

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Revitalizing the Role of ESCAP for Advancing Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific

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May 2022

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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AI	artificial intelligence
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CoP26	Conference of Parties 26
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization
EEC	European Economic Community
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
ESG	environmental, social and governance
JICA	Japan International Cooperation
NGO	non-governmental organization
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

I. Opportunities

1. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has an ambitious vision but modest capabilities. This is not a bad thing. ESCAP does not make headlines, but it is always there somewhere in the picture, playing a helpful role. That is a good thing. I have reflected on why until quite recently, I knew so little about ESCAP despite having served five years as the Singapore Trade and Industry Minister and seven years as Foreign Minister. ESCAP was never central to the country's trade or foreign policy but, at critical moments, it came into the picture. My two strongest impressions of ESCAP were in 2018 when I was with the former Executive Secretary of ESCAP, Noeleen Heyzer, at the Yangon Pledging Conference following Cyclone Nargis and in 2010, with the current UN Undersecretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCAP, Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, who was then an Indonesian minister visiting post-tsunami projects in Aceh.
2. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) play like background music. People often forget that they are there but, from time to time, they hear its strains and feel a guilty conscience about not doing more. The Goals remind us that we belong to a common human family and that the United Nations is the highest organizational expression of it. ESCAP derives its mission from the United Nations and its permanent structure is largely financed by it. This gives ESCAP its legitimacy. It also means that what ESCAP can do is limited by its United Nations mandate.
3. The current emphasis on environmental, social and governance (ESG) around the world is a force that can push the ESCAP mission forward. From big corporations to venture start-ups, ESG is almost a new religion. Even though many bow before it because of social pressure, that social pressure is positive. ESCAP should seize the current mood in the world to make itself better known. ESCAP today is mostly known in government circles and, even then, only among certain departmental circles. In the private sector, while the name may be familiar, few know what ESCAP actually does.
4. ESCAP covers a wide geographical region from the Caucasus to South Pacific islands and organizes a wide range of activities. Its member States in the region make up more than half the world's population, including giants, such as China and India, and small island States, such as Nauru and Palau. It is impossible for one size to fit all. Happily, technology has made it easier to customize different sizes for different member States or groups of States. What is most important is the sharing and transfer of knowledge. Despite COVID-19 restrictions, technology has enabled us to continue meeting and communicating. The legitimacy of ESCAP as a regional marketplace for knowledge and ideas on sustainable development is therefore incomparable. ESCAP has great convening power.

II. Conditions for the marketplace

5. The success of ESCAP as a marketplace for knowledge, ideas and projects depends on how useful it is to those who come to it. I use the idea of a marketplace to clarify what ESCAP has been doing for many years and to shape its future direction. For the ESCAP marketplace to work well, certain conditions must be in place, including the following:
 - Being apolitical
 - Open architecture
 - Data repository
 - Organising fairs
 - Special focus on least developed countries
6. These conditions already exist, more or less, but it is useful to crystallize them more sharply.

III. Being apolitical

7. A marketplace should be welcoming and safe. Visitors should enjoy freedom to buy or sell or just to look around. There should be no loud quarrels or fisticuffs. It must not be threatening.
8. ESCAP in Bangkok should never be like the United Nations in New York. The United Nations in New York is necessarily political and has always been intensely so. ESCAP derives its mission and legitimacy from a consensus at the New York headquarters. Consensus usually means being boring and minimalist. This is a great asset of ESCAP. ESCAP should rarely seek to make headline news. It should refrain from claiming too much credit for the good it does. Our success is in seeing countries succeed.
9. ESCAP should avoid politically controversial undertakings however important this may be to some members. It is right that ESCAP is not involved in Afghanistan or Myanmar at this point. It may play a role later, but not now. This may engender criticisms of ESCAP from time to time as being ineffective, but we should not be too affected by them. Maintaining strategic discipline is absolutely important. The Sustainable Development Goals have already been identified in New York and need not be further debated in Bangkok.
10. All five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council are members of ESCAP. It is good that there is a tradition of not politicizing the activities of ESCAP. This tradition should be consciously recognized and maintained. The permanent members' collective blessing of the work ESCAP does is always important and never to be taken for granted.

IV. Open architecture

11. The agenda of ESCAP should be broad, open-ended and inclusive. It exists for its members and not the other way around. Marketplaces are never static. Some activities die out; new ones appear. There must always be space for spontaneity. Marketplaces have to be regulated, but the regulations must never be bureaucratic.
12. For example, a country or a non-governmental organization (NGO) may have good ideas on removing plastics from waterways. ESCAP is a ready-made platform to bring together all those interested in the subject who can contribute expertise or resources, or who may just want to learn about it. Among NGOs, ESCAP should always be seen as a good and fair platform. It should delight with the positive. Negative campaigning should be frowned upon.
13. Establishing ESCAP as a go-to regional platform requires both insertion and marketing. Insertion means going down to member States and regional organizations, engaging NGOs and making ground visits in a spirit of learning and investigation. Marketing means letting member States, regional organizations, NGOs, business associations and business corporations know what we are and what we can do for them. Being a United Nations organization gives us high status, which should be used to good effect. Being a United Nations organization also means that ESCAP tends to be bureaucratic, which should be mitigated.
14. ESCAP already works closely with regional organization, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the European Economic Community (EEC). It should, if it is not already, be linked to ALL regional organizations in the Asia-Pacific region. We should consider including regional organizations, such as ASEAN, SAARC, SCO, ECO and EEC, as members or associate members of ESCAP.

V. Data repository

15. ESCAP should provide the best data network for the region for data on economic and social development. It should be a repository of repositories and connect specialized data centres regionally and internationally. ESCAP should be linked to all national and regional data centres. Sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific region requires us to work across national and regional boundaries. The availability of data is a precondition for effective cooperation.
16. In the coming decades, trillions of dollars will be needed for improvement of physical infrastructure in the Asia-Pacific region. Alignment of national and regional master plans will reduce waste and enhance overall cost-effectiveness. All master plans in the public domain should be made available through ESCAP for national governments and for the private sector.
17. The Baker Library at Harvard Business School can be a kind of model for ESCAP. Baker Library is not only a library in itself. It has librarians and information systems, which enable an incredible range of information on companies, businesses and markets to be made available to students and researchers. The information ESCAP can generate on its own should be only a small proportion of information that can be accessed conveniently through ESCAP.
18. Many organizations already collect data on the region. China is accumulating a lot of data for the Belt and Road Initiative. The Japan International Cooperation (JICA) has one of the most comprehensive data collection systems. The Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and others are collecting information too. We must expect that not all information is freely shared because information can be a source of power or provide a competitive advantage. However, most information can be because it is probably in the public domain already.
19. In addition to information specialists, it will be good for ESCAP to have staff with some understanding of data analytics ESCAP need not do the data analysis itself, but it must know the centres that have the expertise. Centres that collaborate with ESCAP enjoy access to more data. Once a virtuous circle develops, ESCAP will be seen as the best regional node for data and data analysis. The regional Statistical Institute of ESCAP in Chiba, Japan should develop a network for this purpose.
20. Visitors to a marketplace always discover or learn new things. That's what makes markets such interesting places. Leaps in progress often begin with serendipitous insights. ESCAP should try to achieve such a position in people's minds. It can only do this by being apolitical and by having an open architecture.

VI. Organizing fairs

21. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals agreed by the General Assembly should form the basis of “fairs” organized by ESCAP, which has incomparable convening power. Each of these goals should be given periodic emphasis so that interested parties and experts come together to concentrate on problems and their solutions. This is akin to fairs held from time to time in marketplaces.
22. With the Conference of Parties 26 (CoP26) over, ESCAP could perhaps have a fair on climate change. A fair should not be held for no longer than a month. It should not be geographically confined to ESCAP centres, but should instead be organized through the ESCAP network. The fair would be a focusing mechanism and needs to be widely marketed.
23. Fairs are a way to seed ideas and inspire creativity. Small successes achieved in one part of the Asia-Pacific region can create positive energy in other parts. This might be a successful village experiment which ESCAP can draw attention to through its network, or initiatives by NGOs, or novel corporate ESG projects. ESCAP should facilitate and encourage, but leave others to organize and tell stories.
24. Engaging the enthusiasm of the younger generation is absolutely critical. For the ESCAP mission to be sustainable, many young people must be involved in its activities. ESCAP needs a plan of action to bring this about. Few in the younger generation have heard of ESCAP. They are passionate about the climate cause. They are moved by ESG. They should be our strong supporters.
25. It would be good if ESCAP were to also be associated with the harnessing of new technologies for achieving our goals. For example, Pinduoduo, has an annual competition to promote smart agriculture. In 2021, there was one on the cultivation of strawberries. Those grown with the help of artificial intelligence (AI) won hands down. In 2022, the crop chosen is cherry tomatoes. Many other corporations and foundations must have similar activities. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supported ESCAP. Each project not only does good, it also brings joy and happiness and encourages others to participate as well.
26. The switch to alternative energy is a long-term process. It begins with the sparking of new ideas. There is so much we can learn from one another in fostering the growth of the green economy. Green technology has to be adapted to different situations. Local conditions must always be taken into account. What works in one town may not work in another for a whole host of reasons. We should be able to enlist the help of private sector players in green energy.
27. Fairs succeed because they are focused on particular interests. In Singapore, I am a strong supporter of the World Toilet Organisation which, remarkably, succeeded in persuading the United Nations Member States to declare 19 November as World Toilet Day. Clean toilets are a very important part of the Sustainable Development Goals. Toilets are a classic example of market failure in many places. The cost of improving toilets is tiny compared to the utility of having clean toilets. ESCAP should seriously consider partnering with the World Toilet Organisation in helping local communities improve toilet conditions in our region.
28. The regional institutes of ESCAP can help organize these fairs. It may be that their current terms of reference are too narrow. They should, if they are not already, work with the regional offices in a matrix. Many fairs are better organized at the regional or local levels.

VII. Special focus on least developed countries

29. The meaning of ESCAP is enhanced by putting a special focus on helping least developed countries take off. Of its 53 member States, 12 are least developed countries. Every least developed country is different and the assistance ESCAP provides to each one should be customized. ESCAP should, of course, do this in coordination with regional and international organizations.
30. The principal assistance extended by ESCAP to least developed countries is not financial, but in network support. Enlisting the help of NGOs and business corporations is important. A voluntary buddy system to help least developed countries in specific areas should be considered. Existing buddies can become more effective by working with ESCAP.
31. A special study should be conducted together with the least developed countries to identify their requirements to achieve sustainable development. Developed and developing countries can then pledge their assistance. ESCAP should be able to tap, the services of all kinds of organisations, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and NGOs.
32. A marketplace puts peers together. The presence of least development countries side by side with more advanced countries naturally generates peer pressure to uplift them. There is a limit to what can be achieved top down. Greater focus should be placed on bottom-up initiatives. Current emphasis on ESG is helpful. Getting young people from developed and developing countries involved in extending helping hands to least developed countries is also good education for them.

VIII. ESCAP trust mark

33. Apart from activities or programmes that ESCAP is directly involved in, there could be many others that are supported or endorsed by ESCAP. An idea worth considering is an ESCAP trust mark. ESCAP must, of course, maintain standards and some auditing will be necessary. An endorsement from ESCAP can help raise funds for a range of activities. Many companies now look for ESG projects to support. Those with the ESCAP trust mark should become blue ribbon. This, however, requires ESCAP to market itself to them.
34. The ESCAP marketplace is a quality marketplace. If we can make this widely accepted, the ESCAP endorsement would become valuable. In this way, despite its limited resources, ESCAP can leverage its legitimacy and reputation to foster many more activities than can be directly financed from its budget.
35. In addition to the five ESCAP regional institutes, we should consider setting up a system of ESCAP affiliation. By affiliating a range of national and regional institutes to ESCAP, we can have access to a much wider network of expertise and capabilities.

IX. Evolving regionalism

36. The world is entering a new phase of globalization that is combined with localization. Unfettered globalization has reached its zenith. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to rediscover our neighbours and neighbourhoods. We are much more conscious about being secure in our local environments. At the same time, we still need to trade and cooperate with others. New regional groupings are evolving throughout the Asia-Pacific region, somewhat untidily. The untidiness is not necessarily negative. It is good that every country has options. This creates greater honesty and fairness. ESCAP should insert itself into these regional organizations and encourage them to finance the establishment of ESCAP facilities. I recommend the four discussed below.
37. The Shanghai Organization should consider supporting an ESCAP centre in Tashkent. I participated in a UNDP forum on Uzbekistan recently and could sense a strong desire for the country to open up and draw energy from a much wider region. Uzbekistan is very strategic to inner Asia. All the countries of that area would benefit if the country were fully plugged into the international system and the evolving role of Uzbekistan in the peaceful economic development of a much wider region will be important.
38. The Association for Southeast Asian Nations could support establishing an ESCAP facility in Jakarta where the Association's headquarters are located. ESCAP already works closely with ASEAN, but more can be done. ASEAN is probably the most successful regional organization in the developing world. It has a story, which ESCAP can help tell more emphatically to the world.
39. For the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, China might be prepared or persuaded to finance an ESCAP facility in Hainan which is keen to promote itself as a free trade port. By 2025, there will be no border controls between Hainan Island and the mainland and an ESCAP training centre for its member States could be considered.

X. Finding balance

40. Going ahead, five balances for ESCAP to consider are as follows:

- ESCAP vs. organizations, such as the World Economic Forum
- Top-down vs. bottom-up
- Woke vs inclusive culture
- Quantity vs. quality
- Maternal vs. paternal

XI. ESCAP vs. organizations, such as the World Economic Forum

41. Conceptually, it may be useful to think through how ESCAP is different from organizations, such as the World Economic Forum. At a high level, the objectives are broadly similar. The World Economic Forum targets the global elite and, with some justification, has a reputation for being elitist. Corporate members pay high fees to participate in the Forum. ESCAP, in contrast, is much broader-based and should aim to be closer to ordinary people. It should be practical and hands on. It should never come across as elitist.
42. However, we should emulate the World Economic Forum and enhance marketing of ESCAP and its activities. We should ride on the ESG tide and make ESCAP better known. We should certainly target corporate boardrooms so that when board members discuss ESG, they think of ESCAP. All corporate boards have already been sensitized to ESG. We should also insert ourselves into the consciousness of young people, especially students in schools and universities. In reaching out to different groups, we will also generate new ideas for what ESCAP can do.

XII. Top-down vs. bottom-up

43. ESCAP is part of the United Nations and derives its mandate and mission from the New York headquarters. Thus, it begins as a top-down initiative. However, for ESCAP to be more successful in its mission, much of its work has to be bottom-up, which is why creating enthusiasm among NGOs and young people is so important. We should try to make ESCAP a grass-roots movement. This is good for the United Nations.
44. Take the 17 Sustainable Development Goals as an example. They were agreed to after long and hard negotiations in New York. But how many of us can list them without checking a website? If we take a sample of university students anywhere, most would be hard put to list even half of them. The 17 Goals are not an end in themselves. The real goal is sustainable development. The 17 Goals are only aspects of it. How these Goals are internalized and acted on must grow organically from the bottom-up. Depending on the local situation, some are naturally more important than others. Maybe only a few should be given emphasis. Furthermore, with technological disruption everywhere, a grass-roots revolution is ongoing against old hierarchical structures. In their place are untidy neural networks connecting individuals and entities, which are closer to ground conditions and ESCAP needs to engage grass-roots leaders.
45. However, in staying close to the ground, our culture must be inclusive. We should avoid a spirit of condemnation, and rather be infused instead with a spirit of inclusion. As one shades into the other, we cannot always avoid divisions. Our instinct must be to reduce divisions, not accentuate them. If we stay apolitical, we will be able to maintain our balance.
46. The moral foundation of ESCAP is our common humanity. We do not want to preach, but our values should shine through in the work we do.

XIII. Quantity vs. quality

47. In reporting to the United Nations, ESCAP needs to show quantity in the volume of work it does. In our annual reports, quantity is naturally important. However, on the ground, quantity is irrelevant. It is what is of value to ordinary folks which matters. The lack of knowledge of what ESCAP does among most people should trouble us. We do not exist for the United Nations. We exist for the people in our region. For them, quality is more important than quantity. When we improve lives sustainably, that is quality. When we measure success by the number of activities and reports, that's only quantity.

48. Quality is expressed when we are relevant in times of great need. If we are present to help prevent a disaster or help communities recover after a disaster, that gives enormous joy and satisfaction to all those working with us. And motivates us to work even harder. Quality translates into quantity; not the other way around.

XIV. Riding the environmental, social and governance tide

49. ESCAP should see the current global wave to promote ESG as a huge opportunity to promote sustainable development in the world. ESG began as an idea in the 1990s, giving wider meaning to corporate social responsibility. It received a major boost with the Millennium Development Goals and following that, the SDGs. The CoP meetings have also added force to the movement. In a sense, ESG takes the SDG goals, structures them and lays out specific targets to be met. The International Standards of Accounting and Reporting, which is a United Nations global forum of policymakers, regulators, standard-setters and lead experts in the field of enterprise accounting and reporting, is working with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to quantify SDG and ESG accounting and reporting. In short, while SDGs sets the goals, it is ESG which will get us there.

50. ESCAP should, therefore, set up a task force to learn from International Financial Reporting Standards, and UNCTAD and other agencies and bring these new accounting and reporting standards into our work. All the international accounting firms and many other bodies are now deeply involved in these activities. Among them, some would be happy to volunteer their services to ESCAP.

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