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## Regional cooperation

### **Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019–2020**

#### **Note by the Secretary-General**

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith a summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific for the period 2019–2020.



## **Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019–2020**

### *Summary*

At the start of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development, Asia and the Pacific will need to accelerate progress to meet its ambitions by 2030. The coronavirus disease pandemic and its repercussions are likely to further complicate the trajectory of sustainable development in the region. The present report contains the latest data and analysis as well as an overview of the work carried out by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in the past year in advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in responding to the pandemic and its impacts in the region.

The Economic and Social Council may wish to comment on the work of the Commission and take note of the present document.

## I. Introduction

1. The Asia-Pacific region stands at a crossroads at the outset of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development. Economic growth over the past two decades has brought prosperity, but the region has not yet found a sustainable and inclusive path. The economic prosperity of the region is increasingly overshadowed by rising inequality, the exclusion of vulnerable groups, a lack of social protection, environmental degradation and increased vulnerability to climate-induced disasters. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has served to further expose and exacerbate ingrained inequalities and vulnerabilities and is likely to have adverse impacts on the region's future trajectory towards sustainable development.

2. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has been providing support to its member States to identify and carry out accelerated actions in line with the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific. The Commission continues to use its position as an intergovernmental platform to champion the follow-up and review of norms, standards and regional actions. It also continues to use its knowledge products to spotlight entry points for accelerated actions in a wide range of areas, such as disaster risk reduction, sustainable urbanization and the protection and sustainable use of oceans. The Commission has tailored technical support to member States, in particular through capacity-building in areas such as graduation from the category of least developed countries, the use of data in policymaking, and infrastructure financing.

3. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission has carried out rapid analyses of impacts and policy responses to contribute to system-wide global and regional assessments and responses in the context of the United Nations framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19. Similarly, ESCAP is repurposing its work programme in support of action in the following key areas: (a) stimulating economies through fiscal and monetary measures that are in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement; (b) protecting people, especially the most vulnerable and those most affected by the pandemic, including through social protection policies and support for small and medium-sized enterprises; and (c) restoring and building the resilience of supply chains through regional and subregional coordination and the promotion of connectivity in trade, transport, energy and information and communications technology. Those action areas will be implemented under the principle of "building back better". In that regard, the Commission will employ its convening authority as an intergovernmental platform to collaborate with other United Nations development system entities at the regional level and will partner with subregional intergovernmental organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, as well as other stakeholders.

4. The present report contains an overview of the work carried out by ESCAP in the past year in partnership with all relevant stakeholders, including Governments, entities within the United Nations development system, development banks, civil society, communities and the business sector.

## II. Advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region

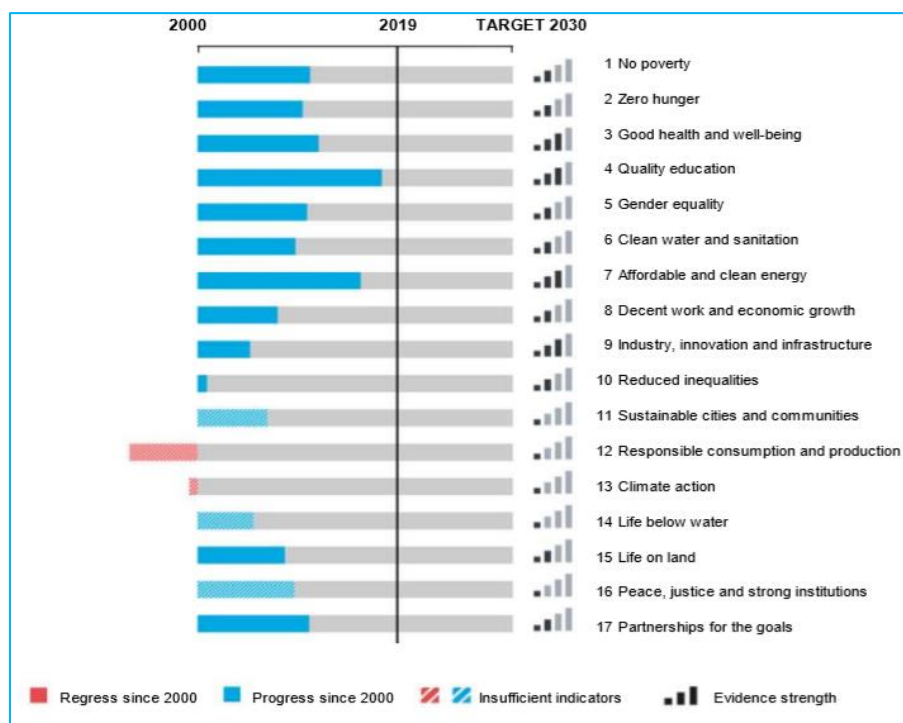
### A. Assessment of progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific

5. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, neither the Asia-Pacific region as a whole nor its subregions were on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (see figure). The region has made strong progress with regard to some Goals, such as Goal 1 (no poverty) and Goal 4 (quality education), but, at the same time, there has been little progress in respect of Goal 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), Goal 10 (reducing inequalities), Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and Goal 14 (life below water).

6. The region is regressing with regard to Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production) and Goal 13 (climate action). Asia-Pacific countries continue to be responsible for more than half of global greenhouse gas emissions. The region is also home to the countries most prone to the impacts of climate change. Owing to disasters, progress in poverty reduction is slowing down and, in many cases, reversing course, while inequality continues to rise.

7. Moreover, many groups of people continue to encounter structural barriers to equal opportunities and equal participation in socioeconomic and political life. For example, while many Asia-Pacific member States have laws that protect women and girls from discrimination and promote gender equality, women and girls in the region continue to face gender-based violence, harassment and trafficking in persons.

#### Snapshot of progress towards the achievement of the Goals in Asia and the Pacific, 2019



Source: *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F 10).

## B. Regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific

### Leaving no one behind

8. Leaving no one behind is a central commitment of the 2030 Agenda. For many people in Asia and the Pacific, quality of life has improved. However, the divide between groups is widening. In response, ESCAP has continued to drive transformative actions to close the gender gap and to ensure equal rights for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

9. With the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, world leaders made a historic commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. Since then, more women have been able to gain access to high-quality education, achieve higher educational outcomes and participate in socioeconomic life in Asia and the Pacific. Yet progress has been slow, and patterns of inequality persist. In 2019, the average representation of women in lower or single houses of parliament in Asia and the Pacific was 20 per cent, lagging behind the global average of 25 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Women are also more likely to work in vulnerable settings, with approximately 64 per cent of women workers employed in the informal sector.

10. In that context, ESCAP conducted a regional review of progress in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in Asia and the Pacific, in cooperation with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) (see ESCAP/MCBR/2019/1). At the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+25 Review, held in Bangkok from 27 to 29 November 2019, member States adopted the forward-looking Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing+25 Review (see ESCAP/76/8/Add.1), in which they recognized women as key contributors and vital agents in combating poverty and inequalities and called upon Governments to ensure women's economic empowerment and inclusive social protection systems, public services and infrastructure, and to transform negative gender norms.

11. With regard to lifting barriers to women's economic participation and leadership, ESCAP has been leading a project on catalysing women's entrepreneurship, in cooperation with the United Nations Capital Development Fund. The project, implemented in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa and Viet Nam, contributes to breaking down the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, with a focus on three interconnected areas of influence: policy and advocacy; innovative financing; and information and communications technology and business skills.

12. At the core of the secretariat's work on disability-inclusive development is the Incheon Strategy to "Make the Right Real" for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific. In 2019, in its biennial analysis of disability issues, ESCAP highlighted that 690 million persons with disabilities were still facing numerous barriers to participation, and increased investment in accessibility was required to narrow the gaps.<sup>2</sup> That was also the theme of the fifth session of the Working Group on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013–2022, held in 2019.

13. The implementation of the Incheon Strategy was further reviewed at the Regional Forum on Advancing Disability-inclusive Development through the Beijing

<sup>1</sup> *Pathways to Influence: Promoting the Role of Women's Transformative Leadership to Achieve the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.4).

<sup>2</sup> *Disability at a Glance 2019: Investing in Accessibility in Asia and the Pacific – Strategic Approaches to Achieving Disability-inclusive Sustainable Development* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.5).

Action Plan to Accelerate the Implementation of the Incheon Strategy, held by ESCAP and the China Disabled Persons' Federation in December 2019. The Forum underlined the need for technical support in harmonizing international and regional frameworks for disability-inclusive development with national plans and policies. To that end, the secretariat has been providing policy advice and technical support to strengthen the capacities for disability assessment and data collection in countries such as Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Micronesia (Federated States of), Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

14. Recognizing the important role of social protection in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the region, the Committee on Social Development of ESCAP requested the secretariat, in collaboration with other United Nations entities, to explore and develop a modality for strengthening regional cooperation on social protection. To that end, ESCAP, in partnership with the International Labour Organization, established a group of government experts that led to the dissemination of a draft regional action plan on social protection in Asia and the Pacific to all ESCAP members and associate members for further feedback and discussion.

15. The secretariat also developed practical methodologies and tools to assist in national policymaking to leave no one behind. Innovative methodologies, including a classification regression tree analysis and a dissimilarity index, were developed using data from nationally representative household surveys and disseminated to Governments and national stakeholders. At the national level, the methodologies were applied in capacity-building exercises to assist the policymakers of member States in North and Central Asia to identify the furthest behind and measure inequality of opportunity with regard to a wide range of basic services. A social protection toolbox was also developed as an interactive assessment tool for policymakers. Besides enabling the sharing of more than 100 good practices and electronic learning guides, it supports policymakers in identifying coverage gaps at the country level and devising steps to close them based on the steps being taken in other countries to fill similar gaps.

16. Reaching the furthest behind requires the inclusion of hard-to-reach and marginalized groups in registration systems. Thirty-eight midterm progress reviews were completed at the national level as part of the midterm assessment of the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, facilitated by the secretariat, the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific and development partners. There have been notable improvements in birth registration, particularly in South Asia. However, registration of the hardest-to-reach and marginalized groups remains a challenge.

### **Disaster risk reduction and resilience**

17. Asia and the Pacific continues to be hit by disasters in an environment of increasing complexity and uncertainty. According to the *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2019: The Disaster Riskscape across Asia-Pacific – Pathways for Resilience, Inclusion and Empowerment*, average annual economic losses stemming from disasters amount to \$675 billion when taking into account both rapid and slow-onset events.<sup>3</sup> In addition, disasters, inequality and poverty are intricately linked, and investment in resilience has not been sufficient to offset disaster losses.

18. In the report on its sixth session, held in Bangkok from 28 to 30 August 2019, the Committee on Disaster Risk Reduction underlined the importance of deepening analytical research to support risk-informed policy decisions and respond to the changing geography and intensification of disaster risks. The Committee recommended that the Commission scale up regional cooperation to complement

<sup>3</sup> United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.12.

national efforts in reducing disaster risks and promoting the use of space applications for disaster risk reduction and resilience to support high disaster risk, low-capacity countries (ESCAP/CDR/2019/3).

19. Against the backdrop of persistent drought in South-East Asia, ESCAP and ASEAN presented a study, entitled *Ready for the Dry Years: Building Resilience to Drought in South-East Asia – With a Focus on Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Viet Nam: 2020 Update*, at the thirty-fourth meeting of the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management, held in April 2019. The study has led to an ongoing effort to develop an ASEAN-level approach to drought and resilience-building. At the national level, ESCAP, as Co-Chair of the thematic working group on disaster risk reduction and resilience, coordinated a joint United Nations technical mission to the Islamic Republic of Iran in October 2019, at the request of the Government, to support the development of a national response strategy, conduct a post-disaster needs assessment and organize a workshop on flood risk management.

20. In order to advance the use of digitally enabled geospatial tools for disaster risk reduction and resilience, ESCAP has been assisting member States in the implementation of the Asia-Pacific Plan of Action on Space Applications for Sustainable Development (2018–2030). Support was provided to the Governments of Kyrgyzstan and other countries of Central Asia to integrate geospatial data into drought monitoring and early warning systems.

21. In 2019, the Statistical Commission considered the Disaster-related Statistics Framework, which was developed to guide national statistical offices and disaster management agencies in producing comprehensive disaster statistics that would be comparable over time and between countries, and consistent with the monitoring requirements for the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. The Statistical Commission expressed appreciation for the Disaster-related Statistics Framework as the starting point for the development of international guidance for disaster-related statistics (see [E/2019/24-E/CN.3/2019/34](#)). To advance the work, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction and ESCAP will co-chair a global inter-agency and expert group under the auspices of the Statistical Commission.

### **Climate change and management of natural resources**

22. The *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020*<sup>4</sup> serves to highlight the region’s striking lack of progress on climate action for environmental sustainability, the consequences of which are most acutely felt in cities throughout the region. According to analysis conducted by ESCAP in cooperation with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the European Union, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Rockefeller Foundation, the United Nations Development Programme and other partners, with the region having become majority urban for the first time in human history in 2019, its cities are facing the four interconnected challenges of unsustainable natural resource management, climate change impacts, disaster risks and rising inequalities.<sup>5</sup> Four integrated priority areas were proposed: urban and territorial planning; strengthening resilience to future risks; supporting the effective interplay between people and technology; and financing tools. The analysis was further utilized at national urban policy dialogues, including the First Cambodia Urban Forum, held in November 2019 with the support of ESCAP.

23. The analysis helped to set the context for the Seventh Asia-Pacific Urban Forum, which was held in October 2019 and attended by more than 5,000 participants. The

<sup>4</sup> United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F 10.

<sup>5</sup> *The Future of Asian and Pacific Cities 2019: Transformative Pathways towards Sustainable Urban Development* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.1).

Forum concluded with the launch of the Penang Platform for Sustainable Urbanization. As a follow-up measure, ESCAP, UN-Habitat and other partners launched the Asia-Pacific Mayors Academy to build the capacity of new mayors to implement sustainable urban development solutions in support of the New Urban Agenda and the 2030 Agenda.

24. Tackling the climate emergency depends critically on decarbonizing economies. According to the *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2020: Towards Sustainable Economies*,<sup>6</sup> if a business-as-usual, resource- and carbon-intensive trajectory is pursued, average annual losses could amount to \$675 billion, with attendant economic instability, loss of human capital and deteriorating ecosystems. To achieve a low-carbon transition, Governments should take the lead by eliminating fossil fuel subsidies, introducing carbon pricing and greening the financial systems.

25. To that end, the secretariat initiated a multi-country partnership to improve the climate readiness of countries in South-East Asia, focusing on climate finance, climate governance and the vertical integration of climate action. The partnership was launched with the support of the Korean International Cooperation Agency during the twenty-fifth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Madrid in December 2019.

26. At its seventy-fifth session, ESCAP adopted its resolution [75/4](#) on strengthening regional cooperation to tackle air pollution challenges in Asia and the Pacific. That enabled it to establish an inter-agency working group to coordinate United Nations system-wide support for member States and identify joint activities to accelerate efforts to combat air pollution throughout the region. The secretariat also initiated a project supported by the Republic of Korea to assist with the development of city-level air pollution mitigation plans in three countries.

27. In support of the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 14, the secretariat is closing data gaps through partnerships and support for the production of integrated data and statistics related to oceans. Five member States – China, Malaysia, Samoa, Thailand and Viet Nam – piloted the compilation of ocean accounts in 2019. Draft technical guidance was developed and will be considered by the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting. In addition, in 2019, the secretariat and the University of New South Wales co-founded the Global Ocean Accounts Partnership (see [www.oceanaccounts.org](http://www.oceanaccounts.org)). The Partnership, which held its first global dialogue in November 2019, brings together international institutions, research organizations and other stakeholders to develop and promote holistic ocean accounts for sound decision-making with regard to the oceans.

28. In order to facilitate urgent actions for the oceans, the Commission will focus on the theme of regional cooperation on oceans at its seventy-sixth session, in May 2020. In the theme study for the session, ESCAP highlighted the lack of data and statistics on the oceans, the growing demand for moving towards inclusive and green maritime shipping, the gaps in fisheries management and the mounting pressure of marine plastic pollution.

## **Connectivity for the 2030 Agenda**

### *Trade and investment*

29. International trade was recognized in the 2030 Agenda as an engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction that contributes to sustainable development.

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.16.



That premise has faced a serious test since 2018. In 2019, export growth slowed as a result of the global economic downturn and unresolved trade and political tensions.<sup>7</sup>

30. To complicate the situation further, the COVID-19 pandemic will have a significant impact on trade in the region in 2020, especially on tourism and travel. The pandemic has also unleashed nationalistic beggar-thy-neighbour policies in the region, with many member States struggling to secure sufficient medical equipment and resorting to export bans. In some of the main food-producing countries, export bans on certain food products have also been instituted.

31. In that context, sustaining regional cooperation is critical to curb protectionism and move towards a more efficient multilateral trading system. The Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific serves to complement that work.

32. In support of the implementation of the Framework Agreement, ESCAP and ADB prepared a report in which they provided an overview of the progress in the implementation of trade facilitation in the region and an in-depth analysis to help to bridge the gaps in trade finance. The report also served to highlight that cross-border trade digitization would help all firms in Asia and the Pacific, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises. The further implementation of digital trade facilitation measures could reduce trade costs by an average of 16 per cent, almost double the current worldwide average tariff rate.

33. There has also been a significant rise in the number of non-tariff measures.<sup>8</sup> While almost half of those measures in Asia and the Pacific directly and positively address the Sustainable Development Goals, the trade costs associated with the measures are estimated to be double those associated with tariffs. Therefore, non-tariff measures have become a key concern for traders and policymakers in their efforts to ensure that trade can continue to be an effective means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

34. The policy analysis and recommendations contained in the report also helped to set the context for the Ninth Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum, held by ESCAP, ADB and other partners in New Delhi from 17 to 19 September 2019. At the Forum, discussions among policymakers, think tanks and the private sector brought to light opportunities and challenges associated with trade digitization in the context of the sustainable development of the region.

35. In order to support national analysis of bilateral trade flows, tariffs and regional trade agreements, ESCAP launched the Trade Intelligence and Negotiation Adviser tool in 2019 (see <https://tina.negotiatetrade.org>). The tool helps trade negotiators to prepare tariff request-and-offer lists used in bilateral negotiations on tariff concessions. It also helps to identify trade facilitation gaps to be addressed through cooperation between countries, using data from another ESCAP-led initiative, the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation.

### *Transport*

36. With the increase in population, economic growth and trading activities in Asia and the Pacific, the transport sector is pivotal to the region's sustainable development journey. According to ESCAP analysis, because the region's strong overall transport

<sup>7</sup> *Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Report 2019: Navigating Non-tariff Measures towards Sustainable Development* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.14).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

connectivity performance is driven by a few top performers, it hides significant variations across subregions and countries.<sup>9</sup>

37. At the same time, Asia had the highest growth in carbon dioxide emissions from the transport sector. The way forward will depend on the transition to seamless and inclusive connectivity through better-integrated infrastructure across modes of transport and the improved environmental performance of road transport.

38. To that end, ESCAP has been supporting member States to implement and further develop regional multilateral transport agreements, such as the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network, the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network and the Intergovernmental Agreement on Dry Ports. The secretariat facilitated regional dialogues and capacity-building on key issues pertaining to sustainable regional transport connectivity, including the harmonization of standards, the facilitation of international rail transport, the management and operation of intermodal transport and corridors, and sustainable port development.

39. The secretariat also developed a sustainable urban transport index. In 2019, it was used to assess urban mobility in five cities, in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Mongolia. Advisory services were provided to cities and countries to facilitate the collection and analysis of data and the preparation of city assessment reports.

40. Road traffic safety is an important policy priority, given the increasing trend in the number of road traffic fatalities in the region. The Regional Road Safety Goals, Targets and Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2016–2020, administered by ESCAP, serve as important guidelines for policy formulation and implementation, as well as progress assessment. The secretariat and its development partners have been facilitating ongoing discussions on establishing an Asia-Pacific road safety observatory as a regional forum focused on road safety data, policies and practices.

41. Smart transport systems have garnered increasing interest among member States. In that regard, ESCAP is supporting the development of a regional road map for sustainable smart transport systems in response to a request to strengthen activities related to intelligent transport systems that was made at the expert group meeting and regional meeting on intelligent transport systems development and operation for sustainable transport systems in Asia and the Pacific, held in April 2019. The secretariat has worked closely with national stakeholders in North and Central Asia and South-East Asia to collectively evaluate the potential of shifting to smart transport technologies with a view to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions.

### *Energy*

42. With Asia and the Pacific having become a vibrant economic hub for the world, countries in the region are confronted with a series of challenges in securing the energy to meet their increasing needs into the future. The region's energy demands are expected to increase by 37 per cent between 2018 and 2030.<sup>10</sup> As the region continues to rely on fossil fuel to meet that rapid rise, countries will continue to face looming environmental consequences and climate change impacts.

43. Analysis of progress towards the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 7 is mixed. Between 2010 and 2017, an additional 305 million people were provided with access to electricity, but 43.7 per cent of the population in Asia and the Pacific

<sup>9</sup> *Review of Sustainable Transport Connectivity in Asia and the Pacific 2019: Addressing the Challenges for Freight Transport* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.2).

<sup>10</sup> *Electricity Connectivity Roadmap for Asia and the Pacific: Strategies towards Interconnecting the Region's Grids* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.9).

still relied on polluting and harmful cooking solutions in 2017 (see ESCAP/CE/2019/1). The region has made little progress in increasing the share of renewable energy and improving energy efficiency. Meeting growing energy demand while at the same time achieving Goal 7 will require reducing fossil fuels in the energy mix, replacing them with renewable energy sources and substantially improving energy sustainability.

44. To assist in the national-level implementation of measures to achieve Goal 7, the secretariat developed a tool for national energy planning that helps stakeholders to examine national targets in the energy sector; perform modelling and analysis in connection with the targets of Goal 7 and nationally determined contributions in accordance with the Paris Agreement; and conduct policy analysis to bridge gaps. The tool was piloted in Bangladesh, Georgia and Indonesia, and peer-reviewed by a group of external experts.

45. To promote energy connectivity, a regional road map on power system connectivity, entitled “Promoting cross-border electricity connectivity for sustainable development”, was developed in 2019. The regional road map, facilitated by ESCAP, provides the framework for creating a pan-Asian interconnected grid that offers a more reliable, affordable and sustainable electricity supply. It will serve to integrate more renewable energy generation into the power grid, underpin the region’s social and economic development and assist the move to a low-carbon energy system.

46. At its second session, held from 9 to 11 October 2019, the Committee on Energy emphasized the need for the secretariat to continue to support member States, especially countries with special needs, to adopt the national expert Sustainable Development Goal tool for energy planning for use in developing their national road maps. The regional road map on power system connectivity was welcomed by the Committee and will be submitted for the consideration of the Commission in 2021.

#### *Information and communications technology*

47. The region continued to make progress in bringing mobile connectivity to its people. It is estimated that approximately 95 per cent of the population now has physical access to a third-generation mobile network. However, the quality and affordability of the networks are not guaranteed. Investments in fixed-line networks continued to lag. In addition, in at least 18 countries in the region, fixed-line Internet connectivity was available to less than 2 per cent of the population. A lack of bandwidth availability and unaffordable subscriptions continued to constrain people’s ability to access the Internet and effectively use more content-rich applications. Conversely, hyperconnectivity accelerated in high-income countries such as the Republic of Korea, the first country in the world to launch fifth-generation connectivity.

48. The new digital reality ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it an increasing concern that the digital divide will amplify inequalities. In response, ESCAP, through its Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative, continued to conduct activities aimed at enhancing cross-border connectivity for universal access to affordable and reliable broadband Internet, especially in the most disconnected subregions. In the Pacific subregion and in Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Viet Nam, activities were focused on improving Internet-traffic management. Feasibility studies were conducted on establishing a common Internet exchange point in the Pacific and the above-mentioned countries to reduce the transit costs of traffic exchanged internationally and to increase data transfer speeds. In the landlocked countries of North and Central Asia, analysis, policy dialogue and capacity-building activities were carried out on the co-deployment of

fibre-optic cable along passive infrastructure as a cost-effective way to bring connectivity to underserved, geographically remote communities.

### **III. Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda**

#### **A. Ambition beyond growth: towards sustainable economies in Asia and the Pacific**

49. According to ESCAP analysis, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic growth of the region's developing countries had slowed considerably, from 5.3 per cent in 2018 to 4.3 per cent in 2019.<sup>11</sup> In the light of the pandemic and the ongoing containment measures, uncertainties regarding the region's productive activities continue to mount, with spillover effects on trade, tourism and finance.

50. The pandemic has exacerbated sustainable development challenges in an unprecedented manner. Besides upending people's lives, COVID-19 is wreaking havoc on already weak economies. A region-wide economic recession in 2020 cannot be ruled out, nor can the possibility of financial crises. Either outcome would have major implications for vulnerable population groups and households, some of which are already bordering on poverty.

#### **B. Data and statistics**

51. Reliable and timely statistics are indispensable for evidence-based decision-making and are of principal value for transparency, accountability and inclusive societies. According to the *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020*, data availability for measuring progress on the Sustainable Development Goal indicators in the region increased from 25 per cent in 2017 to 42 per cent in 2019. However, data availability is still nil for one third of the indicators in the region. Notably, availability is very limited on the Goals where there has been slow progress, highlighting the need to strengthen the policy-data nexus.

52. In that context, in 2019, ESCAP launched an Asia-Pacific Sustainable Development Goals gateway, which provides access to available data and statistics on the current status and progress towards the achievement of the 17 Goals (see <http://data.unescap.org>). The Gateway is fully functional and uses the same official data collected by the national statistical offices and compiled by the custodian agencies, without interfering with the clear data flow between them. In 2020, the Gateway was further developed to include improved data visualization, national Goal profiles and information on Goal data availability at the national level, as well as a regional progress assessment. That assessment, which is also available in the annual *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report*, served as the basis for identifying regional issue-based coalitions for system-wide collaboration. At the request of the resident coordinators, national progress assessments were made available to assist in the development of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks in 2019 in countries including Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Timor-Leste and Turkmenistan.

53. At the national level, ESCAP has been providing advisory services and capacity-building support to strengthen national statistical systems and mainstream the Goals into national development plans. The secretariat supported national statistical offices

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<sup>11</sup> *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2020*.

to produce data for priority Goal indicators, to strengthen the quality of statistics used to calculate multiple indicators, such as gross domestic product, and to increase the availability of statistics for the data-poor environment-focused Goals by implementing the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting.

54. In addition, ESCAP assisted national efforts to better use data and statistics for policymaking. A tool entitled “Every policy is connected” was developed to facilitate dialogues between policymakers and statistical offices to better use data and statistics in national development plans. The tool was piloted in Armenia, the Philippines, Samoa and Sri Lanka to allow for more structured and inclusive dialogues between data users and producers in the development of comprehensive policies such as women’s empowerment plans.

55. The secretariat is supporting the implementation, follow-up and review of key regional frameworks such as the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. The implementation of the Regional Action Framework is monitored by the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, which comprises representatives of 22 Governments and 8 development partners and is coordinated by ESCAP. At its fifth meeting, held in 2019, the Regional Steering Group addressed the progress that member States were making in the preparation of their midterm reports on the implementation of the Framework. In following up on the outcomes of the meeting, ESCAP and development partners provided technical support to national statistical offices, civil registration offices and ministries of health to ensure high-quality responses and continue the preparatory work for the Second Ministerial Conference, to be held in 2020.

56. The secretariat’s work in the statistics field is amplified by the strong regional statistical community convened by the Committee on Statistics. In 2019, the Commission’s endorsement of the Declaration on Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No One Behind highlighted statistics as a development issue. Central to implementing the Declaration is the empowerment of national statistical offices to lead national statistical systems, and the transformation of statistical institutions to become leaders in innovation and modernization, which will be the focus of the Asia-Pacific Statistics Week in 2020.

57. In cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund, ESCAP has developed the Asia-Pacific indicator framework for monitoring progress towards the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and of the commitments contained in the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development, in the context of the 2030 Agenda. The Asia-Pacific indicator framework, drawn primarily from the Sustainable Development Goals and other internationally agreed frameworks and data sets, serves as the basis for voluntary regular monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration upon its endorsement by member States.

### C. Finance

58. In response to the need to assess investment requirements and financial strategies for implementing the 2030 Agenda, ESCAP designed a framework for calculating investment requirements to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in the economies of Asia and the Pacific. The framework was presented in the *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2019: Ambitions beyond Growth*,<sup>12</sup> in which the annual investment gap of \$1.5 trillion for developing countries

<sup>12</sup> United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.6.

in the region to achieve the Goals by 2030 was highlighted. The secretariat is developing a guidebook for assessing investment needs to achieve the Goals, which will serve as the basis for developing financing strategies and mainstreaming the Goals into economic planning and policymaking.

59. In the report on its second session, held in Bangkok from 6 to 8 November 2019 (ESCAP/CMPF/2019/6), the Committee on Macroeconomic Policy, Poverty Reduction and Financing for Development highlighted the need to build national capacities for implementing public-private partnership modalities for infrastructure financing and innovative finance. The Committee called for continued support for countries with special needs, as well as enhanced access of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises to finance.

60. The secretariat provided technical assistance to the Government of Bhutan throughout 2019 to support its plan to issue a sovereign green bond. With support from ESCAP, the Committee on Government Bond Issuance was established in Bhutan to work on key implementation issues, such as the amount of funds to be raised, potential bondholders, bond yields and maturity periods. The secretariat has also engaged investment banks and credit rating agencies to provide support for the work.

61. The Infrastructure Financing and Public-Private Partnership Network of Asia and the Pacific, established in 2018 in collaboration with the Government of China, continued to support countries to develop infrastructure financing strategies and public-private partnership projects, including through infrastructure regulatory frameworks and resilient infrastructure policies. By 2019, presentations on 23 early stage and pilot demonstration infrastructure projects from 19 countries had been made at meetings of the Network, with the facilitation of ESCAP, and the Network had published an overview of the infrastructure financing landscape and new strategic approaches for Asia and the Pacific.

62. The secretariat's knowledge products have been focused on the specific development challenges of countries with special needs related to structural transformation. In 2019, ESCAP produced a report in which it underscored the need for countries with special needs to provide decent employment through structural transformation to realize the socioeconomic aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>13</sup> In addition, analysis of the landlocked developing countries in Asia reveals the need for economic diversification and reduced dependency on extractive industries in order to accelerate structural transformation.<sup>14</sup>

63. The secretariat has also been delivering regional advisory services and capacity-building initiatives on graduation from the category of least developed countries. A series of capacity-building and consultation exercises was organized, with a focus on the graduation of member States in South Asia. The exercise allowed policymakers from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal to review the impact of graduation on existing flexibilities and other special and differential treatments for least developed countries established in World Trade Organization and regional trade agreements.

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<sup>13</sup> *Structural Transformation and its Role in Reducing Poverty: Asia-Pacific Countries with Special Needs Development Report* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.5).

<sup>14</sup> *Asia's Landlocked Developing Countries: Structural Transformation, Poverty Reduction and Financing for Development* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.3).

## **D. Technology**

64. Science, technology and innovation are recognized as important levers to realize the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda and ensure that no one is left behind, yet the promise of technology and innovation remains unfulfilled for the poor.

65. In that context, ESCAP has supported member States to formulate a range of policy initiatives that promote technology and innovation across the three dimensions of sustainable development. With ESCAP support, the Government of the Philippines has adopted a strategy to promote more inclusive innovations through a grass-roots approach. In addition, a more inclusive national policy on science, technology and innovation was introduced in Cambodia. Furthermore, ESCAP supported the Government of Mongolia to design an inclusive national development strategy for the digital age.

66. In 2019, ESCAP supported five ASEAN member States in efforts that led to the introduction and consideration of national measures to promote inclusive business models. The efforts were further promoted at the subregional level in the Leaders' Vision Statement on Partnership on Sustainability and the Chair's Statement at the thirty-fifth ASEAN Summit. The development of guidelines for inclusive business in ASEAN member States is included as a priority deliverable in the 2020 workplan of the ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises.

## **IV. Spotlight on the response to and recovery from the coronavirus disease pandemic in Asia and the Pacific**

67. Since the start of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has spread across the world at an alarming speed, severely disrupting economies and millions of lives on a sweeping scale. Countries in Asia and the Pacific, many of which are characterized by the concentration of economic activities, dense populations and urbanization, are badly affected by the unprecedented crisis. In its rapid response to the pandemic, ESCAP developed a regional assessment of impacts and policy responses as the crisis unfolded in the region. The analysis served as a basis for input to the report entitled "Shared responsibility, global solidarity: responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19". At the same time, the findings of the ESCAP assessment provided the context for a discussion on coordinated interventions of the United Nations development system to support the region's member States and United Nations country teams in the response to and recovery from the pandemic. Below is a snapshot of the key findings across the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

68. Key findings with regard to the economic impact of and policy responses to the pandemic include the following:

(a) The shock of COVID-19 with regard to both supply and demand has significantly threatened people's lives and the region's economic outlook, and short-term economic responses should prioritize people over economic recovery;

(b) Immediate and large fiscal measures, supported by targeted monetary easing, are required to contain COVID-19, cure people and ensure economic and financial stability;

(c) Governments should facilitate the expedient cross-border movement of essential medicines, medical equipment and teams, and other essential goods, and remove tariffs and non-tariff measures;

(d) Regional cooperation can provide additional avenues to respond to the pandemic, by establishing a regional and/or subregional public health emergency fund and coordinating debt relief measures.

69. Key findings with regard to the social impact of and policy responses to the pandemic include the following:

(a) Countries with established universal health care and universal social protection systems are best positioned to address the pandemic;

(b) Vulnerable population groups must be placed at the centre of all social policy reform packages in the short and medium terms;

(c) In the long term, Governments should invest to enhance emergency preparedness and strengthen social protection in order to enhance the resilience of economies and minimize the impact of future health emergencies;

(d) Digital connectivity is making social distancing without social isolation possible, but investments need to be stepped up to reduce the digital divide;

(e) Regional cooperation can promote enhanced collaboration on health-care-related research and development, so that vaccines and medicines can be developed quickly and made available for the benefit of all countries in the region.

70. Key findings with regard to the environmental impact of and policy responses to the pandemic include the following:

(a) Policy measures that are grounded in the commitment to sustainability, in key economic infrastructure areas such as transport, energy and telecommunications, not only will help to fight COVID-19, but also will enable the region to pursue its sustainable development and address climate change;

(b) The aim of government stimulus packages and the rationalization of fossil fuel subsidies should be to accelerate decarbonization and the greening of the economy, including sustainable mobility, and stimulus packages should not support business behaviours that lead to further environmental degradation;

(c) Regional cooperation remains vital in responding to the environmental dimension of the crisis to ensure that the outbreak and recovery are managed sustainably; without that, the region's capacity to recover will be undermined and negative fallout from the outbreak will be exacerbated;

(d) Regional cooperation on preserving wildlife can prevent and mitigate future pandemics, for example by collectively banning the illegal trade of wildlife, adopting international sanitary standards and working together on stopping habitat loss.

71. The secretariat is also working with Governments in Asia and the Pacific to strengthen policy measures for supporting women and vulnerable groups in the context of COVID-19. It has initiated steps to assess the impact of the pandemic on women entrepreneurs and provided policy advice to Governments on special assistance to women-led micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises. The secretariat has also been working with key partners to support resource mobilization for additional loans for such enterprises that are affected by the pandemic.

72. The secretariat is leading the provision of regional guidance on mainstreaming disability rights and inclusion in the response to COVID-19, including through a policy brief and an online resource database. Consultations with Governments and civil society organizations are under way to identify effective measures and approaches that address the specific challenges facing persons with disabilities in the context of the pandemic.



73. The secretariat has supported the development of the United Nations framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19. In that context, it is repurposing its work programme in support of action in three key areas: (a) stimulating economies through fiscal and monetary measures that are in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement; (b) protecting people, especially the most vulnerable and those most affected by the pandemic, including through social protection policies and support for small and medium-sized enterprises; and (c) restoring and building the resilience of supply chains through regional and subregional coordination and the promotion of connectivity in trade, transport, energy, and information and communications technology. Those action areas will be implemented under the principle of “building back better”. In that regard, the Commission will employ its convening authority as an intergovernmental platform to collaborate with other United Nations entities at the regional level and partner with other stakeholders.

## V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

74. At the heart of the 2030 Agenda is the ambition of transforming the world together. Partnerships are both a Sustainable Development Goal and an underlying principle of the overall ambition of the 2030 Agenda. Guided by the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP continues to foster partnerships at the subregional level with intergovernmental organizations, facilitate dialogue and coordinate actions among the United Nations development system entities at the regional level, engage with the private sector and serve as a bridge between the national and global policy discussions on the 2030 Agenda.

75. At the subregional level, ESCAP has engaged in dialogues with intergovernmental organizations on issues relevant to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. For example, ESCAP has been coordinating the implementation of the Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Partnership between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the United Nations (2016–2020). In 2019, the partnership resulted in the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue; the establishment of the ASEAN Resources Panel as one of the flagship initiatives of the complementarities road map for the period 2020–2025; and the development of the complementarities road map itself. Since the end of 2019, ESCAP has been facilitating the dialogue between the United Nations development system and the ASEAN secretariat to develop the next plan of action.

76. At the regional level, ESCAP and the Chair of the Regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group co-led the process of developing specific proposals for operationalizing the recommendations of the Secretary-General for the restructuring and reprofiling of the regional assets. Inter-agency working groups were established to take stock of the existing resources and expertise and identify forward-looking options for better utilizing regional assets in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

77. While the regional review of the United Nations development system reform process was under way in 2019, the Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism continued to facilitate cooperation across regional United Nations entities. In March 2019, for the first time, a meeting of the Mechanism was held back to back with the meeting of the regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group to reinforce the strategic coordination between the two bodies.

78. The substantive work of the Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism is focused on key areas of regional cooperation and carried out by seven thematic working groups. For example, the thematic working group on gender equality and women's empowerment provided substantive support in the preparation of the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+25 Review, such as inputs to communications strategy, the organization of side events and the selection of potential speakers. The thematic working group on disaster risk reduction and resilience delivered joint technical assistance at the country level, including in the context of the coordinated response to post-disaster assessment in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and advisory services during a joint technical mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In November 2019, the Regional United Nations Network on Migration for Asia and the Pacific was established to coordinate system-wide support to ESCAP member States in the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

79. Since the launch of the rapid response facility, ESCAP, in partnership with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the United Nations Development Programme and the resident coordinators, has been providing technical support to member States in the preparation and follow-up of voluntary national reviews. More than 15 member States from the region have been supported in the preparation of their reviews, including through innovative programmes such as the twinning programme, which paired Armenia with Kyrgyzstan and Georgia with Uzbekistan to facilitate learning and cooperation between member States preparing their first reviews and those preparing their second reviews. Best practices were highlighted at a regional peer-learning workshop during the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in 2019 and in a virtual discussion series on accelerating transformation in Asia and the Pacific in 2020.

80. At the subnational and local levels, ESCAP has been supporting cities in five countries – Cambodia, Fiji, Mongolia, the Philippines and Thailand – to identify relevant targets, indicators and analysis in developing policy actions to support the 2030 Agenda. In Cambodia, the project was showcased as an example of good practice for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 11 in the country's voluntary national review report, submitted to the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2019.

81. With regard to accelerating progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, ESCAP has engaged with the private sector to leverage its expertise and resources. The main mechanism for engagement with businesses in that regard is the ESCAP Sustainable Business Network, which brings together executives and representatives of leading businesses in the region to promote sustainable business practices, partner with Governments and enrich policy discussions. The annual Asia-Pacific Business Forum, co-organized by the secretariat and the Network, was held in Port Moresby on 21 and 22 June 2019 on the theme "Global goals, local opportunities". The Forum discussed how sustainable business solutions could help to meet the needs of rural and urban communities in Asia and the Pacific.

82. Another example of ESCAP partnering with the private sector to develop innovative solutions is the prototype Pacific Ocean accounting portal (see <https://portal-test-escap.hub.arcgis.com>). The joint initiative capitalized on the statistical expertise of ESCAP and the innovative geospatial data solutions of the Environmental Systems Research Institute. The aim of the prototype portal is to address the issue of fragmented and unharmonized ocean data by bringing together data in a user-centric and harmonized data centre. The prototype spatially integrates public data about the protection and use of the Pacific Ocean, such as data on ocean conditions and the use of ocean resources in the fisheries and tourism sectors.

83. Partnerships were developed with international development entities such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and the International Association for Public Participation to promote stakeholder engagement and a whole-of-society approach in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The partnerships resulted in an analysis of case studies on engaging vulnerable and marginalized groups to achieve the environment-related Sustainable Development Goals<sup>15</sup> and a practical planning and assessment tool for stakeholder engagement in the context of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>16</sup> The work informed a wider regional dialogue on stakeholder engagement and discussions on developing a regional network of experts to support the inclusive engagement of all stakeholders in environmental issues in Asia and the Pacific.

84. The Sustainable Development Goals Help Desk, a platform for regional knowledge-sharing, cultivated partnerships with more than 50 United Nations entities and more than 130 global and regional knowledge providers and training institutions to share knowledge products and services in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. On-site peer-learning sessions, hands-on training sessions and e-learning sessions on the Help Desk benefited more than 3,000 policymakers and stakeholders. Since the Help Desk was launched in 2018, its user base has grown to exceed 28,300 users, with more than 122,365 page views, in addition to 2,000 e-learners on the Help Desk e-learning platform and 1,700 members of the Sustainable Development Goal Community of Practice.

## VI. Conclusions

85. At the start of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development, the region is arriving at a critical juncture. Ample evidence has pointed to the need for transformative pathways, as the region's focus on short-term growth has brought about chronic development challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have significant adverse social impacts (health, education and food security) and economic impacts (jobs, employment, personal wages, business revenues and profits) in the region and increase the risk of slowing progress towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

86. The task ahead in 2020 is to support the region's response to and recovery from the impacts of the pandemic. Those efforts are not separate from but rather integral to the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda. They are part of the ambition to leave no one behind and build more inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate change, disasters, conflicts and many other national and transboundary challenges. The Commission will continue to support member States in realizing their commitments to accelerate progress and emerge from the crisis.

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<sup>15</sup> *Environmental Change through Participation: A Closer Look at How Inclusive Engagement Can Achieve Environmental Outcomes* (United Nations publication, ST/ESCAP/2864).

<sup>16</sup> ESCAP and International Association for Public Participation, "Creating a seat at the table: a stakeholder engagement planning and assessment tool for the 2030 Agenda". Available at <http://sdghelpdesk.unescap.org/node/1264> (accessed on 20 April 2020).