



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

Bangkok, 27–31 May 2019

Item 7 of the provisional agenda*

Midpoint review of the conference structure of the Commission**Midpoint review of the conference structure of the Commission in implementation of resolution 73/1****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

In its resolution 73/1, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific decided to review its conference structure at its seventy-eighth session, in 2022, with a midpoint review at its seventy-fifth session, in 2019, and requested the Executive Secretary to submit a report in both cases, with a focus on the programme areas of the Commission, to serve as a basis for the review.

The present document contains recommendations concerning the conference structure of the Commission pertaining to aspects such as (1) the content of the Commission session, (2) the organization of the Commission session and (3) the subsidiary bodies of the Commission.

The Commission is invited to consider the recommendations contained in the present document and provide guidance on any changes required to the conference structure.

I. Background and introduction

1. The present document is submitted pursuant to paragraph 6 of resolution 73/1 of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), in which the Commission decided to review its conference structure at its seventy-eighth session, in 2022, with a midpoint review at its seventy-fifth session, in 2019, and requested the Executive Secretary to submit a report in both cases, with a focus on the programme areas of the Commission, to serve as a basis for the review.

2. In preparing the present document, the secretariat conducted a review and analysis of assessments of individual meetings held under the conference structure, including survey questionnaires completed by member States. Countries provided further inputs through informal consultations and at the

* ESCAP/75/L.1.

380th session of the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission.

3. Section II of the present document contains a number of recommendations concerning the conference structure of the Commission pertaining to aspects such as (a) the content of the Commission session, (b) the organization of the Commission session and (c) the subsidiary bodies of the Commission. Section III contains options for the way forward, including the possibility of the Commission taking some immediate decisions while deferring others for further study and analysis in the lead-up to the seventy-eighth session in 2022.

II. Recommendations concerning the conference structure of the Commission

A. Content of the Commission session

4. The current conference structure of the Commission broadly outlines the issues to be covered in each session. It stipulates that the Commission shall “meet annually under an overarching theme selected by member States” and “discuss and decide on important issues pertaining to inclusive and sustainable development in the region, decide on the recommendations of its subsidiary bodies and of the Executive Secretary, review and endorse the proposed strategic framework and programme of work and take any other decisions required in conformity with its terms of reference”. It provides for the Special Body on Least Developed, Landlocked Developing and Pacific Island Developing Countries to be part of the session. It further establishes that the Commission “shall serve as the regional platform for integrating the sectoral streams of the Committees, with a view towards promoting sustainable development equitably through all of its three dimensions”.

5. In terms of outcomes, the conference structure stipulates that the report of the Commission shall be composed of the decisions and resolutions of the Commission, with a record of proceedings produced separately. It further notes that draft resolutions shall reflect the substantive deliberations of member States.

6. Within this framework, there is sufficient scope to allow for deliberations and outcomes to focus on issues relevant to member States. At the same time, some measures could be considered to further sharpen the focus of deliberations and strengthen the outcomes. In this regard, the following recommendations are put forward for the consideration of the Commission.

Recommendation 1: agree on a series of theme topics for multiple years

7. Deliberations of the ministerial segment of the Commission focus on important and emerging issues pertaining to inclusive and sustainable development in the region, and in particular the theme topic.

8. The Commission decided, through resolution 73/1, that the theme of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development shall be consistent with that of the high-level political forum on sustainable development and that in the years when the high-level political forum meets under the auspices of the General Assembly at the summit level, which is every four years, the Commission and the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development will share the same theme, where appropriate. The seventy-fifth session of the Commission is the first instance in which this decision is applicable and it was agreed that the session would be convened under the same theme as the

high-level political forum, namely “empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”.

9. Currently, each session of the Commission decides on the theme topic for the next session. An alternative approach may be for the Commission to decide on a series of theme topics for multiple years, perhaps for three sessions, with the possibility that in the fourth year the theme would be the same as the high-level political forum, should the current format of the high-level political forum continue.¹ The theme topics for the three years may be interlinked, possibly looking at different dimensions of a broader topic, so as to create a narrative that would link the three sessions of the Commission and would allow deliberations to build upon the outcomes of the previous sessions.

Recommendation 2: consider adopting, as appropriate, a declaration matching the series of theme topics

10. Substantive deliberations during the Commission session result in the adoption of a number of resolutions pertaining to various issues under consideration, including the theme topic. In the majority of instances, the Commission has adopted a resolution on the theme topic, building upon the analysis and recommendations provided by the Executive Secretary in the theme study.

11. In the past, the Commission has adopted a declaration, in addition to resolutions, to deliver a political message of commitment of the region on certain important issues, when the session was hosted by a member State and at the initiative of the host.

12. Drawing from this practice, it may be desirable, from time to time and when appropriate, for the Commission to adopt a declaration on the theme topic, when it deems important to reflect the political aspirations and chart a vision for the region on a theme considered of particular relevance for the region. Considering this recommendation in conjunction with recommendation 1 on the theme topics, the Commission could, for example, consider adopting a declaration in the third session of the cluster of three sessions looking at related themes, to take stock of the deliberations of each session and chart a way forward for the region. Alternatively, it could also consider adopting a declaration when it convenes under the same theme as the high-level political forum to provide a strong message to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly reflecting the region’s priorities under the theme.

Recommendation 3: review allocation of agenda items in senior officials and ministerial segments and how they are discussed

13. The agenda of each Commission session can be described generally as containing items that review the reports of all subsidiary bodies of the Commission, ad hoc ministerial and other meetings convened by it, the regional institutions under its auspices, administrative and programme aspects of the work of the Commission and other usual items. These agenda items are usually taken up during the senior officials segment.

14. Agenda items that are more policy-oriented are usually considered by the ministerial segment. These agenda items usually cover the theme topic, the

¹ The high-level political forum will undergo a review, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 70/299. Therefore it has yet to be determined that the forum will follow a similar cycle.

Special Body on Least Developed, Landlocked Developing and Pacific Island Developing Countries and, in prior years, the findings of the Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific. The national statements are usually delivered during the ministerial segment.

15. Bearing in mind this structure for the agenda, the Commission may wish to consider the necessity of some agenda items, the allocation of agenda items and even how those agenda items are discussed.

16. For example, because the reports of subsidiary bodies of the Commission, be it of the committees or ad-hoc intergovernmental meetings, are presented to the Commission, discussion on these may be confined to issues requiring the Commission's action or attention instead of the proceedings.

17. Similarly, consideration of the reports of the regional institutions could focus on policy aspects rather than on the activities which have already been reviewed by their respective governing bodies.

18. Another approach may be that of clustering the deliberations on the outcomes of subsidiary bodies under key themes and exploring the linkages among the sectoral issues dealt by subsidiary bodies. Such clusters could include:

(a) Connectivity: to cover issues such as transport, energy and information and communications technology;

(b) Means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: to cover issues such as trade and investment, financing for development, science, technology and innovation and statistics;

(c) Social development: to cover issues such as population, migration, gender, ageing, persons with disabilities and social protection;

(d) Environment and resilience: to cover issues such as environment and natural resource management including oceans, disaster risk reduction, climate change, space applications and sustainable urban development.

Recommendation 4: allocate one day for special events organized by member States and other stakeholders

19. Official deliberations during Commission sessions are complemented by a limited number of side events, mainly organized by member States, which provide a valuable opportunity for more informal interactions and discussions.

20. In order to increase the opportunities for interaction among member States and between member States and other stakeholders, including civil society, academia and the private sector, and to provide a platform for showcasing solutions and best practices, a full day of special events organized by member States and other stakeholders could be considered.

21. The current agenda of the Commission is accommodated in five working days. The agenda of the senior officials segment could be streamlined to fit into two working days, with two days allocated to the ministerial segment. The special events day could, therefore, be held between the senior officials and the ministerial segments in parallel to the Working Group on Draft Resolutions. It would showcase good practices, solutions and partnerships. It would provide a platform for engagement for various stakeholders, which would not distract participants from the main sessions.

B. Organization of the Commission session

22. The conference structure of the Commission sets out various organizational aspects of the session, such as frequency, length and format. The current conference structure of the Commission stipulates, for example, that the Commission meet annually for a total of five working days. It allows for no more than two simultaneous meetings during the senior officials segment. It provides for the Special Body on Least Developed, Landlocked Developing and Pacific Island Developing Countries to be held during the senior officials segment.

23. Over the course of the years, the Commission has reviewed these organizational aspects with a view to enhancing the effectiveness of the Commission and making the most efficient use of the resources and time of the members and associate members and the secretariat.

24. Keeping these objectives in mind, the following recommendations are put forward for the consideration of the Commission.

Recommendation 5: maintain the annual frequency of the Commission and alternate between a high-level session and a “Committee of the Whole”

25. The Commission is the apex decision-making body of the conference structure and, while it remains the prerogative of each member State to choose the composition of its delegation, the nature and expected outcomes of the meeting make participation at the ministerial level desirable. In recent years, only about half of the members in attendance were represented at the level of Vice-Minister or above. Meeting fatigue and competing high-level events in the region have been cited as constraints for high-level participation from member States.

26. Taking the above into consideration, one option may be for the Commission to be convened at a senior ministerial level in alternate years, with a shorter procedural session, or “Committee of the Whole”, convened in the other years in New York.

27. The high-level session would still address procedural matters, but these would be taken up at a senior officials segment, with the main focus being ministerial deliberations and interactions.

28. Organizing the Commission in this manner may mitigate the feeling of meeting fatigue and provide a more compelling reason for members to attend at the senior ministerial level and above while retaining the annual meeting frequency needed to address procedural matters, such as the consideration of the outcomes of subsidiary bodies or the review of the draft programme of work.

Recommendation 6: agree on the dates and venue for future sessions

29. The dates of the Commission session are decided in consultation with the host Government and the Advisory Committee, usually by August or September of the year preceding the session. Fixing the timing of the Commission in the calendar in advance may have the benefit of providing a predictable schedule, which in turn, may lead to more predictable attendance by delegations given the ability to plan ahead for the session.

30. One approach may be to emulate the General Assembly in how it decides the start of its new session, as embodied in Assembly resolution 57/301,² which states that the session will begin “on the Tuesday of the third week in September, counting from the first week that contains at least one working day”.

31. Another approach may be to fix the dates ahead of time, with the flexibility to change them for exigent circumstances.

32. With respect to the venue of the session, in resolution 40/243, the General Assembly reaffirmed the general principle that “United Nations bodies shall meet at their respective established headquarters”. In accordance with that resolution, the Commission normally has been held in Bangkok at the United Nations Conference Centre.

33. Paragraph 4 (f) of the same resolution also provided for holding regular sessions of the Commission away from headquarters when the Commission so decides, subject to the approval of the Economic and Social Council. The last instance that the session was held away from Bangkok was the sixty-sixth session in 2010, when it was held in Incheon, Republic of Korea.

34. Additionally, in resolution 47/202, the Assembly also reaffirmed that United Nations bodies may hold sessions away from their established headquarters “when a Government issuing an invitation for a session to be held within its territory has agreed to defray the actual additional costs directly or indirectly involved”.³

35. Bearing in mind the above, the Commission may wish to encourage members to consider hosting sessions of the Commission, either in the country or in Bangkok but designated as the host country, as done, for example, in the case of the United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development in 2017.⁴

Recommendation 7: establish a rotational system for the Chair of the session

36. Rule 13 of the rules of procedure of the Commission states that a Chair and two Vice-Chairs shall be elected by the Commission at its first meeting of each year. By established practice, the Commission has elected a Chair and designated all ministerial-level attendees as Vice-Chairs.

37. Currently, there is no formal mechanism to determine the Chair of the Commission.

38. A systematic, predictable mechanism for selecting the Chair of the Commission session may ensure that the bureau is based on a geographical balance among the five ESCAP subregions: East and North-East Asia; North and Central Asia; the Pacific; South and South-West Asia; and South-East Asia.

² See paragraph 1 of the resolution.

³ See section A, paragraph 17.

⁴ See General Assembly resolution 70/303 on modalities for the United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development (paras. 1 and 2).

39. The Chair could rotate among the five subregions. The Commission may also decide to keep the practice of appointing all ministerial-level attendees as Vice-Chairs, or, to ensure a geographical balance among the bureau, designate representatives from the other subregions as the four Vice-Chairs.

40. It should be noted that the Commission has four non-regional members, which are not considered territories of Asia and the Pacific as defined by the terms of reference of the Commission,⁵ and which would not fall under any of the five ESCAP subregions listed above. Any mechanism established to ensure the rotation of the Chair among members of the Commission would need to take this into account.

41. Moreover, the Commission may wish to consider selecting the bureau of the next session at the end of each session. This would allow the selected country to play an active role in the preparations and lead-up to the next session, including in terms of developing a proposed provisional agenda.

C. Subsidiary bodies of the Commission

42. The conference structure of the Commission spells out what the subsidiary bodies of the Commission are. The main subsidiary structure, as established by resolution 64/1 and later amended by resolution 71/1 to establish the Committee on Energy and add financing for development and science, technology and innovation to the agenda of existing committees, comprises the following nine committees:

- (a) Committee on Macroeconomic Policy, Poverty Reduction and Financing for Development;
- (b) Committee on Trade and Investment;
- (c) Committee on Transport;
- (d) Committee on Environment and Development;
- (e) Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation;
- (f) Committee on Disaster Risk Reduction;
- (g) Committee on Social Development;
- (h) Committee on Statistics;
- (i) Committee on Energy.

43. Moreover, through resolution 73/1, the Commission decided that the subsidiary structure of the Commission should include the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development.

44. The conference structure spells out issues to be addressed by the committees, as well as by the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development.

45. The conference structure also provides for ad hoc ministerial conferences and other intergovernmental meetings. It stipulates that in those years when a ministerial conference or intergovernmental meeting is held covering issues normally discussed in a committee, the corresponding committee need not be convened. Moreover, subject to the approval of the

⁵ Terms of reference of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Available at www.unescap.org/commission/about-the-commission.

Commission, a committee may be convened at the ministerial level on an ad hoc basis to ensure high-level engagement on the issues to be addressed.

46. Some of these ad hoc intergovernmental meetings may be mandated by the Commission on a case-by-case and often continuous basis. Some examples include the Ministerial Conference on Transport, the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific, the Asia-Pacific Energy Forum and the Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration. Ad hoc intergovernmental meetings can also be mandated by the General Assembly or the Economic and Social Council, oftentimes in the case of regional preparatory meetings for global conferences such as those on migration, gender or ageing.

47. In addition, the Commission, through resolution 74 (XXIII), established the Asia-Pacific Population Conference as a statutory organ of the Commission.

48. Lastly, the conference structure lists the regional institutions under the auspices of the Commission, which include:

- (a) Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology;
- (b) Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific;
- (c) Centre for Sustainable Agricultural Mechanization;
- (d) Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development;
- (e) Asian and Pacific Centre for the Development of Disaster Information Management.

49. Through resolution 74/5, the Commission decided that the Centre for Alleviation of Poverty through Sustainable Agriculture would transition to an organization outside of the United Nations system and requested the Executive Secretary to reflect changes emanating from the resolution in her report to the Commission at its seventy-fifth session, in 2019, on the midpoint review of the conference structure.

50. Four years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Commission may wish revisit the composition of its subsidiary structure, as well as the issues to be addressed by the committees, to ensure that it is fit for purpose and effectively supports its members and associate members in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

51. Towards this end, the following recommendations are put forth for consideration of the Commission.

Recommendation 8: examine the subsidiary bodies of the Commission, and update their terms of reference

52. The Commission may wish to undertake an examination of its subsidiary structure for effectiveness, efficiency and relevance to the priorities of member States. As part of the exercise, the Commission could request each committee to undertake a review of the list of issues that it will address to ensure their suitability and relevance, given that it is four years into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

53. For example, the Committee on Macroeconomic Policy, Poverty Reduction and Financing for Development at its first session reviewed and discussed an initial proposal by the secretariat to update the terms of reference of the Committee.⁶ The Committee recommended that further discussions, as necessary, be held to review the Committee's terms of reference to better align them with the 2030 Agenda, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development and the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific.⁷ The next session of the Committee will be held in November 2019 and this issue will be considered again.

Recommendation 9: align the frequency of ad hoc ministerial conferences with their associated committees or convene committees at the ministerial level on an ad hoc basis to ensure high-level engagement on the issues to be addressed

54. The Commission conference structure already stipulates as follows: "In those years when a ministerial conference or intergovernmental meeting is held covering issues normally discussed in a committee, the corresponding committee need not be convened. Subject to the approval of the Commission, a committee may be convened at the ministerial level on an ad hoc basis to ensure high-level engagement on the issues to be addressed."

55. The Commission may therefore wish to consider either aligning the frequency of ad hoc ministerial conferences with their associated committees or convening them at the ministerial level on an ad hoc basis, much like it did with the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development and the Committee on Environment and Development through resolution 74/4.

Recommendation 10: update the list of regional institutions under the auspices of the Commission to reflect the transition of the Centre for Alleviation of Poverty through Sustainable Agriculture to an organization outside of the United Nations system

56. Through resolution 74/5 the Commission decided that the Centre for Alleviation of Poverty through Sustainable Agriculture would transition to an organization outside of the United Nations system and requested the Executive Secretary to reflect changes emanating from the resolution in her report to the Commission at its seventy-fifth session, in 2019, on the midpoint review of the conference structure.

57. Therefore, given that the Centre is no longer a subsidiary body of the Commission, it is recommended that references to the Centre be removed from the conference structure of the Commission.

III. Conclusions

58. Based on the analysis and recommendations provided in the present document, the Commission may wish to consider taking action on some of the recommendations immediately, while identifying other recommendations for further study and analysis and for decision at a later date.

⁶ E/ESCAP/CMPF(1)/5.

⁷ E/ESCAP/CMPF(1)/6.

59. In this regard, the Commission could consider establishing an open-ended working group or requesting the Advisory Committee to assist in this process by conducting periodic discussions on the remaining issues to be decided.

60. The outcomes of such deliberations may be brought to the Commission for its consideration and action at any time, as appropriate, without prejudice to the final review of the conference structure to be conducted at the seventy-eighth session of the Commission in 2022.
