

Assessment Report on the Implementation of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development and its Action Plan

by Rumen Dobrinsky and Lyudmyla Tautiyeva

1. Introduction and background

The main objectives of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development and the adoption of the Action Plan

The SPECA Governing Council approved at its 14th session (Ashgabat, 21 November 2019) the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development and encouraged the SPECA countries, donors and partner organizations to support its implementation. This Strategy reflected the ambition of the SPECA countries to develop and consolidate their national capacity to design and implement innovation policies for sustainable development taking into account not only their national contexts and existing constraints but also recognizing the possible transboundary effects, especially within the SPECA region.

The overall objective of the Strategy is to achieve a sustained improvement in the national capacity and capabilities of the SPECA countries to formulate and implement innovation policies for sustainable development and to raise the level and quality of regional cooperation in the implementation of innovations that target and support sustainable development.

For the achievement of this ambitious goal the Strategy formulated the following specific objectives:

1. Upgrade the knowledge and skills base of key stakeholders in the SPECA countries to match the challenges of addressing SDGs with innovative solutions;
2. Facilitate the diffusion of innovations and the transfer of technologies addressing sustainable development challenges in the region;
3. Enhance the institutional framework for regional cooperation for implementing innovation addressing sustainable development challenges of common interest;
4. Contribute to improved performance of the SPECA countries in the degree of SDG achievement.

In a following step, the SPECA Governing Council endorsed at its 16th session (Tashkent, 19 November 2021), an Action Plan of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development. The Action Plan outlines a set of activities through which the SPECA countries aim to achieve the objectives of the Strategy. The Action Plan also specifies

the governance and monitoring mechanisms necessary for the oversight of progress in implementing the SPECA Innovation Strategy.

Challenges in Strategy implementation caused by the covid-19 pandemic and actions taken in this regard

The period following the adoption of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development was difficult and accompanied by unforeseen events on the global scene. The global covid-19 pandemic that broke out in the beginning of 2020 and lasted for more than two years confronted the global community with unprecedented challenges. Travel, trade and tourism activities as well as face-to-face human interactions worldwide were grossly interrupted and, in some cases, came to a complete halt. Being land-locked, the SPECA region was particularly badly affected by these developments.

Inevitably, the disruptions caused by the covid-19 pandemic affected significantly the implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan. This imposed the necessity to introduce *force majeure* changes in implementation and, regrettably, the cancellation of some envisaged activities. The latter concerned in the first place the implementation of several field events in the SPECA countries which entailed travel and face-to-face contact, including the participation of international experts and/or participants from other SPECA countries in the envisaged field-based events.

Nevertheless, thanks to the combined efforts of the SPECA countries and the secretariats of UNECE and ESCAP, the implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan continued, with some inevitable modifications. In particular, the *force majeure* events imposed the need of reformatting planned activities from onsite to online format as well as the substitution of planned field-based activities involving travel from abroad with events that could be implemented without the need of travel, most often, in an online format.

As noted above, the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development as adopted by the SPECA Governing Council envisages regular monitoring of implementation on the basis of periodic evaluation reports. The Strategy also delegates the national Focal Points and their teams with responsibilities for preparing inputs for these reports, to be compiled with support from the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development.

The objective of the current assessment report

The present report is part of the regular monitoring of implementation as envisaged in the Strategy. In particular, the Action Plan envisaged the undertaking in 2023 a Mid-term evaluation on the basis of a Mid-term evaluation report of implementation. To this effect the UNECE secretariat initiated an effort aimed at taking stock of the progress made in the implementation of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development and its Action Plan, taking into account of the significant changes in circumstances in the process of implementation. The main instrument for this evaluation was a questionnaire circulated among a large group of SPECA stakeholders seeking to assess their perception of the achieved results

and outcomes, of the successes and failures as well as of the difficulties and problems encountered in implementation.

The partial results from this survey were presented at the Subregional SPECA Workshop on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development held in Tashkent on 18-19 October 2023 and served as the basis for a discussion with the participants in the workshop on the outcomes and results of Strategy implementation and its Action Plan since the launch of the latter.

Outline of the report

This report contains a brief overview of the actual implementation in the period 2022-2023 (Section 2) and presents a summary of the results of the questionnaire together with some issues raised during the discussions at the Subregional SPECA Workshop on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development held in Tashkent on 18-19 October 2023 (Section 3). Section 4 recapitulates some key conclusions that merit bringing back to the attention of the governments of the SPECA countries. Finally, Section 5 outlines some proposals for adjusting and updating the Action Plan in the years 2024-2025. It is expected that these conclusions would allow the governments to perform a fair, evidence-based evaluation of the progress in implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan and contribute to elaboration of the next steps in implementation of these strategic documents.

2. Overview of the implementation of the Action Plan in the period 2022-2023

The UNECE support to SPECA participating states in implementation of the Action Plan of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development over 2022-2023 has capacity building activities on topics requested by the SPECA states and others that contribute to progress towards SDG achievement. Thus, the capacity-building events included i) online trainings for policymakers on support for innovative high-growth enterprises in SPECA region; ii) online workshops on new approaches to innovation policy adapted to the SPECA policy context; iii) online trainings for managers of business incubators and accelerators on effective management, work with venture funds and business angels; iv) a study tour to Georgia to get deeper insight and gain better understanding of Georgian framework of business support institutions, best practices in nurturing innovation and supporting start-ups, and foster networking and collaboration with Georgia; v) an in-person workshop on using innovation by business sector for circular economy transition.

The list of the abovementioned events with indication of the dates is the following:

1. Online training for policy practitioners “Supporting innovative high-growth enterprises in SPECA subregion” (15,17 February 2022, Zoom platform);
2. Webinar “New approaches to innovation policy in transition economies of SPECA subregion” (19 May 2022, Zoom platform);

3. Expert Group Meeting on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development (hybrid event, 19-20 July 2022, Almaty, Kazakhstan and Zoom platform);
4. Online training for SPECA representatives “Effective management and development of business incubators and accelerators” (27-29 Sept 2022, Zoom platform);
5. Online training “Development of business incubators and accelerators: educational programme for university management” (23 Feb 2023, Zoom platform);
6. Online training “Working with venture funds and business-angels” (16 March 2023, Zoom platform);
7. Study tour for SPECA policymakers on innovation to Georgia (10-11 Jul 2023, Tbilisi, Georgia);
8. B2B event on innovation for the circular economy: bridging start-ups and corporations (18 October 2023, Tashkent, Uzbekistan).

In addition, a series of training materials to support the capacities of the SPECA policymakers to design and implement innovation policy for sustainable development was developed by the UNEC and disseminated among stakeholders. These include the UNECE handbooks on “Business Incubators for Sustainable Development in the SPECA Subregion” (2021), “Supporting Innovative High-Growth Enterprises in the SPECA subregion” (2022), “New Innovation Policy in the SPECA Subregion” (2023), as well as a “Innovation for the Circular Economy: A Practical Guide for the SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development” (2023).

The contribution of these activities to the objectives of the Strategy and the Action Plan implementation are summarised in the Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the results of the Action Plan implementation over 2022-2023

N	Actions and sub-actions	Desc#ription	S/O	Timeline	Results
A1	Action Plan launch	Organisational activities to support Action Plan implementation in the SPECA countries	O1, O2, O3, O4	2021-2022	Action Plan endorsed by the SPECA Governing Council on 19 November 2021
A1.1	Nomination of Focal Points	Each SPECA country nominates a Focal Point to coordinate implementation in the respective countries	O1, O2, O3 O4	2021-2022	Focal points nominated in Dec 2021
A1.2	Promotional/awareness raising campaigns	Each SPECA country undertakes a national promotional/ awareness raising campaign to mobilise participation of national stakeholders in the implementation of actions	O1, O2, O3 O4	2022	Undertaken for CB and other events in 2022
A2	National capacity building and skills-	The workshops will cover selected topics on innovation policy for	O1, O3	2022-2024	In progress with 8 events conducted 2022-2023

	development workshops	inclusive and sustainable development based on identified needs and priority areas for cooperation for the SPECA countries			
A2.1	First series of national workshops	Possible topics: a) Building institutional capacity in innovation for inclusive and sustainable development policy; b) Policy coordination on innovation for inclusive and sustainable development	O1, O3	2022	4 workshops conducted on supporting innovative high-growth firms, new approaches to innovation policy, development of business incubators
A2.2	Second series of national workshops	Possible topics: a) Policy experimentation in innovation policy for inclusive and sustainable development; b) Innovation-enhancing public procurement targeting innovation for sustainable development	O1, O3	2023	3 workshops conducted on developing BI and accelerators in universities, working with venture funds and innovation in circular economy; a study tour to Georgia for innovation policymakers;
A2.3	Third series of national workshops	Possible topics: a) Alternative sources of early-stage financing: microfinance and crowdfunding; b) Facilitating digital innovation and digital ecosystems supporting inclusive and sustainable development in the SPECA countries	O1, O3	2024	Upcoming
A3	Training materials on innovation for SD policies (in 3 sets)	Develop and disseminate training materials on good practices in innovation policies for inclusive and sustainable development	O1	2021-2022	Handbooks and guides developed on managing effective BI, supporting IHGEs, working with venture funds, applying new approaches to innovation policy to drive SD; enabling circular economy transition

A4	SPECA innovation/startup competition	A competition of innovation projects initiated by startups from the SPECA countries	O2, O4	2021-2022	Not conducted
A5	SPECA Innovation Week	A series of mini webinars on consecutive days, during each of which one or two SPECA countries share their good practices in innovation for sustainable development policy and practice	O1, O3	2022	Not conducted and replaced by the national event held by Uzbekistan, UZInnoweek (16-20 Oct 2023)
A6	Technical assistance missions by international experts	During missions, leading international experts will share their expertise with SPECA policymakers on selected topics of innovation policy design and implementation	O1, O3	2022-2024	Not conducted, upcoming
A7	SPECA startup accelerator programme and support network	The programme will help innovative SPECA startups to accelerate the life cycle of their businesses	O2, O4	2023-2024	SPECA Network of BI and accelerators for SD launched in 2022 with activities in progress
A8	Mid-term monitoring and evaluation report	Preparing a mid-term monitoring and evaluation report on Action Plan implementation	O1, O2, O3 O4	2023	In progress (October – November 2023)
A9	SPECA subregional event on innovation for SD policy instruments	A skills development workshop on good practices in the design and administration of policy instruments targeting innovation for sustainable development	O1, O2, O3 O4	2023	Sub-regional seminar on innovation and technology for SD (18-19 Oct)
A10	SPECA subregional event on innovation support institutions	A skills development workshop on good practices in design and management of innovation support institutions (business incubators, tech parks and technology transfer offices)	O1, O3	2024	Upcoming

While the satisfaction of SPECA stakeholders with selected abovementioned events will be presented in the next section based on the results of the survey, available feedback of the participants for individual events suggests relatively high levels of satisfaction. Thus, more than half of participants of the training “Supporting innovative high-growth enterprises in SPECA subregion” (15,17 February 2022, Zoom platform) indicated that they will be using most of the training material in their work, and around 80% assessed the content and the format of the presentations delivered as useful¹. When it comes to the study tour to Georgia², the content and the organisation of the study tour was highly ranked by all the participants (an

¹ A total of 40 participants took part in the training and 21 provided feedback on the training afterwards.

² A total of 8 SPECA stakeholders took part.

average of 9.9/10). Given the high appreciation by SPECA stakeholders of the study tour to Georgia, another study tour to a country championing innovation policy, Israel, was planned for 6-9 Nov 2023. Unfortunately, due to changes in the security situation in Israel on the 7th October due to the terrorist attack, the study tour was postponed.

Current experience in the implementation of the Action Plan comprises a few important learnings for going forward:

- Study tours have proven to be a useful and effective tool for policy learning and hands-on experience exchange on innovation policy design and implementation, as well as for prompting ideas to improve national innovation ecosystems in SPECA region;
- Training materials to support innovation policy for sustainable development should be tailored to the needs of the SPECA participating states clearly addressing the challenges they face in promoting an innovation-driven sustainable development and growth.

3. Results from the survey among SPECA stakeholders

For the purpose of obtaining objective evidence of the perceptions about the implementation outcomes such as success and failure in implementation by the target groups of the Strategy, the UNECE secretariat undertook a survey among key SPECA stakeholders. The survey was performed on the basis of an online questionnaire which was addressed to a large group of SPECA stakeholders who had been part of the implementation process.

As noted, the implementation of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development and its Action Plan deviated considerably from the initial plans due *force majeure* factors. Thus, some envisaged activities were forcibly abandoned; others had to be remodelled significantly. These aspects have laid their imprint on the possibilities to trace progress in implementation prompting changes from the conventional approaches of conducting a review of implementation success or failure. The logical framework of the questionnaire reflects these peculiarities in the approach of assessing progress implementation. In particular, the questionnaire has several distinctive features, such as:

- The questionnaire does not seek to review the implementation achievements in each and every concrete activity envisaged in the Strategy and its Action Plan. Instead, it focuses on the implementation achievements vis-à-vis the main objectives and the general spirit of these documents.
- Some questions refer to the general footprint that the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development has had in this period and its overall effect as perceived by the respondents.
- Some questions do refer to key concrete activities promoting innovation for sustainable development in the SPECA countries undertaken during the past couple of years which,

however, may deviate to certain extent from the formulations envisaged in the Strategy and its Action Plan but do reflect their objectives and spirit.

- An important section of the questionnaire is forward looking and refers to expected suggestions from the respondents on how to continue with the implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan in the future. Such concrete suggestions will be invaluable for further implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan and the potential changes these documents may incur based on the available resources in the remaining implementation time.

The full text of the questionnaire is presented in the Annex to this report.

The survey itself was conducted in the period between 5 and 26 October 2023 with survey circulated among 148 stakeholders. The questionnaire was circulated both in Russian and English languages to facilitate access by stakeholders and enable better response rate. All in all, 21 responses to the questionnaire were received (17 in Russian language and 4 in English language). The summary of the results of the questionnaire is presented below .

The first two parts of the questionnaire aims to capture the general perception of SPECA stakeholders about the achievements in implementing the Strategy. Tables 2 and 3 reflect the average rating by the respondents of the success in pursuing the Strategy objectives (Table 2) and the efficiency of its cooperation mechanisms (Table 3).³

Table 2. How successful was implementation in pursuing the Strategy objectives?
 (“5” -> “successful” ; “1” -> “unsuccessful”)

No.	Objective	Average response
1	Upgrade the knowledge and skills base of key stakeholders in the SPECA countries to match the challenges of addressing SDGs with innovative solutions	4.24
2	Facilitate the diffusion of innovations and the transfer of technologies addressing sustainable development challenges in the region	4.05
3	Enhance the institutional framework for regional cooperation for implementing innovation addressing sustainable development challenges of common interest	4.24
4	Contribute to improved performance of the SPECA countries in the degree of SDG achievement	4.19

³ Throughout the whole questionnaire the respondents were asked to rate their answers in a scale from 1 to 5 whereby “5” stands for “best” and “1” stands for “worst”.

Table 3. Were the Strategy cooperation mechanisms efficiently applied?
 (“5” -> “efficient” ; “1” -> “inefficient”)?

No.	Cooperation mechanism	Average response
1	Strengthening the regional policy dialogue and the sharing of good policies and practices; attraction of leading international expertise	4.10
2	Working together in identifying regional and transboundary sustainable development challenges of high priority and common interest	3.95
3	Raising awareness in the SPECA countries on the role of innovation in the efforts to achieve the SDGs	4.00
4	Strengthening cooperation with existing platforms and mechanisms for international collaboration in promoting innovation for sustainable development	4.05

In general, most respondents highly rated the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development as a vehicle to support the efforts of the SPECA countries to promote innovative solutions for pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and strengthen subregional cooperation for these purposes. Most of the Strategy objectives as well the cooperation mechanisms envisaged in the Strategy obtained rating of 4.0 or above. These results indicate that after 2 years of implementation, *the Strategy is still perceived as a valid and useful conceptual model for mobilizing the cooperative efforts of the SPECA countries targeting the promotion of innovation for sustainable development.*

The next question (1.3) of the survey requested the addressees to go one step further and give their assessment of the relative importance (the priorities) of the activities envisaged in the SPECA Strategy for their country, as seen at the current implementation stage (year 2023).⁴ The reason for including this question was double-fold. In the first place, it has a significance of its own, to find out how the respondents assess the absolute and relative importance of the different activities envisaged in the broad menu of the Strategy. And secondly, and probably more important, to compare the 2023 results with an identical assessment undertaken among SPECA stakeholders in 2018, in the phase when the draft Strategy was being prepared and consulted with the SPECA countries.

Chart 1 presents a comparison of the results of the two empirical assessments, those of 2018 and 2023, accordingly.⁵ The most striking feature of the comparison of the two assessments is that overwhelmingly (with only one exception – activity 4.4) the average priorities assigned by the participants of the 2023 assessment fall below those recorded in 2018.

⁴ Let us recall that the Strategy envisaged a menu of 26 different possible actions through which it was to pursue the four Strategy objectives (see Table 1.3 in the Annex).

⁵ Note that two activities (3.5 and 3.6) were not part of the 2018 assessment as they were included in the Strategy in the later phases of its discussion before the adoption by the SPECA Governing Council in 2019.

As the 2018 assessment was undertaken before the start of any implementation, such a gap in perceptions seems to suggest that, overall, the actual implementation of the Strategy fell short of the ex-ante expectations. In other words, the experience of implementing some of the Strategy activities brought about a certain disappointment and setback in perceptions compared to how these activities were viewed before the launch of implementation. However, these results could also be interpreted as a change in perceptions as to policy priorities by the SPECA participating states due to the impact of the pandemic and other global geopolitical events (e.g., accelerated digitalisation of public services, need for extensive support to business sector and new ventures, especially in the case of resource-reliant SPECA states, need to ensure stable trade channels and supply chain operations, pressure to accelerate progress towards SDGs achievement, especially when it comes to climate adaptation mechanisms, etc.) The larger the 2018-2023 gap, the stronger the “disappointment effect”, and this concerns especially activities such as:

- 1.3 Study tours for policymakers and key stakeholders on best practices to promote innovation-driven sustainable development
- 2.3 Establishing a joint regional technology transfer office
- 2.4 Promote multi-stakeholder collaboration on best practices of technology transfer
- 2.5 Identify possible joint innovation for sustainable development projects
- 2.6 Consider establishing a joint Sustainable Development Innovation Fund
- 3.3 Development a network of research institutions dealing with innovation in the areas of the SDGs.
- 4.5 Cooperation with global initiatives on innovation for sustainable development.

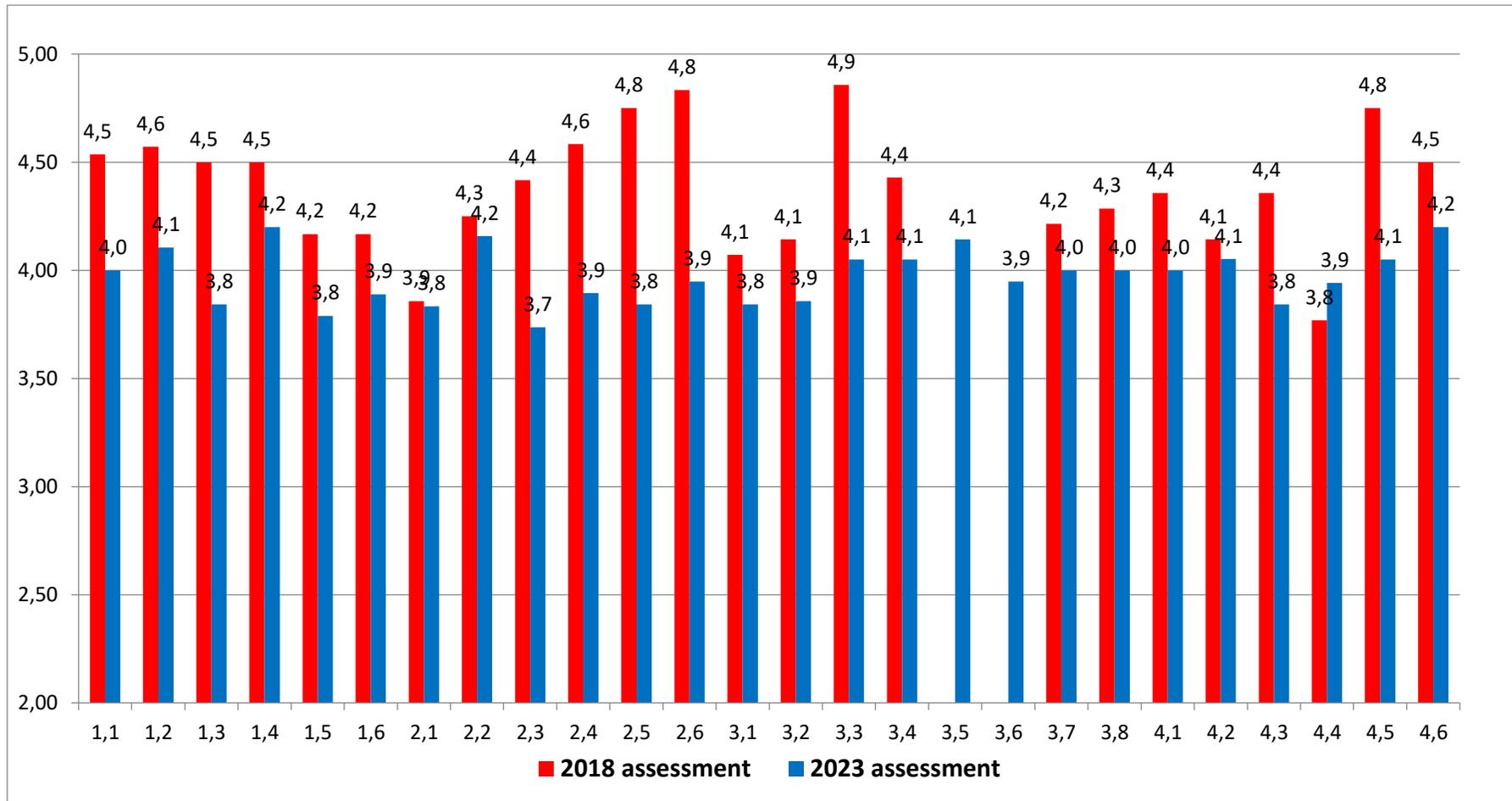
It should be noted that most of the above activities actually were not included in the Action Plan adopted by the SPECA Governing Council in 2021 in view of the insufficient implementation funds raised at that point in time, the lack of implementation partners or other critical reason. Nevertheless, *the outcomes of the 2023 survey suggest that work on the possibility to launch initiatives in the above areas would likely be welcome by SPECA stakeholders.*

On the other hand, the smaller the 2018-2023 perception gap, the closer actual implementation came to the ex-ante expectations. This has been the case for activities such as

- 2.1 Undertaking regular national Innovation for Sustainable Development Reviews
- 2.2 Supporting international linkages of SPECA countries
- 2.3 Eliminate obstacles to cross-border cooperation in implementing innovation policies for sustainable development

The one exception where there is a positive 2018-2023 gap refers of activity “4.4 Share experience and good practices in applying the methodology for Subregional Innovation Policy Outlook”, where the actual implementation experience indicated greater importance than it had been envisaged ex-ante.

Chart 1. Average priorities assigned to Strategy activities by the SPECA participants in the surveys of 2018 and 2023
 (“5” -> “high” ; “1” -> “low”)



The participants in the survey were also asked to state in free text their opinion about the achievements of the Strategy implementation as well as the problems and challenges encountered in the process.

Among the most important achievements of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development listed by the respondents were the following:

- The Strategy implementation contributed to the mobilization of efforts of governments and stakeholders in the region towards the promotion of innovation for sustainable development.
- The implementation activities included a number of useful and relevant capacity building/training programmes of high quality.
- The Strategy implementation contribute to better understanding of sustainable development challenges and ways to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs.
- The implementation activities included useful sharing of good practices and experiences in addressing sustainable development challenges through innovative solutions.
- Strategy implementation helped in establishing direct contacts with leading international experts.
- The implementation activities contributed to better understanding of venture financing and access to venture funding.
- The SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators was listed as a success story by a number of respondents.

The respondents also pointed to several challenges in the implementation of the SPECA Innovation Strategy such as:

- The resources for the implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan were insufficient.
- The geographic coverage of the implementation actions (number of SPECA countries covered) was not adequate.
- There was a gap between the Strategy activities and the general awareness of the public in the region regarding its topics but also more generally regarding innovation for sustainable development.
- There was a gap between the Strategy objectives and the concrete innovation projects in the region, on the one hand, and prospective investors, on the other hand
- There was not sufficient publicly available information about the actual implementation of the Strategy and its Action Plan.

The second two part of the questionnaires aimed to capture the general perception of SPECA stakeholders about the implementation of the activities undertaken as part of the Action Plan. It should be noted that the Action Plan implementation in 2022-2023 as described in section 2 included quite a wide range of activities. Due to the inherent limitations of the survey

and the desire to keep the questionnaire concise and simple, the survey had to be selective and the questions only refer to a fairly limited number of concrete activities which were considered of greater significance.

Table 4 presents the assessment by the SPECA stakeholders of several key activities of the Action Plan by three criteria: relevance, effectiveness and organization. Overall, the ratings assigned by the respondents to these activities are moderately positive. In addition, one can observe a clear trend of improvement of the ratings over time. The activities in the table are listed in their chronological order and on average the ratings in the lower part of the table are generally higher than those in the upper part.

Most of the activities in Table 3 represent capacity-building events which initially were envisaged as in person field-based events but were by necessity transformed into an online (later hybrid) format. The trend indicated above suggests three interpretations:

- There was a two-way learning process by both the trainers and the trainees in the course of implementation and with time the adjustment to the new form contributed to better outcomes.
- The most recent events were carried out in hybrid form, with partial on-site participation which also contributed to better outcomes.
- The topics addressed by the capacity-building activities were better tailored to the needs of the participating SPECA stakeholders which has translated into better results for the latter activities overall.

Another feature of the results that is worth mentioning is that on average the ratings by the criterion “relevance” are higher than those by “effectiveness” while the ratings by the criterion “organization” are the lowest. These outcomes prompt the need to improve the organization of the events and their effectiveness (i.e., success in achieving the stated objectives and contributing to the SPECA Strategy implementation) in the future.

The participants in the survey were also asked to give their opinion about some initially envisaged Action Plan joint activities among the SPECA countries that had not been implemented (or only partly implemented) by that time, mostly due to Covid restrictions or insufficient resources. The respondents were asked to indicate their assessment of how essential they considered to pursue the implementation of those actions in the future even if there was a delay. The results are presented in Table 5 and they indicate that SPECA stakeholders consider it important to continue the efforts for implementing two activities:

- SPECA startup accelerator programme
- SPECA innovation/startup competition.

Table 4. Assessment of already implemented Action Plan activities
 (“5” -> “high” ; “1” -> “low”)

No.	Action Plan Activities	Relevance	Effectiveness	Organization	Total
1	“Challenges and opportunities for supporting innovative, high-growth enterprises in the SPECA countries”, Webinar, 23 December 2021	3.89	3.63	3.70	3.74
2	“Supporting innovative, high-growth enterprises in the SPECA sub-region”, Online training for SPECA policymakers, 15 and 17 February 2022	3.60	3.58	3.55	3.58
3	“New approaches to innovation policy in the transition economies of the SPECA sub-region”, Webinar, 19 May 2022	3.75	3.45	3.60	3.6
4	Expert Group Meeting on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development, Hybrid event, (Almaty, Kazakhstan), 19-20 July 2022,	3.60	3.45	3.74	3.6
5	"Effective management and development of business incubators and accelerators", Online training for SPECA countries, 27-29 September 2022	3.95	4.00	3.71	3.89
6	Development of business incubators and start-up accelerators: educational programme for university management. Online training for SPECA countries, 21 February 2023	3.76	4.00	3.79	3.85
7	Working with venture funds and business angels: UNECE practical online training for staff of business incubators and accelerators in the SPECA sub-region. 16 March 2023	4.10	3.95	3.52	3.86
8	SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development	4.05	3.95	3.86	3.95

Table 5. Assessment of Action Plan activities behind schedule (“5”->“high” ; “1” -> “low”)

No.	Action Plan Activities	Importance
1	SPECA Innovation Week. A series of mini webinars on consecutive days, during each of which one or two SPECA countries share their good practices in innovation for sustainable development policy and practice	3.86
2	SPECA startup accelerator programme. The programme will support successful innovative companies in their early stages to accelerate the life cycle of their businesses. The successful graduates of the programme will be offered the opportunity to pitch their projects to potential investors.	4.24
3	SPECA innovation/startup competition. The competition will be a contest among innovation projects initiated by startups from the SPECA countries. The winners of the competition will be awarded prizes procured by the supporting organizations.	4.29

This result is consistent with the priority topics for further cooperation between the SPECA participating states voiced by the delegates at the 4th session of the SPECA Working Group on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development which took place on 19th October 2023. Furthermore, this result is also in line with the requests of the SPECA participating states on UNECE support to innovative entrepreneurship which translated in activities in 2022-2023 on this topic (see activities 5-8 in the Table 3 above)) and the expressed interest in upgrading the cooperation under the SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators.

Finally, the participants in the survey were requested to formulate in free form their proposals for new actions that could be included in the further implementation of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development as well as their opinion as to how to improve and expedite the future implementation of the Strategy. Below is a summary of some suggestions formulated by the respondents:

- Increase the number of activities directly supporting the work of innovation practitioners in the region, such as hands-on trainings and workshops addressing a particular challenge or a set of challenges.
- Organize more hands-on-trainings which are the most important and useful capacity development activities.
- Increase the number of face-to-face SPECA events.
- Develop activities targeting the support/facilitation of technology transfer in the region.
- Contribute to the development of a SPECA Fund supporting innovation projects and startups.
- Contribute to the initiation of concrete cooperative projects among SPECA countries.
- Mobilize venture investors and funds to take part in SPECA activities.
- Mobilize more internationally renowned experts to participate in the SPECA events.
- Develop SPECA partnership programmes on topics of bilateral or multilateral interest.
- Contribute to the development of university-based business incubators in the region.
- Improve the reporting and dissemination of the implementation outcomes of the Strategy and its Action Plan.
- Improve the gender balance in the SPECA activities.
- Contribute to the monitoring of SDG achievement in the SPECA region.

4. Main conclusions from the evaluation

The results of the survey among SPECA stakeholders on their perception of success and failure in implementation of the SPECA Strategy and its Action Plan complemented by the discussions at the Subregional SPECA Workshop on Innovation and Technology for

Sustainable Development held in Tashkent on 18-19 October 2023 provide evidence that supports the following main conclusions:

1. In the main, SPECA stakeholders appreciate and have a favourable opinion on the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development as an instrument which supports their efforts to address the challenges of the SDGs with innovative solutions and as a mechanism to strengthen subregional cooperation in this area.

2. SPECA stakeholders consider that overall the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development has pursued successfully its objectives in the period following the launch of its Action Plan.

3. According to opinions stated in the survey, the Strategy implementation has contributed to the mobilization of efforts of governments and stakeholders in the region towards the promotion of innovation for sustainable development.

4. At the same time, it appears that the expectations that stakeholders had when the Strategy was prepared and adopted have not been fully met by the outcomes since the launch of the Action Plan. In particular, this concerns the activities aimed at facilitation of technology transfer, establishment of instruments to facilitate funding of innovative activities and projects and enhancing cooperation within the SPECA region and beyond on the uses of innovation to achieve sustainable development.

5. The disruptions caused by the covid-19 pandemic are largely responsible for the gap between expectations and outcomes as it became impossible to carry out some planned activities while others had to be reshaped into a different format. This gap also demonstrates the change in priorities among the SPECA participating states given the impact the global pandemic has had on the socio-economic development across the world.

6. Other factors that negatively affected the implementation of the Action Plan were the resource constraints and the impossibility to raise sufficient funds for implementing all planned activities, especially in the circumstance of the global pandemic.

7. The survey of SPECA stakeholders revealed a strong preference for Strategy activities that target concrete existing problems and issues in the subregion and offer approaches to dealing with real life problems.

8. Among the practical innovation-related issues that enjoy broad interest among SPECA stakeholders (and which were not sufficiently covered in implementation so far) are issues such as technology transfer as well as the establishment of direct contacts between innovative start-ups in the region and potential equity investors.

9. The survey also revealed strong preference for live events with face-to-face communication between local stakeholders and international experts.

10. According to opinions stated in the survey, more attention should be directed in the future to wider dissemination of information about Action Plan activities and publicising its results and achievements regularly.

11. The one success story that was mentioned in the responses to the questionnaire and was widely applauded during the discussions at the Tashkent Workshop was the SPECA Networks of Business Incubators and Accelerators which was established in the course on the implementation of the Action Plan.

12. Different proposals were made for expanding and enriching the cooperative efforts of the SPECA countries undertaken under the auspices of the SPECA Networks of Business Incubators (e.g., creation of the single database of of trainers, trackers, and mentors, launching SPECA association of IT schools, etc.).

5. Some proposals for adjusting and updating the Action Plan in the coming years 2024-2025

The conclusions drawn from the evaluation based on the survey of SPECA stakeholders and the discussions at the Workshop on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development held in Tashkent on 18-19 October 2023 do not prompt the need for a major reshuffling of the Action Plan for implementing the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development. The main accent in the implementation process should remain on the capacity building activities which have proven to be successful and have been further requested by the SPECA participating states. The main proposed future shift is towards more field-based in-person events with the participation of international experts.

The different proposals voiced in the survey and also during the Tashkent workshop need to be studied more carefully with a view to assessing their applicability. This further needs to be accompanied with more efforts towards raising additional funds for the implementation of the Strategy and ensuring that its activities are demand-driven and target specific challenges that SPECA participating states face in promoting innovation for sustainable development, including the transition to green and circular economy.

It seems appropriate to continue the consultations with SPECA participating states with a view to preparing a new Action Plan for implementing the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development for the period 2025-2027 which could be submitted for discussion and approval by the SPECA Governing Council at its 2024 session.

At the same time, there seems to be some room for adjusting and updating the Action Plan for 2024 (and going forward to 2025) regarding joint cooperative SPECA efforts. Moreover, some internal reorganization of the activities may be undertaken without the need to mobilize additional resources for implementation.

The survey specifically asked the respondents to give their opinion on the implementation of three potential activities as was envisaged by the Action Plan, The results are presented in Table 4. They suggest a relatively low interest in conducting the planned SPECA Innovation Week; however, the experience of Uzbekistan which conducted an Innovation Week on 16-20 October 2023 and which served a platform for the SPECA workshop

and the Working Group suggests that such innovation weeks have higher value and are best organized when held nationally rather than regionally. In view of this it is proposed not to pursue the organization of a SPECA-wide Innovation Week in the future but rather create synergies with events held nationally to strengthen regional cooperation and exchange of practices.

The survey also suggested continued interest in organizing a SPECA-wide innovation/startup competition as well as a SPECA startup acceleration programme. Regarding the startup competition, several participants in the Tashkent workshop noted that they felt the need for a “role model” of such a competition as the experience in organising similar competitions at national level has been mixed with some countries stating outright failures in this endeavour . Therefore it seems appropriate to incorporate in the future Action Plan some capacity building activities targeting this aspect and providing methodological support to the SPECA practitioners involved in the organization of startup competitions.

Regarding the idea of a SPECA accelerator programme, given the success of the SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators it seems appropriate to integrate this type of future activities into the work of the Network..

Table 6 below summarizes the proposed reorganization of these two Action Plan activities, including the new sub-actions to be undertaken in the period 2024-2025. The proposed content of these sub-actions seeks to also integrate some other ideas and proposals voiced by SPECA stakeholders in the survey and during the discussions at the Tashkent Workshop.

Table 6. Proposals for updates to the Action Plan for implementing the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development

No.	Actions and sub-actions	Description	Targeted Strategy objectives	Lead UN Agency	Timeline	Performance indicators
New A4 (replaces old A4)	SPECA innovation/startup competitions	Support initiatives related to the organization of innovation/startup competitions in the SPECA region	O2, O4	UNECE ESCAP	2024-2025	Participation of at least 4 countries
A4.1	Training of SPECA practitioners	Capacity development event for SPECA practitioners on the methodology of the organization of innovation/startup competitions	O2, O4	UNECE ESCAP	2024	N/A
A4.2	Launch a SPECA competition	SPECA-wide consultations among practitioners to agree on a model of a SPECA innovation/startup competition	O2, O4	UNECE ESCAP	2024	N/A
A4.3	Competition under way	Joint efforts by SPECA practitioners, UNECE and ESCAP on running the competition according to the agreed model	O2, O4	UNECE ESCAP	2025	N/A
A4.4	Prize event for the winners	The winners of the competition will receive prizes and will be invited to participate in a pitching event with potential investors (Business Angels and Venture Investors)	O2, O4	UNECE ESCAP	2025	3(5) prizes awarded
New A7 (replaces old A7)	SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators	Ensure that SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators is a self-sustained initiative addressing specific challenges in promoting and supporting innovative ventures	O2, O4	UNECE ESCAP	2024-2025	Participation of at least 4 countries
A7.1	Organizational aspects	Develop statute and regulations of the Network; Invite new members; Agree on a workplan; Establish rotating coordination	O2, O4	UNECE ESCAP	2024	N/A
A7.2	Establish cooperation with Business Angels and Venture investors	Mapping Business Angels and Venture investors; Conducting a Survey to establish interest in cooperation; Organize pitching events for SPECA startups and networking events;	O2, O4	UNECE ESCAP	2024 - 2025	N/A
A7.3	Capacity building for Network practitioners	A series of capacity building events (of the type “train the trainers”) for members of the SPECA Network	O2, O4	UNECE ESCAP	2024 - 2025	N/A
A7.4	Developing a single brand for SPECA start-ups with supporting capacity-building activities	Develop and promote the branding of the SPECA Network as an Innovation hub to facilitate access to investors and cooperation between SPECA and other regions (e.g., “Centrasia InnoHub, “StartupStan”); Track the success stories of SPECA startups as role models for new startups and find means for their promotion; Develop a database of trackers, mentors and trainers in the SPECA region.	O2, O4	UNECE ESCAP	2024-2025	N/A

A N N E X

Q U E S T I O N N A I R E

**Assessing Progress of Implementation of the
SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development and its Action Plan**

PART `1. PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING STRATEGY OBJECTIVES

1.1. Please give your opinion about the extent to which the Objectives of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development have been successfully pursued since the launch of its Action Plan (Please rank your opinion by ticking (X) a box in each line of the table below where “5” stands for “fully successfully” ... and “1” stands for “utterly unsuccessfully”)

No.	Objective	1	2	3	4	5
1	Upgrade the knowledge and skills base of key stakeholders in the SPECA countries to match the challenges of addressing SDGs with innovative solutions					
2	Facilitate the diffusion of innovations and the transfer of technologies addressing sustainable development challenges in the region					
3	Enhance the institutional framework for regional cooperation for implementing innovation addressing sustainable development challenges of common interest					
4	Contribute to improved performance of the SPECA countries in the degree of SDG achievement					

1.2. Please give your opinion whether the cooperation mechanisms envisaged in the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development were efficiently applied in the implementation of its Action Plan (Please rank your opinion by ticking (X) a box in each line of the table below where “5” stands for “fully efficiently” ... and “1” stands for “utterly inefficiently”)

No.	Cooperation mechanism	1	2	3	4	5
1	Strengthening the regional policy dialogue and the sharing of good policies and practices, including the attraction of leading international expertise in innovation for sustainable development					
2	Working together in identifying regional and transboundary sustainable development challenges of high priority and common interest that call for innovative solutions					
3	Raising awareness in the SPECA countries on the role of innovation in the efforts to achieve the SDGs					
4	Strengthening cooperation with existing platforms and mechanisms for international collaboration in promoting innovation for sustainable development within the United Nations family of organizations					

1.3 Please mark with "X" in the respective box your assessment of the priority the activities envisaged in the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development for your country, as you assess them at this implementation stage (year 2023)

Objectives	Innovation Strategy Activities	Priority (5=high; 1=low)				
		1	2	3	4	5
Objective 1	1.1 National and regional capacity-building seminars, with the participation of leading international experts for key policymakers and stakeholders in the SPECA countries.					
	1.2 Skill-building workshops, with the participation of leading international experts, for innovation practitioners on the implementation of innovation policies					
	1.3 Study tours and exchanges for policymakers and key stakeholders on best practices to promote innovation-driven sustainable development					
	1.4 Technical assistance missions by leading international experts for addressing existing weaknesses in SPECA countries national innovation systems.					
	1.5 Promotional campaigns for the broad public to enhance the awareness on technology and innovation in society					
	1.6 Promotional operations for awareness raising on the objectives and activities of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development.					
Objective 2	2.1 Strengthen efforts in undertaking regular national Innovation for Sustainable Development Reviews and learn from the each other's experience.					
	2.2 Agree on coordinated policy measures supporting international linkages of SPECA countries with global technological value chains					
	2.3 Establishing a joint regional technology transfer office to support the synergetic transfer of innovative technologies in the region					
	2.4 Promote wide/international multi-stakeholder collaboration on best practices of technology transfer					
	2.5 Identify possible joint innovation for sustainable development projects, where international cooperation can generate regional synergies and economies of scale					
	2.6 Consider establishing a joint Sustainable Development Innovation Fund for early stage support to innovative entrepreneurs in SPECA countries					
Objective 3	3.1 Agree on innovation policy issues of common interest of high priority to the SPECA countries and where international cooperation can generate regional synergies					
	3.2 Establish a dedicated stakeholder network and mechanisms for regular consultations among SPECA countries on innovation policies of common interest					
	3.3 Support the development a network of research institutions dealing with innovation in the areas of the SDGs.					
	3.4 Consider establishing a SPECA network of innovation support institutions (business incubators, technoparks, etc.) and strengthen cooperation in this area.					
	3.5 Launch a joint regional online support service for innovative entrepreneurs, startups and SMEs (consulting, mentoring, match-making, etc.).					
	3.6 Set up a joint SPECA competition for innovation projects targeting sustainable development.					
	3.7 Consider establishing of SPECA Innovation Partnerships, drawing on the successful example of EU's European Innovation Partnerships.					
	3.8 Discuss measures to support regional supply chains, especially in innovative products.					
Objective 4	4.1 Identify sustainable development challenges of high priority to the SPECA countries that call for trans-border/regional cooperation and approaches.					
	4.2 Identify obstacles to cross-border cooperation in implementing innovation policies for sustainable development and agree on measures for eliminating them					
	4.3 Report periodically on progress against relevant SDGs, targets and indicators, and share good practices in pursuing these goals.					
	4.4 Share good practices in applying the methodology for subregional innovation policy outlook and using it to measure progress in upgrading innovation policies.					
	4.5 Support cooperation with global initiatives such as the UN Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDs and other UN initiatives					
	4.6 Liaise with relevant international donors for mobilising additional expertise and resources in support of innovation for sustainable development undertakings.					

1.4. Please list three most important achievements of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development since the launch of its Action Plan (you can also indicate “no achievements”)

- 1) _____

- 2) _____

- 3) _____

- 4) _____

- 5) _____

1.5. Please list the most important problems and challenges in the process of implementation of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development since the launch of its Action Plan

- 1) _____

- 2) _____

- 3) _____

- 4) _____

- 5) _____

PART 2. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACTION PLAN

2.1. Please indicate your assessment of the following activities undertaken under the Action Plan of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Developments by different criteria.

Explanatory note.

“**Relevance**” refers to the degree the action has been aligned with the objectives of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Developments

“**Effectiveness**” refers to the degree the action has been achieved its own objectives and contributed to achieving the objectives of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Developments

“**Organization**” refers to your assessment as to how well the action was organized and carried out.

No.	Action Plan Activities	Relevance of the action (5=high; 1=low)					Effectiveness of the action (5=high; 1=low)					Organization of the action (5=high; 1=low)				
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1	“Challenges and opportunities for supporting innovative, high-growth enterprises in the SPECA countries”, Webinar, 23 December 2021															
2	“Supporting innovative, high-growth enterprises in the SPECA sub-region”, Online training for SPECA policymakers, 15 and 17 February 2022															
3	“New approaches to innovation policy in the transition economies of the SPECA sub-region”, Webinar, 19 May 2022															
4	Expert Group Meeting on Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development, Hybrid event, (Almaty, Kazakhstan), 19-20 July 2022,															
5	"Effective management and development of business incubators and accelerators", Online training for SPECA countries, 27-29 September 2022															
6	Development of business incubators and start-up accelerators: educational programme for university management. Online training for SPECA countries, 21 February 2023															
7	Working with venture funds and business angels: UNECE practical online training for staff of business incubators and accelerators in the SPECA sub-region. 16 March 2023															
8	SPECA Network of Business Incubators and Accelerators for Sustainable Development															

2.2. Some initially envisaged Action Plan joint activities among the SPECA countries were not implemented (or were only partly implemented) so far, mostly due to the restrictions imposed by the covid-19 pandemic. Please indicate your assessment of how essential you consider it is to pursue with the implementation of these actions in the future even if with a delay (Please rank your opinion of the importance of each action by ticking (X) a box in each line of the table below where “5” stands for “high importance” ... and “1” stands for “low importance”)

No.	Action Plan Joint SPECA Activities	Importance of the action (5=high; 1=low)				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	SPECA Innovation Week. A series of mini webinars on consecutive days, during each of which one or two SPECA countries share their good practices in innovation for sustainable development policy and practice					
2	SPECA startup accelerator programme. The programme will support successful innovative companies in their early stages to accelerate the life cycle of their businesses. The successful graduates of the programme will be offered the opportunity to pitch their projects to potential investors.					
3	SPECA innovation/startup competition. The competition will be a contest among innovation projects initiated by startups from the SPECA countries. The winners of the competition will be awarded prizes procured by the supporting organizations.					

2.3. Please suggest new actions reflecting the objectives of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development that you consider essential to include in its future implementation (Please formulate the action and provide a brief annotation):

- 1) _____

- 2) _____

- 3) _____

- 4) _____

2.4. Please provide any further comments and considerations of yours that would improve and expedite the future implementation of the SPECA Innovation Strategy for Sustainable Development:

Personal information (*optional, will be treated confidentially, if provided*)

Name: _____

Affiliation: _____

Position/job title: _____

***** THANK YOU FOR SHARING YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND OPINION!*****
