

**Economic Cooperation Dialogue in Eastern South Asia:
Transport Corridors and Border Special Development Zones**

25-26 April 2016, Shillong, India

Concept Note

The Policy Dialogue on Regional Connectivity and Border Special Development Zones in Eastern South Asia will build on an earlier Policy Dialogue on Economic and Transport Development in Border Areas in Eastern South Asia, organized by UNESCAP jointly with Government of Meghalaya in Shillong, India, on 4-5 December 2013. It will discuss a study conducted by UNESCAP, in follow up of recommendation of the earlier Dialogue, on border special economic zones for Eastern South Asia that could take advantage of the transport linkages between neighboring countries to exploit the synergies between them to foster economic development of the border areas. The Policy Dialogue will be organized with the support of the Government of Meghalaya. It will have senior level participation from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal and the East and Northeast States of India, experts from other subregions, along with development partners, business organizations, among other stake holders.

The context and content

With the twin objectives of regional economic integration and economic development along the border regions of Eastern South Asia, UNESCAP has initiated a policy programme to explore the potential of Border Special Development Zones (BSDZs) which promote both industrial development and trade growth, taking advantage of major transport corridors passing through the subregion. Underdeveloped border areas are typical of the Eastern South Asia subregion, wherein East and North East India shares long and thickly populated borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal. Despite being a geographically contiguous landmass sharing many cultural and linguistic commonalities, Eastern South Asia is yet to harness the full potential of greater commercial interaction within and with its immediate neighborhood.

BSDZs can offer vital solutions to the socio-economic problems of the subregion through a path of industrialization oriented to international trade and investments, exploiting synergies between countries sharing the borders. Drawing on successful examples from other parts of Asia-Pacific, UNESCAP's study provides useful policy lessons on physical infrastructure development and management of a BSDZ, institutional and regulatory framework, ownership arrangements and

international cooperation, design of incentives structure, and sustainable development approaches, keeping in view also the social and environmental concerns raised by such projects.

Development of border zones require a mix of carefully calibrated policies covering regional trade liberalization, investments in connectivity infrastructure and industrial development as well as local level policy interventions for efficient provisioning of public services and facilities that modern economic and social habitats demand for. Given that border economies are centered on trade and cross-border investments, the required policy mix of trade facilitation, investments, transport and customs cooperation cannot be successfully designed and implemented unilaterally. Many developed border economies in Asia follows a twin town model, and even joint administration of border zones, with respective governments engaging in a partnership.

Policy environment for implementation of border zone development in Eastern south Asia has become more conducive in recent times than ever before. India's ongoing policy programme for establishing Integrated Check Posts (ICPs), which will enable advanced trade services, and coupled with favorable SEZ policies in Eastern South Asian countries open up new avenues for economic development of border regions through linked industrialization and trade. Recent developments clearly show a progressive and accommodative approach towards special zones that can utilize connectivity vantage points as a BSDZ would. In addition, the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement (BBIN MVA) and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are progressive examples of complementary transport facilitation in the region.

The proposed policy dialogue is expected to facilitate a discussion on addressing the development challenges in border regions through economic zones and leveraging transport links. It will be informed by UNESCAP's research and will take note of recent policy developments including the BBIN MVA. It will draw up an action plan covering investment requirements of industrial and transport infrastructure for border zones, allied trade facilitation reforms and customs cooperation.

The key issues to be discussed include:

- Regional economic integration and connectivity for development of Eastern South Asia
- Potential and scope of Border Special Development Zones and regional value chains in Eastern South Asia: lessons from other subregions
- Issues and challenges in development of border crossings for transport facilitation and trade
- Role of private sector and development partners

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