

Summary of informal bilateral consultations between COBSEA Secretariat and COBSEA countries in February and March 2021

1. In February and March 2021, the COBSEA Secretariat convened informal online bilateral consultations with National Focal Points (NFPs) and contact persons of COBSEA countries. The purpose was to discuss priorities in 2021 including the 25th Intergovernmental Meeting (IGM) of COBSEA, ongoing and upcoming COBSEA activities as well as the COVID-19 situation. This document summarizes the main points raised at the nine bilateral meetings. The agenda is provided in Annex 1, a list of participants and meeting dates in Annex 2.

Business continuity during COVID-19

2. The COBSEA Secretariat is for most part maintaining normal operations and business continuity through telecommuting arrangements and virtual meeting modalities. COBSEA Secretariat is subject to guidelines from UNEP and the host Government of Thailand. No international or work-related domestic travel is currently possible, and no in-person COBSEA meetings will be held during the coming months. The possibility of convening in-person meetings in the last quarter of the year will be assessed depending on how the situation evolves. Activities for 2021 are being modified as necessary.
3. All COBSEA countries have physical distancing measures in place, in many cases including telecommuting. Several agencies have started returning to office, often at reduced workforce. COBSEA countries are maintaining business continuity as far as possible, with focus on desk-based work. In many countries fieldwork and activities requiring face-to-face interaction or domestic travel are reduced to a minimum or postponed, and where possible virtual events are held. COBSEA countries are at different stages of rolling out vaccination programmes. At current conditions regional in-person meeting will not be possible at least in the first three quarters of the year.

25th Intergovernmental Meeting of COBSEA

Location and timing including COVID-contingencies

4. Viet Nam has generously offered to host the 25th IGM of COBSEA. The aim was to conduct an in-person IGM in or near Hanoi in June 2021. However, due to current travel restrictions, convening an in-person meeting in June is not possible. Alternative options identified include holding a virtual IGM and/or postponing an in-person IGM.
5. Countries agreed that conducting an in-person meeting during the first half of 2021 was unfeasible. Countries expressed interest in a two-step approach (similar to UNEA-5), including a virtual IGM session with limited agenda in mid-2021 to consider time-sensitive elements, and an in-person IGM session as soon as possible (most likely early 2022). Bearing in mind the challenges of negotiation in a virtual setting, some countries highlighted the importance of preparation, including receiving meeting documents well in advance, ensuring time for several rounds of country review of and input on documents. Countries suggested drawing upon lessons learned from other virtual intergovernmental meetings, such as the first session of UNEA-5 and the Third Extraordinary

NOWPAP IGM. COBSEA Secretariat will prepare suggested meeting modalities, agenda items, and timelines accordingly.

6. The Secretariat informed countries that authorization to incur expenditure on the COBSEA Trust Fund in 2021 would be sought through email correspondence ('no-objections' modality). Authorization is required by UNEP so that Secretariat functions can be maintained until a budget for the 2021-2022 biennium is adopted by the IGM. It was recommended that a budget for the biennium 2021-2022 be drafted and circulated in the near future.
7. Views were further sought on conducting an in-person meeting of the Working Group on Marine Litter (WGML) immediately prior to an in-person IGM. Countries supported organizing virtual WGML consultations during the year and convening an in-person meeting when possible, so as to allow for preparation of items for consideration by the IGM. COBSEA Secretariat will propose timelines and agendas accordingly.

Envisaged IGM 25 agenda

6. COBSEA Secretariat gave an overview of matters to address at IGM 25, including standing agenda items, follow-up to outcomes of IGM 24 and issues arising from ongoing activities:
 - Report of the Executive Director including financial report
 - Biennial workplan and budget;
 - Modalities for evaluation of COBSEA Strategic Directions 2018-2022 as well as for development of new Strategic Directions, and respective budgetary provisions. The Secretariat will outline suggested process and key considerations for country input;
 - COBSEA institutional framework: including consideration of Indonesia's proposal to establish the Regional Capacity Centre for Clean Seas (RC3S) as a Regional Activity Centre (RAC) and discussion of potential additional RACs based on simple needs analysis to be prepared by Secretariat;
 - Implementation of Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter (RAP MALI) following up on IGM 24 resolution, including adopting a RAP MALI biennial workplan, adopting Terms of Reference for an Expert Group on Monitoring under the WGML; and establishment of the East Asian Seas Regional Node of Global Partnership on Marine Litter;
 - Finalization and adoption of the Outlook on COBSEA follow-up and review of ocean-related Sustainable Development Goals;
 - Matters arising from ongoing activities, including findings and recommendations of the marine and coastal spatial planning policy review as well as related activities, the UNEP/GEF project Implementing the Strategic Action Programme for the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand (SCS SAP), as well as potential new initiatives and project proposals that may be raised by countries e.g. in relation to addressing nutrient pollution, the post-2020 global biodiversity framework or other matters within COBSEA's purview.
8. Countries expressed broad agreement that these matters require follow-up and/or decision at IGM. Suggestions raised by countries included the importance of taking into consideration outcomes of UNEA 5 when formulating the agenda; to address national and regional readiness for possible global responses to marine litter and microplastics as well as pursuing formal discussion on circular economy. It was also suggested that COBSEA's mandate and role vis-à-vis the post-2020 global biodiversity framework should be discussed and defined. One country noted the need to clarify COBSEA's procedures for project development, approval and resource mobilization. Several countries noted the need of possible RACs to be financially sustainable to avoid reliance on the COBSEA Trust

Fund. The draft provisional IGM agenda will be circulated by the Secretariat, together with proposed modalities and timelines for the IGM.

9. COBSEA Secretariat sought views on intersessional work of the IGM Bureau, including guiding the Secretariat, e.g. in relation to the preparations for and organization of IGMs. No objections were expressed. Countries noted that this is in line with common praxis in intergovernmental fora; that more in-depth discussion on modalities and mandate of the Bureau would be needed; and that this could be pursued as a non-urgent matter for an in-person session of the IGM, based on draft information to be prepared by the Secretariat.
10. Views were sought on observer participation at IGM 25, and countries were encouraged to provide suggestions of potential observers for the upcoming IGM. Countries expressed support for continued observer participation in line with recent IGM practice and in accordance with UNEA rules of procedure.
11. Countries welcomed in principle inviting relevant countries in the region to attend the next IGM as observers (e.g. including additional coastal ASEAN countries and Australia), noting provisions of UNEA resolution 2/10 and the potential utility of such an exchange. Some countries noted the need for further in-country consultation on the matter.

COBSEA activities 2021

Marine Litter

12. Views were sought on the proposal put forward by Republic of Korea to prepare a COBSEA report on potential response options to marine litter and microplastics. In general, countries expressed support for the proposal. Some countries highlighted the importance of considering differences in country readiness and feasibility of response options such as a potential global agreement. One country noted that the use of the COBSEA Trust Fund depended on its current status. One country suggested that the activity should be approved at an IGM rather than through an email modality. COBSEA Secretariat will recirculate the proposal and request comments for further rounds of revision and consideration at the upcoming IGM.
13. COBSEA Secretariat informed countries that UNEP could, on request, support national legislative action related to marine litter based on national action plans. Expression of interest of countries to receive UNEP legal guidance will be invited shortly. The Secretariat will share outcomes of a scoping study UNEP is conducting to map existing legal frameworks on sea-based sources of marine litter in the East Asian Seas region, together with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The mapping exercise could inform further discussion through COBSEA on activities toward implementing RAP MALI Action 2. More information on these efforts will be shared in due course.
14. COBSEA Secretariat informed countries that further support towards demonstration site activities on integrated solid waste management and sharing of best practices in the region would likely become available, expanding on ongoing activities under the SEA circular project. This potential support by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) towards RAP MALI implementation was presented at the technical consultation of the WGML in June 2020. Further information and process to identify demonstration sites will be shared by the COBSEA Secretariat in due time.

15. SEA circular activities to support achievement of the RAP MALI continue in 2021, including support towards development of harmonized national marine litter monitoring programmes, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). A webinar will be held on 18 March 2021 to present initial findings of the monitoring inventory and invite additional country inputs. Other activities include conducting hotspot assessments of plastic waste leakage at city level and technical assistance for marine litter planning. The project also supports the development of the East Asian Seas Regional Node, including expanding a plastic pollution research database together with National University of Singapore and enhanced regional research networking. The Secretariat offered to provide regular updates on the SEA circular project to all COBSEA countries.
16. Several countries expressed tentative interest in the legal support offered by UNEP, in exploring demonstration sites on solid waste management including with a focus on islands, as well as hotspot assessments. Some countries noted that, for the time being, marine litter remains COBSEA's main working area, but that other substantive themes such as marine and coastal planning and management may be elevated further in the future.

Marine and Coastal Planning and Management

17. COBSEA Secretariat updated countries that the review of national and regional policy and legal frameworks is underway. A draft review report will be shared with COBSEA countries for input in due time. Findings stemming from this review will help shape further steps on MCSP action through COBSEA.
18. COBSEA Secretariat recalled that two virtual regional training workshops on Marine and Coastal Spatial Planning (MCSP) were carried out in November 2020 in collaboration with Blue Solutions Initiative. On basis of feedback received from participants, follow-up activities are being investigated including possible development of a community of practice across COBSEA countries, as a means to address priorities identified in trainings as well as in the policy review. This may include developing a network of demonstration sites. A draft concept note will be developed in collaboration with Blue Solutions Initiative and shared for review and input.
19. Countries expressed support for MCSP activities and interest in follow-up. One country enquired about coral reef conservation activities discussed 2020, noting it addressed an important topic. COBSEA Secretariat explained that it is being revised to more closely align with activities identified in COBSEA Strategic Directions 2018-2022. The revised activity would focus on efforts towards establishing a COBSEA network of Marine Protected Areas, and in this context may entail particular focus on critical habitats including coral reefs. The Secretariat will circulate further information on this in the near future, including the possibility of inviting expressions of interest from institutions in the region to conceptualize and develop the activity in greater detail.

Nutrient pollution

20. COBSEA Secretariat shared information on the nutrient pollution work initiated in December 2020 in collaboration with the Global Partnership on Nutrient management and on the basis of COBSEA Strategic Directions 2018-2022. A desk review is carried out by consultants through literature review and country consultation. An introductory webinar was held 14 January 2021 and a virtual workshop took place 3 March 2021 to vet outcomes of the draft study and discuss next steps. Countries yet to nominate national experts and provide input to the draft desk study were encouraged to do so.

21. Countries acknowledged the challenge of nutrient pollution in the region and the importance to focus on this topic. Several countries voiced strong support for the ongoing effort based on which further action on nutrient pollution could be pursued through COBSEA. A suggestion was made to focus primarily on regional rather than national settings and to ensure solutions and policy suggestions are clearly aligned with identified gaps. It was further suggested that responses should benefit local communities and include elements of public awareness.

Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework

22. COBSEA Secretariat shared information on the webinar series on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, and sought views from COBSEA countries on how to proceed with possible further activities, including possible formal consultation on COBSEA's role in relation to post-2020 framework development and implementation and consideration of this at IGM 25.
23. Some countries noted that their ministry or department is not the focal agency for the CBD and the post-2020 global biodiversity framework (GBF). In view of this, a workshop for COBSEA national focal points and CBD focal points to discuss issues pertaining to the GBF could be convened. The workshop would provide opportunity to share visions for how COBSEA can be leveraged in relation to the GBF, and identify a way forward. More information about this will be shared in due time. COBSEA Secretariat will also invite countries to share views during upcoming webinars.

Any Other Business

24. COBSEA Secretariat provided an update on financial status of the Trust Fund, thanked countries for payments made and informed countries that invoices for 2021 contributions would be sent in February 2021.
25. The COBSEA Secretariat noted that a request for a Junior Professional Officer (JPO) in the COBSEA Secretariat had been posted on UNEP's JPO portal. The Secretariat encouraged countries to consider supporting a JPO in the COBSEA Secretariat, which would considerably strengthen capacity of the Secretariat and enhance its work with countries.
26. The COBSEA Secretariat informed countries that a single summary note of all bilateral discussions would be prepared and circulated, and that follow up on country-specific matters would be pursued bilaterally.
27. Several countries noted the usefulness of the bilateral calls and encouraged the COBSEA Secretariat to follow up on specific items via email. Countries further recommended that the Secretariat prepare quarterly/half-yearly progress reports containing updates on COBSEA activities, e.g. drawing on the approach used in NOWPAP. The Secretariat welcomed this recommendation and will put in place a procedure for regular progress reporting.

Annex 1. Agenda

- 1. Opening**
Introductions; overview of meeting objective and agenda
- 2. Business continuity during COVID-19 - Overview of current situation**
Updates by the Secretariat
Updates by Countries
- 3. 25th Intergovernmental Meeting of COBSEA**
Location and timing including COVID-contingencies
Envisaged IGM 25 agenda
Procedural work and participation
- 4. COBSEA activities 2021**
Marine litter
Marine and coastal planning and management
Nutrient pollution
Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework
- 5. Any Other Business**

Annex 2. Participants and meeting dates

Cambodia:

9th February 2021

Mr. Kim Nong	Deputy Secretary General for National Committee for Coastal Management and Development
Mr. Sreng Sophal	Department of Marine and Coastal Zone Conservation
Mr. Than Monomoyith	Department of Marine and Coastal Zone Conservation, Ministry of Environment

People's Republic of China

9th March 2021

Mr. Pei Xiangbin	Director, Department of Marine Ecology and Environment, Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE)
Ms. Liu Guozhi	Director Level, Department of International Cooperation, MEE
Ms. Fu Yulin	Senior Programme Manager, Department of International Cooperation, MEE
Mr. Yu Yunjun	Research Scientist, South China Institute of Environmental Sciences, MEE

Indonesia:

11th February 2021

Mr. Dida Migfar Ridha	Director of Coastal and Marine Pollution and Degradation Control Ministry of Environment and Forestry
Ms. Aditya Yuniarti	Head of Environmental Quality Standards Section, Directorate of Coastal and Marine Pollution and Degradation Control—Directorate General of Environmental Pollution and Degradation Control
Mr. Tedi Bagus Prasetyo Mulyo	Programme and Cooperation Officer Directorate of Coastal and Marine Pollution and Degradation Control—Directorate General of Environmental Pollution and Degradation Control
Ms. Nirwana Sari	Environmental Impact Control Officer Directorate of Coastal and Marine Pollution and Degradation Control—Directorate General of Environmental Pollution and Degradation Control

Mr. Aditya Krisna Laharjana

Staff at the Regional Capacity Center for Clean Seas

Republic of Korea:

1st February 2021

Mr. KIM, Tae Soo

Second Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Mr. HA, MyeongSeon

Second Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Ms. KIM, Hyung Won

Deputy Director, Ministry of Ocean & Fisheries

Mr. Sumin Song

Associate, International Affairs Team
Korea Marine Environment Management Corporation

Malaysia:

2nd February 2021

Mr. Eddy Mazuaansyah Bin Mohd Ali Murad

Deputy Undersecretary
Ministry of Environment & Water

Ms. Nor Azlina Baharum

Principal Assistant Secretary
Ministry of Environment & Water

Mr. Muhammad Ammar Mohd Ghause

Assistant Secretary
Ministry of Environment & Water

Ms. Malisa Mat Noor

Assistant Secretary
Ministry of Environment & Water

Philippines:

4th February 2021

Ms. Consolacion Crisostomo

Planning Officer V
Chief, Planning, Policy and Program
Development Division
Environmental Management Bureau
Department of Environment and Natural
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Ms. Michiko Sibunga

Engineer II, Water Quality Management Section
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Ms. Regina Eugenio

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Singapore:
1st February 2021

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Ms. Siti Aisyah binte Mohamad Firoz
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Thailand:
3rd February 2021

Mr. Ukkrit Satapoomon
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Ms. Sumana Kajonwattanakul
Director of the Marine and Coastal Resources
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Ms. Vararin Vongpanich
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Department of Marine and Coastal Resources

Ms. Saowalak Winyoonuntakul
Foreign Relations Officer (Senior Professional
Level) Strategy and Planning Division
Department of Marine and Coastal Resources

Ms. Chanokphon Jantharakhantee
Fishery Biologist (Professional Level)
Coastal Resources Conservation Division
Department of Marine and Coastal Resources

Ms. Paweena Srisawetichot
Foreign Relations Officer
Strategy and Planning Division
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Viet Nam

23 February 2021

Mr. Luu Anh-Duc

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and Environment (MONRE)

Mr. Tran Van Hung

Department of Science, Technology and
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Vietnam Administration of Seas and Islands
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Participation from COBSEA Secretariat

Mr. Jerker Tamelander

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Ms. Natalie Harms

Programme Officer

Ms. Katrin Eitrem Holmgren

Associate Programme Officer

Ms. Krittika Kleesuwan

COBSEA Programme Assistant