



Economic Commission for Europe**Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry****Seventy-eighth session**

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Item 2(a) of the provisional agenda

Forests in the decade of Action: Keynote presentation**Draft Strategy for landscape restoration and greening the infrastructure of the Caucasus and Central Asia****Note by the Secretariat***Summary*

This document contains the draft country-owned Strategy for landscape restoration and greening the infrastructure of the Caucasus and Central Asia until 2030 (subsequently referred to as “the Strategy”). It will serve as a basis for the final Strategy and its adoption by member States of the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Secretariat facilitated the development of the draft country-owned Strategy to support countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia in their achievement of goals related to forest landscape restoration.

The Committee will be invited to:

- (a) Adopt the Strategy for landscape restoration and greening the infrastructure of the Caucasus and Central Asia;
- (b) Provide advice to countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia on the implementation of the Strategy;
- (c) Provide financial support and/or advice on sources of financing to countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia for the implementation of the Strategy;
- (d) Request the Secretariat to facilitate the development of country-specific action plans to implement the Strategy, in order to better mobilize existing financial instruments;
- (e) Provide recommendations for strengthening subregional cooperation and the development of similar strategies in other ECE subregions.



I. Introduction

1. The Caucasus and Central Asia is a subregion of harsh climate and fragile ecosystems, which has not, so far, featured strongly in global discussions on climate change – even though its impacts are acutely felt. The mostly landlocked sub-region is rapidly improving its infrastructure to become more integrated into the global economy, but it is experiencing several major environmental problems.
2. Over past centuries, already fragile landscape and ecosystems of the Caucasus and Central Asia have been degraded by human activities and changing climate: overcutting of forests, overgrazing, excessive exploitation and waste of water resources, unsustainable agricultural practices, pollution from mining and other sources, as well as dust storms, owing in part to its aridity. In addition, desertification, notably around the Aral Sea basin, shrinking glaciers, soil loss, and erosion threaten the livelihoods and health of local communities¹. The potential extension of transport and other infrastructure could increase these pressures, unless preventive action is taken at the early stages.
3. Some of these changes, including soil loss, desertification and forest degradation have increased emissions of greenhouse gases in the area, combining with emissions from the energy, industry and transport sectors. The projected change in the regional climate, with higher temperatures, and, in the southern part of the subregion, lower precipitation, will increase the pressure on forest ecosystems, making restoration more difficult.
4. Without concerted and forceful action, the situation will become worse, and the subregion will contribute to aggravating climate change at the global level, which in turn will aggravate the vulnerability of rural populations. It is therefore urgent to put in place ambitious measures to reverse the trend from recent decades.
5. All forests and other wooded land in the subregion are publicly-owned and managed through national state forest authorities, which impose specific rules on the land concerned.
6. Due to the global and transboundary nature of challenges faced by the subregion and to the similarities between problems they encounter, the countries of the sub-region decided to strengthen cooperation and to develop a country-owned subregional Strategy to restore the landscape and green the infrastructure of the Caucasus and Central Asia, halting damage and putting the subregion on the path to sustainable development.
7. Landscape restoration and greening the infrastructure of the Caucasus and Central Asia is a dynamic process and needs regular monitoring and adjustment in accordance with changing conditions. The implementation of the Strategy should be facilitated through country-specific action plans and monitored and revised on a regular basis.

II. Overview

8. This country-owned subregional Strategy is voluntary and non-binding and should be implemented in line with existing national legislations and international agreements. The Strategy provides a broad framework within which countries of the subregion may define action plans that fit their national context, circumstances and implementation capabilities. It will help countries of the subregion to facilitate financing for forest landscape restoration through national and international funding (*country-specific funding needs should be assessed considering the context and circumstances*). Accordingly, the Strategy is a document that can be updated in line with changing needs and context.

UN.2019. ECE/DP/72: <https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/timber/publications/DP-72-flr-cca-en.pdf>

III. Scope

9. The Strategy covers the following countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, but could also be applicable to other countries with similar challenges.

IV. Vision

10. By 2030, an integrated approach to landscape protection, management and restoration will be in place in the Caucasus and Central Asia, reflecting the expertise of relevant sectors, including land management, watershed and forest management, rational land use and biodiversity conservation. Funding for forest landscape restoration, afforestation and greening will be secured through subregional infrastructure developments. Greening the subregion will help to make the landscape more sustainable and resilient to climate change, with increased ability of carbon sequestration and fewer greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, less pollution, erosion, soil loss, and salinization. This would provide better livelihoods for rural populations, support more sustainable rural energy supply, grazing practices and enhance biodiversity.

V. Mission

11. To ensure sustainable landscape through the restoration and greening of infrastructure, sustainable investments, scaling up national goals and actions in the forest sector and strengthening collaboration in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

VI. Strategic objectives and actions

12. The main strategic objective is to ensure and improve sustainable forest management and management of rural landscape. The main objective is further developed into four strategic objectives based on common challenges in the subregion. Ecological, social and economic principles of the landscape approach are taken into consideration to achieve these objectives and implement country-oriented actions.

A. Strategic objective 1: Protect what exists

13. Halt deforestation and forest degradation through the provision of alternative energy sources to rural communities, improving grazing regimes, controlling forest fires and forest pests and strengthening forest management, especially at the local level. Rationalize the use of water resources, increase carbon sequestration and reduce GHG emissions from forestry and other land use by introducing sustainable agricultural practices and enhancing sustainable forest management.

14. The main actions could include, among others:

- Optimize the supply of a wide range of services and goods, including forest ecosystem services, through concerted implementation of sustainable forest and integrated water resource management, through the watersheds of the subregion, and notably in the Aral Sea Closed Basin, as well as control landscape planning in regions with large freshwater basins, taking into account the dimensional changes in the ecotone of fresh water basins;
- Strengthen transboundary cooperation and improve forestry and agricultural practices, through improved workforce skills and training;
- Involve local population and authorities and the private sector in the management of natural resources and build their capacity for sustainable management of forest and water resources;

- Introduce resource efficient technologies in agriculture and industry, and provide water storage for reliable water supply in dry years, possibly combined with tree planting around reservoirs;
- Provide a sustainable and efficient energy supply to the rural population, thereby reducing the pressure on forest resources;
- Protect vulnerable forests, including riparian ones.

B. Strategic objective 2: Restore damaged and degraded landscapes

15. Restore damaged and degraded landscapes through planting trees and other vegetation, as well as through supporting natural regeneration, notably in deserts and mountains, and along river valleys and transport corridors. Create shelterbelts around urban areas and farms. This will also contribute to enhancement of soil protection and biodiversity preservation/conservation. The restored landscapes should all be sustainable from an economic, social and environmental point of view, and fully integrated into the development strategies of the countries.

16. The main actions could include, among others:

- Create shelterbelts around agricultural operations to improve microclimates and protect against wind and dust;
- Create protective forest to prevent land erosion, notably in mountain regions;
- Rehabilitate degraded pastures, croplands and forests. Carry out rehabilitation with only local species, excluding invasive species;
- Restore and sustainably manage fruit and nut forests (apple, walnut, pistachio etc.), for rural livelihoods, exports, biodiversity and responsible eco-tourism;
- Create an ambitious integrated, possibly transboundary, network of ecological corridors and reserves to enhance biodiversity and provide other ecosystem services;
- Use salt- and drought-tolerant trees and vegetation (e.g. saxaul) to fix sand in desert areas, including the Aral Sea;
- Support natural regeneration, planting trees and other vegetation (notably in desert and mountain areas), and the sustainable management of existing and future forests.

C. Strategic objective 3: Ensure that all infrastructure investments meet the highest standards of sustainability and resilience

17. All infrastructure construction should meet agreed standards for GHG mitigation, adaptation to climate change, biodiversity conservation, pollution abatement, resource management, integrated land use.

18. The main actions could include, among others:

- Assess the environmental impact of infrastructure projects and alternative solutions from the earliest planning stages;
- Establish protective forest to protect vulnerable transport infrastructure from floods and landslides;
- Develop and use sustainability standards, for infrastructure construction and use, for forest management, and for integrated water resource management.

D. Strategic objective 4: Improve governance and access to financing through comprehensive nexus approaches in the implementation of the Strategy

19. The Strategy should be implemented taking into consideration cross-sectoral cooperation, nexus approach and resource and capacity gaps. Due consideration should be given to mobilizing political and financial support from national, subregional and international partners and projects.

20. The main actions could include, among others:

- Assess gaps in knowledge, resources, technology, policies and capacity for greening landscape and infrastructure in the countries of the subregion;
- Assess national priorities and develop national plans for landscape restoration and greening infrastructure in the countries in the subregion;
- Improve policy and legal frameworks for sustainable management of natural resources;
- Apply environmental impact assessment for landscape restoration programmes and for specific local level projects impacting forest landscapes;
- Build capacity in all the areas covered by the Strategy;
- Create enabling conditions for foreign investments;
- Advance forest related nexuses, in particular the forest-water nexus;
- Monitor and assess the implementation of the Strategy.

VII. Guiding principles

A. Take a regional approach

21. Although much of the action will take place at the local or landscape level, a regional approach to the Strategy is necessary because some of the largest infrastructure projects aim at improving connectivity, are strongly international in nature, and are likely to affect the watersheds and ecosystems beyond national boundaries. Ambitious, large-scale and well-designed landscape restoration activities implemented in most parts of the subregion would have positive consequences also for neighbouring countries. The drying of the Aral Sea is an excellent example of a major environmental challenge which has subregional causes, and thus needs regional solutions based on a transboundary river basin approach, encompassing not only the two countries bordering the Sea, but also those located upstream.

B. Build on existing commitments and partnerships

22. The Strategy does not duplicate or compete with the existing processes and partnerships. On the contrary, the Strategy will deliberately seek alignment and coordination of forest landscape restoration work in the subregion by engaging relevant stakeholders and organizations in the implementation of the Strategy. The implementation of the Strategy will contribute to work of various partnerships and achievement of targets set by international agreements: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development², UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017–2030³, the Global Partnership on Forest and Landscape Restoration (GPFLR)⁴,

² <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

³ <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/documents/un-strategic-plan-for-forests-2030/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.forestlandscaperestoration.org/>

the Global Restoration Council⁵, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change⁶ and the Paris Agreement⁷, the Post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework⁸ and Aichi Biodiversity Targets⁹, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification¹⁰, the Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)¹¹ and the Land Degradation Neutrality target setting programme¹² and the Ramsar Convention¹³. In addition, the Strategy can support countries in meeting their commitments within the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030)¹⁴.

23. There are many regional initiatives, commitments and partnerships aiming to improve the environment and landscape of the Caucasus and Central Asia. So far, they have not significantly reversed the negative trends, partly due to a lack of funding. Some examples are:

- The regional initiative “ECCA30”¹⁵, aiming to restore 30 million hectares of degraded and deforested landscapes in Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia by 2030, in line with the Bonn Challenge, the New York Declaration on Forests¹⁶ and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. This initiative is serviced jointly by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the World Resources Institute (WRI) and the World Bank (WB). The objective of the initiative is to support the mobilization of funds for implementation of country-led restoration efforts and provide technical support throughout the process of restoration;
- National pledges under the Bonn Challenge¹⁷. Six countries (Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) adopted the Astana Resolution (Annex 2) and pledged to restore over 2.6 million ha of degraded land at the Ministerial Roundtable on Forest Landscape Restoration and the Bonn Challenge in the Caucasus and Central Asia¹⁸, held at Astana (now Nur-Sultan) in June 2018. Azerbaijan joined efforts in the subregion and announced a pledge to the Bonn Challenge in May 2019, bringing the total area for restoration to almost 3 million ha. All pledges can be enhanced if more funding is made available;
- The Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea region (MPHSTF)¹⁹, under the aegis of the UN, acts as a single platform to bring together international donor efforts and resources, providing an integrated response framework for the Aral Sea region. The MPHSTF will focus on ensuring environmental, economic, food, social and health security for affected communities, with the aim of reducing poverty, enhancing resilience, and achieving sustainable development across the SDGs.

⁵ <https://www.wri.org/our-work/project/global-restoration-initiative/global-restoration-council>

⁶ <https://unfccc.int/>

⁷ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

⁸ <https://www.cbd.int/conferences/post2020>

⁹ <https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/>

¹⁰ <https://www.unccd.int/>

¹¹ <https://www.unccd.int/actions/achieving-land-degradation-neutrality>

¹² <https://www.unccd.int/actions/ldn-target-setting-programme>

¹³ <https://www.ramsar.org/about/the-secretariat>

¹⁴ <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/>

¹⁵ <https://infoflr.org/bonn-challenge/regional-initiatives/ecca30>

¹⁶ <https://forestdeclaration.org/about>

¹⁷ <https://www.bonnchallenge.org/>

¹⁸ <https://www.unece.org/index.php?id=47712>

¹⁹ <http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/ARL00>

C. Assess environmental impact

24. The major infrastructure investments currently planned for the subregion, including two corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)²⁰ through Central Asia, have the potential to improve the prosperity of the subregion, but also of further damaging its environment, and adding to the subregion's GHG emissions. It is essential to ensure that large scale infrastructure investments (for instance in roads, railways, ports, mines and other facilities) are based on an environmental impact assessment, not only for the immediate neighbourhood of the facility but also for the whole landscape, including, in many cases, other countries. Countries in the subregion have acceded to several multilateral environmental agreements including the Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context²¹, and as such have an obligation to consult with countries and stakeholders that might be affected by infrastructure investment.

D. Protect biodiversity

25. The Caucasus and Central Asia subregion has a wide variety of ecosystems, ranging from mountains, plains and flood plains to steppes, semi-deserts and deserts. These ecosystems contain rich biodiversity that needs to be protected. Around 1.8 million ha of forest in the subregion, which is 11 per cent of all forests in both the Caucasus and Central Asia, are protected for biodiversity conservation, under several legal regimes²². All countries in the subregion are Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). For that reason, the Aichi Biodiversity Targets are of high importance for the Caucasus and Central Asia. Due to the high value and uniqueness of biodiversity in the subregion, this dimension of sustainability should receive special consideration in activities under the Strategy.

E. Take an intersectoral approach

26. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030) emphasizes that forests, wetlands, drylands and other natural ecosystems are essential for sustainable development, poverty alleviation and improved human wellbeing. The direct contribution of the Strategy to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is described in Annex 2. Many challenges related to forest landscape protection, management and restoration, as well as land degradation and desertification, exacerbated by climate change are attributed to the lack of resources and capacities on personal, institutional and societal level, especially due to a lack of cooperation across sectors. It is imperative to approach future developments and organize related actions in a coordinated manner, with involvement of relevant sectors. Improving cross sectoral cooperation in countries of the subregion would be a must for implementation of the Strategy.

F. Ensure a participatory approach

27. It is important that decision making throughout implementation of the Strategy is done with the involvement of stakeholders, to ensure long-lasting, sustainable, inclusive progress in the subregion. A participatory approach can be ensured through strengthening institutions, developing capacity and fostering partnerships. There are many governmental and non-governmental organizations active in the Caucasus and Central Asia, so at an early stage of implementing, it would be appropriate to ensure the initiation of communication between all of them. The country-specific action plans for implementation of the Strategy would have to be developed in a participatory way, taking into consideration local conditions, landscapes and challenges.

²⁰ <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/belt-and-road/>

²¹ <https://www.unece.org/env/eia/eia.html>

²² UN. 2019. ECE/TIM/SP47: <https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/timber/publications/sp-47-soccaf-en.pdf>

G. Mainstream gender

28. The Strategy aims to provide equal opportunities for women and men in activities related to restoration of landscape and greening infrastructure of the Caucasus and Central Asia, recognizing the crucial role that women play in ecosystem conservation and restoration and stressing the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policymaking and implementation for ecosystem conservation and restoration. Based on the “Gender-responsive restoration guidelines”, published by IUCN²³, there are several gender-responsive actions that can be undertaken in the subregion: (a) conducting a gender analysis to provide insights into gender roles; (b) involving women in “greening” decision making; (c) improving women’s rights to land and natural resources; (d) creating partnerships and alliances with regional and national restoration networks; (e) developing gender-sensitive indicators and collecting data disaggregated by gender; (f) developing gender-responsive policies on land and forest management at the subnational and national levels; (g) exchanging knowledge on key gender issues, strategies and outcomes between countries in the region. Gender gaps and biases should be identified, whenever they exist, and addressed”.

VIII. Point for Consideration

29. The Committee will be invited to:

(a) Adopt the Strategy for landscape restoration and greening the infrastructure of the Caucasus and Central Asia;

(b) Provide advice to countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia on the implementation of the Strategy;

(c) Provide financial support and/or advice on sources of financing to countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia for the implementation of the Strategy;

(d) Request the Secretariat to facilitate the development of country-specific action plans to implement the Strategy, in order to better mobilize existing financial instruments;

(e) Provide recommendations for strengthening of subregional cooperation and the development of similar strategies in other ECE subregions.

²³ <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2017-009.pdf>

Annex 1

Astana Resolution

1. Participants in the Ministerial Roundtable on Forest Landscape Restoration and the Bonn Challenge in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Ministerial Roundtable) organized by the Government of Kazakhstan in cooperation with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, with the support of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the Government of Germany,
2. *Welcoming* the ongoing efforts of national forest authorities to increase forest cover in the Caucasus and Central Asia and halt the processes of desertification and land degradation,
3. *Aware* that countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia face similar challenges and common problems related to land degradation, the planning and implementation of forest landscape restoration, and that countries have an opportunity to engage and strengthen regional cooperation, as well as to strengthen partnerships in order to identify best solutions and implement action in support of forests, their ecosystems, and people depending on them,
4. *Recognizing* the major contribution of Forest Landscape Restoration to the implementation of actions for the achievement of global commitments made by countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia within the framework of the Rio Conventions, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF),
5. *Noting* that achieving the Bonn Challenge's 350 million-hectare restoration goal by 2030 could generate US\$ 170 billion per year globally in net benefits from watershed protection, improved crop yields and forest products, and could sequester up to 1.7 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent annually,
6. *Emphasizing* the importance of the Bonn Challenge, an international initiative intended to align quantified national commitments on forest landscape restoration,
7. *Reaffirming* our commitments to the Bonn Challenge global target to restore 150 million hectares of deforested and degraded lands by 2020 and 350 million hectares by 2030, and in accordance with national pledges from the region,

AGREE to:

8. *Identify* degraded lands within our respective countries and work to restore and afforest them by 2030, considering existing national efforts as well as initiatives already outlined in the relevant policy documents;
9. *Assess* the national potential for forest landscape restoration in order to enhance the voluntary regional target;
10. *Reinforce* regional cooperation on forest landscape restoration, through policy dialogues, forest policy development and joint programming;
11. *Call on* development partners, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, as well as international finance institutions and the private sector, to support efforts and investment at the national and regional level in forest landscape restoration and facilitate access to external investment opportunities;
12. *Cooperate* among interested partners to develop a strategy for the financing of forest landscape restoration efforts and reinforce national capacities in order to better mobilize existing financial instruments;
13. *Periodically assess* our respective efforts through alignment with the Bonn Challenge Barometer of Progress in order to voluntarily monitor and report progress towards forest landscape restoration targets in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Adopted in Astana on 22 June 2018

Annex 2

Strategy for landscape restoration and greening infrastructure of Caucasus and Central Asia: what is the contribution to the SDGs?

1. The Strategy outlined in this brief would contribute to the following SDG targets (slightly edited, to ease reading, for instance by omitting deadlines for achieving targets):

- 1.1 Eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere
 - 6.5 Implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate
 - 6.6 Protect and restore water related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes
 - 9.1 Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure
 - 9.4 Upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable, with increased resource use efficiency and greater adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes
 - 9.a Facilitate sustainable and resilient infrastructure development in developing countries through enhanced financial, technological and technical support to [...] landlocked developing countries
 - 12.2 Achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources
 - 13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries
 - 15.1 Ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements
 - 15.2 Promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally
 - 15.3 Combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world
 - 15.4 Ensure the conservation of mountain ecosystems, including their biodiversity, in order to enhance their capacity to provide benefits that are essential for sustainable development
 - 15.5 Take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species
 - 15.b Mobilize significant resources from all sources and at all levels to finance sustainable forest management and provide adequate incentives to developing countries to advance such management, including for conservation and reforestation
-