



Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**Seventy-sixth session**

Bangkok, 21 May 2020

Item 7 of the provisional agenda*

**Review of the conference structure of the Commission
pursuant to resolution 73/1****Review of the conference structure of the Commission
pursuant to resolution 73/1****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

In its decision 75/17, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific established an open-ended working group to further consider issues pertinent to the review of the conference structure of the Commission. It also requested the working group to report on its findings and recommendations to the Commission at its seventy-sixth session.

The Commission may wish to endorse the report of the open-ended working group, as contained in the present document.

I. Introduction

1. At its seventy-fifth session, recognizing the need for the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) to adapt and respond to the evolving development challenges and opportunities within the Asia-Pacific region, and to be fit for purpose in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Commission decided to establish an open-ended working group to further consider issues pertinent to the review of its conference structure as provided for in its resolutions 71/1 and 73/1. The Commission requested the open-ended working group on the review of the conference structure of the Commission to report its findings and recommendations to the Commission at its seventy-sixth session, without prejudice to the final review to be conducted at its seventy-eighth session, in 2022. The Commission also requested the Executive Secretary to make appropriate arrangements and to provide necessary and requested information to support the deliberations of the working group.¹

* ESCAP/76/L.1/Rev.1.

¹ *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2019, Supplement No. 19* (E/2019/39–ESCAP/75/35), chap. I, sect. B, decision 75/17.

2. At the same time, the Commission, in its resolution 75/2, requested the secretariat to consult member States on how to strengthen the link between the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development and the high-level political forum on sustainable development. The announcement of the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals by the General Assembly in its resolution 74/4, the current review of the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum² and the reform of the United Nations development system provide a timely opportunity to review the format and organizational aspects of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development and its linkages with processes at the national and global levels.

3. The secretariat organized four rounds of consultations with member States on the review of the conference structure of the Commission between December 2019 and March 2020. Ms. Samantha K. Jayasuriya, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary and Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to ESCAP served as Chair of the open-ended working group, while Mr. Paul Stephens, Minister and Deputy Head of Mission and Permanent Representative of Australia to ESCAP, served as Vice-Chair.

4. The consultations included a dedicated interactive discussion with member States and other stakeholders and a briefing by Mr. Kaha Imnadze, Permanent Representative of Georgia to the United Nations in New York, in his capacity as the co-facilitator for the review of the high-level political forum on sustainable development and the Economic and Social Council. Mr. Imnadze explained that the process was in its initial stage and that there was a firm intention to maintain inclusivity and transparency in the process and to provide ESCAP member States with the opportunity to contribute to the process by sharing inputs with the respective permanent missions in New York through regional groups. He indicated that by the end of June, a good portion of the final document should be ready. He further said that the ongoing review process would not affect the voluntary national review process of 2020 but would have implications for the 2021 presentations. Member States were also to decide whether to have a single resolution or to have two separate resolutions to cover the reviews of the Economic and Social Council and the high-level political forum.

5. The consultations of the open-ended working group were informed by a paper prepared by the secretariat and by the results of a survey conducted in January 2020 among member States and other stakeholders to take stock of how the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development had delivered on its functions as an annual and inclusive intergovernmental forum and a regional platform for supporting countries, in particular those with special needs, in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

6. The present document contains a summary of the discussions prepared by the Chair.

II. Summary of discussions

A. Updating the issues to be considered by the committees subsidiary to the Commission

7. Several members of the open-ended working group noted the opportunity and desirability to review, and possibly update, the issues to be considered by the committees in light of the announcement of the decade of action for the

² See General Assembly resolution 70/299.

Sustainable Development Goals. The working group requested the secretariat to provide initial suggestions of possible updates to the issues considered by each committee, which the working group reviewed and discussed.

8. The open-ended working group discussed the option to instruct each committee to review the issues and propose amendments, if any, to the Commission. Given that the committees met every other year, starting the review in 2020 would allow all the committees to discuss the matter before the final review of the conference structure, which would take place during the seventy-eighth Commission session, in 2022.

B. Aligning ad hoc ministerial conferences with their associated committees or convening committees at the ministerial level on an ad hoc basis to ensure high-level engagement on the issues to be addressed

9. The open-ended working group discussed the proposal by the secretariat to hold the established ad hoc ministerial conferences and meetings, namely the Ministerial Conference on Transport, the Asian and Pacific Energy Forum and the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific, every four years, in order to align them with the committees. Currently the conferences and high-level meetings meet every five years, while the committees meet every two years. The proposed change would allow ministerial conferences to be held in place of their respective committee every four years.

10. Some members expressed support for the proposal, while others noted that the five-year cycle of the ministerial conferences was in line with the time horizon of most government plans. The open-ended working group heard a proposal to align the frequency of ad-hoc ministerial conferences on a case-by-case basis as those meetings were convened.

C. Strengthening the links between national, regional and global follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda

11. Member States reflected on the added value of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development as a regional space for countries to prepare for the high-level political forum, including in terms of preparing voluntary national reviews.

12. Discussing the outcomes of the Forum, member States highlighted the importance of understanding how the regional outcomes might influence the high-level political forum and requested the secretariat to provide information about other regional forums on sustainable development and the format of their outcome documents. Member States also discussed the terms of reference of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, without prejudice to the review process of the high-level political forum and other elements of the resolution.

13. Member States were generally open to revising the terms of reference of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, as contained in Commission resolution 73/1, to a needs-based principle to reflect the outcome of the review of the high-level political forum, to improve its vertical as well as horizontal coordination, and to strengthen the link between the regional and global levels of follow-up and review without increasing the reporting burdens of the countries.

1. Voluntary national reviews

14. Member States noted the added value of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in creating a space for in-depth exchanges on individual voluntary national reviews and on shared challenges.

15. Several member States stated that the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development could be an opportunity to present, on a voluntary basis, and without aiming at establishing a parallel reporting mechanism, a draft of their voluntary national reviews, either in plenary or during a dedicated side event and that a space could be provided at the Forum for a technical-level peer review of the reviews.

2. Inputs from the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development to the high-level political forum

16. To ensure that regional inputs could better contribute to the assessment of progress and decision-making at the global level, member States supported the institutionalization of a dedicated segment of the high-level political forum for the review of outcomes emanating from the regional forums on sustainable development. Towards that end, member States noted the importance of coordinating with the Bureau of the Economic and Social Council.

17. Moreover, member States discussed the format of the outcomes of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development and stated that they should focus on the follow-up to and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, taking into consideration the format of the outcomes of the other regional forums on sustainable development. It was noted that the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development adopted outcome documents with specific intergovernmentally agreed recommendations at its first, second and third sessions.³ Similarly, the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development adopted the Marrakech Declaration on Sustainable Development in Africa⁴ in 2019 and the Victoria Falls Declaration on the United Nations Decade of Action and Delivery for Sustainable Development in Africa in 2020,⁵ with key messages transmitted to the high-level political forum. Currently, as provided for in its terms of reference, the outcome of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development is a report with an annexed Chair's summary. Several member States supported the proposal to strengthen the outcome of the Forum in support of the decade of action, by formulating, in a non-negotiated modality, main messages, in case of sufficient convergence, which could be transmitted to the high-level political forum through the Commission and be reflected in the ministerial declaration of the high-level political forum.

3. Regional cooperation and the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific

18. Member States noted that the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific was a living document and that the priority areas of regional cooperation were open for review and revision.

³ See E/HLPF/2017/1/Add.3, E/HLPF/2018/2/Add.3 and E/HLPF/2019/3/Add.5.

⁴ See E/HLPF/2019/3/Add.4.

⁵ ECA/RFSD/2020/16, annex.

19. At the same time, participants noted that to ensure the continued relevance of the road map, the reporting on its implementation could be linked to substantive functions of the United Nations development system at the regional level and thus provide the framework for system-wide reporting.

20. Some member States considered a revision of the road map to be premature and proposed instead that the five priority areas for cooperation identified in the road map be assessed with a view to ensuring that they continued to reflect the challenges encountered and progress made in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region.

III. Conclusion

21. While the open-ended working group was able to make good progress in terms of allowing member States to share views and perspectives on the review of the conference structure of the Commission, and in particular in relation to the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, the exceptional circumstances and unprecedented challenges brought about by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic prevented the working group from having in-depth discussions and reaching clear consensus on specific recommendations.

22. Moreover, while some elements of convergence started to appear in relation to recommendations on strengthening the linkages between national, regional and global follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda, any concrete recommendation for the format of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development would need to wait for the ongoing review of the high-level political forum to be completed.

23. Therefore, further discussions on the review of the conference structure of the Commission should take place in the context of the final review of the Commission at its seventy-eighth session, in 2022, while further discussions on strengthening the linkages between national, regional and global follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda should be held in the lead-up to and during the eighth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, in 2021.