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**Regional priorities for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific**

**Addressing inequalities and social inclusion as an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals**

**Note by the secretariat\*\***

*Summary*

In September 2015 member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is a holistic agenda seeking to shift the world onto a more sustainable and resilient path, focusing on people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. Its key features include a strong focus on reducing inequalities and promoting gender equality and its emphasis to reach the furthest behind.

The Asia-Pacific region faces several key social and demographic trends, which are well addressed through the 2030 Agenda. The region faces rising inequalities in spite of income poverty reduction. Gender inequality persists throughout the region. The region is also confronted with demographic trends such as population ageing and international migration, which need to be addressed adequately. Social protection, a key feature in the 2030 Agenda, is still relatively limited in many parts of the region.

The present note provides an analysis of current social and demographic trends in the Asia-Pacific region and how these trends need to be addressed in view of the 2030 Agenda. It also highlights the key actions that need to be taken to achieve sustainable development in a balanced and integrated manner including fully addressing the social dimension.

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\*\* This document has been issued without formal editing.

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### I. Introduction

1. Social inclusion is a core aspiration and prerequisite for successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This information paper provides an overview of socioeconomic and demographic trends in the Asia-Pacific region and highlights key actions that need to be taken to address vulnerabilities in order to reduce inequality in all its forms, strengthen social inclusion and achieve sustainable development in a balanced and integrated manner.

### II. Social exclusion and the inequalities in the 2030 Agenda

2. With the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the SDGs Governments across the Asia-Pacific region have committed to a more comprehensive vision of development embracing economic, social and environmental dimensions. This integrated approach is applied to tackling social exclusion and inequalities, including gender inequalities. Indeed, with Governments' commitments to realizing the human rights *of all* and their pledge to leave no one behind, the 2030 Agenda puts inclusion at its core whilst seeking to address the root causes of exclusion and inequality. Alongside the stand-alone Goal 5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", and Goal 10, "Reduce inequality within and among countries", Governments in the region have recognized that combating rising and damaging levels of all forms of inequality is a "cross-cutting" issue and, as such, a prerequisite for the full realization of all other SDGs.

### III. Key social development trends in Asia and Pacific

3. The following will give an overview of the Asia-Pacific region's key socioeconomic and demographic trends that need to be addressed to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

#### *Persisting or rising inequalities within countries*

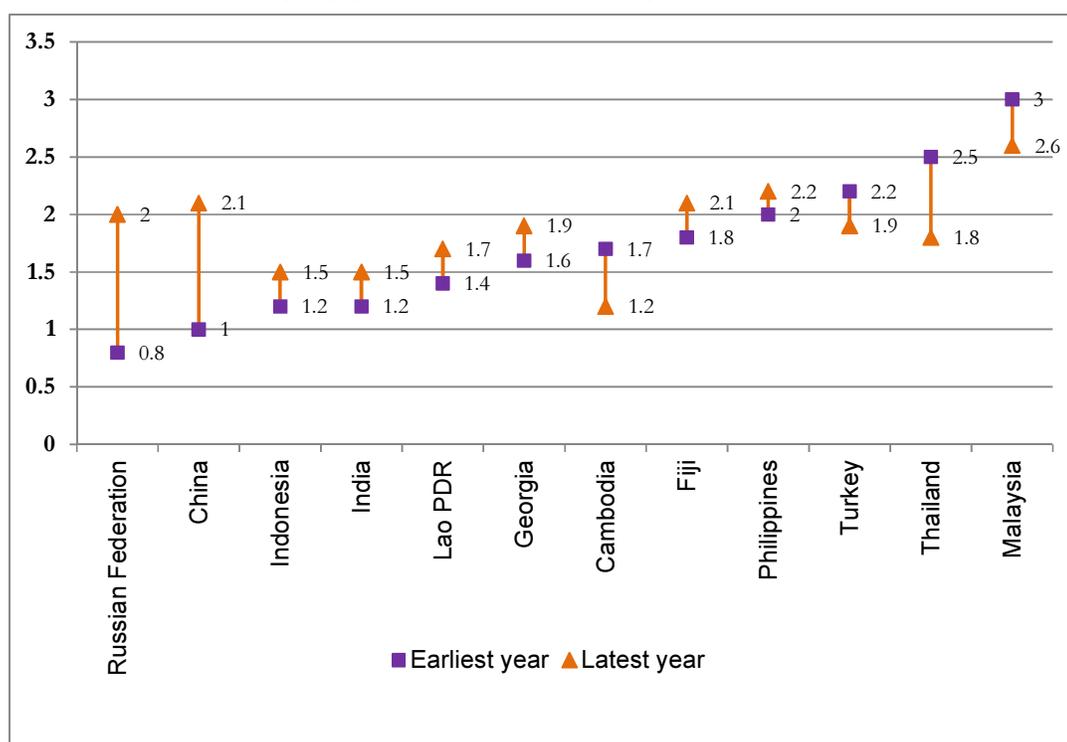
4. Over the past two decades many countries in the region have seen sustained growth of their economies. This positive development resulted in raised living standards that lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. However, increasing economic growth also resulted in a widening, or persistence, of already very high inequalities within countries. These inequalities are multidimensional, pertaining to outcomes, opportunities, as

well as across population groups, identified by, for example, gender, age, ethnicity, disability or migrant status.

5. As an example of the widening of inequalities in outcomes, the Palma ratio – which measures the ratio of the income share of the top 10 per cent to the bottom 40 per cent of a country's population – increased over the past 20 years from 1.0 to 2.1 in China and from 0.8 to 2.0 in the Russian Federation. Even in countries where inequality is stagnant or falling, it remains high. In many countries, the richest 10 per cent now have almost twice as much income as the poorest 40 per cent (see figure 1).

Figure 1

**Palma ratio - income share of the top 10 per cent to the bottom 40 per cent of a country's population, latest available years<sup>1</sup>**



6. In some countries rising inequalities are caused, among other reasons, by the economic transformation in line with cuts in social protection. In other countries, they are caused due to economic growth policies that did not focus enough on marginalized and disadvantaged groups. In other words, growth policies were not accompanied by inclusive social policies to leave no one behind. In countries where inequalities fell, such as in Thailand, Governments made significant efforts to strengthen social protection, including through promoting universal healthcare coverage. Much more needs to be done, however, to achieve more equal societies in the region.

7. Many marginalized groups continue to face inequalities in opportunity, exemplified by unequal access to affordable health care, water and sanitation, and education. Access to healthcare is a particular concern in most of South and South-West Asia as well as in least developed countries of the region. Unequal access to these basic services significantly limit chances to sustain and improve livelihoods and lead productive, healthy and meaningful lives.

<sup>1</sup> Source: ESCAP, based on World Bank, World Development Indicators.

8. Inequalities across population groups are probably best illustrated by the gaps between girls and boys, and women and men. In their diversity, women and girls across the region are connected by unequal opportunities and outcomes, driven by discrimination and oppressive gender stereotypes purely linked to their gender status. This situation is exacerbated through a “double disadvantage” among, for example, persons with disabilities, migrants, older persons, ethnic minorities, and those living in rural areas. With occupational segregation drawing upon traditional, and sometimes restrictive, gender roles, women predominate in vulnerable employment, characterized by low-pay, low productivity, restricted occupational options and little, if any, social protection.

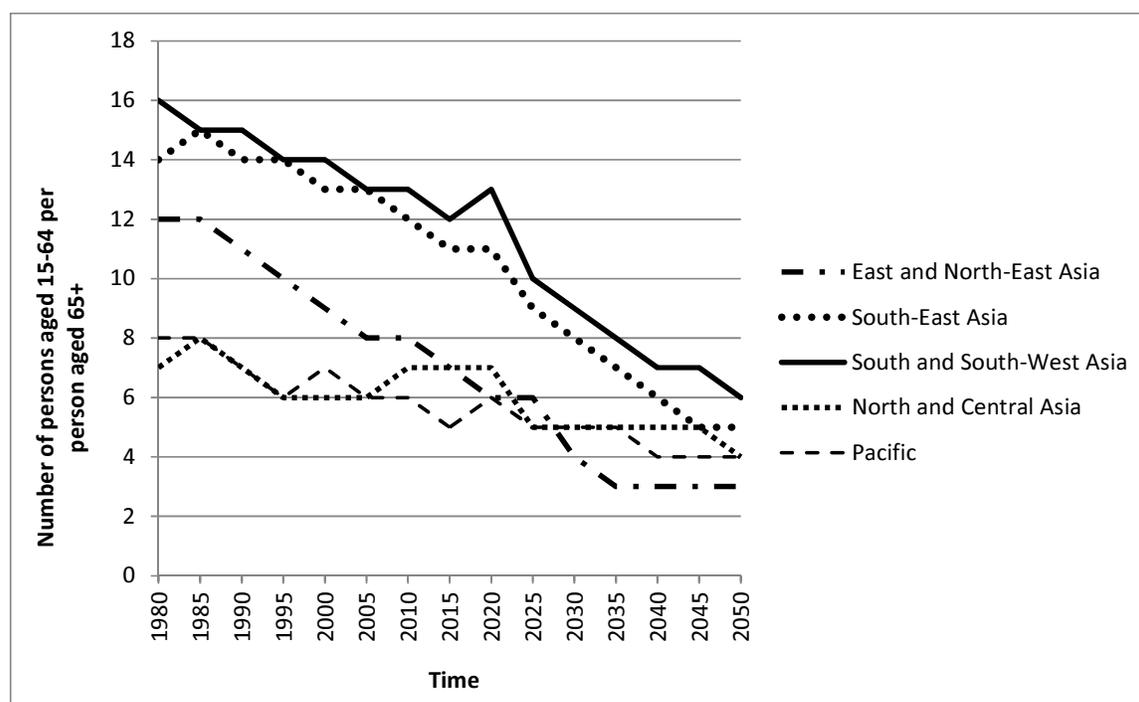
### *Population and demographic change*

9. As a result of better opportunities in cities, population growth throughout the region is concentrated in urban areas, where nearly half of the population of the region now lives. At the current urban growth rate of 2.2 per cent per year, the region’s urban population will double in the coming three decades. This highlights the importance of achieving sustainable cities, access for all urban dwellers to water and sanitation, employment opportunities and services such as health care and education. Creating more equal opportunities between rural and urban areas within countries is also critical.

10. Population ageing is one of the most significant demographic trends in the Asia-Pacific region. The combination of low fertility rates (at a regional average of 2.1 children per woman in 2015) and increased life expectancy - currently 72 years - is leading to a sharp increase in the proportion of older persons making it the fastest ageing region in the world. Due to women’s higher life expectancy there are significantly more older women than men. A serious challenge to economic sustainability is posed by the sharp decrease in the old age support ratio (see figure 2). This trend means that fewer persons in the labour force have to socially and economically support an increasing number of older persons, who are themselves at higher risk of falling into poverty.

11. In addition to internal migration from rural to urban areas, international migration is a major driver of economic and social change in the region. In 2013 over 95 million people from countries of Asia and the Pacific lived outside their country of birth - an almost 50 per cent increase compared to 1990. Temporary labour migration is currently the most common reason for migration. Labour migrants move through both regular and irregular channels filling labour shortages in countries of destination. Through their work and remittances, they contribute to the economies and societies of countries of origin and destination, although in spite of their contributions they often lack access to social protection in these countries. This vulnerability among migrants has several ramifications that countries need to deal with, including that some migrant workers also become victims of human trafficking, forced labour, and other human rights abuses.

Figure 2  
**Old age support ratio in Asia and the Pacific, 1980-2050 (projected)<sup>2</sup>**



### *Social exclusion of vulnerable groups*

12. Vulnerable groups are populations that face heightened exposure to physical, economic, social and environmental risks as a result of their socioeconomic status and social identity. These groups can include, among others, persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV, ethnic minorities, survivors of human trafficking, internally displaced people and refugees, older persons, children and young persons, as well as many women and girls. Many of those “left behind” belong to these vulnerable groups and therefore require special attention in the 2030 Agenda.

13. The impacts of vulnerability are often coupled with discrimination and are felt in numerous ways, including greater risk of human rights abuse, reduced access to education, healthcare, safe drinking water, sanitation, social infrastructure, and decent work opportunities. Despite their diversity, one theme common among many vulnerable groups is their disproportionate risk of poverty. In order to more concretely explore key trends relating to the reduction of causes of vulnerability among groups in the Asia-Pacific region, the integration of persons with disabilities is used as an example.

14. Persons with disabilities are at a greater disadvantage than the general population across several dimensions of social and economic well-being. In Asia and the Pacific alone there are some 650 million persons with disabilities – that is, 15 per cent of the region’s total population. Persons with disabilities are disproportionately marginalized and discriminated against in legal, political, social and cultural structures, and this is borne out in their experiences accessing employment, education, social protection, and legal representation. They are often also victims of a vicious cycle between disability and poverty; disability may increase the risk of poverty by

<sup>2</sup> Source: UNDESA, World Population Prospects, 2015 revision

excluding individuals from leading productive lives. Poverty, conversely, may increase the risk of disability through malnutrition or poor living and working conditions.

#### **IV. The importance of integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development**

15. For member States to fully and effectively implement the 2030 Agenda they need to enhance understanding of the synergies between the three dimensions of sustainable development, namely the economic, environmental and social dimensions. While the link between the social and economic dimensions has been thoroughly discussed, less has been said about the link between the social and environmental dimensions. What is known is that inequalities can further exacerbate environmental degradation and vice versa. The consumption patterns of higher income groups and the production and distribution systems that serve them that are often the main driver of environmental degradation. Poverty and inequality can further aggravate environmental degradation because the poor are, sometimes, compelled to exploit environmental resources for their survival. Environmental degradation increases disaster risk; not all disasters affect the poorest most, yet poorer people tend to be more susceptible to hazards, suffer greater relative loss of assets, and have a lower capacity to recover. Social policies promoting equal access to social services, promoting pro-poor economic growth and sustainable agriculture can contribute to reducing pollution, environmental health risks and degradation, and the risk of disasters.

#### **V. Adopting an integrated approach to sustainable development which fully recognises the social dimension**

16. Addressing the 2030 Agenda requires a comprehensive “whole of government” policy approach that addresses the three dimensions of sustainable development in a coherent and balanced manner, acknowledging their interdependence, synergies and linkages. It requires political commitment, better use of technology, and identifying adequate and innovative financing mechanisms for social development.

##### ***Addressing inequalities within and between countries***

17. Providing social protection throughout people’s lives has a pivotal role in reducing inequalities and vulnerabilities. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, nationally defined social protection floors, including universal access to health care and basic income security will be critical to reducing inequalities, building human capital, strengthening the resilience of individuals and households against poverty and disasters, and for improving health outcomes. Closely linked to social protection is decent work. Enhancing job creation along with implementing the decent work agenda for all will be a key requirement to sustainably reduce poverty, particularly for groups that are trapped in vulnerable employment situations or find difficulties in entering the labour market, such as young people, women, persons with disabilities, and older persons. This means it will be essential to increase the capacity of all countries to collect domestic resources for development and to increase the level and efficiency of social spending. A socially and gender responsive tax system with redistributory elements, effective and transparent tax collection and administration are necessary tools in this regard.

***Addressing the challenges of demographic change***

18. Countries in the region must carefully plan for how their societies can best cope with the challenges posed by population ageing. It will become critical to provide income security and health systems geared to meet the needs of older persons and adopt policies to mitigate potential impacts of shrinking labour forces. At the same time, since youth still make up a large proportion of most societies policies also need to be geared to enhance youth participation in political processes, enhance their school to work transition, and ensure the availability of relevant education systems along with decent job opportunities. Facilitating regular channels for international migration would increase the protection of migrants as would ensuring basic labour standards for all workers.

***Reaching the furthest behind***

19. The 2030 Agenda seeks to ensure that vulnerable and marginalized people are fully integrated into societies and receive the support they need, in a manner underpinned by human rights. Vulnerable groups face specific barriers in accessing social services or finding services that address their needs. Thus, empowering and strengthening the rights of vulnerable groups and targeted action to enhance their integration will be critical to realizing the 2030 Agenda. It is worth highlighting the immediate legal obligation of States who have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights not to discriminate in the exercise and enjoyment of all rights recognized under the Covenant.

***The need for data disaggregation***

20. Leaving no one behind means being able to identify those who are currently being marginalized or invisible. Indigenous populations and slum dwellers, for instance, are consistently left out of most data sets and information is still lacking on the number of children with disabilities that attend formal education in the region. Complete registration of vital events, such as births and deaths are essential for monitoring health outcomes and population dynamics. However, according to assessments of such existing registration systems, conducted in 47 Asian and Pacific countries between 2010 and 2012, revealed that only 11 countries were categorized as having satisfactory registration, while 36 countries were found to have dysfunctional, weak or inadequate registration. Data is often insufficiently disaggregated at sub-national level, making it hard for policy makers or communities, to design, implement and monitor policies but also to share successful outcomes. To the extent possible and with due safeguards, data should be disaggregated across many dimensions, such as geography, wealth, disability, sex and age and where relevant by ethnicity, migrant status, marital status, HIV status and sexual orientation.

***Implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to realize gender equality and women's empowerment***

21. The key for the region to achieving all the sustainable development goals lies in ensuring gender equality and empowerment of women. Increasing female labour force participation through ensuring economically empowering women and decent work; ensuring equal participation of women in all sectors of the economy and society; and addressing violence against women is vital to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. The global blueprint for realizing gender equality and empowering women is already provided in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted in 1995, alongside

the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. At the regional level, countries in Asia and the Pacific should also use the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (November 2014), as a framework for accelerating implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, including through strengthening institutions, enhancing accountability, increasing resources, forging stronger partnerships and supporting regional cooperation.

## VI. Conclusion: The way forward

22. This note has identified a number of challenges and opportunities in addressing the gaps for the region to successfully implement the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The following outlines five overarching and critical actions for the consideration of member States, in order to adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach towards the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs:

23. Demonstrating political commitment to placing the 2030 Agenda at the centre of national development strategies

*Political commitment at the highest level is essential to address SDGs in a balanced and integrated manner. SDGs should be placed at the centre of national development plans and comprehensive strategies developed taking into account the interlinkages between the SDGs. Other steps that could be taken include setting up a high-level coordination body to oversee the balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.*

24. Developing institutional mechanisms and building capacity from national to local levels to ensure policy coherence, consistency and coordination in implementing the 2030 Agenda

*The effective integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development will require reforms within governments to adopt a more comprehensive approach. Policies and programmes being implemented in one dimension must take into account the impact on the other two dimensions. Institutional reform must be guided by SDG 16 which includes the commitment to build accountable, effective and inclusive institutions at all levels.*

25. Mobilize resources through redistributive tax reforms as well as diverse and innovative financing mechanisms, to support social progress along with economic growth

*Increased collection and equitable allocation of domestic resources for development is critical for investing in inclusive social policies, including universal social protection systems. Existing resources can be more effectively spent and new resources can be raised through strengthening redistributive tax collection and administration, but also through reaching out to partners such as the private sector and civil society, including philanthropy. New forms such as social impact investing or social entrepreneurship can also be promoted.*

26. Harness technology and innovation to reduce inequalities and reach the vulnerable and furthest behind

*Aligning Science, Technology and Innovation (ST&I) agendas with the three dimensions of sustainable development and strengthen their ST&I*

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*capabilities and capacities will be a critical means to reduce inequalities. Whilst ST&I strategies in the region have predominantly focused on economic growth, there are significant social and environmental gains to be made by also focusing ST&I strategies on social innovation. To realise these gains the principles of inclusivity, openness and collaboration need to be integrated into ST&I strategies.*

27. Develop multi-stakeholder platforms to enhance participation and accountability in the monitoring and review of progress

*The development and adaptation of participatory and rights-based monitoring and review mechanisms, at the local, national, sub-regional and regional levels, will be critical for the countries in Asia and the Pacific to individually and collectively, realize the SDGs. As a foundation member States should consider strengthening their involvement with existing human rights monitoring mechanisms (by for example issuing standing invitations to the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council).*

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