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THE NEW POST-2025 VISION OF ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (ECO): FULFILLING ECO'S POTENTIAL IN THE NEXT DECADE

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Abstract

The focus of this paper aims at presenting several contributions for the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), in reaching its deep, full and real potential in the coming decade ahead. The latter will find expression in its new post-2025 Vision document, currently in the formulation phase, planned to be finalized by the end of the year. This new Vision will design the future orientation of ECO in the next ten years ahead.

In that respect, this paper offers the following topics to be evaluated and incorporated into the post-2025 Vision of ECO:

- Enhancing the ownership among member states,
- Promoting the visibility of the organization,
- Strengthening result-oriented strategies,
- Focusing on the core areas of economy/trade: ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA),
- Engagement of private sector, youth and women.

Keywords: Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO); post-2025 Vision of ECO; ownership; visibility; result-oriented strategies; ECOTA; private sector, youth and women

Introduction

This paper aims to argue and contribute to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in reaching its deep, full and real potential in the coming decade ahead, finding expression in its new post-2025 Vision, currently in the formulation phase, planned to be finalized by the end of the year.

ECO, established in 1985 by Türkiye, Iran and Pakistan, and enlarged to a total of ten member countries in 1992, is one of the most important regional economic organizations at present. It transcends a strategic geographical location, consisting of 8 million square kilometers, covering about 550 million people and generating a total GDP over 2 trillion dollars.

This overall promising picture reflects a vast potential for the future of ECO, covering its core spheres of cooperation in the fields of economy and trade. It is as well interlinked to its domains of activity in transport, connectivity, energy, environment, tourism and culture.



Unfortunately, it is also a fact that ECO is currently lagging behind to fulfill this deep and promising potential, due to a variety of reasons, the latter which could be addressed and amended by formulation and implementation of rational policies.

This takes us exactly to the point of the present discussions at ECO, as the members states together with the Secretariat are working on a new Vision document which will cover the priorities of the organization in the forthcoming ten years, spanning from 2026 to 2035. In this vein, the main focus of this paper dwells on presenting several view and contributions with regards to the formulation of this new post-2025 Vision in paving the way for ECO in reaching its deep and vast potential in the decade ahead.

Within this framework, the paper is consisted of three sections.

The first section tries to set up and display the background information about ECO, on which the paper will discuss the new Vision. This will be done by elaborating on the history and membership; objectives and functions; and organizational structure of ECO.

The second part analyzes on the current state of affairs of ECO at its 40th year of establishment, and tries to enumerate the reasons and rationale behind the formulation of the new post-2025 Vision of the organization for the next decade.

The third section dwells on presenting contributions for the formulation phase of this new vision which could be evaluated and incorporated into this new Vision document of ECO, the latter which will design the future orientation of the Organization in the next ten years.

The last part is consisted of brief concluding remarks.

SECTION 1: ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (ECO)

1.1. History and membership of ECO

ECO is established by Türkiye, Iran and Pakistan in 1985, as the successor of the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) that was founded in 1964.

Treaty of Izmir originally signed on 12 March 1977 by these three countries forms the basic Charter of ECO. The revised Izmir Treaty (14 September 1996) superseded the original one of 1977 and the Protocols of 1990 and 1992.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, seven new members joined the ECO in 1992: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. This increased the total number of member states of the Organization to ten countries. The 30th Anniversary of ECO expansion was celebrated in December 2022.

Figure 1:

Map of ECO member states



Source: ECO

Article 13 of the Treaty of Izmir regulates the membership conditions to ECO: “Any State enjoying geographical contiguity with the ECO region and/or sharing the objectives and principles of ECO may apply to become a member of the Organization. Such State shall address its application through the Secretary General to the Council of Ministers which may decide the admission of a new member by a unanimous vote” (ECO, 1996). It should also be noted here that ECO granted observer status to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in the name of Turkish Cypriot State (2012), Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (2014), and International Energy Charter (2017).

1.2. Objectives and functions

Article 2 of the Treaty of Izmir, the Charter of ECO, enumerates the objectives of the Organization. To put it briefly, the main objective of the Organization is to promote conditions for sustainable economic development and thereby contribute in a positive manner the living standard and quality of life in member states of ECO. Obviously, the way to realize this objective lies on easing restrictions on trade and expanding intra and inter-regional trade; increasing economic cooperation to integrate the economies of member

states; mutual assistance in economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields; making progress in transport and communications infrastructures; supporting the role of the private sector; promoting human resources; utilizing energy, agricultural and industrial potential of ECO region; cooperating in environmental protection; strengthening cultural ties and tourism among members; and making partnership with other regional and international organizations (ECO, 1996).

1.3. Organizational structure

Summit gives direction to the Organization. It is gathered every two years at the level of the heads of members states. Last Summit was organized in Uzbekistan in 2023. The next one (17th Summit) is planned to be held in Azerbaijan on 2-3 July 2025.

Article 5 of the Treaty of Izmir states that the principal organs of ECO are Council of Ministers (COM), Council of Permanent Representatives (CPR), Regional Planning Council (RPC), the Secretariat and the Specialized Agencies (ECO, 1996).

The Council of Ministers (COM), is the highest policy and decision-making body of ECO. It is consisted of Ministers from the members states. It gathers at least once a year by rotation between them. The last COM meeting (the 28th) was held in Mashhad on 3 December 2024.

The Council of Permanent Representatives (CPR) formulates and carries out policies of ECO as well as takes appropriate steps on the implementation of the decisions of the COM. It comprises from the Permanent Representatives/Ambassadors by member states accredited to ECO in Tehran, meeting under the chairpersonship.

The Regional Planning Council (RPC) is the technical organ of the organizational structure of ECO, mainly responsible from program of action and evaluation of their results. It consists of high-level bureaucrats from the members states. RPC meets at least once a year prior to the annual meeting of COM.

The Secretariat is comprised of the Secretary General (SG) and its staff. Based in the headquarters in Tehran, the Secretariat initiates, coordinates and monitors the implementation of ECO activities and regulates the meetings of the Organization. The Secretariat shall carry out its technical work through the following Directorates: (a) Trade and Investment; (b) Transport and Communications; (c) Energy, Minerals and Environment; (d) Agriculture and Industry; (e) Tourism; (f) Human Resources and Sustainable Development (ECO, 2021).

There are also specialized agencies and regional institutions in specific fields of cooperation. The number, nature and objectives of these agencies and institutions are determined by the COM. Specialized agencies include ECO Cultural Institute in Tehran, ECO Science Foundation in Islamabad, and ECO Educational Institute in Ankara. To cite regional institutions, ECO Consultancy & Engineering Company in Lahore, ECO Research Centre in Baku, and ECO Trade and Development Bank in Istanbul. We could also name for the affiliated bodies such as ECO College of Insurance in Tehran and the Parliamentary Assembly of ECO Countries with the Secretariat in Islamabad.

SECTION 2: THE WAY TOWARDS THE NEW POST-2025 VISION OF ECO

To set up the background in a systematic way for current discussions on the new post-2025 Vision of ECO, it would be useful to go back to the work of the Eminent Persons Group

(EPG), back in 2012. EPG had concluded some notable landmarks in the Organization's reformation process with tangible proposals with regards to fulfillment of its vast potential.

In summary, EPG in its report concluded that the majority of ECO's ideals across the entire spectrum of its areas of interest have still yet to be realized and enumerated the main impediments and shortcomings for this goal in the following points:

"Lack of efficient decision-making procedure,
Minimal participation by Member-States in the activities of the Organization,
Non-implementation of the decisions adopted by the decision-making bodies,
Lack of financial resources and insufficient budget,
Inadequate capacity of the Secretariat due to existing recruitment procedures" (EPG, 2012).

In this context, the main motto of the EPG in its report was prescribed in the following sentence: "The Organization has no choice but to succeed" (EPG, 2012: 30).

This motivating conclusion of EPG triggered the endeavor for member states together with the Secretariat in the formulation of the ECO 2025 Vision, back in 2017.

The statement in this ECO 2025 document reads as: "ECO will pave the way to a territory of integrated and sustainable economies as well as free trade area achieved by highly educated societies and improved governance through enhanced cooperation" and to materialize this goal, it enumerates strategies in the areas of (i) Trade (ii) Transport and Connectivity (iii) Energy (iv) Tourism (v) Economic Growth and Productivity and (vi) Social Welfare and Environment (ECO, 2007: 1-2).

Therefore, the ECO Vision 2025 was in essence designed to constitute the main agenda of ECO during 2015-2025, and every effort was designed to realize the goals set in this Document by various follow up and review mechanisms to ensure its implementation (ECO, 2007:10).

This ECO Vision 2025 is expiring at the end of this year. In accordance with that, the 28th COM Meeting in Mashhad at the end of 2024 mandated the Secretariat to formulate the new post-2025 Vision strategy for the next decade. In this regard, the Mashhad Communiqué of 2024 requested the Organization to formulate this new Vision for 2026-2035, building upon the previous ECO Vision 2025. This is aimed to align with the proposals made by the member states with a view to deepening economic and trade cooperation among member countries, and fostering development and implementation of result-oriented programs and projects (ECO, 2024 (b): 4).

In this direction, the High-Level Committee (HLC), convened as the subsidiary organ of the COM, was tasked with preparing specific proposals and recommendations for the new Vision of ECO 2026-2035. This Committee made its first meeting at the Deputy Ministers level from the member states at the ECO headquarters in Tehran in February 2025.

In this meeting, HLC underscored the need for a future-oriented strategy, built on past achievements and current challenges. It underscored the importance of a pragmatic, results-driven vision with clear goals, strong implementation mechanisms and enhanced coordination among member states. Along with the participation of public sector, it was underlined that other stakeholders' involvement, such as the private sector, youth and women were vital for attaining a more dynamic and inclusive approach. In such a way, it is aimed at preparing a new vision document aligning with the priorities of member states which ensures clear, measurable goals, practical, realistic timelines which are action and

project driven with accountability mechanisms and achievable initiatives, concrete tools and monitoring mechanisms to track progress to foster tangible outcomes (ECO, 2025 (b): 13).

SECTION 3: CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NEW VISION

Based on the background information of ECO, given in the first section of this paper and taking into consideration the work of EPG in the overall reform of ECO as well as the pros and cons of the previous ECO Vision 2025 which will expire at the end of this year, this part aims at presenting several contributions which could be evaluated and incorporated into the post-2025 Vision of ECO.

The latter are:

- (i) Enhancing the ownership among member states,
- (ii) Promoting the visibility of the organization,
- (iii) Strengthening result-oriented strategies,
- (iv) Focusing on the core areas of economy/trade: ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA),
- (v) Engagement of private sector, youth and women.

3.1. Enhancing the ownership among members states

Ownership of ECO by its member states in coordination with the Secretariat is critical and accounts for the key quality of overall success of the Organization.

Ownership under strong leadership sets coherent vision, priorities and commitment of the Organization towards accomplishing desired goals and objectives and transforms these into result-oriented plans and work programs by the member states.

The most important parameter of ownership for member states is in honoring their commitments and implementing the decisions taken by the organs of ECO, particularly the Summit, COM, CPR and RPC, the latter discussed in the first section of this paper.

As the EPG had argued at its time, member states should demonstrate serious interest and priority in ECO affairs and without their active involvement, the goals set by the Organization cannot be achieved (EPG, 2012: 4). The most visible way to prove the latter is obviously sign and ratify the basic ECO agreements.

Table 1:

Signature and Ratification Status of Basic ECO Agreements

ECO Agreements	Afghanistan		Azerbaijan		Iran		Kazakhstan		Kyrgyzstan		Pakistan		Tajikistan		Turkey		Turkmenistan		Uzbekistan		Total Signatories		Total Ratifiers		
	Signed	Ratified	Signed	Ratified	Signed	Ratified	Signed	Ratified	Signed	Ratified	Signed	Ratified	Signed	Ratified	Signed	Ratified	Signed	Ratified	Signed	Ratified	Total Signatories	Total Ratifiers	Total Signatories	Total Ratifiers	
Treaty of Izmir	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	10	09	10	09	
Agreement on Legal Status of the ECO National Representatives and International Staff	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	10	5	10	5	
Agreement on Simplification of Visa Procedures for Businessmen of the ECO Member States	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	5	7	5	
Additional Protocol on Simplification of Visa Procedures for Businessmen and Transit Drivers	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	3	1	3	1	
Articles of Agreement of the ECO Trade and Development Bank	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	6	6	6	6	
Charter of ECO Cultural Institute	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	5	8	5
Charter of ECO Science Foundation	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	10	5	10	5
Charter of ECO Educational Institute	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	7	8	7
Transit Transport Framework Agreement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9	8	9	8
Framework Agreement on ECO Trade Cooperation	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9	6	9	6
ECO Trade Agreement	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	5	5	5
Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investment	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	4	5	4
Agreement on the Establishment and Operation of ECO Smuggling and Customs Offences Data Bank	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6	5	6	5
Articles of Agreement on the Establishment of ECO Reinsurance Company Islamabad	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	3	3	3	3
ECO Regional Institute for Standardization, Conformity Assessment, Accreditation and Metrology	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	4	4	4
ECO Veterinary Commission	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	2	2	2
Statute of the ECO Regional Center of Anti-Corruption Agencies and Ombudsmen (RCCACO)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	5	4	5	4
Charter of the Parliamentary Assembly of ECO	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	4	7	4
Charter of ECO Research Center	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3	2	3	2
Charter of the ECO Clean Energy Center	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	0	5	0
Statute of the ECO Regional Center for Risk Management of Natural Disasters	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	1	0	1	0

Source: ECO, 2025

However, as the above table clearly demonstrates, there are still major discrepancies in this regard by some member states. We could see that even the so-called Charter of ECO, the Treaty of Izmir is not ratified by all members; likewise, the flagship project of ECOTA for instance, is signed and ratified by only half of the member states.

A similar gap is evident in the signature and ratification situation of the agreements of ECO specialized agencies. As the below table illustrates, the total numbers in this respect are still not satisfactory.



Table 2:

Signature and Ratification of Agreements of ECO Specialized Agencies

Agreements	Signed by	Ratified by
ECO Educational Institute	8	7
ECO Cultural Institute	8	5
ECO Science Foundation	10	5
ECO Bank	6	6
ECO Research Center	3	-
ECO Clean Energy Center	4	-

Source: ECO, 2025

This general picture illustrates an overall deficiency concerning the comprehension and application of ownership among member states as well as for the entire organization. Therefore, it is utmost important for the new Vision document of ECO to address this serious issue and try to develop strategies to alleviate this gap.

Promoting the visibility of the organization

Strong ownership is directly linked to the visibility of ECO on both regional and global scale. Once the Organization is owned in fullest sense by member states in a strong manner, the visibility of ECO externally will definitely be promoted in a proportionate manner. As the ECO Secretary General rightly argues, “strengthening ECO’s visibility and fostering a stronger sense of regional unity is crucial” (Khan, 2025).

Promotion of visibility should be done both at regional and global levels, with increasing engagement of participation of various stakeholders. To achieve that in a sustainable manner, it should be benefited more from digital platforms and media; engaged more in partnership with international organizations; coordination between the ECO Secretariat and ECO Specialized Agencies, regional institutions and affiliated bodies should be deepened; and some visibility-related tasks outsourced in a cost-effective way (ECO, 2025 (b): 10).

The visibility of the organization should be strengthened through effective publicity. As mentioned, both traditional and social media tools should be better utilized to that end. Deep and strong historical and cultural ties between member states should be used to enhance the cultural cooperation dimension within ECO and promote tourism relations among ECO countries. This will definitely help to increase the visibility of ECO internally and abroad (Cavusoglu, 2022 (c): 35).

As EPG had previously argued, ECO Specialized Agencies especially ECO Cultural Institute, ECO Science Foundation and ECO Educational Institute in coordination with the ECO Secretariat could play an active role in this regard to promote the visibility and image of ECO in line with their respective mandates (EPG, 2012: 25, 26).

In parallel with these important initiatives, one of the most important ways to increase the visibility of ECO at regional and global realm is stronger engagement with other



organizations, both at regional and global level. This should be done by deepening collaboration with the United Nations (UN) in the first place; but also establishing partnerships with other organizations.

As for the UN part, we realize that ECO has already established comprehensive relationship with the UN itself as well as its specialized agencies, funds and programs. Gaining observer status in the UN General Assembly since 1993, ECO currently engages with several other key UN agencies and conventions as well, including the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA), the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (UNESCAP), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), United Nations Conference on Trade & Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Office of High Representative for Least Developed Countries, the Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing Countries (UNOHRLLS), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and others which have been growing steadily in an upward trajectory (ECO, 2024: 29).

However, to promote its regional and global visibility, ECO needs to partner not only with the UN, but also find ways for creating and developing new partnerships with other organizations. We already see that ECO has taken important way in this regard. For instance, it partners with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), since 1995 and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB). It also gained Observer Status with the International Energy Charter in 2018 and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2023. ECO is also in process to obtain observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and International Organization for Migration (IOM). ECO intends to obtain Observership in the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) (ECO, 2024: 29). It will be beneficial and advantageous for ECO to enhance its visibility once it further develops these relationship and partnership with these organizations.

Strengthening result-oriented strategies

Based on previous experience, in a general, overall manner and methodology, the new Vision of ECO for 2026-2035 should be based on result-oriented strategies.

Likewise, it should apply clear timeframes and implementation mechanisms with a program and project-oriented approach, addressing the needs of member countries (Koç, 2025).

To achieve that, ECO shall be transformed into a project-oriented organization. Real success of ECO will depend on the effective implementation of concrete common projects (Cavusoglu, 2022: 35).

Similarly, it is very important for the new Vision to give priority to concrete and result-oriented programs with set and verifiable timetables in parallel to the development goals of the region (Sekizkok, 2025).

A more result and project-oriented organization, based on member states driven priorities and common economic interests obviously require reforms aimed at increasing efficiency of the Organization and streamlining its activities (Bayramov, 2022: 12).

Devising such result-oriented and concrete projects aligned with the goals of ECO and member countries' common development challenges are essential and to provide broader support, these projects should be in accordance with the international development agenda (Duran, 2024 (d): 2).

Focusing on the core areas of economy/trade: ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA)

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) is committed to fostering long-term sustainable development in the ECO region (ECO, 2025) and in this respect, the fields of economy and trade have utmost importance.

The ECO Vision 2025, adopted in 2017 put the spheres of economy and trade as the guiding areas for cooperation and collaboration to streamline ECO activities. This Document prioritized to double intra-regional trade, simultaneously increasing ECO share in global trade, taking into account the fact that trade is one of the most effective engines of economic development and an instrument for socio-economic integration. This prioritized trade liberalization; harmonization of policies; reducing cost of doing business; financial restructuring; and institutional capacity building. In that vein, the most important expected outcomes were operationalization of and increasing the membership in the flagship project of ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) and to enhance the scope of the latter from preferential trade to Free Trade Agreement (FTA) (ECO, 2017: 2-3).

However, despite some progress in enhancing collaboration in various areas, concrete progress could not be achieved in these expected outcomes (Koç, 2025).

The share of the ECO in global trade increased from USD 648 billion in 2016 to USD 1 trillion 16 billion in 2023. In percentage terms, the contribution of the ECO region in world trade was recorded at 4.14 % in 2021, which increased marginally to 4.48 percent in 2022 amid the global recovery. In 2023, it has declined somewhat to 4.31 percent according to data reported so far. For a region that is strategically located on important trade routes, ECO region's contribution in world trade is clearly below its potential level (ECO, 2024: 4).

The picture with regards to intra-regional trade is also similar which has remained dismally low. According to a study conducted by ECO "Leveraging Economic Potential of ECO Region", intra-regional trade stands at around 8 percent. ECO's intra-regional trade was recorded at 81.9 billion USD in 2023 which demonstrate that we are still far below the real potential of the Organization (Duran, 2024 (d): 1). The region has actually 10-fold potential to increase trade among its member states (Zardari, 2022: 24).

As the previous ECO Secretary General had mentioned similarly, given the real potential of the ECO region, trade sector has not been statistically significant. COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the vulnerabilities and fault-lines in trade among ECO Member States (Noziri, 2022: 42).

The ECO region therefore runs under a trade deficit regime. The ECO least integrated regions in terms of connectivity and intra-regional trade merely 7.9 percent, which is below expectations (Noziri, 2022: 43).

Similarly, ECOTA, the flagship agreement of ECO in the trade domain, has not been implemented since its inception. ECOTA was signed in 2003 by Türkiye, Afghanistan, Iran,

Pakistan and Tajikistan. It entered into force in 2008. However, although ratified by these said member countries, it could still not be operationalized.

As the previous Secretary General of ECO has again rightfully stated, ECOTA offers tremendous trade benefits, and after its full implementation by member states, it could even be upgraded to a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). In this respect, ECO Trade and Development Bank can play an important role, too (Noziri, 43).

That is why, as mentioned by former Foreign Minister of Türkiye, necessary actions to fully implement ECOTA should be taken as soon as possible (Cavusoglu, 2022: 35).

A significant breakthrough in this regard has been the convening of the 9th ECOTA Cooperation Council Meeting (ECOTA CCM), in Islamabad last year on 30-31 July 2024. The ECOTA parties have agreed to create a balance in the ECOTA text in this meeting.

In this respect, the 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Commerce & Foreign Trade, which will be hosted by Türkiye in June this year will be very instrumental (ECO, 2024: 15). This meeting is aimed to refine the agreement; expand its membership; and boost trade liberalization to unlock the full potential (Khan, 2025). The new round of negotiations will foster this broader membership, particularly through updated trade data sharing and participation from non-ECOTA member states (Khan, 2024 (c): 1). As the ECO Secretary General has also mentioned, the year 2025 should be marked by signing and ratifying ECOTA by all members during this meeting in Istanbul (Khan, 2025).

Therefore, the field of economy and trade, and especially ECOTA should be given utmost priority in the new Vision document of ECO for 2026-2035. As mentioned by the Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister in the last COM meeting last year in Mashhad, focus should be on economic and commercial cooperation and development priorities, especially for the trade sector, focusing on trade expansion, where ECOTA and trade facilitation enjoy a special place, rather than spending our energy on secondary areas (Duran, 2024 (d): 2).

To achieve this goal requires greater emphasis on business networking and private sector engagement; and in that respect organization of trade fairs; easing visa restrictions; enhancing B2B networking or making Business Forums on the sidelines of the ECO Summits (Khan, 2025). It would be very useful to reflect and incorporate all these initiatives in the new Vision document of ECO.

The effectuation of ECO Trade Facilitation Strategy is also critical here to boost intra-regional trade. The effective implementation of the Strategy will contribute to trade facilitation among member countries (Koç, 2025).

To sum up, in the new Vision document of ECO for 2026-2035, trade facilitation and full implementation of ECOTA should be given utmost priority to enhance intra-regional trade as well as in increasing the share of ECO in global trade figures.

As Director General at Turkish Foreign Ministry Ambassador Sekizkök mentioned at the HLC meeting in Tehran this year, ECO has unfortunately lost sight of its core area of activity in economy and trade focus to a wide array of fields which stalled visible progress in core areas such as the flagship project of ECOTA. Therefore, the Organization should deepen cooperation in trade and economic development with new energy and determination on the way towards the new Vision document (Sekizkök, 2025).

Engagement of private sector, youth and women

As the Concept Note, entitled “Broadening Participation in the Formulation of ECO Vision 2026-2035”, prepared by ECO Secretariat has rightly argued, to pave the way for the

creation of a more effective new vision document, the scope of dialogue should be broadened to encompass a variety of other important stakeholders. In this regard, the engagement of particularly the private sector, women and youth is essential. It is essential to actively engage these important stakeholders across critical sectors, including trade, transport and connectivity, energy, tourism, economic growth and productivity, and social welfare and environment (ECO, 2025).

Such an attitude will also increase the level of corporate and democratic governance at the member states per se, as supportive engagement of the private sector, individual entrepreneurship and innovation could be benefited in developing creative and new business models to meet the demands of the members states themselves.

In that case, the overall objective of engagement of the private sector will transcend beyond the “quantity” of growth which is measured in statistical terms, but will also pay attention to the “quality” of growth. This conception and concentration of growth in ECO program and projects will put the latter not as an end itself or an objective in its own right, but a means to alleviate poverty; reduce inequality; increase employment; and bring wealth and prosperity for the entire ECO geography. In such a framework, small and middle-sized firms in the region could be assisted to gain market access, funds, financing opportunities, technology, skills and know how. Corporate governance shall be promoted and local firms could be channeled to invest more in the provision of basic infrastructure and services or develop creative and new business models to meet the demands of the entire ECO region (Bayar, 2009).

Economic activity has a gender dimension as well in the ECO geography, like everywhere else. This phenomenon demonstrates itself as women comparably constitute the socio-economically disadvantaged proportion of the population in the region in the sense that they are mostly concentrated in insecure, unsafe and low paid works; have insufficient access to decent employment; and under-represented in politics as voters, party leaders and parliamentarians.

“Inclusiveness” of women here is the key term to encompasses equity, equality of opportunity, and protection in the market and employment transitions in the case of most member states of ECO, which are going through from upper-middle to high income economies; and from efficiency-driven to innovation-driven state structures.

Therefore, gender equality here is not only a goal in itself but also a core component of sustainable and human development in the ECO region. Discrimination on the basis of gender is above all a denial of human rights and therefore, achieving gender equality through gender mainstreaming lie at the center of achieving the SDGs in the region.

In that context, the projects of women’s empowerment and enhancing women’s participation in politics and decision-making as well as women’s enhanced integration in the economy should be proposed as the basis for efficient projects and initiatives in the new ECO vision document for the new decade.

Last but not least, one other relatively vulnerable group in the ECO region is the youth. Child and youth poverty in the region transcend beyond the issue of income and involves other elements such as nutrition; physical and spiritual development; protection; health care; proper and quality education. Unemployment rate among young people is relatively high. They are still isolated from participation in socio-economic life and labor market as well as young people do not have access to proper education facilities.



Therefore, developing comprehensive youth policies is very important for the ECO region to face effectively the challenges ahead. The ultimate strategy and method to achieve the latter is obviously to incorporate the subject matter in the new ECO Vision for 2026-2035 in a comprehensive manner.

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to present several contributions for the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), in reaching its deep, full and real potential in the coming decade ahead.

The latter will find expression in its new post-2025 Vision document, currently in the formulation phase, planned to be finalized by the end of the year. This new Vision will design the future orientation of ECO in the next decade.

In that respect, this paper aimed to offer the following to be evaluated and incorporated into the 2026-2035 Vision of ECO: (i) Enhancing the ownership among member states; (ii) Promoting the visibility of the organization; (iii) Strengthening result-oriented strategies; (iv) Focusing on the core areas of economy/trade: ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA); and (v) Engagement of private sector, youth and women.

Realization and implementation of these five pillars in the new post-2025 Vision of ECO are presumed to contribute to the Organization (ECO) in reaching its deep, full and real potential in the coming decade ahead.

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