

## High-Level Session on Sustainable Tourism Development in the CAREC Region

Nadi, Fiji; 1 May, 2019

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### A. Background

1. A high-level session on the potential under the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program to advance sustainable tourism development in the CAREC region was organized on the sidelines of ADB's 52nd Annual General Meeting in Nadi, Fiji which attracted about 50 participants. The session was opened by Mr. Shixin Chen, Vice President, Asian Development Bank (ADB). Mr. Werner Liepach, Director General, Central and West Asia Department (CWRD), ADB, moderated the discussion. High-level officials from eight CAREC member countries<sup>1</sup> and senior representatives from six international development institutions participated in the session (see Annotated Agenda in Annex 1, Policy Background Note in Annex 2, and List of Participants in Annex 3).

2. This high-level session aimed to generate dialogue on how a regional approach to sustainable tourism development can lead to increased socio-economic development and job creation in the CAREC region. Specifically, the session sought to gather inputs and insights from CAREC countries and development partners on key challenges and opportunities for regional initiatives and collaborative actions in the tourism sector, and the potential role that CAREC can play in this regard.

### B. Highlights of the Discussions

3. In his opening remarks, VP Chen noted that sustainable tourism is recognized as a core driver of socio-economic development and one of the most dynamic and fast-growing sectors in the world. CAREC countries enjoy a vast range of natural and cultural endowments and tourist arrivals in the CAREC region (excepting Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and PRC) have grown at an average annual rate of 4.5%, reaching almost 20 million in 2018. Despite the positive recent developments, several common challenges, however, remain to be addressed and require joint and concerted efforts including limited air, rail and road connectivity, underdeveloped tourism infrastructure and services, inadequate business and policy environment, quality human resource constraints, lack of coordinated and integrated approach involving all key stakeholders, and insufficient public-private partnerships in the tourism sector. CAREC presents an excellent platform for cross-learning, experience-sharing and synergy-building guided by its new long-term strategy-CAREC 2030.

4. CAREC countries and development partners discussed the strong linkages of tourism with sustainable development goals (SDGs) and saw the necessity of strengthening regional efforts in promoting sustainable tourism development as tourists often combine two or more neighboring countries when selecting their destinations. Facilitating travel between countries and promoting multi-country experiences can result in greater socio-economic benefits for each of the countries in the region. Participants commended CAREC's focus on tourism which is very much aligned with national development agendas of CAREC countries and considered that CAREC provides a robust mechanism for coordination and cooperation among member countries to discuss common development challenges and evolve joint approaches in the tourism sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Azerbaijan, PRC, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

**5. Views of CAREC member countries.** Delegates noted that CAREC countries are confronted with the challenges of economic diversification and tourism development provides one of the solutions to diversify regional economies. A regional approach is deemed crucial to help deepen social and economic ties among CAREC countries. CAREC countries should join hands to tap tourism complementarities rather than focus on competition with each other. In this process, CAREC can:

- (i) further improve transport connectivity and simplify customs procedures and streamline cross-border movement procedures to provide easy access for tourists;
- (ii) mobilize resources to improve tourism infrastructure and services;
- (iii) develop joint marketing strategy for the region to capitalize on various tourism assets available in the region;
- (iv) facilitate joint tourism products development;
- (v) build capacity of private tourism operators and enhance private sector and civil society engagement;
- (vi) provide assistance to CAREC countries for visa regime relaxation and establish single visa for the CAREC region;
- (vii) promote harmonization of tourism-related policies and standards and help build integrated policies and strategies among CAREC countries;
- (viii) facilitate joint promotion of environmental standards in the tourism sector to manage possible adverse environmental and ecological impacts induced by tourism expansion;
- (ix) help create enabling environment for tourism development in the region; and
- (x) conduct knowledge sharing and capacity building to ensure high-quality and sustainable tourism cooperation.

**6. Perspectives of development partners.** Development partners observed that tourism is a low-hanging fruit for purposes of economic diversification and CAREC's endeavors in promoting a regional approach for sustainable tourism development are timely and relevant. CAREC can support tourism development in the region at both national- and regional- level to facilitate information exchange and capacity building. Development partners further stressed that:

- (i) There has been growing recognition of the importance of tourism development. Its direct, indirect and induced impacts on economic and social development can help accelerate the achievements of SDGs through job creation, community development, and living standards enhancement;
- (ii) CAREC countries enjoy fascinating natural and cultural endowments and historical and religious diversity. Joint marketing branded by the ancient silk road routes is a great way to promote cross-border tourism corridors development;
- (iii) Transportation network creation and facilitation as well as visa facilitation are fundamental for attracting tourists. Meanwhile, the evolving trend of tourism development also requires enhanced digital connectivity including internet access and connectivity, optical fiber deployment, and broad-band network development;
- (iv) Tourism development involves tangible natural and cultural heritage, and the role of cultural heritage as a source of civilizational diversity and driver of sustainable development should be fully recognized. Correspondingly, different approaches are required for preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage; and
- (v) Environment and ecology conservation should be paid equal importance while developing tourism to ensure tourism sector sustainability.

7. The CAREC Secretariat apprised that a \$2.0 million technical assistance to promote sustainable tourism development in the CAREC region is being processed this year. The TA will (i) support the development of a tourism sector strategy, which will set out a vision and a roadmap towards 2030. It will build on the findings and recommendations of the tourism scoping study as well as on the past and ongoing trade and economic corridor work in several CAREC countries and other development partners' tourism initiatives; (ii) formulate a regional investment framework with concrete projects to be implemented during the first five years of the strategy period (2021–2025). This will comprise both hard and soft infrastructure interventions in the areas covered by the strategy; (iii) support the conduct of workshops, seminars and training activities to enhance the capacity of government agencies in tourism planning and policymaking, including improving countries' ability to collect and analyze tourism statistics and undertake market research; (iv) develop a CAREC tourism virtual portal linked to the CAREC website to consolidate and disseminate tourism-related information; and (v) facilitate the establishment of CAREC tourism expert group to enhance information exchange, standards harmonization and capacity building.

### **C. Next steps**

8. This high-level session generated candid dialogue and fruitful deliberations on sustainable tourism development in the CAREC region. ADB, as the CAREC Secretariat, will continue working closely with member countries and development partners to facilitate such dialogue, further study the suggestions made in the discussions and come up with a pragmatic regional approach and implementable and concrete initiatives to realize the tourism potential of the region.

*Annexes: i. Annotated Agenda  
ii. Policy Background Note  
iii. List of Participants*