UNITED NATIONS
ESCAP
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
Subregional Office for North and Central Asia

Expert Group Meeting

Implementing the Vienna Programme of Action in North and Central Asia

19-20 April 2022 | Virtual meeting

Meeting Report

A. Introduction

The Expert Group Meeting (EGM) was held virtually on Zoom platform on 19-20 April 2022. The objectives of the meeting were to (i) discuss the level of alignment between national development plans/strategies in the Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) of North and Central Asian and the priority and action areas of the Roadmap for Accelerated Implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action (VPoA); (ii) identify national developmental needs and gaps in implementing the Roadmap; (iii) assess the level of digitalisation; (iv) identify areas for potential digitalization that can support implementation of the action areas listed in the Roadmap; (v) explore areas for cooperation among LLDCs as well as between LLDCs and transit countries, and identify support needed from development partners; and (vi) discuss financing options to support implementation of the VPoA. The final programme of the EGM is enclosed in Annex 1.

B. Participation and Evaluation

The expert group meeting was attended by a total of 55 participants from almost all ESCAP member States in North and Central Asia[1] except for Georgia, as well as from other regional organizations. There were 20 participants (6 female, 14 male) from member States, 8 participants (3 female, 5 male) from international and regional organisations, and 27 participants from the United Nations (17 female, 10 male). The list of participants is enclosed in Annex 2.

Almost 43 per cent of meeting participants completed the post-event assessment. Based on the post-event assessment, participants rated the meeting favourably (maximum rating of 5) – 4.08 for relevance, 4.35 for effectiveness, and 4.63 for efficiency. Participants commented that the meeting allowed for stocktaking of ideas, concerns, challenges, and opportunities, as well as information about ongoing projects in the region. The meeting also improved participants' awareness on tools and resources for digital transformation and allowed for better cooperation and sharing of experiences. Participants suggested to have more examples and recommendations for policy implementation, improve time-keeping aspect and organize more international workshops, seminars, and conferences on the topic. Participants also indicated their interest to learn more about the progress of the Roadmap of the Digital Solutions Center for Sustainable Development.

[1] Countries in North and Central Asia include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

C. Substantive discussions and outcomes

Session 1: Mapping the priority areas of the Roadmap for Accelerated Implementation of the VPoA to national development plans and strategies of LLDCs in North and Central Asia

The session discussed how national development strategies of North and Central Asian LLDCs correspond with the Roadmap for Accelerated Implementation of the VPoA and discussed challenges in implementing the Roadmap in North and Central Asian LLDCs. Most LLDCs have articulated some form of a long-term national development plan that seeks to address priorities that are similar to the Roadmap.

Structural economic transformation was identified as the most prominently reflected priority area of the VPoA in national strategies. The structure of economies in North and Central Asia varies, with different stages of development observed. Agriculture still makes up a large share of the economy and employment in many LLDCs in North and Central Asia and is mentioned in all the national strategies of North and Central Asian LLDCs. The presentation and discussions revealed that most countries are committed to developing trade, transit, and transport sectors, although there were few references to climate and disaster resilient infrastructure in national strategies and plans. All countries are committed to developing renewable energy systems, improving energy efficiency, and modernizing of energy infrastructure.

However, it was observed that these strategic documents lacked quantitative elements such as the required financing estimates. Furthermore, most documents do not articulate a comprehensive resource mobilization strategy , except for the case of Tajikistan. This does not allow for adequate assessment of the financing needs and gaps. On the gender dimension, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have explicitly included the pursuit of gender equality and women empowerment in their national strategies. It was also highlighted that regional cooperation and integration has been limited among the North and Central Asian countries.

In the current context, there are opportunities for LLDCs in North and Central Asia to strengthen collaboration in developing transport and transit corridors and in facilitating energy transit.

Session 2: Digital potential to advance implementation of the VPoA in North and Central Asia

The session analysed the issues related to digitalization in North and Central Asian LLDCs and discussed ongoing initiatives, capacity-building supports and policies that can support sustainable and inclusive development as well as implementation of the VPoA Roadmap.

Given the importance of bridging the digital divide and accelerating digital transformation, ESCAP has been promoting the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative since 2016. The initiative promotes digital connectivity, digital technology and data use in the Asia Pacific region. In addition, ESCAP currently cooperates with the government of Kazakhstan to establish the Digital Solutions Center for Sustainable Development in Nur-Sultan. The key goal of the Center is to provide digital solutions to accelerate digital transformation towards an inclusive digital society in Central Asia. The Center aims to function as an accelerator and coordinator of digital related agendas and cooperation in development sectors such as water, energy, agriculture, industry, and trade. Participants also learned about the ICT capacity building

activities conducted by the Asian and Pacific Training Centre for ICT for Development of ESCAP in the areas of digital government and transformation, as well as digital connectivity and ICT for new and emerging socioeconomic issues.

The importance of regional cooperation in digitalization initiatives was highlighted during the session. Countries need to recognise mutual benefits to realise digital cooperation efforts. Among existing challenges for digitalization and digital cooperation, experts pointed out the high access costs to the Internet, lack of enforcement for regulatory and legal frameworks for digital development, and low degree of harmonization for digital legislations at the regional level. The reliance of landlocked countries in the subregion on transit countries to access ICT infrastructure pose challenges as well as opportunities to seek out mutually beneficially arrangements. The importance of digital inclusion was also highlighted during the session by several speakers.

UN agencies and development organizations could provide capacity building and technical support to improve institutional skills and capacities in creating regulatory and policy frameworks in the ICT sphere, as well as in developing cybersecurity and personal data protection systems.

Policy Dialogue on “Financing a Sustainable Recovery from COVID-19 and Beyond”

The policy dialogue facilitated discussions on financing options to support implementation of the VPoA and sustainable development, especially in the context of COVID-19 and beyond.

Even before the pandemic ESCAP highlighted the colossal financing requirements to achieve the SDGs, and the pandemic has exacerbated these financing challenges. In addition to an increase in Government spending to launch response measures countries are also with faced a deterioration in revenues and a precarious debt position.

Against his backdrop participants discussed i)The insights from the forthcoming Countries with Special Needs Development Report 2022; ii) The financing challenges of LLDCs in North and Central Asia and how organizations like the World Bank and AIFC (Astana International Finance Center) support these countries in line with the principles of sustainable development; and iii) The measures taken by Governments and Central Banks of LLDCs in North and Central Asia to mitigate the impacts of the COVID19 pandemic and support inclusive development.

Notably, speakers expressed that the current context provides an opportunity to introduce policy reforms in terms of public expenditure management and to explore innovative and inclusive financing options for sustainable development. Measures taken by governments in the subregion include the issuance of green and social bonds, initiating a green climate fund and introducing subsidy schemes for development projects that consider sustainability aspects. Sustainable and green finance markets have also attracted increasing attention in the subregion with the sustainable finance market of the Astana International Financial Center valued at approximately USD 250 million and the Green Climate Fund in Armenia obtaining support of USD 100 million from the private sector for refinancing.

Challenges persist in the financing landscape of the subregion. Innovative financing instruments may have the potential to plug the financing gap, but there are still gaps in capacity, policy, and regulatory aspects.

The development of the financial landscape across countries in the subregion is also uneven. Despite some successes, one of the main challenges is the utilization of finances and mobilization of financing from private sector. There is also a need to develop the digital finance infrastructure in an inclusive manner, to allow participation and access of vulnerable groups to financial resources.

Countries need to initiate institutional reforms to sustain investment flows and prioritize the digitalization of financial systems. The subregion could also consider the development of green financing on a regional level to finance implementation and achievement of the sustainable development goals.

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Annex 1. Final Programme

** All times are stated in Almaty time (GMT+6).*

Day/Time	Session
Tuesday, 19 April 2022	
10:00 – 12:00	Opening Session • Welcome remarks *by Mr. Nikolay Pomoshchnikov, Head, Subregional Office for North and Central Asia, ESCAP* Session 1: Mapping Vienna Programme of Action priority areas within national strategies of North and Central Asia This session will showcase how national strategies of North and Central Asian countries have correspond with the VPoA and discuss how VPoA priority areas can be further mainstreamed in national strategies. The expert group is expected to identify national developmental needs and gaps in implementing the VPoA Roadmap in North and Central Asian LLDCs and suggest areas where development partners could further support implementation of the VPoA. *Moderator: Mr. Oliver Paddison, Chief, Countries with Special Situations Section, ESCAP* • Presentation *by Ms. Savia Hasanova, Consultant, ESCAP* • Remarks by expert group - *Mr. Iskandar Abdullaev, Deputy Director, CAREC Institute* - *Ms. Saodat Jurahonzoda, Deputy Director, Center for Strategic Studies of Tajikistan* - *Mr. Emin Mammadov, Senior Researcher, Center for Economic and Social Development Azerbaijan* • Open discussion • Concluding remarks
12:00 – 14:00	Break
14.00 – 16:00	Session 2: Digital potential to advance implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action in North and Central Asia This session will discuss digitalization efforts in North and Central Asia. The expert group is expected to analyze the level of digitalization in North and Central Asia, especially in each of the action areas of the VPoA Roadmap and identify potential areas for digitalization that can support implementation of the action areas listed in the Roadmap. *Moderator: Ms. Michiko Enomoto, Deputy Head, Subregional Office for North and Central Asia, ESCAP* • Presentation on the Roadmap for the establishment of a Digital Solutions Center for Central Asia *by Ms. Tiziana Bonapace, Director, ICT and Disaster Risk Reduction Division, ESCAP*

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Day/Time	Session
	• Presentation on ICT Capacity Building Activities in Central Asia *by Mr. Kiyoung Ko, APCICT, ESCAP* • Remarks by expert group - *Mr. Dulguun Damdin-Od, Executive Director, International Think Tank for Landlocked Developing Countries* - *Ms. Tattu Mambetalieva, Director, Civil Initiative on Internet Policy* - *Ms. Irina Divakova, UN Engagement Officer, International Telecommunication Union* • Open discussion Concluding remarks
Wednesday, 20 April 2022	
10:00 – 12:00	<u>Policy Dialogue on "Financing a Sustainable Recovery from COVID-19 and Beyond"</u> The policy dialogue is expected to facilitate discussions on financing options to support implementation of the VPoA, especially in the context of COVID-19 and beyond. It will feature interventions from development partners, financial regulatory authorities and governments who will be sharing about trends, measures and innovations in financing that can support recovery efforts and ensure that these recovery efforts are in line with the principles of sustainable development. *Moderator: Mr. Nyingtob Norbu, Economic Affairs Officer, Countries with Special Situations Section, ESCAP* • Presentation *by Mr. Yusuke Tateno, Economic Affairs Officer, Countries with Special Situations Section, ESCAP* • Remarks by discussants - *Ms. Aigul Kusaliyeva, Chief Strategy Officer, Green Finance Center, Astana International Financial Center (AIFC)* - *Ms. Suzy Yoon, Senior Operations Officer, Regional Office for Central Asia, World Bank* - *Mr. Yusif Sofiyev, Chief Adviser, Economic Policy Department, Ministry of Economy of Azerbaijan* - *Mr. Davit Kirakosyan, Program Manager, Central Bank of Armenia* • Open discussion • Concluding remarks

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Annex 2. List of participants

Member States

Armenia

- Mr. Davit Kirakosyan, Programme Manager, Central Bank of Armenia

Azerbaijan

- Mr. Yusif Sofiyev, Chief Adviser, Economic Policy Department, Ministry of Economy
- Mr. Ilgar Gasimli, Adviser, Ministry of Economy
- Mr. Nijat Mikayilov, Senior Adviser, Department of International Cooperation, Ministry of Digital Development and Transport
- Ms. Aytan Turabova, Lead Adviser, Transport Policy Department, Ministry of Digital Development and Transport
- Mr. Emin Mammadov, Senior Researcher, Center for Economic and Social Development Azerbaijan

Kazakhstan

- Mr. Nurzhan Rakhmetov, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the United Nations
- Mr. Amirbek Islamuly, Head of Division of International Organizations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Mr. Nursultan Nurmashev, Attaché, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Mr. Rustem Bigari, Chief Executive Officer, Digital Government Support Center
- Ms. Aigul Yelaman, Chief Strategy Officer, Green Finance Center, Astana International Financial Center
- Ms. Meruyert Syzdykova, Senior Manager, Nazarbayev University

Kyrgyzstan

- Ms. Tattu Mambetalieva, Director, Civil Initiative on Internet Policy
- Ms. Zalina Enikeeva, Research Fellow and Academic Programme Coordinator, Institute of Public Policy and Administration, University of Central Asia

Russian Federation

- Mr. Egor Alimov, Attaché, Russian Embassy to Thailand

Tajikistan

- Ms. Saodat Jurakhonzoda, Deputy Director, Center for Strategic Studies

Turkmenistan

- Mr. Begmyrat Miriyev, Head, Division of Macroeconomic Policy, Ministry of Finance and Economy
- Mr. Guvanch Shamuhammedov, Head, Division of Computer Technology, Ministry of Finance and Economy
- Mr. Bayrammyrat Akmyradov, Chief specialist, Division of Financial Analysis of Trade, Transport and Communication Sectors, Ministry of Finance and Economy

Uzbekistan

- Mr. Mirazim Khamidov, Chief Specialist, Ministry of Transport

International/ Regional Organizations

CAREC Institute

- Mr. Iskandar Abdullaev, Deputy Director
- Mr. Hans Holzhacker, Chief Economist
- Mr. Qaisar Abbas, Head of Research Division

Eurasian Development Bank

- Mr. Leonid Efimov, Head, International Cooperation Division

International Telecommunication Union

- Ms. Irina Divakova, UN Engagement Officer

International Think Tank for Landlocked Developing Countries

- Mr. Dulguun Damdin-Od, Executive Director
- Ms. Enkhtuul Jantsankhorol, Research Officer

World Bank

- Ms. Suzy Yoon, Senior Operations Officer

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Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS)

- Gladys Mutangadura, Senior Programme Management Officer
- Nnana Pheto, Economic Affairs Officer
- Nathalie Risse, Economic Affairs Officer

ESCAP Section for Countries with Special Situations

- Oliver Paddison, Section Chief
- Yusuke Tateno, Economic Affairs Officer
- Nyingtob Norbu, Economic Affairs Officer
- Juliet Braslow, Economic Affairs Officer
- Channarith Meng, Economic Affairs Officer
- Savia Hasanova, Consultant
- Sutinee Yeamkitpibul, Staff Assistant
- Ruby Mathapongpan, Research Assistant
- Symone McCollin-Norris, Intern

ESCAP ICT and Disaster Risk Reduction Division

- Tiziana Bonapace, Head
- Kiyoung Ko, Director, Asian and Pacific Training Centre for ICT Development
- Tae Hyung Kim, Section Chief
- Aida Karazhanova, Economic Affairs Officer
- Soomi Hong, Associate Economic Affairs Officer

ESCAP Subregional Office for North and Central Asia

- Nikolay Pomoshchnikov, Head
- Michiko Enomoto, Deputy Head
- Elvira Mynbayeva, Programme Management Officer
- Patricia Wong Bi Yi, Associate Economic Affairs Officer
- Agapi Harutyunyan, Consultant
- Artur Akhmetov, Research Assistant
- Dinara Assaubayeva, Research Assistant
- Ainur Dyussyubekova, Administrative Assistant
- Valentin Gryunberg, Programme Assistant
- Alexander Parkyn-Smith, Intern