



Economic Commission for Europe**Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards****Ninth session**

Geneva, 26(pm)–28 June 2024

Report of the Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards on its ninth session**I. Overview**

1. The Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards held its ninth session on 26(pm)–28 June 2024. The session was chaired by Mr. Zdenko Lucić, (Chair), Mr. Nurbek Maksutov (Vice-Chair), and Mr. Ilyas Akhmetov (Vice-Chair).

II. Attendance

2. About 150 registered participants attended the session, including representatives from the following ECE member States: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Spain, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America and Uzbekistan.

3. Representatives of the European Union (EU) attended the meeting.

4. The following inter-governmental organizations attended the meeting: the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Trade Centre (ITC), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Network on Quality Infrastructure (iNetQI), the International Organization of Legal Metrology (OIML), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the World Bank, the World Economic Forum and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

5. The meeting was also attended by representatives from the private sector and non-profit organisations: the Asia-Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI), Association for Farmers Rights Defence (AFRD), the Change-Rural Development Agency, the Christian Care Foundation Pakistan, the Circular Economy IL, the Collectif des Leaders pour le Développement durable de l'Afrique, the Egyptian Clothing Bank, HELVETAS, Impact Hub, the Institute of Development Studies, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), the International Institute for Sustainable Development, ISA



Industrial Limited, KazNARU, the OVSM Observatory of the Values in Society and Management, the Public Corporation of Land and Business Registrars of Spain, the Rishi Partners, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the Sustainable Leather Foundation, the Swiss Youth Council and the Women at the Table, SWITCH to Green Facility (DG INTPA).

6. The meeting was attended by representatives from academia, including the Tbilisi State University, the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, the Polytechnic University of Madrid, the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, the University College Dublin, the University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Uzbekistan, and the World Trade Institute (WTI) of the University of Bern.

III. Item 1. Adoption of the agenda

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7. The Committee adopted the agenda (ECE/CTCS/2024/1).

A. High-level substantive segment

IV. Item 2. Regional Conference on the Circular Economy

8. The Regional Conference featured two panels. The first panel discussed advancing circular economy in agri-food value chains, focusing on food loss and waste reduction and management. The second panel was dedicated to improving the traceability of products along international value chains for the circular economy.

(a) Advancing Circular Economy in Agri-Food Value Chains

9. This panel discussed challenges and policy options for ensuring a circular transition in the agri-food sector through increasing resource-use efficiency, minimizing food loss and waste, and promoting the use of byproducts in a circular bioeconomy (ECE/CTCS/2024/9). It underscored the critical role of agri-food value chains for the circular economy transition (SDG 12), and for several other global sustainability priorities, including climate action (SDG 13), zero hunger (SDG 2) and the objectives set out in the United Nations Food Systems Summit.

10. Speakers shared experiences on different entry points for promoting circularity, including enhancing resource use efficiency within the food systems (e.g. minimizing food loss and waste, reducing water and land use), promoting the use of by-products in a circular bioeconomy, and the role of trade in these regards. Solid regulatory and policy frameworks were recognised as a key element for success, noting the importance of finding the right balance between local and international approaches, and the challenges that arise in policy implementation.

11. Noting the importance of circular and green transitions, experts stressed that these transitions also involve trade-offs, including in the social sphere (e.g. ensuring affordable diets, including for the poor and marginalized). Sharing of experiences between countries was seen as a driver for success, as was cooperation between different actors (e.g. including businesses and non-governmental organization), the need to collaborate closely and to innovate in areas like waste reduction and resource efficiency. The session allowed for a sharing of experiences, including by ECE programme countries, on their efforts towards greater circularity, and the use of ECE tools in this regard.

12. Specific interventions included the following:

- The secretary of the ECE Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards (WP.7) acknowledged the importance of the WP's work on circularity in agri-food value chains, including food loss and waste management, reduction and the reuse of by-products. She noted that the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit had

highlighted that circularity is a key component towards Agenda 2030, supporting multiple goals of climate action and resource efficiency.

- An expert of University College Dublin stressed the importance of national climate policies prioritizing sustainable land use to meet global market demands for verifiable food origins. He highlighted the need to promote the bioeconomy, focusing on producing less and reusing waste, by optimizing resource-use efficiency, closing nutrient loops, and minimizing environmental discharges in food value chains. He warned of risks that generating a market for waste streams can reduce incentives on primary producers to be efficient and on retail companies to reduce food waste. He noted the importance of adopting holistic approaches to food supply systems, which must close loops on local, regional, and global scales simultaneously, thus the critical role of international trade in modern societies. He underscored the impacts of environmental burden shifting that occurs when imports effectively shift negative impacts abroad, which are then borne primarily by the distant countries where the commodities are produced. There was therefore a need to increase consumer awareness.
- A representative of the FAO called for focusing on the national level to analyze food systems, to develop food waste reduction strategies and to establish multi-stakeholder steering committees. He emphasized the importance of detailed investigations into the causes and reasons behind food waste to formulate effective solutions. These solutions must be cost-effective, environmentally friendly and socially acceptable within the country's cultural context. The representative also stressed the need for clear definitions of what constitutes food waste and for raising awareness among stakeholders and the public to implement these strategies effectively.
- A representative of the OECD shared insights from a recent survey of 42 countries on food loss and waste policies, revealing gaps in measurement, reporting and target-setting. She suggested that the low results can be attributed to the lack of effective mechanisms, clear timelines and indicators, as well as a preference for soft measures over mandatory ones. She also indicated that there are three levers to achieve lower impacts in food systems: a shift to lower-impact product categories, a shift to lower-impact producers, and a shift to lower-impact techniques. She warned that mitigating negative environmental impacts is impossible without measuring impacts (at each level - product-level, firm-level, and project-level respectively), and called for convening policymakers and experts to work together to avoid fragmentation.
- The representative of Serbia outlined Serbia's 2023 Roadmap aimed at creating regenerative, climate-resilient food systems. She described the country's action plan for 2024-2026, which addresses climate change across seven key sectors with 25 measures. She also described Serbia's biodistrict initiative, promoting sustainable local resource management to enhance agricultural competitiveness and environmental protection. She also mentioned that efforts are underway to abolish the value-added tax on food donations. She emphasized that digital agriculture is advancing, exemplified by the first digitalized farm in Belegiš, which uses the MOBISAN smart device for automated irrigation and fertilization, significantly reducing costs and emissions.
- A representative of the Impact Hub Switzerland elaborated on how the Impact Hub supports micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in implementing circular and inclusive business models globally. He emphasized the need for policy support and favourable conditions to transition from a linear to a circular economy, stating that about 50 per cent of the lever to create a circular economy lies in regulations and framework conditions. He cited Switzerland's recent environmental law revision, which facilitates the circular economy by requiring producers to show product reparability and imposes penalties for non-compliance. He urged entrepreneurs to engage with authorities and local communities to foster favourable conditions for circular economy transitions.
- An expert of the Wageningen University (pre-recorded message) emphasized the need for a radical redesign of the European food system based on circularity principles to

respect human and planetary health. She noted that incremental changes within the current linear system are insufficient. She discussed the Circular Food Systems (CiFoS) model, developed to assess the potential of transitioning to a circular food system by reducing land use, greenhouse gas emissions and water use while ensuring sufficient healthy food production. She noted significant reductions in land use and emissions in different scenarios, emphasizing the need for radical redesigns to achieve sustainable food systems and better respect human and planetary health.

13. Looking forward, the discussion concluded that ECE can play a pivotal role in facilitating knowledge exchange and the dissemination of best practices to address gaps in measurement, reporting and target-setting for food loss and waste. For example, ECE's WP. 7. has developed relevant guidance in the field of agricultural quality standards, notably the Code of Good Practice: Reducing food loss and ensuring optimum handling of fresh fruit and vegetables along the value chain (ECE/TRADE/470), which could inform future initiatives.

14. The latter could include support to MSMEs in transitioning to circular business models, promoting bioeconomy practices and facilitating cross-sector partnerships to drive sustainability and efficiency in agriculture and other industries. The role of trade as a possible lever for the circular transition was also emphasized, specifically focussing on two value chains (textiles and agri-food value chains), that are hotpot sectors for circularity discussions and experiencing vibrant international trade growth.

(b) Improving Traceability and Transparency along International Value Chains in the Garment and Footwear Sector for the Circular Economy

15. This panel discussion focused on global implementation experiences, benefits, and challenges in achieving effective traceability and transparency for circularity in garment and footwear sectors (ECE/CTCS/2024/10). The panel flagged the critical role of textiles value chains for numerous global sustainability priorities, including the circular economy transition (SDG 12). Recognizing the importance of global trade in textiles, the panel focussed on the potential that lies in fostering the ESG traceability of textiles value chains, as piloted by developing countries and countries with economies in transition (e.g. Bangladesh, Uzbekistan).

16. Based on the successful experience with ECE's Sustainability Pledge, which over three years showcased over 20 project pilot projects in 30 countries¹, there was a discussion about applying similar approaches to other circularity sectors, notably critical raw materials, where existing ECT tools, such as the United Nations Framework Classification for Resources, could provide opportunities. There was strong recognition about the importance of cooperation between different actors and agencies, with several institutions showcasing their relevant tools and activities (e.g. Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Exeter Center for Circular Economy, the Finnish Innovation Fund, Sitra, Switch to Green Facility, in addition to UN entities and other international organizations).

17. Specific interventions included the following:

- The Chief ad Interim of the Trade Facilitation Section of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD) of the ECE highlighted the importance of sectors like textiles, and international trade in textiles and textiles waste, as they matter to the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. She noted that these sectors are significant for economic growth and job creation while also being highly sensitive to environmental concerns.
- The representative of Albania spoke about the country's efforts to move towards the circular economy. She referred to the Roadmap Towards Circular Economy in Albania, which aims to assist the Albanian government in establishing robust policy foundations for a successful circular economy transition. The roadmap strategically integrates existing policy initiatives, fostering synergies across sectors, measures and actors involved in this transformation. She emphasized that the roadmap highlights three key areas where circular economy policies can have a significant impact in

¹ Available at <https://unece.org/media/press/392018>.

Albania – economic instruments, circular business models for MSMEs, and targeted solutions for plastics, with a focus on marine litter.

- The representative of the ECE Sustainable Energy Division emphasized the agri-food industry’s reliance on critical raw materials like phosphate, which produces significant waste during fertilizer production. He underscored that the primary challenge is the need to transition from opaque value chains to systems that ensure equitable benefit-sharing for all stakeholders. Achieving this goal necessitates a commitment from governments and stakeholders to develop innovative technologies, such as blockchain, and international cooperation to support a sustainable transition. Tools like the United Nations Framework Classification for Resources and the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) standards could offer guidance for action.
- A representative of the SWITCH to Green Facility described available tools for technical advice on circular and green economy transitions. He described the experience of the SWITCH2CE (“Switch to Circular Economy Value Chains”) pilot in Bangladesh, which is part of a global UNIDO-led project co-funded by the EU and the Government of Finland. The pilot is aimed at building indigenous capacity on collection, sorting and recycling solutions for cotton and polyester and to scale up traceable recycling of post-industrial waste, including by building alliances with clothing companies. He emphasized the project’s expected impact to support MSMEs and spillovers in the form of decent jobs and environmentally sustainable growth.
- A representative of UNEP addressed the triple planetary crisis and the role of circular economy principles in achieving sustainability. The representative emphasized the need for affordable traceability systems for smallholders in developing countries and access to financing mechanisms. She noted that UNEP is working on digital public infrastructure to facilitate data exchange and identify environmental hotspots along value chains.
- A representative of UNIDO described the organization’s portfolio that includes more than 30 ongoing projects across four continents and covers sectors such as plastics, textiles, agri-food and blue economy. She discussed UNIDO’s projects focusing on efficient resource use and waste reduction, integrating circularity into production processes (e.g., SwichMed II, EU4Environment).
- A representative of the Sustainable Leather Foundation highlighted the importance of certification and standard schemes in minimizing the environmental impact of leather production. Highlighting the gap between policy-making and grassroots implementation, she stressed the need for a better understanding of circularity principles at the industry level. She explained that leather, a by-product of the meat industry, could be utilized to avoid landfill emissions and support an industry vital for livelihoods in high-producing, low-income countries. She called for a better financial architecture to support small companies’ investments in technology and improvements, stressing the importance of partnerships across sectors and building public confidence through transparency initiatives.

18. The discussion concluded that ensuring ESG traceability and transparency along value chains in critical sectors like textiles and critical raw materials is essential for fostering more responsible consumption and production (SDG 12). By disseminating best practices and policy recommendations, ECE can help countries in implementing effective circular economy strategies in sectors with significant international trade. By working on digital public infrastructure to facilitate data exchange and identify environmental hotspots along value chains, ECE can play a pivotal role in promoting cross-sector collaboration and stakeholder engagement.

(c) Closing and the Way Forward

19. The Deputy Executive Secretary of the ECE highlighted the progress made on the circular transition, stressing the contribution of ECE tools in this regard. He expressed satisfaction that several ECE intergovernmental bodies have delivered specific results in response to the mandates arising from ECE’s sixty-ninth Commission session. Noting also

the success of ECE's Circular STEP Platform (currently having 26 government-nominated focal points, including from all of ECE's 17 programme countries), he emphasized the importance of continuing and scaling these initiatives. Appropriate donor support and best possible institutional set ups would be crucial for success in this regard. He thanked key partners, such as Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Sitra, as well as other UN agencies, for the excellent cooperation.

20. The Circular Step Focal Point from Kyrgyzstan highlighted the importance of the circular economy in addressing environmental challenges. He called on leading ECE member States and development partners to provide advisory and technical assistance to support Kyrgyzstan and other countries at the beginning of their circular economy journeys.

21. A representative of UNIDO and GACERE congratulated ECE for the successful event. He referred to the recent launch of a policy brief on the circular design of plastic products aimed at influencing the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution.

22. A representative of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation congratulated ECE and Circular Step for their excellent collaboration and advised member States embarking on their circular economy transition to align their objectives with their fiscal conditions and incentive structures. He used a vehicle emphasized the importance of removing obstacles to accelerate progress effectively.

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23. The Steering Committee recognised the significant progress made by the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) in advancing the transition to a circular economy within the region since the sixty-ninth session in 2021, including in the context of the approval by the Steering Committee of the new approach to integrate circular economy approaches into ECE Studies on Regulatory and Procedural Barriers to Trade (RPBT) (ECE/CTCS/2023/6). It welcomed the timely discussions during the Regional Conference on Circular Economy, in the context of initiatives undertaken by the Steering Committee and its subsidiary bodies. The Steering Committee emphasized the importance of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division's workstreams on addressing food loss and waste reduction and management in agri-food value chains, as well as improving product traceability along international value chains to facilitate repair, reuse, and recycling processes in advancing the circular economy agenda. The Steering Committee requested the secretariat to compile a comprehensive report summarizing the outcomes and recommendations of the Regional Conference on the Circular Economy for dissemination among member states and relevant stakeholders, with a view to informing future policy and action in this area.

B. General segment

V. Item 3. Programme of work

(a) Status of implementation of the Trade subprogramme's programme of work for 2024

24. The Director of the ECTD provided an update on the ongoing programme of work, highlighting key achievements and deliverables. She emphasized ECE's response to cross-cutting topics including recent Commission topics such as the circular economy (sixty-ninth Commission session), digital and green transformations (seventieth Commission session), as well as broader United Nations priorities such as promoting gender equality, disability inclusion and human rights. The Regional Conference on the Circular Economy, jointly hosted by this Committee and the Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships (CICPPP), marked a significant milestone in integrating these topics into inter-governmental discussions.

25. In addition, she noted accomplishments from the Steering Committee's workstreams, including RPBT studies for Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the Republic of Moldova, with similar studies launched for Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. She highlighted active

cooperation with ESCAP under the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), focusing on innovation and trade (including trade facilitation and sustainable trade). Noteworthy achievements include the adoption of the SPECA Roadmap for the Digitalization of Multimodal Data and Document Exchange along the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor Using United Nations Legal Instruments and Standards (SPECA Roadmap), which leverages the United Nations legal instruments and standards, including in the context of the UN/CEFACT work.

26. The delegate of Uzbekistan thanked the ECE for supporting the country's trade reforms, including as part of the WTO accession process. This included the RPBT study, the certification and traceability of Better Cotton in Samarkand using ECE blockchain technologies, and the implementation of the agricultural quality standard for dried melon. He also referred to the recent trade facilitation developments, such as the creation of an action plan for the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement and the establishment of a national Trade Facilitation Committee. He expressed readiness to further enhance cooperation building on the previous capacity-building activities, including the recommendations contained in the RPBT study.

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27. The Steering Committee acknowledged the impact that existing normative and technical cooperation on trade regulatory and procedural measures, including regulatory cooperation and standardization policies, agricultural quality standards, and trade facilitation can have for supporting member States in advancing sustainable development and the Agenda 2030. It acknowledged the progress made in advancing cross-cutting issues such as the circular economy transition and digital and green transformations for sustainable development. The Steering Committee encouraged the secretariat to continue its work on each of these issues.

(b) Draft programme of work of the Trade subprogramme for 2025 and outline of key components of the programme of work for 2026

28. The Chief ad Interim of the ECE Market Access Section provided background information on the draft programme of work of the Trade subprogramme for 2025 and the outline of key components of the programme of work for 2026. He referred to the ECE Executive Committee decision of 14 December 2020, on the consideration of the draft programme of work for the following year, with the option for sectoral governing bodies to provide recommendations on key elements of their subsequent programmes of work (INF.doc. 2021/8). In line with that requirement, he presented the informal document containing the key components for 2026, with differences from the 2025 programme marked in track changes. These differences mostly pertain to the titles of field and technical cooperation projects and seminars within the three ECE workstreams: regulatory cooperation and standardisation, agricultural quality standards, and trade facilitation. Changes also include the shortening of seminar titles and updating references to some cross-cutting themes.

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29. The Steering Committee endorsed the Trade subprogramme's draft programme of work for 2025 (ECE/CTCS/2024/13) and the outline of key components of the Trade subprogramme's programme of work for 2026 (ECE/CTCS/2024/INF.1). It requested the secretariat to prepare the programme of work for 2026, together with an outline for 2027, for review and endorsement at the 2025 session.

VI. Item 4. Capacity-building and technical assistance activities

30. The regional adviser of the ECTD, provided an update on relevant capacity-building and technical assistance activities (ECE/CTCS/2024/8), including progress achieved under the United Nations Development Account projects on accelerating the transition to a circular economy and on trade facilitation and electronic business involving the development of a package of standards and supporting materials for the digitalization of documents

accompanying goods along the supply chain and multimodal exchange of information. Regarding the SPECA, he mentioned the SPECA Roadmap adopted in November 2023, which aims to leverage the United Nations legal instruments and standards, including the Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention), the Convention on the Contract for the International Carriage of Goods by Roads (CMR Convention) and the UN/CEFACT Package of Standards. He also informed about a series of capacity-building sessions on the use of the UN/CEFACT standards, with reference to the latest, which took place in Aktau, Kazakhstan (11-12 June 2024).

31. The delegate of Kyrgyzstan thanked the ECE secretariat for the RPBT study and the national training in Bishkek in March 2024. He emphasized the need for an institutional framework to boost trade capacity in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia. He requested assistance for setting up an inspectorate for the quality control of agricultural products in Kyrgyzstan and requested potential assistance from the ECE secretariat for the training of its employees. He also appreciated the capacity-building event in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in June 2024, noting its benefits in addressing the critical needs of Central Asian countries to align with international quality standards and ensure appropriate infrastructure for inspections to facilitate access to new markets.

32. The delegate of Turkmenistan thanked the ECE secretariat for launching the RPBT study and organizing a training session on regulatory and procedural trade measures related to WTO accession in June 2023. He informed about Turkmenistan's work on a memorandum of its trade regime, enhancing legislation to meet standards, and optimizing tariff policy. He welcomed ECE's potential assistance in capacity building, institutional development, and organizing training sessions on trade negotiations and legal analysis for government representatives.

33. The delegate of the Republic of Moldova reaffirmed the country's strong ambition to continue working closely with ECE to promote trade facilitation, innovation-driven growth, digital economic development, and circularity. She requested further support from ECE in capacity building on the follow-up to the RPBT study, as well as other potential assessments and national reports on new topics related to the digital and circular economy. She expressed Moldova's gratitude to all development partners for their financial assistance.

34. The ECE secretariat took note of the requests for support and stressed the importance of mobilizing of extrabudgetary funds to respond to member States requests. The secretariat referred to ECE-wide resource mobilization plans, and recalled Division-specific initiatives, including the tabulation of specific requests in a technical cooperation tool that was developed in response to a recommendation contained in the OIOS evaluation report (E/AC.51/2023/5 and its recommendation)² and called upon member States and development partners for cooperation on the way forward.

Decision 2024-05

35. The Steering Committee took note of the report on capacity-building and technical assistance activities outlined in document ECE/CTCS/2024/11. It recognized the value of its policy advisory and capacity-building activities, observing a growing demand from member States for further support in these areas. The Steering Committee commended the secretariat's initiative to systematically identify and track fundraising needs and opportunities, urging potential donors to contribute additional resources to existing and new projects.

Decision 2024-06

36. The Steering Committee noted the needs and priorities expressed by Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova, Turkmenistan and requested the secretariat to report again at the 2025 session.

² Available at <https://technical-cooperation.unece.org/>.

VII. Item 5. Cooperation with other organizations and Economic Commission for Europe bodies

37. The Chair introduced the report on the Trade subprogramme's collaboration with other organizations and ECE bodies (ECE/CTCS/2024/14).

- A representative of the Codex Alimentarius secretariat commented on ongoing cooperation with ECE in agricultural quality standards and trade, specifically with the Specialized Sections on the Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables (FFV) and Dry and Dried Produce (DDP) of the ECE WP.7. The cooperation has involved the harmonization of provisions and layouts in relevant standards for fresh fruit and vegetables with a view to maximising synergies, as well as the organization of capacity-building workshops. She expressed hope to enhance the existing coordination through the use of IT and digital tools to organize virtual activities to increase inclusiveness and outreach. She welcomed the participants to attend the upcoming Codex Committee on FFV session next year (in person or online, to be confirmed).
- A representative of the ESCAP secretariat highlighted the longstanding collaboration between ESCAP and ECE in trade facilitation. ESCAP's core work focuses on cross-border paperless trade, and it serves as the secretariat for the United Nations Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific, effective since 2021. He commended the ECE UN/CEFACT recommendations, tools, and standards for paperless trade and reaffirmed ESCAP's commitment to co-hosting joint events, such as last year's UN/CEFACT Forum in Bangkok.
- A representative of the OECD outlined ongoing and potential cooperation with ECE, focusing on agricultural quality standards, which involves the matching of ECE standards with related brochures prepared by OECD to ensure harmonized interpretation, and on food loss and waste. She also informed about the ongoing collaboration with United Nations Regional Commissions like ESCAP, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Economic Commission for Africa aimed at collecting information on regulations impacting digital trade. She hoped this collaboration could be expanded to ECE with the objective of identifying trade barriers and improving participation in global value chains of the Central Asian economies.
- A representative of the iNetQI³ and the OIML provided insights into international quality infrastructure and ongoing cooperation with ECE. He praised the significant contribution that ECE is making in regulatory compliance and in harmonizing the implementation of quality infrastructure across different domains. He highlighted particular deliverables in this regard, including the revised WP.6 Recommendation K and the publication on the Basics of Quality Infrastructure for Trade.
- A representative of United Nations Trade and Development shared insights on the cooperation with ECE, particularly within the framework of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS). Highlights included the fourth Academic Advisory Council meeting in Florence in October 2023, where ECE moderated several panels on due diligence regulations. She also informed that all UNFSS members are developing a strategy framework and joint project proposal for UNFSS, leveraging ECE workstreams: Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) and traceability for sustainable value chains, the Sustainability Pledge, and RPBT studies. The biennial report on Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) will incorporate inputs from all Steering Committee agencies, including ECE. She thanked ECE for its active contributions and looked forward to the continued collaboration.

³ iNetQI is a network consisting of 15 member organizations, with the ECE joining in 2010, focused on information sharing, addressing common issues, and considering technology transfer from developed to developing countries in the area of quality infrastructure.

- A representative from the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Committee of the WTO noted that ECE is an observer and a regular participant in formal meetings of the TBT Committee, primarily through WP.6, providing substantive updates on the agenda item for observers, submitting reports, and contributing to ECE work streams. Conversely, the TBT Committee secretariat contributes to events organized by the ECE. She introduced several potential areas for collaboration: 1) guidelines on conformity assessment procedures recently adopted by the TBT Committee; and 2) the multilateral declaration focusing on the TBT agreement after the thirteenth Ministerial Conference of the WTO. She also highlighted two upcoming events organized by the TBT secretariat, emphasized the high value of ECE's work in regulatory cooperation and looked forward to complementing each other's efforts to support countries in their trade and growth.
- Two representatives of the Academic Outreach and Chairs Programme of the WTO and of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Uzbekistan provided insights into the intersection of academia and trade policy within the context of WTO work and highlighted areas for cooperation. They informed about the WTO Chairs Programme, a technical assistance programme aimed at building capacities in economies in transition and in countries acceding to the WTO, as well as activities to which ECE contributed as part of this programme. They looked forward to expanding this cooperation in the future.

38. Moving to the intervention by the representatives of the ECE bodies, the Vice-Chair informed the Committee about the additional arrangements to strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation in response to the evaluation of the ECTD by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (item 6).

- The Chair of the CICPPP highlighted recent initiatives in innovation and public-private partnerships within ECE. He informed about the CICPPP's plans to apply its expertise to the upcoming United Nations Pact for the Future, particularly in science, technology, innovation, and development financing. He noted critical advice and capacity-building efforts, such as supporting the Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC2024) with the ECE Public-Private-Partnerships (PPP) and Infrastructure Evaluation and Rating System (PIERS) as well as the collaboration under the United Nations SPECA and on the circular economy topic. He informed about recent CICPPP policy dialogues on artificial intelligence's (AI) potential to enhance science, research, and innovation in climate adaptation, infrastructure design and the net-zero transition and hoped CICPPP could contribute to the future RPBT.
- The Chief ad Interim of the Trade Facilitation Section of the ECTD shared updates on the work of the UN/CEFACT. Key projects included developing trade facilitation roadmaps for transition economies like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This work is also ongoing for Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, based on RPBT studies. She also informed about the Report on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation conducted in 2023 jointly with five United Nations Regional Commissions and United Nations Trade and Development. She invited delegates to the Sustainable and Digital Trade Facilitation Week in Geneva on 8-12 July 2024, featuring the 42nd UN/CEFACT Forum and 30th UN/CEFACT Plenary.
- The Lead of the ECE Circular STEP initiative highlighted the efforts by ECTD to promote circular economy practices in the ECE region. Since its launch in April 2022, Circular STEP has produced seven knowledge pieces, conducted national capacity-building activities, and partnered with organizations like the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Sitra, OECD, FAO and UNIDO. Specifically on trade-related issues, she informed about the collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung office in Geneva on a study about the harmonized system (HS) code system's role in circular trade. Circular STEP held its first in-person Regional Policy Dialogue on the Circular Economy in October 2023 in Belgrade, Serbia and co-organized accelerator sessions at the World Circular Economy Forum in Brussels in May 2024.

Decision 2024-07

39. The Steering Committee took note of the report on cooperation with other organizations and ECE bodies in document ECE/CTCS/2024/12. The Steering Committee reaffirmed the benefits of cooperation and coordination, including on the cross-cutting themes on circular economy, and green and digital transformations with other ECE bodies, networks and international organizations. This includes specifically other United Nations bodies, development partners, as well as relevant ECE bodies and networks. The Steering Committee requested the secretariat to report again at the 2025 session and make an extra effort to seek for extrabudgetary funding for relevant joint activities.

VIII. Item 6. Follow-up to the evaluation of the Trade subprogramme and the Economic Cooperation and Integration subprogramme by the Office of Internal Oversight Services

40. The Director of the ECTD presented the progress on implementing the recommendations from the evaluation of the Trade Subprogramme and the Economic Cooperation and Integration Subprogramme by the Office of Internal Oversight Services, as they pertain to Subprogramme 6. She informed about the success of the evaluation, which resulted in four recommendations: a) implementing a technical cooperation request tracking mechanism, b) developing a division-wide integrated strategic plan, c) creating divisional action plans on resource mobilization, partnerships, and technical cooperation, and d) integrating gender, environment, disability inclusion, and human rights. She informed about the progress in addressing these recommendations, including the development of tabulated summaries of the technical assistance requests and cost-estimates presented to the Steering Committee as well as the ECE online tool to track all technical cooperation requests, which is being rolled out across ECE, including in ECTD. She also informed about piloting division-wide response to cross-cutting priority themes, expanding cooperation across subprogrammes and across Sections (the Regional Conference on the Circular Economy on 26 June 2024, co-hosted by CICPPP and SCTCS was an example). She also discussed steps taken to foster the integration of United Nations-wide priorities (e.g. gender, human rights and disability considerations) in ECTD workstreams.

41. The Director of the ECTD also expressed concerns over the effects of the so-called "liquidity crisis" of the United Nations, which is disrupting the team's ability to fulfil its mandates and deliver results. The crisis has led to a shortage of human resources including staff (regular P and G staff) as well as consultants and individual contractors. The crisis has also impacted delivery given reduction given challenges with regular-budget funds for travel (for both, secretariat and experts). Impacts resulting from these challenges include delays, reduction and shortening of parliamentary documentation, delays in the publication of standards (including website update), and inability for the Division to participate in global events, such as the UNCTAD 2023 World Investment Forum, WTO's thirteenth Ministerial Conference, COP 28, the ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development Follow-up, and in bringing experts to ECE meetings in Geneva.

Decision 2024-08

42. The Steering Committee welcomed the report on progress made on implementing the recommendations of the evaluation of subprogramme 4 and subprogramme 6 (implemented by the ECE Economic Cooperation and Trade Division, (ECTD)) undertaken by the Office of Internal Oversight (ECE Executive Committee informal document no. 2023/21), notably on a technical cooperation request tracking mechanism.

43. The Steering Committee also invited its Bureau to work with the secretariat on the implementation of the recommendations and to report back in 2025; and called on member States and development partners to work with the secretariat in support of the implementation of the ECE strategies on resource mobilization, partnerships and technical cooperation.

C. Substantive segment

IX. Item 7. Removing regulatory and procedural barriers to trade in the Economic Commission for Europe region, country studies: Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

44. The Vice-Chair introduced this item, recognizing the importance of the secretariat's work in supporting countries in removing regulatory and procedural barriers to trade. He underlined that the RPBT studies are an important element of the Committee's work and ECE's broader trade-related agenda. He congratulated the Governments of Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on the significant progress achieved.

45. The secretariat presented the summary of the findings of the RPBT studies for Armenia (ECE/CTCS/2024/3), Kazakhstan (ECE/CTCS/2024/4) and Kyrgyzstan (ECE/CTCS/2024/5), aiming to enhance exports of fish products (Armenia), vegetable oil (Kazakhstan), and dried fruits (Kyrgyzstan). The studies assess current and potential markets, trade facilitation frameworks and quality infrastructure for trade. The recommendations aim to increase cross-border trade efficiency and support the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

46. The delegate of Kyrgyzstan thanked ECE for the RPBT study (ECE/CTCS/2024/5) and outlined ongoing initiatives to boost the country's export potential, including export promotion, quality infrastructure, access to finance and trade facilitation. He highlighted the "Made in Kyrgyzstan" national export program (2024-2027), which enhances State support and public-private cooperation, and the establishment of the Kyrgyz Export Center and its information technology (IT) platform. He emphasized the importance of optimizing trade formalities and improving access to finance for exporters. He also acknowledged international support for logistical infrastructure and bilateral funds for export-oriented companies.

47. The delegate of Armenia highlighted progress in reducing non-tariff trade barriers and the importance of the RPBT study (ECE/CTCS/2024/3) recommendations. He emphasized Armenia's commitment to paperless trading and improved cross-border trade infrastructure. Supported by the United States Agency for International Development, Armenia has worked to diversify exports beyond existing partners for three product categories, ranked by the degree of logistical and technical challenges. The delegate called for technical assistance in building the necessary capacity to enable the export of products facing the most challenges, stressing the importance to attain export diversification goals.

48. The delegate of Kazakhstan highlighted Kazakhstan's strategic geographical position and its role in regional integration initiatives. She noted that Kazakhstan's trade turnover increased in 2023, reflecting the country's active participation in global trade. She emphasized efforts to diversify exports beyond fossil fuels, focusing on high-value sectors like vegetable oil production. She discussed the progress made in simplifying trade procedures and the implementation of the National Portal on Simplification of Trade Procedures. She also highlighted the importance of regional cooperation in the context of the development of the Middle Corridor.

Quality infrastructure: challenges to integration into value chains

49. The secretariat highlighted that a lack of compliance with international quality standards is among key obstacles to expanding exports. It provided an overview of the main achievements and challenges in the quality infrastructure systems of Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that was assessed as part of the RPBT studies. Achievements include the updating of legal frameworks on standardization, conformity assessment, and metrology to align with destination markets. At the same time, challenges remain, such as limited international recognition of Armenia's national accreditation body, inadequate testing laboratories in Kazakhstan, and a lack of a comprehensive food safety system in Kyrgyzstan. Recommendations for the way forward based on the work of WP.6 and WP.7 were made.

50. A discussion followed with interventions by international organizations and development partners.

- A representative of the Asia-Pacific Association of Agriculture Research Institutions highlighted the need for capacity building in agriculture innovation, promoting biopesticides, and fostering public-private partnerships.
- A representative of the OECD stressed the importance of quality infrastructure for conformity assessment and reducing trade barriers, mentioning ongoing projects on policies for paperless trade and voluntary sustainability standards.
- A representative of the UNIDO detailed tools for enhancing quality infrastructure, emphasizing the Global Quality and Standards Program's technical cooperation and capacity building.
- All speakers stressed a holistic approach to quality infrastructure development for trade and sustainable development.

Trade facilitation: findings from business process analysis

51. Regarding trade facilitation aspects assessed as part of the RPBT studies, the secretariat reported significant improvements in trade facilitation across all countries, reflected in higher scores from the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation. However, challenges persist, such as a lack of electronic data exchange in Armenia, border crossing inefficiencies in Kazakhstan, and unreliable transit routes in Kyrgyzstan. The secretariat expressed readiness to assist with recommendations based on UN/CEFACT standards and best practices to enhance electronic data exchange, improve border procedures, and increase transit route reliability.

52. Experts on trade facilitation commented on the findings of the studies.

- A representative of the EBRD noted record trade volumes in 2023 and emphasized the importance of de-risking in banking operations and the impact of reduced correspondent banking relationships on trade facilitation.
- A representative of the ICC highlighted progress in simplifying border processes and digitalizing trade during the COVID-19 pandemic, while cautioning against current setbacks, including rising protectionism.
- A representative of the Trade Facilitation Office, Canada outlined ongoing efforts to support sustainable trade partnerships for exporters from developing countries with Canadian and foreign buyers. He underscored challenges such as resource constraints, inadequate legal frameworks, infrastructure issues and technological gaps that hinder efficient trade facilitation processes in developing countries.

Way forward: fostering sustainable growth and economic diversification – the role of trade in services

53. To account of the significance of the services sector in the economies of ECE member States, and in addressing today's global priorities, the Committee hosted a discussion on the vital role of trade in services in promoting sustainable growth and economic diversification. The representative of the WTO presented the World Bank and WTO's report titled "Trade in services for development: Fostering sustainable growth and economic diversification." He highlighted that services now contribute more jobs and gross domestic product (GDP) than agriculture and manufacturing combined, especially in developing countries where services exports have seen substantial growth. He noted the rapid expansion of digitally delivered services due to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and digitalization and stressed the importance of improved trade policies to facilitate services trade, boost productivity and support MSMEs, including in the ECE region.

54. The representative of the World Bank outlined their focus on harnessing services trade for economic development, recognizing the sector's complexity and diversity. Emphasizing the need for increased resources and aid for trade, especially for developing countries, he detailed the five-point agenda of the World Bank - WTO Trade in Services for Development (TS4D) Initiative. This agenda aims to improve data on services trade, map trade and investment restrictive measures, develop a competitiveness checklist, promote trade in services, and establish an online platform for best practices.

55. The Director of the ECTD underscored the vital role of services trade for ECE member States, noting its substantial contribution to GDP. She highlighted how the services sector featured prominently in several of the Division's work streams, including the work stream on mobilizing infrastructure investment through public-private partnerships, the work stream on transformative innovation and the work stream on digitalization of multimodal trade and transport connectivity. Referring to the Committee's terms of reference, and the explicit reference to trade in services, she saw opportunities for strengthening the services dimension of its work, including the RPBTs. Cooperation with the World Bank and WTO would surely present a unique potential for the way forward.

56. The delegate of the Republic of Moldova highlighted the increasing importance of trade in services for the economy of the Republic of Moldova, with services accounting for 25 per cent of GDP in 2022. Key exports include ICT, travel and transport. She emphasized the potential for expanding services exports, particularly in ICT, and stressed the importance of facilitating trade in services through capacity-building and improved trade statistics. She also noted her country's commitment to services liberalization under the General Agreement on Trade in Services Agreement and recent efforts within the Central European Free Trade Agreement framework.

57. The delegate of Kyrgyzstan acknowledged the usefulness of the work done by the WTO and World Bank and highlighted the potential for developing the transportation and tourism sectors due to the country's strategic location and natural endowments. He emphasized the importance of a well-governed regulatory framework and a favourable institutional environment for economic diversification, investment inflows, and job creation. He expressed interest in the competitiveness checklist, transparency of services trade regimes, and best practices in trade and investment promotion.

58. The delegate of Kazakhstan noted the significant contribution of services to the country's GDP, accounting for over 40 per cent. She highlighted the development of the transport, financial services, and construction sectors, and the challenges posed by extensive regulation. She emphasized the need for mutual recognition of permits and licenses or deregulation to facilitate services sector growth and referred to the importance of liberalizing the services sector to enhance trade and economic development.

Decision 2024-09

59. The Steering Committee congratulated the Governments of Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for the completion of studies on assessing regulatory and procedural barriers to trade in the context of integration into value chains. The Steering Committee emphasized the importance of leveraging the findings and recommendations of these studies (ECE/CTCS/2024/3, ECE/CTCS/2024/4, ECE/CTCS/2024/5) to inform policy decisions and strategic actions aimed at reducing trade barriers, enhancing export competitiveness and fostering sustainable economic growth in the respective countries. The Steering Committee also emphasized the critical importance of extrabudgetary funding to offer follow-up activities and advisory services to Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and called on donors and development partners to consider providing additional funding for this work.

Decision 2024-10

60. The Steering Committee welcomed the presentation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank Report on Trade in Services for Development, which, among others, looks at the role of logistics, finance and information technologies in the functioning of modern economies. The Steering Committee recognized the role of the services sector as a source of economic growth in recent decades and requested the secretariat to explore ways for potential collaboration in this area in line with the Terms of Reference of the Steering Committee and subject to extrabudgetary funding.

X. Item 8. Updates from the Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization Policies and roundtable discussion

61. The Vice-Chair of the Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization Policies (WP.6) (Israel) presented the Working Party's recent activities and underlined that in 2023, the WP.6 Bureau and secretariat continued the internal process to streamline its work, which resulted in two documents on summary of working practices (ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/12 and ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/13). These were approved by the WP.6 thirty-third session and presented to the Committee as per its decision 2023-06. He highlighted the recent period's activities of the WP.6, including seven webinars and 14 official meetings besides the annual session. These meetings were generally balanced at a 50-50 women and men ratio.

62. The Advisory Group on Market Surveillance (MARS) finalized the revision of Recommendation K on Metrological Assurance of Conformity Assessment and Testing (ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/5) and launched the revision of Recommendation M on the Use of Market Surveillance Infrastructure as a Complementary Means to Protect Consumers and Users Against Counterfeit Goods. The Group of Experts on Risk Management in Regulatory Systems (GRM) launched a project on achieving integrated risk management through a single window system. The Ad-Hoc Team of Specialists on Standardization and Regulatory Techniques (START) closed the initiatives on earth-moving machinery and telecommunication and launched a project on the harmonization of technical requirements of material used for the extraction and transport of hydrogen and hydrogen-mixes. The Team of Specialists on Gender-Responsive Standards (ToS-GRS) finalized a paper on gender and salutation code lists (ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/11). The plans for the next period were presented in the programme of work (ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/14) which included the request to renew the mandates of the WP.6 subgroups MARS, GRM, START and ToS-GRS.

63. WP.6 has featured several work items which support the seventieth Commission session theme on digital and green transformations. A conference on "How to target continuous compliance" was integrated into its thirty-third annual session (ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/2). Speakers at the event underlined the challenge such technologies have on regulating products and performing conformity assessment or market surveillance. Products with embedded artificial intelligence may evolve after their entry into the market, which reinforces the needs for continuous compliance.

64. WP.6 presented a document on artificial intelligence (ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/9) and has launched work on a common regulatory arrangement to harmonize technical regulations and market surveillance procedures, which will be accompanied by a declaration on the topic. WP.6 has started a series of publications highlighting the basics of the various themes within its scope. The first publication on the Basics of Quality Infrastructure for Trade (ECE/TRADE/478) was released, and several of the chapters were highlighted during the discussion. The Vice-Chair of the Committee highlighted the usefulness of the study and the importance that the report be translated into other United Nations official languages. The secretariat mentioned that efforts will be made to translate the document subject to the availability of extrabudgetary resources.

65. The representative of the OIML underlined the importance of metrology as the basis of all measurements and controls of products. The representative of the Belgian Metrology Department under the Belgian Federal Public Service Economy presented the role of market surveillance and the methods of product control. The representative of the European Cooperation for Accreditation Association stressed the importance of conformity assessment and accreditation as well as the efforts made to ensure mutual recognition of results.

66. The representative of Lex Informatica introduced the forthcoming "Basics of Risk Management in Trade" document and a case study on the New Zealand risk engine. She highlighted the importance of integrating risk management into businesses' systems and addressing key emerging issues like the circular economy, artificial intelligence, and gender considerations. The representative of the Women at the Table association stressed that gender-responsive considerations taken in international trade and in the creation of the national quality infrastructure improve desired outcomes and help in achieving the

Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting gender-responsive standards as a successful initiative among standards-setting bodies. The next “Basics” publication planned on risk management in regulation and trade was briefly presented.

Decision 2024-11

67. The Steering Committee expressed its satisfaction with the work undertaken by the Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization Policies (WP.6). It recognized the importance of quality infrastructure for reducing technical barriers to trade and endorsed the report of the thirty-third session of WP.6 on 23–24 November 2023 in document ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/2. Following decision 16 of the thirty-third session of WP.6, the Steering Committee endorsed the Programme of work of WP.6 in document ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/14. The Steering Committee invited WP.6 to continue implementing its programme of work and report to the 2025 session. The Steering Committee also called on donors and development partners to consider providing funding to offer demand-driven capacity-building in line with the programme of work of WP.6. Following decision 7 of the thirty-third session of WP.6, the Steering Committee endorsed the revision of Recommendation K on Metrological Assurance of Conformity Assessment and Testing in document ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/5. Following decision 13 of the thirty-third session of WP.6, the Steering Committee endorsed the publication *Why Gender Responsive Standards are Better for Everyone* (ECE/TRADE/474).

Decision 2024-12

68. Following decision 17 of the thirty-third session of WP.6, the Steering Committee endorsed the extension of the mandates of WP.6 subgroups contained in the annexes of document ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/14 for a further two year period: the Advisory Group on Market Surveillance (MARS) in annex III, the Ad Hoc Team of Specialists on Standardization and Regulatory Techniques (START) in annex IV, the Group of Experts on Risk Management in Regulatory Systems (GRM) in annex V and the Team of Specialists on Gender-Responsive Standards (ToS-GRS) in annex VI.

Decision 2024-13

69. Following up on decision 2023-06 of the Steering Committee, WP.6 finalized and approved in decision 14, its internal procedures in documents ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/12 and ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2023/13. The Steering Committee took note of these documents and commended WP.6 for its efforts to streamline and clarify its internal procedures.

Decision 2024-14

70. The Steering Committee took note of the publication *The Basics of Quality Infrastructure for Trade* (ECE/TRADE/478) and expressed its appreciation to WP.6 and its secretariat for its efforts to clarify the base principles of its work. It also took note that further “Basics” publications were planned and encouraged WP.6 and its secretariat to present these publications at future meetings of the Steering Committee.

XI. Item 9. Updates from the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards

71. The Chair of Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards (WP.7) (Poland) presented on recent activities of the Working Party. She noted that ECE’s over 100 agricultural quality standards in fresh fruit and vegetables, dried fruit and nuts, meat and seed potatoes form an essential part of the international trade infrastructure, facilitating trade through (i) providing a common trading language for all economic operators along the value chain; (ii) building confidence and competitiveness in a market; (iii) serving as a basis for pricing, thus increasing the profitability of high-quality produce; (iv) enabling groups of producers to combine produce into larger lots to better serve the market; and (v) reducing food loss and waste down the value chain. The standards development process is a demand-driven, inclusive, responsive and open process for the entire United Nations membership.

This helps to adopt standards that reflect emerging varieties of changing production, marketing, trading and regulatory conditions.

72. The Chair briefed on the outcomes of the 2023 the seventy-eighth session of the WP.7, which had adopted three new standards for certain small fruits, inshell pecans and pecan kernels; a new recommendation for sweet potatoes, for a one-year trial; eight revised standards (asparagus, broccoli, cashew kernels, kiwifruit, onions, peas, sweet chestnut, and bovine meat); a revised standard layout for ECE standards on fresh fruit and vegetables, and revised position papers on seed potatoes.

73. The Working Party had agreed on revisions to its Terms of Reference, which had been reviewed through an inclusive process involving the establishment of an open working group and review in the annual sessions of all Specialized Sections. The resulting revised text was submitted to the Committee for adoption.

74. The Working Party also adopted the programme of work for WP.7 for 2024, initiated a review of its Working Procedures, agreed to prepare a WP.7 strategy for capacity building, and held discussions on digitalization and food loss and waste reduction.

75. The WP.7 Chair informed the Committee about recent capacity-building activities, in particular the recent training workshop on “Agricultural quality standards: methods and tools for inspection and sampling”, which was held on 4-6 June 2024 in Uzbekistan in collaboration with UNDP, OECD and Hilfswerk International.

76. During 2024, three meetings of Specialized Sections had already been held, and work in progress included the ongoing review of the entire ECE standard for seed potatoes, reviews of the standards for pears, courgettes, garlic, carrots, ovine meat, the development of a new standard for whole dried rosehip, a proposal for digitalization of the bovine standard and work on aligning standards with the revised standard layouts.

77. The Secretary to WP.7 informed of efforts to assess the use and impact of ECE standards and presented key findings of a joint OECD-ECE study attempting to quantify the impact of the ECE marketing standards on trade. The study, which is based on regression analysis at the individual product level, found that of the 39 categories of fresh fruit and vegetables considered, implementation/revision of ECE standards and publication of OECD fruit and vegetable explanatory brochures are associated with substantial increases in international trade across multiple product categories. The study also showed that trade in the products was higher between countries that had adopted the standards than with other countries.

Decision 2024-15

78. The Steering Committee expressed its satisfaction with the work undertaken by the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards (WP.7) and its four Specialized Sections on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables (GE.1); Dry and Dried Produce (GE.2); Seed Potatoes (GE.6) and Meat (GE.11). The Steering Committee recognized the trade-related impact of the ECE work on agricultural quality standards. It endorsed the Report of the seventy-eighth session of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/2) and the Programme of work of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards for 2024 (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/25). The Steering Committee invited WP.7 to continue implementing its programme of work. It expressed appreciation for the regional seminar on “Agricultural Quality Standards: Methods and Tools for Inspection and Sampling of Fresh and Dried Fruit and Vegetables” that was held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan (4-6 June 2024), and called on donors and development partners to consider providing funding to support other activities to increase the capacity to implement standards in ECE programme countries in line with the programme of work of WP.7.

Decision 2024-16

79. The Working Party approved the revised Terms of Reference of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards as contained in document ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/3/Rev.1 and endorsed the extension of its mandate for another five-year period, until the end of 2028.

Decision 2024-17

80. Following the decisions of the WP.7 at its seventy-eighth session on 13–15 November 2023, the Steering Committee endorsed the following new and revised standards and recommendations and related guidance:

- Standard for certain small fruits (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/6)
- Standard for sweet potatoes, as a recommendation for one-year trial (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/7)
- Revised standard for asparagus (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/8)
- Revised standard for broccoli (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/9)
- Revised standard for kiwifruit (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/10)
- Revised standard for onions (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/11)
- Revised standard for peas (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/12)
- Revised standard for sweet chestnuts (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/13)
- Revised Minimum Quality Specifications for Fresh Fruit and Vegetables (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/14)
- Revised Standard layout for United Nations Economic Commission for Europe standards on fresh fruit and vegetables (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/15).
- Standard for inshell pecans (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/16)
- Standard for pecan kernels (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/17)
- Revised standard for cashew kernels (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/19).
- Revised position papers of the Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/23).
- Revised Standard for Bovine Meat – Carcasses and Cuts (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2023/24).

XII. Item 10. Removing regulatory and procedural barriers to trade in the Economic Commission for Europe region, forthcoming country studies: Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan

81. The secretariat presented the outlines of the forthcoming RPBT studies for Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan (ECE/CTCS/2024/6 and ECE/CTCS/2024/7), which aim to strengthen the capacity to reduce regulatory and procedural trade barriers and support trade reforms as part of the WTO accession process in these countries. The studies respond to the request for capacity-building expressed at the Committee session in 2022. The secretariat reported on its efforts to secure initial funding for both projects and identified the next steps, which include undertaking desk research, stakeholder interviews, fact-finding missions, training, and workshops. Key partners and programme countries shared their perspectives on this recently initiated work on RPBTs.

- The representative of the IsDB (pre-recorded message) expressed appreciation of the upcoming joint cooperation with ECE in Turkmenistan, co-funded by the Bank. He underscored the IsDB's commitment to enhancing cross-border connectivity and investment climate in Central and West Asia, aligning with its Regional Cooperation and Integration policy launched in 2019. He highlighted the role of development finance in undertaking significant trade-enhancing projects like the Bereket Etrek railway and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, emphasizing the need for regulatory frameworks and regional cooperation to support trade development.
- The delegate of Azerbaijan welcomed the undertaking of a new RPBT study co-funded by the Government of Azerbaijan. She expressed the country's commitment to a diversified market economy, reducing oil dependence and enhancing trade

transparency. She elaborated on the WTO accession process, ongoing since 1997, highlighting legislative reforms and infrastructure development aimed at attracting foreign investment and integrating into global value chains.

- The delegate of Turkmenistan highlighted Turkmenistan's efforts to join the WTO, including with respect to legal reforms and trade facilitation measures like the integrated customs information system and green corridors for vehicles. He stressed the importance of regulatory harmonization and institutional coordination to align with WTO standards and facilitate trade and underlined the important role of the new RPBT study in this context.

82. Representatives of other member States commented on the relevance of RPBT studies for countries with economies in transition.

- The Deputy Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of the European Union to the WTO discussed the strategic importance of WTO membership for economic integration and diversification, using the EU's single market as a model. He emphasized the need for regulatory coherence and domestic coordination in trade policies, encouraging Central Asian countries to pursue WTO accession to enhance global competitiveness, and noted the useful contribution that ECE, including through its trade-related work, could make in this regard.
- The representative of the Republic of Moldova expressed appreciation of the secretariat's support with the trade reforms through RPBT studies. She highlighted the country's progress in trade facilitation since joining the WTO in 2001, including the establishment of the National Trade Facilitation Committee and the adoption of a comprehensive action plan. She emphasized ongoing digitalization efforts, gender equality initiatives, and green agenda advancements, while calling for continued international support.
- The Director of the ECTD noted the relevance and value added of the substantive discussions on regulatory and procedural barriers to trade in this Committee, congratulating Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan for the progress made. She emphasized the relevance of ECE cross-cutting themes, such as digitalization and green/circular transformations, for the issues at hand. In terms of the Division's activities, she highlighted the importance of avoiding duplication of work undertaken by other organizations and the need for financial support to continue trade-related technical assistance and capacity-building efforts for the benefit of ECE programme countries.

83. A discussion followed with interventions by international organizations and development partners, who highlighted the relevance of complementary interventions to foster sustainable trade.

- A representative of United Nations Trade and Development discussed the relevance of its non-tariff measures (NTM) program's efforts to enhance transparency and good regulatory practices, highlighting the TRAINS database's role in reducing information costs and supporting trade agreements.
- A representative of ITC outlined its work to support MSMEs' competitiveness and regulatory alignment with international standards.
- A representative of the OECD emphasized the need for operational improvements, transparency, and border agency cooperation and welcomed the work of the ECE in the context of the RPBT studies.
- A representative of the WTI emphasized the importance of introducing a digital economy and developing policies that support economic growth and diversification, particularly for resource-rich countries like Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.
- The representative of the Rishi Partners stressed the importance of creating a compelling narrative for Central Asian countries to enhance their presence in global value chains. He discussed the need to overcome the mindset of being landlocked and to focus on regional connectivity, digitization and human resource development.

Decision 2024-18

84. The Steering Committee acknowledged the importance of removing regulatory and procedural barriers to trade within the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region and recognizes the forthcoming country studies on Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. The Steering Committee welcomed the initial outlines (ECE/CTCS/2024/6 and ECE/CTCS/2024/7) proposed under these projects, recognizing the significance of these initiatives in promoting trade facilitation, enhancing competitiveness, and fostering economic integration within the ECE region. It emphasized the importance of ensuring active participation and collaboration among relevant stakeholders, including government authorities, industry representatives, and international partners, in the implementation of these projects. The Steering Committee thanked the Government of Azerbaijan, the Islamic Development Bank, and the Islamic Centre for Development of Trade for their extrabudgetary contributions under these projects and invited other partners to support related capacity building activities. The Steering Committee requested the secretariat to provide an update on the progress of these projects in 2025.

D. Continuation of the general segment**XIII. Item 11. Other business**

85. The Chair opened the floor for any other business points. There were no requests from the floor. The Secretary of the Committee informed the Committee about ongoing arrangements for the tenth session. Responding to the request at the 2024 session, it was proposed to hold the 2025 session of the Committee in Geneva on 23-24 June 2025. She noted that this also reflects the availability of the United Nations Conference Services in Geneva.

Decision 2024-19

86. The Committee agreed that its tenth session would take place in Geneva on 23-24 June 2025, subject to confirmation of room availability and interpretation services.

XIV. Item 12. Adoption of the report**Decision 2024-20**

87. The Committee invited the secretariat to prepare a draft report and distribute it to the Geneva Permanent Missions for subsequent approval by silence procedure in accordance with paragraph 21 of appendix III of document E/ECE/1464 (Guidelines on procedures and practices for ECE bodies). Once the report is adopted, it will be published in English, French and Russian.
