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Transport infrastructure projects, activities and initiatives at national and international level in SPECA countries

(Item 5.1 of the Agenda)

Note by ESCAP/UNECE

ESCAP

1. ESCAP has played a major role in bringing about a new approach by member States to include an international dimension in the planning of their transport infrastructure. This joint effort has led to the successful definition and formalization of the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway Networks, as well as the identification of a set of dry ports of international importance to facilitate the operationalization of the two networks and their integration with other modes.

2. In the context of the 2030 Development Agenda, the Intergovernmental Agreements on the Asian Highway Network, the Trans-Asian Railway Network and on Dry Ports will continue to be important frameworks assisting member countries in improving intercountry and interregional transport links, in particular in addressing the specific transport challenges facing landlocked and transit developing countries in line with the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014-2024. The three Working Groups established under the Agreements provide platforms for member countries to coordinate actions, exchange best practices and benchmark progress in the development of cross-border and transit transport connectivity.

3. The Asian Highway Network comprises over 145,000 km of roads passing through 32 member countries, the Trans-Asian Railway Network comprises approximately 117,500 km of railway lines passing through 28 member countries. All SPECA countries are parties to the Intergovernmental Agreement on Asian Highway Network. However, not all SPECA countries are parties to the intergovernmental agreements on Trans-Asian Railway Network and Dry

Ports.(Table 1) It is suggested that the SPECA countries which have not done so should take measures to become parties to the Agreements.

Table 1. Status of parties to ESCAP's Intergovernmental Agreements in SPECA member countries*

	Intergovernmental Agreement on Asian Highway Network	Intergovernmental Agreement on Trans-Asian Railway Network	Intergovernmental Agreement on Dry Ports
Afghanistan	party		party
Azerbaijan	party	signatory	party
Kazakhstan	party	signatory	party
Kyrgyzstan	party		
Tajikistan	party	party	party
Turkmenistan	party	party	party
Uzbekistan	party	party	

** Note: an empty box indicates that the country is neither a signatory, nor a party.*

4. Being a party to the Intergovernmental Agreement on Trans-Asian Railway Network would support their active participation in further developing and operationalizing the network with significant consequences for the transport connectivity at national and regional levels. In the meantime, recognizing the important role of the agreement plays is fostering regional connectivity, the number of parties to the Agreement continues to rise. Turkey became 20th party to the Agreement in 2019 and more recently in September 2020 Myanmar acceded to the Agreement as 21st contracting party.

5. The development of the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway Networks has been incorporated into national plans or strategies in a number of countries, and their routes have supported the definition of several multilateral transport initiatives such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation programme of the Asian Development Bank and two important agreements, namely the "Agreement between the Governments of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Creating Favourable Conditions for International Road Transport"[1] signed in Dushanbe in September 2014 and the Intergovernmental Agreement on International Road Transport along the Asian Highway Network[2] signed by the Governments of China, Mongolia and the Russian Federation in Moscow in December 2016.

[1] Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.
[2] https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Intergovernmental-Agreement-on-International-Road-Transport-along-the-Asian-Highway-Network-English-language.pdf

Sustainable Road Transport

The Asian Highway Network

6. The Intergovernmental Agreement on Asian Highway Network[3] has been the basis of ESCAP secretariat's work to promote and facilitate the development and upgrading of the international highway network in the region, notably through eight Working Group sessions in which SPECA member States and other states have actively participated.

7. The eighth Biennial Meeting of the Working Group on the Asian Highway held in Bangkok on 18 - 19 September 2019[4] recalled the importance of road transport and recognized that greater efforts would be needed to manage the negative externalities of road transport operations in order to support the region's sustainable growth. The Working Group was of the view that improving the quality of road infrastructure had become an increasingly significant factor in supporting economic growth and delivering results on sustainable development. In addition, the Working Group also stressed the importance of transport facilitation, including border-crossing requirements to ensure smooth and seamless international road transport along the Asian Highway Network.

8. While the network continues to expand, the quality of Asian Highway routes remains a concern. According to the ESCAP Asian Highway Database,[5] while the majority of the network consists of Class II roads (38 per cent), followed by Primary and Class I roads (35 per cent), in some countries in Central Asia over 50 per cent of Asian Highway routes are reported to be class III or below. These substandard conditions adversely affect the road transport operations along these segments leading to increased costs, road accidents, emissions, noise pollution and congestion. Hence, SPECA countries are encouraged to continuously improve their road infrastructure quality.

9. The pandemic of COVID-19 coronavirus revealed strong need for efforts strengthened towards realizing the potential of information and communications technology for efficient cross-border and transit transport along the Asian Highway Network. Promotion of the use of technology and intelligent transport systems to move towards smart Asian highways, reducing road crashes, traffic congestion, resilience and negative environmental externalities in the Asia-Pacific region is also of great importance.

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[3] United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 2323, No. 41607.

[4] Relevant documents are available at https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/eighth-meeting-working-group-asian-highway

[5] ESCAP, Asian Highway Database, 2019 preliminary update.

Sustainable Railway Transport

10. There is growing acceptance that rail has an important role to play in the national and international movements of goods and people. A number of features speak in favour of a greater utilization of rail transport in serving the region's trade and in particular facilitating the access of landlocked countries to international maritime ports. The pandemic strongly showed that railways is the most resilient mode of transport during external shocks. Finally, the 2030 Development Agenda is inviting governments of the region to give environmentally sustainable transport, including rail new prominence into their transport development plans.

The Trans-Asian Railway Network (TAR)

11. The Sixth Biennial Meeting of the Working Group on the Trans-Asian Railway Network was convened in Bangkok on 10-11 December 2019. The Working Group considered the implementation of the Agreement and amendments proposed by the Parties. The Working Group also adopted amendments to the routes of the network proposed by Islamic Republic of Iran and Russian Federation. It expressed its continued concern with regard to the remaining missing links and urged the member States to give priority to the construction of those links in cooperation with development partners.

12. The Working Group reiterated the importance of electronic information exchange among railways and between railways and control agencies to enhance operational efficiency along the Trans-Asian Railway Network.

13. While within SPECA countries[6] the technical and operational standards inherited from Soviet Railways are harmonized, they nevertheless differ from those applied in two of the neighbouring countries namely China and the Islamic Republic of Iran which operate shorter trains on networks of a 1,435-mm gauge configuration and are key for transit to important international maritime ports offering access to markets in other regions of the world. The future development of rail transport in SPECA member countries needs to reach a better match between new infrastructure and these emerging trade patterns.

Development of dry ports to facilitate intermodal transport

14. Currently, the Intergovernmental Agreement on Dry Ports has 16 parties. In SPECA region, the latest is Azerbaijan which acceded to the Intergovernmental Agreement on Dry Ports on 24 April 2020.

[6] With the exception of Afghanistan which has yet to develop an operational rail network.

15. ESCAP member States continue to experience challenges and issues in the development and operation of dry ports. This is caused by a range of factors, from infrastructural insufficiencies (setting up dry ports at proper locations, availability of transport linkages properly connecting dry ports to other locations, compliance with technical standards, etc.) to institutional matters (insufficient policy guidance, lack of harmonization of rules and procedures across different agencies, financing and operation of dry port development), as well as lack of deployment of modern technological solutions for dry ports.

16. ESCAP secretariat has developed a Regional Framework for the Development, Design, Planning and Operation of Dry Ports of International Importance as a regional guideline to assist in the development of the network of dry ports. The Regional Framework aims to assist ESCAP member states and associate members in their efforts to realize the vision of a sustainable integrated intermodal transport and logistics system.

17. At its third meeting, which was convened from 13 to 14 November 2019 in Bangkok, Thailand, the Working Group on Dry Ports adopted amendments to revise the list of dry ports of international importance in India, Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation. The Working Group emphasized the need to include dry ports in the international intermodal transport and economic corridors, to develop an up-to-date legal frameworks for international multimodal transport operations and application of modern information and communications technologies, digital solutions and innovative business models and of developing a region-wide strategic vision of digital transport corridors.

18. From 18 to 19 November 2020, ESCAP is organizing the capacity development workshop on Application of Smart Digital Solutions for Dry Ports in Caucasus and Central Asia to raise awareness and technical capacity of member States to formulate policies and deploy smart transport technologies in the design and operation of dry ports and their linkages to intermodal corridors.

19. At its seventy-fifth session, held in Bangkok in May 2019, the Commission recognized that the Intergovernmental Agreements on the Asian Highway Network, the Trans-Asian Railway Network and Dry Ports were major building blocks for the realization of an international integrated intermodal transport and logistics system in the region and recognized the important role of dry ports in its achievement. Dry ports, indeed, are key to the efficiency of international transport corridors, acting as points of convergence, where multiple interactions between transport modes, operators and service providers can be synchronized. These facilities also offer benefits to a broad

spectrum of stakeholders, such as port operators and local or national authorities, who can use them to implement a range of economic, social and environmental policies.

20. Thus, the development and operation of dry ports, especially dry ports of international importance, can be more efficiently addressed if considered holistically alongside and as an integral part of matters relating to international intermodal transport corridors

UNECE

Euro-Asian Transport Links

21. In the field of transport infrastructure, UNECE is currently responsible for the development of several transport infrastructure Master Plans, including the Trans-European North-South Motorways (TEM) and Trans-European Railway (TER) masterplans[7]; the Pan-European Cycling Infrastructure Master Plan[8] (in cooperation with THE PEP) and the Euro-Asian Transport Linkages (Phases I, II and III)[9].

22. The **Euro-Asian Transport Links Project (EATL)** is the most relevant in the context of the Vienna Programme of Action (VPoA) as it is a long-term endeavour and gathers many Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and transit countries in Europe and Asia[10].

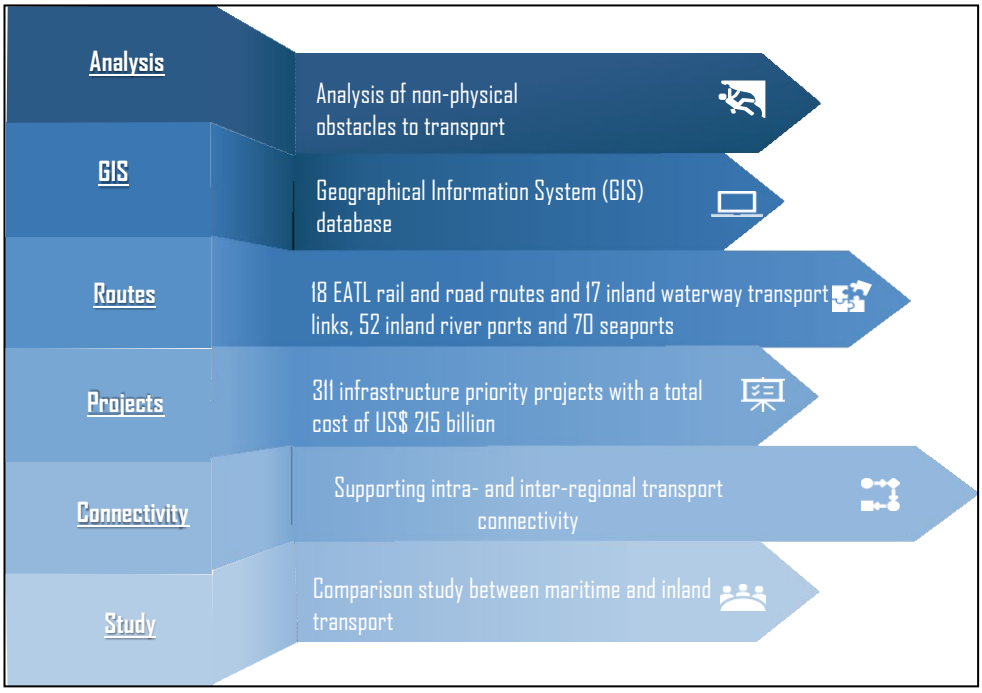
23. In 2000, UNECE Working Party on Transport Trends and Economics (WP.5) requested the secretariat to undertake together with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) secretariat a series of tasks including the preparation of a common UNECE/ESCAP vision for Euro-Asian Transport links. At its next session (September 2001) the Working Party considered the Common ECE/ESCAP Strategic vision on Euro-Asian transport links as reproduced in document (TRANS/WP.5/2001/14)[11] and agreed on several actions (TRANS/WP.5/30, para. 31)[12]. Since then, WP.5 monitors the work and the development of the Euro-Asian transport links either through a task force and ad hoc informal group meetings in the beginning, the establishment of a project afterwards (Phase I (2002–2007)) and of a formal group of experts for the last two phases (Phase II (2008–2012) and Phase III (2013–2017). Since then the working party organized four group of experts' meetings, six national workshops and one

7 Website: http://www.unece.org/transport/areas-of-work/ter/about-us/tem-and-ter-master-plan.html
8 Website: https://www.unece.org/trans/main/wp5/special_project_pan_european_cycling_infrastructure_master_plan.html
9 Website: http://www.unece.org/trans/main/eatl.html
10 Phase III was supported by 38 countries: Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, China, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Mongolia, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Spain, Tajikistan, Republic of North Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.
11 www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trans/main/wp5/wp5docs/2001/wp50114.pdf
12 www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trans/doc/2001/wp5/TRANS-WP5-30e.pdf

ministerial for phase I; seven group of experts' meetings, three national workshops and one ministerial for phase II; and nine group of experts' meetings, and two informal meetings for phase III. In addition, in the framework of the Working Party as part of its agenda seven capacity building workshops were organized.

24. The Euro-Asian Transport Links (EATL) workflow has produced a solid set of concrete deliverables as illustrated in Figure I. The Phase III report launched at the ECE Inland Transport Committee (ITC) at its eighty-first session in February 2019 identifies cargo for which the EATL inland routes could compete with maritime and air routes between Europe and Asia.

Figure I: Summary of the Euro-Asian Transport Links achievements



25. What the previous EATL analysis suggested is that while the Euro-Asian corridors are practically operational, they would benefit from further operationalization efforts to make them truly competitive for the inter-continental transport of high-value and time sensitive cargo. In order to be effective and efficient EATL transit transport corridors need not only to have good and well-maintained transport infrastructure, they also require smooth implementation of agreed legal frameworks, transit rules and policies and transport and trade facilitation measures. Furthermore, coordination is needed in order to design and implement integrated services along specific corridors such as block trains. What is needed now, more than anything else at this stage is corridor-based action, including through the development of corridor specific work plans and operational targets, the attraction of specific cargo types and volumes, regionally agreed key performance indicators, pooling of rolling stock, railway wagons, containerised transport units etc.

Therefore, it was proposed to establish the Corridor Management Groups (CMGs) with an objective to set up corridor interoperability priorities and monitor their implementation under the overall oversight by WP.5. CMGs should also set operational targets and monitor them, as well as propose corrective action.

26. To support discussion on Euro-Asian transport connectivity, the Forum on Sustainable Transport Connectivity between Europe and Asia was held on 30 October 2019, jointly organized by ECE and ESCAP. The Forum resulted in the exchange of information on efforts undertaken in countries to strengthen interregional sustainable transport connectivity in the context of intermodal transport and logistics, including infrastructure connectivity, operational connectivity, as well as safety, security and environmental concerns of integrated intermodal transport and logistics. The participating countries were able to inform about their efforts in establishing conditions for improving intermodal transport and logistics in international inland transport supporting the Euro-Asian connectivity.

27. The Forum stressed the necessary basis in the operationalization work and enhancement of transport connectivity are the United Nations transport legal instruments and that the Unified Railway Law can be instrumental in improving rail competitiveness. Digitalization of transport documents and various phytosanitary and veterinary certificates and acceptance of such along the whole railway route are considered among key challenges to further the corridor operationalization.

28. In December 2019, the Workshop on Strengthening security and inter-operability along Euro-Asian inland transport corridors was held in Tbilisi, co-organized by UNECE and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) with the support of the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia. Over 40 security experts and officials from ministries of transport, economy, trade, customs committees and other relevant agencies as well as road and railway transport operators, infrastructure operators, shipping companies and logistics providers from across the Euro-Asian region participated in the event. Participants took stock of both “at” and “behind” the border measures in support of international supply chain security and transport facilitation, such as the use of customs risk management systems, techniques for profiling of suspicious cargo flows, exchange of preliminary customs information and the introduction of regional transit regimes.

29. Participants also discussed how administrative bottlenecks on Euro-Asian inland transport routes can be solved through corridor specific regulatory coordination and harmonization efforts. They exchanged views on the many benefits related to the introduction of a unified railway regulatory regime, and the use of a harmonized road transport consignment note such as CMR and

its electronic variant eCMR. The possible use of the TIR/ eTIR for multi-modal transport operations across Euro-Asian corridors was also discussed alongside cyber threats, which pose a growing danger to increasingly digitalized inland transport systems.

Joint UN call for smooth transit and transport facilitation to and from landlocked developing countries

30. While it may appear that the Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) have been less exposed to COVID-19, they are amongst the most vulnerable countries facing binding constraints to growth and development, including isolation from global markets, dependence on transit neighbours, small size, lack of productive capacities, structural challenges and vulnerability to external shocks. LLDCs are particularly vulnerable to cross-border restrictions and border closures, given their dependency on transit transport to access international markets. Therefore, UN issued the Joint call on 09 June 2020 to support efficient transport and transit procedures to increase connectivity and integration of the LLDCs in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America into world markets. In order to help reduce delays and keep vital supply chains up and running, UNECE supported by the other regional commissions and organizations created an online "Observatory on Border Crossings Status due to COVID-19", which provides a real-time overview of up-to-date information regarding freight border crossing limitations globally.

International Transport Infrastructure Observatory

31. The observatory is being developed in the framework of an XB project, which has as beneficiary countries Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) members in Central Asia and the South Caucasus (almost all of which are SPECA countries). The project has received full funding by the Islamic Development Bank.

32. In the framework of the project, benchmarking data and practices from the following 10 ECO member States have been compiled: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan, all of which are also participating in the UNECE Euro-Asian Transport Links initiative. In the framework of the project, data has been collected on transport infrastructure construction costs covering road, rail, inland waterways and ports as well as intermodal terminals sectors. The collected data will be integrated in the Observatory which is expected to be fully operational by 2021.

33. The observatory is being devised as an online platform in a Geographic Information System (GIS) environment where (a) General public should find the illustration of transport infrastructure data, (b) Governments find all the relevant data to prepare, benchmark and present their transport infrastructure projects and (c) International Financial Institutions (IFIs) can consider, analyse and

compare projects from a regional/international perspective and identify projects they wish to finance and (d) RCO users which will have, tailored to their specific needs, an overview of all functionalities available to them including access to statistics, charts and tables.

34. In the course of 2019-2020, good progress has been made, *inter alia*:

- The project team in cooperation with a specialized external GIS expert is currently creating a user-friendly interface for the Observatory.
- This user interface will be based on the different functionalities/services that the observatory should be able to provide to its users, each with their different users' profiles and with different access and editing rights.
- Data collection templates have been prepared and disseminated among the project's beneficiary countries and two workshops with national experts have been held. In general, the data that the observatory should collect on transport infrastructure will be vertical – road, railways, inland waterways, intermodal transport, ports, logistics centres, airports etc. as well as horizontal such as benchmarking data, climate change data, hours of operations, resources available, tariffs, time schedules for roads, railways etc. The users should be able to identify regional/sub-regional transport networks and corridors, combine them, illustrate the climate impacts along those corridors, identify new projects etc. The consultant is expected to provide his expertise and further improve the proposed data collection templates / layers / fields ensuring efficient and easy usage of the observatory.

The Thematic Working Group may wish to:

- Encourage those SPECA countries that have not yet done so to take measures towards ratification, acceptance, approval of or accession to the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network and Intergovernmental Agreement on Dry Ports and to actively participate in the secretariat's activities related to these agreements.

- Encourage SPECA countries to put efforts in improving the quality of road infrastructure as well as to give priority to the construction of missing railway links in cooperation with development partners to ensure sustainable development.

- Encourage SPECA countries to use the regional framework for the planning, design, development and operation of dry ports of international importance and to enhance intermodal/multimodal transportation with the involvement of dry ports.

- Invite SPECA countries to participate in the capacity development workshop on Application of Smart Digital Solutions for Dry Ports in Caucasus and Central Asia organized by ESCAP from 18 to 19 November 2020 in virtual format;

- Encourage SPECA Governments to actively participate in discussions how to operationalize EATL corridors and in establishing and activities of the Corridor Management Groups (CMGs);

- Request SPECA countries to engage actively in the transport infrastructure construction costs data collection efforts taking place in the framework of the ongoing establishment of a web-based International Transport Infrastructure Observatory.

Annex I

Asian Highway Network in SPECA States

SPECA Country	Primary	Class I	Class II	Class III	Below III	Total	Status Year	AH Agreement	
	Length in km							Signed in	Entry into force
Afghanistan	0	10	2,549	0	1,461	4,020	2015	2004	2006
Azerbaijan	0	843	606	0	0	1,449	2019	2004	2005
Kazakhstan	0	557	5,407	6,389	475	12,828	2010	2004	2008
Kyrgyzstan	0	0	303	1,324	136	1,763	2013	2004	2006
Tajikistan	0	20	978	0	914	1,912	2015	2004	2006
Turkmenistan	0	60	0	2,120	24	2,204	2008		2016
Uzbekistan	0	1,195	1,101	670	0	2,966	2008	2004	2005
Total	**0**	**2685**	**10944**	**10,503**	**3,010**	**27,142**			
Percentage (SPECA States only)	*0%*	*9.89%*	*40.32%*	*38.70%*	*11.09%*				
Corresponding percentage in 2004	*0%*	*1%*	*14%*	*55%*	*29%*				
Latest percentage for the entire AH network (2019)	*11.75%*	*23.4%*	*38.2%*	*19.79%*	*6.86%*				

Trans-Asian Railway Network in SPECA countries

SPECA Country	TAR Network		TAR Agreement	
	Gauges (mm)	Route Length (km)	Signed in	Became Party in*
Afghanistan			-	
Azerbaijan	1,520	1,261	2006	
Kazakhstan	1,520	9,548	2006	
Kyrgyzstan	1,520	280	-	
Tajikistan	1,520	527	2006	2008(AA)
Turkmenistan	1,520	1,741	-	2016 (a)
Uzbekistan	1,520	3,484	2006	2009
Total		16,841		
*Date of Ratification, Acceptance (A), Approval (AA), Accession (a)				

Intergovernmental Agreement on Dry Ports in SPECA countries

SPECA Country	Signed in	Became Party in*
Afghanistan	-	2016(a)
Azerbaijan	-	2020(a)
Kazakhstan		2016(a)
Kyrgyzstan	-	
Tajikistan	2013	2015(AA)
Turkmenistan	-	2016(a)
Uzbekistan	-	
*Date of Ratification, Acceptance (A), Approval (AA), Accession (a)		