

Policy Dialogue on Strengthening Transport Connectivity in Southern Asia

New Delhi, India, 18-19 November 2014

Concept Note

Background

Southern Asia remains the least integrated subregion in Asia as measured by intra-regional trade, investment, transport connectivity and people to people contacts. Intra-regional trade in Southern Asia is under 6% of their global trade in comparison with 39 per cent in East Asia and 25 per cent in Southeast Asia. One of the main reasons for low trade is high trade costs due to poor transport connectivity within the subregion.

Southern Asia has the largest concentration of poor people in the world. However, it has yet to harness potential benefits of closer subregional integration and cooperation. Though Southern Asian countries are physically linked with land, sea and rivers the cross-border transport operations are inadequately developed. For example, while Bangladesh and India share land, sea and river borders, most traded goods are transported by ships via Sri Lanka and even Singapore.

Compared with other subregions, countries in Southern Asia have made a limited progress in cross-border transport in terms of formulation of subregional/bilateral agreements, harmonization of documentation and procedures, opening of domestic routes, improvement of border facilities and simplification of controls. Southern Asian countries urgently need to improve transport connectivity and economic integration to promote intra-regional trade.

South Asian leaders have recognized the importance of subregional connectivity and taken measures to promote subregional trade and transport. The 17th South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit declared to intensify efforts to fully and effectively implement SAFTA¹ and the work on early resolution of non-tariff barriers and expediting the process of harmonizing standards and customs procedures. The Eighteenth SAARC Summit to be held in Kathmandu from 22 November 2014 has decided to focus on the theme of Connectivity.

Among the other groupings combining Southern Asian countries the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Techno-Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is also paying attention to improving connectivity among its members. Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) has also been exerting efforts to facilitate cross-border and transit transport among its member countries.

However, subregional transport connectivity and integration face enormous challenges due to perception biases, lack of mutual trust, security and smuggling concerns among the countries.

¹ South Asia Free Trade Agreement

Therefore, advocacy efforts need to be intensified to increase political and public awareness about the opportunities lost due to inadequate transport connectivity. Meanwhile, technical solutions are also required, to address practical concerns of control authorities and increase mutual trust.

Drawing on the experience of and lessons learned from other subregions in strengthening transport connectivity, it is proposed to have a master plan on subregional connectivity as a guiding document for countries and their development partners besides discussing the potential and challenges for implementing some extended transport corridors identified along the Trans Asian Railway (TAR) routes such as Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad-Delhi-Kolkata-Dhaka (ITI—DKD) Container Train Corridor and similar highway corridor along the Asian Highway (AH) routes.

These proposals and the master plan approach were fully supported by the Policy Dialogue on Strengthening Transport Connectivity among South and South-West Asian Countries held at Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 26-27 June 2013 and Regional Conference on strengthening transport connectivity and trade facilitation held in Lahore, Pakistan on 9-10 December 2014. Keeping this in background the

Objectives of the Policy dialogue are to:

- Identify potential opportunities and challenges for strengthening subregional connectivity in Southern Asia;
- Share experiences on the current status and measures in enhancing transport connectivity by countries and development partners;
- Explore ways to apply various transport facilitation tools developed by ESCAP to deepen transport connectivity; and
- Discuss and agree on actionable measures required to further strengthen transport connectivity including through implementation of extended corridors along TAR and AH routes and through a master plan approach.

Participants

Policy makers from ministries in charge of economic development, transport, trade and commerce, finance (Customs) and border control from countries of SSWA will be invited to participate. Representatives from international, regional, subregional organizations, representatives from multilateral development banks and development agencies will also be invited apart from private sector

Organizers

UN-ESCAP South and South-West Asia Office jointly with the Transport Division at UNESCAP headquarters. It will be organized in collaboration with the Asian Institute of Transport Development, New Delhi.

Duration, Dates and Venue

Two days. 18-19 November 2014, New Delhi

Cost

UN-ESCAP will bear the cost of travel and stay of invited participants from SSWA countries.

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