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**Back to a sustainable future: achieving resilient connectivity
for post-COVID-19 sustained recovery and economic growth**

Concept note of the high-level policy segment “Back to a sustainable future: achieving resilient connectivity for post-COVID-19 sustained recovery and economic growth”

Note by the secretariat

Summary

This document outlines the concept and main themes of the high-level policy segment organized around Back to a sustainable future: achieving resilient connectivity for post-COVID-19 sustained recovery and economic growth. This document also contains information on planned activities, side events and other social events. The Bureau of the Inland Transport Committee, at its July 2020 meeting, agreed that the themes of the panels of the first day of the eighty-third session of the Committee would focus on this topic. The High-level policy segment will conclude with the endorsement of the Ministerial Resolution on Enhancing resilient inland transport connectivity under emergency situations: an urgent call for concerted action” (ECE/TRANS/2021/2).

I. Policy Context

Background and general outlook

1. Five years after the adoption in 2015 of the Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations General Assembly, due the COVID-19 pandemic and its epidemiological and socioeconomic impacts, the world experienced a global emergency of unseen proportions for a peace-time era. The 2020 Sustainable Development Goals Report issued a global alert, pointing out that the world faces the worst economic recession since the great depression, with gross domestic product (GDP) per capita expected to decline by 4.2 per cent in 2020. In a similar vein, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that several developing countries are at the brink of bankruptcy and default. As a direct implication of these developments, we observe increases in poverty and income inequality in several vulnerable countries. It is also becoming increasingly clear that, as a result, several United Nations



Member States will face serious challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals targets.

2. Under these circumstances returning to a robust and quick recovery is a top priority, nationally, regionally and globally. There is no doubt that from an economic, social and operational point of view, transport has a key role to play in supporting worldwide recovery efforts.

3. At the same time, returning to a “business-as-usual”-based recovery would mean that the lessons of the emergency the world still faces today have not been fully utilized. To accomplish *sustained* recovery, it is equally critical to fully understand the weaknesses exposed by the responses to the pandemic impacting the supply chains of the inland transport systems that link economic activity worldwide and bridge national borders. Only when these weaknesses are addressed, will we be able to assert that we have contributed towards making inland transport systems more resilient and have achieved a sustained, as well as full, recovery.

4. The High-level policy segment will contribute to the global debate by addressing these questions and by showing transitioning to sustainable and resilient connectivity is an area where “Building back better” is not merely a motto but has a tangible meaning and real positive implications.

5. The Inland Transport Committee (ITC) is uniquely situated to contribute to solutions that would accelerate the transition to sustainable and resilient connectivity. Through its global normative and operational impact in border-crossing facilitation as a global regulator, solutions proposed at the conference stand to result in real, tangible outcomes.

II. High-level Policy Segment

6. Building on recommendations by the ITC and Bureau debates, the general theme of the policy segment will be on Back to a sustainable future: achieving resilient connectivity for post-COVID-19 sustained recovery and economic growth. This theme will provide an opportunity to reflect on the unique assets of the Committee, highlighting its value added and underlining its future potential in a heavily impacted global economy due to the pandemic and a fast-changing production and trade landscape regionally and globally.

7. The draft programme on Tuesday, 23 February 2021, includes:

(a) Opening statements and launch of the publication on Sustainable Transport in the Age of COVID-19 -Practices, Initiatives and Responses: Building pandemic-resilient transport systems;

(b) A keynote speech on the importance of addressing connectivity challenges in transport under emergency situations and the role of the Committee in creating solutions;

(c) Two thematic panel debates with up to five panellists each and followed by scheduled interventions from the floor;

(d) The conference will conclude with the endorsement of the Ministerial Resolution.

A. Opening, launch of emergency resilience publication and keynote speech

8. The traditional opening statements will be followed by the official launch of an in-depth publication on the resilience of the inland transport systems to pandemics and international emergency situations. A keynote speech will follow on the vital need of finding and promoting effective solutions to enhance the preparedness of inland transport systems against emergencies and other types of unpredictable challenges, while addressing issues that may arise when such emergencies do occur. It will also place an emphasis on the strategic role of the Committee in providing a comprehensive cooperation platform to forge concerted solutions and enhance international collaboration. It is increasingly becoming evident that

improving the emergency resilience of transport is of critical importance to ensure the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. ITC has demonstrated its long and successful track record of real, positive impacts when working under business as usual conditions and in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders from the public and private sectors. What is new and urgent is to achieve a strong commitment to enhance cooperation frameworks for existing inland transport systems in hard times and under atypical operating conditions, such as those that occurred with the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to achieve sustained recovery and economic growth at both micro and macro levels of economic activities.

B. Panel debates

9. Two high-level panel debates will follow, with themes on critical policy and regulatory issues of direct relevance to the challenge of achieving emergency resilience and preparedness more broadly in the work of ITC and its subsidiary bodies. The panel themes are:

(a) Leveraging existing international transport connectivity solutions as enablers of economic growth and development: what room for enhanced international agreements?

(b) First or last response in a global emergency? International transport conventions as a catalyst of concerted national responses

10. Each panel debate will accommodate up to five high-level panellists.

11. Each debate will be moderated, and will last approximately 40 minutes, starting with short statements of five minutes by the panellists. The panellist's statements will be followed by scheduled high-level interventions from the floor (up to three minutes each). Statements and interventions will be followed by an open discussion.

1. Panel I: Leveraging existing international transport connectivity solutions as enablers of economic growth and development: what room for enhanced international agreements?

12. Here are some sobering facts from the 2020 Sustainable Development Goals report:

- in 2020 the world has seen the first increase in global poverty in decades with more than 70 million people pushed into extreme poverty.
- The pandemic is an additional threat to food systems and food security
- The pandemic has interrupted childhood immunization programmes in around 70 countries
- School closures kept 90 per cent of all students out of school, thus reversing years of progress on education
- Remote learning remains out of reach for at least 500 million students
- Tourism is facing unprecedented challenges with international tourist movements estimated to have dropped by 0.85 to 1.1 billion arrivals

13. In today's world, dominated by the global efforts to accelerate recovery from the economic, social and public health effects of the pandemic, restoring interconnectedness could not be more critical, both as an end and a means underlying global efforts. The first national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in limiting connectivity and national and international flows of goods and people. These first responses notwithstanding, there is little doubt that in the post-pandemic era and for the years to come, the capacity to participate unimpededly in the global and regional value chains will increasingly become one of the main determinants of economic development and growth. Reverting to the previous equilibrium of physical and nonphysical connectedness may not be automatic or linear but restoring connectivity is critical and an important factor in determining the collective ability of the international community to rationalize and normalize investment, production, distribution and consumption dynamics and trends.

14. With these in mind, the first panel of the high-level segment will focus on how to leverage existing international transport connectivity solutions as enablers of economic growth and development. In the longer-term, the physical and nonphysical connectedness is crucial for access to mobility for people and freight. This includes both transport infrastructure and services within a country and through facilitated border crossing conditions among the neighbours and those along the corridors. But how will it be possible to achieve resilient connectivity under emergency conditions? What is the room for enhancing international agreements? Two angles are of crucial importance.

15. First, geographically, how well does the toolkit of border-crossing facilitation legal instruments fare under emergency conditions comparatively among the various regions of the world? What lessons on improving mutual responses and reducing adverse economic impacts can be drawn from those regions more successfully deploying these instruments and benefiting from them? How can these lessons become useful and relevant for the rest of the regions? Regional perspectives of successes and failures, as well as challenges and opportunities will be critical in shaping the collective understanding of what works best and charting the way forward.

16. Second, functionally, are all relevant conventions meeting their full potential? Which can be upscaled, modernized and possibly adapted to better support national and international supply chains and trade flows, even under conditions of emergency pressures, thus lowering the levels of unpredictability and unintended consequences on economic activity triggered by uncoordinated national responses? Are new ones needed? What are the benefits and risks of the development and applications of regional alternative instruments and agreements outside the purview of the Committee? Do they better respond to regional characteristics or lead to more fragmentation and duplication? Which is the best response at a time when efficiency is as decisive as ever in determining the ranking of countries in global competitiveness ratings, as well as the long-term opportunities for employment and growth of national economies?

17. This panel will take a critical look and build on the ITC strengths in forging consensus, strengthening coordination and enhancing intergovernmental cooperation, especially in hard times, through its key assets, its convening power and normative functions, as enablers of economic growth and development.

2. Panel II: First or last response in a global emergency? International transport conventions as a catalyst of concerted national responses

18. International movement and connectivity have faced unprecedented challenges as an increasing number of countries around the world closed their borders and imposed travel restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time the implementation of United Nations inland transport conventions was not universally homogenous, as some governments opted for selective or adjusted implementation of legal instruments to which they are contracting parties. Last but not least, the networks utilized by Member States that are contracting parties to the TIR convention provided a unique governance network and mechanism that made it possible to set up, in record time, mechanisms for collection and dissemination of business-critical information on border crossing limitations worldwide.

19. This was the manifestation of the last response scenario for the international regulatory system: the entry into force of national emergency plans, without an overarching international coordinating framework, has led to suboptimal outcomes (lose-lose situations). The observed immediate COVID-19 responses at the national and international level create unique opportunities to critically reflect on the “first or last response” alternative, and specifically on:

(a) The role of the international regulatory system, as a potential enabler for establishing mechanisms for enhanced intergovernmental cooperation and coordination, thus creating win-win situations even under extraordinary circumstances. Under this theme/panel, the focus of the discussions would be on immediate actions to coordinate crisis measures but also a coordinated exit strategy to ensure supply chain flows. Cooperation with relevant international organizations and agencies is key, as the health and sanitary measures must be evidence-based and fully in line with existing recommendations and guidance.

(b) The resilience of conventions for future pandemics and extraordinary circumstances. This theme will be examined both top-down and bottom-up. The top-down perspective will examine diverging implementation of existing conventions, in order to assess their resilience and derive lessons that may lead to possible amendments or other responses to ensure harmonized implementation and, potentially, enforcement. The bottom-up perspective will start at the level of operators who, at a time of crisis, face competing rationales that could lead to non-compliance with existing rules and regulations set out in United Nations transport conventions. Offsetting losses and rewarding compliance at the micro level could go a long way into strengthening the resilience and relevance of the Conventions under the purview of the Committee.

(c) The economic dimension. The most compelling argument for further developing the existing inland transport regulatory system would be derived by an examination of the economic impacts of non-concerted actions and, conversely, the economic benefits of international cooperation and coordination. Trade-offs and co-benefits with large scale government interventions, including on green recovery, could also enrich the discussion which is of direct relevance to the development of international regulatory architecture.

20. At its eighty-second session in February 2020, the Committee decided to conduct necessary research on provisions in existing frameworks and new needed areas of work, with the support of interested governments and key stakeholders. The purpose was to promote cooperation between transport authorities in the field of counteracting the effects of emergency situations of cross-country nature, including epidemics and pandemics. This panel will create room for a high-level discussion, the conclusions of which will pave the way towards enhancing intergovernmental and inter-institutional cooperation in this high-impact, critical area.

C. Endorsement of the Ministerial Resolution Enhancing resilient inland transport connectivity under emergency situations: an urgent call for concerted action

21. At the end of the meeting, Ministers and Heads of delegations of Contracting Parties will be invited to express their support for the Ministerial Resolution on Enhancing resilient inland transport connectivity under emergency situations: an urgent call for concerted action (ECE/TRANS/2021/2). The Resolution takes stock of the global emergency underway, recognizes the unique strengths of the Committee and articulates the urgent call for concerted action in the face of international emergencies in terms relevant to the Committee's mandates. It does so by recognizing the Committee's relevance as a main avenue of the international efforts to find solutions for these challenges and by calling upon world transport leaders to embrace and intensify their support for the work of the Committee as the United Nations Platform for Inland Transport, to the benefit of the global community.

III. Scheduled high-level side-events

ITC Roundtable: "Road safety at a crossroads at the dawn of the new Decade of Action"

22. Despite strong and consistent efforts by Member States, the international community was not able to achieve by 2020 the target of the Sustainable Development Goals on road safety as evidenced by increasing, rather than decreasing, road fatalities and injuries globally.

23. There were three milestones in 2020 for the global community's and United Nations' efforts to recognize the shortcomings and address this challenge. First, the international community came together at the 3rd Global Ministerial Conference (Stockholm, 19–20 February 2020), in order to reach global consensus through the Stockholm Declaration on continued international collaboration on road safety up to 2030. Second, the ITC of ECE adopted at its eighty-second session (Geneva, 25–28 February 2020), effective 1 April 2020, the ITC Recommendations on Enhancing National Road Safety Systems, providing much

needed direction and guidelines to Member States on how to strengthen systematic improvement of road safety in a sustainable manner. Third, the General Assembly adopted on 31 September 2020 Resolution 74/299 on Improving global road safety, inaugurating the second Decade of Action for Road Safety, setting new ambitious goals and calling for the preparation of a plan of action of the Second Decade as a guiding document to support the implementation of its objectives. All three milestones recognize the unique and critical role of ECE and ITC.

24. The ITC Roundtable will bring together key worldwide stakeholders for a strategic discussion on the new course of action that is needed in order to make measurable progress in successfully addressing the continuing crisis.

Annex I

Draft weekly programme (22–26 February 2021)

Monday 22 February	3–6 p.m.	ITC Bureau meeting
Tuesday 23 February	11 a.m.–1 p.m.	ITC High-level Policy segment Hybrid session with interpretation
	1–3 p.m.	<i>Break</i>
	3–5 p.m.	ITC Annual Session - Restricted session* Hybrid session with interpretation (*Government representatives only)
	6–8 p.m.	Cocktail/Reception (Palais des Nations) (tbc)
Wednesday 24 February	11 a.m.–1 p.m.	ITC Annual Session Regular session Hybrid session with interpretation
	1–3 p.m.	<i>Break</i>
	3–5 p.m.	ITC Annual Session Regular session (Cont'd) Hybrid session with interpretation
Thursday 25 February	11 a.m.–1 p.m.	ITC Annual Session Regular session (Cont'd) Hybrid session with interpretation
	1–3 p.m.	<i>Break</i>
	3–5 p.m.	ITC Annual Session Regular session (Cont'd) Hybrid session with interpretation
Friday 26 February	10 a.m.–12 p.m.	ITC Roundtable on Road Safety Hybrid session with interpretation
	1–3 p.m.	<i>Break</i>
	3–6 p.m.	ITC Bureau meeting

Annex II

Draft Programme

High-level policy segment

“Back to a sustainable future:

achieving resilient connectivity for

post-COVID-19 sustained recovery and economic growth”

23 February 2021, 11 a.m. – 1 p.m., Hybrid session with interpretation

Palais des Nations, Geneva

11–11.15 a.m.	Opening statements, welcome speeches and official launch of emergency resilience publication
11.15–11.30 a.m.	Keynote speech
11.30 a.m. –12.10 p.m.	Panel I: Leveraging existing international transport connectivity solutions as enablers of economic growth and development: what room for enhanced international agreements? <i>Discussion and scheduled interventions (3 minutes each maximum)</i>
12.10–12.50 p.m.	Panel II: “First or last response” in a global emergency? International transport conventions as a catalyst of concerted national responses? <i>Discussion and scheduled interventions (3 minutes each maximum)</i>
12.50–1 p.m.	Announcement of the Ministerial Resolution and closing statements
1–3 p.m.	<i>Lunch break</i>
