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## Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

### Seventieth session

Bangkok, 23 May 2014 (Phase I)

Item 3(a) of the provisional agenda\*

**Review of issues pertinent to the subsidiary structure of the Commission, including the work of the regional institutions: macroeconomic policy, poverty reduction and inclusive development**

## Report of the Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific

### Summary

The Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific was held in Bangkok. It consisted of a senior officials segment (17-18 December 2013) and a ministerial segment (19-20 December 2013). The Conference was attended by 36 members and associate members of ESCAP, as well as representatives of United Nations bodies and specialized agencies, and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

The Conference adopted the Bangkok Declaration on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific, in which members and associate members resolved to work closer together to pursue enhanced regional economic cooperation and integration in four areas: (a) moving towards the formation of an integrated market; (b) developing seamless connectivity; (c) enhancing financial cooperation; and (d) increasing economic and technical cooperation to address shared vulnerabilities and risks.

The Commission may wish to review and endorse the Declaration and provide the secretariat with future guidance on its implementation and on any other matters contained in the report of the Conference.

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\* E/ESCAP/70/L.1/Rev.1.

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## I. Matters calling for action by the Commission or brought to its attention

The Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific recommends to the Commission the endorsement of the following declaration.

### **Bangkok Declaration on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific**

#### **I. Preamble**

*We, the Ministers and representatives of members and associate members of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific attending the Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific, held in Bangkok from 17 to 20 December 2013,*

*Emphasizing* the need to sustain the region's inclusive and sustainable development to continue to reduce the number of poor people living in absolute poverty from the current levels and to close the development gaps across countries,

*Reaffirming* the unique role of the Commission as the most representative body for the Asian and Pacific region and its comprehensive mandate as the main economic and social development centre of the United Nations system for the Asian and Pacific region,

*Recalling* the First Ministerial Conference on Asian Economic Cooperation, which was held in Manila in 1963 under the auspices of the Commission and led to the establishment of the Asian Development Bank,

*Also recalling* important contributions of the Commission to regional economic cooperation and integration, as highlighted in its resolution 68/10 on enhancing regional economic integration in Asia and the Pacific, and noting other important regional economic cooperation and integration initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region,

*Further recalling* that the Commission in its resolution 68/10 requested the Executive Secretary to support the convening of the First Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Integration in 2013, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the First Ministerial Conference on Asian Economic Cooperation, and to review the theme study for the sixty-eighth session of the Commission, entitled *Growing Together: Economic Integration for an Inclusive and Sustainable Asia-Pacific Century*,<sup>1, 2</sup>

*Recalling* Commission resolution 69/10 on promoting regional information and communications technology connectivity and building knowledge-networked societies in Asia and the Pacific,

*Also recalling* General Assembly resolutions 64/186 and 67/194 on building connectivity through the Trans-Eurasian Information Super Highway and 67/298 on developing cooperation for better connectivity and telecommunications transit routes in the Trans-Eurasian region,

*Recognizing* the important role of safe, efficient, clean, reliable and affordable transport systems in supporting sustainable economic growth, improving social welfare of people and enhancing regional integration in Asia and the Pacific,

*Also recognizing* that, given the vast land mass, oceans and diversity of the Asian and Pacific region, land-based and sea-based fibre-optic cable networks and satellites play a critical role in developing a seamless regional information space,

*Further recognizing* that in the context of economic uncertainties after the global financial and economic crisis and with the rising economic prominence of the Asia-Pacific region in the world economy, the promotion of intraregional trade within Asia and the Pacific can provide enormous opportunities to support economic growth and employment creation in the region,

*Reaffirming* the imperatives of sustainable development, reducing poverty and inequalities, increasing the resilience of our economies to natural and economic disasters and the effects of climate change, sustainable management of natural resources, enhancing food and energy security, closing the digital divide and reducing development gaps across countries to enhance social cohesion,

*Emphasizing* that fostering trade, investment, and economic and development cooperation among countries in Asia and the Pacific can create opportunities not only for supporting economic growth, but also for achieving wider *developmental* objectives,

*Noting* that improving connectivity with regard to land, river, sea and air transport as well as energy and information and communications

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<sup>1</sup> ST/ESCAP/2629.

<sup>2</sup> See also E/ESCAP/68/22.

technology infrastructure, as well as trade facilitation, is critical to boost trade, investment and the movement of people among countries,

*Emphasizing* the need to substantially enhance the degree of connectivity in the region, including through investment in transport, energy and information and communications technology infrastructure, and through improvements in trade and transport facilitation,

*Recalling* Commission resolution 69/6 on the implementation of the Tehran Declaration to promote public-private partnerships in infrastructure development in Asia and the Pacific for sustainable development,

*Emphasizing* the need to develop existing, evolving and innovative national, regional and global partnerships to help members and associate members address the challenges and seize the opportunities associated with growing populations, the demographic dividend, internal and international migration, and urbanization,

*Noting* the urgent need to increase the availability of and access to financing for regional infrastructure projects, especially those that link least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States with each other and with other economies in Asia and the Pacific, including through facilitating transit transportation to seaports,

*Also noting* with satisfaction the adoption of the Suva Declaration on Improving Maritime and Related Services in the Pacific,<sup>3</sup> which is aimed at improving the economic feasibility of the provision of regular and predictable inter-island shipping services in the Pacific subregion,

*Emphasizing* that cooperation among countries in the region is critical to increase resilience to address vulnerabilities and risks of natural disasters, food and energy insecurity, scarcity of surface- and groundwater resources, and unsustainable use of natural resources, including those in the oceans, and the effects of climate change in order to pursue a sustainable development path,

*Also emphasizing* the need to address the growing gap in broadband connectivity between developed and developing countries, so that affordable access to high-speed networks is available to all,<sup>4</sup>

*Noting* that the Zero Hunger Challenge, which was launched globally by the Secretary-General in Brazil in June 2012 and regionally by the Deputy Secretary-General on the occasion of the sixty-ninth session of the Commission, could provide a useful framework for regional cooperation in the area of food security,

*Recognizing* the accumulation of financial resources within Asia and the Pacific, the need for facilitating their broader flow, and the positive role of financial cooperation in enhancing economic resilience and closing infrastructure gaps in the region, and building on the work under way for widening the scope of existing arrangements and deliberating on new relevant

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<sup>3</sup> See E/ESCAP/FAMT(2)/6.

<sup>4</sup> The gap in broadband connectivity is widening in terms of indicators such as total international Internet bandwidth, international Internet bandwidth per user, and in terms of broadband access between the developing and developed countries of Asia and the Pacific. Source: ESCAP, based on the International Telecommunication Union, World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators database 2013.

coordinated mechanisms, such as a regional financial institution that promotes infrastructure investment and complements existing financial institutions,

*Acknowledging* the valuable role of regional groupings and organizations, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Customs Union and Common Economic Space of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, the East Asia Summit, the Economic Cooperation Organization, the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the Micronesian Trade Committee, the Pacific Islands Forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in the area of regional and subregional economic cooperation and integration,

*Taking note* of the visions for a broader Asia and Pacific community,

*Having reviewed* the theme study prepared for the sixty-eighth session of the Commission, *Growing Together: Economic Integration for an Inclusive and Sustainable Asia-Pacific Century*,

## **II. Policy directions**

1. *Resolve* to work together to pursue enhanced regional economic cooperation and integration in Asia and the Pacific in the following four areas:

(a) Moving towards the formation of an integrated market;

(b) The development of seamless connectivity across the region in the areas of transport, energy and information and communications technology, among others, including through the full realization of key regional initiatives;

(c) Enhancing financial cooperation for, among other things, closing infrastructure gaps across countries in the region and exploring the possibility of providing liquidity support;

(d) Increasing economic and technical cooperation to address shared vulnerabilities and risks;

2. *Agree* to pursue the agenda for such cooperation as outlined in section III of the present Declaration as an important step towards realizing a broad long-term vision of an economic community of Asia and the Pacific;

3. *Decide* to create four area-specific expert working groups to take stock of current regional efforts pertaining to economic cooperation and integration, to identify gaps in those efforts, to recommend concrete actions to make progress in each of the four areas listed in operative paragraph 1 above, and to submit their recommendations to intergovernmental open-ended preparatory meetings to be convened for the second Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific to take place in 2015;

4. *Agree* to assist countries with special needs, especially least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, in taking advantage of opportunities arising from regional economic cooperation and integration, including, as appropriate, through support to enhance their capacities and through technical assistance;

5. *Invite* members and associate members of the Commission, donor countries, multilateral financing institutions, relevant agencies and organizations of the United Nations system, other intergovernmental and regional organizations, relevant non-governmental organizations, international think tanks and the private sector to provide financial and technical support, within their mandates and core competencies, for the implementation of the agenda for regional economic cooperation and integration;

6. *Request* the Executive Secretary:

(a) To accord high priority to the agenda for regional economic cooperation and integration in the work of ESCAP;

(b) To support the work of the four area-specific expert working groups including the preparation of their terms of reference in consultation with members and associate members and convene the intergovernmental open-ended preparatory meetings for the second Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific referred to in operative paragraph 3 above;

(c) To ensure effective coordination with United Nations and multilateral agencies concerned, including relevant subregional technical organizations within their respective mandates and core competencies, in supporting the implementation of the regional economic cooperation and integration agenda;

(d) To convene the second Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific in 2015 to review the progress on the agenda of regional economic integration outlined in section III of the present Declaration, consider the recommendations of the intergovernmental open-ended preparatory meetings and decide on follow-up actions.

### **III. Suggested agenda for regional economic cooperation and integration in Asia and the Pacific**

1. The agenda for regional economic cooperation and integration is aimed at deepening and broadening economic cooperation and integration in Asia and the Pacific and at moving towards the formation of an economic community of Asia and the Pacific as a long-term goal.

2. Recognizing the important progress achieved by regional groupings and organizations in integrating their subregions, the agenda is designed to support their efforts and further strengthen their contribution as building blocks of a broader regional initiative. For this purpose, the subregional offices of the secretariat could provide support to and liaise with the subregional groupings in their respective subregions within their respective mandates.

3. In order to promote and facilitate opportunities for mutual learning and coordination among regional groupings and organizations, including their sectoral cooperation initiatives, ESCAP could facilitate consultations among such groupings and organizations at the annual sessions of the Commission for the purpose of discussing progress in economic cooperation and integration in ESCAP subregions, sharing best practices and considering ways to enhance economic cooperation and integration among the subregions.

4. It is important to recognize that challenges generally associated with least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island

developing States, such as small market sizes, geographic limitations and absence of relevant trade infrastructure, reduce the impact of regional cooperation and integration initiatives that are meant to enhance trade, market development and improve economic growth. In order to broaden the access of those countries to regional trade and connectivity, there is a need to implement specific policies that focus on productive capacity-building related to infrastructure development, broadening the economic base, access to finance and providing assistance in overcoming the risks and shocks of entering into a regional trade block.

5. The second Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific, which is proposed to be held in 2015, will take stock of the progress made on the agenda of cooperation and integration agreed at the First Ministerial Conference and consider the recommendations of the area-specific expert working groups established by it.

#### **A. Moving towards the formation of an integrated market**

6. In order to exploit complementarities between subregions, it is critical to move towards an integrated market of Asian and Pacific economies. One of the four area-specific expert working groups will explore the possible options for building an integrated market of the Asian and Pacific region in an inclusive and equitable manner.<sup>5</sup>

7. Recognizing the importance of trade for growth and development, members and associate members will strive to foster trade facilitation, bring down trade barriers through cooperation on liberalization, and resist and refrain from protectionism.

8. It is necessary to recognize the importance of migration flows for tackling structural labour demand and supply mismatches across countries and the critical developmental role that remittances play. In this context, it is also necessary to enhance regional consultations to address the protection of rights of migrant workers in accordance with internationally agreed principles, as appropriate, as well as applicable national laws, regulations and policies.

9. Intraregional tourism, which has been growing in Asia and the Pacific as a consequence of the region's progress in raising standards of living and reducing poverty, could help spur development in least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States of the region. However, the development of the tourism sector is highly dependent on the existence of efficient, regular and affordable air services connecting recipient and source countries. Regional cooperation in this area is particularly important in order to support these countries in promoting the development of their tourism sectors.

#### **B. The development of seamless connectivity in the region**

10. In order to strengthen seamless transport connectivity in the region, it is essential, as appropriate, to implement the Ministerial Declaration on Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific,<sup>6</sup> and the Regional Action Programme for Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific, phase II

<sup>5</sup> The word "equitable" refers to the principle of special and differential treatment in favour of weaker economies, as included in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

<sup>6</sup> Commission resolution 68/4, annex.

(2012-2016),<sup>7</sup> the Regional Strategic Framework for the Facilitation of International Road Transport,<sup>8</sup> the Ministerial Declaration on Transport as a Key to Sustainable Development and Regional Integration,<sup>9</sup> and the Suva Declaration on Improving Maritime Transport and Related Services in the Pacific.<sup>10</sup> It is also important for ESCAP members and associate members that have not already done so, to consider becoming parties to the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network,<sup>11</sup> the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network<sup>12</sup> and the Intergovernmental Agreement on Dry Ports.<sup>13</sup>

11. In view of the critical importance of the connectivity agenda, one of the four area-specific expert working groups will take a closer look at cross-sectoral synergies among transport, energy and information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and make recommendations.

12. The Asian and Pacific Energy Forum could address the need to develop energy connectivity by facilitating the evolution of an “Asian energy highway”, including oil and gas pipelines and grid connections across borders, to exploit demand-supply mismatches among countries and to further develop a regional energy market and a Pacific regional energy data repository for sustainable energy for all. In view of the importance of energy cooperation for the energy security of the region, the Forum could consider means of implementing a review mechanism for its recommendations. The Forum could also enhance cooperation among energy-producing, transit and energy-consuming countries for the sustainable use of resources.

13. Improved ICT connectivity and the reduction of the digital divide may require enhanced cooperation at the regional and subregional levels in such activities as entering into public-private partnerships, exploring new opportunities emerging from technological innovations and connectivity and supporting the development of regional initiatives for ICT connectivity set forth in Commission resolution 69/10 in order to provide seamless broadband connectivity and reduce the costs of such connectivity for all throughout Asia and the Pacific. Improved regional cooperation on ICT issues could also promote policies that maximize the economic and social benefits of improved ICT connectivity, while mitigating the common challenges and threats raised by new and continuously evolving technologies.

### C. Enhancing financial cooperation

14. It is important to recognize the large potential for cooperation in finance in order to develop the region's capital markets and a regional

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