Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

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Purview:

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is responsible for supporting the economic and social development of Member

States in the Asia-Pacific region. ESCAP focuses on poverty reduction, managing globalization and tracking emerging social issues within the region. This includes issues facing the entire region or several States within it, cross-border issues, and other emerging economic and social issues. ESCAP also provides technical assistance to its members and monitors progress of, and provides advice to, countries pursuing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The Commission is composed of 53 Member States and nine associate members. The associate members are not members of the United Nations and have no voting rights.

Topics:

Towards disability-inclusive sustainable development

Since the 1980s, the United Nations has remained strongly committed to the ideal of sustainable development. In 1987, Our Common Future, a report by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, defined sustainable development as economic development that should avoid being overly taxing on the environment as well as being able to be continued into the future. However, despite the title of the 1987 report, modern development efforts have struggled to properly include these people with disabilities. According to the World Health Organization, about 15 percent of the global population has a physical or mental disability—personal impairments which interact with social or environmental factors in negative ways—with over 80 percent of people with disabilities living in the developing world. Disabilities are thus highly contextual to whatever society persons with disabilities live, with factors like the design of infrastructure, general societal attitudes, access to resources such as corrective lenses all playing a role. Children with disabilities lag behind those without disabilities across the world in educational achievement. A 2017 UNESCO case study showed that children with disabilities can be less than half as likely to

attend school in certain countries, leading to decreased literacy and increased poverty among persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities also face struggles in the workplace, both because of lack of accommodation and prejudiced views of what they are able to do. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported in 2007 that persons with disabilities are often underemployed or kept in low-level jobs in developing and developed countries alike, leading to lower workforce participation and worse self-image.

Recognizing the international failure to fully include persons with disabilities in development plans, the United Nations began devoting special attention to this issue. In 2012, the Economic and Social Council for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) launched the Incheon Strategy in an effort to enact disability-specific development goals. The targets set forward by the Incheon Strategy include increased political participation, greater work prospects, and improved early education. In 2013, noting these unfortunate trends, the General Assembly expressed its concern that persons with disabilities were not properly considered in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. Other significant actions include the creation of a Special Rapporteur for the rights of persons with disabilities in 2014 by the Human Rights Council, as well as the publication of a flagship report on how the Sustainable Development Goals can be adapted for those with disabilities in 2018.

Despite these major United Nations efforts to elevate this issue, inequalities remain for those with disabilities. ESCAP conducted a midpoint survey in 2017 to determine whether the Incheon Strategy's initiatives were succeeding, and found that significant work still needs to be done in all of its key areas. The disadvantages of those with disabilities in education, income, employment and social participation have remained severe across Asia and the Pacific. In terms of employment, people with disabilities were two to six times less likely to be employed in countries across the region. Recognizing this struggle, ESCAP put forward the Beijing Declaration and Action Plan to serve as a guide for specific actions on the part of ESCAP and national governments to ensure that the goals of the Incheon Strategy are met. Among other goals, the Action Plan asks governments to review their education systems to ensure that all schools are accessible and inclusive for children with disabilities, rather than relegating children with disabilities to schools specifically dedicated for them. In 2018, ESCAP further endorsed the Beijing Declaration and its Action Plan that would speed up the implementation of the Incheon Strategy. While this was the most

recent resolution on the topic, ESCAP prepared a report the following year regarding the [progress toward the goals of the Incheon Strategy](). Concerns raised primarily relate to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its implementation [within countries in the region](). Specifically, several Member States state that they are doing enough to protect the rights of people and do not wish to do more. Also, [accountability for disability-inclusive initiatives]() remains a concern, as many government initiatives lack proper monitoring mechanisms.

With COVID-19, the protection and implementation of disability-inclusivity actions have been greatly hindered. The global pandemic has [caused an even larger gap]() to manifest between persons without disabilities and persons with disabilities, especially since many COVID-19 related measures, [such as testing sites](), do not provide the range of accommodations needed to serve the disability community. The World Bank [recently stepped up efforts in order to provide for the inclusiveness of disabled individuals]() by encouraging COVID-19 relief projects to provide provisions for disabled people while also actively working with its partners to develop disability-inclusive education programs. At the same time, the General Assembly [addressed the intersection of COVID-19 and disabilities](), recognizing the disparate effects of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities and the potential for long-term disabilities caused by the virus itself, and strongly endorsing the mainstreaming of persons with disabilities in COVID-19 relief plans by Member States and United Nations agencies. ESCAP, by contrast, did not mention disabilities in its [2020 resolution concerning the pandemic]() and has not taken action on the matter.

Questions to Consider from Your Government's Perspective:

· What can individual Member States do to ensure inclusivity for people with disabilities in their development plans, and how can ESCAP facilitate such efforts?

- What can ESCAP do to ensure accountability in development plans' efforts to include people with disabilities?
- How can ESCAP work to alleviate the impact of COVID-19 and future pandemic-like events on disability inclusivity?

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Building resilience to cross-border disasters

[Several States across the Asia-Pacific region]() are at a high risk of flooding, tsunamis and earthquakes; [in the decade prior to 2016](), the region suffered more than one thousand natural disasters, affecting over 1.4 billion people and causing nearly a half trillion dollars in economic damages. Today, the social and economic costs from these disasters are major impediments to the efforts of Member States to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2019, [six of the 12 States]() with the most natural disasters were in Asia. Compounding the problem, climate change [is driving stronger and more frequent disasters](), and exposing new areas to disaster risk. Natural disasters can devastate wide areas with no regard for the political boundaries of States; thus, efforts to mitigate the risk of and bolster resilience to natural disasters require regional collaboration.

The Asia-Pacific region has been a leading proponent for regional collaboration in disaster risk reduction and resilience. In the mid-1960s, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, the precursor to the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), partnered with the World Meteorological Organization to improve cooperation in typhoon forecasting and flood warning, and to establish a regional office, culminating in the 1968 establishment of the Typhoon Committee. The Committee's early work focused on increasing the use of science and technology to improve forecasting and mitigate damage.

In 1971, the United Nations adopted a resolution addressing assistance in cases of natural disasters and created the United Nations Disaster Relief Office (UNDRO), which over the next several decades led assistance missions in response to droughts in Afghanistan and several African States. As the General Assembly continued to discuss this topic in subsequent years, efforts evolved beyond just a post-disaster response toward disaster and risk mitigation. The General Assembly established the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction and promoted regional and global efforts to better understand, forecast and reduce the risk from natural disasters. The Decade was successful in sparking a concerted international approach to improvements in early warning capacities for natural disasters that lasted beyond its ten years. In 2000, the General Assembly established the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). The UNDRR has since worked across the globe, including their regional office for Asia and the Pacific, to aid local governments in prevention of and recovery from disasters.

That same year, the General Assembly adopted the Millennium Development Goals, however they were a missed opportunity for the United Nations to emphasize the relationship between disasters and development. While all countries are vulnerable to natural disasters, the impacts on Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States—many of which are Member States of ESCAP—can destroy development gains achieved over decades. Investments in pre-disaster mitigation deliver important social and economic benefits to communities everywhere, but they offer a significant benefit to the populations most at risk. While requiring upfront costs, pre-disaster mitigation saves money in the long run by reducing costs in disaster relief aid and recovery.

The Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction produced the 2015–2030 Sendai Framework: a set of common standards, a comprehensive framework with achievable targets and a legally-based instrument for disaster risk reduction. The Sendai Framework is an initiative designed to cover every aspect of disaster management—from preparation to recovery. Moreover, the Sendai Framework firmly integrated the concept of resilience, recognizing that the risk from disasters cannot be reduced to zero. UNDRR and regional leaders like ESCAP are implementing the Sendai Framework and are compiling and maintaining disaster data to continuously monitor resilience efforts.

The Sendai Framework will serve as a key part of ESCAP's work to improve resilience for the Asia-Pacific region and continue progress toward realizing the SDGs. Since 2015, the ESCAP secretariat has promoted regional cooperation in early warning and disaster monitoring to promote disaster harm reduction and increase resilience, which became a key strategy in ESCAP's regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Robust data collection and risk analysis, in line with the Sendai Framework, allows for innovative, data-driven proposals to address extreme and slow onset disasters and was a key focus of the ESCAP Asia-Pacific Disaster Resilience Network (APDRN). The APDRN serves as a network of networks to promote connections between regional experts and scalable and practical solutions. Another data-driven approach is the Regional Cooperative Mechanism for Drought Monitoring and Early Warning, a flagship program of the Regional Space Applications Programme for Sustainable Development designed to enhance capacity for integrated analysis of space and ground sensor data and information to build resilience among agrarian communities perennially affected by drought.

ESCAP's work in establishing the Regional Cooperative Mechanism for Drought Monitoring is one example of how ESCAP and its secretariat are replicating the Typhoon Committee model to improve regional collaboration on forecasting. Moving forward, the reality of stronger storms and more frequent disasters—supported by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's latest report—means ESCAP must consider how to maintain progress on collaboration for slow onset disasters like droughts and sea level rise, and build resilience in the face of intensified disasters fueled by climate change. Improving cross-border collaboration on development and infrastructure planning in border regions,

continuing progress on improving impact forecasting, and continued advancements in data collection and analysis are all areas ESCAP can consider.

Questions to consider from your country's perspective:

· How should ESCAP prioritize the secretariat's work in promoting regional collaboration on resilience building, especially to protect impoverished and vulnerable populations from cross-border disasters?

- What examples can Member States share demonstrating the importance and cost-savings of pre-disaster planning in building resilience? How can Member States more effectively use ESCAP regional platforms to bolster resilience?
- How can development in border regions be informed now to ensure a more resilient future in the face of a changing climate?

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