

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

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Item 5 (c) of the provisional agenda*

Management issues**Report on the evaluation activities of the Commission during the biennium 2020–2021****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

The purpose of the biennial reporting on the evaluation activities of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific is to strengthen the accountability of the Commission to its member States and facilitate organizational improvement by providing evidence-based information on the performance and results of its work. The present report includes a summary of the main findings and recommendations contained in evaluations conducted during the biennium 2020–2021 and the steps taken by the secretariat to address those recommendations. It also contains an outline of the efforts made by the secretariat to further strengthen the evaluation function.

The Commission may wish to review the present report and recommend actions to further enhance the performance and results of its work and strengthen its evaluation function.

I. Introduction

1. Evaluation at the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) complies with the rules and regulations of the United Nations, which mandate that all programmes should be evaluated on a regular, periodic basis. It also responds to Commission resolution 66/15, in which the Commission requested the Executive Secretary to ensure periodic evaluation of the secretariat's programmatic work, including the work of divisions, subregional offices and regional institutions. Moreover, member States also mandate the secretariat through resolutions to conduct evaluations of specific themes or areas of work in support of the Commission's decision-making processes. Based on these evaluative activities, the present biennial report has been prepared to provide the Commission with evidence-based information on the performance and results of its work.

2. During the biennium 2020–2021, two subprogramme and thematic evaluations and nine project evaluations of the Commission's work were completed (see annex for more details). The secretariat engaged external

* ESCAP/78/L.1/Rev.1.

evaluators to conduct an independent assessment of the results and performance of the projects. The evaluation reports can be accessed on the ESCAP website.¹ The above evaluations were conducted in accordance with an ESCAP evaluation plan.

II. Key findings and recommendations from evaluations of the Commission's work and related actions taken by the secretariat

A. Subprogramme/thematic evaluations

3. In Commission resolution 73/4, member States requested the Executive Secretary to accord priority to the Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Connectivity in Asia and the Pacific, phase I (2017–2021), and carry out an evaluation of the implementation of phase I. In line with the resolution, the secretariat commissioned an independent evaluation of phase I of the Regional Action Programme in 2021 with the goal of informing the deliberations at the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Transport on the formulation of the next regional action programme. The evaluation found that almost all representatives of member States confirmed that phase I was relevant to their needs and priorities and was in line with multilateral and bilateral transport-related agreements. However, it showed that not all of the thematic areas were top priorities of all the member States, owing to their geopolitical, social and economic diversity. In terms of tangible results, the evaluation highlighted the outcomes of the sessions of the thematic working groups and the expert group meetings, as well as the introduction of the sustainable urban transport index methodology as the most successful and scalable approaches. The evaluation recommended that the next phase of the regional action programme be better linked to sustainable transport, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement, include thematic areas related to environmentally sustainable and inclusive transport, move towards a results-oriented approach by defining specific and measurable outcomes, and incorporate gender-responsive activities, among others. It also recommended that the secretariat further strengthen the partnerships, communication, outreach and visibility of the Regional Action Programme. The evaluation findings and recommendations informed the drafting of the Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific (2022–2026), which was adopted at the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Transport, held in December 2021.

4. In 2020, the secretariat commissioned an evaluation of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation aimed at informing deliberations at the Senior Officials Meeting of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation and supporting its strategy development process for the next five-year period (2021–2025). The evaluation confirmed the relevance of the Programme and its usefulness to its member States, highlighting its ability to facilitate quality dialogue among a diverse membership in a politically sensitive environment. The evaluation found that the Programme is highly effective as a multilateral cooperation platform, and it is performing as designed, but concluded that the Programme lacked governance and steering that would allow it to deliberately select future thematic areas based on its strategic principles. The evaluation determined that while the Programme was cost-effective with resources, efficiency should not be a key criterion to assess its contributions because it was set up to facilitate

¹ www.unescap.org/monitoring-and-evaluation/evaluation/reports.

the pursuit of enduring intergovernmental cooperation, thus privileging political considerations over efficiency. Furthermore, the evaluation found that the recognition of the Programme's association with the United Nations and the inherent value of environmental protection for human well-being provided a foundation to further address gender equality and human rights issues. The evaluation recommended that the secretariat operationalize the Programme to enable the full realization of its founding vision as a comprehensive environmental cooperation mechanism, encourage member States to have a higher level of representation at its meetings, strengthen the linkage with ESCAP regional programmes, and develop new, more stable and predictable funding modalities. The secretariat accepted these recommendations and facilitated the adoption of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation Strategic Plan 2021–2025 and the development of new funding modalities in consultation with its member States.

B. Capacity development project evaluations

5. The secretariat commissioned nine project evaluations during the 2020–2021 biennium. Of the nine projects, five were funded from the United Nations secretariat regular budget under the United Nations Development Account and four were funded from extrabudgetary sources. Key recommendations and lessons drawn from those evaluations are provided below.

6. **Sustaining and maximizing the impact of knowledge products and learning platforms through continuous improvement and synergy with similar initiatives.** The secretariat's projects were effective at developing extensive information hubs and e-learning courses, however, for their impact to be preserved and sustained, support to related websites needed to be maintained together with efforts to improve access to specialized materials and user support services where resources allow. Evaluation recommendations highlighted the potential benefits of integrating those knowledge products with the secretariat's overall knowledge management platforms as well as existing regional knowledge hubs. Moreover, the secretariat should leverage its experience developing novel knowledge products, in particular those delivered in blended modalities, to guide the design of similar initiatives.

7. **Informing project design with a better understanding of the needs of beneficiary organizations and Governments through engaged relationships.** Evaluations highlighted the importance of keeping in mind the evolving and differentiated needs among project beneficiaries. For example, under a Development Account project to strengthen the capacity of financial institutions to develop sustainable financial products for their portfolios, small to medium-sized banks were not convinced and needed more training, while the larger players already had knowledge and motivation. Evaluations recommended the development of targeted communications and guidance products aimed at different stakeholders. Moreover, for the design of future projects, the secretariat should renew and build on relationships with organizational networks such as bankers' associations to stay up to date with their needs and priorities.

8. **Deepening gender mainstreaming and disability inclusion.** Issues related to gender mainstreaming and disability inclusion should be considered at the project design stage and included as part of the project objectives. While recognizing that the opportunity to elevate gender and human rights may vary depending on the scope and focus of the project, the secretariat should integrate such issues as part of the project design to ensure that they will be allocated

resources, measured and evaluated. In addition, evaluations recommended the inclusion of questions related to gender and human rights in post-event surveys and the collection of gender-disaggregated data for all project activities.

9. **Better documentation of results indicators to improve evaluability and increase the visibility of project contributions to policy formulation.** Gaps in results framework and record keeping have created difficulties in formulating results narratives and raising the profile of good practices. Evaluations recommended that ESCAP strengthen the project theories of change with direct links to expected results and improve the documentation of feedback regarding the effectiveness of project interventions by putting in place a structured mechanism to facilitate such feedback from target countries.

10. **Rightsizing project scope to resources available to enhance project management.** Evaluations identified instances of projects being underresourced for what they were expected to achieve, in particular in terms of ESCAP staff available for project management and support over the project period. Evaluation recommendations highlighted the need to take into consideration the different resource needs of a variety of project delivery modalities, as well as the advantages of focusing on fewer target countries to have more time for follow-up sessions.

III. Strengthening evaluation at the Commission

11. As part of the efforts to strengthen its evaluation function, the secretariat issued guidelines in August 2020 for conducting surveys to assess the quality and results of ESCAP activities, including intergovernmental meetings, seminars, training activities and advisory services. The purpose of the guidelines was to ensure a more systematic and consistent approach within the secretariat in assessing the quality and results of its activities; to enable continuous improvement and promote accountability; to generate information to facilitate the monitoring and evaluation of the secretariat's programme of work; and to enhance its capacity to report on its performance and results to member States and development partners.

12. To continue to build evaluation awareness and capacity among ESCAP staff, the secretariat conducts internal training on monitoring and evaluation, including results-based management and theory of change. In August 2020, the secretariat rolled out a practical hands-on training course for project managers to design impact-focused capacity development projects to support secretariat divisions in formulating project proposals. In addition to these internal training activities, the secretariat also co-organized the annual regional workshop on evaluation in the United Nations context conducted by the United Nations Evaluation Development Group for Asia and the Pacific. The regional workshop was effective in building the capacities of United Nations staff in designing and managing evaluations, and it enhanced the quality and effectiveness of evaluations in the United Nations system, including at ESCAP.

13. The ESCAP evaluation function benefits from a broad network of evaluation professionals located in the region and worldwide. The Evaluation Unit of ESCAP represents the secretariat in the United Nations Evaluation Group, which holds annual knowledge-sharing workshops, organizes task forces for particular evaluation projects and conducts coordination meetings.

IV. Coordination mechanisms with regional and subregional organizations

14. In its resolution 67/14, the Commission requested the secretariat to assess the manner in which it carries out its mandate and coordinates its work with regional and subregional organizations operating in Asia and the Pacific and describe the functioning, decision-making and results of the regional coordination mechanism, including how the secretariat leverages synergies and other efficiencies that could serve as a model for coordination, and present the results to the Commission as part of the biennial reporting on the secretariat's evaluation activities. The summary of results for the biennium 2020–2021 is contained in the overview of partnerships, extrabudgetary contributions and capacity development (ESCAP/78/29).

V. Issues for consideration by the Commission

15. As outlined in the present report, during the biennium 2020–2021 evaluations continued to provide evidence-based information on the results and performance of the Commission's work to strengthen accountability to its member States. The information also facilitated performance enhancement and guided structural changes at ESCAP. Key follow-up actions to address evaluation recommendations were taken with a view to strengthening the results orientation of the Commission's capacity development work, including at the national level, promoting sustainability and gender mainstreaming and creating strategic partnerships with national and regional development organizations.

16. The Commission may wish to use the information contained in the present report to recommend actions to further enhance the performance and results of the Commission's work and further strengthen its evaluation function.

Annex**Evaluations completed during the biennium 2020–2021**

	<i>Title</i>	<i>Year</i>
Subprogramme/thematic evaluation		
1	Evaluation of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation	2020
2	Evaluation of the Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Connectivity in Asia and the Pacific, phase I (2017–2021)	2021
Project evaluations		
1	Evaluation of the Development Account project (eleventh tranche): Strengthening statistical capacity to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 14 in selected ESCAP member countries	2020
2	Evaluation of the Development Account project (tenth tranche): Evidence-based policies for the sustainable use of energy resources in the Asia-Pacific region	2020
3	Evaluation of the Development Account project (tenth tranche): Innovative climate finance mechanisms for financial institutions in the Asia-Pacific region	2020
4	Evaluation of the Development Account project (tenth tranche): Strengthening the capacities of policymakers for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: an Asia-Pacific (Sustainable Development Goal help desk)	2020
5	Evaluation of the project: Strengthening connectivity for the implementation of the Asia-Pacific information superhighway	2020
6	Evaluation of the Project: Seoul Initiative Network on Green Growth	2020
7	Evaluation of the Development Account project (tenth tranche): South-South cooperation for science, technology and innovation policies in the Asia-Pacific region	2021
8	Evaluation of the project: Integrating the Sustainable Development Goals into local actions in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific	2021
9	Evaluation of the project: Asia-Pacific sustainable urban transport systems to support the region's achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	2021