



Evaluation of the project

“Strengthening capacities of SPECA countries for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals” Project E262, UNECE

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Commissioned by the UN Economic Commission for Europe

August 2020

Disclaimer: The views in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily express the position of the UNECE.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express her gratitude to the staff at UNECE and ESCAP who extended all their support and cooperation for this evaluation. Special thanks go to Mr. Mario Apostolov, Regional Adviser, UNECE Deputy Coordinator of SPECA, and manager of the project, for his guidance through all stages of the evaluation from start to finish of the assignment; Ms. Mijidgombo Oyunjargal, Senior Research Assistant, who provided access to all relevant documentation, while Ms. Tatiana Apatenko, long time SPECA Programme Assistant and consultant, provided the institutional memory. The Report also greatly benefited from a thorough read and comments by Mr. Nicolas Dath-Baron, Programme Management Officer, Programme Management Unit (PMU) of the UNECE Office of the Executive Secretary.

The author interviewed staff members of UNECE as well as staff members of ESCAP familiar with the project, namely Mr. Hirohito Toda, former Head of the ESCAP Sub-regional Office for North and Central Asia, and Mr. Nikolay Pomoshchnikov, Deputy Head and focal point for SPECA in ESCAP. Gratitude goes to them for their insights.

Finally, the consultant would like to acknowledge the support of all SPECA country delegations and representatives who agreed to provide their insights for this evaluation. Their names are provided in the Annex.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
EU	European Union
EECCA	Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit / German Corporation for International Cooperation
HLPF	High Level Political Forum
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IsDB	Islamic Development Bank
KBD	Knowledge-based Development
LDCs	Least Developed Country
LLDCs	Landlocked Developing Countries
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NSO	National Statistical Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RPTC	Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SPECA	United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia
TOR	Terms of Reference
TWG/WG	Thematic Working Group /Work Group
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Teams
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDA	United Nations Development Accounts
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDG	UN Development Group
UNDP	UN Development Program
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNRC	United Nations Resident Coordinator
UNRCs	United Nations Regional Commissions
UNRCCA	United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia
VNR	Volunteer National Review
WB	World Bank
WTO	World Trade Organization

Executive Summary

1. Background

- The project “Strengthening the capacities of SPECA countries for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals” (E262), was created by UNECE and funded by the Russian Federation. It ran from June 2016 to December 2019, had an envelope of USD 547,000.00 .
- The goal of the project was to enable the Regional Commission to support the SPECA process as a platform for cooperation, exchanges of best practices, joint strategy development, norms implementation, etc., notably, to support the implementation of selected Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets that can be better achieved through regional cooperation.

2. Evaluation Findings and Performance Assessment

A) Relevance

- The project facilitated the functioning of SPECA for what its purpose was: to act as a *de facto* platform for cooperation and policy coordination at the regional level. The process was estimated as relevant by participating states as a platform for exchanges of information, networking, dissemination of norms, research, building capacity for achieving SDGs, overcoming common challenges, attracting investments and working towards joint projects, all high on the priorities of the SPECA countries.

B) Effectiveness

OBJECTIVE 1: EA1. Strengthened national capacity of beneficiary countries in all SPECA thematic areas: (1) water and energy resources, (2) transport and border crossing, (3) trade, (4) statistics, (5) knowledge-based development, and (6) gender and economy;

- The extended duration of the project allowed for the organization of 4 annual SPECA Economic Forums and 4 sessions of the SPECA Governing Council (instead of 2 Forums and 2 Governing Council sessions), with the participation of 409 experts. 23 sessions of the 6 SPECA TWGs took place during the extended framework (using just the original budget), with the participation of 392 policymakers and experts.
- The project supported the effectiveness of SPECA by organizing a two-day Expert Meeting in Almaty, Kazakhstan in June 2018 where a package of measures were developed to strengthen SPECA to better enable regional cooperation. The measures were then proposed for endorsement to the 13th Session of the Governing Council in September 2018.

OBJECTIVE 2: EA2. Enhanced capacity of SPECA countries to monitor and review progress on SDGs in SPECA thematic areas.

- Through the project, UNECE undertook a “Review of the public web-sites of national statistical organizations and web-sites for national reporting on SDGs”, published subsequently in English and Russian.
- A scoping study was commissioned by UNECE in 2016 on profiling which TWG should focus on which SDG targets, on the status of implementation of SDGs in SPECA countries

and how the TWGs could monitor the achievement of the SDGs.

OBJECTIVE 3: EA3. Improved cooperation between SPECA countries.

- 24 advisory services were provided by UNECE staff and resource and a number of concrete projects were developed with the support of the E262 project. The strength of cooperation through SPECA improved, the level of participation and interest of the SPECA countries in the annual events increased; Uzbekistan became fully involved in 2019 and studies, projects and trainings in all subject areas intensified.
- Follow up on the recommendations however is hampered by a lack of a dedicated Secretariat and the high staff turnover in national ministries with the ensuing loss of institutional memory.

C) Efficiency

- All annual SPECA events, TWG sessions and studies were implemented as planned in the project document. Only the WG on Gender and Economy was delayed once by one year. The project budget was envisaged as seed money to build on and involve more partners and other projects. Without the cost sharing, some of the activities could not have taken place, especially not during the extended period.
- Collaboration with ESCAP in organizing the annual events on a bi-annual base was overall positive. Relations with the UN Resident Coordinators' system can be explored further. Certain development partners provided support for the work of specific WGs.

D) Sustainability

- A number of different regional public goods were produced with support from the project, including: platform for cooperation; cross-border agreements; regional strategies; a number of studies and concrete projects; publication of materials from the SPECA process, such as the background materials and outcome documents from the 2019 SPECA events.
- The idea of a SPECA Fund was put forward by the UNECE for consideration by SPECA countries.
- A mechanism is needed in order to provide sustained funding both for organizing the SPECA annual meetings and enabling the implementation of the regional strategies developed by the WGs as well as the studies.

E) Gender and Human Rights

- The project contributed to women's rights, including economic rights in the region, by providing support to the SPECA WG on Gender and SDGs. However, there was no evidence that the rights-based or the gender lenses approaches were used in the design, implementation and results other than ensuring the participation of women in meetings, the management of the SPECA WGs and among consultants under the project.

4) Conclusions and Recommendations

- SPECA countries value SPECA as a process. Without the E262 project, UNECE would not have been able to support this process to the extent it did for the past four years.
- The question of funding for the process remains on the table. So far, the two UN Regional Commissions have found *ad hoc* ways to go on funding the meetings, and this E262 project

was indispensable for UNECE to make this happen.

- If the SPECA Fund eventually becomes established and is able to raise significant funds, a percentage could be devoted solely to covering administrative/operational costs in order to continue organizing the meetings. Until that time, it is imperative that other sources of funding are found.

Recommendations

1) Streamlining and improving the organization of the SPECA meetings:

Rationalize on time, travel and ensuring continuity by trying to hold WG sessions, the Economic Forum and the Governing Council meetings together during four days.

- ✓ Consider turning the Economic Forums into opportunities for more dynamic exchanges through round table formats instead of conference modality which consist of lots of papers and little discussions.
- ✓ Rethink the format of reporting conclusions and recommendations from the various meetings. This could involve shortening documentation, revisiting recommendations stemming from the WGs and Economic Forums to make them more concrete, feasible and measurable.

2) Strengthening mechanisms for follow-up:

- ✓ Documents coming out of the various meetings should become live documents that have an action plan and a system for follow-up and not be simply uploaded on a static UN website.
- ✓ Considering ways to allow networking of experts, policy advising, discussions between TWGs, experts and national authorities by creating more online platforms. Constant and sustained dialogue can continue on specific issues through guided online discussions.
- ✓ The designation of a Secretariat could make the follow up to recommendations and decisions an on-going task, relieving from the responsibility of the UNECE and ESCAP substantive divisions.
- ✓ Accelerate the nomination of Focal Points for SPECA and for the TWGs.

3) Strengthening the work of the Thematic Working Groups

- ✓ Review the ToRs of Working Groups to make them more targeted and focused on developing and implementing concrete outputs such as strategies with concrete action plans for their implementation.
- ✓ Encourage the WG on Gender and SDGs and the WG on Statistics to render more substantive and systematic support to the other TWGs.
- ✓ Reinforce the capacity of experts to be able to mainstream concerns of women's rights and the rights based approach in the work of the TWGs and Economic Forums.

4) Improving cooperation and coordination with other UN and international entities working in the SPECA region

- ✓ The UN Resident Coordinator System, as representative of the UN at the national level, could be formally enlisted for follow-up on the implementation of recommendations at the SPECA country level.
- ✓ Increase cooperation/harmonization between the two Regional Commissions in order to

pool funding.

- ✓ Coordinate/cooperate more closely with other regional processes in order to share resources, studies, projects etc.

5) Reinforcing the sustainability of support to the SPECA process

- ✓ Find a mechanism in order to sustain the operational cost of supporting the SPECA process, such as the organization of annual meetings in a more systematic and less ad hoc way. This could be done for example by either ensuring that any eventual Trust Fund has a budget for operational support, or through encouraging more systematic contribution from SPECA countries, or by pooling of resources between the two Regional Commissions and devoting it to the sole purpose of organizing the annual meetings of SPECA institutions.
- ✓ Intensify efforts to ensure sustained funding to develop further projects/financing for the implementation of the Ashgabat Initiative; the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy; the SPECA innovation Strategy, the regional study on procedural and regulatory barriers to trade, an updated SDG scoping study etc.

1. Background, Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

Background of the project

The United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) was established on 26 March 1998 by the Tashkent Declaration signed by the Presidents of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republics of Tajikistan, the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the Executive Secretaries of the two Regional Commissions in charge of jointly supporting the Programme: the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).¹ The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan joined the Programme later as per their own request.

The project being evaluated, “Strengthening the capacities of SPECA countries for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals”, was created by UNECE and funded by the Russian Federation in order to allow the Regional Commission to be able to support the SPECA process.

SPECA was originally designed with the purpose of forging regional economic cooperation among participating countries in areas where UNECE and ESCAP have comparative advantage, namely transport, water (the environment), energy and trade. It aimed to support economic development, transition of the economies to market principles, and their integration into the economies of Europe and Asia, especially given the fact that six of the seven SPECA countries are Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and one (Afghanistan) is a Least Developed Country (LDC). SPECA aimed to forge cooperation in an area where cooperation was not forthcoming, despite the potential benefits.

The SPECA Governing Council, at its 10th session held in 2015 in Dushanbe, further reiterated support for the SPECA framework to act as a mechanism for regional cooperation to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development in the

¹Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are the countries participating in SPECA in 2020. Document A/62/7/Add.40 of the General Assembly from 15 July 2008 noted in paragraph 68 that “The United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) is jointly carried out by two regional commissions (ECE and ESCAP).” The UNECE strategic framework for the period 2018-2019 (doc. A/71/6 (Prog.17)) states in paragraph 17.6 “The United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia, jointly implemented by ECE and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, will continue to serve as the major framework for ECE cooperation with other relevant stakeholders in Central Asia.” The “Proposed programme budget for 2020”, part V: Regional cooperation for development, section 20: Economic development in Europe, Programme 17: Economic development in Europe, Subprogramme 6: Trade: enhance trade facilitation, agricultural quality standards and regulatory and trade-related economic cooperation for the transition to sustainable economic growth and sustainable production and consumption in the ECE region and beyond (e.g. for the SPECA region).

sub-region.² The project under evaluation (E262) was designed to provide resources for this important shift of SPECA. The 20th anniversary of the founding of SPECA was celebrated in Almaty, Kazakhstan in September 2018 during the 13th Session of the Governing Council with an emphasis on this shift. One of the first activities under the E262 project in 2016 was a scoping study, prepared by an expert from Kazakhstan: on which SDG targets each SPECA Working Group should concentrate. We will refer to this study throughout this report.

A key stakeholder Expert Meeting was organized under the E262 project in June 2018 in order to review recommendations of an evaluation on the performance of SPECA in fulfilling its mandate³ which had been prepared based on the approval of the 11th Session of the SPECA Governing Council (November 2016 in Ganja, Azerbaijan). The key results and recommendations of the SPECA Evaluation and the Expert Meeting were presented at the 13th session of the Governing Council (September 2018 in Almaty, Kazakhstan). Options for the future development of SPECA were discussed with country representatives at the December 2017 Governing Council session in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, and the September 2018 session in Almaty. The sessions of the Governing Council in September 2018 in Almaty and November 2019 in Ashgabat considered the recommendations of the Expert Group and further endorsed the importance of SPECA as a platform for policy discussions and cooperation on achieving selected SDGs and targets that will be better implemented through bilateral and sub-regional cooperation.

In order to enable the UNECE to support the SPECA process in translating this political declaration into specific activities and initiatives that would help participating countries address regional and transboundary issues, the project “Strengthening capacities of SPECA countries for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals” (known as E262) was launched in 2016. The project was designed to support the SPECA process so that it could, in turn, contribute to build trust in regional cooperation by encouraging information, knowledge, and best practice sharing, dialogue, joint project implementation, strategy development etc. The project was implemented by the UNECE, where substantive divisions of UNECE provided support for the various working groups, while the key partner for the implementation was ESCAP, which shared the responsibility to support the SPECA institutions since its foundation together with UNECE. Each Regional Commission was in charge of organizing the meetings of the main SPECA institutions (mainly Economic Forum and Governing Council) in alternating years.

² The Declaration of the 10th session stated, “We reconfirm that SPECA, as envisaged at the 2014 session of its Governing Council in Ashgabat, has a strong potential for supporting and facilitating the achievement of the SDGs. The SPECA framework, including its Governing Council, Economic Forums, and Working Groups as well as projects implemented under its aegis, can provide an important platform for supporting progress towards many of the SDGs through the exchange of best practice, capacity-building, joint development and implementation of regional projects and the sharing of experience on the use of new financial mechanisms and partnerships.” (http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session10/DECLARATION_of_the_10th_session_of_the_SPECA_Governing_Council_ENGLISH.pdf), while the Report of the Governing Council stated: “...SPECA offers a neutral sub-regional framework for supporting and monitoring regional efforts to achieve the SDGs...” (http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session10/Report_of_the_10th_session_of_the_SPECA_Governing_Council.pdf)

³The Evaluation Report can be found in English and Russian on the following web sites
http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session_13/SPECA_Evaluation_Report_ENG.pdf;
http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session_13/SPECA_Evaluation_Report_RUS.pdf

At the time this evaluation was being prepared, discussions were being held among participating countries and the UNECE about the creation of a SPECA Trust Fund.

The E262 project, implemented by the UNECE in support of the SPECA process, was originally supposed to run from June 2016 to May 2018, but was extended until December 2019 for a total of 30 months. It had an envelope of USD 547,000 and was entirely financed by the Russian Federation.

The main objective of the project was to strengthen the capacities of SPECA countries for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the SDGs. The project envisaged the following expected accomplishments and activities:

Expected accomplishments (EA)	Main activities
EA1. Strengthened national capacity of beneficiary countries in all SPECA thematic areas: (1) water, energy and environment, (2) transport and border crossings, (3) trade, (4) statistics, (5) knowledge-based development, and (6) gender and economy;	A1.1. Organization of maximum 12 sessions of the SPECA Thematic Working Groups in the areas of water, energy and the environment, transport and border crossings, trade, statistics, knowledge-based development and gender and economy (6 meetings per year)
	A1.2. Organization of 2 annual SPECA Economic Forums and 2 sessions of the SPECA Governing Council (one per year);
	A1.3. Organization of 1 expert group meeting to review the institutional and governance structure of SPECA;
EA2. Enhanced capacity of SPECA countries to monitor and review progress on SDGs in SPECA thematic areas;	A2.1. Preparing a framework document on the role of SPECA and its TWGs in the sub-regional follow-up;
	A2.2. Conducting a sub-regional review of the implementation of relevant SDGs in the SPECA region;
EA3. Improved cooperation between SPECA countries.	A3.1. Providing advisory services to SPECA countries;
	A3.2. Developing project proposals in the areas of SPECA’s mandate and mobilizing resources for their implementation.

Evaluation objective and outcomes

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the project “Strengthening capacities of SPECA countries for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals” (E262). The evaluation was prepared by an individual consultant hired by UNECE who was greatly supported by long term current and former UNECE staff who had been involved with SPECA continuously for many years.

This evaluation looked at:

- (a) The relevance and effectiveness of the project's design and implementation in support of cooperation between SPECA countries and their achievement of the SDGs (*Relevance*);
- (b) Results achieved by the project in terms of reaching the initial objectives; (*Effectiveness*);
- (c) The efficiency of the project in terms of adequate use of resources in relation to outputs (*Efficacy/efficiency*);
- (d) The degree to which the project's outputs will be sustained and potentially replicated in the future (*Sustainability*);
- (e) Assessment of how gender mainstreaming and human-rights aspects were considered and incorporated in the course of the project's design and implementation.

The results of the evaluation are aimed to support the UNECE Secretariat in improving its services as well as future projects and activities in support of regional processes. The outcomes of the evaluation are also geared at contributing to the broader lessons learned regarding supporting regional cooperation processes for the achievement of SDGs.

The evaluation can also be used to highlight how the contribution from the Russian Federation has effectively supported a regional network through this project. Should the donor wish to continue its support, it will have an overview of how the first project led to concrete outcomes and outputs. The findings can be beneficial for the SPECA participating countries to make better use of SPECA and its institutions to achieve sustainable development nationally and improve cooperation regionally.

Both donor and implementer can use the findings and concrete recommendations of the Evaluation Report, coupled with the Management Response to the evaluation, and the annual progress reports, in order to fine-tune follow-up projects in support of SPECA.

Scope of the evaluation

The evaluation covered the support for the SPECA process for the full period of the project, from June 2016 to December 2019. It covered the organization of the Economic Forums, Governing Council and Thematic Working Group sessions in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. ESCAP was responsible for organizing the high-level SPECA events in 2016 and 2018, yet through the project UNECE provided the substantive work on preparing documents and the proper functioning of the events in 2016 and 2018 as well, following a procedure established in SPECA.

The evaluation used the traditional indicators of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (namely relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability), as corresponding to the UNECE Evaluation Policy and the UNEG norms and standards. As per the Terms of Reference (TOR) of the consultant⁴, the OECD evaluation criteria of 'impact' was not analyzed, because the impact of a project on the process of cooperation is usually measurable in a longer timespan after the project has ended.

⁴ Please refer to the Terms of Reference for the Evaluation found in Annex E

2. Methodology

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation used the following sources:

1. A desk review of relevant strategic and meeting documents, including those resulting from the annual SPECA events and Thematic Working Group (TWG) activities and outputs (Terms of References (TOR) of SPECA and all of its institutions, Evaluation of SPECA, Progress Reports, Documents adopted by the Governing Council, Economic Forums and TWG sessions, research papers).
2. Interviews with government representatives of SPECA countries during the annual SPECA events in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan and the 14th Session of the SPECA Governing Council in November 2019.
3. Interviews with relevant staff from UNECE supporting the six Thematic Working Groups, administrative and finance staff and former experts involved with SPECA.
4. Interviews with dedicated staff covering SPECA at ESCAP, including from the ESCAP Sub-regional Office for North and Central Asia (SONCA). Representatives of other stakeholder organizations (UN Resident Coordinators, UNDP, UNRCCA).
5. Interviews with representatives of the donor, the Russian Federation during the SPECA events in Ashgabat in November 2019.
6. As much as possible, efforts were made to interview both men and women. As it happened, most of the heads of delegations from SPECA countries attending the Governing Councils were men, while many of the respondents involved or active in the TWGs were women, as were representatives of international organizations.
7. A review of SPECA media coverage, 2017-2019 consisting of articles published in the media (social media, online and newspaper) compiled by UNECE.
8. Previous interviews conducted in SPECA countries among experts and government officials as well as with key staff of the two UN Regional Commissions conducted for the 2018 SPECA Evaluation that this consultant had undertaken for ESCAP.

The data gathered for the evaluation was gender responsive as much as possible. Information about the participation of men and women in the various projects has been included when available.

The process of the evaluation as well as the preparation of the report were hampered by the onslaught of lockdowns caused by COVID-19 which added constraints including limitations to travel, divergence of priorities and attention etc. Given these circumstances, a number of interviews had to be done remotely. UNECE also accepted to extend the initial schedule

Key evaluation questions

The evaluation was designed to provide answers to key questions listed below in order to assess whether the project delivered the optimal outcomes in the most efficient way, and to identify key lessons learnt in the process:

	Key evaluation questions	Evaluation Reference Guidelines and judgment points
Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways was the project relevant to support sub-regional cooperation? • To what extent did the activity respond to the priorities and needs of UNECE member States that are SPECA participating countries? • What is the relevance of the activity for the broader work of UNECE? • How did it contribute to maintaining the relevance of the SPECA Programme in general (maintaining a sub-regional network in support of the SDGs, as sub-regional collaboration is required by the UN development pillar reform)? • To what extent support for a unique regional cooperation platform was useful for maintaining a network in support for sustainable development of the sub-region; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevance of the Programme’s concept and design, both structurally and the activities, within the context of the region • Responsiveness to situation on the ground then and now • Recognition of relevance to country and regions’ priorities • Adaptability to change
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what degree the project was successful in attaining the desired results stated in the project document? Did it support the SPECA networks? • To what extent are the outputs consistent with and relevant to the overall objective and expected accomplishments? • To what extent the expected accomplishments of the activity were achieved? • What were the challenges/obstacles (if any) to achieving the expected results? • How effective was the support to implement the annual SPECA Economic Forums and Governing Council sessions? • Were the recommendations of the annual sessions of the SPECA Governing Councils, the SPECA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extent to which the immediate objectives, results and indicators of the Project have been attained and how effective has been the support of SPECA institutions • Achievements by result areas. What factors influenced the achievement/non-achievement of the expected results. • Degree and quality of support provided by UNECE and contribution to results achieved. • Structures’ role in delivering expected results. Did they contribute to or hamper their achievement

	Key evaluation questions	Evaluation Reference Guidelines and judgment points
	Economic Forums and the 2018 SPECA Evaluation effectively implemented through this project?	
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were the planned activities carried out on time as intended? • To what extent the resources made available through this project contributed to the achievement of the objective? • Did the countries mobilize sufficient in-kind and financial resources to supplement the activities and objectives of the project? • What was the efficiency of collaboration with other agencies, development partners, civil society and the business community? • Were the activities implemented in the most efficient way compared to alternatives? In particular, how do the costs and use of resources compare with other similar projects (within UNECE, other regional commissions, other UN agencies, or other organizations and initiatives)? Would you propose any alternatives to achieve the same results? If yes, which ones? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality and timeliness of the implementation of activities • Extend to which intended objectives, results were achieved in a cost-efficient manner. • Nature of support provided. Was it best suited to the SPECA needs. • Utilization of human and financial resources. Did alternative means exist; if so, would they have been more efficient.
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the regional public goods produced by SPECA with support from this project? • How did the project contribute to the overall sustainability of the sub-regional network of cooperation in the sub-region? Did the project contribute to enhancing the level of cooperation among the SPECA countries? • What projects or project proposals, mobilizing additional resources, in the areas of SPECA’s mandate were developed as a result of activities under the E262 project? • How can the UN Resident 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality and quantity of public goods created and their use beyond the project. • Ability of the SPECA institutions to operate with reduced, or even no, technical assistance in the future. • Possible scope of future support and recommendations on how best the Project could capitalize on its achievements.

	Key evaluation questions	Evaluation Reference Guidelines and judgment points
	Coordinators be more efficiently involved in supporting SPECA activities?	
Gender and Human Rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the project helped to strengthen the application of gender mainstreaming principles and contribute to substantial and meaningful changes in the situation of the most vulnerable groups? • Did the project apply gender and rights-based approaches in the design, implementation and results of the activities? • Did UNECE advocate for gender equality and advancement of women in the SPECA work? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extend of women's involvement and participation in activities of the project • Application of rights based approach for the project design and implementation.

Constraints and limitations of the evaluation

While no budget had been foreseen for conducting field work for this evaluation within SPECA countries, this shortcoming was overcome in three different ways. Lack of fieldwork ended up not being too much of a handicap for the evaluation:

First, the consultant was able to attend the 14th Session of the Governing Council as well as the Economic Forum in Turkmenistan in November 2019 during which time she observed proceedings, negotiations, discussions and adoptions of decisions pertaining to the Governing Council, the Economic Forum and the Working Groups. During the two-day meeting, she was also able to set up interviews with each of the delegations attending from the SPECA countries, and as such, was able to directly speak to the highest authorities involved in SPECA decisions in the countries. During the Economic Forum, interviews were also set up with members of the donor country, Russia, as well as UN agencies (UNDP, UNRCCA, ESCAP) as well as ECO, a non-UN agency.

Second, the consultant, with the help of the UNECE Deputy Coordinator of SPECA, had access to all documents pertaining to the financial and administrative running as well as the focal points of the substantive divisions within the Regional Commission.

Third, the fact that the same consultant was used for the evaluation of SPECA in 2018 meant that much of the information gathered during the field work and country visits during September-December 2017 as well as during the 12th Session of the Governing Council in Dushanbe in December 2017 which the Consultant attended, were used as background information. However, the consultant refrained from using the conclusions of the SPECA evaluations to judge or evaluate this E262 project, given that the project to support the Programme is different from SPECA itself.

The evaluation come up against a number of challenges which were either avoided or mitigated. Notably:

There could have been overall limited interest in the Central Asian countries in engaging with the evaluation → However, given the high interest in the countries and the donor in the Ashgabat events in November 2019, their representatives at the 2019 SPECA Forum and Governing Council session, as well as the sessions of the SPECA Thematic Working Groups on Trade and on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity were active in responding to the interviews. In addition, the fact that the SPECA Evaluation of 2018 had already been discussed at two Governing Council sessions and an Expert Meeting, and that the findings of that evaluation had led to a number of changes and reforms in the way SPECA operated (in a way selected by the participating countries directly), they were willing to cooperate with the current evaluation. Having made a decision to reinforce the country ownership of SPECA as a UN Programme supported by the two Regional Commissions and the UN Resident Coordinators, Central Asian countries had made a willing choice to participate more in the ownership of the project and had a stake in the evaluation of the main project supporting the Programme.

The evaluation could have been restrained by the loss of institutional memory in the Regional Commissions and at the level of SPECA countries. → This could have been a real limitation of the evaluation methodology given the high turnover of officials involved with SPECA within ministries of different countries as well as the changes in personnel within Regional Commissions. Furthermore, at the UNECE, the person considered as key in developing SPECA between 2003 and 2018, coordinating the support for the Programme and raising funds for it including for the project under review, and communicating with SPECA countries on their needs, Mr. Andrey Vasilyev, the Former Deputy Executive Secretary of UNECE and UNECE Coordinator of SPECA, passed away in October 2019. However, his views of the E262 Project which supported SPECA were related to the consultant throughout 2018, and as such were deemed valuable to use for this evaluation. Nonetheless, the evaluation consultant was able to count on the cooperation of other long term staff who had been involved with SPECA continuously for many years, including Mr. Mario Apostolov, UNECE Regional Advisor on Trade and Deputy Coordinator of SPECA, Ms. Mijidgombo Oyunjargal (Senior Research Assistant) and, especially, Ms. Tatiana Apatenko, who had been supporting SPECA as the Secretary to the SPECA Governing Council and preparing documentation for SPECA Governing Council sessions and Economic Forums since 2005 (or preparing documentation for the SPECA Governing bodies since 1998)⁵ as UNECE staff member and then as consultant, including for the meetings for which ESCAP and not UNECE were responsible.

Too few numbers of respondents because of limitations in terms of travel, duplication of the 2018 Evaluation etc. → Much of the information gathered for the 2018 Evaluation of SPECA during country visits were still be relevant to gauge opinions and evidence for the E262 Project, designed to support the SPECA process. Furthermore, as this evaluation was conducted during the months of lockdown because of COVID-19 in the winter of 2020, it had access to fewer

⁵ In 2005, the SPECA Regional Advisory Committee was renamed the SPECA Governing Council – Reform of SPECA (SPECA II)

people. As a result, the focus of this evaluation went not on quantitative methods of tallying responses from a large base of respondents, but qualitative findings from interviews with selected key respondents who had in-depth knowledge of the E262 project. Long, in-depth and repeated interviews were held with such individuals to clarify points, dig deeper etc. These qualitative assessments were added to the responses received for the 2018 Evaluation from beneficiaries in SPECA countries, as well as new sets of respondents, the name of which is in the Annex B.

3. Evaluation Findings and Performance Assessment

This section presents an analysis of the project's results through the prism of OECD criteria for evaluating development assistance programs, namely relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability.

A) Relevance

Relevance of the project in support of sub-regional cooperation

When SPECA was created in 1998, it was not allocated any specific budget, neither for its operational nor programmatic work, and the task of finding finances has fallen on the two UN Regional Commissions ever since. As stipulated by the SPECA ToR, the costs of participation of National Coordinators and experts in the sessions of the Governing Council and Economic Forums as well as in the sessions of the SPECA TWGs should, as a rule, be borne by the Governments of the participating countries while UNECE and ESCAP were expected to provide supplementary financial support, within their available resources. The reality, however, has been that the participation of representatives of SPECA countries to events is solely covered by UNECE and ESCAP. An exception is the contribution of Kazakhstan in terms of an annual contribution of USD 15,000 since 2010 as support to the WG on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity, and contributions of 40,000 USD to the overall operational budget of SPECA in 2018 (when Kazakhstan chaired SPECA) and USD 20,000 in 2019.

The countries provide in-kind support (meeting rooms, organizational support and logistics, staff dedicated to support the organization of events, often the interpretation and social events), when they organize a Governing Council session and Economic Forum (as a country chairing SPECA for that year) and the SPECA TWG sessions. Yet the travel of most participants, as well as part of the cost of organizing the annual meetings of the TWGs, the annual SPECA Economic Forums and Governing Council sessions have been born by UNECE and ESCAP through their regular and extra-budgetary resources.

The project under evaluation (E262), with its contribution of USD 547,000 from the Russian Federation, allowed UNECE to uphold its responsibility in ensuring that the SPECA process continues. By supporting the organization of the key meetings of SPECA, the project provided indispensable support for the SPECA sub-regional cooperation process to go forward. This point was reiterated by UNECE staff in charge of supporting SPECA interviewed for the evaluation.

While they had to raise additional funds, the seed money provided by the E262 was indispensable for the organization of the main meetings of the SPECA major institutions.

SPECA, for its part, is the platform *par excellence* for cooperation in a sub-region, which to a certain extent lacks the sense of regionalism. According to its ToR, “the objectives of the Programme 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. SPECA (a) provides a neutral United Nations platform for discussions on strategic issues of regional economic cooperation among the SPECA participating countries as well as their integration into the world economy for the attainment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; (b) develops, supports and coordinates relevant capacity-building activities in the SPECA countries; (c) promotes compliance with relevant international legal instruments, norms, guidelines, standards and recommendations; and (d) stimulates the exchange of best national practices among the SPECA countries.”⁶

SPECA is the only forum specifically created to bring together only the countries of the sub-region (the landlocked countries of Central Asia, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan) around a platform for cooperation and policy coordination, allowing countries to exchange experiences, search for common solutions and build a common vision.

By making possible the key meetings of the Programme, i.e. the Governing Council sessions, the Economic Forum and Thematic Working Group sessions, the project facilitated the functioning of SPECA for what its purpose was: to act as a *de facto* platform for cooperation and policy coordination at the regional level. The project facilitated experts to meet through the Thematic Working Groups and Economic Forum in order to exchange information, as well as decision makers and representatives to meet in the Governing Council meetings in order to make decisions regarding the workings of SPECA.

Specifically, SPECA countries could use this platform to overcome barriers to cooperation, exchange information, commission studies and learn from each other so that they could, as a group, be in a stronger position to negotiate with and integrate into larger processes (such as cooperation in the International Fund for the Salvation of the Aral Sea, IFAS, or a network of national trade negotiators, notably, in the perspective of WTO negotiations). As such, the rationale of SPECA is different from other existing bodies, making it unique.

The Conclusions of the 2018 Economic Forum noted that SPECA participating countries have been able to achieve progress in the implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action (VPoA) for Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) for the Decade 2014-2024 (A/RES/69/137), through strengthening cooperation in a number of areas, such as investment in infrastructure, transport, trade, energy, and ICT connectivity.⁷ Improving access to regional markets, developing regional connectivity and transport route diversification will be crucial for the SPECA

⁶ https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/V._SPECA_ToR_ENG_Final.pdf

⁷ https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/ecf/2018/Report_of_the_2018_SPECA_Economic_Forum_FINAL_VERSION.pdf

participating countries to become land-linked in order to increase competitiveness and sustainable growth, which requires removing barriers to regional trade. SPECA countries, through the SPECA platform, have been able to engage in infrastructure development, trade facilitation, implementing measures recommended by UNECE and the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, using them as vehicles to provide access to the regional and global markets. Further examples are provided under the work of the Thematic Working Groups.

The Conclusions of the 2018 Economic Forum also noted the need to foster global and regional economic integration and cross-border cooperation within the SPECA region and beyond. Integration of SPECA participating countries into the regional and global economies is important to achieve inclusive growth by offering new markets and improving competitiveness and productivity intra SPECA and international trade, transport, transit connectivity, water and energy cooperation. SPECA provides the opportunity to share good practices and exchange experience on the economic cooperation within the SPECA region and beyond.

Moving forward, SPECA can effectively leverage opportunities offered by regional integration initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, Eurasian Economic Union as well as intergovernmental agreements on trade corridors to enhance connectivity in the sub-region. These were reinforced by the decisions of the 14th session of the SPECA Governing Council on 21 November 2019 in Ashgabat, which endorsed the *Ashgabat Initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations legal instruments, norms, standards and recommendations, while bolstering connectivity in the SPECA region*, the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy, the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development, and the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade.⁸

Relevance of activity to priorities and needs of UNECE member States and Afghanistan (the SPECA participating countries)

Since the 2018 20th Review of SPECA, it has become increasingly clear that the SPECA participating countries and the UN Regional Commissions insist on the value of SPECA as a country-owned and country-run platform for regional cooperation. The SPECA process is estimated by key informants as very relevant as a platform for exchange of information, networking, cooperation for the implementation of norms, research, building capacity for SDGs, overcoming common challenges, raising investments and working towards joint projects. All these elements feature very high in the priorities of the SPECA countries.

The project facilitated the following types of activities that were rated high among representatives of SPECA countries interviewed for the evaluation: policy dialogue, negotiation of mutually beneficial solutions to problems; implementation of recognized UNECE and ESCAP legal norms, standards and best-practice recommendations; experience sharing from high-level international

⁸ See <http://www.unece.org/speca/meetings-and-events/speca-governing-council-sessions/2019/fourteenth-session-of-the-speca-governing-council/doc.html> ⁹ See the key mandates in the 2020 approved budget for Sect. 20 [https://undocs.org/a/74/6\(Sect.20\)](https://undocs.org/a/74/6(Sect.20))

expertise and technical cooperation; exchange and application of economic and technical expertise among the countries.

Regional cooperation not only helps the landlocked SPECA countries take advantage of opportunities provided by linking their economies, it also helps them make substantial progress together on the priority area of achieving progress in attaining national and sub-regional Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

During the implementation of the E262 project, SPECA was able to align the direction it was taking in delivering on its agreed ToR, with the needs and priorities of its participating countries:

- At the Ganja session in 2016, the SPECA participating countries took a strategic decision that the Programme serves as a sub-regional mechanism for cross-border cooperation to implement selected SDGs and targets that would be better implemented through cross-border cooperation. The project was then instrumental in the development, adoption and application of the Decisions of the 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 sessions of the Governing Council and relevant declarations of the SPECA Economic Forums which refocused SPECA to become a platform for sub-regional cooperation to achieve the SDGs.
- In June 2018, in Almaty, the project facilitated an expert meeting, during which representatives of SPECA countries perused recommendations stemming from the evaluation of SPECA and decided collectively on the modalities of reform, priority areas and strengthened *modus operandi* of SPECA. This showed the relevance of the development of SPECA according to its participating countries' wishes and priorities.
- At the SPECA Governing Council sessions in Almaty in September 2018 and Ashgabat in November 2019, the countries clearly noted that they wanted SPECA to continue as a UN Programme, and they would strengthen their support for it as a country-owned platform. This project built on these decisions.

Interviews with delegations of SPECA countries during the 14th Session of the Governing Council, which was the final session supported by the E262 project, as well as statements made during Governing Council sessions between 2017 and 2019 showed that each SPECA country has its specific priorities and needs through which they view the value of SPECA:

- Kazakhstan sees in the SPECA process the opportunity to share experiences and knowledge, as well as identify future priorities. It sees SPECA as a mechanism to unite countries, solve common problems, make common decisions and develop efficient mechanisms for regional cooperation on development. It seeks to rely on SPECA to increase the benefits from trade, and to develop new research in such areas as non-tariff measures for imports and exports. It also would like to see more promotion of joint projects, including social projects.
- For Kyrgyzstan, SPECA is a platform for useful exchange of information and for overcoming challenges the countries face, namely barriers to cross-border trade, costly and complex Customs procedures, lack of IT equipment and skills, lack of investment opportunities.

- Tajikistan would like to use SPECA as a platform for coordinated decisions for connectivity and for mobilizing investments and financial resources to address challenges like infrastructure. It sees the value of SPECA in mobilizing financial resources for national and regional projects through reaching out to donors. In addition to advice, legislative and normative support, Tajikistan seeks investments, e.g. more technical support for hard and soft infrastructure. SPECA can also help remove barriers to implementing good transit policies and practices, overcoming bottlenecks, harmonizing trade procedures and procedures for Customs and border crossings.
- Turkmenistan sees in SPECA ample opportunity for policy exchanges and infrastructure development. SPECA can also help remove barriers to implementing good transit policies and practices, overcoming bottlenecks, harmonizing trade procedures and procedures for customs and border crossings.
- Uzbekistan, newly re-engaged in SPECA, would like to build on the 2nd meeting between the leaders of Central Asia in practical ways and increase trade between Central Asian countries. It is also interested in exchanging experiences on economic reforms, as well as sharing of experiences on supporting Afghanistan.
- For Afghanistan, which is constrained by geography, SPECA is an opportunity to increase trade with the region while developing strategic partnerships to advance initiatives in terms of security, transport, trade and transit.

As further sign of the relevance of SPECA to the priorities of its countries, the UNECE information section identified 204 instances of media pieces covering SPECA in various countries in several languages between January 2017 and December 2019.

Relevance of the activity for the broader work of UNECE

UNECE is a multilateral platform with fifty-six member States, which, according to its mandate, « is responsible for facilitating economic integration and cooperation among its member States and promoting sustainable development and economic prosperity in the ECE region ... The alignment of the subprogrammes' objectives with the Sustainable Development Goals builds on the core interlinked functions that are consistent with the legislative mandates of ECE, namely: (a) policy dialogue; (b) normative work; and (c) technical assistance».⁹

In this sense, the objective of the project, to support the SPECA countries in their effort to cooperate and integrate with the economies of Europe and Asia and to achieve relevant SDGs through sub-regional cooperation, is a major contribution to fulfilling the UNECE mandate.

The six areas of activities of the SPECA Thematic Working Groups are aligned to the mandate and agreed areas of work of UNECE. These activities promote the UNECE legal instruments,

⁹ See the key mandates in the 2020 approved budget for Sect. 20 [https://undocs.org/a/74/6\(Sect.20\)](https://undocs.org/a/74/6(Sect.20))

standards and recommendations in transport, environment (water management), energy, trade, innovation, gender, and statistics. In this sense, the project helped implement the UNECE instruments strategically.

How did the project contribute to maintaining the relevance of SPECA in general (maintaining a sub-regional network in support of the SDGs, as sub-regional collaboration is required by the UN development pillar reform)?

The project provided indispensable support to cooperation in an unstable sub-region, which needs most support from the UN, out of all UNECE sub-regions. While E262 is not the only project contribution to the 2030 Agenda in the region, it helped maintain a sustained process of dialogue between ECE countries, through annual meetings of Governing Councils, Economic Forum and TWGs, which led to the development of a number of joint projects and strategies that support cross-border SDGs in areas of trade and transport, innovation, etc.. During the Governing Council Meeting of 2016, SPECA which was partly organized by the E262 project, SPECA countries agree that there are SDGs that can be better achieved through sub-regional cooperation and stated so in the Final Declaration.

The project also facilitated discussions and decisions on how to make SPECA more relevant to the needs of the region by organizing an Expert Meeting in June 2018 during which concrete recommendations were made to be considered by the 13th Session of the Governing Council in September 2018 for adapting SPECA further to their needs and maintaining the relevance of SPECA.

To what extent support for a unique regional cooperation platform was useful for maintaining a network in support for sustainable development of the sub-region;

The project supported the evolution of SPECA into a platform/network specifically focusing on achieving regional and national sustainable development goals in the sub-region.

A scoping study supported by the E262 project in the very beginning outlined specific SDGs and targets where sub-regional cooperation through SPECA would be very beneficial for their achievements. The study outlined a list of SDG targets that can be better achieved through cross-border cooperation by SPECA Working Group and by SPECA country, with specific policy recommendations on how to reach long term objectives, through fostering greater political will for cooperation, industrialization policy, market access reform to support entrepreneurship, economic efficiency and social inclusion. The findings were acknowledged by the countries at relevant meetings of the SPECA Thematic Working Groups and the Governing Council. A Table with the SDGs and targets followed up by the TWGs is found on pages 45-47 in the section on sustainability.

A decision was made at the 10th session of the Governing Council in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in 2015, and reinforced at the 11th session in Ganja, Azerbaijan in 2016, to reinvigorate SPECA as a platform/mechanism for achieving the SDGs and targets which necessitate regional cooperation, including cross-border SDGs. The areas for intensifying cooperation included water management, the rational use of the region's energy wealth, sustainable transport, trade,

knowledge-based development, innovation, gender equality and strengthening statistical capacity for monitoring progress.

The E262 project was then instrumental in the process of reviewing where countries stood on their commitments. This process included the support for the development, adoption and application of the Ganja Declaration of the 2016 SPECA Economic Forum “Strengthening Implementation of SDGs through Enhanced Cooperation”, as well as the Conclusions and Recommendations of the 2017 SPECA Economic Forum “Innovation for the SDGs in the SPECA region” and the 2018 SPECA Economic Forum “Twenty years of SPECA: A new stage in regional cooperation for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, which all refocused SPECA as a mechanism for sub-regional cooperation to achieve the SDGs, as well as the concluding document of the 2019 Forum: the “Ashgabat Initiative on Reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations legal instruments, norms, standards and recommendations while bolstering connectivity in the SPECA region”, which fostered a transition to sustainable growth in the region.

A) Effectiveness

To what degree the project was successful in attaining the desired results stated in the project document?

The main objective of the E262 project was broad: “Strengthening the capacities of SPECA countries to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve the SDGs”. In essence, it was about supporting networking among SPECA countries so that they could increase their cross-border cooperation to reach notably the SDGs and targets which fall within the remit of the UNECE, ESCAP and the SPECA TWGs.

In this regard, the project set out to achieve three related goals, or, in other words, adopted a three-pronged approach to achieving its overall objective:

- a. *Supporting the functioning of SPECA as a process of networking:* The core of the project was in support for the continuation of the institutional framework, i.e. the Governing Council, annual Economic Forums, and Thematic Working Groups that deliver the work of SPECA. Maintaining the SPECA process, what this project facilitated, was key. It allowed subsidiary initiatives to build on the existence of a process: organizations of concrete *ad hoc* events on highly topical and timely subjects, raising funds from development partners or building broader cooperation networks. Without the project, UNECE may not have been able to support the SPECA process of sub-regional cooperation systematically, even though for each regular event of the SPECA governing bodies and the SPECA TWGs, additional funds were used from other sources.
- b. *Educating about and promoting the SDGs, especially cross-border ones:* The project sought to educate policymakers and experts in the SPECA countries about the SDGs. That involved, in the first place, defining the relevant SDG targets within each Working Group, which was done through a scoping exercise, prepared by a consultant during the first year of the project. The TWGs used that information to define and develop their targets.

- c. *Concrete collaboration through Working Groups:* Several WGs were able, through their meetings, to lead to concrete strategies and programmes (see below), while others were conducted more as annual meetings for exchanges of information.

To what extent are the outputs consistent with and relevant to the overall objective and expected accomplishments?

With the extension of the project, and with costs cut with cost sharing from other projects, all the planned events, activities and studies envisaged in the E262 project were carried out in support of the SPECA process. Moreover, through *ad hoc* mobilization of external resources, UNECE managed to make savings which helped it organize more activities in response to new demands in a dynamically developing sub-region.

To what extent the expected accomplishments of the activity were achieved?

Here, a detailed analysis of achievements and shortcomings in the implementation of the 3 objectives of the E262 project are presented.

OBJECTIVE 1
EA1. Strengthened national capacity of beneficiary countries in all SPECA thematic areas: (1) water and energy resources, (2) transport and border crossing, (3) trade, (4) statistics, (5) knowledge-based development, and (6) gender and economy;

To reach this first objective, three blocks of activities were envisaged and organized through the original two-year timeframe of the project, centered around the organization of 1) at least 12 Thematic Working Group sessions, 2) 2 annual SPECA Economic Forums and Governing Council sessions and 3) 1 expert group meeting to review the institutional and governance structure of SPECA. The numbers of meetings however increased with the extended timeframe of the project and the additional cost-sharing from other funds and donors.

SPECA Economic Forums and Governing Council sessions

<i>Expected activities:</i>	<i>Actual activities</i>
Organization of 2 annual SPECA Economic Forums and 2 sessions of the SPECA Governing Council (one per year)	Organization of 4 annual SPECA Economic Forums and 4 sessions of the SPECA Governing Council during the prolonged timeframe of the project with the participation of 409 experts (including 98 women)

Achievements:

- The E262 project was instrumental in the organization of the Economic Forums and the Governing Council sessions during the duration of the project, including travel of participants and experts, and supporting the two Regional Commissions in the preparation of documents, invitation of experts, etc. The prolonged duration of the project allowed for double the amount of meetings anticipated.

- For the two years that UNECE was responsible for organization the Economic Forum and the Governing Council Sessions (in Dushanbe in December 2017 and in Ashgabat in November 2019), UNECE was able to add funds from its Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation (RPTC) to provide logistics, translation and the travel of SPECA country participants and UNECE experts. In the years when ESCAP was responsible for the organization of these meetings (Ganja, Azerbaijan in November 2016 and Almaty, Kazakhstan in September 2018), the project was used to provide substantive support in the preparation of documents and expertise.
- The Governing Council meetings were usually held during one afternoon after the Economic Forum. They were an opportunity for delegations of SPECA countries to consider the conclusions and recommendations from the TWGs and the Economic Forums and discuss other matters of relevance.
- The annual Economic Forums, normally held back-to-back with the Governing Council sessions, focused on selected strategic issues of economic development and cooperation in the SPECA region. They provided a platform for high-level policy dialogue and made concrete recommendations to the Governing Council. They introduced different themes every year for discussion at the regional level, chosen by the Secretariat of the Regional Commissions and the hosting country (which is chairing SPECA) in cooperation with the SPECA countries. Their participation was open to policymakers from the experts, non-governmental organizations, the business community and representatives of other regional and international organizations. As such, they got the most profile among SPECA partners.
- The Economic Forums were effective in as much as they provided the following concrete outputs: policy conclusions, networking and exchanges on good practices and challenges; ideas for new research.

Shortcomings:

Interviews conducted during the two Economic Forums that the consultant assisted leads to the following observations:

- *The need for more discussions:* The agendas of the Economic Forums are heavily dominated by speakers from the two Regional Commissions and UN organizations, who provide high quality information on global standards, norms, analysis, etc. Representatives of the SPECA countries often only speak about their own experiences. Opportunities for cross-country fertilization are missed when the formats of the meetings are strict and formal and consist primarily of a lineup of papers with little discussion. The Forums would be more effective if there were more time for discussions and exchanges.
- Instead of a conference modality with multiple speakers presenting papers, often leaving little time for questions and answers or discussion, the Forum could consider being organized as round tables where representatives of SPECA countries could engage with each other and with UN expert on different challenges. One SPECA delegation recommended the Forum to change modality completely and be devoted to highlighting concrete projects that show results. Another delegation wanted to see more opportunities for bilateral meetings and more linkages between initiatives and not only policy talk.

- *The need for concrete recommendations:* Some recommendations stemming out of the Economic Forums can be succinct and concrete, with the possibility of concrete follow up. For example, the final Conclusions and Recommendations of the 2017 SPECA Economic Forum in Dushanbe called for the preparation of a SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development for the region, which could then be used to raise funds and assess benchmarks at the national level. This concrete recommendation was then followed up by the WG on Knowledge-based Development, supported by the project, and a draft SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development was drawn and presented to participants at subsequent meetings. Similarly, the 2019 Forum was focused on connectivity, trade and transport facilitation, and concrete projects (studying possibilities to streamline border-crossing procedures and reduce non-tariff barriers to trade in the region) have been put in the pipeline for drafting and implementation. Most other recommendations however are often elaborative in nature. A number of delegations interviewed noted that the recommendations do not clarify for whom recommendations were intended, nor take into consideration what was already done by countries, or what was feasible within the national legislation. They suggested that outcome documents be action oriented, specifying to whom recommendations are directed, by when, how, etc.
- *Reducing the number of documents:* A number of delegations as well as representatives of international organizations complained that there was too much information and long reports for the Governing Council to consider in a short time.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Consider streamlining the timing of all SPECA meetings in order to economize on travel and ensure that there is continuity between discussions in the different meetings and that the same representatives are involved. One of the SPECA delegations recommended the following modality to the evaluator: to organize all the meetings once a year during 4 days: on the first two days, WGs can meet in parallel. The third day and half of the fourth day can be devoted to the Economic Forum, which should be run like a workshop with discussions, round tables etc. The afternoon of the fourth day could be devoted to the Governing Council Session.
- ✓ The Economic Forums would be more effective if they were devoted to more exchanges and less formal presentations. They could be organized as round tables where representatives of SPECA countries could engage with each other and with UN experts on different challenges.
- ✓ The Regional Commissions to consider making documents (conclusions and recommendations from the WG sessions and Economic Forums) shorter and more concrete and to possibly distribute them to countries in advance (if the first recommendation of holding all the meetings together is not pursued).
- ✓ When preparing documentations, UNECE should consider highlighting recommendations that need to be decided by the Governing Council as separate from other documentation and allowing more time for discussion in depth of recommendations coming from the Economic Forum and the TWG meetings. Regional Commissions should also encourage SPECA countries to devise a mechanism for following up on the implementation of the recommendations.

- ✓ UNECE should encourage the Resident Coordinator System to collaborate more proactively and follow up formally in their respective countries, on behalf of the UN, on the recommendations and decisions coming out of these meetings.

Thematic Working Group meetings:

<i>Expected activities:</i>	<i>Actual activities</i>
<p>Organization of 12 meetings of the SPECA WGs in the areas of water and energy resources, transport and border crossing, trade, statistics, knowledge-based development and gender and economy (6 meetings per year during the original timeframe of 2 years)</p> <p>At least 150 experts from the SPECA countries benefit from capacity building activities in SPECA thematic areas</p>	<p>Organization of 23 meetings during the extended framework, with the original budget. All the TWGs met four times, except for the Gender and Economy which could not be organized the first year in 2016. Approximately 392 policymakers and experts (of whom 165 women) participated in the sessions of the six TWGs.</p> <p>Approximately 463 experts (of whom 195 women) benefited from capacity-building in the thematic areas.</p>

Achievements:

- The E262 project was instrumental in allowing UNECE to organize the TWGs. As per the ToR of SPECA, countries need to ensure the financial cost for the participation of personnel in the TWG meetings, something that they have not done, except for Kazakhstan that funded its own and other country’s participation in the sessions of the WG on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity. While some TWGs have a donor that funds the participation of countries to the annual meetings (notably the IDB sponsoring the WG on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity), it has been up to the Regional Commissions to come up with financing of the TWG annual sessions. Both UNECE and ESCAP were able to supplement the funding for the organization of some of the TWGs through the capacity building activities that they organized. This impacted on the themes and nature of the TWG sessions. ESCAP subsequently pulled out in recent years from a number of TWGs, leaving UNECE in charge of organizing the majority of the meetings, mostly using the E262 project for this purpose.
- Participants of the TWG sessions that were interviewed pointed out to the value of these exchanges of information and opportunities to get to know counterparts in other countries. They found these exchanges especially helpful in improving their national legislation, policies and know-how. At the same time, many mentioned the need to follow up between meetings and maintain the networks.
- Most of the impacts of the TWGs have been in the area of capacity building, as opposed to policy development, with noted exceptions. While some TWGs worked together towards developing a specific regional strategy, others examined in an *ad hoc* way the implementation of norms and conventions facilitated by UNECE or ESCAP. These were mostly opportunities for exchange of information:

- a. The **WG on Trade** produced a regional Trade Facilitation Strategy, Principles for Sustainable Trade, and commissioned a study on non-tariff barriers to trade in the sub-region. These were approved by the Governing Council on 21 November 2019. The WG was rated highly useful as a venue for exchange of information and experiences on WTO accession, helping build sub-regional cooperation among policymakers, negotiators and experts, and for capacity-building for the implementation of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement by SPECA countries. The WG on Trade also commissioned four studies through the E262 project on (a) harmonization of border-crossing procedures as part of the implementation of the regional strategy for trade facilitation; (b) regional cooperation for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals related to trade (principles of sustainable trade); (c) link between water management, trade and environment in the SPECA region; and (d) non-tariff measures in trade in the SPECA region.
- b. The **WG on Water, Energy and Environment** was involved in the development of a regional strategy, given that Central Asia lacks a coherent regional approach to addressing water, energy and environment challenges which are largely transnational and can only be tackled in a collaborative manner. The Strategy is supposed to guide countries in formulating and implementing national strategies on water, energy and environment, with particular focus on transboundary and regional issues, while addressing environmental challenges such as sand and dust storms, sustainability of water-related eco-systems, as well as related emerging safety considerations such as dam safety and other challenges stemming from new economic developments
- c. The WG on Knowledge-based Development, which changed its name to **WG on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development (ITSD)** in 2019, developed the SPECA Strategy on Innovation for Sustainable Development which was submitted and approved by the Governing Council on 21 November 2019. The Strategy aims to improve national capacity and capabilities of the SPECA countries to formulate and implement innovation policies for sustainable development and raise the quality and level of regional cooperation in implementing innovations related projects.
- d. The **WG on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity** supported the implementation of international conventions and agreements, development of transport databases in the region, as well as national coordination mechanisms for transport facilitation. It has worked to help countries with the promotion of international transit transport, simplification of border crossing procedures and the harmonization of national transport and customs legislation with international standards, such as for example the TIR Convention, road safety, etc.
- e. The WG on Gender and Economy, which changed its name to **WG on Gender and SDGs** in 2019, raised the capacity of SPECA countries to implement gender-related SDGs. The programme of work of this WG consisted of meetings to discuss critical emerging issues related to gender equality, poverty reduction and economic growth and sharing of info on non-discriminatory labor policy, participation of women in public and private companies, prevention of stereotypes in education, support to women's entrepreneurship development, etc. The 2018 SPECA Evaluation suggested for this WG to work with other TWGs in order to ensure that

gender is mainstreamed into their work actively. For this, however, specific skills are needed, which the WG may want to use for future projects to prepare experts in the field of mainstreaming gender in initiatives and policies around transport, environment, water, trade, innovation, etc.

- f. The **WG on Statistics** was created to build on the UNECE knowledge hub and data platform for SDGs in order to help improve capacities to monitor progress in achieving SDGs in the SPECA countries. The 2018 Evaluation and ensuing discussions involving the SPECA participating countries and Regional Commissions questioned whether it would be more rational to have a separate WG on Statistics or to include statistics as part of each WG. During the 14th Session of the SPECA Governing Council, the WG did not submit its draft ToR for consideration and instead provided the Report of the 14th session held in September 2019 where participants expressed preference for working in a wider group of countries including Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. They expressed concerns at the number of international meetings with similar agencies. The WG informed the Governing Council that it wanted to discontinue meetings and activities, and to continue instead in a new broader format of annual Eurostat / EFTA / UNECE High-Level Seminars for Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asian (EECCA) countries and other relevant forums. The WG had already organized its fourteenth session in the new format. However, the delegation of Turkmenistan noted that SPECA countries needed the WG on Statistics and requested all other delegations to reject the proposal to discontinue the WG. SPECA delegates then unanimously supported the Governing Council request to the WG on Statistics to draft its ToR for consideration at the next session. Nonetheless, the WG on Statistics needs to work more closely with the other TWGs to address the demand for data and measurement.

Shortcomings:

- Between the annual sessions, the TWGs are supposed to carry out their activities (trainings, seminars, studies, etc.) in accordance with their work programmes. However, there is not much evidence of this collective work being carried out in all the TWGs systematically. TWGs (with some notable exceptions) are *de facto* once a year meeting of different experts, many of whom have no institutional memories given the change in sub-themes. In the absence of a Secretariat devoted specifically to SPECA, it is difficult to ensure that cooperation and connections continue between meetings. The UN Regional Commissions do not have enough resources or coordinating role to ensure follow-up and continued networking between experts, and this must come from SPECA countries themselves.
- Each SPECA country has to nominate a focal point for each of the Working Groups in order to coordinate among different ministries engaged in the activities of the Group at the national level and stay as the point of contact at the regional level for networking and to ensure continuity. At a number of Governing Council sessions this request was formulated by different delegations, representatives of TWGs, as well as the two UN Regional Commissions.
- The work/activities of the TWGs is supposed to be discussed during the sessions of the

Governing Council. Yet, because of the short time devoted to these sessions and the large number of TWGs, enough time is not devoted to the examination and discussion on the results of the meetings, the advancement of the agendas, the needed policy reforms, result of any project implementation, etc.

Recommendations:

- ✓ UNECE could support the TWGs focus more on priority areas, such as the preparation of a regional strategy, conducting research and providing strategic recommendations, conducting a feasibility study, coordination of legislation and policies etc. by providing advice and expertise, as per the demand of TWGs.
- ✓ Some of the work of the TWGs can be done online and reporting done to the chairs electronically, and not necessarily each time through a workshop, which could facilitate savings on budget for the organization of TWGs and concentrating instead on outputs.
- ✓ As much as possible, UNECE could ensure that there is follow-up between meetings and that networking continues so that the TWGs are not seen as a one time workshop but as a process with a mission.. The Regional Commissions should also ensure that recommendations and decisions taken (in the WGs, as much as in the Economic Forums and Governing Council sessions) are followed up at the national level, by the appointment of SPECA TWG Focal Points for example.
- ✓ The evaluation also endorses the proposition of the delegation of Turkmenistan at the 13th SPECA Governing Council session in September 2018 for the ESCAP and UNECE secretariats to submit background papers for the TWGs well in advance before meetings in order to have enough time for SPECA delegations at the Governing Council sessions to review and comment on the papers.
- ✓ Both the WG on Gender and SDGs and the WG on Statistics need to work more closely with other WGs in order to address their demands for statistics and for ensuring that gender is properly mainstreamed. In the case of the WG on Gender and SDGs, future projects in support of the SPECA process may consider training specialists in gender mainstreaming into trade, transport, water, knowledge-based development, etc., so that other WGs take gender aspects into consideration.

Expert group meeting

<i>Expected activities:</i>	<i>Actual activities</i>
Organization of 1 expert meeting to review the institutional and governance structure of SPECA	A two-day Expert Meeting was organized in in Almaty, Kazakhstan in June 2018 with the participation of 26 experts (of which 9 women) to validate the SPECA Evaluation Report and develop a package of measures to strengthen SPECA to better enable regional cooperation to implement the SDGs. Their recommendations were then used to elaborate the decisions of the 13 th session of the SPECA Governing Council (Sept. 2018) on improving the workings of SPECA.

OBJECTIVE 2**EA2. Enhanced capacity of SPECA countries to monitor and review progress on SDGs in SPECA thematic areas.**

<i>Expected activities:</i>	<i>Actual activities</i>
Preparation of a framework document on the role of SPECA and its TWGs in the sub-regional follow-up; and 2) conducting a sub-regional review of the implementation of relevant SDGs in the SPECA region.	A scoping study commissioned by UNECE identified how SPECA as a process can help its participating countries achieve sub-regional SDGs through cooperation. Monitoring of where SPECA countries stand in the implementation of SDGs became part of the broader UNECE regional review process.

Achievements:

- With the support of the E262 project, UNECE commissioned a scoping study in 2016 on the status of SDG achievements in SPECA countries, which SPECA WG should focus on which SDG targets, and how to monitor the SDGs. The findings were presented at the 2016 Economic Forum and the 11th Governing Council session and were then finalized in 2017.
- The paper proposed that the list of SDGs and targets, which the SPECA TWGs have selected for future work, “may become an SDG framework, on which to concentrate the implementation of SPECA , in order to support the participating countries in achieving the identified SDGs and targets.”¹⁰ Decisions were made for SPECA TWGs to work on SDG targets which (1) correspond to their mandates, (2) correspond to the priorities and needs of the SPECA participating countries, and (3) sub-regional cooperation can substantively help their achievement. Implementation of these SDGs and targets would then help the SPECA countries in achieving the whole complex of SDGs. Each WG monitors progress in the achievement of SDG targets identified for their work See pages 45-47 in the section on sustainability for the SDGs being monitored by each TWG.
- While the project envisaged the preparation of a framework document on the role of SPECA in the sub-regional follow-ups of SDGs, the issue of organizing a sub-regional SPECA review of the implementation of the SDGs was discussed at UNECE regional fora. A decision was made to keep the regional reviews within the framework of the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development for the whole UNECE region.¹¹ Reviews of the implementation of the SDGs was kept at the regional (UNECE and ESCAP) level. The latest UNECE Regional SDG Forum was held in March 2020 as a one-day virtual meeting, as a result of COVID-19, and also covered all the UNECE member States.¹²

¹⁰ Aida Alzhanova, « Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the SPECA Region » Study Commissioned by the UNECE for the 12 SPECA Economic Forum in Dushanbe, December 2017

¹¹ <https://www.unece.org/rfsd2019.html>

¹² <https://www.unece.org/rfsd2020.html>

- A number of SPECA countries also agreed to undergo a Volunteer National Review (VNR) and some of them (Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan) are to present theirs at the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development, scheduled to be held in July 2020 at the UN Headquarters in New York.¹³ Turkmenistan prepared one in 2019, Tajikistan in 2017, Kazakhstan in 2019 and Azerbaijan two in 2017 and 2019.
- The UNECE also undertook an analysis of the implementation of the SDGs in SPECA countries excluding Afghanistan. The report, “Review of the public web-sites of national statistical organizations and web-sites for national reporting on SDGs”, was published subsequently in English and Russian.¹⁴

Recommendations:

- ✓ UNECE may consider updating the scoping study on SDGs and TWGs, translating it in Russian and making it more widely available.
- ✓ The scoping study could be further analyzed in order to draw concrete recommendations on how to achieve regional-level SDGs, and what it would take concretely. Based on this analysis, countries could then chart their Strategy for Implementation of cross-border SDGs at the Regional Level until 2030 together with plans of action, benchmarks, indicators etc. These priority areas, together with an analysis of major regional challenges, could then inform the choice of the TWGs.
- ✓ Through an updated analysis of the feasibilities and bottlenecks in the implementation of SDGs in the region, SPECA could be more proactive rather than reactive to what is happening in the region. For this, UNECE could commission frequent, updated and strategic assessments within the TWGs and supported by the WG on Statistics.
- ✓ UNECE should encourage better cooperation and coordination with international partners to ensure success and avoid duplication of efforts, given that other UN organizations are heavily involved in supporting the implementation of SDGs, namely the UN Resident Coordinators, UNDP Resident Representatives, UN Country Teams and, especially, UNDP dedicated teams. Members of other UN organizations (e.g. UNDP, UNRCCA, DPA, UNIDO and others) interviewed for the evaluation mentioned that they had been invited to and participated in Economic Forums of SPECA, but that they would have liked to see better cooperation through regular exchanges of information and coordination of activities.

OBJECTIVE 3

EA3. Improved cooperation between SPECA countries.

<i>Expected activities:</i>	<i>Actual activities</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing advisory services to SPECA countries. • Developing project proposals in the areas of SPECA mandate and 	<p>24 advisory services were provided by UNECE staff and resource persons under this project and supported experts' participation in SPECA meetings. A number of concrete projects were developed.</p>

¹³ <https://www.unece.org/sustainable-development/sdgs-in-the-region.html>

¹⁴ <https://statswiki.unece.org/display/SFSDG/COUNTRY+RESOURCES>

mobilizing resources for their implementation	
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Achievements:

- Through missions to SPECA countries facilitated by the E262 project, UNECE staff advised governments, policymakers and experts on regional cooperation and international norms, standards and best-practice recommendations. Project funds were also used to invite experts from Central Asia and other countries to the Economic Forums, TWG sessions and capacity building events, and to prepare background papers used in the various SPECA processes.
- A number of concrete projects were developed with the support of the E262 project. Among them:
 1. A UN Development Account (UNDA) 12th tranche project on “Strengthening innovation policies for SPECA countries in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (with a budget of USD 475,000) developed to implement the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development..
 2. A Project E293 (SB-008547) “Strengthening the capacity of Central Asian countries to implement trade facilitation measures and better integrate into the international rules-based trading system”, financing from the Russian Federation, which was developed based on the Trade Facilitation Strategy of the WG on Trade.
 3. A “Road Safety Performance Review of Kazakhstan”, fully financed by Kazakhstan which came out from the meetings of the WG on Transport, Transit and Connectivity
- Even though the indicator of achievement was about number of projects development, the effectiveness of this activity can be assessed qualitatively by noting that the strength of cooperation through SPECA has been through the process of dialogue, in addition to projects. SPECA countries became more involved in SPECA institutions during the duration of the project. The level of participation and interest of the SPECA countries in the annual events improved; Uzbekistan became fully involved in the Governing Council and in organizing TWG sessions since 2019, while studies, projects and training events focused on sub-regional cooperation in all subject areas intensified.
- Currently, the official webpage of SPECA, within the UNECE website, acts as a depository of official documents, including in Russian.¹⁵ However, the structure of the SPECA web page is not optimal. On the main page one can find documentation of Governing Council sessions and Economic Forums, and only reports and presentations of the WG on Knowledge-based Development. All other TWGs’ reports and other documentation is updated systematically on the web pages of the different substantive Divisions. UNECE is working on solving the technical issue of assembling all the documents to ensure that all WG materials show up on the main SPECA webpage.

¹⁵ <https://www.unece.org/speca/welcome.html>

Recommendation:

- ✓ UNECE should consider using regional experts and government officials from the region to provide advisory services to other SPECA countries and not just UN staff or international experts. To this end, more active exchanges between countries (study tours, peer reviews, etc.) can be organized.
Using new information technologies, thematic communities of practice online could be created where officials and experts could exchange views on common challenges, possible solutions, moderated discussions, etc.
- ✓ As travel becomes more difficult in the post-COVID-19 era and as more and more meetings are happening online, it is important for SPECA to also develop a dynamic website that could be a depository of all documents, in English and in Russian, that can help provide virtual advisory services. Dissemination of knowledge online, organized by theme and in a user-friendly manner, would render much needed on-going service to SPECA countries.

Table: Summary of achievements

Expected accomplishments (EA)	Main activities	Indicators of achievement (IA)	Actual achievements (quantitative)
EA1. Strengthened national capacity of beneficiary countries in all SPECA thematic areas: (1) water and energy resources, (2) transport and border crossing, (3) trade, (4) statistics, (5) knowledge-based development, and (6) gender and economy;	A1.1. Organization of maximum 12 meetings of the SPECA thematic working groups in the areas of water and energy resources, transport and border crossing, trade, statistics, knowledge-based development and gender and economy (6 meetings per year)	IA1. At least 150 experts from the SPECA countries benefit from capacity building activities in SPECA thematic areas;	<i>Fully achieved:</i> 16 meetings of the Thematic Working Groups with participation of 392 policy makers and experts
	A1.2. Organization of 2 annual SPECA Economic Forums and 2 sessions of SPECA Governing Council (one per year);		<i>Fully achieved</i> Organization of 4 Economic Forums and Governing Council sessions
	A1.3. Organization of 1 expert group meeting to review the institutional and governance structure of SPECA;		<i>Fully achieved</i> Organization of 1 expert group meeting to discuss how to strengthen SPECA (June 2018)

EA2. Enhanced capacity of SPECA countries to monitor and review progress on SDGs in SPECA thematic areas;	A2.1. Preparing of a framework document on the role of SPECA and its TWGs in the sub-regional follow-up;	IA2. SDGs in SPECA thematic areas are regularly monitored by the SPECA countries;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Fully achieved</i>: Scoping review of TWGs and SDGs drafted and presented to the GC • SPECA becomes Platform to assist implementation of SDGs
	A2.2. Conducting a sub-regional review of the implementation of relevant SDGs in the SPECA region;		<p><i>Partially achieved</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional review left to UNECE Regional Forums on Sustainable Development • Voluntary National Reviews done for HLPFWGs implement SDGs as part of their workplan
EA3. Improved cooperation between SPECA countries.	A3.1. Providing advisory services to SPECA countries;	IA3. At least 3 projects in the SPECA thematic areas are developed.	<i>Fully achieved</i> 24 advisory services provided through missions, consultants etc.
	A3.2. Developing project proposals in the areas of SPECA mandate and mobilizing resources for their implementation.		<p><i>Fully achieved</i></p> <p>3 concrete projects developed and financed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Strengthening innovation policies for SPECA countries in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, • “Strengthening the capacity of Central Asian countries to implement trade facilitation measures and better integrate into the international rules-based trading system”, • “The Road Safety Performance Review of Kazakhstan”

What were the challenges/obstacles (if any) to achieving the expected results?

Although all the objectives set out in the E262 project were achieved, there were some challenges, with some alleviated but others persisting. They were related to the lack of systematic funding for project, lack of participation of some major countries, and lack of a secretariat to ensure more continuity:

- Even though SPECA is presented as a country-owned and country-led Programme, many officials in SPECA countries continue to expect the UN to raise money for their projects

and respond to their infrastructure needs, instead of seeing themselves in the drivers' seat. Until the 2018 Evaluation, which brought the question of ownership to light, government officials saw their countries as beneficiaries, sometimes passive, instead of owners of a platform they could actively use for regional cooperation and fund raising. At the same time, they lamented the low impact of meetings and annual sessions – what the bulk of SPECA budget goes to - that produced what they considered as declarative statements with no substantive follow-up. When the 4 options noted above (business as usual, reform, institutionalization, or closure) was put to their vote during the 2017 Dushanbe Governing Council session, they unanimously selected option 2 as the only option and began engaging more actively in decisions and implementation of SPECA work plans. The Expert Meeting, which the E262 project supported, came up with a set of recommendations on how the countries could step up on ownership and become more active and involved in SPECA activities. The obstacle of lack of interest of the countries in sub-regional cooperation gradually fades away, including thanks to the activities under the E262 project.

- The effectiveness of SPECA, and by extension of the E262 project, was for a few years largely impacted by regional differences. The withdrawal of Uzbekistan from regional cooperation schemes, including from SPECA, hampered efforts to cooperate on common challenges in the region. After the change of leadership in Uzbekistan in 2016, the country gradually started participating in SPECA activities while at the same time unblocking the political deadlocks that had made cooperation around trade, transit and water sharing extremely difficult. Uzbekistan organized the meeting of the WG on Water, Energy and Environment in October 2019 and a high-level delegation participated in the Economic Forum and the Governing Council session in Ashgabat, in November 2019.
- For cooperation on issues related to trade, transport etc., other organizations have grown in membership, relevance and size in the region, some much better funded and owned by international development banks (such as ADB supported CAREC) or larger political processes backed by large regional integration entities (notably, the Eurasian Economic Union). Nonetheless, despite the small scale of its activities, the added value of SPECA has been the regularity of exchanges through a systematic platform among countries beyond the EAEU, and this could not have been sustained without the support of the E262 project. In essence, the project created the advantage that allowed SPECA to collaborate on a par with much bigger and better funded initiatives in the region.

How effective was the support to implement the annual SPECA Economic Forums and Governing Council sessions?

The organization of the SPECA Economic Forums and Governing Council sessions was the responsibility of the UN regional commissions, alternately, every second year. Yet, even when it was the turn of ESCAP, the E262 project of UNECE supported a consultant to prepare all the documentation and support the logistics. In this sense, the support of the project was crucial and effective. Without the project, even if the hosting countries provided all facilities and support in kind, these events would not have been possible. The E262 project financed the participation of countries, the preparation of the documents of the Governing Council session and the background studies of the Economic Forum and travel of experts.

Were the recommendations of the annual sessions of the SPECA Governing Council, the SPECA Economic Forums and the 2018 SPECA Evaluation effectively implemented through this project?

- There are ways that future projects supporting the SPECA process could help improve the process of presenting recommendations and following up on their implementation. Often times, recommendations coming from the TWGs and Economic Forums are too numerous, broad or too impractical. Two of the heads of delegations interviewed for this evaluation noted that the recommendations from the WG meetings should be more concrete, that they should be shared with the Governing Council with enough advance to notice to solicit informed decisions. Mechanisms for follow up need also to be drawn concretely. As the Regional Commissions help prepare the recommendations, they can help improve their presentation.
- This evaluator sat through the 12th session of the Governing Council in Dushanbe, in December 2017 as well as the 14th session in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, and noted very little discussion after each agenda item among SPECA participating countries. Lack of proper discussion in Governing Council sessions may have to do with the participation of officials that cannot take decisions, or the variety of issues on which to deliberate (such as the recommendations of the different TWGs) hence a quick approval without scrutiny, or the very formal format of the sessions run by the Regional Commissions. The floor was given after each agenda item for comments, but was seldom taken by country representatives. While countries can send their comments to the Secretariat of the Regional Commissions, opportunities are lost for an inter-state discussion and debate. The documents are then deposited on the website of SPECA within the UNECE site in both English and Russian.¹⁶
- Nonetheless, there was a marked difference between discussions in the 12th and 14th sessions, with the latter one including a much more active discussion among participating State representatives who felt strongly about some of the issues being discussed (the SPECA Fund, the Secretariat, the discontinuing of the WG on Statistics etc.). Uzbekistan formally requested to include a sentence in all adopted documents that it will take more time to consider the issues, while other countries actually negotiated some of the points and the language used for long minutes. This showed a more active participation and ownership, after 2018.
- As there is no Secretariat, and the responsibility for the different TWGs falls on different substantive units of UNECE (and ESCAP), the follow-up at the national level cannot be properly ensured. The E262 project for example envisaged support to the organization of the meetings and not for the systematic follow up of all recommendations.
- Another major hurdle to follow-up on SPECA decisions and processes is the high staff turnover in national ministries and the loss of institutional memory. The appointment of Focal Points both for SPECA and for the TWGs would ensure better and more systematic follow-up on decisions and ensure handover.

¹⁶ <https://www.unece.org/speca/welcome.html>

- All this said, some of the major decisions taken during the timeframe of the project were implemented. They include for example:
 - Decision 1 (SPECA/Governing Council/Dec/2017/1) of The Governing Council meeting held on 6 December 2017 which calls upon UNECE and ESCAP and other partners to provide active support to the efforts of the SPECA participating countries, undertaken on the national and regional levels, in promoting innovation for the achievement of the Sustainable Developments Goals. → *UNECE, ESCAP have been focusing their efforts to this effect.*
 - Decision 2 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2017/2) which underscored the importance of elaborating an innovation strategy for the SPECA region to achieve the SDGs → *The SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development was drafted, discussed, validated and adopted in 2019.*
 - The Governing Council decision in the 11th Session in Ganja to have an evaluation of SPECA, and then to endorse the organization of a meeting of expert in June 2018 in preparation for the twentieth anniversary of the SPECA → *Decision was fully implemented.*
 - The Governing Council decision to consider at its 13th session how the recommendations contained in the evaluation will be operationalized so that SPECA fully serves as the mechanism for cooperation for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development → *Implemented in September 2018, when countries reviewed the SPECA evaluation, agreed with some of the recommendation and rejected others.*

B) Efficiency

Were the planned activities carried out on time as intended?

All annual SPECA events, TWG sessions and studies were implemented as planned in the project document. Only one session of the WG on Gender was delayed once by one year.

The timeframe of the project was able to be extended at no cost given that additional resources were raised by the Regional Commissions to organize some of the meetings. UNECE added funds from its Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation (RPTC) while also accepting contributions from SPECA countries or other international organizations (such as IDB, WTO) for the organization of selected WG meetings. In order to ensure continuity between the end of a project and the possible start of another one eventually, and given that meetings needed to be organized on a yearly basis, UNECE estimated that it is better to stretch the money in order not to have a long gap before additional money could be raised. SPECA representatives interviewed may not have necessary been aware of how UNECE found and spent funds to organize the annual meetings: They simply benefited from the regularity of annual meetings.

To what extent the resources made available through this project contributed to the achievement of the objective?

- The project budget of USD 547,000.00 was envisaged as seed money to build on and

involve more partners and other projects. The project budget was conservative to begin with, but resources were enough only for the very basic level of the planned activities.

- As the staff of UNECE interviewed for the project mentioned, without the possibility to tap into additional funds (from the RPTC or from other organizations that agreed to host the WG meetings), some of the activities could not have taken place, especially not during the extended period.
- The human resources involved in the implementation included the Regional Adviser in the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD) as the manager of the project and UNECE Deputy Coordinator of SPECA, as well as UNECE focal point for the WG on Trade, the UNECE Coordinator of SPECA (Deputy Executive Secretary), funded from the UNECE portion of the UN Regular programme of technical cooperation the focal points for the various SPECA TWGs for their areas of work, as well as individual contractors hired on a part time basis for several months during the years of the project to assist with its implementation.
- The project drew from the expertise from various UNECE divisions, under the coordination of the Regional Adviser. As such, the project substantially relied on ECE staff funded from the regular budget providing capacity.
- The highest proportion of expenditures went to costs related to organizing events (travel of participants, staff and experts, consultancy costs to prepare studies), which reflects the key objective of the project: to maintain the SPECA process as a sub-regional cooperation initiative. Financial support was provided in an efficient manner, covering travel costs for relevant representatives from the beneficiary countries.
- Overall, the budget expenditure was highly efficient, with a good balance between the substantive and administrative costs. The figures below are provisional as at 18 June 2020
 1. Contractual services (108,602 USD) was used for the hiring interpreters/translators/equipment for interpretation for the events organized for the project
 2. Grants out of 20,000 USD is for organizing an event by local institution upon agreement with UNECE.
 3. Operating costs 13,237 USD includes UNDP service fee/ bank/operational fee and charges
 4. Staff and personnel of 97,600 USD used for consultancy contracts
 5. Travel of 251,697 USD includes, staff/consultants/experts/SPECA delegations to attend the events
 6. PSC of 13% is project service cost.
- The total of 572,348 USD exceeded the received contribution of 547,000 USD as the UNECE used a difference created in the Russian project budget over the years. This was done based on a clearly stated request from the SPECA participating countries at the 14th SPECA Governing Council session on 21 November 2019, subsequently endorsed by the donor. This brings the financial implementation rate to 104.63%.
- Regular staff working on SPECA spent the following time on SPECA: 2 months for the Deputy

Coordinator; 2 months of the Programme Assistant; and 3 months of the focal points supporting the various Thematic Working Groups.

Did the countries mobilize sufficient in-kind and financial resources to supplement the activities and objectives of the project?

- SPECA participating countries provided in-kind support for the annual Economic Forums and Governing Council sessions which they hosted, in terms of allocation of rooms, interpretation, transfers from the airport and to the venue, etc. Azerbaijan provided full in-kind support in 2016, Tajikistan in 2017, Kazakhstan in 2018, and Turkmenistan in 2019. The same is valid for most of the meetings of the SPECA TWGs.
- Kazakhstan even provided annual financial support to the WG on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity (USD 15,000) and to the whole SPECA process (USD 60,000 in 2018-2019)

What was the efficiency of collaboration with other agencies, development partners, civil society and the business community?

- Collaboration with ESCAP in co-supporting SPECA and organizing the annual events on a bi-annual base was overall positive. The relationship consolidated after the 2018 SPECA Evaluation which was commissioned by ESCAP but was then vetted during the Expert Meeting organized by UNECE through the E262 Project. The Expert Meeting in Almaty in 2018, led by the Deputy Executive Secretaries of UNECE and ESCAP became an occasion for the two Regional Commissions to decide jointly and together with SPECA countries on the future directions.
- Certain development partners provided support for the work of specific WGs: The Islamic Development Bank (IDB) funded participants to the WG on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity on a regular basis, the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) provided support for the WG on Trade and collaborated also with the WG on Water, Energy and Environment. The World Trade Organization (WTO) provided in-kind contribution (venue and facilities) for two sessions of the WG on Trade during the period of the project.
- The closest relationships were developed with some of the UNDP offices which provided support during the organization of the annual meetings. UNDP Tajikistan, for example, provided crucial support for the organization of the 2017 annual events in Dushanbe.
- The UN Resident Coordinators and the UNRC system in countries such as Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, whom the consultant saw in the context of the SPECA evaluation as well as during the Turkmenistan meeting of the Governing Council in 2019, expressed interest in closer coordination with UNECE and ESCAP, especially as part of the new UN reforms calling for more cooperation between the UN RC system and the Regional Commissions. This became specifically apparent during the preparation of a

concept note on a potential UN Regional Hub that this consultant was hired to prepare for the Government of Kazakhstan during their membership on the Security Council in 2018. The concept note explored the division of responsibility and coordination between the UN Resident Coordinator and the two Regional Commissions in Central Asia in the context of the UN reforms, and touched upon the possibility to use SPECA as the umbrella programme under which this cooperation could be concretized.

- The UNDP Deputy Resident Representative in Tajikistan was especially cooperative with SPECA during the organization of the Governing Council meeting in Dushanbe in 2018. The UN Special Representative for the Secretary General in Central Asia, Head of the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia (UNRCCA), interviewed for the project, assisted the Governing Council Meeting in Ashgabat in 2019 and expressed interest in closer coordination on issues related to water specifically. The UN Resident Coordinator in Turkmenistan organized a SPECA meeting on financing for sustainable development in May 2020 in Ashgabat, which had to be organized online, given the COVID-19 lockdown.
- The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), given that they have their own instrument for support cooperation in the region, have been less involved, leaving space for improvement.

Were the activities implemented in the most efficient way compared to alternatives? In particular, how do the costs and use of resources compare with other similar projects?

- The project budget can be described as seed money for developing further cooperation in the SPECA substantive areas with further support from other projects, development partners and the SPECA countries. The USD547,000 spent on the project are dwarfed by the USD 35 billion mobilized primarily as loans for activities under the CAREC programme for 20 years, as announced by the Development Banks in CAREC in October 2019. In Afghanistan, for example, CAREC, with the financial and technical assistance of six international and regional financial and economic institutions (ADB, EBRD, IMF, IDB, UNDP and WB), is working to implement 17 projects for the development of trade, transport and energy.¹⁷
- While the process supported by SPECA cannot be quantified similarly through their value for the dollar, they have helped build capacity for policy development, cooperation and they made a sustained use of the UNECE and ESCAP norms, standards, recommendations and other tools, which were valued by participants.
- The overall results achieved by the project are commensurate to the funding that was available. The initial timeframe was June 2016 – May 2018, but was extended until the end of 2019, as the need for further intervention became obvious. UNECE managed to organize all the planned activities and maintain the SPECA process through support of the

¹⁷ “Afghanistan: economy and peace are two essential parts of stability”, *Daily News* , 12/01/2018

meetings, research and field projects, with the existing budget, mostly through mobilizing supplementary funds to complement the activities of the project.

- As a result, the project could be extended for one and a half years, something that was unique for this project, but may not be possible to duplicate.

Recommendations:

- ✓ In order to maintain the activities initiated under the E262 project in support of the SPECA institutions, further fund raising is necessary, and this could include joining forces with other institutions in the region on SPECA's thematic areas. Better coordination with other institutions would also ensure that UNECE (and ESCAP) add value to the SPECA countries' efforts where there is advantage. To do so, a scoping study may be necessary to see how SPECA could work with which institutions on which issues. Based on that survey, a strategy should be devised in order to replace *ad hoc* and one-time partnerships with a more coordinated and rational system of partnerships, which can add value and streamline efforts of international and regional institutions in the SPECA region.
- ✓ The most important partnership would be with the UN Resident Coordinator System in each SPECA country. As representative of the United Nations in the countries, the UN RCs should be in a position to closely associated with the work of the SPECA Governing Council”.

C) Sustainability

What were the regional public goods produced by SPECA with support from this project?

A number of different regional public goods were produced with support from the project, of different nature, including:

- *Platform for cooperation:* SPECA was maintained as a regional process of cooperation bringing together policymakers and experts. Networking was sustained in each of the areas in the mandate of the WGs.
- *Cross-border agreements,* including support for the ones on water management in the Chu-Talas and the Amu-Darya river basins; the “Ashgabat Initiative on Reducing barriers to trade and transport using UN legal instruments, norms, standards and recommendations, while bolstering connectivity in the SPECA region”, data exchange among Customs services of the SPECA countries.
- *Regional strategies,* such as the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development¹⁸ as well as the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy, both adopted at the 14th session of the SPECA Governing Council in Ashgabat in November 2019.
- *A number of studies on:* the SDGs and targets to be better achieved through sub-regional cooperation; status of innovation systems in the region; transition to more sustainable growth in the sub-region; status of transport and trade facilitation measures in the region;

¹⁸ www.unecce.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/SPECA_Innovation_Strategy_English.pdf

the nexus of water management, food security and cross-border trade in the region; border-crossing procedures; the modalities of establishing a SPECA Fund, etc.

How did the project contribute to the overall sustainability of the sub-regional network of cooperation in the sub-region? Did the project contribute to enhancing the level of cooperation among the SPECA countries?

- The project helped solve the two crucial problems for SPECA for 4 years: the lack of budget and secretariat. Without this project, UNECE would not have been able to uphold its commitment to help organize the annual meetings of the SPECA process on the years that it was responsible. It provided a stable basic budget for all essential meetings of the SPECA governing body and TWGs, while additional funds were raised to raise the level and efficiency.
- The project budget provided funding for national policymakers and experts to participate in the process.
- It funded an individual contractor to prepare and manage the documentations of all the SPECA Governing Council sessions and Economic Forums.
- The project budget also supported the drafting of the key documents of the Governing Councils and Economic Forums (such as final declarations, recommendations, report of meetings etc.,) as well as the background studies requested by the TWGs.

What projects or project proposals, mobilizing additional resources, in the areas of SPECA's mandate were developed as a result of activities under the E262 project?

The following projects stemmed directly from the activities of the project:

- “Strengthening the capacity of Central Asian countries to implement trade facilitation measures and better integrate into the international rules-based trading system” (Russian-funded: 2018-2020, 350,000 USD).
- UNDA 11th tranche “Evidence-based trade facilitation measures for economies in transition” (2018-2021, 490,000 USD)
- UNDA 12th tranche project 2023N “Strengthening innovation policies for SPECA countries in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (January 2020 – June 2023, 475,000 USD)
- In addition, based on the raised profile of SPECA during the activities of the project, a proposal was put together for the establishment of a SPECA Fund, as a way to address one of the long term sustainability challenges of SPECA by acting as a platform to develop future projects and attract investments. The idea of a SPECA Fund was put forward by the UNECE taking into account the needs of SPECA countries and discussed during a visit of the UNECE Executive Secretary to Turkmenistan in August 2019 for the First Caspian Forum, when she met the President of Turkmenistan, who agreed to support the initiative.
- The proposal for a SPECA Fund was circulated for comments at the 14th Session of the SPECA Governing Council in Ashgabat, and several delegations noted the need to obtain more information on its functioning, financing and management before making a

decision. Questions remained as to whether all countries must contribute equally to be able to benefit. Some delegations suggested that the Fund should be established under the UN, others noted that the Fund should not be managed by the UN as some donors may not be ready to give money to a UN Programme. Other countries, like Tajikistan, were keen to establish the Fund as it would create opportunities to render targeted support to specific projects. In order to look at all modalities and options, upon request from the Governing Council, UNECE engaged a consultant to come up with a concept note detailing the potential functioning, governance structure and financing mechanisms of the SPECA Fund.

- While the scope of the Trust Fund had not been finalized yet by the time this evaluation was prepared, it could be anticipated that any eventual SPECA Fund, while it would most likely consist primarily of a development budget, could consider also providing some operational funds to support the SPECA process, as the E262 project had done.
- As is, most of the SPECA activities are limited to meetings for exchanges of experiences and capacity-building workshops, often one-off. These types of initiatives are usually difficult to get donor funding, given the preference of donors for tangible ‘results’. In the opinion of the evaluator, SPECA should not become an implementation body that oversees regional and bilateral/trilateral projects, for at least two reasons. First, it would never be able to compete with much more established bodies funded by a consortium of IFIs (such as CAREC). Second, dedicating it to a platform for project implementation misses the opportunity for SPECA to occupy an empty niche in the region as a convener of Central Asian countries, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan to dialogue and coordinate their policies on issues of high relevance to the region.

To what extent did this project strengthen the capacity of SPECA countries to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g. SDG 6.5, SDG 7.1 and SDG 7.2 for the WG on Water, Energy and the Environment, SDG 3.6; SDG 9.1 and SDG 11.2 for the WG on Sustainable Transport and SDG 17.10 for the WG on Trade) through sub-regional cooperation?

The Thematic Working Groups each contributed to helping SPECA countries implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve the relevant SDGs, as seen below.

Table: Main activities and SDGs and targets they helped achieve or monitor

Thematic Working Groups and their main activities	SDGs and target they helped achieve or monitor
The WG on Water, Energy and Environment acted as a platform for identification and coordination of technical issues, sharing of best experiences and strengthening mutual trust at the political level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation), target 6.5 ○ SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy), targets 7.1 and 7.2.

<p>The WG on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity organized five events during the timeframe of the project, mostly organized and funded by Kazakhstan (the chair of the WG), the E262 project and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SDG 3 (Good health and wellbeing), target 3.6; ○ SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy), target 7.3; ○ SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), target 9.1; ○ SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), target 11.2; and ○ SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), target 12.c.
<p>The WG on Trade made tangible contribution to progress on SDG target 17.10 through a SPECA Trade Policy Forum in Ashgabat in May 2016 (notably on WTO accession), national WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement readiness assessments and trainings for trade facilitation implementation. The Group developed a regional SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy, a document Principles of Sustainable Trade in the sub-region and a concept for a study on non-tariff barriers to trade.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), targets 17.10, and 17.11.
<p>The WG on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development (formerly the WG on Knowledge-Based Development) developed the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development and a Roadmap to implement it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SDGs 8 (Decent work and economic growth), targets 8.2 and 8.3; ○ SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), targets 9.1, 9.4, 9.5, 9b and 9c. ○ SDG 13 (combat climate change and its impacts), targets 13.1, 13.3 ○ SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), targets 17.1, 17.2
<p>The WG on Gender and SDGs (formerly the WG on Gender and Economy) concentrated on SDG 5 (Gender equality), worked to raise awareness on the interdependency between gender and economy through sharing good practices in mainstreaming gender in economic policies, policy-oriented research and projects as well as developing cross-sectional linkages and synergies with other relevant areas of SPECA activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SDG 5 as well as all other relevant SDGs
<p>The WG on Statistics reviewed and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Support to monitoring of all SDGs

<p>contributed to improving the statistical systems of the SPECA countries to collect, process and analyze statistics, including on the SDGs. The WG contributed to the UNECE analysis of the implementation of the SDGs in the SPECA countries (without Afghanistan): Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – “Review of the public web-sites of national statistical organizations and web-sites for national reporting on SDGs”, published subsequently in English and Russian.</p>	
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How can the UN Resident Coordinators be more efficiently involved in supporting SPECA activities?

- Throughout 2019, the UNECE Deputy Coordinator of SPECA and several of the WG focal points in UNECE discussed with the Resident Coordinators in the SPECA countries the possibilities for strengthening cooperation. A document on strengthening this cooperation was developed by UNECE Deputy Coordinator of SPECA and discussed with the SPECA countries RCs. The idea is that the RCs would become the third supporting UN network for SPECA, in addition to UNECE and ESCAP. A meeting of the RCs was envisaged during the SPECA Days in Ashgabat, in November 2019, but it could not materialize as the RCs were invited for a meeting with the UN Secretary General in New York at that moment. A second plan to meet on 19 March 2020 in Geneva was hampered by the COVID-19 pandemics. At the time of preparation of the Report, a third attempt was planned during the meeting on financing for the SDGs in the SPECA sub-region in May 2020 in Ashgabat, but a physical meeting could not take place again, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

D. Gender and Human Rights

Did the project apply and rights-based approaches in the design, implementation and results of the activities?

- The project contributed to women’s rights, including economic rights in the region, by providing support to the SPECA WG on Gender and Economy (renamed to SPECA WG on Gender and SDGs in 2019). The WG met a few times in order to streamline gender into sustainable development policies in the sub-region. Without the project, which provided financing for the meetings, the WG would not have existed.
- Other than this, there is no evidence that a Rights-based approach was used for the design or implementation of the project, or that the participation of beneficiaries of the various meetings and studies were chosen on the basis of vulnerability or human rights.

Has the project helped to strengthen the application of gender mainstreaming principles and contribute to substantial and meaningful changes in the situation of the most vulnerable groups?

The project supported the organization of two meetings of the Working Group on Women and the Economy which changed its name to Gender and SDGs. These meetings brought together a network of women policy makers, entrepreneurs and experts working on advancing the rights and situations of women through boosting economic activities. However, in the opinion of this evaluator, women targeted through the project are not necessarily the most vulnerable groups in the region and consist of active entrepreneurial women. In fact, given that this project was not a humanitarian or development project, but one encouraging regional cooperation, it would be unrealistic to expect it to have directly targeted the “most vulnerable groups”. This said, more could have been done in terms of including gender concerns not only in the WG of Gender and SDGs but all other WGs. For this, experts in gender mainstreaming should be specifically trained.

Did UNECE advocate for gender equality and advancement of women in the SPECA work?

In addition to the WG on Gender and the SDGs being one of the active TWGs of SPECA, UNECE also encouraged SPECA countries to nominate women as much as possible in the GC sessions and Economic Forums. UNECE kept gender disaggregate data on participants in all meetings of SPECA. As seen from the table below, however, the number of men and women was not equal. This has to do most likely with the low level of representation of women in high-level positions in SPECA countries, and the governments’ inability to ensure representation, which was beyond the control of UNECE.

Table: Total number of participants at the Economic Forum and Governing Council sessions and number of women

Location of Forum and Governing Council session	Date	total participants/women	no.
Ganja, Azerbaijan	Nov. 2016	83/32	
Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Dec. 2017	120/35	
Almaty, Kazakhstan	Sept. 2018	100/45	
Ashgabat, Turkmenistan	Nov. 2019	106/26	

UNECE, also looked to ensure gender equality when hiring consultants to support the background studies and work on SPECA.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

High expectations

Overall, cooperation through SPECA has proven useful: During the last 20 years, the size of the economy of the SPECA countries has increased more than 8 times from \$40 billion in 1998 to \$343.3 billion in 2018. The total trade has increased almost 10 times from \$18 billion to \$179 billion. The population has grown from 49.8 million to 117.8 million and life expectancy at birth has risen from 65.8 to 70.2 years. Except for Afghanistan (a least developed country – or LDC) and Tajikistan, a low-income country¹⁹, all SPECA participating countries are now middle-income countries. Trade, transport, energy and ICT links in these landlocked countries have been expanded, offering new possibilities for all.

Since SPECA was created in 1998 as a UN Special Programme supported by the two UN Regional Commissions, it has raised a lot of expectations of services that it can provide for its participating countries. As pointed out by delegations during the 20th year review of SPECA at the 2018 Economic Forum held in Almaty, each country sees value in SPECA for its own priority in integration into the global and regional economies:²⁰

- a. Afghanistan is committed to exploiting the potential of its geographical location to provide a land transit from China to Europe and access to sea ports for the Central Asian countries, e.g. through the Chabahar Port in Iran and Gwadar Port in Pakistan.
- b. Azerbaijan is interested in increasing linkages with Central Asia. It has been implementing a broad range of measures on structural economic transformation including diversification, private sector development, infrastructure modernization and investment climate promotion.
- c. Kazakhstan is committed to promoting regional cooperation and integration through infrastructure development, connectivity, international competitiveness and integration of Kazakhstan into the global economy.
- d. Kyrgyzstan looks to further integrate its economy into the regional and global markets through digitalization, diversification, export enhancement and innovations.
- e. Tajikistan has great expectations from its membership in WTO and is looking for support to its various development strategies for creating a favorable environment for small and medium businesses, attractive investment climate and competitiveness of domestic producers.
- f. Turkmenistan considers regional integration and cooperation as effective means to respond to economic and social challenges in the region, enhancing competitiveness of countries in rapidly changing global economy and considers Central Asia as a key player in the revival of the Silk Road.
- g. Uzbekistan has a renewed interest in regional cooperation and has been conducting liberalization of its foreign trade regime and business climate. It is looking to build on the experiences of countries that have successfully integrated into the global economy.

¹⁹http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session10/Report_of_the_10th_session_of_the_SPECA_Governing_Council.pdf

²⁰https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/ecf/2018/Report_of_the_2018_SPECA_Economic_Forum_FINAL_VERSION.pdf

To this aim, different countries have been pushing for more concrete outcomes from SPECA, such as the implementation of projects and technical support, in addition to acting as a platform for exchange of information and good practices, norms implementation, and policy coordination. Two things are however clear in the meantime: first, all SPECA countries value SPECA as a process; and, second, without the E262 project, UNECE would not have been able to support this particular process, to such an extent, for the past four years.

After the 2018 review, both SPECA countries and the two Regional Commissions renewed their commitment and reengaged in the SPECA process with renewed vigor. During an Expert Meeting organized under the Project, a number of recommendations were prepared on how to improve the institutions, while keeping the spirit of a country-led and country-owned process.

All these elements point to the importance of the E262 project, which was able to keep the SPECA process going, by supporting the organization of its main meetings on an annual basis. There were practically no problems with the implementation of this project. It helped solve one of the fundamental issues for SPECA: the lack of a sustained budget for maintaining the network through the organization of meetings. Even if the funds of the project were insufficient to cover the full execution of the Programme, it was enough to provide for the basic activities, and allowed for other funds to be mobilized for capacity-building and other activities.

And yet, challenges remain

While the project itself was successful in helping sustain the SPECA institutions, there are some larger structural issues for SPECA as a UN Programme which also impacted the achievements of the E262 project, and which need to be taken into consideration in any future project to support SPECA. These include:

- *Funding for process of dialogue and cooperation rather than projects:* SPECA was initially set up as UN Programme, instead of a regional commission for Central Asian countries, as may have been the intention of some of the countries. Even as a UN Programme, SPECA was not created with adequate and sustainable financial resources by the UN and had to keep looking for funds for its basic operations, or to share costs with other projects and institutions. Other initiatives in the region, such as the ADB-run CAREC or the inter-governmental TRACECA, supported by the European Union, or the Belt and Road Initiative, supported by China, have much more funds allocated to projects (some of them in loans that have to be reimbursed). As such, the added value of SPECA is not as a programme supporting projects. It is in acting as a regionally owned neutral UN platform, where experts and policy makers of the region meet systematically in order to exchange information and good practices and use the UN conventions, standards and best practice tools to enhance regional cooperation and monitoring of achievements towards the SDGs. Even if the SPECA Trust Fund raises much investment, the added value of SPECA will remain more as a platform for exchanges, policy coordination and coherence than a vehicle for raising investments for projects.
- *The need for further institutionalization and sustained support:* SPECA does not have a mechanism to follow up systematically and continuously on the various initiatives and the task falls on the staff of UNECE and ESCAP. UNECE has been able to raise funds for

SPECA-specific activities, including the E262 project under evaluation, before that mostly from the UN Regular Programme for Technical Assistance (RPTC), and through extra-budgetary resources. ESCAP supports activities of SPECA mostly through its extra-budgetary funds. In terms of allocation of personnel, SPECA was the full responsibility of a Regional Advisor within UNECE until 2016. After the retirement of that person, the responsibility of focal point was added to the responsibility of the lead of the Regional Adviser on Trade. Within ESCAP, SPECA matters are followed up by the staff of the Sub-Regional Office for North and Central Asia (SONCA) in Almaty, notably by a staff that has long-term institutional memory.

The lack of a dedicated secretariat, compounded with the lack of adequate dedicated budget, creates challenges for the effective operation of SPECA as a special programme of the UN. The ToR of SPECA stipulates that the two Regional Commissions are to provide secretariat support on a rotational basis to the preparation and organization of the sessions of the Governing Council, Economic Forums and sessions of the TWGs. This type of secretariat support includes the preparation of documents and studies as well as maintaining records of their activities. Indeed, ESCAP and UNECE coordinate with each other to prepare these sessions, even though ESCAP withdrew for some time its support for a number of TWGs, and returned to support the WG on Trade in 2020. The tasks, however, are very labour intensive, especially because of the lack of substantive support from the SPECA countries in preparing documents, studies, maintaining records, etc. While it was the wish of the original participating countries that a SPECA secretariat be created and funded by the UN, there is no *de facto* permanent secretariat for SPECA at the moment. The appointment of a secretariat for SPECA that is well staffed and well-funded will alleviate the responsibility on the staff of the two Regional Commissions and will especially allow more ownership and follow up by countries. The establishment of a secretariat would also address the lack of institutional memory and coordination of reporting systems and joint research in order to improve the work of SPECA and the constructive dialogue between participating countries.

- *Inclusiveness is important for regional cooperation* : The lack of participation of Uzbekistan in regional processes, including SPECA, until 2016 had an impact on the effectiveness of SPECA in a region where Uzbekistan plays a key role. However, after 2018, with the process of change that started to happen within Uzbekistan, coupled with continued attempts by UNECE and ESCAP to involve Uzbekistan despite reticence, started to pay off, thanks to the project. Officials from Uzbekistan participated in the 14th Governing Council session and the 2019 Forum in Ashgabat, and hosted a meeting of the WG on Water, Energy and Environment in October 2019.

These larger structural problems inevitably impacted the results of the E262 project. Some of these problems were solved gradually during the duration of the E262 project. Uzbekistan started participating in the activities under the project and in SPECA activities in general; more country ownership/genuine involvement by the countries started to bear fruit with the proposition of a secretariat (Kazakhstan), or a Fund (Turkmenistan), and with the revision of the names, ToR and *raison d'être* of some of the Thematic Working Groups.

The E262 project solved the problem with the budget temporarily, helping maintain the regular meetings of the SPECA institutions, in order to allow for more ownership, more engagement and more meaningful support. Given that SPECA countries and the UN Regional Commission

secretariats became accustomed to the funding under the project, if the project is not renewed, it would be hard to fulfill the expectations and to continue the process towards a stronger, more relevant SPECA.

Any future SPECA Fund, if established, could potentially raise development money to attract investors for SPECA projects, yet the organization of meetings of the SPECA institutions, i.e. the TWGs, the Economic Forum and the Governing Council sessions, would still have to be funded through a pot for operational budget that needs to be institutionalized. So far, the two UN Regional Commissions have found *ad hoc* ways to go on funding the meetings, and the E262 project was indispensable for UNECE to make it happen. UNECE has used this project, RPTC, and XB resources, while ESCAP has its own funding from donors and from other projects, which it sometimes uses for SPECA. Allocation has been *ad hoc*, commitments not always in par. For UNECE, continuation of a similar project that could finance continued support to the SPECA process is crucial. Overall, a sustainable strategy is necessary in order to ensure the continued operational financing.

In the long run, an institutional mechanism needs to be found to sustain support for SPECA and fill the structural gap that this project was able to fill. For example, once the SPECA Fund becomes operational and able to raise significant resources, a percentage could be devoted solely to administrative/operational funds in order to continue organizing the meetings. Until that time, it is imperative that other sources of funding are found.

Recommendations:

Based on the analysis above, the following recommendations are provided for UNECE to consider along. They are organized along five strategic areas, under which practical steps are highlighted.

1) Streamlining and improving the organization of the SPECA meetings:

- Rationalize on time, travel and ensuring continuity by trying to hold WG sessions, the Economic Forum and the Governing Council meetings together during four days, when feasible and demanded by the countries.
- ✓ Consider turning the Economic Forums, if the countries wish, into opportunities for more dynamic exchanges through round table formats instead of conference modality with little discussions.
- ✓ Rethink the format of reporting conclusions and recommendations from the various meetings. This could involve shortening documentation, revisiting recommendations stemming from the WGs and Economic Forums to make them more concrete, feasible and measurable.

2) Strengthening mechanisms for follow-up:

- ✓ Documents coming out of the various meetings should become live documents that have an action plan and a system for follow-up and not be simply uploaded on a static UN website.

- ✓ Considering ways to allow networking of experts, policy advising, discussions between TWGs, experts and national authorities by creating more online platforms. Constant and sustained dialogue can continue on specific issues through guided online discussions.
- ✓ The designation of a Secretariat by the countries could make the follow up to recommendations and decisions an on-going task, relieving from the responsibility of the UNECE and ESCAP substantive divisions.
- ✓ Accelerate the nomination of Focal Points for SPECA and for the TWGs.

3) Strengthening the work of the Thematic Working Groups

- ✓ When next reviewing the ToRs of Working Groups, make them more targeted and focused on developing and implementing concrete outputs such as strategies with concrete action plans for their implementation.
- ✓ Encourage the WG on Gender and SDGs and the WG on Statistics to render more substantive and systematic support to the other TWGs.
- ✓ Reinforce the capacity of experts to be able to mainstream concerns of women's rights and the rights-based approach in the work of the TWGs and Economic Forums, based on input from the WG on Gender and SDGs.

4) Improving cooperation and coordination with other UN and international entities working in the SPECA region

- ✓ The UN Resident Coordinator System, as representative of the UN at the national level, could be formally enlisted for follow-up on the implementation of recommendations at the SPECA country level.
- ✓ Increase cooperation/harmonization between the two Regional Commissions in order to pool funding.
- ✓ Coordinate/cooperate more closely with other regional processes in order to share resources, studies, projects etc.

5) Reinforcing the sustainability of support to the SPECA process

- ✓ Find a mechanism in order to sustain the operational cost of supporting the SPECA process, such as the organization of annual meetings in a more systematic and less ad hoc way. This could be done for example by either ensuring that any eventual Trust Fund has a budget for operational support, or through encouraging more systematic contribution from SPECA countries, or by pooling of resources between the two Regional Commissions and devoting it to the sole purpose of organizing the annual meetings of SPECA institutions.
- ✓ Intensify efforts to ensure sustained funding to develop further projects/financing for the implementation of the Ashgabat Initiative; the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy; the SPECA Innovation Strategy, the regional study on procedural and regulatory barriers to trade, an updated SDG scoping study etc.

ANNEX A) List of individuals or groups interviewed or consulted

From UNECE

- Mr. Andrey Vasilyev, Former Deputy Executive Secretary of UNECE
- Mr. Mario Apostolov, Regional Adviser, UNECE Economic Cooperation and Trade Division
- Mr. Nenad Nikolic, Regional Adviser, Sustainable Transport Division
- Mr. Batyr Hajiyev, Environment Division
- Ms. Malinka Koparanova, Senior Social Affairs Officer and Gender Focal Point, Sustainable Development and Gender Unit, UNECE (By Phone)

From ESCAP, including Sub-Regional Office for North and Central Asia,

- Mr. Hirohito Toda, Principal Officer of the Office of the Executive Secretary, ESCAP
- Mr. Nikolay Pomoshchnikov, Head of the Sub-regional Office for North and Central Asia, SONCA, ESCAP

Afghanistan

- Mr. Ajmal Ahmadi, Minister of Industry and Commerce
- Mr. Amir Ramin, Director General for Regional Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Azerbaijan

- Mr. Mushfig Osmanov, Head of Division on Trade Representatives, Trade Policy and WTO Issues Department, Ministry of Economy, Azerbaijan
- Mr. Ruslan Rustamli, Head of Cooperation with International Organizations Department, Ministry of Economy
- Dr. Vasif Aliyev, First Secretary, Division of UN and global economic organizations, Department of Economic Cooperation and Development, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Kazakhstan

- Mr. Erzhan Nesibkulov, Director, Department of International Cooperation, Ministry of National Economy
- Mr. Kairat Torebayev, Former Director, International Cooperation Department, Ministry of National Economy now Vice Minister of Trade and Integration

Kyrgyzstan

- Ms. Muloyem Karimova, Head of Division, Ministry of Economy
- Ms. Aizada Kudaiberdieva, Senior Specialist, International Cooperation Department, Ministry of Economy

Tajikistan

- Mr. Zavqi Zavquzoda, First Deputy Minister of Economic Development and Trade, now Minister of Economic Development and Trade

Turkmenistan

- Mr. Atagelti Haljanov, Ambassador of Turkmenistan to the UN in Geneva
- Mr. Henga Ammanazarov, Head, International Organizations Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Uzbekistan

- Mr. Badriddin Abidov, Deputy Minister of Investments and Foreign Trade

Russia

- Mr. Sergey Vasiliev, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Other:

- Ms. Natalia Gherman, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Central Asia, Head of UNRCCA
- Ms. Natia Natsvilishvili, Resident Representative, a.i.; UNDP Turkmenistan
- Mr. Sayed Yahya Akhlaqi, Deputy Secretary General, Economic Cooperation Organization
- Mr. Rumen Dobrinsky, International Expert, How to Propel Inclusive and Sustainable Growth in the SPECA Region

ANNEX B) List of supporting documents reviewed

Project document of the E262 project “Strengthening the capacity of SPECA countries for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”

Documents related to SPECA

- Tashkent Declaration on the creation of the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), 26 March 1998
- Terms of Reference of SPECA
- SPECA Work Plan for 2020-2021
- SPECA Work Plan for 2018-2019
- SPECA Work Plan for 2016-2017
- Report of the Expert Group meeting on SPECA, Almaty, Kazakhstan 11-12 June 2018
- SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development
- SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy and its Roadmap for Implementation
- Draft SPECA Strategy Concept on Water, Energy and Environment

Documents of the Governing Council

- Terms of Reference of SPECA
- Documents of the Fourteenth Session of the SPECA Governing Council 21 November 2019, Ashgabat, Turkmenistan
- Documents of the Thirteenth Session of the SPECA Governing Council, 21 September 2018, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- Documents of the Twelfth Session of the SPECA Governing Council, 6 December 2018, Dushanbe, Tajikistan
- Documents of the Eleventh Session of the SPECA Governing Council, 23 November 2016, Ganja, Azerbaijan

Documents from the Economic Forums:

- Documents of the 2016 Economic Forum on “Enhanced Implementation of SDGs through Cooperation”, 22 - 23 November 2016 in Ganja, Azerbaijan
- Documents of the 2017 Economic Forum on “Innovation for the SDGs in the SPECA region”, 5 - 6 December 2017 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan
- Documents of the 2018 Economic Forum on “Twenty years of SPECA: A new stage in regional cooperation for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, 20 - 21 September 2018 in Almaty, Kazakhstan
- Documents of the 2019 Economic Forum on « Connectivity: Sustainable Transport and Trade Facilitation in the SPECA sub-region », 20 - 21 November 2019 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan as well as presentations

Thematic Working Group Documents

- Documents of meetings of the different SPECA Thematic Working Groups 2016-2019
- TOR of the SPECA Working Groups on Water, Energy and Environment
- TOR of the SPECA Working Groups on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity
- TOR of the SPECA Working Groups on Trade
- TOR of the SPECA Working Groups on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development
- TOR of the SPECA Working Groups on Gender and SDGs
- TWGs Progress reports prepared for the various Sessions of the SPECA Governing Council

Other UNECE Evaluation Reports

- Ms. Nelly Dolidze, Evaluation of UNDA Project 1617X «Sustainable Energy for All (SE4A11) in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia», commissioned by the UNECE, 28 December 2019
- Ms. Una Murray, Final Evaluation «Extending policy relevance of the Active Ageing Index (AAI): Cooperation with UNECE» AAI project Phase III, UNECE in collaboration with EC, commissioned by the UNECE, 26 November 2019

ANNEX C) SPECA Economic Forums, dates, themes and outcomes

Under the auspices of the E262 project, 4 Economic Forums were organized with the following themes:

Year	Date and Place	Theme	Outcome
2016	22-23 Nov. 2016, Ganja, Azerbaijan	Enhanced Implementation of SDGs through Cooperation	Participants adopted the Ganja Declaration where, <i>inter alia</i> , they welcomed the progress made in mainstreaming SDGs into national development strategies and in establishing national coordination mechanisms for coherent implementation of SDGs at the national level, as well as their support to the sub-regional consolidation of national assessments in SDG implementation with SPECA, serving as a bridge to the regional and global follow-up and review mechanisms for the 2030 Agenda.
2017	5-6 Dec. 2017, Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Innovation for the SDGs in the SPECA region	Participants adopted 8-point Conclusions and Recommendations, where, <i>inter alia</i> , they called for the alignment of national science, technology and innovation strategies and programmes with National Strategic Sustainable Development Programmes or National Development Plans and recommending the development of an innovation strategy to promote sustainable development in the SPECA region.
2018	20-21 Sept. 2018, Almaty, Kazakhstan	Twenty years of SPECA: A new stage in regional cooperation for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	Participants reviewed progress achieved in the latest 20 years and current challenges in the areas of structural economic transformation, trade, transport, ICT, environment, infrastructure, water and energy, statistics, knowledge-based development, women's empowerment and regional connectivity, cooperation and integration. The Economic Forum participants agreed to further strengthen SPECA to support the regional economic cooperation and integration into the regional and global economies and called for acceleration of structural economic transformation, which is a fundamental condition to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to increase shared prosperity in the SPECA participating countries. They also recommended to include

			banking system and capital markets issues and address the relatively weak regional financial interlinkages among SPECA countries, for example at the next SPECA Economic Forum.
2019	20-21 Nov. 2019, Ashgabat, Turkmenistan	«Connectivity: Sustainable Transport and Trade Facilitation in the SPECA sub-region using UN norms, standards and best practice recommendations»	Participants reviewed the current situation and practices in transport, transit and trade facilitation and adopted the Ashgabat Initiative on reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations legal instruments, norms, standards and recommendations, while bolstering connectivity in the SPECA region

ANNEX D) Table of recommendations from the 2018 Review

The following recommendations of the Expert group meeting on strengthening the SPECA) are brought to the attention of the Governing Council of the SPECA for its consideration and possible action: Expert group meeting on SPECA (Almaty, Kazakhstan, 11-12 June 2018)

Theme	Recommendation	Decisions of the 13 th Session	Decisions of the 14 th Session
Identity of SPECA	Consider substituting “Platform” for “Programme” in the name of SPECA and focus SPECA on policy dialogue (away from project management), to be reflected in the revised Terms of Reference of SPECA.	Decision 4 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2018/4) Noting the proposal to change the name of SPECA, the Governing Council decides to consider this issue at its next session. There was no support for changing the name when the issue was discussed.	When discussing draft decision 3 on the updated TOR of SPECA, the representative of Tajikistan underlined that in Decision 4 of the last session, the Governing Council noted the recommendation of the Expert Group meeting to focus SPECA on policy dialogue (away from project management) and decided to consider these issues at this session. He proposed not to make this change, as limiting SPECA to policy dialogue will remove the possibility of implementing capacity-building activities and establishing the SPECA Fund. The delegations of the SPECA countries supported this proposal and insisted not to modify the SPECA ToR to policy dialogue and to keep its main mandate as it is.
Focal Points	Nominate national focal points for SPECA and for each WG	Decision 4 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2018/4) The Governing Council requests the SPECA participating countries to nominate focal points for SPECA and for each WG in writing to the ESCAP and UNECE secretariats.	Decision 7 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2019/7) The Governing Council requests those SPECA participating countries which have not yet appointed SPECA Focal Points as well as Focal Points for each WG, to

			<p>nominate them in writing to the UNECE and ESCAP secretariats no later than 31 March 2020.</p> <p>When considering draft decisions 7 and 8, a representative of the ESCAP delegation proposed to add a deadline for the SPECA countries to nominate all relevant Focal Points by 31 March 2020.</p>
Thematic Working Groups	<p>SPECA should support implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets, that are “regional – cross border” in their nature. In compliance with this criterion, the WGs on Water, Energy and Environment; on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity and on Trade should be maintained; The other two TWGs should work more closely with other WGs.</p>	<p>Decision 4 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2018/4)</p> <p>10. The Governing Council decides that the WGs on Water, Energy and Environment; on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity; and on Trade should continue and work towards supporting the implementation of the SDGs and targets that are “regional” and “cross border” in nature.</p> <p>11. The Governing Council notes that the WG on Knowledge-based Development will consider its TOR at its next session and report to the next session of the Governing Council.</p> <p>13. The Governing Council notes that the WG on Statistics has not yet met in 2018 and decides that the WG at its next session in October 2018 should formulate, with</p>	<p>The Governing Council rejects the proposition of the WG on Statistics to discontinue and asks for a revised ToR to consider at its next session. Furthermore, it asks the WG on Statistics to collaborate with other WGs.</p> <p>The Governing Council approves the recommendations of Working Group on Gender and Economy to change the Group’s name to “SPECA Working Group on Gender and SDGs”. The WG should work in the area of gender mainstreaming and transformative policies as follows: (a) non-discriminatory labour market policies in the course of hiring and work environment free of discrimination and exploitation; (b) policies to promote the participation of women in public and private companies; (c) policies to prevent stereotypes in</p>

		<p>support from the ESCAP and UNECE secretariats, where regional coordination is needed in relation to the achievement of the SDGs in its area (notably on monitoring and measuring progress in the implementation of SDGs and targets) and submits its conclusion to the next session of the Governing Council in 2019 for its consideration.</p> <p>14. The Council decides that the TWGs on Gender and SDGs as well as on Statistics should support the other Thematic Working Groups on cross-cutting issues.</p> <p>Each country should review the necessity to continue work of these thematic working groups or reform them in a more flexible arrangement through time-bound, issue-focused, result-oriented task forces;</p>	<p>education and research to advance the participation of women in R&D sectors; and (d) policies for building support systems for women entrepreneurship development.</p> <p>In addition, the WG should also contribute to the monitoring and reporting for the regional review process of Beijing +25 as well as the SDGs.</p>
<p>Governing Council and Economic Forums</p>	<p>(a) Reporting practices should be streamlined. Re-focus reporting from description of activities to focus on results, achievements and exchange of experiences, which can be reported to the Governing Council; (b) Focus SPECA work on policy-level</p>		<p>The participants made the following changes and additions:</p> <p>12. In discussing the draft decisions on the updated Terms of Reference of the SPECA Thematic Working Groups, the delegation of Tajikistan proposed to insert into the TORs capacity-building activities and</p>

	<p>discussions on a limited number of issues at every Forum and Governing Council;</p> <p>(c) Look for ways to raise the level of country representatives;</p> <p>(d) Policy discussions should be defined by the countries;</p> <p>(e) Research for each Forum would be necessary, and tasks should be formulated well in advance; and</p> <p>(f) Consider which relevant high-level initiatives in the region could be supported through SPECA, considering that the decision to establish SPECA and on its priority areas of activities were made by Presidents.</p>		<p>implementation of decisions of the Governing Council.</p> <p>31. The delegation of Turkmenistan requested the ESCAP and UNECE secretariats to submit background papers for the Thematic Working Groups well in advance before meetings in order to have enough time for the SPECA participating countries to review and comment the papers.</p>
Financing	<p>Participants from SPECA countries are invited to explore with their Governments possibilities for financing and in-kind contributions to the SPECA operational budget, as well as look for support from the countries as indicated in the Terms of Reference of SPECA.</p>	<p>Decision 4 (SPECA/GC/Sept/2018/4)</p> <p>18. The Governing Council invites SPECA participating countries to explore possibilities for financial and/or in-kind contributions for the activities of SPECA. The Council requests the ESCAP and UNECE secretariats to send an official letter with a calendar of SPECA events (date and venue) to the SPECA participating countries for their consideration for financial</p>	<p>The proposition for a SPECA Fund was put on the table, but no decisions were taken yet.</p>

		and/or in-kind support.	
Secretariat	<p>- Re-establish the joint ESCAP-UNECE SPECA Office in Almaty within the ESCAP SONCA office.</p> <p>- Explore possibilities for hosting the secretariat of SPECA within the UN building in Almaty with the support of the Government of Kazakhstan</p> <p>- Explore possibilities to support the SPECA secretariat virtually or through staff/staff time contributions to the SPECA activities.</p>	<p>Decision 5 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2018/5)</p> <p>I 19. The Council notes the offer by the Government of Kazakhstan to host the secretariat of SPECA in the new UN common premises in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The Council requests the Government of Kazakhstan to send an official letter proposing the function and financing of the secretariat of SPECA for further consideration by the SPECA participating countries. The Council also decides to consider this issue further at its next session in 2019.</p>	<p>Decision 6 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2019/6)</p> <p>In Decision 5 (SPECA/GC/Dec/2018/5) Governing Council noted the offer by the Government of Kazakhstan to host the secretariat of SPECA in the new United Nations common premises in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The Council decides to consider this issue further at its next session in 2020.</p>
Web site	<p>Consider developing a joint Web site on which both the UN Regional Commissions and SPECA countries can upload documents in English and Russian.</p>	<p>No discussion or decisions. The website continues to be maintained by UNECE. http://www.unece.org/speca/welcome.html</p>	<p>No discussion or decisions. The web site is maintained by UNECE; a brief discussion at the Governing Council maintained this situation.</p>

ANNEX E) ToR of the Evaluation

Evaluation of the project E262: *“Strengthening the capacity of SPECA countries for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”*

1- Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the project in supporting member States to achieve the SDGs. The evaluation of project E262 is to analyze the current arrangements in place by UNECE for strengthening the capacity of SPECA countries for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The results of the evaluation will support improvement of services provided as well as future projects and activities implemented by Secretariat. The outcomes of the evaluation can also be used to help the donor to achieve its objectives in effectively supporting a regional network through such a project, and the beneficiary countries on making better use of such projects for their sustainable development.

I. Scope

The scope of evaluation will cover the full period of the project, from June 2016 to December 2019, as the project was extended till end of 2019 from its original May 2018 end date. In particular, the evaluation will cover the organization of the Economic Forums, Governing Council sessions and Working Group meetings in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. UNECE was responsible for organizing the high-level SPECA events in 2017 and 2019, yet through the project UNECE provided the substantive work on preparing documents and the proper functioning of the events in 2016 and 2018, following the procedures established in SPECA.

The universally recognized values and principles of human rights will be integrated at all stages of the evaluation, in compliance with the United Nations Evaluation Group’s revised gender-related norms and standards. Therefore, the evaluation will assess how gender considerations were included in the process and it would make recommendations on how gender can be better included in the process.

II. Background

Six of the seven SPECA countries are Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and one (Afghanistan) is a Least Developed Country (LDC). The level of cooperation among them since independence in the early 1990s has been low, and many efforts to deal with serious problems for sustainable development in the sub-region have been stymied by this problem. The SPECA Programme aims at improving cooperation among the SPECA countries to enhance their capacity for sustainable development through sub-regional cooperation in areas where UNECE and ESCAP have comparative advantage.

The SPECA structure can provide a useful platform for implementing the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development; and the SPECA Governing Council took a course on refocusing the

programme to become a platform for policy discussions and cooperation on achieving selected SDGs and targets that will be better implemented through bilateral and sub-regional cooperation. The 10th session of the Governing Council held on 10 November 2015 took a decision to strengthen cooperation as an important precondition for the achievement of the SDGs in the sub-region; and it was reinforced by the decisions of all subsequent sessions of the Governing Council and the 2018 SPECA Evaluation report.

The logic of this project's intervention was to refocus the SPECA Programme on improving the understanding among SPECA countries of the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development and plan for the implementation of SDGs that can be better achieved through cross-border cooperation, notably SDGs and targets which fall within the remit of the UNECE, ESCAP and the SPECA Thematic Working Groups. The project seeks change of mentality among policy makers and experts in the SPECA countries towards the SDGs. The core of the project was in support for the institutional framework (Governing Council, annual Forums, and Working Groups) that deliver the work of SPECA. The logic of the project was to define first the relevant SDG targets within each Working Group. A scoping exercise, including each Working Group defining the SDG targets on which to focus, including a scoping study prepared by a consultant, took place the first year of the project. On this basis, action plans were developed, and implementation started. The project also provided substantive support to the SPECA Evaluation in 2017-2018²¹, notably, by organizing an Expert meeting in June 2018, in Almaty, to assess the findings and recommendations of the Evaluation, which had a key place in the development of this project.

The donor of the project is the Russian Federation. The human resources involved in the implementation included the Regional Adviser in the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD) as the manager of the project and Deputy Coordinator of SPECA in UNECE, as well as UNECE focal point for the WG on Trade, the SPECA Coordinator (Deputy Executive Secretary) in UNECE, and the focal points for the various SPECA Working Groups to service those WGs and their areas of work. The initial timeframe was June 2016 – May 2018, but was extended until the end of 2019, as the need for further intervention became obvious. The key implementers are the substantive divisions providing support for the various working groups (thus the project was split among several segments) and the key partner for the implementation was ESCAP, which services SPECA, together with UNECE. The modalities of the project included split of the budget and activities among the divisions servicing SPECA WGs. Practically all the planned outputs were organized under this setting.

III. Issues

The evaluation criteria are *relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability*.

Relevance:

- 2- Was the project relevant to support sub-regional cooperation?

²¹The Evaluation Report can be found in English and Russian on the following web sites
http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session_13/SPECA_Evaluation_Report_ENG.pdf;
http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session_13/SPECA_Evaluation_Report_RUS.pdf

- 3- To what extent did the activity respond to the priorities and needs of UNECE member States (the SPECA participating countries)?
- 4- What is the relevance of the activity for the broader work of UNECE?
- 5- How did it contribute to maintaining the relevance of the SPECA Programme in general (maintaining a sub-regional network in support of the SDGs, as sub-regional collaboration is required by the UN development pillar reform²²)?
- 6- To what extent support for a unique regional cooperation platform was useful for maintaining a network in support for sustainable development of the sub-region;
- 7- Did the project apply gender and rights-based approaches in the design, implementation and results of the activities?
- 8- Did UNECE advocate for gender equality and advancement of women in the SPECA work?

Effectiveness:

- 9- To what degree the project was successful in attaining the desired results stated in the project document? Did it support the SPECA networks?
- 10- To what extent are the outputs consistent with and relevant to the overall objective and expected accomplishments?
- 11- To what extent the expected accomplishments of the activity were achieved?
- 12- What were the challenges/obstacles (if any) to achieving the expected results?
- 13- How effective was the support to implement the annual SPECA Economic Forums and Governing Council sessions?
- 14- Were the recommendations of the annual sessions of the SPECA Governing Councils, the SPECA Economic Forums and the 2018 SPECA Evaluation effectively implemented through this project?

Efficiency:

- 15- Were the planned activities carried out on time as intended?
- 16- To what extent the resources made available through this project contributed to the achievement of the objective?
- 17- Did the countries mobilize sufficient in-kind and financial resources to supplement the activities and objectives of the project?
- 18- What was the efficiency of collaboration with other agencies, development partners, civil society and the business community?
- 19- Were the activities implemented in the most efficient way compared to alternatives? In particular, how do the costs and use of resources compare with other similar projects (within UNECE, other regional commissions, other UN agencies, or other organizations and initiatives)? Would you propose any alternatives to achieve the same results? If yes, which ones?

Sustainability:

²² “The new generation of UN country teams would draw on strengthened regional economic commissions and regional UNDG teams for additional technical capacities to support national efforts.” From the Proposals for a New Generation of UNCTs, February 2018, https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/qcpr/1_%20A%20new%20generation%20of%20UN%20Country%20Teams.pdf

- 20- What were the regional public goods produced by SPECA with support from this project:
- 21- How did the project contribute to the overall sustainability of the sub-regional network of cooperation in the sub-region? Did the project contribute to enhancing the level of cooperation among the SPECA countries?
- 22- What projects or project proposals, mobilizing additional resources, in the areas of SPECA's mandate were developed as a result of activities under the E262 project?
- 23- To what extent did this project strengthen the capacity of SPECA countries to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g. SDG 6.5, SDG 7.1 and SDG 7.2 for the WG on Water, Energy and the Environment, SDG 3.6; SDG 9.1 and SDG 11.2 for the WG on Sustainable Transport and SDG 17.10 for the WG on Trade) through sub-regional cooperation?
- 24- Has the project helped to strengthen the application of gender mainstreaming principles and contribute to substantial and meaningful changes in the situation of the most vulnerable groups?
- 25- How can the UN Resident Coordinators be more efficiently involved in supporting SPECA activities?

IV. Methodology

The evaluation will be conducted on the basis of:

1. A desk review of relevant strategic and meeting documents, including those resulting from the annual SPECA events and WG activities and outputs (strategy documents, action plans, concrete practical projects, other documents adopted by the Governing Council and the Working Groups.
2. An online survey to gather feedback from a range of stakeholders;
3. Structured interviews and focus group discussions with: member States' representatives, key development partners in SPECA participating countries, relevant staff from UNECE and ESCAP supporting the six working groups in all divisions in UNECE and ESCAP, staff of other stakeholder organizations (e.g. UN Resident Coordinators, UNDP, IFAS, the Islamic Development Bank, WTO and GIZ, etc.). In the recipient countries, interviews should take place with the coordinators and focal points for SPECA and for the working groups, Permanent Mission staff in Geneva, chairs of SPECA working groups. The UNECE Project Manager will provide the list with contact details, in coordination with focal points for the various groups.

The report will summarize the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation in English. An executive summary (max. 2 pages) will summarize the methodology of the evaluation, key findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Material needed for the evaluation, will be provided to the Consultant by the UNECE Project manager in consultation with focal points in the various divisions: SPECA activities documents and reports, meeting reports and publications, list of involved experts that can be interviewed by telephone. The UNECE Project Manager will provide support and further explanation to the evaluator as needed.

The evaluation will be conducted in accordance with the UNECE Evaluation Policy, as well as UNEG norms and standards. A gender-responsive methodology, methods and tools, and data techniques are selected. The evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations reflect a gender analysis.

V. Evaluation schedule

- A. Preliminary research: 1-15 December 2019
- B. Data collection: 1 December 2019 – 31 January 2020
- C. Data analysis: 1-15 February 2020
- D. Draft report sent to Project Manager: 2 March 2020
- E. Comments back to the evaluator after review by the project manager and the PMU: 13 March 2020
- F. Final report: 30 March 2020

VI. Resources

The resources available for this evaluation are USD 10,000, inclusive of all costs. This amount will be paid to a hired external evaluation consultant identified through the UNECE evaluation roster upon satisfactory delivery of work on 15 March 2020.

The consultant will be managed by the UNECE Project Manager – Mr. Mario Apostolov – who will provide support by ensuring the provision of all necessary documentation needed for the desk review, guide the evaluator on the appropriate recipients for the questionnaire and for follow up interviews, and ensure that the necessary communications with these recipients are introduced by the secretariat.

The UNECE Programme Management Unit will provide guidance to the Project Manager and evaluator as needed on the evaluation design, methodology and quality assurance of the final draft report.

VII. Intended use / Next Steps

The findings of the Evaluation report will be used to plan and implement better similar projects in the future. The donor will use the evaluation report to assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the interventions under this project. Donor and implementer will use the findings to finetune any possible follow-up project in support of SPECA, for the period 2020 – 2022.

The findings of the evaluation will inform follow-up actions and guide initiatives already started and required to disseminate the knowledge created and enhance its use. The outcomes of the evaluation will also contribute to the broader lessons learned, by being made available on the project website²³ and in Open UNECE.

VIII. Criteria for the Evaluators

Evaluators should have:

- a. Advanced university degree in a relevant discipline.

²³ <https://www.unece.org/energy/pathwaystose.html>

- b. Specialized training in such areas as evaluation, project management, political science, social statistics and analysis.
- c. Demonstrated professional and technical experience in evaluation (application of evaluation norms, standards and ethical guidelines and the relevant organizational evaluation policy and promotion of evaluation and evidence-based learning); design, management and conduct of evaluation processes with multiple stakeholders, survey design and implementation, and project planning, monitoring and management.
- d. Demonstrated methodological knowledge of evaluations, including quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis for end-of-cycle project evaluations.
- e. Fluent in written and spoken English. Knowledge of another language (Russian and or another language of the SPECA region) will be an advantage.
- f. Experience and knowledge of intergovernmental cooperation mechanisms and platforms in Central Asia, of the objectives, rules and functioning of the UN, of XB projects will be an advantage;
- g. Knowledge of major development trends and issues in Central Asia, particularly in the areas covered by SPECA, such as environment, energy, transport, transit and connectivity, trade, statistics, knowledge-based development and gender and economy.
- h. Knowledge of the United Nations System, including its programmes, organizational structures, its principles, values, goals and approaches, including human rights, gender equality, cultural values, the Sustainable Development Goals and results-based management.
- i. Demonstrated ability to communicate and engage with high-level government officials on challenging and politically sensitive matters.
- j. Demonstrated experience in applying gender perspective and human-rights based approach to evaluations.

Evaluators should declare any conflict of interest to UNECE before embarking on an evaluation project, and at any point where such conflict occurs.