

Regional Conference on Strengthening Transport Connectivity and Trade Facilitation in South and South-West Asia

Lahore, Pakistan, 9-10 December 2013

Key Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The Regional Conference on Strengthening Transport Connectivity and Trade Facilitation in South and South West Asia organized jointly by ESCAP and Ministry of Commerce, Government of Pakistan took place in Lahore on 9-10 December 2013. The Conference was attended by representatives of governments, private sector and civil society in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Nepal, Pakistan and Turkey. Officials from UNCTAD, the World Bank, Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and bilateral donors like AusAid also participated in the Conference. The Conference was addressed by the honourable Minister of Commerce and also the Minister for Railways in the Government of Pakistan, among other senior policy makers.
2. The Conference was organized as a part of ESCAP's initiative to engage policy makers and other key stakeholders to sensitize them on the potential of regional economic integration and improved connectivity in South and South-West Asia, highlight the key challenges and solutions to address them, and to share knowledge and experiences to take forward the connectivity agenda, building on the previous one held in Dhaka in June 2013. It was supported by the Trade and Transport Facilitation Project based at the Ministry of Commerce, the Government of Pakistan with funding support from the World Bank and technical support from UNCTAD. The participants agreed on the importance of such dialogues in raising awareness of stakeholders on benefits of regional economic integration and strengthened connectivity and identification of solutions.
3. The Conference noted that harnessing the potential of regional economic cooperation and integration had assumed a new criticality with the dramatically changed global context on a post-financial crisis world and the compulsions of rebalancing the drivers of growth. They also noted that poorly developed land transport infrastructure and facilitation at the borders was an important barrier for fuller exploitation of potential of regional economic integration in South Asia as high transport and trade costs were denying to intraregional trade, benefits of geographical proximity and contiguity. Poor surface transport links and 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 South and South-West 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 development. . The

transport connectivity would also help in developing regional energy pipelines and power grids critical for energy security and for ICT connectivity.

4. The Conference noted the efforts made by countries to develop cross-border trade and transport and integrated border management including by development of the integrated check posts (ICPs), authorized economic operator programmes, customs automation and use of ICT, movement towards national single windows, entering into bilateral and subregional transport arrangements, and accession to international conventions.
5. The Conference noted the strategic location of Pakistan as a gateway for South Asia and East Asia to Central Asia, Middle East and beyond and its potential to emerge as a transshipment hub. In this regard, it was felt that creation of a dedicated ministry would be helpful in order to coordinate with different agencies to strengthen transport connectivity within Pakistan and with its neighboring countries.
6. The Conference noted the importance of railways as a most economical and environmentally benign mode for domestic and regional transit transport for passengers and for cargo movements.
7. The Conference noted numerous initiatives to strengthen transport connectivity under various subregional organizations that are under overlapping frameworks of SAARC, BIMSTEC, ECO and bilateral and trilateral arrangements. It noted a need for a coordinated approach to developing transport corridors between these subregional bodies to maximize network externalities that can provide a major boost to the economic activity in the region especially in the landlocked countries of the region. The Conference noted two potential corridors including a road corridor on the Asian Highway Network linking Turkey passes through Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The other is a railway corridor is on Trans-Asian Railway Network extending the existing Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad container block train to Dhaka through Delhi and Kolkata linking it with the container train proposed in the Bangladesh-India-Nepal trilateral framework. It was noted that these corridors could be made effective with minimal investments as the infrastructural links already existed. Only necessary transport and transit facilitation arrangements would need to be put in place.
8. The Conference 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.
9. The Conference noted the ESCAP Regional Strategic Framework for Facilitation of International Road Transport as a guiding document that can be used to plan and implement measures to strengthen transport connectivity in SSWA and ESCAP transport facilitation models as tools to address the operational challenges in international road 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 along the corridors.

10. The Conference welcomed UNESCAP proposal for a Master Plan on Strengthening Transport Connectivity in South and South West Asia (SSWA), taking note of logistics audit as appropriate, which could be developed in consultation with government agencies, regional and subregional organizations, multilateral development banks and other key stakeholders. The Conference noted that such a masterplan could be implemented using a building block approach and could help to attract investments for infrastructure development in the subregion.
11. The Conference felt a need to encourage member countries for having a unified institutional arrangement for logistics development at the national level besides evolving national single windows for facilitation of trade.
12. The Conference highlighted the need for developing credible information and analysis on the potential and prospects of regional economic integration and knowledge sharing policy advocacy partnerships for dissemination to all the stakeholders including the private players to overcome the perceptual biases existing among the people on benefits of regional cooperation. It also stressed the need for effective follow up on the recommendations of the Conference.
13. The Conference thanked Ministry of Commerce, Government of Pakistan for warm hospitality and excellent organization of the Conference.

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