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**ESCAP REFORM: THE ROLE OF ESCAP IN THE PROMOTION OF ECONOMIC  
AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC:  
DRAFT ESCAP POSITION PAPER FOR REVIEW BY  
THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL**

(Item 5 (b) of the provisional agenda)

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SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC:  
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*Note by the secretariat*

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
INTRODUCTION .....	1
I. THE CONTRIBUTION OF ESCAP TO THE REGION'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT .....	2
A. Regional "team leader" .....	3
B. Policy catalyst .....	4
C. Operational support .....	6
II. RELATIONS BETWEEN ESCAP AND ITS DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS .....	8
A. United Nations global entities .....	8
B. Other regional organizations .....	10
C. Subregional organizations .....	11
D. Civil society .....	12
III. PREPARING FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY .....	13



## INTRODUCTION

1. The report of the Secretary-General on "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform" (A/51/950 of 14 July 1997) refers, *inter alia*, to the ongoing reform efforts within each of the five regional commissions. In that regard, the report of the Secretary-General recommends that the Economic and Social Council initiate a general review of the regional commissions, in consultation with other regional bodies and Governments, bearing in mind the individual reviews each commission has already conducted. The proposed review would consider the core competencies of the regional commissions *vis-à-vis* global bodies and other regional and subregional intergovernmental bodies and evaluate the most appropriate division of labour with regard to both standard-setting and technical cooperation activities, and prospects for further rationalization and consolidation.

2. In its continuing effort to serve the evolving economic and social development needs of its 56 regional members and associate members (in addition to the Commission's four non-regional members), ESCAP has over the course of its 51-year lifespan undertaken a number of reviews and self-evaluations of its role and has adjusted its structure and functions accordingly, within the overall scope and content of the terms of reference set for it by the General Assembly. Thus, the focus of ESCAP (which was called the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East until 1972) in the early years was on post-War reconstruction and development planning, with particular emphasis on industrialization and trade expansion. That concern was paired with a major emphasis on the promotion of a sense of regional identity, solidarity and cooperation. With the achievement of those aims, attention turned in the 1960s to additional areas of concern, including macroeconomic management, with particular reference to terms of trade, structural change, employment and income distribution. At the same time, attention turned to the prospects for subregionalism, initially focusing on South-East Asia.

3. Since the 1970s the Commission has concentrated the region's attention on a number of additional development priorities, such as transport, urbanization, the environment, population, social welfare and human resources development. Increasingly, the Commission's role in raising those issues for policy consideration has been complemented by an emphasis on technical assistance, much of which has been supported by extrabudgetary resources generously contributed by the Commission's developed country members and major United Nations development funds and programmes. In sum, ESCAP has a history of resilience in dealing with changing regional development priorities over the past five decades, which demonstrates its unique qualifications as *primum inter pares* of the development partners serving Asia and the Pacific.

4. The institutional resilience in response to the region's evolving development needs and priorities has been particularly evident during the 1990s. It may be recalled that, following an extended period of self-examination of its comparative advantage and organizational arrangements in the light of evolving regional development priorities, the Commission revised its conference structure at its forty-

eight session, which was held in 1992. That comprehensive reform introduced a thematic approach to the conference and programme structure, and focused the Commission's work on the themes of economic cooperation, poverty alleviation and environmentally sustainable development. In conformity with that approach, the Commission's conference structure was revised from nine sectoral committees to three thematic committees, two technical committees and two special bodies. The sessions of several of those bodies were biennialized, and all were streamlined through the adoption of more focused agendas and a reduction in their duration. At the same time, the annual sessions of the Commission were streamlined by a reduction in the number of working days from 10 to 6, along with a commensurate reduction in the volume of documentation.

5. At its fifty-third session, held in April 1997, the Commission reaffirmed the continuing validity of the reforms undertaken in 1992. In doing so, it re-emphasized its view that the complexity of the development problems faced by the countries in the region increasingly demanded that those problems be tackled in a comprehensive manner through interdisciplinary and intersectoral action. It called for continued and intensified exercise of the multidisciplinary advantage of the Commission at both the policy and operational levels through its complementary analytical and technical assistance functions.

6. In anticipation of the review to be undertaken by the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 1998, and building on the reforms already undertaken by the Commission, the present document reviews the contribution of ESCAP to economic and social development in Asia and the Pacific, analyses the relationship between ESCAP and its development partners in the region, and offers some suggestions regarding the future role of ESCAP as a regional development institution.

## **I. THE CONTRIBUTION OF ESCAP TO THE REGION'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

7. From an analytical perspective, the mandate of ESCAP can be seen as threefold. First, the Commission serves as the United Nations "team leader" for economic and social development in the Asian and Pacific region. Second, it functions as the region's main economic and social development policy forum. Third, it provides operational support to the countries and areas of the region in their development efforts. These three elements are synergistic and indivisible; between them, they form a platform for action that ESCAP has been implementing for the past five decades, with profound influence on the economic and social progress of the three-fifths of humanity populating this vast and dynamic region.

**A. Regional "team leader"**

8. As specified in the terms of reference under which it was founded by the General Assembly in 1947 and as reaffirmed in Assembly resolution 32/197 of 20 December 1977, ESCAP serves as the regional arm of the United Nations in Asia and the Pacific. Many other United Nations bodies and agencies operate in the region, of course, but all are fundamentally global in reach. Although some of those other United Nations entities maintain regional or subregional offices, none covers the full scope of the ESCAP region. ESCAP thus has the distinction of being the only entity within the United Nations system that serves exclusively the Asian and Pacific region. The terms of reference of ESCAP, reinforced by the "team leadership" clause of Assembly resolution 32/197, provide the legal basis upon which the Commission is empowered to ensure the necessary regional coordination among the various concerned bodies and agencies of the United Nations system.

9. Not only within the United Nations system, but in the broader regional setting, ESCAP enjoys the advantage of being the only intergovernmental body charged with region-wide responsibility for promoting the economic and social development of the 56 countries and areas of Asia and the Pacific. The only other body in the region that enjoys a range of membership anywhere comparable with that of ESCAP is the Asian Development Bank (ADB), itself established by ESCAP (when still called ECAFE); as a bank, however, its operations focus primarily on lending activities and financial rates of return, even though its policy orientation is development. Beyond that single region-wide intergovernmental development organization, the Asian and Pacific region has witnessed the establishment of several subregional organizations, including the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the South Pacific Forum, and the Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand - Economic Cooperation organization (BIMST-EC), as well as several interregional bodies, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation organization (APEC) and the Indian Ocean Rim - Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC). Each of those organizations is mandated to play a distinct and specific role in meeting the development needs and aspirations of its select membership. None, however, can claim the universality, objectivity and capacity to reflect the views and interests of the region at large. In contrast, as an all-inclusive and impartial regional institution, ESCAP can and does pursue the common well-being of all the countries and country groupings in the region, thereby helping to deflect potential tensions and promote constructive interaction.

10. The assigned role of ESCAP as an impartial forum for open dialogue on economic and social issues of current concern among the countries and areas of Asia and the Pacific bestows on the organization an additional advantage. As ESCAP is a consensus-seeking rather than negotiating forum, its regional universality and the equal status of its membership have particular significance for the region's less advantaged developing countries, many of which find themselves excluded, owing to either geographical isolation or weak economic bargaining power, from other intergovernmental forums.

ESCAP provides opportunities for all countries of Asia and the Pacific, especially the least developed countries, to articulate their development aspirations and fashion cooperative arrangements towards their self-realization. Recent arrangements forged between disparate countries of the region with respect to the sharing of water resources as well as hydro and other energy endowments, the exploration of the development opportunities afforded by growth triangles, and cross-border cooperation in such matters as trade facilitation and drug demand reduction offer vivid examples of the vitality of this continuing function.

11. With the recent expansion in the Commission's membership to include the Central Asian republics and Turkey, and with the decision to include the Russian Federation within the geographical scope of the region, the terrain and population covered by ESCAP have increased considerably. The Commission's responsibilities have increased commensurately, though no additional resources have been made available. With that expanded mandate, heightened priority has been accorded to several issues, including assistance to the economies in transition, privatization, transit trade, infrastructure development and toxic waste disposal. Such adjustment to emerging trends has extended the scope of ESCAP activities into issues of critical concern in an era of unprecedented economic and social transformation.

12. ESCAP also enjoys a distinct advantage in the location of its headquarters. The central location of the Commission's headquarters at Bangkok, supported by its Pacific Operations Centre at Port Vila, facilitates effective networking, close monitoring of economic and social trends and events, speedy collection and dissemination of information, and least-cost delivery of technical assistance. Through the convenience provided by its headquarters' location, ESCAP draws with relative ease on expertise from around the region in rendering assistance to the member States. Its continuous and long-term interaction with policy makers, technical experts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private-sector representatives contributes to its deep understanding of the economic and social forces shaping the region.

## **B. Policy catalyst**

13. The development process in Asia and the Pacific has benefited immeasurably over the years from enlightened policy leadership. The contrasting development records of different countries, and of individual countries during different periods of their development experience, attest eloquently to the significance of that fundamental proposition. ESCAP plays a catalytic role in promoting enlightened policy through its regular dissemination of information and monitoring of current economic and social conditions and trends, research on policy issues of priority concern, the setting of regional development standards and goals, and the provision of a regional forum for policy dialogue and consensus formation.

14. *Information dissemination.* In its continuing effort to make publicly available up-to-date information on current economic and social conditions and trends, ESCAP issues a number of publications. The annual *Asia-Pacific in Figures* and *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific* and

*Foreign Trade Statistics of Asia and the Pacific* and the quarterly *Statistical Indicators for Asia and the Pacific* provide basic quantitative information on current economic conditions. The annual *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific* presents a comprehensive analytical update on the region's development situation. These basic information sources are supplemented by a variety of periodic information bulletins and newsletters in more specialized areas, such as trade and investment, industry and technology, remote sensing and geographic information systems, social development, human resources development and infrastructure development.

15. *Monitoring of economic and social trends.* Supplementing the dissemination of information, ESCAP undertakes regular analysis of that information as a means of monitoring economic and social trends for policy-making purposes. The annual *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific* provides insight into current trends and policy options and provides a basis for the Commission's policy deliberations at its annual sessions. Similar functions are performed by other major publications, such as the *State of the Environment in Asia and the Pacific* which is published every five years and the occasional *State of Urbanization in Asia and the Pacific*.

16. *Research on policy issues.* Research on major policy issues is a continuing preoccupation of the Commission, forming the basis for its policy proposals at intergovernmental deliberations. Each annual Commission session takes as its theme topic a critical policy issue, with the discussion based on a major ESCAP policy study. Recent years have seen consideration of the following themes: Social development into the twenty-first century (1998); Prospects and constraints in trade, investment, and transport and communications (1997); Rural poverty alleviation and sustainable development (1996); and Regional cooperation in human resources development (1995). In addition to such major research efforts, the Commission undertakes research on a variety of other current regional policy priorities. Recent examples include research on policy aspects of fiscal devolution, the Trans-Asian Railway, the ageing of population, and trade and investment between the Pacific island countries and East and South-East Asia.

17. *Regional development standard- and goal-setting.* Regional development standards and goals are actively promoted by ESCAP through declarations and resolutions promulgated by the Commission and its occasional ministerial conferences. In many cases, these regional consensus instruments build upon and place in regional context global agreements reached at world summits and world conferences. Major examples include the Agenda for Action on Social Development in the ESCAP Region; Bali Declaration on Population and Sustainable Development; Agenda for Action for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons; Regional Action Programme for Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development; New Delhi Action Plan on Infrastructure Development in Asia and the Pacific; Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women in Asia and the Pacific; Regional Action Plan on Urbanization; and the regional follow-up to the 1994 Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States.

18. *Regional development policy forum.* All the above means by which ESCAP serves as a policy

catalyst for the region are given voice through the Commission's role as the economic and social development forum for Asia and the Pacific. At its annual sessions, ministerial conferences, meetings of subsidiary bodies and other intergovernmental meetings, the Commission provides a venue for policy dialogue, exchange of experience and promotion of consensus. The opportunity provided for senior policy makers and administrators of the region to gather together on a regular basis in this neutral setting to deliberate on critical development issues of common concern cannot be underemphasized.

### C. Operational support

19. By virtue of its close proximity to the field, constant interaction with governments and key elements of civil society, and adherence to a thematic, multidisciplinary approach, ESCAP enjoys a clear comparative advantage over the global United Nations entities in its operational activities within Asia and the Pacific. Three types of operational activities are emphasized by the Commission: technical assistance, technical cooperation among developing countries (TCDC) and advisory services. They form a natural extension of the Commission's policy role and complement it by translating policy guidance into concrete, practical action.

20. *Technical assistance.* Three sorts of multidisciplinary regional technical assistance are provided by ESCAP: (a) pilot or demonstration projects, which provide a basis for replication around the region by illustrating practical means whereby specific policy initiatives can be translated into action; (b) cross-border projects, which introduce innovative approaches to economic and social cooperation between neighbouring countries sharing common problems across their mutual frontiers; and (c) catalytic projects, which seek to plant ideas or create public awareness of opportunities which can then be carried through to fruition by the people themselves:

(a) *Pilot or demonstration projects (i.e. projects aimed at generating replication).* Examples of such projects include the "seven sisters" project, which promotes district-level development coordination and improved poverty project design in the SAARC member countries through the example of a series of selected case studies; an urban transport development project which demonstrates through selected case studies the anti-pollution and direct-cost advantages of converting diesel-fueled buses to compressed natural gas (CNG) in urban transport; a biogas promotion project which uses selected case studies to publicize the low-cost technology whereby agricultural biogas can be applied by households and communities for sustainable agricultural development; and an environmental access project under which three major cities in the region are taking the lead in redesigning their physical infrastructure to facilitate access by disabled persons to all public facilities.

(b) *Technical assistance activities concerned with cross-border issues.* Examples of such activities include several projects to assist the economies in transition to devise appropriate trade policies as a basis for the formulation of transit trade regulations and border-crossing procedures; several projects to facilitate the cross-border movement of traffic through the development of complementary multimodal transport facilities and freight forwarding arrangements; and several



projects to assist neighbouring countries in coordinating their policies and programmes relating to community-based drug demand reduction and HIV/AIDS prevention.

(c) *Catalytic projects (i.e. projects intended to kick-start independent follow-up).* Examples of such projects include several Asia-Pacific international trade fairs; a series of leadership training projects to promote the development of self-help organizations of disabled persons, women entrepreneurs, rural youth and literacy trainers; a project to promote environmentally sound and sustainable development policies and programmes in urban areas; and a project to promote sustainable water demand management through appropriate water pricing policies and related regulations.

21. Of special interest is the promotion by ESCAP of South-South cooperation through TCDC. One objective is increased self-reliance of the region's developing countries through the enhancement of their creative capacity to resolve their development problems in keeping with their own aspirations. A corollary is the promotion and strengthening of collective self-reliance among developing countries through exchange of experience and the pooling, sharing and joint utilization of their technical resources. ESCAP pursues those objectives by meeting the costs of international travel of participants, in particular those from the least developed, island and landlocked countries and economies in transition, in seminars, study visits, workshops and hands-on training programmes in a number of areas, such as port management and operations, tourism sector development and entrepreneurship for women. In addition, ESCAP in 1997 signed memoranda of understanding relating to third country training programmes with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Under those arrangements, ESCAP covers the trainees' travel costs and related expenses while the host country bears all other costs, including training, accommodation and local transport.

22. *Advisory services.* Regional advisory services are rendered by ESCAP to the developing countries of Asia and the Pacific with resources made available under United Nations programme 21. Under that programme, 11 regional advisers currently provide advisory services on priority issues to ESCAP members and associate members upon request. Those requests have been numerous and at times overwhelming. To give but a few examples, in 1997 the Regional Adviser on Poverty Alleviation and Social Integration provided assistance to the Islamic Republic of Iran in the preparation of its first national human development report; the Regional Adviser on Statistics provided assistance to Fiji on follow-up work on the 1996 census, including the design of a post-enumeration survey; the Regional Adviser on Economies in Transition provided assistance to Turkmenistan on the establishment of free trade zones. The emphasis on the Commission's current thematic issues and the strong interdisciplinary character evident in these advisory services are noteworthy examples of the unique role of ESCAP in the region.

## II. RELATIONS BETWEEN ESCAP AND ITS DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

23. As an integral aspect of the leadership role of ESCAP in anticipating economic and social

development needs and generating effective responses to emerging development issues in the Asian and Pacific region, considerable scope exists for consultation, coordination, cooperation and collaboration with other development organizations in the region. The Commission recognizes the value of inter-organizational partnerships and, with that objective in mind, consistently takes active steps to work closely with four groups of development partners: the global United Nations bodies and agencies, other regional organizations, subregional organizations and civil society.

#### **A. United Nations global entities**

24. As an integral element of the United Nations system and one of the five commissions serving as regional counterparts to the global role played by the Economic and Social Council, ESCAP works closely with the various global United Nations bodies and agencies concerned with economic and social development in three ways. First, in its "team leadership" role, it coordinates the United Nations' economic and social development activities in the region through the Regional Inter-agency Committee for Asia and the Pacific (RICAP). Second, in the conduct of both its policy-level and operational activities, it seeks to form strategic alliances with the respective concerned global United Nations entities. Third, in its services as a regional policy catalyst, it contributes to the preparatory and follow-up activities pertaining to United Nations world summits and conferences.

25. *RICAP.* The General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council have directed ESCAP, in its capacity as the arm of the United Nations in the Asian and Pacific region, to foster inter-agency cooperation and coordination. It does so through its function as convener and secretariat of RICAP, which includes in its membership ESCAP, UNAIDS, UNCHS, UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNDP, UNEP, UNHCR, UNDCP, UNFPA, ILO, FAO, UNESCO, WHO, ICAO, the World Bank, ITU and UNIDO. The Commission, at its fifty-third session in 1997, expressed satisfaction with the functioning of RICAP and its subcommittees. It suggested that future meetings of RICAP should focus on how ESCAP could benefit from the activities of the various global United Nations bodies and agencies, and vice versa, so that each could concentrate on areas in which it had a comparative advantage. That approach has been pursued in the several RICAP sessions convened since the fifty-third session of the Commission.

26. Within the RICAP framework, ESCAP has consistently sought to strengthen cooperation with its United Nations development partners, notably UNDP. At the same time, UNDP has indicated interest in strengthening its cooperation with ESCAP through the RICAP process. In pursuit of that intent, discussions have been held with the UNDP resident coordinators in various countries of the region on ways and means of strengthening linkages between activities under way at the regional and country levels, thereby heightening the prospects for closer conformity between ESCAP regional policy initiatives and UNDP country strategies and programmes. Further accommodation to ensure effective complementarity between the regional policy and operational functions of ESCAP and the role of the UNDP Asia-Pacific Bureau, which operates out of its New York headquarters, is required.

27. *Strategic alliances.* The inherent strength of ESCAP as the regional economic and social development forum for Asia and the Pacific contributes to its comparative advantage in forging strategic alliances with and among the diversity of regional, subregional and country offices and programmes of other United Nations bodies and agencies. Given the vastness of the region and its development complexities, there exists considerable scope for such inter-agency cooperation. In that respect, ESCAP regularly invites the other United Nations entities to participate in its relevant activities and calls on them to provide their expertise and advice on technical issues in their respective areas of competence. Furthermore, ESCAP has served as an official executing agency for major regional projects and programmes funded by UNDP, UNFPA, UNIDO, UNCTAD, UNDCP and UNESCO, among other United Nations entities.

28. In its quest to build strategic alliances, ESCAP has sought to develop closer cooperation with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as with ADB. One product of that effort was a joint ESCAP/World Bank seminar of high-level policy makers convened in 1994 to draw lessons from the East and South-East Asian growth experience and consider the replicability of that experience in the region. Further to that dialogue, preparations are under way to convene in 1998 a joint ESCAP/IMF/World Bank/ADB seminar of high-level officials to examine the management of capital flows within the region and between it and the rest of the world. On a longer-term basis, ESCAP has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with ADB and serves as an official executing agency for various ADB-funded projects; the possibility of similar arrangements has been discussed with the World Bank. Such efforts will need to be sustained if a closer association between ESCAP and the Bretton Woods institutions is to evolve.

29. *Support to United Nations world conferences.* ESCAP and the other regional commissions regularly provide inputs to major United Nations documents on economic and social affairs submitted by the United Nations Secretariat to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. Out of that regional support function has evolved in recent years the practice of regional support in the preparation for and follow-up to United Nations global summits and conferences. ESCAP has played an

active role in mobilizing regional preparatory activities and generating a sense of regional mission with respect to a number of recent United Nations' global events, including the Rio environment conference, Beijing women's conference, Cairo population conference, Copenhagen social summit, Istanbul habitat conference and Barbados small island developing States conference. It has helped maintain the regional follow-up momentum by sponsoring a number of activities pursuant to those global events. That regional role in support of global United Nations initiatives is currently being played out on an *ad hoc* basis; it requires careful review and legislative regularization, with due care and attention to ensure that the necessary resources are provided to accomplish the task while at the same time preserving the autonomy of the regional commissions as representatives of their respective constituencies.

### **B. Other regional organizations**

30. Activities have been undertaken by ESCAP in cooperation with a number of regional intergovernmental organizations, including Asian Clearing Union (ACU); Asian Development Bank (ADB); Asian Productivity Organization (APO); Asian and Pacific Development Centre (APDC); Asian Reinsurance Corporation (ARC); Centre for Integrated Rural Development in Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP); Coordinating Committee for Coastal and Offshore Geoscience Programmes in East and Southeast Asia (CCOP); Mekong River Commission; and Typhoon Committee Secretariat. The Commission has entered into memoranda of understanding with several of those regional organizations.

31. Several of the above-mentioned regional intergovernmental organizations were established under the auspices of the Commission, and ESCAP has played a role in nurturing their development as full-fledged intergovernmental organizations. It should be noted, however, that the membership of none of these organizations encompasses the full range of ESCAP membership. As a consequence, they find a particular utility in participating at the annual sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies as well as affiliating with various other Commission activities, including technical assistance activities, which enables them to interact and exchange views with the broad gamut of the Commission's membership and draw upon the experience of other organizations.

32. Given the multidisciplinary character of ESCAP, on the one hand, and the sectoral orientation of most of the other regional organizations, on the other, considerable scope exists for enhanced collaboration, including within the framework of existing agreements. Such enhanced cooperation would, however, necessarily be contingent on the availability of the requisite resources to devise and carry out programmes of mutual benefit.

### C. Subregional organizations

33. Parallel with the continuing relevance of regional cooperation for economic and social development, subregional organizations are assuming an increasingly influential role in Asia and the Pacific. ESCAP played a catalytic role in facilitating the creation of several of the subregional organizations. In recent years subregional organizations -- ASEAN, SAARC, ECO, the South Pacific Forum and most recently BIMST-EC -- have expressed a desire for closer cooperation with ESCAP. ESCAP therefore took the initiative in 1994 to convene the first consultative meeting between the executive heads of the subregional organizations and ESCAP.

34. ESCAP has also played an intermediational role in strengthening cooperation among the respective regional intergovernmental organizations. At its 1994 consultative meeting with ASEAN, SAARC, ECO and the South Pacific Forum, trade and investment, transport and communications, energy and human resources development were identified as areas for inter-subregional cooperation, and agreement was reached on exchange of information on initiatives taken for poverty alleviation. Subsequent consultative meetings in 1995 and 1997 considered specific proposals for inter-subregional cooperation in the identified areas. It is expected that the fourth consultative meeting, to be convened in October 1998, will reach formal agreement and result in the initiation of project implementation. To cite but one additional example of ESCAP facilitation of inter-organizational cooperation, mutually supportive relations between the Executive Committee of the Interstate Council for Addressing the Aral Sea Crisis and the International Aral Sea Rehabilitation Fund have been promoted, and these two organizations have been brought into communication with the Mekong River Commission.

35. Beyond the progress being made towards enhanced cooperation among the subregional organizations, several of those organizations have called on ESCAP to assist them in programme development and the execution of specific technical assistance activities. In that regard, ESCAP has prepared for BIMST-EC a report which considers opportunities for economic cooperation in nine major areas and presents 30 concrete project proposals for immediate implementation. At the operational level, ESCAP has implemented, at the request of SAARC, a technical assistance project on district-level administrative coordination and project design.

36. In the absence of any institutionalized subregional arrangement in North-East Asia, ESCAP has facilitated several meetings on economic cooperation, bringing together senior officials from China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation to discuss issues ranging from trade zone management and private sector involvement to infrastructure development and environmental protection. These opportunities for dialogue on common economic and social development concerns have had a beneficial effect in supporting the movement towards subregional political rapprochement and stability in North-East Asia.

37. For the countries of Central Asia which are members of both ESCAP and the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the two regional commissions are jointly formulating a programme, the

Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), to address their specific needs. It is expected that this programme will generate a high degree of synergy through interregional coordination while ensuring against duplication of effort by the two regional commissions.

#### **D. Civil society**

38. The post-cold war era has witnessed growing involvement by civil society in the United Nations system at both the policy and operational levels. That emerging paradigm has manifested itself in an increasingly proactive role by ESCAP in interaction with the major elements of civil society. Representatives of civil society today attend and take an increasingly active part in ESCAP policy deliberations. At the same time, ESCAP provides support to representative elements of civil society in their efforts to play a more vigorous participatory role in the development process. Closely associated with the current emphasis on good governance and public sector rationalization, the Commission's enhanced support for civil society has thus sought to "level the playing field" by supporting alternative civil institutions in meeting the people's development needs and aspirations.

39. The dual advocacy and service functions of NGOs on behalf of disadvantaged and vulnerable population groups is well recognized by the Commission. As advocates of their interest groups, a number of NGOs have for many years attended, with observer status, the sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary organs. Increasingly in recent years, however, they have been afforded an opportunity to voice their views, and increasingly NGO representatives have been included in national delegations at ESCAP intergovernmental meetings. Furthermore, several recent regional ministerial conferences have been accompanied by parallel NGO policy forums which have submitted their consensus recommendations to the ministers for incorporation in official ESCAP policy instruments.

40. An even greater upsurge in emphasis on the role of NGOs as a development institution has been discernable in the Commission's operational activities in recent years. A number of ESCAP technical assistance activities have been undertaken jointly with NGOs, and others have relied on NGOs as executing agencies. Others have sought to catalyse the role of NGOs as self-help groups among such disadvantaged or vulnerable sections of the population as disabled persons, elderly persons, youth, women and communities afflicted with serious drug abuse problems. Yet others have sought to strengthen the capacity of NGOs in providing specific types of services, including functional literacy, prevention of child exploitation, enhancement of the status of women and environmental protection.

41. The key role played by the private sector in development, while well appreciated by ESCAP, has yet to receive its full due. Some activities have been undertaken to examine policy options for promoting small and medium-sized industries. In addition, several regional trade fairs have been co-sponsored with national governments and industry federations, UNIDO and UNCTAD have joined ESCAP in an effort to develop the private sector in Central Asia, and tripartite (private sector, public sector, intergovernmental sector) cooperation has been initiated on infrastructure development in the

region. Further work is awaited to promote a broader and deeper understanding in the region of the social responsibilities of both direct foreign investors, including transnational corporations, and local business firms as vital elements of civil society. This is clearly an area in which the Commission may wish to take more vigorous action in coming years.

### **III. PREPARING FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

42. The value of ESCAP to the countries of Asia and the Pacific will continue only so long as it retains its comparative advantage, based on its regional policy leadership, interdisciplinary focus, professional integrity and resilience in responding to changing development needs and priorities. To ensure its continued vitality, the Commission is determined to take the following steps:

- Intensify the close synergy between its policy and operational functions as the basic methodology whereby it serves the interests of its members and associate members and, in so doing, rationalize its work programme to ensure more clearly defined and sharply focused policy leadership and technical assistance functions
- Maintain its standing policy of periodic review of its thematic programme framework (currently comprising regional economic cooperation, poverty alleviation and environmentally sustainable development), revising that framework as the region's changing development needs and priorities may warrant
- Continue to ensure that its policy deliberations and operational activities adhere closely to the Commission's thematic focus in order to maintain a sharp edge to its contribution to current regional needs and priorities
- Strengthen its regional development standard- and goal-setting role, and focus its monitoring and technical assistance activities in support of agreed regional standards and goals
- Enhance its strategic alliances with the relevant global United Nations bodies and agencies, as well as regional and subregional intergovernmental entities, to ensure maximum effectiveness in programme formulation and delivery
- Create opportunities for non-governmental organizations and other representative elements of civil society to play a more vigorous participatory role in the affairs of the Commission
- Pursue every means of rationalizing its limited resources to ensure cost-effectiveness, within the scope of the Commission's mandates

43. In addition to the above structural considerations, a number of technical measures will be considered by ESCAP as means of enhancing its effectiveness and efficiency as the twenty-first century

approaches. Based on an exhaustive internal efficiency review undertaken with the aim of improving performance and reducing costs, the contemplated efficiency measures cover the following areas: structure and functioning of meetings, management information system, internal reporting, documentation and publications, conference services, general services and related matters.

44. In concert with the intended steps to be taken by ESCAP to revitalize and enhance efficiency, the Economic and Social Council may wish to consider taking the following complementary actions:

- Revitalize the mandate of ESCAP as regional "team leader" of the United Nations system for Asia and the Pacific
- Formalize the mandate of ESCAP to provide regional input and follow-up to United Nations world summits and conferences on economic and social development issues
- Provide ESCAP with the regular budget resources required to discharge effectively the additional functions and tasks which it has been directed to implement under various recent General Assembly, Economic and Social Council and Commission resolutions and decisions

45. The possibility of inter-agency overlap and duplication of activities and functions is a matter of concern throughout the United Nations system. Not only are overlap and duplication wasteful in their own right, but much time, effort and resources are squandered in the associated "turf battles" waged by the respective entities. ESCAP has consistently sought to avoid that problem by operating resolutely within the terms of its mandate and in accordance with its comparative advantage. Over the years, however, there has been a process of progressive encroachment by certain other entities upon ESCAP regional coordination, policy leadership and operational support functions. That problem can only be resolved through firm leadership from above to ensure that the respective entities do not operate beyond their mandates. Early resolution of the issue will carry substantial long-term benefits for the system's operating integrity in the economic and social fields.

46. The demand for ESCAP technical assistance services can only be met through continued availability of the requisite extrabudgetary resources. Donor governments, both regional and non-regional, have indicated that, in the current climate of fiscal austerity, support at past levels will be difficult to sustain. Similar messages are being received from the major donor agencies, including the largest traditional source of extrabudgetary funds, UNDP. Clearly, the trend to extrabudgetary downscaling is a fact of life to which ESCAP will need to accommodate its programme activities in the immediate future. At the same time, however, a careful reconsideration by the respective United Nations funds and programmes, including UNDP, of the relative social rates of return that can be expected from their contributions to different executing entities, including ESCAP, is called for, along with a commensurate reallocation of the available resources among executing agencies.



47. Over the course of its five decades of service in support of the economic and social development of Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP has a proud record of achievement. Great development issues remain, but the region as a whole is today well embarked on its historic mission to realize the development aspirations of all its people. At the threshold of the new millennium, the Commission stands poised to provide continued service in guiding the region towards self-sustaining economic and social development based on the principles set forth in the Charter of the United Nations.