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The form and function of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development beyond 2015

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Note by the secretariat**

Summary

The inaugural Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development was held from 19 to 21 May 2014, in Pattaya, Thailand. The Commission in its resolution 70/11 of 8 August 2014 requested the secretariat to launch an intergovernmental consultative process, within the broad framework of General Assembly resolution 67/290, to determine the future architecture of the Forum, including its mandate, scope of work and other procedural aspects, and to submit a report on those matters to the Commission at its seventy-first session. The present note presents the secretariat's proposals for the consideration of member States and stakeholders.

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** The present document was submitted late owing to the need to incorporate additional inputs from various contributors.

I. Background and objectives

1. The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development was established by General Assembly in its resolution 67/290 of 9 July 2013. It has a wide-ranging mandate for follow-up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

2. In the resolution, regional Commissions of the United Nations were given a specific role, with the General Assembly acknowledging “the importance of the regional dimension of sustainable development” and inviting “the United Nations Regional Commissions to contribute to the work of the Forum, including through annual regional meetings, with the involvement of other relevant regional entities, major groups and other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate.”¹ The Assembly in the resolution also decided that the meetings of the Forum under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council should benefit from regional preparatory processes.²

3. The inaugural Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development was held in Pattaya, Thailand, from 19 to 21 May 2014. It focused on: (a) developing substantive regional inputs to inform global dialogue and decision-making, as well as national responses; (b) identifying effective and inclusive means of implementing a transformational development agenda; and (c) defining the regional High-level Political Forum processes to 2015 and beyond.

4. Following the inaugural Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, the Commission in its resolution 70/11 of 8 August 2014 requested the Executive Secretary to “launch an intergovernmental consultative process, within the broad framework of General Assembly resolution 67/290, to determine the future architecture of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, including its mandate, scope of work and other procedural aspects, and to submit a report on those matters to the Commission at its seventy-first session”.

5. The secretariat outlined its proposal for the intergovernmental consultative process and presented five basic parameters for the Forum’s form and function through a note to the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission dated 25 November 2014.³

6. The intergovernmental consultative process involved consultations with member States through the Advisory Committee, civil society representatives were consulted through the ESCAP online consultation platform on sustainable development,⁴ the private sector was consulted through a questionnaire to members of the ESCAP Business Advisory Council and members of the Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism were consulted through a questionnaire and through follow-up informal discussions.

¹ See General Assembly resolution 67/290, para. 13.

² Ibid., para. 7 (f).

³ See ACPR/357/INF/1. Informal and formal sessions of the ACPR were convened in January and March 2014 to discuss follow up to Commission resolution 70/11

⁴ See www.worldwewant2015.org/node/470371.

7. Regional Commissions have discussed the development of a common approach to the organization of the regional sustainable development forums. Four modalities are being explored during 2014-2015, namely: (a) integrating the regional forums into their respective Commission sessions; (b) holding the regional forums back-to-back with the Commission sessions; (c) using the regional forums as preparatory meetings for the Commission sessions or some aspects of the Commission sessions; and (d) staging the regional forums as stand-alone events.⁵

8. The present paper contains proposals by the secretariat on the future architecture of the Forum for consideration at its meeting in 2015. Pursuant to ESCAP resolution 70/11, the recommendations of the Forum will be brought to the attention of Commission at its seventy-first session, which will be held in Bangkok from 25 to 29 May 2015.

II. Adding value through the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development

9. The inaugural Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development received positive evaluations from the participants in a post-meeting questionnaire.

10. Government participants responding to the evaluation questionnaire generally indicated the following: the theme of the inaugural Forum session had increased their knowledge; and their institutions would make use of the knowledge gained. Government representatives largely agreed that the objectives of the meeting had been met.

11. Civil society and private sector representatives stated that they also benefited from attending the inaugural Forum as it had strengthened their policy advocacy, networking and partnerships. Among civil society participants surveyed, almost 80 per cent agreed on the following: there were sufficient opportunities to speak during the Forum; civil society participation was representative of relevant stakeholders; and the format was conducive to meaningful exchange of views. More than 80 per cent of civil society questionnaire respondents agreed that they had sufficient opportunities to interact with government participants and were satisfied with the impact of their engagement at the Forum.

12. An overall evaluation of the Forum indicated that it had the potential to play a critical role as a regional platform for (a) supporting member States in their implementation of the prospective post-2015 development agenda, (b) exploring and deepening partnerships, and (c) providing regional perspectives to the High-level Political Forum.

13. Member States may wish to endorse or otherwise comment on the following propositions for strengthening the role of the Asia-Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development, as well as recommend other actions:

⁵ Regional Commissions New York Office, "Regional forums on sustainable development: A concept note" (RCNYO, Rev5.27.01.2014), unpublished.

(a) **Consolidating work streams in the period following the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.** Several follow-up processes have been launched since the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, including those on financing for sustainable development and on a technology facilitation mechanism. Bringing those work streams together at the regional level through a single forum could make each process more effective;

(b) **Strengthen, complement or replace related and existing high-level intergovernmental forums.** Regional commissions have been tasked with promoting sustainable development among member States and the integration of its three dimensions. For more than 25 years, the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific has been dealing with issues related to sustainable development. Sectoral high-level meetings organized by ESCAP and other parts of the United Nations system also tackle some aspects of sustainable development. The efficiency and effectiveness of these forums in relation to the role of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development should be reviewed;

(c) **Focus on the functions of the High-level Political Forum.** Some issues that are currently not well covered by regional forums could bring value to implementation of the post-2015 development agenda, which is expected to be adopted at the United Nations Summit to Adopt the Post-2015 Development Agenda in September 2015. The aspects of the wide-ranging mandate of the High-level Political Forum most suited for support at the regional level should be retained;

(d) **Bridging the global level to the local level.** While the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development is focused on providing inputs from the regional to the global levels, linking the Forum to national implementation arrangements could strengthen implementation of the sustainable development agenda locally/subnationally;

(e) **Explore innovations.** In order to maximize the impact and accelerate implementation of the proposed development agenda beyond 2015, intersessional activity and other processes could be explored to translate the intraregional dialogue and broad consensus into concrete actions. The successful formulation and operationalization of outcomes of the regional forum would require meaningful engagement of civil society and private sector representatives, as well as researchers and high-level independent experts.

III. Broad parameters for the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development

14. The secretariat proposed five broad parameters for the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, as presented to member States in December 2014.⁶ Further to review and consideration of the views of stakeholders, the original proposal has been revised. Member States attending the Forum may wish to endorse or otherwise comment on the following proposals:

(a) The Forum will be convened as a stand-alone event in the first quarter of 2016. Based on the experiences of organizing the events in 2014 and back-to-back with the Commission session in 2015, this proposal recognizes the following:

(i) Holding the Forum in the first quarter of the year as a stand-alone event will allow time to bring the results of the Forum's deliberations in a formal manner to the attention to the High-level Political Forum at the Economic and Social Council;

(ii) Should there be need for a Commission resolution or further decision to be taken by the Commission, sufficient time between the Forum and the Commission for this will be arranged;⁷

(b) The Forum should meet the following broad objectives identified for the High-level Political Forum: foster high-level commitment to action; enhance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development at all levels; strengthen the science-policy interface; and identify new and emerging sustainable development challenges;

⁶ They are as follows: (a) the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development will be convened annually as an intergovernmental forum (in line with General Assembly resolution 67/290), subject to the availability of funds. When the High-level Political Forum meets under the General Assembly at the summit level (every four years), the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development will converge with the Commission session in April/May at the summit level (and the Commission and Forum will share the same theme), and when the High-level Political Forum meets under the Economic and Social Council, the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development will be convened as a stand-alone event in March. It will, where appropriate, be convened for one day back-to-back with other United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development-related regional forums; (b) the theme of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development should be consistent with that of the High-level Political Forum and related processes in line with General Assembly resolution 67/290, and global agreements on sustainable development; (c) the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development will include relevant stakeholders, in line with General Assembly resolution 67/290; (d) sessions of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development after 2015 should closely align with the role of the Forum in providing "political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development, follow-up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments, enhance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner at all levels and have a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda, ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges"; and (e) the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development will be a key platform for the accountability and monitoring system at the regional level.

⁷ Rules of the Commission require that draft resolutions be submitted to the secretariat nine days before the start of each Commission session.

(c) The Forum should also provide a monitoring and review platform to support the implementation of the United Nations post-2015 development agenda, including evaluating progress and defining subregional and regional responses. In addition, the Forum should address means of implementation. Reflecting those proposed functions, the Forum sessions can be convened over three to four days, subject to the availability of funding, to address:

(i) The theme of the High-level Political Forum, including identifying the related emerging issues;

(ii) Monitoring and review, including evaluation of progress and defining responses;

(iii) Means of implementation, including financing, trade and science, technology and innovation. The Forum should provide a platform to review means of implementation and their impact on progress in implementing the post-2015 development agenda. The deliberations on financing for development will build on the existing regional consultative process and the outcome of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, to be held from 13 to 16 July 2015 in Addis Ababa;

(d) The effectiveness of these modalities will be reviewed in an intergovernmental consultative process, and reported to the Forum in 2016⁸ with a further proposal for changes to this modality, as appropriate;

(e) The procedural aspects of the Forum will be generally guided by the following:

(i) The Forum will adopt the rules of procedures of the Commission and modalities of the High-level Political Forum;

(ii) The Forum will be convened as an intergovernmental meeting. The relationship with the Commission should be reviewed as part of the intergovernmental consultative process and reported to the Forum in 2016;

(iii) The Chair or Rapporteur of the Forum will present the report of the Forum, consisting of a formal report with a Chair's Summary annexed to it, to the Commission;

(iv) Continuity between sessions may be established by the practice that the Chair of each Forum session assumes the responsibility to address the subsequent Forum session on the progress made during the intersessional period;

(v) Stakeholder engagement will respect established rules of engagement. The Forum should, as far as possible, convene major groups and other stakeholders in official preparatory events prior to each session;

⁸ As specified in General Assembly 67/290, the General Assembly has decided to review at its seventy-third session the format and the organizational aspects of the High-level Political Forum, unless otherwise decided.

(f) A regional road map may be developed for implementing the post-2015 development agenda, which would include progress on the sustainable development goals. Such a road map could provide a focus for the Forum with respect to implementation of the global development agenda; serve to strengthen institutional arrangements and partnerships; and be equipped with an appropriate monitoring framework in line with the global framework and assessment. The current session of the Forum may wish to endorse the secretariat's plan for such a regional road map in close consultation with governments and other stakeholders;

(g) In support of the above functions, the Forum process may include intersessional activities and institutional innovations along the following lines, subject to availability of financing and further review and consultation with member States:

(i) Special rapporteurs for the prospective post-2015 development agenda to provide expert support to the evaluation of progress in implementation of the agenda and defining regional responses;

(ii) Multi-stakeholder and interagency partnerships on the monitoring and review of the implementation of the prospective post-2015 development agenda, including through the United Nations Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism;

(iii) Round tables on sustainable development of eminent scientists and policymakers from the region.

IV. Matters for consideration by the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development

15. Member States and other stakeholders participating in the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development are invited to consider the proposals presented above and to make recommendations, noting that implementation of the final recommendations will be subject to availability of financing, any relevant changes in modalities of the High-level Political Forum and to further decisions of the Commission.