Introduction

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), one of the five regional commissions of the UN, is committed to promoting socio-economic development in the Asia Pacific region. ESCAP has been working closely with the member governments to address some of the major development challenges facing the region, which include poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, and environmental issues. In pursuit of sustainable development, ESCAP promotes environmentally sound infrastructure development and transport operation through various regional activities, which include formulation of policy interventions required at different spatial levels to address the social and environmental impact of transport development.

The Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development Division (TCTIDD) of ESCAP is concerned with various environmental issues, particularly those arising out of transport development in the region. The Division is responsible for assisting member countries in addressing various issues of the transport sector, which include development, management, maintenance and pricing of environmentally sound, and efficient and safe transport facilities and services. It also acts as the principal agency for establishing regional policies, standards and requirements in these areas.

With the support of the donor agencies, particularly from the Government of Germany through GTZ, the Division is involved in activities related to environmental issues in the field of transportation. Activities of various natures have been undertaken or are being undertaken under the GTZ-ESCAP Transport Policy and Planning Assistance project for a number of years. All the project activities are carried out in the context of the Regional Action Programme (RAP) Phase I (1997 – 2001) for the Implementation of the New Delhi Action Plan on Infrastructure Development.

It is important to mention here that ESCAP-TCTIDD pursues activities mainly at the policy level, and its assistance is provided by conducting studies on common issues/problems among countries in the region, formulating appropriate recommendations/policies, preparing guidelines to facilitate implementation of the recommended policies, as well as by providing a forum for coordination between countries, and for awareness creation, experience sharing and transfer of knowledge gained through seminars/workshops and publications. Some of the recent activities are outlined next.
Recent Activities

With a view to reducing the negative effects of road traffic on human and natural environment by using more and more vehicles driven with natural gas, a concept for converting diesel-fuelled buses to compressed natural gas (CNG) and respective policy level guidelines (as follow-up to a joint ESCAP/UNDP CNG demonstration project in Pakistan) were developed and made available to the member countries in the form of a publication. However, promotion of CNG-fuelled vehicles has been deferred, until fuel-pricing policies are favourable for CNG.

In view of the alarming environmental degradation, considerably caused by road transport, the ESCAP Secretariat has undertaken a comprehensive plan of activities on transport related environmental issues. In this regard, ESCAP in 1996 undertook a study "Road Transport and the Protection of the Environment: Identifying and Prioritizing Programme Activities". This study provided an overview of the situation in the region, identified major areas of environmental concern, and various preventive and corrective policies and measures with promising implementation potential in the ESCAP region, as well as presented 21 project proposals. A policy-level expert group meeting was held in May 1997 in Bangkok, which considered the study report and endorsed high priority projects. The final study report, “Road Transport and the Environment: Areas of Concern for Asia and the Pacific Region”, as well as the meeting report, was published in 1997.

As a follow-up on infrastructure development, a review of the status of environmental/social impact assessment (EIA) in the region, highlighting the methodological, legal, technical and institutional issues and constraints that affect the viability and effectiveness of an EIA system for road infrastructure projects, was completed in 1998. In addition, as a basis for the preparation of practical EIA guidelines, a review of “Road Development and the Environment: Methodologies for Minimizing Environmental Damages” was undertaken and published in 1999. Furthermore, ex-post case studies on the environmental impact assessment process of implemented road projects have been undertaken recently, and the development of a multi-stage framework for impact analysis/assessment and practical guidelines for EIA is currently underway.

ESCAP also has sponsored twice the biennial “Asia Pacific Conference on Transport and the Environment (APTE)” which deals with, inter alia, the problem of air pollution caused by transport operations and the need for clean air in Asian cities. The APTE conferences are organized to bring together government officials, transportation planners, managers, researchers, experts and professional from different parts of the world to present, discuss, and exchange ideas and experience, to promote the use of environment-enhancing transportation development and management technology, with special focus on the Asian and the Pacific region. The first APTE was held in 1998 in Singapore and the second in 2000 in Beijing. In addition to conference sponsorship and delivery of keynote addressees and papers, ESCAP conducted a special workshop on the transport of dangerous goods during the 2nd APTE.
The Division is conducting a study on environmentally friendly energy for transport. The study will review, inter alia, the existing and emerging fuel technologies for the transport sector, cost economics of vehicle operation using alternative fuels, progress made and obstacles faced in introducing NGVs and public transport vehicles powered by engines with higher emission control, and identify policy interventions required for faster introduction of such vehicles. The study is on going.

To consider a broader context of the urban environmental problem, and in recognition of the need of an integrated and comprehensive approach to sustainable transport development, ESCAP, in close collaboration with the Royal Netherlands Government and direct participation by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) is implementing a pilot project on Integrated Planning and Sustainable Transport Development. The approach being adopted in the pilot project essentially inverts the traditional approach, going first to the principal stakeholders and asking their views on the problems, the causes of the problems and strategic transport sector goals. The results of these interviews are then used to develop problem and cause relationships, which after further consultation and analysis by experts have been used to develop a set of 12 integrated, draft action plans. Some of these draft action plans particularly those for the improvement of public transportation and transport demand management consider measures to address various environmental issues including that of air pollution from transport operation. The Rattanakosin Pilot Project, as it is commonly known, is in its final stage of completion.

Road safety is a major issue of concern in the region. To assist member countries in this important area, ESCAP initiated in 1995 a comprehensive study to identify the factors affecting road safety and recommend actions to tackle the deteriorating situation. A number of publications including Guidelines on Road Safety Action Plans and Programmes and other activities in this area have also been made with cooperation from the Transport and Road Research Laboratory (United Kingdom) and the Asian Development Bank. It is also worth mentioning here that ESCAP attended the launching of the Global Road Safety Partnership at a meeting convened by the World Bank.

Future Activities/Areas of potential cooperation with other agencies

As for future activities, ESCAP-TCTIDD is planning to focus more on air pollution / clean air, since this problem has obviously become acute in major cities of the Asia-Pacific region. Road transport is one of the major sources of air pollution; a clean air initiative is thus sorely needed for the region. In this respect, ESCAP could play a major role through concerted efforts by the Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development Division (TCTIDD) regarding, in particular, awareness creation; studies and guidelines on policy issues; and regional and country-level seminars/workshops for experience sharing. ESCAP’s policy advice to member countries includes, where relevant, emphasis on appropriate stakeholders’ participation / public involvement to ensure sustainability of proposed transport policies.
Under the upcoming project phase of the GTZ-ESCAP Transport Policy and Planning Assistance (July 2001 – June 2003), ESCAP-TCTIDD has planned the following clean air related activities: (1) development of policy guidelines on strategies and measures to reduce air pollution caused by road traffic, and presentation and discussion of the guidelines at a regional seminar; (2) development of guidelines on energy policies and measures for improvement of fuel efficiency in motor vehicles; (3) development of practical guidelines on economic instruments for promoting sustainable transport, and presentation and discussion of the guidelines at a regional seminar; and (4) sponsorship / contribution to the third “Asia Pacific Conference on Transportation and the Environment (APTE)” in 2002; (5) other activities within the framework of the “Clean Air Initiative for Asia” as agreed jointly with the cooperation partners World Bank, ADB and others.

To enhance the impact of its regional activities, ESCAP is always looking to join hands with others working at the national level. Cooperation with multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, bilateral donor agencies and, where possible, private sector partners is considered essential for success in tackling the environmental problems in the Asia-Pacific region.