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Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations & Executive Secretary of
The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**

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**Opening Statement: Enhanced Implementation of SDGs through Cooperation
2016 SPECA Economic Forum**

**Ganja, Azerbaijan
9:00-9:30, 22-23 November 2016,**

[Check against delivery]

H.E. Minister of Economy Mr. Mustafayev,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of Dr. Shamshad Akhtar, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific I would like to welcome you to the 2016 SPECA Economic Forum.

I wish to thank H.E. Mr. Mustafayev, Minister of Economy of Azerbaijan, for chairing and hosting this year's Forum and the 11th Session of the Governing Council, under the able leadership of the President of Azerbaijan H.E. Mr. Aliyev.

This year's Forum is a valuable opportunity for SPECA countries to take stock of and share perspectives on implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires not only national leadership and action, but also strengthened regional and subregional cooperation to enhance national implementation capacities. To this end, engaging with ESCAP SPECA can help share knowledge, experience, and best practice on SDG implementation across the region.

Since the adoption of the Dushanbe Declaration last year, ESCAP has been supporting participating countries to strategically position the SPECA Programme as a mechanism for reviewing, measuring, and implementing the 2030 Agenda. This shift would allow SPECA to function as bridge between national, regional and global SDG follow-up and review mechanisms. It would also enable SPECA to make tangible contributions to both regional forums on sustainable development, such as ESCAP's Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, as well as annual regional Commission sessions, which directly feed into ECOSOC sessions and the High-Level Political Forum in New York.

My remarks today will underscore the need for SPECA to be strategically repositioned so that it is able to support countries to address policy priorities in the SDG implementation process.

1. The first priority is to revive and rebalance economic growth in the subregion for equality, inclusion and social justice.

The sluggish growth witnessed in the North and Central Asia (NCA) subregion in 2015,¹ driven by declining commodity prices, has underlined the urgent need for NCA to diversify its economic structure to achieve inclusive economic growth. To diversify its growth engine, NCA economies must focus on gaining competitiveness beyond the export of primary commodities. To fully leverage global value chain opportunities, NCA economies need to create a vibrant business services sector and expand into the growing markets for green business and technologies.

NCA economies need to accelerate their efforts to mobilize and facilitate direct investments to promote economic diversification, support small and medium-sized companies and allow for more inclusive growth in the subregion.

2. The second is to enhance subregional infrastructure connectivity to support trade and investment competitiveness.

Investing in the modernization of infrastructure related to transport, power generation and communication is an essential component of a pro-growth strategy. It is essential for economic competitiveness, sustainability and inclusiveness. However, the lack of seamless cross-border infrastructure corridors has hindered the potential of the NCA subregion to become a center trade between the three big markets – East Asia, South Asia and Europe.

Nevertheless, clear signs of progress in infrastructure connectivity are emerging through the Eurasian rail land bridge link, trans-Caspian multimodal routes, and the launch of the TAPI and CASA-1000 projects. Moving forward, effectively leveraging the opportunities offered by regional integration initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union, will be critical to enhancing connectivity in NCA.

3. Investing in people is the third priority.

To capitalize on the subregions demographics investment in education, skills formation and health care is critical for improving the quality of the workforce. However, if the SDGs are to be successfully implemented, this must also be accompanied with investments in hard infrastructure.

Illustrating this need, the incidence of vulnerable employment in the subregion remains high with over one-third of workers in 5 of the 7 SPECA countries employed in a vulnerable job. At the same time, the working-age population has already started to decline in many NCA economies. By 2050, the subregion will be the second largest host of persons over 60. Furthermore, between now and 2050 the ratio of working-age to older persons will halve in the subregion from 8-1 to 4-1.² Effectively managing this population transition will require timely planning. To this end, the subregion can benefit from experiences, lessons learnt, and best practices emerging from current population transitions in East and North-East Asia. To achieve poverty reduction and social inclusion., NCA subregion will be critically dependent on increasing social protection.

¹ Excluding the Russian Federation, average economic growth in the subregion slowed to 3.1% in 2015 from 5.4% in 2014. ESCAP Economic and Social Survey 2016

² ESCAP (2016) Population sheet.

4. The fourth and final priority is to address shared environmental vulnerabilities:

NCA is highly vulnerable to climate change. Growing demands for water, energy and food, coupled with the increasing frequency and intensity of weather events and climate-related disasters, have exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities. Opportunities exist for GHG reductions, such as modernizing energy infrastructure and phasing-out inefficient subsidies.

In ESCAP's recently launched report *The Economics of Climate Change in the Asia-Pacific Region* five key actions to address climate change in the Asia-Pacific region are recommended, all of which are particularly pertinent to North and Central Asia. i) ensure adaptation to climate change and improve resilience; ii) the phasing out fossil fuel subsidies; iii) the encouragement of renewable energy and energy efficiency; iv) the implementation of carbon pricing; and v) the scaling-up of climate finance.

In addition, to better manage the effects of climate change induced natural disasters, ESCAP's newly established Centre for the management of disaster information, hosted by the Islamic Republic of Iran, will provide multi-hazard early warning systems that will reduce the trade-offs inherent to the water-energy-food nexus and climate change impacts of this semi-arid area.

To conclude, the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development has presented a window of opportunity for SPECA countries to change their development trajectory by addressing their common policy priorities and working towards shared goals. ESCAP, stands ready support SPECA in realizing its full potential as a platform to support NCA countries accelerate their efforts to achieve the SDGs.

I look forward to the outcomes of our deliberations and to the adoption of the Draft Ganja Declaration on Enhanced Implementation of SDGs through Cooperation. The declaration will send a strong signal to the international community of the leadership role of the SPECA subregion in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

I thank you.

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