

Regional Policy Dialogue on Strengthening Transport Connectivity in Southern Asia

Desire, Le Meridien, New Delhi, India, 19-20 November 2014

Key Highlights of Discussion

1. The Policy Dialogue on Strengthening Transport Connectivity in Southern Asia organized by UNESCAP jointly with Asian Institute of Transport Development (AITD) took place in New Delhi on 19-20 November 2014. It was attended by over 100 participants including senior representatives of governments, private sector and civil society from following countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Turkey. The representatives of Secretariats of SAARC, BIMSTEC, ECO, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Trade Finance Corporation, and the World Bank, among other organizations also participated.
2. The Policy Dialogue was organized as a part of the UNESCAP's initiative to engage policy makers and other key stakeholders to sensitize them on the potential of regional economic integration through improved transport connectivity in Southern Asia. Building on the previous Policy Dialogues held in Dhaka in June 2013 and Lahore in December 2013, it highlighted key challenges to strengthen transport connectivity and in this regard shared knowledge and experiences of different stakeholders and proposed solutions to take forward the connectivity agenda. The participants agreed on the importance of such dialogues in raising awareness of stakeholders on benefits of regional economic integration, strengthened transport connectivity and identification of solutions to support them.
3. The Policy Dialogue agreed that harnessing the potential of regional economic cooperation and integration had assumed a new criticality in the changed global context particularly following the financial crisis and need to focus on rebalancing the drivers of growth. They also noted that poorly developed land transport infrastructure and facilitation were significant barriers to exploiting potential of regional economic integration in Southern Asia as high transport costs were denying benefits of geographical proximity and contiguity to boost intraregional trade.
4. Poor surface transport links and lack of transit arrangements have prevented formation of regional production networks and do not allow the subregion to leverage its strategic location on the cross-roads of Asia. Furthermore, poor transport connectivity was affecting the vulnerable segment of population the most as the border areas often remain among the poorest in the subregion. It was hoped that an analysis and discussion of the lost opportunities due to poor connectivity would assist

in compelling the governments in Southern Asia to put aside the political differences and move ahead to exploit the potential of stronger connectivity and economic integration for enhanced competitiveness, shared prosperity and inclusive and balanced regional development.

5. The Policy Dialogue was informed of the efforts made by countries to develop cross-border transport and integrated border management including by development of the integrated check posts (ICPs), authorized economic operator programmes, customs automation and use of ICT, entering into bilateral and subregional transport arrangements, and accession to international conventions. It also observed the importance of railways as one of the most economical and environmentally sound modes for domestic and regional transit transport for passengers and for cargo movements.
6. The Policy Dialogue noted numerous initiatives to strengthen transport connectivity under different overlapping subregional frameworks of SAARC, BIMSTEC, ECO, SASEC, and BCIM. It noted the need of coordination between transport corridors being promoted by these subregional bodies to maximize network externalities and provide a major boost to the economic activity in the region especially in the landlocked countries of the region. UNESCAP, given its broader membership, could facilitate the coordination between the subregional organizations.
7. The Policy Dialogue discussed a number of potential extended land transport corridors for development in Southern Asia. In particular a railway corridor along the Trans-Asian Railway Network, extending the existing Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad container block train to Dhaka and Yangon through Delhi and Kolkata linking it with the container train proposed in the Bangladesh-India-Nepal in the SAARC framework. With multimodal feeder links to landlocked countries including Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal and the Central Asian Republics and ports of the region and with other such corridors coming up in the region such as GMS corridors, the Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad-Delhi-Kolkata-Dhaka-Yangon (ITI-DKD-Y) corridor could become an important transport artery not only for promoting intra-regional trade and transport by improving its competitiveness but could also become important conduit of Asia's trade with Europe. This corridor was seen as a low hanging fruit and could be made effective with minimal investments as the infrastructural links already existed. Only necessary transport facilitation arrangements would need to be put in place. The meeting recommended that UNESCAP could support further exploration into the feasibility of ITI-DKD-Y container train corridor by moving towards a demonstration run on the ITI-DKD sector initially, facilitated by a memorandum of understanding between the stakeholders. This will help to identify the physical and non-physical barriers and institutional mechanisms.
8. The Policy Dialogue noted that even though the infrastructure along the ITI-DKD Corridor was complete, its efficient operation would require upgrading/construction of bridge over Padma river in Bangladesh for transfer of heavier cargo along the Kolkata to Dhaka sector, and upgrading of Quetta to Taftan segment in Pakistan along the Tehran-Islamabad segment, which will reduce train running time considerably. The corridor could be eventually extended to Yangon after small missing links between Jiribam (in Manipur State of India) and Kalay (in Sagaing Region of

Myanmar) through Moreh-Tamu border-crossing point between India and Myanmar are completed.

9. The Policy Dialogue expressed satisfaction on the finalization of SAARC Railways and Motor Vehicles Agreements and on their likely endorsement at the forthcoming SAARC Summit. It also hoped that the SAARC would take a decision to create a SAARC Development Bank to catalyze the financing of infrastructure development especially regional projects such as regional transport and energy corridors.
10. The policy dialogue noted the findings of preliminary assessments that find inland connectivity through railway corridors would help to substantially reduce time and costs of intra-regional trade. The cost and time effectiveness of railway corridors was corroborated by presentations made by a number of logistics operators. The policy dialogue noted that security concerns and other risks concerning surface transport can be addressed by modern technologies. Adherence to international transport conventions or development of regional transport protocols can help in this regard.
11. The policy dialogue advocated that development of industrial infrastructure along the transport corridors to create economic corridors could lead to development of lagging regions. Appropriate land acquisition policies, special economic zones etc. are needed to create economic corridors. It also noted that strengthened transport connectivity between India-Bangladesh-Myanmar, and Bangladesh-India-China-Myanmar (BCIM) contexts, among other neighboring countries had the potential to develop the impoverished border regions in Eastern South Asia and make it a hub of South Asia-ASEAN trade. It also noted the potential of border haats and special economic zones facilitated by strengthened connectivity for regional development.
12. The Policy Dialogue noted the UNESCAP Regional Strategic Framework for Facilitation of International Road Transport and the proposed UNESCAP Regional Cooperation Framework for Facilitation of International Railway Transport as guiding documents that can be used to plan and implement measures to strengthen transport connectivity in Southern Asia and UNESCAP transport facilitation models as tools to address the operational challenges in international land transport. Secure Cross Border Transport Model provides a concept for vehicle tracking system using new technologies; Efficient Cross Border Transport Model as a methodology to identify non-physical barriers, evaluate alternatives and find optimal solutions which can work best in a given subregion; Model on Integrated Border Crossing that provides ways to streamline the flow of information and equipment at the borders; and Time/Cost- Distance methodology (TCD) to identify bottlenecks and monitor performance along the corridors.
13. The Policy Dialogue reaffirmed need of a comprehensive master plan on Transport Connectivity in Southern Asia. Such a master plan could be developed in consultation with government agencies, regional and subregional organizations, multilateral development banks and other key stakeholders. The Policy Dialogue further noted that such a master plan could be implemented using a building block approach and could help to attract investments for infrastructure development in the subregion.
14. The Policy Dialogue highlighted the need for developing credible information and analysis on the potential and prospects of regional economic integration and

knowledge sharing and policy advocacy partnerships for dissemination to all the stakeholders including the government representatives, subregional groupings, think-tanks, and private sector players to overcome the perceptual biases existing among the people on benefits of regional cooperation and draw up action plans for development of connectivity. It also stressed the need for effective follow up on the recommendations of the Policy Dialogue. The participants also felt the need for institutionalizing a specialized body or group of experts for pushing the connectivity agenda in the subregion to ensure continuity. The Corridor management and joint marketing across countries involved and coordination would also require specialized transport authority.

15. The Policy Dialogue reiterated the important role of private sector and need to incorporate their views in developing and implementing initiatives to strengthen transport connectivity. The need to build capacity of the private sector and government officials to ensure effective implementation of such measures was also indicated.
16. The Policy Dialogue concluded with a note of appreciation to organizers for its efficient organization that facilitated frank sharing of experiences among the participants.

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