

Regional Policy Brief *(Input Paper – February 2024)*

Understanding Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) Policy Ecosystem Regionally for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

Report on the Regional Policy Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption and Production *(Output Paper – August 2024)*



Regional Policy Brief (Input Paper)

Understanding Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP)

Policy Ecosystem Regionally for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

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Background

Agriculture plays a pivotal role in the economies of Central Asian countries, with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan being significant contributors. In these countries, food industry and agriculture play an important part in the economy, providing employment and contributing to the GDP. In Tajikistan, approximately 25% of the country's land is utilized for agricultural purposes. As of 2021, agriculture employed around 61% of the workforce in Tajikistan (UNECE). In Uzbekistan, only 10% of land is used for cultivation.¹ Although the percentage of the workforce engaged in agriculture in Uzbekistan is lower (25%) than in Tajikistan, it still represents a notable portion of employment opportunities in the country (UNECE). Agriculture is vital to both Tajikistan's and Uzbekistan's economies, amounting to around 25 %² and 30 %³ to the countries GDP's, respectively.

In 2019 the food processing, beverage and tobacco, i.e., food industry in Uzbekistan, employed 107 thousand workers or 2.6% of agri-food jobs, and the food-processing sub-sector contributed approximately 7% to the country's GDP in 2017.⁴ The overall population in CAREC region is projected to experience a rapid growth, population to increase 32 % in Uzbekistan and 53% in Tajikistan by the 2050, relative to 2022 numbers. In addition to the increase in food demand⁵, the population growth is assumed to lead to additional stress on natural resources, and increased use of energy and water⁶, all of which are instrumental parts of to the food industry.

According to Eurasian Research, the value output per worker in Central Asia remains low, with Kazakhstan leading the region at \$6,900 in 2018. In comparison, Tajikistan reported an output of \$1,500 and Uzbekistan recorded \$2,130 during the same period. One of the key factors contributing to this disparity is the low productivity observed in the agricultural sector (Euroasian Research). The economic models of CAREC countries seem to continue to prioritize the extraction of resources over shifts towards improving productivity and enhancing efficiency.⁷ For comparison in 2018, Australia achieved an output per agricultural worker of \$80,408. This significant contrast can be attributed to the limited adoption of capital-intensive agriculture practices in Central Asia (Euroasian Research).

The food sector, specifically the agricultural sector, while being an important part of the economy, is vulnerable to the climate change⁸. This sector is experiencing the effects of climate change both in both

¹ [Scoping of promising land management and water use practices in the dry areas of Uzbekistan - ScienceDirect](#)

² [Microsoft Word - Tajikistan Annual Economic Report 2019.docx \(s-ge.com\)](#)

³ [reap_uzbekistan_policy_brief_input_paper_2021.pdf \(switch-asia.eu\)](#)

⁴ [World Bank Document](#)

⁵ <https://www.carecinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CI-climate-research-report-29-May-2020.pdf>

⁶ CAREC 2030 Regional Action on Climate Change

⁷ <https://www.carecinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CI-climate-research-report-29-May-2020.pdf>

⁸ [CAREC 2030, connecting the region for shared and sustainable development](#)

countries⁹. Notably, Tajikistan's contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions is minimal.¹⁰ The region is one of the most vulnerable to climate change,¹¹ and has experienced temperature increase higher than global average over the last 100 years¹², along with increase in number of days with excessive heat. For example, the data shows that since 1880 in Uzbekistan the average annual temperature has been increasing around 1,6 degrees and is projected to rise by 1,5-3 degrees by 2040.¹³ Experts are warning that the average temperature will be continuing to increase in the future.¹⁴

The projected increase of number of hot days¹⁵, in addition to the overall temperature increase, will lead to growth in moisture evaporation which can increase the water losses and as a result lead to increase in excess water consumption.¹⁶ The issues of water scarcity are particularly prominent in Uzbekistan. According to data from 2021 the country uses 169% of its water reserves, and the water scarcity is projected to increase even more in the future¹⁷.

In addition to the changing weather patterns due to climate change, other environmental challenges in Central-Asia's agro-food processing sector are: water scarcity, i.e. limited water sources and inefficient water management may result in competition for water among different sectors, which may, as a result, affect the food processing sector; inadequate waste generation, i.e. improper disposal of products and packaging materials leads to pollution and harm to environment.

Both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan rely strongly on food imports, which vulnerability is increasing due to climate change and geopolitics. A key condition for improving economic growth and investment involves improving the business environment in agri-food processing by introducing more efficient production techniques.¹⁸ Crucial to this development can be the regional enabling policies that guide the economies toward collaborative sustainable practices in production and consumption. These policies also can play a vital role in enhancing the efficiency of the food-processing industry, which heavily depends on the availability of energy and water.

Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, small businesses (Micro-, Small, and Medium-sized Enterprises - MSMEs) dominate the agricultural production sector, contributing 98.1% to gross agricultural output. The country is experiencing a steady increase in the export of agricultural products and ranks among the top twenty worldwide in terms of cold storage capacity.¹⁹ In an effort to liberalize its economy, Uzbekistan has undertaken several reforms aimed at improving energy efficiency, optimizing taxation, reducing state involvement in the economy, and opening up the banking sector. These reforms have supported economic development; however, some challenges remain. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies Uzbekistan as one of the world's most emission-intensive economies, attributed to its reliance on fossil fuels, an energy-intensive industrial sector, outdated energy infrastructure, and substantial energy subsidies.²⁰ Despite these challenges, food manufacturing

⁹ 2021-11-02_GCA Action Plan

¹⁰ [Tajikistan is Highly Vulnerable to Climate Change Impacts \(cabar.asia\)](https://cabar.asia/tajikistan-is-highly-vulnerable-to-climate-change-impacts)

¹¹ [Central Asia: The Impact of Climate Change Will Be Disastrous \(cabar.asia\)](https://cabar.asia/central-asia-the-impact-of-climate-change-will-be-disastrous)

¹² CAREC 2030 Regional Action on Climate Change

¹³ [Uzbekistan: Temperature Rise and Water Scarcity \(cabar.asia\)](https://cabar.asia/uzbekistan-temperature-rise-and-water-scarcity)

¹⁴ [Abnormally Hot Summer – New Normal for Central Asia - CABAR.asia](https://cabar.asia/abnormally-hot-summer-new-normal-for-central-asia)

¹⁵ [CI-climate-research-report-29-May-2020.pdf \(carecinstitute.org\)](https://carecinstitute.org/ci-climate-research-report-29-May-2020.pdf)

¹⁶ [Uzbekistan: Temperature Rise and Water Scarcity \(cabar.asia\)](https://cabar.asia/uzbekistan-temperature-rise-and-water-scarcity)

¹⁷ [Ibid](#)

¹⁸ [Classic Hub Homepage - REAP \(reap-centralasia.org\)](https://reap-centralasia.org/)

¹⁹ [REAP > GRANTS PROGRAMME | SWITCH-Asia](#)

²⁰ [Ibid.](#)

is a rapidly expanding sector, growing annually by 10-15 %.²¹ However, water stress is a significant issue, particularly in agriculture.²² These factors underscore the importance of prioritizing resource efficiency and balancing resource optimization with environmental sustainability. Advancing towards more resource-efficient technologies is vital for sustainability, increased production, and enhanced competitiveness in both regional and international markets and is crucial for fostering green economic growth.²³

Tajikistan

A considerable part of Tajik labor force (43%) is employed in the agricultural sector, and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) comprise over 95% of all private companies in the country.²⁴ However, the overall sectors contribution to the country's GDP is comparably low, being around 30% due to factors such as underdeveloped value chains, regulatory and economic barriers, and relatively small turnover.²⁵ Cumulatively, these aspects have led to a 17.3% increase in the price of food between April 2019 and April 2020.²⁶

Over 60% of the population resides in rural areas, facing food security challenges due to a weak natural resource base and agricultural inefficiencies from the Soviet era.²⁷ The recurrent droughts, water and energy shortages in the rural areas continue to negatively impact the countries' food security.²⁸ In addition to the overall limited access to energy, the rural MSME's are experiencing electricity shortages. This leads to 30% damage of agricultural produce, and closure of around 850 small and medium enterprises to close down annually.²⁹ As a result, around 70% of the countries' food is imported even though climatic conditions would allow for increase in local production.³⁰ It is therefore important to develop and ensure reliable energy supply both for food security and economic development of the country.³¹

1. Current challenges in midstream agri-food production in the region

Although primary agriculture, food security, trade, and water-related matters continue to hold a central position on the regional agenda, the emphasis on integrating sustainable production methods within agro-food processing seems to be noticeably absent. Among other current challenges in midstream agro-food production and processing in Central Asia are shown in Table 1. Many of these challenges are interconnected and can exacerbate one another. For instance, without adequate access to financial resources, the adoption of resource-efficient technologies becomes more difficult. Conversely, the absence of resource-efficient technologies can impede the optimization of resource usage, potentially affecting financial stability.

²¹ [Uzbekistan - Market Overview | export.gov](#)

²² [Chapter 9. Uzbekistan's sustainable infrastructure investments | Sustainable Infrastructure for Low-Carbon Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus : Hotspot Analysis and Needs Assessment | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#)

²³ [REAP > GRANTS PROGRAMME | SWITCH-Asia](#)

²⁴ [reap_tajikistan_policy_brief_input_paper_2021.pdf \(switch-asia.eu\)](#)

²⁵ [Enhancing Access to Finance for SME Development in Tajikistan.pdf \(oecd.org\)](#)

²⁶ [Tajikistan Food Inflation \(tradingeconomics.com\)](#)

²⁷ <https://www.switch-asia.eu/project/reap/>

²⁸ [reap_tajikistan_policy_brief_input_paper_2021.pdf \(switch-asia.eu\)](#)

²⁹ [reap_tajikistan_policy_brief_input_paper_2021.pdf \(switch-asia.eu\)](#)

³⁰ [Microsoft Word - A754-Rapport A@conomique-TJK 2020 Intern.docx \(s-ge.com\)](#)

³¹ [reap_tajikistan_policy_brief_input_paper_2021.pdf \(switch-asia.eu\)](#)

Table 1 Current challenges in midstream agro-food production in the region

Challenge	Description
Access to affordable Finance	High interest rates and high collateral demands hinder access to finance for green economy transition. Global events such as COVID-19 and war in Ukraine have increased these barriers. ^{32 33}
Access to Technologies	Access to technologies is a hindering factor to implementation of SCP. SMEs use outdated equipment because of the lack of access to finance.
Market Linkages	SMEs face challenges in establishing effective linkages with both urban domestic and foreign markets, as well as establishing professional connections with larger agro-processors. ³⁴
Competencies and Sustainable Practices	Lack in the awareness and application of sustainable production principles within MSMEs operating within the agro-processing sector.
Policy environment	Lack of enabling political environment and inclusive policies. ³⁵

1.1 Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has shown commitment through various initiatives and policy measures aimed at promoting sustainability, renewable energy, and environmental conservation. Among various strategic intervention areas energy efficiency has been notably prioritized within Uzbekistan's national green development agenda. Among others, Uzbekistan has approved The Green Economy Transition and Green Growth Programme in Uzbekistan until 2030 and has developed Action Plan on the Transition to a Green Economy and Ensuring Green Growth in Uzbekistan until 2030.^{36 37}

Table 2 Main Policies, Strategies and Initiatives in Uzbekistan

Name	Description
Strategy for Agriculture Development in Uzbekistan (2020-2030)	The strategy aims to enhance the agriculture sector by promoting sustainable natural resource use and improving environmental protection. It focuses on optimizing resource utilization, upgrading eco-agricultural practices, and revising standards for natural resource conservation. ³⁸

³² https://berlin-economics.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GET_UZB_PB_06_2021_en.pdf.

³³ (OECD, 2018)

³⁴ <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/214121/adbi-pb2016-4.pdf>

³⁵ <https://www.fao.org/3/cc5830en/cc5830en.pdf>

³⁶ The World Bank and Uzbekistan's Ministry of Economy and Finance: Working Together for a Greener Future

³⁷ [ПП-436-сон 02.12.2022. О мерах по повышению эффективности реформ, направленных на переход Республики Узбекистан на «зеленую» экономику до 2030 года \(lex.uz\)](#)

³⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9141516/>

The SCP Action Plan for Uzbekistan	Encompasses national policy development, value-chain actions, and cross-sectoral actions aimed at promoting sustainable consumption and production (SCP) practices across agricultural value chains, with specific emphasis on water efficiency, waste resource recovery, and GHG emissions reduction. ³⁹
Strategy for the transition of the Republic of Uzbekistan to a Green economy in the period of 2019-2030	Key objectives of the strategy include technological modernization to boost energy efficiency, promoting sustainable agriculture through rational resource use and organic farming, and expanding renewable energy use. The strategy emphasizes developing financial and non-financial support mechanisms, international cooperation in green economy initiatives, and comprehensive training for green jobs. ⁴⁰
Green Growth Strategic Framework Uzbekistan (2022)⁴¹	The Framework targets sustainable development by prioritizing efficient use of natural resources, addressing challenges like climate change, and biodiversity loss. It aims to support the nation's resilience through improved climate action and afforestation, integrating green growth into agriculture, food, water, and energy sectors to promote a comprehensive and sustainable economy. ⁴²

In Uzbekistan, several projects and initiatives aim to foster a transition towards a green economy, particularly within the agri-food sector. The EU-AGRIN project⁴³, active from 2021 to 2025, partners with the Ministry of Agriculture to enhance the food and agriculture sector through the development of a "climate-smart" Uzbek Agriculture Knowledge and Innovation System (UAKIS). This includes forming Agri-food Innovation Operational Groups, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, and improving policy frameworks. Other significant efforts include the Agriculture Modernization Project and the Livestock Sector Development Project, both supported by the World Bank, which provide financial support and aim to modernize agricultural practices and boost sectoral cooperation among farmers, enhancing the horticulture and livestock sectors respectively.⁴⁴

In Uzbekistan, the transition towards green agriculture faces significant challenges. There is a disconnect between the needs of farmers and agri-businesses and the responsiveness of the agricultural research sector, compounded by a lack of mechanisms for sharing knowledge and experience. Additionally, private investment in green initiatives is insufficient due to an inadequate regulatory framework for green finance, modest carbon reduction targets, and limited engagement from financial institutions in assessing the risks and potential benefits of green finance.

1.2 Tajikistan

Tajikistan is actively promoting sustainable development through key policies like the National Action Plan and the Green Economy Strategy, which focus on enhancing environmental conservation and fostering a green economy.

³⁹ https://www.switch-asia.eu/site/assets/files/3647/uzbekistan_nap_scp_en_abridged.pdf

⁴⁰ [Strategy for the transition of the Republic of Uzbekistan to a Green economy in the period of 2019-2030. | UNEP Law and Environment Assistance Platform](#)

⁴¹ [GGSF 071222_FINAL_Clean.docx \(undp.org\)](#)

⁴² [The World Bank and Uzbekistan's Ministry of Economy and Finance: Working Together for a Greener Future](#)

⁴³ [Supporting an inclusive transition to a green economy in the Agri-food sector and development of a "climate-smart" Uzbek Agriculture Knowledge and Innovation System \(EU-AGRIN\) | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\)](#)

⁴⁴ [World Bank Document](#)

Table 3 Policies, Strategies and Initiatives in Tajikistan

Name	Description
National Action Plan focusing on responsible consumption and sustainable lifestyles	This plan targets fostering a circular economy, especially within the agri-food sector, aligning with broader goals set out in the Medium-Term Development Program for 2021-2025, which is key to implementing the second phase of the National Strategy of Tajikistan until 2030. This comprehensive approach aims to integrate responsible consumption and sustainable lifestyles into national policy and practice. ⁴⁵
Strategy for the Development of the Green Economy for 2023-2037	The objective of this strategy is enacting regulatory reforms, maximizing the efficient utilization of natural resources, drawing investments, incorporating contemporary and innovative technologies, and bolstering international collaboration within the framework of the green economy. ⁴⁶
Green Growth Strategy	The period spanning from 2022 to 2026 has been designated as the years of industrial development, with the ambitious goal of establishing 870 new industrial units. This initiative holds the potential to serve as a catalyst for advancing green transformation. ⁴⁷
The National Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan	The Strategy mentions as one of the principles of agricultural development is to eliminate the impact of human activities on the natural environment and improve the quality of water and soil. ⁴⁸

A major challenge in of SCP in the agro-food processing sector of Tajikistan is the prevailing concentration of initiatives on primary production, primarily cantered around upstream agricultural activities. This pattern is evident not only in domestic efforts but also in the context of international development cooperation, aligning with the funding priorities of international donors.

2 Regional Policies and Initiatives

This section provides an overview of regional policies and initiatives for Sustainable Production and Consumption (SCP), identifies the key stakeholders and assesses the current policy gaps. In the context the agri-food sector, regional initiatives between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan play a critical role in addressing the shared challenge and promoting sustainable development in the region. Through collaborative efforts, effective strategies to increase the sustainability of the midstream agri-food sector can be developed and subsequently implemented. These initiatives typically involve sharing knowledge, resources, and expertise to develop and implement strategies that benefit the region as a whole. Regional initiatives can focus on a wide range of issues, including economic development, environmental protection, social welfare, and political stability.

2.1. Regional Policies

⁴⁵ [tajikistan_2022_SCP_country_profile SWITCH asia.pdf \(adelphi.de\)](#)

⁴⁶ <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/12/05/tajikistan-unveils-2023-2037-green-development-policy/>

⁴⁷ <https://mfa.tj/ru/berlin/view/9393/prezident-respubliki-tadzhikistan-emomali-rakhmon-predlozhit-obyavit-2022-2026-gody-godami-razvitiya-promyshlennosti-i-prinyat-strategiyu-razvitiya-zelenoi-ekonomiki>

⁴⁸ [Challenges Threatening Agricultural Sustainability in Central Asia: Status and Prospect - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

This sub-chapter provides a brief look at any regional policies, including any governmental bi-party agreements or international regulations concerning SCP policies, focusing on resource and energy efficiency, and water management in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, targeting the mid-stream agri-food processing sector, specifically the MSMEs. The analysis of relevant policies and regulations will provide further insights into the existing framework and contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the policies influencing the sector. Furthermore, any sustainability related policies are also looked at, if they are relevant.

The regional policy framework primarily supports trade, water resource management, and primary agricultural production. Central Asian water policies are targeted mainly towards agricultural needs, particularly in terms of supplying irrigated lands⁴⁹, and showcase a link between water resources and other sectors such as energy and land use.⁵⁰ The concept of the Water–Food–Energy (WEF)⁵¹ nexus advocates for cross-sectoral interactions and resource interdependencies essential for sustainable regional integration. Through the lens of the WEF nexus, the discussion emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to managing these interlinked resources, particularly in the face of environmental and climate challenges in broader Central Asian region.⁵² This approach highlights the importance of a coordinated policy framework to support sustainable development in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and neighbouring countries.⁵³

The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program involves Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, aiming to drive economic growth and reduce poverty through cooperative initiatives. Notably, CAREC's 2030 strategy, supported by the Asian Development Bank, focuses on enhancing energy efficiency through technological modernization and promoting renewable energy investments to reduce the carbon footprint across member countries. It also seeks to integrate sustainable practices within the regional energy matrix, considering the intermittent nature of renewable resources and the benefits of regional cooperation in managing energy reserves. CAREC has established mechanisms to share backup energy capacity among nations, anticipating significant cost savings and environmental benefits by 2030. This regional cooperation highlights the importance of energy efficiency and sustainable energy practices as central components of CAREC's environmental agenda, which also includes significant initiatives in primary agriculture production and transboundary water management.⁵⁴

The Asian Development Bank has developed a climate change strategy for Central and West Asia, focusing on integrating climate considerations into developmental interventions in the region. This strategy supports various operational priorities, including climate and disaster resilience and enhancing environmental sustainability, with a particular emphasis on rural development and food security, energy sector reform, and water resource management.⁵⁵

The EU Central Asia strategy, updated in 2019, emphasizes strengthening regional cooperation among Central Asian countries in areas critical to SCP such as environment, water management, climate change, and sustainable energy. This strategy facilitates dialogues that address these pivotal issues at a

⁴⁹ <https://deliverypdf.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=836003098074007073007101121081065081113072089033089044065117024103091067064017091096019037058000058022054087011004087067099065056045086013087029087025111066005027065021029028124088116068120096110109102120109087119073001083024007116070029127083087100115&EXT=pdf&INDEX=TRUE>

⁵⁰ <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/14/13/8064>

⁵¹ Holistic framework that emphasizes the complex and interdependent relationships between water resources, energy, and food security.

⁵² <https://www.mdpi.com/2073-4441/12/7/1896>

⁵³ <https://www.mdpi.com/2073-4441/12/7/1896>

⁵⁴ <https://www.carecprogram.org/uploads/2017-CAREC-2030.pdf>

⁵⁵ [56025-001: Delivering a Climate Change Strategy for Central and West Asia | Asian Development Bank \(adb.org\)](https://www.adb.org/publications/delivering-a-climate-change-strategy-for-central-and-west-asia)

regional level, promoting comprehensive and integrated approaches to environmental and resource management.⁵⁶

The GREEN Action Task Force, established in 1993, is dedicated to improving environmental policies in the transition economies of Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia. It aims to embed environmental considerations within economic, social, and political reforms. The Task Force's agenda for 2023 and 2024 focuses on four main areas: economy-wide policies for green growth, environmental policies including climate change mitigation and circular economy, water and ecosystems management, and sustainable infrastructure with emphasis on green finance and investments. It facilitates its goals through national dialogues and annual meetings that review progress, share experiences, and build consensus on future priorities.⁵⁷

2.2. Other regional initiatives (projects, programmes, platforms, etc)

This sub-chapter provides a brief look at any regional bilateral, or international initiatives in SCP in agri-food and food processing sectors, which are currently being implemented or have been conducted in the past. There are several initiatives in the region that represent a strong commitment to integrating sustainable practices into the agricultural and food processing sectors of Central Asia, focusing on both environmental sustainability and economic efficiency.

Both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have demonstrated their commitment to sustainable development by promoting green economic strategies. These strategies focus on reducing resource consumption and incorporating resource-efficient technologies, implementing low-waste approaches, and enhancing recycling initiatives. Additionally, as described below, various international organizations have shown interest and actively participated in collaborative efforts towards sustainability in the Central Asian region, also providing financial support for numerous regional initiatives.⁵⁸

In 2022, the FAO inaugurated the Regional Technical Platform on Green Agriculture, a significant initiative offering resources in both English and Russian. This platform is facilitating knowledge exchange within the region and beyond, covering various aspects of green agriculture. It collaborates with international, national, and local partners to enhance successful practices, strengthen regional cooperation, and bridge gaps in science, policy, and digital communication, thereby accelerating the dissemination of knowledge and best practices in green agriculture.⁵⁹

Another key initiative is the "One Country One Priority Product" program by the FAO, which focuses on improving production methods, minimizing environmental impacts, and maximizing efficiency for specific agricultural products. This program integrates traditional methods with modern scientific advancements and technology to enhance agricultural value chains and market integration.⁶⁰

The UNDP is developing a comprehensive knowledge-sharing platform for Central Asia focused on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This platform will assist Central Asian nations in effectively monitoring their progress towards the SDGs, evaluating financial allocations, and adapting socio-economic strategies. It aims to enhance the effectiveness of regional EU programs in achieving SDG targets, making a significant contribution to sustainable development and informed policy-making in the region.⁶¹

⁵⁶ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/178/central-asia#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20the%20EU%20updated,on%20connectivity\)%20and%20regional%20cooperation.https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/178/central-asia#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20the%20EU%20updated,on%20connectivity)%20and%20regional%20cooperation.https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf).

⁵⁷ <https://www.oecd.org/environment/outreach/green-action-taskforce-mission.htm>

⁵⁸ <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/14/13/8064>

⁵⁹ [Regional Technical Platform on Green Agriculture | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(fao.org\)](https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/europe-and-central-asia-promoting-green-agriculture-to-transform-local-agrifood-systems/en)

⁶⁰ <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/europe-and-central-asia-promoting-green-agriculture-to-transform-local-agrifood-systems/en>

⁶¹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/central-asia-sdgs-platform_en?s=352

The Green Central Asia initiative, launched in 2019 by the German government and Central Asian countries, aims to promote sustainable development and enhance climate resilience. This initiative focuses on regional climate adaptation strategies, emphasizing enhanced climate finance, water and energy collaboration, capacity building, and joint scientific research.⁶²

2.3. Regional Stakeholders

Public stakeholders are responsible for developing and formulating policies and guidelines related to SCP in agri-food sector. They assess the existing challenges, scientific data, and best practices to design effective strategies and frameworks. They are also tasked with implementing policies and programs. This involves coordinating with various government departments, agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to ensure the effective execution of initiatives. A brief description of some of the key stakeholders is provided in the tables below.

In Tajikistan, there are many public stakeholders which play a key role in developing and implementing of SCP policies. The National Development Council, supported by the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, leads reforms aligned with SCP goals, focusing on intersectoral collaboration and efficient data management. The Ministry of Energy and Water Resources is instrumental in forming sustainable management policies for energy and water, addressing both climate adaptation and transboundary issues. The Ministry of Agriculture is tasked with enhancing agricultural productivity through sustainable practices, supporting the broader SCP framework in the region. A brief description of some of the key stakeholder is provided in the table below:

Table 4 Key public Stakeholders in Tajikistan for regional policy development

Stakeholder	Role
The National Development Council under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan (NDC)	The council outlines the country's reform strategy. It facilitates collaboration among government bodies, the private sector, and civil society in executing strategic documents aligned with the SDGs. The NDC focuses on tracking progress, data collection, and reporting. The SDGs' coordination is led by the NDS Secretariat, which is represented by the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Tajikistan. ⁶³
Ministry of Energy and Water Resources	Develops policies for managing and conserving energy and water resources. Its responsibilities include setting national goals, assessing the value of these resources, and crafting strategies for climate adaptation related to water and energy. It also participates in bilateral and multilateral agreements on water-energy issues, including transboundary concerns, and fosters institutional and capacity-building initiatives to enhance energy efficiency and address climate impacts. ⁶⁴
The Ministry of Agriculture	The ministry oversees agricultural policies, development programs, and initiatives related to the agricultural sector in the country, focusing on improving productivity, and introducing effective measures and developing methods of production.

In Uzbekistan, the integration and implementation of SCP related policies are driven by several public stakeholders. For example, The Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Water Resources, and the Ministry

⁶² <http://greencentralasia.org/>

⁶³ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Session4_Tajikistan_SDG_indicators_Russian.pdf

⁶⁴ [Направление деятельности – Министерство энергетики и водных ресурсов Республики Таджикистан \(mewr.tj\)](#)

of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Climate Change each play an important role in shaping these policies. These ministries work to enhance agricultural productivity, manage water resources effectively, and ensure ecological stability across the country, supporting SCP goals through comprehensive policy development and innovative management strategies. A brief description of these selected key stakeholders is outlined in the table below:

Table 5 Key public Stakeholders in Uzbekistan for regional policy development

Stakeholder	Role
Ministry of Agriculture	The Ministry is responsible for implementing unified state policies in the agricultural sector. It oversees agricultural policies, development programs, and initiatives aimed at improving productivity and sustainable practices within the country.
Ministry of Water Resources	The Ministry is responsible for creating comprehensive policies that govern the use, protection, and management of water resources, including tackling the adverse effects of climate change. This includes developing regional water management programs, and enhancing water security through innovative measures. Additionally, the Ministry coordinates with various governmental and economic sectors to implement these policies effectively, ensuring the stable and rational provision of water resources across territories and economic sectors. ⁶⁵
Ministry of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Climate Change	The ministry is responsible for managing and safeguarding the environment and natural resources. Its duties include ensuring ecological stability, protecting ecosystems, and overseeing the lawful use of resources such as land, water, and forests. The ministry also regulates waste management. Additionally, it conducts environmental control, coordinates environmental policy, and organizes educational programs for environmental awareness and professional development in ecological fields. ⁶⁶

Development organizations play an important role in the Central Asian region by providing crucial funding, technical expertise, and guidance to promote sustainable environmental practices. International organizations, such as UNDP, USAID, and the European Union, contribute significantly. These organizations enhance local capacities and foster the adoption of sustainable practices in the region. A brief description of some key development organizations operating in the region is provided in the table below:

Table 6 Key Development Organisations in the region

Stakeholder	Role
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)	USAID promotes economic growth and regional connectivity in Tajikistan by supporting reforms in energy, trade, and water sectors. This focus on regional cooperation can indirectly contribute to a more sustainable approach to

⁶⁵ [МИНИСТЕРСТВО ВОДНОГО ХОЗЯЙСТВА РЕСПУБЛИКИ УЗБЕКИСТАН \(gov.uz\)](http://gov.uz)

⁶⁶ [O'zbekiston Respublikasi Ekologiya, atrof-muhitni muhofaza qilish va iqlim o'zgarishi vazirligi \(uznature.uz\)](http://uznature.uz)

	resource management. ⁶⁷ USAID's initiatives in Uzbekistan target trade facilitation, enterprise development, and improvements in the agriculture sector. These can indirectly promote sustainable practices by encouraging efficient production methods and resource management. ⁶⁸
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)	The UNDP is actively involved in promoting green economies and recoveries both in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Tajikistan ⁶⁹ the UNDP supports initiatives for sustainable land management, renewable energy, resource efficiency, green jobs, and climate-smart agriculture. In Uzbekistan ⁷⁰ the UNDP helped develop Uzbekistan's Green Economy Strategy and supports projects focused on renewable energy, water management, green industries, climate adaptation, and water security.
European Union	The EU plays supports green development in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. They focus on similar areas as UNDP, such as Green Economy: The EU offers financial and technical help for these countries' transitions to green economies. This includes promoting energy efficiency, and modernizing industries. The EU aids with climate change adaptation (disaster risk reduction, climate-smart agriculture) and water management. ^{71 72 73}

There are numerous private stakeholders and financial institutions in the region, such as the World Bank, the European Investment Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Development Bank of Latin America, the InterAmerican Development Bank, the African Development Bank, the New Development Bank supported by the BRICS, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. These Financial Institutions play an important role in supporting developing countries and emerging market economies by offering advice, financing development projects (among other things, issuing guarantees to attract private sector investment, including foreign direct investment), and aiding in project implementation. A list of selected key financial institutions with their brief description is listed in the table below:

Table 7 Key Private Stakeholders/Financial Institutions

Stakeholder	Role
International Finance Corporation	The IFC is engaged in collaboration with businesses to encourage the adoption of sustainable production practices and the mitigation of their environmental footprint. Through the provision of financial support and technical guidance, the IFC assists businesses in embracing sustainable production methods. Furthermore, the IFC collaborates with governments to formulate policies and regulations conducive to fostering sustainable production practices, thereby contributing to the advancement of environmentally responsible business practices in the region.

⁶⁷ <https://www.usaid.gov/tajikistan>

⁶⁸ <https://www.usaid.gov/uzbekistan>

⁶⁹ <https://www.undp.org/tajikistan>

⁷⁰ <https://www.undp.org/uzbekistan>

⁷¹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/uzbekistan/european-union-and-uzbekistan_en?s=233

⁷² https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-tajikistan-relations_en

⁷³ <https://www.switch-asia.eu/>

World Bank (WB)	The World Bank supports the economic development in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. WB has several programmes which address environmental sustainability, such as Central Asia Water and Energy Program. The WB utilizes loans, grants, and technical assistance to support its projects in both countries. They collaborate with the governments and other stakeholders to design and implement programs that address their specific needs and priorities. ⁷⁴
Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED)	International development agency, which promotes entrepreneurship and supports with building economically sound enterprises in the developing world. The fund is active in 18 countries, including Tajikistan and has made investments and operated companies in Central Asia. ⁷⁵

2.4. Policy Gaps

Regional collaboration among Central Asian nations has increasingly highlighted the need for sustainable production in the agro-food production and processing sector. Although agriculture, food security, trade, and water-related matters continue to hold a central position on the regional agenda, the emphasis on integrating sustainable production methods within agro-food processing seems to be noticeably absent.

Tajikistan's financial sector in preparation for transformation to ensure its resilience. This transformation seeks to mobilize financial resources for advancement of different sectors, particularly through the issuance of thematic bonds focused on renewable energy, transportation, water management, and waste disposal. These bonds should be aligned with international standards and proven methodologies, enhancing their attractiveness for private investments. To ensure effective implementation, a well-structured policy and regulatory framework is vital, and the involvement of developmental organizations is recommended to provide technical support.

The application of SCP often depends on voluntary actions across various sectors, including government, and businesses in industrial and service sectors. The motivation to adopt SCP practices is enhanced by providing stakeholders with tailored tools and guidance, establishing mechanisms to incentivize these voluntary actions. ⁷⁶

The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and the EU Central Asia strategy underscore the importance of sustainable practices. However, there seems to be challenges in policy harmonization, leading to inefficiencies. A more integrated approach, like Water-Food-Energy nexus, that connects energy efficiency with water management and agri-food production could foster more effective strategies.

Companies in the mid-stream agri-food sector often encounter challenges such as limited knowledge, motivation, and resources, which can hinder the adoption of sustainable practices. Although regional policies may promote technological modernization, the actual transfer, adoption, and accessibility of these technologies can be particularly challenging, especially in rural areas where many companies are based (more so in the case of Tajikistan). The Central Asian region benefits from numerous donors who facilitate knowledge transfer and provide financial support to local MSMEs (see Table 6 and Table 7). To further encourage these companies towards sustainable transformation, it is crucial to introduce specific incentives such as tax breaks, subsidies for energy-efficient technologies, and support for water-saving techniques. Moreover, policies should also focus on easing access to modern, energy-efficient,

⁷⁴ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/brief/central-asia>

⁷⁵ [About the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development - AKDN](#)

⁷⁶ https://www.switch-asia.eu/site/assets/files/3647/uzbekistan_nap_scp_en_abridged.pdf

and water-conserving technologies for MSMEs, incorporating the necessary training and know-how for local implementation. Supporting regional cooperation could amplify these efforts, allowing for shared strategies, pooled resources, and unified policies across neighbouring countries, thereby creating a more conducive environment for implementing sustainable practices in the sector.

Effective policy implementation relies on data collection and monitoring mechanisms, which seem to be currently insufficient. Enhancing capabilities to monitor water and energy use in the agri-food sector and track progress towards SCP goals would help identify shortcomings and areas for improvement. This could involve developing regional data standards and encouraging data sharing across borders to improve overall resource management.

There is often a disconnect between policy-making and the stakeholders at the operational level, including farmers, agri-businesses, and mid-stream processors. Developing mechanisms for greater stakeholder engagement and establishing public-private partnerships could facilitate more practical and accepted SCP practices. These partnerships could focus on developing joint projects that demonstrate the benefits of SCP, thereby encouraging wider adoption. Additionally, enhancing cross-border collaboration between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan could further strengthen these efforts. By sharing resources, knowledge, and best practices, both countries can create a unified regional strategy that supports SCP adoption.

Given the region's particular vulnerability to climate change, especially regarding water resources, it is crucial for policies to be both reactive and proactive. Currently, there appears to be a significant gap in a comprehensive regional framework for climate resilience, which is essential for consistent and effective adaptation strategies. Establishing such a framework in the agri-food sector that aligns with SCP objectives would not only mitigate risks but also promote sustainability across borders.

3. Recommendations

Develop Regional sustainability vision and goals focusing on SCP targeting mid-stream MSMEs in the agri-food processing sector.

This should aim to establish clear, actionable objectives that align with both national priorities and international sustainability standards. The vision should encompass reducing environmental impacts, optimizing resource use, and enhancing economic viability across the sector.

Enhance Policy Integration Across Sectors:

Develop comprehensive policies that integrate SCP practices. These policies should not only align with national priorities but also with regional sustainability goals. Establish frameworks that encourage cross-sectoral collaboration and data sharing among Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and other Central Asian countries. Ensure that SCP policies are flexible enough to adapt to emerging environmental, social, and technological changes. Policies should be regularly reviewed and updated based on performance assessments and changing conditions. Implement pilot projects that allow for testing of new SCP approaches in a controlled environment before scaling up successful practices across the region.

Strengthen Data Collection and Monitoring Systems:

Develop a regional strategy to enhance the data collection, monitoring, and reporting on SCP indicators. This includes creating standardized methodologies and tools that can be used across countries to ensure comparability and reliability of data.

Create Incentives for Mid-Stream Agri-Food Companies:

Implement fiscal incentives such as tax reductions, grants, or subsidized loans for mid-stream agri-food companies that invest in energy-efficient technologies or water-saving practices. This could be supported by a regional fund dedicated to promoting SCP practices in the agri-food sector. Special attention would require rural businesses.

Facilitate Technology Transfer and Capacity Building:

Establish regional centres of excellence or innovation hubs in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan that focus on SCP technologies suitable for the agri-food sector adapted to the local context. These centers could serve as knowledge and technology transfer points that provide training and technical support to local businesses. Encourage partnerships with international organizations, donors, international initiatives, and countries with advanced SCP practices to bring new technologies and expertise to the region.

Increase Stakeholder Engagement and Public-Private Partnerships:

Initiate regular regional dialogue forums that include government representatives, industry stakeholders, and civil society to discuss SCP implementation challenges and opportunities. These forums can help align the interests of different sectors and integrate practical insights into policy-making. Promote public-private partnerships that focus on developing sustainable supply chains and enhancing resource efficiency in the agri-food sector.

Regional Cooperation on Climate Adaptation and Water-Energy Nexus:

Strengthen existing frameworks like the CAREC program to address specific regional challenges related to climate change adaptation, particularly in the water-energy nexus. Focus on creating policies that support sustainable water and energy use to protect and enhance food security. Encourage cooperative water governance mechanisms that address transboundary water issues between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and neighbouring countries, ensuring equitable and sustainable water distribution and usage.

Report on the Regional Policy Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption and Production (Output Paper)

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Introduction

The Regional Policy Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) was organized on 15 July 2024 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, under the EU SWITCH Asia-funded REAP project. This roundtable marked a significant step in fostering cooperation and collaboration between public stakeholders from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, along with development organizations, in addressing pressing issues in SCP and advancing sustainable practices in the agri-food sector.



The roundtable pursued the following objectives:

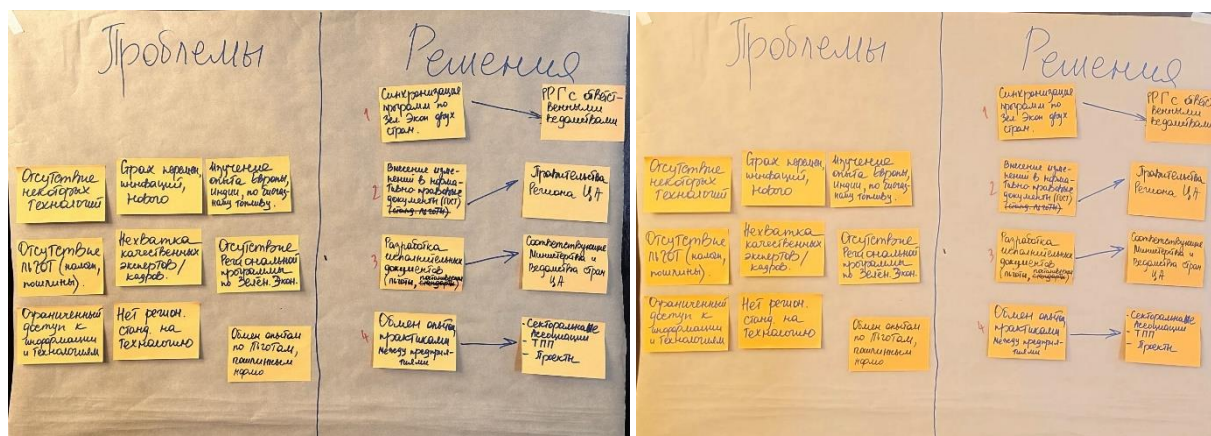
- Enhancing Regional Cooperation: Strengthening collaborative ties between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to promote SCP in industry sectors.
- Utilizing Existing Frameworks: Reviewing and adapting existing regional cooperation frameworks to support SCP initiatives and identify successful policies for broader regional implementation.
- Developing Regional Mechanisms: Drafting actionable regional mechanisms to facilitate SCP adoption using proven policy methodologies.
- Facilitating Knowledge Sharing: Encouraging the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and best practices related to SCP, while fostering dialogue on challenges and opportunities in implementation.

- Drafting Policy Recommendations: Developing actionable, regionally relevant policy recommendations tailored to promote SCP.
- Ensuring Broad Dissemination: Sharing outcomes and recommendations with governmental and non-governmental organizations across Central Asia.

Regional Challenges for SCP and Green Economy Cooperation

Several challenges hinder the effective implementation of SCP and the green economy in Central Asia. These challenges, as discussed during the roundtable, are outlined below:

- **Lack of Coordinated Policies:** Divergent environmental regulations and standards across the region impede unified efforts, creating disparities in SCP implementation.
- **Institutional Weaknesses:** The absence of regional institutional frameworks undermines cooperative efforts and policy alignment for SCP.
- **Economic Disparities:** Varying levels of economic development among Central Asian countries limit equal investment capacities in green technologies.
- **Limited Financial Resources:** Inadequate funding for large-scale sustainable projects hinders progress and innovation in SCP practices.
- **Access to Technology:** Unequal access to modern green technologies results in implementation gaps and inefficiencies in adopting SCP practices.
- **Research and Development (R&D):** Insufficient regional collaboration in R&D restricts innovation and the adaptation of global best practices.
- **Resource Depletion:** Over-extraction of natural resources exacerbates environmental degradation, impacting long-term sustainability goals.
- **Skill Gaps:** A shortage of skilled professionals in the green economy sector delays the successful implementation of sustainable projects.
- **Environmental Awareness:** Uneven levels of public awareness about sustainability issues result in slow and inconsistent adoption of SCP practices.
- **Limited Incentives:** The absence of incentives, such as tax breaks and favorable customs duties, discourages industries from adopting green economy principles.
- **Knowledge Exchange Platforms:** A lack of platforms for knowledge exchange and collaboration limits regional learning and mutual growth.



Solutions and Recommendations for Regional Cooperation

Participants at the roundtable proposed several solutions to address the challenges and enhance regional cooperation for SCP and the green economy. Key recommendations included:

- **Enhancing Political Dialogues:** Regular high-level summits and working groups focused on SCP and the green economy to build trust and foster political dialogue.
- **Regional Environmental Policy and Standards Development:** Creating unified regional standards for sustainable production, resource management, and green initiatives to ensure consistency.
- **Establishment of a Regional Environmental Agency:** Forming an agency to coordinate and implement sustainable development projects, acting as a central body for SCP activities.
- **Capacity Building Programs:** Implementing initiatives to strengthen institutional capacities and encourage peer learning among Central Asian countries.
- **Green Investment Fund:** Establishing a regional fund to finance green technologies and sustainable projects, bridging financial gaps.
- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):** Promoting PPPs to leverage private-sector investment and expertise in advancing SCP initiatives.
- **Free Trade Agreements:** Developing trade agreements to facilitate the exchange of sustainable products and services while fostering a common market for green products.
- **Exchange Programs:** Creating exchange programs for students, researchers, and professionals to encourage knowledge sharing and collaboration.

Priority Solutions for Regional Collaboration

1. Establishment of a Regional Environmental Agency



A Regional Environmental Agency (REA) was proposed as a central mechanism to coordinate and strengthen SCP and green economy initiatives across Central Asia. This agency would serve as a focal point for collaboration, policy alignment, and implementation support in the region.

Structure and Governance

- The REA could either build on existing platforms, such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), or function as a new independent entity.
- It would have representation from the ministries of environment, industry, trade, and finance from all Central Asian countries.
- A governing council comprising senior policymakers and technical experts would oversee its operations, ensuring alignment with national priorities.

Key Roles and Responsibilities

Policy Coordination:

- Harmonizing SCP-related policies and standards to eliminate inconsistencies and enable a unified approach.
- Providing advisory support to governments on integrating SCP principles into national development plans.

Implementation Support:

- Offering technical assistance and financial resources to facilitate SCP projects in industries like agriculture, manufacturing, and services.
- Acting as a liaison between governments, development organizations, and the private sector to ensure effective project execution.

Capacity Building:

- Organizing workshops, training programs, and regional peer-learning initiatives to build institutional and human resource capacities.
- Encouraging the development of green technology skills and expertise in industries.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Establishing mechanisms to monitor SCP project outcomes, assess compliance with regional standards, and provide regular progress updates.
- Offering evidence-based recommendations for scaling successful initiatives.

Collaboration and Synergies

The agency would work closely with:

- **National Ministries:** To implement SCP initiatives and align national priorities with regional goals.
- **Development Organizations:** For funding and technical expertise, leveraging programs like EU SWITCH Asia.
- **Private Sector:** Encouraging investment and innovation in green technologies through public-private partnerships.
- **Educational Institutions:** To incorporate SCP-related research and skill development into academic curriculums.

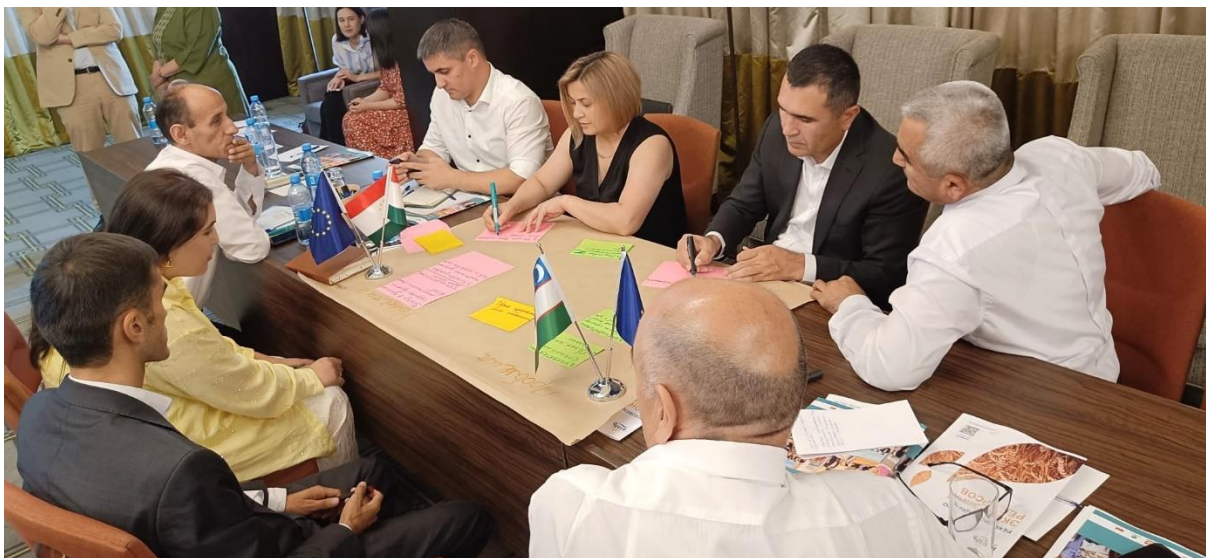
Expected Benefits

- **Streamlined Efforts:** Elimination of policy overlaps and inconsistencies across countries.
- **Shared Resources:** Pooled expertise, technology, and funding for more impactful outcomes.
- **Stronger Regional Identity:** A unified approach to SCP and green economy initiatives strengthens the region's standing in global environmental forums.

- **Enhanced Accountability:** Clear metrics and regular evaluations promote transparency and accountability in SCP implementation.

The establishment of the REA would enable Central Asia to move towards a more sustainable and resource-efficient economy, addressing regional challenges through a coordinated and strategic approach.

2. Establishment of a Regional Knowledge Hub



A Regional Knowledge Hub was identified as an essential solution to address knowledge gaps and facilitate information sharing across Central Asia. This hub would act as a repository of resources, a network of experts, and a platform for collaboration, fostering innovation and informed decision-making.

Functions and Services

Information Repository:

- Collecting, curating, and disseminating best practices, research findings, and case studies on SCP and the green economy.
- Hosting policy documents, such as the 'Free Trade Agreement on Environmental Products,' to guide stakeholders.

Knowledge Sharing:

- Organizing webinars, conferences, and workshops to exchange experiences and lessons learned.
- Providing a platform for dialogue between policymakers, industry leaders, researchers, and civil society.

Expert Network:

- Establishing a pool of regional and international experts in SCP and green economy practices.
- Facilitating access to experts for technical guidance, capacity-building programs, and project evaluations.

Research and Development (R&D) Promotion:

- Encouraging regional collaboration on R&D to adapt global innovations to local contexts.
- Supporting joint research projects to address region-specific challenges like water scarcity, soil degradation, and renewable energy.

Policy Support:

- Assisting governments in designing SCP policies and certification mechanisms based on proven international models.
- Offering insights on market trends and opportunities for green products.

Structure and Accessibility

- The hub could be hosted virtually, making it accessible to stakeholders across the region.
- It would be managed by a dedicated team of professionals, supported by contributions from member countries and development organizations.
- Local nodes or centers could be established in each country to facilitate localized access and implementation.

Collaboration and Capacity Building

- The hub would partner with universities, research institutions, and think tanks to foster innovation and train the next generation of SCP professionals.
- Exchange programs for students, researchers, and practitioners would be implemented to strengthen regional cooperation.
- Public awareness campaigns on sustainability issues could be organized through the hub's outreach activities.

Expected Benefits

- **Knowledge Centralization:** A single platform for SCP-related information reduces duplication of efforts and ensures easy access to resources.
- **Enhanced Innovation:** Collaborative R&D and expert networks promote the development of region-specific solutions.
- **Improved Policy Making:** Governments and industries benefit from data-driven insights and international best practices.
- **Greater Inclusivity:** Broad accessibility ensures that diverse stakeholders, including small businesses and local communities, benefit from the hub's resources.

The Regional Knowledge Hub would enable Central Asian countries to overcome knowledge barriers and accelerate their transition towards SCP and a green economy, fostering regional collaboration and innovation.