



Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
Committee on Environment and Development**Sixth session**

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Item 4 of the provisional agenda*

**Consideration of the future focus of the subprogramme,
particularly on opportunities to enhance regional
cooperation to accelerate environmental actions****Opportunities to enhance regional cooperation to
accelerate environmental actions****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

The present document contains a discussion of opportunities to enhance regional cooperation to accelerate environmental action in Asia and the Pacific, including a proposal to establish a technical expert group that will support the implementation of the Ministerial Declaration on Environment and Development for Asia and the Pacific, 2017, in which the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific resolved, inter alia, to address environmental issues through enhanced climate action, improve the efficiency of natural resources management and promote sustainable urban planning.

The mandate of the technical expert group would be consistent with the mandate in the Ministerial Declaration to support member States in promoting the review of progress at the regional level on the areas identified in the Declaration through the Committee on Environment and Development. The technical expert group could facilitate a regular exchange of information as well as technical discussions among experts from ministries or other public institutions and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) on environment and development matters. It could also provide technical feedback and guidance to the Environment and Development Division on how best to leverage the work of ESCAP to strengthen regional cooperation and advance environmental action. The group could also serve as a space for technical discussions among member States between Committee sessions.

* ESCAP/CED/2020/L.1.

I. Introduction

1. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has exposed a number of fault lines across different areas of environmental concern, including climate change, air pollution, ecosystem health and urban development. Unhealthy ecosystems and climate change increase the likelihood of viral outbreaks, while the effects of air pollution and inadequate urban infrastructure contribute to an increased risk of human infections. At the same time, progress on the environment-related Sustainable Development Goals has lagged in Asia and the Pacific, and environmental degradation and the risks to human health have continued to increase since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement.

2. Document ESCAP/CED/2020/1 is focused on the link between environmental degradation and COVID-19, while document ESCAP/CED/2020/2 contains policy options that member States can adopt to accelerate progress in specific environmental areas. The current pandemic has made clear the urgent need for policy action before the changes in vital Earth systems are irreversible. Enhanced regional cooperation is required to increase action to raise ambitions to address climate change, improve air quality, protect and restore degraded ecosystems, and promote sustainable urban development.

3. Given this urgency, member States could explore further means to enhance regional cooperation, including by mobilizing the expertise of Governments and relevant ministries. Under the mandate given in resolution 71/1 of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), committees are empowered to review and analyse regional trends, identify emerging issues, promote regional dialogue and monitor the implementation of Commission resolutions.

4. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the expertise of member States will be increasingly important in order to support recovery efforts that will ensure the health and well-being of the region's population and the integrity of the environment. The Commission already has a mandate to do such work under the Ministerial Declaration on Environment and Development for Asia and the Pacific, 2017,¹ and Commission resolution 71/1 on restructuring its conference structure to be fit for the evolving post-2015 development agenda. The establishment of a technical expert group would support such aims.

II. Establishing a technical expert group

5. In the Ministerial Declaration, the Conference requested the secretariat to support member States in promoting the review of progress at the regional level on the identified areas through the Committee on Environment and Development. A technical expert group could be established to do so, thereby supporting the efforts to implement the commitments contained in the Ministerial Declaration, in which member States resolved, *inter alia*, to address the effects of climate change through enhanced climate action, improve the efficiency of natural resources management and promote sustainable urban planning.

¹ ESCAP/74/10/Add.1.

6. Further, a technical expert group could help to strengthen the efforts to implement relevant Commission resolutions through enhanced regional cooperation on areas of environmental concern. The technical expert group could also support the Committee in its review of environmental progress in one or more of the Committee's thematic areas, particularly those that may be supported by specific mandates or resolutions.

7. A key objective of COVID-19 recovery plans must be to incorporate environmental action to protect human and planetary health. Policy actions by member States for green, resilient and inclusive development will benefit from more regular and robust sharing of best practices, mainstreaming of solutions and knowledge exchange. The technical expert group could strengthen the secretariat's support to member States in the development of policy actions to advance environmental action and its work under subprogramme 4, drawing on the relevant expertise of member States, academia and civil society.

III. Functions of the technical expert group

A. Overall functions

8. The technical expert group should select priorities with clear outcomes and specific timelines (for example, climate change, air pollution or the health of oceans) in order to achieve the following objectives:

(a) Facilitate regular exchange of information and technical discussions among experts from ministries or other public institutions and ESCAP on environment and development matters;

(b) Provide technical feedback and guidance to the Environment and Development Division on leveraging the secretariat's work to strengthen regional cooperation by helping to accelerate action and monitor progress across the region in key environmental areas, including through the recommendation of effective mechanisms or regional modalities to advance environmental actions;

(c) Serve as a space for technical discussions among member States between Committee sessions.

B. Proposed focus of the technical expert group for the period 2021–2022

9. A technical expert group could benefit the Commission and member States by mobilizing the expertise of Governments in order to provide clear, focused and timely attention on key environmental issues to enhance solutions and regional cooperation. The technical expert group could look at existing mandates in the Ministerial Declaration, as discussed above, and in Commission resolutions in order to determine what areas of work to focus on for the period 2021–2022. Some of those resolutions are discussed below.

10. At the seventy-second session of the Commission, member States adopted resolution 72/8 on fostering regional cooperation and partnerships to respond to the climate change challenge in the Asia-Pacific region. In the resolution, the Commission, inter alia, invited members and associate members of ESCAP to facilitate the exchange of best practices and information-sharing in the context of taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

11. Member States, at the seventy-fifth session of the Commission, adopted resolution 75/4, on strengthening regional cooperation to tackle air pollution challenges in Asia and the Pacific, in which the Commission requested the Executive Secretary, inter alia, to facilitate the voluntary exchange of experiences and the collection and dissemination of information, to provide technical support for the development of policies on mitigation of air pollution and to report on the implementation of the resolution at the seventy-seventh session of the Commission.

12. The General Assembly, at its seventy-fourth session, adopted resolution 74/212, establishing the International Day of Clean Air for blue skies, which was first observed on 7 September 2020. In coordination with the United Nations Environment Programme, ESCAP has convened an issue-based coalition on climate change mitigation and air pollution which has engaged United Nations agencies in the region to work collaboratively to support member States and United Nations country teams to combat air pollution.

13. In the critical area of ecosystem health, the Commission, in its resolution 76/1, which was adopted at its seventy-sixth session, requested the Executive Secretary to continue to support countries in sharing experiences and enhancing cooperation on the conservation and sustainable use of marine resources, including ecosystem restoration and the sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism and through coastal habitat restoration efforts, in light of the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific.

14. The Commission adopted, at its seventieth session, resolution 70/12 on strengthening efforts on human settlements and sustainable urban development for the Asia-Pacific region, in which it requested the Executive Secretary, inter alia, to continue to analyse conditions and trends regarding human settlements and sustainable urban development in the region, and to facilitate regional understanding and action on issues critical to housing and sustainable urban development by, inter alia, sharing good practices and lessons learned and convening expert group meetings and regional multi-stakeholder dialogues.

15. In addition to these resolutions, member States have strengthened their efforts to implement the commitments contained in the Ministerial Declaration, including by providing support to the secretariat for new capacity development and technical cooperation projects. Such projects include but are not limited to the following:

(a) Capacity-building project on supporting countries in Asia and the Pacific to meet commitments to the Paris Agreement (supported by the Government of the Russian Federation). The aim is to strengthen the capacity of member States to accelerate implementation of their nationally determined contributions and reach the targets of the Paris Agreement;

(b) Agroecology and safe food system transitions in South-East Asia (funded by the Government of France). The aim is to harness the potential of agroecology to transform food and agricultural systems into more sustainable systems;

(c) Strengthening regional cooperation to tackle air pollution challenges in Asia and the Pacific (supported by the Government of the Republic of Korea). The aim is to support the development of city-level air pollution mitigation plans and methodologies to localize air quality data;

(d) Forecasting sustainable urbanization and support for sustainable infrastructure planning in cities (supported by the Government of China). The aim is to develop a forecasting tool to allow cities to better manage urban resource use;

(e) Closing the loop and scaling up innovation to tackle marine plastic pollution in cities in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations region (supported by the Government of Japan). It aims to build the capacity of cities in that region to address plastic waste in urban waterways.

16. Leveraging these existing mandates and initiatives while strengthening engagement with member States and their national expertise through a technical expert group provides an opportunity to significantly accelerate action to address the increasing environmental challenges.

17. The technical expert group could initially focus on one or more of the following thematic areas and priorities:

- Raising climate ambition
- Safeguarding ecosystem health
- Clean air for all
- Cities for a sustainable future

18. The technical expert group could identify specific initiatives or modalities that could be supported through the ESCAP platform to advance action on thematic areas of the programme of work relating to the environment and development as feasible or on the recommendation of the Committee. Some of that work could include the following:

(a) Identifying regional initiatives and/or modalities that could assist member States in accelerating action on the thematic areas and supporting the implementation of relevant Commission resolutions and the commitments contained in the Ministerial Declaration;

(b) Supporting the strengthening of data and information systems and methodologies to ensure consistent monitoring and reporting across the thematic focus areas;

(c) Recommending to the Committee on Environment and Development additional measures that ESCAP, member States and other entities could take to improve progress in specific areas of work relating to the environment, including through policies, advocacy and/or intergovernmental actions.

19. If established, the technical expert group's work during the period 2021–2022 would be presented to the Committee on Environment and Development at its seventh session, to be held in 2022.

C. Conduct of the technical expert group

1. Membership

20. The technical expert group will be composed of technical experts nominated by ESCAP members and associate members. The members will be nominated by respective Governments and may include government officials, representatives of academia, civil society or other subject experts.

21. All ESCAP members and associate members shall be eligible to participate in the technical expert group, including through representation from relevant ministries.

2. Modality of work

22. The technical expert group and the ESCAP secretariat will coordinate the organization of the meetings on a quarterly basis, or as needed, to implement its functions. These meetings could be online, in-person or a combination of both.

23. The Environment and Development Division will provide, within existing resources, support for the meetings of the technical expert group. It will, inter alia, disseminate documentation for the group in accessible formats, support the organization of technical meetings and share information with relevant ESCAP bodies.

IV. Issues for consideration by the Committee

24. The Committee is invited to take the following actions:

(a) Comment generally on the benefits of establishing a technical expert group to support work under subprogramme 4 on environment and development;

(b) Provide guidance to the secretariat on the establishment and initial convening of a technical expert group and on the proposed thematic priorities for 2021 in advance of the seventy-seventh session of the Commission.
