



Implications of the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Summit on the Environment: Towards a Resource-efficient and Pollution-free Asia-Pacific

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1. Introduction

This briefing note examines the implications of the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Summit on the Environment (the Summit) held in Bangkok, Thailand, on 5-8 September 2017 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), air pollution, and resource efficiency. The Summit represented a notable first-time effort to bring together the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific (MCED-7) (organized for the seventh time by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)) and the Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia Pacific (organized for the second time by UN Environment). While MCED-7 aimed to discuss environment trends in the region, review implementation of the outcomes of the sixth MCED, and provide guidance on the ESCAP programme of work on environment and development, the UNEP Forum sought to consolidate regional inputs into the third United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-3) scheduled for Nairobi, Kenya in December 2017. The Summit was organized under the broad theme of “Towards a Resource-efficient and Pollution-free Asia-Pacific.” Resource efficiency was the main concern of ESCAP; pollution control was the chief interest of UN Environment.¹

Given these varying organisational motivations and preferences, it is not surprising that the Summit also concluded with two main sets of outcome documents, one for ESCAP-organized segments and the other for UN Environment-organized segments. The MCED-7 Ministerial Declaration re-affirmed the region’s commitment to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, its Regional Roadmap, and other multilateral and regional policy frameworks. It, moreover, requested ESCAP and its Committee on Environment and Development to take the lead in catalyzing actions outlined in the previously mentioned agendas.² Meanwhile, the UNEP Forum’s Chair’s Summary reviewed progress and challenges in the Asia-Pacific region and described regional inputs to the UNEA process. It nonetheless merits underlining that some countries favored a more formal, negotiated Declaration demonstrating a higher-level political aspiration and commitment than the concise, action-oriented Chair’s Summary. Therefore, the Summit was not only attempting to bridge the differing preferences of regional organizations but also the divergent views of participating countries.

To some extent, the Summit managed to make headway despite these varying preferences and views. Arguably, the most visible illustration of such progress was that the Summit integrated two sustainable development processes that previously had been held

¹ For additional information on the Summit see International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), “Asia-Pacific Ministerial Summit on the Environment Bulletin,” September 2017, Available at <http://enb.iisd.org/download/pdf/sd/enbplus228num3e.pdf>.

² Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Draft ministerial declaration on environment and development for Asia and the Pacific, September 5, 2017. Available at: http://apministerialenv.org/document/MCED_L4E.pdf.

separately. MCED had been convened every five years since 1985 to strengthen environmental and developmental cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. Over the past three decades, MCED generated several declarations and regional implementation plans. Since the 2012 Rio+20 Summit, ESCAP has taken it upon itself to bring these declarations and plans into the Asia-Pacific Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Development, and thereby align these parallel processes at the Summit. Another way that the Summit demonstrated progress was the number of countries that spoke encouragingly about incorporating the SDGs into national policies and the cross-sectoral linkages they made in designing relevant policies. Finally, the Summit helped to share the many good practices on the featured themes that could be more widely disseminated and emulated within and beyond the region.

But while the Summit took several steps forward, it also revealed the difficulties of getting the Asia-Pacific region to unite around a coherent set of actions and messages. Part of the challenge was reflected in the frequent blurring of priorities and objectives during the Summit. This lack of focus may have contributed to the Summit's more notable blind spots. These include limited attention to newly emergent pollution problems such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs), nanotechnology, e-waste, hazardous chemicals, disaster related waste, methane hydrates, deep-sea mining, fracking, and nuclear waste management. There was also a lack of discussion of monitoring and evaluation and a shortage of references to the UN Environment's Global Environment Outlook (GEO) that could potentially help benchmark progress in implementation.³ The lack of these references was mirrored by insufficient discussion of compliance and enforcement issues that are central to the Summit's pollution control and resource efficiency themes. Perhaps most disappointing was that no single country or theme emerged as an Asia-Pacific leadership item for UNEA-3 or beyond, and many countries were not in favor of the proposed Declaration for UNEA-3 (or more informal versions of such a contribution). In the end, an opportunity for regional leadership on sustainable development was not fully realized.

This briefing draws upon the observations of researchers from the Institute of Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) to underline several issues that could help policymakers take advantage of that opportunity in the lead up to UNEA-3 and future Summits. More concretely, the briefing highlights some key points involving the SDGs, air pollution, and resource efficiency that stood out during the Summit and could contribute to a stronger regional message on sustainable development at UNEA and beyond. In the next section, the briefing highlights four considerations before greater convergence between regional sustainable development and international SDG processes is possible. The briefing's third section suggests that co-benefits offers a pragmatic, cost-effective way to manage air pollution and mitigate climate change in the Asia-Pacific region; guidance to the region's policymakers on the leveraging of social co-benefits, packaging short-term and long-term

³ United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), 2016, Global Environmental Outlook (GEO-6), Regional Assessment for Asia and the Pacific, Available at: <http://www.unep.org/geo/assessments/regional-assessments/regional-assessment-asia-and-pacific>.

measures, and strengthening regional institutions is also provided to help achieve those multiple benefits. The Briefing's fourth section reflects on some of the options and challenges to increase resource efficiencies in the Asia-Pacific; the section also underlines greater awareness of systemic constraints (as well as attendant rebound effects) that lock-in inequitable unsustainable resource use patterns and the potentially critical role of stakeholder engagement in working around systemic barriers. A final section reiterates key messages and discusses environmental governance issues that will help future Summits capitalize on the opportunity for greater regional leadership on sustainable development

2. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Summit did not focus specifically on the SDGs; global and regional processes such as the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) were created for those purposes. However, the holistic nature of the SDGs makes it virtually impossible to discuss resource efficiency and a pollution-free planet without relating those themes to the 2030 Agenda. To a significant degree, the spillover of the SDGs into other fora demonstrates that the 2030 Agenda is operating as intended, offering a frame of reference for multiple interrelated development concerns. As such, it is also not surprising that the SDGs were referenced in the Summit's statements, discussions and inputs. However, the linkages to the SDGs also brought to light some difficulties that need further consideration.

These difficulties were most apparent during an episode involving support for greater regional institutional convergence with the SDGs. During this episode, the Philippine delegation (supported by Thailand) as well as civil society organizations (CSOs) call for a streamlining of processes to match the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. The Philippines presented "a draft resolution for the synchronization of objectives and activities especially the conduct of meetings of the conferences of parties (COP)/ governing bodies, of multilateral environmental agreements and protocols for efficient implementation and monitoring of the Agenda 2030 and for cost-reduction and effective participation of UN member states."⁴ CSOs made related interventions, advocating for "alignment of the review of implementation of the UNEA and MCED Resolutions with the tools, indicators and review framework already adopted for the SDGs". They argued that smaller states would be particularly hard-pressed to contribute meaningfully to a proliferation of sustainable development platforms and processes and multiple international meetings on the topic.

⁴ Republic of the Philippines, Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Resolution Calling for the Synchronization of Objectives and Activities, Especially the Conduct of Meetings of the Conferences of Parties (COP)/ Governing Bodies, of Multilateral Environmental Agreements and Protocols for Efficient Implementation and Monitoring of the Agenda 2030 and for Cost Reduction and Effective Participation of UN Member States, August 25, 2017. Available at: <http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/21642/Envi%202017-1228%20%28comm.%29.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

The call for streamlining relevant processes was not supported by all member states, however. And while some of these objections were rather general in nature, other concerns pointed to four specific challenges many stakeholders will need to address to facilitate institutional convergence with SDG processes. First, replicating the reporting processes at global and regional levels would overlap with existing processes under HLPF and APFSD. This may not be desirable, and some actors may prefer retaining the distinct character and content of existing processes. Second, if different processes such as the Summit are not sufficiently different or otherwise have outlived their usefulness, some of the unfinished business from those processes will need to be folded into ongoing fora. Determining which issues are covered where promises to be a difficult and prolonged process. Third, strengthening synergies in line with the “One UN” ideal would require broad backing by UN Member States (see also Concluding Thoughts section). To get this widespread support, the UN could undertake a review of existing processes to establish ‘meshing points’ between the processes and the SDGs and call for adoption of elements within the SDGs review framework to create desired synergies. A fourth possible point of contention, mentioned by some member states at MCED, concerns national institutional frameworks. In many ministries, staff focusing on different multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and the SDGs are different, and international and regional-level changes would require comparable reforms at the national level to ‘integrate’ reporting based on the SDGs so that all parties are assessed against the same parameters. Thus, while *prima facie* a good idea for promoting greater integration of the 2030 Agenda was introduced at the Summit, operationalising integration would need to be considered carefully at multiple levels to move forward.

3. Air Pollution

The Summit also generated some useful reflections on a pollution-free planet. The threat that air pollution poses to Asia-Pacific has grown with quickly-changing resource use and consumption patterns. The results of this fast change are as stark as they are sobering: “Asia-Pacific has the largest deaths linked to both indoor and outdoor air pollution, resulting in 5.9 million deaths a year in total. Asia has 25 of the world’s 30 most polluted cities in terms of PM_{2.5}.”⁵ The Summit also underlined that often sources of air pollution contribute to climate change, which is already levelling a costly toll on the region. Fortunately, one of the main messages from the Summit was that policymakers need to leverage synergies across multiple environmental, social and economic objectives (like those found in the SDGs targets). When it comes to air pollution and climate change, a so-called ‘co-benefits’ or ‘multiple benefits’ approach offers policymakers in the Asia-Pacific region a pragmatic and cost-effective way to achieve numerous development objectives.

⁵ United Nations Environment Programme Asia and the Pacific Office, September 6, 2017, *Towards a pollution-free Asia Pacific*, Para 5-6, UNEP/APEnvforum(2)/INF/1.. Available at: http://apministerialenv.org/document/UNEP_INF_1E.pdf

During the Summit's discussion on air pollution, three types of co-benefits were mentioned. Environmental co-benefits are the benefits accruing to actions that mitigate climate change while achieving other environmental goals. A typical example is the benefit from air pollution control measures that simultaneously mitigate carbon dioxide (CO₂). Social co-benefits are the outcomes of actions that lift up marginalized segments of society or empower youth and women while addressing climate change. Typical examples of these co-benefits are the improved working conditions and social status from incorporating waste-pickers or/and informal sector into a more formalized solid waste management regime that also cuts methane (CH₄) and other emissions, including black carbon. The third category of co-benefits, economic co-benefits, often stem from improvements in the use of resources. A good example is energy efficiency reforms that bring down GHG emissions and provide bottom-line financial savings from lower energy costs.

The Summit's side events on air pollution not only highlighted these different co-benefits but offered guidance to help policymakers achieve them. This guidance begins with aiming upstream in formulating pollution-control policies. End-of-pipe controls do not remove CO₂ from exhaust gases. In contrast, strengthening of fuel efficiency standards can deliver substantial co-benefits because they promote efficiency improvement that controls both local air pollutants and CO₂ emissions. Generally, upstream policies and measures tend to deliver more co-benefits than those downstream. Another insight raised at the Summit involves the importance of socially-inclusive processes to link different kinds of benefits. To highlight a relevant example, a cooking stove or biodigester improvement project⁶ that brings women into the marketing and sales of these cleaner technologies creates a value chain that could not only reduce indoor air pollution, but generate jobs and new livelihood opportunities. Linking different streams of co-benefits—particularly social co-benefits—has considerable promise in the region. This linking will require not simply providing women with technologies but meaningful opportunities to influence decision making processes.

A third suggestion discussed at the Summit involved the difference between delivering co-benefits through short-term and long-term measures. Some of the above examples such as integrated solid waste management are short-term—that is, they are already fully-implemented in developed countries, and the supporting technologies and policies are well understood and available immediately.⁷ At the same time, longer-term measures such as the promotion of electric vehicles will need a lengthier gestation period to register materially significant impacts. For these longer-term actions, enabling technologies (such as charging stations) are still nascent, and scalable examples do not yet exist. At one of the Summit's side event on air pollution, a couple of experts from developing countries

⁶ For additional information on this approach, see videos and knowledge products from an Asian Development Bank project entitled *Harnessing Climate Change Mitigation Initiatives to Benefit Women* Available at <https://gender-climate.iges.jp/>.

⁷ It warrants underlining that from a resource efficiency perspective integrated waste management can be a short-term. However, transforming societies into sustainable lifestyles and consumption and production patterns often require a long-term process. This is because it involves not only technology but also change of attitudes and ways of thinking.

emphasized the importance of long-term measures, while experts from developed countries stressed short-term measures. One of the conclusions reached from this discussion was that this is not an either-or type of discussion, but rather how to combine the immediately feasible short-term measures and ultimately fundamental long-term measures to build a multi-benefit pollution-free pathway.⁸

A final point highlighted at the Summit that also relates to this pathway involves the spatial dimension of air pollution. Pollution, in particular air pollution, does not respect physical and administrative boundaries. Pollutants travel long distances, sometimes across borders, and transboundary movement of pollution has become more noticeable in the Asia-Pacific region. At the Summit, Iran pointed to dust and sand storm (DSS) as a serious cross-border issue and appealed for regional and global actions to properly deal with DSS. China supported Iran's approach, noting that a similar issue exists in Northeast Asia. Singapore also stressed international collaboration to deal with transboundary air pollution, for which an international agreement exists involving, amongst others, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. In this connection, an initiative taken recently by UN Environment should receive more attention. The UNE Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific has set up a science-based body called "Asia Pacific Clean Air Partnership" (APCAP) to discuss desirable forms of regional cooperation and expert-recommended solutions to air pollution in the region. The work on co-benefits requires a good appreciation of linkages to social objectives and policies that work on different temporal scales supported by institutions of varying spatial dimensions; co-benefits could fit well within the programme of APCAP.

4. Resource Efficiency

Another featured theme at the Summit was resource efficiency in the context of SDGs. The exchanges on this theme helped the participants better appreciate the linkages between sustainable resource management and sustainable development. The discussions also highlighted the multiple benefits from pursuing sustainable natural resource management together with, *inter alia*, poverty reduction, decent work, food security and public health. Further, many linkages between resource efficiency and a pollution-free planet were noted. Good practices for pollution-free sustainable resource management—organic farming improvements, fertilizers and pesticide reductions, renewable energy and electronic vehicle promotion, natural ecosystems preservation and sound management of waste, water and wastewater—were all raised in this multi-benefit context. While some ongoing regional initiatives were mentioned, rigorous and systematic measurements of their contributions to resource efficiency were notably lacking, suggesting a potentially fruitful area of research.

The Summit also discussed concepts that support resource efficiency and have gained

⁸ "Solutions towards an Air Pollution Free Planet" September 7, 2017, United Nations Conference Centre. Concept Note Available at: http://apministerialenv.org/files/Air_Quality_Side-Event_concept_note_programme.pdf.

traction in the region. These included the 3Rs (Reduce, Reuse and Recycle) concept and variants of the green growth/circular economy/development paradigms. Several countries presented efforts to apply these concepts in plans and strategies, but practical implementation and concrete results of doing so were often left underexplored. To the extent that the reasons for these gaps were given due attention, the lack of demonstrable progress was attributed to familiar enforcement capacity and data management shortfalls. Some developing countries requested support in these areas, while others pointed to efforts they have made to overcome key hurdles. India, for example, discussed open data initiatives that is helping facilitating cooperation among ministries. At least in this connection, the Summit did not produce many new ideas as much as raise implementation challenges as well as support needed to overcome identified barriers.

One of the more useful lines of thought from some participants at the Summit suggested that resource efficiency alone was not a solution. Systemic and structural issues (such as inequality of access, lifestyles etc. to make it happen) that are often underlying these problems need to be considered and addressed. On this point, it was highlighted that the Asia-Pacific region has 80% resource productivity compared to developed countries in the industrialized west. This suggests a significant portion of natural resources are being squandered for the same material outputs. However, simply improving resource efficiency without addressing structural issues that lock-in resource-intensive lifestyles and inequitable distribution patterns would offer, at best, a temporary solution. Moreover, improving resource efficiency by itself without preparing for a 'rebound effect"—so named because additional resource space created by improved resource efficiencies are offset by increased consumption—may cause more problems than it solves. Therefore, any steps taken towards resource efficiency improvements need to include long-term efforts to cap absolute resource consumption, leading to a decoupling of resource use from economic growth.

Another potentially fruitful area participants raised, including member states (Indonesia, for example), involved engaging citizens and private sector (both formal and informal). Greater participation may help to constructively address some of the structural and systemic issues mentioned previously. For instance, it may help to examine what forms of stakeholder engagement lead to resource-efficient solutions that truly cut absolute consumption levels and hold a rebound effect in check. Similarly, it may help to better understand how some forms of community-led participation result in more equitable and sustainable uses of resources. In-depth discussions on who should be engaged in what decision-making processes to help curb overconsumption is arguably needed during future Summits. A related promising, albeit still limited, development at the Summit was that civil society representatives were able to share the outcomes of the civil society preparatory meeting from the floor. Their interventions informed the discussions of negative impacts that government resource efficiency may have on people and offered concrete people-centred solutions. It was similarly helpful that some cases of effective collaboration between governments and civil societies were raised during these interventions.

5. Concluding Thoughts

While the outcome documents for ESCAP-organized segments and UNEP-organized segments were separate, the co-organization of the Summit by the two organizations was generally welcomed and appreciated. As member states and other stakeholders support the idea of co-organization of the Summit, ESCAP and UNEP should continue to building on this experience and respond to the needs of its participants. Based on the Ministerial Declaration adopted at the Summit, ESCAP now loses MCED, which has served as a useful platform for regional initiatives for environment and development such as the Kitakyushu Initiative for a Clean Environment and Green Growth. One major rationale for abolishing MCED is its functions are already subsumed by APFSD. Though APFSD has been recognized as an important platform to discuss sustainable development, the discussions at the past APFSDs indicate member states' reluctance to commit more than what they already contribute at the global level. It is unlikely that the member states will put forward funding for concrete regional initiatives at APFSD.

In this context, the ESCAP secretariat may need to reflect more closely on the needs of its member states and other stakeholders and reconsider where ESCAP can play a most effective and strategic role in promoting sustainable development in the region, while staying true to its mandate and drawing upon its strengths as a regional commission. The Ministerial Declaration that the Summit adopted requests ESCAP to support member states on six items (from 20) and, in all of them, ESCAP is asked to work with UNEP and other UN entities. This suggests that member states see a need for ESCAP to work more closely with other UN entities. In light of this call, ESCAP may need to reflect on existing mechanisms that promote regional and subregional cooperation on sustainable development and consider how it can enhance synergies among them. For example, ESCAP can use the Regional Coordination Mechanism to facilitate discussions and genuine coordination and collaboration among regional offices of the UN and international organizations. In addition, ESCAP has a mandate for convening meetings of member states and could use this mandate to promote greater South-South cooperation.

Meanwhile, one implication of abolishing MCED is that the region loses a platform to discuss important environmental issues at a ministerial level. While the Committee on Environment and Development will be held at ministerial level from time to time, it is convened on an irregular basis and less frequent than UNEP's ministerial level meeting in Asia and the Pacific that is held every two years. This UNEP platform is used as a regional preparation meeting for UNEA, and the topic of the regional meeting corresponds to that of the UNEA. Important regional environmental issues that UNEA does not discuss from that year will require a different platform to host those discussions. Now that MCED does not exist, UNEP may need to consider how to pick issues up at the ministerial meetings alongside UNEA topics. This is increasingly important given divisions in Asia over pressing issues such as climate change and the SDGs. The fact that UNESCAP and the UN Environment for the first time held their respective regional conferences together under the

overall title of the “Asia-Pacific Environmental Ministers’ Summit suggests that there may be potential for the kind of convergence needed to bridge some of these divisions.

In this connection, it is worth mentioning that convergence was featured at the recently completed 72nd UN General Assembly (UNGA). Although much of the focus at UNGA was on security issues such as North Korea’s recent launches of missiles and Iraq’s nuclear program, climate change and SDGs were also given attention. Moreover, it was underlined (during President of the United States Donald Trump’s remarks) that there is a need for the UN to reform as “too often the focus...has not been on results, but bureaucracy and processes.”⁹ Some of the side events at the UNGA organized on the margins of the General Assembly echoed a similar call for less bureaucracy and more results. In particular, the Permanent Mission of France on a Global Pact for the Environment that would be designed to strengthen coherence and integration within more than 500 existing multilateral environmental agreements. The Global Pact for the Environment aims to be the first international legally binding document that gathers and harmonizes all environmental laws in one single document. Given the impact made by the Asia Pacific region on global sustainability, it will have an essential role to play in this initiative in coming years. For instance, regional leaders will need to think carefully about four issues raised earlier in the briefing on integration with the SDGs as part of effort to streamline and harmonise processes.

However, given the magnitude of Asia Pacific’s impact, the region arguably needs a different approach to environmental governance not only in the medium but near-term. Rather than spending considerable time and energy to work out legally binding international agreements, it might be more effective in the near term if various multiple environmental initiatives are further promoted not only among countries in the region, but non-state stakeholders, particularly civil society organizations (CSOs), businesses and cities. In this way, the role of governments should shift towards those of enablers and facilitators, rather than that of direct implementers. This repositioning might also make it easier for the countries to get behind a coherent set of actions and messages in future Summits.

⁹ “Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly”, September 19, 2017, Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/19/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly>



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