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Protecting our planet through regional cooperation and solidarity in Asia and the Pacific

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Note by the secretariat

Summary

The present document contains a summary of the report of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) *Protecting our Planet through Regional Cooperation and Solidarity in Asia and the Pacific*. It explores critical environmental and development trends and drivers in the region as well as the impact of the environmental crisis on human well-being and health. In doing so, it focuses on air pollution, climate change, ocean and marine ecosystems, sustainable cities and rights-based approaches to environmental protection, in line with the current mandates of ESCAP on environment and development as expressed in various resolutions of the Commission and the General Assembly. The flagship report also contains recommendations for reinvigorating multilateralism to protect the planet through regional cooperation and solidarity. Opportunities are identified for the region to align actions with global mandates and multilateral environmental agreements. The present document also contains recommendations to collectively address the environmental challenges discussed.

In addition, the document contains a proposal on the secretariat's role in supporting member States with regard to the recommendations.

The Committee on Environment and Development may wish to consider identifying ways to protect the planet through regional cooperation and solidarity in Asia and the Pacific.

* ESCAP/CED/2022/L.1.

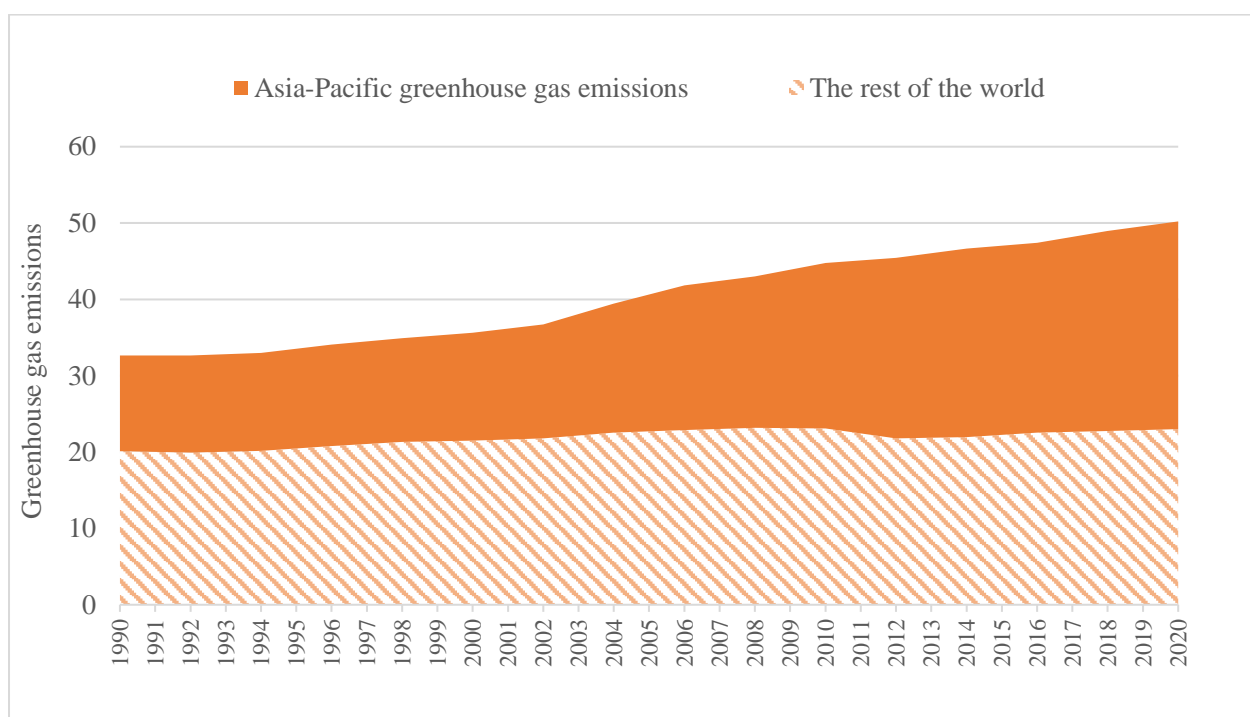
I. The state of the environment in Asia and the Pacific

A. Three key environmental challenges in Asia and the Pacific: climate, biodiversity and pollution

1. The Asia-Pacific region contributes to more than 55 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, with a trend of continuous growth between 2010–2022 (figure).¹ However, despite the commitments of Governments in the region to reach net-zero emissions by mid-century, current ambitions as set out in nationally determined contributions fall short of what is needed to reach the Paris Agreement targets.

Growth of greenhouse gas emissions in the Asia-Pacific region compared to the rest of the world, 1990–2020

(Gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent)



2. Cumulative greenhouse gas emissions in the region are on the rise again, following a brief stall in early 2020; the steady growth trajectory is close to a 26 per cent increase over the 2010 greenhouse gas emission levels. The region is collectively responsible for more than three quarters of global coal-fired power generation and almost all (94 per cent) of the global total capacity of proposed coal-fired power stations.² In 2019, Asia-Pacific economies spent more than \$205 billion on fossil fuel subsidies, which represents a 35 per cent decrease from 2012 levels.³ However, subsidies are expected to increase again as a result of the current energy market turmoil and inflation. In addition, the region's share of modern renewable energy (excluding the use of traditional biomass) remains low compared to other

¹ Data from Climate Watch, Historical greenhouse gas emissions database. Available at www.climatewatchdata.org/ghg-emissions (accessed on 4 January 2022).

² *Coal Phase Out and Energy Transition Pathways for Asia and the Pacific* (ST/ESCAP/2936).

³ *Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Report 2021: Accelerating Climate-smart Trade and Investment for Sustainable Development* (United Nations publication, 2021).

regions, at 8.5 per cent in 2018.⁴ While it has risen from 5.9 per cent in 2010, this change needs to accelerate to meet sustainable energy and climate targets.

3. The silver lining is that 40 Asia-Pacific member States have pledged carbon neutrality by 2050, 2060 or 2070 and have advanced in national planning, ranging from the institution of laws to the development of policy documents, strategies and road maps to support the implementation of those commitments.

4. Among all regions, Asia and the Pacific has experienced the most rapid and serious decline in biodiversity and related ecosystem services. The extent of the damage is evident from the region's biodiversity intactness index score, which has fallen to 77 per cent of its pre-impact value and is projected to continue to decline under business-as-usual socioeconomic trends.⁵

5. The region contains the world's largest number of threatened species, with 72,716 plants and 56,957 vertebrates categorized as threatened in 2021. Much of the region's biodiversity cannot be found anywhere else on the planet, yet as much as 25 per cent of these endemic species are at high risk of extinction, and bird extinctions on some islands are as high as 88 per cent of historically recorded species.⁶ While all Asia-Pacific subregions showed a decline in their Red List Index, which depicts overall extinction rates for species, tropical zones in South and South-East Asia and the Pacific are facing the highest risks.

6. In Asia and the Pacific, land use change and land use degradation are major issues due to large-scale agricultural development, shifting cultivation, urban expansion and salinization. Overall, land degradation has affected approximately 850 million hectares or approximately 28 per cent of land area in the region.⁷

7. The marine and coastal ecosystems in Asia and the Pacific are increasingly pressured by human activities, including overexploitation, habitat destruction and aquaculture as well as invasive species. Approximately 60 per cent of the coastal mangroves in the region have been cleared for development, resulting in terrestrial and marine biodiversity loss and the loss of a wide range of ecosystem services related to carbon sequestration, coastal protection, natural products and tourism. Additionally, more than 40 per cent of coral reefs have disappeared in the region due to human activities as well as increased water temperatures and ocean acidification, and approximately 80 per cent of remaining coral reefs are currently at risk of bleaching.⁸

⁴ Data from Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), Asia Pacific Energy Portal. Available at <https://asiapacificenergy.org> (accessed on 10 September 2022).

⁵ World Wide Fund for Nature, *Living Planet Report 2020: Bending the Curve of Biodiversity Loss* (Gland, Switzerland, 2020).

⁶ Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), *The IPBES Regional Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services for Asia and the Pacific* (Bonn, Germany, 2018).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ ESCAP/CED/2018/1.

8. Air pollution levels have increased significantly in the region, especially in its urban areas. Nearly 90 per cent of the population regularly breathe air considered by the World Health Organization (WHO) to be unsafe.⁹ The annual population-weighted fine particulate matter (PM 2.5) concentrations in the region increased by 19 per cent in the period 1990–2015, making the population in the Asia-Pacific region one of the most exposed to ambient air pollution. This increase was estimated to be 10 per cent higher than the global average increase within the same period.¹⁰ In South Asia, concentrations of fine particulate matter have increased at a higher pace, reaching an annual average of 78.2 micrograms/m³ in 2019, representing a 17 per cent increase from 2000 levels.¹¹

9. In 2019, the average annual population-weighted PM 2.5 concentration in Asia was 50.7 micrograms/m³,¹² with most of the population living in areas exceeding 35 microgram/m³, exceeding the 2005 WHO interim target 1¹³ (the current WHO air quality guideline for the annual concentration of PM 2.5 is 5 microgram/m³).¹⁴ Although air pollution affects high- and low-income countries alike, low- and middle-income countries experience the highest burden, with the highest concentrations in Central, South Asia and South-East Asia.

10. Solid waste and plastic pollution threaten marine ecosystems due to the bioaccumulation of plastics, including microplastics in the ocean. It is estimated that Asia and the Pacific produces 43 per cent of the global plastic volume and consumes 38 per cent of all plastic, much of which is released into the environment. The region's reliance on plastics, coupled with poor waste management practices, has made the region a significant contributor to global plastic input into the ocean: in 2019, 81 per cent of ocean plastics came from Asian rivers and coastlines.¹⁵ Recent studies suggest that approximately 95 per cent of river-borne plastic in the oceans is transported by 10 major rivers, 8 of which are located in Asia.¹⁶ Urban rivers in South-East Asia are identified as one of the main hot spots for plastic emissions.

⁹ WHO, "Ambient (outdoor) air pollution", 22 September 2021.

¹⁰ Climate and Clean Air Coalition to Reduce Short-lived Climate Pollutants and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Air Pollution in Asia and the Pacific: Science-based Solutions* (Bangkok, 2019).

¹¹ Calculations based on data from Health Effects Institute, State of Global Air 2020 database. Available at www.stateofglobalair.org/data/#/air/plot (accessed on 31 May 2022).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See WHO, *Air Quality Guidelines: Global Update 2005* (Geneva, 2006).

¹⁴ See WHO, *WHO Global Air Quality Guidelines: Particulate Matter (PM 2.5 and PM 10), Ozone, Nitrogen Dioxide, Sulfur Dioxide and Carbon Monoxide* (Geneva, 2021).

¹⁵ Lourens J. J. Meijer and others, "More than 1000 rivers account for 80% of global riverine plastic emissions into the ocean", *Science Advances*, vol. 7, No. 18 (30 April 2021).

¹⁶ Christian Schmidt, Tobias Krauth and Stephan Wagner, "Export of plastic debris by rivers into the sea", *Environmental Science & Technology*, vol. 51, No. 21 (7 November 2017), pp. 12,246–12,253.

11. Pollution and waste from food systems represent another key environmental challenge in Asia and the Pacific. Chemical production in the region was projected to increase by 46 per cent over the period 2012–2020.¹⁷ Although the use of pesticides and fertilizers for agricultural purposes has not been perceived as key inputs, they contain toxic chemicals that can negatively affect the environment, including soil, surface and groundwater, beneficial insects and human health.¹⁸ Asia has the largest land areas at risk of pollution, with China, Japan, Malaysia and the Philippines at highest risk.¹⁹

B. Megatrends and drivers of change

12. Rapid demographic and socioeconomic transitions since the 1990s have led to significant environmental and natural resource pressure. Asia and the Pacific dominates global use of resources: it is responsible for 63 per cent of global material consumption, including fossil fuels, biomass, metals and non-metallic minerals.²⁰ This growth in resource use, which represents a 25 per cent increase since 1970, results from new infrastructure projects in cities, a growing consumer base and global manufacturing centres in the region. Modelling results following historical trends show that without improvement in resource efficiency and sustainable consumption and production patterns, domestic material consumption could increase by 75 per cent between 2020 and 2060 in Asia and the Pacific. If that trend continues the region could face constraints in resources as it pursues its longer-term economic development and well-being.²¹

13. Economic growth in the region has been prioritized over social and environmental progress or sustainable development. In some instances, highly polluting sectors are heavily supported. For example, Asia-Pacific economies spent more than \$205 billion on fossil fuel subsidies alone in 2019.²² In response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis, businesses that have a heavy environmental footprint such as airlines and coal companies have been given bailouts in the form of loans, grants and guarantees without proper environmental conditions or safeguards.

14. Food systems play an important role in the Asia-Pacific environmental and socioeconomic landscapes and provide livelihoods for millions. Yet, they are also a major driver of environmental degradation. The International Resource Panel estimates that cultivation and processing of biomass is responsible for almost 90 per cent of global water stress and land-use-related

¹⁷ International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook: Asia and Pacific – Preparing for Choppy Seas*, World Economic and Financial Surveys (Washington, D.C., 2017).

¹⁸ UNEP, *Study on the Effects of Taxes and Subsidies on Pesticides and Fertilizers: Background Document to UNEA-5 Review Report on the Environmental and Health Effects of Pesticides and Fertilizers* (Nairobi, 2020).

¹⁹ Fiona H.M. Tang and others, “Risk of pesticide pollution at the global scale”, *Nature Geoscience*, vol. 14 (March 2021).

²⁰ UNEP, “Supporting resource efficiency”. Available at www.unep.org/regions/asia-and-pacific/regional-initiatives/supporting-resource-efficiency (accessed on 10 September 2022).

²¹ Yingying Lu, Jim West, and Heinz Schandl, “Asia-Pacific resource outlook – technical input for the ESCAP Environment Division flagship report” (Canberra, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, 2020).

²² *Regional Trends Report 2021: Shaping a Sustainable Energy Future in Asia and the Pacific – A Greener, More Resilient and Inclusive Energy System* (United Nations publication, 2021).

biodiversity loss.²³ Driven by population growth and changing consumption practices, production, processing, distribution and consumption of agricultural products result in the extraction of natural resources, declining ecosystem health, biodiversity loss, soil erosion, loss of stored carbon and the generation of greenhouse gas emissions.

15. The region's rapid and unplanned urban expansion has resulted in sprawl as well as environmental degradation such as loss of biodiversity, generation of large volumes of solid waste, increases in urban air pollution and significant amounts of marine pollution from land-based activities. The region is already experiencing unprecedented urban challenges that compromise the urban health, sustainability, and resilience of cities and their residents. Many local governments struggle to meet existing backlogs in infrastructure, housing and urban services with limited resources and capacity. Greater demand for transportation due to urbanization has contributed to mobility challenges that could threaten environmental quality and safety and economic performance. The increased demand for energy, materials and water resources will continue to put pressure on the environment and challenge the capacities of cities to provide adequate urban services and of countries to meet climate and sustainable development targets.

C. Deterioration of the environment in the Asia-Pacific region negatively impacts human well-being and health

16. The impacts of climate change, pollution and environmental degradation as well as unsustainable consumption and production are felt keenly across Asia and the Pacific. The region hosts some of the most vulnerable countries and communities, which must deal with the compounding risks associated with the degradation of the common environment. Geopolitical dynamics are further amplifying environmental and health crises. As a result, societal inequalities are exacerbated by the disproportionate impact on the health and well-being of the poor and the most vulnerable groups, including women and children, indigenous populations, gender minorities, migrants, displaced persons and persons with disabilities.

17. The Asia-Pacific region is the most disaster-prone in the world. Climate-induced disasters such as floods and storms are estimated to cause 43,000 human casualties in the region each year.²⁴ Additionally, an increasing number of people in the region are experiencing more frequent health issues such as heatstroke, heart attacks and strokes as a result of the unusually hot temperatures. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of people exposed to extreme temperatures and heatwaves in the region increased by 125 million.²⁵ Climate change-induced disasters impose multiple pressures on health systems and disrupt health services, exposing people to greater risks in facilities with poor conditions.

²³ UNEP and International Resource Panel, *Global Resources Outlook 2019: Natural Resources for the Future We Want* (Nairobi, 2019).

²⁴ *Leave No One Behind: Disaster Resilience for Sustainable Development – Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2017* (United Nations publication, 2017).

²⁵ *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2021: Resilience in a Riskier World – Managing Systemic Risks from Biological and Other Natural Hazards* (United Nations publication, 2021).

18. Most of the displacements triggered by climate-induced disasters in 2021 were in Asia and the Pacific. In 2021, nearly 13.7 million people were newly internally displaced in East Asia and 5.25 million in South Asia due to disasters.²⁶ The region accounted for 76.9 per cent of the new disaster displacements globally.²⁷ It is estimated that, even if the Paris Agreement targets are met, more than 34.4 million people in South Asia are likely to become climate migrants by 2050.²⁸ Population displacement is projected to increase in the decades leading up to 2050 and is expected to cause instability, tension and conflict.

19. While all countries in the region experience the impacts of the climate crisis, several low-lying territories are especially vulnerable to climate-induced disasters, including Pacific small island developing States, low-lying deltas and archipelagic states. Human societies in these coastal environments are particularly exposed to hazards associated with the ocean, including sea-level rise, tropical cyclones and marine heatwaves. The global trend of rising sea levels is expected to have the most severe consequences for low-lying territories, as it poses a direct threat to their habitability and existence as nations. These hazards have been exacerbated by the direct effects of climate change and are projected to intensify with rising global temperatures.

20. Ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss in the region force species to shift habitats, which further increases the interface between wild species, livestock and humans, in turn increasing the risk for zoonoses. Research shows that when biodiversity is endangered, the spread of infectious diseases is more likely, which significantly impacts the health and well-being of people. Approximately 60 per cent of known human infections and 75 per cent of all new and emerging human infectious diseases derive from animals. Researchers estimate that between 650,000 and 840,000 potential zoonotic agents exist today globally that have yet to cross the species barrier.²⁹ It is estimated that almost one quarter of the global environmental burden of disease arises from 14 South-East and East Asian countries alone.³⁰

21. Air pollution is a significant compounding factor for the poor health of the region, accounting for almost two thirds of global premature deaths, or 7 million people per year. Air pollution has disproportionate health impacts on the poor and vulnerable populations, including women. Gender-specific impacts from air pollution are evident, affecting maternal health and increasing the risk of pregnancy losses. Exposure to unhealthy levels of PM 2.5 is linked to an 80 per cent increased risk of mortality from breast cancer for women. Additionally, children are also disproportionately affected by air pollution.

²⁶ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2022: Children and Youth in Internal Displacement* (Geneva, 2022).

²⁷ ESCAP, “Profile for the Sustainable Development Goal 13” 28 March 2019. Available at www.unescap.org/kp/2019/sdg13-goal-profile-0.

²⁸ Harjeet Singh and others, “Costs of climate inaction: displacement and distress migration” (Johannesburg, ActionAid, 2020).

²⁹ Dennis Carroll and others, “The global virome project”, *Science*, vol. 359, No. 6478 (23 February 2018), pp. 872-874.

³⁰ WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, *Environmental Health in Selected Asian Countries* (Manila, 2018).

More than 600,000 children die each year globally from diseases related to air pollution, both ambient and household.³¹

22. The COVID-19 pandemic accentuated inequalities, affecting most the poor, who experienced the dual burden of increased vulnerabilities to the disease and reduced opportunities for livelihoods due to economic restrictions, in particular in cities. Lower-income households were more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 due to compromised health and living conditions and were more likely to experience job losses, reduced income and food insecurity. The pandemic has also further exposed the limitations of pursuing an unsustainable development path that degrades the environment, including the violations of biophysical and ecological boundaries. It has also reinforced the understanding that environmental vulnerabilities multiply health and socioeconomic impacts.

23. Many of the environmental crises mentioned above are transboundary in nature and present significant challenges to all countries in the region. The sources of air pollution are often outside the areas of impact and require coordinated action across local and national jurisdictions. Ecosystems and ecosystem services are not constrained by borders. As such, coordinated and complementary actions to address the most pressing transboundary issues facing the region are essential. Across Asia and the Pacific, examples of successful collaboration exist, but more needs to be done to successfully meet regional and global environmental challenges. Regional collaboration should be based on effective international environmental governance and deepen knowledge-sharing, multilateral policy dialogue and capacity-building through reinvigorated multilateralism.

II. Priorities for advancing regional action

24. Given the environment and development challenges in the region, many countries in the region believe that reinvigorated multilateralism is needed. In response to a survey administered by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), more than half the respondents stated that reinvigorated multilateralism and collaboration between governments and institutions need to be more networked, inclusive and effective in order to make progress on the pressing environmental and development concerns. This section contains proposals for regional action to reinvigorate multilateralism in environment and development policy areas that will be the focus of the regional discussions at the seventh session of the Committee on Environment and Development.

25. Expert consultations and the responses to an ESCAP survey, in preparation for the seventh session of the Committee, pointed to opportunities to reinvigorate multilateralism through actions that advance five key aspects of multilateralism: (a) accountability measures, (b) information-sharing, transparency and evidence for action, (c) coordinated, inclusive and participatory action, (d) economic system and financing interventions, and lastly, (e) solidarity, which underpins the other four.

26. The following paragraphs include a discussion of the priorities for advancing regional action, within the framework detailed above and in line with the current mandates of ESCAP on the environment and development,

³¹ Sneha Gautam and others, “A review on recent progress in observations, sources, classification and regulations of PM 2.5 in Asian environments”, *Environmental Science and Pollution Research*, vol. 23 (August 2016), pp. 21, 165–21, 175.

namely climate action, ocean's and ecosystem health, air pollution, sustainable urbanization and environmental rights.

A. Climate action

27. **Accelerating the energy transition to realize the potential of energy and resource efficiency.** There is an urgent need to rapidly shift away from fossil fuel regimes towards low-emission energy systems, including through pathways for a just energy transition for least developed countries and small island developing States. Such efforts can be supported by strengthening regional cooperation for removing the barriers to phase down coal, facilitating the penetration of renewable energy and replicating success stories. Regional cooperation already facilitates improving cross-border grid infrastructure to induce higher penetration of renewable energy.

28. **Prioritizing ecosystem-based solutions for climate mitigation and adaptation.** Ecosystem-based solutions, including the protection, conservation and restoration of ecosystems, can deliver a wide range of benefits for people and the planet, particularly climate benefits, as various ecosystems act as sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases and increase climate resilience. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, ecosystem-based solutions implemented across all ecosystems can reduce and remove 5 to 12 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year by 2030, while adding an additional \$2.3 trillion in productivity growth to the global economy.³²

29. **National action and regional cooperation on raising climate ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region.** The next round of nationally determined contribution reviews in 2025 will allow countries to take into consideration the outputs of the collective assessment of the global stocktake of the Paris Agreement (November 2021–November 2023) and will provide an important opportunity to significantly increase mitigation ambition, while improving their data collection and reporting processes and stepping up implementation of current nationally determined contribution commitments. Most countries in the region, at all levels of income, have an abundance of enabling conditions to help to drive up their climate ambition. Scientific collaboration and information-sharing can support efforts to make pledges achievable, reflecting commitments in the nationally determined contributions with clear mid-term goals supported by long-term low-emission development strategies. That creates opportunities to gain the confidence to introduce high-ambition targets and measures.

B. Ecosystems and biodiversity action

30. **Strengthening policy coherence, synergies and legal frameworks.** It is critical to highlight the central role that institutions, governance and decision-making play in protecting and sustainably managing ecosystems and biodiversity. Strengthened policy coherence, synergies and legal frameworks could translate the objectives of global mandates into tangible results. Asia and the Pacific can align their actions with their obligations under multilateral environmental agreements and recommendations formulated around them. These include the post-2020 global biodiversity framework currently being developed under the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing

³² United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *Yearbook of Global Climate Action 2021: Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action* (Bonn, 2021).

Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, among others. Specifically with regard to the ocean, regional efforts could focus on realizing an international legally binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, as mandated by the General Assembly. Furthermore, regional cooperation should support the development of an international legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution, as outlined in the recent resolution of the United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme.

31. Promoting sustainable land management and ensuring the transition to sustainable food systems. To tackle the biggest driver of biodiversity loss and ecosystem restoration, the Asia-Pacific region requires a major transformation in land use and food systems. This includes a shift toward agroecological practices and the implementation of sustainable land management practices, including agroforestry. The principle of land degradation neutrality should be applied to ensure key requirements of productivity such as soil fertility, pollination, water supply and resilience against climate change. While sustainable land management is necessary across agricultural land and forest production areas, urban areas should not be overlooked as they involve the highest levels of threats and extinctions. Cities in the Asia-Pacific region can enhance their biodiversity by designing and implementing community gardens, preserving parks and avoiding building new construction on critical land resources such as biodiverse-rich wetlands.

32. Regional action on strengthening sustainable management of the oceans and marine ecosystems. Solidarity and cooperation are needed to strengthen global marine governance based on the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. Particular attention needs to be paid to the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction. Specifically for the protection of marine ecosystems across the region, ESCAP, in collaboration with United Nations agencies and programmes, has developed a Regional Decade Programme, promoting coordination and networking to address the challenges and objectives laid out in the implementation plan of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development for the most pressing challenges for Asia and the Pacific. The Regional Decade Programme promotes the protection and safeguarding of ecosystem health, including marine ecosystems, and their interconnectedness with land ecosystems from a one-health approach.

C. Air pollution action

33. Strengthening policies to combat air pollution. Many Asian countries have already initiated a comprehensive action plan to reduce emissions of air pollutants. Success in combatting air pollution in the region will largely depend on national technical capacity to strengthen air quality standards and management, enhance existing institutions, enforce air quality monitoring and regulations with innovative technologies, improve air pollution inventory with the identification and source apportionment of air pollution and create partnerships for cooperation. It will be important to set timebound and clear national targets for air pollution reduction, aligned with WHO guidelines and considering the different country contexts and the development of action plans supporting the achievement of these objectives.

34. **Strengthening integrated approaches.** Countries would benefit from implementing integrated approaches to effectively tackle air pollution. Given that air pollution is exacerbating the environmental crisis and threatening people's livelihoods by contributing to climate change, ecosystem and biodiversity loss, and crop losses, multiple benefits can come from integrated air pollution control strategies. Understanding the interplay between air quality and other environmental challenges including climate change is key for designing integrated policies and plans that maximize air quality and environmental co-benefits.

35. **Increasing collaborative regional action on air pollution.** In order to secure clean air, it is necessary to mobilize commitment to long-term multilateral cooperation. Existing multilateral cooperation mechanisms in the ESCAP subregions have contributed to comprehensive data exchanges, national and regional policy developments, scientific cooperation and knowledge-sharing in the field of transboundary air pollution, and it will be essential to build on these existing practices. These mechanisms can lead to more effective cooperation. A road map for a regional intergovernmental agreement on air quality for the region can be created, which could include the harmonization of air quality standards, the establishment of an emission monitoring and evaluation programme for Asia and the Pacific and the application of best available control techniques.

36. **Strengthening regional and subregional initiatives.** It will also be essential to build on subregional initiatives in North-East Asia, South Asia and South-East Asia, as well as subregional and region-wide partnerships, which have been established to share and scale up the adoption of science-based solutions within and across subregions. Existing cooperation initiatives in Asia and the Pacific provide a foundation for further discussions and sharing of experiences across subregions and demonstrate the existing commitment and willingness of member States to cooperate on air pollution. The Asia-Pacific region has several existing multilateral partnerships that have helped to promote collective action. For instance, the Asia-Pacific Clean Air Partnership aims to build a platform for knowledge-sharing on air pollution abatement, including policies and technology, achieve better cooperation and coordination between countries, enhance institutional capacity and provide technical support on air quality management and implementation. Building on such existing frameworks will help the region to build momentum in mitigating air pollution.

D. Urban sustainability action

37. **Integrating sustainability and well-being into inclusive urban planning across the region to future-proof public and private investments in cities.** Governments in the region need to make a concerted effort to cooperate at a regional level to mainstream evidence-based planning and monitoring, people-centred approaches, and integrate health, well-being and quality of life targets into national and subnational urban and territorial processes. Regional cooperation could leverage multi-stakeholder networks such as the Penang Platform for Sustainable Urbanization, convened by ESCAP and partners. Regional mechanisms such as the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development could also be leveraged to foster greater knowledge of urban issues and mainstream integrated solutions.

38. **Promoting urban planning strategies that optimize quality of life and sustainability.** The lockdowns and disruptions due to the global pandemic necessitate urban recovery strategies that rethink planning. Urban recoveries need to focus on enhancing liveability at the neighbourhood, city and city-region scales. Neighbourhood-based planning encourages the integration of housing, green spaces and amenities and access to urban services within compact development patterns.

39. **Strengthening regional cooperation for sustainable infrastructure and housing.** Increases in urban populations and rapid, unplanned urbanization have contributed to the region's infrastructure gaps and housing challenges, including the challenges of informal settlements in vulnerable and/or disaster-prone areas, lack of access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene, and inefficient building and construction. Considering the multiple crises the region faces with regard to climate action, progress cannot be made without a focus on sustainable infrastructure, nature-based solutions, and sustainable building practices and neighbourhood improvements to generate multiple social and environmental co-benefits. The complexities around the provision of housing and infrastructure require multi-stakeholder cooperation across countries and comprehensive programme design and targeting to promote sustainability, efficiency, equity and effectiveness in line with Sustainable Development Goal 11 targets and the New Urban Agenda.

40. **Promoting vertical integration of urban policies for liveable cities to accelerate multilevel action on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement.** There are many opportunities to influence dialogue, enhance knowledge-sharing and provide regional-level technical assistance to national Governments and cities on a range of topics such as access to municipal climate financing and strengthening the evidence base with tools such as city-level greenhouse gas emissions inventories and deployment of urban nature-based solutions. Building the capacity of municipal staff on climate change mitigation and adaption through e-learning tools and peer-to-peer learning opportunities can also play a key role in raising awareness and sharing knowledge of best practices. A voluntary local review can be one of the tools to measure the progress and effectiveness of urban policies. Strengthening integration between voluntary local reviews and voluntary national reviews can enhance both vertical and horizontal coordination with support from national Governments for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

E. Environmental rights

41. **Accelerating regional actions to enhance rights-based approaches.** The most efficient way to ensure environmental rights in the region is by developing harmonized policies on procedural environmental rights, such as access to remedies, access to information and public participation in decision-making, to operationalize the exercise of substantive rights. A regional approach could provide the impetus for developing a stronger enabling environment that would necessitate reforms in policy, regulation and judicial procedure to ensure environmental rights are protected at the national level.

42. **Establishing compliance and assistance mechanisms to guarantee the full exercise of environmental rights.** Strengthening the legal regime to promote access rights (access to information, participation and justice) in environmental matters and to protect substantive environmental rights through a regional approach can also lead to national law reform by facilitating

compliance through appropriate implementing mechanisms. Such an arrangement could lead to the introduction of national legislation specifically institutionalizing access rights and procedures for environmental redress, protecting environmental defenders and providing for the full exercise of environmental rights. As a necessary consequence of the regional approach, the focus needs to be on strengthening national systems to implement the resulting binding obligation.

43. **Implementing right to information measures to increase public participation.** Access rights to environmental information and public participation should be a foundational aspect of a regional approach, which could provide an impetus to develop national-level action in the fields of climate change, land management, air pollution and waste management, among others. As a guiding post, the rights of access to information enshrined in the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters and the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean could be a reference for developing a regional approach in Asia and the Pacific.

44. **Focusing on substantive and procedural environmental rights to help to reshape government competence.** Building on the experience and expertise of the Economic Commission for Europe and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, which have accumulated lessons on the effective safeguarding of environmental rights, the Asia-Pacific region can address this challenge through the adoption of an instrument on access rights. Countries in the region may also draw some lessons from existing international legal and policy frameworks, as well as multilateral environmental agreements, to adopt a regional instrument that fosters the implementation of access rights and safeguards environmental justice.

III. Looking ahead: protecting the planet through regional cooperation and solidarity

45. The Asia-Pacific region could lead the world in enhancing the resilience of planet and society, building on the strong scientific and technological capacity of the region and supported by leaders in government, business and civil society. Regional cooperation and solidarity to protect the common environment in Asia and the Pacific is guided by the various resolutions adopted by ESCAP and the General Assembly.

46. In its resolution 78/1, entitled “Bangkok Declaration Commemorating the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific: a Common Agenda to Advance Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific”, members and associate members of ESCAP committed to leaving no one behind, building resilience against future pandemics, natural disasters, climate change and other shocks, protecting the planet and addressing, inter alia, climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, and all types of natural disasters.

47. In its resolution 72/8 on fostering regional cooperation and partnerships to respond to the climate change challenge in the Asia-Pacific region, the Commission focused on raising climate ambitions in Asia and the Pacific and developing more ambitious emissions-cutting commitments and targets, as well as on phasing down unabated coal and inefficient fossil fuel subsidies to accelerate progress on the Paris Agreement and the Glasgow Climate Pact. Member States also called for the immediate curbing of greenhouse gas

emissions and the pursuit of an effective and progressive response to the urgent threat of climate change on the basis of the best available scientific knowledge. Mobilizing financial resources, promoting the provision and transfer of sound environmental technologies, and building capacity to help member States to achieve climate-resilient development in the region are also key priorities outlined in the Bangkok Declaration.

48. In its resolution 75/4 on strengthening regional cooperation to tackle air pollution challenges in Asia and the Pacific, the Commission focused on increasing collaborative action on air pollution pursuant to global and regional mandates through support for the establishment and implementation of national legislation as well as mutual agreements on harmonizing standards, data sharing, exchange of knowledge and solutions, strengthening capacity-building and undertaking regional actions, facilitated by a regional modality. Member States also called for the reduction of air pollution levels to mitigate the impacts on human health in the Bangkok Declaration.

49. In General Assembly resolution 76/300 on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, the Assembly focused on exploring opportunities to collaborate on enhancing rights-based approaches including through the implementation of access rights across a variety of institutions to facilitate access to remedies, information and public participation in decision-making. A clean, healthy and sustainable environment is important for the enjoyment of human rights and for sustainable development in all its dimensions. As emphasized in the Bangkok Declaration, human beings are entitled to healthy and productive lives in harmony with nature. The well-being of humanity depends on the health of nature and hence on the ability to sustainably use, restore and protect ecosystem services.

50. In its resolutions 72/9 on regional cooperation to promote the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific and 76/1 on strengthening cooperation to promote the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific, the Commission focused on strengthening sustainable management of the oceans and marine ecosystems in Asia and the Pacific through actions aligned with the objectives of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030). In the Bangkok Declaration, member States called for urgent action to enhance international collaboration for the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources and to reduce all forms of pollution negatively impacting oceans and freshwater.

51. In line with the United Nations system-wide strategy on sustainable urban development and the New Urban Agenda, scaling up local and subnational actions, including efforts to integrate climate change into urban planning and development in sync with national strategies, deploying inclusive smart city technologies, building resilient and accessible infrastructure that addresses the housing crisis and adopting nature-based solutions can minimize the impact of unplanned urbanization on the environment. Vertical integration of urban policies and better coordination between local authorities and national Governments can support the capacities of cities to manage urban growth through transitions to inclusive, resilient, low carbon development and minimize the environmental impact of unplanned urban expansions. The Bangkok Declaration demonstrates the commitment of member States to promote sustainable urban development to enhance quality of life, develop healthy environments and better manage environmental risks and resources.

52. In Commission resolution 77/1 on building back better from crises through regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific, member States called for a shift towards a climate and environment-responsive approach to COVID-19 recovery in support of the goals and objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. To support transitions to development models that put nature at the centre of economic development, ensure biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, raise climate ambition, reduce pollution, promote sustainable urban development, and enhance integrated environmental action, existing regional multi-stakeholder platforms for discussing, prioritizing and supporting action on environment and development could be strengthened. In the Bangkok Declaration, member States recognized the value of an integrated One Health approach that fosters cooperation on issues relevant to human health, animal health and plant health, as well as environmental and other relevant sectors.

53. The converging crises related to climate, biodiversity and pollution call for solidarity, greater attention to science and commitment to reinvigorated multilateral action. Existing multilateral platforms can engage new partners to overcome fragmentation, enhance partnerships and coordination, engage with various kinds of stakeholders and all States, and deliver on ambitious, well-framed targets and effective accountability measures, with the right financing.

54. The secretariat should continue to assist members and associate members to enhance integrated environmental action by continuing to facilitate regional platforms for discussing, prioritizing and supporting action on the environment and development in Asia and the Pacific, support synergies among the regional environmental agendas of United Nations' agencies and programmes, and support global multilateral environmental agreements, as relevant.

IV. Issues for consideration by the Committee

55. In view of the challenges and opportunities outlined above, the Committee may wish to provide guidance on regional cooperation and solidarity opportunities to protect the planet from the negative effects of climate change and air pollution and to enhance the health of ecosystems.

56. The Committee may wish to take note of the proposals contained in the present document with respect to strengthening multilateral action in five key policy areas, namely climate action, air pollution, sustainable urbanization, ocean's and ecosystem health, and environmental rights, and actions relating to strengthening solidarity, inclusive networking and collaboration, transparency, data and information, and accountability, as well as economic system and financing support.

57. The Committee may wish to urge members and associate members to recognize the potential for the Asia-Pacific region to show leadership in enhancing the resilience of planet and society, including by taking appropriate steps to manage the shared risks to environment and health, building on the strong scientific and technological capacity of the region, and enabling leaders in government, business and civil society. The Committee may also wish to recommend that members and associate members follow up in this regard, with special attention to solidarity with countries in special situations with special needs and vulnerable communities and groups in the region.

58. The Committee may wish to take note of the current mandates of the secretariat, as set forth in the above-mentioned resolutions and the Bangkok Declaration, to recommend continued follow-up, in close consultation with members and associate members and through the establishment of partnerships and collaboration with other stakeholders, with a view to mobilizing resources and expertise to effectively confront these challenges.

59. The Committee may also wish to recommend other points of programmatic strengthening to respond to the challenges outlined in the present document.

60. The Committee may wish to identify and provide guidance on activities and programmes to be implemented by the secretariat in support of protecting the planet through regional cooperation and solidarity in Asia and the Pacific.
