
Evaluation of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC)

DRAFT
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North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC)

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CBD	Convention for Biological Diversity
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2019, designation by the World Health Organization for the disease caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2
CSO(s)	Civil Society Organisation(s)
DLD	Desertification and Land Degradation
DLDD-NEAN	Northeast Asia Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought Network
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
EDD	(ESCAP's) Environment and Development Division
ENEA	(United Nations ESCAP) East and North-East Asia Office
ESCAP	(United Nations) Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GHG(s)	Greenhouse gas emission(s)
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LCC	Low Carbon Cities
LDN	Land Degradation Neutrality
M & E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MPA(s)	Marine Protected Area(s)
NEA	North-East Asia (subregion and/or member countries)
NEACAP	North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership
NEA-LCCP	North-East Asia Low Carbon City Platform
NEAMSP	North-East Asia Multi-Stakeholder Plan
NEASPEC	North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation
NFP(s)	National Focal Point(s)
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee
PoW	Programme of Work
ROK	Republic of Korea
ROP	Rules of Procedure
SPC	Science and Policy Committee
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SOM	Senior Officials Meeting
SPMD	(ESCAP's) Strategy and Programme Management Division
TAP	Transboundary Air Pollution
TC	Technical Centre(s)
TOC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme

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Executive Summary

OVERVIEW OF NEASPEC: THE OBJECT AND PURPOSE OF THIS EVALUATION

Initiated in 1993 as a voluntary framework to address environmental challenges in the subregion of North-East Asia (NEA), the “North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC) is constituted by 6 member States: China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the Russian Federation. These countries have been cooperating with respect to Nature Conservation, Transboundary Air Pollution (TAP), Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), Low Carbon Cities (LCCs), Desertification and Land Degradation (DLD). These five themes, which have a transboundary orientation in varying degrees, provide entry points for collaboration amongst the member States and relate to Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

PURPOSE, SCOPE, OBJECTIVE, AND INTENDED USE OF THIS REPORT

The main purpose of this endeavour and the resulting Evaluation Report is to contribute to deliberations to be carried out during the upcoming meeting of NEASPEC’s governing body, the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM), planned for September 2020. This Report is intended to provide input to inspire and inform NEASPEC’s strategy development process for the upcoming 5-year period (2021-2025) as well as give a view to the medium- and longer-term horizon and potential of this inter-governmental platform. The primary target audience for this Report includes NEASPEC member States, project partners, the NEASPEC Secretariat, and ESCAP management.

METHODOLOGY, TIMEFRAME OF THIS ASSESSMENT, AND LIMITATIONS

This exercise used an evidence-based approach with robust analytical underpinning. It relied on extensive consultation of stakeholders and an assessment of NEASPEC’s institutional/organisational arrangement and programmatic activities [focussed on the period of the current Strategic Plan (2016-2020)]. Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered with the aim of developing and triangulating insights into areas of the platform’s Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Sustainability, and Mainstreaming of Gender/Human Rights, and its fundamental strengths and shortfalls. Evidence-based conclusions were drawn from these findings, which provided the basis for recommendations to enhance NEASPEC’s ability to fulfil its envisaged mandate in the context of subregional priorities for environmental cooperation. The evaluation was carried out during April – July 2020. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent restrictions on international travel, envisaged field missions were replaced with virtual consultation (through 1:1 or small group interviews of 41 member State representatives and project partners), together with an online survey of 250 stakeholders (with 65.2% response rate), and participation as an observer in 3 NEASPEC-convened meetings that were shifted to a remote platform, related to Nature Conservation, TAP, and MPAs during May-June 2020.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

RELEVANCE

NEASPEC's Unique Added Value

Beyond the platform's achievement of laying a foundation for environmental cooperation in the challenging NEA setting and its longstanding role in fostering subregional coordination, NEASPEC's unique added value has been linked to its inclusiveness, its success in balancing the interests of six member States with varying levels of development and priorities, and its ability to enable breakthroughs on inter-governmental cooperation. It has achieved this by leveraging a strong science-policy linkage and navigating sensitive political territory. The latter has been achieved primarily by focussing on cooperation and coordination with national implications (i.e. by pursuing the exchange of information, knowledge, and experience as first steps), more so than explicitly pushing for transboundary cooperation.

Strengthening of Coordinated Actions to Address Environmental Challenges in North-East Asia

NEASPEC's relevance is linked to its utility for member States. In fulfilling an objective need to develop an institutional basis for cross-country environmental cooperation, NEASPEC has incrementally pursued the strengthening of coordinated actions under its programmatic agenda. While coordinated action has increased with the creation of structures accompanied by more formalised procedures, the pace has been slow, and the timeline is extended.

Responsiveness to Member States' Needs and Demands

As a platform, NEASPEC provides ample opportunity for member States to express their needs and interests. While deliberate efforts are undertaken to request feedback, garner proposals, and ensure regular solicitation of national positions vis-à-vis thematic activities, the SOM's current operationalisation as a 'working-level' governing body channels the member States into being more reactive than proactive and increases reliance on the Secretariat to propose areas for collective action. This dynamic is enhanced due to the desire for a consensus-driven approach.

Conclusion

At the very least, NEASPEC has achieved the minimum of what was intended in setting a framework for cross-country environmental cooperation. Its longevity is taken as an indicator of its value to member States and other stakeholders alike. Situated in a landscape crowded with a plethora of actors and initiatives, NEASPEC stands out in the quality of dialogue that it facilitates and its ability to navigate sensitive political territory in its pursuit of environmental diplomacy. Its diverse membership and the degree of political/economic influence and environmental footprint that its six nations represent support the conclusion that NEASPEC serves a strategic purpose, which no other platform can easily perform.

NEASPEC's relevance is directly linked to its usefulness to its member States. It is aligned with achieving their obligations related to international treaties and the vision of Agenda 2030; however, NEASPEC's ability to support and accelerate progress towards these commitments has not been fully recognized nor has its potential been purposely leveraged by its member States to this end. This conclusion is evidenced by: i) member States' shortfall in the staffing of its governing body with sufficiently high level decision-makers (as was intended, and arguably needed); ii) allowing domestic political considerations to override effectiveness/efficiency ramifications from the frequent change of the National Focal Points (NFPs); iii) the preference to focus NEASPEC's

impact on strengthening national capacities and coordination rather than more comprehensively pursuing transboundary challenges; and iv) not ensuring a reliable, independent, and adequate funding stream to enable the platform to implement a higher level of ambition.

EFFECTIVENESS

NEASPEC's Pursuit of Subregional Environmental Cooperation

In the light of its founding framework (1996), Vision Statement (2000), and Strategic Plan (2016-2020), NEASPEC's development has evolved, particularly over the past 5 years and positive strides have been made vis-à-vis its key objective to promote common policy dialogue on approaches and coordinated action on environmental issues in NEA. While stakeholders are generally satisfied with NEASPEC's performance, its untapped potential was highlighted.

Key Programmatic Results and Achievements:

a. Nature Conservation

NEASPEC was able to identify and fill a gap that has triggered important multilateral and bilateral cooperation that sets the stage for deepening cross-country cooperation related to flagship species and habitat protection in biodiversity hotspots. While this direction has gained momentum and is satisfying for some stakeholders, others assert that stronger steering would be opportune to set this thematic area on a course and level of ambition that is better aligned with an 'end game' that deepens transboundary commitments to environmental cooperation.

b. Transboundary Air Pollution (TAP)

Albeit over a decade in the making, NEASPEC's work in this domain has resulted in a voluntary framework to improve air quality in the subregion, which has been amplified through the ESCAP setting to impact the Asia Pacific region and subsequently, carried to the UN General Assembly of nations at large. The profile and impact of NEASPEC's activities related to TAP demonstrate the catalytic impact of strengthening the push-pull dynamic of NEASPEC and ESCAP.

c. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

In searching to define a distinctive territory on which to work and reflecting member States' preference to focus within national borders and avoid a transboundary orientation in this thematic domain has resulted in a priority programmatic area operating with limited scope, with a focus on experience-sharing at local government level, which does not appear to be consistent with NEASPEC's competence, resourcing, and the nature of its infrastructure. To date, neither NEASPEC nor ESCAP have sufficiently leveraged the opportunity to drive catalytic impact through the recent ESCAP resolution to promote conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia-Pacific, reflective of a disconnect between these two inter-governmental structures.

d. Low Carbon Cities (LCCs)

Having identified a value-added niche on a relatively crowded landscape, the resulting focus on subnational government level has generated challenges for implementation under the NEASPEC structure. While facilitating helpful exchange and described as having a well-defined goal and process that includes peer review and comparative country assessment, the mismatch between the effort and timelines required to identify and engage the 'right' local government actors outstrips the networks and resourcing of this programme. Strengthening the link with related activities under

ESCAP's Urban Development Programme has the potential to impact a significantly wider group of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. To date, this connection has not gained traction.

e. Desertification and Land Degradation (DLD)

While this thematic area is well-suited to NEASPEC's transboundary agenda, the extent of duplication with other instruments has made it difficult to identify a value-added contribution, despite the amplification that would potentially be available from better synchronisation with ESCAP, a missed opportunity to date. At least two member States are interested to continue collaboration in this domain, pointing to the links between land, security, sustainability, and the opportunity to address Gender Equality/Human Rights (GE/HR) that could provide a more strategic future direction for this thematic domain.

Conclusion

Assessed using the lens that reflects its purpose, NEASPEC's effectiveness has been judged as very high. NEASPEC's purpose is to function as the political and diplomatic infrastructure for multi-state discussion and cooperation on environmental issues. The high assessment of its effectiveness is based on NEASPEC's capacity to facilitate cooperation between its six very diverse NEA member nations, integrate technical experts' input, respond to the occasional request or proposal from a member State or ESCAP, its respect of the agreed protocols, and the timeliness of the implementation of decisions made at the SOM.

In its own context, as a multilateral cooperation platform in NEA, arguably NEASPEC is performing precisely as designed. NEASPEC's purpose is not to count Black-faced spoonbills or perform molecular genetic analysis of Amur tiger faeces. Its purpose, which it has successfully fulfilled for 27 years, is in providing a forum for the involved nations to discuss the question, "shall we count Black-faced spoonbills?", and if so, "who should do the counting, in which way?". The outputs of the Black-faced spoonbill study and the observation of transborder vagaries of Amur tigers, in and of themselves, do not contribute to the progress of human civilisation, per se. But they do act as key indicators of the viability of the NEA ecosystem, which, in turn, is needed to support humanity, both in the region and beyond. The obvious question emerges: does NEASPEC itself need to commandeer such studies, or could it rely on similar studies organised by other initiatives or agencies [such as UNEP, Conservation International, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Greenpeace, etc.]? Irrespective of who observes the migrating birds or tracks the tigers, NEASPEC's role is to be the forum for its six member States to decide what indicators need to be monitored in order to appropriately check the pulse and health of the wider ecosystem and be in position to select how these indicators should be monitored and by whom.

The embedding of the NEASPEC framework within a UN-related structure and its operational norms has the full support of its member States, for its inclusiveness, multilateralism, and consensus-based approach. The compatibility of this consensus-based approach arguably reflects an intrinsic facet of East Asian culture that a Western observer may perceive as a vacuum. Consequently, there is a risk that UN colleagues might feel that in the absence of leadership from a single member State, NEASPEC's ESCAP-embedded Secretariat should be taking a leadership role, while the NEASPEC Secretariat itself, which is embedded within this same East Asian culture, fully understands the impropriety of taking leadership and therefore insists on the community of member States, through the SOM, to drive the consensus towards decision-making. This explains why there is no perceived leadership as well as why there may also be no perceived need for leadership.

One consequence of this mutual deference is that it facilitates regular injections of ideas, which, as long as they adhere to the underlying tacit values and principles, are never rejected. The extent to which proposals comply is not necessarily measured and certainly not made explicit, because those values and principles themselves are not explicit. While a governance body might be held accountable to ensure a certain level of due diligence in the choice of active thematic areas and activities, there is less inclination to do so under NEASPEC as the values and principles are currently tacit. As the governing body, the SOM, is acting in recursive responsiveness with the Secretariat, no single entity feels accountable for ensuring due diligence of the choices being made.

In its mandate as a service to the SOM and member States, and in order to preserve its legitimacy, it is incumbent on the NEASPEC Secretariat to demonstrate a high level of responsiveness to member States' needs, interests, and requests as well as deliver on expectations for service level quality. This drive for responsiveness (observed in relation to member States' reactive mode) inherently increases the reliance and load on the Secretariat to carry out necessary sensemaking, negotiation, coordination, research, and preparation (which together, accumulate to a resource-intensive overhead). Protocols and formalised procedures (which drive pressure for and scrutiny of their compliance) have been adopted specifically to temper progress in order to facilitate response to domestic political priorities (and whims) and/or to buy time to carry out needed consultation with the high-level decision-makers who are best-equipped to articulate national positions on proposed directions (but are absent from the SOM). Based on this evidence, it is concluded that it is the intention of member States' for NEASPEC to proceed with caution and prudence.

The implication of the resulting, somewhat arbitrary and random, choice of thematic activities serves as an obstacle to effective communications, public relations, and advocacy. Translating this into practical terms, nobody knows how to leverage NEASPEC in an effective manner.

While addressing some highly visible and distinctive gaps, NEASPEC's thematic agenda is not driven by a formal Theory of Change, a logical framework, or a structured breakdown of strategic goals. This is natural and understandable because, per the establishment of its framework, NEASPEC was never set up to have a goal. NEASPEC is an infrastructure for multilateral cooperation on environmental issues.

The assessment of the way in which NEASPEC's thematic agenda has evolved reflects a blend of technical and diplomatic opportunities, which reflect the mix of inputs and direction channelled from its field of stakeholders (member States and project partners) into and mediated by the NEASPEC Secretariat. The areas identified for cooperation under NEASPEC's thematic agenda reflect a tacit desire to have high visibility and catalytic impact, and sometimes, to respond to pressure from the wider global community (e.g. TAP, LCCs). The resulting programmatic choices are occasionally perceived as 'pet projects'.

While the eventual selection of thematic areas seems to reflect some underlying strategic principles, there is a lack of governance and steering that would allow NEASPEC, both SOM and Secretariat, to deliberately select future thematic areas based on such principles.

NEASPEC's progress, admittedly slow, has accelerated over the past 5 years since the establishment of its first Strategic Plan. While stakeholders are generally satisfied with NEASPEC's performance, its potential contributions are not fully coherent, and therefore, have not yet been fully recognized by its member States and ESCAP, let alone exploited.

NEASPEC's programmatic agenda does not have strategic, coherent vision – and certainly far away from one that is consistent with an 'end game' that deepens within-country and transboundary commitments to environmental cooperation, consistent with intentionally accelerating progress towards Agenda 2030.

In the event that other instruments are more suitable than NEASPEC and are currently being more powerfully deployed in the above-mentioned direction, it would be understandable to allow NEASPEC to continue on its current, cautious, relatively slow value-adding trajectory. Should this not be the case, then the sustained reluctance of member States to strengthen and use NEASPEC to support themselves in more expeditiously and more robustly achieving their global commitments vis-à-vis the SDGs is concluded to be an expression of the individual and collective political will of the involved member States.

EFFICIENCY

The Pertinence of Efficiency

As a project, NEASPEC would be judged quite harshly for its timeliness of execution and cost-effectiveness. As an inter-governmental platform, imposing an efficiency regime would undermine NEASPEC's purpose and the strength of its political function in so far that this infrastructure has been established to facilitate inter-state cooperation with a process and rhythm that privilege political and diplomatic considerations over efficiency.

Conclusion

Using efficiency as a key criterion to assess NEASPEC's relevance and contributions risks distracting attention from focussing on the nature and impact of its contribution. Imposing an efficiency regime onto this mechanism would defeat NEASPEC's purpose and undermine the strength of its political and diplomatic functions. Its processes have been set up to facilitate the pursuit of enduring inter-governmental cooperation, with a process and rhythm that privilege political considerations over efficiency. These processes should necessarily be free from the constraints of misguided scrutiny and pressures for accountability, which are factors that are vital for goal-driven projects and programmes.

MAINSTREAMING OF GENDER EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Gender Equality and Human Rights

NEASPEC's comparatively timid treatment of this topic, to date, was justified by a combination of inadequate competence (for connecting GE/HR with NEASPEC's work), concern that it would politicize and thereby impair the platform's cross-country cooperation, and differing notions regarding the pace and way in which to approach these considerations. Acknowledging NEASPEC's association with the UN and its obligation to address GE/HR, aspects in DLD, MPA, and Nature Conservation were uncovered that could be entry points to tackle this challenge.

Conclusion

While acknowledging there are differing notions across the member States regarding the pace and way in which to approach GE/HR, by virtue of NEASPEC's embedding within and resourcing under the UN framework, there is an obligation to address these issues driven from the highest UN level. The recognition that addressing GE/HR is integral to achieving sustainable development provides a

way forward. In this light, the relatively benign, potentially non-controversial entry points within NEASPEC's work on DLD, MPAs, and LCCs that have been identified provide a foundation on which to build further.

SUSTAINABILITY, RESOURCE MOBILISATION, PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS

Sustainability Prospects of this Platform

NEASPEC's sustainability is not in question, given its longevity, perceived relevance, and the substantial support available through its association and accommodation within the UN system, although the earmarking of funding, diversity of contributions provided across the set of its member States, and the lack of predictability in funding flows are issues of growing concern.

Resource Mobilisation and Utilisation

Contrasting perceptions of the platform's financial sustainability (i.e. NEASPEC is not faced with actual funding constraints versus a perceived need for substantially more funding to enable the mechanism to tap its potential) are indicative of a weakness in fund utilisation. This effect is set to be heightened in relation to COVID-19 which saw the replacement of many planned activities with virtual convening. Savings strategies deployed to smooth the unpredictable flow of contributions strengthen their conviction of poor utilisation of provided funds, undermining the legitimacy of requests for increased funding. This is generating a vicious cycle of deteriorating credibility and potentially inhibiting member States from feeling compelled to embark on a more ambitious programme under NEASPEC.

Secretariat's Role, Capacities, Constraints, and Risks

With the 2011 inauguration of a permanent secretariat in Incheon, NEASPEC has benefitted from a marked increase in support. The Secretariat's competence, professionalism, and commitment are tremendously valued and effective. While suitable organisational measures have been undertaken to manage the undulating workflow and compliance with the Rules of Procedure (ROPs), the expanding and diverging portfolio of thematic activities, rising expectations for service level quality, and the extensive level of sensemaking and horizon scanning to proactively support member States is outstripping the Secretariat's resources and generates growing risk for the platform.

Leveraging Partnerships

Engaging national institutions as project partners has successfully functioned to mobilise resources and bolster the science-policy linkage underlying and driving NEASPEC's inter-governmental environmental cooperation. However, the transactional approach to their engagement misses an opportunity for the platform to gain catalytic power.

Conclusion

As long as NEASPEC reflects the will of the member States, its sustainability is not in question.

The arrangement of being embedded within ESCAP, which has not been questioned since NEASPEC's creation, is perhaps unwittingly stopping member States from taking stronger national and collective ownership for this endeavour and strengthening their resolve to cooperate in a deeper and more binding manner.

The inter-governmental cooperation under NEASPEC would be more effectively served through the provision of unearmarked funds and a reliable, predictable, and adequate flow of resources consistent with its ability to play a more visible, progressive, and impactful role. The reluctance to take up recommendations and exhortations to move the resourcing of this platform to a more predictable basis is consistent with a lack of political will on the part of the member States, both nationally and collectively.

Savings strategies deployed by the Secretariat to smooth the ebb and flow of unpredictable member State contributions add to their conviction that there is a poor utilisation of provided funds, which undermines the legitimacy of requests for further maintenance as well as increased funding. With the shift to virtual meetings imposed by COVID-19 travel restrictions, the recent recognition that online collaboration is not only possible but can also be fruitful risks feeding into a vicious cycle of weakening perceptions about the need for funds. These elements are also blurring comprehension of the actual resourcing requirements for pursuing a more meaningful agenda.

While the establishment of a permanent secretariat in Incheon and its staffing with a highly competent and committed small team, together with appointing a member State as rotating chair, have improved the resourcing and consistency of support available to NEASPEC, the role of and demands managed by the Secretariat, currently underplayed by the label of 'coordination', together with increasing complexity of the platform's expanding and diverging thematic portfolio, is exacting a toll on the team and risks to outstrip its resourcing and resilience.

A more strategic approach to partnership that goes beyond the transactional engagement of national institutes would unleash further financial and in-kind support from project partners. This could also drive catalytic impact, provided that project partners could be linked together in a more formalised way under NEASPEC. Currently, the scheduling of the SOM is the primordial driver of NEASPEC's cadence. The implication of pursuing resourcing through strengthening of partnership arrangements is that NEASPEC may be pressured to align itself with the priorities, working rhythms, and milestones of key partners and initiatives, rather than drive its own strategic agenda. Should such a situation materialise, it would present a significant risk to the integrity of the NEASPEC framework.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF THE INSTITUTIONAL/ORGANISATIONAL SET-UP

NEASPEC's Governance Mechanism: Assets, Efficiency, Effectiveness

Institutionally, NEASPEC draws strength from its linkage into Foreign Affairs ministries, which are authorized to strike inter-governmental agreements and can facilitate outreach to appropriate national entities for coordination on the thematic programme. However, the shortfall in realising the anticipated level of participation in the SOM and the frequent change in NFPs are seen as negatively impacting the efficient and effective use of the platform's resources.

Progress Towards Envisaged Comprehensive Mechanism

While there has been practical, step-by-step evolution over 27 years since NEASPEC's creation, including a SOM-level request in 2007 to investigate options to strengthen this platform, the modality has not risen to the comprehensive mechanism envisaged by its member States upon its establishment.

Leverage from the NEASPEC–ESCAP Linkage

The anticipated leverage for both involved entities from embedding this independent subregional cooperation platform within the current organisational setting has not been fully realised. There is insufficient comprehension of NEASPEC’s assets, strategic agenda, and *modus operandi*.

Conclusion

Mid-level SOM participation, frequent NFP changes, a voluntary approach and minimal resourcing can be seen as indicators of mediocre political will of member States. This approach could equally reflect a deliberate political will to operate in a measured and prudent manner, taking all interests into account, not just the environmental agenda. In operating NEASPEC as a ‘working level’ apparatus, insufficient political support has been generated to strengthen the institutional basis for subregional cooperation. By implication, as NFPs and SOM delegates are primarily mid-level and not senior, the room for manoeuvre to shift the power that NEASPEC wields is currently limited.

The member States have ecological interdependence, with deterioration of common pool resources (sea, air) and transboundary ecosystems with socio-economic and environmental implications. While there is a high level of complex interdependence amongst China, Japan, and ROK (stemming from high intra-regional trade), the extent to which this applies to all six states is not clear. The drive to strengthen subregional governance is related to both the level of complex interdependence sown through deepening economic interaction and “institutionalized complex interdependence”¹. Additionally, exogenous inputs and external brokers can bring member States into discussion by identifying agendas for cooperation. While NEASPEC’s embedding in ESCAP creates potential for these triggering and consolidating effects, insufficiently deep comprehension on the part of ESCAP actors, including its leadership team, of NEASPEC’s relevance and usefulness for generating meaningful contributions to ESCAP’s Programme of Work (PoW) has led to NEASPEC being an unappreciated and under-utilised in responding to its calls to action and the agenda-setting function for its member States.

The profile and impact of NEASPEC’s activities related to TAP clearly demonstrate the catalytic impact of strengthening the push-pull dynamic between NEASPEC and ESCAP. There is a golden opportunity to link NEASPEC’s *raison d’être* more strongly to achieving member States’ obligations related to international treaties and Agenda 2030. Translating this into an operational scope and substance is a demanding task. While ESCAP has the internal capabilities to contribute to this challenge, these cannot be easily marshalled under the current organisational set-up. NEASPEC could question whether the interests of the member States are best being served by a Secretariat hosted within ESCAP’s ENEA subregion or whether a different modality might be more appropriate.

Given the magnitude of the missed opportunity, the significance and demonstration effect of this particular cohort of member States nudged into taking stronger leadership, and the degree to which NEASPEC is being overlooked and siloed within the much larger ESCAP organisation (itself struggling with its own silo effects, transition/succession issues, and inadequate delegation), the conclusion is that the vision and direction needs to be determined at Executive Secretary level and communicated down through the ESCAP organisation. Without this level of engagement and direction, and the

¹ Institutionalizing Complex and Ecological Interdependence: Subregional Environmental Governance in Asia and the Pacific’, S. Nam, *Environmental Policy* (2008), Vol. 16, No. 3, p15

appropriate resourcing and authority, the observed disconnects will persist.

RECOMMENDATIONS

<p>Recommendation 1: FOR THE SOM</p>	<p>Decide whether or not to move forward in operationalising NEASPEC in a way that would enable the realisation of its founding vision to be a comprehensive environmental cooperation mechanism.</p>
<p>Recommendation 2: FOR THE SOM</p>	<p>Review the 1996 founding framework and update NEASPEC’s charter so that it is aligned with the ambition and intention of the involved member States, as informed by the 27 years of cooperation and coordination and in light of the accelerative effect of using a Strategic Plan. As part of this endeavour, it would be pertinent to set a long-term vision, mission, and goals – and to make values and principles that are presently tacit more explicit.</p>
<p>Recommendation 3: FOR THE SOM and NFPs</p>	<p>Honour the notion of high-level participation in the SOM, as per the founding vision, and provide for significantly more stability of designated NFPs.</p>
<p>Recommendation 4: FOR THE SOM AND NEASPEC SECRETARIAT</p>	<p>Review the pertinence of embedding NEASPEC’s Secretariat within ESCAP’s ENEA office and whether this hosting best suits the mechanism’s purpose and needs.</p>
<p>Recommendation 5: FOR ESCAP’S EXECUTIVE SECRETARY</p>	<p>Establish more formal links between NEASPEC and ESCAP and direct the relevant touchpoints in ESCAP in order to leverage the push-pull dynamic of NEASPEC-ESCAP in serving the calls to action of ESCAP member States, of which NEASPEC’s membership is an important cohort, with vital leadership and demonstration potential.</p>
<p>Recommendation 6: FOR THE SOM</p>	<p>Revise the funding modalities to enhance the reliability and level of funding flows, and review options for progressively moving towards more equitable contributions from all member States, with a roadmap towards this achievement.</p>
<p>Recommendation 7: FOR SOM AND ESCAP</p>	<p>Enhance the resourcing of the NEASPEC Secretariat.</p>
<p>Recommendation 8: FOR THE NEASPEC SECRETARIAT</p>	<p>Use virtual meetings to enhance the frequency and quality of the inter-governmental connectedness being pursued under the auspices of NEASPEC.</p>

1. Introduction

- 1) This Report relates to the evaluation of the “North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation” (hereafter, NEASPEC), an inter-governmental platform composed of six member States [China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the Russian Federation] that have been working together since 1993 under this framework to address environmental challenges in the subregion of North-East Asia (NEA). This evaluation was commissioned by the NEASPEC Secretariat, at the request of its governing body, during the 23rd Senior Officials Meeting (SOM-23) convened during 9-10 October 2019 in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.
- 2) This evaluation was carried out by an independent Swiss-based consultant, Dr. Joyce Miller, under the responsibility of an Evaluation Reference Group chaired by the Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (hereafter, ESCAP), and composed of members drawn from the NEASPEC Secretariat and ESCAP.
- 3) Working from a remit to better understand the relevance and effectiveness of NEASPEC in addressing subregional environmental challenges, having been in operation for over 25 years, this exercise was undertaken in support of NEASPEC’s upcoming strategy planning process. In this light, the evaluation adopted two perspectives: a) backward-looking: assessing NEASPEC’s performance and achievements vis-à-vis the current Strategic Plan (2016-2020) and the platform’s strengths/challenges with respect to its institutional setup, partnership arrangements, and resource mobilization; b) forward-looking: gathering feedback, aspirations, concerns, and recommendations from the member States, project partners, the NEASPEC Secretariat, ESCAP, and other stakeholders as input to preparing NEASPEC’s next Strategic Plan (2021-2025).
- 4) The conduct and results of this exercise feed into this strategic planning process, specifically forming an input to the SOM-24. Planned to be convened in a virtual manner in late September 2020, its agenda is focussed on ways to enhance the relevance, utility, and impact of the NEASPEC platform in the context of subregional priorities for environmental cooperation and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This global development framework encapsulates 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with 169 targets related to economic, social development, and environmental protection under an overarching goal of poverty eradication, in pursuit of peace and prosperity for all by 2030.

1.1 Background

- 5) The NEASPEC platform was established in 1993 as a follow-up to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). Since its creation, NEASPEC has been hosted by ESCAP, itself a much larger regional inter-governmental cooperation framework. Under this platform, its 53 member States (including NEASPEC’s 6 member States) and 9 associate members are pursuing inclusive and sustainable economic and social development in the Asia-Pacific region. ESCAP is one of five regional commissions under the United Nations Economic and Social Council’s jurisdiction.
- 6) In promoting environmental cooperation and sustainable development across the NEA subregion under the NEASPEC inter-governmental framework, its six member States have been cooperating in activities organised under five thematic areas: Nature Conservation, Transboundary Air Pollution (TAP), Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), Low Carbon Cities (LCCs), Desertification and Land Degradation (DLD). These programmatic activities, which relate to the SDGs and have an inherent transboundary orientation in varying degrees, provide entry points and an infrastructure for collaboration amongst NEASPEC’s member States.

1.2 Objective, Use, and Scope of this Evaluation

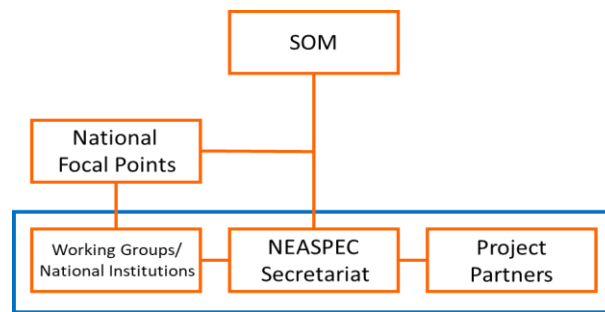
- 7) The main purpose of this exercise is to contribute to deliberations to be carried out during SOM-24 (September 2020) by providing input to inspire and inform NEASPEC's strategy development process for the upcoming 5-year period as well as give a view to the medium- and longer-term horizon and potential of this platform. In this light, this exercise has generated evidence-based lessons and actionable recommendations for improving the performance of the platform in fulfilling its mandate in the context of subregional priorities for environmental cooperation, based on consultation of its stakeholders and an assessment of programmatic activities and its institutional arrangement.
- 8) A Terms of Reference (ToR) with evaluation criteria provided by the NEASPEC Secretariat (Annex 1) directed the evaluation to:
 - assess NEASPEC's programmatic results and achievements against the Strategic Plan 2016-2020;
 - assess NEASPEC's performance against (ESCAP's) standard evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, mainstreaming of gender and human rights, and sustainability;
 - identify strengths and challenges in NEASPEC's current institutional and organizational setup;
 - analyse its partnership arrangements and resource mobilization;
 - formulate concrete, actionable recommendations for improvement in fulfilling its mandate in the context of subregional priorities for environmental cooperation.
- 9) The scope and content of the exercise was subsequently clarified through discussions carried out with Evaluation Reference Group members during the inception phase, which:
 - provided important refinements and prioritization;
 - strengthened the orientation of this exercise towards assessing the strategic aspects of the platform rather checking the minutiae of programmatic implementation;
 - deepened the consultation with stakeholders, with the aim of backgrounding an audit orientation in favour of foregrounding the opportunity to raise the quality of thinking regarding the level of ambition, relevance, effectiveness, and intended impact of collaboration under the NEASPEC platform.
- 10) The primary target audience for this Evaluation Report includes the member States of NEASPEC, project partners, the NEASPEC Secretariat, and ESCAP management.

2. The Object and Context of Evaluation

2.1 NEASPEC's Institutional Arrangements

- 11) NEASPEC operates under the overall guidance of its member States, expressed through National Focal Points (NFPs) and annual meeting and deliberations of its governance body, the SOM (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - NEASPEC's Institutional Arrangement



- 13) ESCAP has hosted the NEASPEC Secretariat since its inception, initially within its Environment and Development Division (EDD, based in Bangkok) and since 2010, under ESCAP’s East and North-East Asia (ENEA) Office located in Incheon, one of ESCAP’s four subregional offices that function “as a means to put into action the analytical and normative work of ESCAP at subregional and national levels”². From the ESCAP side, NEASPEC activities have been framed as providing the ENEA office with “opportunities to promote smallscale but practical cooperation in areas of common concerns” and enable outreach to the member States”. In this respect, the ENEA Office is expected to³:
- ensure close consultation/coordination with national counterparts, implementing agencies, and project partners to promote national ownership of programmatic implementation;
 - liaise with multilateral/international mechanisms to harness their expertise and build synergies;
 - link NEASPEC activities with relevant regional processes and ESCAP programmes through EDD by mobilizing NEASPEC to provide subregional inputs/support for regional processes on SDGs.
- 14) NEASPEC’s programmatic activities are pursued through Working Groups composed of representatives of national institutions of the member States. This mechanism facilitates and promotes regular consultation, which is intended to enhance the sense of ownership of NEASPEC on the part of its member States. Within the thematic activities, a range of instruments are deployed (e.g. expert groups, expert workshops, consultation meetings, international fora and seminars, roundtables, review meetings) to enable exchange and consultation amongst the involved parties.
- 15) Depending on the maturity of discussion and collaboration, further structures have been formed to more deliberately and formally architect subregional cooperation. For instance, the North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership (NEACAP) was formed in October 2018, together with an accompanying Science and Policy Committee (SPC), which steers its activities and provides direction, drawing on expertise of designated partners (Technical Centres – TCs). Composed of two experts from each Member State, the SCP functions to promote science-policy linkages through guiding technical assessments. Designated research institutions in the member States support the work of this partnership, which itself is described as a voluntary framework to address transboundary air pollution in the subregion.

2.2 Current Strategic Plan (2016-2020)

- 16) Following SOM-20 (February 2016) discussions, which developed the notion that NEASPEC could benefit from having a longer-term strategy and approach to effectively and efficiently address the subregion’s priority areas (i.e. the five thematic areas operating under the platform; see ¶16), the first Strategic Plan

² <https://www.unescap.org/subregional-office>

³ Mentioned in Executive Summary of (ESCAP) Project Document: Secretariat Operation and Activity Implementation of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC II)

was adopted, spanning the 2016-2020 period, with three over-arching goals:

- Enhance coordinated actions to address subregional environmental challenges, including climate change;
- Mobilize mutual support to manage domestic environmental issues in member States;
- Contribute to the implementation of national, regional, and global goals for sustainable development, in particular, environment-related SDGs.

17) The approaches envisaged to work towards these strategic goals include:

- Strengthening science-policy linkages in programme development and implementation;
- Operating effective platforms and networks for member States and other key stakeholders to enhance subregional environmental cooperation and coordinated actions;
- Joint actions to maximize the efficiency and impact of subregional cooperation;
- Supporting knowledge sharing and capacity development amongst member governments and other stakeholders, as appropriate;
- Identifying and enhancing potential linkages between NEASPEC and subregional programmes and regional and global goals.

2.3 Project Document, Results Framework, and Resourcing

- 18) To operationalise the current Strategic Plan (2016-2020) and provide a framework to resource NEASPEC's ongoing support needs and governance, an ESCAP project, "Secretariat Operation and Activity Implementation of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC II), was conceived with an initial timeframe of 1 July 2016 to 31 December 2018, subsequently extended to 1 July 2016 to 31 December 2020.
- 19) Within the ESCAP setting in which NEASPEC is accommodated, this project has been categorized as a subprogramme. This subprogramme is elaborated as part of ESCAP's Programme of Work (PoW). Within the afore-mentioned Project Document, ESCAP's ENEA Office is identified as NEASPEC's lead implementor and ESCAP's Environment and Development Division (EDD) is named as another implementing unit. Within its six member States, NEASPEC targets government officials, national institutions, academic institutions, and civil society organisations (CSOs).
- 20) The NEASPEC Secretariat and the platform's operations are resourced and organised according to UN rules and ESCAP procedures. For the 5-year period of its implementation, which will reach a close at the end of 2020, this project had a budget of USD 863,000, which was drawn from NEASPEC's Core Fund and Project Fund, contributed by China, ROK, and the Russian Federation.
- 21) The Project Document, which englobes NEASPEC's Secretariat, operations, and thematic agenda, was developed, approved, and is administered under the ESCAP context. Similar to the approach used by the UN and other international cooperation initiatives, this document contains a results framework that elaborates the outputs, underpinned by a set of key activities, which are expected to deliver the envisaged outcome; in this case: 'strengthened knowledge and capacity of policy makers in the ministries of environment and sustainable development to develop and implement subregional agendas for environmental sustainability' (see Table 1). Together with the Annual Project Progress Reports provided by the NEASPEC Secretariat, this material serves as the basis for gauging programmatic results and achievements against the current Strategic Plan.

Table 1 - Results Framework Relative to NEASPEC's Strategic Plan (2016-2020)

Project Results	Indicators	Means of Verification
Project outcome Strengthened knowledge and capacity of policy makers in the ministries of environment and sustainable development to develop and implement subregional agendas for environmental sustainability	At a minimum, 1 new activity under each of the 5 topics developed and implemented during next project cycle	Country Statements at Commission Sessions, SOMs, project meetings SOMs' conclusion, recommendations
Output 1 Enhanced knowledge of member governments and major stakeholders on subregional situation of sustainable development, through strengthened subregional dialogue and cooperation for advancing joint efforts for sustainable development	At a minimum, 4 SOMs held and 1 specific activity to review and discuss programmes under this Project	Government reports, official documents Country Statements
<p>Key Activities</p> <p>1.1 Review progress of implementation of ongoing programmes and activities under NEASPEC framework</p> <p>1.2 Support dialogue amongst member States on strengthening subregional environmental cooperation through NEASPEC</p> <p>1.3 Establish and operate a Working Group on National Institutions and other relevant stakeholders for each programmatic area</p> <p>1.4 Organise the annual SOM including preparation of meeting documents, logistical arrangements, and preparation of the outcome document</p> <p>1.5 Facilitate dialogue amongst key stakeholders in member States as well as other relevant subregional, regional, and international organizations to identify and develop new joint initiatives in support of the implementation of the SDGs directly related to NEASPEC's programmatic areas</p>		
Output 2 Expanded and enhanced subregional cooperation to address key challenges to sustainable development in North-East Asia in accordance with recommended objectives and activities outlined in NEASPEC Strategic Plan 2016-2020	At a minimum, 2 specific events held for each activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting reports including SOM Report
<p>Key Activities</p> <p>2.1 Facilitate information-sharing, joint study, and cooperation amongst member States and relevant institutions on transboundary air pollution</p> <p>2.2 Implement joint projects for 6 target species under the NEASPEC Nature Conservation Strategy with enhanced and strengthened transboundary cooperation amongst all stakeholders</p> <p>2.3 Operationalize the North-East Asia Marine Protected Network (NEAMPAN) to support partnerships amongst target Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and stakeholders, and enhance capacity to achieve, inter alia, the Aichi Biodiversity Targets related to marine and coastal biodiversity in a holistic manner</p> <p>2.4 Operationalize a subregional platform for Low Carbon Cities to support communications and cooperation amongst stakeholders, and link cities and major stakeholders both within and beyond the subregion, and promote awareness and capacity to promote low carbon and climate resilient development</p> <p>2.5 Implement partnership projects recommended by member Governments or North-East Asia Multi-stakeholder Plan (NEAMSP) on Combating Desertification and Land Degradation (DLD) for more coordinated, efficient actions on DLD</p> <p>2.6 Develop and implement activities of the North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership (NEACAP) under the guidance of its Science and Policy Committee</p>		
Output 3 Enhanced knowledge and awareness of policy makers and other stakeholders to strengthen information sharing on the objectives and results achieved under NEASPEC and its activities	At a minimum, 4 specific outputs have been produced (e.g. publications)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reports of project outcomes NEASPEC website
<p>Key Activities</p> <p>3.1 Enhance function of NEASPEC website as a medium for effective outreach by improving its system and updating information</p> <p>3.2 Publish the outcomes of NEASPEC projects and activities for wider dissemination of information</p>		

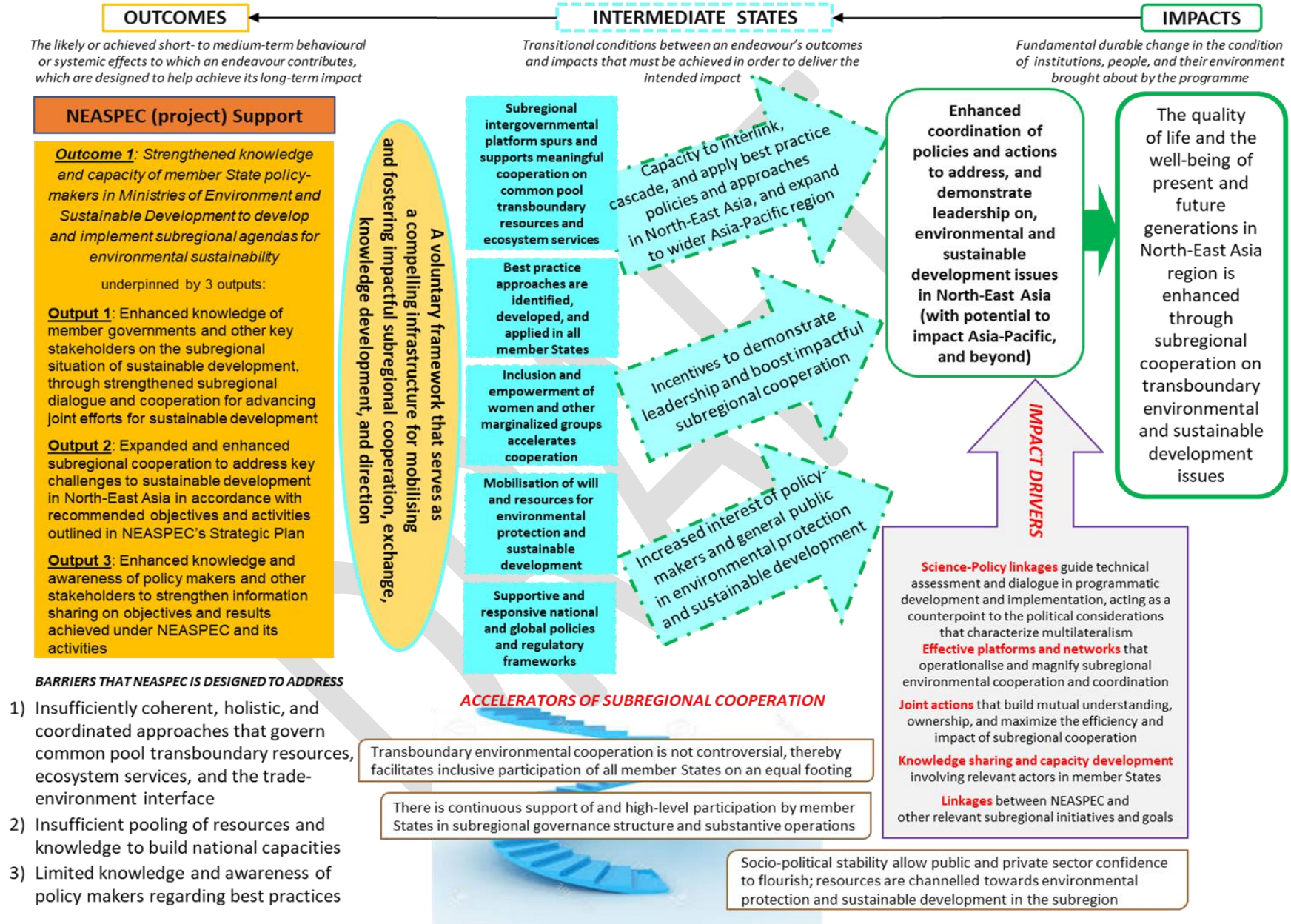
Source: ESCAP Project Document: Secretariat Operation and Activity Implementation of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC II)

2.4 NEASPEC's Theory of Change

- 22) During inception phase interviews, it became apparent that a Theory of Change (TOC) had not been developed, nor had any of NEASPEC's partners been engaged in discussions about this concept. The Evaluation ToR requested the use of a TOC approach to understand the results achieved and the process of achieving results. In approaching this task, NEASPEC's TOC has been reconstructed (i.e. RTOC) by drawing on the above-mentioned results framework and enriching this scheme with the perspectives and input gathered through the evaluation. In this light, the RTOC has a forward-looking perspective, rising to the potential suggested by the platform's assessment herein.
- 23) This reconstruction is designed to facilitate a deeper understanding of NEASPEC's underlying logic. In addition to identifying the barriers that NEASPEC has been set up to address, the RTOC makes the accelerators of subregional cooperation and its impact drivers explicit. Furthermore, the RTOC demonstrates how NEASPEC can be expected to contribute to enhanced coordination of policies and actions to address environmental and sustainable development issues in NEA by starting with the intended long-term impact and working backwards through the necessary preconditions to identify the causal pathways, which, if followed, will contribute to the desired end state (which represents a transformative change). Refer to Figure 2.

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Figure 2 - Reconstructed Theory of Change



3. Methodology

- 24) The evaluation used an evidence-based approach with robust analytical underpinning. Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered with the aim of developing insights into areas of the platform's Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Sustainability, and Mainstreaming of Gender and Human Rights, and as well as its fundamental strengths and shortfalls. This formed the basis for developing findings, which then formed the basis for generating recommendations and lessons.

3.1 Data Collection to Allow for Triangulation of Findings

- 25) Inception phase interviews with the Evaluation Reference Group were used to determine the desired prioritization of effort, with backward-looking assessment giving way to an emphasis on generating more forward-looking insights that could be used to inform and inspire NEASPEC's future strategy. The adopted approach was documented in an Inception Report, which was approved.
- 26) Data was collected from a range of sources, using multiple means, in order to triangulate findings:
- Desk review: of key documentation supplied by the NEASPEC Secretariat (see

- Annex 2), including the founding framework, vision/mission statements, institutional reviews, strategic plans, annual work plans, financial/fundraising reports, monitoring reports, publications and working papers generated during 2016-2020 under NEASPEC's 5 thematic areas, end-of-project ESCAP reports on activities undertaken in support of NEASPEC, annual SOM reports, annual Reviews of Programme Planning and Implementation presented to the SOM during 2016-2019.
 - Interviews: were conducted with National Focal Points (NFPs) of 5 member States, the NEASPEC Secretariat (Incheon), selected ESCAP staff (Bangkok), Evaluation Reference Group, and project partners across the 5 thematic domains. The resulting process was described by one informant as garnering "broad brush strokes on what directions NEASPEC should move into based on discussions with those who have benefited from and/or participated in the programme".
- 27)** The NEASPEC Secretariat identified a pool of 56 relevant respondents. A sampling strategy based on their availability and resources allocated for this method of data collection resulted in 41 people being interviewed indepth; of these, 7 provided written input.

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Annex 3 contains the list of consulted stakeholders.

- Online Survey: was sent to 250 stakeholders (i.e. NFPs; project partners; experts who joined NEASPEC activities; former staff, consultants, and interns) to supplement interview data and allow for the strategic interrogation of a wider set of actors regarding NEASPEC's performance and to gather their ideas to enhance relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and responsiveness.
- The survey achieved a 65.2% response rate (i.e. 163 responses; of this, 34.4% were complete and 65.6% were partial responses). The profile information contained in Annex 4 confirms a relatively balanced representation of views across NEASPEC's 5 thematic domains, with a preponderance of informants drawn from academic/research Institutions, reflecting the large extent to which project partners are drawn from these sectors. In terms of member State participation, representatives from China and ROK were the most active in providing their input.
- Project Meetings: observation of the conduct, substance, and decision-making processes in online sessions with member States and project partners in three thematic areas: Nature Conservation: 18 participants with input from China, ROK, the Russian Federation and relevant international organization (15 May 2020); TAP: 18 participants with inputs from China, Japan, Mongolia, ROK, and the Russian Federation (2-3 June 2020); MPAs: 10 participants with inputs from China, Japan, ROK, and the Russian Federation (24 June 2020).

28) An Evaluation Matrix was developed as the overall instrument to guide data collection. Its bank of questions was used to explore NEASPEC's Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Mainstreaming of Gender and Human Rights, Sustainability. An Interview Protocol, reflecting key elements of the Evaluation Matrix, was used to focus data collection on areas where informants were expected to provide key evidence and perspectives that would optimally contribute to the evaluation's main aim.

3.2 Data Analysis to Assure Rigour and Evidence Base

29) A rigorous approach was used to analyse the collected data and to identify potential causality and contextual influencing factors. The quality of data analysis was assured using a software tool⁴, which provides a trace back to the evidence underpinning the findings. This tool was used to systematically organise, analyse, cross-reference, and comment data gathered through documentary materials and interviews according to the evaluation criteria, allowing for the triangulation of findings and evidenced-based recommendations.

3.3 Ethical Concerns and How These were Addressed

30) The Evaluator adhered to the UNEG Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct adopted by ESCAP for all evaluation activities. As part of the contracting process, an agreement was signed, which attested to their understanding and compliance.

31) Subsequent efforts were made to identify, understand, and adequately address ethical concerns. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their input, which has been respected throughout the process in terms of storage, sharing, and communication of and about respondent perspectives and data in all the ways in which this has been collected and processed. During the evaluation, data has been stored securely, regularly backed-up, and will be deleted following completion of the mandate.

⁴ QDA Miner – www.provalisresearch.com

3.4 Limitations on the Evaluation and How These were Mitigated

- 32) This evaluation confronted the standard limitations related to available budget and time. In this respect, direct inquiry could not be undertaken with all partners engaged in and benefitting from all NEASPEC activities. As a mitigation measure, field missions were envisaged during April-June 2020:
- to the NEASPEC Secretariat and ESCAP headquarters to consult Evaluation Reference Group, interview NEASPEC management/staff, review additional strategic and meeting documents;
 - in conjunction with planned project meetings (in China, Mongolia, ROK) to interview the participating NFPs and allow for as many stakeholders as possible to be personally consulted;
- 33) With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent restrictions on international travel, these field missions were replaced with virtual consultation (through 1:1 or small group interviews carried out), together with participation as an observer in three NEASPEC-convened meetings that were shifted to a remote platform, related to Nature Conservation, TAP, and MPAs during May-June 2020.

4. Findings

4.1 Relevance

Finding 1 – NEASPEC’s Unique Added Value

Beyond the platform’s achievement of laying a foundation for environmental cooperation in the challenging NEA setting and its longstanding role in fostering subregional coordination, NEASPEC’s unique added value has been linked to its inclusiveness, its success in balancing the interests of six member States with varying levels of development and priorities, and its ability to enable breakthroughs on inter-governmental cooperation. It has achieved this by leveraging a strong science-policy linkage and navigating sensitive political territory. The latter has been achieved primarily by focussing on cooperation and coordination with national implications (i.e. by pursuing the exchange of information, knowledge, and experience as first steps), moreso than explicitly pushing for transboundary cooperation.

- 34) In every other region, there is an inter-governmental organisation that covers the member States in that region. In North-East Asia, NEASPEC fulfils this function, unlike any other.
- 35) Informants representing the breadth of stakeholder groups affirm that NEASPEC is relevant; its 27-year longevity was identified as a key indicator of this in the eyes of the bulk of those consulted, particularly in view of its heterogeneous membership with diverse geographical, political and economic features and a mix of both developed and developing countries at varying levels of development. Given the magnitude of member States’ population, political stature, and environmental footprint, NEASPEC is seen as playing a vital role in fostering subregional cooperation/coordination, with its most important achievements highlighted in terms of providing opportunities for exchange of information, knowledge, and experience⁵.
- 36) Situated in relation to the existing tripartite cooperation of China-Japan-ROK⁶, where it was observed that

⁵ From NEASPEC Survey conducted by Secretariat (N=163, with 56 fully completed; others partially): it is important to consider that the bulk of respondents are from academic (34.7%) and research institutions (35.3%); a minority (20%) represent member States, which presumably have political considerations more top of mind. Respondents indicated that NEASPEC’s most important achievements are in providing opportunities for exchange of information, knowledge, experience (71.2%) compared to Joint Action, 47.9%; Capacity Building, 37%; Common Vision, 31.5%.

⁶ Referring to the Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting (TEMM) which has been convened annually since 1999

consensus amongst these strong member States is not easy to achieve, NEASPEC's unique added value is associated with enabling breakthroughs on inter-governmental cooperation⁷. In this respect, informants mentioned that a good dialogue has been developed under the NEASPEC setting (*"to see that level of open and frank interaction is not so usual"*), and it seems able to moderate impasses. This success was explained in relation to NEASPEC's focus on environmental issues (described as "benign", "not controversial"), which has thereby provided an entry point to discuss common issues and a platform for exchange amongst the involved countries. The Expert Group Meeting (15 May 2020) convened in relation to the Tumen Estuary under NEASPEC's Nature Conservation area is a case in point: it mobilized diverse participants who are key actors for wetland conservation in the subregion, including the participation of government officials from China, ROK, and the Russian Federation. An informant asserted, "getting their support for this project was extremely meaningful; this is not easy even during the face-to-face meetings".

- 37) In managing to navigate politically sensitive territory and by following an orientation towards experience-sharing, NEASPEC is viewed as a very useful cooperation mechanism in that it allows for explicit as well as implicit collaboration opportunities to be pursued. Portrayed as "the place to decide items that can't be solved with bilateral mechanisms", NEASPEC is highly appreciated by its member States for "bringing people to the same table" and facilitating what was termed "type B diplomacy", which allows for "creative ambiguity" and "digging out interests and priorities from informal discussions and technical discussions".
- 38) While such an approach may be characteristic of multilateral platforms, it seems especially effective in the NEA setting, given its vast/diverse geographic coverage, different levels of development and priorities across member States, and their cross-cultural differences. Illustrative of the appreciation of its role, NEASPEC was attributed by a Member State representative as "laying the foundation for environmental cooperation in a region where cooperation has historically been limited due to the lack of multilateral frameworks, a tendency to prioritize development over environmental protection, and weak civil society". A unique way in which NEASPEC has achieved this relates the way in which is seen to provide a space for brainstorming, guided by input from project partners whose expertise is tapped for thematic activities, which is seen as enabling "better work plans". This approach was described as "unique and very useful" and in stark contrast to legally binding negotiations and purely scientific workshops.
- 39) Identified as the only inter-governmental mechanism that has emerged in NEA covering all 6 countries, the membership of NEASPEC is perceived to constitute a unique added value: this particular set of countries is seen as having a huge obligation to manage the region's resources in an environmentally-sound and sustainable way. As a set, these countries are critically important for global sustainability (*"if things can change in these countries, there is an exceptionally good chance that the entire world can change"*). As one of the few mechanisms that has engaged DPRK (i.e. in Nature Conservation, albeit minimally), NEASPEC's relevance is also linked to providing an entry point that needs to be kept open and nurtured, thereby paving the way for further cooperation. In this light, NEASPEC was described especially by UN stakeholders as serving "a very strategic purpose, which no other platform can easily serve".

Finding 2 – Strengthening of Coordinated Actions to Address Environmental Challenges in NEA

with a view to promoting a candid exchange of views and strengthening cooperation on environmental issues for the region and beyond - <https://www.env.go.jp/earth/coop/coop/english/dialogue/temm.html>

⁷ This achievement could arguably be linked to academic findings indicating that state actors typically expand the scope and intensity of multilateral and bilateral cooperation if more social actors are involved increasing webs of transboundary interactions (cited in 'Institutionalizing Complex and Ecological Interdependence: Subregional Environmental Governance in Asia and the Pacific', S. Nam, *Environmental Policy* (2008), Vol. 16, No. 3:5-30

NEASPEC's relevance is linked to its utility for member States. In fulfilling an objective need to develop an institutional basis for cross-country environmental cooperation, NEASPEC has incrementally pursued the strengthening of coordinated actions under its programmatic agenda. While coordinated action has increased with the creation of structures accompanied by more formalised procedures, the pace has been slow, and the timeline is extended.

- 40) In offering a platform to develop an institutional basis for environmental cooperation, NEASPEC has been portrayed by informants as meeting an objective need of its member governments. In so doing, it is fully aligned with their obligations stemming from international treaties and the global vision of Agenda 2030. This enhances the utility of NEASPEC, and therefore its relevance to member States.
- 41) While NEASPEC is widely acknowledged for its crucial role in “maintaining the environment and nature through seeking systematic cross-cultural and inter-country cooperation” and is perceived as “a truly unique opportunity for the participating countries to implement necessary and important initiatives for cross-border cooperation”, the extent to which it is actually functioning to strengthen coordinated actions to address pertinent environmental challenges is one question at the heart of this evaluation. In principal, it is pursuing this, in an incremental manner, based on the breakthrough cooperation and quality of dialogue that is regularly achieved (¶36). Informants stressed that NEASPEC not only provides an infrastructure for communication and exchange, but also for finding solutions. These elements are indicative of the strengthening of coordinated actions, albeit at a very slow pace.
- 42) The October 2018 establishment of NEACAP (¶15) is the most advanced example of strengthened coordinated actions under the NEASPEC framework and is illustrative of its strategic potential in this respect. While voluntary and not legally-binding, the NEACAP partnership is seen as very important (“*the involved countries are starting to discuss air pollution in a way in which they are talking about being responsible for and impacted by air pollution*”). Beginning with technical assistance projects in 1996, TAP is amongst the first domains that NEASPEC has tackled. Progress has been extremely slow, as is characteristic of multilateral instrument with a consensus-based approach for decision-making.
- 43) The experience under TAP reflects what informants see as a realistic timeframe for implementation of such multilateral action: while efforts have been underway over the past decade, it was particularly with the 2014-2017 project⁸, and only from 2019, with the operationalisation of NEACAP and subsequent efforts still ongoing in 2020 to develop and formalise a Work Plan, that coordinated actions are now beginning to materialise. The creation and/or endorsement of more formal structures [e.g. North-East Asia Marine Protected Network (NEAMPAN), the North-East Asia Low Carbon City Platform], their potential for expansion (replication) and formalisation of respective Work Plans are underway in other thematic areas. These are in varying stages of maturity and reflect a strengthening of cross-country coordination, with varying strategic impact, thus far. In all cases, the pace of action has been muted.

Finding 3 – Responsiveness to Member State Needs and Demands

As a platform, NEASPEC provides ample opportunity for member States to express their needs and interests. While deliberate efforts are undertaken to request feedback, garner proposals, and ensure regular solicitation of national positions vis-à-vis thematic activities, the SOM's current operationalisation as a 'working-level' governing body channels the member States into being more reactive than proactive and increases reliance

⁸ The project, ‘Development of the Technical and Policy Frameworks for Transboundary Air Pollution Assessment and Abatement in NEA, set the stage for reaching agreement on NEACAP’s creation, through its mandate to assess viable options for establishing a science-based, policy-oriented cooperation framework to mitigate TAP in NEA.

on the Secretariat to propose areas for collective action. This dynamic is enhanced due to the desire for a consensus-driven approach.

- 44) There is an overarching notion that NEASPEC should be responsive to member States while also operating through consensus. Mechanisms have consequently been put in place to: i) deliberately and persistently facilitate responsiveness; ii) ensure the articulation of member States' positions; and iii) request feedback and proposals, which, ideally, signal the direction of interest for cooperation. In some thematic areas (e.g. TAP), rules of procedure (ROP) and terms of reference (ToR) have been established to formalise feedback processes. These give all involved parties an opportunity to reflect on the range of input and thereby consider respective national conditions and priorities in plotting an agreed way forward.
- 45) The following assumption was uncovered: that the result of the strategy being used to prompt interest and enable responsiveness will strengthen member States' ownership of NEASPEC. Following on from this, there is a conviction that with strong demand coming from member governments, the Secretariat could mobilise support from other agencies (e.g. Asian Development Bank) to develop and scale up NEASPEC's impact. The former does not appear to hold true; the latter has not yet been tested.
- 46) A few proposals have emerged (e.g. under Nature Conservation to study transborder movement of Amur tigers, leopards, migratory birds; under MPAs, to link marine areas with climate change, which has subsequently evolved into management plans for MPAs). Astonishingly, while directly reflecting member States' interests, these initiatives have been perceived by some stakeholders as "pet projects", as they are seen to respond to the interest of only 1-2 countries.
- 47) Despite the regular, active solicitation of member State needs and interests, it was reported that the involved partners tend to look to the NEASPEC Secretariat to propose areas for collective action. In fact, there is strong appreciation for the Secretariat, which was commonly described as "doing great, up-to-date with all the issues, putting out feelers, sensing the interest of member States, working with consultants to summarize proposals, contacting the interested parties, and preparing the ground".
- 48) While significant effort is indeed invested by the Secretariat to identify areas for collective work, informants indicated this generates a corresponding load to mobilize member government interests to tangibly engage. This situation was explained in relation to NEASPEC's governing body. In contrast to the TEMM, which has 'ministerial level participation' (which implies a top-down approach, depicted as being "helpful to work faster"), NEASPEC's SOM was described by informants as a 'working level participation', meaning that its delegates do not typically "carry the responsibility to endorse or initiate"; consequently, its member States are seen to be "always in a reactive mode, by definition".

4.2 Effectiveness

Finding 4 –NEASPEC's Pursuit of Subregional Environmental Cooperation

In the light of its founding framework (1996), Vision Statement (2000), and Strategic Plan (2016-2020), NEASPEC's development has evolved, particularly over the past 5 years and positive strides have been made vis-à-vis its key objective to promote common policy dialogue on approaches and coordinated action on environmental issues in NEA. While stakeholders are generally satisfied with NEASPEC's performance, its untapped potential was highlighted.

- 49) Created in 1993 in UNCED's wake, NEASEPC's 1996 framework was adopted in March 2000 (SOM-6), and a Vision Statement was elaborated that has since guided the platform with respect to its objective [promote common policy dialogue on approaches, views, and coordinated actions on subregional environmental issues]; resourcing [core fund, ESCAP-supported Secretariat]; and conduct [i. e. periodically

review environmental conditions/trends; implement priority projects in NEA; identify additional priority areas for cooperation; enhance synergies and avoid duplication by forging mutually beneficial partnerships with relevant initiatives; engage other groups to contribute to NEASPEC (i.e. particularly local governments, civil societies, private sector); disseminate information to raise public awareness of NEASEPC's activities].

- 50) Aiming for “long-versed directions and approaches” and to offer NEASPEC a reference for effectively and efficiently implementing the 5 agreed priority areas, a Strategic Plan (2016-2020) was conceived. It positions NEASPEC as “a comprehensive inter-governmental cooperation framework in NEA that has adopted a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral approach to address transboundary environmental issues and issues of common concern in the region”.
- 51) The advent of the Strategic Plan (2016-2020) is viewed quite positively. It has been attributed with accelerating NEASPEC's development and evolution towards bigger projects: NEASPEC is now covering “many faceted issues, working across the SDGs, digging into sustainable consumption, and the nexus between energy, water, nutrition”. Informants also observed that NEASPEC is following a global trend in “going down to the local level focussing on real implementation” and reflects a drive for results (“*doing a project is not for doing a project but rather for having a result on the ground*”).
- 52) The bulk of informants reported satisfaction with the level of results delivered by NEASPEC thus far, pointing to projects in LCCs and MPAs which were portrayed as “making steady progress” and “received high appraisals from all sides”. While COVID-19 effects have resulted in the cancellation of various meetings in some areas of the thematic programme, which has shifted milestones, in other parts (Nature Conservation, TAP, MPAs), the shift to virtually-convened sessions has maintained momentum. While noting the advantages of meeting in person and wanting this to continue, these virtual sessions have been generally experienced as generating relevant inputs and gaining commitments to move to the next step. Looking at its performance overall, NEASPEC was described as supporting environmental, economic, and development progress. Many informants, including NFPs, indicated that NEASPEC “can continue as it is”.
- 53) In view of its founding vision and current Strategic Plan, there appears to be more willingness to engage in a transboundary manner for some areas of the portfolio (TAP, Nature Conservation, DLD) than others (MPAs, LCCs). Furthermore, not all member States are actively engaged in all thematic areas due to varying perceptions of relevance, although all have an opportunity to be informed through the SOM and thereby guide aspects of the entire thematic agenda.
- 54) While some informants perceive NEASPEC to be delivering very meaningful cooperation, others raised questions about the extent to which its insights and results have been mainstreamed at national level within all member States. The mechanism has now developed a certain momentum. Nevertheless, in being focussed on projects, processes, procedures, and protocols, there is a sense that NEASPEC's potential has not yet been fully tapped. Taking stock of NEASPEC's programmatic implementation provides a window into the operational effectiveness of the framework.

4.2.1 Nature Conservation

Finding 5 – Key Programmatic Results and Achievements: Nature Conservation

NEASPEC was able to identify and fill a gap that has triggered important multilateral and bilateral cooperation that sets the stage for deepening cross-country cooperation related to flagship species and habitat protection in biodiversity hotspots. While this direction has gained momentum and is satisfying for some stakeholders, others assert that stronger steering would be opportune to set this thematic area on a course and level of

ambition that is better aligned with an ‘end game’ that deepens transboundary commitments to environmental cooperation.

- 55) NEASPEC’s work in this thematic area was described as quite mature, “going in the right direction” (i.e. there has been an increase in biodiversity linked to the protection of flagship species and habitat), and is seen to be doing “ground-breaking work” to strengthen and institutionalise transboundary cooperation in the Tumen River delta). In this light, NEASPEC is seen as having identified and is filling a gap “where there is no other organisation with the capacity, willingness, and resources to work on it”. It is credited with bringing together the relevant actors and nudging along the development of a system that supports stakeholders in three countries (China, DPRK, Russian Federation) to jointly manage ecological aspects and connectivity in three neighbouring wetlands. It came to light during the evaluation that ESCAP is developing an initiative on transboundary cooperation in this same biodiversity hotspot, but the extent to which linkages with NEASPEC have been forged was not clear.
- 56) NEASPEC’s *‘Study on Transborder Movement of Amur Tigers and Leopards using Camera Trapping and Molecular Genetic Analysis’* is credited with playing a pivotal role in triggering bilateral cooperation between China and the Russian Federation through the exchange of monitoring data on these populations based on a unified methodology. While these two governments had clear goals on a national level for how to conserve these flagship species, they faced a conundrum in that the habitats are in frontier areas. NEASPEC succeeded in acting as a bridge, connecting the countries.
- 57) This project is appreciated for bringing “practical results”: it demonstrates NEASPEC’s power to raise awareness and facilitate technical/scientific cooperation (species protection lends itself well to sharing of technical solutions). It has set initial steps towards comprehensive protection of the transboundary habitat, where sensitive political territory will need to be navigated in discussing trade-offs (environment, economic, social), particularly those related to industrialised and populated areas. With tough discussions ahead, there is a feeling that the ground has been well-prepared.
- 58) Some informants indicated that the path for moving forward in this thematic area is quite clear, in view of the upcoming World Tiger Summit in 2022. In this light, NEASPEC’s work was characterised as achieving the inter-governmental permissions to continue the existing research and conservation work. However, others interviewed suggested a pressing need to re-examine whether this is still the right focus and level of ambition for NEASPEC, observing that the “end game” of NEASPEC’s work in Nature Conservation is not readily apparent. The question was asked, “is it going to lead to an agreement on transboundary nature conservation? Is there scope for building confidence towards a NEA biodiversity corridor? Otherwise, it just seems like tinkering about with some bizarre species.”
- 59) Based on the nature and level of activities in the Nature Conservation domain (and beyond), sentiments were expressed that stronger steering could usefully guide the platform to reach its full potential. There was also a contention that “the member States are looking to the UN for guidance and steering; the way that this is structured and experienced will be the success of NEASPEC”.

4.2.2 Transboundary Air Pollution

Finding 6 – Key Programmatic Results and Achievements: Transboundary Air Pollution (TAP)

Albeit over a decade in the making, NEASPEC’s work in this domain has resulted in a voluntary framework to improve air quality in the subregion, which has been amplified through the ESCAP setting to impact the Asia Pacific region and subsequently, carried to the UN General Assembly of nations at large. The profile and

impact of NEASPEC's activities related to TAP demonstrate the catalytic impact of strengthening the push-pull dynamic of NEASPEC and ESCAP.

- 60) There is largescale agreement amongst stakeholders that NEACAP's 2018 launch constitutes NEASPEC's most meaningful achievement, to date. It is credited with evolving a tangible, voluntary framework to improve air quality in NEA (*"without NEASPEC, that clean air subregional ambition would have not happened"*). While China, Japan, and ROK have been steadily working on this for over 20 years under the TEMM, informants indicated that the entry of Mongolia, Russian Federation, and DPRK into this collaborative work under NEASPEC's framework has had a catalytic impact.
- 61) The road to establishing NEACAP has stretched over a decade, and its members are still conferring about its operation. While it is still too early to assess its effects on TAP, since NEASPEC ventured into this space, its 6-country collaboration has helped the involved parties understand the theoretical concepts, put them into practice, and collectively develop subregional models using similar protocols that have generated comparable result. Although there is not yet a binding agreement in place to reduce particulate matter, they have begun to tackle the challenge of developing common understanding of this topic. And built trust amongst the member States in the process
- 62) Significantly, NEASPEC's work in this thematic domain has been amplified through the wider ESCAP container in which the platform is hosted. Directly inspired by NEASPEC's TAP advances, ESCAP approved a resolution (75/4) on air pollution sponsored by the ROK in its May 2019 commissioning session, thereby strengthening the resolve of its 53 member countries to tackle air pollution challenges. This resolution provides ESCAP with an essential platform to strengthen its focus on improving air quality across the Asia Pacific region. Subsequently, in September 2019, ROK tabled a UN General Assembly resolution, catapulting the ESCAP resolution's impact to the global arena. The resulting designation of September 7th as 'Clean Air for Blue Skies' Day is instrumental in emphasizing the need to strengthen international cooperation to improve air quality worldwide.

4.2.3 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

Finding 7 – Key Programmatic Results and Achievements: Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

In searching to define a distinctive territory on which to work and reflecting member States' preference to focus within national borders and avoid a transboundary orientation in this thematic domain has resulted in a priority programmatic area operating with limited scope, with a focus on experience-sharing at local government level, which does not appear to be consistent with NEASPEC's competence, resourcing, and the nature of its infrastructure. To date, neither NEASPEC nor ESCAP have sufficiently leveraged the opportunity to drive catalytic impact through the recent ESCAP resolution to promote conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia-Pacific, reflective of a disconnect between these two inter-governmental structures.

- 63) Approved in November 2013 during the SOM-18, NEAMPAN has been described as " still at the starting point", having convened only two committee meetings over the course of its 7-year run, informed by the input of marine environment conservationists and other experts, with a third one held virtually in June 2020. This pace is typical of the extended period of consultation taken under such an inter-governmental mechanism. The conduct of the MPA agenda is similar to that of other thematic activities: it is consensus-driven; project partners (identified by the member States and Secretariat) support MPA work and liaise with other subregional cooperation mechanisms. Programmatic work is governed by established protocols, procedures, and processes that are reliable, predictable, and privilege the regular solicitation and expression of Member State positions.

- 64) At the outset, it was challenging to define a distinctive territory on which to work, given member States' perceived preference to focus on MPAs within national borders and avoid a transboundary orientation (which would trigger other governance/boundary issues, e.g. by verging into fishery management, thereby stalling discussion and action). As well, the Northwest Pacific Action Plan (NOWPAP) set up in 1994 managed by UNEP under its Regional Seas Programme was already in operation with virtually the same member States (China, Japan, ROK, Russian Federation), carrying out assessments of environmental threats and dealing with scientific issues. In searching for a space to fill, the NEASPEC Secretariat launched an appeal to its member States and received only one proposal. This has since formed the basis for NEASPEC's work in relation to MPAs and spurred the creation of NEAMPAN. If NEASPEC's performance were to be judged on managing to avoid overlapping with existing initiatives and attending to political sensitivities, it has succeeded.
- 65) However, the result here is a priority programmatic area operating with limited scope, with a focus on experience-sharing at local government level. The people who are involved are interested in participating; the sharing of experience across NEAMPAN's 12 MPAs (spanning 4 countries, intended to level up site management practice and balance socio-economic criteria) is appreciated, and this approach appeals to stakeholders interested in having practical action on the ground (¶151) and is seen by some to "give NEASPEC an edge" (i.e. provide a space to contribute). The outreach to local government and civil society is actually aligned with the call to action set out in NEASPEC's 1996 Vision Statement (¶49); however, the ensuing level of intervention does not appear to be consistent with NEASPEC's competence, resourcing, and the nature of its infrastructure.
- 66) While enabling exchange at grassroots level and recognizing the value of involving local government officials (who are observed to "spread the knowledge to other areas"), the NEASPEC team has encountered significant challenges in carrying out this direction of activity: most MPA sites are located in hard-to-reach remote areas. Mobilizing their local managers is a challenge. Communicating with them is another, as most MPA managers use their local language and have limited English proficiency. In carrying out workshops, extensive effort is needed to "match each NEAMPAN site with the appropriate information-sharing and capacity-building".
- 67) Furthermore, this programme is perceived to be small, insufficiently resourced, and not (yet) getting the desired results. Considering the targets set in the current Strategic Plan, by 2020, NEAMPAN was supposed to have regular meetings and working with strong partnerships. Some stakeholders reported disappointment, indicating that it has fallen short on convening, although good progress has been made in building the network. In this portfolio, some additional delay was indeed introduced in relation to governmental reorganisation in the Member State hosting NEAMPAN, together with COVID-19 effects, which postponed the envisaged 3rd workshop for a third time.
- 68) Further stakeholders pointed to the disconnect between the direction of the MPA programme with its current emphasis on making connections at local level (thereby focussing on getting local people to attend meetings, do capacity-building) and the parts of NEASPEC's mandate related to supporting member States in meeting their obligations vis-à-vis national biodiversity strategies, action plans, and the associated international goals, which appears to have been backgrounded. Informants confirmed that the Aichi Targets under the Convention for Biological Diversity (CBD), which fall firmly within the domain of central government responsibility, are taken very seriously by the member States; yet, they appear to have not diligently used NEASPEC to support discussion and develop collaborative work towards their achievement. This was explained by the level of delegates sent to the SOM, who were mainly characterized as "mid-level government officers" (¶48) as opposed to being decision-makers closely linked to the pursuit of

central government goals (¶114). A Member State informant asserted that international pressure from NEASPEC or the UN provides tangible impetus to change and that an academic report from NEAMPAN can be utilised as the basis for change inside the national government apparatus of member States.

4.2.4 Low Carbon Cities (LCCs)

Finding 8 – Key Programmatic Results and Achievements: Low Carbon Cities (LCCs)

Having identified a value-added niche on a relatively crowded landscape, the resulting focus on subnational government level has generated challenges for implementation under the NEASPEC structure. While facilitating helpful exchange and described as having a well-defined goal and process that includes peer review and comparative country assessment, the mismatch between the effort and timelines required to identify and engage the ‘right’ local government actors outstrips the networks and resourcing of this programme. Strengthening the link with related activities under ESCAP’s Urban Development Programme has the potential to impact a significantly wider group of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. To date, this connection has not gained traction.

- 69) While some stakeholders perceived that the LCC domain was “tagged onto NEASPEC” (implying it is a distraction), activities in this domain were justified by NEA’s contribution to the planet’s current level of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (given that this subregion has four of the top 10 global GHG emitters and generates almost one-third of such emissions overall), and the critical role that cities can play in mitigating GHG emissions. While in the past, environment was considered to be more of an end-of-pipe issue, cities are increasingly taking account of nature-based development and there is a need for more integration on environmental issues.
- 70) Similar to the approach adopted in other thematic areas, efforts were undertaken to identify a niche where NEASPEC could make a value-added contribution. As the TEMM was already active in this domain with three overlapping member States, with the aim of realising synergies, the North-East Asia Low Carbon City Platform (NEA-LCCP) was launched in 2014 to exchange experience, enhance collaboration, and empower local governments to pursue low carbon city development. This platform is largely based on existing networks of experts and research institutions (in Mongolia, ROK, and the Russian Federation). NEASPEC’s value in being able to extend the span of this programme to its full set of member States was seen as a benefit. China and ROK have been since invited to join in and the NEA-LCCP has been used as the infrastructure to initiate pilot projects involving three cities⁹, to date.
- 71) Realising that the LCC agenda is “difficult to advance at national level” (even though that is the natural level at which NEASPEC operates with its NFPs and transboundary potential), the proposal to intervene at a different leverage point (i.e. to put cities and local government at the centre of the national low carbon action planning for mitigation and adaptation) was approved in June 2019 during the SOM-23.
- 72) Activities in the LCC domain followed the typical NEASPEC path in so far as beginning with research studies (benchmarking, comparative analysis) with an aim to build common understanding across the involved countries (in this case, regarding LCC indicators). Although it has been difficult to agree on and adopt a universal approach (put down to cross-country/cultural differences), informants reported that the exchange facilitated by NEASPEC has been “very helpful”. To progress in this domain, informants indicated that there needs to be a common understanding between each country. But they also pointed out the

⁹ During 2018-2019, international consultation workshops on low carbon city development were organized in China (Guangzhou, Wuhan) and ROK (Gwangju). Key cities in China, Japan, and ROK were invited to share their experiences on low carbon development with the pilot cities.

disconnect with NEASPEC's infrastructure and resourcing in the way it is currently being pursued.

- 73) While the LCC programme was positively described as having a well-defined goal and a process that includes peer review and comparative country assessment, it appears to be disconnected from NEASPEC's priority mandate, which is not on the subnational government level. Designed to work on national level, NEASPEC's experience, thus far, suggests that it is not a suitable instrument for efficiently securing the engagement of cities nor for getting their analysis and input. It was reported that "this is not close to satisfaction; outcomes could be better". To improve the situation, it was suggested that robust funding would need to be provided "for this time-consuming, travel intensive, and work-load-heavy campaign. Periodic, isolated projects will not be able to gain good traction or build momentum". For the most part, LCC programme's design is seen as over-optimistic, not taking sufficient account of the time and resourcing required to engage local government participation. The resource mobilisation needed to attract the pilot cities was described as "heavily underestimated". The feedback that "the right government agencies need to be engaged to make it more relevant" is further evidence of a mismatch between the direction of this programme and NEASPEC's assets.
- 74) In some countries of the subregion, NEASPEC has been able to add value in this setting as their cities need the blessing from the national government to cooperate. In this light, as an established mechanism, NEASPEC offers valuable legitimacy that cities can leverage to secure national buy-in for their participation in the low carbon planning and implementation promoted under NEA-LCCP. As the relationship between national and subnational levels is dynamic, informants indicated that the NEASPEC mechanism, in providing room to explore differences, could be (better) used to define that dynamic and engage with suitable partners that work closely with the city-level in order to expand the effort and work already initiated on the ground. It was mentioned that there is an ample supply.
- 75) While the programme lost some momentum due to the cancellation of the expert-local government dialogue envisaged for June 2020 in Ulan-Ude related to COVID-19 travel restrictions, there also seems to be a missed opportunity for gaining input and direction through the NEASPEC-ESCAP linkage. While intentional efforts have reportedly been undertaken to connect NEASPEC's LCC work with EDD's work on sustainable cities under its Urban Development Programme, thereby impacting a significantly wider group of ESCAP countries, this connection does not seem to have gained traction ("*we don't have the chance to communicate with each other for these kind of programmes*").
- 76) Based on the variety of proposals offered as input to the next Strategic Plan (ranging from "leveraging the building back better discussion" for expanding the LCC platform to "expanding the scope of LCC to work on Climate Change issues" in order to support countries on their Nationally Determined Contribution and targets, to investing in mechanisms to more effectively share NEASPEC's outputs to reach relevant stakeholders in other countries including beyond NEA, to more focus on building the mechanism and expanding the scope of the NEA-LCCP to include more cities, to adopting a stronger solution-focus, thereby "connecting projects to other actors like ADB to provide preparation grants, soft loans, etc."), there seems to be a need for stronger steering, consolidation, and selection of a coherent future direction.

4.2.5 Desertification and Land Degradation (DLD)

Finding 9 – Key Programmatic Results and Achievements: Desertification and Land Degradation (DLD)

While this thematic area is well-suited to NEASPEC's transboundary agenda, the extent of duplication with other instruments has made it difficult to identify a value-added contribution, despite the amplification that would potentially be available from better synchronisation with ESCAP, a missed opportunity to date. At least two member States are interested to continue collaboration in this domain, pointing to the links between land,

security, sustainability, and the opportunity to address Gender Equality/Human Rights (GE/HR) that could provide a more strategic future direction for this thematic domain.

- 77) Recognising that the challenge of dust storms can not be solved by one single country acting alone, the DLD topic seems to be quite suitable for the agenda of a transboundary inter-governmental cooperation platform like NEASPEC. With China and Mongolia as source countries for dust storms and land degradation in NEA and Japan, ROK, and DPRK their recipients, NEASPEC was seen as providing an amenable opportunity for the countries to work together to find science-driven solutions.
- 78) Given the modest resourcing of this programmatic area, its outputs have been limited, thus far: a policy review (described as “a real success”) and an attempt to establish a web-based platform for civil society to share information (little information was available about this). The main direction of late has been for the NEASPEC Secretariat to facilitate various outreach activities with member governments, CSOs, and international organizations in order to showcase progress in DLD work in NEA and to forge partnerships [(i.e. with the Northeast Asia Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought Network (DLDD-NEAN) and the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)].
- 79) Since 2003, various projects have been implemented to provide capacity building, knowledge sharing, training support, and recently a land restoration pilot in Mongolia. While four Member states were involved at the outset, interest appears to have dwindled over time, with only China and Mongolia being active in this thematic area under NEASPEC. Seeing NEASPEC as a more broadly-focussed framework, some informants pointed to the opportunity, moving forward, to think about how to link the land issue to security and sustainability (i.e. water security, food security, green economy, sustainable resource management, ecosystem management) and exploit artificial intelligence technology to better manage knowledge for air pollution control, land management, etc.
- 80) One of the key challenges to NEASPEC in this domain is the extent of duplication with other initiatives. In light of DLDD-NEAN being tasked as the core implementation platform to support NEA countries to achieve voluntary Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) targets and enhance UNCCD’s implementation in the subregion, after informal consultation of member States (2019), the proposal to discontinue NEASPEC’s programmatic work on DLD was documented in the Report of SOM-23.
- 81) While ideas have been put forward to alternatively integrate NEASPEC’s work on DLD with interlinked issues or projects (thereby focussing on the co-benefits and interplay between DLD and other sectors, including climate change, agroforestry, renewable energy, and biodiversity), the strategic direction of this thematic area had not yet been clarified at the writing of this report.
- 82) Informants mentioned that, to date, there had actually been a missed opportunity to have better synchronisation with ESCAP’s corresponding division on this theme. Moving forward, ESCAP is reportedly planning to expand its focus to include climate change topics, which would provide an opportunity to develop new linkages related to the DLD portfolio.
- 83) Furthermore, with climate change effects in the subregion linked to increased frequency of storms, in a context that has witnessed largescale migration of (male) labour to urban areas, the bulk of land management practice is increasingly falling into women’s hands. In this light, informants pointed to the DLD programme as an entry point for NEASPEC to address GE/HR issues, given the observation that these (women’s) capacities need to be developed to think about disaster risk reduction. Such a direction would be potentially relevant to ESCAP’s ICT and Disaster Risk Reduction division.

4.3 Efficiency

Finding 10 – The Pertinence of Efficiency

As a project, NEASPEC would be judged quite harshly for its timeliness of execution and cost-effectiveness. As an inter-governmental platform, imposing an efficiency regime would undermine NEASPEC's purpose and the strength of its political function in so far that this infrastructure has been established to facilitate inter-state cooperation with a process and rhythm that privilege political and diplomatic considerations over efficiency.

- 84) In keeping with the OECD/DAC definition of efficiency¹⁰, this criterion considers outputs (qualitative and quantitative) in relation to inputs. It focusses on the extent to which an initiative has delivered the maximum results from the given inputs (and the extent to which these are the least costly resources possible), including an assessment of cost-effectiveness and timeliness of execution.
- 85) Amongst the respondents consulted, there was not a driving concern expressed about NEASPEC's efficiency. This topic only came up in a few instances, in relation to:
- The SOM being negatively affected by the frequency of change of national focal points (accompanied by insufficient onboarding and preparation, loss of institutional memory), which is seen as a major drag on NEASPEC's efficiency, given that its key governing body only meets once year and operates with consensus decision-making;
 - A concern about ongoing initiatives in the thematic areas and a wish for NEASPEC to avoid duplication in order to increase efficiency (presumably in relation to outcomes);
 - The heavily underestimated use of resources to pursue the chosen direction in LCCs (¶173);
 - NEASPEC Secretariat's staffing; the over-representation of staff drawn from a single member State was portrayed as missing an opportunity to more efficiently connect with all member States for the regular solicitation of input and consultation;
 - On a positive note: NEASPEC's opportunity to improve efficiency by enhancing synergies with other mechanisms in the region.
- 86) Regarding timeliness of execution: there is a general perception that NEASPEC has delivered sufficient results. From the online survey (N=70): 44.3% of informants indicated NEASPEC has provided an effective platform and built up networks for member governments and other stakeholders to enhance environmental cooperation; 20% indicated that its performance has exceeded their expectations in this respect. While the notion of a timeframe for conducting various activities related to delivering specific outputs is captured in a Project Document (¶18) designed to operationalise NEASPEC's Strategic Plan (2016-2020), the timeliness for execution is not a rigid concept. It is followed adaptively, according to the rhythm of consensus-driven inter-governmental coordination with its ebbs and flows, linked to both domestic political considerations and inter-state relations. An informant explained, "at project level, there are things we have to do, but when it is a broader objective, then it's very difficult to use the notion of a timeframe". Another observed "the NEASPEC framework shows how things can happen but it is a very slow-moving machine".
- 87) Regarding cost-effectiveness: as operations are mostly financed through in-kind contributions (e.g. ESCAP's staffing of the Secretariat, hosting in its premises, member State hosting of events), arguably NEASPEC is a highly efficient platform using very cost-effective resources. Further evidence is drawn from the NEASPEC project budget presented at SOM-23, showing planned activities were delivered at 48.6%

¹⁰ <https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/49756382.pdf> <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/other-evaluation-reportsdocuments/unep-evaluation-manual>

less than the approved budget, with USD 419,433 remaining on 31 July 2019. The online survey pointed out that NEASPEC's most important achievements are associated with the opportunity for exchange of information, knowledge and experience. The cost of organising this exchange has been significantly reduced since the reported budget surplus by the imposed move to virtually convened meetings since March 2020. This has enhanced NEASPEC's efficiency profile by a further major margin.

4.4 Mainstreaming of Gender Equality and Human Rights (GE/HR)

Finding 11 – Gender Equality and Human Rights (GE/HR) Mainstreaming

NEASPEC's comparatively timid treatment of this topic, to date, was justified by a combination of inadequate competence (for connecting GE/HR with NEASPEC's work), concern that it would politicize and thereby impair the platform's cross-country cooperation, and differing notions regarding the pace and way in which to approach these considerations. Acknowledging NEASPEC's association with the UN and its obligation to address GE/HR, aspects in DLD, MPA, and Nature Conservation were uncovered that could be entry points to tackle this challenge.

- 88) To date, NEASPEC has not made strong efforts to broach GE/HR and its position on this topic is perceived as relatively passive, related to a variety of justifications:
- Fear of politicizing NEASPEC's agenda due to the different definitions and scope of these topics within member States (NEASPEC should not politicize its activities; therefore, it should avoid directly addressing HR"; "it is felt that it is better to walk around this issue");
 - This is considered to be largely a domestic matter by some member States ("some countries are quite sensitive about those kinds of issues that are raised outside of their sovereignty");
 - Informed by previous experience that a direct or explicit mention of this topic will block further collaborative work ("if you mention HR, it closes the door"; "the UN's HR framework is perceived by some Member states as hostile");
 - Lack of familiar with/difficulty in connecting this topic to NEASPEC's work (competence issue).
- 89) While some informants pointed out that the serious environmental issues across the subregion need to be dealt with as a first priority ("*first we need to focus on the problem; as our environment gets better, then we can address these other issues*"), others indicated that addressing GE/HR is integral to achieving sustainable development. Yet others felt that while these considerations need to be brought into the process for all environmental issues, NEASPEC is not necessarily the venue for discussing such points. Some informants suggested that this topic could be addressed in a hidden way, while others were willing to take it a step further, indicating that its coverage did not need to be covert but should be "touched in a subtle way" and is a topic to "slowly sensitize people about".
- 90) There was an observation that NEASPEC already does indirectly address the underpinning objective of such considerations in that HR implies the right to clean air, clean soil, clean environment, and land use/impact considerations, which are at the heart of its thematic programme. Looking to the future, DLD was identified as providing a useful and potentially non-controversial entry point (¶183). In developing an orientation towards ecosystem services, NEASPEC's work in Nature Conservation and MPAs would also lend itself to the issue of HR and benefits from nature being available to all people. These thematic domains, with their as yet undeveloped links to disaster risk reduction and building resilience, provide potential for deepening the people-centred principles underlying GE/HR.
- 91) There is an expectation that NEASPEC should address GE/HR issues, given its association with the UN ("*it's*

not optional, it's a requirement to work on this") and the 2030 Agenda, which was portrayed as providing a clarion call to leave no one behind. In the UN context, its funders, which include the NEA member States, expect ESCAP "to put its entire weight onto the UN's normative values; otherwise, it would just be a thinktank or a consulting firm". All UN outfits were described as having an accountability framework to ensure that gender considerations are included, reflecting the Secretary General's strong push in this direction, having put gender equality at the heart of all UN policies.

4.5 Sustainability, Resource Mobilisation, and Partnership Arrangements

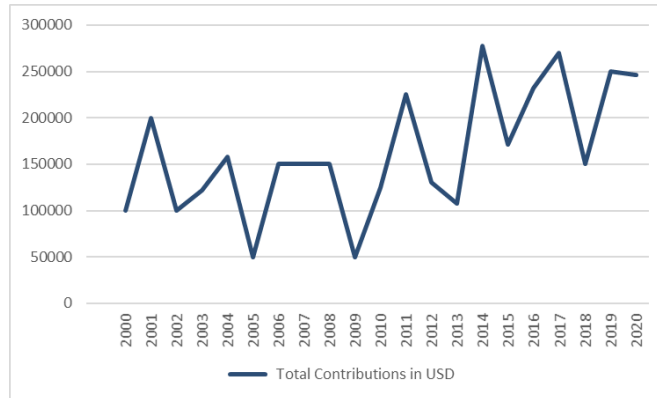
Finding 12 – Sustainability Prospects of this Platform

NEASPEC's sustainability is not in question, given its longevity, perceived relevance, and the substantial support available through its association and accommodation within the UN system, although the earmarking of funding, diversity of contributions provided across the set of its member States, and the lack of predictability in funding flows are issues of growing concern.

- 92) Given the longevity of the NEASPEC platform (¶134), its significance and relevance as an inter-governmental cooperation mechanism in the subregion (¶138), its accommodation within ESCAP and the competence and professionalism of the NEAPSEC Secretariat, its sustainability is not in question. As long as NEASPEC reflects the will of the member States, its sustainability is not in question.
- 93) In addition to activities resourced by a Core Fund replenished via member State contributions through ESCAP, NEASPEC also operates a project-based fund with earmarked contributions from member States for specific activities. There is growing recognition that pledged support (which, to some extent, directs project implementation) is becoming more difficult to maintain, knowing that each country has its own funding priorities. This acknowledgement by the platform's funders demonstrates an understanding that inter-governmental cooperation would be more effectively served through unearmarked funds.
- 94) Financial and in-kind inputs across the member States vastly differ in magnitude, with three countries as the main contributors. While this situation has been represented as corresponding to the means available domestically, informants indicated that the diversity of national support is an issue of growing concern for the platform's sustainability. Over 60% of those consulted in the online survey¹¹ indicated that NEASPEC's most critical challenge/constraint is its funding modality and financial sustainability. Putting this in context, such a result may be correlated with the fact that the bulk of respondents to the survey represent two of the countries that are NEASPEC's major contributors.
- 95) Projects are the key carriers of cooperation. In this light, sufficient and reliable financing provides a guarantee for project cooperation. Yet NEASPEC is characterised by an ebb and flow of member State allocations (see Figure 3), which translates into fluctuations in the scope of the platform's work. The hypothesis that member State contributions are linked to perceptions of NEASPEC's relevance (¶145) could not be verified. Each year, the countries commit themselves to more or less funding, retreating and/or advancing without predictability, as such decisions are related to domestic and inter-state political considerations (¶186).

Figure 3 - Core and Project Funding for NEASPEC (2000 - 2020)

¹¹ Survey respondents (N=119) indicated that Funding Modality and Financial Sustainability is NEASPEC's most critical challenge/constraint (60.3%) compared to Partnership with National Stakeholders, 41.1%; Relationships with other Sub/Regional Mechanisms, 37%; Organizational Structure and Governance Modality, 21.9%.



- 96) NEASPEC’s need for reliable financial resources has been highlighted since its creation. This is to be generated from *inter alia* voluntary and/or mandatory contribution of member States and international organisations¹². The idea of establishing a trust fund, following other examples [e.g. South Asia Cooperative Environmental Programme and South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, which act as hubs for multilateral environmental cooperation], has not yet born fruit in the NEA context, although this notion was advanced at an early stage through the review mandated by member States (SOM-11, 2005). While text for a trust fund agreement has been prepared (by ESCAP) and presented several times to the SOM, such a structure has yet to be adopted.

Finding 13 – Resource Mobilisation and Utilisation

Contrasting perceptions of the platform’s financial sustainability (i.e. NEASPEC is not faced with actual funding constraints versus a perceived need for substantially more funding to enable the mechanism to tap its potential) are indicative of a weakness in fund utilisation. This effect is set to be heightened in relation to COVID-19 which saw the replacement of many planned activities with virtual convening. Savings strategies deployed to smooth the unpredictable flow of contributions strengthen their conviction of poor utilisation of provided funds, undermining the legitimacy of requests for increased funding. This is generating a vicious cycle of deteriorating credibility and potentially inhibiting member States from feeling compelled to embark on a more ambitious programme under NEASPEC.

- 97) Evidence concerning the extent to which funding is an actual constraint is nuanced. NFPs, the NEASPEC Secretariat, and ESCAP staff alike reported that there is a sufficient amount of funding (“*there is not a lack of resources for specific actions*”; “*it has enough resources to implement projects*”). They further contended that the support available under ESCAP Resolution 53/3 (thereby covering NEASPEC’s administration under the UN budget) assures NEASPEC’s continued viability. Furthermore, NEASPEC has been quite successful in organising and mobilising human, financial, and other resources across member States to jointly carry out activities under its thematic programme.
- 98) However, the perceived utilisation of funds appears to be fostering growing irritation for some parties. The Core Fund Report presented during SOM-23 documented a 51% delivery rate (USD443,567 spent of USD863,000 budget available for the 2016-2020 period). This surplus is set on a trajectory to further increase for the remaining period of the current Strategic Plan as COVID-19 effects have led to substantially more convening of discussions using virtual means.
- 99) Informants feel that NEASPEC has tremendously untapped potential to benefit its member States and conduct advocacy at regional and global levels (“*if more financing could be engaged, then nothing can*

¹² Institutional and Financial Mechanisms of NEASPEC: Review and Options, Expert Group Meeting and 12th SOM (22-23 March 2007, Beijing, China), p1

beat NEASPEC for its impact”; if NEASPEC had more financial support, it could do even better work”; “its budget and projects are not at all reflective of its capabilities”). Project partners and other stakeholders asserted that NEASPEC should and could play a more visible role but indicated that “its funding is too modest” and its extended bureaucratic procedures (linked to following UN rules) are inhibiting factors. Compared to other platforms, NEASPEC’s core budget and project financing are small indeed.

- 100) Under its current level of ambition and architecture, NEASPEC is seen as having a sufficiently ambitious agenda, which is underpinned by an ESCAP Project Document in order to operationalise its aims. However, there is a necessarily tenuous link to existing resources, given the need to privilege and ensure flexibility and accommodation of political considerations throughout processes, which is consistent with NEASPEC’s nature in being an instrument of inter-governmental cooperation. While a savings strategy may be a pragmatic hedge in this uncertain context, perceptions regarding the consequent under-utilisation of resources undercuts the legitimacy of requests to member States for increased funding, and potentially puts into question the ability of the overall instrument to embark on a more ambitious agenda.

Finding 14 – NEASPEC Secretariat’s Role, Capacities, Constraints, and Risks

With the 2011 inauguration of a permanent secretariat in Incheon, NEASPEC has benefitted from a marked increase in support. The Secretariat’s competence, professionalism, and commitment are tremendously valued and effective. While suitable organisational measures have been undertaken to manage the undulating workflow and compliance with ROPs, the expanding and diverging portfolio of thematic activities, rising expectations for service level quality, and the extensive level of sensemaking and horizon scanning to proactively support member States is outstripping the Secretariat’s resources and generates growing risk for the platform.

- 101) Rotating chairmanship amongst member States (since 1993) and the creation of a permanent secretariat in a host country (ROK in 2011, after 18 years in operation) are measures that reflect the “practical” and “step-by-step” approach mentioned in NEASPEC’s founding framework. Informants indicated that the (alphabetically) rotating chair has served to enhance attention on NEASPEC in the chairing country during this responsibility but such attentiveness outside of the SOM has not necessarily extended to all member countries (*“member States should make more efforts to work in intersessional periods”*).
- 102) While NEASPEC’s slow pace is recognized and seen as characteristic of multilateral mechanisms (¶142), the Secretariat does not inhibit the advance of the platform’s work; quite the contrary, in fact (¶147). Rather, informants declared that the member States face internal constraints and contend that “it is always the case in a setting that deals with the challenge of setting and coordinating priorities”.
- 103) In taking up one of the recommendations of the 2007 institutional review to establish an independent secretariat, many of the promised benefits¹³ have indeed been delivered. Since the 2011 move from ESCAP’s premises in Bangkok to ESCAP’s ENEA’s office in Incheon, the NEASPEC Secretariat has demonstrated a noticeable increase in the professionalism, competence, and impact of its support. Appreciated for the calibre and dedication of its work (*“is very efficient, fast, capable”*), its conduct was described very positively in relation to providing the (relevant) agenda, bringing suitable topics, appropriately engaging with stakeholders bilaterally and then bringing people together, “understanding

¹³ A Secretariat Paper (ENRD/SO/ECNEA(7)/4) presented to SOM-7 (2001), cited in the 2007 Institutional Review spelled out the benefits of an independent Secretariat. It would: (a) enhance ownership of member States in NEASPEC programmes; (b) promote wider participation of national experts/institutions in programme development and implementation; (c) enhance coordination/monitoring of activities; (d) provide a distinct identity and rallying point for subregional cooperation; (e) serve as a permanent custodian for official records, reports, and other papers.

where are the most sensitive spots to go around them”, and “shedding light on common issues so that proposed ideas can be more readily accepted”. Observers verified the team exhibits a collaborative spirit, even in situations where assertive views are expressed and where there are strong, diverse conflicts.

- 104) The Secretariat has organised its human resources to provide oversight and coordination support across the five thematic areas, including overlapping responsibilities within its small team to create back-up. Under the existing arrangement, the Secretariat has limited staffing, all provided by ESCAP (2 staff dedicated 90%/10% to NEASPEC/ESCAP; 2 with 50:50 NEASPEC/ESCAP tasks, and their manager, who provides substantive direction to the Secretariat (particularly in agenda-setting), engages in regular sensemaking and negotiation with member States, and plays a dual role as Deputy Director of ESCAP’s ENEA Office. This carries a raft of responsibilities linked to ESCAP initiatives in the subregion.
- 105) An approach that is currently being deployed in order to allay capacity constraints is drawn from NEASPEC’s work in Nature Conservation. While the Secretariat initially “organized everything”, now it is “coordinating all national partners so that they organize their own local surveys and meetings”. This was depicted as a real sharing of ownership for implementation amongst national stakeholders as “Secretariat staff cannot handle everything”. Furthermore, the Secretariat relies on established procedures and protocols to manage its workload. With the expanding portfolio of activities and increasing expectations of service level quality (driven by compliance with ROPs and corresponding requirements related to turnaround time), the ebb and flow of the Secretariat’s work linked to its convening function is increasingly transforming into a more continuous stream of demand related to mobilizing member States (described as being mainly in reactive mode), sensemaking, negotiation, tacit steering, preparation, coordination, and “scanning the horizon to see the agenda ahead”.
- 106) While playing its demanding role in an effective manner, this is actually taking a major toll on the Secretariat team. The expanding and diverging repertoire within its thematic activities (¶151) can be expected to enlarge their load even further, thereby generating growing risk for the platform, particularly given the extent of dependence on such a small core for support and guidance. The extent to which succession plans are in place was not clear; in their absence, this would heighten organisational risk, as the level of expertise in the Secretariat could quite understandably be well sought after by other actors.
- 107) Various suggestions to enhance the Secretariat’s bench strength were put forward, including:
- Designation of a technical contact point per country to play a dedicated liaison role between member States and the NEASPEC Secretariat (located in the national capitals or outposted to Incheon to keep abreast of the research, correspondence, preparation of documents, with a role to generate awareness, do follow-up, etc.);
 - Voluntary secondments (described as step-loans of 18-24 months), drawing on the existing pool of research fellows working closely with government officers in line ministries of member States, who could be attached to specific tasks in the NEASPEC Secretariat, like producing documents, proposals, recommendations in order to reduce the need to hire experts and/or additional staff;
 - Human resource exchanges with project partners, especially of young professionals;
 - Putting NEASPEC activities under a substantive ESCAP division (e.g. EDD would be a natural candidate); with accountability for delivering on that PoW, in such a context, resources would be channelled towards NEASPEC’s agenda. This would also provide a platform for fundraising.

Finding 15 – Leveraging Partnerships

Engaging national institutions as project partners has successfully functioned to mobilise resources and bolster the science-policy linkage underlying and driving NEASPEC's inter-governmental environmental cooperation. However, the transactional approach to their engagement misses an opportunity for the platform to gain catalytic power.

- 108) Working Groups are the mechanism through which thematic activities are pursued. This instrument functions to promote regular consultation and hence, is expected to enhance NEASPEC's ownership by member States. Project partners consist of key stakeholders and entities identified by member States and the Secretariat that are linked to and/or support thematic activities one way or another (including liaison to other relevant cooperation mechanisms operating in the subregion).
- 109) As a large part of NEASPEC's cooperation is based on science, the strengthening of the science-policy linkage appears to be a key organising principle for its partnership arrangements. In this light, the NEASPEC Secretariat has obtained both financial and in-kind support from project partners through joint activities and collaboration. In the past year alone, as reported in SOM-23, the Secretariat has collaborated with various project partners in member States for project implementation, including Innovative Green Development Program (iGDP), Guangzhou Energy Conservation Supervision Center, National Forestry and Grassland Administration of China, Northeast Forestry University of China, Korea Environment Institute (KEI), and Institute for Global Environment Studies (IGES).
- 110) An NFP asserted, "NEASPEC needs to collaborate more with research institutes and relevant international organisations to expand and deepen its scientific expertise and broaden partner areas". At the same time, there is a contention that NEASPEC could get more catalytic power from developing a more strategic approach to partnership, rather than interacting with loosely connected institutions engaged in a transactional way ("it's not just about contracting an institute to do some research"). It is understood that some preliminary thinking about a more institutionalized approach is already underway whereby "the interesting bundle of cooperation resources, piecemeal initiatives, and institutions in the subregion" could be linked together in a more formalised way under NEASPEC.
- 111) A further suggestion captured through this evaluation exercise relates to better leveraging relevant think tanks in each member States, who already have existing networks and communications between them. In so far that these are mostly financed by national public funds, the proposal is for NEASPEC to put some aspects of its agenda onto the annual plan of such national institutes. While they operate at their own rhythm, which may differ from that of NEASPEC, these entities regularly organise meetings, have workshops, engage experts, and facilitate meaningful exchange.

4.6 Strengths and Challenges of NEASPEC's Institutional and Organisational Set-Up

Finding 16 – NEASPEC's Governance Mechanism: Assets, Efficiency, and Effectiveness

Institutionally, NEASPEC draws strength from its linkage into Foreign Affairs ministries, which are authorized to strike inter-governmental agreements and can facilitate outreach to appropriate national entities for coordination on the thematic programme. However, the shortfall in realising the anticipated level of participation in the SOM and the frequent change in NFPs are seen as negatively impacting the efficient and effective use of the platform's resources.

- 112) NEASPEC has adopted a relatively simple governing structure with the annual SOM, supported by NFPs who coordinate vis-à-vis thematic activities. NEASPEC's primordial linkage into the Foreign Affairs ministries of member States is seen as an advantage in that such entities have the right to make international agreements whereas Environment Ministries are not authorized to strike inter-

governmental accords. Foreign Affairs can also outreach to appropriate national-level authorities for support on various aspects of the thematic agenda. This is seen as one of the platform's assets.

- 113) The SOM has fulfilled its foreseen function of bringing the involved countries together to coordinate inter-state cooperation. However, since the outset, there has been insufficient participation of fairly senior level officials, despite recommendations documented in SOM minutes throughout 27 years of operation to improve on this aspect in order to realise NEASPEC's founding vision of bringing stronger political commitments from member countries towards a comprehensive mechanism. Due to the primarily "working level participation" in its governing body, NEASPEC has been portrayed by informants as a "mediocre modality". While this allows the platform to find areas where its member States can work, once an area becomes subject to inter-governmental decision, the subsequent discussion was described as becoming relatively rigid (triggered by the establishment of ROP).
- 114) A few informants said that the SOM is quite effective as it is (fearing that higher level delegates would overly politicize NEASPEC's operation, "water things down", "slow progress") and expressed caution about recalibration ("*don't touch a running system*"). However, the bulk of those consulted felt that the mid-level government officials who typically participate do not have sufficient institutional power (and were also seen as "quite overburdened by their work", "remember their responsibilities from time-to-time when given a document for review, or have to prepare for a visit") to enable NEASPEC's ambition to forge and institutionalize transboundary environmental cooperation ("*NEASPEC is dealing with big issues that link to a big agenda*"; "*this level does not have the power to lift it up and take leadership*"). Informants indicated that strengthening cooperation under NEASPEC is directly linked with participation of senior officials with the power to make important policy decisions.
- 115) Another weakness of the current arrangement relates to the frequency of change of NFPs and consequent loss of institutional memory. Reportedly, up to 50% of SOM delegates are 'first timers'. While this appears to result from member States following their own staffing protocols, informants revealed frustration about its heavy toll on efficiency-effectiveness as multilateral communication and consensus needs time and sustained relationships ("*that's why we spent 10 years to reach agreement on air pollution*"; "*it's been 15 years of trying to have something on biodiversity*").

Finding 17– Progress Towards the Envisaged Comprehensive Mechanism

While there has been practical, step-by-step evolution over 27 years since NEASPEC's creation, including a SOM-level request in 2007 to investigate options to strengthen this platform, the modality has not risen to the comprehensive mechanism envisaged by its member States upon its establishment.

- 116) The effects of mid-level SOM participation and overly frequent NFP changes have long since been brought to member States' attention and were partly responsible for triggering the 2007 review of NEASPEC's institutional and financial mechanisms. In responding to the SOM-11 request, the Secretariat put forward suggestions to reorganize the governance and policy-making apparatus in order to bring stronger political commitments from the member countries towards a comprehensive mechanism (aligned with the platform's founding vision). Although various options were laid out to bolster NEASPEC's resolve and national ownership (including holding regular ministerial meetings, assuring the level of representation at SOM, organising biennial ministerial participation, holding preparatory meetings of working level officials and formal meetings of senior officials, moving to mandatory financial contributions, using legally-binding agreements, rotating the Secretariat and its support costs amongst member States), none of these approaches has yet been adopted in the 13 intervening years since this review.
- 117) The extremely slow uptake of the overarching notion that the above-mentioned options reflect

demonstrates a sustained reluctance to strengthen the NEASPEC framework. A 2012 consultancy carried out in response to SOM-16's request to provide a roadmap for strengthening the programme and NEASPEC's institutional arrangements based on best practices of other subregional mechanisms in Asia Pacific pointed out that "strong political will and commitment are needed from member States to make full use of the platform, and this remains the greatest challenge for the future of NEASPEC"¹⁴.

Finding 18 – Leverage from the NEASPEC – ESCAP Linkage

The anticipated leverage for both involved entities from embedding this independent subregional cooperation platform within the current organisational setting has not been fully realised. There is insufficient comprehension of NEASPEC's assets, strategic agenda, and modus operandi.

- 118) NEASPEC means different things to different groups. Member States conceived it as framework to facilitate their inter-governmental environmental cooperation, whereas ESCAP actors perceive NEASPEC as an ESCAP programme, reflecting its inclusion in one office under ESCAP's set of subregional offices (ENEA, which includes NEASPEC's 6 member States and 2 associate members: Hong Kong, Macau). The ambiguity of being an independent subregional unit while also being an embedded organisational programme "as a subpart within a subpart" of a large organisation (itself with a big agenda dealing with reported silo effects, transition/succession issues, and inadequate delegation) is generating key challenges to NEASPEC's relevance and effectiveness.
- 119) At present, there is insufficient comprehension on the part of ESCAP stakeholders, including its leadership team, of NEASPEC's pertinence and utility for making meaningful contributions to the calls to action of ESCAP member States, of which NEASPEC's membership is a subset. Likewise, there appears to be inadequate realisation of the extent and ways in which NEASPEC could more strategically support member States vis-à-vis their obligations to international treaties and Agenda 2030 overall.
- 120) While the creation of the Strategic Plan (2016-2020) may have been intended to build alignment between NEASPEC and ESCAP, it does not seem to have fully bridged the gaps. Communications crafted by NEASPEC's Secretariat about needing to fit the pursuit of inter-governmental cooperation into an ESCAP Project Document, following ESCAP's organisational rhythm and requirements, appear to be de-energizing stakeholders and is currently not achieving the anticipated leverage from this institutional linkage. For member States, the NEASPEC mechanism is more about enduring cooperation than having the type of fixed end objectives that define a programme or project.
- 121) ESCAP informants commented on disconnects between the NEASPEC platform, Secretariat, and thematic programme and ESCAP's PoW and organisational structure, but without having a common narrative about how this has evolved, let alone how it could be constructively addressed, observing, for example: "*it's a struggle to match the NEASPEC programme even though it maps to ESCAP divisions/activities related to energy, climate change, nature protection*"; "*under NEASPEC, the work areas are different*"; "*EDD is difficult for NEASPEC to work with but would be its natural home*"; "*EDD is steering policy dialogues on SDGs by engaging numerous stakeholders, but it is hard to bring those topics into NEASPEC's very issue-specific setting*"; "*staff are busy with their own projects*"; "*there are many areas for collaboration but we don't have the chance to communicate with each other*".
- 122) While offering a vital mechanism (with its geographic scope and diverse membership of such magnitude, political/economic influence, and environmental footprint), through which ESCAP could regionalise its

¹⁴ NEASPEC Working Paper: 'North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities', Pak Sum Low, prepared for/discussed in SOM-17 (Chengdu, China 20-21 December 2012), p37

work, it was nevertheless emphasized that with each incoming Executive Secretary, NEASPEC has been subjected to serious scrutiny. It is the only entity of its kind resourced in this manner under the ESCAP framework. The resulting questions customarily posed (“*what is NEASPEC?*”; “*why is it doing wetlands and birdwatching?*”; “*why are they counting the number of tigers?*”; “*how does it contribute to ESCAP’s work?*”) show lack of understanding NEASPEC’s strategic agenda and modus operandi and reveal a clumsy fit between ESCAP’s socio-economic pursuits and NEASPEC’s exercise of environmental diplomacy.

- 123) One of the challenges for bridging the disconnects in the current institutional/organisational arrangement is that NEASPEC is relatively mature in its sector, particularly in biodiversity and nature conservation, whereas ESCAP’s founding focus has only recently broadened towards inclusive sustainable development. Informants highlighted the need for a greater level of internal clarity and top-level direction with delegation down through the organisation (“*we need to understand the thinking of ESCAP management as to what should be its role*”) in order to better leverage the asset inherent in NEASPEC, which appears to have been under-appreciated and under-utilized, to date.
- 124) Since the adoption of the current Strategic Plan, the potential for NEASPEC to mobilise subregional efforts to achieve the SDGs has been highlighted but not yet fully translated into scope and substance. The wish to deepen this direction is naturally enhanced by NEASPEC’s association with ESCAP due to its role in coordinating and strengthening the resolve of the wider community of 53 Asia Pacific member States vis-à-vis the 2030 Agenda. At the same time, informants mentioned their interest for the NEASPEC Secretariat to work on behalf of member States to link subregional topics to the global agenda, explore synergies with the Belt and Road Initiative, deepen practical cooperation, and engage with other mechanisms to raise financial resources (e.g. Green Carbon Fund, GEF, ADB, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank). Translating these notions into a meaningful work programme is very demanding in a cross-country cooperation context. These expectations clearly outstrip the Secretariat’s current resourcing.
- 125) NEASPEC’s results in the area of TAP (¶62) give a glimpse into the significant potential for its impact to be magnified through its association with ESCAP, and vice-versa. Apart from TAP, this catalytic effect has not been pursued, let alone realised, to date, in the other thematic areas. While NEASPEC, through NEACAP, is seen to have inspired and fuelled the deepening of ESCAP’s mandate with respect to air pollution (¶62), in the area of marine conservation, NEASPEC was apparently not even visible in the ESCAP agenda. This reflects another disconnect between NEASPEC and ESCAP. Its 76th session (May 2020) adopted a resolution (ESCAP/RES76/1)¹⁵, which mandates its 53 member States to strengthen cooperation to promote the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia-Pacific. As 2021 kicks off the UN Ocean Decade for Sustainable Development, informants pointed to this “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for ocean society, including NEAMPAN, to activate international cooperation for the sustainability of NEA seas”.

4.7 Summary of Findings

- 126) Table 2 summarizes the findings according to the requested criteria.

Table 2 - Summary of Findings by Evaluation Criteria

Criterion	Title of Finding	Summarized Finding	Section
Relevance	Finding 1 – NEASPEC’s Unique Added Value	Beyond the platform’s achievement of laying a foundation for environmental cooperation in the challenging NEA setting and its longstanding role in fostering subregional coordination, NEASPEC’s unique added value has been linked to its inclusiveness, its success in balancing the interests of six member	4.1

¹⁵ <https://www.unescap.org/commission/76/documents>

		States with varying levels of development and priorities, and its ability to enable breakthroughs on inter-governmental cooperation. It has achieved this by leveraging a strong science-policy linkage and navigating sensitive political territory. The latter has been achieved primarily by focussing on cooperation and coordination with national implications (i.e. by pursuing the exchange of information, knowledge, and experience as first steps), moreso than explicitly pushing for transboundary cooperation.	
	Finding 2 – Strengthening of Coordinated Actions to Address Environmental Challenges in NEA	NEASPEC’s relevance is linked to its utility for member States. In fulfilling an objective need to develop an institutional basis for cross-country environmental cooperation, NEASPEC has incrementally pursued the strengthening of coordinated actions under its programmatic agenda. While coordinated action has increased with the creation of structures accompanied by more formalised procedures, the pace has been slow, and the timeline is extended.	
	Finding 3 – Responsiveness to Member States’ Needs and Demands	As a platform, NEASPEC provides ample opportunity for member States to express their needs and interests. While deliberate efforts are undertaken to request feedback, garner proposals, and ensure regular solicitation of national positions vis-à-vis thematic activities, the SOM’s current operationalisation as a ‘working-level’ governing body channels the member States into being more reactive than proactive and increases reliance on the Secretariat to propose areas for collective action. This dynamic is enhanced due to the desire for a consensus-driven approach.	
Effectiveness	Finding 4 – NEASPEC’s Pursuit of Subregional Environmental Cooperation	In the light of its founding framework (1996), Vision Statement (2000), and Strategic Plan (2016-2020), NEASPEC’s development has evolved, particularly over the past 5 years and positive strides have been made vis-à-vis its key objective to promote common policy dialogue on approaches and coordinated action on environmental issues in NEA. While stakeholders are generally satisfied with NEASPEC’s performance, its untapped potential was highlighted.	4.2
	Finding 5 – Key Programmatic Results and Achievements: Nature Conservation	NEASPEC was able to identify and fill a gap that has triggered important multilateral and bilateral cooperation that sets the stage for deepening cross-country cooperation related to flagship species and habitat protection in biodiversity hotspots. While this direction has gained momentum and is satisfying for some stakeholders, others assert that stronger steering would be opportune to set this thematic area on a course and level of ambition that is better aligned with an ‘end game’ that deepens transboundary commitments to environmental cooperation.	4.2.1
	Finding 6 – Key Programmatic Results and Achievements: Transboundary Air Pollution (TPA)	Albeit over a decade in the making, NEASPEC’s work in this domain has resulted in a voluntary framework to improve air quality in the subregion, which has been amplified through the ESCAP setting to impact the Asia Pacific region and subsequently, carried to the UN General Assembly of nations at large. The profile and impact of NEASPEC’s activities related to TAP demonstrate the catalytic impact of strengthening the push-pull dynamic of NEASPEC and ESCAP.	4.2.2
	Finding 7 – Key Programmatic Results and Achievements: Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)	In searching to define a distinctive territory on which to work and reflecting member States’ preference to focus within national borders and avoid a transboundary orientation in this thematic domain has resulted in a priority programmatic area operating with limited scope, with a focus on experience-sharing at local government level, which does not appear to be consistent with NEASPEC’s competence, resourcing, and the nature of its infrastructure. To date, neither NEASPEC nor ESCAP have sufficiently leveraged the opportunity to drive catalytic impact through the recent ESCAP resolution to promote conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia-Pacific, reflective of a disconnect between these two inter-governmental structures.	4.2.3
	Finding 8 – Key Programmatic	Having identified a value-added niche on a relatively crowded landscape, the resulting focus on subnational government level has generated challenges for	4.2.4

	Results and Achievements: Low Carbon Cities (LCCs)	implementation under the NEASPEC structure. While facilitating helpful exchange and described as having a well-defined goal and process that includes peer review and comparative country assessment, the mismatch between the effort and timelines required to identify and engage the 'right' local government actors outstrips the networks and resourcing of this programme. Strengthening the link with related activities under ESCAP's Urban Development Programme has the potential to impact a significantly wider group of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. To date, this connection has not gained traction.	
	Finding 9 – Key Programmatic Results and Achievements: Desertification and Land Degradation (DLD)	While this thematic area is well-suited to NEASPEC's transboundary agenda, the extent of duplication with other instruments has made it difficult to identify a value-added contribution, despite the amplification that would potentially be available from better synchronisation with ESCAP, a missed opportunity to date. At least two member States are interested to continue collaboration in this domain, pointing to the links between land, security, sustainability, and the opportunity to address Gender Equality/Human Rights (GE/HR) that could provide a more strategic future direction for this thematic domain.	4.2.5
Efficiency	Finding 10 – The Pertinence of Efficiency	As a project, NEASPEC would be judged quite harshly for its timeliness of execution and cost-effectiveness. As an inter-governmental platform, imposing an efficiency regime would undermine NEASPEC's purpose and the strength of its political function in so far that this infrastructure has been established to facilitate inter-state cooperation with a process and rhythm that privilege political and diplomatic considerations over efficiency.	4.3
Mainstreaming of Gender Equality and Human Rights	Finding 11 – Gender Equality and Human Rights	NEASPEC's comparatively timid treatment of this topic, to date, was justified by a combination of inadequate competence, concern that it would politicize and thereby impair the platform's cross-country cooperation, and differing notions regarding the pace and way in which to approach these considerations. Acknowledging NEASPEC's association with the UN and its obligation to address GE/HR, aspects in DLD, MPA, and Nature Conservation were uncovered that could be entry points to tackle this challenge.	4.4
Sustainability, Resource Mobilisation, Partnership Arrangements	Finding 12 – Sustainability Prospects of this Platform	NEASPEC's sustainability is not in question, given its longevity, perceived relevance, and the substantial support available through its association and accommodation within the UN system, although the earmarking of funding, diversity of contributions provided across the set of its member States, and the lack of predictability in funding flows are issues of growing concern.	4.5
	Finding 13 – Resource Mobilisation and Utilisation	Contrasting perceptions of the platform's financial sustainability (i.e. NEASPEC is not faced with actual funding constraints versus a perceived need for substantially more funding to enable the mechanism to tap its potential) are indicative of a weakness in fund utilisation. This effect is set to be heightened in relation to COVID-19 which saw the replacement of many planned activities with virtual convening. Savings strategies deployed to smooth the unpredictable flow of contributions strengthen their conviction of poor utilisation of provided funds, undermining the legitimacy of requests for increased funding. This is generating a vicious cycle of deteriorating credibility and potentially inhibiting member States from feeling compelled to embark on a more ambitious programme under NEASPEC.	
	Finding 14 – NEASPEC Secretariat's Role, Capacities, Constraints, and Risks	With the 2011 inauguration of a permanent secretariat in Incheon, NEASPEC has benefitted from a marked increase in support. The Secretariat's competence, professionalism, and commitment are tremendously valued and effective. While suitable organisational measures have been undertaken to manage the undulating workflow and compliance with ROPs, the expanding and diverging portfolio of thematic activities, rising expectations for service level quality, and the extensive level of sensemaking and horizon scanning to proactively support member States is outstripping the Secretariat's resources and generates growing risk for the platform.	

	Finding 15 – Leveraging Partnerships	Engaging national institutions as project partners has successfully functioned to mobilise resources and bolster the science-policy linkage underlying and driving NEASPEC’s inter-governmental environmental cooperation. However, the transactional approach to their engagement misses an opportunity for the platform to gain catalytic power.	
Strengths and Challenges of the Institutional / Organisational Set-Up	Finding 16 – NEASPEC’s Governance Mechanism: Assets, Efficiency, and Effectiveness	Institutionally, NEASPEC draws strength from its linkage into Foreign Affairs ministries, which are authorized to strike inter-governmental agreements and can facilitate outreach to appropriate national entities for coordination on the thematic programme. However, the shortfall in realising the anticipated level of participation in the SOM and the frequent change in NFPs are seen as negatively impacting the efficient and effective use of the platform’s resources.	4.6
	Finding 17 – Progress Towards the Envisaged Comprehensive Mechanism	While there has been practical, step-by-step evolution over 27 years since NEASPEC’s creation, including a SOM-level request in 2007 to investigate options to strengthen this platform, the modality has not risen to the comprehensive mechanism envisaged by its member States upon its establishment.	
	Finding 18 – Leverage from the NEASPEC – ESCAP Linkage	The anticipated leverage for both involved entities from embedding this independent subregional cooperation platform within the current organisational setting has not been fully realised. There is insufficient comprehension of NEASPEC’s assets, strategic agenda, and modus operandi.	

5. Conclusions

RELEVANCE

- 127) At the very least, NEASPEC has achieved the minimum of what was intended in setting a framework for cross-country environmental cooperation. Its longevity is taken as an indicator of its value to member States and other stakeholders alike. Situated in a landscape crowded with a plethora of actors and initiatives, NEASPEC stands out in the quality of dialogue that it facilitates and its ability to navigate sensitive political territory in its pursuit of environmental diplomacy. Its diverse membership and the degree of political/economic influence and environmental footprint that its six nations represent support the conclusion that NEASPEC serves a strategic purpose, which no other platform can easily perform.
- 128) NEASPEC’s relevance is directly linked to its usefulness to its member States. It is aligned with achieving their obligations related to international treaties and the vision of Agenda 2030; however, NEASPEC’s ability to support and accelerate progress towards these commitments has not been fully recognized nor has its potential been purposely leveraged by its member States to this end. This conclusion is evidenced by: i) member States’ shortfall in the staffing of its governing body with sufficiently high level decision-makers (as was intended, and arguably needed); ii) allowing domestic political considerations to override effectiveness/efficiency ramifications from the frequent change of NFPs; iii) the preference to focus NEASPEC’s impact on strengthening national capacities and coordination rather than more comprehensively pursuing transboundary challenges; and iv) not ensuring a reliable, independent, and adequate funding stream to enable the platform to implement a higher level of ambition.

EFFECTIVENESS

- 129) Assessed using the lens that reflects its purpose, NEASPEC’s effectiveness has been judged as very high. NEASPEC’s purpose is to function as the political and diplomatic infrastructure for multi-state discussion and cooperation on environmental issues. The high assessment of its effectiveness is based on NEASPEC’s capacity to facilitate cooperation between its six very diverse NEA member nations, integrate technical experts’ input, respond to the occasional request or proposal from a member State or ESCAP, its respect

of the agreed protocols, and the timeliness of the implementation of decisions made at the SOM.

- 130) In its own context, as a multilateral cooperation platform in NEA, arguably NEASPEC is performing precisely as designed. NEASPEC's purpose is not to count Black-faced spoonbills or perform molecular genetic analysis of Amur tiger faeces. Its purpose, which it has successfully fulfilled for 27 years, is in providing a forum for the involved nations to discuss the question, "shall we count Black-faced spoonbills?", and if so, "who should do the counting, in which way?". The outputs of the Black-faced spoonbill study and the observation of transborder vagaries of Amur tigers, in and of themselves, do not contribute to the progress of human civilisation, per se. But they do act as key indicators of the viability of the NEA ecosystem, which, in turn, is needed to support humanity, both in the region and beyond. The obvious question emerges: does NEASPEC itself need to commandeer such studies, or could it rely on similar studies organised by other initiatives or agencies [such as UNEP, Conservation International, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Greenpeace, etc.]? Irrespective of who observes the migrating birds or picks up the poop, NEASPEC's role is to be the forum for its six member States to decide what indicators need to be monitored in order to appropriately check the pulse and health of the wider ecosystem and be in position to select how these indicators should be monitored and by whom.
- 131) The embedding of the NEASPEC framework within a UN-related structure and its operational norms has the full support of its member States, for its inclusiveness, multilateralism, and consensus-based approach. The compatibility of this consensus-based approach arguably reflects an intrinsic facet of East Asian culture that a Western observer may perceive as a vacuum. Consequently, there is a risk that UN colleagues might feel that in the absence of leadership from a single member State, NEASPEC's ESCAP-embedded Secretariat should be taking a leadership role, while the NEASPEC Secretariat itself, which is embedded within this same East Asian culture, fully understands the impropriety of taking leadership and therefore insists on the community of member States, through the SOM, to drive the consensus towards decision-making. This explains why there is no perceived leadership as well as why there may also be no perceived need for leadership.
- 132) One consequence of this mutual deference is that it facilitates regular injections of ideas, which, as long as they adhere to the underlying tacit values and principles, are never rejected. The extent to which proposals comply is not necessarily measured and certainly not made explicit, because those values and principles themselves are not explicit. While a governance body might be held accountable to ensure a certain level of due diligence in the choice of active thematic areas and activities, there is less inclination to do so under NEASPEC as the values and principles are currently tacit. As the governing body, the SOM, is acting in recursive responsiveness with the Secretariat, no single entity feels accountable for ensuring due diligence of the choices being made.
- 133) In its mandate as a service to the SOM and member States, and in order to preserve its legitimacy, it is incumbent on the NEASPEC Secretariat to demonstrate a high level of responsiveness to member States' needs, interests, and requests as well as deliver on expectations for service level quality. This drive for responsiveness (observed in relation to member States' reactive mode) inherently increases the reliance and load on the Secretariat to carry out necessary sensemaking, negotiation, coordination, research, and preparation (which together, accumulate to a resource-intensive overhead). Protocols and formalised procedures (which drive pressure for and scrutiny of their compliance) have been adopted specifically to temper progress in order to facilitate response to domestic political priorities (and whims) and/or to buy time to carry out needed consultation with the high-level decision-makers who are best-equipped to articulate national positions on proposed directions (but are absent from the SOM). Based on this evidence, it is concluded that it is the intention of member States' for NEASPEC to proceed with caution

and prudence.

- 134) The implication of the resulting, somewhat arbitrary and random, choice of thematic activities serves as an obstacle to effective communications, public relations, and advocacy. Translating this into practical terms, nobody knows how to leverage NEASPEC in an effective manner.
- 135) While addressing some highly visible and distinctive gaps, NEASPEC's thematic agenda is not driven by a formal Theory of Change, a logical framework, or a structured breakdown of strategic goals. This is natural and understandable because, per the establishment of its framework, NEASPEC was never set up to have a goal. NEASPEC is an infrastructure for multilateral cooperation on environmental issues.
- 136) The assessment of the way in which NEASPEC's thematic agenda has evolved reflects a blend of technical and diplomatic opportunities, which reflect the mix of inputs and direction channelled from its field of stakeholders (member States and project partners) into and mediated by the NEASPEC Secretariat. The areas identified for cooperation under NEASPEC's thematic agenda reflect a tacit desire to have high visibility and catalytic impact, and sometimes, to respond to pressure from the wider global community (e.g. TAP, LCCs). The resulting programmatic choices are occasionally perceived as 'pet projects'.
- 137) While the eventual selection of thematic areas seems to reflect some underlying strategic principles, there is a lack of governance and steering that would allow NEASPEC, both SOM and Secretariat, to deliberately select future thematic areas based on such principles.
- 138) NEASPEC's progress, admittedly slow, has accelerated over the past 5 years since the establishment of its first Strategic Plan. While stakeholders are generally satisfied with NEASPEC's performance, its potential contributions are not fully coherent, and therefore, have not yet been fully recognized by its member States and ESCAP, let alone exploited.
- 139) NEASPEC's programmatic agenda does not have strategic, coherent vision – and certainly far away from one that is consistent with an 'end game' that deepens within-country and transboundary commitments to environmental cooperation, consistent with intentionally accelerating progress towards Agenda 2030.
- 140) In the event that other instruments are more suitable than NEASPEC and are currently being more powerfully deployed in the above-mentioned direction, it would be understandable to allow NEASPEC to continue on its current, cautious, relatively slow value-adding trajectory. Should this not be the case, then the sustained reluctance of member States to strengthen and use NEASPEC to support themselves in more expeditiously and more robustly achieving their global commitments vis-à-vis the SDGs is concluded to be an expression of the individual and collective political will of the involved member States.

EFFICIENCY

- 141) Using efficiency as a key criterion to assess NEASPEC's relevance and contributions risks distracting attention from focussing on the nature and impact of its contribution. Imposing an efficiency regime onto this mechanism would defeat NEASPEC's purpose and undermine the strength of its political and diplomatic functions. Its processes have been set up to facilitate the pursuit of enduring inter-governmental cooperation, with a process and rhythm that privilege political considerations over efficiency. These processes should necessarily be free from the constraints of misguided scrutiny and pressures for accountability, which are factors that are vital for goal-driven projects and programmes.

MAINSTREAMING OF GENDER EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS (GE/HR)

- 142) While acknowledging there are differing notions across the member States regarding the pace and way in which to approach GE/HR, by virtue of NEASPEC's embedding within and resourcing under the UN

framework, there is an obligation to address these issues driven from the highest UN level. The recognition that addressing GE/HR is integral to achieving sustainable development provides a way forward. In this light, the relatively benign, potentially non-controversial entry points within NEASPEC's work on DLD, MPAs, and LCCs that have been identified provide a foundation on which to build further.

SUSTAINABILITY, RESOURCE MOBILISATION, PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS

- 143) As long as NEASPEC reflects the will of the member States, its sustainability is not in question.
- 144) The arrangement of being embedded within ESCAP, which has not been questioned since NEASPEC's creation, is perhaps unwittingly stopping member States from taking stronger national and collective ownership for this endeavour and strengthening their resolve to cooperate in a deeper and more binding manner.
- 145) The inter-governmental cooperation under NEASPEC would be more effectively served through the provision of unearmarked funds and a reliable, predictable, and adequate flow of resources consistent with its ability to play a more visible, progressive, and impactful role. The reluctance to take up recommendations and exhortations to move the resourcing of this platform to a more predictable basis is consistent with a lack of political will on the part of the member States, both nationally and collectively.
- 146) Savings strategies deployed by the Secretariat to smooth the ebb and flow of unpredictable member State contributions add to their conviction that there is a poor utilisation of provided funds, which undermines the legitimacy of requests for further maintenance as well as increased funding. With the shift to virtual meetings imposed by COVID-19 travel restrictions, the recent recognition that online collaboration is not only possible but can also be fruitful risks feeding into a vicious cycle of weakening perceptions about the need for funds. These elements are also blurring comprehension of the actual resourcing requirements for pursuing a more meaningful agenda.
- 147) While the establishment of a permanent secretariat in Incheon and its staffing with a highly competent and committed small team, together with appointing a member State as rotating chair, have improved the resourcing and consistency of support available to NEASPEC, the role of and demands managed by the Secretariat, currently underplayed by the label of 'coordination', together with increasing complexity of the platform's expanding and diverging thematic portfolio, is exacting a toll on the team and risks to outstrip its resourcing and resilience.
- 148) A more strategic approach to partnership that goes beyond the transactional engagement of national institutes would unleash further financial and in-kind support from project partners. This could also drive catalytic impact, provided that project partners could be linked together in a more formalised way under NEASPEC. Currently, the scheduling of the SOM is the primordial driver of NEASPEC's cadence. The implication of pursuing resourcing through strengthening of partnership arrangements is that NEASPEC may be pressured to align itself with the priorities, working rhythms, and milestones of key partners and initiatives, rather than drive its own strategic agenda. Should such a situation materialise, it would present a significant risk to the integrity of the NEASPEC framework.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANISATIONAL SET-UP

- 149) Mid-level SOM participation, frequent NFP changes, a voluntary approach and minimal resourcing can be seen as indicators of mediocre political will of member States. This approach could equally be reflect a deliberate political will to operate in a measured and prudent manner, taking all interests into account, not just the environmental agenda. In operating NEASPEC as a 'working level' apparatus, insufficient political support has been generated to strengthen the institutional basis for subregional cooperation. By

implication, as NFPs and SOM delegates are primarily mid-level and not senior, the room for manoeuvre to shift the power that NEASPEC wields is currently limited.

- 150) The member States have ecological interdependence, with deterioration of common pool resources (sea, air) and transboundary ecosystems with socio-economic and environmental implications. While there is a high level of complex interdependence amongst China, Japan, and ROK (stemming from high intra-regional trade), the extent to which this applies to all six states is not clear. The drive to strengthen subregional governance is related to both the level of complex interdependence sown through deepening economic interaction and”¹⁶. Additionally, exogenous inputs and external brokers can bring member States into discussion by identifying agendas for cooperation. While NEASPEC’s embedding in ESCAP creates potential for these triggering and consolidating effects, insufficiently deep comprehension on the part of ESCAP actors, including its leadership team, of NEASPEC’s relevance and usefulness for generating meaningful contributions to ESCAP’s PoW has led to NEASPEC being an unappreciated and under-utilised in responding to its calls to action and the agenda-setting function for its member States.
- 151) The profile and impact of NEASPEC’s activities related to TAP clearly demonstrate the catalytic impact of strengthening the push-pull dynamic between NEASPEC and ESCAP. There is a golden opportunity to link NEASPEC’s *raison d’être* more strongly to achieving member State obligations related to international treaties and Agenda 2030. Translating this into an operational scope and substance is a demanding task. While ESCAP has the internal capabilities to contribute to this challenge, these cannot be easily marshalled under the current organisational set-up. NEASPEC could question whether the interests of the member States are best being served by a Secretariat hosted within ESCAP’s ENEA subregion or whether a different modality might be more appropriate.
- 152) Given the magnitude of the missed opportunity, the significance and demonstration effect of this particular cohort of member States nudged into taking stronger leadership, and the degree to which NEASPEC is being overlooked and siloed within the much larger ESCAP organisation (itself struggling with its own silo effects, transition/succession issues, and inadequate delegation), the conclusion is that the vision and direction needs to be determined at Executive Secretary level and communicated down through the ESCAP organisation. Without this level of engagement and direction, and the appropriate resourcing and authority, the observed disconnects will persist.

6. Recommendations

FOR THE SOM:

Recommendation 1: Decide whether or not to move forward in operationalising NEASPEC in a way that would enable the realisation of its founding vision to be a comprehensive environmental cooperation mechanism.

- 153) The overall outcome of this assessment indicates that NEASPEC is highly aligned with member States’ global obligations and commitments towards achieving the objectives of Agenda 2030. To date, the potential of this mechanism to support the membership in more robustly and expeditiously working towards this end appears to not be fully recognized, let alone purposely pursued and exploited – judging by the regular channelling of mid-level delegates to the SOM, allowing for frequent change of NFPs, and maintaining a voluntary approach and minimal resourcing. These elements systematically inhibit this

¹⁶ Institutionalizing Complex and Ecological Interdependence: Subregional Environmental Governance in Asia and the Pacific’, S. Nam, *Environmental Policy* (2008), Vol. 16, No. 3, p15

framework from rising to a higher level of ambition and contribution in strengthening the resolve of member States towards the end goal of enhancing the quality of life and well-being of present and future generations in the NEA region. While these elements have been brought to the attention of the member States in the past, recommendations documented in SOM minutes throughout NEASPEC's 27 years of operation to improve on this aspect have not yet borne fruit (e.g. through the adoption of best practices of other subregional mechanisms in Asia Pacific). Now, 20 years after the endorsement of NEASPEC's Vision Statement, it is more than pertinent for the SOM to review the positioning and use of the NEASPEC framework. The bulk of evidence points to a sustained reluctance on the part of member States to operationalise this platform in a way that would give it higher authority and thereby function to bring stronger political commitments from member countries towards a comprehensive environmental cooperation mechanism (which is aligned with the founding vision). If there is actual political will in the subregion to address major topics in relation to Agenda 2030 and international treaty obligations, NEASPEC could be used as a highly effective instrument to trigger major momentum in this direction.

FOR THE SOM:

Recommendation 2: Review the 1996 founding framework and update NEASPEC's charter so that it is aligned with the ambition and intention of the involved member States, as informed by the 27 years of cooperation and coordination and in light of the accelerative effect of using a Strategic Plan. As part of this endeavour, it would be pertinent to set a long-term vision, mission, and goals – and to make values and principles that are presently tacit more explicit.

- 154) After working together for over two decades, the involved parties have a much more informed understanding of what this type of subregional cooperation can deliver and how it can be used. Formalising the expressed intention of the member States within a constitution instils the sense of belonging and identity for its constituents, which is vital for supporting and driving national and collective ownership of the platform. As well, such a charter provides purpose and goals, directs the ensuing strategy towards their coherent pursuit, and channels the different actors to work in concert to enable their delivery. Making tacit values and principles more explicit would better serve to guide decision-making, action, communications, advocacy, and incline towards stronger due diligence, with a view to enhancing coherence and reducing the risk of misguided forays in directions not fully aligned with the envisaged level and manner of contribution. Making the tacit more explicit would provide a pragmatic counterpoint to the effects of the platform's consensus-based approach and mutual deference, which currently allow for suboptimal selection of the type and level of action within NEASPEC's programmatic agenda. Aligning NEASPEC's overall guiding framework with its purpose would reduce the somewhat arbitrary and random choice of thematic activities and the emergence of 'pet projects', which, while reflecting the interest of member States, are hit-and-miss in terms of their potential to generate catalytic impact and drive the platform in a coherent, strategic manner.

FOR THE SOM and NFPs

Recommendation 3: Honour the notion of high-level participation in the SOM, as per the founding vision, and provide for significantly more stability of designated NFPs.

- 155) The two afore-mentioned recommendations would facilitate the mechanism in having stronger steering and more strategic intention and coherence in the design of its programmatic agenda. The area addressed by this recommendation relates to the operationalisation of the above recommendations and corresponds to the wisdom that was demonstrated in the initial formulation of the NEASPEC platform, occasionally echoed in SOM discussions, and voiced strongly by the majority of informants consulted as

part of this assessment exercise. NEASPEC has been described as standing out in the quality of dialogue that it facilitates and its ability to navigate sensitive political territory in its pursuit of environmental diplomacy. This appears to be a very good horse to back indeed! If the channelling of mid-level government delegates to the SOM and the frequent change of NFPs are being used intentionally for the advantages that these tactics bring in ensuring time for sufficient consultation with the appropriate national actors, the trade-offs in efficiency, loss of momentum and institutional memory, and varying abilities to ensure an unadulterated transmission of discussions to stakeholders who were not present should be more carefully assessed.

- 156) Could it be possible that there is a disconnect between the intended and actual empowerment of the delegates to the SOM? Ideally, these delegates are and know that they are authorized to discuss and decide on behalf of their nations. If those who are currently participating in the SOM believe that they do not have the authority to speak on behalf of their superiors, while their superiors have entrusted them to do so – this would be an issue that can be rectified by the national government and the individuals concerned.

FOR THE NEASPEC SECRETARIAT AND THE SOM

Recommendation 4: Review the pertinence of embedding NEASPEC's Secretariat within ESCAP's ENEA office and whether this hosting best suits the mechanism's purpose and needs.

- 157) The decision to embed the NEASPEC Secretariat within ESCAP dates from the inception of the instrument. In addition to drawing on the analytical and normative work of ESCAP at national and subregional levels, this institutional/organisational arrangement was seen as facilitating opportunities to promote smallscale, practical cooperation in areas of common concern as well as provide financial and administrative benefits arising from its operation under a UN framework. With the opening of ESCAP's ENEA office in 2010 and the offer of the ROK government to host a permanent secretariat, NEASPEC's shift from Bangkok [where it had been under the auspices of ESCAP's Environment and Development Division (EDD)] to Incheon (where it now sits "as a part within a subpart" within ESCAP's subregional ENEA office) seemed opportune at the time. While this brought the NEASPEC Secretariat closer to the member States, it has distanced the team from their ESCAP colleagues in Bangkok and in so doing, appears to have attenuated the relevance and potential leverage of calls to action by the wider ESCAP membership, which are prepared and mediated through Bangkok.

FOR ESCAP'S EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

Recommendation 5: Establish more formal links between NEASPEC and ESCAP and direct the relevant touchpoints in ESCAP in order to leverage the push-pull dynamic of NEASPEC-ESCAP in serving the calls to action of ESCAP member States, of which NEASPEC's membership is an important cohort, with vital leadership and demonstration potential.

- 158) This recommendation follows on from the above recommendation, whose solution can be understood and addressed as a management problem. The mandate of NEASPEC (environmental), and therefore the NEASPEC Secretariat, contrasts, but at the same time is complementary, with the overall mandate and mission of ESCAP (economic and social). Through the ENEA subregional office, NEASPEC presumably could enable the delivery of a more holistic approach out of the Incheon part of the organisation. However, the absence of an explicit substantive complementarity and institutional liaison between NEASPEC's and

ESCAP's strategic agendas and constituent activities in the subregion have resulted in a situation where the potential synergies of both entities with each other is currently overlooked, under-appreciated, and under-utilised, with genuine missed opportunities in both directions.

- 159) From what was observed and heard through this evaluation exercise, the NEASPEC Secretariat has the interest to tap and integrate substantive contributions of the larger ESCAP organisation. However, this unit and its team members appear to face blockages in pursuing the development and contribution of input from ESCAP colleagues into NEASPEC's substantive agenda, although the SOM might welcome this. Formalising the relationship between NEASPEC and ESCAP at a substantive level would facilitate the integration of wider ESCAP and UN agendas/priorities, thereby facilitating their deployment and demonstration in the subregion, under the auspices of NEASPEC. Translating such a notion into practice could be easily achieved by having a custodian for NEASPEC sitting within ESCAP's leadership team. This role would serve as an advocate for the ESCAP environmental agenda towards NEASPEC and intentionally orchestrate the effective flow of programmatic ideas between Incheon and Bangkok, acting in both reactive and proactive modes, continuously networking and scanning for useful inputs, channelling these in the appropriate direction, and ensuring there is sufficient prioritization and resourcing available to seize and build strategic synergies. Such a role would be inspired by and build on the catalytic impact demonstrated under the TAP thematic area where NEASPEC's work is currently in the process of being amplified through the wider ESCAP container. Such a role would also seek to enhance and benefit from the push-pull dynamic between the organisations by better leveraging NEASPEC as a test bed for gaining subregional consensus on areas of cooperation, enabling the demonstration and leadership effect of this important cohort of member States to flourish and accelerate momentum in the wider Asia Pacific region. With ESCAP's call to action with respect to oceans (ESCAP/RES76/1), marine conservation would be a good place to start.

FOR THE SOM:

Recommendation 6: Revise the funding modalities to enhance the reliability and level of funding flows, and review options for progressively moving towards more equitable contributions from all member States, with a roadmap towards this achievement.

- 160) The need for reliable financial resources has been highlighted since the creation of this framework. Financial and in-kind inputs across the member States vastly differ in magnitude, with three countries as the main contributors. While this situation reflects the means available domestically, informants to this evaluation indicated that the diversity of national support is an issue of growing concern for the platform's sustainability. Given the varying levels of development of its member States, this would be a timely moment to review the resourcing of the NEASPEC framework to determine whether adjustments would be in order to respond to the expressed concern regarding equity.
- 161) Following the examples and best practice of other similar platforms that act as hubs for multilateral cooperation, the idea of establishing a trust fund (which has been studied, discussed several times, and drafted into text) has not yet born fruit within the NEASPEC context. While NEASPEC's financial sustainability is not in jeopardy, per se, given the success that the Secretariat has had in mobilising human, financial, and other resources across member States to jointly carry out activities under the thematic programme, this is a highly resource intensive endeavour being conducted by a small team already playing a demanding role. As NEASPEC's strategic agenda is heightened and expanded, particularly in view of the opportunity to strengthen its linkages with Agenda 2030 even further, the need to carry out fundraising due to the lack of reliable funding sources and earmarked funding threatens to become even more of a distraction and contributes to outstripping the resources of the Secretariat team. The savings strategy

currently being used by the Secretariat as a hedge against unpredictable inflows is generating suboptimal effects. Ensuring adequate, predictable funding would set NEASPEC on a course to being able to realise a more visible, progressive, and impactful role in the context of its purpose and goals.

FOR THE SOM and ESCAP:

Recommendation 7: Enhance the resourcing of the NEASPEC Secretariat.

- 162) While playing its current role of horizon scanning, sensing, negotiation, tacit steering, and preparation (all subsumed under the relatively benign and deceptive label of ‘coordination’) in an extremely competent manner, the demands on the Secretariat are on the verge of outstripping its resources and resilience. Assorted suggestions have been put forward to alleviate constraints and enhance the bench strength of the Secretariat, while also, in some cases, potentially functioning to enhance national ownership and accelerate the consolidation and communication of national positions which are a fundamental and regular part of advancing inter-governmental cooperation. The options and offers that have been fielded require careful consideration of their assets and drawbacks and should be selected in conjunction with the level of absorption capacity at Secretariat level and the establishment of suitable onboarding, supervisory, management arrangements, and other considerations.

FOR THE NEASPEC SECRETARIAT:

Recommendation 8: Use virtual meetings to enhance the frequency and quality of the inter-governmental connectedness being pursued under the auspices of NEASPEC.

- 163) The shift to online meetings and virtual collaboration is a legacy benefit of the COVID-19 travel restrictions that have been imposed throughout the world. In addition to the significant cost reduction such avenues immediately deliver, the contribution in reducing GHG emissions is staggering. Such virtual convening, and its quick adoption, has brought unprecedented opportunities to bring key stakeholders into discussion and decision-making fora. The recognition that online collaboration is not only possible but can also be fruitful sets a valuable stage for increasing the frequency of interaction amongst NEASPEC stakeholders. Increasing the frequency and quality of interaction through online means, in a way that is relevant and effective, can be expected to have a positive spin-off in terms of enhancing the connections amongst the member States.
- 164) While virtual meetings should not completely replace *in situ* encounters, such as the SOM, they can address targeted, operational issues, leaving more time during face-to-face meetings for discussions that can only be adequately addressed in person. The combination of regular physical and virtual meetings can only serve to enhance the sense of belonging under the NEASPEC platform.
- 165) Increasing the sense of community is a key driver of ownership. Ownership drives commitment. Commitment drives action.
- 166) This effect will presumably be enhanced not only on the part of the current population and profile of NEASPEC delegates who take part in meetings, but the virtual nature of online meetings facilitates the inclusion of a wider, and perhaps more senior audience, for participation. Collectively, these elements can be expected to feed the relevance and utility of the mechanism, contributing to a virtuous cycle, anchoring its sustainability and impact.

ANNEXES

Annex 1 - Evaluation Terms of Reference

To be inserted as final step

DRAFT

Annex 2 - List of Documents and Other Resources Consulted

Establishment of NEASPEC Framework, Programme Design, Programme Description, Context

- Framework of NEASPEC (Report of the 3rd Meeting of Senior Officials on Environmental Cooperation in North-East Asia, Ulaanbaatur, 17-20 September 1996)
- Resolution of ESCAP on NEASPEC, adopted by 53rd Commission Session of ESCAP on 30 April 1997
- Vision Statement for Environmental Cooperation in North-East Asia, adopted by 6th SOM, 9-10 March 2000, Seoul, North Korea
- Regional Environmental Governance in Asia and the Pacific: Review of NEASPEC and other Subregional Programmes (published by NEASPEC Secretariat), 2005
- Institutional and Financial Mechanisms of NEASPEC: Review and Options, output of Expert Meeting and 12th SOM, 22-23 March 2007, Beijing, China
- Nam, Sangmin (2008), "Institutionalizing Complex and Ecological Interdependence: Subregional Environmental Governance in Asia and the Pacific", Environmental Policy, Vol. 16, No. 3:5-30
- NEASPEC Working Paper: North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environment Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities, 2012 (author: Pak Sum Low, published by ESCAP)
- NEASPEC Brochure (6pgs) and NEASPEC Factsheet (2pgs) downloaded from NEASPEC website
- Project Document 2016-ENEA-002 "Secretariat Operation and Activity Implementation of North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC II)", spanning 1 July 2016 to 31 Dec 2020
- Project Document 2019-ENEA-001 "Enhancing Regional Cooperation and Integration among ESCAP member States in East and North-East Asia and with the Rest of the Asia Pacific region for the Achievement of SDGs, spanning Jan 2019 – Dec 2021
- ESCAP Proposed Programme Budget for 2002, Part V,: Regional Cooperation for Development, Section 19: Economic and Social Development in Asia and the Pacific, Programme 16: Economic and Social Development in Asia and the Pacific, presented to the 74th session of the UN General Assembly (April 2019)
- NEASPEC Institutional Arrangements and Mapping of Major Initiatives, Project Partners, and Existing Cooperation Mechanisms in North-East Asia, April 2020, developed by NEASPEC Secretariat

Strategy Development and Planning

- Plan for the NEASPEC Strategic Plan (2021-2025), presented to 23rd SOM, 9-10 October 2019, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia (developed by NEASPEC Secretariat)
- Strategic Plan (2016-2020), adopted by 20th SOM, 1-2 February 2016, Tokyo, Japan
- Feedback of 15 respondents RE: development of Strategic Plan (2016-2020), provided by NEASPEC Secretariat
- Development Process of Strategic Plan (2016-2020), April 2020 (developed by NEASPEC Secretariat)
- Extracts from ESCAP Reporting related to V.19 C.8.2 Subregional activities for development in East and North-East Asia Programme of Work for the Biennium 2016-2017 and 2018-2019

Reporting, Monitoring, Evaluation Information

- External Evaluation of NEASPEC, presented to 22nd SOM 25-26 Oct 2018, Beijing, China (NEASPEC Secretariat)
- Report of 20th SOM, 1-2 February 2016, Tokyo, Japan
- Report of 21st SOM, 16-17 March 2017, Seoul, Republic of Korea
- Report of 22nd SOM, 25-26 October 2018, Beijing, China
- Report of 23rd SOM, 9-10 October 2019, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
- Related to Project 2016-ENEA-002 "Secretariat Operation and Activity Implementation of North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC II)", Project Annual Progress Reports for 4 reporting periods: July-Dec 2016, Jan-Dec 2017, Jan-Dec 2018, Jan-Dec 2019

Evaluation Guidance

- ESCAP Monitoring and Evaluation Policy and Guidelines, 2017

Financial Reports

- Secretariat Operation and Activity Implementation of the North-East Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC II) Financial Statements for:

- 20 July 2016 to 31 December 2016
- 20 July 2016 to 31 December 2017
- 5 February 2018 to 31 December 2018
- 20 July 2016 to 31 December 2019

Review and Planning of the Core and Project-Based Fund presented to:

- 20th SOM, 1-2 February 2016, Tokyo, Japan
- 21st SOM, 16-17 March 2017, Seoul, Republic of Korea
- 22nd SOM, 25-26 October 2018, Beijing, China
- 23rd SOM, 9-10 October 2019, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Implementation -Related (Programmatic Areas)

Nature Conservation

Review of Programme Planning and Implementation related to Development of Cooperation Mechanisms for Nature Conservation in Transboundary Areas in North-East Asia (prepared by NEASPEC Secretariat)

- submitted to 20th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd SOM (spanning period of 2016-2019)

Publication: Protecting Habitats for Cranes and Black-faced Spoonbills in North-East Asia, NEASPEC Project Report, Conservation and Rehabilitation of Habitats for Key Migratory Birds in North-East Asia with Special Emphasis on Cranes and Black-faced Spoonbills, 2016

Publication: Managing Connectivity Conservation in North-East Asia: Case of Dauria International Protected Areas, 2017

Publication: Saving the Amur Tiger and Amur Leopard, NEASPEC Project Report, Transborder Movement of Amur Tigers and Amur Leopards using Camera Trapping and Molecular Genetic Analysis, 2018

Transboundary Air Pollution (TAP)

Review of Programme Planning and Implementation Transboundary Air Pollution in North-East Asia (prepared by NEASPEC Secretariat)

- submitted to 20th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd SOM (spanning period of 2016-2019)

Discussion Paper on the Workplan of the North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership (NEACAP), presented to 1st Meeting of NEACAP Science and Policy Committee, 5 July 2019, Seoul, Republic of Korea

NEASPEC as a Bridge between Science and Policy: Transboundary Pollutant Issue in East Asia (author: Prof. Cheol-hee Kim, Pusan National University), Busan, Republic of Korea

Review of Regional Air Pollution Control Mechanisms – Focus on LRTAP Convention (author: Laurence Rouuil), August 2016

Marine Protected Areas (MPA)

Review of Programme Planning and Implementation related to Strengthening Subregional Cooperation on Marine Protected Areas (prepared by NEASPEC Secretariat)

- submitted to 20th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd SOM (spanning period of 2016-2019)

Low Carbon Cities (LCC)

Review of Programme Planning and Implementation for Low Carbon Cities (prepared by NEASPEC Secretariat)

- submitted to 20th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd SOM (spanning period of 2016-2019)

North-East Asia Low Carbon City Platform (30pg brochure)

Publication: Comparative Study on Low Carbon City Development in China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (34-page Summary Report), NEASPEC NEA-LCCP, 2019 ?

Peer Review Report – Wuhan, NEASPEC North-East Asia Low Carbon Cities Platform (73pgs)

Peer Review Report – Guangzhou, NEASPEC North-East Asia Low Carbon Cities Platform (43pgs)

Desertification and Land Degradation (DLD)

Review of Programme Planning and Implementation for Desertification and Land Degradation in North-East Asia (prepared by NEASPEC Secretariat)

- submitted to 20th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd SOM (spanning period of 2016-2019)

North-East Asia Multi-Stakeholder Plan on Combating Desertification and Land Degradation (22pgs)

Annex 3 - List of Stakeholders Consulted

Through Indepth Interview or Written Contributions

NEASPEC Secretariat

	Name	Role / Function	Organisation	Location
Mr	Sangmin NAM	NEASPEC Coordinator, Deputy Director of ENEA office, and Member of Evaluation Reference Group	NEASPEC Secretariat and ENEA Office in ESCAP	Incheon
Ms	Nobuko KAJIURA	MPA and LCC work areas	NEASPEC Secretariat	Incheon
Ms	Qian CHENG	NC, TAP, and DLD work areas	NEASPEC Secretariat	Incheon
Ms	Minkyung HONG	TAP, LCC and DLD work areas	NEASPEC Secretariat	Incheon
Ms	Mi-Jin LEE	MPA and NC work areas	NEASPEC Secretariat	Incheon

Selected ESCAP Staff

	Name	Role / Function	Organisation	Location
Ms	Armida Salsiah ALISJAHBANA	Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of UNESCAP and Chair of Evaluation Reference Group	ESCAP HQ	Bangkok
Mr	Hirohito TODA	Principal Secretary	ESCAP HQ	Bangkok
Mr	Ganbold BAASANJAV	Director	ENEA Office, ESCAP	Incheon
Mr	Adnan ALIANI	Director, Strategy and Programme and Member of Evaluation Reference Group	SPMD, ESCAP	Bangkok
Mr	Edgar DANTE	Evaluation Manager and Member of Evaluation Reference Group	Evaluation Unit, SPMD, ESCAP	Bangkok
Ms	Channe Lindstrom OGUZHAN	Gender Focal Point, Social Development Division	ESCAP HQ	Bangkok
Mr	Stefanos FOTIOU	Director, Environment and Development Division	ESCAP HQ	Bangkok
Mr	Kaveh ZAHEDI	Deputy Executive Secretary, ESCAP	ESCAP HQ	Bangkok

National Focal Points and Related Members

	Name	Role / Function	Organisation	Location
Mr	Li GEN	National Focal Point, China	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Beijing
Mr	Kazuhiro KUSAKABE plus ➤ Mr. Ryuzo SUGIMOTO, Director ➤ Mr. Tadasuke ARAHORI, Section Chief ➤ Ms. Mika AIHARA, Staff	National Focal Point, Japan	Ministry of Environment	Tokyo
Ms	Ariuntuya DORJSUREN	National Focal Point, Mongolia	Ministry of Environment and Tourism	Ulaanbaatar
Ms	Hyejung HUR	National Focal Point, ROK	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Seoul
Mr	Oleg KOBIAKOV	Ex-National Focal Point, Russian Federation	Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)	Moscow

Ms	Irina FOMINYKH	Deputy Director	Department of International Cooperation	Moscow
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Transboundary Air Pollution

	Name	Role / Function	Organisation	Location
Ms	<u>China</u> Shuxiao WANG	Professor	Tsinghua University	Beijing
Mr	<u>ROK</u> ➤ Dr. Limseok CHANG	Senior Researcher	National Institute of Environmental Research (NIER)	Incheon
Mr	<u>Russian Federation</u> Alexander ROMANOV (NEACAP SPC member)	Deputy Director General - General Management and International Cooperation	SRI Atmosphere	Saint Petersburg

Nature Conservation

	Name	Role / Function	Organisation	Location
Mr	<u>China</u> Dr. Lu CAI	Research Scientist	School of Nature Conservation, Beijing Forestry University	Beijing
Mr	<u>Russian Federation</u> Yury DARMAN	Deputy Director of Science	Land of the Leopard National Park	Vladivostok
Mr	<u>DPRK</u> Dr. Bernhard SELIGER	Director	Hanns-Seidel Foundation Korea (ROK-based international NGO)	Seoul

Marine Protected Areas

	Name	Role / Function	Organisation	Location
Mr	<u>China</u> Zhang ZHAOHUI	Professor	Marine Ecological and Environmental Research Center, First Institute of Oceanography of China	Qingdao, China
Mr	<u>Japan</u> Makino MITSUTAKU	Professor	Atmosphere and Ocean Research Institute (AORI), University of Tokyo	Tokyo
Mr	<u>ROK</u> Dr. Young Nam KIM	Deputy Head of department	Korea Marine Environment Management Corporation (KOEM)	Seoul
Mr	<u>Russian Federation</u> Anatoly KACHUR	International Project Manager	Pacific Geographical Institute Far East Branch Russian Academy of Sciences	Vladivostok
Mr	<u>DPRK</u> Felix GLENK	Project Manager for DPRK	Hanns-Seidel Foundation Korea (ROK-based international NGO)	Seoul

Low Carbon Cities

	Name	Role / Function	Organisation	Location
Ms	<u>China</u> Hu MIN	Senior Advisor	Innovative Green Development Programme (iGDP)	Madrid, Spain/Beijing
Mr	<u>Japan</u> Dr. Fujino JUNICHI	Senior Researcher	Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)	Tokyo
Mr	<u>ROK</u> Dr. Sangin KANG	Senior Research Fellow	Korea Environment Institute (KEI)	Gwangju, ROK
Mr	Merlin LAO	Programme Officer	ICLEI East Asia Secretariat	Seoul

Desertification and Land Degradation

	Name	Role / Function	Organisation	Location
Ms	<u>China</u> Xiaoxia JIA	Formerly, Programme Officer	National Forestry and Grassland Administration of China	Bonn, Germany (now in UNCCD)
Mr	<u>ROK</u> Jungyo LEE plus: ➤ Ms. Minyoung CHANG, Deputy Director of ODA Department ➤ Hana CHO, Policy Officer in ODA Department	Director, ODA Department	Korea Forestry Service (KFS) KFS also acts as the DLDD-NEAN Secretariat	Daejeon, ROK

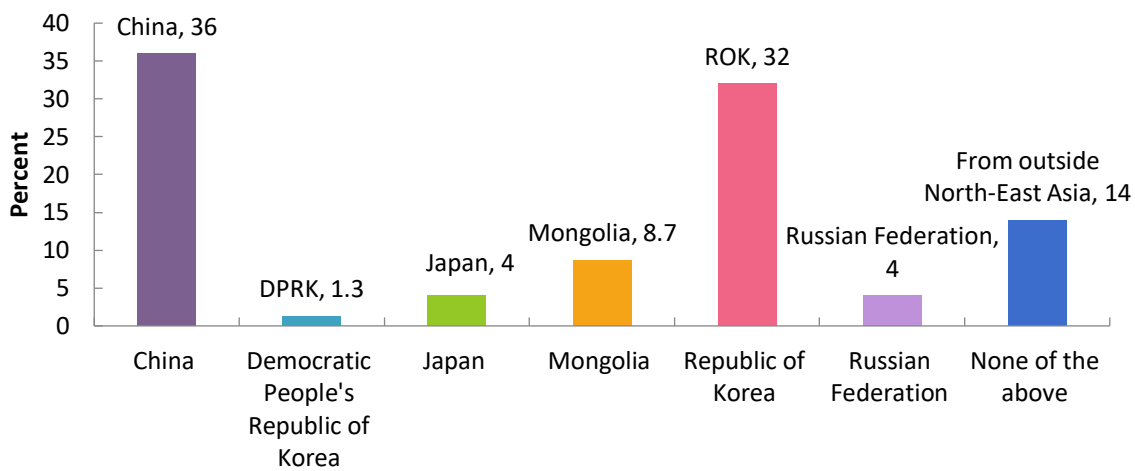
Through Participation in NEASPEC Survey

The invitation to provide input through an online survey was sent to 250 NEASPEC stakeholders including: a) NEASPEC National Focal Points; b) project partners; c) experts who participated in NEASPEC activities (meetings, workshops, training); d) former staff, consultants, and interns.

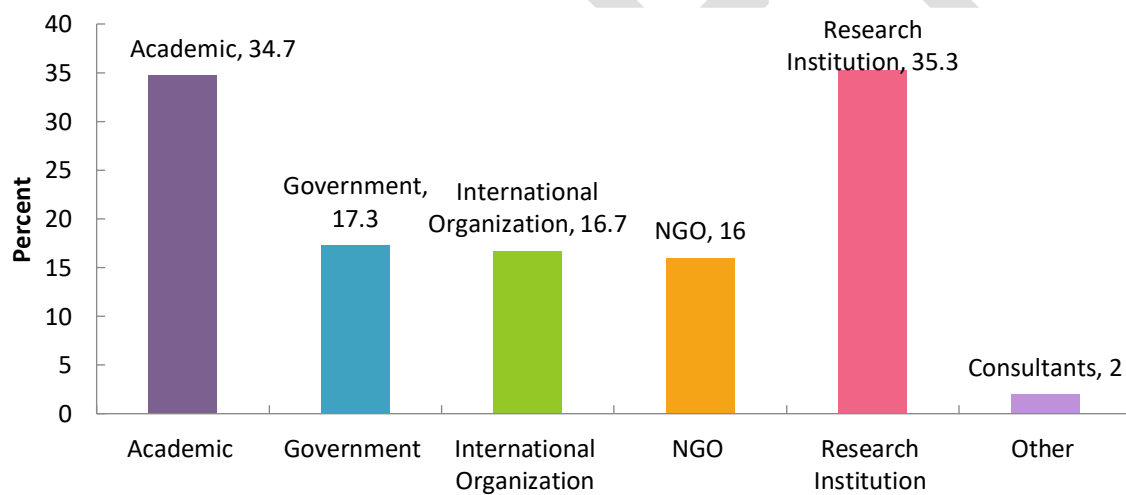
163 individuals responded to the survey, either fully (56) or partially (107).

Annex 4 - Profile of Online Survey Respondents

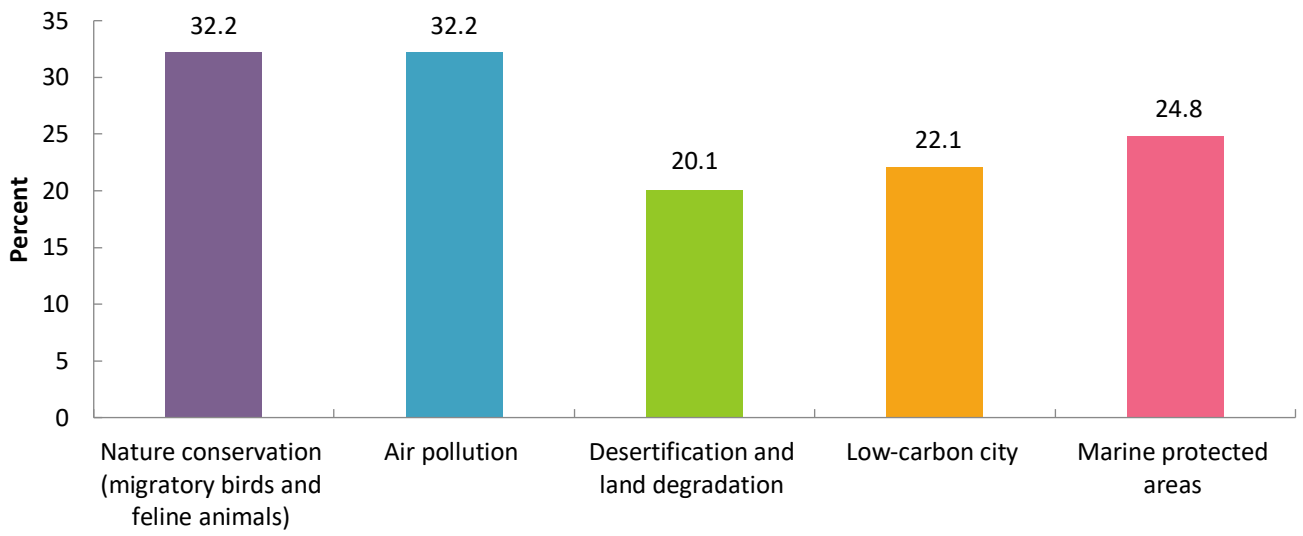
1. What is your nationality?



2. What is your professional background?



3. In which areas of NEASPEC have you participated thus far?



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