Report of the Governing Council of the Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia on its fifteenth session

Summary


The Council called upon the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the United Nations resident coordinators and United Nations country teams, United Nations funds, programmes and specialized agencies, international and regional organizations, international financial institutions and donor agencies to provide active support to the participating countries of the Special Programme in strengthening cooperation in the subregion to foster a sustainable, resilient and inclusive socioeconomic recovery in the wake of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and a transition towards a circular economy. It invites the international agencies to assist the participating countries of the Special Programme in implementing relevant international agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014–2024, as well as the Ashgabat initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations legal instruments, norms, standards and recommendations while bolstering connectivity in the Special Programme region, at the national and regional levels.

The Council adopted the Bishkek Declaration, entitled “Strengthening regional cooperation to support socioeconomic recovery in the wake of COVID-19”. In addition, the Council decided that the establishment of the Special Programme secretariat and the Special Programme fund needs to be further considered holistically. The Council requested the Secretariat of the United Nations to hold consultations for the participating countries of the Special Programme in order to reach a final decision on those issues. The Council will continue considering the outcome of the consultations at its next session in 2021. Furthermore, the Council noted the statement of the secretariats of ESCAP and ECE on the Special Programme thematic working group on statistics. Based on the comments from the participating countries during the discussion, the Council decided to continue the activities of the thematic working group online in order to minimize financial costs. The Council took note of the initiative of the Government of Uzbekistan to establish a new Special Programme thematic working group on investment and financial cooperation, taking into account that the Government will
submit information on the establishment of the new thematic working group to the secretariats of ESCAP and ECE for further consideration at the next session of the Council in 2021.

The sixteenth session of the Council is scheduled to be held in Uzbekistan in 2021, with the Government of Uzbekistan acting as Chair.

I. Decisions

1. At its fifteenth session, the Governing Council of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia took the following decisions:

Decision 1 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2020/1)

The Council notes with satisfaction the outcomes of the 2020 United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia Economic Forum, “Regional cooperation to support socioeconomic recovery in the wake of COVID-19”, held on 18 and 19 November 2020. The Council calls upon the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the United Nations resident coordinators and United Nations country teams, United Nations funds, programmes and specialized agencies, international and regional organizations, international financial institutions and donor agencies to provide active support to the participating countries of the Special Programme in strengthening cooperation in the subregion to foster a sustainable, resilient and inclusive socioeconomic recovery in the wake of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and a transition towards a circular economy. It invites the international agencies to assist the participating countries in implementing relevant international agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014–2024, as well as the Ashgabat initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations legal instruments, norms, standards and recommendations while bolstering connectivity in the Special Programme region, at the national and regional levels.

Decision 2 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2020/2)


Decision 3 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2020/3)

In view of decision 5 of the fourteenth session of the Council (SPECA/GC/Dec/2019/5), the Secretariat of the United Nations developed draft legal documents for establishing a Special Programme fund, namely the following: an agreement on the establishment of the Special Programme fund, the statute of the Special Programme fund and a headquarters agreement. The Council expresses its appreciation to the ECE secretariat for the elaboration of these documents.

The Council decides that the establishment of the Special Programme secretariat and the Special Programme fund needs to be further considered holistically. The Council requests the Secretariat of the United Nations to conduct consultations for the participating countries of the Special Programme
in order to reach a final decision on these issues. The Council will continue considering the outcome of the consultations at its next session in 2021.

Decision 4 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2020/4)

The Council, noting the statement of the ESCAP and ECE secretariats on the Special Programme thematic working group on statistics, and based on the comments from the participating countries during the discussion, decides to continue the activities of the thematic working group on statistics online in order to minimize financial costs.

The Council notes the initiative of the Government of Uzbekistan to establish a new Special Programme thematic working group on investment and financial cooperation, taking into account that the Government will submit information on the establishment of the new thematic working group to the ESCAP and ECE secretariats for further consideration at the next session of the Council in 2021.

Decision 5 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2020/5)

The Council takes note of, with appreciation, the progress reports on the activities of the five Special Programme thematic working groups since its previous session and expresses satisfaction with the implementation of the activities covered in their reports. The Council also notes with appreciation the progress made in the implementation of the Ashgabat initiative, the Special Programme trade facilitation strategy, the principles of sustainable trade and the Special Programme innovation strategy for sustainable development.

Decision 6 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2020/6)


Decision 7 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2020/7)

The Council welcomes the offer by the Government of Uzbekistan to act as the Chair of the Special Programme in 2021 and elects Uzbekistan as the Chair country of the Special Programme for 2021.

Decision 8 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2020/8)

The Council decides that the sixteenth session of the Council and the 2021 Economic Forum will be held in Uzbekistan. The exact dates and venue of these events as well as the theme of the 2021 Economic Forum will be agreed upon and communicated through diplomatic channels.

Decision 9 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2020/9)

The Council expresses its deep appreciation to the secretariats of ESCAP and ECE for their efforts to organize these important annual events online, their active work aimed at strengthening the Special Programme and their continued support for the implementation of the activities of the Special Programme.
II. Proceedings

(Agenda item 3)

2. The 2020 Economic Forum focused on strengthening cooperation in the subregion to support sustainable and inclusive economic recovery in the wake of COVID-19. The Forum provided a platform for participating countries of the Special Programme and their partners to discuss and develop ideas for coordinated actions by Governments, the United Nations system and other relevant stakeholders to respond to the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, keeping in view the experiences and lessons learned from recent policy actions. The Forum discussed the complementarities between the implementation of short- to medium-term measures to support socioeconomic recovery and responding to the call for action to accelerate implementation of relevant international agendas such as the 2030 Agenda and the Vienna Programme of Action.

B. Special Programme fund, Special Programme secretariat and other issues
(Agenda item 4)

3. The Government of Turkmenistan had proposed the creation of the Special Programme fund through equal financial contributions from each participating country of the Special Programme in both the initial and regular annual contributions of participating countries. As an option for managing the fund, the Government of Turkmenistan proposed the establishment of the secretariat of the fund in the capital of the Special Programme’s chairing country until the end of its term as chair. The secretariat of the fund would thus move, each time, to the capital of the next chairing country. Alternatively, the Government of Turkmenistan suggested that the function of the secretariat of the fund could be entrusted to ECE in Geneva. At the same time, it was noted that when considering all the above proposals, it was necessary to take into account international legal norms, as well as the views of other participating countries.

4. The Executive Secretary of ECE stated that she supported the initiative and ECE was ready to assist at the inception phase. She stressed that the decision on the creation of the fund was up to the participating countries of the Special Programme.

5. The representatives of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan stated that the issue of the Special Programme secretariat should have priority. Donor contributions would be the best option for funding the fund due to the economic situation of countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The representative of Turkmenistan noted that by creating a Special Programme fund, the countries could signal their readiness for deeper cooperation, while donor aid could be obtained later, based on the practical act of creating the fund.

6. The Chair suggested that the creation of the Special Programme secretariat be discussed first since that issue interrelated with the establishment of the Special Programme fund.

7. The representative of Uzbekistan suggested that the Special Programme secretariat be located in Tashkent and noted that the Government of Uzbekistan would provide full support and appropriate working conditions for the
secretariat. The representative of Kazakhstan reminded the participants that the Government of Kazakhstan had developed a concept note relating to locating the Special Programme secretariat in Almaty. The concept note had been circulated to the participating countries of the Special Programme before the Economic Forum. He requested the Council to implement consistently decisions taken earlier. The representatives of Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan supported the idea that further consultations were needed on the establishment of the Special Programme secretariat. The representative of Turkmenistan suggested that the decisions on the Special Programme secretariat and the Special Programme fund should be considered together.

8. The participants agreed that the creation of the Special Programme secretariat and fund needed to be considered holistically during further consultations among the Special Programme participating countries.

C. Statement of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the Economic Commission for Europe secretariats on the future activities of the Special Programme thematic working group on statistics
(Agenda item 5)

9. A representative of the ESCAP secretariat read out a letter from the Director of the Statistical Division of ECE and the Director of the Statistics Division of ESCAP, addressed to the Council. The fourteenth session of the Special Programme thematic working group on statistics took place in October 2019 and was attended by representatives of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The thematic working group agreed to consider its dissolution, in response to member States’ preference for working in a wider group of countries from Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. The countries had also expressed their concern about the large number of international meetings with similar agendas. The countries of the Special Programme would be able to participate in annual ECE/Eurostat/European Free Trade Association high-level seminars in a new format for the countries from Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. They would still be invited to other relevant forums organized by ECE and ESCAP. The letter contained the argument that the new format of annual meetings would benefit participating countries of the Special Programme, as it would allow broader country participation. It would enable the exchange of best practices and training opportunities, such as those delivered by ECE, ESCAP and the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific, for Central Asian countries. The ECE and ESCAP secretariats requested the Council to consider the matter and approve the dissolution of the thematic working group on statistics.

10. The representative of Turkmenistan did not support the idea of dissolving the thematic working group on statistics and suggested that the activities of the thematic working group be continued online, which would not require much financing. The representative of Uzbekistan supported the proposal.

11. The representative of Uzbekistan proposed the establishment of a new Special Programme thematic working group on investment and financial cooperation. The concept note on creating the new thematic working group would be shared with the ESCAP and ECE secretariats.
D. Special Programme activities since the fourteenth session of the Governing Council
(Agenda item 6)

12. The representative of the ECE secretariat presented a brief overview of the activities carried out by the Special Programme thematic working groups since the fourteenth session of the Council.

13. The activities carried out by the Special Programme thematic working groups since the fourteenth session of the Council were noted with appreciation.

E. Election of the next Chair country of the Special Programme
(Agenda item 7)

14. The Government of Uzbekistan made the proposal that it would host the 2021 Economic Forum and the sixteenth session of the Council. The head of the delegation of Uzbekistan confirmed the proposal and expressed gratitude to the ESCAP and ECE secretariats for their assistance. The representatives of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan supported the proposal that Uzbekistan become the host country in 2021. The Council elected Uzbekistan as the Chair of the Special Programme in 2021.

F. Date and venue of the 2021 Special Programme Economic Forum and the sixteenth session of the Governing Council of the Special Programme
(Agenda item 8)

15. The dates and venue of these events would be agreed upon and communicated through diplomatic channels. The theme of the 2021 Economic Forum would also be determined at a later date.

G. Other business
(Agenda item 9)

16. No issues were raised by participants under this agenda item.

III. Organization

A. Opening, duration and organization of the session

17. The fifteenth session of the Council of the Special Programme was held on 20 November 2020 online. It was jointly organized by the Government of Kyrgyzstan, the Chair country of the Special Programme for 2020, ESCAP and ECE.

B. Participants

18. Representatives of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as well as the ESCAP and ECE secretariats participated in the session. The representative of Afghanistan could not take part in the session due to technical reasons. Representatives of other States Members of the United Nations, United Nations agencies and programmes, and the United Nations resident coordinators in the Special Programme participating countries, as well as representatives of international and regional organizations, the academic community, the private sector and civil society participated as observers.
C. Agenda

19. The Council adopted the following agenda:

1. Opening of the session.

2. Adoption of the agenda.


4. Special Programme fund, Special Programme secretariat and other issues.


6. Special Programme activities since the fourteenth session of the Governing Council.

7. Election of the next Chair country of the Special Programme.

8. Date and venue of the 2021 Special Programme Economic Forum and the sixteenth session of the Governing Council of the Special Programme.

9. Other business.

10. Adoption of decisions.

11. Closing of the session.