Main Message

As members of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) from China, Japan, Mongolia, Russia and Republic of Korea, we welcome UNESCAP for this opportunity to deliver a collective statement at the Seventh Northeast Asia Multistakeholder Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals for Asia and the Pacific.

Although countries in the Northeast Asia subregion are increasingly positioning themselves as key actors in global development, there is a fragmentation among stakeholders, including opportunities for civil society to engage in decision-making spaces. Thus, this forum is a crucial opportunity for us to deliver the voices of communities and contribute to the regional and global efforts towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that ‘leaves no one behind.’

While we welcome the progress towards eradicating poverty and hunger, and advancing climate action, peace and justice and partnerships, the realities in this subregion reveal gaps which must be addressed in order to meet the 2030 SDGs agenda. The ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, rise in conflicts and climate change have serious ramifications on the implementation of SDGs, and reveal the urgent need to act with solidarity and cooperation.

While noting the intersectionality of our global challenges, in the effort towards realising targets for SDGs 1, 2, 13, 16 and 17, we call upon all stakeholders to establish clear and ambitious goals that consider the needs of all affected, particularly vulnerable communities; develop appropriate roadmaps for implementation including transparent policy processes that ensure meaningful engagement of CSOs; build capacity for institutions to effectively enforce the policies; and secure democratic accountability mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating.

Civil society has played pivotal, irreplaceable roles in revealing the realities on the ground and realising the SDGs. We therefore urge all stakeholders to take collective responsibility in realising our shared goals, and consider the following proposals that reflect the challenges and needs of Northeast Asia.
Goal Specific Challenges

SDG1 & SDG2

Current situation
Our sub-region has made huge progress in eradicating extreme poverty and increasing social security coverage among the population. However, due to the ongoing influence of COVID-19, war, disasters, and other factors, we still face shared and country-specific challenges in fighting poverty and hunger.

Challenges
The following are common challenges faced among the Northeast Asian countries:

- Slow or no increase in wages, worsening the issue of the “Working poor.” Income inequality persists and there are increasingly large numbers of non-regular employees and persisting gender wage disparity.
- High inflation and rising cost of living which impact low income households, especially their children who face problems of food affordability or nutrition imbalance. They are also the main victims of food safety problems, such as food poisoning or food products with quality issues.
- Certain groups in rural areas remain vulnerable, such as disadvantaged women and girls, people with disabilities, elders, suburban and rural communities, herdsmen with few animals, farmers with small land, entrepreneurs without collateral, people who do not qualify for support announced by the government, LGBTQI+ communities, people with special health needs who are at risk or being neglected to access public services.
- Lack of effective multi-stakeholder partnership mechanisms which would help improve policies, implementation and achieve results.

We are also concerned by specific challenges faced in each Northeast Asian countries:

**China:** Despite successes in eradicating absolute poverty and alleviating regional poverty by the end of 2020, people with various disabilities still face threats of poverty and vulnerability.

**Japan:** Poverty rates including the child poverty rate are slowly decreasing, but remain at high levels, with one out of six people and one out of nine children living in poverty. Almost half of single-headed households face poverty, especially female single-headed households and the elderly who live alone.

**Mongolia:** Although it seems that poverty has not increased due to the extensive social welfare programs during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a lack of comprehensive policies and plans for poverty eradication. Thus, poverty remains as a main public issue.
Republic of Korea: 5% of households live in basements of Seoul and some districts have more than 7% living in basements. The Central Government cut off budgets of public housing programmes. Floods and climate crises may cause increasingly severe disasters in the future.

Russia: People below the poverty line may exceed 15 million, with real incomes at the beginning of 2022 being lower than in 2013.

Solutions and recommendations

- Establish proper goals and indicators for eliminating poverty and hunger.
- Ensure social protection, equity and inclusion, improve social protection measures and provide cash benefits and financial support to low-income and vulnerable households, such as child allowance, tuition assistance, housing assistance, assistance for expectant and nursing mothers, etc.
- Promote drastic improvement of labour policies for stable employment and working conditions, increase wages and eliminate gender wage gaps.
- Ensure non-discrimination for vulnerable groups and equal access to public support services.
- Establish multistakeholder mechanism/partnership, particularly ensure CSOs engagement, low-income and vulnerable groups, for participation in policy, implementation, monitoring and evaluation at national, local, sector and cross-sector levels.
- Ensure the safety and quality of food products, and support traditional technology of food preparation. Promote transformation toward sustainable and fair food systems.
- Support farmers with small land, herdsmen with few animals, women without land tenure and homestead for protecting people’s livelihood, environment, and the community.

SDG13

Current Situation
The North-East Asian region faces significant challenges related to the climate crisis, marked by an increase in extreme weather events, devastating forest fires, floods, rising sea levels, and the thawing of permafrost, which already has a negative impact on large groups of the population, especially vulnerable communities, and violates their basic rights. The collective contributions of Russia, Mongolia, Korea, China, and Japan amount to 43% of global greenhouse gas emissions, underscoring their pivotal role in global climate action.

Challenges
The predominant source of greenhouse emissions in this region stems from its heavy reliance on fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas. This reliance, coupled with a lack of explicit plans to phase out from fossil fuel, poses a substantial obstacle in achieving the target of net-zero emissions.
through the adoption of clean energy alternatives. Despite commitments to combating climate change, the effective execution of these plans encounters impediments, notably misalignments between governmental strategies and practical implementation. Moreover, civil society in these countries confront issues of disengagement and external pressures.

**China**

Current Situation: China, the largest emitter of greenhouse gases globally, faces vulnerabilities from extreme weather events. Despite significant investments in low-carbon technologies, Climate Action Tracker rates the country’s overall climate action as 'highly insufficient.'

Challenges: Challenges persist in aligning policies with global climate goals. Continued financing of fossil fuel projects abroad, reliance on fossil fuel infrastructure, and discrepancies between environmental impact assessments and emission reduction targets pose challenges.

Recommendations from CSOs: Stress the importance of increasing ambition in NDC targets to align with the 1.5-degree goal. Propose comprehensive measures to transition away from fossil fuels, including discontinuing funding for overseas fossil fuel projects.

**Japan**

Current Situation: Gets questioned despite setting ambitious net-zero targets due to continued financing of fossil fuel projects and promotion of inadequate solutions like hydrogen/ammonia co-firing. Loopholes in commitments hinder the phase-out of coal and fossil fuels.

Challenges: Unique definitions of decarbonization and abatement prolong fossil fuel usage. Emphasis on hydrogen/ammonia and carbon capture strategies impedes the expansion of renewable energy sources.

Recommendations from CSOs: Emphasise the urgency for a concrete roadmap to achieve Net Zero by 2050. Call for 2030 coal phase out, cessation of new coal projects, cessation of strategies prolonging fossil fuel use, and increased transparency in policy processes.

**Mongolia**

Current Situation: Mongolia experiences the impact of climate change through changing weather patterns and extreme events, negatively affecting economies and livelihoods. Discrepancies in monitoring SDG progress between CSOs and governmental stakeholders pose significant challenges.

Challenges: Inadequate policy implementation, limited transparency, and restricted CSO participation in rural areas hinder SDG progress in Mongolia. Reduced legislative powers to protect the environment amid the COVID-19 pandemic worsen environmental concerns.
Recommendations from CSOs: Stress the importance of a clear roadmap for SDGs. Advocate for increased civil society engagement in policy processes and the establishment of a national monitoring system for SDGs to enhance transparency and accountability. Republic of Korea

Current Situation: Korea faces the imperative need to enhance its climate action, particularly in aligning with the 1.5-degree Celsius pathway. The country’s energy strategy includes goals for a coal phaseout by 2035 and an increase in renewable energy to 40%.

Challenges: Despite setting ambitious targets, challenges persist in achieving these goals due to ongoing reliance on fossil fuels, inefficient market structures, and permitting regulations. Balancing energy demands post-Ukraine crisis exacerbated carbon-intensive activities.

Recommendations from CSOs: Civil Society Organizations urge the Korean government to take on climate and energy leadership by committing to accelerate 1) renewables generation by revisiting the outdated fossil-fuel reliant power market structure and permitting, siting, and licensing regulations, and 2) the current coal phase-out date of 2050 to an achievable timeline of at least 2035 or earlier by initiating the existing pipeline of coal plants and their growing devaluation leading up to the 2030s tied with stranded assets.

Russia

Current Situation: Ranks 4th globally in greenhouse gas emissions. Struggles to decrease emissions due to reliance on fossil fuel extraction. Heavy reliance on afforestation for achieving net-zero emissions by 2060 raises concerns about insufficient commitment to reducing fossil fuel emissions.

Challenges: Political promotion of fossil fuel extraction, limited discussion of phase-out plans, and geopolitical tensions due the military conflict in the Ukraine hinder progressive climate action and effective cooperation.

CSO Recommendations: Civil society organisations emphasise the need for ambitious NDC targets, advocating for emissions reductions of more than 50% by 2030, prioritising a phase-out of fossil fuels, and planning for a just transition for affected regions.

SDG16 & SDG17

Current situation and Challenges

While direct deaths in war, refugee numbers, military spending, and terrorist incidents have all reached historic highs, our region unfortunately lacks substantial discussions on matters directly related to peace and justice, particularly regarding the disarmament and abolition of nuclear weapons. Additionally, there is much ground to cover in achieving meaningful partnerships with civil society for the cause of peace. The ongoing decrease in civic space remains a prevalent issue in our region, hindering the intervention of civil society in situations of violence and conflict. For example,
since the invasion of Ukraine, civic space in Russia has shrunk dramatically. Authorities have restricted freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Dozens of independent media outlets have been shut down and thousands of websites blocked. To make matters worse, the Ministry of Justice listed more than 700 foreign agents and 116 undesirable organisations, there more than 600 political prisoners. Foreign agents entail additional responsibilities, restrictions, administrative and criminal sanctions, and complicate the work of those organisations.

Civic space, a prerequisite for partnerships, is seriously shrinking or retreating in other 4 countries as well as Russia. In many cases it may be understood that constitutional provisions, laws and regulations aren’t enough to guarantee a healthy civic space, since it could be argued that the way in which power is exercised, the independence of the judiciary, and the degree to which political cultures can shape processes also play a significant role. For example, in China, there is very limited civic space for active practice, especially in rural areas and for independent CSOs. Human rights defenders and civil society are targeted by the state and stigmatised by many netizens. In Japan, the low human rights consciousness of Japanese society hinders active civil society movements and the development of democracy. Tight controls on freedom of expression are particularly severe; Japan ranks 66th on the Press Freedom Index. In the Republic of Korea, since 2022, when Yoon Seok-yul became president, the Republic of Korea’s democratic progress has been dramatically reversed. The current government has blatantly restricted civil society activities by restricting gatherings near public institutions, banning road rallies at the notification stage, restricting outdoor gatherings during late night hours, and strengthening the police’s manual for dealing with gatherings and protests. Mongolia has a relatively good civic space compared to other countries, but in recent years, civil society participation in decision-making processes and partnerships with the government have declined, and transparency and access to information have regressed.

Solutions and recommendations

Given these current challenging situations and issues, we call on all stakeholders, including national and local governments and UNESCAP to take the following actions.

- Establish relevant laws for the implementation and achievement of SDGs 16 and 17 including protective legal mechanisms against violence and discrimination that protect the human rights of marginalised communities, and establish institutions capable of enforcing them. Provide a roadmap for existing laws and regulations that have been enacted but are either not implemented or are progressing slowly.
- Nationally strive to enhance understanding and awareness of democracy and citizenship. Ensure the freedom of civil society and media activities. Cease biassed media coverage and the dissemination of fake news distorting efforts towards civic duty, accountability, and transparency.
- Establish a public multistakeholder forum that ensures meaningful engagement of civil society, to raise awareness on neglected topics and openly discuss roadmaps for SDG implementation, including financial, regulatory, monitoring and evaluating aspects. Ensure a
platform where various perspectives can contribute to the discussion on financial and regulatory matters.

- Provide technical and financial support for independent implementation assessments. Establish a transparent system that offers adequate funding and personnel, ensuring a secure space for evaluations.

Way Forward for North-East Asian Multi-stakeholder Forum on Sustainable Development Goals

While we are midway to 2030, we are nowhere near to achieving the SDGs. Considering this challenge, the forum should become a more effective space for accelerating actions. So far, the participation by the member states has been relatively low, especially after the COVID-19. This is alarming. We have to revitalise the sub-regional cooperation towards achieving the SDGs, capitalising the unique memberships of this region. Therefore, we propose a following set of recommendations.

- Map out the relevant processes in the sub-region which could be organised in synergy.
- Organise a consultation process with a series of online consultations in order to gather views by member states and stakeholders.
- Engage and partner with civil society and other stakeholders of the region across all operations of the ESCAP NEA office, as the SDGs are cross cutting, ensuring continuity and consistency across all work areas and expanding opportunities for stakeholders to engage meaningfully.