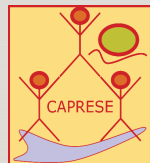




# LOOKING BACK WITH A VIEW TO LOOKING FORWARD

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS STEMMING FROM  
EVALUATION OF NEASPEC'S OPERATION AND STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION



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# Background and Intention of the Evaluation Exercise

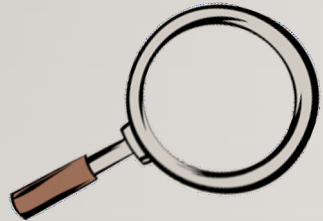
## PURPOSE

- ❑ To inspire and inform strategy development process for next 5-year period (2021-2025)
- ❑ Reflect on medium- to longer-term horizon and potential this inter-governmental platform



## SCOPE

- Focus on NEASPEC's operation over period of current Strategic Plan (2016-2020)
- In context of its 1993 creation, 1996 framework, 2000 Vision Statement, and subsequent evolution



## CRITERIA

- Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Mainstreaming of Gender Equality/Human Rights, Sustainability in light of NEASPEC's programmatic results and achievements as guided by current Strategic Plan
- Gauge platform's fundamental strengths and shortfalls vis-à-vis its institutional/organisational arrangement
- Review partnership approach and resource mobilisation

## APPROACH

- Qualitative and quantitative: desk research + interviews (41) + survey (263 consulted, 62.5% response rate)
- Supervised by Evaluation Reference Group: strengthened orientation towards strategic assessment
- Evidence-based findings, conclusions, recommendations

## RELEVANCE – Key Findings

### NEASPEC's UNIQUE ADDED VALUE

- Linked to its inclusiveness, ability to navigate sensitive political territory
- Level of dialogue (quality, openness) has enabled breakthroughs

### STRENGTHENING COORDINATED ACTIONS TO ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES IN NEA

- Cooperation with a view to national implications more so than explicitly transboundary
- Incremental approach, strong science-policy anchoring
- Coordinated actions enhanced by creation of structures, accompanied by more formal procedures

### RESPONSIVENESS TO MEMBER STATES' NEEDS AND DEMANDS

- Ample opportunities to express needs/interests
- Systematic efforts by the Secretariat to solicit feedback, proposals, national positions
- Consciously or unwittingly: member States have been channelled into being more proactive than reactive
  - ➔ due to NEASPEC's operationalisation as a 'working level' mechanism
  - ➔ dynamic is further enhanced by consensus-driven approach

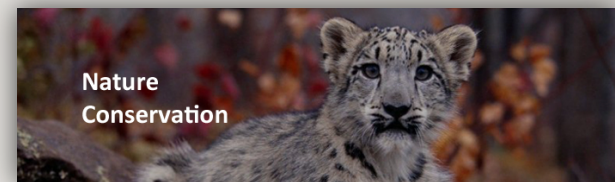


## Conclusions

- Stands out amongst plethora of actors and initiatives; it serves a strategic purpose not easily performed by others
- NEASPEC's ability to accelerate progress of member States' achievement of obligations vis-à-vis global goals has not been fully recognized; platform's potential has not (yet) been fully leveraged

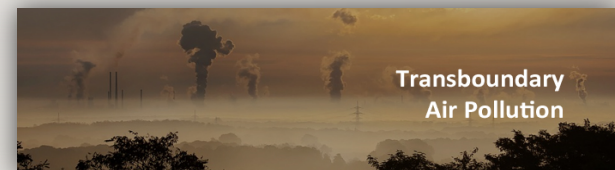
## EFFECTIVENESS – Conclusions

- NEASPEC's development has especially evolved with creation/implementation of Strategic Plan (2016-2020)
- While some stakeholders are generally satisfied with platform's performance, its untapped potential was highlighted



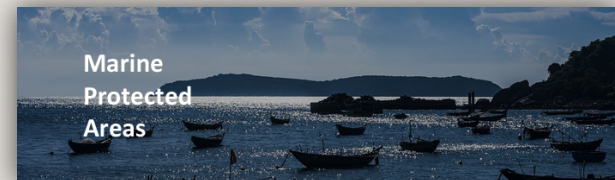
### Key Findings: Nature Conservation

- Identified and is filling a gap that has triggered important bilateral and multilateral cooperation
- Informants indicated stronger steering could set this area on course & ambition level better aligned with an 'end game' that deepens transboundary commitments to environmental cooperation



### Key Findings: Transboundary Air Pollution (TAP)

- Voluntary framework (10+ years in its making) to improve air quality in subregion heralded as significant breakthrough
- Its amplification through ESCAP setting has potential to impact wider Asia Pacific region
  - ➔ demonstrates catalytic impact of strengthening NEASPEC-ESCAP's 'push-pull' dynamic



### Key Findings: Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

- So far, missed opportunity to drive catalytic impact related to ESCAP's work/call of member States vis-à-vis marine protection
- Preferred focus of implications of this work is 'within national boundaries' more so than transboundary orientation
  - ➔ priority programmatic area operating with limited scope: experience-sharing at local government level with high demand on resourcing and networks that outstrips NEASPEC's competence and nature of its infrastructure

## Key Findings: Low Carbon Cities (LCCs)

- So far, missed opportunity to amplify impact of activities to Asia Pacific with ESCAP's Urban Development Programme
- Crowded landscape has led to resulting focus on subnational government level (seen as way to create a value-added niche)
  - ➔ effort and timelines needed to identify 'right' local government actors mismatched with NEASPEC's networks, resourcing
- demonstrates catalytic impact of strengthening NEASPEC-ESCAP's 'push-pull' dynamic
- Feedback collected indicates stronger steering could set this thematic area on a course and ambition level better aligned with an 'end game' that deepens transboundary commitments to environmental cooperation



## Key Findings: Desertification and Land Degradation (DLD)

- Given its transboundary nature and impact on member States, this thematic area is well-suited to NEASPEC's setting/agenda, and could be amplified through better synchronisation with ESCAP
- Extent of duplication with other instruments has been recognized by NEASPEC members
- Current discussion about future direction of this thematic area not yet resolved
- Informants gave feedback about elements that could strengthen the strategic future direction:
  - ➔ links between land, security, sustainability
  - ➔ entry point for addressing Gender Equity/Human Rights dimension





## EFFICIENCY – Conclusions

- Imposing an efficiency regime onto an inter-governmental platform designed to support enduring cooperation between states would undermine its purpose and political/diplomatic functions
- Expectations for timely execution and cost-effectiveness can generate misguided scrutiny and pressures for accountability; these factors are vital for goal-driven projects/programmes, which NEASPEC is not
  - ➔ creates ambiguity that needs to be managed

## MAINSTREAMING OF GENDER EQUITY/HUMAN RIGHTS – Conclusions

- While treated in a relatively timid manner thus far, NEASPEC's association with the UN gives it an obligation to delve further
- There is positive potential in this topic for achieving sustainable development
- Potentially non-controversial entry points can be found in NEASPEC's work on DLD, MPAs, LCCs



## SUSTAINABILITY, RESOURCE MOBILISATION, PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS – Conclusions

- As long as NEASPEC reflects the will of its member States, its sustainability is not in question
- Inter-governmental cooperation under NEASPEC setting would be more effectively served through provision of unearmarked funds and predictable, adequate flow of resources consistent with its ability to play a more visible progressive, impactful role
- Secretariat faces deteriorating case to request further funding ==> creating conviction of poor utilisation of funds
  - ➔ due to savings strategies used to smooth unpredictable fund flow + shift to virtual convening from COVID-19 effects
- This vicious cycle potentially inhibits member States from embarking on a more ambitious agenda with this platform
- The shift to a permanent secretariat in Incheon has brought marked increase in support, professionalism, competence
- Increasing demand on Secretariat threatens to outstrip its resources
  - ➔ ‘coordination label’ covers extensive sensemaking, horizon scanning for proactive support, meeting service expectations amidst increasing complexity of platform’s expanding and diverging thematic portfolio, unreliable funds flow
- A more strategic approach to partnership that goes beyond transactional engagement of national institutions would unleash further financial and in-kind support from project partners and drive catalytic impact from more effective networking
  - ➔ beware of risk of being pressured into aligning with priorities, working rhythms, milestones of key partners/initiatives rather than driving own strategic agenda forward



## STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF INSTITUTIONAL/ORGANISATIONAL SET-UP – Conclusions

### NEASPEC's GOVERNANCE MECHANISM

- Mid-level SOM delegates, frequent NFP changes, voluntary approach, minimal resourcing reflect member States' will
- Current operationalisation as a 'working level' mechanism has generated insufficient political will to strengthen institutional basis for subregional cooperation

### EVOLUTION TOWARDS ENVISAGED COMPREHENSIVE MECHANISM

- While there has been practical, step-by-step progress since 1993, this modality has not risen to what seems to be intended
- There is a case for deepening member States' cooperation:
  - ❑ deterioration of common pool resources (sea, air)
  - ❑ transboundary ecosystems with socio-economic and environmental implications
  - ❑ complex interdependence stemming from intra-regional trade (CJK is high; what about other members?)

### LEVERAGE FROM THE NEASPEC – ESCAP LINKAGE

- Significant demonstration and leadership effects of this cohort of member States is under-appreciated, under-utilised
- Anticipated leverage from this linkage (to trigger and consolidate effects as external broker) has not been fully realised due to inadvertent silos and disconnects
  - ➔ insufficient comprehension on part of ESCAP of NEASPEC's assets, modus operandi, relevance, utility for generating meaningful contributions to its Programme of Work, Calls to Action, and Agenda-Setting function for member States
- NEASPEC's achievements under TAP show catalytic impact of strengthening 'push-pull' dynamic of this setting
- Golden opportunity to link NEASPEC's *raison d'être* more strongly to achieving member State obligations of Agenda 2030



## RECOMMENDATION #1 (for the SOM)

Decide whether or not to operationalise NEASPEC in a way that would enable realisation of its founding vision to be a comprehensive environmental cooperation mechanism.

- NEASPEC is highly aligned with member States' global obligations
- Its potential is not being purposely used to support more robust, expeditious, collective work
- Operationalisation as 'working level' mechanism systematically inhibits from rising to a higher level of ambition and strengthening member States' resolve towards its intended end goal (enhance quality of life of present + future generations)
- If there is actual political will in subregion to address major topics of Agenda 2030 and international treaty obligations, NEASPEC could be a highly effective instrument to trigger major momentum in this direction

## RECOMMENDATION #2 (for the SOM)

Update NEASPEC's charter to align member States' ambition and intention, as informed by 27 years of cooperation, in light of Strategic Plan's accelerative effects. 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.

- Formalising intention within a constitution instils belonging and identity for member States; these elements are vital to drive national and collective ownership of the platform
- Such a charter provides purpose and goals, directs strategy, and orchestrates contributions towards their coherent pursuit
- Making tacit values/principles more explicit can better guide decisions, communication and assure sufficient due diligence
  - ➔ pragmatic counterpoint to platform's consensus-based approach and mutual deference leading to suboptimal decisions
  - ➔ need to reduce risk of misguided forays in directions not fully aligned with envisaged level and manner of contribution

*==> stronger steering, more strategic intention, coherence in design of NEASPEC's programmatic agenda*

## RECOMMENDATION #3 (for the SOM and NFPs)

Honour notion of high-level participation in SOM, as per founding vision; provide more stability in NFP participation.

- NEASPEC stands out for quality of dialogue, ability to navigate sensitive political territory
- High-level participation in SOM envisaged from outset; is its absence intentional ?
- Review potential disconnect between intended & actual empowerment of SOM delegates (is this a management problem to be rectified by national government and involved individuals ?)



## RECOMMENDATION #4 (for the SOM and NEASPEC Secretariat)

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

- Decision to embed NEASPEC within ESCAP reaches back to instrument's inception. Advantages:
  - draws on UN's analytical and normative work at national and subregional levels
  - facilitates smallscale, practical cooperation in areas of common concern
  - provides financial and administrative benefits arising from operation under UN framework
- Permanent secretariat in Incheon brings platform's work closer to its member States, but distancing from ESCAP colleagues in Bangkok has attenuated relevance and potential leverage of calls to action by wider ESCAP membership and vice-versa
  - ➔ this is a management problem with a management solution



## RECOMMENDATION #5 (for ESCAP's Executive Secretary)

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

- NEASPEC's (environmental) mandate complements ESCAP's (economic and social) mandate
- Absence of explicit substantive complementarity and institutional liaison between NEASPEC and ESCAP strategic agendas & constituent activities is generating missed opportunities in both directions
- Reported blockages to pursue development/contribution of input from ESCAP colleagues into NEASPEC's substantive agenda
- Suggestion to appoint Custodian for NEASPEC within ESCAP's leadership team, which would serve to:
  - advocate for ESCAP environmental agenda towards NEASPEC
  - intentionally orchestrate effective flow of programmatic ideas between Incheon and Bangkok (reactive and proactive modes)
  - continuously scan for useful inputs and channel these in appropriate direction
  - ensure sufficient prioritization and resourcing to seize and build strategic synergies (TAP, MPAs offer ground to build on)

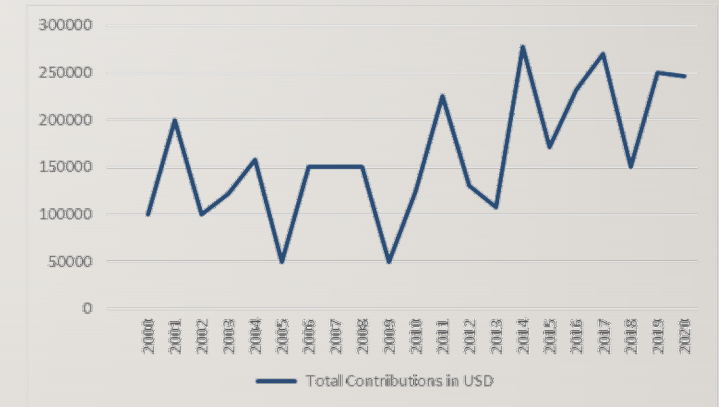


## RECOMMENDATION #6 (for the SOM)

Revise funding modalities to enhance reliability and level of funds. Review options to move towards more equitable contributions, with a roadmap for supporting progress.

- Strategies being used to hedge unpredictable inflows are generating suboptimal effects; fundraising is beyond Secretariat scope
- Tried and true methods (e.g. trust fund) are available and have been studied in the NEASPEC context
- Ensuring adequate, predictable, unearmarked funding would set NEASPEC on a course to being able to realise a more visible, progressive, and impactful role in context of its purpose and goals
- Differing magnitude of contributions reflect available means and varying levels of development amongst member States
- Timely opportunity to review in light of informants' notion that diversity of support may impact platform's sustainability

Core and Project Funding  
for NEASPEC (2000 – 2020)



## RECOMMENDATION #7 (for the SOM and ESCAP)

Enhance the resourcing of the NEASPEC Secretariat.

- Demands are on verge of exceeding Secretariat's resources and resilience
- Assets and drawbacks of numerous suggestions for enhancing capacities need to be carefully reviewed to identify:
  - potential to enhance national ownership; accelerate consolidation, collection, communication of national positions
  - level of absorption capacity within Secretariat
  - suitable accompanying onboarding, supervisory, management arrangements, etc.

## RECOMMENDATION #8 (for the NEASPEC Secretariat)

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

- Virtual collaboration (legacy COVID-19 benefit) has brought unprecedented opportunities to assemble key decision-makers and facilitates inclusion of a wider, perhaps more senior, audience
- Increasing frequency and quality of interaction in relevant, effective ways can enhance inter-governmental connectedness
- Enhancing the sense of community under NEASPEC platform
- is a key driver of ownership

**==> Ownership drives commitment**

**==> Commitment drives action**

*Thanks for your attention !*

Expert Group Meeting on Promoting Transboundary Cooperation  
among Protected Wetlands in Tumen River Estuary

15 May 2020

