



ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Sixty-third session
17-23 May 2007
Almaty, Kazakhstan

**ESCAP REFORM: CONSIDERATION OF THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF ESCAP
IN THE CONTEXT OF OVERALL UNITED NATIONS REFORM:
KEY FINDINGS AND PROPOSALS FOR ACTION**

(Item 6 (a) of the provisional agenda)

**EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF ESCAP: KEY FINDINGS AND PROPOSALS
FOR ACTION**

Note by the secretariat

SUMMARY

The present document summarizes the key findings and recommendations of the external evaluation of ESCAP undertaken in June 2006. Against the background of the external evaluation report, the document presents issues and concerns related to a revised ESCAP thematic, conference and programme structure for ESCAP, as considered by the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission at a retreat in November 2006. The document suggests criteria that could be used in determining the focus of the work of ESCAP in the future. Furthermore, it identifies key programmatic and managerial issues relating to the comparative advantages of ESCAP and implementation modalities.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The 2005 World Summit Outcome¹ constitutes one of the most far-reaching reform initiatives launched by the States Members of the United Nations to date. Along with most other United Nations entities, ESCAP faces the prospect of major programmatic and organizational change.
2. Against the background of the World Summit Outcome as well as the review requirements relating to the conference structure of ESCAP,² the Executive Secretary of ESCAP commissioned an external evaluation of ESCAP, which was conducted between May and June 2006 by three external evaluators, Darmansjah Djumala (Indonesia), Ryokichi Hirono (Japan) and Piyush Mankad (India). The external evaluation highlights a range of strengths of and challenges faced by ESCAP that are being taken by the Executive Secretary and the members and associate members of ESCAP as the starting point in shaping its future.
3. The external evaluation (ACPR/303/1464) was presented to the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission at its three hundred and third and three hundred and fourth sessions in June and August 2006.³ The Committee charged the Executive Secretary with the task of presenting for its consideration, during a retreat that would be conducted in November 2006, options for ESCAP reform. Based on the findings and recommendations of the external evaluation particular focus was to be given to the conference and programme structure of ESCAP. At and following the retreat, members of the Committee have since held further discussions on the conference structure of ESCAP, culminating in the preparation of draft resolutions which will be presented to the Commission at its sixty-third session.
4. The decisions of the Commission relating to the conference and programme structure are expected to feed into the broader United Nations reform agenda, which is being taken forward by the General Assembly and its major subsidiary bodies.

II. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION

5. The primary focus of the external evaluation was on establishing the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of ESCAP. At the same time, the evaluation recognized that ESCAP was firmly embedded in the larger framework of the United Nations system, which was undergoing far-reaching reforms. As such, while many findings and recommendations of the external evaluation highlighted the strengths of and challenges facing ESCAP, as well as the opportunities to further enhance the role and results of the organization, these also had to be related directly to the

¹ General Assembly resolution 60/1 of 16 September 2005.

² The members and associate members of ESCAP may wish to discuss the conference structure of ESCAP during the sixty-third session of the Commission, in line with Commission resolution 58/1 of 22 May 2002 on the restructuring of the conference structure of the Commission and resolution 61/1 of 18 May 2005 on the mid-term review concerning the functioning of the conference structure of the Commission.

³ For the account of the discussions, see ACPR/305/1467, paras. 6-17, and ACPR/306/1469, paras. 5-8.

discussions on global reform of the United Nations and their possible implications for the Asian and Pacific region.

6. Notwithstanding the broad scope of the external evaluation, it was conducted within a period of less than two months, with the aim of providing feedback to the Executive Secretary and members and associate members of ESCAP by early June 2006. The evaluation drew upon written and oral inputs provided by 27 Governments, as well as by numerous other stakeholders, including United Nations regional entities and country teams, other regional intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and the ESCAP secretariat.

7. The external evaluation recognized that the economic and social situation in the Asian and Pacific region had changed considerably in the previous 20 years. The institutional landscape had also changed, with a proliferation of organizations both inside and outside the United Nations system. While ESCAP had repositioned itself from time to time to respond effectively to the needs of its membership, it still faced a challenge to maintain its relevance.

A. Primary strengths of ESCAP

8. Some of the primary strengths of ESCAP, as identified by most stakeholders, are the following:

(a) Its convening power and capacity to provide a comprehensive and inclusive regional forum for high-level discussions on a wide range of policy issues;

(b) Its role in giving countries in the Asian and Pacific region a regional voice and identity and, in particular, in representing an Asian and Pacific perspective vis-à-vis global United Nations bodies;

(c) Its multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral approach in all areas of its work;

(d) Its analytical, normative⁴ and capacity-development work in programme areas, such as transport, statistics, energy and disability.

B. Primary challenges facing ESCAP

9. The evaluation also suggested that ESCAP faced, inter alia, the following challenges:

(a) Its thematic approach was generally considered to be too broad to provide programmatic guidance;

(b) Its operational work at the country level was viewed by many stakeholders as being carried out on a piecemeal basis, lacking adequate follow-up and generally appearing not to be well coordinated with the work of the relevant United Nations country team;

⁴ The external evaluation defined the term “normative” as work relating to policy analysis, advice, advocacy and cooperation.

(c) Its secretariat structures, which were sectoral in nature, were viewed as inhibiting the ability of ESCAP to work in a multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral manner;

(d) Its work in general suffered from low visibility, particularly in programme areas such as information, communications and space technology, operational activities in poverty reduction, investment promotion, tourism and ageing, and its annual publication, the *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific*.

C. Key recommendations

10. Bearing in mind the above-mentioned strengths and challenges, the evaluation proposed that ESCAP take the following steps:

(a) ESCAP should focus on its primary function as an inclusive regional forum for its members and associate members to exchange views, experiences and knowledge on major policies dealing with economic, social and environmental issues;

(b) ESCAP should discontinue the thematic framework, revise the thematic areas or sharpen the focus of work under each area in order to narrow the scope of coverage;

(c) ESCAP should re-establish itself as an organization that can undertake cutting-edge research and policy analysis, and promote creative solutions to address the changing development needs of its members and associate members;

(d) ESCAP should continue to work in its programme areas of strength as long as its presence in them remains relevant. Moreover, it should identify other possible areas of relevance in line with its comparative advantage of working in a cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary manner;

(e) ESCAP should reassess its work with a view to discontinuing its activities in those areas where there is little or no value, bearing in mind, in particular, the efforts of other United Nations bodies and specialized agencies;

(f) ESCAP should ensure a better balance between its normative, analytical and operational work and undertake only those operational activities that contribute to its normative and analytical functions;

(g) To the extent that ESCAP is involved in operational work, it should strengthen planning, coordination with other United Nations agencies and implementation, and pay adequate attention to sustainability;

(h) ESCAP should establish suitable internal mechanisms, such as interdivisional teams, on selected critical issues as a means of fully tapping its multidisciplinary approach;

(i) ESCAP should ensure regional value additions through closer coordination and cooperation with the work of the United Nations country teams under the United Nations country assistance framework;

(j) ESCAP should further strengthen system-wide coherence among United Nations entities at the regional level by utilizing its ministerial conferences as well as an improved regional coordination meeting;

(k) ESCAP should strengthen its cooperation with non-United Nations subregional organizations in order to achieve synergies with the planning and programmatic processes of these organizations;

(l) ESCAP should devote considerably more attention to external communications to ensure higher visibility for ESCAP in the region;

(m) ESCAP needs to strengthen its capacity to evaluate the impact of its work in an objective and credible manner;

(n) ESCAP should further review the performance of the regional institutions and should apply the lessons learned from the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific to enhance the effectiveness of the other regional institutions;

(o) ESCAP should support its members and associate members by catalysing funds and technical assistance from various sources, and by promoting and facilitating partnerships among developing countries in the framework of South-South cooperation.

11. The evaluation report suggested that the external evaluation afforded an opportunity to enhance the relevance of ESCAP, not only directly, to its members and associate members, but also indirectly, within the framework of a more coherent United Nations system. ESCAP had the potential to add significant value to the economic and social development of the Asian and Pacific region. In order to do so, it had to address a number of challenges relating to its conceptual framework as a regional organization, its programme, conference and secretariat structure, and its operating modalities, including importantly its synergistic relationship with other development partners, particularly within the United Nations system.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR ESCAP REFORM

12. In preparation for the retreat of the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission in November 2006, the secretariat was requested to prepare a background note on the thematic, conference and programme structure of ESCAP, taking as its starting point the external evaluation. The background note also took into account (a) the requirement for the Commission to review its conference structure at its sixty-third session in line with Commission resolutions 58/1 of 22 May 2002 on restructuring of the conference structure of

the Commission and 61/1 of 18 May 2005 on mid-term review concerning the functioning of the conference structure of the Commission; (b) ongoing United Nations reform efforts; and (c) the global consensus to focus development efforts on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, as reaffirmed in the 2005 World Summit Outcome.

A. Proposed guiding principles for the revision of the thematic, conference and programme structure of ESCAP

13. In the Advisory Committee's review of the thematic, conference and programme structure of ESCAP, the secretariat proposed that the following principles be applied, based, inter alia, on the recommendations of the external evaluation:

(a) The overall focus of the ESCAP programme of work should be towards supporting the efforts of members and associate members of ESCAP in achieving the Millennium Development Goals;

(b) The ESCAP programme of work should be oriented towards analytical and normative work. Demand-driven operational (technical assistance) work should continue to be conducted, provided that it is directly related to analytical and normative work;

(c) The resources of ESCAP are spread too thinly. In order to make an impact, ESCAP needs to concentrate and enhance its resources in fewer, more strategic areas;

(d) As ESCAP combines expertise from a range of disciplines, it could add particular value in addressing complex developmental issues that would benefit from interdisciplinary and multisectoral analysis;

(e) In view of the status of ESCAP as a regional commission, its work should be focused primarily on regional and subregional issues of a transboundary nature, such as transport and migration;

(f) Where issues that are not transboundary in nature are tackled on a region-wide basis, ESCAP should have a demonstrated niche role, such as in disability issues;

(g) Social development and sustainable development concerns should be mainstreamed throughout all subprogrammes. In this regard, particular attention should be paid to gender and human rights;

(h) Information and communication technologies should be applied, as appropriate, in the delivery of all subprogrammes.

B. Mainstreaming concerns

14. In implementing its programme of work, ESCAP would need to ensure that the following cross-cutting substantive concerns are mainstreamed throughout:

(a) The Millennium Development Goals, along with their respective indicators, provide a broad results framework, agreed upon by the States Members of the United Nations, that defined the

development agenda for the Asian and Pacific region over the coming decade and beyond. Supporting members and associate members of ESCAP in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals was thus an overriding developmental concern, which would need to be mainstreamed throughout the ESCAP programme of work;

(b) Gender equality was regularly highlighted by the General Assembly, most recently in the 2005 World Summit Outcome, as being a fundamental principle of the United Nations that required action by all Member States and that should be addressed by all United Nations entities. ESCAP would thus need to ensure that a gender perspective was mainstreamed throughout its programme of work;

(c) Principles of sustainable development constituted another set of concerns which should be mainstreamed in all ESCAP subprogrammes. ESCAP would need to ensure that sustainable development concerns are known and incorporated throughout its work. Where ESCAP is making a concerted effort to integrate a social perspective into more conventional economic analysis, the need to take into account the environmental perspective should also be highlighted;

(d) Similarly, the General Assembly had emphasized the central importance of a rights-based approach in development. In striving for relevance and in seeking to ensure that the ESCAP programme of work conformed to the highest United Nations standards, ESCAP would need to ensure that a rights-based approach was introduced and mainstreamed;

(e) In planning and implementing the work of ESCAP, it would also be important to pay particular attention to the circumstances and needs of least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and island developing countries. Where possible, ESCAP should specifically address the concerns of these countries and customize its activities accordingly.

C. Implications for the thematic approach

15. Since the biennium 2002-2003, the ESCAP programme of work has been planned and implemented under the umbrella of three broad programmatic themes, namely (a) reducing poverty, (b) managing globalization and (c) addressing emerging social issues. The conference structure of ESCAP has also been aligned with this thematic approach.

16. One of the primary reasons for introducing and strengthening the thematic approach was to encourage intersectoral and interdisciplinary work, among members and associate members of ESCAP, in the context of ESCAP intergovernmental thematic committees, as well as within the secretariat. However, the external evaluation recommended that the thematic approach be discontinued or revised. Based on the information contained in the external evaluation, many members and associate members of ESCAP appear to concur with this conclusion. As such, it would be necessary to look into alternative means of strengthening intersectoral and interdisciplinary work in the context of the conference structure as well as within the secretariat.

D. Implications for the conference structure

17. An important purpose of the thematic approach was to facilitate interdisciplinary programmatic and legislative work on the part of the members and associate members of ESCAP. The conference structure of ESCAP was thus structured along thematic lines in recent years.

18. While most members and associate members of ESCAP had subscribed to this approach since 2001, their feedback on its success, as recorded in the external evaluation, was less encouraging. The themes were considered too broad to provide a useful conceptual and operational framework. In practical terms, there had also been a disconnect between the thematic framework and sectoral governmental structures. This has weakened Governments' sense of ownership of the various committees.

19. In possibly revising or discontinuing the thematic approach, the conference structure of ESCAP would also need to be adjusted. Two options may be considered in that regard. The first would be to retain the thematic approach but sharpen considerably the focus within each theme. The second option would be to shift to a sectoral approach by identifying an appropriate number of sectoral committees, which could facilitate a revival of interest on the part of members and associate members of ESCAP in participating in the intergovernmental process since it would align sectoral line ministries with corresponding ESCAP committees.

20. With regard to the frequency and number of committee sessions per biennium, the respective thematic or sectoral committees could meet on an annual or biennial basis, depending on the requirements of the members and associate members of ESCAP.

E. Implications for the programme structure

21. A number of subprogramme options were presented for the consideration of the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission, ranging from maintaining the status quo to a very strict interpretation of the recommendations contained in the external evaluation. Over and above any possible programmatic shifts, it was envisaged that the modus operandi of ESCAP would need to change significantly in order to enhance the effectiveness and impact of its programme of work. Determining what ESCAP would do in the future was thus considered to be equally important as identifying how it would do it.

22. While members and associate members of ESCAP, during the retreat of the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission held in November 2006, conducted a preliminary review of the implications of different programmatic options, a clearer understanding of the forthcoming reform process, covering the thematic, conference and programme structures, has since emerged. One important consideration in this connection relates to the need to align the ESCAP reform process with overall United Nations reform at the global level. At this point, the General Assembly is still awaiting the report of the

Secretary-General on the outcome of the High-level Panel on United Nations System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and the Environment (E/ESCAP/63/20), and is expected to deliberate on the report in the context of overall United Nations system-wide reform. It is thus recommended that the Commission at its sixty-third session focus its attention on the thematic and conference structure, as mandated under resolution 58/1 of 22 May 2002, and that the review of the programme structure be carried out by the Commission at its sixty-fourth session. By the end of 2007, members and associate members of ESCAP would then need to begin the process of formulating the strategic framework for the period 2010-2011, to be approved by the Commission at its sixty-fourth session, in 2008. This would be an ideal opportunity to review the necessity for changes to the programme structure in line with the thematic and conference structure decided by the Commission at its sixty-third session.

F. Key modalities and management concerns

23. In line with the guiding principles outlined in section A above, the following issues relating to how ESCAP would go about its work would require further attention:

(a) The multidisciplinary and multisectoral approach of ESCAP clearly constitutes one of the organization's more salient comparative advantages. This was acknowledged in the external evaluation, which recommended that "suitable internal mechanisms, like interdivisional teams, on selected critical issues [be established] as a means of fully tapping [the secretariat's] multidisciplinary capacity". By adopting such a team-based approach it would be possible to address topical cross-cutting issues in a flexible and time-bound manner. Task forces comprising staff from different subprogrammes could thus be established on an ad hoc basis to work together on particular issues. Task forces could be continued or dissolved as issues were addressed and as priorities evolved;

(b) ESCAP would need to define a new capacity-development approach that would be focused on demand-driven technical assistance services, provided that such work would be directly related to the analytical, normative and transboundary areas of competence of ESCAP. Such an approach would ensure the needed linkage between normative and operational activities in these areas. In this regard, ESCAP and the regional institutions would, in the future, need to forge stronger strategic alliances and partnerships with United Nations and other development partners to ensure synergies and advance the United Nations development agenda at the regional level;

(c) In line with the recommendations of the external evaluation, ESCAP should develop a strategic external communications strategy. Effective knowledge management, not only within the secretariat, but also for the immediate benefit of members and associate members of ESCAP, would also be critical in ensuring that ESCAP could add value within the region;

(d) As indicated above, the quality of future ESCAP subprogrammes depends on the extent to which gender, human rights, sustainable development and the concerns of countries with special

needs are mainstreamed in the ESCAP programme of work. Effective mechanisms to do so need to be instituted;

(e) Finally, effective results-based management is a function of good planning, budgeting, administration, monitoring and evaluation. The capacity of ESCAP in these areas needs to be maintained and further strengthened. The role of evaluation in particular needs to be given more prominence as a key mechanism for ensuring that lessons pertaining to current strategies, practices and performance are learned and would inform the strategic planning process related to future programmes and projects.

IV. NEXT STEPS

24. The ESCAP reform process is being taken forward on two tracks. The internal review by members and associate members of ESCAP represents Track One. This track is critical in that it is expected to contribute towards fostering an Asia-Pacific understanding of (a) the value added of ESCAP within the region and (b) the primary mechanisms through which ESCAP could deliver results. The review of the external evaluation by the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission, its deliberations during its retreat in November 2006 and its subsequent discussions, in both formal and informal forums, of the implications for the thematic, conference and programme structure of ESCAP constitute one element of Track One. Other opportunities for regional review and decision-making, including discussions during the sixty-third session of the Commission, will further consolidate it.

25. The Asia-Pacific perspective emanating from Track One will feed into and shape Track Two, which is represented by the overriding process of United Nations reform under the auspices of the General Assembly. In this regard, the report of the High-level Panel on United Nations System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and the Environment (E/ESCAP/63/20), issued in November 2006, makes a range of strategic recommendations on how to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the United Nations system, including that of the regional commissions.

26. It is anticipated that these and other recommendations will be discussed by Member States in detail over the coming months and beyond, and will focus, inter alia, on: (a) a review of the roles of the United Nations and its funds, programmes and specialized agencies to ensure the complementarity of mandates and to eliminate duplicated functions; and (b) the review of the United Nations architecture at the regional level. The inputs from Track One will thus be critical in giving voice to the views and decisions of the members and associate members of ESCAP within the wider context of United Nations reform.

V. CONCLUSION

27. The current review process, driven by broader United Nations reform efforts and mandated by resolutions of the Commission on its conference structure, constitutes a unique opportunity for members and associate members to take stock of the performance of ESCAP, to reassess its current and potential role and to shape the organization in such a way as to add value to the developmental efforts of the countries of the Asian and Pacific region. The sixty-third session of the Commission is thus a critical milestone in the process of adjusting the thematic and conference structures to the current requirements of the members and associate members of ESCAP.

28. Against this background, the members and associate members of ESCAP will have the opportunity towards the end of 2007 to assess the need for programmatic reform, as they shape the strategic framework for the period 2010-2011. Such programmatic changes, if approved by the Commission at its sixty-fourth session, could be effected during the biennium 2008-2009, subject to the approval of the relevant intergovernmental oversight bodies at United Nations Headquarters. In this way, while adhering to the established global United Nations processes of programmatic appraisal and approval, the programme of work of ESCAP would be able to reflect the new priorities of the members and associate members of ESCAP at the earliest possible time.

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