the PWG. The session welcomed the commitment expressed in the message from the Ministry to attend future meetings.

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Annex I

TERMS OF REFERENCE
OF THE PROJECT WORKING GROUP ON INFORMATION
AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

PREAMBLE

1.   The Project Working Group on Information and Communication Technologies for Development (PWG) is a subsidiary body within the governing structure of the Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA). The member countries of the Programme are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) provide overall support to the Programme.

2.   At the International Conference on Strengthening Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation and the Future Role of SPECA and the SPECA Regional Advisory Committee (Astana, Kazakhstan, 25-27 May 2005), it was decided to establish a SPECA Project Working Group (PWG) on ICT for Development. It is also a follow-up initiative of the Bishkek Conference on Information Society and Regional Cooperation in Information and Communication Technologies for Development, held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, from 16 to 18 November 2004.

OBJECTIVES

3.   In line with the overall objectives of SPECA to support its member countries in (i) developing subregional cooperation and (ii) in integrating their economies into the world economy, the PWG shall (i) facilitate cooperation in the initiatives related to knowledge-based economy development, in particular on ICT for development between the interested SPECA member countries; (ii) support and coordinate capacity-building activities and programmes in the area of ICT for development of the SPECA member countries; (iii) serve as a forum for discussion of issues on ICT for development; (iv) promote and support the knowledge-based economy development of the SPECA member countries.

PARTICIPANTS

4.   The PWG shall comprise National Representatives, nominated by the Governments of SPECA member countries. The National Representatives shall be senior level officials involved in the formulation and implementation or be aware of national policies and programmes, which affect national ICT policies in their respective countries and able to effectively follow up the recommendations and decisions of the PWG.

5.   Each participating country shall also nominate, on a permanent or on an ad hoc basis, experts on various aspects of ICT and it's applications for development, as required.

6.   Neighboring countries of the SPECA region may be invited to nominate their representatives to participate in the work of the PWG, especially when issues concerning cooperation with neighboring regions are discussed.

7.   Relevant subregional organizations implementing programmes related to knowledge-based economy and ICT for development may be invited to nominate their representatives to participate in the work of the PWG.

8.   United Nations organizations bodies as well as other bilateral and multilateral agencies and organizations operating in the knowledge-based economy development and ICT for development issues in the SPECA member countries may be invited to participate in the work of the PWG and to nominate liaison officers on matters related to its work.

MODALITIES OF OPERATION

9.   The PWG shall elect two Co-Chairpersons from among the National Representatives nominated by the Governments.

10.   The Secretariats of UNECE and UNESCAP will provide secretarial support to the PWG. The Secretariats will facilitate the preparation and organization of the sessions of the Group and will maintain records of its activities.

11.   The PWG shall hold annual sessions at a date and venue agreed by the participating countries.

12.   Important decisions and recommendations made at the annual sessions should be submitted for consideration to appropriate policymaking authorities in the SPECA member countries.

FUNDING

13.   The operational costs of the PWG as well as the costs of participation of National Representatives and experts in its sessions shall as a rule be borne by the Governments of participating countries. In addition, the UNECE and UNESCAP shall support, within their available resources, the functioning of the PWG.

14.   The PWG shall also seek funds and technical assistance for its operations from multilateral and bilateral donors.

PROGRAMME OF WORK AND ACTIVITIES

15.   The PWG shall develop, agree upon and implement an annual work programme.

16.   The PWG shall formulate and agree upon specific projects and programmes and seek the necessary budgetary resources for their implementation.

17.   Should any project recommended by the PWG require large capital investment, it should be presented to relevant international financial institutions, bilateral donors or to private investors, as appropriate.

OTHER MATTERS

18.   The Terms of Reference shall be reviewed every 3 years or earlier if the SPECA member countries so decide.

Annex II

PROJECT WORKING GROUP ON INFORMATION
AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

PROGRAMME OF WORK FOR 2006

ICT FOR DEVELOPMENT		
Name of Project/activity	**Objectives**	**Activities**
1.Capacity-building for ICT policymaking	To assist decision makers in the SPECA member and neighbouring countries in building indigenous capacity for ICT policy and strategy development, in particular, for integration of ICT in national development programmes, as well as for participation in international agenda-setting and policymaking bodies relevant to ICT for development.	Regional training seminar on ICT policymaking, to be held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan from 11 to 14 July 2006. Two national capacity-building seminars on ICT policymaking – venue to be determined.
2. Improving Business Opportunities through ICT Access Points	To enhance enterprise development of the SPECA member countries through improved capacity and usage of the ICT access points for business purposes.	The project will organize: (1) a regional awareness-raising seminar on ICT access points; and (2) national or regional capacity-building events on e-business. It is expected that implementation of the project would start as soon as the proposal is approved and the budget is made available.