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**Regional perspectives on accelerating progress on the
2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

**Updates on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for
Sustainable Development at the subregional level****

Summary

Despite the devastating pandemic that swept Asia and the Pacific in 2020, the five subregions of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) successfully convened their forums on implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in preparations for the Eighth Asia and the Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. The forums took place between September and December 2020 in a virtual format in almost all the subregions, and were attended by over 1,500 government officials and other stakeholders. The forums created space for sharing and critical discussions on the topic of the Eighth Asia-Pacific Forum, “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific”. This information document provides an update on the deliberations that have taken place in the subregional events, including achievements and challenges in the process of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the update on voluntary national reviews, and recommendations for acceleration on progress of the Sustainable Development Goals in the five subregions of ESCAP.

I. Introduction

1. The unprecedented pandemic of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), and the consequent socioeconomic repercussions that marked 2020 have had a significant impact on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in all the subregions of Asia and the Pacific. The health crisis exposed the vulnerabilities of systems and infrastructure in place across countries, which further slowed down the progress on sustainable development goals and posed threats to reverse development gains achieved over the past years.

2. Despite the unparalleled disruptions, the subregions recognized that pursuing the 2030 Agenda should be at the heart of the recovery strategies from the ongoing pandemic. The subregions made concerted effort to continue with subregional cooperation and adapt to virtual realities that allowed cooperation, exchange of information and pursuit of subregional agendas. All the five subregions in Asia and the Pacific succeeded in organizing their annual Forums

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on implementation of Sustainable Development Goals, mostly in a virtual meeting format.

3. The Forums across all the subregion recognized that the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic would be closely tied to the progress of Sustainable Development Goals. Accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda will be critical and calls for policy measures and initiatives at both the national, subregional and regional levels.

4. This document aims to inform participants of the Eighth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development on subregional perspectives on the theme “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific”, as discussed during the subregional forums in 2020.

5. The document is structured by subregion. Each chapter provides a brief background of the subregion in focus, followed by national achievements and challenges with respect to the 2020 Agenda implementation (including in the context of the pandemic) and the voluntary national reviews reporting. The chapters also include selected subregional actions for accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

II. South-East Asia

Subregional background

6. South-East Asia is a highly diverse and dynamic region consisting of eleven countries with an estimated 662 million people in 2019.¹ The subregion is also a mix of economies in terms of their population and level of development, where incomes vary widely, ranging from Singapore with US\$ 65,233 gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in 2019 and Brunei Darussalam US\$ 31,068, to less than US\$ 1,650 in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste.

7. Almost a year into COVID-19, the countries of South-East Asia are still managing the hardships caused by the pandemic. The focus remains on reducing the devastating impact on the economies and livelihoods and more broadly to recover fully in the medium to long term. The pandemic has significantly impacted progress made on Sustainable Development Goals, especially since the subregion has been extremely successful in reducing poverty.

8. Despite the adversity of the pandemics, the region continued pursuing its regional ambitions. A mega-regional trade arrangement in the form of the Regional Comprehensive Partnership Agreement was launched in late 2020 by the fifteen countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, and New Zealand. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership would account for a third of the world’s population and global GDP providing both immense opportunities and challenge for the region and beyond. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership was also acknowledged to helping build the region’s resilience as countries implement their post-COVID-19 recovery process.

9. During the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the wider 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will be critical to the subregion’s recovery and future well-being.

¹ ESCAP 2019, ESCAP 2019 Population Data Sheet, available at <https://www.unescap.org/resources/2019-escap-population-data-sheet>.

A. Subregional progress and impact of the coronavirus disease on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

10. The South-East Asia subregion is well on-track to achieve the goal of eradicating poverty as measured in terms of population living under the international or national poverty rates. However, progress toward Goal 1 is negatively impacted by natural disasters and is expected to be further exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. Similarly, the subregion is on-track to eliminate hunger as measured through undernourishment or through children affected by stunting or malnutrition, despite slow progress in eliminating food insecurity with still nearly 100 million affected in the subregion.²

11. The subregion is regressing and needs to reverse trends on environmental goals. On climate action, emissions of greenhouse gases are still increasing for most countries in the subregion. The subregion is affected by worsening eutrophication and slow progress regarding protected marine areas and this trend also needs to be reversed. Further, the negative trend recorded on Goal 16 at the end of 2019 in the subregion is expected to jeopardize the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.³

12. International trade continues to be the engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction for the subregion. The volume of merchandise exports has been multiplied by over 3 since 2000 and nearly by 4 since 2005 concerning commercial services. Consequently, manufacturing remains a key economic driver contributing around 21 per cent of GDP through the period of 2010–2019 and accounting for 14.3 per cent of total employment in 2018.⁴ The manufacturing share of total employment in the subregion is still increasing while downward trends for this indicator is observed for the Asia-Pacific region, as well as for the whole world.

13. However, the strong economic growth rate and significant progress over the period 2010–2019 will be affected in the coming years due to the COVID-19 pandemic with the risk of millions of people being pushed into poverty as a result. Efforts for scaling up social protection will need to be accelerated in the subregion, especially for the most vulnerable population.

B. National achievements and challenges with respect to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the voluntary national reviews

14. All South-East Asian countries will have presented their voluntary national reviews by 2021. Myanmar is planning to submit their first report while Indonesia their third report. Participating countries highlighted their respective preparatory process, institutionalization, consultations and focus of the review at the Fourth South-East Asia Forum on the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2020 as described below.

15. Brunei Darussalam presented their first voluntary national review report to the high-level political forum on sustainable development on 14 July 2020. A

² ESCAP Statistical Database, available at <https://data.unescap.org/dataviz/progress-2021/#>.

³ UNHCHR, 2020, a presentation delivered during the 4th South-East Asian Forum on Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, available at <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/4.5%20UNHCHR.pdf>.

⁴ ESCAP calculations based on World Trade Organization data available on ESCAP's online statistical database, available at <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/>.

ministerial level special steering committee as well as a working group were established to undertake the voluntary national review process. These committee and working group facilitated the coordination and engagements with the relevant ministries, non-governmental organizations, and relevant stakeholders. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is in line with the achievement of the national vision, Wawasan Brunei 2035. Several challenges were faced in developing the first report, including minimal data availability of Sustainable Development Goals. For the next voluntary national review report, improved time management and obtaining all the resources will be important for a meaningful voluntary national reviews process.

16. Indonesia reported in 2017 and 2019, with a third voluntary national review report to be submitted in 2021. The second report highlighted Sustainable Development Goal progress along with the institutionalization and integration of Sustainable Development Goals into development planning. Sustainable Development Goal auditing and evaluation has increased in importance with the country's Supreme Audit Institution having aligned Sustainable Development Goals into development auditing, especially on the performance of budget on Sustainable Development Goal implementation. Issues likely to be addressed in the upcoming report will include the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic slowdown in the Sustainable Development Goal implementation. Planning and execution as well as monitoring and evaluation will be part of the reporting.

17. Lao People's Democratic Republic will be presenting their second voluntary national review report in 2021, following their initial submission in 2018. The inaugural report highlighted the institutionalization and processes in preparing for the voluntary national review, such as the establishment of a national steering committee, serving as the Sustainable Development Goal secretariat; and integrating Sustainable Development Goals into the 5-year national economic development plan 2016–2020. The second report will focus on trade analysis to track progress in the Sustainable Development Goal implementation. Based on the experiences of the first voluntary national review, improvements will be made regarding i) information and coordination with focal ministries; ii) early preparation of the scope of the voluntary national review; iii) developing stakeholder engagement plans using established Sustainable Development Goal networks; iv) mobilizing and identifying resources to support the planned activities of the voluntary national review; v) data and information collection, working closely with the national statistical office and relevant agencies; vi) setting timelines for finalizing report (review and editing).

18. Malaysia has embedded Sustainable Development Goals into their national strategy, incorporating the 2030 Agenda in their 5-year national development plan, namely the Malaysia Plan. The process of the voluntary national review and the Malaysia Plans are effectively integrated. An implementation framework for the Sustainable Development Goals is already in place with the establishment of the National Sustainable Development Goal Council chaired by the Prime Minister. A Steering Committee of the Council is chaired by the Director-General of the Economic Planning Unit, supported by working committees on Inclusivity; Human Capital; Well-being; Environment and Natural Resources; and Economic Growth. The theme of the first voluntary national review report in 2017 was Eradicating Poverty and Prompting Prosperity in a Changing World, focusing on government initiatives. The theme for the 2021 report is Sustainable and Resilient Recovery from COVID-19 Pandemic. Due to the challenges and constraints arising from the pandemic, the voluntary national review will source relevant information and data collected for the upcoming 12th Malaysia Plan and the newly released Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Malaysia 2019. Furthermore, the 2021 voluntary

national review report will feature private sector initiatives, as well as from civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations.

19. Myanmar's Sustainable Development Plan 2018–2030 consists of 28 strategies and 251 action plans. The plan combines shared goals of the Sustainable Development Goals and related global commitments. In preparing the voluntary national review report, which will be the first for the country, a coordinating committee was established, to be chaired by the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Planning, Finance, and Industry. The Ministry acts as the focal point for the voluntary national review and works with relevant ministries, agencies, and the United Nations Country Team to help prepare the report as well as organize stakeholder engagements. In the course of drafting the report, difficulties were faced regarding data harmonization, financial resources, and organizations of stakeholder engagements due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences will serve as valuable experiences in preparing for the country's next voluntary national review report.

20. Thailand will be presenting their second official voluntary national review report in 2021. Voluntary national reviews have been conducted annually since 2017 under different themes e.g. localization of Sustainable Development Goals, local community empowerment, volunteerism (2020). Institutional arrangements for conducting the voluntary national review include having set a national committee on sustainable development led by the Prime Minister, supported by four sub-committees on Sustainable Development Goal implementation; monitoring and evaluation; sufficiency economy philosophy, and strategic environment assessment. New sub-committees can be added as required. To guide in the Sustainable Development Goal implementation, a Sustainable Development Goal Roadmap was developed with the following six elements i) policy integration and coherence; ii) enabling mechanisms; iii) partnerships; iv) pilot projects; v) monitoring and evaluation; and vi) awareness raising. When completed, a Sustainable Development Goals+5 report covering the period 2016–2020 will help in developing the voluntary national review report. The 2021 report itself will be data driven; utilize the e-database; and be more inclusive, allowing for inputs from different stakeholders.

C. Selected actions for accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

21. The forum focused on the progress of specific Sustainable Development Goals that will be discussed at the high-level political forum in 2021, namely Goals 1 on no poverty, 2 on zero hunger, 8 on decent work and economic growth, 12 on responsible consumption and production, and 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.

22. The COVID-19 pandemic risks setting back poverty level by a decade in Southeast Asia, especially since the region is often known for its remarkable success in eradicating poverty.⁵ The pandemic significantly weakened regional economic growth and trade dynamics. Over the past three quarters of 2020, countries have been designing and implementing effective policy measures to mitigate the disruptions caused by border closures and restrictive trade and supply chains measures imposed in various levels. Yet, the long-term risk lies in the rise of persistent inequalities in this region. The solutions need to be country specific, as well as regionally coordinated: from economic slowdown, increase

⁵ Fourth South-East Asia Forum on Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, October 2020, available at <https://www.unescap.org/events/4th-sea-forum-sdg>.

in poverty, disruptions in education to health deterioration resulting from decrease in nutrition and increase in mortality.

23. A world without hunger by 2030 will require multisectoral actions, including transforming food environments to make nutritious foods more available and affordable and enhancing agricultural Research, Development and Extension, agricultural information systems, female literacy improvement and scaling up existing social protection programs.⁶

24. Priority actions with regards to promoting a sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all include support for vulnerable enterprises and workers, building strong labour market institutions and ensuring policy processes are inclusive.⁷

25. Countries are recommended to report both to the Global Indicator Framework and in their voluntary national reviews to improve implementation and obtain international recognition for responsible consumption and production. There is a need to integrate reporting mechanisms and improve coordination between the actors involved in Sustainable Development Goal monitoring and reporting to reduce institutional fragmentation and improve the quantity and quality of the reports. Consistency in reporting is key to accurate monitoring and evaluation of regional and global progress.

26. For achieving progress on Goal 16, meaningful, safe, and effective participation of all stakeholders is required. This will facilitate candid expression and reflect on the challenges as well as sharing of experiences and knowledge. The aim is to create synergies with other reporting obligations, such as to the Universal Periodic Review and other international human rights mechanisms.

27. The pandemic has highlighted deep inequalities, shortfalls in governance and the imperative for a sustainable development pathway. The recovery of the subregion is closely tied to the progress of Sustainable Development Goals in the subregion. Accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the subregion will call for policy measures and initiatives at both the national and regional level.

III. East and North-East Asia

Subregional background

28. The subregion comprises of six countries, covering an area accounting for more than half the total land area of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) region with over 1.8 billion or a quarter of the global population. The East and North-East Asia as a group is the strongest economic subregion in Asia and the Pacific, with four member countries among the world's 12 largest economies.

29. While wealthier than other subregions, the East and North-East Asia subregion sees a large income disparity within and among countries. Despite significant achievements of socioeconomic development across the subregion, challenges remain in reaching many who are still left behind, such as deep pockets of poverty, people with disability facing disparity in poverty incidents, access to education and employment. In addition, demographic shift potentially increases the poverty among the older population, as the subregion holds fastest

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

growing (Republic of Korea), largest pool (China), and highest rate (Japan) of ageing population in the world.

30. Its advances in socioeconomic development have also been at the cost of environmental sustainability. Increasing its resource efficiency and decarbonizing its energy system and economy together with a rapid change in demographic structure, are posing serious tasks for the subregion.

A. Subregional progress and impact of the coronavirus disease on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

31. North-East Asia is on track to achieve goals on no poverty (Goal 1), and clean water and sanitation (Goal 6) by 2030. Also, relatively good progress has been made on zero hunger (Goal 2), good health and well-being (Goal 3), affordable and clean energy (Goal 7), decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), and industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9).⁸

32. However, the subregion is the first region hit by the COVID-19 outbreak, which has threatened to reverse years of hard-won development gains in the subregion, particularly in socioeconomic development related Sustainable Development Goals, such as Goal 2, 6, 9, as well as Goal 4 (quality education).⁹

33. The pandemic tested the resilience of the subregion's achievement in health and well-being (Goal 3), while the subregion has a major advantage in responding to the pandemic in view of access to basic services (e.g., water and sanitation), universal health coverage and solid infrastructure. As the pandemic response measures such as restricting the movement of people led to the downturn of economic activities, it directly impacted the employment and severely affected income aspects of households across the subregion, hampering the progresses on Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), 1 (no poverty), and 2 (zero hunger).¹⁰ The pandemic has also led to school closures, which disrupted educational attainment and potentially reduced future earnings of students. Increasing unemployment is reported to be particularly severe among specific sector and groups such as service sector, youth, small to medium-sized enterprise workers, women, informal and migrant workers.

34. The disproportionate effect on vulnerable populations deepened the challenge and widened the pool of vulnerable people, which would further pull back the already slow progress in Goal 5 (Gender equality) and 10 (Reduced inequalities). For instance, the increased burden of unpaid care work by the pandemic added the constraints to women's access to employment, widening gender inequalities in labour market. The North-East Asia Multistakeholders Forum on Sustainable Development Goals in 2020 also highlighted the intensified challenges of people with disability, such as inequality in access to information (e.g., access of visually-impaired persons to information on pandemic) and health service (for those who need regular health monitoring).¹¹

⁸ ESCAP, 2020 "Turning the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis into Collective SDG Actions in North-EAST Asia", available at <https://www.unescap.org/resources/turning-covid-19-pandemic-crisis-collective-sdg-actions-north-east-asia>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ ESCAP's North-East Asian Multi-stakeholder Forum on Sustainable Development Goals 2020, available at <https://www.unescap.org/events/north-east-asian-multistakeholder-forum-sustainable-development-goals-2020>.

35. The subregion's advance in the access to information and communications technologies, (target 9.c.1), has enabled remote communication and helped mitigate socioeconomic disruption under restricted movement and face-to-face interaction. The pandemic accelerated the digitization of the society while it also widened the digital divide and further disadvantaged those who have limited access to technology. For example, shift to online education added difficulties to students who have limited access to internet connection and facilities, while online information disadvantaged the visually impaired people to access essential information.

36. Disruption of economic activities have temporarily reduced the carbon emission (Goal 13) and improved the air quality (Goal 15). Nonetheless, it also added pressure on environment as exemplified by more intensive use of plastic due to hygienic concern, increased packaging, and lower oil price, leading to increase of wastes.

B. National achievements and challenges with respect to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the voluntary national reviews

37. All the countries will have submitted their voluntary national review by 2021. China (2016), Japan (2017), Republic of Korea (2016), Mongolia (2019), and Russian Federation (2020) have submitted its first voluntary national review, while Democratic People's Republic of Korea plans to do so in 2021. China and Japan plan to submit the second review in 2021.

38. China's key experiences in implementing the 2030 Agenda include poverty reduction through targeted approach which lifted over 700 million people out of poverty in 4 decades, green development with strong commitment to address climate change, inclusive development in education modernization, protection of women's rights, empowering people with disabilities, among others.¹² China also actively promotes global partnership including through South-South cooperation, for achieving 2030 Agenda as well as responding to COVID-19.

39. Democratic People's Republic of Korea initiated preparation for the voluntary national review in view of presenting it in 2020. The Government established National Task Force under the cabinet in 2018, supported by 6 technical committees. Central Bureau of Statistics is tasked with assessment of the progress. In preparation for the voluntary national review, the National Standing Unit on Sustainable Development completed the draft report in collaboration with ESCAP. However, the Government had to delay the national preparatory process under the COVID-19 and postpone the reporting of voluntary national review to 2021.

40. Since the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goal Promotion Headquarter in 2016, the Government of Japan developed and revised Action Plans and Implementation Guiding Principles for Sustainable Development Goals. The conscious efforts to engage multi-stakeholders is highlighted in the Guiding Principles revised in 2019. The Action Plan 2020 stipulates initiatives and actions by the government focusing on (i) business and innovation including science, technology and innovation for Sustainable Development Goals; (ii) regional revitalization driven by the Sustainable Development Goals including building resilient cities; and (iii) empowerment of the next generation and women.

¹² Ibid.

41. Mongolia's whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to Sustainable Development Goals are reflected in their institutional mechanisms such as the Parliamentary Sub-Committee on Sustainable Development Goals and National Council for Sustainable Development headed by the Prime Minister. Law on Development Policy, Planning and Management enables localization of Sustainable Development Goals through policy planning, while Vision 2030 approved in 2016 spells out long-term strategy towards sustainable development. The Government also developed national Sustainable Development Goal targets and indicators. However, various challenges remain including Mongolia's vulnerability to external economic and environmental factors, growing disparities in such areas as poverty and inequality, social service delivery and opportunities for decent work. Policy coherence and institutional coordination also remain the challenge.

42. The Government of the Republic of Korea developed Korea's national Sustainable Development Goals in 2018 through extensive process of stakeholder engagement and public participation. K-Sustainable Development Goals contain additional targets and indicators to reflect the local context. According to the first National Sustainable Development Report 2020 by the National Commission on Sustainable Development, about one-third of the K-Sustainable Development Goals indexes evaluated, including gender aspects, are either regressing or making slow progress. The Republic of Korea also aligns its development cooperation strategy with Sustainable Development Goals, in efforts to support other countries for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.

43. The Russian Federation submitted its first voluntary national review in 2020. Preparation was led by the Analytical Center, in cooperation with relevant ministries and agencies. Seventeen thematic working groups were established to address each Sustainable Development Goal. Each group consists of the Government including municipal authorities, civil society organizations, academia, business community, etc. The preparation process enabled to engage various stakeholders in the discussion on the document, analyse the consistency between national goals and the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, and evaluate the progress of implementation. The review found some tangible achievements of Russian Federation in Sustainable Development Goal implementation such as eradication of extreme poverty in Goal 1, quality education in Goal 4, and decent work and economic growth in Goal 8.¹³

C. Selected actions for accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

44. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the existing challenges of the subregion such as inequality. It also exposed fragility of the past achievements such as decent work and quality education and created new pool of marginalized population, requiring targeted approach and more concerted efforts to address them.

45. **Inclusive Digitization:** Digitization has become a main pillar of the national strategies for sustainable development path and long-term post-pandemic economic recovery, as exemplified in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–25), Japan's "Society 5.0", and Republic of Korea's "Digital New Deal". Accelerated digitization of the society and economy in the subregion during the

¹³ Russian Federation 2020, Voluntary National Review of the Progress Made in the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, available at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26959VNR_2020_Russia_Report_English.pdf.

pandemic shows that digitization can offer solutions even in such areas as healthcare and education, while exposing adverse impact as well. With the rapid development of technology and the growing reliance on digital economy, digital divide is likely to reinforce existing inequalities and even propagate new layers of inequality. The subregion should ensure inclusive access to technology. Engagement of multi-stakeholders is also critical to embrace the diverse needs of people and to ensure that technology advancement is aligned with various aspects of sustainable development including governance, human rights, equality, and environmental issues.

46. **Multi-stakeholder engagement:** Engaging multi-stakeholders including civil society and vulnerable people in decision-making process ensure inclusive and accelerated implementation of Sustainable Development Goals. Governments in the subregion have shown their conscious efforts to involve multi-stakeholders in the voluntary national review process and other Sustainable Development Goal initiatives. The Subregional Sustainable Development Goal Forum also stressed the critical role played by the civil society to complement and fill the gap of the pandemic responses to ensure no one left behind. For instance, the civil society in Mongolia voiced the concerns and highlighted specific challenges of people with disability, which led the government to provide some targeted support measures.

47. **Private sector engagement:** Private sector is increasingly aware that sustainable development should go beyond their social responsibility and be part of their business strategies. For example, the banking sector can play a crucial role in integrating climate change risks into their investment decision, as seen in green banking frameworks in China. Experience in the Republic of Korea showed public-private partnership between disease control office and telecom company helped contact tracing of infected patients to prevent the spread of COVID-19 virus. To accelerate private sector engagement in Sustainable Development Goals implementation, policies need to create a conducive environment.

48. **Building sustainable and resilient society:** COVID-19 is a wake-up call to accelerate its efforts to ensure environmental sustainability and promote decarbonization, aligning national environmental and climate objectives with the stimulus measures. For example, the Green New Deal of the Republic of Korea supports the transformation of the economy out of a carbon-dependent economy. Japan and the Republic of Korea have pledged to become carbon neutral by 2050, while China is committed to peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. Mongolia announced its target for the Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Climate Agreement.

49. **International cooperation with more emphasis on sustainable and green recovery:** As the subregion with major players of development cooperation, North-East Asian countries need to accelerate their efforts to materialize their renewed commitments and closer alignment of their international cooperation with the 2030 Agenda.

IV. South and South-West Asia

Subregional background

50. Despite economic dynamism, South Asia still hosts disproportionately high share (34 per cent) of people living in extreme poverty and hunger. The subregion suffers from persistent gender inequalities, wide infrastructure and service delivery gaps, poor productive capacities, pervasive informality and rising income inequalities. South Asia is one of the most vulnerable subregions

to the effects of climate change and natural disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed further some of the vulnerabilities of the subregion and undermined the progress on Sustainable Development Goal achievement.

A. Subregional progress and impact of the coronavirus disease on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

51. South and South-West Asia subregion achieved some notable progress on poverty (Goal 1), hunger (Goal 2) and health (Goal 3) with progress made, to a lesser extent, on education (Goal 4), gender equality (Goal 5), decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), and industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9). However, the subregion is stagnating on access to clean energy (Goal 7), and has regressed on the Goals related to reducing inequalities (Goal 10), sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), climate action and life below water (Goals 13 and 14) and Peace, Justice and strong institutions (Goal 16).¹⁴

52. COVID-19 has had mixed impacts on Sustainable Development Goal progress, and the subregion has stagnated on access to clean energy (Goal 7) and sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), with regressing trend observed on environmental goals, that is, Goals 13 (Climate action) and 14 (Life below water).

53. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the subregion severely due to poor public health infrastructure, pervasive informality, poor coverage of social protection and limited fiscal space to address the manifold challenges of the crisis. The ESCAP-Subregional Office for South and South-West Asia policy paper,¹⁵ which formed basis for a high-level policy dialogue¹⁶ found that key sectors such as micro, small and medium enterprises, tourism and labour intensive exports such as textiles, handicrafts etc. have been most adversely impacted leading to sharp economic recession and job losses that could push up to 132 million people into extreme poverty. As the vulnerable sectors of society have been further marginalized, the inequalities are widening further. ESCAP simulations suggested that large, people-centred, inclusive and sustainable stimulus packages ranging between 7–14 per cent of GDP covering public health infrastructure needs, social protection and economic revival would be required for South Asian economies to build back better from the pandemic.

54. Furthermore, COVID-19 threatens sustainable graduation pathways of South Asian least developed countries, viz. Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal – that are at various stages of graduation from least developed countries status, as highlighted in another ESCAP policy paper,¹⁷ that has recommended greater support and flexibility in the transition period.

¹⁴ ESCAP Asia-Pacific SDG gateway. Accessed at <https://data.unescap.org/dataviz/progress-2021/#>.

¹⁵ ESCAP, 2020 “COVID-19 and South Asia: National Strategies and Subregional Cooperation for Accelerating Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Recovery”, available at https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/South%20Asia%20Covid-19%20Paper_5.pdf.

¹⁶ Virtual High-Level Policy Dialogue COVID-19 and South Asia, available at <https://www.unescap.org/events/virtual-high-level-policy-dialogue-covid-19-and-south-asia-socio-economic-impacts-national>.

¹⁷ ESCAP, 2020 Towards Sustainable Graduation of South Asian LDCs in the aftermath of COVID-19: Challenges, Prospects and Policy Lessons, available at https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Towards%20Sustainable%20Graduation%20of%20South%20Asian%20LDCs_UNESCAP%20SSWA_151020_0.pdf.

B. National achievements and challenges with respect to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the voluntary national reviews

55. All South and South West Asian countries submitted their first Voluntary National Reviews by 2019. Turkey presented its voluntary national review for the second time in 2019. Bangladesh, Nepal and India presented their second voluntary national reviews in 2020, with Bhutan and Pakistan gearing up for their second voluntary national reviews in 2021. In this context, the Fourth South Asia Forum for Sustainable Development¹⁸ hosted jointly by ESCAP and Maldives, on 2–3 December 2020, focused on providing reflections on Sustainable Development Goals progress in the face of challenges compounded by the COVID-19 crisis, with a focus Goal 1,2,3,8,10,12,13,16, and 17.

56. Given the socioeconomic and political context of Afghanistan, persistent conflicts and COVID-19 pandemic have worsened poverty, hunger, and access to basic services, such as health and education, caused massive displacement and limited the fiscal options for recovery and stimulating economic growth due to low revenue collections and has affected foreign aid commitments. Working with partners to attract private investment, leveraging public-private partnerships remain urgent priorities to finance infrastructure projects and Sustainable Development Goal targets.

57. **Bangladesh** presented its second voluntary national review at the high-level political forum 2020 after extensive consultations including through high-level committee, followed by 17 dedicated coordinating ministries, who arranged consultations with stakeholders for each Sustainable Development Goal. Bangladesh has achieved positive progress on multiple Goals, particularly Goal 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10. In particular, in addressing Goal 10, Bangladesh has had success in increasing social protection coverage. However, COVID-19 has pushed the progress back in multiple areas, particularly in growth and employment, health, and industrialization. National measures to tackle COVID-19 aimed to provide stimulus to the economy by increasing government expenditure and creating employment, providing assistance and liquidity, and ensuring social security.

58. **Bhutan** gearing up to present its second voluntary national review in 2021, has fully aligned Sustainable Development Goals with its national plans given the overlaps with its development philosophy of Gross National Happiness. Bhutan is on-track to achieving all relevant Sustainable Development Goals. COVID-19 has impacted Sustainable Development Goal progress, overwhelmed health systems, disrupted education services and overburdened limited human and financial resources. To accelerate Sustainable Development Goals, Bhutan is finalizing its Sustainable Development Goal tracking and monitoring dashboard and developing a 21st Century Economic Roadmap underpinned by innovation and technology. Bhutan will undertake a needs assessment for financing for the Sustainable Development Goals and seek additional international support for economic recovery in critical sectors.

59. **India** presented its second voluntary national review in 2020, by adopting a “whole of society” approach, engaging with civil society organizations, local communities, people in vulnerable situations and the private sector. It has effectively localized the Sustainable Development Goals and established a framework covering both the national (NITI Aayog) and

¹⁸ ESCAP’s Fourth South Asia Forum for Sustainable Development, December 2020, available at <https://www.unescap.org/events/fourth-south-asia-forum-sustainable-development-goals>.

subnational levels. At the subnational and local levels, there are planning departments that map and set targets to develop the Sustainable Development Goal vision roadmaps and the use national Sustainable Development Goal Index to measure Sustainable Development Goal performance at the subnational level. India has also identified action points for monitoring Sustainable Development Goals progress in cities, States and districts, improving Sustainable Development Goals-India index, measure private sector contribution, improve the statistical system, including through capacity-building.

60. The **Maldives** is mainstreaming Sustainable Development Goals priorities into development planning processes at all levels; implement the National Resilient and Recovery Plan focusing on economic diversification, job creation and reintegration of workforce, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, strengthening social protection and universal health care, and accelerating digital initiatives and technology-based platforms. Decentralized systems and empowering local governments, better data management, and Sustainable Development Goal reporting while exploiting alternative means of financing and fostering national and regional partnerships remain urgent priorities.

61. **Nepal** shared the key lessons from its second voluntary national review presented at the high-level political forum 2020. It has aligned Sustainable Development Goals with national plans, with its Constitution capturing the aspiration of the Sustainable Development Goals. The high-level committees and parliamentary committees are involved in implementing, monitoring, and overseeing the Sustainable Development Goal progress. An integrated approach will be needed to accelerate implementation of Sustainable Development Goals. Strong global partnership and cooperation, innovative resource mobilization and strengthening institutions, good governance and statistical systems would be essential to building back better.

62. **Pakistan** gearing up to present its second voluntary national review in 2021, has had its Parliament unanimously adopt Sustainable Development Goals through resolution in 2016. It has established Parliamentary task forces, including supporting units at the federal, provinces, and federally administered areas to oversee Sustainable Development Goals implementation. Currently, all Sustainable Development Goals have been mainstreamed into government plans, policies, and growth strategies. Pakistan has improved its monitoring and evaluation framework and is creating a Sustainable Development Goal dashboard for better governance.

63. **Sri Lanka** has restructured the Ministries in line with the Sustainable Development Goals to further strengthen institutional mechanisms for horizontal and vertical coordination for planning, implementation and monitoring. The Sustainable Development Council and the Department of Census and Statistics are involved in strengthening the statistical capacities of the national institutions, and among key data innovations is the Sustainable Development Goal Data Portal, an integrated reporting mechanism promoting a whole of government approach to data collection, management and sharing. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals requires mutual cooperation and partnerships, including among regional partners to increase investment, trade, technology, and knowledge transfers.

C. Selected actions for accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

64. The following actions were recommended by the South Asia Forum on Sustainable Development Goals for accelerating Sustainable Development Goal achievement in the aftermath of COVID-19:

65. **South Asia needs to align its COVID-19 recovery strategies with Sustainable Development Goal implementation.** As South Asian countries re-activate their economies, future policy priorities for recovery and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals include (i) economic diversification and industry-focused structural transformation, (ii) raising investments in health and education, (iii) expanding social protection, closing gender gaps and improving basic infrastructure for addressing inequalities, (iv) ensuring food security, agriculture and rural development, and (v) enhancing environmental sustainability through green recovery packages, renewables and clean technologies.

66. **Poverty reduction efforts must focus on multidimensional aspects of poverty.** Although South Asia has achieved the fastest annualized absolute reduction in multidimensional poverty globally, the overlapping dimensions of poverty have worsened due to the pandemic. Mainstreaming Multidimensional Poverty Index in policy responses can help South Asia to identify newly vulnerable groups and to orient policy solutions from a multidimensional approach, integrating health, social and economic priorities.

67. **A Subregional Action Plan for Social Protection is needed to enhance resilience.** To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and to protect the lives and livelihoods of people, leave no one behind, countries ought to integrate social protection and targeted programs at national and subnational levels. The Regional Action Plan adopted by ESCAP member states could be contextualized for South Asia.

68. **Addressing inequalities and gender disparities, through economic empowerment of women.** Vulnerable groups such as women, migrants, rural inhabitants, children, older persons, among others, are disproportionately affected by the crisis and require targeted support including to address the gender inequalities.

69. **Need to invest more for structural transformation, employment creation and environmental sustainability.** South Asian countries must leverage structural transformation in job-creating and environmentally sustainable sectors, integrating ecosystem services and circular economy approaches including through investments in education and skill development.

70. **Mobilizing finance to achieve Sustainable Development Goals.** South Asian countries should augment their fiscal space by widening tax bases, improving tax administration and increasing tax progressivity, reorienting expenditure, innovative financial instruments like Sustainable Development Goals-bonds, improving public debt management, and harnessing the potential of public private partnerships. Regional financial initiatives such as the Network of Central Bank Governors and Finance Secretaries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Region and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation COVID-19 Emergency Fund could be built upon further.

71. **Harnessing emerging technologies and digital transformation.** Responding to the onset of 4th industrial revolution, technological advancements, digitization and emerging market trends characterized by reorientation of global supply chains, South Asia needs to invest in skill development and closing the digital divide.

72. **Increasing intra-regional trade and strengthening of value chains.** Strengthening regional value chains and exploiting intra-regional trade potential, estimated at least three times the current levels, would help faster economic recovery in a robust, inclusive and sustainable manner including through removal of trade barriers, strengthened transport connectivity and facilitation.

73. **Building statistical capacities.** Subregional countries should mobilize resources for building statistical capacities for bridging data gaps, in particular for tier-2 and tier-3 Sustainable Development Goal indicators and for ensuring availability of timely, high quality, reliable and disaggregated data. ESCAP was invited to facilitate capacity-building and a common, collaborative platform of statistical systems South Asian countries.

74. **Civil society and private sector engagements form critical pillars in multi-stakeholder partnerships.** Forward-looking engagements on partnership and collaboration between governments, civil society organizations, industry players are needed for building back a more sustainable and just recovery that ensures acceleration across interrelated Sustainable Development Goals.

75. **Regional cooperation is critical for resilient recovery from COVID-19.** South Asian countries should deepen regional cooperation for the common and shared development goals. A regional monitoring mechanism with regional Sustainable Development Goal progress indicators would be helpful to reprioritize Sustainable Development Goal action programmes, especially in the context of COVID-19 impacts and to improve policy coherence at the subregional level.

76. **ESCAP has an important role in fostering subregional and regional cooperation in South Asia.** The stakeholders appreciated ESCAP's role in providing a subregional platform to discuss shared challenges such as achieving inclusive, resilience and sustainable development in South Asia in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the role it is playing in fostering regional cooperation and sharing of good practices in South Asia, including through its new initiative namely the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals, besides the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.

V. Pacific

Subregional background

77. The Pacific subregion¹⁹ is recognized as a special case for sustainable development due to its geographic isolation, remoteness from export markets,

¹⁹ The 12 Pacific island countries with a presence in the United Nations (Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) are full members of ESCAP along with the following countries and territories as associate members: American Samoa, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Guam, New Caledonia, Niue and the Northern Mariana Islands.

diseconomies of scale in production, and vulnerability to external market shocks, climate change and natural disasters.

78. Limited economic base also restricts the capacities to increase employment opportunities and improve social safety nets for the vulnerable. Vulnerability to external market shocks, exacerbated by COVID-19, is expected to result in an economic contraction of 5.5 per cent,²⁰ and triggered wide-spread unemployment and income loss, particularly in tourism dependent economies such as Fiji, Vanuatu and Palau. Two major cyclones in 2020 impacting Vanuatu and Fiji in particular, underscored the subregion's increasing vulnerability to climate change and natural hazards. The Pacific Ocean remains a critical resource for the subregion. However, over-fishing, waste pollution, and climate change pose significant threat on ocean health and sustainability. Collectively, an array of economic, social and environmental factors, together with the impact of COVID-19, limit the subregion's capacity to achieve national and global development goals. Holistic response and recovery measures, tailored to small island developing states context, needs to be decisively pursued.

A. Subregional progress and impact of the coronavirus disease on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

79. While COVID-19 threatens to reverse development gains and invokes the specter of a 'lost decade',²¹ the Pacific subregion was not on track when the pandemic struck to achieve any of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Social protection remains low covering only a third of the eligible persons in the subregion; and household access to basic services, particularly in rural communities, is limited. Pacific women still hold the lowest percentage of Parliamentary seats worldwide and are under-represented in formal employment and over-represented in informal and unpaid work. In addition, women in the subregion experience more violence at the hands of intimate partners than elsewhere in the region. More than 1 million persons with disabilities in the Pacific islands still face deep inequalities and multiple barriers and are over-represented among the poor.

80. Communicable diseases remain critical in parts of the subregion, while non-communicable diseases have already been labelled a crisis by the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders. Early Childhood Education enrolment rates and adult literacy rates are lagging behind the Asia-Pacific region. While youth literacy is close to 100 per cent for most countries with data for recent years, the quality of education and the youth bulge remain problematic and a challenge in a subregion where the pandemic has further imperiled youth employment opportunities.

81. Measured in terms of carbon dioxide emission per capita, the Pacific is the worst performing in the Asia-Pacific region at 9.9 tons of carbon dioxide per capita annually (down from 14.5 tons in 2005) or more than double the regional average (in part due to the high level of emissions from developed economies in the subregion).²² Moreover, the subregion's biodiversity is under severe pressure from climate change and other human-induced impacts including pollution and waste which remains a low priority in national development plans. The overall level of electricity access in the Pacific subregion reached 90.6 per cent, yet

²⁰ ESCAP (August 2020), Can this time be different? Challenges and opportunities for Asia-Pacific economies in the aftermath of COVID-19.

²¹ ESCAP's Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development: Nadi 2020, available at <https://www.unescap.org/events/pacific-forum-sustainable-development-pfsd-2020-capacity-building-workshop-pacific-sids>.

²² ESCAP SDG Gateway, available at <https://data.unescap.org/home>.

remains the lowest in the Asia-Pacific, but the share of renewable energy in total final energy consumption remained relatively stable.

82. Economic growth in the Pacific subregion remains low and uneven, with overall GDP/capita growth rate being around one third of the regional average. Overseas development assistance is an important contributor to the government revenues and infrastructure projects in the Pacific islands. Whilst personal remittances are relatively a small contributor to total GDP for the Pacific, this source of income is significant for some developing economies at over 41, 18, and 14 per cent for Tonga, Samoa and Marshall Islands respectively.²³

83. The region's policy responses, summarized in ESCAP's COVID-19 policy tracker²⁴ have focused on containing COVID-19, as well as implementing fiscal and liquidity measures to limit the economic impact of the pandemic. As a result, public expenditure, fiscal deficit and net borrowing have increased in the Pacific. This raises an urgency for domestic revenue mobilization to support sustainable development. Moreover, the pandemic is changing the structure of economies as it revealed the riskiness of some industries, e.g. tourism while accelerating the digital economy (Claus, 2021²⁵). In fact, investing in offshoring and online outsourcing and other information technology related industries carry significant potential to drive jobs of the future in services sector. Fiji, in particular, is endowed with several competitive advantages including a young and qualified labour market as well as a positive international perception as the hub of the Pacific Island Countries region.

84. COVID-19 and the two strong cyclones experienced by the region in 2020 have also shown that maritime connectivity continues to constitute one of the greatest impediments to lowering Pacific small island developing states trade costs and increasing access to global markets. A deeper maritime connectivity with modern and climate-resilient port infrastructure (such as contactless ports) would enable countries to create a resilient distribution base and thus reducing the impact on revenues, livelihoods and sustainable development of a single manufacturing hub or shipping route creating a supply shock during a pandemic or a natural disaster.

B. National achievements and challenges with respect to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the voluntary national reviews

85. The eleven²⁶ voluntary national reviews undertaken in the Pacific subregion indicate that country systems, institutional arrangements, policies and processes are largely in place, although with varying levels of effectiveness. A review of the nine voluntary national reviews undertaken up to 2019 has documented a number of Sustainable Development Goal implementation challenges: (a) lack of ownership and political will to effectively deal with the cross-sectoral and inter-related nature of the Sustainable Development Goals; (b) lack of national alignment with global and regional commitments including by localizing global goals, targets and indicators; (c) lack of awareness and engagement of stakeholders within governments, civil society and private sector;

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ ESCAP's compilation of Policy Responses to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific, available at <https://www.unescap.org/covid19/policy-responses>.

²⁵ ESCAP's forthcoming publication, 2021 Pacific collaboration for higher incomes and revenue post COVID-19.

²⁶ 2016: Samoa; 2018: Kiribati; 2019: Fiji, Nauru, Palau, Tonga, Vanuatu; 2020: Federated States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands.

(d) human and institutional capacity constraints i.e., insufficient financial resources and capacity for resource mobilization; and (e) paucity of data and limited capacity to collect and analyse data.²⁷ It is important to note that the challenges relating to data, capacity constraints and stakeholder engagement were also reported during the times of Millennium Development Goals.

86. There is recognition in the voluntary national reviews that effective national planning systems remain critical for implementing national development priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals and that the Pacific must align and integrate relevant global commitments when implementing master strategies for national plans. National budgets and development cooperation efforts need to be effectively linked to priorities outlined in the national plans to ensure desired results. National development plans and sector plans that can be used for global reporting and policymaking need proper monitoring and adequate reporting. However, it appears there is very little progress on or support for building national planning capacity (Goal 17.9) which is either minimal (1 out of possible 5)²⁸ or in need of significant acceleration.²⁹

87. With regards to stakeholder engagement, there is agreement that meaningful consultations are critical for preparing plans and strategies as well as partnering to implement priority agendas. Civil society partners, academics, media, parliaments and private sector stakeholders are all essential for successfully raising demand for sustainable development outcomes and greater engagement in the process. Yet, the 2020 Pacific Sustainable Development Goal progress report indicates only minimal (1 out of possible 5) progress against or support for multi-stakeholder engagement (Goal 17.16)³⁰ thus far.

88. The non-availability and poor quality of data makes it difficult for governments, inter-governmental organizations and partners, to be held accountable. Progress measurements are weak and unreliable without baseline data and a system which allows comprehensive, consistent and constant monitoring. At the subregional level, the Pacific Roadmap for Sustainable Development has an indicator framework made up of 132 Sustainable Development Goal indicators, of which only 50 per cent could be measured. While these Sustainable Development Goal indicators have been identified for the Pacific Roadmap for Sustainable Development and incorporated in part into some national development plans, more should be done to review these indicator frameworks for their relevance and to tailor them to the context of the subregion and countries.

C. Selected actions for accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

89. The Pacific Roadmap for Sustainable Development remains the subregion's pathway for implementing the 2030 Agenda and with a shift towards the social and planetary dimensions of development evident in the voluntary national reviews and COVID-19 assessments, there is momentum which could be mobilized towards a more human-centred or inclusive approach to growth that respects the carrying capacity of the earth and limits, if not reverses, human impacts. The impact of COVID-19, alongside those of natural disasters and other

²⁷ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, The 2020 Biennial Pacific Sustainable Development Report, pp 45–49.

²⁸ Ibid p.40.

²⁹ ESCAP, SDG Gateway.

³⁰ Ibid p.40.

global disruptions, highlight once again the need for a stronger focus on risk and resilience and adaptive capacity-building.

90. Faced with financial constraints and increasing dependence on grants and loans, the subregion needs stronger coordination with international donors and financial institutions to ensure effective planning and use of their support. Apart from immediate and short-term poverty reduction and social security measures, there is agreement for increased investment in health and educational systems, water and sanitation, social protection and employment creation, and food security.³¹ To ensure sustainability of these policy responses, inclusive and sustainability considerations need to be incorporated into macroeconomic policies and financial regulations, national planning and budgeting, trade and investments and economic diversification, and domestic resource mobilization. Likewise, apart from providing short term relief responses to climate-related disasters and better access to climate financing, best options need to be identified for risk mitigation and resilience in the medium to long term by building adaptive capacities and increasing investment in climate adaptation for infrastructure and economies.

91. COVID-19 has put digitization at the centre of the subregion's development agenda as it seeks to facilitate transport, enhance the resilience of supply chains and ports, and strengthen e-commerce and financial mechanisms. Overcoming the digital divide will enable economic opportunities and empowerment, enhancing gender and opportunities for women, the elderly and persons with disabilities, intensifying multisector efforts (i.e., include health, education, culture) and financing for addressing the non-communicable disease crisis in the Pacific. Building on COVID-19 initiatives, the subregion must continue to work with other nations to address the issues around de-risking financial flows and its impact on remittances flows to the Pacific, tackling gender gaps in employment outcomes and high youth unemployment.

92. Ensuring availability of timely, accurate and disaggregated data to monitor implementation across the three dimensions of sustainable development must remain a priority to strengthen evidence-based policy, planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and accountability. This challenge can be supported by developing more refined indicator frameworks, with greater focus on subregional and national priorities, through the assistance of partners, and support of countries. Effective national planning systems remain critical for implementing the national development priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals, plans which align relevant policy commitments and budget allocations, and function as the master strategy and accountability framework for implementing national priorities.

93. Meaningful multi-stakeholder engagement is needed more than ever before given the growing scope and inter-relatedness of the development agenda. Private sector and civil society institutions have capacity and potential to play a meaningful role. As clearly recognized in the SAMOA Pathway, the sustainable development of small island developing states “can be achieved only with a broad alliance of people, governments, civil society and the private sector all working together to achieve the future we want for present and future generations”.³² What is needed is stronger leadership and political will by governments to seek and deploy needed resources, engage stakeholders and

³¹ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, The 2020 Biennial Pacific Sustainable Development Report, p. iii, available at <https://www.forumsec.org/download/pifs20femm-3-regional-sdg-biennial-report/>.

³² SAMOA Pathway Para 1 <https://unohrlls.org/custom-content/uploads/2015/01/SAMOA-Pathway.pdf>.

partners on mutually agreed terms, and strengthen coordination of national and subregional programs and initiatives.

94. COVID-19 with its global- and region-wide disruptions has clearly increased the need to ‘rethink, plan and collaborate’³³ including in new and more effective ways of working together at national and regional levels in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Coordination can be vastly improved in the subregion with a common accountability framework and the 132 Sustainable Development Goal indicators of the Pacific Roadmap for Sustainable Development could be developed alongside robust data systems to fulfil such a critical role.

VI. North and Central Asia

Subregional background

95. In the North and Central Asia subregion, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused more than just a health emergency, but also an unprecedented socioeconomic crisis. Already before the COVID-19 pandemic, North and Central Asia countries were lagging behind on progress for most Sustainable Development Goals and structural economic transformation remained incomplete. Juxtaposed with the rapidly changing pandemic situation, this has made it difficult to effectively implement and expand social protection measures to support affected social groups. In the subregion, the COVID-19 crisis is leading to growing inequality and poverty, particularly among already vulnerable groups, women, youth, children, elderly and persons with disabilities. Another vulnerable group are labour migrants and their families as their income has broken away amidst restrictions of movement and reduced labour demand.

96. Structural economic vulnerabilities, such as overdependence on commodity exports, migrant labour and remittances, and the prevalence of informal sector employment pose challenges for post COVID-19 economic recovery. The measures taken during the pandemic also had a negative impact on trade and transport links, which are essential for landlocked countries of the subregion. Substantial fiscal deficits have already been recorded and are expected to widen further in 2021, adding to sovereign debt which was already a concern for some North and Central Asia countries. A temporary improvement in air quality was observed but were not sustainable as the underlying reasons for the pollution have not been addressed. Poor waste management has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic with waste volumes increasing, including for single-use plastics and for hazardous waste.

97. The “Fourth North and Central Asian Forum on Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals” (North and Central Asia Subregional Sustainable Development Goal Forum) was organized in the virtual modality during 2–4 September 2020. The Forum focused on what a “new normal” after the COVID-19 crisis should entail.

A. Subregional progress and impact of the coronavirus disease on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

98. North and Central Asia has made progress only on 4 out of 17 Sustainable Development Goals, on quality education (Goal 4), clean water and sanitation (Goal 6), reduction in inequality (Goal 10), and on peace, justice, strong institutions (Goal 16). However, regressed on sustainable urbanization (Goal 11)

³³ Foreign Ministers Joint Statement 17 July 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental effect on already off-track Sustainable Development Goals in the North and Central Asia subregion. At the same time, the big challenge for North and Central Asia countries is that sufficient data exists for only 42 per cent of indicators, with 27 per cent relying on a single datapoint and 31 per cent with no data at all.³⁴ Aligning with the theme and Sustainable Development Goals proposed for the 2021 high-level political forum, the discussions of the North and Central Asia Subregional Sustainable Development Goal Forum highlighted the following main impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in North and Central Asia.

99. The COVID-19 crisis highlighted and intensified pre-existing inequalities: putting vulnerable groups, including older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants, youth and women, at risk of being left behind. The interrelation between health and other socioeconomic issues requires multisectoral cooperation and a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach.

100. Several North and Central Asia countries are dependent on food imports and were impacted by COVID-19 related border closures. Supply interruptions led to higher prices and increased vulnerability of food commodity chains.

101. North and Central Asia countries' measures to stop the spread of the pandemic - such as temporarily seizing or reducing production, introducing export bans and restrictions, and restrictions on the movement of people - have negatively affected industries, employment, supply chains and connectivity. Generation and distribution of up-to-date information has constituted another significant challenge.

102. As part of the UN75 campaign and contribution to ESCAP's Regional Conversation Series on Building Back Better, a High-Level Dialogue with Youth was held during the North and Central Asia Subregional Sustainable Development Goal Forum. Speakers discussed how countries in the subregion can recover better from the crisis; the degree to which the pandemic has affected and is likely to continue affecting young men and women, boys and girls in North and Central Asia; as well as the role of young people and of the United Nations in global cooperation - across borders, sectors, stakeholder groups, and generations. The main takeaways of this Dialogue are present in part C.

B. National achievements and challenges with respect to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the voluntary national reviews

103. All member States from the North and Central Asia subregion have undergone at least one voluntary national review during the first five years of 2030 Agenda implementation: Armenia (2018, 2020); Azerbaijan (2017, 2019); Georgia (2016; 2020); Kazakhstan (2019); Kyrgyzstan (2020); Russia (2020); Tajikistan (2018); Turkmenistan (2019), and; Uzbekistan (2020). Moreover, Azerbaijan informed that it plans to present its third voluntary national review in 2021.

104. Countries agreed that voluntary national reviews should play a critical role in delivering multi-stakeholder cooperation between national governments, regional organizations, civil society, academia, and the private sector, including innovative use of data through new technologies and from non-state actors. Sustainable Development Goals should be deeply embedded into national

³⁴ ESCAP, Asia and Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020, available at <https://www.unescap.org/publications/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report-2020>.

development frameworks, with the focus not only on voluntary national review preparations, but also on institutionalized collaboration to implement Sustainable Development Goals and measure progress. In other words, integrated and Sustainable Development Goals-aligned planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring and evaluation are needed.

105. Efforts need to be increased to produce timely, accurate and disaggregated data. North and Central Asia countries are comparatively advanced in collecting data, but large gaps remain in measuring Sustainable Development Goal progress.³⁵ This seriously hampers evidence-based approaches for enhancing and acceleration efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda. In addition, population censuses can be a very important tool in the subregion for collecting disaggregating statistics to identify most vulnerable groups.

106. It was indicated that moving towards accelerated implementation of Sustainable Development Goals is the best strategy to address interlinked and multidimensional vulnerabilities – both to recover from the current crisis and move development trajectories towards inclusive, resilient and sustainable economies and societies. More focus should be given to the key drivers of sustainable development: digitalization, big data, regional integration, multilateral cooperation, green innovations, and equality (across age, ethnicity, gender, geography, etc.).

C. Selected actions for accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

107. The North and Central Asia Subregional Sustainable Development Goal Forum addressed the main transboundary issues in the subregion and discussed ways forward to accelerate the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals.

108. The countries highlighted the importance of a whole-of-society approach to move out of the crisis and to achieve sustainable development.

109. Further, the countries called for improving the enabling environment for volunteering and supporting initiatives by youth. During the High-Level Dialogue with Youth, youth representatives noted that they do not just want symbolic participation, but meaningful inclusion in actual decision-making.

110. The Forum identified social protection as crucial to building resilience. Universal access to healthcare is key for containing the virus and supporting infected patients and social protection was fundamental to build resilience during the pandemic – in particular when it increased access to basic services for vulnerable groups. Social protection is therefore considered as a core component of building back better.

111. There is a call to prevent the reversal of progress made on gender equality and empowering women. Women are disproportionately affected by secondary impacts of the pandemic (dealing with childcare and school closures, care for elderly and ill persons, more vulnerable to losing paid work and income as disproportionately represented in highly affected sectors and more precarious employment situations); and noted the need for special support for women by governments in the face of COVID-19 impacts.

³⁵ ESCAP, Asia and Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020, available at <https://www.unescap.org/publications/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report-2020>.

112. Participants also noted the adverse effects of discrepancy in IT and digital technologies access and skills, particularly impacting older persons, women, and persons living in rural areas. Technological transformation and accelerated digitalization are essential, including improved access to broadband internet and digital devices.

113. The countries discussed the strong correlation between adopting sustainable food systems, building back better after COVID-19, and accelerating 2030 Agenda. They identified the need to focus on sustainable solutions for healthy food supply, accounting for interconnectedness and trade-offs, and supporting most vulnerable groups – affected by undernourishment and obesity.

114. It was suggested that the investment into agriculture needed to be more focused - emphasizing market-based and value-chain approaches as core of development programmes to underpin sustainability; agriculture also needed strong infrastructure and policy development to be an integral part of SFS.

115. The participants called for financial relief and expanding social benefits and protection to unemployed persons whose numbers had risen during the pandemic.

116. The Forum noted that government incentives, e.g. fiscal instruments or public-private partnerships needed to be targeted towards accelerating the transition to a green economy, proposing targeted relief and job-creation efforts in the environmentally conscious sectors and direct support to businesses involved in the green economy, through government procurement and capital markets.

117. The participants emphasized that in building forward, ecological sustainability was crucial. Climate risks are growing and cannot be downplayed even in crisis. Ecologically sustainable investments and practices should be prioritized when restarting the economy.

118. It was also highlighted that the need for more efficient and transparent communication between public and private sectors.

119. The importance of considering geopolitical factors was noted and the Forum called for politicians to hold high the virtues of multilateral, rules-based cooperation, and not bending to increasing popular pressure for protectionism.

120. The participants stressed that multilateral development banks were key in COVID-19 mitigation and for continuing sustainable and resilient development.

121. The Forum emphasized that cities should be people-centred, green and innovative in order to support well-being and opportunities for all - from affordable housing to waterways for active living, green rooftops, digitization and technological innovation in infrastructure and services. Cities should also be safe and inclusive, in particular for women.