Regional cooperation in the economic, social and related fields

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

The present report is submitted to the Economic and Social Council in accordance with General Assembly resolution 1823 (XVII) and Council resolutions 1817 (LV) and 1998/46 (annex III). The COVID-19 pandemic is the defining crisis of our time. In addition to its grave human impact, it will have global economic and social impacts of unprecedented magnitude and scale. Strengthened multilateral policy coordination and cooperation both at the global and regional levels will be required to address the impacts of the crisis in the immediate and long run. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic will be the defining test of the international community’s determination to drive forward the 2030 Agenda and the Decade of Action to deliver on the SDGs. Against this background, the first part of the report focuses on demonstrating the value proposition of regional cooperation to contribute to an effective response to the COVID-19 crisis. On the basis of data and analysis generated by the Regional Commissions, the report summarizes the key socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 region by region and presents policy responses and solutions, highlighting the importance of regional cooperation and concerted action at regional and subregional levels. The second part of the report provides updates on developments and outcomes in selected areas of regional and interregional cooperation, including in the context of the repositioning of the UN development system.
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I. Policy and Analysis

A. The COVID-19 pandemic: regional analyses, policy responses and the role of regional cooperation.

1. The COVID-19 pandemic is the defining crisis of our time. The pandemic is impacting societies and economies in multiple ways, reversing development gains and enhancing vulnerabilities at a global scale. The Regional Commissions have been monitoring the socio-economic impacts of the crisis in their respective regions, generating data and analysis and actively advocating policy responses including by leveraging their convening power to disseminate and promote regional cooperation and coordination in support of such policies. They have launched a number of tools to support, among others, immediate peer learning among decision makers and facilitate access to urgent policy advice.

1. Regional analyses of impact

2. The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global health crisis affecting the global economy, hitting manufacturing and service sectors alike, with enormous impacts on the labor force. Its economic and social impacts on vulnerable individuals and households who are already bordering poverty may widen inequality gaps and entrench people in poverty. Asymmetries between and within countries and regions will be exacerbated, and development gains achieved in the last years will be reversed unless adequate policies are implemented.

ECA Region

3. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to seriously dent Africa’s growth with oil exporting nations losing up to US$ 65 billion in revenues as crude oil prices continue to tumble.

4. Africa may lose half of its GDP growth, with growth falling from 3.2% to between 1.8 % (best case scenario) to -2.6% (worst case scenario), due to various reasons, including the disruption of global supply chains and the interconnectedness to affected economies of the European Union, China and the United States and related ripple effects.

Source: ECA.
5. The resulting economic slowdown will translate in a decline in trade of primary commodities and key services such as transport and tourism, remittances and the deterioration of the current account balance. A decline in commodity prices could lead to additional fiscal pressures for Africa’s largest economies such as South Africa, Nigeria, Algeria, Egypt and Angola. Further impacts will include a decline in FDI flows; additional capital flight; domestic financial market tightening; and a slow-down in investments.

6. Debt servicing costs will continue to rise further impacting debt sustainability (Debt/GDP). The declining trend in FDI inflows to Africa (2008-2018) likely to persist in short run.

7. Furthermore, decline in investments will aggravate job losses, further compounding social impacts on poverty, gender (with disproportionate impact on female caregivers), inequality and social services.

8. ECA analysis for the region indicates that between 5 million and 29 million people will be pushed below the extreme poverty line of $1.90 per day owing to the impact of COVID-19 on growth. The likelihood of vulnerable households moving into transient poverty will increase as a result of COVID-19 and those in staying in poverty might stay in that situation longer. Consequently, increased poverty levels will also exacerbate existing income inequalities. Lower tax revenues and higher social protection spending will also translate in a deterioration in the fiscal position.

9. Pharmaceuticals, imported largely from Europe and other COVID-19 affected partners from outside the continent, could see their prices increasing and availability reduced for African countries. With nearly two-thirds of African countries being net importers of basic food, shortages are feared. Disruptions in access to trade credit will impact pre-financing options of food exporters and importers, threatening to severely impact food availability and food security. Furthermore, negative consequences are expected to worsen, if COVID-19 infections spiral out of control in Africa and lockdown measures persist. ECA estimates that a one-month full lockdown would cost the continent 2.5 percent of its annual GDP equivalent to $65.7bn month.\(^1\)

**ESCAP Region**

10. The impact of COVID-19 in Asia Pacific is exacerbated by the concentration of economic activities, demographics, urbanization, and insufficient progress on SDGs. The initial measures to contain the spread through quarantines, travel restrictions and lockdown of cities resulted in a reduction in aggregate demand, with particular impacts on service sectors such as tourism, retail, hospitality, and civil aviation. International demand for commodities also fell especially for oil, further contributing to economic and financial uncertainty and instability.

11. The deceleration in GDP growth will be significant. ESCAP’s latest analysis\(^2\) reveals that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, economic growth of the developing countries of the Asia Pacific region had slowed down considerably to 4.3 per cent in 2019 from 5.3 per cent in 2018. In addition, the fallout will be uneven across countries depending on their current economic conditions and the exposure to COVID-19. Although exact data of the impact of the pandemic on employment is not yet available, the impact is likely to be substantial as services and labor-intensive manufacturing comprise over 80 per cent of the

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\(^2\) Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2020: Toward sustainable economies
region’s informal sector and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and contribute to most of the jobs in the region.

12. Health inequalities abound in the Asia Pacific region. Estimates indicate that over four in ten people in the region have no access to health care. In the region, some countries, including Bhutan, China, Georgia, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Thailand, have established universal health care systems.

13. Over 60 percent of the Asia Pacific population also lack access to social protection, as do most of the 70 percent of all workers in the informal sector. Currently, developing countries in the region spend on average only 3.7 percent of GDP on social protection far below the OECD average of around 20 percent, but also less than one-third of the global average of 11.3 percent.

14. People in vulnerable situations (ageing population, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, in addition to gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities) are particularly at risk to the outbreak of COVID-19 due to their health and overall social and economic circumstances. This may be aggravated by the inequality on access to broadband connectivity in a region with growing digital divide.

15. On the other hand, slowdown of economic activities in Asia and the Pacific has given the environment breathing space. COVID-19 has reduced demand for oil and gas, and at the same time resulted in reduction in emissions of carbon dioxide and nitrogen dioxide and reduced air pollution. For global energy commodities, most notably oil and to a lesser extent gas, lower demand has resulted in a fall in prices.

**UNECE region**

16. Europe has been greatly affected by the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. A high degree of personal mobility across this region facilitated the spread of the virus while a high degree of economic integration and external openness contributed to the transmission and amplification of economic shocks.
17. Some structural, sectoral specialization features and supply chain implications have contributed to economic shocks. As the epidemic moved to Europe, some sectors, like tourism and ancillary activities, came to a complete halt. Countries in which tourism represents a significant share of economic activity, were particularly affected.

18. Europe is highly urbanized, with areas of high population density, which favoured transmission but also increased the difficulties and economic cost of implementing social distancing measures. Cities were heavily affected, thus undermining city finances and questioning the sustainability of urban services. In the absence of corrective policy measures, it will negatively affect long-term investment in affordable housing and social infrastructure. Further, countries with aging populations recorded higher mortality rates.

19. Economic difficulties in the EU will impact other countries in the region, in particular the Western Balkans. Moreover, social protection and assistance systems are especially impacted. In many countries, in particular in the Western Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the departing situation was already fragile, with the share of unemployed people receiving benefits relatively low and social benefits in general limited. In the CIS and Georgia subregion, links with the EU are less intense but productive specialization makes it vulnerable to the fall in the price of oil and other commodities. Non-energy exporting countries will also suffer from this worsening outlook through different channels.

20. Additional checks and restrictions are increasing the costs of cross-border trade. Those were already relatively high in parts of the Europe and Central Asia region, in particularly in some landlocked countries.

21. In some countries in the CIS and Georgia, exchange rates have come under pressure, amid capital outflows and increased uncertainty. As foreign debt is largely dollar denominated, the weakening of the exchange rates will increase debt servicing costs and create additional pressure over highly dollarized banking systems in many countries in the subregion. In such circumstances, the ability of monetary policy to support the economy may be restricted.

**ESCWA Region**

22. Initial estimates of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic show that the Arab region may lose around $42 billion in income in 2020. Losses are likely to increase further as the virus continues to spread through other regions and major economies, compounded by a significant drop in oil prices. Exports from the Arab region are expected to decline by $28 billion owing to the global slowdown. Arab Governments are projected to lose tariff revenues amounting to $1.8 billion.

23. Between January and mid-March 2020, businesses in the Arab region lost $420 billion in market capital. The consequent loss in wealth is equivalent to 8% of total regional wealth. The region may lose 1.7 million jobs in 2020, thus increasing the unemployment rate by 1.2%. Given that the service sector is the main employer, the adverse impact on its activities will result in significant job losses.

24. The Arab region may witness a further shrinking of the middle-income class, pushing 8.3 million people into poverty. The economic slowdown caused by COVID-19 is expected to negatively impact wages and the flow of remittances. The consequences could be particularly severe on vulnerable groups, especially women and young adults, and those working in the informal sector who have no access to social protection and unemployment insurance. The challenge is further compounded by a lack of social protection floors in some Arab countries. Increased poverty could lead to an additional 1.9 million people becoming under-nourished. A protracted worldwide pandemic would also impact food...
security in many Arab countries because of their high dependence on food imports, especially of staple and protein-rich foods.

25. The pandemic threatens 55 million people in need of humanitarian aid in the Arab region, inter alia in terms of food, water and sanitation, medical supplies and health services. Around 26 million people of those are forcibly displaced (refugees and internally displaced persons). In addition, for countries in conflict it is even more challenging to mitigate the impact of a COVID-19 outbreak owing to the devastation of health infrastructure and the displacement or migration of many health-care workers.

26. Women in the Arab region face further vulnerabilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the region, most health-care workers are women. This places them at a higher risk of exposure to the virus. Vulnerability to domestic violence, currently experienced by 37% of women in Arab countries, is projected to increase, and existing recourse and protection mechanisms will not be able to absorb the surge in cases due to the social isolation imposed by the pandemic.

27. Over 74 million people in the Arab region are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 owing to a lack of access to basic handwashing facilities. This affects vulnerable communities in eight Arab countries that reported on this indicator in 2018.

Source: ESCWA

**ECLAC Region**

28. In terms of the economic impact, Latin America and the Caribbean is facing the pandemic from a weaker position than the rest of the world. Before the pandemic, ECLAC had projected that the region would grow by a maximum of 1.3% in 2020. However, this forecast has been revised downwards in light of the effects of the crisis, with GDP now predicted to fall by at least 5.3%, adding 11.6 million to the ranks of unemployed, and worsening inequality within and between countries.

29. The effects of COVID-19 are exacerbating the already weak foreign trade prospects for the region. It is estimated that the value of the region’s exports will fall by at least 14.8% in 2020. At the subregional level, the greatest impact will be felt by the countries of South
American (a decline of 17.6%), which specialize in the export of commodities and are therefore more vulnerable to a decline in their prices.

30. The sectors most affected by social distancing and quarantine measures are the service sectors, which are largely dependent on interpersonal contact. In the region, the sectors that could suffer the greatest contractions — trade, transport, business services and social services — provide 64% of formal employment.

Figure 2
Socioeconomic effect of COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America and the Caribbean

Note: GDP figures report 2020 growth estimation in 2019 and 2020 respectively
Source: ECLAC

31. Digital technologies have lessened the impact of the pandemic on some professions and on education. Although more than 67% of the region’s inhabitants were using the internet by 2019 and broadband penetration has increased sharply, the greater use of digital technologies could exacerbate inequalities in access among countries and among income groups.

32. In terms of social impacts, the effects on the health sector will be profound owing to shortages of skilled labour and medical supplies, and to escalating costs. Most countries of the region have weak and fragmented health systems, which do not guarantee the universal access needed to address the COVID-19 health crisis. Disruption of activities in educational establishments will have an impact beyond education, affecting nutrition, care and parents’ (especially women’s) participation in the labour market.

33. Given the region’s economic and social inequalities, the strong unemployment effects will disproportionately impact the poor, and the vulnerable of the middle-income strata. The crisis is likely to lead to an increase in informal employment. The poorest families may send their children into the labor market. The crisis will put additional pressure on countries with limited fiscal space, endangering social spending, which is already strained after seven years of sluggish economic growth.
With the direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is very likely that current extreme poverty (11.0%) and poverty (30.3%) rates in Latin America will increase in the short term. According to the most recent projections, ECLAC estimates that the projected downturn in economic activity and expected 3.4 percentage point increase in unemployment could increase poverty by at least 4.4 percentage points in 2020 to 34.7% of the population, driving an additional 28.7 million people below the poverty line. Extreme poverty is expected to increase 2.5 percentage points, which would account for an additional 15.9 million people and reach a total of 83.4 million people.

2. Regional cooperation key in the multilateral response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Regional cooperation and strengthened multilateral policy coordination are essential dimensions of any effective response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including to, most immediately, build mutual trust, share information and lessons learned, ensure supply and delivery of medical materials, and equipment and also coordinate macroeconomic responses, R&D and environmental measures and set the foundation for long-term recovery based on inclusiveness, equality and resilience.

The Convening Power of the Regional Commissions

As part of promoting regional cooperation and multilateral responses to the crisis, the Regional Commissions have been convening dialogues between fiscal and monetary authorities and ministers in the social areas to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the most vulnerable. These dialogues allow for policy advocacy and consideration of key issues such as debt relief from bilateral, multilateral and commercial partners, with participation of the IMF, WBG and the G20. For example, recent webinars organized by ECA led to a statement from African finance ministers to urgently call for a $100bn immediate emergency financing for COVID-19.

In the Latin America and Caribbean region, since the onset of the pandemic, ECLAC has brought together Ministers of Social Development, Ministers of Finance, Ministers of Science and Technology, as well ministers and authorities from the Machineries for Women’s Advancement in Latin America and the Caribbean and the Statistics Conference of the Americas. These intergovernmental meetings are useful platforms to monitor responses, exchange best practices, identify key areas for regional advocacy and deliberate on common regional approaches to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Such regional spaces call attention to the specific challenges of middle-income countries, which constitute the majority of the region, including Small Island Developing States, which are in a particularly difficult position as they lack access to concessionary financing and preferential treatment from IFIs yet still face large gaps in their capacity to respond to the crisis. ECLAC is also adapting its institutional and position documents, including for its Biennial Session, to reflect policy responses and proposals for a greener and more inclusive long-term recovery. The Comprehensive Development Plan for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and south and southeast Mexico, a subregional and interagency initiative coordinated by ECLAC, will also be revised to reflect the impacts of COVID-19.

ESCWA convened the Expert Group on Social Protection Reform online, in coordination with the Regional Office for Arab States of the International Labour Organization. More than 30 experts from Arab States reviewed national measures to increase social protection, particularly for the most vulnerable. ESCWA also held a special meeting of its Committee on Women, in coordination with the regional offices of UNDP, UNFPA and UN-Women.
Arab Ministers and high-level officials responsible for women’s affairs reviewed policies implemented by Arab States to protect women and girls in COVID-19 times.

39. In the case of Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP is convening policy dialogues with ASEAN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to examine how to address challenges with supply/value chains and trade digitalization, respectively. ESCAP’s annual session will examine how countries can address the socio-economic effects of the pandemic through stronger regional cooperation. The 7th Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development will be an opportunity for multi-stakeholder discussions on the impacts of the pandemic on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. ESCAP is working with governments in the region to bolster policy measures for supporting women and vulnerable groups and to identify effective measures and approaches that address the specific challenges of persons with disabilities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the issue-based coalition on climate change mitigation, co-led by ESCAP, is working to support countries to integrate climate-related parameters into stimulus packages in response to the pandemic.
Resources and tools offered by the Regional Commissions

The five Regional Commissions have actively contributed to the development of the UN framework for an immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19, including by spearheading the macroeconomic and multilateral collaboration pillar of the UN collective response and offering assistance to developing countries. Furthermore, all the Regional Commissions have launched knowledge management tools, such as observatories and hubs, and products for their respective regions.

The Africa Knowledge hub on COVID-19 is developed by the UN Development System in Africa and features knowledge products, statistical data, research, and best practices to inform decision-making of governments, UN agencies and development partners.

ECLAC has developed a COVID-19 Observatory in Latin America and the Caribbean at the request of CELAC to monitor impacts and responses to the pandemic over the medium and long terms. The Observatory tracks and analyzes national responses and public policies that the 33 countries of the Latin America and Caribbean region are implementing to address the COVID-19 pandemic. ECLAC is working closely with the Resident Coordinators and Regional DCO to ensure the continuous updating of this information. The Observatory is publishing periodical special reports on COVID-19 focusing on growth, trade, poverty and inequality, people with disabilities, food security, and climate change.

In the Arab region, ESCWA has launched a COVID-19 policy tracker to monitor policy responses at the regional and global levels. Specific analysis on various dimensions of the crisis (food security, gender, etc.) is being developed under the umbrella of policy briefs on socio-economic impacts of the pandemic.

In the case of the Asia Pacific region, ESCAP has also undertaken rapid analyses of impacts and policy responses in the region. Areas of sectoral attention include women entrepreneurs, working with key partners to support resource mobilization for women-led micro, small and medium-sized enterprises affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. ESCAP is also leading the provision of regional guidance on mainstreaming disability rights and inclusion in the response to COVID-19, including a policy brief and an online resource database.

In the UNECE region, to facilitate the work of transport operators and preserve connectivity by keeping supply chains working as smoothly as possible, UNECE launched an “Observatory on Border Crossings Status due to COVID-19”. The Observatory is supported by ECA, ECLAC, ESCAP and ESCWA, as well as by the International Transport Union and other stakeholders. Building on this, the ESCAP secretariat is monitoring the policy responses along the regional transport infrastructure network in Asia and the Pacific, as formalized by intergovernmental agreements on the Asian Highway Network, the Trans-Asian Railway Network and Dry Ports of International Importance.
Policy Advocacy by the Regional Commissions

40. Policy solutions advocated by the Regional Commissions to address the immediate and medium terms impacts of the pandemic include:

- Addressing the social and health crisis first

41. Immediate policy priority should be to put people first and addressing the social and health crisis. Universal access to testing and medical care must be guaranteed to all that need it. The immediate health response should be prioritized, including through procurement of surveillance and logistical supplies, ensuring funding for prevention and curative facilities and turning the crisis into an opportunity to improve health systems. Regional cooperation and coordination could optimize the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of such polices. A global emergency facility to cope with the pandemic was advocated by some Regional Commissions to support health systems in developing countries.

42. Social protection systems need to be bolstered to support populations in situation of vulnerability. Comprehensive public policies based on a gender and rights perspective must be designed and implemented. Regional cooperation is key to promote, among others, a rights approach for transboundary human mobility during the crisis.

- Fiscal stimulus and monetary policy, coupled with liquidity management in the financial sector

43. Proactive fiscal stimulus is necessary to avoid major disruptions to livelihoods and wellbeing and mitigate socio-economic impacts. Significant public expenditure is needed to confront the slack in private demand, including consumption and investment. Immediate support must be put in place for workers in SMEs and low-income workers. Policy options should include non-contributory social protection programs such as cash transfers, expanded unemployment benefits, credit to firms to pay wages, and loan payment deferrals. Basic universal income support should be considered for at least the duration of the crisis. Labor intensive investment projects should be prioritized, and cost of remittances for the population reduced. Other measures could include targeted credit support for companies that directly participate in pandemic control, and emergency loans and credit guarantees to address supply chain disruptions.

44. Monetary policy should be directed at supporting the health and stability of the financial sector, including by supplying sufficient liquidity to the banking system and addressing the risk of capital flight. Implementing this measure would require reduction in interest rates by central banks. Central banks have the possibility to mobilize and use their emergency instruments such as quantitative easing and debt buying programmes to stabilize interest rates. A regional perspective is key to consult with national and regional stakeholders on those issues. Regional partners could be instrumental in providing technical support to analyze the economic impact of such measures in terms of monetary
stability and exchange rate fluctuations. The special initiative for Africa launched by the G20 is an illustration of the importance to echo regional voices at the multilateral level.

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**Multilateral response and regional development banks**

45. Multilateral organizations and international financial institutions should consider increasing grants and technical support to vulnerable countries that are confronted with fiscal pressures, with instruments that meet both the need of least developed countries and middle-income countries. The issuance of Special Drawing Rights should be considered to supply much-needed liquidity support to developing countries. Regional development banks can contribute to soften adverse effects by reducing liquidity pressures created by a temporary fall in demand and preventing bankruptcies. But the role of development banks would need to go further, in a context of a general increase in risk aversion and permanent impact that would undermine the viability of existing business models in some sectors. Regional development financial institutions, and multilateral financial institutions, have to consider debt deferral and debt reduction mechanisms to enhance the fiscal space for middle- and low-income countries. The specific fiscal context of certain subregions, including the Small Island Developing States of the Caribbean, also calls for exploring alternative approaches, such as the extension of concessional financial assistance and innovative financing instruments, including debt swap instruments for investments in climate resilience. Accelerating the implementation of initiatives such as the “ECLAC debt for climate swap initiative” and the creation of a resilience fund has now become a matter of urgency. Facilitating regional coordination and inter-regional exchange of innovative proposals is an area where the Regional Commissions have specific expertise.

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**Securing Trade and Connectivity**

46. Ensuring the uninterrupted supply of essential goods, in particular pharmaceuticals, food, and energy, requires that the free movement of trade between countries be safeguarded. In times of border closures and travel limitations, regional cooperation on trade is essential to build long term regional resilience and volatility management. A case in point is the Africa Continental Free Trade Area for which the momentum has to be preserved.

47. Recommended trade policy actions include suspension of tariffs on essential COVID-19 imports, measures such as the customs ‘Green Lanes’ for super-fast clearance of medical supplies, ensuring international movement of critical health and technical experts and promoting emergency public-private partnerships for medical supplies. Equally, the long-term impact and reconfiguration of global value chains ensuing from the vulnerabilities exposed in the COVID-19 crisis, may also accelerate the drive towards regional trade integration and the strengthening of regional trading blocks. In the long term, it will be important to leverage trade agreements. The Regional Commissions could play a role in supporting Member States in the policy design and coordination regarding regional responses to these scenarios.

48. Facilitating connectivity and trade through the implementation of harmonized regulatory frameworks for border crossing, the promotion of digital implementation of existing legal transport instruments and the exchange of electronic information are also important policy recommendations.

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**Ensuring food security.**
49. Measures proposed to address potential national food shortages include ensuring continued and expanded agricultural production by extending access to credit, increasing rented public land areas, and removing barriers to trade. Further, small food producers should be supported with in-kind assets and production inputs such as seeds, compost, irrigation systems and pesticides. Immediate support to vulnerable populations entails expanding access to food in the framework of existing food voucher schemes and food ration cards. The risk of food security challenges in some import-dependent regions or subregions, also highlights the need for supporting regional and subregional trade of agricultural products.

- Regional solidarity funds, including with participation of the private sector.

50. Regional solidarity funds are also important tools to address emerging needs, in particular on health, but also on food security, SMEs support, aid for trade and other areas. The Regional Commissions could be suitable platforms to manage such emergency funds, and to bring stakeholders together, including Member States, regional intergovernmental organizations, multilateral development banks, the private sector, philanthropies, and civil society.

- Sharing best practices

51. Regional cooperation is also critical in terms of advocacy, awareness raising and sharing know-how on specific aspects of COVID-19 crisis management. For example, some regions have recommended cooperative frameworks to identify and disseminate best practices for the safe and sustainable management and disposal of bleaches and disinfectants and medical and hazardous waste. Regional platforms aimed at combatting violence, in particular domestic violence, are also important. Geo-referenced big data deepens understanding on the patterns of contagion. There is scope to leverage existing regional cooperation mechanisms to promote the sharing of geospatial data and technical expertise.

52. Furthermore, governments should invest in regional cooperation efforts in recovering better, promoting best practices and innovative solutions piloted during the outbreak as recommended best practices. A more responsible approach to human mobility could also be a lasting positive effect, as well as enhancing the use of multilateral environmental agreements and standards, and improving evidence-based decision making through better use of statistical frameworks.

53. The COVID-19 crisis has shown the need for ex-ante emergency preparedness to minimize economic and social impacts in future. While focusing on containment and mitigation efforts is imperative in the short-term, countries could also strive to turn the crisis into an opportunity to rethink their economic development strategies towards building more inclusive, cohesive and sustainable economies and societies, ensuring a green and resilient recovery, and leveraging the digital economy. Also, gender-aware planning and decision making will be key, including ensuring increased use of sex-disaggregated data to analyze impacts.

B. Other key policy issues addressed by the Regional Commissions

Ministerial sessions of the Regional Commissions
54. The Regional Commissions have deliberated on a number of other areas relevant to their regions at various high-level meetings. Summaries of the work of the Regional Commissions submitted to the Economic and Social Council provide more details of their work (see E/2020/16, E/2020/17, E/2020/18, E/2020/19 and E/2020/20). Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, most Ministerial sessions planned during this reporting period were postponed, namely those of ECA, ECLAC and ESCWA, or adjusted to virtual format as was the case of ESCAP’s seventy-sixth session on 21 May 2020 by videoconferencing.

55. ESCWA held its sixth special session in Amman, Jordan on 21–22 December 2019. The special session adopted a new strategic vision for the Commission as well as its new programme plan for 2021. The session also welcomed the requests from Algeria and Somalia for ESCWA membership. In addition, the session discussed regional and global issues, including financing for development; the Belt and Road Initiative; the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action; social protection reform; climate change.

II. Developments and outcomes in selected areas of regional and interregional cooperation, including in the context of the repositioning of the UN development system

1. Promoting coherence at the regional level and enhanced policy-operational nexus

56. The Regional Commissions have been actively participating in the conceptualization and shaping of the repositioning of the regional assets of the United Nations development system (UNDS), on a region-by-region basis, around the five broad transformative areas proposed by the Secretary-General in his December 2017 report to the Economic and Social Council (A/72/684).

57. Pending final intergovernmental agreement on the regional architecture, the regional UNDS is preparing to transition to UN Regional Collaborative Platforms (RCPs) in the second half of 2020.

58. The RCPs in each region will foster collaboration on sustainable development. The RCP will be chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General, in the Capacity of UNSDG Chair, with the Executive Secretary of the respective Regional Commissions and the UNDP regional directors – as vice chairs. The RCP will meet under several configurations, including once a year under the Deputy Secretary-General, back-to-back with the Regional Fora on Sustainable Development, which remains the intergovernmental platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda at the regional level. The secretariat of the RCP will be provided by the regional offices of DCO, the Regional Commissions and UNDP, under the overall direction of the RCP chair and the two vice-chairs.

The Regional Commissions are co-leading a number of Issue-Based Coalitions, which will bring together the existing expertise of the regional UNDS entities to foster collaboration around issues that transcend national borders, namely: UNECE on Gender Equality, Health, Social Protection, Youth, Large Movements of People; ESCAP on Climate Change Mitigation; ECLAC on Equitable Growth; ECA on Strengthened

Note by the Secretary-General on New Strategic Vision of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (E/2020/12).

A draft resolution is submitted for action by the Economic and Social Council in Addendum 1 of the present report (E/2020/15/Add.1)
Regional Knowledge Management and Statistical Hubs led and hosted by the Regional Commissions allow RCs and UNCTs to easily identify and access available regional assets to respond in real time to national needs and priorities and will become critical regional public goods for the countries in the regions and beyond. In the Arab region, building on the ESCWA-hosted UNDS data hub, a knowledge and data management hub called MANARA (“lighthouse” in Arabic) is already at the prototype phase and will be the ‘one-stop shop’ for data and SDG-monitoring, in addition to pooling knowledge products, learning resources, expert rosters and policy simulation tools. In Asia and the Pacific, building on the existing SDG Helpdesk developed by ESCAP, a Regional Knowledge Management Hub is already in place and brings together under one portal the SDG Data Gateway; UNDS knowledge products; a roster of regional experts and sustainable development practitioners from the UNDS; and the list of partners. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the SDG Gateway – the one stop UN inter-agency knowledge and data platform on SDG implementation and measurement - has been developed under the guidance of a UN inter-agency steering committee and ECLAC coordination. This includes a compilation of knowledge products related to SDGs from UNDS entities in the region and a roster of expertise to be developed around the regional IBCs. It will among others provide support to UNCTs in the preparation of UNSDCFs. In the UNECE region, a web-based guide will be created in 2020 providing entry points, contact information and flagship products of the regional UN system by major policy area. In addition to knowledge products and expertise, the regional knowledge management hub will include a data and statistics dimension. In this regard, UNECE is setting up a regional platform on statistics for SDGs, which consists of three components: a knowledge hub focusing on statistics for SDGs, launched in December 2019, a dashboard of SDG Indicators, launched in March 2020, and a database of SDG Indicators.

In Africa, the Regional Knowledge Management Hub will serve as a one-stop shop hosting multi-sectoral data, publications, learning resources and a roster of experts. ECA and UNFPA are leading the implementation of the hub, which will be deployed following a staggered approach that can adjust the scope according to resources and emerging dynamics.

To reflect the regional UNDS value proposition and ensure transparency and accountability for results in support of implementing the 2030 Agenda and achieving the SDGs in the regions, annual regional reports on system-wide activities will capture the collective contributions by regional level initiatives, including transboundary programmes in the thematic areas of respective IBCs; collaboration on regional intergovernmental processes; and support by the regional level to country results. The reports will be shared with Member States in each region in advance of the annual Regional Forums on Sustainable Development (RFSD) convened by the Regional Commissions. They will also inform reporting to ECOSOC at the global level, providing Member States with the opportunity to better guide the efforts of the UNDS at all levels, including in the regions. For example, the report on system-wide results at the regional level, coordinated by ESCAP and Regional DCO, was presented at the seventh Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development on 20 May 2020.

Finally, on the identification of administrative services that could be provided more efficiently to regional offices through common back offices, all RCPs will develop regional level business operations strategies. In Africa, a mapping of existing joint
agreements between UN agencies on clustering of services into common back offices and lessons learned is ongoing; a system-wide Business Operations Strategy will be piloted in Nairobi, making this the first of its kind; and a group of UN entities are moving into common premises in Addis Ababa. In the Arab region, ESCWA is already offering services and helping establish common services in Beirut. It is also hosting the RC Office in Lebanon, in addition to OCHA, UNIC and UNSCOL. In Latin America and the Caribbean, a Regional Operations Management Team will be convened to prepare an interagency plan to advance common services. As a first step in this direction, ECLAC is already carrying out a joint procurement process for travel services in Chile on behalf of the system. Moreover, ECLAC has established a joint substantive unit with UN-Habitat in Santiago, Chile and plans more in the future. In Asia and the Pacific, the UNDS has established a regional operational team in early 2020 to develop a common business operations strategy, drawing on existing services provided by ESCAP to over 20 UN entities in the region. The first training of trainers on the strategy took place in 2020 for senior operation specialists from Thailand-based UN entities and RCOs in the region. In the UNECE region, to advance common back-offices, a Regional Operations Management Team is being established to engage in a thorough assessment of areas where common services could be explored in the main locations of the UN – Geneva and Istanbul.

63. As part of the efforts to improve the UNDS offer in multi-country office (MCO) settings, SIDS-specific Priority Theme Groups will be established, in coherence with UN regional assets, and will build on existing intergovernmental processes and capacities to support SIDS – including those supported by ECLAC and ESCAP in their respective regions. UNDS entities have also been asked to review and align their presence in SIDS with MCO arrangements and to take immediate concrete steps to align and better utilize UN regional assets, in line with Member States’ decisions on the regional review. Finally, UNDS entities will work to strengthen data systems, collection and use, including by strengthening and initiating the roll out of national capacity-building programmes, in collaboration with the Regional Commissions, and improving inter-agency and region-specific coordination mechanisms on data and statistics in support of countries and territories serviced by MCOs, in line with proposals to reprofile and restructure UN regional assets.

**Strengthened country-regional nexus**

64. In addition to the regional commissions’ key engagement on the repositioning of the regional assets described above, efforts continue to be made to strengthen the country-regional nexus.

65. The Regional Commissions are increasingly and systematically active members of the relevant regional peer support group (PSG) mechanisms, which support the development and review of United Nations sustainable development cooperation frameworks, allowing for the leveraging of their cross-sectoral expertise and ensuring a more thorough analysis of regional and transboundary issues. For example, ESCAP provided substantive inputs to five Common Country Analysis (CCAs) and UNSDCF over the past 12 months; ECLAC directly supported the preparation of four CCAs and UNSDCF and provided quality assurance to a number of others; ESCWA supported nine RCs/UNCTs; UNECE provided substantive support to 11 CCAs and UNSDCF, and is working with UNCTs on planning and implementation of UNSDCF through Joint Work Plans in all 17 UN programme countries in the UNECE region; ECA provides integrated delivery of five service lines to 20 countries through its five Subregional Offices and supports UNCTs among others through contributions to the formulation of CCAs. Overall, the
Regional Commissions’ active engagement has provided macro-economic analysis, data and statistics, input on regional and subregional contexts and impact, and further analysis on specific issues leading to a marked improvement in analysis and integration of regional, subregional and transboundary issues, as well as of economic, environment, trade and other matters into the cooperation frameworks.

66. The engagement among the Regional Commissions and the resident coordinators (RCs) and United Nations country teams (UNCTs) has increased, including through the development of induction programmes for RCs, communication on upcoming travel by staff of the regional commissions to the countries, joint retreats and dedicated meetings to enhance awareness of the assets available in the regions to be leveraged by the RCs in support of the implementation of the UNSDCF's. For example, in Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC, R-DCO and UNDP partnered to develop seminars for new RCs and RCOs staff, such as economists and monitoring and evaluation officers, that were replicated elsewhere. Another example is the UNECE “Meet the RC” initiative, which was launched to have an open discussion about joint initiatives, challenges and opportunities between RCs and UNECE staff. The Commissions have also further encouraged the active participation of UNDS entities and RCs in the meetings of their various intergovernmental bodies, including the RFSD. Furthermore, Regional Commissions in various regions have supported R-DCOs and RCOs in strengthening their economic policy function, including through supporting the recruitment of senior economists for the RCOs and setting up regional United Nations economists’ networks and rosters. For example, in Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP’s methodology for SDG costing was presented to the RCOs and UNCTs at the regional roll-out of UNSDCF and the Financing for the SDGs workshop organized by the R-DCO.

67. Finally, some new forms of collaboration have emerged showing the value added of increased synergies among UN entities. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the RCs of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico worked under the leadership of ECLAC and with other UN entities to support an inter-governmental comprehensive development plan for Central America covering economic development, social welfare, environmental sustainability and migration management. Another example is the continued collaboration among ECE, ESCAP and RCs in the countries of the Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia to strengthen subregional coordination, addressing common challenges and supporting the achievement of SDGs.

**Strengthened regional-global nexus**

68. Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the Regional Commissions remain active in leading the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda at the regional level and supporting countries in preparations towards the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). Convened annually by the Regional Commissions, the RFSDs are recognized as the preeminent regional multi-stakeholder platforms for exchanging knowledge, best practices and solutions to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Regional assessments, progress reports and data, prepared in the lead-up to the RFSDs, contribute to identifying gaps and opportunities for action of the UN system around regional and country priorities. In this

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6 In 2020, ECA held its Regional Forum in February, resulting i.a. in the adoption of the Victoria Falls Declaration (ECA/RFSD/2020/16). Due to the COVID-19 crisis, UNECE held a virtual forum in March (https://www.unece.org/rfsd.html), ESCAP is convening its forum in May (https://www.unescap.org/apfsd/7), whereas ECLAC and ESCWA have consulted with their Member States to bring the regional inputs to the global HLPF.
context, countries have also continued to receive support in the preparation and follow-up of their Voluntary National Reviews and their broader implementation efforts.

69. The regional-global nexus continued to be strengthened, among other things, through the high-level reporting of the outcomes of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development to the HLPF by the Chairs of the regional forums as part of the ministerial segment of the HLPF. Efforts also continue by the Regional Commissions to ensure that adequate space is dedicated to the regional dimension of sustainable development at the HLPF, including by mainstreaming the regional dimension into the thematic sessions of the HLPF as well as in technical workshops, voluntary national review workshops, retreats, expert groups and meetings with Member States, academia and civil society actors. During the 2019 HLPF, the Regional Commissions organized a high-level event under the aegis of the President of ECOSOC where more than 50 Ministers from all regions deliberated on the critical role of regional cooperation in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

70. The nexus has also been strengthened through other thematic intergovernmental processes in which the Regional Commissions serve as platforms for the follow-up on and review of globally agreed frameworks, and contribute the regional voice for the formulation of global frameworks. For example, in the second half of 2019, the Regional Commissions hosted regional reviews of 25 years of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which provided forums for their Member States to review progress and identify challenges in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Another example is the regional follow-up and review process related to the Global Compact on Migration, on which the Regional Commissions work closely with IOM.

71. Moreover, collaboration with global entities has been furthered in areas such as financing for development, statistics, inequalities, migration, social development, disaster risk reduction and South-South and triangular cooperation. Newly instituted bi-annual meetings between the Executive Secretaries and the Deputy Secretary-General will also enhance coordination between the global and regional levels.

2. Enhanced interregional cooperation among the Regional Commissions

72. Since the previous report (E/2019/15, E/2019/15/Add.1 and E/2019/15/Add.2), the Executive Secretaries of the Regional Commissions have met over 20 times in person on the margins of other meetings or by videoconference. Their meetings resulted in coordinated positions and contributions to regional responses in support of the 2030 Agenda, including on the repositioning of the United Nations to better support Member States in the achievement of their development goals, in responding to the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as on migration, financing for development, inequalities, gender and other matters.

73. In addition to closely working together on the monitoring and analysis of the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, the Regional Commissions continued to collaborate in other areas such as regional integration, partnerships, road safety, energy, trade facilitation, water management, gender, youth and reducing inequality.

74. In a joint effort, the five Regional Commissions conducted in 2019 the third UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation (https://untfsurvey.org/report) to collect relevant data and information from their respective Member States on the implementation of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement and other related measures. The results of the survey enable countries and development partners to better understand and monitor progress on trade facilitation, support evidence-based public policies, share best practices and identify capacity building and technical assistance needs.
75. **ECA and ESCAP**, in collaboration with UNFPA, are implementing an innovative project entitled “Demographic Dividend with a Gender Dimension: Entry Points for Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals in Africa and Asia and the Pacific”. The project aims to strengthen the capacity of Member States and regional economic communities to mainstream gender into national policies and programmes, promote youth development and enhance national evidence-based policies to reduce inequalities and reap the demographic dividend.

76. Under the Forum for East Asia–Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC), **ECLAC and ESCAP** are continuing to jointly implement two interregional projects: one that addresses reducing inequality in member countries of the Forum through innovative policymaking and another that focuses on value chain development for the deeper integration of East Asia and Latin America.

77. **ECLAC and ESCAP**, along with DESA and other UN partners, launched the “I am a Youth of a Small Island” global competition, to mark the mid-term review of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA Pathway).

78. **UNECE** continues leading collaboration among all the Regional Commissions to advance road safety in countries and communities and to promote people-first public-private partnerships for the 2030 Agenda. On the latter, UNECE, in cooperation with ECA, organized the fourth UNECE International Public-Private Partnerships Forum entitled: “The Last Mile: Promoting People-first PPPs for the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

79. Collaboration continued in 2019 between **ESCWA and UNECE** with the organization of a second training workshop on Geographic Information Systems for the Integrated Transport System in the Arab States as well as of a two-day workshop about enhancing cooperation on transboundary water resources management in the Arab region.

80. **UNECE, ESCAP and ESCWA** also jointly organized a workshop on Sustainable Energy and Gender Empowerment within the framework of the Tenth International Forum on Energy for Sustainable Development.