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

FINAL

4 September 2020

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

4 September 2020

Prepared by

Dr Joyce Miller, Founder and Director
Capacity Building Resource Exchange
(CAPRESE) Sàrl

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Throughout the planning and implementation of this exercise, the evaluation and this Report have benefitted from the guidance and supervision of the Evaluation Reference Group, chaired by the Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and composed of members drawn from the NEASPEC Secretariat and ESCAP.

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Dr. Joyce Miller, CAPRESE Sàrl
Aubonne, Switzerland

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	(ESCAP's) East and North-East Asia Office
ESCAP	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
NEAMPAN	North-East Asian Marine Protected Areas Network
NEAMSP	North-East Asia Multi-Stakeholder Plan
NEASPEC	North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation
NFP(s)	National Focal Point(s)
NOWPAP	Northwest Pacific Action Plan
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)
TEMM	Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting
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

Executive Summary

OVERVIEW OF NEASPEC: THE OBJECT AND PURPOSE OF THIS EVALUATION

Initiated in 1993 as a voluntary intergovernmental cooperation framework to address environmental challenges in the subregion of North-East Asia (NEA), the “North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC)” operates under the overall guidance of its six member States and is subject to the oversight and accountability stemming from its association with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) from which it also derives administrative and financial benefits. Through NEASPEC, China, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the Russian Federation have been promoting environmental cooperation in the subregion 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 the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereafter , the 2030 Agenda) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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

The main purpose of this evaluation exercise 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 12-13 October 2020. This Report is intended to provide input to inspire and inform NEASPEC’s strategy development process for the next 5-year period (2021-2025) as well as give a view to the medium- and longer-term horizon and the potential of this intergovernmental platform. The primary target audience for this Report includes NEASPEC member States, project partners, 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, focusing 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-August 2020. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent restrictions on international travel, envisaged field missions were replaced with virtual consultations (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 per cent response rate), and participation as an observer in three NEASPEC-convened meetings that were shifted to a virtual setting, related to Nature Conservation, TAP, and MPAs during May-June 2020.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

RELEVANCE

This evaluation confirms the relevance of NEASPEC and the wisdom laid down in its founding tenants that this framework has the potential to support subregional environmental cooperation and accelerate the progress of its six member States towards achieving their global treaty obligations and commitments under the 2030 Agenda. NEASPEC's relevance is linked to its usefulness to its member States. Operating in a crowded landscape, NEASPEC stands out in the quality of dialogue that it facilitates and its ability to navigate sensitive political territory, leveraging a strong science-policy linkage in its pursuit of environmental diplomacy. Its diverse membership and the degree of political and economic influence and the environmental footprint of its member countries support the conclusion that NEASPEC serves a strategic purpose that no other platform can easily perform.

In the light of its founding Framework (1996), Vision Statement (2000), and first Strategic Plan (2016-2020), NEASPEC's development has evolved, particularly over the past 5 years. Positive strides have been made on its key objective to promote common policy dialogue on approaches and coordinated action on environmental issues in NEA. While coordinated action has increased with the creation of structures accompanied by more formalised procedures, the pace has nevertheless been slow, and the timeline for consensus-based actions and decisions is extended.

A key conclusion is that the value of the NEASPEC framework has not yet been fully recognized nor has its potential been purposely leveraged by its constituents, evidenced by: i) member States' shortfall in staffing its governing body, the SOM, with sufficiently high level decision-makers (as was intended and arguably is needed); ii) allowing domestic political considerations to override effectiveness and efficiency effects from the frequent change of the National Focal Points (NFPs); iii) its inordinately slow pace in comprehensively pursuing transboundary challenges (admittedly, this pace reflect the inherent nature of multilateralism); and iv) not ensuring a reliable, independent, adequate funding stream to enable this platform to pursue a higher level of ambition.

EFFECTIVENESS

As a multilateral cooperation platform, NEASPEC is performing as designed: it provides a structure for environmental cooperation in the challenging NEA setting and has played a longstanding role in fostering subregional coordination at governmental level. NEASPEC's effectiveness has been judged positively based on its capacity to facilitate cooperation amongst six very diverse nations, integrate technical experts' input, respond to requests and proposals from member States and ESCAP, its respect of agreed protocols, and the timely implementation of decisions made through its key governance mechanism, the SOM.

The assessment of the way in which NEASPEC's thematic agenda has evolved reflects a blend of technical and diplomatic opportunities, which reflect a mix of inputs and direction channelled from member States and project partners, mediated by the NEASPEC Secretariat. Areas identified for cooperation under NEASPEC's thematic agenda seem to reflect a tacit desire to have high visibility and catalytic impact, and sometimes, appear to respond to pressure from the global community (e.g. TAP, LCCs). In cases where activities are seen to address the interest of only 1-2 countries, these have occasionally been perceived as "pet projects", with an inconsistent ability to generate catalytic impact and drive collective subregional cooperation in a coherent and strategic manner.

To mitigate such risks and reduce effects of the SOM possibly acting in recursive responsiveness with its Secretariat, NEASPEC's activities are integrated within ESCAP's Programme of Work (PoW), thereby subject to its accompanying accountability framework and overall oversight of ESCAP's Executive Secretary. While the eventual selection of thematic areas seems to reflect some underlying tacit strategic principles, a conclusion of the evaluation is that there is a need to strengthen the governance and steering, which would enable the SOM and Secretariat to more deliberately select future thematic areas based on such principles, which also need to be made more explicit.

While stakeholders are generally satisfied with NEASPEC's performance and applaud the incremental strengthening of coordinated actions through its programmatic agenda, the untapped potential of NEASPEC was highlighted by many of those consulted as part of the evaluation exercise. There is an opportunity to strengthen the alignment of NEASPEC's programmatic agenda and its implementation with notions encapsulated in its initial Framework, Vision Statement, and Strategic Plan, consistent with an "end game" that deepens within-country and transboundary commitments to environmental cooperation, thereby intentionally accelerating progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

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. Having undertaken projects with initial steps towards comprehensive transboundary habitat protection, not all stakeholders seem to fully understand NEASPEC's role in being a forum for its six member States to decide what indicators need to be monitored to appropriately check the pulse and health of the wider ecosystem and to be in a position to select how these indicators should be monitored and by whom.

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, it 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 fully consistent with NEASPEC's competence, resourcing, and the nature of its infrastructure. The recent (May 2020) ESCAP resolution to promote conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia-Pacific offers a timely opportunity for NEASPEC to

drive catalytic impact in the wider region through deepening the synergistic connection with ESCAP's substantive activities in this thematic area.

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 framework. 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. 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.

EFFICIENCY

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. In contrast to goal-driven projects and programmes, NEASPEC's processes have been set up to facilitate the pursuit of enduring intergovernmental 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.

SUSTAINABILITY

As long as NEASPEC reflects the will of its member States, its sustainability is not in question, particularly given its longevity, perceived relevance, and the substantial support available through its association and accommodation within the UN system.

RESOURCE MOBILISATION

The level and lack of predictability in funding flows are issues of growing concern. Savings strategies deployed by the Secretariat to smooth the ebb and flow of contributions, which ensure resources are available to act on decisions, are creating a conviction of poor fund utilisation. 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 funding needs and risks blurring comprehension of resource requirements for pursuing an even more meaningful agenda.

NEASPEC's intergovernmental cooperation would be more effectively served through provision of unearmarked funds and a forecastable, adequate flow of resources consistent with NEASPEC's ability to play a more visible, progressive, and impactful role. Reluctance to take up recommendations to move this cooperation framework's resourcing to a more predictable basis is arguably reflective of

a lack of political will and shortfall in fully grasping NEASPEC's power to effect change and accelerate progress on the part of the member States, both nationally and collectively.

PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS

Engaging national institutions as project partners has successfully functioned to mobilise resources and bolster the science-policy linkage underlying and driving NEASPEC's intergovernmental environmental cooperation. A more strategic approach to partnership that goes beyond the (more or less) transactional engagement observed at present 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, while being mindful of not being pressured to align with the priorities, working rhythms, and milestones of key partners and initiatives, in case this would affect the integrity of NEASPEC driving its own strategic agenda.

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

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 association with and resourcing under ESCAP, 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, 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.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF THE INSTITUTIONAL/ORGANISATIONAL SET-UP

Secretariat's Role, Capacities, and Risks

With the 2011 inauguration of a permanent secretariat in Incheon staffed with a highly capable small team, together with appointing a member State as rotating chair, 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 role of and demands managed by the Secretariat, currently underplayed by the label of "coordination", together with the expanding and diverging portfolio of thematic activities, rising expectations for service level quality, and extensive level of sensemaking and horizon scanning to proactively support member States is exacting a toll on the team and risks to outstrip its resourcing and resilience.

NEASPEC's Governance Mechanism: Assets, Efficiency, Effectiveness

NEASPEC draws strength from its linkage to Foreign Affairs ministries, which are authorized to strike intergovernmental agreements and can facilitate outreach to appropriate national entities for coordination on the thematic programme. However, the shortfall in realising the anticipated seniority of participation in the SOM and frequent change in NFPs are negatively impacting the efficient and effective use of resources. Mid-level SOM participation, frequent NFP changes, maintaining a voluntary approach, and providing minimal resourcing could indeed reflect a deliberate political will to operate in a measured and prudent manner, taking all interests into account, not just the environmental agenda. However, as NFPs and SOM delegates are primarily mid-level not senior (as envisaged), the room for manoeuvre to shift the power that NEASPEC wields is limited. Consequently, in operating NEASPEC as a "working level" apparatus, insufficient political

support has been generated to strengthen the institutional basis for subregional cooperation.

Leverage from the NEASPEC–ESCAP Linkage

The anticipated leverage for both involved entities from associating this subregional cooperation platform with ESCAP’s organisational setting has not yet been fully realised. There is insufficiently deep comprehension on the part of ESCAP actors, including its leadership team, of NEASPEC’s assets, strategic agenda, modus operandi, and usefulness for generating meaningful contributions to ESCAP’s PoW, which has led to NEASPEC being unappreciated and under-utilised in responding to its calls to action and agenda-setting for the 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 the 2030 Agenda. Translating this into an operational scope and substance is a demanding task.

The establishment of more optimal links between NEASPEC and ESCAP, together with more intentional top-level direction, is expected to unleash the available synergies and demonstration effect of this particular cohort of member States nudged into taking a stronger leadership role.

RECOMMENDATIONS

<p>Recommendation 1: FOR NEASPEC SECRETARIAT and 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 NEASPEC SECRETARIAT and 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 make values and principles presently tacit more explicit.</p>
<p>Recommendation 3: FOR SOM and NFPs</p>	<p>Honour the notion of high-level participation in SOM, as per the founding vision and provide for significantly more stability of designated NFPs.</p>
<p>Recommendation 4: FOR ESCAP’S EXECUTIVE SECRETARY and NEASPEC SECRETARIAT</p>	<p>Strengthen existing links and identify and broaden new communication and reporting channels between NEASPEC and ESCAP with a view to optimising the synergy of this relationship for mutual gain.</p>
<p>Recommendation 5: FOR NEASPEC SECRETARIAT AND 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 6: FOR NEASPEC SECRETARIAT, SOM, and ESCAP</p>	<p>Enhance the resourcing of the NEASPEC Secretariat.</p>
<p>Recommendation 7: FOR NEASPEC SECRETARIAT</p>	<p>Use virtual meetings to enhance the frequency and quality of the intergovernmental connectedness being pursued under NEASPEC.</p>

1. Introduction

- 1) This Report relates to the evaluation of the “North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation” (hereafter, NEASPEC), an intergovernmental platform composed of six member States, namely China, the 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 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 October 2020, its agenda is focussed on ways to enhance the relevance, utility, and impact of NEASPEC 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 intergovernmental 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 intergovernmental 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

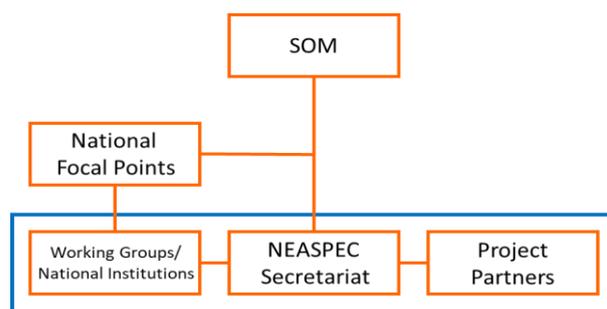
- 7) The main purpose of this exercise is to contribute to deliberations to be carried out during SOM-24 (October 2020) by providing input to inspire and inform NEASPEC's strategy development process for the upcoming 5-year period as well as give a view to the medium- and longer-term horizon and potential 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 consultations with 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 than 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 Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - NEASPEC's Institutional Arrangement



12) 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"¹. From the ESCAP side, NEASPEC activities have been framed as providing the ENEA office with "opportunities to promote small-scale but practical cooperation in areas of common concerns" and "enable outreach to the member States". In this respect, the ENEA Office is expected to²:

- 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.

13) NEASPEC's programmatic activities are pursued through various types of working-level arrangements (e.g. working groups, steering bodies, informal expert groups, etc.) 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, and review meetings) to enable exchange and consultation amongst the involved parties.

14) 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)

15) 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

¹ <https://www.unescap.org/subregional-office>

² 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)

priority areas (i.e. the five thematic areas operating under the platform; see ¶16), the first Strategic Plan 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.

16) 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 Accountability Framework and Resourcing

17) 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.

18) 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). ESCAP develops an annual PoW and budget that is subject to member States' review, monitoring, and approval at the regional level through annual Commission sessions and at the global level in the General Assembly of the United Nations (UNGA). This framework of accountability and due diligence encompasses ESCAP's overall PoW, including NEASPEC. Furthermore, NEASPEC is a platform under the auspices of ESCAP and therefore under the overall responsibility and oversight of ESCAP's Executive Secretary. In this light, NEASPEC's activities, outputs, and outcomes are also subject to ESCAP management review and approval through the development of an ESCAP project document. ESCAP project documents go through an internal appraisal and approval process and are signed off by the Executive Secretary once approved. The implementation process is subject to internal monitoring, through annual progress reports and monitoring meetings with ESCAP's Strategy and Programme Management Division (SPMD). 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).

19) 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, the ROK, and the Russian Federation.

20) 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, namely “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
Key Activities 1.1 Review progress of implementation of ongoing programmes and activities under NEASPEC framework 1.2 Support dialogue amongst member States on strengthening subregional environmental cooperation through NEASPEC 1.3 Establish and operate a Working Group on National Institutions and other relevant stakeholders for each programmatic area 1.4 Organise the annual SOM including preparation of meeting documents, logistical arrangements, and preparation of the outcome document 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		
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 the NEASPEC Strategic Plan 2016-2020	At a minimum, 2 specific events held for each activity	Meeting reports including SOM Reports
Key Activities 2.1 Facilitate information-sharing, joint study, and cooperation amongst member States and relevant institutions on transboundary air pollution 2.2 Implement joint projects for 6 target species under the NEASPEC Nature Conservation Strategy with enhanced and strengthened transboundary cooperation amongst all stakeholders		

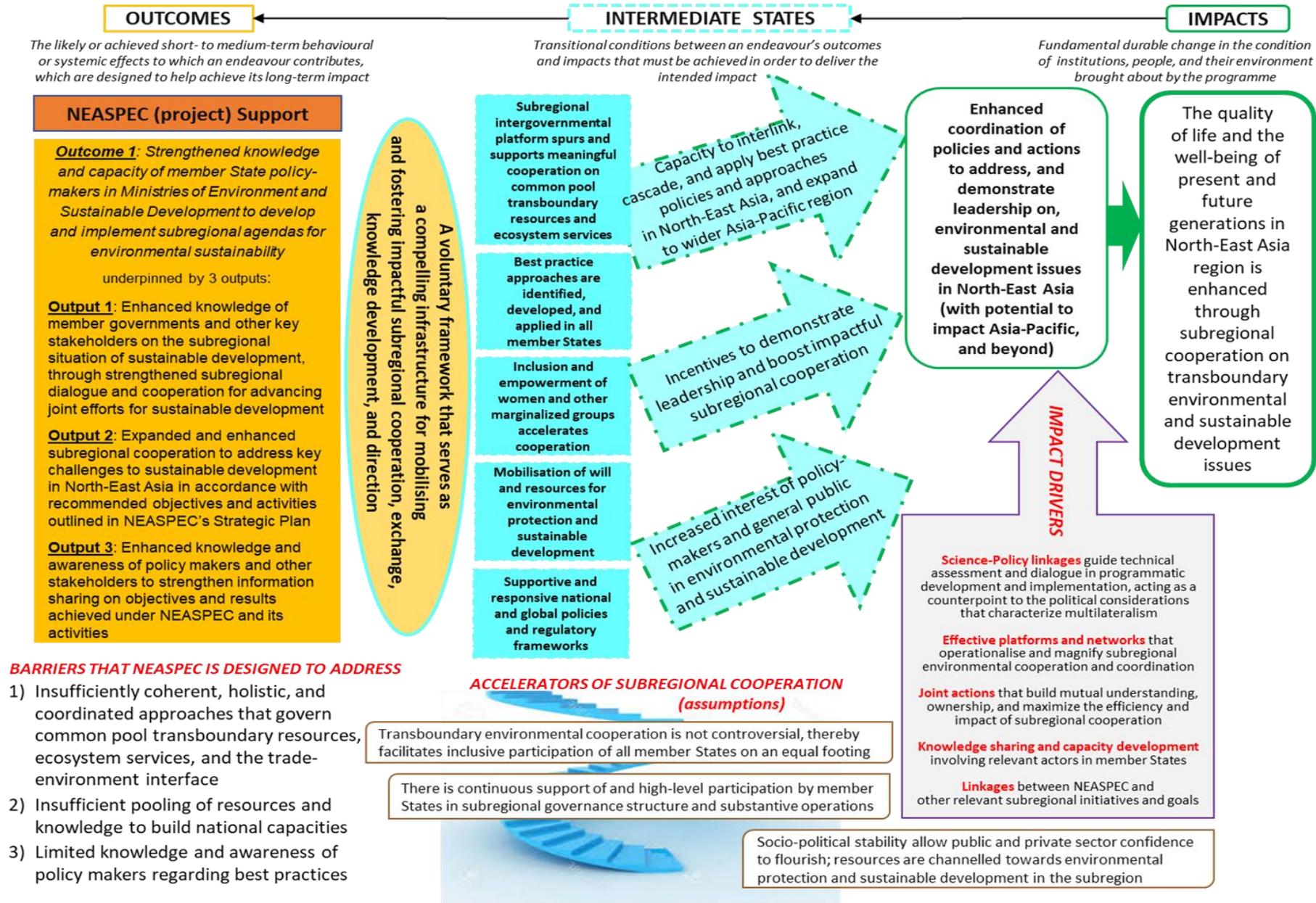
<p>2.3 Operationalize the North-East Asia Marine Protected Network (NEAMPAN) to support partnerships amongst target Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and stakeholders, and enhance capacity to achieve, inter alia, the Aichi Biodiversity Targets related to marine and coastal biodiversity in a holistic manner</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>		
<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</p>	<p>At a minimum, 4 specific outputs have been produced (e.g. publications)</p>	<p>Reports of project outcomes NEASPEC website</p>
<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

- 21) 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.
- 22) 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 assumptions about 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.

Figure 2 - Reconstructed Theory of Change



BARRIERS THAT NEASPEC IS DESIGNED TO ADDRESS

- 1) Insufficiently coherent, holistic, and coordinated approaches that govern common pool transboundary resources, ecosystem services, and the trade-environment interface
- 2) Insufficient pooling of resources and knowledge to build national capacities
- 3) Limited knowledge and awareness of policy makers regarding best practices

3. Methodology

23) 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

24) Inception phase interviews with the Evaluation Reference Group were used to determine the desired prioritization of effort, with backward-looking assessment with 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.

25) Data was collected from a range of sources, using multiple means, in order to triangulate findings:

- **Desk review:** Reviewed 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 five 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:** Conducted interviews with National Focal Points (NFPs) of five member States, the NEASPEC Secretariat (Incheon), selected ESCAP staff (Bangkok), Evaluation Reference Group, and project partners across the five 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". 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 in-depth; of these, 7 provided written input. [Annex 3](#) contains the list of consulted stakeholders.
- **Stakeholder Survey:** The survey was sent to 250 respondents (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 per cent response rate (i.e. 163 responses; of this, 34.4 per cent were complete and 65.6 per cent were partial responses). The profile information contained in Annex 4 confirms a relatively balanced representation of views across NEASPEC's five 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 the ROK were the most active in providing their input.
- **Project Meetings:** Observed 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, the ROK, the Russian Federation and relevant international organization (15 May 2020); TAP: 18 participants with inputs from China, Japan, Mongolia, the ROK, and the Russian Federation (2-3 June 2020); MPAs: 10 participants with inputs from China, Japan, the ROK, and the Russian Federation (24 June 2020).

26) 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, and 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

27) 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 tool³, 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

28) 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.

29) 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.

3.4 Limitations on the Evaluation and How These were Mitigated

30) 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, and the ROK) to interview the participating NFPs and allow for as many stakeholders as possible to be personally consulted;

31) 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

³ QDA Miner – www.provalisresearch.com

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 inclusion of six member States of varying levels of socio-economic development, its success in balancing their interests and priorities, and its ability to enable breakthroughs on intergovernmental 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 from the outset in all thematic domains.

- 32) In every other region, there is an intergovernmental organisation that covers the member States in that region. In North-East Asia, NEASPEC fulfils this function, unlike any other.
- 33) 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 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 experience⁴.
- 34) Situated in relation to the existing tripartite cooperation of China-Japan-ROK⁵, where it was observed that consensus amongst these strong member States is not easy to achieve, NEASPEC’s unique added value is associated with enabling breakthroughs on intergovernmental cooperation⁶. 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

⁴ 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%.

⁵ Referring to the Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting (TEMM) which has been convened annually since 1999 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>

⁶ 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

platform for exchange amongst the involved countries. The Expert Group Meeting (15 May 2020) convened in relation to the transboundary cooperation in 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, the 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".

- 35) 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".
- 36) While such an approach may be characteristic of multilateral platforms, it seems especially effective in the NEA setting, given its vast/diverse geographic coverage, varying 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". One way in which NEASPEC has achieved this is through providing 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.
- 37) Identified as the only intergovernmental mechanism that has emerged in NEA covering all six countries, NEASPEC's membership is perceived to constitute a unique added value: this set of nations is seen to have 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 the 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

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.

- 38) 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 the 2030 Agenda. This enhances the utility of NEASPEC, and therefore its relevance to

member States.

- 39) 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 (¶134). 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.
- 40) The October 2018 establishment of NEACAP (¶14) 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.
- 41) The experience of 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 project⁷, and 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

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 by a consensus-driven approach.

- 42) 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) persistently facilitate responsiveness; ii) ensure 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.

⁷ 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.

- 43) There is an assumption that prompting interest and being responsive 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 to develop and scale up NEASPEC's impact. Evidence of this potential is seen in Asian Development Bank's willingness to fund technical assistance projects on air pollution during 1996-2012.
- 44) 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). Given the vast geography and varied levels of socio-economic development across NEASPEC's member States, it is inevitable that some projects might be more relevant to the concerns of a subset. Astonishingly, while directly reflecting member States' interests, some of 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.
- 45) 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".
- 46) 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. Having started with three priority areas (Energy and Air Pollution, Ecosystem Management, Capacity-Building), the thematic agenda subsequently evolved and expanded into the five thematic areas reviewed below. While stakeholders are generally satisfied with NEASPEC's performance, its untapped potential was highlighted.

- 47) Created in 1993 in UNCED's wake, NEASPEC's framework was adopted in 1996 and a Vision Statement was elaborated in 2000 (SOM-6) 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].

- 48) Aiming for “long-visioned 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 intergovernmental 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”.
- 49) 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*”).
- 50) 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”.
- 51) 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.
- 52) 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.

- 53) 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.

- 54) When NEASPEC was launched, nature conservation was identified as one of three priority areas. From this, member governments adopted the NEASPEC Nature Conservation Strategy with target species. The subsequent ‘*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.
- 55) 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.
- 56) Some informants indicated that the path forward in this thematic area is clear. In view of the upcoming World Tiger Summit in 2022, NEASPEC’s work was characterised as achieving the intergovernmental 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, with questions posed like: “is it going to lead to an agreement on transboundary nature conservation? Is there scope for building confidence towards a NEA biodiversity corridor”.
- 57) 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.

- 58) Air pollution was identified as one of three priorities from the outset; therefore, NEASPEC has focussed on this domain since the mid-1990s. 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, the Russian Federation, and DPRK into this collaborative work under NEASPEC's framework has had a catalytic impact.

59) The road to establishing the North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership (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 six-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 in the process amongst the member States.

60) 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 (ESCAP/RES/75/4) on air pollution sponsored by the ROK in its May 2019 Commission 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, the ROK tabled a UN General Assembly resolution, catapulting the ESCAP resolution's impact to the global arena. The resulting designation of September 7th as "International Day of Clean Air for blue skies" is instrumental in emphasizing the need to strengthen international cooperation to improve air quality worldwide.

4.2.3 Marine Protected Areas

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. The recent (May 2020) ESCAP resolution to promote conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP/RES/76/1) offers a timely opportunity for NEASPEC to drive catalytic impact in the wider region through deepening the synergistic connection with ESCAP's substantive activities in this thematic area.

61) Approved in November 2013 during the SOM-18, the North-East Asian Marine Protected Areas Network (NEAMPAN) has been described as "still at the starting point", having convened only two committee meetings over the course of its seven-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 intergovernmental mechanism. The conduct of the MPA agenda is similar to that of other thematic activities: it is consensus-driven; and project partners (identified by the member States and Secretariat) support MPA work and liaise with other subregional cooperation mechanisms. The 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.

- 62) 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, the ROK, and the Russian Federation), carrying out assessments of environmental threats and dealing with scientific issues. In searching for a space to fill, the NEASPEC Secretariat organised an expert meeting to review relevant areas and identify the scope and content of this thematic area. 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.
- 63) At present, this is a priority programmatic area operating with limited scope, with a focus on experience-sharing at local government level. Strengthening this thematic area's transboundary orientation relies on further designation of MPAs in border areas of the DPRK, the ROK, China, and the Russian Federation. The people who are involved appreciated the sharing of experience across NEAMPAN's 12 MPAs (spanning 4 countries, intended to level up site management practice and balance socio-economic criteria). This approach appeals to stakeholders interested in having practical action on the ground (¶149) 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 Vision Statement adopted in 2000 (¶147); however, the ensuing level of intervention does not appear to be consistent with NEASPEC's competence, resourcing, and the nature of its infrastructure.
- 64) 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 as most MPA sites are located in hard-to-reach remote areas, and that mobilizing their local managers is a challenge. Communicating with them is another challenge, 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".
- 65) 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 be having 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.
- 66) 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 and 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” (¶146) as opposed to being decision-makers closely linked to the pursuit of central government goals (¶112). 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

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.

67) 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 ten 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.

68) 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 Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting (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 fill the need for a platform of organisations in the subregion to collectively support municipal authorities by facilitating the exchange of experience, enhancing collaboration, and empowering local governments to pursue low carbon city development⁸. This platform is largely based on existing networks of research institutions, CSOs, and international organisations. 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 the 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.

69) 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

⁸ From <http://www.neaspec.org/sites/default/files/4%20LCC%20Annex.%20Platform%20for%20Low%20Carbon%20Cities.pdf>

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

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.

- 70) 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.
- 71) While the LCC programme was positively described as having a well-defined goal and a process that includes peer review and comparative country assessment, informants pointed out that way in which activities were currently being pursued was generating high demand on resources and misaligned with its infrastructure insofar that it was not deemed to be 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. These observations from respondents point to a need to address a weakness in the implementation of the LCC strategy, to bring it back into alignment with the notion that NEASPEC is not intended to operate a city network or a programme collectively engagement cities but rather, to review national and city-level practices to build its own references for subregional cooperation, and to provide technical support for selected cities.
- 72) 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.
- 73) 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*”).
- 74) 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. For example, the suggestion to expand the scope of the NEA-LCCP and provide preparation grants, etc. seems to show insufficient understanding of the objective, scope, and capacity of NEASPEC’s work in the LCC area (¶71).

4.2.5 Desertification and Land Degradation

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

While this thematic area is well-suited to NEASPEC’s transboundary agenda, potential duplication with other instruments has made it difficult to identify a value-added contribution. At least two member States are interested to continue collaboration, pointing to links between land, security, sustainability, and the opportunity to address GE/HR that could provide a more strategic future direction for this thematic domain.

- 75) Recognising that the challenge of dust storms cannot be solved by one single country acting alone, the DLD topic seems to be quite suitable for the agenda of a transboundary intergovernmental cooperation platform like NEASPEC. With China and Mongolia as source countries for dust storms and land degradation in NEA and Japan, the ROK, and the DPRK as their recipients, NEASPEC was seen as providing an amenable opportunity for the countries to work together to find science-driven solutions.
- 76) Despite the modest resourcing of this thematic area, several projects have been initiated (¶77) and outputs have been generated, like a policy review (described as “a real success”) and a web-based platform for civil society to share information. 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)].
- 77) 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 remaining active. Seeing NEASPEC as a more broadly-focussed framework, some informants pointed to the opportunity to link the land issue to security and sustainability (i.e. water security, food security, green economy, sustainable resource management, and ecosystem management) and exploit artificial intelligence technology to better manage knowledge for air pollution control, land management, etc.
- 78) A key challenge 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.

79) 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.

80) While ESCAP did not have DLD-themed activities running to date, informants hope for synchronisation in future as 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.

81) 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, land management is increasingly falling into women's hands. In this light, informants pointed to DLD as an entry point for addressing GE/HR issues, observing that women's capacities for disaster risk reduction need to be developed. Such a direction would be 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 intergovernmental 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.

82) 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.

83) 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 points¹¹ (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 use of resources to pursue the chosen direction in LCCs (¶171);
- NEASPEC's opportunity to improve efficiency by enhancing synergies with other regional mechanisms and by welcoming voluntary secondments (¶105) to more efficiently connect with all member States for regular consultation and solicitation of input/positions.

84) Regarding timeliness of execution: there is a general perception that NEASPEC has delivered sufficient

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

¹¹ *It is understood that annual or biannual rotation of staff is common practice in China, Japan and the ROK while Mongolia and Russia tend to keep staff in the same position for a much longer time. While the frequent change is not related to the level of member governments' commitment to NEASPEC and any other multilateral mechanisms, the effects of such practices are felt within these instruments, as reported by the bulk of the respondents consulted*

results. From the stakeholder survey (N=70): 44.3 per cent of informants indicated NEASEPC has provided an effective platform and built up networks for member governments and other stakeholders to enhance environmental cooperation; 20 per cent 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 (¶17) 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 intergovernmental 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".

85) 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 per cent less than the approved budget, with USD 419,433 remaining on 31 July 2019. The Stakeholder 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

In recognizing the inherent value of environmental protection for human well-being, NEASPEC contributes to GE/HR principles. Acknowledging NEASPEC's association with the UN and its obligation to address GE/HR, in moving forward, aspects in DLD, MPA, and Nature Conservation were uncovered that could be entry points to further tackle this challenge.

86) Neither ESCAP's environmental programme nor NEASPEC have been subject to the explicit elaboration of GE/HR although the inherent value of environmental protection for human well-being is well-recognized, thereby contributing to principles in the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights. Moving forward, the following considerations raised by respondents should be considered:

- 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).

- 87) 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”.
- 88) 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 (¶81). 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.
- 89) 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 founders, 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

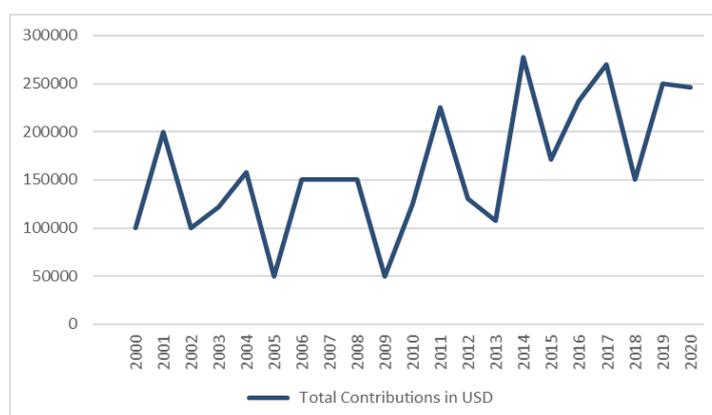
NEASPEC’s sustainability is not in question, given its longevity, perceived relevance, and the substantial support available through its association and accommodation within the UN system, although the earmarking of funding, diversity of contributions provided across the set of its member States, and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

- 90) Given the longevity of the NEASPEC platform (¶32), its significance and relevance as an intergovernmental cooperation mechanism in the subregion (¶36), 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.
- 91) 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 intergovernmental cooperation would be more effectively served through unearmarked funds.
- 92) 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 per cent of those consulted through the Stakeholder Survey¹² 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.

93) 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 (¶143) 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 (¶184).

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



94) 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 organisations¹³. 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 financial sustainability (i.e. NEASPEC is not faced with actual funding constraints versus a perceived need for more funding to tap its potential) are perceived to be 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

¹² Conducted online, 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%.

¹³ Institutional and Financial Mechanisms of NEASPEC: Review and Options, Expert Group Meeting and 12th SOM (22-23 March 2007, Beijing, China), p1

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.

- 95) 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.
- 96) 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 per cent 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.
- 97) Informants feel that NEASPEC has great untapped potential to benefit its member States and conduct advocacy at regional and global levels (“if more financing could be engaged, then nothing can 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 indicated NEASPEC should 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.
- 98) 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 intergovernmental 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 highly valued and effective. While suitable measures have been undertaken to manage the undulating workflow and compliance with 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.

- 99) Rotating chairmanship amongst member States (since 1993) and 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*”).

- 100) While NEASPEC’s slow pace is recognized and seen as characteristic of multilateral mechanisms (¶140), the Secretariat does not inhibit the advance of the platform’s work; quite the contrary, in fact (¶145). 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”.
- 101) In taking up one of the recommendations of the 2007 institutional review to establish an independent secretariat, many of the promised benefits¹⁴ 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 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.
- 102) 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 per cent /10 per cent 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.
- 103) 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”.
- 104) 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 (¶149) can be

¹⁴ 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.

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. While the team is small and each programme has been assigned one primary staff, the risk of losing all staff at the same time was judged to be relatively low, and further mitigated by efforts to create back-up responsibility in each domain.

105) Various suggestions to enhance the Secretariat's bench strength were put forward by the consulted stakeholders, 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 agenda¹⁵. This would also provide a platform for fundraising.

Finding 15 – Leveraging Partnerships

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

106) 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).

107) 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

¹⁵ It was understood that the NEASPEC Secretariat did not consider this suggestion as suitable, considering the organizational setting of the ESCAP PoW and the mandate of the ENEA subregional office (SRO-ENEA), as described in ¶12) and ¶18); however, the idea that some technical components could be managed by EDD was not discounted.

Studies (IGES).

- 108) 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.
- 109) 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 intergovernmental 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.

- 110) 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 intergovernmental accords. Foreign Affairs ministries 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.
- 111) 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 intergovernmental decision, the subsequent discussion was described as becoming relatively rigid (triggered by the establishment of ROP).
- 112) 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.

- 113) Another weakness of the current arrangement relates to the frequency of change of NFPs and consequent loss of institutional memory. Reportedly, up to 50 per cent of SOM delegates are “first timers”. While this appears to result from member States following their own staffing protocols (see Footnote 11) and is not to be interpreted as an indication of the level of member government commitments to NEASPEC, 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 the 27 years since NEASPEC’s creation, there is an opportunity to further strengthen this platform in order to support and incite the political will and commitment of its member States to make full use of this subregional environmental platform.

- 114) The effects of mid-level SOM participation and frequent NFP changes have 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.
- 115) The extremely slow uptake of the overarching notion reflected in the above-mentioned options¹⁶ demonstrates a sustained reluctance to fully implement NEASPEC in a way that obliges and/or encourages strengthening of political will and commitment of member States in the pursuit of transboundary environmental cooperation, which could be seen as a requisite for making full use of this subregional environmental platform. 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

¹⁶ These options reflect various means to implement the notions set out in NEASPEC’s Founding Framework (1996), Vision Statement (2000) and the conclusions elaborated in the Secretariat Paper (2007) and a 2012 consultancy

platform, and this remains the greatest challenge for the future of NEASPEC¹⁷.

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.

- 116) NEASPEC means different things to different groups. Member States conceived it as framework to facilitate their intergovernmental 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 and Macau, China). 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 vis-à-vis ESCAP.
- 117) 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 the 2030 Agenda overall.
- 118) While the creation of the current 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 intergovernmental 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 fostering enduring cooperation than having the type of fixed end objectives that define a programme or project.
- 119) 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”.
- 120) 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 work, it was nevertheless emphasized that with each incoming Executive Secretary,

¹⁷ 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

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 on NEASPEC’s strategic agenda and modus operandi, and reveal insufficient optimisation between ESCAP’s socio-economic pursuits and NEASPEC’s exercise of environmental diplomacy.

- 121) 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 NEASPEC’s role”*) to better leverage the asset inherent in NEASPEC, which appears to have been under-appreciated and under-utilized, to date.
- 122) 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 Climate 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.
- 123) NEASPEC’s results in the area of TAP (¶160) 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, 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 Commission session (May 2020) adopted a resolution (ESCAP/RES76/1)¹⁸, 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”.

5. Conclusions

RELEVANCE

- 124) 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

¹⁸ <https://www.unescap.org/commission/76/documents>

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.

125) 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 the 2030 Agenda. 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) its inordinately slow pace in comprehensively pursuing transboundary challenges (admittedly, this pace may be reflective of the inherent nature of multilateralism); and iv) not ensuring a reliable, independent, and adequate funding stream to enable the platform to implement a higher level of ambition.

EFFECTIVENESS

126) Assessed using the lens that reflects its purpose, NEASPEC's effectiveness has been judged as very high. In functioning as a comprehensive intergovernmental mechanism, NEASPEC provides a useful 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 countries, 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.

127) As a multilateral cooperation platform, NEASPEC is performing as designed. Its purpose is not to count Black-faced spoonbills or perform molecular genetic analysis of Amur tiger faeces. Its purpose is to provide a forum for the involved countries 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 NEA ecosystem's viability, which, in turn, is needed to support humanity, both in the region and beyond. The question emerges: does NEASPEC itself need to commandeer such studies, or could it rely on studies organised by other entities, e.g. 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 a position to select how these indicators should be monitored and by whom.

128) 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 the 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 role¹⁹, 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.

- 129) A consequence of this mutual deference is that it facilitates regular injections of ideas, which, as long as they adhere to underlying tacit values and principles, are never rejected. The extent to which proposals comply is not necessarily measured nor 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. To mitigate the risk that the SOM acts in recursive responsiveness with the Secretariat, NEASPEC's activities are integrated within ESCAP's PoW and thereby supported by the accompanying accountability framework and subject to the overall responsibility and oversight of ESCAP's Executive Secretary (¶18).
- 130) 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.
- 131) 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.
- 132) The way in which NEASPEC's thematic agenda has evolved reflects a blend of technical and diplomatic opportunities, which reflect a mix of inputs and direction channelled from stakeholders (member States and project partners) mediated by the NEASPEC Secretariat. Areas identified for cooperation reflect a tacit desire to have high visibility and catalytic impact, and sometimes, to respond to pressure from the global community (e.g. TAP, LCCs). In cases where the choice of activities pursued are seen to address the interest of only 1-2 countries, these have occasionally been perceived as "pet projects".
- 133) 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.
- 134) NEASPEC's progress, admittedly slow, has accelerated over the past five years since the

¹⁹ Apart from the recent NEACAP working process, the Secretariat has led the process to set the agenda and develop projects. However, the Secretariat has held to its position that member States should enhance their ownership over programme development and implementation.

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.

135) There are opportunities to strengthen the alignment of NEASPEC's programmatic agenda and its implementation with the notions encapsulated in its initial Framework, Vision Statement, and the Strategic Plan, consistent with an "end game" that deepens within-country and transboundary commitments to environmental cooperation, thereby intentionally accelerating progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

136) In the event that other instruments²⁰ are currently being more powerfully deployed to address key issues, it would be understandable to allow NEASPEC to continue on its current, cautious, and 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

137) 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. In contrast to goal-driven projects and programmes, NEASPEC's processes have been set up to facilitate the pursuit of enduring intergovernmental 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.

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

138) 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

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

140) The arrangement of being associated with 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.

141) The intergovernmental cooperation under NEASPEC would be more effectively served through

²⁰ Those mentioned by respondents include: the NEA subregional instrument of DLDD-NEAN whose Secretariat is based in the ROK has three founding countries, the ROK, China, and Mongolia, and ongoing discussions with the Russian Federation about joining; the UNCDD; and bilateral mechanisms.

the provision of unearmarked funds and a reliable, forecastable, and adequate flow of resources consistent with its ability to play a more visible, progressive, and impactful role. The reluctance to take up recommendation to move this cooperation framework's resourcing to a more predictable basis is arguably reflective of a lack of political will and shortfall in fully grasping NEASPEC's power to effect and accelerate progress on the part of the member States, both nationally and collectively.

- 142) 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.
- 143) 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, is currently underplayed by the label of "coordination". Together with increasing complexity of the platform's expanding and diverging thematic portfolio, it is exacting a toll on the team and risks to outstrip its resourcing and resilience.
- 144) 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

- 145) Mid-level SOM participation, frequent NFP changes, maintaining a voluntary approach and providing minimal resourcing can be seen as indicators of the political will of member States. This approach could indeed reflect a deliberate political will to operate in a measured and prudent manner, taking all interests into account, not just the environmental agenda. However, as NFPs and SOM delegates are primarily mid-level and not senior (as originally envisaged), the room for manoeuvre to shift the power that NEASPEC wields is currently limited. Consequently, in operating NEASPEC as a "working level" apparatus, insufficient political support has been generated to strengthen the institutional basis for subregional cooperation.
- 146) 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 the ROK (stemming from high intra-regional trade), the extent to which this applies to all six countries 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" referring to exogenous inputs and external brokers can bring member States into

discussion by identifying agendas for cooperation²¹. 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 unappreciated and under-utilized in responding to its calls to action and agenda-setting for member States.

- 147) 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 the 2030 Agenda. Translating this into an operational scope and substance is a demanding task. There is an opportunity for ESCAP to better draw on its internal capabilities to contribute to this challenge, which seem to not be optimally marshalled under the current organisational set-up.
- 148) Given the magnitude of the opportunity, the significant 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 and synergies will be missed.

6. Recommendations

FOR THE NEASPEC SECRETARIAT and THE SOM:

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

- 149) The overall outcome of this assessment indicates that NEASPEC is highly aligned with member States' global obligations and the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. To date, NEASPEC's potential to support its members in more robustly and expeditiously working towards their commitments 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 NEASPEC 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. adoption of best practices of other subregional mechanisms in Asia-Pacific). Now, 20 years after the endorsement of NEASPEC's Vision Statement, it is pertinent to review the positioning and use of the NEASPEC Framework. Evidence points to sustained reluctance of member States to operationalise this platform in a way that would

²¹ Institutionalizing Complex and Ecological Interdependence: Subregional Environmental Governance in Asia and the Pacific', S. Nam, *Environmental Policy* (2008), Vol. 16, No. 3, p15

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 more deeply address major topics in relation to the 2030 Agenda and international treaty obligations, NEASPEC could be used as a highly effective instrument to trigger major momentum in this direction.

FOR THE NEASPEC SECRETARIAT and 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.

150) In working together for over two decades, the involved parties have a more informed understanding of what such subregional cooperation can deliver and how it can be used. Formalising the expressed intention of member States within a charter instils 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 activities within the thematic areas and the perceived emergence of “pet projects”, which, while reflecting the interest of some 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.

151) 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.

- 152) 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 ESCAP'S EXECUTIVE SECRETARY and THE NEAPSEC SECRETARIAT

Recommendation 4: Strengthen existing links and identify and broaden new communication and reporting channels between NEASPEC and ESCAP with a view to optimising the synergy of this relationship for mutual gain.

- 153) The decision to associate NEASPEC with ESCAP dates to its inception. In addition to drawing on ESCAP's analytical and normative work, this arrangement was seen as facilitating opportunities to promote small-scale, 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, responsibility for the programme shifted 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. This 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.
- 154) NEASPEC's mandate (environmental) complements ESCAP's mandate (economic and social). Being embedded within the ENEA subregional office presumably enables the delivery of a more holistic approach out of the Incheon part of the organisation. Strengthening the substantive complementarity and institutional liaison between NEASPEC's and ESCAP's strategic agendas and constituent activities in the subregion could more optimally leverage synergies. Currently, this value-added dimension appears to not be fully understood or is being overlooked and consequently under-appreciated and under-utilised, with genuine missed opportunities in both directions.
- 155) The NEASPEC Secretariat has an interest to tap ESCAP's substantive contributions but appears to face blockages in garnering input of ESCAP colleagues, although the SOM might welcome this. Optimising the substantive relationship between NEASPEC-ESCAP 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 is a management issue. It could be achieved by having a custodian for NEASPEC on 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 ideas between Incheon and Bangkok, in both reactive and proactive modes, continuously networking and scanning for useful inputs, channelling these in the appropriate direction, and ensuring sufficient prioritization and resourcing is available to build strategic synergies. Such a role should be inspired by the amplification through ESCAP of NEASPEC's work in TAP. This role should also seek to enhance the "push-pull" dynamic between the organisations by better leveraging NEASPEC as a test bed for gaining subregional consensus on cooperation areas, enabling the demonstration and leadership effect of this important cohort of

member States to flourish and accelerate momentum in the Asia-Pacific region. With ESCAP's call to action on oceans (ESCAP/RES76/1), marine conservation would be a good place to start.

FOR THE NEASPEC SECRETARIAT and THE SOM:

Recommendation 5: 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.

156) 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.

157) Following the best practice of similar platforms that act as multilateral cooperation hubs, the idea of establishing a trust fund (which has been studied, discussed several times, and drafted into text) has not yet born fruit in 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 thematic activities, 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 the 2030 Agenda 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 NEASPEC SECRETARIAT, SOM, and ESCAP:

Recommendation 6: Enhance the resourcing of the NEASPEC Secretariat.

158) While playing its current role of horizon scanning, sensing, negotiation, tacit steering, and preparation (all subsumed under the 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 intergovernmental 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 7: Use virtual meetings to enhance the frequency and quality of the intergovernmental connectedness being pursued under the auspices of NEASPEC.

- 159) 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.
- 160) 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.
- 161) Increasing the sense of community is a key driver of ownership. Ownership drives commitment. Commitment drives action. 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

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

Terms of Reference

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the evaluation

The North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC), established in 1993 as a subregional follow-up of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) of 1992, is a comprehensive intergovernmental cooperation framework in North-East Asia with membership of six countries namely China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Russian Federation. NEASPEC has adopted a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral approach to address transboundary environmental issues in the subregion. The principal objective of NEASPEC is to promote subregional environmental cooperation and sustainable development efforts for enhancement of quality of life and well-being of present and future generations in line with the spirit of UNCED²², with the vision of promoting common policy dialogue on approaches and views and coordinated actions on subregional environmental issues²³.

Since the inception, ESCAP has served as the secretariat of NEASPEC. The inauguration of the ESCAP East and North-East Asia Office (SOENEA) in May 2010 brought about the change of the secretariat arrangement from interim to permanent nature by the endorsement of the 67th Commission Session in May 2011.

Further to the new arrangement, the 16th Senior Officials Meeting (SOM-16) of NEASPEC in September 2011 discussed the need to clearly define rules of procedure for the operation of NEASPEC, and the SOM-17 in December 2012 reviewed a study on functions and institutional arrangements of other subregional environmental mechanisms and their implications for NEASPEC.

Based on the decision and subsequent discussions on the need of developing a long-term (five-year or ten year) strategy, the NEASPEC Strategic Plan 2016-2020 was adopted at SOM-20. The Plan provides long-term directions and approaches of NEASPEC to effectively and efficiently address the priority areas of the subregion. The Plan also keeps in mind the need to integrate economic, social and environmental aspects and supports the achievement of environment-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Having operated for over 25 years, ESCAP proposed NEASPEC member States to conduct a comprehensive and independent evaluation of the relevance and effectiveness of NEASPEC. This evaluation was expected to support organizational learning and decision-making. The 22nd Senior Officials Meeting of NEASPEC, held on 25 October 2018 in Beijing, China, welcomed and adopted the proposed NEASPEC evaluation²⁴. The 23rd Senior Officials Meeting of NEASPEC, held on 9-10 October 2019 in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia requested the Secretariat to carry out the external evaluation in parallel with the preparation of the Strategic Plan, in accordance with the UN's norms and standards

²² The Framework for NEASPEC, adopted at SOM-3, 1996

²³ Vision Statement for NEASPEC, adopted at SOM-6, 2000

²⁴ http://www.neaspec.org/sites/default/files//6.%20SOM22_External%20Evaluation.pdf

for evaluation and in full consultation with member States.²⁵ The 23rd SOM also recommended the Secretariat to revise the initial scope of evaluation which would focus on the implementation of the current strategic plan, completed and ongoing projects and the institutional arrangement.

Evaluation at ESCAP is an important function that seeks to determine as systematically and objectively as possible the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of its subprogrammes, projects or initiatives. Recognizing the value of an independent evaluation in guiding efforts to improve ESCAP's overall performance and effectiveness, the Commission adopted resolution 66/15 on "Strengthening of the evaluation function of the secretariat of the Commission", which requested the secretariat to ensure that its programmatic work, including the work of divisions, subregional offices and regional institutions, is evaluated periodically.

1.2 Purpose and objectives

The purpose of the evaluation is to contribute to the deliberations at the 24th Senior Officials Meeting of NEASPEC to be held in Vladivostok, Russian Federation in October 2020 on ways to further strengthen the Programme in the context of the subregional priorities of environmental cooperation and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Agenda and provide inputs to the formulation of the NEASPEC Strategic Plan 2021-2025. The target users of the evaluation findings and recommendations are member States of NEASPEC, the secretariat and project partners.

The objective of the evaluation is to determine, as systematically and objectively as possible, the performance of NEASPEC in fulfilling its mandate. In particular, the evaluation will

1. Assess its programmatic results and achievements against the NEASPEC Strategic Plan 2016-2020²⁶;
2. Assess NEASPEC's performance against standard evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and mainstreaming of gender and human rights;
3. Identify strengths and challenges in the current institutional and organizational setup of NEASPEC;
4. Analyze partnership arrangements and resource mobilization; and
5. Formulate concrete and actionable recommendations for improvement in fulfilling its mandate in the context of subregional priorities for environmental cooperation.

1.3 Scope of the evaluation

²⁵ <http://www.neaspec.org/sites/default/files//NEASPEC%20SOM-23%20Meeting%20Report.pdf>

²⁶ http://www.neaspec.org/sites/default/files/NEASPEC%20Strategic%20Plan_after%20SOM20.pdf

The evaluation will cover NEASPEC’s programme of work as well as the institute’s means for implementation of the programme, including its institutional and organizational setup. The evaluation will cover the period from 2016 to 2020 (present), being the time frame of the current NEASPEC Strategic Plan, with limited focus on the period in 2020, for which less written data can be expected to be available. It will focus on all activities implemented and outputs produced and delivered to participating countries in that period as part of the work plan of the Programme.

1.4. Evaluation criteria and questions

The following questions are proposed under each evaluation criteria:

Evaluation criteria	Tentative evaluation questions
Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the work of NEASPEC contribute to the goals of the Strategic Plan 2016-2020, i.e. (a) strengthening coordinated actions to address environmental challenges in North-East Asia, (b) mobilizing mutual support to manage national environmental issues in member States, (c) implementing national, regional and global goals for sustainable development, in particular, environment-related Sustainable Development Goals? • How did NEASPEC make its programmes and other interventions fully responsive to the needs and demands of member States? • What measures have been made to make NEASPEC more relevant to its member States?
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the key programmatic results and achievements of NEASPEC, as effective platforms and networks for member governments and other major stakeholders to maximize environmental cooperation? • What can be done better to improve the effectiveness of the work of NEASPEC in fulfilling its mandate in addressing environmental priorities in North-East Asia and enhancing linkages between NEASPEC and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at national, subregional, and global levels?
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the strengths and challenges in the current institutional and organizational setup of NEASPEC? • What human, financial and in-kind resources were leveraged through contributions of member governments and project partners?
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What partnership arrangements exist, and resource mobilization undertaken to sustain the work of NEASPEC? • How these partnership arrangements and resource mobilization could be further improved?
Gender and human rights mainstreaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has NEASPEC mainstreamed gender and human rights in the design and delivery of its programmes?

2. METHODOLOGY

The evaluation will be conducted start during the second quarter of 2020 based on the terms of reference (TOR) developed in line with ESCAP evaluation guidelines. Follow-up consultations with partners in each thematic area and national focal points will be undertaken to ensure that the needs and expectations of NEASPEC member countries are addressed.

In assessing the results achieved, the evaluation will make use of a theory of change approach to understand the actual results achieved and the process of achieving results. The development of the theory of change should be guided by the overall results framework of NEASPEC and its projects and the actual implementation strategy and delivery of outputs.

The evaluation will use a mix of data sources collected through multiple methods, with analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. Results will be triangulated where possible.

A consultant will be recruited based on the agreed TOR to undertake the evaluation in a rigorous and participatory manner. The evaluation methodology includes *inter alia* the following actions:

- A desk review of relevant strategic and meeting documents;
- Interviews with member States' representatives, key programme partners, and relevant staff from the NEASPEC Secretariat Office;
- A questionnaire to gather feedback from a wide range of stakeholders;
- Visit to selected member countries to engage with NEASPEC national focal points and other relevant government agencies as well as programme partners, including other UN entities.

The following outputs will be delivered to the ESCAP SPMD through the NEASPEC Secretariat:

- 1) Inception report, including an evaluation work plan and framework detailing the methodology and approach for the evaluation;
- 2) Analysis of the questionnaire
- 3) First draft and final evaluation reports
- 4) Presentation (ppt) on the findings, conclusions and recommendations

In analyzing the data and information, the evaluation will take qualitative and quantitative approaches, provide charts and direction quotations and highlight good practices examples.

Table 1. Tentative Workplan

Evaluation phase	Activities	Outputs	Tentative Dates
Phase 1: Planning and Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of relevant documents • Meet with evaluation reference group (virtual) • Draft inception report • Present & finalize inception report, including detailed evaluation framework and workplan, interview guides & <u>draft</u> survey questionnaire (to be prepared with the secretariat) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inception report including: Evaluation framework and workplan; Interview guides; Draft survey questionnaire 	8 April -17 April
Phase 2: Data collection and analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission to NEASPEC Secretariat and a field mission in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia (to attend the NEACAP meeting) • Meet/consult with evaluation reference group • Interviews at NEASPEC Secretariat and Incheon and Ulaanbaatar-based stakeholders • Skype interviews with external stakeholders • Conduct focus group discussions • Launch survey questionnaire • Debrief evaluation reference group on preliminary findings & recommendations • Follow-up Skype/telephone interview with stakeholders • Analyse data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey questionnaire finalised and launched at end of mission • Preliminary findings & recommendations 	19-25 April (Mission to Incheon and Ulaanbaatar) 26-8 May (Follow-up skype interviews)
Phase 3: Report Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft evaluation report • Obtain comments from evaluation reference group and other stakeholders • Present findings and recommendations to ESCAP senior management (virtual) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft evaluation report • Comments from stakeholders 	10-19 June (18-20 June: Mission to NEASPEC Secretariat to join the NEASPEC national focal points meeting)
Phase 4: Finalization of report and follow-up action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft final evaluation report • Facilitate a discussion on implementation of evaluation recommendations (virtual) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final evaluation report • Roadmap for implementing the evaluation recommendations 	20 June-17 July

3. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1 Reference group

An evaluation reference group will be established within ESCAP to enhance stakeholder participation and provide oversight and substantive support to the NEASPEC evaluation, joined by the Deputy Executive Secretary of ESCAP responsible for the NEASPEC (Chair), Director of Strategy and Programme Management Division (SPMD), Head of the East and North-East Asia Office (SOENEA), appointed professional staff of ENEA office, and Chief of Evaluation Unit, SPMD (secretariat). It will provide technical and methodological guidance to the evaluation process; review and agree on the evaluation terms of reference taking into account the consultation with NEASPEC member countries; select qualified evaluation consultant approved by the reference group; review the inception report; provide quality assurance to the preparation of the evaluation report and validation of recommendations; ensure adherence to ESCAP Monitoring and Evaluation Policy and Guidelines; and support the dissemination of the evaluation results and the formulation of the evaluation management response and follow-up action plan.

3.2 Evaluator

The evaluator will assume overall responsibility for carrying out the evaluation in an objective and independent manner. This includes, among other activities, managing the work, ensuring the quality of interviews and data collection, preparing the draft report, presenting the draft report and producing the final report after comments have been received in line with standard templates provided by ESCAP. The evaluator must have:

- Knowledge of the intergovernmental cooperation mechanism and processes and approaches, and the Sustainable Development Goals;
- Knowledge of results-based management and the formulation of indicators for measuring development results, as well as familiarity with the planning and monitoring framework;
- Professional and technical experience in evaluation (application of evaluation norms, standards and ethical guidelines and the relevant organizational evaluation policy and promotion of evaluation and evidence-based learning)²⁷; and
- Good technical knowledge and experience on environmental issues in the North-East Asia region.

ESCAP adheres to the UNEG Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct in evaluation and all staff and consultants engaged in evaluation are required to uphold these standards. To this end, ESCAP has developed a Consultants Agreement form that evaluators are required to sign as part of the contracting process.

²⁷ See Standard 3.1. Competencies, UNEG. 2016. *Norms and standards for evaluation*.

ANNEXES

Annex 1. Contents of the Inception Report

The inception report sets out the conceptual framework for the NEASPEC external evaluation, including detailed evaluation methodology, the evaluation criteria and questions, indicators, method of data collection and analysis, and the risk and limitations. It clarifies the scope and rationale of the evaluation, and provides preliminary findings based on desktop research and the initial review of documents and consultation with the Evaluation Reference Group and other stakeholders.

CONTENT	PAGES (estimate)	COMMENTS
Title page	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Title, date of publication• Names of the evaluators
1. Introduction	1-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Background and context• Purpose and scope of the evaluation
2. Methodology	3-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluation criteria and questions• Indicators• Methods of data collection and data analysis• Risk and limitations
3. Preliminary findings	2-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Elaborate on the results of the desk study and other preparatory work carried out to this point
4. Workplan	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop a timeline which shows the evaluation phases
5. Outputs to be delivered	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outputs to be delivered
Annexes	6-10	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluation logical framework based on an ESCAP template• Evaluation terms of reference• List of documents reviewed• Proposed template for questionnaires (if applicable)

Annex II. Contents of the Evaluation Report

CONTENT	PAGES (estimate)	COMMENTS
Title page	1	Title, date of publication Names of the evaluators Name of ESCAP or division that commissioned the evaluation
Acknowledgments	1	Prepared by the evaluation team
Table of contents	1	List of chapters, sections and annexes
List of acronyms	1-2	In alphabetical order; these are written out in full the first time they are used in the report
Management response	1-3	General response Response to individual recommendations
Executive summary	1-3	Background of the evaluation (one paragraph) Purpose and scope (one paragraph) Methodology (one paragraph) Main conclusions (one-sentence conclusions with brief explanation if needed) Recommendations (one-sentence recommendations) Other comments or concluding sentence
1. Background, purpose and scope	1-3	1.1 Background of the evaluation and the topic being evaluated 1.2 Purpose, objectives and scope
2. Object of evaluation description and context	1	Describe object of evaluation – location, target group, budget, timing, relevant norms standards and conventions Goals, objectives of the subprogramme.
3. Methodology	1-3	3.1 Description of methodology: activities, timeframe, changes compared to TOR, and reasons for selecting sample reports, countries, sites, case studies, and interviewees 3.2 Limitations: limitations of the methodology and scope and problems encountered
4. Findings	Varying length	4.1 Overview: supporting information for the performance assessment 4.2 Performance assessment: assessment against relevant evaluation criteria (effectiveness, relevance, efficiency, gender and human rights mainstreaming) 4.3 Other assessment: assessment against relevant additional criteria
5. Conclusions	1-4	Main conclusions, both positive and negative, of the evaluation that follow logically from the findings

CONTENT	PAGES (estimate)	COMMENTS
		Ratings table with ratings for standard evaluation and additional criteria and a brief justification (optional)
6. Recommendations	1-4	Recommendations based on the conclusions. Can be addressed to ESCAP management, staff, donors and other relevant stakeholders
7. Lessons learnt	1.3	Lessons learnt based on the findings and conclusions.
Annexes		I. Management response (to be completed by ESCAP) II. Terms of reference III. List of documents reviewed IV. List of interviewees V. Data tables and analysis Other annexes as required

Annex III. Quality control criteria used to review the inception and the evaluation reports

Report content	The report is structured logically and is well written
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The report follows the table of contents outlined in the TOR and includes the relevant annexes • The executive summary is 1-2 pages and highlights the key findings, conclusions and recommendations • The report uses consistent grammar and spelling in line with UN rules, written in good English and is easy to read. Main messages are clearly distinguished from the text
Purpose, objectives	The report meets the purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation stated in the TOR
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The report gives a clear description of the object of evaluation. The expected results chain is clearly outlined. Key stakeholders are listed. • The report clearly explains the evaluation's purpose, objectives and scope, including main evaluation questions, and limitations • The report describes and explains the chosen evaluation criteria • Evaluation objectives and scope address gender and human rights
Evaluation method	The evaluation methodology and its application are explained clearly
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The methodology is clearly explained and applied throughout the evaluation process • The report describes data collection methods and analysis and consultation process • Methods are appropriate for effective gender and human rights analysis • Amendments to the methodology identified in the inception report are clearly explained • The limitations and their implications for the validity of the findings and conclusions have been explained
Findings	The findings and conclusions are credible
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Findings respond to the evaluation criteria and questions detailed in the scope and objectives section of the report • Findings are based on evidence gathered using methodology identified in the report • Findings are based on rigorous analysis, are evidence based and objective • Findings are adequately substantiated, balanced and reliable • The relative contributions of stakeholders to the results are explained
Conclusions	Conclusions are relevant, evidence based and insightful
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The conclusions derive from the findings and are evidence based • Conclusions relate to the purpose and key questions of the evaluation • Conclusions are logically connected to evaluation findings
Recommendations	The recommendations are useful
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The recommendations are clear and follow logically from the findings and conclusions • Recommendations are realistic, concrete and actionable within a reasonable timeframe • Recommendations for NEASPEC should be clearly within NEASPEC's mandate

Annex IV: Evaluation Consultants Agreement Form

To be signed by all consultants as individuals (not by or on behalf of a consultancy company) before a contract can be issued. This is an agreement to abide by the UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation²⁸ and the UNEG Code of Conduct for Evaluation in the UN System²⁹, specially to the following obligations, among others:

- **Independence.** Evaluators shall ensure that independence of judgement is maintained, and that evaluation findings and recommendations are independently presented.
- **Impartiality.** Evaluators shall operate in an impartial and unbiased manner and give a balanced presentation of strengths and weaknesses of the policy, program, project or organizational unit being evaluated.
- **Conflict of Interest.** Evaluators are required to disclose in writing any past experience, of themselves, which may give rise to a potential conflict of interest.
- **Competence.** Evaluators shall accurately represent their level of skills and knowledge and work only within the limits of their professional training and abilities in evaluation.
- **Accountability.** Evaluators are accountable for the completion of the agreed evaluation deliverables within the timeframe and budget agreed.
- **Confidentiality.** Evaluators shall respect people's right to provide information in confidence and make participants aware of the scope and limits of confidentiality.

Name of Consultant:

Name of Consultancy Organization (where relevant):

I confirm that I have received and understood and will abide by the UNEG Norms and Standards and Code of Conduct for Evaluation.

Signed at (place) on (date)

²⁸ <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914>

²⁹ <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/100>

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, Ulaanbaatar, 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 1919)
- 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 In-depth 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

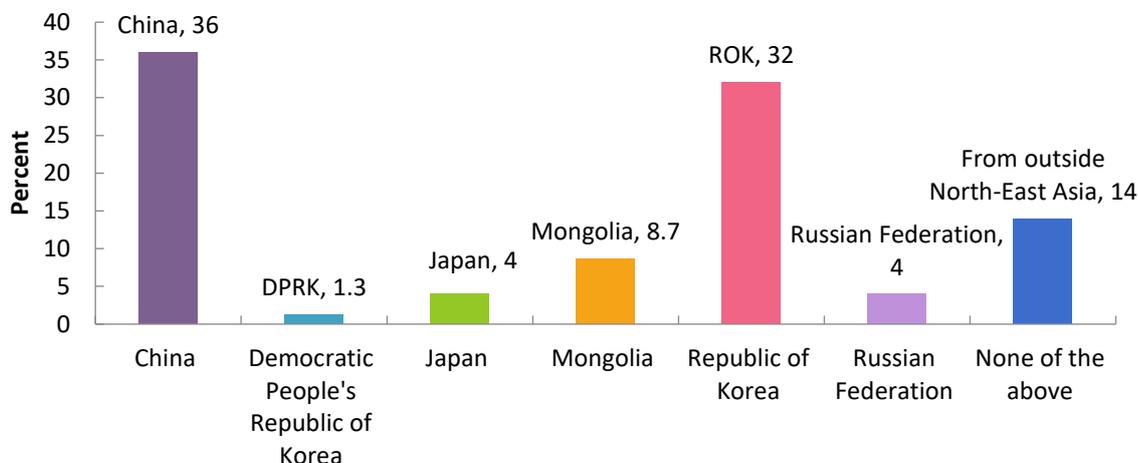
Through Participation in NEASPEC Survey

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.

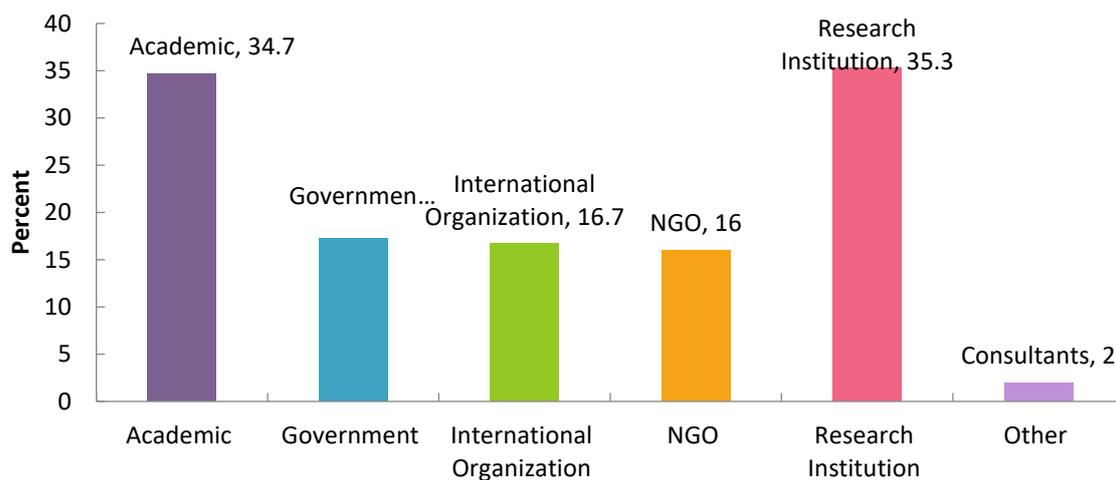
163 individuals responded to the survey, either fully (56) or partially (107).

Annex 4 - Profile of Stakeholder Survey Respondents

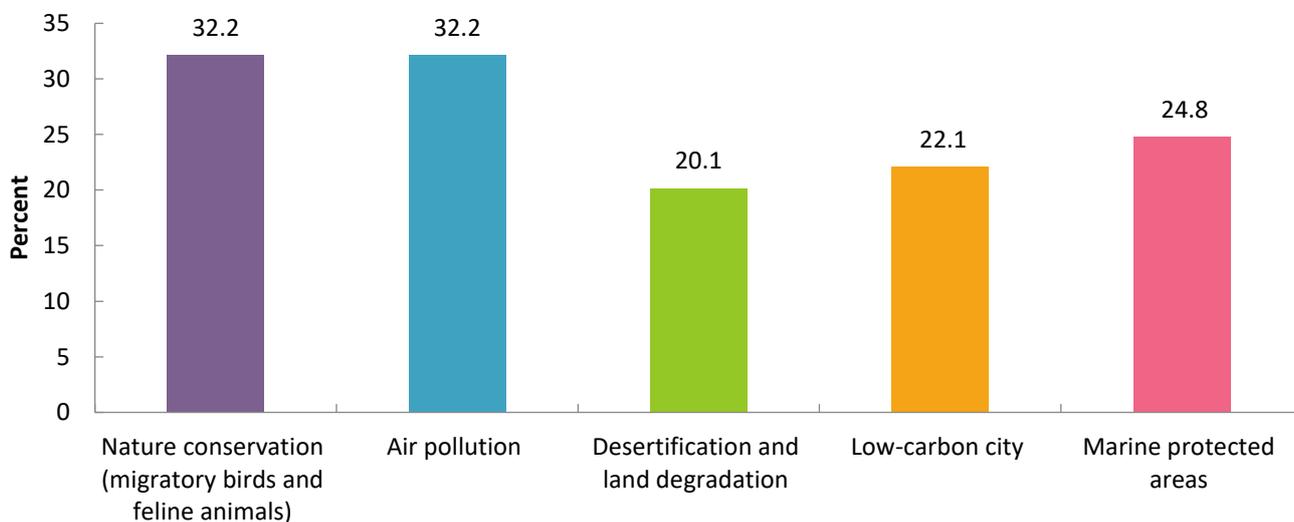
1. What is your nationality?



2. What is your professional background?



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



Annex 5 - Management Response

Please refer to the SOM document NEASPEC/SOM(24)/7