

EXPERT CONSULTATION ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRAMME PRIORITIES

(8 December 2015, Almaty, Kazakhstan)

SUMMARY

Opening Statements

1. In her opening statement, Ms. Tiziana Bonapace, Head of ESCAP Subregional Office for North and Central Asia, introduced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the context of North and Central Asia (NCA). Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration (RECI) through enhancing infrastructure connectivity, as well as promoting innovation were underlined as key drivers of economic diversification and sustainable development. ESCAP reiterated its commitment to the integration of the subregion, in partnership with its member States.
2. H.E. Ms. Akmaral Arystanbekova, Ambassador-at-Large of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, underlined that partnership with multilateral organisations will help neighbouring countries and those of the ESCAP region to achieve stronger regional cooperation. Such collaboration was highlighted as essential for building subregional and regional mechanisms to promote sustainable technologies as important implementation tools for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Presentations and Discussions

3. In the first session, emerging economic and social development issues specific to the North and Central Asia subregion were highlighted to lay the ground work for the discussion on opportunities for cooperation and partnerships. The small size of the economies and the volatility of commodity prices underline the need for widening economic spaces. Recent developments in energy, rail and ICT connectivity, notably, connectivity between South and South West Asia (SSWA) subregion and Central Asia. Initiatives, such as CASA1000, TAPI and the China-Pakistan Economic corridor reflected, for the first time in two decades, a notable acceleration in the process of RECI. The opening up of new routes would promote diversification, enhance competitiveness and create trade opportunities.
4. Representatives from member States and experts noted that addressing infrastructure gaps in transport, energy and ICT can provide economic stimulus in medium term and ensure robust growth in the long term. In this regard, ESCAP's initiatives such as the Asian Highway Network, the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway and the energy highway initiative should be fully utilized to provide roadmaps for enhancing connectivity and platforms for discussion at both regional and subregional levels.
5. Participants discussed on-going initiatives that provide opportunities for subregional cooperation on sustainable development, such as the upcoming EXPO-2017 with a focus

on future energy. Significant improvements in cross cutting sectors, such as education and healthcare were also noted as vital to economic diversification and inclusive growth.

6. The second session summarized the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDGs. In the region, the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) was noted as the key regional forum to support implementation of SDGs through the ESCAP-facilitated development of a regional road map to support national implementation. Economic diversification through Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration (RECI) by addressing gaps in infrastructure connectivity was noted as a critical driver of sustainable and inclusive growth. In addition, significant improvements in the business and investment climates are essential to developing clear and cohesive economic and social policies that lead to sustainable growth. National ownership complemented with ESCAP's support through sound policy analysis that reflects ground-level realities can ensure active roles of member States in the global dialogue for sustainable development.
7. The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC) presented subregional activities for SDGs implementation, possible collaboration with ESCAP to promote sustainable development, including the Central Asian Leadership Programme, a centre of e-learning policy of "green growth and sustainable development" and proposed CAREC knowledge portal as a platform for cooperation, knowledge-sharing and technology exchange. Similarly, the roles of regional organizations, such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) and Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development (ICSD) were highlighted.
8. Representatives from member States highlighted the subregion's success in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including significant improvements in indicators for education, health and the reduction of poverty. Looking forward to the SDGs, the lessons learned during the implementation of MDGs – including best practices for evidenced-based policy development and bottlenecks, such as inadequate financing instruments – need to be further reviewed and incorporated in the planning of the SDGs. Based on the experiences from the MDGs, the importance of establishing well designed indicators was highlighted in conjunction with the need to enhance statistical capacity among member States.
9. Participants noted shared challenges, including transboundary subregional issues, such as cross-border infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation and disaster risk reduction. Active and constructive cooperation between member States and all relevant stakeholders, including ESCAP, is indispensable for tackling such challenges. The United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) was noted as a critical subregional mechanism which provides a platform for coordination on transboundary developmental issues.
10. Experts urged ESCAP and member States to explore the interdependence, interlinkages and spillover effects among different areas of development, such as infrastructure connectivity, labour mobility, innovation and poverty. Comprehensive understandings of

such relationships help to streamline the implementation of SDGs at national and regional levels. In addition, participants remarked on the need for increased attention to the social dimension of sustainable development, particularly on issues such as aging and disability. Implementation of the Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth in North and Central Asia requires serious attention in realisation of the Decent Work Agenda of the International Labour Organisation according to the international standards.

11. The third session reviewed SONCA's strategic framework and programme of work with an emphasis on alignments with SDGs. Regional cooperation was noted as imperative for achieving many of SDGs, particular those of transboundary nature, including goals and targets on transport, trade, disaster risk reduction, air pollution and water. Support was expressed for SONCA's programme of work for the next two biennia that will address emerging issues in the subregion and the changing needs of the member States.
12. Looking forward, SONCA highlighted several important upcoming events. Notably, the 72nd Commission Session of the ESCAP will focus on Asia-Pacific Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), many of which are from NCA subregion. Towards this end, the Executive Secretary of ESCAP Dr. Shamshad Akhtar is currently planning a series of visits in February 2016 to NCA countries to enhance ESCAP partnerships with member States in the subregion and carryout pre-sessional preparatory meetings. Also, the theme study of the upcoming Commission Session will focus on Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) as drivers of Sustainable Development. Participants pledged full support and committed to follow up through relevant government channels in order to secure support from the highest decision-making level.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Participants:

13. Noted that cooperation and mobilizing collective policy leadership among member States are vital to ensure the successful implementation of the SDGs relevant, but not limited to, transboundary issues. Participants urged ESCAP to continue providing a platform for regional intergovernmental discussion and cooperation including facilitating the APFSD and regional consultation on Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs).
14. Noted that ESCAP's regional cooperation and integration initiatives, evidence-based strategic analysis and capacity development programmes should continue to reflect and address regional and subregional specificities in the context of SDGs. For the NCA subregion, infrastructure connectivity and economic diversifications are key issues that require ground-based substantive analysis.
15. Noted that ESCAP SONCA should continue to provide support for strengthening partnerships within the subregion and with other subregions, such as between the NCA and the SSWA subregions. Towards this end, SPECA, as the only available subregional

mechanism, can serve as the intergovernmental platform to address transboundary SDGs and promote knowledge-sharing.

16. Asked that ESCAP provides opportunities to engage in the on-going global discussion over SDGs monitoring and indicators. This will ensure subregional and regional concerns and realities are reflected within the monitoring process. Furthermore, continuation of capacity development programmes is essential for effective monitoring. For the NCA subregion, SPECA can also serve as a monitoring and review mechanism.
17. Thanked the speakers and expressed their wishes to attend such expert group meetings at a subregional level regularly to discuss emerging issues and share best practices.
18. Thanked ESCAP for organising the meeting and the opportunity to discuss subregional priorities in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Secretariat:

19. Thanked H.E. Ms. Akmaral Arystanbekova for her insightful and inspiring statement during the opening session.
20. Thanked the participants for sharing their valuable comments and providing important inputs for lively and constructive discussion.
21. Expressed deep appreciation to the governments of member States, particularly the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation for their financial support.

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