

Reinvigorating multilateralism on environment and development challenges in Asia and the Pacific

Note by the secretariat for the Expert group meeting: “Regional Cooperation to protect our Common Environment”, 22-23 June 2022

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Background

- Prepared as a background note for the participants in the Expert Group Meeting: Regional Cooperation to protect our Common Environment. This note highlights actions to reinvigorate multilateralism on environment and development challenges in Asia and the Pacific.
- It draws from the draft of the report for the Seventh ESCAP Committee on Environment and Development at ministerial level (29 November to 2 December 2022) and related preparations.
- It also draws from preliminary insights from a survey issued by the ESCAP secretariat to help support the regional discussion.

Reinvigorating multilateralism – a framework

- The Asia-Pacific region is home to increasing environmental pressures which disrupt the flow of ecosystem services to the economy and society, and threaten human health, well-being and security. In this region, economic dynamism, vulnerability to climate change and vulnerability co-exist. Converging climate, biodiversity and economic and food security crises call for greater attention to solidarity, science and commitment to action.
- The need to accelerate progress, including through reinvigorating multilateralism is well recognized. General Assembly Resolution 76/6 recognizes the need for reinvigorated multilateralism to address “global risks and challenges, find viable solutions and accelerate the implementation of agreed frameworks.” Existing multilateral platforms can engage new partners to overcome fragmentation, enhance partnership and coordination, engage with different kinds of stakeholders and all States, and deliver on

ambitious, well-framed targets and effective accountability measures, with the right financing. The record speed of the decision to enact a global convention on plastics in response to stakeholder pressure is an example of how leadership from governments working with stakeholders, and with, (and within) multilateral frameworks can accelerate action.

- The framework below (figure 1) is grounded in the Report of the Secretary General "Our Common Agenda", ESCAP's participatory foresight work with stakeholders to produce "Asia-Pacific Environmental Futures in 2040" and "The Future of Asian and Pacific Cities" as well as preliminary insights from an expert survey issued by ESCAP to contribute to the preparations for the upcoming Committee on Environment and Development at Ministerial level.
- The framework helps to identify gaps and opportunities for strengthening multilateral actions proposed as outcomes for the upcoming Seventh Committee on Environment and Development at ministerial level, and beyond.

REINVIGORATING MULTILATERALISM
to protect the environmental commons





Figure 1: Key elements for reinvigorating multilateralism.
Source: ESCAP, 2022.




- The framework emphasizes an *integrated approach* to reinvigorate multilateralism. Each element supports and reinforces the others. For example, information, data sharing transparency and evidence for action strengthens accountability measures, and at the same time, can be advanced through networking and partnerships. Similarly, economic system and financing interventions can be made more effective and responsive with the right accountability measures.
- Solidarity is a central element. It keeps focus on ensuring that no-one is left behind, and applies to both solidarity between countries, and with affected populations. Economic system and financing interventions should ensure just transitions and climate justice, while accountability, information and data sharing and transparency should include data on the needs and perspectives of marginalized and vulnerable communities. Networking opportunities for those who are most in need are equally as important and potentially transformative, as networking by the powerful and well-financed.

Revitalizing multilateralism – actions

- There is considerable commitment expressed to regional action in ESCAP forums, with follow up supported by the ESCAP secretariat in collaboration with the United Nations system and other partners. The initiatives to be considered at the Committee on Environment and Development include thus far:
 - A Ministerial Declaration emphasizing commitment to regional cooperation in specific areas and requesting ESCAP's further action.
 - A regional modality on air pollution emphasizing cooperation on data sharing and joint action.
- Using the above framework, Table 1 identifies opportunities to reinvigorate multilateral action in environment and development challenges to be discussed at the 7th Committee on Environment and Development at ministerial level.

Table 1.
Reinvigorating multilateralism for protecting the environmental commons

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Solidarity				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote equitable regional actions to address vulnerability and marginalization • Ensure equitable access to, and influence on multilateral cooperation for all countries and stakeholder groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate justice and environmental rights mainstreaming • Mainstream integrated approaches including green growth, sustainable blue economy, One-Health and related health-environment concepts through sub-regional, regional, and international collaboration 				
	Information sharing, transparency and evidence for action	Accountability measures	Coordinated, networked & participatory action	Economics system & financing interventions
 Climate action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement “blue carbon readiness assessments”, including valuation of coastal wetlands’ mitigation and adaption benefits • Support city level climate action plans which localize Nationally Determined Contributions through regional platforms such as the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have an accountability process in place to ensure countries implement obligations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and Paris Agreement • Harmonize NDC targets and goals across the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a regional Carbon Neutrality Partnership • Establish a regional GHG emissions inventory community of practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate regional cooperation in the development of carbon pricing instruments such as carbon taxes or emissions-trading system • Facilitate regional climate finance incubators to support decarbonization projects
 Nature action (including biodiversity, marine & terrestrial ecosystems)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish regular scientific dialogues and assessments to address contentious regulatory vacuums around environmental issues, such as deep-sea mining, carbon dioxide removal, marine pollution • Establish multi-country and multi-stakeholder data-sharing platforms to better understand transboundary challenges including incorporating artificial intelligence to better manage marine plastics, freshwater use, landscape restoration, among others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen linkages and complementarity between regional and global accountability process to ensure implementation of obligations under agreements such as the Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, and the outcomes of the Food Systems Summit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional coordination and synergies across programmes, working towards priority goals aligned with the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021–2030, and the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development 2021-2030, including establishment of regional networks of interconnected marine and terrestrial protected areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-stakeholder regional expert body on financing for sustainable agriculture and ecosystem restoration • Regional cooperation initiatives to promote green and blue economies

 <p>Air Pollution action</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate air quality monitoring and open data sharing, including using innovative data sources and deployment of emerging technologies to identify air pollution hotspots and transboundary impacts; strengthen the quality of emission inventories Mainstream the use of well-established scientific tools that enable integrated policy assessments (GAINS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalize a regional agreement focused on improved and harmonized regional air quality standards Peer learning regularized to promote the exchange of best practices and best available techniques to control emissions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalize a regional agreement committing to expand and deepen multilateral action built on regional and sub-regional partnerships, which have been established to share and scale up the adoption of science-based solutions, such as the Asia Pacific Clean Air Partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish emission standards for the industry and mining and high emission sectors application of best available techniques approaches and use tax-incentives and/or fines to close or adapt existing installations that do not meet agreed standards
 <p>Urban sustainability action</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote sustainability, efficiency, equity, and effectiveness under SDG 11 related targets and the New Urban Agenda through regional stocktaking platforms Reinvigorate existing intergovernmental platforms such as the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development for Asian and Pacific cities to bring a much sharper quality of life focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen city partnership platforms to foster mutual accountability, localizing sustainable urban development and climate actions, and coordinating across government levels targets related to pollution reduction, waste generation, public transport use and greenhouse gas emissions, among others Strengthen integration between Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leverage regional multi stakeholder networks such as the Penang Platform for Sustainable Urbanization Integrate an inter-ministerial segment in the Asia-Pacific Urban Forum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with multilateral financial institutions for local authorities to identify best practices on financing and vertical integration with national and subnational government structures. Explore regional models for integrating climate financing into housing subsidies, among other socially solidarity measures
 <p>Action on environmental rights</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen online platforms that catalogue best practices in environmental rights (e.g. the Environmental Rights Database) Agreed standards of public disclosure for the private sector and public entities to support environmental and social governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional mutual accountability measures to promote efficient access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including effective redress and remedy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt a regional agreement to strengthen existing legal provisions for the promotion of access rights and the protection of environmental rights developed through an inclusive multi-stakeholder process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional guidelines for investment in public infrastructure for the promotion of access rights, including by training public authorities to facilitate access to information and by providing the necessary tools and technology to honor it

The role of ESCAP in addressing environment and development challenges

The seventh session of the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP/74/10/Add.1) held in 2017, resolved *inter alia*, to address the harmful effects of climate change including the adverse effects of air pollutants, unplanned urbanization, environmental degradation, as well as unsustainable consumption and production, regional cooperation and solidarity to protect our common environment.

ESCAP Resolution 78/1 “Bangkok Declaration Commemorating the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific: a Common Agenda to Advance Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific”¹ provides the most recent indication of regional commitment calls for leaving no one behind, for building resilience against future pandemics, natural disasters, climate change and other shocks and for protecting our planet and addressing *inter alia*, climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, and all types of natural disasters. The Declaration calls for the immediate curbing of greenhouse gas emissions and the pursue of an effective and progressive response to the urgent threat of climate change on the basis of the best available scientific knowledge. Mobilizing financial resources, promoting the provision and transfer of sound environmental technologies, and building capacity to help member States achieve climate-resilient development in the region are also key priorities outlined in the Declaration.

The Bangkok Declaration also recalls that human beings are entitled to healthy and productive lives in harmony with nature. The well-being of humanity depends on the health of nature and hence on our ability to sustainably use, restore and protect the ecosystem services. Exploring opportunities to collaborate on enhancing rights-based approaches including through the implementation of access rights across a variety of institutions to facilitate access to remedies, information, and public participation in decision-making, in support of Human Rights Council Resolution 48/13 on “*The right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment*”.² A clean, healthy and sustainable environment is important for the enjoyment of human rights and for sustainable development in all its dimensions.

ESCAP Resolution 72/8 “Fostering regional cooperation and partnerships to respond to the climate change challenge in the Asia-Pacific region”³ can support action to develop more ambitious emissions-cutting commitments and targets, as well as on phase-down of unabated

¹ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_RES_78_1_E.pdf

² <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/289/50/PDF/G2128950.pdf?OpenElement>

³ https://live01.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/E72_RES8E.pdf

coal and inefficient fossil fuel subsidies to accelerate progress on the Paris Agreement and the Glasgow Climate Pact.

Increasing collaborative action on air pollution pursuant to global and regional mandates responds to mandates expressed, in ESCAP resolution 75/4 on “Strengthening regional cooperation to tackle air pollution challenges in Asia and the Pacific”,⁴ through supporting the establishment and implementation of national legislation as well as reaching mutual agreements on harmonizing standards, data sharing, exchange of knowledge and solutions, strengthening capacity building and undertaking regional actions, facilitated by a regional modality. The Bangkok Declaration also calls member States to reduce air pollution levels to mitigate the impacts on human health.

Strengthening sustainable management of the oceans and marine ecosystems in Asia and the Pacific responds to ESCAP Resolutions 72/9 on “Regional cooperation to promote the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific” and 76/1 on “Strengthening cooperation to promote the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific.” Actions are aligned with the objectives of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030).⁵ The Bangkok Declaration also calls for urgent action to enhance international collaboration for the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources and to reduce all forms of pollution negatively impacting oceans and freshwater.

The Bangkok Declaration also demonstrates the commitment by ESCAP member States to promote sustainable urban development to enhance quality of life, develop healthy environments and better manage environmental risks and resources. In line with the United Nations System Wide Strategy on Sustainable Urban Development and the New Urban Agenda, scaling up local and subnational actions, including efforts to integrate climate change into urban planning and development in sync with national strategies, deployment of inclusive smart city technologies, building resilient and accessible infrastructure which addresses the housing crisis and adoption of nature-based solutions can minimize the impact of unplanned urbanization on the environment. Vertical integration of urban policies and better coordination between local authorities and national governments can support the capacities of cities to manage urban

⁴ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/E75_Res4E.pdf

⁵ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N17/421/90/PDF/N1742190.pdf?OpenElement>

growth through transitions to inclusive, resilient, and low carbon development and minimize the environmental impact of unplanned urban expansions.

ESCAP member states through resolution 77/1 on “Building back better from crises through regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific”⁶ called for a shift towards a climate and environment-responsive approach to COVID-19 recovery in support of the goals and objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as they recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. To support transitions to development models that put nature at the centre of economic development, ensure biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, raise climate ambition, reduce pollution, promote sustainable urban development, and enhance integrated environmental action, existing regional multi-stakeholder platforms for discussing, prioritizing, and supporting action on environment and development could be strengthened. The Bangkok Declaration recognises the value of an integrated One Health approach that fosters cooperation on issues relevant to human health, animal health and plant health, as well as environmental and other relevant sectors.

The ESCAP secretariat is committed to working with Member States to **enhance integrated environmental action by continuing to facilitate regional platforms for discussing, prioritizing and supporting action on environment and development in Asia and the Pacific.** The regional agenda should bring in all relevant actors, ensure biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, raise climate ambition, promote sustainable cities and put nature at the centre of economic development, as well as support synergies among the regional environmental agendas of United Nations’ Agencies and Programmes and support global environment related Multi-lateral Environmental Agreements, as relevant.

Other insights on regional action from preliminary survey responses

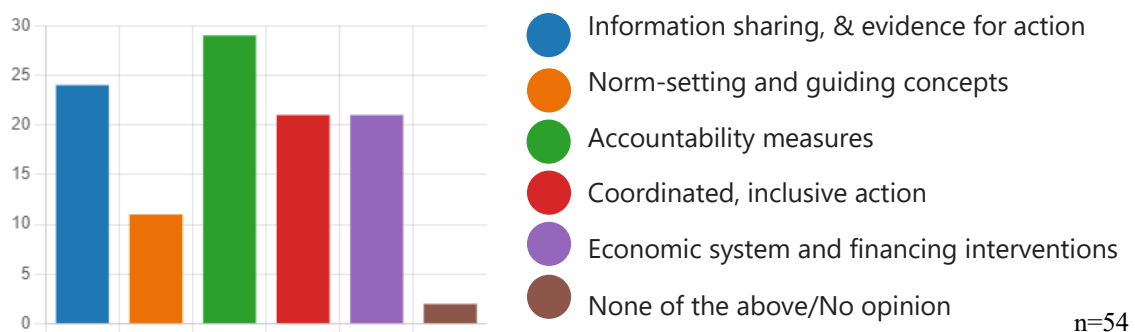
- **Reinvigorating multilateralism is a legitimate and essential response from the region.** Preliminary responses to a survey administered by ESCAP issued for the upcoming Committee on Environment and Development show that more than half of respondents view reinvigorated multilateralism as *critical* for advancing on environment and development challenges
- **A call for accountability measures – and for information sharing, transparency and evidence for action.** Respondents to the ESCAP Survey perceive accountability measures,

⁶ Available at: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_RES_77_1_E.pdf

and information sharing, transparency and evidence for action, and economic system and financing interventions as holding the most potential for reinvigorating multilateralism (figure 2).

- **Multilateral cooperation arrangements can help forge transformative agreements on joint monitoring, multistakeholder review processes, and standards for data exchange**, to support decisions that are evidence-based and transparent to the public. Remote sensing and digital technologies can support effective accountability measures and facilitate smooth cooperation on managing transboundary and shared environmental resources.
- **Effective accountability measures that increase trust, can also help mobilize new resources and partnership.** Vertical and horizontal accountability measures at the regional and subregional levels and within multilateral arrangements can be re-examined with a view to strengthening both horizontal and vertical accountability for example through peer review and learning and formalized multi-stakeholder review.
- **Economic system and financing interventions – more action needed.** Preliminary survey results indicate support for two priority areas of action: climate action and environmentally sustainable economic growth (with others being people, human security and environment, sustainable urban development and securing ecosystem services).

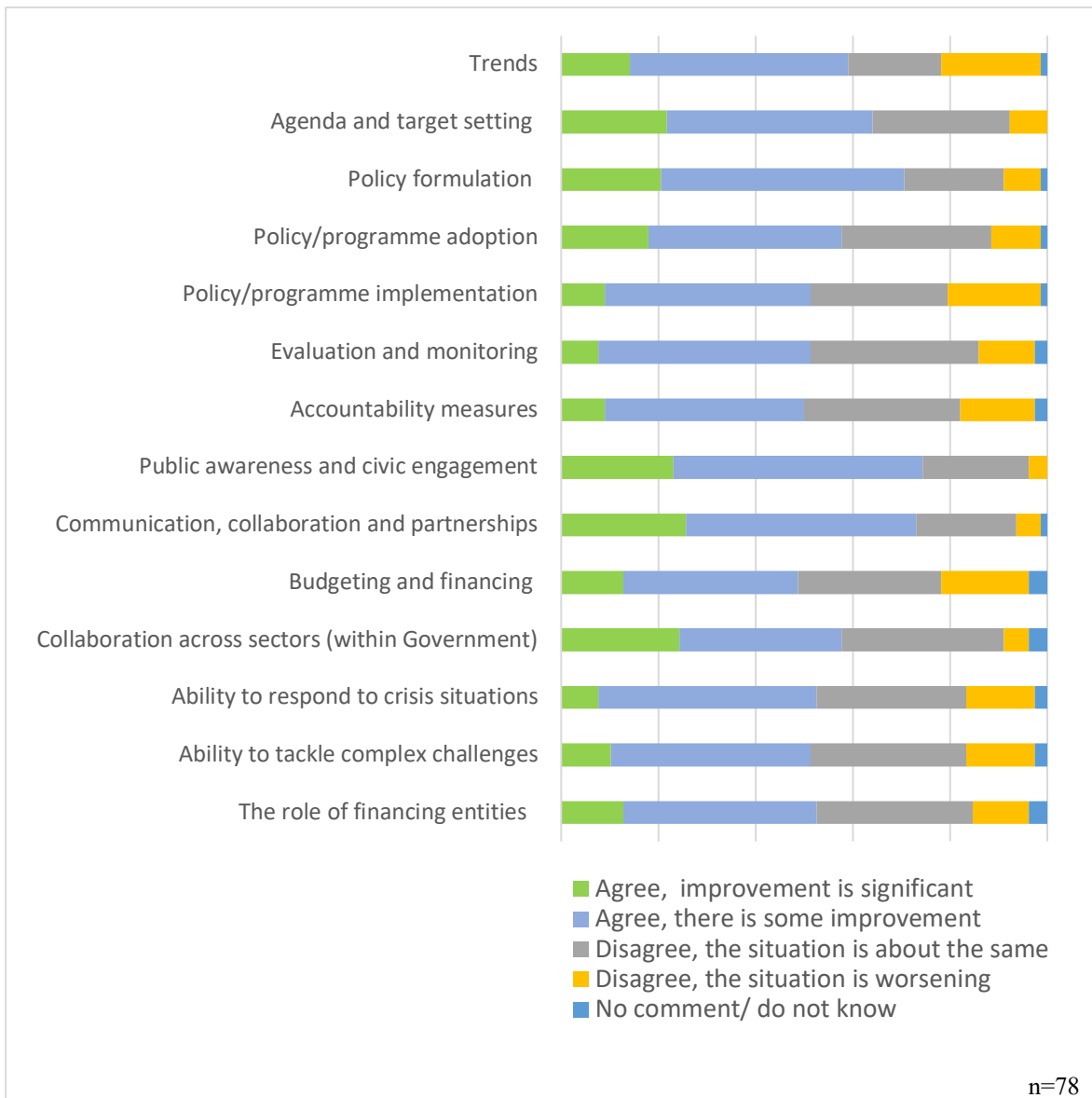
Figure 2. Which areas hold the most potential for reinvigorating multilateralism?



- **Regional action to reinvigorate multilateralism should pay close attention to important opportunities, as well as barriers to change.**
 - Respondents also largely perceive that there is **better agenda setting, policy formulation, public and civic engagement and communication, partnership and stakeholder communication than five years ago** (figure 3).
 - Respondents to the ESCAP survey point to **capacity, knowledge and skills gaps, and shortcomings in governance and in stakeholder and public engagement as being the three most important barriers** to advancing on environment and development challenges (figure 3). Multilateral action may help to shape the opportunities and financing to ramp up progress in these areas.
 - Preliminary results from the ESCAP survey also shows that **respondents perceive a stagnating or worsening situation in relation to accountability measures, policy implementation and evaluation, and monitoring and budgeting and financing**, including at the national level (figure 3). While competence in these areas help drive improvements in implementation and more effective policy, shortcomings in these areas are detrimental to efforts to improve governance.
- **A focus on solidarity.** The Asia-Pacific region is home to some of the most dynamic economies globally, and some of the most vulnerable. Solidarity is essential for addressing common challenges, including mutual points of vulnerability. Attention to solidarity with affected populations within countries, and between countries can strengthen each of the other elements of the framework, being built into accountability measures, information and data sharing, collaboration and networking and cooperation on financing. Economic system and financing interventions should pay particular attention to the challenges of environmental migration and just climate transition.
- Respondent comments point to the need for renewed commitment to international cooperation, the need to effectively coordinate and synergize between regional environmental forums and those more broadly focused on development and increasing peer learning and joint campaigns and also pointed to the existence of several forums⁷ that could be better linked.

⁷ For example: the Forum of Ministers and Environment authorities of Asia Pacific, the Regional Ministerial Forum on Environment and Health, the East Asia Acid Deposition Network, the Asia Pacific Clean air Partnership, the Asia Pacific Adaptation Network, the Coordinating Body for the Seas of East Asia and the Northwest Pacific Action Plan.

Figure 3. Perceptions of progress since 2017



The ESCAP Survey on environment and development challenges and reinvigorating multilateralism

ESCAP has issued a survey to a wide group of government and other stakeholders. The survey looks at five environment and development policy arenas and captures the perceptions of progress in fourteen specific aspects of policymaking, policy implementation and governance. It also looks at cooperation and potential interventions for reinvigorating multilateralism.

To date, the survey has captured the views of a highly relevant group. Respondents are government officials (almost half), and from civil society, the private sector, the UN system and academia, and from 20 countries in the Asia-Pacific region. They work at the national level of government, and in the multi-country arena (more than one third). About half of the respondents work in the area of environment and related sectors and other work mainly in diverse sectors. Two-thirds of respondents have technical/substantive/managerial functions in their organizations and are almost split in terms of gender representation. The survey is open until 30 June and can be accessed online and widely shared to peer and other networks:

[Survey on environment and development challenges and reinvigorating multilateralism in Asia and the Pacific | ESCAP \(unescap.org\)](https://www.unescap.org/en/survey-environment-and-development-challenges-and-reinvigorating-multilateralism-in-asia-and-the-pacific)

