Regional Environmental Programme for Sustainable Development of Central Asia for 2020-2030

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Foreword

The purpose of the Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea is to organize and coordinate the development of regional programmes and action plans on environmental protection and sustainable development.

In 2000, the ministers of environmental agencies of the Central Asian countries (members of ICSD) initiated the preparation of the Regional Environmental Action Plan of Central Asia (REAP CA). It was prepared in 2000-2001 under the guidance of ICSD and as a joint initiative of ADB, UNEP and UNDP. This document was approved at the ICSD meeting in September 2001, and in August 2003 it was adopted by the IFAS Board.

Five priority areas were identified in the REAP CA including: *water pollution, air pollution, waste management, mountain ecosystems and land degradation*. The main objective of the REAP CA was to improve the environmental condition of the region and develop sustainable environmental management through strengthening regional cooperation among Central Asian countries in this area. Subsequently, it was decided to update this document and start developing a draft Regional Environmental Programme for Sustainable Development of Central Asia. The objective of this decision was the need to review priority areas in the context of global and regional issues, such as adaptation to climate change, transition from "brown" to "green" economy, which considered mandatory measures of environmental impact factors in the process of economic development.

The ICSD's initiative to develop the draft REP4SD CA was supported by the Decision taken by the IFAS Board on 30 January 2018, as well as by the Joint Communiqué adopted by the Summit of Heads of States – Founders of IFAS on 24 August 2018. Preparation of the REP4SD CA was included into the IFAS Executive Committee's Work Plan. The ICSD Chair recommended the IFAS member-states to use special Terms of Reference and establish National Working Groups with representatives of interested ministries, agencies and public organizations, in order to prepare proposals for the draft REP4SD CA. At the same time, the Regional Working Group was established consisting of representatives of environmental agencies of the Central Asian countries and ICSD bodies, as well as one representative from civil society in Central Asia.

The National Working Groups' experts were tasked to:

– identify national priorities;

– outline environmental SDGs included in national strategic and policy documents for the period up to 2030, including those on climate change adaptation, transition to "green" economy and environmental protection;

– identify national priorities that will enable potential benefits from regional cooperation in the framework of the REP4SD CA implementation.

The priority areas included the following topics for cooperation within the framework of the REP4SD CA preparation:

- ✓ SDGs, with a special attention to environmental goals, which are identified according to the countries' interests;
- ✓ mitigation and adaptation to climate change;
- ✓ "green" economy;
- ✓ environmental protection, UN environmental conventions and international obligations of countries under these conventions;
- ✓ legal and institutional regulation of ICSD and its bodies.

Proposals were approved by the agencies and national governments after submission by national experts, joint analysis and systematization of the selected priority areas.

The analysis of national proposals, selection of regional priorities for cooperation in the process of achieving environmental SDGs, preparation of the basic draft version of the REP4SD CA and other tasks were carried out by members of the Regional Working Group of ICSD with the support of the German Society for International Cooperation, United Nations Environment Programme and Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia.

The ICSD expresses its gratitude for the technical, methodological and expert support provided for the preparation of this document, particularly, to national ministries and agencies, civil society institutions of Central Asia countries, the UN Environment Programme and its Sub-regional Office for Central Asia, GIZ Regional Programme and EU/CAREC project.

Introduction

The Central Asian states have recognized the need for sustainable development as a result of humanity's awareness of the limited natural resource potential for the economic growth of the countries in the region and the impending danger of irreversible changes in the environment.

Central Asia is characterized by such factors as increased vulnerability of natural ecosystems and the dependence of socio-economic development on solving environmental problems. A vivid example of this is the Aral Sea ecological disaster, pollution of transboundary watercourses, increasing degradation of ecosystems, desertification and other negative processes caused by anthropogenic impact on the environment.

In order to prevent environmental deterioration in the region and to implement the principles of sustainable development, the Heads of Central Asian states signed the Nukus (1995), Almaty (1997), Ashgabat (1999) and Dushanbe (2002) Declarations, as well as Ashgabat (1999), Tashkent (2001) and Almaty (2009) Statements on the Aral Sea Basin problems.

The Central Asian countries have ratified key international environmental conventions and agreements, which are universally recognized as tools for solving environmental problems. Action plans have been developed and are being implemented to fulfil the obligations under these documents, and appropriate institutional entities have been established.

Nowadays, it can be stated that a lot of work has been done in Central Asian countries, within the framework of interstate cooperation including creation of a legislative and legal framework and adoption of programmes and development strategies for almost all sectors of the economy. As a result, every year social and economic situation of countries in the region is improving, and a greater attention is paid to environmental protection measures.

The creation and implementation of such a significant legislative and legal potential would seem to indicate a more obvious trend towards environmental improvement, but in fact it is still far from desired. The volume of harmful emissions into the atmosphere, including traffic pollution, is increasing; the area of irrigated and arable land per capita is decreasing while its degradation is increasing; irrigated arable land is inefficiently used due to salinization and deficiencies in irrigation operation systems, and cultivated land is subject to desertification. In addition, the productivity of forests is decreasing and the amount of industrial and domestic waste, including toxic waste, is increasing due to the low degree of their processing and huge areas of land are seized for landfilling.

Climate change is also affecting the region, in particular the weather conditions. Extreme events such as heat waves and more intense and frequent rain showers are expected. The process of glaciers melting in the mountains of Central Asia, which fed the Aral Sea, affects the ecological condition of the Aral Sea region, where over the past 40 years the volume of water inflow has decreased by almost sevenfold. It is therefore possible to predict that the Central Asian region will face another environmental and associated socio-economic catastrophe in the near future.

In this regard, it is crucial to properly assess the extent to which policy and programme documents, adopted at the regional and national levels, are coherent and harmonized with each other. Awareness and understanding of the importance of addressing these issues is essential, if the natural resources in the region are to be managed rationally and the negative impact on the natural environment is to be reduced.

Integration processes are particularly important to address these issues. Regional integration and intersectoral cooperation should be considered as a prerequisite for economic growth, a guarantee of sustainable development, water supply and achievement of energy and food security of countries of the region, as well as their successful integration into the global economic market, which is especially important in the complex context of the processes taking place in the modern world.

This situation requires the development of a new mechanism of regional cooperation, strengthening the existing capacity and involving a greater number of national agencies, international stakeholders, business sector and the general public to this process.

The REP4SD CA offers agreed priority areas at national and regional levels, and a common approach in creating necessary legal and institutional framework, as well as economic, information and other aspects of achieving the SDGs in the region.

I. Goals and objectives

Goal:

To identify priority areas in addressing environmental issues in Central Asian countries through the establishment of effective mechanisms of regional cooperation, ensuring stable socio-economic development, conservation and sustainable management of natural resources.

Objectives:

1. To strengthen the institutional, legal and expert capacity in order to attract project funding from IFAS member states, donors, private sector and other stakeholders, targeting priority areas identified in the REP4SD CA.
2. To improve coordination of activities within the REP4SD CA priorities framework and relevant national strategies and programmes, as well as civil society and academia projects.
3. To harmonize legal and institutional frameworks of ICSD structures at national and regional levels.

II. Key priorities of REP4SD CA

REP4SD CA is a strategic framework document that defines priority areas for regional cooperation in the field of environmental protection until 2030. Its long-term nature would allow better coordination of the regional programme with the priorities of national strategies and state programmes in the field of environment, and the achievement of environmental SDGs.

SDG 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opopportunities for all"

Priority areas:

- Capacity building of existing institutions including training, retraining and professional development of personnel in the field of environmental protection and sustainable development, "green" economy, climate change adaptation for interested government agencies, academic and private sectors, NGOs, etc., considering international experience.
- Knowledge sharing and scientific cooperation within the framework of commitments adopted within the UN environmental conventions and the multiplication of knowledge on application of innovative climate-resilient technologies in agriculture. Joint trainings, conferences, etc. on vulnerability reduction and adaptation to climate change, as well as other regional environmental priority issues.
- Development of a system of indicators for monitoring to assessment of SDGs implementation. Preparation of handbooks and training manuals, information materials, including those on forest legislation for (state) forestry staff in Central Asia.

SDG 6: "Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all"

Priority areas:

- Creation of a regional database on the exchange of best practices and adoption of modern technologies for treatment and reuse of wastewater and sludge disposal.
- Ensuring efficiency of water quality monitoring in the Aral Sea Basin.
- Analysis of anthropogenic and natural impacts on environment to prevent ecosystem degradation in Central Asia, including water ecosystems.

SDG 7, 11 and 12: "Green economy including renewable energy sources (RES), waste management and clean transport infrastructure development"

Priority areas:

- Study the key needs for RES, waste management and clean transport infrastructure development in the region. Investigate the possibilities of employing solar and wind energy for electricity generation, considering local climatic conditions. Introduction of new technologies, pilot facilities, etc.
- Capacity building targeting promotion of cooperation among the countries of Central Asia in terms of sharing expertise, legislation practices and technology, relevant to the preparation of a regional programme on RES, holding scientific conferences and implementing joint projects.
- Establishment of a Regional Centre for Waste Management and Information Exchange with the following objectives:
  - ✓ creating a Regional Information Network of organizations working in the field of waste management including recycling of certain types of waste (waste, which generally moves across the borders of the Central Asian countries) in order to promote regional partnerships;
  - ✓ exchange of best practices among the Central Asian countries on improving methods of state control, standardization and certification in environmental sphere adopted in the field of waste management;
  - ✓ exchange of best practices and technologies in utilization and processing of domestic and industrial waste, production of environmentally friendly products from recyclable materials;
  - ✓ conducting a regional overview on the status of tailing dumps, landfills and other hazardous waste disposal sites with recommendations to improve their safety.
- Promotion of environmentally friendly modes of transport, related infrastructure and sustainable financing. Introduction of "green" technologies in the infrastructure of the Central Asian "Great Silk Road".
- Cooperation with BRIGC (Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition).

SDG 13: "Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts"

Priority areas:

- Development of a Regional Strategy for Climate Change Adaptation taking into account the context of Central Asian ecosystems and climate risk reduction, development of a unified regional vision, information exchange between national focal points of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and other stakeholders.
- Preparation and implementation of regional programs and projects financed by the Global Environment Facility, Green Climate Fund and other donor agencies.
- Assessment of climate risks and vulnerability through the application of corresponding models of a climate change impact on water resources, terrestrial ecosystems and natural disasters, tackling the development of state policies and strategies in this area.
- Monitoring of the glaciers' condition in Central Asia. Development of a Regional Atlas of Hazardous Transboundary Exogenous Geodynamic Processes, including data on potential threat of glacial lake outburst floods, mudflows, landslides, avalanches, dust storms and droughts using GIS technologies.

SDG 15: "Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems"

Priority areas:

- Implementation of the "Sub-regional Action Programme to Combat Desertification", including:
  - ✓ implementation of the ecosystem approach for climate change adaptation at the strategic, programmatic and project levels to improve cross-sectoral collaboration (and sectoral plans) and ecosystem protection, restoration and sustainable management.
  - ✓ enhanced capacity for sustainable management of forests, land and pastures;
  - ✓ development of a unified methodology for ecosystem assessment, inventory and mapping for Central Asian countries;
  - ✓ development of a regional ecosystem restoration scheme in the region, including establishment of green belts, forest planting, restoration of delta lakes;
  - ✓ exchange of experience, project data and methodologies for ecosystem services assessment;
  - ✓ exchange of experience in the development of ecotourism in protected areas and at unique nature sites;
  - ✓ use of modern monitoring methods to account for flora and fauna species, ecosystem conditions, land resources.

- Cooperation on biodiversity conservation, including:
  - ✓ creation of a Red Book of Central Asia (regional atlas);
  - ✓ strengthening scientific cooperation on restoration of rare and endangered plant and animal species, taking joint measures for their protection;
  - ✓ development of ecological corridors for migratory species of animals and birds, transboundary cooperation on protection of key habitats, including protected areas;
  - ✓ joint activities on conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources, as well as research to prevent invasion of alien species into the territory of Central Asia;
  - ✓ joint activities to control pests and diseases of agricultural plants and forest plantations in the border areas of the Central Asian countries;
  - ✓ sustainable management of Central Asian wetlands by introducing best management practices;
  - ✓ restoration of riparian forests in the Amu Darya, Syr Darya and Panj river valleys as protection measures from flood risks and biodiversity conservation;
  - ✓ combating poaching in the border territories of the Central Asian countries.

SDG 17: "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development"

Priority areas:

- Involvement of the region into implementation of global environmental conventions, programmes and initiatives.
- Strengthening of cooperation among international organizations and regional and national institutions for better access to new technologies, preparation of legal and regulatory frameworks, development and implementation of national and regional strategies and plans and development of sustainable financing opportunities.

- Strengthening of legal, institutional and technical frameworks of the ICSD and its bodies to ensure the implementation of regional programmes and projects, organization of environmental monitoring in Central Asia, and cooperation with other regional and international organizations for the sustainable development of Central Asia.
- Development of guidelines and standards for establishing strategic environmental assessment (SEA) on environmental protection and adaptation to climate change.
- Conducting joint activities for the protection and conservation of the UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites.
- Organization of thematic campaigns in Central Asian countries, such as "Waste-free City", etc. under the leadership of ICSD and environmental agencies.
- Promotion of the "South-South" cooperation on issues related to environment and "green economy".

III. Implementation mechanism

The REP4SD CA aims to promote regional cooperation in the field of environmental protection of Central Asia and to ensure that the priorities, outlined by the countries of the region, as well as regional and international organizations will not only serve the interests of individual countries of Central Asia, but will also contribute to the overall sustainable development of the region.

The work on the preparation of project proposals under the REP4SD CA envisages a joint approach and establishment of cooperation mechanisms, which should meet both the common regional interests of economic sectors and the interests of two or more countries committed to the preparation and implementation of thematic areas.

The projects for the REP4SD CA implementation are to be initiated by the ICSD and its bodies, environmental and other national and regional agencies, organizations and NGOs, international stakeholders. They should meet the following principles:

- Establishment of cooperation mechanisms ensuring participation of multiple economic sectors from all Central Asian countries, as well as other countries sharing common interests on specific topics (e.g. transboundary protected areas, pollution sources, etc.).
- Maximizing the use of project expertise and the experience of Central Asian countries in analysing the effectiveness of the results achieved and the sustainability of post-project activities.
- Activities on the selection and implementation of REP4SD CA projects should be transparent and open.

Preparation of the REP4SD CA projects is initiated by national and regional institutions, international and non-governmental organizations in coordination with SIC ICSD.

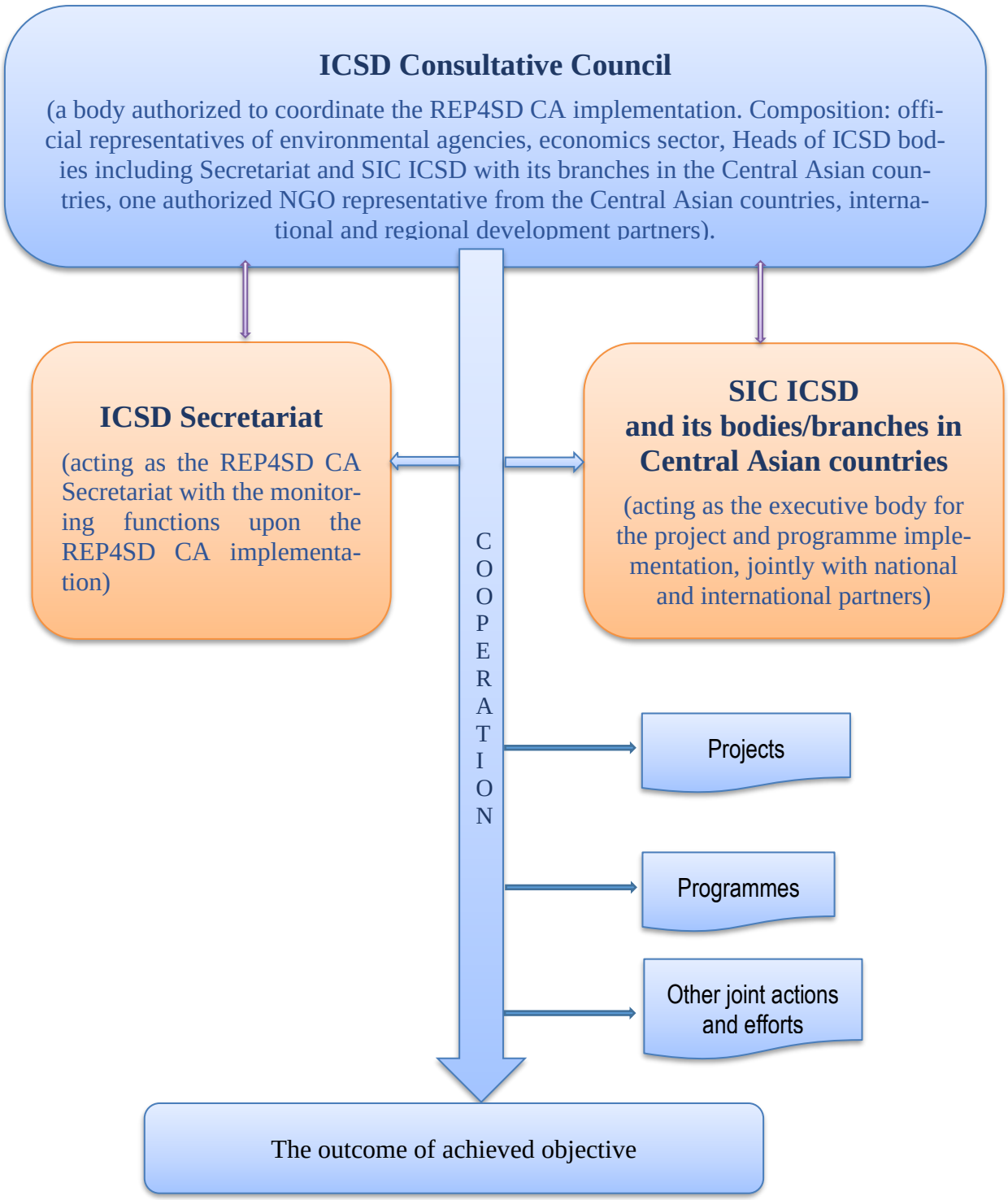
Strengthening and enhancing cooperation of all stakeholders based on the above-mentioned principles can be implemented through all acceptable forms of engagement, such as the following:

- Organization and conducting scientific conferences, seminars, round tables to discuss pressing issues, develop joint actions and report on their implementation.
- Organization of expert meetings of the authorized bodies of the Central Asian countries at all stages of project implementation, which will enable assisting in solving organizational and financial issues between stakeholders.

- Consolidation and analysis of incoming environmental information as a result of project preparation and implementation with subsequent posting of information and implemented projects on the ICSD Eco Portal.
- Involvement of NGOs and business sector in the project preparation and implementation processes.
- Other forms of cooperation.

In order to ensure interaction between stakeholders, synergy of efforts of the Central Asian countries and its partners, a coordinating role in the formation and selection of priority projects is assigned to the ICSD Consultative Council (hereinafter referred to as the *Council*). The Council holds meetings of partners on the management and implementation of the REP4SD CA at least twice a year.

REP4SD CA Implementation Scheme



The Council's work on harmonization of priorities and project planning with international organizations and donors will significantly improve efficiency of the REP4SD CA implementation.

Member-states of the ICSD in Central Asia may participate in the work of the Council on particularly important issues related to the REP4SD CA implementation.

The Council, within the framework of its competence, considers issues related to preparation and implementation of the REP4SD CA, implementation of the ICSD decisions, involvement of interested partners from Central Asian countries, participation of international organizations, donors and other interested parties, the financing and efficiency of the use of funds, the sustainability of the project and other issues according to the project format.

IV. Monitoring and evaluation of implementation

Monitoring and evaluation entails systematic monitoring of the progress and quality of the REP4SD CA implementation, assessment of set tasks and adjustment of decisions taken at all stages of its implementation.

Monitoring and evaluation of the REP4SD CA is based on the institutional and organizational capacities of the region and use of capacities of regional organizations and national structures. These include such regional platforms for dialogue as the Central Asian International Environmental Forum, the Central Asian Conference on Climate Change, intersectoral working groups, etc.

In order to determine the success of the REP4SD CA implementation, regional assessment reports will be regularly prepared based on the use of SDG indicators, national reports, results of expert assessments of NGO representatives and donors, materials and recommendations of regional organizations.

The ICSD Secretariat coordinates the process of preparing assessment reports on its implementation and, with technical support from UNEP and other development partners, monitors the REP4SD CA implementation.

The SIC ICSD prepares information and background materials on the REP4SD CA projects implementation and submits them to the ICSD Secretariat for compilation.

Functions on coordination of country actions on the REP4SD CA projects implementation under the guidance of national environmental agencies and other responsible agencies of countries of the region are assigned to the SIC ICSD and its divisions/branches in the countries of Central Asia.

The leading role in evaluating the REP4SD CA implementation is assigned to the ICSD, which reviews the evaluation reports and takes decisions regarding the REP4SD CA implementation.

The regional evaluation report on the REP4SD CA implementation contains data from the national evaluation reports, expert assessments of NGO representatives and donors, materials and recommendations from regional organizations based on the use of SDG indicators.

The following is necessary to monitor and evaluate the REP4SD CA implementation:

- support and develop institutional entities for regional cooperation on monitoring and information exchange;
- develop and approve on regional indicators to measure progress in implementing the REP4SD CA;
- facilitate the establishment of a Regional Monitoring System to achieve progress on environmental SDGs;
- create a unified information system, using ICSD's Eco Portal, for collection, processing, analysis and provision of information on environmental SDG indicators both at national and regional levels;
- improve interstate coordination among responsible entities, organizations and actors involved in monitoring environmental SDGs based on agreed regional indicators.

V. Financing

REP4SD CA implementation is possible with sustainable financing from multiple sources.

The main sources of funding include national budgets, international financial institutions, funds and donors. Timely preparation of project proposals and coordination with donor interests on the part of ICSD institutions and their potential partners will make it possible to reach an agreed decision on project financing.

The Consultative Council therefore needs to:

- create favourable conditions for attracting financial resources;
- improve coordination and management of financial resources for their efficient use;
- attract and effectively use international financial and economic mechanisms provided for by international conventions and agreements, the Global Environment Facility, the Green Climate Fund and other donor organizations.

Sources of financing may also become:

- Central Asian countries' contributions to IFAS;
- Funds from enterprises and business sector.

It is necessary to:

- create conditions for the generation and development of domestic investments focused on environmental issues;
- create economic incentives for the introduction of clean technologies and rational environmental management.

Private sector funds could also be a source of funding. This source has a good potential in terms of attracting funds for tourism development, offsetting schemes in order to compensate the impact of extractive industries, etc.

VI. Preparation of project proposals under the REP4SD CA framework

At the initial stage, project proposals under the REP4SD CA should be prepared according to the technical specifications (see table), which will allow to get basic information about the project at an early stage, which will simplify the search for partners and fundraising, as well as will help to obtain information from the ICSD Secretariat about the interest of potential partners.

Table
(draft format)

Priority theme
Project title
Initiating country/organization
Implementation area
Leading implementing partners
Additional partners
Estimated budget, including in kind contributions
Proposed sources of financing (budget, grant, loan, mixed)
Implementation duration
Description (1-2 pages): 1. Issue, which the project aims to solve; 2. Implementation area; 3. Contribution to the objectives of the priority theme and to the REP4SD CA overall; 4. Necessary cooperation and contribution of other participating countries; 5. Expected project outcomes and measurable indicators.

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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASB	Aral Sea Basin
BRIGC	Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition
CA	Central Asia
CAREC	Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia
GIS	Geographic Information System
GIZ	German Society for International Cooperation
ICSD	Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development
IFAS	International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PA	Protected areas
REAP CA	Regional Environmental Action Plan for Central Asia
REP4SD CA	Regional Environmental Programme for Sustainable Development of Central Asia
RES	Renewable energy sources
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SIC	Scientific and Information Centre
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change