

ESCAP

**United Nations Economic and Social
Commission for Asia and the Pacific**



UNECE

**United Nations Economic
Commission for Europe**

United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA)

2020 SPECA ECONOMIC FORUM

“Regional Cooperation to Support Socioeconomic Recovery in the Wake of COVID-19”

18-19 November 2020

BISHKEK DECLARATION

**STRENGTHENING REGIONAL COOPERATION TO SUPPORT SOCIOECONOMIC
RECOVERY IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19**

We, the high-level representatives of the countries participating in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA),

Having met on 18-20 November 2020 in a virtual format to participate in the 2020 SPECA Economic Forum and the 15th session of the SPECA Governing Council,

In view of the need to implement a set of measures on economic recovery providing a more sustainable, efficient and secure environment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, enhancing sustainable trade and transit,

Taking into account the discussions held and having listened to the opinions of the participants on the agenda of the 2020 SPECA Economic Forum, having developed recommendations for an integrated approach aimed at creating a circular economy in the region that meets urgent economic, social and environmental challenges,

Adopt the following Declaration:

We reaffirm the commitment to regional cooperation and stress the importance for the SPECA participating countries of the following areas of activity through:

1. Strengthening regional cooperation in the areas of trade, transport and digital connectivity to support inclusive and sustainable recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic through:

- Regional integration and cooperation, reinforcing transport connectivity, international transport, information and communications technology infrastructure, as well as international trade facilitation, which are among the priorities for action in the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries;
 - Regional cooperation to facilitate trade, transport and digital connectivity, which are important to restore and build greater supply chain resilience, as well as maintain and enhance trade and economic relations within the region and with major trading partners;
 - Continued commitment of the SPECA participating countries to the values of the Programme as a relevant platform for knowledge sharing and exchange of best practices to strengthen cooperation among the Governments of SPECA participating countries, relevant stakeholders and development partners, notably for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which has come under strain as a result of the pandemic;
 - Mobilization of efforts to implement the recommendations of the Ashgabat Initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport, using United Nations legal norms, standards and recommendations for trade and transport facilitation, understanding that the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted existing structural problems in trade and transport procedures and regulations and made the implementation of the Ashgabat Initiative even more pertinent now. In this sense, the implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy and Principles of Sustainable Trade should be considered a priority, with a view to enhanced cooperation on the circular economy, which is particularly important for the SPECA subregion;
 - Active assistance in the realization of the Innovation Road Map to accelerate the implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action for LLDCs in the remaining five years.
2. Continuation of efforts to accede to and effectively implement the UN transport-related legal instruments and other conventions and agreements dealing with trade and transport facilitation, and their successful implementation. These agreements, for which ESCAP and UNECE can provide support and advice, include legal instruments listed in Annex II of the Ashgabat Initiative:
- The SPECA participating countries can fully implement the conclusions of the Regional Dialogue on Strengthening Transport Connectivity in the SPECA Subregion and Beyond in the era of COVID-19 and take advantage of these regional measures to facilitate trade and transport activities;

- SPECA participating countries can use regional transport cooperation within the activities of the SPECA Working Group on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity to support regional transport connectivity, mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and cooperate in developing the SPECA Transport Connectivity Strategy.
3. Enhancing the effectiveness of seamless digital connectivity and assessing e-resilience readiness of digital networks, in particular:
- Developing and updating national strategies and action plans to realize the digital potential of the countries for sustainable economic transformation;
 - As recommended by the ESCAP Committee on Information and Communications Technology and Science, Technology and Innovation at its third session, support the work of the drafting committee that will develop an action plan for advancing implementation of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative in its second phase 2022-2026 and continue efforts to implement the 2019-2022 Master Plan;
 - Accepting digitalization as a key factor for economic transformation and driver of sustainable development. In this regard, SPECA participating countries should scale-up the sharing of best practices and technical expertise within the programme of work of the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development to successfully implement the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development;
 - Adopting digital technologies for sustainable transformation strategies to ensure no one is left behind in the efforts for recovery from the COVID-19 crisis;
 - Developing and updating national strategies and action plans for digital transformation through multistakeholder consultations at the interface of the ICT, energy, trade and transport sectors, involving the private sector, civil society, academia and development partners. To this end, the SPECA participating countries should support ongoing research related to the identification of smart corridors and creation of a portal on cross-sectoral infrastructure projects;
 - Taking into account the priority of multimodality, digitalization and interoperability, development of and participation in pilot projects to standardize digital multimodal transport data and document exchange, using international standards, and starting from key documents accompanying goods in various modes of transport in the region: road, rail, inland waterways, air and maritime transport in the Caspian Sea, as well as eTIR for transit. Explore ways of financing these activities through partnership arrangements.

4. Increasing fiscal resources and mobilizing additional financial resources to support economic recovery and meet the large investment needs to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.
 - The SPECA participating countries could increase their fiscal space by gradually phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, improving tax administration through adoption of digital technologies, introducing taxes that help reduce income inequalities and carbon emissions, and reorienting public spending towards inclusive and green development. As an immediate step, the SPECA participating countries could actively engage in global initiatives on debt service relief;
 - Mobilizing additional financial resources from the private sector to promote inclusive and sustainable development to address the current funding gap. In particular, the SPECA participating countries could further explore innovative public-private partnership (PPP) initiatives to expand transport connectivity, introduce green bank lending practices, issue diaspora bonds to enhance the benefit from significant remittance inflows, and create special funds.
5. Recognizing that a more integrated approach for structural economic transformation is needed for building back better with a view to implement the Sustainable Development Goals.
 - Structural economic transformation is a priority for action in the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries that has made limited progress as indicated in the outcomes of the mid-term review, emphasizing the importance to accelerate efforts in this regard;
 - An integrated approach considering the achievement of the SDGs can provide countries with a relevant framework for longer-term socioeconomic recovery efforts;
 - The concept of drivers for achieving the SDGs and proposed measures to identify potential drivers that could accelerate progress towards the SDGs can be used by the SPECA countries in their efforts to better recover after the pandemic.
6. Developing and strengthening the network of SPECA Thematic Working Groups as the organizational and knowledge hub of regional cooperation in the SPECA thematic areas and creating further synergies with the UN Resident Coordinator and Country Team system as the third UN pillar in support of SPECA using the excellent experience of cooperation during the 2020 SPECA Economic Forum.