



Thematic Working Group on Sustainable Transport, Transit and Connectivity (TWG-STTC)

28th Session
16-17 November 2023
(online)

**Enhancing operational connectivity along international
transport routes in SPECA region**

(Item 5.3 of the Agenda)

Note by ESCAP/UNECE

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1. In order to improve the efficiency of international transport routes and corridors, not only transport infrastructure but also issues related to operational connectivity need to be addressed. ESCAP supports the efficient and smooth movement of goods, passengers and vehicles by road, railways and intermodal transport across the region through its work on enhancing operational transport in Asia and the Pacific.
2. Countries in Central Asia are putting significant efforts towards stronger integration and cooperation in transport connectivity. The Fifth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State for Central Asia took place on 14 and 15 September 2023 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Discussions were held between the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Azerbaijan's President also attended the summit.
3. The Heads of States adopted an Agreement on Strengthening Land Transport Connectivity in Central Asia to further enhance the transport connectivity in the subregion by improving the efficiency and reliability of transport services and reducing transport costs. ESCAP assisted in developing the text of the Agreement strengthening the provisions on transport digitalization and other issues.
4. The first meeting of transport ministers of Central Asian countries was organized within the framework of the event. As a result, a Joint Communiqué on cooperation in transport and logistics was adopted.
5. The 7th session of the Committee on Transport¹ held in Bangkok from 23 to 25 November 2022 discussed matters of strategic importance to regional transport development,

¹ <https://www.unescap.org/events/2022/committee-transport-seventh-session>

regional cooperation and the formulation of regional policies to advance sustainable transport development in the region. This included discussions and several initiatives related to enhancing operational connectivity in Asia and the Pacific. In particular, the Committee welcomed:

- The “Guidelines for Harmonization of National Laws on Multimodal Transport in Asia and the Pacific”²
- The revision of the Model Subregional Agreement on Transport Facilitation³ to include the crisis provisions;
- The new online platform on AH, TAR, DP and maritime ports.

6. In addition, the Committee called for a renewed support to enhance the transport connectivity of countries in special situations through concrete initiatives like rail digitalization.

Further operationalization of the Asia-Pacific regional transport network

7. The operationalization of transport connectivity on the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railways networks as well as in respect of dry ports continues to be addressed by the Working Group on the Asian-Highway Network, the Working Group on the Trans-Asian Railway Network and the Working Group on the Dry Ports which met for their biennial meetings in 2023.

8. At its tenth Meeting on 14-15 June 2023, Bangkok and online⁴, the **Working Group on the Asian Highway** continued its discussions on the importance of enhancing the operational connectivity of the Asian Highway Network and agreed upon relevant measures, including:

- Easing the requirements for cross-border road transport permits and other requirements;
- Facilitating transit operations, including for the benefit of countries in special situations;
- Enabling multimodal linkages and further digitalization of the Network;
- Enhancing the interfaces of the Network with logistics platforms and services;
- Making transport connectivity along the Network safer and more socially inclusive, including from gender and rural accessibility perspectives.

9. Representatives of the following SPECA countries attended the Meeting: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

10. At its eighth meeting⁵ on 14-15 September 2023, Bangkok and online, the **Working Group on the Trans-Asian Railway Network** considered and, pending the agreement by the parties to accept the final changes, **adopted a new annex (Annex III) to the Agreement, entitled “General principles on electronic information exchange/data interchange among railways and between railways and control agencies along the Trans-Asian Railway Network”**.

² https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/June15_Guideline_for_harmonization_of_multimodal_transport_laws.pdf

³ <https://www.unescap.org/resources/model-subregional-agreement-transport-facilitation>

⁴ <https://www.unescap.org/events/2023/tenth-meeting-working-group-asian-highway#:~:text=In%20line%20with%20the%20Regional,for%20economic%20growth%3B%20environmentally%20sustainable>

⁵ <https://www.unescap.org/events/2023/eighth-meeting-working-group-trans-asian-railway-network#:~:text=The%20eighth%20meeting%20of%20the,14%20and%2015%20September%202023>

11. These principles aim to provide grounds for the further harmonization of electronic information exchange/data interchange among railways and between railways and control agencies. The main objective of the principles is to provide general guidance to the railways on harmonizing electronic information exchange practices with the overarching objective of increasing the competitiveness of international railway transport along the Trans-Asian Railway Network. They also encourage the members of the Trans-Asian Railway Network to use existing standards and practices on electronic information exchange/data interchange developed by international railway organizations. The principles could also serve as a basis for developing plurilateral, multilateral and regional agreements on harmonizing electronic information exchange/data interchange among railways and between railways and control agencies.

12. In addition, a policy segment on enhancing regional cooperation for more sustainable railway transport in Asia and the Pacific was held on 15 September 2023, in conjunction with the eighth meeting. Representatives of the following SPECA countries attended: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

13. At its fifth biennial meeting⁶ on 12 and 13 September 2023, held in Bangkok and online, the **Working Group on Dry Ports** considered the digitalization of dry ports so as to enhance their resilience to external shocks. It also called upon the parties to the Agreement to establish a dedicated platform for the coordination and exchange of relevant information on the operations of dry ports. The Working Group noted the importance of continuing to work to improve the operational environment and legal frameworks for multimodal transport operations. The fifth meeting also considered issues related to digitalization of rail and multimodal transport involving dry ports. In addition, an enlarged policy segment on digital transformation of rail and multimodal transport operations in North and Central Asia and beyond was organized during forenoon session on 13 September 2023, in conjunction with the fifth meeting. Representatives of the following SPECA countries attended: Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Promoting digitalization along the Asia-Pacific regional transport network

14. **High-Level Conference on Accelerating Rail Digital Transformation in Asia and Pacific region**⁷ was held on 5 and 6 April 2023 in New Delhi, India and online under the United Nations Development Account project on Enhancing Shift towards Sustainable Freight Transport in Asia and the Pacific. The High-Level Regional Conference deliberated on a regional strategy for accelerating rail digital transformation for a more competitive rail transport including way forward for its adoption; shared experiences on rail digitalization related challenges and emerging opportunities; and identified key issues for landlocked and least developing countries for them to leapfrog to digital rail.

15. The Final Strategy was endorsed by the eighth meeting of the **Working Group on the Trans-Asian Railway Network** as Strategy 2030 on Accelerating Rail Digital Transformation in the Asia-Pacific Region.⁸ The Working Group noted that implementing the Strategy 2030 through regional and subregional action plans would give a big push to rail digitalization, boosting the competitiveness of rail transport and enhancing the sustainability of transport, thereby contributing to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. It was attended by the representatives from Ministries of Transport/railway authorities of SPECA countries, namely Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

⁶ <https://www.unescap.org/events/2023/5th-meeting-working-group-dry-ports#:~:text=The%20fifth%20meeting%20will%20be,amendments%20proposed%20by%20the%20parties>

⁷ <https://www.unescap.org/events/2023/high-level-regional-conference-accelerating-rail-digital-transformation-asia-and>

⁸ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_TARN%288%29_4_E.pdf

16. In addition, an **Expert Meeting on Digital Transformation of Railway and Multimodal Transport in North and Central Asia & Joint ESCAP-UIC Capacity Building Workshop on Accelerating Rail Digital Transformation for Countries in North and Central Asia**⁹ were held from 02 to 03 November 2022 in Baku, Azerbaijan. The Expert Meeting was organized as part of a project on “New technologies and digital transformation in support of more resilient and competitive railway operations in North and Central Asia”. The Expert Meeting facilitated discussion among the countries of North and Central Asia on the existing technical and institutional capacity gaps in terms of digital transformation and use of new technologies for enhancing efficiency and resilience of railway/intermodal transport. The meeting also reviewed a draft study report on digitalization of rail and multimodal transport in the subregion and discuss its findings and recommendations.

17. The Expert Meeting was followed by the Capacity Building Workshop on Accelerating Rail Digital Transformation for countries in North and Central Asia organized jointly by the ESCAP secretariat and International Union of Railways (UIC). The representatives of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan participated in both the meeting and workshop.

Developing a Regional Road Map to Support Regional Cooperation for the Wider Deployment of Sustainable Smart Transport Systems

18. Smart transport systems have proved their benefits as a key enabler of reducing road crashes and traffic congestion and enhancing environmental sustainability in the Asia-Pacific region. However, the development of such systems in Asia and the Pacific has been imbalanced due to various factors, including low awareness of the role of smart transport technologies, limited capacity and, more importantly, a lack of regional cooperation.

19. In this context, ESCAP Transport Division developed the first regional roadmap which would include a package of strategies and policy plans on smart transport systems in Asia and the Pacific. Following the 1st Expert Group Meeting¹⁰ (1 December 2021), and the 2nd Expert Group Meeting¹¹ (07 December 2022), both held in virtual format, ESCAP organized the Regional Meeting on Developing a Regional Road Map to Support Regional Cooperation for the Wider Deployment of Sustainable Smart Transport Systems¹² in Seoul, Republic of Korea and online from 11 to 13 July 2023.

20. The Regional Meeting emphasized the importance of the coordinated efforts, discussed and adopted the Regional Road Map to Support Regional Cooperation for the Wider Deployment of Sustainable Smart Transport Systems, recommending further consideration by the Committee on Transport to endorse the Regional Road Map at its 8th session in fourth quarter 2024.

21. Furthermore, the Meeting adopted the Seoul Declaration on Regional Road Map to Support Regional Cooperation for the Wider Deployment of Sustainable Smart Transport

⁹<https://www.unescap.org/events/2022/expert-meeting-digital-transformation-railway-and-multimodal-transport-north-and>

¹⁰ <https://www.unescap.org/events/2021/expert-group-meeting-developing-regional-road-map-support-regional-cooperation-wider>

¹¹ <https://www.unescap.org/events/2022/2nd-expert-group-meeting-developing-regional-road-map-support-regional-cooperation>

¹² <https://www.unescap.org/events/2023/regional-meeting-developing-regional-road-map-support-regional-cooperation-wider>

Systems¹³ which contained the strategies and policy plans. The Regional Meeting was attended by more than 30 member states, including Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

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22. Taking the international legal framework as a starting point, it should be mentioned that among the vast array of available United Nations transport legal instruments, several are aimed at the simplification and harmonization of procedures at border-crossings, and some are most prominent, broadly used in the SPECA region. For example, the International Convention on the Harmonization of Frontier Controls of Goods¹⁴, generally known as the “Harmonization Convention” forms one of the most broadly accepted legal foundations of coordinated border management. There are 58 contracting parties¹⁵ to it, including all SPECA countries except Afghanistan.

23. The Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention), of 1975, sets up the procedure that permits the international carriage of goods by road vehicles or containers from one customs office of departure to a customs office of arrival, through as many countries as necessary, without intermediate check of the goods carried and without the deposit of a financial guarantee at each border. The Convention now has 78 contracting parties.

24. A significant milestone was achieved when, in February 2020, TIR contracting parties approved the legal basis for eTIR in the form of a new Annex 11 to the TIR Convention. The new Annex, which entered into force on 25 May 2021, brought new impetus to the digitalization of the TIR procedure. Convinced that computerization and digitalization of transport documents brings with it considerable time, cost and efficiency gains, TIR contracting parties, out of which many are LLDC or transit developing countries, have started to implement project on connection of national system to the eTIR international. The eTIR international system was recognized as the United Nations tool/convention that protects people from the pandemic while facilitating and simplifying borders crossing procedures by the United Nations system and Governments. Furthermore, after UNECE’s initial call to implement eTIR (7 April 2020), 17 countries plus the European Commission (27 Member States) have so far responded positively to connect their national systems to the eTIR international system. Further to the entry into force of Annex 11, a number of customs administrations have expressed interest in interconnecting their customs systems with the eTIR international system, the first required step to enable the eTIR procedure.

25. The status today regarding the interconnections of eTIR international system with the National Customs Systems:

¹³ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/Jul11-12_Seoul%20Declaration%20on%20Regional%20Road%20Map%20for%20Sustainable%20Smart%20Transport%20Systems.pdf

¹⁴ Detailed information on Harmonization Convention, TIR Convention, eTIR project and other customs transit facilitation measures are available on, http://www.unece.org/trans/main/itc/itc_doc_2019.html . Please refer to document ECE/TRANS/2019/17.

¹⁵ https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XI-A-17&chapter=11&clang=_en



- Azerbaijan, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Tunisia have finalised the interconnection of their national customs systems with the eTIR international system (Green),
- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Funds were already provided by UNECE, national consultants have been hired, contracts have been finalised and the interconnection projects have started,
- Iran, the President of Iranian customs and Deputy Minister of Economy attended the TIR Administrative Committee (AC.2) this October stating that the interconnection of Iranian customs systems with the eTIR international system will be finalised until the end of the year.
- Ukraine officially expressed interest to interconnect to the system. Funds will be secured for the project to start in January.
- The objective is to finalise those interconnections during 2024 and September 2024 to start discussions, secure funds and start interconnection projects with Türkiye, Turkmenistan, China, India, Mongolia and Afghanistan.

26. During the TIRExB meeting in Samarkand, Uzbekistan June 2023, a roadmap for eTIR International implementation in the Middle Corridor has been agreed upon and it is summarized as follows:



Sustainable transport connectivity and implementation of transport related SDGs in selected landlocked and transit/bridging countries project

27. A UNDA funded project entitled “Sustainable transport connectivity and implementation of transport related SDGs in selected landlocked and transit/bridging countries” has been completed in 2021. The project, in which Kazakhstan was one of beneficiary countries, provided a set of Sustainable Inland Transport Connectivity Indicators (SITCIN)¹⁶ - tool for LLDCs/ transit developing countries to measure their degree of connectivity.

28. SITCIN.org user platform, developed within the project, provides a comprehensive set of indicators for self-use by governments to measure the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of inland transport systems, including road, rail and inland waterways. The indicators allow Governments to assess the extent to which they effectively implement the relevant United Nations transport-related legal instruments, agreements, and conventions; and the degree to which their inland transport system is inter-operable with the systems within their respective region.

29. Current status: SITCIN.org has so far been used by seven member States, including Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan that have self-assessed the performance of their inland transport systems (or aspects thereof). In 2023 and 2024 measures are being taken to upgrade the SITCIN.org technical interface/ incl. through the deployment of French and Russian language versions thereby expanding the geographical outreach of the tool. Furthermore, additional tailored SITCIN.org functionalities are under development, e.g., enabling users to measure progress in a specific area: i.e., customs/ border management or for specific country profiles: i.e., landlocked developing countries (LLDCs).

Strengthening the capacity of Central Asian countries to develop sustainable urban mobility policy on car sharing and carpooling initiatives sharing

30. The objective of the project is to strengthen the capacity of Central Asian countries to develop a sustainable urban mobility policy on car sharing and car-pooling initiatives. In the project’s first phase, a study which (i) provided a brief history of the emergence and development of shared mobility services, which contribute to a more efficient use of available resources and to achieve a number of UN sustainable development goals, (ii) considered car sharing and carpooling in countries from Western Europe, Asia, and North America and tries to assess the possible development of similar services in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and (iii) offered guidelines and recommendations taking into account the best practices that may facilitate the transition in Central Asia to modern forms of sustainable urban mobility was prepared in October 2020.

31. On 8 October 2021 a workshop dedicated to urban mobility, car sharing and car-pooling in Central Asia with representatives from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was held. The workshop strengthened capacities of national representatives on the good practices and lessons learned from urban mobility, car sharing and car-pooling initiatives.

32. In 2022, several stakeholders were met in Kazakhstan (30 June 2022), Kyrgyzstan (17 May 2022) and Tajikistan (20 September 2022): local (mayor’s offices) and national (representatives of the transport ministries) public authorities, transport associations, national chambers of entrepreneurs, transport specialists and educational institutions (Technical University in Bishkek, Academy of Logistics and Transport in Nur-Sultan, Tajik Technical University in Dushanbe). The project has been presented and contacts were taken with the local authorities for a possible collaboration to the project. These meetings have also offered the

¹⁶https://www.unecce.org/trans/main/wp5/special_project_development_of_sustainable_inland_transport_connectivity_indicators.html

opportunity to collect information about the current legislative frameworks and policies in place in these three countries. They helped to raise awareness about sustainable transport mobility and to share the lessons learnt related to its development.

33. The final case studies for the three countries mentioned above were completed in 2023 and are available on the UNECE website. A final regional workshop was held in Astana, Kazakhstan on 5 October 2023 presenting the final findings for the study and providing capacity building for the countries of Central Asia on the potential for Car-sharing and Car-pooling initiatives. In addition to this final workshop a training course on this subject will be developed which will hopefully provide further capacity building opportunities in this area. UNECE stands ready to take further steps with countries in the region to work further on this topic when appropriate funding can be identified.

LearnITC platform on sustainable transport and trade connectivity

34. UNDA-financed project “Sustainable mobility and smart connectivity (trade and transport nexus) in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Western Balkans” which started in 2021. The project aims to develop the capacity of member States to implement sustainable mobility and connectivity policies, specifically by increasing the knowledge and skills of institutional and sectoral stakeholders in relation to UN inland transport and trade legal instruments.

35. This will be done initially through the development of the Smart and Sustainable Connectivity E-Learning Platform (LearnITC) that will include training material on sustainable mobility and connectivity tied to the UN legal instruments but also to the development of appropriate policy tools to implement the requirements of legal instruments, standards and guidelines.

36. Following the development of the E-Learning Platform, targeted capacity building activities aimed at increased the ability of national stakeholders to implement sustainable mobility and smart connectivity policies will be organized in the form of regional, and where necessary national, workshops as well as the preparation of national action plans on increasing sustainable mobility and smart connectivity.

37. After successful launch of LearnITC platform, a SPECA workshop - eLearning platforms on transport legal instruments will be held on 27 October 2022 in Tashkent. The aim of the Workshop was to equip national representatives with the knowledge and resource materials to understand the main concepts of sustainable transport and trade connectivity, and the UN inland transport and trade Conventions/Legal Agreements. UNECE will present courses that has been already implemented (vehicle regulation, transport of dangerous goods, transport networks and logistics, trade facilitation implementation, etc). Furthermore, the workshop will strengthen national capacities on how to develop policy tools for sustainable transport and better trade connectivity.

38. Since then, over 500 courses have been started on the platform with participants from 70 member States. Further courses are being developed for the platform and will come online in the coming months. In addition, the additional capacity building elements of this project are well underway. National Action Plans on specific aspects of Sustainable Transport have been launched in Albania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia and Uzbekistan. Plans are completed in Albania, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan leaving just the Serbian and Kyrgyz to finalise. National workshops to review and endorse these Action Plans have already taken place in Georgia, Albania and Uzbekistan with the Azerbaijan workshop planned for the end of November, the Serbian one for the end of January and the Kyrgyz workshop for the first half of February. Later in 2024 sub-regional workshops will be organised to share the results of all the national workshops and the action plans.

The Thematic Working Group may wish to:

- Welcome signing the Agreement on Strengthening Land Transport Connectivity in Central Asia and take concrete actions for its implementation.
- Encourage SPECA countries to take further actions to improve operational connectivity along the Asian Highways, Trans-Asian Railways networks and Dry Ports by identifying and eliminating non-physical barriers to land transport.
- Take note of the outcomes of the 7th session of the Committee on Transport held in Bangkok from 23 to 25 November 2022.
- Take note of the outcomes of the tenth Meeting of the Working Group on the Asian Highway, 14-15 June 2023, Bangkok and online; the eighth meeting of the Working Group on the Trans-Asian Railway Network, 14-15 September 2023, Bangkok and online; and the fifth biennial meeting of the Working Group on Dry Ports, 12 and 13 September 2023, Bangkok and online.
- Take note of the newly adopted annex to the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network entitled “*General principles on electronic information exchange/data interchange among railways and between railways and control agencies along the Trans-Asian Railway Network*” and invite SPECA countries to use apply these principles in their future work.
- Promote the use of digitalization, smart transport solutions and electronic exchange of information for international freight by rail transport, including based on the Strategy 2030 on Accelerating Rail Digital Transformation in the Asia-Pacific Region.
- Welcome finalization of the Regional Road Map to Support Regional Cooperation for the Wider Deployment of Sustainable Smart Transport Systems.
- Encourage SPECA countries to continue activities on interconnection of their national customs system with the eTIR international system (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) and join Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan who already connected with eTIR International. This would create electronic TIR corridors in the Central Asian countries following the TIR Convention especially the Annex 11 of the Convention on eTIR. More information can be found: www.etir.org.
- Invite the SPECA countries to nominate experts from both the ministries of Transport and customs authorities to actively participate at the sessions of the group of experts on the operationalization of eCMR. The objective of the group is to find a sustainable solution for a future eCMR system that covers the needs and requirements of all stakeholders and regions as well as agree on the way forward.
- Invite SPECA countries to ratify the additional protocol to the convention on the contract for the international carriage of goods by road (CMR) concerning the electronic consignment note (eCMR).
- To invite the SPECA member countries to appoint a SITCIN National Focal point and use the indicators for assessment of their respective national inland transport systems.
- To invite SPECA member countries to make full use of LearnITC to garner further understanding of the Inland Transport and Trade Connectivity legal instruments and policy initiatives.