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Accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific through environmental solutions

Accelerating regional ocean actions for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific**

Summary

The present document provides an overview of the challenges for the ocean in fisheries, tourism, marine pollution, shipping, and ocean data and statistics in Asia and the Pacific, as well as the regional actions that can be carried out to accelerate the protection of the ocean against harmful human-induced activities. The recommendations presented in this document may assist member States in the determination of enhanced resource allocation and policymaking, as well as identifying potential areas for regional cooperation. The document includes recommendations that will inform the design of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Decade Program for the regional implementation of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030), including outcomes from the Third Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean held on 29 October 2020.

I. The Commission, the Ocean and the Asia-Pacific region

1. At its seventy-sixth session, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) adopted a resolution reinforcing the mandate to strengthen cooperation to promote the conservation and sustainable use of the ocean, seas and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific, (ESCAP/RES/76/1). Among others, member States requested the continuation of participatory, multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms. Accordingly, the Secretariat institutionalized the Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean, hosting its third edition on 29 October 2020.

* ESCAP/CED/2020/L.1.

** The present document is being issued without formal editing.

2. In anticipation for the seventy-sixth Commission Session and the United Nations Ocean Conference (the Lisbon Conference), ESCAP developed a theme study (ST/ESCAP/2905)¹ identifying regional priorities for the ocean. This publication identified (a) ocean data and statistics, (b) maritime connectivity, (c) fisheries and tourism, and (d) marine pollution as some of the most pressing issues requiring urgent action in Asia and the Pacific. In line with these concerns, the Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean embraced four interactive dialogues to identify solutions that can accelerate progress in the related sustainable development goals, in particular, Sustainable Development Goal 14 and its interlinkages.

3. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission will coordinate the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030), the "Ocean Decade". In accordance with ESCAP's mandate, the Secretariat will continue to strengthen current partnerships with United Nations bodies and specialized agencies for the effective implementation of internationally agreed conventions. Consequently, ESCAP plans to develop a "Decade Program" within the scope of the Decade Action Framework, to enhance and facilitate the regional implementation of the Ocean Decade.

4. The substantive discussions held during the Day for the Ocean served as an opportunity to engage regional stakeholders and to collect inputs from all constituencies for the comprehensive development of ESCAP's Decade Program. ESCAP envisages the Ocean Decade as an opportunity to accelerate regional ocean actions for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific, seizing the global and regional momentum for transformative ocean actions. As a result, a decade program will be submitted in early 2021 for the consideration of endorsement by the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission -UNESCO.

II. The Ocean and the impacts of land-based activities

5. Most of the environmental threats to the ocean are human-induced and arise from land-based activities. This is the case for fisheries, tourism and pollution; and notably, climate change stands out as a land-based phenomenon with drastic impacts on ecosystems, including marine ecosystems, and on the peoples across Asia and the Pacific. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere highlighted some observed physical changes and projected impacts (Figure I). The ocean has been warming since 1970, absorbing more than 90 per cent of excess heat in the climate system, doubling the rate since 1993. The ocean has taken up approximately 20–30 per cent of carbon dioxide in the past four decades, resulting in additional ocean acidification. Against this backdrop, the projected Representative Concentration Pathway (RCP) 8.5 scenarios predict further acidification, an increase of mean sea surface temperature globally, additional marine heatwave days, rising heat content in the ocean water, decreasing ocean

¹ ESCAP (2020). *Changing Sails: Accelerating Regional Actions for Sustainable Oceans in Asia and the Pacific*. ST/ESCAP/2905. ISBN: 978-92-1-120812-2 (www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/CS76%20Theme%20Study.pdf). Bangkok: ESCAP.

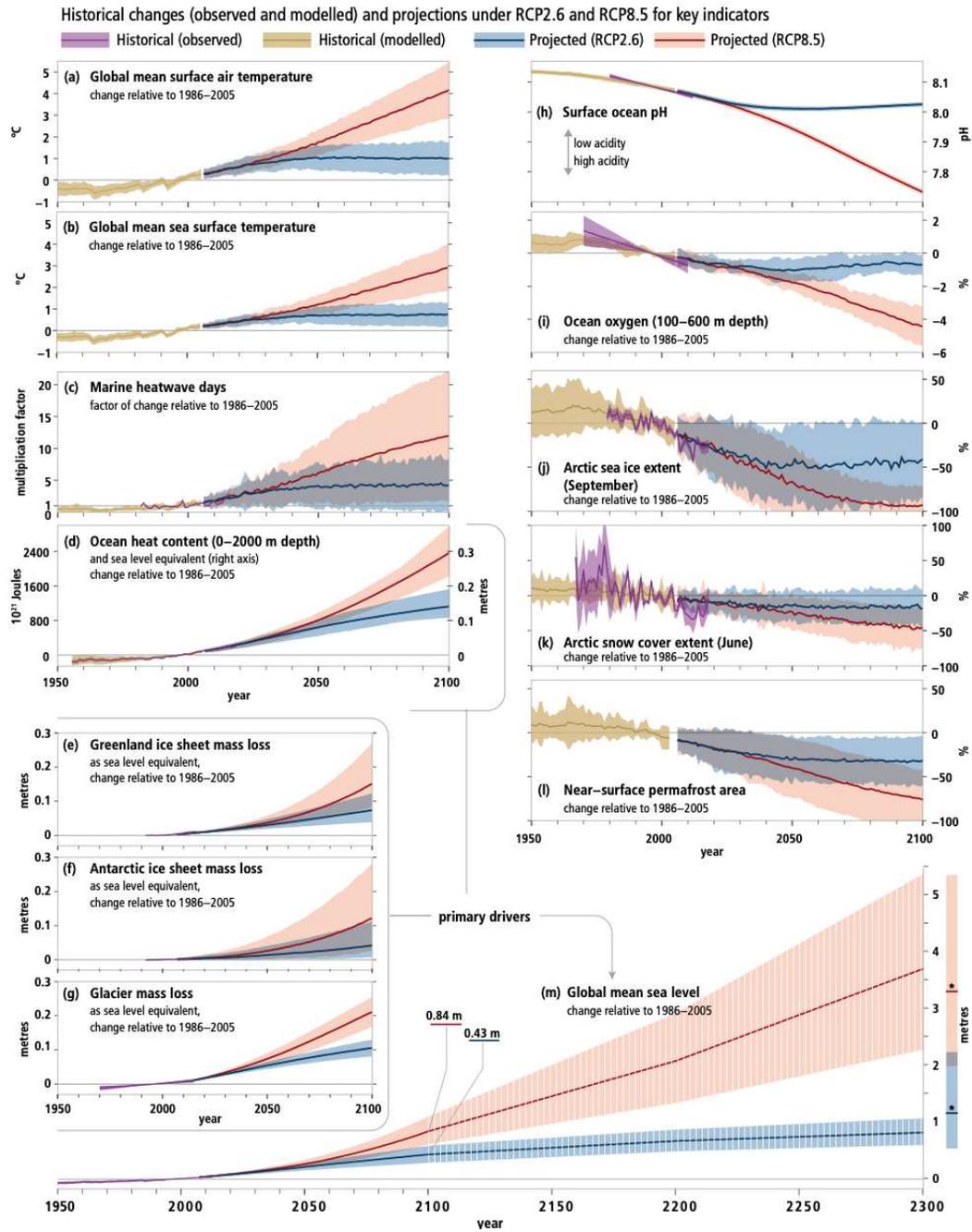
oxygen, continued ice sheet mass losses, and consequently, a rising global mean sea level.²

6. In Asia and the Pacific, the physical changes described above will have repercussions on different ecosystems across all subregions. These impacts encompass negative effects on human systems and ecosystem services, including fisheries, tourism, habitat services, transportation and shipping, cultural services and coastal carbon sequestration. Human-induced activities may have a negative multiplying effect on these services. For example, overfishing exacerbates the challenges to marine species and biodiversity posed by geographical range shifts, triggered by ocean warming and the affected biochemical composition of ocean waters.

7. Within the scope of ocean and climate synergies, land-to-ocean and ocean-to-land interactions require further attention. For instance, plastic pollution from land-based sources, including through solid waste (such as macro and microplastics) has a negative impact on fish stocks and other marine species. Carbon dioxide emissions arising from the production of plastics are expected to triple by 2050; eventually representing a double burden for the ocean, through the absorption of excess carbon dioxide generated during the production process and through the impacts of plastic pollution on marine species. The vulnerabilities of small island developing States have been studied for at least three decades. Most studies suggest that climate change is an imminent threat to their survival. Ocean-to-land interactions, such as rising sea levels and extreme weather events will continue to pose a threat to the livelihoods and economies of coastal communities in the region, and in particular to small island developing States in the Pacific, these climate-related occurrences will prompt internal displacements and/or international migration across the region.

² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2019: Summary for Policymakers. In: IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, V. Masson-Delmotte, P. Zhai, M. Tignor, E. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, M. Nicolai, A. Okem, J. Petzold, B. Rama, N. Weyer (eds.)]. In press.

Figure I
Past and future change in the ocean and the cryosphere³



III. Recommendations from the Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean

8. One of the key messages that has resonated during the Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean is the urge for regional cooperation. Stakeholders appreciate and support the strategic advantages of joining efforts to accelerate transformative actions for ocean protection and sustainable development. Member States have

³ Ibid.

also urged ESCAP to strengthen regional cooperation towards the harmonized implementation of the 2030 Agenda for the ocean, especially Sustainable Development Goal 14.

9. Specific recommendations from the thematic interactive dialogues include:

(a) **Fostering tourism and fisheries for sustainable development.**

Countries in the Asia-Pacific region must step up their efforts to manage their ocean resources more sustainably, to enable a sustainable blue economy that can accelerate sustainable development, especially considering the significant socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which are threatening to reverse years of development gains. The effects of the pandemic have increased the burden on countries, most of which continue to face devastating impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. Fostering tourism and fisheries for sustainable development is especially important for small island developing States in terms of their contribution to the economy, and their importance for livelihoods as well as food security in the case of fisheries. Countries must continue to do more to embrace their blue economy to foster their sustainable development. This includes, the effective implementation and enforcement of Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter, and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing.

(b) **Marine pollution.** Pollution in the form of eutrophication and marine debris continue to be a growing challenge in Asia and the Pacific. Plastic production in Asia-Pacific accounts for almost half of the global volume. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen an acceleration of this trend, as the culture of disposability and use of single-use plastic have intensified. Unless effective policies are implemented urgently, the amount of plastic debris in the ocean could triple by 2050. By this same year, nutrient fluxes from inorganic nitrogen and phosphorus are expected to increase, across all subregions. Urbanization, water sanitation, fertilizers and detergent use are some of the drivers of nutrient pollution.⁴ Enhancing solid waste management, as well as wastewater treatment across the region is still one of the outstanding challenges. Abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear continues to be a marine pollution issue that must be addressed in conjunction with plastic waste and fishing regulations, especially assessing extended producer responsibility. Scientific developments will be crucial to accomplish this, as they may provide effective technology to monitor pollution, but also the required tools to prevent it at its root, on land.

(c) **Sustainable maritime connectivity.** Asia and the Pacific rely heavily on a safe, secure and efficient international shipping industry, which is an essential component of any sustainable green economic growth. The COVID-19 pandemic reemphasized key policy priorities for sustainable maritime connectivity, such as accessibility of affordable shipping services, digitalization of maritime and port services, improving transport safety and social conditions, and scaling up regional cooperation. The pandemic has also underscored the persisting connectivity divide and vulnerabilities of the small island development States in the Pacific. Systematic regional dialogue on sustainable maritime connectivity, in close collaboration with the key global and regional stakeholders, including the

⁴ United Nations Environment et al. Eutrophication assessment and nutrient criteria development: Atlas of global assessments and scenario forecasting on nutrient cycling and environmental impacts. (Prepared by: GRID-Arendal) Component C: Doc: B7-1. December 2018. www.nutrientchallenge.org/sites/default/files/documents/GNC-Publications/B7-1_GNC_AtlasDraft1_A.pdf.

International Maritime Organization, is an integral part of the Asia-Pacific socio-economic response to COVID-19 and an overall progress towards the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the post-pandemic context.

(d) **Ocean, data and statistics.** Complex, cross-border ecosystems such as the ocean call for holistic decision-making supported by integrated data solutions. This requires more comparable and integrated data on the ocean, and the services it provides to humanity, as well as commonly agreed terminology to homogenize measurements. ESCAP's theme study this year proved that improving ocean data and statistics is still one of the challenges for the region. Out of the ten globally agreed indicators for Goal 14 on the conservations and sustainable use of oceans, there is sufficient data available for target 14.5 only, on the conservation of coastal and marine areas, and a proxy indicator for target 14.1 on reducing marine pollution.

IV. From harmful land-based activities to effective land-based policies

10. Accelerating regional ocean actions for the delivery of Goal 14 will require shifting from harmful land-based activities to effective land-based policies, as the region is currently not on track to meet this goal. In a policy brief for Goal 14 in Asia and the Pacific.⁵ This encompasses enhanced fishing policies with appropriate compliance and enforcement to combat the illegal, unreported and unregulated, regulations on single-use plastics, sustainable tourism and greener carbon-neutral shipping and port operations.

11. ESCAP recommended an accelerator approach for implementation, optimizing development benefits aligned to national priorities though the identification of pivotal interventions with a positive multiplier effect. Interactive dialogues from the Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean have evidenced that the case of fisheries is a symbolic example of needed pivotal interventions. More data is needed on most Goal 14 indicators, including 14.4, 14.6 and 14.7, especially disaggregated data that can contribute to comprehensive policymaking on fisheries. The fishing industry and the shipping industry are interrelated, sound interventions on fishing must address regulations on the catch, but also on the practices on vessels and their operations. The interconnection of these challenges exposes the need for holistic approaches where the strategic allocation of resources could have a positive accelerator effect with appropriate identification of challenges and the implementation of inclusive policies.

12. The design of such policies must incorporate the social elements of the ocean. Dialogues with a diversity of stakeholders have emphasized the *human dimension* of the ocean, which encompasses a spectrum of issues that range from food security and cultural heritage, to human trafficking and other illegal activities, such as illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Stakeholders demand inclusive and gender-sensitive policies. Associations of women in the fisheries industry across the Pacific have called for acknowledgment of their significant role in the industry, and for more institutional support to promote their livelihoods. Likewise, in a dialogue with an LGBTQ+ seafarer's organization from the Philippines, they ratified their dedication to break through gender barriers, but also their simultaneous commitment to a greener shipping industry, to protect the marine environment.

⁵ www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/ESCAP_SDG14_Policy%20Brief_Final.pdf.

13. Additional calls to accelerate ocean action have come from the Pacific region. Fiji's Ocean Pathway⁶ launched during COP23 proposed a two-track strategy, increasing the role of ocean considerations in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change process and significantly increasing actions in priority areas of ocean and climate change. Via the Kanaki II Declaration,⁷ the Pacific Island Forum Leaders underscored the need for an ocean work programme in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change process, they also characterized climate change as a *crisis* for Pacific Ocean nations. The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, expected to be finalized in 2021, highlights vulnerabilities to environmental, climate change, disaster risk and economic shocks, and its current interaction with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused border closures and immediate and long-term health, economic and social challenges. During the High-Level Political Dialogue between the Pacific Island Forum Leaders and the United Nations Secretary-General in 2019, they called for urgent climate change action, stating: "After meeting today, we will return to our island homes. Some of us will find our villages inundated by waves and our homes and public infrastructure wrecked by cyclones. Our coral reefs are dying, our food is disappearing, and we fear for the safety of our loved ones, who are being injured and even killed by some of the most ferocious of cyclones and other extreme weather events ever witnessed in our region." They also emphasized on sea level rise and how climate change impacts may potentially reverse economic development, leading to instability and conflict, affecting all countries globally.⁸

14. Participants in the Day for the Ocean have acknowledged and praised the role of ESCAP promoting a welcoming and safe space where different constituents can share challenges, experiences and best practices. The event has provided an opportunity to report progress on registered voluntary commitments on the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14, submitted within the framework of the United Nations Ocean Conference in 2017. They have also asked for continued guidance, and requested the concerns of Asia-Pacific stakeholders be voiced at international platforms such as upcoming the Lisbon Conference. The progress and completion of some voluntary commitments underscores the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement in acceleration ocean actions.

V. Conclusions towards the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development

15. The Decade Program will allow ESCAP, within existing resources, to optimize infrastructure, institutional and professional capacities to strengthen regional work supporting the delivery of Goal 14 and its interlinkages with other Sustainable Development Goals, especially climate action. In addition to the development of relevant knowledge products, ESCAP will offer ocean-specific capacity building activities in close collaboration with other United Nations specialized agencies, to mainstream *the science we need for the ocean we want* in Asia and the Pacific.

⁶ <https://cop23.com.fj/the-ocean-pathway/>.

⁷ www.forumsec.org/2019/08/28/the-kainaki-ii-declaration-is-a-signal-of-our-strength/.

⁸ www.forumsec.org/2019/05/15/pacific-islands-forum-statement-blue-pacifics-call-for-urgent-global-climate-change-action/.

16. ESCAP’s Ocean “Decade Program” will include the foundational work on data, statistics and accounts as part of the Asia-Pacific response to the ocean challenges. This encompasses co-chairing and contributing to activities of the Global Ocean Accounts Partnership, including capacity development on ocean data, statistics and accounts; and globalizing technical guidance on ocean accounting piloted by member States, for adoption by the United Nations Statistical Commission as a global statistical standard.

17. Based on the success of the three previous editions of the Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean, ESCAP is committed to continue hosting the event on an annual basis throughout the Ocean Decade to promote systematic dialogues among civil society, the private sector, governments, the scientific community, academia, philanthropic organizations and the youth, as mandated by member States.

18. The challenges exposed in section II, III and IV above, call for more work on Ocean and Climate work in the years ahead. During the last edition of the Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean, participants were asked to identify the challenges for the ocean in a dynamic interaction. Overwhelmingly, climate change stood out as one of the most pressing issues for the region, according to a variety of voices. ESCAP will incorporate work regarding ocean and climate in the decade program in closer collaboration with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

19. Regarding management and governance, member States have encouraged ESCAP to facilitate dialogue on ocean governance. The issues detailed in this document call for enhanced management and synergies among all levels of government: local, national and regional. Shifting the approach towards ecosystem-based management beyond or regardless of national jurisdictions requires effective transboundary cooperation with resolve to protect the ocean, guaranteeing its resources, and its unique biodiversity for the future through sustainable use and oversight.
