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**Coordinating Body on the
Seas of East Asia (COBSEA)**

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Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA)**
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**Guidance on the Establishment and Operation of
COBSEA Regional Activity Centres**

Background

1. Regional Activity Centres (RACs)¹ have been established by several Regional Seas programmes as autonomous technical entities, operating under the overall authority of the respective Regional Seas governing body, to strengthen delivery of regional priority actions and obligations.
2. The COBSEA Consultation Meeting on the 'Regional Capacity Centre for Clean Seas' held in Jakarta, Indonesia, 8-9 April 2019, noted that countries may wish to seek the establishment of COBSEA RACs to carry out specific functions in support of the East Asian Seas Action Plan. The need for alignment, coherence and reciprocity of such centres and their respective mandates and areas of work was recognized. To this end, it was noted that COBSEA RACs should be developed and operate following a common procedure.
3. In view of this the COBSEA Secretariat was requested to prepare guidance for participating countries on the establishment of COBSEA Regional Activity Centres, drawing on the experiences of other Regional Seas programmes and encompassing e.g. key steps and standard provisions including relating to mandate, governance, institutional and financial aspects, to be presented for consideration by the Intergovernmental Meeting.
4. Draft guidance on the establishment of COBSEA Regional Activity Centres prepared by the COBSEA Secretariat is provided in Annex 1.

Recommendations to the 24th Intergovernmental Meeting of COBSEA

5. COBSEA countries are requested to review and comment on the guidance on the establishment of COBSEA Regional Activity Centres and, as appropriate, consider its adoption.

¹ <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/oceans-seas/what-we-do/working-regional-seas/regional-seas-programmes/regional>

Annex I. Guidance on the establishment and operation of Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA) Regional Activity Centres

1. Introduction

1. Regional Activity Centres (RACs) provide a means to support and supplement efforts by governments and other partners towards implementation of the East Asian Seas Action Plan.
2. In the implementation and coordination of the the East Asian Seas Action Plan, sub-regional and regional institutions will be used to the maximum possible extent (paragraph 62 of the Action Plan). Where appropriate, national institutions will be proposed by a State to assume a regional role with the objective of providing services in support of the action plan (paragraph 63). Governments may decide that such an institution assumes the role of a Regional Activity Centre (paragraph 67).
3. Further to this, COBSEA Strategic Directions 2018-2022, in paragraph 37, recognizes that establishment of regional centres hosted by participating countries can support resource mobilization and partnership building under the East Asian Seas Action Plan.
4. This document provides guidance on the establishment and operation of COBSEA RACs, drawing on the experiences of and similar guidance prepared by other Regional Seas programmes. It is intended to serve as a resource for COBSEA participating countries and relevant organizations, establishing common praxis in the development, establishment and operation of RACs, including the evaluation of proposals for establishment of RACs and administration and implementation of RACs. It is recognized RACs will be developed in often differing contexts and with differing aims and objectives. Some flexibility in application of this guidance may therefore be required.

2. Definition of Regional Activity Centre

5. A Regional Activity Centre (RAC) is an autonomous, international or regional organization, or a national institution with regional remit, designated by the COBSEA Intergovernmental Meeting to coordinate or carry out specific technical functions and activities in support of the East Asian Seas Action Plan and decisions of the COBSEA Intergovernmental Meeting, with the purpose to strengthen delivery and support participating countries meet their commitments. RACs operate under the overall authority of the the COBSEA Intergovernmental Meeting and the guidance of the COBSEA Secretariat, decentralizing delivery of activities while adding human, technical and financial capacity to the work of COBSEA.

3. Objectives and functions of Regional Activity Centres

6. The general objective of the East Asian Seas Action Plan is the protection and sustainable development of the marine and coastal area of the region. Under the authority of the COBSEA IGM and the guidance of the COBSEA Secretariat, COBSEA RACs assist, within their respective mandate and field of activity, in the implementation of the East Asian Seas Action Plan as well as decisions of the COBSEA IGM.
7. All COBSEA RACs shall strive to enhance the impact and visibility of COBSEA through
 - i. Concrete, effective activities, developed and implemented on the basis of best available science;
 - ii. Enhanced cooperation among national institutions as well as with relevant regional and global initiatives;
 - iii. Effective and targeted communication, including dissemination of results of activities;
 - iv. Strengthened shared information systems, including websites and databases.

8. Common operational principles for COBSEA RACs include:
 - i. Development of biennial work plans focusing on COBSEA priorities and needs, under the guidance of the COBSEA Secretariat and for approval by the COBSEA IGM, and providing progress and financial reports to the COBSEA IGM;
 - ii. Consultation with COBSEA countries and national institutions, with a view to strengthening collaboration in development and delivery of activities as well as increasing efficiency, avoiding duplication and improving the overall coherence of COBSEA efforts;
 - iii. Supporting resource mobilization towards activities undertaken in the context of the East Asian Seas Action Plan;
 - iv. Transparency, accountability, efficiency and effectiveness in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of activities;
 - v. RACs will respect the regulations of the United Nations System and in particular UN Environment relating to the administration and operation of RACs.

9. Common functions of COBSEA RACs are to:
 - i. maintain regular contact with national, regional and global agencies and institutions related to the relevant scientific and technical aspects of the East Asian Seas Action Plan;
 - ii. foster scientific and technical cooperation with, for example, UN specialized agencies, intergovernmental, governmental and non-governmental organizations;
 - iii. facilitate the provision of technical and scientific assistance to participating countries and other partners as appropriate;
 - iv. develop, resource and implement projects on topics relevant to the mandate of the RAC;
 - v. promote the implementation of specific activities in cooperation with relevant partners including UN specialized agencies, intergovernmental, governmental and non-governmental organizations;
 - vi. compile, update and disseminate data and information relevant to the mandate of the RAC, promoting accessibility to this information among participating countries and other partners as relevant.

10. RACs will be utilized for technical, scientific and financial aspects; political and policy aspects of activity development and implementation will be coordinated by the COBSEA Secretariat. The COBSEA Secretariat will provide programmatic supervision of RAC activities unless other arrangements are made by decision of the COBSEA IGM.

11. Any products prepared by RACs (such as publications) that will be issued as COBSEA documents and bearing the COBSEA and UN Environment logos will be approved by the COBSEA Secretariat or, where appropriate, COBSEA IGM, prior to their publication in final form by the RAC.

4. Establishment of Regional Activity Centres

Key considerations in the establishment of COBSEA RACs

12. The COBSEA Secretariat is the primary entity for coordination of the East Asian Seas Action Plan and related activities. RACs should be established when circumstances necessitate it, inter alia to enhance or supplement the technical capacity of the COBSEA Secretariat, assist in mobilizing additional financial resources, promote activities to implement the East Asian Seas Action Plan, and support COBSEA in general.

13. As a technical institution, a RAC should have the necessary capacity to undertake the activities envisaged, including staff and facilities.

14. The level and nature of the specialization of a RAC will determine the types of activities that it can implement or coordinate, and how this complements or supplements the functions available within the COBSEA Secretariat and other regional institutions where relevant.

15. The work of COBSEA spans several topics, and it may therefore be necessary to utilize multiple RACs. However, the staff size and budget of the COBSEA Secretariat overall may limit the number of RACs that can be effectively managed.

Steps towards the establishment of COBSEA RACs:

16. A COBSEA participating country may prepare a proposal to establish a RAC. A RAC proposal should clearly identify how the proposed RAC meets the criteria outlined in this guidance document, and to this end should include terms of reference including a rationale; statement of purpose and objectives; description of functions; operational procedures (including programmatic, financial and reporting); as well as institutional and governance arrangements (including staffing and procedures for appointing a director).
17. The RAC proposal should be submitted to the COBSEA Secretariat for review and comment, after which the Secretariat will share it with participating countries for consideration.
18. A decision to establish a RAC is made by the COBSEA Intergovernmental Meeting. This decision should define the scope, mandate and role of the RAC, as well as any other provisions that participating countries wish to establish. The decision should authorize the COBSEA Secretariat to develop and enter a hosting agreement (e.g. a host country agreement or memorandum of understanding) with the host government or organization.
19. The hosting agreement should be consistent with the decision adopted by the COBSEA Intergovernmental Meeting, and with this guidance. The final hosting agreement will be shared with COBSEA participating countries for information.

Criteria for RACs and host institutions

20. Key criteria for RACs and their host institution include the following, which may guide development of RAC proposals as well as review of such proposals:
 - i. Institutional Capacity: The institution must have a policy orientation and organizational objectives which are consistent with those of COBSEA. It is desirable that the institution is recognized as a leader in its sphere of activity. The organizational structure of the host institution should be sufficiently flexible to allow it to function as/host a RAC. The institution must have sufficient human capacity including requisite technical, administrative and managerial expertise. Appropriate office space, equipment and other physical resources must be provided to carry out the activities of the RAC.
 - ii. Technical Capacity: The institution must have expertise in the fields of project coordination as well as relevant technical, scientific or academic expertise in the particular subject area, enabling it to offer specialized assistance on implementation of the East Asian Seas Action Plan.
 - iii. Management Capacity: The institution must possess efficient management systems. It should have expertise in the use of strategic planning tools, budget tracking and financial reporting that meet the needs of COBSEA as a UN-administered Regional Seas programme.
 - iv. Financial Capacity: RACs must be financially self-sustaining and have appropriate financial management mechanisms in place.

5. Institutional and Administrative Arrangements

21. The relationship of a RAC to the East Asian Seas Action Plan, the COBSEA Intergovernmental Meeting and the COBSEA Secretariat are critical to its functioning. This must be clearly defined in the terms of reference of a RAC.
22. RACs should have an organizational structure appropriate for the fulfillment of its duties. RAC personnel will be attached to the institution hosting the RAC, in accordance with the rules of that organization and relevant national legislation. RAC personnel will normally be selected and hired by the host organization/government, whereas the director of a RAC would normally be selected by the host government in consultation with the COBSEA Secretariat. International staff can be recruited directly for the RAC by a UN organization or the host government in accordance with the laws and regulations of that organization and/or the host government, including through secondments.
23. Each RAC will maintain its own administration for personnel, procurement, travel, and other support functions.
24. Communications on matters related to the activities of a RAC should be directly between the RAC and the relevant designated national authorities or focal points. Such national authorities or focal points should be nominated by the COBSEA National Focal Point. Communication on political and policy matters should be to COBSEA National Focal Points and through the COBSEA Secretariat.
25. A RAC is expected to develop and maintain collaboration with other institutions and entities, within the region and beyond. Development of legal instruments on such collaboration should be done in consultation with the COBSEA Secretariat.
26. COBSEA participating countries may at any time terminate a RAC if they determine that a RAC is not operating consistently with the decision establishing the RAC, or if they otherwise decide that a RACs operation no longer further the goals and objectives of the East Asian Seas Action Plan.

6. Work Plans and Budgets

27. Each RAC will prepare a brief Strategic Plan, in the context of and aligning with the period of the COBSEA Strategic Directions, which will be presented to and approved by the COBSEA IGM. This will include information on trends and developments in the subject area of the RAC and related challenges for the EAS region; the overall strategy of the RAC in addressing these challenges; and identification of appropriate performance indicators.
28. In consultation with the COBSEA Secretariat and in accordance with the approved Strategic Plan, each RAC will prepare a biannual work plan and budget for the approval of the COBSEA IGM, in line with formats provided by the COBSEA Secretariat. The work plan and budget must be submitted to the COBSEA Secretariat for review and comment at least three months prior to the COBSEA IGM, so that a final submission can be made to participating countries in line with the rules of procedure for IGMs.
29. Each RAC will submit brief half-yearly progress reports to the COBSEA Secretariat. Upon completion of an activity, RACs will submit a final report.
30. The RAC or where appropriate its host institution is responsible for all project-related reporting to donors.

7. Finances and Financial Reporting

31. RACs will not be funded by the East Asian Seas Trust Fund, except when funds are being provided by participating countries or other donors expressly for the RAC through a trust fund contribution.
32. Recurring Expenses: A RAC is expected to be financially self-sustaining. The host government and/or institution should make appropriate provisions for operating and recurrent costs of the RAC. However, the host government and/or institution is not expected to provide all funding needed for implementation of the activities of the RAC, and the RAC must therefore have the ability to leverage project funding from donors. The RAC should not rely on the COBSEA Secretariat to source project funding, but the COBSEA Secretariat will, within its capacity, support the project development work of RACs, including by endorsing RAC proposals for funding to donors.
33. Finances on Establishment: When a RAC is established, an initial contribution (in cash and in kind) should be provided by the host government and/or institution, e.g. towards development of activities and project proposals for submission to donors.
34. Financial Reporting: In addition to the submission of biannual work plans and budgets, the RAC will submit biannual financial reports and progress reports to the COBSEA IGM, following UN Environment's format for this purpose. The RAC, or where appropriate its host institution, is responsible for all project-related reporting to donors.