Chapter 2

Strengthening Governance for Environment and Sustainable Development: The potential for a capacity and information exchange platform in Asia-Pacific

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1. Introduction

Asia-Pacific is now a central actor in the globalized economy. It is a diverse region that is home to both highly developed countries like South Korea and Japan, as well as fast growing emerging economies like China, which despite the current global economic slowdown, achieved a 9.3% GDP growth rate in 2011 (World Bank 2011a). India experienced a slightly lower but still impressive 8.8% GDP growth rate in 2010 (World Bank 2011b). The region is also home to ten least developed countries (LDCs) and many small island developing states (SIDS).

Millions of people have escaped poverty, but the rapid economic growth has taken a heavy toll on the environment (ESCAP 2010). There are countries with all types of environmental problems and development profiles ranging from large and rapidly growing emerging economies like China, India and Indonesia, to smaller commodity-exporting countries like Malaysia, and poor developing countries of various population sizes, like Laos, Cambodia, and Nepal. Moreover, despite this wide diversity among the countries, there are drivers and impacts common to the whole region.

Many developing countries throughout the region are facing constraints in their ability to take action on environment and sustainable development (SD)

Key Messages

- Rio+20 framed a broad discussion on the Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD), but it mainly focused on reform of global UN bodies. More attention needs to be placed on how to strengthen regional institutions, and this chapter focuses specifically on ideas for the Asia-Pacific region.
- The Asia-Pacific region has a wide variety of institutions for the environment and sustainable development, but taken as a whole, they have been described as a “spaghetti bowl” with a great deal of fragmentation and duplication.
- Capacity development and information sharing in particular could benefit from enhanced regional cooperation, especially in relation to implementation of multi-lateral environment agreements (MEAs), accelerating progress in meeting Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and potential new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and to enhance resilience in the face of an expected increase in natural disasters.
- Other regions have had useful experiences, especially from the European Environment Agency (EEA) and its European Environment Information and Observation Network (EIONET). Although the EEA itself does not focus on regulation, the harmonization of information and capacity on environmental matters across the EU has benefited the environment indirectly by enhancing countries’ coping capacity.
- This chapter recommends the creation of a capacity and information exchange platform, as a regional body to promote information sharing, and capacity building, including helping member states adjust monitoring and reporting of progress towards meeting their environmental and sustainability commitments. Establishing such a platform could be seen as initial step for, in the longer term to set the stage for a regional environmental institution or agency.

issues domestically. Most countries in the region already have fairly well developed laws and policies, and have established specialist agencies and ministries, yet advances in environmental and SD governance often remain seriously handicapped by an acute shortage of technical resources, such as data information systems and implementation capacities.

This chapter suggests that countries could address existing and emerging drivers of environmental change and their impacts with lower costs if they were approached in a multi-lateral fashion utilizing a capacity and information exchange platform operating at the regional or sub-regional levels. This platform could serve as the first step in the long-term vision for regional sustainable development governance which would ultimately result in the creation of a regional environmental institution.

An important argument for multi-lateral capacity and information sharing on environmental issues is that countries will have to prepare low-carbon road-maps and climate change mitigation and adaptation plans as a result of the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action. Before 2015, this platform is expected to develop a "…protocol, legal instrument or agreed outcome with legal force at the twenty-first session of the Conference of the parties…" (UNFCCC 2011, 1) expected to be functionally implemented by 2020. While the details of the Durban Platform remain to be developed, it is quite likely that it will result in greater importance for acquisition and exchange of carbon emission reduction techniques and other capacity related to eco-efficiency and climate change abatement, in particular. It is therefore possible that a demand for establishing a regional and sub-regional capacity and information exchange platform will emerge in the near future, the prospects of which will be examined in the following pages.

It is very timely to discuss these issues relating to the use of international cooperation schemes to strengthen environmental and sustainable development governance at the national level, including inadequate capacity and information, since these are related to one of the key themes of the Rio+20 conference in Brazil in June 2012, that is, how to strengthen the institutional framework for sustainable development (IFSD). Much of the discussion leading up to the conference focused on reform of UN organisations, and much less attention was paid to how to strengthen governance and cooperation at the regional and national levels. One of the aims of this chapter is to address the issue of how to strengthen governance at the regional level, and how this in turn could help to strengthen governance at the sub-regional and national levels.

1.2 Main argument

This chapter explores how to enhance international cooperation on environment and development issues in Asia and the Pacific, and it concludes that the creation of a capacity and information exchange platform would be a desirable way to do this. This chapter will present options for such a platform, mandated to synthesize and disseminate capacity and information relevant for development and environmental sustainability. The aims of such a capacity and information exchange platform should be to: a) work as a hub to synthesize the communication of information; b) help member states harmonize monitoring and reporting of progress towards meeting ratified environmental treaties and development goals; and c) exchange and develop capacity and knowledge between countries.

It might be more desirable to advocate stronger institutionalisation of cooperation for the region, rather than just a capacity and information exchange platform. However, harmonizing environmental capacity and information through the latter is considered a

more politically feasible suggestion in the short run. It would be voluntary and non-binding but would help countries meet their existing commitments through capacity building, and may even lower costs by sharing information on best practices. In the long run, more institutionalised cooperation on information and capacity has potential to facilitate future harmonization of policies, legislation, regulations and standards among participating countries. All of this would not only improve the environment among participating countries, but also make it easier to maintain a strong environmental dimension in the ongoing economic integration in the region.

The chapter first reviews a number of pertinent drivers of environmental change that could become thematic issues for cooperation in this region, including a discussion of important international treaties for which Asia-Pacific countries need to enhance their capacity to implement. Second, it presents a brief overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the "spaghetti bowl" (Austrevicus and Boozman 2007) or "noodle bowl" (Baldwin 2007) of existing regional and sub-regional institutions and treaties, which are characterised by significant fragmentation and duplication.[1] This analysis will help to consider the most optimal geographic scope of countries for cooperation as well as the most likely themes for cooperation. Third, the chapter reviews a number of institutional arrangements from countries outside, as well as inside, the Asia Pacific region. Fourth, the analysis concludes that capacity and information sharing are the most appropriate areas to focus on expanding cooperation in the short-term. Two options are developed for a regional or sub-regional capacity and information exchange platform in the region. Finally, the paper concludes that the best areas of focus for a capacity and information exchange platform would be climate change, disaster resilience and carbon market related issues, since these present the least contentious issues for cooperation and would result in the most obvious benefits for countries that may choose to engage in this kind of cooperation.

1.3 Environmental issues in Asia-Pacific

Environmental issues in Asia-Pacific are similar to those challenging development globally and which are also experienced in other regions. However, due to the rapid economic growth of many countries in the region, environmental constraints may be becoming increasingly serious here. Among the global megatrends and driving forces especially relevant for the Asia-Pacific region's environment are: 1) economic growth, and its accompanying energy consumption and CO_2 emissions; 2) urbanization; 3) consumption (Marcotullio 2007, Choi and Didham 2009); and 4) population growth (Parker 2011).

Areas that could benefit from greater international cooperation include climate change, resilience and disaster prevention, environmental and sustainability related aspects of increased trade and economic integration, as well as other transboundary problems. All of these issues are interrelated. Therefore, cooperation on the drivers of climate change such as consumption, energy demand, and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and their effects in terms of natural disasters and the implications for countries' resilience could improve national capacity to respond.

This becomes apparent when looking at the region's growing CO_2 emissions. Between 1995 and 2005, the Asia-Pacific share of global CO_2 emissions grew from 42 to 48%. In 2006, the region emitted nearly 14 billion tonnes of CO_2, an increase of 5.3% from the previous year (ESCAP 2010). Overall, the emissions are predicted to increase by 75% in the next two decades (Doi et al. 2010). The GHG emissions are largely from increased energy demand. In connection with the Durban Plan for Enhanced Action, it is conceivable that all countries, no matter their development status, eventually will engage

in low-carbon development and make increased use of market-based mechanisms, such as carbon trading and the clean development mechanism (CDM). Increased exchange of knowledge and expertise in these areas could therefore soon become a feasible theme for cooperation, as this creates financial incentives for all involved parties. Building on that idea, this chapter combines climate change responses with the concept of resilience, early warning and disaster prevention, as these thematic areas seem to have less conflict and appear to be win-win issues on which countries can cooperate.

Resilience is an urgent issue in this region, as Asia-Pacific "bears the brunt of natural disasters, accounting for 80% of lives lost globally" (Reliefweb 2012). Therefore, transboundary cooperation on disaster prevention and resilience could become a relevant area for international cooperation through a capacity and information exchange hub.

The convergence of environmental with international trade concerns is a trend emphasized by the Asian Development Bank (ADB 2011). Transboundary environmental challenges are not limited to the Asia-Pacific region; increasing regional cooperation and integration, and the stronger role for softer forms of policy coordination are recognized elsewhere as well (EEA 2010). While some degree of cooperation is already occurring, the global negotiations on further trade liberalization under the Doha Development Round (DDR) under the World Trade Organization (WTO) have stalled, so trade and economic integration is now proceeding through regional and bilateral initiatives. The deadlock in the global trade negotiations has also prevented a comprehensive global agreement on trade and environment (EEA 2011). Early response to these trends by establishing regional or sub-regional capacity and information exchange mechanisms could be advantageous for countries, anticipating the move towards overall regional integration.

As argued above, the transboundary characteristics of energy, climate change, disaster resilience and environment/sustainability-related trade and economic integration issues would benefit from enhanced multilateral cooperation. Some of the trends above already show a range of regionalization and integration, based on the assumption that a multi-lateral approach is cost-effective and beneficial. However, more can be done in the Asia-Pacific region, especially when we compare the level of integration that is apparent elsewhere. Other chapters of this White Paper, particularly the chapters on climate change and waste management and recycling, also provide examples of how cooperation in those issue areas could be approached.

2. Potential areas of focus

One important function of a capacity and information exchange platform would be to assist with implementation of multi-lateral environment agreements (MEAs). In addition to providing assistance on existing agreements, it could also support countries' efforts in areas where discussions or negotiations are still underway. Countries in the region are already members of many agreements at multiple levels, although there are significant differences in terms of which countries are members of which agreements. This can complicate the achievement of synergies between different agreements. However, for an information exchange platform, this need not be a problem, since information sharing itself does not impose significant obligations on countries. Moreover, it could actually facilitate cooperation, as countries that are not members of a particular treaty may still benefit from the information provided.

This section provides a brief discussion of a few intergovernmental agreements related to the major environmental issues, drivers and impacts discussed above. It particularly

looks at the extent to which Asia-Pacific countries are members, and to what extent it is necessary to build up their implementation capacity.

All countries in the Asia-Pacific region have ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). While different countries have different statuses and obligations in the UNFCCC (Annex I, Annex II, and Non-Annex I countries), the framework convention and its protocol should provide a legal foundation for cooperation on climate change issues throughout the region, in particular with a view to future commitments as proposed in Durban. There is no consolidated regional information sharing platform on climate change yet, although there are some initiatives underway, such as the International Research Network for Low Carbon Societies (LCS-RNET, which has a global scope but whose secretariat is in East Asia) and the Asia Pacific Adaptation Network (APAN).

The biodiversity related conventions are slightly more complex. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (1992) has been ratified and accepted by all Asia-Pacific countries (CBD 2011). The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) (CITES 2011) is ratified by almost the entire region.[2] The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) has not been ratified by Japan, South Korea, Laos and a number of Central Asian countries, which therefore would limit the possibility of clustering work on biodiversity across the entire region. However, enhancing ASEAN-wide cooperation would still be possible and necessary in light of the pressure on biodiversity caused by urbanization and resource use. The biodiversity area already has two official initiatives related to information sharing in the region, the East and Southeast Asia Biodiversity Information Initiative (ESABII) and the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) (See ESABII 2012; ACB 2012). ACB in particular has collected a significant amount of information on its website, but it is unclear how biodiversity can be linked to other issues such as climate change or resilience. The biodiversity initiatives also have funding problems, so linkage to capacity and information exchange platform with a wider scope might help them to attract more funding and operate more efficiently.

In the field of disaster management, the United Nations is already working through the International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction (ISDR), its Hyogo Framework for Action, and regional initiatives including the Asia-Pacific Gateway for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Development Gateway. The latter currently exists only as an internet-based portal for “information sharing, building networks, accessing technical services and promoting regional cooperation among partners working on mainstreaming DRR in Asia and the Pacific” (Asia-Pacific Gateway 2012). In addition, in 2010, ESCAP launched the Regional Cooperative Mechanism for Disaster Monitoring and Early Warning, Particularly Drought. This initiative has national focal points in all countries.

Climate change (especially adaptation) is thematically closely related to disaster risk reduction. Cooperation on these issues in the Asia-Pacific region could focus on technology transfer, capacity exchange and bilateral or multi-lateral carbon trading. It would be relevant for countries to develop their capacity in these areas to enable multi-lateral engagement in climate change and resilience related work in the future. As mentioned, the region’s countries are diverse, and include Annex I, Annex II and non-Annex I countries. Cooperation would not necessarily focus on legal commitments, but rather around voluntary cooperation geared towards low-carbon technologies, carbon market access, energy security and disaster risk reduction. Current initiatives include the Asia-Pacific Regional Platform on Adaptation to Climate Change and the Kitakyushu Initiative for a Clean Environment, among others (IGES 2011; Kikusawa 2011). But

there are other initiatives to test-run emissions trading schemes for example in Australia, China and India and countries that engage in this type of activity early on may be able to reap benefits faster, if carbon trading becomes a mandatory part of achieving pledged emission reductions.

A capacity and information exchange platform could help to coordinate information on all of these interrelated issues. To be sure, for biodiversity, treaties and information sharing mechanisms already exist, but they lack predictable funding and have different member countries, so a broader platform could enhance coordination and efficiency. For climate, resilience and disaster related issues it is likely that cooperation activities will not be treaty-based from the beginning. It is more likely that a capacity and information exchange platform could emerge on a voluntary basis, emphasizing the benefits that countries reap from cooperation, in terms of reducing the transaction costs of obtaining information on issue related areas benefitting implementation.

3. Existing regional and sub-regional institutional frameworks

The following section briefly surveys a few of the main regional and sub-regional bodies in the environment and development field in the Asia-Pacific region. An in-depth evaluation of the bodies in the region is beyond the scope of the chapter; however, this survey can provide information on the trends in the region, which can help in considering how to enhance the regional institutional framework.

The first observation is that there is a large number and variety of different bodies, networks and institutions in the Asia-Pacific region (e.g. ADB 2010), covering a wide variety of areas and functions, as can be seen from the following table.

Table 2.1 Variety of regional institutions in the Asia Pacific

Categories	Major Examples
UN-related (regional & country offices)	• United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) • United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) • United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) • World Health Organization (WHO) • Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
Multi-lateral development banks & funding agencies	• World Bank (WB) • Asian Development Bank (ADB) • Global Environment Facility (GEF)
Regional and sub-regional integration	• Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) • ASEAN+3, ASEAN+6, ASEAN ++ • Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA)
Sub-regional, general environment	• North-East Asian Subregional Programme on Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC) • Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) • South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) • Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) • Coordinating Body of the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA) • Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia (PEMSEA) • Northwest Pacific Action Plan (NOWPAP) • Network of Asian River Basin Organisations (NARBO)

Categories	Major Examples
Environment ministers meetings	• East Asia Summit Environment Ministers Meeting (EAS EMM) • Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting Among Japan, China, and Korea (TEMM) • Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific (MCED)
Multi-lateral Environmental Agreements	• Acid Deposition Monitoring Network in East Asia (EANET) • ASEAN Haze Agreement • Male Declaration
Bilateral cooperation	• Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) • Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) • China-ASEAN Environmental Cooperation Center (CAEC)
International intercity networks	• International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) • Kitakyushu Initiative • CITYNET • C40
UN Type II Partnerships	• CAI-Asia
Regional networks	• Asia 3R Forum • Asia Co-benefits Partnership • Asia Pacific Adaptation Network (APAN) • Asian Environmental Enforcement and Compliance Network (AECEN) • Water Environment Partnership in Asia (WEPA) • East and Southeast Asia Biodiversity Information Initiative (ESABII) • CAI-Asia
Regional groupings/ offices of NGOs	• World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) • CSR Asia • World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)
Others	• Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI)[1]

Note: [1] GGGI has been initially structured as a non-profit foundation under Article 32 of the Civil Code of the Republic of Korea on 16 June 2010. Its aim is to convert into an international organization in accordance with an agreement among its major partner governments in 2012 (http://www.gggi.org/about/overview, accessed 26 March 2012).

This is not a complete listing of Asia-Pacific mechanisms. Categories are illustrative and not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Source: Authors.

Some are geographically overlapping in terms of their mandate and membership, and have members in different sub-regions, although not necessarily covering all countries in a sub-region. Overall, the institutional framework in the region can be characterized as a “spaghetti bowl” or “noodle bowl” with an extensive and complex set of bodies characterized by significant duplication and overlap. It is important to point out that the summarized regional and sub-regional institutions and mechanisms are by no means comprehensive or representative of all activities in the entire Asia and Pacific region.

The different institutional forms range from soft agreements and voluntary networks, to entities based on treaties or resolutions. Membership also varies, both in terms of countries, including regional vs. sub-regional, but also in terms of whether they are intergovernmental, non-governmental, or have mixed governmental and non-governmental membership. The scope of functions and activities of these organizations is also wide ranging. Regardless of membership, it seems that some kind of institutional linkage between these organizations and the countries may be important for the organization’s effectiveness, and this would also be true in the case of a multi-lateral capacity and information exchange platform.

Overall, many institutions are centred around the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is the focal point of the gradual trend towards increasing regional

(especially economic) integration. China, Japan, and South Korea are connected through ASEAN+3, and additional countries are added in other configurations. The ASEAN member countries have established a research institute, the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), to further promote integration in the long run.

A number of United Nations (UN) institutions are active in the region. Some, like the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), which is a regional commission, have a very broad mandate, ranging beyond sustainable development. Others include UN programmes like the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as specialized agencies like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Some focus more broadly on sustainable development, while others focus more narrowly on the environment. Regarding functions, many focus on knowledge and information exchange, some on monitoring, and few on harmonization. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) and multi-lateral development banks such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) play a key role in financing, and national donors (particularly from developed countries) and select NGOs are also important.

Two examples from this region which already have extensive information sharing functions include the Network of Asian River Basin Organizations (NARBO) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC). NARBO aims to promote integrated water resources management (IWRM) throughout Asia. The network is based on a charter and focuses on training and enhancing the capacity of governments and thematically related organizations in the field of IWRM. As a network of networks, it provides exchange programmes to its members. Its 76 members (as of 2010) consist of river-basin organizations, governments, and other knowledge partners at national, regional and interregional levels. The charter of NARBO requests members to pay annual fees, but in reality this has not yet been necessary, since members receive support from development banks and financing institutions, and are requested to co-finance any activities they wish to engage in. NARBO functions like a meta-network, disseminating information and capacity from thematically more substantive organisations like the MRC, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and other organizations with expertise over larger geographical areas. The MRC, which began as the Interim Mekong Committee over 50 years ago, gained independence from other development agencies (notably the UN) in 1995, as a result of the 1995 Mekong Agreement, which provided it with the legal foundation for its operations.

In addition, there are many smaller networks, some including both governments as well as other stakeholders, particularly from the research community, that focus on a variety of issues. The scope and functions of NGOs also vary widely. Existing institutions also vary to the extent on which their governance process includes multi-stakeholder participation. It should be noted that there is significant variation in institutional endowment in the different sub-regions.

Taken together, it is widely recognized that there is significant overlap and duplication among the institutions and frameworks in the spaghetti bowl, as well as issues that fall between the cracks (e.g., PRCEE, IGES, and KEI 2009; Yoon 2007; Takahashi 2002). Many are underfinanced and understaffed, and coordination is difficult. There are many reasons for this situation, including competition among donors (and recipients), jurisdictional territoriality, and inadequate communication between different policy communities. There have been a number of efforts to rationalize the situation in a number of areas, but their success has been limited.

However, the situation has now reached the point where there are so many networks and initiatives, that countries are having increasing difficulty managing their own participation in them, paralleling a similar problem with environmental and sustainable development governance at the global level (e.g., Najan et al. 2006). Moreover, the constrained financial situation of donors and governments is likely to continue, so in the future it will become increasingly difficult to maintain funding for so many overlapping initiatives.

Capacity and information exchange may be the best way to begin to synergize the efforts of some of the disparate bodies and networks in the region and foster greater cooperation and coordination among them. Information collection, sharing and exchange is one of the most common elements of existing institutions and networks, while capacity building is commonly cited as a key need in the region. Therefore, capacity and information exchange is a good candidate to focus on in terms of strengthening regional institutions. Moreover, the region overall tends to be characterized by "soft" or voluntary cooperation mechanisms rather than binding agreements (Yoon 2007; Koh and Robinson 2002), and this also tends to make information sharing and capacity building an easier focus of cooperation.

4. Examples from other regions

The following section highlights examples of institutionalisation of environment-related regional and multilateral cooperation from outside the Asia-Pacific region. They have been chosen because they are important existing examples, and examining their structures and functions could provide ideas on how to strengthen institutions in the Asia-Pacific region.

4.1 The European Environment Agency

A prime example from the European region is the well-known European Environment Agency (EEA), which has successfully strengthened regional environmental governance through capacity building, knowledge generation, awareness raising and information exchange. The increased quality and availability of reliable information has benefitted informed decision-making and formulation of good policies in the countries that are members. The EEA is facilitating data collection across Europe, and it obtains its information through the European Environment Information and Observation Network (EIONET), which is a partnership network of the EEA (EEA 2011). This network is a congregation of almost 350 institutions with more than 1,000 experts situated throughout and beyond Europe. The EIONET network provides timely and quality-assured data, information and expertise for assessing the state of the environment in Europe and the pressures acting upon it. Its structure is loosely knit but nationally and regionally integrated with reference centres and national focal points in each member country. To harmonize this information gathering effort and provide access, the shared environmental information system (SEIS) has been established creating a web between existing databases across the region. One of the many advantages of this modernization of information collection and dissemination is that it can reduce the administrative burden both at national and international levels. This fundamental realization brought about the EEA, which is funded by the overall EU budget.

The success of the EEA and its EIONET network can be partly explained by the obvious division between regulatory and information gathering/diffusion functions (EU 2011). While EIONET, through its national focal points, collects data on countries' environmental status, the regulatory mandate of the EU is exercised by a completely different

organization, the Environment Directorate General. The EEA just ensures that the data as well as the capacity to collect, process and disseminate it is harmonized throughout member states. The European examples show that separating the regulatory from the information and capacity generating functions has gained the trust of member countries and fostered a greater willingness to participate. As a result, the EU now has very clear indicators of the state of the regional (and national) environment, which enables well-informed decision-making on the environment and other sectors.

While EEA and EIONET are part of the EU, membership in the EU is not a prerequisite to membership in EEA and EIONET. In fact, five out of the 32 members are not part of the EU (Turkey, Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, and Lichtenstein), while seven West Balkan countries are cooperating members.[3] Non-EU members also contribute to the EEA's budget. The EEA began operations in 1993, and in its early years, there were many non-EU members who joined EEA as a key part of the accession process to join the EU (Hoffman 2011).

Of course, currently there is no Asia-Pacific equivalent to the EU. Nevertheless, an organisation similar to the EEA may still be useful in Asia-Pacific. ASEAN has developed several environment-related working groups under the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on the Environment, and the ASEAN Secretariat has an Environmental Department under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Department (ASEAN Secretariat 2009). The ASEAN Secretariat has already made important efforts to collect and harmonize environmental information and publishes a state of the environment report, but there are general problems of data consistency and harmonization, as well as basic data collection.[4] Creating an organisation like the EEA/EIONET could help to address this problem.

4.2 The Commission for Environmental Cooperation

The Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) is a cooperation framework between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico. The CEC focuses on conservation, protection and enhancement of the environment and sustainable development including enforcement and compliance, environmental information, the nexus between environment and economy, pollutants and human health, as well as biodiversity conservation. It is administered by a council, consisting of the highest level environmental authorities of the respective countries, and it is legally defined as an international organization, based on a treaty among the three participating countries. Since the CEC also adheres to Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, an advisory body consisting of 15 citizens from the member countries advises the council. It is funded by equal contributions from all three member states (CEC 2012).

The CEC was intended to address potential environmental issues expected to result from trade and investment liberalization based on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into force at the same time. As sub-regional and regional trade and investment liberalization also move steadily forward in the Asia-Pacific region, it is important to consider how to institutionalise environmental safeguards, as seen with the establishment of the CEC.

One lesson for the Asia-Pacific region is that other regions have realized the environmental implications of trade liberalization and have established environmental institutions to address them. A second lesson is that these bodies are overseen by very high level officials at the minister level, thus ensuring that whatever is decided in this forum is linked back to domestic decision-making. There is a strong domestic level legal

backing to whatever decisions are made in the CEC. A third important lesson is that the use of a multi-stakeholder architecture ensures input not only from governments but also from citizen groups, which is arguably an important point for political legitimacy. In the Asia-Pacific region, there are already a few sub-regional trade and economic liberalization initiatives such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), and various others are under discussion. Before these progress any further, more effort should be made to consider bodies which can anticipate and address environmental implications before they occur. A capacity building and information exchange platform, with mechanisms that allow multi stakeholder input, could be the first step.

4.3 The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States

The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) consists of nine states in the eastern part of the Caribbean. Its mission is to contribute to the sustainable development of its member states by means of promoting economic integration, human rights and good governance. It is mandated to help its member states realize their commitments to international environmental agreements. It also seeks to harmonize the positions of its member countries in international negotiations, enabling them to adopt common positions. It is based on a treaty (Treaty of Basseterre) and its level of integration is quite advanced including shared passports as well as a monetary union.

The OECS is based on a strong legal foundation providing legitimacy as the representative organ of its members. The organization helps its countries develop common positions in international negotiations. While this aspect is important and helpful for these countries, it may be premised on the assumption that all member states have similar interests. The OECS is clearly different than the abovementioned CEC, as it is an intergovernmental, treaty-based body, and therefore perhaps most comparable to ASEAN. Among its member states, the level of legal and financial integration is advanced, but since it only involves a limited number of states, it could be a realistic example for a sub-regional congregation of countries in one of Asia-Pacific's sub-regions. Currently there are no bodies with this level of integration in the Asia-Pacific region, but it could be an example to observe over the long-term, as overall regional integration progresses.

5. Scenarios for a capacity and information exchange platform

Broadly speaking, there are two possible options regarding the geographical scope for setting up a capacity building and information exchange platform. One has a sub-regional focus, while the other has a regional focus.

5.1 Sub-regional focus

One option for a capacity and information exchange platform would be to give it a sub-regional scope. Southeast Asia may have the greatest potential to either a) initiate a sub-regional capacity and information exchange platform, or b) act as driving force in initiating a regional capacity and information exchange platform, since the multilateral institutionalisation of environmental cooperation may be more advanced than in other sub-regions, such as Northeast Asia, and its members may have greater capacity than other sub-regions, such as the Pacific islands. Moreover, other Asia-Pacific countries have built regular connections with ASEAN, such as ASEAN+3 and others. Nevertheless, other sub-regions also have existing frameworks (such as NEASPEC, SPREP, SACEP, or CAREC) which could become the nucleus of, or be linked to, a sub-regional platform.

Geographical proximity may be an advantage of this option, as it may be easier to reach an agreement among a smaller (sub-regional) group of countries, rather than a larger and more diverse regional group with fewer environmental issues in common. Arguably, those sub-regions with the least well-developed institutional infrastructure have extra reason to be involved in capacity and information exchange, and they might enjoy well-placed support from better established sub-regions to do so. At the same time it is also possible to imagine using the regional convening powers of bodies such as ESCAP to establish a negotiation forum to reach an agreement on sub-regional capacity and information exchange platforms with each sub-region advancing at its own pace. The UNEP Regional Office for Asia-Pacific (UNEP ROAP) could also play a similar role to the EEA as discussed above: collecting, synthesizing and distributing information obtained through the existing sub-regional networks. This would be consistent with UNEP's sub-regional focus in the Asia-Pacific. These sub-regional platforms could then be coordinated by either UNEP or ESCAP.

5.2 Regional focus

Another option is to give the capacity and information exchange platform a broader regional focus. In Asia-Pacific, however, this may be more difficult than the example of the EEA/EIONET would indicate. While the EEA is completely disconnected from regulatory functions, it still rests solidly on EU regulation (current version No. 401/2009), as well as on the Aarhus Convention—a UNECE convention, which provides a legal requirement for access to environmental information (among others). Both provide crucial legal backing and incentives for regional information exchange, which can hold states accountable and committed to share information with EU agencies and the public at large. This also means that the funding for the EEA and EIONET is provided through the EU and participation is linked to countries' existing obligations. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, EU membership is not a requirement for EEA membership, and the EEA membership includes some non-EU members, who also contribute to the funding and benefit from the information and capacity which is shared through the EEAs networks.

Of course, there is no institution comparable to the EU in the Asia-Pacific region which could serve as the anchor for this type of regional focus. Therefore, in order to obtain these benefits in Asia Pacific, it is important to consider how a seed can be planted to help the region to begin to move in the direction of the EU's capacity and information sharing system. ASEAN and other sub-regional organisations already collect some information, and ASEAN publishes a State of the Environment Report with a certain level of information, although considerably more needs to be collected. Moreover, it is important to harmonize and unify the information collected by member countries.[5] These efforts might be enhanced if cooperation among these various sub-regional organizations could be strengthened. Expanding the geographic scope to include Northeast Asia and some Pacific countries could make it easier to raise funds, although given the stringent fiscal conditions among developed countries, emerging economies may need to fund their own participation. In the longer term, the sub-regional networks could be linked together, thereby augmenting the capacity and information exchange platform at the regional level.

For Asia-Pacific, a regional arrangement would be possible, but only to the extent that it involves clear benefits for participating countries, and as long as the capacity and information sharing is voluntary–or until an Asia-Pacific version of the Aarhus Convention is articulated and ratified, as suggested elsewhere in this White Paper. Therefore, capacity building and information exchange on either climate change, and/or disaster

resilience related issues could be the most attractive option for countries to start with as a focus for the platform.

5.3 Recommendations regarding the structure

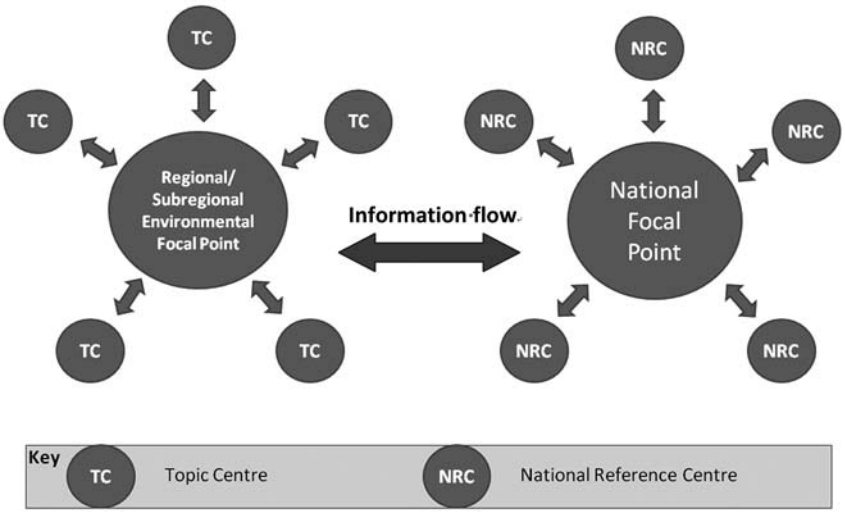
Regardless of whether cooperation is initiated with a sub-regional or regional scope, it is important that the physical centre of the capacity and information exchange platform finds a neutral home, potentially housed by existing international organisations in this region, provided they have an appropriate focus area matching the mandate of the capacity and information exchange platform. Doing so would avoid dominance by a single country, which could undermine multi-lateral cooperation. In addition to the actual centre, it is equally important that the platform links up with existing national focal points in member countries, and that these are connected to national policy making processes.

The organization of the platform should include multi-stakeholder participation. Collecting information, reporting monitoring results and creating regional or transboundary surveys of the state of the environment is necessarily a multi-stakeholder effort needing input from research institutes and NGOs, as well as academia and other stakeholders. This is the case not only for collecting information, but also for using it. Currently in the Asia-Pacific, multi-stakeholder participation in governance is practiced in some cases,[6] but generally it is not as strong compared to other regions, so there is room for improvement.

There are three ways this could be done. First, more focus could be placed on the science-policy interface, which might provide avenues for more science-based decision-making. Second, multi-stakeholder involvement in monitoring and reporting must be intensified and reinforced. Third, it would be crucial to provide a central role for civil society in a future capacity and information exchange platform to ensure that it is not only governments that develop their capacity on environmental issues.

If it were decided from the outset that the capacity and information exchange platform should have a regional scope, existing multilateral negotiation forums could be utilized to reach an agreement on funding arrangements. In this case, ESCAP could be an appropriate platform for intergovernmental negotiations, as well as for secretariat services, and could house a virtual information exchange platform, as well as organise capacity building on regional levels. If a sub-regional focus was considered more appropriate, then discussions could be centred on UNEP ROAP, in conjunction with ASEAN++.[7] Regardless of its scope, the structure could be patterned on the following figure:

Figure 2.1 Possible structure for enhancing information exchange and harmonization in Asia-Pacific



Source: Adapted from EEA/EIONET model (EEA 2011)

Organisations with the necessary issue relevant expertise to be Topic Centres (TCs) already exist and could be hosted by, for instance, the Asian Policy Forum, the East Asian Bureau of Economic Research, the Network of East Asian Think Tanks (NEAT), the ASEAN University Network, and the Association of East Asian Research Universities to name a few. ISDR could act as a topic centre for climate and disaster related issues, and the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity for biodiversity related issues. These topic centres could act as information hubs and synthesise reports received from countries to ensure that a harmonized standard is achieved. The right side of Figure 2.1 depicts the national level, where national focal points would be responsible for obtaining information from the local level and for collaborating with national reference centres. National reference centres would be appointed including universities, civil society groups, consultancies and other centres knowledgeable in the thematic area. These would have to be identified in consultation with national governments.

As mentioned above, many countries already have national focal points for other forums. Where appropriate, these should be given new portfolios to match the mix of mandates on the regional institutional level. Doing so can potentially guard against the disabling overlap and fragmentation of related work portfolios on national levels. When cross-cutting issues are to be addressed, there should be a corresponding focal point appointed in relevant ministries and agencies at the national level.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has argued that there is a need to strengthen the institutional framework for sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific, and that the creation of a regional or sub-regional capacity and information exchange platform may be a good option for the short-term. A reference for this could be the EEA/EIONET in Europe. There are several different interrelated issues such as climate change, disaster/resilience, economic integration, and other transboundary issues that would benefit from such a capacity

and information exchange platform. While there is a broad range of organisations and frameworks already operating in the region, and many of them engage in information sharing, they nevertheless suffer from significant overlap and duplication as well as inadequate funding and human resource capacity. A focused capacity and information exchange platform may help to synergize these efforts and enhance their efficiency and effectiveness, while building a foundation to further institutionalise cooperation in the region.

Two broad options to set up a platform were presented, including either a sub-regional or a regional scope. The platform could be new or based on existing regional or sub-regional frameworks and organisations such as ASEAN, ESCAP, UNEP, or sub-regional cooperation mechanisms.

In the long run, cooperation on knowledge generation, information sharing and harmonization of information among those countries would reduce the costs of obtaining information on particular issues and help address environmental problems with help from other partner countries. It is most likely that it will be more effective to approach countries which already share environmental or developmental commonalities (shared ecosystems important to their development for instance) to set-up such meta-knowledge platforms. In the long run, the progression of open regionalism may steadily increase the feasibility of enhanced environmental cooperation and institutionalisation among the region's countries, especially Japan, South Korea, China, and the ASEAN++ countries.

Regardless of the scope, the capacity and information exchange platform could quite reasonably start among a small number of countries—a “coalition of the willing”—and expand to interested countries in other sub-regions, depending on existing bilateral ties and the successes of the original members. The development of capacity to collect and process information could be financially supported by lead-countries such as Japan and South Korea, and involve organizations from those countries with expertise and experience in managing capacity building and information sharing networks. Climate change and carbon trading would be attractive themes for cooperation, as they involve financial incentives for all involved parties. Resilience and disaster risk reduction have clear potential for reducing damage costs and fewer apparent implications for economic competitiveness, and as they are newer topics the existing base of information is particularly underdeveloped, so countries may be interested in cooperation on information sharing these areas.

From an initial focus on capacity and information sharing in one or several of the suggested issue areas, this cooperation could be subsequently enhanced, leading to a more institutionalised form of regional organization. Expanded areas of cooperation could include joint policy studies among countries. In time, these studies could analyse the strengths and weaknesses of different options for addressing particular problems and help to foster deeper international cooperation on domestic problems of mutual interest as well as on transboundary problems, leading eventually to the achievement of multilateral policy coordination in the region. In the long run, as the platform develops and expands its own capacity, it could help to maintain a strong environmental dimension in the process of economic integration, as well as help the countries to develop common positions in international negotiations.

Notes

1. The concept of the Asia spaghetti bowl or noodle bowl was coined by Haruhiko Kuroda, President of the Asian Development Bank in July 2006, denoting the fragmentation and overlap of regional agreements and initiatives.

2. Countries which have not yet ratified include Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Timor Leste and Iraq.
3. See the EEA's website, http://www.eea.europa.eu/about-us/countries-and-eionet (accessed 26 March 2012).
4. Interviews with the ASEAN Secretariat, 2010.
5. Interviews with the ASEAN Secretariat, 2010.
6. For example, a student-business forum was included in the Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting (between China, Japan and Korea) from 2011. See the TEMM website: http://www.temm.org/sub05/view.jsp?id=21 (accessed 12 March 2012).
7. ASEAN++ refers to unspecified combinations of ASEAN plus other countries, such as ASEAN+3, ASEAN+6, etc.

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