Working Document 1

# Governance of the Asia Pacific Regional Forum on Health and Environment and the Framework for Cooperation

**Background**

The Asia Pacific Regional Forum on Health and Environment[[1]](#footnote-0), was established in 2004 to address the growing threat that environmental hazards pose to human health. The forum seeks to create greater synergy among relevant sectors in order to better tackle environmental and health issues. The International Secretariat to the Regional Forum was formed with WHO WPRO and SEARO and UNEP ROAP.

Initially founded by ministers of health and environmental sectors from 10 ASEAN countries and 4 East Asian countries (China, Japan, South Korea, and Mongolia), the Regional Forum is now open to all member states of UNEP ROAP, WHO WPRO, and WHO SEARO.

The Framework for Cooperation, which defines the governance structure of the Regional Forum was adopted at the Third Ministerial Meeting (3MM) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2013, when the Regional Forum still consisted of only 14 founding countries. The Ninth High Level Officials Meeting (9HLOM) and Fourth Ministerial Meeting (4MM) held in Manila, Philippines in 2016 endorsed a recommendation to form a task force to review the governance of the Regional Forum and the Framework for Cooperation.

The task force put forward twelve recommendations to the Tenth High Level Officials Meeting (10HLOM) held in Manila, Philippines in 2019. The revised title of the Regional Forum – ***the Asia-Pacific Regional Forum on Health and Environment and its goal “To create a platform for national and regional policy and action to enhance and safeguard health and environment towards achievement of the SDGs” were both adopted by the meeting. The objectives of the Regional Forum were revised as “To identify and promote the implementation of priority health and environmental issues that require regional cooperation and support for national action.”***

The expansion of membership of the Regional Forum was confirmed as being open to all 51 countries and territories covered by WHO WPRO, WHO SEARO and UNEP ROAP. New members would need to provide/submit a letter of intent to the Chair of the Forum to participate and become a full member of the Regional Forum signed by both the ministries of health and environment. WHO and UNEP would continue to encourage their Member States to participate in the Regional Forum including through relevant governing bodies. One Ministerial meeting and two high-level officials’ meetings would be held every five years. Meeting modalities such as in-person or hybrid will be decided by the Chair of the Forum in consultation of the joint secretariat.

The mechanism of selecting the Regional Forum Chair would be based on voluntary expression of interest. In the event of multiple expressions of interest, a roster of countries would be established with the selection following alphabetical precedence. The Chair of the Regional Forum would lead in hosting the Ministerial Meeting and HLOM with support from the secretariat, however, other formal meetings could be hosted by other countries if agreed. The term of the Chair will be for a period of 5 years. The position of Vice-Chair would also be subject to voluntary expression of interest and unlike previous arrangements would not be linked to the position of Chair. In a departure from past practice, the position of Vice Chair would not automatically become Chair of the Regional Forum but would be subject to a separate call for expression of interest.

It was agreed that the Secretariat would establish more flexible arrangements for the Scientific Panel including creating a roster of experts from the Member States that could contribute to different thematic areas of work.

It was agreed that the thematic working groups (TWGs) would be more closely governed by the Regional Forum. Each TWG members would have to synchronize with the priorities of the Regional Forum. The Secretariat would prepare or revise Terms of Reference for each of the TWG. The Chairs of each of the TWG would have the authority to accept new members subject to advice from the Secretariat who would undertake a process of due diligence to avoid conflicts of interests. The Knowledge Network of the Regional Forum would be retained pending further discussion.

**Current status of the Framework for Cooperation**

For the continuation of discussions, substantial part of the Framework is still pending and/or needs further elaboration. The Framework is composed of:

1. Vision (4 paragraphs)
2. Goal and Objectives
	* Goal (1 paragraph)
	* Objectives (1 paragraph + list a) to d))
3. Environment and Health Priorities for the Region (4 paragraphs + list a) to e))
4. Strategies (1 paragraph + list a) to h))
5. Structure and Functions
	* Structure (3 paragraphs)
	* Functions
		1. Ministers of Environment and Ministers of Health (2 paragraphs + list a) to f))
		2. The High-level Officials of the Ministries of Environment and Ministries of Health (1 paragraph + list a) to c))
		3. National Communication Focal Points (1 paragraph + list a) to c))
		4. The Secretariat (3 paragraphs + list a) to h))
		5. Scientific Panel (2 paragraphs + list a) to e))
		6. Knowledge Network (2 paragraphs + list a) to i))
		7. Thematic Working Groups (4 paragraphs)
		8. Existing Initiatives or Forum and Institutions (1 paragraph)
		9. New Initiatives (1 paragraph)
6. Entitlements and Responsibilities (5 paragraphs)
7. **Vision, goal and objectives**

APRFHE is a platform of cooperation and collaboration between the health and environment sectors at the regional and national levels. It aims to (1) share knowledge and experiences; (2) advocate for measures, policies and actions to protect the health and well-being caused by environmental risk factors; and (3) promote the inclusion of human health in other sectors policies such as transport, education, energy, trade, agriculture advance the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the Paris Agreement, the Minamata Convention, WHO and UNEP resolutions and other multilateral environmental agreements, International Conventions and Regional Initiatives.

1. **Health and environmental priorities and relevant technical areas**

The priorities of the Regional Forum, have been defined reflecting the priorities of the member states. The priority actions of the previous Ministerial Declarations have been embedded in the work of different TWGs. The implementation of workplans to achieve the goal of the APRFHE was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategic discussion that ordinarily takes place during a chairs term did not take place due to the COVID-19 related circumstances. Towards the end of the term, such discussions shifted to focus on the next term 2025-2029. As it aligns with the 2030 targets of SDGs and other initiatives, the strategic issues could be embedded into the revised Framework for Cooperation.

**Governance mechanisms – historical background**

Until 2013, the governance and mechanism of the operation of the Regional Forum was guided by the Charter of the Regional Forum on Environment and Health in Southeast and East Asian Countries – Framework for Cooperation.

At the Second Ministerial Meeting in Jeju, it was proposed to establish a working group to review the governance and operation of the Regional Forum. A report called “Chair and Vice-Chair Report on the Governance, Impact, Partnerships and Sustainable Financial Mechanisms of the Regional Forum on Environment and Health” was presented at the Third Ministerial Meeting at Kuala Lumpur Malaysia.

The major findings of the Chair and Vice Chair Report was that the Regional Forum was still needed because it was a useful forum and had contributed significant achievements both at the Regional and national levels. However, the Report highlighted several weaknesses such as:

* the Regional Forum was too hierarchical and should be simpler and practical; unclear line of communication between the different entities of the Regional Forum, especially unclear of communication between the Chair and countries and between the International Secretariat and countries;
* the Advisory Board was ineffective; and
* too rigid in allowing new countries to join the Regional Forum.
* the lack of financial resources to support the implementation of activities of the Regional Forum and organization of meetings.

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration in 2013 then agreed with the new Framework of Cooperation of the Regional Forum which has a simpler structure in its governance and operation (See Annex 2 for the Framework for Cooperation of the Regional Forum on Environment and Health in Southeast and East Asian Countries). A guidance document on the Mechanisms for Conducting Meetings was also approved in Kuala Lumpur

1. **Mechanism of operations**

The revised structure of the Regional Forum proposed from the HLOM 2019 has a leaner structure and a simpler mechanism to operate the Regional Forum. In summary, it has the Ministers of Environment and Ministers of Health as the highest body which decide on policy and strategic matters and they are advised by their respective high level officers; then each member state will have designated focal point for communication related to the Regional Forum; and the International Secretariat which receives advice from the Scientific Panel which constitutes a panel of experts on various aspects of environmental health. The most significant change was that the TWG sit under the Knowledge Network, without naming specific areas of work of the TWGs.



1. **High Level Officials Meeting and Ministerial Meetings**

The Regional Forum had its First High Level Officials Meeting in 2004 and since then have met eleven times[[2]](#footnote-1) to discuss specific technical work and make recommendations to the Ministerial Level meetings. Ministerial meetings representing the highest level of the regional forum; held every three years to decide on policy aspects – the First Ministerial Meeting was held in Bangkok Thailand (2007); Second meeting was in Jeju Korea (2010); and Third Meeting was in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2013) and the Fourth Meeting was held in Manila, Philippines in 2016. The Republic of Indonesia is the current and Fifth Chair of the Regional Forum.

* 1. Thematic Working Groups

The regional forum pursues a range of activities, including intercountry working group meetings and scientific conferences encouraging exchange of information among member countries through the thematic working areas or groups (TWGs). Each TWG is chaired by a member state of the Regional Forum. During the 11th HLOM in Jakarta the TWGs were revised and are currently as follows: (1) air quality and health; (2) water, sanitation, hygiene ; (3) Chemical, Waste and Health ; (4) climate change and health; (5) health impact assessment; and (6) One Health.

* 1. **Scientific Conferences**

The Regional Forum has organized specific scientific conferences which have encouraged exchange of scientific information and good practices on various aspects of environmental health impacting member countries. These were the Scientific Conferences organized by the Regional Forum since 2005:

* First Scientific Conference, December 2005 in Bangkok - identified and discussed significant and emerging environmental health issues facing the region.
* Second Scientific Conference, April 2007 in Seoul - discussed the priority environment health issues in the region from scientific perspectives.
* Third Scientific Conference, April 2008 in Jeju - discussed environmental effects on human health with focus on vulnerable groups: pregnancy and birth; children and elderly.
* Fourth Scientific Conference, September 2010 in Seoul, conjunction with ISEE/ISES conference - discussed the adaptation and mitigation policies to response to risks of climate change;
* Fifth Scientific Conference back-to-back with 9th High Level Officials Meeting, 2016 in Manila – discussed major themes, challenges and achievements, in the MDGs and future work for the SDGs

The Chair, in consultation with the Secretariat can organize Scientific Conferences which are of interest to the Forum.

* 1. Activities at the Country Level

One of the most significant contributions of the Regional Forum is that it has served as catalyst for the development of national environmental health action plans (NEHAPs) or similar plans in countries to strengthen cooperation and policy dialogues between the different sectors to address major environmental health challenges.

At the Fourth Ministerial Meeting in Manila in 2016, countries proposed that the Regional Forum should also take a coordination role in the transboundary environmental health issues facing the region particularly with regards to air pollution and toxic and hazardous waste transhipments in the region.

1. **Issues and challenges**

Since its inception in 2004 and despite renewed commitment amongst member countries to continue the Regional Forum as recorded in the Ministerial Declarations in Kuala Lumpur and Manila, the Regional Forum has faced significant challenges which are affecting the sustainability of the Regional Forum. Some of these challenges are related to its governance and some are related to the Regional Forum technical functions.

## V.I Governance

Despite the leaner and simpler structure, the governance of the Regional Forum involving countries of the WHO-SEARO, WHO-WPRO and UNEP regions still poses a challenge. The WHO-SEARO, WHO-WPRO and UNEP has their own governing bodies to bring forward recommendations, resolution and decisions of the Regional Forum. Without the governing bodies endorsement, there is unclear mechanisms to monitor progress on the implementation of the Regional Forum activities.

In going forward to address these, technical support and Secretariat function from WHO WPRO will be provided by Asia Pacific Center for Environment and Health (ACE) in Seoul. t

With the expansion of the countries of Regional Forum to more than 50 countries, the governance is more complicated as it also involves WHO-EMRO, not just WPRO and SEARO. The logistical challenge of bringing officials from the Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Health from 51 countries is immense. WHO three regional offices will review and propose appropriate governance and operation mechanism at the next High Level Official’s meeting to be held in 2025 (2026)?.

The Regional Forum emulates a similar Forum in Europe but it has simpler structure as all countries are in the WHO-EURO. Meaning, the outcomes of the European Ministerial Conferences are then brought forward and if necessary, endorsed by the European Regional Committee, and hence have the legitimate responsibility in terms of implementation and reporting.

Getting other sectors involved in the Regional Forum

Another issue is getting the participation of other sectors to participate and attend the Regional Forum. For examples, in dealing with water quality and sanitation which affect health, in most countries this falls under the rural or infrastructure sectors and international agencies such as UNICEF, ADB or the World Bank need to brought into the Regional Forum. The question is also getting their interest to join the Regional Forum.

Another example is in dealing with the ambient air pollution. In addition to the environment sector, the energy or transport sectors are also equally important as they are dealing the upstream functions.

Lack of Financial Resources

Most Regional Forum activities are hampered by lack of financial support. In the Chair and Vice Report, it was estimated that the Regional Forum needs at least USD 1 million dollars every 2 years? to support TWG in particular and essential work of the Secretariat.

The thematic working groups (TWGs) are intended to work on specific issues and provide specific the technical added-value to the Regional Forum. However, most of the planned TWG activities could not be implemented due to lack of funds. During the 11th HLOM, it was agreed to develop a term of reference and establish a committee to develop a sustainable financing mechanism for the Forum.

Following guiding principles will be employed for the Framework:

* The Framework for Cooperation (***Annexed is the existing approved one***) describes the medium- to long-term perspective for the Regional Forum to avoid frequent revisions/amendment.
* Complementary documents will be developed to address the other issues such as:
	+ Short-term priorities, issues, directions, etc. will be addressed by ad hoc declarations and/or policy documents.
	+ Administrative aspects will be described by an Operational Guidance.
	+ A Terms of Reference will be developed for the operational issues of the Thematic Working Groups.
	+ An Implementation Plan will describe the activities to be undertaken by the Regional Forum for each term.
* Terms used for the Framework (e.g., NEHAP) will be properly defined.
* Synergy, collaboration with other initiatives/programmes should be enhanced as much as possible.
* New mode of implementation, e.g., digital technology including hybrid forms for meetings, should be considered.

A series of online discussions among countries and territories will be planned for sections/portions of the Framework, which improves the understanding and interest of the Regional Forum. The secretariat will prepare the discussion papers (e.g., a comparison table between original and revised) to facilitate the communications. The record of discussions will be summarized and presented to the HLOM. In moving forward, following online sessions will be expected:

1. Schedule of online discussions, outlines of the Framework, goal and objective (already approved): Q4 2023.
2. Vision, priorities: (need to revisit) Q1 2025.
3. Strategies, structure (including demarcation with other initiatives/programmes to avoid overlap): Q1 2025.
4. Functions (excluding administrative detail, which will be described in other documents): Q2 2025.
5. Preamble, entitlements: Q2 2025.
6. Full draft text for final review: Q3 2025.

Considering the discussions at 11th HLOM in Jakarta in 2023 and recent developments in the secretariat, the following aspects have been proposed to moving forward:

* The chairmanship of the Forum by a national member be reduced to 4 years and meeting of the forum be held every four years (subject for discussion with member countries).
* The workplan should be practical and aligned with and support the implementation of the declarations.
* Increase Pacific representation at the Forum, including the Secretariat Pacific Community (SPC) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP).
* A new agreement between WHO Regional Office in the Western Pacific, WHO Regional Office in the South -East Asia and WHO EMRO; and an agreement with UNEP will be established if needed.
* TWG are the backbone of the forum and hold meetings online or as back-to back with HLOM and MM. The TWG chair and co-chair should not be solely financially responsible for these meetings. The Secretariat will provide necessary support.
* Secretariat function to be provided by the WHO Asia Pacific Centre for Environment and Health in the Western Pacific (ACE), in collaboration with SEARO and UNEP. Terms of Reference of the Secretariat to be updated.
* WHO (through ACE) will support fund mobilization for the Forum and activities of the Thematic Working Groups. Participation of Member States delegates to the Ministerial Meeting and HLOM will be funded by WHO and UNEP, upon request.
1. Formerly the Regional Forum on Environment and Health in Southeast and East Asian Countries [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. High Level Officials Meeting (HLOM) – 1st in 2004 in Manila; 2nd in 2005 in Bangkok; 3rd in 2007 in Bangkok; 4th in 2009 in Beijing; 5th in 2010 in Jeju; 6th in 2012 in Bandung Indonesia; 7th in 2013 in Kuala Lumpur, Extra Ordinary High-Level Officials Meeting in 2014 in Bangkok; 8th in 2015 (virtually) hosted by the Gov of Philippines; 9th in 2016 in Manila; 10th in 2019 in Manila, 11th in Jakarta in 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)