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Role of Subregional Organizations and Bodies in accelerating sustainable solutions in the region
Information note for Agenda item 10

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Role of Subregional Organizations in accelerating sustainable solutions in the region

Information Note

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Subregional organizations and programmes (namely ASEAN, SAARC, PIF, SPREP, SACEP, ICIMOD, SPC) in Asia and the Pacific play a vital role in coordinating regional actions, supporting capacity building, resource mobilization, and monitoring and implementation of the global and regional environmental goals, including the United Nations Environment Assembly resolutions and the Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), towards achieving the environmental dimension of 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.
- 1.2 The region faces interconnected environmental challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, and pollution and waste. Collaboration at the subregional level becomes more important than ever to foster inclusive, science-based, and solutions-oriented approaches that respond to local priorities while supporting global goals. These subregional organizations and programmes provide a platform to share knowledge, capacity building on relevant tools, and review progress on achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs).

2.0 Promoting subregional cooperations in accelerating sustainable environmental solutions

- 2.1 Regional organizations play a vital role in fostering environmental sustainability through cooperation, policy harmonization, capacity-building, and knowledge exchange. In Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) promotes environmental sustainability through its ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)¹ and related sectoral bodies (namely ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity², ASEAN Centre for Energy³). ASEAN has developed regional frameworks such as the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, the ASEAN Working Group on Climate Change, and the ASEAN Environmental Education Action Plan, which guides member states in addressing pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change in a coordinated manner.
- 2.2 The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) advances environmental cooperation through regional action plans and centres such as the SAARC Forestry Centre and the SAARC Centre for Disaster Management and Preparedness⁴, focusing on sustainable forest management, climate adaptation, and disaster risk reduction. SAARC has also adopted regional strategies on climate change and biodiversity conservation, encouraging collective action among its member states.
- 2.3 The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) promotes environmental sustainability through high-level political commitment and regional strategies such as the 2050 Strategy for the Blue

¹ <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-socio-cultural-community/>

² <https://www.aseanbiodiversity.org/>

³ <https://aseanenergy.org/>

⁴ <https://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/about-saarc/saarc-chaimanship/33-about>

Pacific Continent⁵, which integrates climate action, ocean governance, and sustainable development. PIF provides a platform for coordinated advocacy in global climate negotiations and supports regional cooperation on environmental security and resilience.

- 2.4 The Pacific Community (SPC) contributes to environmental sustainability by providing scientific and technical support in areas such as natural resource management, climate resilience, and ocean governance. It supports Pacific Island countries and territories through regional initiatives on integrated coastal management, sustainable agriculture, and disaster preparedness, helping to build long-term environmental resilience.
- 2.4 The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) serves as the principal regional organization for environmental management in the Pacific. It leads efforts on climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation, waste management, and environmental monitoring. SPREP also supports the implementation of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) in Pacific Island countries⁶, ensuring regional alignment with global sustainability goals.
- 2.5 The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) facilitates collaboration among China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea in addressing regional environmental challenges. Through joint initiatives on air pollution, marine litter, and green technology, TCS promotes transboundary cooperation and scientific exchange, contributing to environmental sustainability in Northeast Asia.
- 2.8 The South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) provides a platform for South Asian countries to coordinate regional environmental action. It implements regional projects on waste management, biodiversity protection, and marine and coastal ecosystem conservation. As the secretariat of the South Asian Seas Programme, SACEP also promotes the sustainable use of marine resources under the UNEP Regional Seas framework.
- 2.9 The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) plays a critical role in promoting sustainable mountain development and environmental protection in the Hindu Kush Himalaya region. Through its work on climate change, disaster risk reduction, ecosystem services, and water resource management, ICIMOD fosters regional cooperation and evidence-based policymaking to protect fragile mountain ecosystems.
- 2.9 The Mekong River Commission (MRC) contributes to environmental sustainability by facilitating transboundary water governance in the Lower Mekong Basin. It promotes integrated water resource management, environmental monitoring, and basin planning to balance development and conservation. The MRC's collaborative approach supports ecosystem health, climate resilience, and equitable resource use among its member countries.

⁵ <https://forumsec.org/2050>

⁶ <https://www.sprep.org/programme/environmental-governance/enabling-frameworks/multilateral-environmental-agreements>

- 2.10 Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO): The Economic Cooperation Organization recognizes sand and dust storms (SDS) as a significant regional challenge impacting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly addressing it within the framework of disaster risk reduction (DRR) and disaster risk management (DRM). ECO actively participates in international efforts to combat SDS, emphasizing the need for a joint mechanism among its Member States to address this issue.

3. Key Issues for Discussion under Agenda Item 10:

- a. Policy coordination and harmonization: Develop shared environmental policies, standards, and frameworks; facilitate alignment with global agreements (e.g., Paris Agreement⁷, SDGs⁸); encourage legal frameworks for joint action (e.g., ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution⁹).
- b. Transboundary Cooperation: Address environmental issues that cross borders (e.g., rivers, forests, air); establish joint management systems for shared ecosystems; promote regional agreements on marine, forest, and atmospheric protection. (e.g. Mekong River Commission manages water resources across multiple countries¹⁰)
- c. Knowledge and Data Sharing and South-South Cooperation: Collect, harmonize, and disseminate environmental data; promote the use of scientific research, modeling, and indicators; support information systems (e.g., ASEAN's Circular Economy Framework¹¹, SPREP's Pacific Islands Waste Management Outlook¹², ICIMOD's Mountain Knowledge and Action Networks¹³).
- d. Capacity Building and Technical Assistance: Train national and local officials, researchers, and practitioners; provide technical guidance and best practices for sustainable resource management; enhance disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation capacities (e.g. SACEP's Plastic Free Rivers and Seas for South Asia Project¹⁴; SPC's Science, Technology and Resources Network¹⁵).
- e. Early Warning and Risk Reduction: Develop regional early warning systems for disasters; integrate climate risk assessments into national and local planning; and build resilience to environmental hazards (e.g. the SAARC Disaster Management Centre¹⁶).

⁷ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>

⁸ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

⁹ <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASENAAgreementonTransboundaryHazePollution-1.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.mrcmekong.org/>

¹¹ https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Framework-for-Circular-Economy-for-the-AEC_Final.pdf

¹² <https://library.sprep.org/content/small-island-developing-states-waste-management-outlook>

¹³ <https://www.icimod.org/regional-programme/mountain-knowledge-and-action-networks/>

¹⁴ <https://www.sacep.org/programmes/plastic-free-rivers-and-seas-for-south-asia>

¹⁵ <https://gem.spc.int/projects/star>

¹⁶ <https://saarc-sdmc.org/>

- f. Project Implementation and Financing: Coordinate and implement joint environmental projects; mobilize financial and technical resources from donors or member states; and pilot sustainable practices at regional and community levels (e.g. the Greater Mekong Subregion Program 2030¹⁷).
- g. Stakeholder Engagement and Dialogue: Facilitate dialogue among governments, NGOs, academia, and local communities; encourage inclusive decision-making that reflects regional and local priorities; and support public awareness and environmental education campaigns (e.g. Pacific Islands Forum¹⁸).
- h. Monitoring and Evaluation: Track progress of regional environmental goals and policies; evaluate effectiveness of programs and adjust strategies accordingly and publish regional and national state-of-the-environment reports (SOEs).

¹⁷ <https://greatermekong.org/strategy>

¹⁸ <https://forumsec.org/>

Brief Profiles of Key Organizations and Programmes

- **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967 through the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Its mandate is to promote regional peace and stability, accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development, and foster cooperation in areas such as trade, agriculture, education, and the environment. ASEAN currently comprises ten member states: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam. The organization is headquartered in Jakarta, Indonesia.¹⁹
- **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)**- The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established on 8 December 1985 with the adoption of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka, Bangladesh, by its seven founding members. Its primary mandate is to promote regional cooperation and integration in South Asia to accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development, as well as to improve the quality of life of the people in the region. SAARC emphasizes collective self-reliance, mutual respect for sovereignty, and peaceful coexistence. The current member states are Afghanistan (joined in 2007), Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The SAARC Secretariat, which facilitates and coordinates regional cooperation among member states, is headquartered in Kathmandu, Nepal.²⁰
- **Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)**- The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) was established in 1971 to promote regional cooperation and integration among Pacific Island countries. Its mandate is to foster political and economic policy coordination, enhance sustainable development, and strengthen the collective voice of the Pacific region on global and regional issues. The Forum serves as a platform for high-level dialogue and decision-making among member states. PIF currently comprises 18 members, including 16 independent and self-governing states and two associate members: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat is based in Suva, Fiji.²¹
- **Pacific Community (SPC)**- The Pacific Community (SPC) was established in 1947 as the South Pacific Commission by six founding members: Australia, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Its mandate is to support sustainable development in the Pacific region by providing scientific and technical assistance to its members in areas such as public health, agriculture, fisheries, education, climate change, disaster resilience, and statistics. SPC promotes regional cooperation

¹⁹ <https://asean.org/>

²⁰ <https://www.saarc-sec.org/>

²¹ <https://forumsec.org/pacific-islands-forum>

and capacity-building to improve the well-being of Pacific people. It currently has 27 members, including 22 Pacific Island countries and territories and five founding metropolitan countries. The organization is headquartered in Noumea, New Caledonia, with regional offices in Suva, Fiji, and other Pacific locations.²²

- **Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP)**- The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) was formally established as an independent intergovernmental organization in 1993, although it originated in the 1980s as a programme of UNEP, ESCAP, and other partners. Its mandate is to promote cooperation and provide assistance in protecting and improving the environment to ensure sustainable development for present and future generations in the Pacific region. SPREP focuses on key areas such as biodiversity and ecosystem management, climate change resilience, environmental governance, and waste management and pollution control. It comprises 21 Pacific Island member countries and territories, along with five metropolitan members: Australia, France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The SPREP Secretariat is headquartered in Apia, Samoa.²³
- **The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)**- The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was established in 1989 to promote sustainable economic growth, trade and investment liberalization, and regional integration across the Asia-Pacific region. APEC operates based on non-binding commitments and consensus-based decision-making, emphasizing voluntary cooperation among its members. Its core mandate is to support open and free trade, improve economic and technical cooperation, and strengthen capacity-building to enhance prosperity and resilience in the region. APEC has 21 member economies: Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Chinese Taipei, Thailand, the United States, and Viet Nam. APEC's Secretariat is headquartered in Singapore.²⁴
- **Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS)**- The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) was established in September 2011 to promote peace, stability, and common prosperity among the People's Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea through advancing trilateral cooperation. Headquartered in Seoul, Republic of Korea, the TCS functions as an intergovernmental organization mandated to facilitate dialogue, coordinate cooperative projects, and support summit-level, ministerial, and working-level mechanisms across a wide range of fields, including economic affairs, sustainable development, public health, education, and culture. The Secretariat also conducts research, issues publications, and enhances public awareness to strengthen mutual understanding and trust among the three countries.²⁵

²² <https://www.spc.int/>

²³ <https://www.sprep.org/>

²⁴ <https://www.apec.org/>

²⁵ <https://www.tcs-asia.org/en/main/>

- **South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP)**- The South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) is an intergovernmental organization established in 1982 by the South Asian countries to promote and support regional cooperation in environmental protection and sustainable development. Its primary mandate is to encourage the exchange of knowledge, promote joint action, and build capacity for effective environmental management in South Asia. SACEP serves as the Secretariat for the implementation of the South Asian Seas Programme (SASP) under the UNEP Regional Seas Programme. The member states of SACEP are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The organization is headquartered in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and operates under the governance of its Governing Council, supported by a Consultative Committee and a Programme Advisory Committee.²⁶
- **International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)** -The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is a regional intergovernmental knowledge and learning centre established in 1983, with its headquarters in Kathmandu, Nepal. Its mandate is to promote sustainable mountain development and improve the well-being of people living in the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region through research, knowledge sharing, policy support, and regional cooperation. ICIMOD works on transboundary issues such as climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity conservation, water resource management, and livelihoods. It serves eight regional member countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan. The Centre operates through partnerships with governments, civil society, research institutions, and development agencies to foster collaboration and regional integration for mountain development.²⁷
- **Mekong River Commission (MRC)** -The Mekong River Commission (MRC) is an intergovernmental organization established in 1995 by the Mekong Agreement between Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Viet Nam. Its mandate is to promote sustainable development and coordinated management of the Lower Mekong Basin's water and related resources for the mutual benefit of its member countries and the well-being of the people in the region. The MRC provides a platform for regional dialogue, joint planning, data sharing, and technical cooperation in areas such as hydropower, flood and drought management, fisheries, and climate change. It also engages with upstream countries China and Myanmar as Dialogue Partners. The MRC Secretariat, headquartered in Vientiane, Lao PDR, facilitates implementation of decisions and supports technical and administrative operations of the Commission.²⁸
- **Economic Cooperation Organization:** The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) was established in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan, and Türkiye as the successor to the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), which had been founded in 1964. Its primary mandate is to promote economic, technical, and cultural cooperation among its member

²⁶ <http://www.sacep.org/>

²⁷ <https://www.icimod.org/>

²⁸ <https://www.mrcmekong.org/>

states, with the aim of fostering sustainable economic growth, social development, and regional integration. ECO's areas of cooperation include trade and investment, transport and communications, energy, environment, and agriculture. The organization expanded in 1992 to include seven new members: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The current member states are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan. The ECO Secretariat, which coordinates and facilitates the organization's activities, is headquartered in Tehran, Iran.²⁹

²⁹ <https://eco.int/>