

Biographical Note

Noeleen Heyzer

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific



At the end of August 2007, the Secretary-General of the United Nations appointed Noeleen Heyzer (Singapore) as Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific at the level of Under-Secretary-General. She is the first woman to occupy this position.

Since taking office, Ms. Heyzer has championed institutional change and development effectiveness positioning ESCAP as the regional hub assisting countries to build the economic and social foundations for inclusive and sustainable societies in the Asia Pacific region. She has been cultivating regional co-operation and strong partnerships to mobilize support and harness new energies to address shared development concerns, striving for common prosperity, social progress, stability and ecological sustainability in a region challenged by high growth with growing inequalities and persistent poverty.

Before her appointment to ESCAP, Ms. Heyzer was the first Executive Director from the South to head the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Through her leadership, UNIFEM assisted over 100 countries to formulate and implement legislation and policies to realize women's security and rights. This resulted, for example, in changes in inheritance laws for women, better working conditions for migrant workers, the inclusion of women as full citizens in the constitution of Afghanistan and as full participants in several peace negotiations and electoral processes. Ms. Heyzer also played a critical role in addressing violence against women and in the Security Council's adoption of the landmark resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security and undertook extensive missions to conflict-affected countries worldwide. She led UNIFEM's restructuring to maximize performance. Consequently, UNIFEM increased its resources tenfold, strengthened its ground presence and successfully advocated to put issues affecting women high on the agenda of the whole United Nations system.

Ms. Heyzer served on numerous boards and advisory committees of international organizations, including the UNDP Human Development Report, the UNDP Eminent Persons Group on Trade and Sustainable Development. She convened and chaired the International Women's Commission for a Just and Sustainable Palestinian-Israeli Peace, was on the High-Level Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding chaired by Nobel Laureate Prof. Amartya Sen. Ms. Heyzer successfully mobilized private sector partners such as Macy's, CISCO, and the Calvert Investment Fund to provide high value employment and market access to women and youth in conflict and tsunami-affected areas, and to the Arab States, as well as to set new standards for ethical investment.

Ms. Heyzer has received several awards for leadership, including the UNA-Harvard Leadership Award, the Woman of Distinction Award from the UN-NGO Committee on the Status of Women, the National Council for Research on Women (NCRW) "Women Who Make a Difference" Award in 2005, Women of the Year Award (2007) by the Singapore Press Holdings, and the Dag Hammarskjöld Medal in 2004, given to "a person who has promoted, in action and spirit, the values that inspired Dag Hammarskjöld as Secretary-General of the United Nations and generally in his life: compassion, humanism and commitment to international solidarity and cooperation". In recognition of her contribution to women, peace and justice, Ms. Heyzer was among the nominees for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005.

Ms. Heyzer received a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Arts from the University of Singapore, and a doctorate in social sciences from Cambridge University in the United Kingdom.