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Regional Perspectives on the Institutional Framework on Sustainable Development (IFSD)

Issues Paper
by the UN Regional Commissions

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1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, regional integration processes have gained momentum, and have been complemented by many forms of intra-regional cooperation. These processes have provided the platform for many of the important and effective policy actions and dialogues to address key development issues, including climate change and sustainable development, at the regional and subregional levels. Regional organizations and groupings have evolved as important players in determining the development agenda at all levels. There is an increasing acknowledgement of the regional dimension of development as a critical link between the global and national levels, and for formulating an effective and coordinated response to address transboundary issues, including climate change and environmental issues.

In view of their strategic positioning, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) called upon the Regional Commissions to play a leading role in coordinating regional and subregional activities by sectoral and other United Nations bodies, and to assist countries in achieving sustainable development. The regional dimension of promoting sustainable development was strongly recognized in Agenda 21 and has been constantly reaffirmed thereafter. UNCED also called upon the Regional Commissions and regional programmes within the United Nations system, as well as other regional organizations, to review the need for modification of ongoing activities, as appropriate, in light of Agenda 21. It stressed the need for active cooperation and collaboration, inter alia, among the regional commissions and other relevant organizations, regional development banks, non-governmental organizations and other institutions at the regional level. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) reiterated and further strengthened this mandate and tasked the Regional Commissions to facilitate and promote a balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development into their work, and into the work of regional, sub-regional and other bodies. It was indicated that this could be done by facilitating and strengthening the exchange of experiences, including national experiences, best practices, case studies and partnership experiences related to the implementation of Agenda 21.

2. Current regional structure for sustainable development

A. The United Nations System

The UN Regional Commissions and their distinctive role

The establishment of the UN Regional Commissions as early as after the Second World War was an acknowledgement of the importance of economic and social regionalism, and the regional dimensions of development. They function as the regional arms of the UN, in addition to being part of its regional institutional landscape. The Regional Commissions are mandated to address social, economic and environmental issues, especially those of a common or trans-boundary nature in their regions. The unique nature of the Regional Commissions' work give them the comparative advantage of having the capacity to link the economic, social and environmental issues towards integration of the three pillars of sustainable development through harnessing and synergizing regional perspectives. The

convening power of the Regional Commissions is effective in bridging the gap between the global and national levels by providing regional analysis and perspectives to the global review of the implementation of internationally agreed goals. The Regional Commissions promote an integrated approach to sustainable development in the following ways:

(i) Providing an inclusive platform for adopting an integrated approach to sustainable development

In line with the mandate received at the WSSD, the Regional Commissions facilitate and promote a balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in their respective regions. This is done by promoting an overarching multisectoral approach through multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary forums. For example, the Commission sessions and meetings of the subsidiary bodies of the Commissions related to sustainable development provide ideal platforms for the promotion of integrative and interlinking approaches.

In addition, many of the challenges that countries face cannot be resolved within the national borders or face barriers at the global scale. These issues are more effectively addressed as part of cross-cutting regional frameworks. Such issues may be policy related, such as economic competition, physical integration through infrastructure, economic policies for development, taxation policies, or natural resource management. The Regional Commissions also support countries in their regions in building the statistical foundation required to inform these policies and promote multidisciplinary analysis and sharing of experiences based on south-south cooperation.

(ii) Providing the link between the global and the national levels

The Regional Commissions have been collaborating with all stakeholders in providing the vital link in translating global frameworks to concrete action at regional, subregional and national levels. For example, all the Regional Commissions have led the regional preparatory processes for Rio+20 in close collaboration with the regional development banks, UNEP, UNDP and regional and subregional organizations. In many cases, the preparations and background reports were supported by the entire UN system at the regional level, using the Regional Coordination Mechanism.

The Regional Commissions, working closely with UN organizations and regional development banks have also been instrumental in the establishment of high-level intergovernmental forums at the regional level to promote sustainable development. For example, ECA collaborated with the AUC and UNEP in establishing the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN). ECA also established the Climate for Development in Africa (ClimDev-Africa) Programme, and hosts the African Climate Policy Centre (ACPC), the policy arm of the Programme. Similarly, ESCWA closely cooperates with UNEP/ROWA and the League of Arab States (LAS) through a joint technical secretariat to follow-up on the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. ESCWA and LAS are actively cooperating on this follow-up and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Initiative in the Arab Region, including through collaborative capacity-building efforts in the Arab countries. In the ECLAC region, the Regional Implementation Forum has convened the regional implementation meetings in support of Sustainable Development and CSD processes.

ESCAP's regional mandate includes convening the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific (MCED) as well as other Ministerial Conferences in sectoral areas. ECE provides the secretariat for the "Environment for Europe" process. These processes and the Ministerial Conferences provide a high-level platform for governments, UN system organisations and other stakeholders to discuss, decide and join efforts in addressing environmental priorities in different regions, and constitute a regional pillar of sustainable development.

(iii) Setting norms and standards at the regional level

In addition to their pool and capacity of cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary skills and expertise, and their convening power, the Regional Commissions play an important role in promoting environmental norms and conventions in their respective regions. Experiences have showed that regional approaches to the development and implementation of conventions can be more effective in certain instances, especially on issues of trans-boundary nature. The ECE conventions (including those related to water, transboundary pollution and access to information) and their associated protocols constitute a legal backbone for improving the environment in the region. The ECE, through its Environmental Performance Review Programme (EPR), has been providing in-depth advice to countries with economies in transition to improve their environmental performance.

(iv) Coordination among UN organizations and entities at the regional level

There are two main mechanisms for coordination among the UN organizations and agencies operating at the regional level. The Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) is mandated by ECOSOC and chaired by the Regional Commissions. The RCMs in different regions have on average a membership of 30 UN and affiliated entities at the regional level, including the Regional Development Banks and the World Bank, and provide policy coherence and coordination among the work programmes of the organizations of the UN system, including in the area of sustainable development. A number of RCMs have constituted thematic working groups on environment and climate change as well as disaster risk reduction. The RCMs have also been the primary platform for the joint interaction of the UN system with the non-UN regional organizations and processes. The role of the UNDG regional teams (the former Regional Directors Team, or RDTs), is to provide strategic guidance and support to Resident Coordinators and UN Country teams (RCs/UNCTs) for the achievement of country-level results. RCM's and UNDG regional teams can support and complement each other's work through a two-way interaction.

Regional Offices of UN organizations and agencies working in the area of sustainable development

Most UN organizations and agencies, such as UNEP, FAO, UNDP, UNESCO and others, have regional offices mainly to support country-level activities in the area of sustainable development. The Regional Commissions have established close collaboration with UNEP and other UN organizations, as well as regional organizations in support of their Member States.

B. Non-UN organizations

Regional Development Banks

Regional development banks such as EBRD, ADB, AfDB, IADB, CAF and others have also emerged

as important actors for supporting economic integration and development at the national and regional levels by providing effective instruments to fund development initiatives. The regional banks work closely with the Regional Commissions in translating policy to programmes and in producing high-profile knowledge-products, including for the promotion of a sustainable development agenda in the regions.

Regional organizations:
Anumber of regional and subregional organizations, including the African Union, ASEAN, SAARC, the Central Asia Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development, the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation, the League of Arab States SICA, Andean Community, MERCOSUR and the Caribbean Community have developed regional frameworks to address sustainable development, climate change and environment sustainability issues, including disaster risk reduction. A number of these regional frameworks are supported by the UN Regional Commissions, UNEP, UNDP and other UN organizations and entities, notably through the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM).

3. The way forward

(i) Recognition of the critical role of regional institutions as an integral part of an enhanced Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development

A global institutional framework for sustainable development requires effective interaction between the global and the regional levels (and increasingly between the regional and the local level, and vice versa).

Regional consensus building and ownership of sustainable development principles and norms, enables moving forward at the global level. In recent years there has been a trend towards creation of such agreed norms or standards at the regional level, and the regional level is making headway on collective action on sustainable development. Addressing issues at the regional requires agreements and joint initiatives among countries at similar levels of development with similar priorities and challenges. This is something that should be built upon. Regional frameworks can complement and facilitate the effective translation of global policies into concrete action at the local level. This can be achieved through coherent regional governance, which may require effective regional frameworks that currently do not exist in every region. Thus, one of the priorities should be to strengthen the regional frameworks for an integrated approach to sustainable development, building on existing institutions, and ensure a strong interaction and linkage with the framework for global sustainability governance.

(ii)Strengthening of the Regional Commissions

The development of a coherent regional framework should consist of strengthening the Regional Commissions to serve as an umbrella for regional sustainable development governance with a close and visible link to the UN headquarters. Globalization has changed the dynamics of cooperation with regional groupings looking for and earning increased influence on global decision-making. The role of Regional Commissions as platforms for experience sharing and knowledge networking (indicators, data, expertise, best practices, roadmaps and policy tools) as well as for forging regional positions and empowering regional voices on sustainable development should be emphasized. This would also mean (i) strengthening their capacity, as chairs of the RCMs, to act as the platform for collaboration of the UN system with regional and sub-regional groups; (ii)

promoting greater synergies between the work of the RCMs, the UN headquarters and the regional UNDG teams to ensure that the policy coherence work of the RCMs can be conveyed to regional UNDG teams to inform their country-level actions and vice-versa and; (iii) strengthening their level of representation at UN headquarters to ensure an enhanced link with the global sustainability governace and and a farther reaching impact on global negotiations.

(iii) Enhanced engagement between UN and non-UN sub-regional and regional organizations, institutions and civil society

There is significant cooperation at present between regional and subregional organizations and the UN system in the area of sustainable development, especially in the areas of disaster risk reduction and climate change. However, there is considerable opportunity for improving its scope and coherence as in the case of water, energy, infrastructure and fiscal policy. This collaboration could be expanded, building on the existing platforms for interaction by deepening existing collaboration with a view to achieving a better integration among UN and non-UN sub-regional and regional institutions. Regional development banks, working closely with the Regional Commissions, have a crucial role in this process in providing the funding for sustainable development projects and for building capacity, especially in developing countries.

(iv) Promoting system-wide coherence at the regional level in the area of sustainable development

In cases where the complimentarity between the analytical and consensus building role of regional commissions and their policy coordination functions through the RCM, and the operational strengths of UN agencies, have been effectively channelled in support of regional initiatives or processes, concrete and sustained outcomes have often been achieved. The RCMs and the Regional UNDG teams could work more closely with a view to linking these two bodies more strongly to ensure input from the normative regional work into the work of the RDTs in support of UNCTs and input from work at the country level into the normative work.