

**United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA)****2022 SPECA ECONOMIC FORUM ON “GREENER AND SAFER FUTURE”****16-17 November 2022, Almaty, Kazakhstan and online****CONCEPT NOTE****Context**

Impressive economic and social development of the SPECA participating countries in the past two decades increased well-being of citizens and reduced level of poverty. These achievements are threatened by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which took significant numbers of lives, brought economies to a standstill, pushing many people back into poverty. Rapid resource-driven economic growth, has been generating dangerous levels of pollution, accelerating desertification and the loss of biodiversity. SPECA participating countries are also facing inflations, reduction of remittance income, and shipping and transport disruptions due to the recent geopolitical crises and sanctions.

ESCAP “Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2022: Widening disparities amid COVID-19” confirmed the progress of North and Central Asia on targets under: good health and well-being, industry, innovation and infrastructure, peace, justice, and strong institutions. However, it alerted the widening inequalities amid COVID-19. Progresses towards achieving clean water and sanitation, sustainable cities and communities, climate action are limited, or showing regressing trends. While renewable energy capacity has increased in the subregion, the share of renewable energy in the total energy supply remains low. The progress towards achieving on gender equality is slow and uneven across SPECA participating countries.

The 2022 SPECA Economic Forum will discuss and provide an integrated approach towards a greener, safer, and prosperous future of the subregion. It aims to facilitate cooperation among SPECA participating countries to build back better while getting back on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The Forum will discuss best practices and lessons learned to ensure economic security and resilience, structural economic transformation, sustainable energy transition, digital transformation while achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment.

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

The objectives of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) are to facilitate economic cooperation in the SPECA region, integration of the SPECA participating countries into the world economy and to provide a platform for cross-border cooperation for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The SPECA participating countries are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) jointly provide overall support to the Programme.

## Objectives

The objectives of the 2022 SPECA Economic Forum are:

- To discuss potential opportunities for enhanced regional cooperation to support greener and safer future of SPECA participating countries.
- To encourage knowledge sharing, experiences and lessons learned among government officials of SPECA participating countries and relevant stakeholders with regard to policies, strategies, and initiatives to: (i) promote socioeconomic security and resilience, in line with the clarion call of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind, (ii) facilitate sustainable economic transformation and green transition, (iii) support sustainable energy transition, and (iv) advance digital transformation, leveraging digital opportunities.
- To enhance knowledge of policymakers of SPECA participating countries to accelerate women's participation in all areas of socioeconomic activities.
- To enhance capacity of policymakers of the SPECA participating countries to align national development strategies with objectives of international agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries.

## Outcome

The 2022 SPECA Economic Forum will discuss and identify the opportunities for regional cooperation to support a greener and safer future. It aims to support implementation of internationally agreed goals, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries.

The conclusions and recommendations emerging from the 2022 SPECA Economic Forum will feed into the outcome document “**Almaty Declaration**” which will be submitted for adoption to the 17<sup>th</sup> session of the SPECA Governing Council.

## TENTATIVE PROGRAMME

**Wednesday, 16 November 2022**

### *Morning Sessions*

- **Opening of the 2022 SPECA Economic Forum**

The opening of the Forum will include welcome remarks by the current Chair country of SPECA (Kazakhstan), and opening remarks by the Executive Secretaries of ESCAP and UNECE, and the Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, United Nations Development Coordination Office (DCO).

- **Session I: High-Level Policy Dialogue on Greener and Safer Future in the SPECA region**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inherent vulnerabilities in the economies of the SPECA participating countries which have relied on resource-based, short-term economic growth at the expense of long-term sustainability. In going forward, recovery should be greener, inclusive, and safer with improved social, health and environmental protection systems.

The high-level policy dialogue will discuss regional cooperation strategies to support greener and safer future. During this session, heads of delegation of the SPECA participating countries and other experts will provide their views about water, climate change, other environmental and social issues.

- **Session II: Economic security and resilience: leaving no one behind**

The COVID-19 pandemic and its wider socioeconomic impacts particularly affected vulnerable population groups. High inflation and volatile economic conditions also further exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. It is imperative that policies will aim to mitigate these socioeconomic impacts, considering the fundamental principle of leave no one behind.

The pandemic induced developmental challenges provide a unique opportunity for SPECA participating countries to repurpose policy priorities to make economies more resilient to future pandemics, disasters and crises. Such policies should ensure inclusiveness, harnessing regional cooperation and regional connectivity, promoting the SDGs and other international commitments and standards.

As the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in dire consequences across all spectrums of the economic and social development globally, cities have become the key players in addressing its impacts as well as in restarting the economy, “building back better” and, as one important aspect, promoting urban resilience in the increasingly urbanizing region.

## *Afternoon Sessions*

- **Session III: Sustainable economic transformation**

Economies which rely on natural resources and remittances are vulnerable with external risks. The commodity price fluctuations expose countries to external shocks, which impacts countries' fiscal space, currency value and trade balance. Additionally, the expansion of extractive industries in the some of the SPECA participating countries created limited job opportunities and brought about negative environmental externalities.

Despite the recorded economic growth in past decades, the overall development model remained less effective in developing knowledge-based economy, reducing informal employment, encouraging non-commodity export, and promoting inclusive economic growth. As resource-driven growth shows its limitations and the threat of climate change looms, countries in the subregion are increasingly prioritizing economic diversification and green transition strategies. Concerted policies are required to accelerate sustainable economic transformation.

- **Session IV: Sustainable energy transition**

The expansion of conventional energy sources and the initiation of market reforms allowed countries to establish a stable energy supply and benefit from energy trade.

However, challenges remain in terms of energy efficiency, energy security and diversification. Technological innovation and advancements in energy that drive down renewable energy costs made sustainable energy development more affordable. In the past decade, energy transition plans have been set in the national strategies of SPECA participating countries.

Accelerated efforts to promote sustainable energy transition including in transport sector, is needed to realize the potential gains of energy security and to build readiness to a new energy paradigm.

## **Thursday, 17 November 2022**

### *Morning Sessions*

- **Session V : Digital transformation – leveraging digital opportunities**

Digital technologies are transforming global economies and societies at unprecedented speed. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated usages and adoption of digital technologies as governments impose strict measures to control the spread of the virus.

Digital readiness and capacity, access to the high-speed broadband services proved as keys to contain COVID-19 disease, mitigating the devastating socioeconomic impacts, and to

prepare for fast recovery. Digital transformation has become one of the top policy priorities for SPECA participating countries.

The session will discuss areas for subregional cooperation and actions that promote connectivity for all, digital technology applications and digital data as underlying foundations for building an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient digital economy and society. It will also discuss how cross-border investment can support digital transformation.

It will also share the main findings of the Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Report 2022, and the key outcomes of the Asia-Pacific Digital Ministerial Conference on “Shaping Our Digital Future” (Seoul, Republic of Korea, 10 November 2022).

- **Session VI: Gender equality and women’s empowerment**

SPECA participating countries have achieved substantial progress in expanding opportunities for women and girls in the economic realm in the last decades across the public and private sectors underpinned by legal reforms and policies at various levels. The advancement of women, however, remains slow, uneven across industries and occupations, and varies by countries. Gender disparities are recorded in the labour force participation rate, in mean years of schooling, and among youth not in education, employment or training. These disparities are expected to worsen because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Women have been hit harder than men as they tend to earn less and dominate in sectors that have suffered the most from closures during lockdowns and restrictions imposed to combat the spread of the COVID-19. The loss of income from employment, remittances, and other sources, including informal economy as well as increased domestic care responsibilities and risks of domestic violence, have worsened the living and health conditions of women both in urban and rural areas in the SPECA countries. The increased burden of unpaid care of women as schools closed during lockdowns has made many women drop out of the labour market, thus reducing their economic security amid growing uncertainties for re-joining gainful employment. Inclusive policies need to be in place to ensure women’s equal participation in all areas of socioeconomic activities.

### *Afternoon Session*

- **Wrap-up and Closing of the 2022 SPECA Economic Forum**

The Chairperson of the Forum will share the draft outcome document of the Forum “**Almaty Declaration**” followed by closing remarks.

### **Further information**

The 2022 SPECA Economic Forum will take place in hybrid modality on 16-17 November 2022. It will be conducted in English and Russian with simultaneous interpretation.

Detailed information will be available on the official event page. For further information, please contact [escap-sonca@un.org](mailto:escap-sonca@un.org).