



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
28 April 2021

Original: English

2021 session

23 July 2020–22 July 2021

Agenda item 15

Regional cooperation

Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020–2021

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 2020–2021.



Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020–2021

Summary

The Asia-Pacific region has witnessed a remarkable transformation in the past two decades. At the current pace, however, it will not achieve any of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Putting the region on track to achieving the Goals and recovering from the devastating coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic will require transformative policies, investment and action targeted explicitly at promoting inclusive, resilient and sustainable development. The present report provides the most recent data and analysis and an overview of the work undertaken by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in the past year in advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in responding to the pandemic and its impact on the region.

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

I. Introduction

1. In the past two decades, the Asia-Pacific region has witnessed a remarkable transformation that has connected countries and people, pulled millions out of poverty and laid the foundation for a future driven by digital and technological innovation. At the same time, not everyone has benefited from the growth-focused development of the past, given the persistent and growing inequalities within and between countries. That growth-focused development has also left the region vulnerable to severe climate-related disasters and a major contributor to rampant climate change. Transformative policies, investment and action targeted explicitly at promoting inclusive, resilient and sustainable development are needed to put the region on track to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and building back better from the devastating coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

2. In the face of the multiple challenges, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has supported its member States in taking accelerated action for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the context of the pandemic. The Commission's intergovernmental platforms have helped to provide guidance for regional and national action in areas critical for achieving the Goals and recovering from the pandemic. The discussions have benefited from knowledge and analysis developed through the secretariat. The secretariat has also tailored technical support to member States, including in areas vital to responding to the pandemic and its impact, such as building social protection systems, restoring connectivity and supply chains and financing the recovery of small and medium-sized businesses, especially those run by women. There has also been a focus on longer-term needs, such as gender lens investing, trade negotiation support and the development of policy packages for a post-pandemic recovery that is aligned with the Goals.

3. The present report provides an overview of the work undertaken 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.

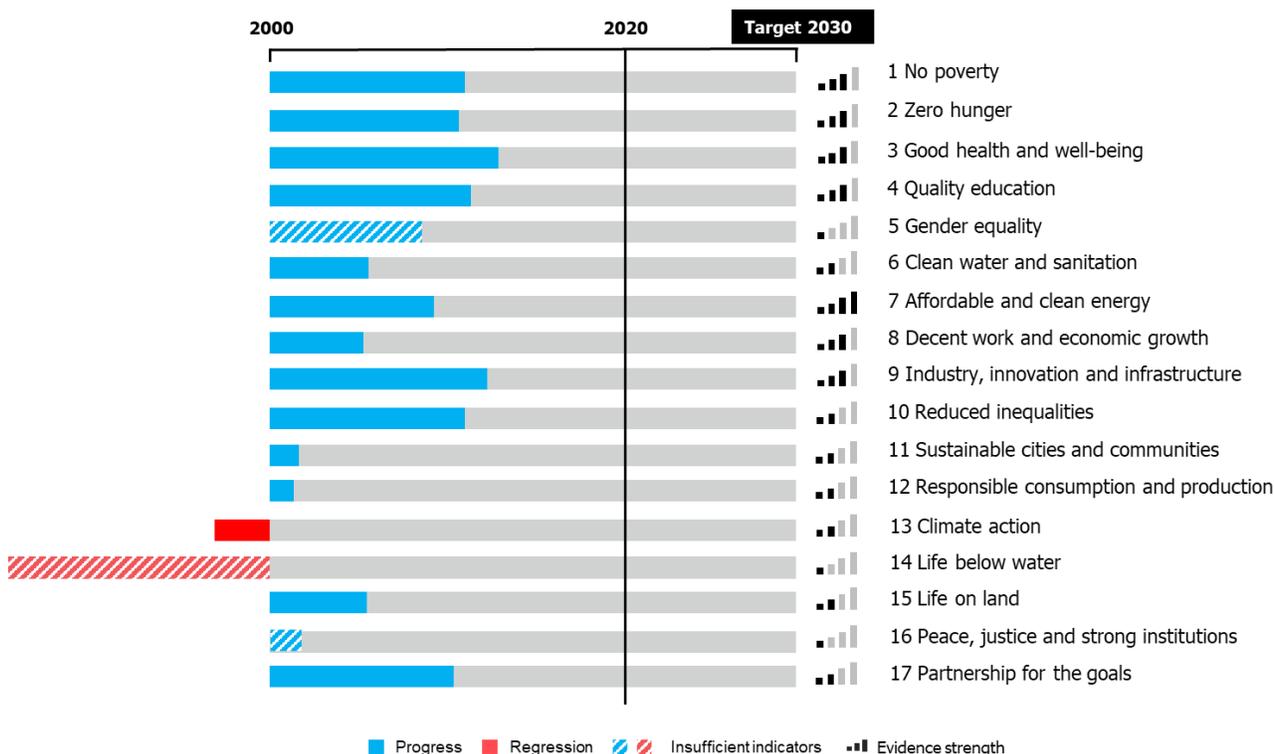
II. Advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region

A. Regional progress towards the achievement of the Goals

4. Even before the pandemic began in early 2020, the region was not on track to achieve any of the 17 Goals by 2030. The region has made the most progress in ensuring healthy lives and well-being (Goal 3) and promoting sustainable industrialization and innovation (Goal 9). It has, however, regressed in terms of taking climate action (Goal 13) and in the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and marine resources (Goal 14).¹

¹ *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.II.F.4).

Snapshot of progress towards the achievement of the Goals in Asia and the Pacific, 2020



Source: *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021*.

5. The pandemic has had a further adverse impact on progress across the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development. Together with seven United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, ESCAP developed an early assessment of the impact on the Goals in seven areas.² It was identified, for example, that the COVID-19-induced economic contraction could push 89 million people below the poverty line while exacerbating inequalities, in particular among women and informal workers. The pandemic placed significant pressure on the weak waste management system in the region. Some 6.7 million students at the primary and secondary levels are at risk of dropping out, jeopardizing the hard-earned progress in promoting education for all. The devastating impact was compounded by the effects of severe climate-induced disasters in 2020, further exacerbating vulnerabilities.

6. While jeopardizing the region's already slow progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda, the pandemic has emphasized the importance of achieving the Goals as a means not only of recovering now but also of building resilience to future pandemics. Sustainable and transformative solutions will be needed to put the region back on track to achieve the Goals and to build resilience against future shocks.

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

7. Endorsed at the Fourth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, held in 2017, the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific contains the following priority thematic areas

² Ibid.

for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda that remain valid in the context of policies and plans to recover from the pandemic.

Leaving no one behind

8. The strong progress made in eradicating extreme poverty notwithstanding, the underlying drivers, such as exclusion and vulnerability, are yet to be fully tackled in the region. It is indicated in *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific*³ that current social protection systems are inadequate and underinvested to be able to help people to buffer from external shocks. Half of the region's population are not protected by social protection schemes. Increasing investment in comprehensive social protection systems is a clear priority in achieving the Goals and recovering from the pandemic.

9. To bridge the gap, ESCAP, in partnership with the International Labour Organization, assisted member States in the development of the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP/CSD/2020/3, annex III), which was adopted at the sixth session of Committee on Social Development, held in October 2020. Spelled out therein are 15 national actions and three regional actions to enhance the implementation of comprehensive social protection measures.

10. At the same session, the Committee endorsed the Asia-Pacific Indicator Framework for Voluntary Monitoring of 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 (ESCAP/CSD/2020/2/Rev.1). The Framework, with 85 indicators drawn from the Goals and other internationally agreed frameworks, helps Governments to track progress and design specific policies addressing population and development concerns, including fundamental inequalities in terms of access to health, education and social protection.

11. While contributing to sustainable development in countries of origin, destination and transit, migrants and their families continue to face challenges to safe, orderly and regular migration, including being excluded from life-cycle social protection schemes and safety nets. Findings of the *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2020: Assessing Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration*⁴ show that the region is home to 65 million international migrants, a quarter of the global migrant stock in 2019. Much of the migration is regional in nature, which underlines the importance of regional cooperation and partnership on international migration. Building on the baseline analysis, ESCAP and the Regional United Nations Network on Migration for Asia and the Pacific organized the Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, held in March 2021. It highlighted the need to seize the opportunity to reimagine human mobility in the region, with a call made for stronger collaboration among Governments and in partnership with stakeholders in implementing the Global Compact to ensure that no one was left behind. The review will feed into the International Migration Review Forum, to be held in 2022.

12. The Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing+25 Review, adopted in 2019, provided a renewed commitment by the region to achieving gender equality. In follow-up, recent analysis by ESCAP and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) suggests that, although levels of women's representation have increased, progress is uneven, both within countries and regionally.⁵ In that

³ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.19.

⁴ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.18.II.F.3.

⁵ *The Long Road to Equality: Taking Stock of the Situation of Women and Girls in Asia and the*

context, ESCAP has been working with the Governments of Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa and Viet Nam to improve the policy environment for women entrepreneurship. As part of a related project, the secretariat, in cooperation with the United Nations Capital Development Fund and Global Affairs Canada, supported the reorientation of financing mechanisms to help women entrepreneurs with the financing needed to recover and build back from the pandemic's impact, the development of COVID-19 impact assessments and the drafting of policies in support of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular those led by women.

13. Persons with disabilities are particularly vulnerable amid the pandemic, yet their issues have still to be adequately reflected in COVID-19 response measures and plans. To that end, the secretariat is supporting five pilot initiatives to better mainstream disability inclusion into measures to combat COVID-19 at the country level in Bangladesh, China, India, Malaysia and Thailand. In partnership with participating Governments and organizations of persons with disabilities, the initiatives supported the provision of inclusive community-based mental health assistance for persons with disabilities through national-level services, as well as the development and delivery of training modules for persons with disabilities on using digital technologies and life skills. ESCAP also developed a technical guide and a supplementary document on indicator measurement to support Governments in collecting and analysing data on the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific.

14. The secretariat also produced knowledge products to support member States in assessing multidimensional inequality and mainstreaming inclusion strategies into national development plans and action, including COVID-19 responses. For example, using classification and regression tree analysis and a dissimilarity index, ESCAP helped to identify the furthest-behind groups and analyse inequality of opportunity in countries including Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Turkmenistan and Viet Nam. Technical assistance was provided to the resident coordinators and United Nations country teams in Kyrgyzstan, Thailand and Viet Nam, including to adopt the methodology and analysis in their common country analysis.

Disaster risk reduction and resilience

15. Asia and the Pacific is the world's most disaster-prone region. ESCAP analysis shows that the impacts of climate-induced disasters are not even, with the cost of the increasing severity and frequency of disasters borne more by low-income communities and countries.⁶ Nevertheless, the escalating impact of climate change, coupled with rapid economic growth, population expansion and unprecedented exogenous shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, will increase the region's vulnerability to disasters and shocks.

16. Included in this category are slow-onset disasters such as droughts. The most recent analysis by ESCAP and the secretariat of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) reveals a statistically significant increase in temperature over the past 40 years.⁷ Droughts have cumulatively affected more than 66 million people in the region throughout the past 30 years. No ASEAN member State will be spared the disruption that this transboundary slow-onset disaster brings to livelihoods and food security.

Pacific for Beijing+25: A Synthesis Report (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.II.F.1).

⁶ *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2020: Toward Sustainable Economies* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.16).

⁷ *Ready for the Dry Years: Building Resilience to Drought in South-East Asia*, 2nd ed. (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.18).

17. The analytical findings informed the development of the ASEAN Declaration on the Strengthening of Adaptation to Drought, which was adopted at the thirty-seventh ASEAN Summit, held in November 2020. In addition, ESCAP, in collaboration with United Nations partners, supported the development of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response work programme for the period 2021–2025, which was endorsed at the eighth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management, held in November 2020. It signals a shift towards a more proactive and adaptive drought management system across ASEAN member countries. The ESCAP secretariat has taken a similar approach in other subregions in relation to cascading disaster risks and their impact on efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, beginning with South Asia.

18. To bring drought management analysis into practice, the secretariat developed a guidebook, *Adaptation and Resilience to Drought: From Know How to Do How*, to support practitioners in reducing and preventing the negative impact of drought through cross-sectoral policy initiatives. The Asian and Pacific Centre for the Development of Disaster Information Management of ESCAP and the CIMA Research Foundation supported the Plan and Budget Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the development of its seventh five-year national development plan (2022–2026) through a capacity-building exercise on mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in such plans.

19. The use of digitally enabled geospatial tools has proved valuable for disaster risk reduction and resilience, including in the context of the pandemic. An interactive compendium of country case studies and good practices was developed to demonstrate geospatial data-driven responses in the six priority areas under the Asia-Pacific Plan of Action on Space Applications for Sustainable Development (2018–2030). That work informed the discussion at the twenty-fourth session of the Intergovernmental Consultative Committee on the Regional Space Applications Programme for Sustainable Development, held in August 2020. The Committee reiterated the urgency of scaling up the use of space science, technology and geospatial information applications in pursuit of the 2030 Agenda and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

Climate change and management of natural resources

20. Over recent decades, the region has lost more than 60 per cent of its mangroves and 40 per cent of its coral reefs (see [ESCAP/77/1](#)). Rising incomes, lifestyle changes and continued resource-intensive growth patterns are expected to further exacerbate resource depletion and ecosystem degradation. Environmental damage is also intensifying as a result of global heating. While containment and lockdown policies in response to the pandemic reduced global emissions temporarily in 2020, greenhouse gas emissions are rising again in the absence of urgent climate action (see [ESCAP/CED/2020/2](#)).

21. COVID-19, as a zoonotic disease, is a result of the fragmentation of ecosystems and the degradation of environmental health, while its spread is further compounded by such chronic challenges as fast-growing energy demands, emissions and air pollution.

22. At its sixth session, held in December 2020, the Committee on Environment and Development discussed the region's environmental challenges, highlighting four critical entry points: increasing climate ambition; safeguarding ecosystem health; clean air for all; and cities for a sustainable future. In recognition of the need to accelerate environmental and sustainable development action, the Committee endorsed the establishment of a technical expert group on environment and development to facilitate the exchange of information among countries and stakeholders.

23. Based on ESCAP analysis and consultations through expert group meetings, four thematic pillars and related policy pathways have been identified as a robust framework for the recovery and sustainable development of cities: urban and territorial planning; urban resilience; smart and inclusive cities; and urban finance.⁸

24. Analysis by the secretariat, the United Nations Environment Programme and The Greenwerk highlights that the commitments of countries in Asia and the Pacific in their nationally determined contributions are falling short of the level of ambition needed to achieve the Paris Agreement targets.⁹ Tackling the climate emergency will depend on increasing the level of ambition. At the same time, many COVID-19 recovery actions in the region are not aligned with nationally determined contributions.¹⁰ To that end, the secretariat delivered a senior-level capacity-building exercise for policymakers in November 2020 to support the development of comprehensive recovery plans that would be in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. At the national level, the secretariat provided technical support to the National Environment Commission of Bhutan in aligning environment policies with the 2030 Agenda through the new national environment strategy (2020).

25. The third edition of the Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean was marked in 2020, helping to inform the next United Nations Ocean Conference and identify actionable proposals that can be integrated into a regional decade programme as part of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030). At the city level, the secretariat, in partnership with the Government of Japan, is undertaking a new project addressing plastic waste pollution and leakages into the marine environment in selected cities in ASEAN member countries.

26. Countries in the region are actively undergoing comprehensive energy transformations towards a sustainable and low-carbon energy model, with the region experiencing a rapid growth of renewable energy coupled with a steady decline in energy intensity. Nevertheless, the share of renewables in the energy mix remains low compared with other regions, while energy intensity remains higher than the global average.¹¹

27. The region accounts for 76 per cent of current global coal capacity and 94 per cent of planned new global coal capacity for power generation.¹² The shift towards greener, more resilient and inclusive energy systems is critical as the region strives to build back better from the pandemic.

28. ESCAP has been supporting member States to develop national Goal 7 road maps using the national expert Sustainable Development Goal tool for energy planning. The process enables policymakers to make informed policy decisions to support the achievement of Goal 7 targets for clean and affordable energy, as well as emission reduction targets under the Paris Agreement. In 2020, ESCAP collaborated with the Governments of Georgia and Indonesia to develop such road maps. National stakeholders were assisted in using the tool to examine targets in the sector and develop policy scenarios and analyses integrating targets under Goal 7 and nationally

⁸ *The Future of Asian and Pacific Cities: Transformative Pathways towards Sustainable Urban Development in the Post COVID-19 Era* (United Nations publication, 2020).

⁹ ESCAP, United Nations Environment Programme and The Greenwerk, “Progress of NDC implementation in Asia-Pacific: methodological framework and preliminary findings”, 2020.

¹⁰ ESCAP, “Are countries in Asia and the Pacific initiating a ‘green recovery’? What more can be done?”, Environment and Development Policy Brief, No. 2020/1 (December 2020).

¹¹ *2021 Regional Trends Report: Shaping a Sustainable Energy Future in Asia and the Pacific – A Greener, More Resilient and Inclusive Energy System* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.II.F.3).

¹² *Coal Phase Out and Energy Transition Pathways for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2021).

determined contributions under the Paris Agreement. The launches of the road maps were followed by a high-level policy dialogue with energy experts, legislators and resident coordinators to guide the energy transition pathway and provide feedback on the road maps.

29. To support the development of pathways for energy transitions, in March 2021 ESCAP organized a regional round-table event on the extractives industry in the context of the 2030 Agenda. Bringing together high-level representatives of Governments, the private sector, academic institutions and civil society, the event served as a forum to discuss the transition from fossil fuels and pathways for improving the social and environmental sustainability of extractive industries.

Connectivity for the 2030 Agenda

Trade and investment

30. International trade was recognized in the 2030 Agenda as a potential engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction. As of December 2020, 184 bilateral, plurilateral and regional trade agreements involving at least one Asia-Pacific member State were in force, with another 100 either signed or under negotiation.¹³

31. The pandemic has brought about the worst economic performance since the Great Depression of the 1930s, with global trade falling by 14.5 per cent and global foreign direct investment by 49 per cent in 2020.¹⁴ ESCAP estimates that the region lost \$2.2 trillion in trade in 2020, based on pre-pandemic growth forecasts. Services trade, especially those related to travel, tourism and transport, has been hit harder than merchandise trade. ESCAP analysis shows an uneven impact across the region, with developing economies hit hardest.¹⁵

32. In that context, at its seventh session, in January 2021, the Committee on Trade and Investment reiterated the indispensable role of international trade and investment in the recovery from the pandemic. The Committee endorsed recommendations to the Commission in support of the recovery and stronger regional cooperation. They included the addition of provisions limiting disruptions to trade in future regional trade agreements, concerted efforts to promote inward and outward foreign direct investment in support of sustainable development, support for the integration into value chains of small and medium-sized enterprises, especially those owned by women, and the harmonization of digital trade rules, including through the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific.

33. The Framework Agreement entered into force on 20 February 2021 when five ESCAP member States – Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Philippines – completed their national procedure for accession or ratification. To ensure the inclusive implementation of the Framework Agreement, the secretariat launched an accession or ratification accelerator programme, providing technical assistance and advisory services for developing economies. In collaboration with the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law, ESCAP launched an online platform in December 2020 to facilitate countries' self-assessment of their legal and technical readiness for cross-border paperless trade. The new interactive guide has been designed to support not only the implementation of the Framework Agreement

¹³ ESCAP, "Asia-Pacific trade and investment trends 2020/2021: preferential trade agreements in Asia and the Pacific – trends and developments", December 2020.

¹⁴ ESCAP, "Asia-Pacific trade and investment trends 2020/2021: foreign direct investment trends and outlook in Asia and the Pacific – trends and development", December 2020.

¹⁵ ESCAP, "Asia-Pacific trade and investment trends 2020/2021: trade in goods outlook in Asia and the Pacific", December 2020.

but also the full digital implementation of the World Trade Organization Agreement on Trade Facilitation.

34. ESCAP launched an updated version of its online Trade Intelligence and Negotiation Adviser tool (see <https://tina.trade/>), designed to assist trade policymakers and negotiators in the preparation for trade agreement negotiations. Since its inception in 2018, the tool has assisted countries in identifying and prioritizing those sectors and markets most likely to be affected by trade agreements. One of the most promising features of the latest version is its ability to identify the most affected sectors of an economy upon graduation from least developed country status.

Transport

35. International transportation of people and goods within and across the region is a key enabler of social and economic development. During the pandemic, the region has made great efforts to preserve transport connectivity, preventing major interruptions of freight transport along the Trans-Asian Railway network and sustaining land border connectivity for freight, with ports remaining operational throughout the region, keeping global trade flowing.¹⁶

36. Nevertheless, the significant financial losses sustained by the transport sector will have a lasting impact on its competitiveness in the aftermath of the pandemic. The Asian road freight industry is expected to experience a turnover decline of 21 per cent in 2020 and rail freight of \$1.7 billion for 2020 and 2021 (see [ESCAP/CTR/2020/2](#)). It has been highlighted in ESCAP analysis and virtual expert meetings on the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway networks that a coordinated response is likely to prove more cost-effective in maintaining freight flows, especially in case of prolonged crisis.¹⁷

37. To ensure that the transport sector meets the objectives of economic, environmental and social sustainability, in November 2020 the Committee on Transport convened its sixth session, reiterating its support for advancing regional and interregional transport connectivity, addressing environmental sustainability challenges and improving safe and inclusive transport and mobility. In that regard, the Committee provided direction for phase II of the Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Connectivity in Asia and the Pacific (2022–2026), which will be further developed in close consultation with member countries and submitted for endorsement at the fourth session of the Ministerial Conference on Transport, to be held in October 2021.

38. In promoting sustainable urban transport, the secretariat continued to support cities in reviewing urban mobility using the sustainable urban transport index and in assessing the impact of COVID-19 on urban mobility. By the end of 2020, the index had helped to assess urban mobility in 20 cities in 12 countries of the region. Advisory services and capacity-building support were provided to participating cities to collect and analyse data and prepare city assessment reports and plans for sustainable, inclusive and resilient urban public transport systems, including in the context of the pandemic's impact on mobility.

39. To promote the adoption of smart transport technologies, the secretariat is developing a regional road map for smart transport systems for Asia and the Pacific and guidelines for smart mobility for South-East Asia. That work is accompanied by

¹⁶ ESCAP, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and Pacific Community, "COVID-19 and its impact on shipping and port sector in Asia and the Pacific", 30 September 2020.

¹⁷ Asian Development Bank and ESCAP, "Regional cooperation for trade and transport connectivity in the age of pandemics in Asia and the Pacific", 2020.

capacity-building workshops to strengthen national capacity to utilize smart transport technologies.

40. Safety of transport and mobility remains a policy priority, given that the region accounts for more than 60 per cent of global road fatalities.¹⁸ In 2020, to support effective monitoring and evaluation of progress in promoting road safety, the secretariat and development partners established the Asia-Pacific Road Safety Observatory as a regional platform on road safety data, policies and practices.

41. To realize the potential of multimodal transport for sustainable development, ESCAP has been working on the development of multimodal legal frameworks in Asia and the Pacific. Policy options for harmonizing those legal frameworks have been developed through consultations with a group of experts in 2020.

Energy

42. At its third session, held from 24 to 26 February 2021, the Committee on Energy highlighted the need for an energy transition in achieving sustainable development and recovering from the pandemic and endorsed the Regional Road Map on Power System Connectivity: Promoting Cross-border Electricity Connectivity for Sustainable Development (ESCAP/CE/2021/4). Reiterating the need to accelerate progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 7, the Committee finalized the terms of reference of expert working groups established by the Commission to analyse energy connectivity and the achievement of Goal 7.

III. Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda: towards resilient post-COVID-19 economies

43. In its latest analysis, ESCAP forecasts that, on average, developing Asia-Pacific economies are expected to grow by 5.9 per cent in 2021 and 5 per cent in 2022, after having experienced an estimated contraction of 1 per cent in 2020.¹⁹ The reasonably strong rebound expected in 2021 notwithstanding, the cumulative output losses for 2020–2022 are estimated at \$26 trillion, with a high probability of what are known as “K-shaped” recoveries, both across and within economies. Poorer countries and more vulnerable groups risk being marginalized in the post-pandemic recovery and transition period.

44. It is estimated that, owing to the pandemic, in 2020 an additional 89 million people in the region could have been pushed back into extreme poverty at the \$1.90 per day threshold, erasing years of progress in poverty reduction. Working-hour losses in 2020 equalled 140 million full-time jobs, while severe disruptions to economic activity and education are likely to have caused a significant setback in terms of human capital accumulation and productivity.

45. Based on an analysis of the risk landscape of some 450 adverse events since the 1960s in Asia and the Pacific, it is highlighted that investing in resilience is key to reducing adverse setbacks. Such shocks reverse hard-won gains across the three dimensions of sustainable development, exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and delay recoveries. Impacts were found in terms of lower income, wider inequality, higher unemployment, slower accumulation of human and physical capital and weaker environmental performance. Policy choices, such as a swift and strong response to adverse shocks, investment in health and social protection systems, quality of

¹⁸ *Road Safety: Saving Lives Beyond 2020 in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2020).

¹⁹ *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2021: Towards Post-COVID-19 Resilient Economies* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.II.F.5).

infrastructure and economic diversification, were found to have a significant impact on resilience to shocks.

46. In moving forward, what is termed a “build forward better” policy package for resilient post-COVID-19 economies is proposed. The package is focused on enhancing access to health care and social protection, improving access to digital technologies and strengthening climate and clean energy action. It is estimated that, if implemented, the package could reduce the number of poor people in the region by almost 180 million, increase the potential output by 12 per cent and cut carbon emissions by about 30 per cent in the long term. Policy options for financing and implementing the package, such as ending fossil-fuel subsidies, introducing a carbon tax and engaging in stronger and more inclusive multilateralism and collaboration, have been proposed.

Data and statistics

47. The *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021* shows that more data are becoming available as countries accord priority to monitoring the Goals. Data availability increased from 25 per cent in 2017 to 49 per cent in 2020, although one third of the indicators remain without data, in particular among those Goals where progress is slow.

48. At its seventh session, in August 2020, the Committee on Statistics highlighted the regional commitment to promoting reliable and timely statistics to inform sound policymaking and empower people. The Committee endorsed the monitoring and evaluation framework for the collective vision and framework for action and the Declaration on Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No One Behind. Three priority areas were identified for regional action: developments of accounts for integrated statistics and analysis; embracing big data to modernize official statistics; and addressing the skill gaps of national statistical offices in line with the 2030 Agenda.

49. In support of the follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda, the *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021* and the Asia-Pacific Sustainable Development Goals Gateway provided the reference point for the region, subregions and countries to assess progress, prioritize action and make the necessary course corrections. The Gateway has continuously evolved, with the latest addition, the National Sustainable Development Goals Tracker, launched in March 2021. It allows Governments to develop their own Goals progress assessment using national indicators and data, on which basis they are able to identify areas for scaled-up action during the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development. The secretariat provided technical support to the Resident Coordinator and United Nations country team in Thailand to develop a national progress assessment of the Goals, on which basis priority actions have been identified in the country’s new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. Upon the request of resident coordinators, national progress assessments were also made available to assist in the development of the Frameworks for the multi-country offices in the Pacific.

50. The disruption wrought by COVID-19 to statistical operations notwithstanding, the secretariat continues to provide technical support to strengthen the capacity of national statistical systems to produce official statistics. For example, ESCAP organized a regional training-of-trainers session in November 2020 for expert trainers from the Network for the Coordination of Statistical Training in Asia and the Pacific, which helped to build the capacity of a host of master trainers in national statistical systems. The secretariat organized an Asia-Pacific Stats Café series, bringing in-depth technical discussions to the region’s statistical community. The 25 cafés organized in 2020 were attended by more than 3,000 participants who explored a wide range of statistical issues, including in the context of the pandemic, in response to member

States' requests, such as household surveys, civil registration and vital statistics, the use of remote sensing data and the adoption of big data. The virtual discussions made it possible to reach more junior and mid-level staff in national statistical systems and engage a much larger number of countries compared with face-to-face events.

51. In the area of civil registration and vital statistics, in December 2020 the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific met for the sixth time to share knowledge on how to collect and analyse civil registration and vital statistics effectively amid the pandemic. The Regional Steering Group also discussed the findings of the midterm review of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024) in preparation for the Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, to be held in 2021. Areas of collaborative action were identified for strengthening cooperation at the local, subnational, national and international levels in line with the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific.

Information and communications technology

52. While digital innovation has become the engine for growth in Asia and the Pacific, nearly 52 per cent of the region's 4.3 billion people are denied online access. Less than 14 per cent of the population are connected to affordable and reliable high-speed Internet (see [ESCAP/CICTSTI/2020/2](#)), exacerbating inequality of opportunity and vulnerabilities. The digital divide within and across countries has been accentuated during the pandemic as response measures and other products and services are increasingly delivered digitally.

53. The need for regional cooperation in scaling up effective technologies and increasing innovation capacity was reaffirmed at the third session of the Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation, held on 19 and 20 August 2020. The Committee recommended that the secretariat set up a drafting group as part of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee to develop an action plan for the next phase of implementation of the Master Plan for the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway, for the period 2022–2026, with a view to strengthening regional collaboration on building digital inclusion and resilient digital networks. The Committee decided to scale up the use of space applications to deliver on the Goals by implementing the Asia-Pacific Plan of Action on Space Applications for Sustainable Development (2018–2030) ([ESCAP/75/10/Add.2](#)) and building a regional gateway to promote the sharing of integrated geospatial data, tools and best practices. The Committee also recognized the potential of innovative business models and practices, while underscoring the need to develop policies that promoted inclusive technology and innovation.

54. In response, the secretariat is scaling up the implementation of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative towards affordable and resilient broadband connectivity across the region. To that end, it is supporting member States in the development of the action plan for the next phase, to serve as a regional blueprint for digital transformation. In the Pacific, a working group consisting of stakeholders in Fiji, New Zealand and Samoa was set up to work on establishing a shared Pacific Internet exchange point, which is expected to improve broadband Internet affordability and reliability through more efficient Internet traffic management. The Asia-Pacific E-Resilience Toolkit²⁰ was developed to provide policymakers with information, including solutions and case studies, to promote e-resilience to disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Capacity-building support was also provided by the

²⁰ Available at <https://drrgateway.net/e-resilience>.

Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development to build national expertise in digital government and transformation, digital inclusion, disaster risk reduction and the impact of climate change.

55. As the secretariat of the Regional Committee of United Nations Global Geospatial Information Management for Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP is working with member States to implement the Integrated Geospatial Information Framework to promote the use of geospatial information and maximize its economic, social and environmental benefits in the region.

56. In the area of inclusive business and innovation, the secretariat worked with the ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises to develop the Guidelines for the Promotion of Inclusive Business in ASEAN, which were endorsed at the fifty-second meeting of the ASEAN Economic Ministers, held in August 2020. They provide insight into the dynamics between Governments and businesses and a framework for institutional support for inclusive businesses at all levels. They were introduced to regional stakeholders at the third ASEAN Inclusive Business Summit, held in September 2020.

57. ESCAP and the United Nations Capital Development Fund initiated the Women Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise Fintech Innovation Fund in 2019 to support financial technologies, financial service providers and innovators to develop, test and scale solutions that support women entrepreneurs to succeed. In 2020, with the Fund's financial and technical support, innovative financing solutions for women entrepreneurs were introduced, such as the KOTRA Riel bookkeeping application, the first tool for Cambodian micro-entrepreneurs to plan and manage cash flows.

Finance

58. Recent ESCAP analysis shows that significant financial resources will be needed to build forward better, not only to address the immediate crisis but also to build resilience to future shocks and achieve the 2030 Agenda. Proposed policy options include debt service suspensions, debt swaps for development, sovereign bond financing, effective public debt management and sustainable investing by institutional investors.²¹

59. In diversifying financing options, the Infrastructure Financing and Public-Private Partnership Network of Asia and the Pacific, established in 2018, continues to serve as a platform for sharing knowledge and building capacity on the use of public-private partnership mechanisms. In October 2020, at the fourth meeting of the Network, ESCAP introduced the InfraPPPnet web portal, compiling information on good practices and project pipelines on infrastructure financing and public-private partnerships. The discussions underscored the urgency of accelerating public-private partnerships as a financing option and to improve the infrastructure needed in response to the pandemic and future shocks.

60. At the national level, in November 2020 ESCAP, in coordination with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund, launched a United Nations joint programme on aligning policy and financing with the Sustainable Development Goals towards an integrated national financing framework in Kazakhstan. The joint programme is focused on strengthening government capacity to develop the institutional ecosystem necessary to increase the impact of financial resources on the achievement of the Goals.

61. The secretariat also supported the Government of Bhutan in issuing the country's first sovereign bond in early 2020, a milestone for the country in tapping

²¹ *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2021.*

into the domestic resources market and preparing for its entry into the international capital market. The secretariat had previously provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Finance, the Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan, the Royal Securities Exchange of Bhutan and other key stakeholders since 2017. The issuance is a major step in supporting the country's economic recovery from the pandemic while diversifying financial sources.

IV. Response to and recovery from the pandemic

62. Nearly one year into the pandemic, the region has faced multi-faceted crises. The pandemic was found to have erased years of socioeconomic progress. The economic and educational shutdowns are likely to have severely harmed human capital formation and productivity and exacerbated poverty and inequality.²² In supporting countries and stakeholders in the response to and recovery from the pandemic, ESCAP developed a framework for its activities²³ in line with the United Nations Framework for the Immediate Socioeconomic Response to COVID-19 and the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific.

63. As a rapid response, ESCAP developed a COVID-19 policy tracker to help stakeholders to gain insight into national responses, such as containment measures and fiscal and monetary policies.²⁴ The tracker is accompanied by analytical products for assessing impact, developing estimates, understanding national responses and identifying entry points for building back better in such thematic areas as macroeconomic policies, disaster risk reduction and trade facilitation.

64. ESCAP also developed analytical tools to support member States in designing better policy responses that are aligned with the 2030 Agenda. For example, the secretariat created a modelling tool to assist countries in designing integrated policies and responses. The model provides a snapshot of the national socioeconomic context and lays out simple scenarios for designing integrated policy responses. It also incorporates social and environment indicators and captures the broader social and environmental impact of policy responses, in addition to economic variables. Technical support was provided to the United Nations country team and national stakeholders in Mongolia to apply the tool in developing a national response plan. ESCAP also provided technical support to the Governments of Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Samoa to conduct a rapid assessment of the potential economic impact of the crisis and to quantify the financing necessary for response measures. Building on the analysis, policy advice is provided to the participating countries on the design of rescue packages to both achieve the 2030 Agenda and recover from the pandemic. Knowledge products on cascading risks from climate-induced disasters and biohazards were developed by the Asia-Pacific Disaster Resilience Network.²⁵

65. To support women-led micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises amid the pandemic, the secretariat introduced financing initiatives under the Catalysing Women's Entrepreneurship Programme. ESCAP partnered with the United Nations Capital Development Fund, with support from the Entrepreneurial Development Bank, the Government of Canada and Visa, to launch a fund to support women enterprises in adopting innovative business solutions in South and South-East Asia.

²² United Nations, Asian Development Bank and UNDP, *Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leaving No Country Behind* (Bangkok, 2021).

²³ ESCAP, "Socioeconomic response to COVID-19: ESCAP framework", May 2020.

²⁴ See www.unescap.org/covid19/policy-responses.

²⁵ ESCAP, "Protecting the most vulnerable to cascading risks from climate extremes and the COVID-19 in South Asia", June 2020.

ESCAP partnered with the Global Gender Lens Emergency Loan Finance Facility, part of the Small Enterprise Assistance Funds, to provide women-led small and medium-sized enterprises in Cambodia and Viet Nam with emergency loan financing and business support to mitigate the business impact of COVID-19.

66. At the subregional level, ESCAP, in partnership with the International Transport Forum, supported the development of the COVID-19 Recovery Guidelines for Resilient and Sustainable International Road Freight Transport Connectivity in ASEAN. Endorsed in January 2021, they provide recommendations for ASEAN member countries to develop national and transnational plans for building resilient and sustainable road freight connectivity, as part of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework.

V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

67. In the 2030 Agenda, multi-stakeholder partnerships are defined as a means for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. To that end, ESCAP continues to build partnerships and deliver specific action with partners in the United Nations development system, donors, the private sector, civil society organizations and academic institutions.

68. At the regional level, the Executive Secretary of ESCAP and the Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific of UNDP served as the Co-Vice-Chairs of the Regional Collaborative Platform for Asia and the Pacific. The Platform, established in October 2020, strengthens policy coherence and ensures collaboration within the United Nations development system at the regional level. Central to its analytical and policy activities is the work of the five issue-based coalitions focusing on climate change mitigation, building resilience, inclusion and empowerment, people mobility and urbanization, and gender equality and human rights. The Platform is also supported by four inter-agency working groups on knowledge management, reporting of system-wide results, Goals data and statistics, and regional operations management.

69. The issue-based coalition on climate change mitigation, co-convened by ESCAP and the United Nations Environment Programme, organized regional advocacy initiatives and explored new regional partnerships for climate action. That led to the commemoration of the International Day of Clean Air for blue skies, exploring new regional partnerships for addressing air pollution in the region. The coalition also mapped regional and subregional initiatives to explore opportunities for developing an intergovernmental modality on clean air and a regional clean air fund.

70. As a member of other issue-based coalitions, ESCAP contributed to regional syntheses and joint policy messages. These include a publication, *Recovering from COVID-19: Lessons from Past Disasters in Asia and the Pacific*, with the coalition on building resilience, and a regional dialogue on social protection responses to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific,²⁶ with the coalition on inclusion and empowerment.

71. The Asia-Pacific Knowledge Management Hub²⁷ was put in place by an inter-agency working group on knowledge management led by the Regional Development Coordination Office for Asia and the Pacific and ESCAP. Launched at the Eighth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, it draws from the resources and financial contributions of the regional United Nations development system.

²⁶ ESCAP and others, "Social protection responses to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific: the story so far and future considerations", August 2020.

²⁷ See <https://knowledge.unasiapacific.org/>.

72. The Regional Collaborative Platform's working group on Goals data and statistics, co-chaired by ESCAP and the United Nations Population Fund, reached out to 24 United Nations country teams in the region and established regular contact and information flows. Throughout 2020, the group has been a source of support for resident coordinators and country teams, including to navigate the impact of COVID-19 on statistical operations.

73. At the subregional level, ESCAP continues to strengthen partnerships with intergovernmental organizations on issues critical to the 2030 Agenda and the recovery from the pandemic. Following the completion of the ASEAN-United Nations Plan of Action for 2016–2020, its successor plan of action, for 2021–2025, was noted at the eleventh ASEAN-United Nations Summit, held in November 2020. ESCAP contributed to it as the lead coordinator on the economic cooperation and sociocultural cooperation pillars, as well as cross-sectoral cooperation. ESCAP also worked closely with the ASEAN secretariat in the development of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, which was also endorsed at the summit.

74. ESCAP and the Economic Commission for Europe assisted the Economic Forum of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia, held in November 2020. The Forum adopted the Bishkek Declaration: Strengthening Regional Cooperation to Support Socioeconomic Recovery in the Wake of COVID-19, calling for strengthened regional cooperation in trade, transport and digital connectivity, continued efforts to accede to and effectively implement United Nations legal instruments, conventions and agreements, and enhanced fiscal resources for sustainable development.

75. Results of the long-standing partnership between ESCAP, the Asian Development Bank and UNDP help to inform the deliberations of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. A report, *Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leaving No Country Behind*, produced by the partners, set the tone for discussions. It was highlighted therein that, in response to the pandemic, digitalization had proved conducive to societal and economic transformation. Regional cooperation is vital to mitigate the threat of an uneven recovery between countries and prepare countries to deal with future shocks.

76. ESCAP has also strengthened partnerships with development partners to scale up action for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. The ESCAP multi-donor trust fund for tsunami, disaster and climate preparedness in Indian Ocean and South-East Asian countries continues to evolve, with the publication of a new strategic plan for the period 2021–2024. The trust fund has built on global and regional cooperation to scale up, share and replicate successful pilots in relation to early warning systems in 19 beneficiary countries as of 2020. The work has included the development of standard operating procedures for multi-hazard early warning in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet Nam.

77. The ESCAP Sustainable Business Network serves as a platform for showcasing Asia-Pacific business leadership on sustainability. With a new vision set out by its Executive Council, the Network will evolve to better align and engage with ESCAP work to scale up business ambition and action towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The annual Asia-Pacific Business Forum, co-organized by ESCAP and the Network, was held in October 2020, focusing on the future of global value chains and the implications for small and medium-sized enterprises. The Forum highlighted the opportunities to build back better from the pandemic in relation to adopting and implementing internationally recognized standards and improving long-term competitiveness.

78. ESCAP continued to provide technical support to member States in the preparation of and follow-up to voluntary national reviews through its rapid response facility, in partnership with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UNDP and resident coordinators. Eight member States were supported in the preparation of their reviews, including through a toolkit for second-generation reviews.²⁸ Best practices were highlighted at a regional peer-learning workshop during the Eighth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. To strengthen the role of local authorities, the secretariat developed and launched the Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews, in partnership with the Penang Platform for Sustainable Urbanization.²⁹ They provided the framework and guidance needed for city governments to review commitments to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in coordination with the voluntary national reviews.

VI. Conclusions

79. Even before the pandemic, the region was not on track to achieve the Goals, but the devastating socioeconomic impact has exposed chronic inequalities in access to opportunities and accentuated vulnerabilities. An early assessment of the impact on the Goals indicates a significant risk of derailing the hard-earned progress across the social, economic and environmental pillars.

80. Such findings make accelerating action for achieving the 2030 Agenda even more important. The intergovernmental discussions in the region in 2020 highlighted countries' ambition and commitment to build resilience and scale up solutions, ranging from building comprehensive social protection systems and strengthening regional connectivity to better utilizing data, including geospatial data, for mitigating future risks. The results of the 2020 programme of work have helped to build the momentum for this change to occur. The secretariat will continue to support member States and regional and national stakeholders in realizing that shared ambition.

²⁸ ESCAP, "Voluntary national reviews: a practical guidance tool for 2nd VNRs", November 2020.

²⁹ *Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews: Reviewing Local Progress to Accelerate Action for the Sustainable Development Goals* (United Nations publication, 2020).