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Regional cooperation

Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2021–2022

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 2021–2022.



Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2021–2022

Summary

In 2021, countries in Asia and the Pacific emerged from the worst of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic only to be confronted by a reality of growing inequalities and converging crises. Even before the pandemic, the Asia-Pacific region was not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, but the pandemic has made the need to shift to a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient development pathway clearer than ever.

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 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.

I. Introduction

1. In 2021, countries in Asia and the Pacific emerged from the worst of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic only to be confronted by a reality of growing inequalities and the converging crises of natural disasters, biohazards and climate change. Even before the pandemic, the Asia-Pacific region was not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, but the pandemic has made the need to shift to a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient development pathway clearer than ever. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides the compass to guide countries in setting in motion a sustained and sustainable recovery. Efforts need to be redoubled to put countries back on track towards achieving the Goals and a better recovery.

2. In this challenging context, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has supported its member States in taking action to build back better while advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Commission's intergovernmental platforms helped to provide guidance for regional cooperation and national action on building back better (see Commission resolution 77/1 on building back better from crises through regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific). ESCAP has supported a whole-of-society response to the pandemic and encouraged coordinated action across the region to mitigate the economic and social devastation it wrought. Knowledge and analysis developed by the secretariat has informed discussions and underlined the importance of investing in social protection systems, in particular to meet the health care and social care needs of the most vulnerable populations; developing an environment-responsive approach to COVID-19 recovery efforts; and promoting the continued and equitable flow of essential goods and services as set out in the policy agenda of the theme study for the seventy-seventh session of the Commission.¹ As discussed in the information note on the system-wide results of the United Nations development system in Asia and the Pacific in 2021, secretariat has focused on partnering with stakeholders and promoting regional cooperation to shape the regional and national policy discussions and catalyse progress along recovery pathways that are more risk-informed, gender-responsive and human-rights-centred.²

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 implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the region

A. Regional progress on the Sustainable Development Goals

4. Throughout Asia and the Pacific, Governments are striving towards the Sustainable Development Goals and the ambitious objectives of reaching the furthest behind first, but progress has slowed. An increase in the frequency and intensity of anthropogenic crises and natural disasters and the exigencies of responding to the pandemic have exacerbated development challenges. ESCAP analysis shows that the region is not on track to achieve any of the 17 Goals, vulnerability has increased, and huge gaps persist between population groups. Those furthest behind, including

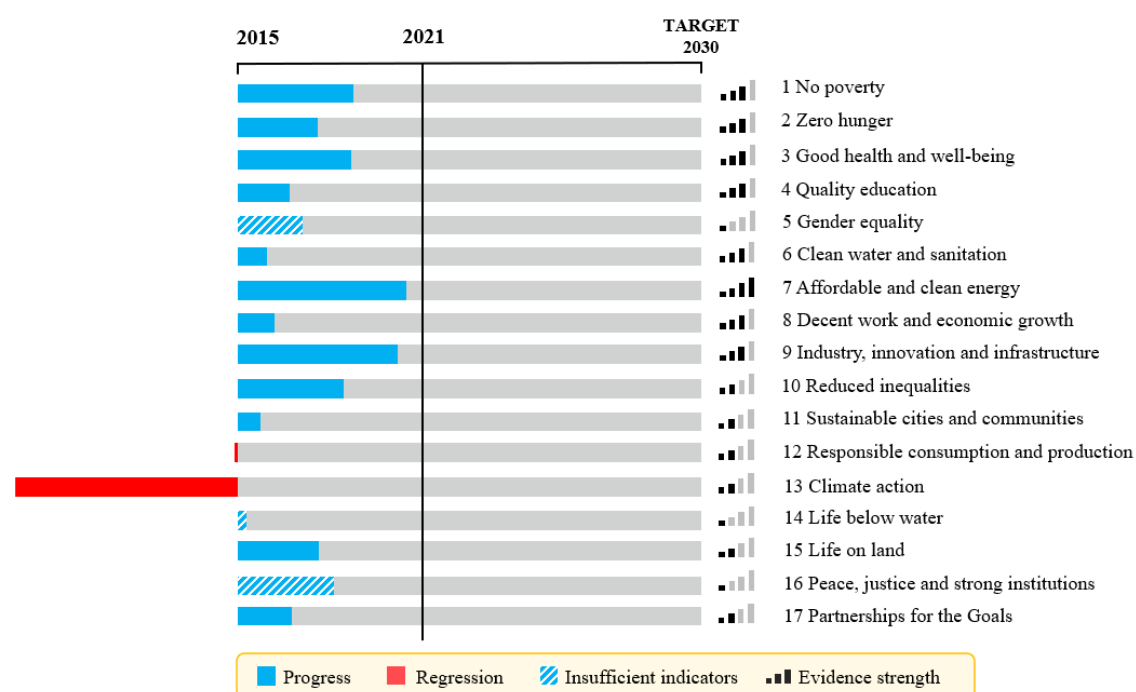
¹ *Beyond the Pandemic: Building Back Better from Crises in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2021).

² ESCAP/RFSD/2022/INF/2.

women, persons with disabilities and members of rural populations and poorer households, are also facing increased vulnerabilities. For many vulnerable populations, food security, education and livelihoods have also deteriorated during the pandemic. Given current progress, the estimated year for the achievement of the Goals in the region is now 2065.³

5. The climate crisis has become more acute; alarmingly, the region has regressed on Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and Goal 13 (Climate action). While headway has been made on some of the targets of Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure) and Goal 7 (Affordable and clean energy), progress still falls short of the pace required to achieve the Goals by 2030. Across the region, progress has been very slow or even stagnant on Goal 4 (Quality education), Goal 5 (Gender equality), Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation), Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth), Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and Goal 14 (Life below water).

Snapshot of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific, 2021



Source: *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2022* (United Nations publication, 2022).

6. However, amid these disturbing trends, ESCAP analysis also highlights some good news for the region. The number of Goal indicators with data available has doubled since 2017. Collaboration among national and international custodian agencies has significantly contributed to enhancing the availability of data. ESCAP encourages countries to continue cooperation to close the remaining gaps, as 57 of the 169 targets of the Goals still cannot be measured.

7. The Ninth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development provided an inclusive platform for countries to share regional best practices and lessons learned, support the presentation of their voluntary national reviews and assess progress made in implementing the 2030 Agenda. The Forum brought together a cross section of key

³ *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2022* (United Nations publication, 2022).

development actors, including senior government and United Nations officials, young people and representatives of the private sector and civil society to share their experiences and mobilize regional action on the theme “Building back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific”. Forum participants undertook an in-depth review of the region’s progress on Goals 4, 5, 14, 15 (Life on land) and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) at round tables coordinated and organized by various United Nations entities.

8. According to the report of the Forum, a key message stemming from the Forum was the need for inclusive and sustainable approaches and strengthened regional cooperation to build back better and deliver on the 2030 Agenda (see ESCAP/RFSD/2022/5, annex). Furthermore, the Forum noted the need for policy actions to be grounded in human rights, focus on the vulnerable and empower women and girls through multi-stakeholder partnerships, and also noted the importance of enhancing social protection, providing quality education and advancing gender equality. The outcomes of the regional Forum will feed into the global high-level political forum on sustainable development, to be held in July 2022.

9. ESCAP continued to provide technical support to Kazakhstan, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Tuvalu in the preparation of and follow-up to their voluntary national reviews. Best practices were highlighted at a regional peer-learning workshop held during the Forum to promote open dialogue among countries and stakeholders on national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Two policy briefs provided policymakers with practical tools and ideas for addressing common challenges in the voluntary national review process.

10. At the national level, ESCAP facilitated two twinning programmes, between the Philippines and Tuvalu and between Sri Lanka and Pakistan, to share challenges, best practices and lessons learned in the preparation of and follow-up to their voluntary national reviews. One study tour was successfully conducted for the Pakistan-Sri Lanka programme, and an additional tour is planned. The tour included the wider participation of representatives from coordinating bodies and the business sector, government officials and members of civil society and working groups. National development targets and goals were revised, national policies and institutions were strengthened and assessed, and partnerships were created to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and enhance South-South cooperation.

B. Social development

11. The aggravating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on existing inequalities is erasing many hard-fought gains with regard to gender equality. ESCAP analysis published in 2021 highlighted the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work that women in Asia-Pacific countries are shouldering and proposed policy solutions and strategies to address such challenges, including through gender-responsive socioeconomic measures and the boosting of national investment in the care economy with a view to building a more equal and resilient society.⁴

12. In addition, a lack of economic resilience exposed persons with disabilities – in particular women, young people and rural inhabitants – to even more complex vulnerabilities when the pandemic hit. According to ESCAP analysis of the employment status of persons with disabilities, they fare worse than persons without

⁴ *Addressing Unpaid Care Work in ASEAN (ST/ESCAP/2968) and COVID-19 and the Unpaid Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific (ST/ESCAP/2967).*

disabilities throughout the labour market.⁵ Effective and innovative solutions are needed to address these challenges and leave no one behind.

13. To address the chronic vulnerabilities aggravated by the pandemic, ESCAP has been supporting member States in enhancing social protection systems in line with the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Technical support was delivered to Cambodia, Maldives and Mongolia to take stock of their social protection systems. In addition, using the classification and regression tree and the dissimilarity index methodologies, ESCAP helped to identify the groups that are furthest behind and analyse inequality of opportunity in Kiribati, Maldives, Mongolia, Thailand and Turkmenistan. The analyses also served as the basic inputs for the United Nations country teams in conducting the common country analyses. In addition, ESCAP supported Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines and Thailand with regard to disability-inclusive development policies.

14. With regard to promoting the economic empowerment of women, ESCAP has been working with the Governments of Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Samoa and Viet Nam to improve the policy environment for women's entrepreneurship. Under the programme on catalysing women's entrepreneurship, the secretariat supported policy assessments, for example on (a) the impacts of COVID-19 on micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises and (b) business registration of women-led micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises. Policy recommendations have led to positive changes in the business environment for women-led enterprises, such as the revisions to legislation on small and medium-sized enterprises in Viet Nam to integrate assistance for such enterprises that are led by women.

15. With regard to addressing the challenges and opportunities of population ageing, the secretariat has provided support for countries in the implementation of international norms and standards and the strengthening of national policies, including the following: capacity-building for Bhutan, Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives and Mongolia to conduct assessments of the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, and technical support for national stakeholders in Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste to develop policies on harnessing the demographic dividend that include a gender dimension.

C. Environment and development

16. According to the note by the secretariat containing the summary of the theme study on a common agenda to advance sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific, economic growth has caused devastating environmental harm by exhausting natural resources, pushing many natural systems beyond the point of irreversible damage, generating dangerous levels of pollution and contributing to global climate change.⁶ The Asia-Pacific region is at the forefront of this existential challenge, with regard to both causes and consequences. According to an analysis of nationally determined contributions, the region's greenhouse gas emissions are projected to increase by 34 per cent by 2030 compared with 2010 levels.⁷ At the same time, 5 of the 10 countries with the greatest historical responsibility for emissions since the

⁵ *Disability at a Glance 2021: The Shaping of Disability-Inclusive Employment in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2021).

⁶ [ESCAP/78/1](#).

⁷ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and others, *Is 1.5°C within Reach for the Asia-Pacific Region? Ambition and Potential of NDC Commitments of the Asia-Pacific Countries* (ST/ESCAP/2979).

beginning of the twentieth century are in Asia. While the starting point is not encouraging, the good news is that momentum for climate action is building.

17. The Commission's regional platforms allowed regional perspectives to be mobilized, catalysed joint actions and informed global dialogues. The 2021 Asia-Pacific Climate Week brought together high-level representatives of government, the private sector, academic institutions and civil society to build momentum in the lead-up to the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and underscored the need for resilience to risks emerging during the COVID-19 crisis. Participants in the Asia-Pacific food systems dialogue in the lead-up to the United Nations Food Systems Summit held in 2021 highlighted the importance of regional cooperation and national transformation to enhance the resilience and sustainability of food systems. Analysis carried out by the five regional commissions underscored the need to enhance regional engagement with regard to the sharing of lessons learned for a sustainable food systems transformation aimed at achieving equitable livelihoods for all and a healthy and sustainable planet.⁸ Lastly, the fourth annual Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean helped to inform the next United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, and to identify actionable proposals that can be integrated into a regional programme as part of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development.

18. To translate climate ambitions into national actions, ESCAP has developed an innovative carbon pricing simulation tool to understand the country-specific macroeconomic effects of sector transitions. The simulation tool will support the development of national greenhouse gas emissions scenarios for Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand, among others, in partnership with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

19. ESCAP provided demand-driven cooperation to tackle pollution-related challenges. For example, it held a consultation with a view to developing a regional modality for cooperation on addressing air pollution. ESCAP is supporting Thailand in the use of remote sensing technology, satellite imagery and machine learning to identify specific sources of urban air pollution. It is also providing support in Chiang Mai on a local action plan for air pollution and in Bangkok on an innovative analysis of air quality, crop-burning and traffic congestion data. The Centre for Sustainable Agricultural Mechanization is supporting national partners in Cambodia, Indonesia and Nepal in integrated straw management to curb the serious environmental and public health consequences of straw-residue-burning. Through its "closing the loop" project, ESCAP supported the completion of city-level action plans on plastic pollution and policy interventions to address waste management in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Viet Nam.⁹

20. ESCAP continues to provide support for integrated and participatory environmental policymaking and for the strengthening of engagement and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Technical support was provided to Indonesia on multi-stakeholder partnerships and to Maldives on Sustainable Development Goals systems analysis. ESCAP is also collaborating with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to establish an ASEAN task force to promote the development of a subregional framework agreement on access rights.

⁸ Available at www.cepal.org/es/node/54686.

⁹ See www.unescap.org/projects/ctl.

21. In addition, ESCAP provided technical support to build the capacity of policymakers in environmental management, including an annual executive training on environment and development and the Asia-Pacific Mayors Academy. Furthermore, ESCAP supported the development of voluntary local reviews in several cities, utilizing regional guidelines for voluntary local reviews developed in 2020.

D. Disaster risk reduction

22. Since the start of the pandemic, the region has been hit by multiple natural and biological disasters. At the same time, climate change has continued to warm the world, exacerbating the impacts of many of these disasters. Countries in the region are also being hit by cyclones, floods, landslides and locust infestations. The capacity of disaster management and public health systems to respond to these converging risks will play a key role in the recovery from COVID-19 and beyond.

23. The *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2021*¹⁰ shows that the pandemic, combined with the persistent reality of climate change, has reshaped and expanded disaster risks in Asia and the Pacific. The triple threat of disease, disaster and climate change is causing not only considerable human hardship but also significant economic losses. Currently, average annual disaster-related losses are \$780 billion, which could nearly double – to approximately \$1.4 trillion – in a worst-case climate scenario. A proactive strategy of adapting to natural and other biological hazards would be far more cost-effective, at an annual cost of \$270 billion. A paradigm shift is needed in disaster risk management to focus on investing in prevention and resilience-building.

24. In that context, according to its report on its seventh session, the Committee on Disaster Risk Reduction recommended a scale-up of regional and subregional cooperation strategies that integrate disasters, including climate-related disasters, and associated health perspectives, to complement national efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda, and also recommended technical advice and capacity-building support on the implementation of the health aspects of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.¹¹ The Committee noted the need to operationalize resilience to all types of disasters, including those that are intensifying owing to climate change, by implementing the Sendai Framework. It requested the secretariat to further deepen its analytical research and disseminate the findings through the Risk and Resilience Portal of the Asia-Pacific Disaster Resilience Network.¹²

25. Accordingly, ESCAP supported countries of Central Asia, such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, in the integrated use of geospatial and statistical data for land information. Technical support was delivered to enhance national capacities to integrate geospatial and statistic data for land use management.

26. To support countries in developing a comprehensive understanding of cascading risks, ESCAP developed the Risk and Resilience Portal, which facilitates the tracking of various hazard hotspots and the customization of adaptation priorities with regard to addressing transboundary hazards for each country in the region. ESCAP-developed climate and disaster risk profiles have informed the priority areas for risk reduction action in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia.

27. ESCAP also supported enhanced understanding of the complex impacts of sand and dust storms, which represent an important emerging issue for policymakers in the Asia-Pacific region. The 2021 report of the Asian and Pacific Centre for the Development of Disaster Information Management, entitled *Sand and Dust Storms*

¹⁰ United Nations publication, 2021.

¹¹ ESCAP/CDR/2021/3.

¹² Available at <https://rrp.unescap.org/>.

Risk Assessment in Asia and the Pacific, demonstrates how these storms worsen air quality and degrade vast farmland areas, disrupt commercial flight services, lower the efficiency of solar power generation and accelerate the melting of glaciers.¹³

28. Through its Multi-donor Trust Fund for Tsunami, Disaster and Climate Preparedness in Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian Countries, ESCAP has continued to address early warning gaps, including by holding climate outlook forums in 14 Asia-Pacific countries and expanding the Fund's geographical scope to include small island developing States in the South-West Pacific with a view to addressing the needs of such States in high-risk situations. The Fund deepened its partnerships by cooperating with the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, expanding its donor base to include the Government of Italy and formalizing the cooperation with the Regional Integrated Multi-Hazard Early Warning System for Africa and Asia.

E. Energy

29. As the largest energy-consuming region in the world, Asia and the Pacific will play a pivotal role in the implementation of the global road map for accelerated action on Sustainable Development Goal 7 in support of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. The region's economies account for approximately one third of the world's gross domestic product, consume half of the global energy supply and include the world's top energy producers and consumers. According to the note by the secretariat on implementing the global road map, in 2019, Asia and the Pacific accounted for 57 per cent of global emissions from fuel combustion, nearly two thirds of which were from coal (see [ESCAP/78/14](#)).

30. Across the Asia-Pacific region, progress towards Goal 7 is mixed. Current progress is insufficient for the region to reach all of the targets of Goal 7 by 2030. To support the tracking of progress and inform policies to accelerate the energy transition in the region, the Asia Pacific Energy Portal provides detailed energy data and a depository of policies from across the region.¹⁴ ESCAP analysis highlights several areas where the region has strong potential to progress on the global road map, such as universal access to electricity, job creation, and investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency. However, the region faces challenges in achieving access to clean cooking, leveraging private investment and phasing out coal from power generation.

31. To accelerate the energy transition in Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP has been supporting member States in developing national Goal 7 road maps using the national expert Sustainable Development Goal tool for energy planning. The tool enables policymakers to take informed policy decisions to support the achievement of the targets of Goal 7 for clean and affordable energy and the emissions reduction targets under the Paris Agreement. With the support of ESCAP, road maps were completed in Bhutan, Fiji, Georgia, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Tonga, as well as in cities such as Cauayan, Philippines, Jakarta, and Iskandar, Malaysia. ESCAP is working with member States to implement the nine road map strategies. Ongoing work includes support for regulatory harmonization and capacity-building; development of a road map for a green power corridor in North-East Asia; and development of a set of principles for sustainable connectivity in the form of a green power corridor framework.

¹³ ST/ESCAP/2966.

¹⁴ Available at www.asiapacificenergy.org.

F. Transport

32. The COVID-19 pandemic dealt a significant shock to global and regional transport systems while magnifying the underlying shortages and connectivity gaps. These shocks, combined with the impacts of climate change and the rise in climate-related disasters, highlighted the need to place sustainability and resilience at the core of transport systems.

33. In its *Review of Transport Developments in Asia and the Pacific 2021*, ESCAP assesses the effects of COVID-19 on urban transport systems. It provides recommendations on how urban transport system policies and plans can integrate three key elements, namely environmental sustainability, social inclusiveness and resilience.¹⁵ It also presents the results of an exercise on modelling future scenarios, in which it found that energy efficiency and electric vehicle scenarios had the most significant impact on reducing emissions.

34. In that context, a potentially transformative agenda was adopted by the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Transport, which would enable people and goods to move around the region and the world in greener, smarter and more resilient ways. The Ministerial Conference adopted the Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific (2022–2026), which includes concerted action to address rising freight and passenger volumes and rapid urbanization with high motorization rates, and encourages the accelerated use of digital technologies, the deployment of smart transport systems and a transition towards safer, more inclusive, low-carbon transport systems. The Ministerial Conference also adopted the Ministerial Declaration on Sustainable Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific, in which the Ministers of transport and representatives of the members and associate members of the Commission in attendance call upon all stakeholders to further intensify efforts to address the region's lagging sustainability performance and enhance resilience to future crises.

35. The Ministerial Conference provided an opportunity to rethink transport priorities in the region with a view to achieving more efficient and resilient transport and logistics, as well as affordable, accessible, reliable, safe and sustainable mobility. Ministers welcomed national and regional efforts to preserve and enhance transport connectivity during the pandemic; endorsed the Transport Research and Education Network; decided to work towards a harmonized legal framework for multimodal transport in the region; and encouraged a regional approach to sustainable multimodal freight transport.

36. ESCAP has provided national- and subnational-level technical cooperation to support transitions to sustainable transport. For example, using the sustainable urban transport index, ESCAP completed sustainability assessments of urban transport systems in a total of 25 cities.¹⁶ In addition, ESCAP is facilitating dialogues and national assessments on smart mobility in countries in South-East Asia. It is also assisting in the preparation of country-specific road maps for sustainable resilient port development in Indonesia, Maldives and Viet Nam and national strategies on enhancing the shift towards sustainable freight transport, as well as in the development of policy on related digitalization efforts at small ports in the Pacific Island countries. Countries were also supported in the management of transport corridors to support the achievement of target 9.1 of the Goals on quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, and in improving road safety to meet targets 3.6 and 11.2 of the Goals.

¹⁵ United Nations publication, 2021.

¹⁶ See www.unescap.org/our-work/transport/suti.

37. Furthermore, ESCAP provided assistance to countries in enhancing effective transport policies and building national capacities. A regional conference and a series of national capacity-building workshops for logistic services providers were held in Cambodia, Brunei Darussalam and Indonesia to allow national stakeholders to study the operations of logistics networks in depth.

III. Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

A. Financing for development

38. High and rising inequalities and lack of inclusiveness are constraining the region's future economic and development prospects. Amid continuing uncertainty over the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased global risks, the region's economic recovery and progress must be anchored in a new social contract of inclusiveness to protect the vulnerable from future shocks, according to the *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2022*. With dwindling fiscal space in many developing countries in the region, the secretariat cautions against cuts in fiscal expenditures on health care, education and social protection in order to safeguard the development gains of past decades and prevent further deepening of inequalities in the region.¹⁷

39. ESCAP recommends a three-pronged policy agenda aimed at shaping an inclusive economy in Asia and the Pacific. First, developing countries in the region must tilt public spending towards basic universal health coverage, push further towards achieving universal primary and secondary education and expand social protection coverage. Second, central banks in the region can and should adjust their traditional monetary policy conduct towards promoting inclusive development. Third, Governments can also proactively guide, shape and manage the structural economic transformation process, which is increasingly driven by the revolution in digital robotics and artificial intelligence, for more inclusive outcomes.

40. Taking these challenges and opportunities into account, according to its report on its third session, the Committee on Macroeconomic Policy, Poverty Reduction and Financing for Development established the Consultative Group on Financing Strategies for the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁸ The Committee called for Asia-Pacific countries to ensure that economic recovery packages are aligned with financing sustainable development. Given the capacity constraints facing many developing countries in the region, the Committee also called for strengthened regional cooperation, including on pandemic control, economic recovery and financing for development, and further called for more proactive technical and capacity support from the secretariat to member States.

41. The rising debt burden faced by developing countries in the region is becoming a daunting challenge and squeezing fiscal space considerably. While countries prioritize speedy economic recovery from the pandemic, financial flows should not be diverted from sustainable development and climate action, and policymakers should seek to build back better by enhancing the resilience of their economies. In order to discuss options and strategies to address the debt vulnerabilities of the Pacific small island developing States, the Governments of Fiji and Tuvalu and ESCAP convened the Pacific regional debt conference.

¹⁷ United Nations publication, 2022.

¹⁸ ESCAP/CMPF/2021/4.

42. With regard to mobilizing additional financial resources, the ESCAP report entitled *Financing the SDGs to Build Back Better from the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and the Pacific* contains a review of a range of financing instruments, strategies and mechanisms that can help Asia-Pacific economies to recover from the pandemic and effectively pursue the Goals. It presents a deep dive into the role of innovative climate and digital finance strategies to address the financing gaps in the region and support post-pandemic recovery.¹⁹

43. Regional collaboration is pivotal in achieving net zero emissions. Accordingly, ESCAP and the Global Green Growth Institute signed a five-year partnership agreement to support Asia-Pacific countries to develop green low-carbon post-COVID-19 recovery strategies and policies, with a focus on supporting least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States. The partnership's joint analysis published in 2021 provides options to help countries to raise their climate ambitions and nationally determined contributions and to achieve these goals by examining critical policy gaps and barriers to climate finance and identifying potential financial instruments.²⁰

44. ESCAP has provided technical support to assess the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and to design recovery packages in line with the 2030 Agenda. For example, ESCAP provided dedicated support to the relevant line ministries and stakeholders in Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Samoa to conduct fiscal assessments and identify the most relevant design for fiscal stimulus packages. The secretariat's macroeconomic model was applied in Indonesia, Mongolia and Nepal to explore multiple national policy scenarios for building back better.

45. ESCAP, in coordination with the United Nations country team in Cambodia, is supporting the National Bank of Cambodia and relevant ministries in strengthening the national financing mechanisms for the Goals. The support includes advisory services and technical assistance to mobilize and align financing with sustainable development and to steer the post-COVID-19 economic recovery towards an inclusive, climate-resilient and sustainable future in Cambodia. These efforts are part of a wider collaboration with the ASEAN secretariat to develop a road map on the development of Goal-linked bonds.

B. Technology and innovation

46. The pandemic has clearly demonstrated the importance of digital connectivity, but the digital divide has also deepened socioeconomic inequalities. As the pandemic enters its third year, the need to strengthen investment in digital infrastructure and technologies and ensure that the dividends from digital and emerging technologies, in particular those related to geospatial technology applications, benefit everyone, has become a key pre-requisite for the achievement of the Goals.

47. To that end, and pursuant to its resolution [77/1](#), in which the Commission recognized the importance of digital cooperation at the regional level, members and associate members have finalized a draft action plan for the implementation of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway for the period 2022–2026. The plan sets forth a blueprint for regional cooperative actions to strengthen digital cooperation and capacities, including through the Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development. The draft action plan is expected

¹⁹ Financing for Development Series, No. 4 (United Nations publication, 2021).

²⁰ *Green and Climate Finance Options to Support Post COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery and Climate Action* (ST/ESCAP/2976).

to be considered and adopted by the Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation at its fourth session, in 2022.

48. An increasing number of corporations are beginning to realign their priorities with the Goals, transforming operations in the private sector. Innovative business models are emerging, such as social enterprises and inclusive business models which aim to address social and environmental challenges through market-based approaches and to provide livelihood opportunities, products and services to those at the base of the economic pyramid. In addition, a new wave of investors is shifting the paradigm from investing for profit to investing for impact.

49. ESCAP analysis produced in collaboration with the Alliance for Affordable Internet shows that meaningful connectivity – defined by appropriate access to a device, connection, sufficient data and regular Internet use – is not tied solely to a country’s income level or population density.²¹ While Internet access has enabled many people to adjust to pandemic restrictions, connectivity remains a challenge for many in poor or rural parts of Asia and the Pacific. Future policies must be crafted with these vulnerable populations in mind.

50. ESCAP worked with member States to implement the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative, including by preparing its draft action plan, as the blueprint for regional collaboration on universal digital connectivity, digital transformation and a more inclusive digital society. To that end, ESCAP has been supporting the promotion of subregional Internet exchange points among Fiji, New Zealand and Samoa and among Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Thailand and Viet Nam. ESCAP has also supported the establishment of an information-sharing platform with a view to developing smart infrastructure corridors in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia and a subregional digital solution centre in Kazakhstan to support countries in Central Asia.

51. Through the Asia-Pacific Plan of Action on Space Applications for Sustainable Development (2018–2030), ESCAP helped to strengthen national capacities to adopt geospatial information as an evidence-base for planning and policymaking for the Goals. Capacity-building support, together with satellite-derived data contributed by member States and cooperation partners, were provided to stakeholders in Cambodia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tonga and Uzbekistan, to facilitate the use and management of geospatial information for drought- and crop-monitoring, land use management, mapping of COVID-19 hotspots, and monitoring and early warning of forest fires and cyclones.

52. In the context of increasing inequalities and a major pandemic, Governments should harness science, technology and innovation to achieve the Goals and leave no one behind. ESCAP analysis of inclusive innovation published in 2021 shows that many promising technologies have already emerged, and future policies should seek to ensure that more citizens, enterprises and countries can benefit from such technologies and innovations.²² To that end, ESCAP supported Cambodia in the completion of its science, technology and innovation road map 2030²³ and its strategy for promoting inclusive business.

²¹ “Towards meaningful connectivity: insights from Asia-Pacific case studies” (Bangkok, 2021).

²² *Frontiers of Inclusive Innovation: Formulating Technology and Innovation Policies that Leave No One Behind* (ST/ESCAP/2978).

²³ Available at <https://misti.gov.kh/public/file/202108261629990117.pdf>.

C. Trade

53. Supply chain disruptions and surges in shipping costs reached an all-time peak in 2022 in Asia and the Pacific. Despite the continued rise in trade costs in the region, analysis shows that ongoing efforts to facilitate commerce will help to keep goods flowing.²⁴ To that end, economies in the region have shown continued progress in streamlining trade procedures despite the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, implementation of 31 general and digital trade facilitation measures rose on average across the region, to 64.9 per cent in 2021, approximately six percentage points higher than in 2019. If countries continue to accelerate these processes, average trade costs could drop by more than 13 per cent. In that regard, the study underscored the need to strengthen the resilience of supply chains, as the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the vulnerabilities of concentrated trade networks, limited inventories and financing shortages.

54. High participation in the global value chain left Asia and the Pacific particularly vulnerable to restrictive trade policies. In that regard, cross-border trade digitalization has great potential to help countries in the region to gain access to critical goods, especially those most vulnerable to trade uncertainty and crisis, as highlighted in the *Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Report 2021*. The readiness assessment for cross-border paperless trade is a tool available to support countries. Based on the legal and technical readiness assessment checklists developed to support the implementation of the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific, the readiness assessment enables countries to conduct self-assessments leading to recommendations and individual actions plans for countries to move towards trade digitalization.²⁵

55. The Asia-Pacific region is now the largest emitter of greenhouse gasses in absolute terms. The *Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Report 2021*, jointly prepared by ESCAP, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and UNEP, emphasized the significant role that climate-forward regional trade agreements can play in addressing the climate crisis. There is a general trend towards incorporating a higher number of environmental provisions in regional trade agreements, broadening their scope and deepening their stringency, and significant room for all economies in the region to make their trade and investments more climate-smart. The *Report* is also the first to examine the impact of upcoming carbon border adjustment mechanisms affecting economies in the Asia-Pacific region,²⁶ and it includes the first index created to evaluate the degree to which economies in the region have climate-smart trade and investment policies.

56. In 2021, ESCAP launched the regional integration and value chain analyser as an online tool for policymakers, analysts and researchers to better understand the integration of their economies into global value chains.²⁷ This tool and the Trade Intelligence and Negotiation Adviser tool help countries such as India to use ready-made statistics and comprehensive analysis for their trade policymaking processes.

57. ESCAP supported Bhutan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines in implementing sustainable foreign direct investment strategies and tools. With the secretariat's facilitation, participating stakeholders were able to

²⁴ Asian Development Bank (ADB) and ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Report 2021: Supply Chains of Critical Goods amid the COVID-19 Pandemic – Disruptions, Recovery, and Resilience* (Manila, 2021).

²⁵ Assessment reports are available at www.unescap.org/our-work/trade-investment-innovation/trade-facilitation-digital-trade/paperless-trade.

²⁶ United Nations publication, 2021.

²⁷ Available at <https://riva.negotiatetrade.org>.

explore the potential for such investment in the fourth industrial revolution, as well as national implications and road maps for implementation.

D. Data and statistics

58. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the importance of timely and reliable data on deaths and causes of death and the critical role of civil registration and vital statistics systems in ensuring inclusive access to vaccinations, health care and social protection services in times of crisis. Across the region, more than 65 million children under the age of 5 still have not had their births registered. Birth registration is the first step to establishing one's legal identity; without a birth certificate, a person might be denied access to education, health care and other social protections.

59. The Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific was held in Bangkok and online from 16 to 19 November 2021. The Ministerial Declaration on Building a More Resilient Future with Inclusive Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, adopted by the Ministerial Conference, takes into account progress made since the beginning of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024) and recent related developments to lay out clear actions to accelerate progress towards the shared regional vision that, by 2024, all people in Asia and the Pacific benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems.

60. ESCAP is leading the regional initiative on civil registration and vital statistics to “get every one in the picture” and supports the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda. The technical assistance that ESCAP has provided to member States has helped to produce vital statistics, assess inequalities in registration, set up national coordination mechanisms and strengthen national systems and processes. With the secretariat's facilitation, there has been stronger collaboration among development partners to support countries in their implementation of the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, endorsed by the Commission in 2015.

61. ESCAP developed a tool to assess progress on the Goals at the national level. The tracker enables countries to produce their own Goal progress assessment dashboards using their own data, indicators and national target values. In 2021, ESCAP supported the Resident Coordinator and country team in Thailand in using the tracker to produce a national Goal progress assessment and an integrated analysis as the basis for the common country analysis. The tracker is being implemented in collaboration with national statistical systems and the resident coordinator offices in seven countries, namely Brunei Darussalam, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Nauru, the Philippines, Samoa and Tonga.

IV. Spotlight on enhancing health equity and access in the region

62. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the stark inequalities among and within countries in access to vaccines, medicines and diagnostics. It has also accentuated the existing weaknesses and deficiencies in the health systems of countries in terms of financing, human resources and technologies. Furthermore, it has demonstrated the crucial role of trade, investment, research and development in fighting the pandemic.

63. Against that background, and pursuant to resolution [77/1](#), in which the Commission encouraged member States to work regionally and interregionally to build back better by, inter alia, enabling all countries to have universal, equitable,

timely access to quality, safe, efficacious and affordable diagnosis, therapeutics, medicines, vaccines and essential health technologies, ESCAP convened two regional conversations, bringing together member States, United Nations entities and other stakeholders to understand the impact of enhancing health equity and access in the region. The dialogues served to identify gaps and challenges and actions to address them at the global, regional and national levels.

64. Open trade in vaccines and other health product inputs, strong flows of capital and the smooth transfer of technology and know-how are needed to enhance the availability and distribution of essential health products, such as vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics. Stakeholders in the dialogue on enhancing access to essential health products recognized the need for the region to shift its focus to prioritizing equitable and affordable access to essential health products for all populations.²⁸ Key areas of focus include the simplification and harmonization of regulatory standards, increased investment in digital infrastructure and greater unilateral and regional trade action. To deliver country-level insights, ESCAP provided technical cooperation and analysis in countries such as Pakistan in a series of national studies on digital trade, health-related trade, and national action plans on digital trade integration.²⁹

65. Despite recent improvements within the trade sector, it is imperative that the region continue to reduce inequalities within the vaccine manufacturing and distribution process, address limiting production capacities and reduce customs and regulatory compliance issues and transportation and logistics delays that affect the supply chain. Going forward, an emphasis on resilience is critical to the recovery of the supply chain. Public-private cooperation and regional cooperation must be bolstered to execute smart trade strategies to ensure that the supply chain of vaccines and related products are resilient.

66. With regard to achieving universal health coverage and equal access to affordable and quality health care, the regional conversation on equitable access to vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics and enhancing access to essential health products highlighted both short-term and long-term policy recommendations, including stepping up the manufacturing, distribution and redistribution of effective and safe vaccines in large supplies.³⁰ To address issues of equitable access, it is necessary to reach groups that are easily left behind and increase the supply of vaccines to the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility while transitioning it to a global public goods model. In addition, vaccination programmes must be accompanied by the faster production and distribution of more accurate diagnostics and more effective and affordable treatments. In summary, no one is safe unless everyone is safe, and the world cannot afford to leave anyone behind in the response to the pandemic.

V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

67. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are a key principle of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Acknowledging that partnerships are imperative for transformational change, ESCAP continued to build partnerships and deliver specific actions with

²⁸ Additional information on the dialogue is available at www.unescap.org/events/2022/regional-conversation-series-20212022-promoting-regional-cooperation-enhancing-access.

²⁹ See, for example, ESCAP, *Regional Integration and Cooperation of Pakistan in Health-related Sectors* (Bangkok, 2021).

³⁰ Additional information on the conversation series is available at <http://www.unescap.org/events/2021/regional-conversation-series-2021-equitable-access-vaccines-diagnostics-and>.

governments at all levels, United Nations development system entities, donors, development banks, the private sector and civil society organizations.

68. At the subregional level, ESCAP continues to strengthen partnerships with intergovernmental organizations on issues critical to the 2030 Agenda and a sustainable recovery from the pandemic. The ESCAP secretariat is working with the ASEAN secretariat to establish an ASEAN resource panel to advance on resource efficiency and economic sustainability. It has also facilitated multi-stakeholder dialogue among ASEAN government and other stakeholders on agroecological and safe food system transition. In addition, the two secretariats collaborated to strengthen gender-responsive policy measures in the care economy. Their analytical report on unpaid care and domestic work by women has helped to inform the discussion at ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women and the strategies for moving forward. Furthermore, ESCAP supported Governments in the ASEAN region, such as those of Cambodia and Viet Nam, in developing policy responses to support women entrepreneurs in dealing with the impact of COVID-19.

69. The above-mentioned analytical report was launched on the margins of the Fourth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women. It serves to map out the care economy in ASEAN countries and provide concrete policy actions across four domains, namely care infrastructure, care-related social protection, care services and employment-related policies.

70. ESCAP collaborated with ASEAN to develop the *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action for Adaptation to Drought 2021–2025*. The collaboration helped to implement the ASEAN Declaration on the Strengthening of Adaptation to Drought as a starting point for shifting disaster management towards a more risk-informed system. In that regard, the newly established Risk and Resilience Portal is helping national stakeholders to use data to analyse risk scenarios, measure losses and identify vulnerable areas.

71. Similarly, ESCAP worked closely with the Pacific Islands Forum secretariat to assess the feasibility of debt-for-climate swaps in the Pacific small island developing States. The collaboration resulted in the Pacific regional debt conference, held in March 2022, which brought together finance ministers from debtor and creditor countries, key development partners and multilateral institutions to discuss options for debt relief, including debt-for-climate swaps.

72. In the past year, memorandums of understanding were signed with the Economic Cooperation Organization and the secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme to advance these strategic partnerships in implementing the 2030 Agenda and promoting regional cooperation.

A. Regional Collaborative Platform in Asia and the Pacific

73. Through the Regional Collaboration Platform in Asia and the Pacific, the United Nations development system has coalesced to shape the regional and national policy discussions and catalyse the required solutions. ESCAP has contributed to the functioning of the Platform through the leadership of the Executive Secretary of ESCAP, who serves as a Vice-Chair, and through its secretarial and co-chairing roles, in areas of work such as climate change mitigation and air pollution, knowledge management, data and statistics on the Sustainable Development Goals and system-wide results reporting.

74. The issue-based coalition on climate change mitigation brought together regional expertise to assess nationally determined contributions in the Asia-Pacific region and mobilize the United Nations at the regional and national levels to support

the raising of ambitions in the lead-up to and during the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties. The subjects of the coalition's advocacy efforts include pathways for phasing out coal for a just energy transition and promoting actions to support initiatives related to the International Day of Clean Air for blue skies, including a new modality for regional collaboration on combating air pollution.

75. As member of other issue-based coalitions, ESCAP helped to inform the deliberations of member States on holistic disaster risk reduction, for example at the seventh session of the Committee on Disaster Risk Reduction, as part of the issue-based coalition on building resilience, and building the capacity of country teams in identifying the furthest behind using the secretariat's tools and methodologies, as part of the issue-based coalition on human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment. ESCAP also led the Asia-Pacific informal regional network of focal points on ageing.

76. As one of the Chairs of the inter-agency working group on knowledge management, ESCAP contributed to the continuous improvement of the Asia-Pacific Knowledge Management Hub as the one-stop shop for regional expertise and knowledge assets. A community of practice was piloted with a focus on the implementation of nationally determined contributions, which enabled an exchange between the issue-based coalitions and resident coordinator offices, including the sharing of updated analysis in the lead-up to the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties. In addition, ESCAP and the World Meteorological Organization piloted a climate early warning system in Thailand and Viet Nam.

77. The working group on Sustainable Development Goal data and statistics of the Regional Collaborative Platform, co-chaired by ESCAP and the United Nations Population Fund, helped to enhance the capacity of resident coordinator offices and country teams in their work with national statistical systems and ministries. The work was done through a series of clinics on Goal statistics, starting in December 2021, which was focused on specific Goal indicators.

78. ESCAP contributed substantive inputs to the development of the common country analysis and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. The inputs included analysis of transboundary issues and inequality of opportunities, assessments of progress on the 2030 Agenda, and macroeconomic and climate change analysis for the country teams in India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Mongolia, Pakistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam, as well as the Pacific multi-country offices.

B. Multi-stakeholder partnerships

79. Results of the long-standing partnership between ESCAP, ADB and the United Nations Development Programme help to inform the deliberations of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. For example, the report entitled *Building Forward Together: Towards an Inclusive and Resilient Asia and the Pacific* highlights the reversal of hard-won gains in development across the region and points to the rising risks to developing countries and poor and vulnerable populations.³¹ In the report, partners call for recovery strategies to consider six factors with a view to avoiding a K-shaped recovery: vaccination (including access to diagnostics and therapeutics), social protection, digitalization, economic structure, environmental risks and fiscal space. They also indicate three interrelated areas for urgent policy action as countries shift from emergency response to long-term recovery: inclusion (ensuring social protection and quality education for all), the empowerment of women

³¹ ESCAP, ADB and United Nations Development Programme (Bangkok, 2022).

(advancing gender equality) and environmental sustainability (building inclusive green economies).

80. ESCAP has also strengthened partnerships with civil society organizations, in particular in the follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The secretariat has worked closely with the Asia-Pacific Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism in its capacity as a platform for broad engagement on sustainable development processes to build a dynamic and inclusive Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. The Mechanism is being replicated in other regions and plays a critical role in global engagement among the major groups. The secretariat's work with stakeholders has prompted their investment in organizing annual peoples' forums and youth forums at the regional level in preparation for the Forum. The youth forum also serves as the regional preparatory event feeding into the annual Economic and Social Council youth forum. With regard to population ageing, ESCAP, is organizing three focused stakeholder consultations that will inform the upcoming Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

81. ESCAP continues to strengthen and establish new partnerships with the private sector. The ESCAP Sustainable Business Network serves as a platform for showcasing Asia-Pacific business leadership on sustainability to drive businesses towards implementing the 2030 Agenda. The Network committed itself to the Asia-Pacific green deal declaration to lead green transformation in the following areas: energy, infrastructure and logistics, finance, innovation, production, consumption and waste. In addition, a new partnership between ESCAP and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will promote inclusive business models in agriculture and food systems that benefit low-income and women farmers in particular. ESCAP supports the Infrastructure Financing and Public-Private Partnership Network of Asia and the Pacific. In collaboration with the Government of China, the Network strengthens the operational capacity of the public-private partnership units of member States. The network received a total of 49 infrastructure projects seeking to interest international investors from 12 member States for a total investment value of \$4.5 trillion.

82. ESCAP also links research institutions and policymakers and collaborates with universities to develop capacities in the region. Its academic partners include the Association of Pacific Rim Universities, the Asia-Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade, the Research and Training Centre for Space Technology and Applications, the Centre for Space Science and Technology Education in Asia and the Pacific, and the Asian Institute of Technology.

VI. Conclusions

83. An increase in the frequency and intensity of anthropogenic crises and natural disasters, as well as the challenges of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated development challenges and hampered progress on the 2030 Agenda as a result. The pandemic has brought suffering and loss to every country in the region and affected all aspects of their societies and economies.

84. The recovery from the COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to build back better in Asia and the Pacific, including through multilateral and international cooperation. The intergovernmental discussions in the region in 2021 and 2022 highlighted national ambitions and commitments related to building resilience and investing in solutions, ranging from leveraging digital opportunities, trading and investing more together, raising financial resources and managing debt. ESCAP's efforts related to engagement, partnerships and analysis underline the need to listen to and work with vulnerable people and to ensure that they are at the centre of crisis-

prepared policy action and new people-centred partnerships. The results of the 2021 programme of work have helped to build the momentum for that need to be met. With the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda” serving as the accelerator, the way forward is to help the region to turbocharge the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The secretariat will continue to support member States and regional and national stakeholders in realizing that shared ambition.
