

SUMMARY

ETF Skills Lab Network of Experts Regional Webinar

JUST AND GREEN TRANSITIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA: STRENGTHENING POLICY, FINANCE, AND LABOUR MARKET SKILLS

11 June 2025, 10.00 – 12.00 CET

This regional webinar of the ETF Skills Lab Network of Experts in 2025 focused on just and green transitions in Central Asia, exploring how policy, finance, and labour market skills can be strengthened to support climate action and inclusive development across the region.

Burulcha Sulaimanova (Network regional facilitator for Central Asia) opened the regional webinar by welcoming participants and introducing the event's focus on just and green transitions in Central Asia. As moderator, she outlined the structure of the webinar—divided into two sessions: the first on systems and resources for enabling just transitions, including regional cooperation, gender mainstreaming, financing tools, and the role of academic research; the second on national implementation strategies with emphasis on climate diplomacy, the next round of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC 3.0), and youth engagement in climate policymaking.

Romain Boitard (ETF) welcomed participants by highlighting the importance of dedicating a full webinar session to Central Asia for the second time. He noted the region's vulnerability to climate change—facing rising temperatures, droughts, and socio-economic disruptions—while also recognising its proactive policy efforts towards sustainability and green innovation in sectors like agriculture, energy, and infrastructure. Emphasising the shift from traditional supply-demand models to skills ecosystems, he underscored the region's progress in embedding green skills within broader institutional and social contexts. Boitard also stressed the potential of Central Asia's large youth population to drive green transitions, provided they are equipped with the right skills and opportunities. He concluded by introducing the day's focus on inclusive approaches to climate-related skills development, policy frameworks, gender, financing, and regional cooperation.

The first speaker, **Caroline Milow (GIZ)** presented the *Green Central Asia* initiative as a German government-led effort to promote climate resilience, adaptation, and sustainable development in Central Asia. Built on the momentum of the Berlin Water Process, this initiative supports five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—through projects focused on climate risk management, green economy, land and water management, and skills development. The programme operates within the broader frameworks of the *EU–Central Asia Strategy*, the *UN SDGs*, and *UNECE conventions*, and benefits from collaboration with various research and policy actors, including the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) and Martin Luther University. A key milestone was the adoption of the *Regional Climate Change Adaptation Strategy* and the establishment of regional working groups on glaciers, e-waste, and water–energy mechanisms, as outlined in the official [Green Central Asia](#) documentation.

Drawing from the detailed strategy and structure shared in the presentation, Milow underlined the region's growing capacity for climate governance through both political dialogue and technical implementation. Notable projects include *Climate-Sensitive Water Resources Management* along the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, supported through regional river basin dialogues and pilot initiatives such as automated irrigation canals and groundwater monitoring systems. Capacity building is central, with 11 Central Asian universities and international partners co-developing educational materials and

training modules on integrated water resource management (IWRM). Milow also referenced the EU-funded *EU4SustainableCentralAsia* programme, which enhances coordination in the water–energy–climate nexus under the *Team Europe* initiative. Despite ongoing challenges such as establishing a regional secretariat and improving access to climate finance, the initiative’s integrated bottom-up and top-down approach—combining local engagement with high-level dialogue (e.g. the C5+1 process)—offers a promising path for transformative, regionally coordinated climate action.

Edwina Zhang (CAREC, ADB) delivered a presentation on behalf of Zulfiya Karimova, showcasing the gender–climate nexus within the *Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)* Programme. She emphasised that while women are disproportionately affected by climate change, they are also powerful agents of transformation. Gender and climate are both recognised as cross-cutting themes in CAREC’s six operational clusters, including agriculture, energy, and water. The *CAREC Gender Strategy 2030* promotes women’s economic empowerment, policy engagement, and digital inclusion, while the *CAREC Climate Vision* advocates for integrating gender into regional climate policies. Both frameworks are guided by the Regional Gender Expert Group (RGEG), comprised of representatives from member country institutions. The *2025 CAREC Women’s Business Forum*, to be held in Bishkek, will address topics such as women in green innovation, gender and climate finance, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Additional programme information is available via carecprogram.org and weop.carecprogram.org.

Edwina highlighted CAREC’s efforts to create both in-person and virtual platforms for gender-inclusive climate action. The *CAREC Gender and Green Innovation Awards 2025* recognise individuals and organisations advancing gender equality through sustainable technologies across the region. Past awardees include experts promoting women’s access to finance and employment in renewable energy in Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and the Kyrgyz Republic. The *Women’s Empowerment Online Platform (WEOP)* hosts monthly expert dialogues and mentorship initiatives to expand professional opportunities for women in the green transition. Topics have included unconscious bias, women in renewable energy, and green finance with a gender lens. By amplifying women’s voices and strengthening regional networks, CAREC contributes to a more inclusive and resilient green transition in Central Asia.

Dina Azhgaliyeva (Asian Development Bank Institute) shared insights from a recently published open-access book she co-edited on achieving a just and inclusive transition from coal to green energy. Her presentation focused on the health and environmental challenges posed by coal-fired power plants, especially in winter-heavy Central Asian regions like Kazakhstan and Mongolia. Highlighting the need for early retirement of coal plants, she referenced the Energy Transition Mechanism launched by ADB in 2021 to support renewable investments. Azhgaliyeva underlined that a successful transition requires reliable energy alternatives, not just the deployment of solar and wind energy, which are intermittent and insufficient in harsh Central Asian winters. She also stressed the need for energy storage systems, carbon pricing mechanisms, and most critically, targeted reskilling and re-employment strategies for workers and communities reliant on coal—especially in so-called “monotowns” with limited alternative economic pathways.

She further noted that Central Asia’s unique climate and socio-economic conditions—such as extreme winter temperatures and outdated energy infrastructure—complicate the region’s shift to clean energy. For example, while solar panels are viable in Southeast Asia where high sun exposure aligns with energy demand, in Central Asia the highest energy needs occur during seasons with low solar output. At the household level, barriers such as high upfront investment for cleaner heating systems and gender dynamics in household decision-making hinder individual transitions. Azhgaliyeva concluded that financial access, gender empowerment, and strong governance will be essential to make green transitions not only technically feasible but also socially inclusive. Her call to action aligned with the webinar’s core focus on skills development as a bridge between environmental goals and equitable economic opportunity.

Siddharth Saxena (University of Cambridge) highlighted the role of academic research and scientific capacity in shaping a sustainable green transition in Central Asia. He emphasised the region’s unique post-Soviet trajectory—not as a case of underdevelopment but of interrupted development—which offers an opportunity to reimagine industrial growth and skills formation. Saxena pointed out that Central Asia holds strategic natural resources such as rare earth metals and petrochemicals, which are critical for cleantech innovations like plastic-based solar panels and advanced cooling systems. These materials, if harnessed effectively, can support the development of flexible and scalable green

technologies. Unlike industrialised countries locked into legacy infrastructure, Central Asia has the potential to leapfrog directly into sustainable systems.

He argued that to fully realise this potential, the region must invest in Centres of Advanced Research and prioritise interdisciplinary collaboration across science, engineering, and policy. Saxena introduced the idea of an “Algebra of Development,” where scientific curiosity leads to applied engineering and, eventually, innovation. He cautioned against over-reliance on Western education models and stressed the need to nurture home-grown STEM talent. Drawing from initiatives already underway in Uzbekistan, he illustrated how integrated approaches to education, research, and regional partnerships could position Central Asia as a key contributor to global green transitions. His presentation called for a shift from resource extraction to value creation through local innovation and skills development.

Dastan Abdyldaev (Climate Finance Center) outlined Kyrgyzstan’s progress in climate finance governance and its increasing engagement in global climate diplomacy. He detailed the country’s structured approach to developing its Green Climate Fund (GCF) Country Programme for 2024–2027, including consultations, project prioritisation, and institutional coordination. Emphasising the importance of public investment planning, he highlighted the role of mechanisms such as green budget tagging, fiscal incentives, carbon pricing, and the mobilisation of domestic and international private capital through instruments like green bonds and PPPs. He also stressed the central role of the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Economy, and Climate Finance Center in mainstreaming climate objectives across government budgeting processes.

Abdyldaev also showcased Kyrgyzstan’s diplomatic achievements in international climate forums, particularly its efforts to advance the mountain agenda within the UNFCCC. At COP28, Kyrgyzstan successfully advocated for the inclusion of mountain-related issues in the Global Stocktake and launched the Mountain Partnership negotiation group. These initiatives continued with the hosting of a high-level dialogue on mountains and climate change and the promotion of a political declaration on glaciers and mountain regions. He underlined the strategic value of regional unity for Central Asian countries in climate negotiations and called for strengthened participation and capacity-building, including through new initiatives such as a Climate Finance Training Center aimed at engaging the private sector and enhancing institutional readiness.

Anna Arkhangelskaya (UNDP Kyrgyzstan) discussed how a just transition approach is being integrated into Kyrgyzstan’s updated climate strategy, particularly in the development of NDC 3.0. She emphasised that a just transition is about ensuring climate action is fair, inclusive, and people-centred, enabling low-carbon and climate-resilient development while delivering socioeconomic benefits. Drawing on international definitions and recent progress at COP28, she highlighted key benefits such as gaining social support for climate action, delivering community-level benefits, enabling systemic policy transformation, and attracting both public and private finance. Arkhangelskaya noted that currently, only a limited number of countries include dedicated just transition sections in their NDCs, and Central Asia has the potential to lead by example.

She outlined five key entry points for embedding just transition into NDCs: policy coherence across sectors, inclusive stakeholder dialogue, skills and workforce planning for green jobs, localised and sectoral transition strategies, and aligned financing mechanisms. Anna presented Kyrgyzstan’s recent *Just Transition Readiness Assessment* across energy, transport, and agriculture, which now informs NDC 3.0 as a guiding principle—especially for vulnerable regions. Recommendations included the creation of a dedicated NDC annex on just transition, the use of quantified indicators for jobs and vulnerable groups, and the mobilisation of blended finance. She concluded by encouraging regional collaboration and the involvement of actors such as ETF and national skills councils to turn NDC 3.0 into a driver for green and decent work, ensuring no one is left behind.

Amina Akhmetzhanova (Climate and Clean Air Coalition) presented the coalition’s work on accelerating climate action through national policy implementation and youth engagement, with a focus on Central Asia. She explained that CCAC is a UNEP-convened partnership of over 200 entities working to reduce short-lived climate pollutants (SLCPs) such as black carbon, methane, hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), and tropospheric ozone, which contribute significantly to global warming and air pollution. The coalition provides funding, technical assistance, and capacity-building to partner and non-partner countries alike. In Central Asia, CCAC supports national planning processes, such as Kazakhstan’s SLCP national plan and methane roadmap, SLCP mitigation in coal mining, and targeted support for Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan for energy efficiency and NDC integration.

In addition to policy support, Akhmetzhanova introduced CCAC's Youth Engagement Strategy (YES), aimed at empowering young people to lead climate and clean air action. She highlighted the first youth webinar held in 2024 and ongoing initiatives to promote youth-led innovation and advocacy. The strategy focuses on building awareness, enabling participation, and equipping young leaders with skills and opportunities. She also encouraged participation in CCAC's sector-specific hubs and the *Children and Youth Major Group (CYMG)*, which promotes youth involvement in global environmental governance. Akhmetzhanova concluded by emphasising that embedding SLCP mitigation in national strategies, supported by inclusive engagement and strong institutional capacity, can deliver fast and tangible benefits for both climate and public health in the region.

Romain Boitard (ETF) closed the webinar by sharing key reflections from the day's discussions. He emphasised the importance of recognising the diversity of actors involved in climate action, the centrality of multilateralism, and the need for evidence-based policy frameworks—especially in areas like water management and gender-inclusive green skills. Boitard highlighted insights on phasing out coal, referencing both the technical and behavioural challenges, and pointed to successful transitions in countries like Belgium and Poland as examples. He stressed the dual importance of promoting disruptive innovation and valuing traditional knowledge in addressing climate challenges. In reflecting on NDC 3.0, he underlined that while carbon neutrality is a shared goal, national pathways must be context-specific and inclusive of all stakeholders. He closed with a personal note on breaking down complex challenges into smaller, solvable parts—"problem decomposition"—and echoed a quote from António Costa on the need for deeper EU–Central Asia cooperation to promote peace, prosperity, and the circular economy.

Resources

All presentations and material presented at the event can be found at:

<https://openspace.etf.europa.eu/events/just-and-green-transitions-central-asia-strengthening-policy-finance-and-labour-market>