**Summary**

The magnitude of the challenge to attain the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 in Asia and the Pacific is even greater now as the pandemic slows or reverses many of the region’s hard-won development gains. The need to shift to a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient development pathway is clearer than ever.

The present information document, developed in partnership with the United Nations agencies and programmes, discusses Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality education), 5 (Gender equality), 14 (Life below water), and 15 (Life on land), which, together with Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), constitute the cluster of Goals under review at the 2022 high-level political forum on sustainable development under the theme of “Building back better from coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

The document proposes priority areas to strengthen policy coherence in the implementation efforts to build an inclusive and effective path for sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the achievement of the Goals.

**I. Introduction**

1. The United Nations General Assembly resolution 70/299, adopted in July 2016, has established the mechanism for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national, regional and global level. Furthermore, resolution 75/290, adopted in June 2021, decided that the thematic focus of the 2022 high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council shall be “Building back better from coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

* ESCAP/RFSD/2022/L.1.

**The present document is being issued without formal editing.**
2. In line with the theme of the 2022 high-level political forum on sustainable development, the Ninth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development will examine the following Sustainable Development Goals, in depth.

- Goal 4: Quality education, ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5: Gender equality, achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 14: Life below water, conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 15: Life on land, protect, restore and promote sustainable uses of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt the reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals, strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

3. In collaboration with partner United Nations agencies and programmes and other stakeholders, Goal profiles assessing the status of regional progress on these goals were developed. These profiles are based on data from the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) statistical database, as well as data and resources from partner United Nations agencies and programmes.

II. Developing Goal profiles for Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, 14, 15 and 17

4. The Goal profiles are provided to support common regional understanding of the status of regional progress, areas where good progress has been achieved, and areas that require specific attention. The profiles also integrate human rights and gender equality considerations and highlight promising innovations, good practices and priority actions aimed at making further progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals under review and to make the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic more sustainable and resilient.

5. The profile for Sustainable Development Goal 4 was developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund with inputs from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, ESCAP, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), United Nations Office for Project Service (UNOPS) and a multi-stakeholder reference group (Learning and Education 2030+ Networking Group).

6. The Goal profile for Goal 5 was developed by ESCAP and UN-Women, with inputs from the United Nations Population Fund, the International Labour Organization, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, the United Nations Capital Development Fund, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), UNESCO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and UNOPS.
7. The Goal profile for Goal 14 was developed by UNEP, UNOPS, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), UNDP, ESCAP, the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and UN-Women.

8. The Goal profile for Goal 15 was developed by UNEP, UNDP, ESCAP, FAO, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism.

9. The Goal profile for Goal 17 was developed by ESCAP, United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, UNDP, UNOPS, the United Nations Capital Development Fund, UNIDO, OHCHR and UN-Women.

10. These Goal profiles are available on the ESCAP website in the document section at www.unescap.org/events/apfsd9/.

III. Policy recommendations emanating from the Goal profiles on Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, 14, 15 and 17

11. This section presents the priorities for action in building an inclusive and effective path for sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, emanating from the development of the Goal profiles for Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, 14, 15 and 17.

A. Quality education: priority areas for regional action

12. Continue safe school reopening and prioritize learning recovery strategies with targeted policies and strong equity focus: The most urgent action is for countries to continue reopening schools and operating as safely as possible amidst COVID-19 to enable children to continue or restart learning with their teachers and peers. Education systems need to offer various remedial learning programmes depending on identified learning losses or gaps. These could include extended instructional time, remedial education, catch-up programmes, and accelerated education. Safety and health must be prioritized by integrating water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure and health and nutrition programs in schools.

13. Strengthen teaching and support for teachers to address existing gaps and narrow the learning divide: To be able to leverage blended learning environments effectively and inclusively, it is important to ensure that continuing professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders are in place and fully supported, particularly on priority areas such as assessment of literacy, inquiry-based learning, differentiated instruction, support for students with special needs, and e-pedagogy. To prepare for disruptions where remote learning must be implemented, increasing student agency and making learning more relevant is important. Teachers need to be supported to play a greater counselling and commitment role in detecting mental health issues, providing psychosocial support, and communicating with learners and their parents about safety and risk mitigation.

14. Make early childhood education and learning flexible and universal: Given its crucial role in children’s development and learning, governments need to prioritize pre-primary education across all strategies for recovering lost learning and strengthening and rebuilding the subsector in the medium and long term. Efforts to recover lost learning and developmental
milestones are key to preventing dropouts throughout the school trajectory, including children who will be entering the system later due to COVID-19. Education systems need to be prepared to provide flexible opportunities for alternative education services and modalities for younger children during future shocks include home-engagement and cross-sectoral caregiver well-being components.

15. **Build on the experience gained during COVID-19 and embrace and strengthen, equitable flexible learning modalities and learners’ pathways including skills development for adolescents:** Education systems need to develop specific strategies to prevent dropouts and to re-engage learners who cannot return to formal school due to consequences of the pandemic. Furthermore, secondary education should evolve into a more diverse and effective set of education pathways that respond to needs of all adolescents, providing relevant and inclusive alternative pathways according to the needs, gender, and ages of students, and prioritizing marginalized populations. All learners must be able to fulfil their right to develop core foundational, socioemotional, and job-specific skills. Barriers to education faced by marginalized groups such as women, persons living with disabilities, those in low socioeconomic status, linguistic and ethnic minorities must be removed. For this, it is imperative to establish or update equivalency standards and official recognition for alternative learning pathways. Particularly for adolescents, the need to strengthen education and skilling systems that equip the most vulnerable with an entrepreneurial mindset, technical skills, life skills, and 21st century employability skills, such as digital literacy and support to mental health, are critical in addressing the impact of COVID-19.

16. **Build stronger school links with families, communities, and cross-sectoral policies and programmes to create effective and protective learning environments in and around schools:** It is vital for communities, schools and health and social services to provide comprehensive cross-sector support for the well-being of children, adolescents, families and education staff, focusing on the most vulnerable. Ministries of education need an identification, assessment and referral process to support students and families at risk by ensuring that all schools (including pre-primary) are prepared to provide relevant services for both teachers and learners, including financial support (e.g., cash transfers), nutrition support, age-specific psychosocial support, protection services, including for school-related violence and gender-based violence, health services, and other services. Referral services are also needed for orphaned and separated children.

17. **Protect public financial investments, efficiency in education and encourage equitable-based funding mechanisms:** Governments should always guarantee and protect access to education for all people, including in emergencies. Despite weak economic growth, it is essential that resources to increase funding of the education sector from internal and external sources are pursued. Increased investments in education require efficient and equitable resource allocation, as well as accountability in expenditures. Governments should estimate the financial resources required to ensure better quality education and learning for all children and adolescents, particularly the most marginalized during and beyond the pandemic. Governments should prioritize specific education investments that are expected to have the largest impact (such as implementing hygiene standards) and services that are part of current obligations (remediation, accommodating students shifting from private to public schools and re-enrolling students who have dropped-out due to COVID-19). The use of equity-based funding mechanisms for targeting the most vulnerable and marginalized can help combat exclusion with targeted
investments and actions. To ensure the continuation of essential health, nutrition, well-being and protection services, joint ministerial work needs to be strengthened, underpinned by cross-sector planning and data sharing to ensure that children’s needs are identified, targeted and tracked.

18. **Strengthen inclusive and robust monitoring data mechanisms and work towards more resilient governance structures that allow education systems to respond to future shocks, including related to climate change:** Relevant and regularly collected data on Sustainable Development Goal 4 indicators are not available in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, often with data only collected once over the past six years. Governments need to define how to monitor the implementation of distance learning programmes and the resumption of in-person learning, including collecting relevant information periodically and processing and using data to improve existing programmes. Regional minimum benchmark values must be adopted to monitor progress across the region. Actions should be taken towards the resilience of education systems to prepare for, plan and respond to future shocks, including those related to climate change. Ministries of Education should develop and implement long-term emergency preparedness, risk-informed planning, and response policy frameworks in coordination with disaster management authorities to ensure all stakeholders understand their roles and responsibilities during an emergency.

B. **Gender equality: priority areas for regional action**

19. **Enhance women’s participation and leadership in governance and decision-making:** Women’s participation and leadership in governance and decision-making is crucial for gender-responsive, equitable and inclusive policymaking and resource allocation, including in emergencies like COVID-19. Yet, crisis responses were led predominantly by male decision makers: among COVID-19 taskforce members in Asia and in the Pacific, only 14 and 24 per cent respectively were women. Responses have failed to effectively account for women’s and girls’ essential needs and threaten to exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Governments must strengthen laws and policies that explicitly promote women’s representation and secure spaces for women leaders, activists and women from marginalized groups to participate in political and public affairs, especially in sectors where women are underrepresented (e.g. environmental management and disaster risk reduction). It is necessary to establish gender-responsive political and governance processes and invest in building women’s leadership capacities.

20. **Implement gender-responsive budgeting and innovative financing for more efficient recovery and Sustainable Development Goal implementation:** Gender-responsive budgeting is critical to promote accountability for gender equality and women’s empowerment and is a requirement for good governance. Governments across the region need to institutionalize gender-responsive budgeting across the public sector by legislation, regulation or other means. Technical cooperation and collaboration between Governments and United Nations agencies and development banks can be strengthened to enhance the capacities of national women’s institutions, ministries of finance as well as line ministries with respect to gender-responsive budgeting. South-South cooperation could be used to facilitate learning and exchange with countries where gender-responsive budgeting is officially mandated and implemented, such as Indonesia and the Philippines. These actions are urgently needed to ensure that the COVID-19 response and recovery in the region is gender-responsive. Innovative financing that connects public and private-sector resources, especially for
under-resourced women-dominant sectors and women-owned enterprises, also
needs to be introduced to make economic and social-sector recoveries more
efficient.

21. **Strengthen women’s economic empowerment, including post COVID-19 recovery:** Economic stimulus and policies deployed to curb the pandemic’s socioeconomic impacts and enable long-run recovery must be gender responsive. Measures to revamp vulnerable sectors (e.g. tourism and agribusiness) will not be effective without tailored solutions to support the large number of women in these sectors. Governments also need to take steps to reduce care burdens that fall disproportionately on women by developing policies to provide more affordable, accessible and quality care services for children, as well as for older persons and persons with disabilities. Paid family leave and tax breaks can be used to incentivize more equal distribution of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities. Additionally, governments could consider generating decent work in the care sector as part of a job-rich recovery strategy.

22. **Reinstate and sustain funding and services to address violence and harmful practices against women and girls:** Restrictions to mobility, loss of income, the perception of survivor support and services as “non-essential” and increased online activities have all contributed to an increase in violence and harmful practices against women and girls during the pandemic. Governments must ensure that appropriate funding is earmarked for prevention and protection services for women, including funding to reinstate essential services such as women’s shelters. Governments also should further develop measures to address cyber violence, work-related gender-based violence and harassment and other harmful practices such as child marriage, which restrict women’s and girls’ educational and economic opportunities as well as safety.

23. **Integrate gender in national strategies for statistical development:** Increased efforts are needed towards the production of gender data to monitor the Sustainable Development Goals and to enable gender-responsive policy planning. To achieve this, national governments are encouraged to fully integrate gender across their National Strategies for the Development of Statistics, allocate sufficient funds to generate gender data, implement specialized surveys on topics of relevance to gender, make use of non-conventional data sources (including by performing geospatial and survey data integration), consistently generate, report and publish sex-disaggregated estimates, and improve public access to anonymized microdata.

C. **Life below water: priority areas for regional action**

24. **Enhance policy design and implementation:** Efforts are needed to enhance the design of policies, as well as adequate implementation strategies supported by a holistic approach to the challenges of the ocean and the interactions between marine and land ecosystems. National plans should focus on enhancing resilience of fisheries communities in anticipating and adapting to changes in the environments of inland and coastal waters, including those caused by climate change, and the pandemic, which could adversely affect communities in their operations of fisheries and aquaculture. Furthermore, all relevant stakeholders should be engaged in the process of planning and policy formulation for management of natural resources, conservation and rehabilitation of habitats. Gender analysis training and support for local organizations, government institutions, and project implementers are also needed.
25. **Improve waste management and prevent marine pollution**: Countries should develop policies with clear targets for collection, recycling, use of recycled content for producers, importers, and brand owners of plastics-based products. An enabling environment, led by government with the support of key stakeholders including private sector industry, informal sector and consumers, is needed to nurture circular economy practices. Proper procedures for the treatment of agro-fertilizers must also be accounted for to reduce nitrate and phosphate pollution which is responsible for ‘dead zones’ with incidents like mass fish die-offs and excessive algae that damages fish habitats.

26. **Increase financing for sustainable practices**: Investment in fisheries and governmental support must observe compliance with international agreements and incorporate provisions to deter illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Furthermore, solid financing opportunities and access to credit are needed for women in fisheries, especially in small-scale fisheries to support gender equality in the industry. Future investment in tourism should also demand sustainable, eco-friendly tourism that recognizes and values a healthy ocean environment. The shipping industry must also prioritize and foster investments in greener shipping, with sustainable port operations that prevent all forms of pollution, embracing new technological developments that can enable zero-emission maritime connectivity. The Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Principles should be a guiding framework for ocean-specific standards for banks, insurers and investors to finance and mainstream sustainability of ocean-based sectors.

27. **Enforce international treaties and regulations**: Additional efforts are needed to enhance human capacity on the implementation of international treaties such as the Port State Measures to prevent unauthorized and illegal fishing practices. Promoting the implementation of monitoring, control and surveillance practices are a key factor in pursuing effective fisheries management and the involvement of small-scale fishers in the planning and implementation of relevant actions. While promoting the implementation of monitoring, control and surveillance, which is a key factor in pursuing effective fisheries management, the involvement of small-scale fishers in the planning and implementation of the relevant activities, should be enhanced. This would also address the concerns on continued practices of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing not only by commercial fishers but also by small-scale fishers.

28. **Promote regional cooperation to strengthen ocean governance**: Regional and transboundary cooperation efforts and mechanisms are necessary for the management of natural resources, conservation and rehabilitation of oceanic habitats and to ensure the livelihoods among ocean dependent communities. Continued commitment to and implementation of ocean governance such as the ESCAP resolution 76/1 on “Strengthening cooperation to promote the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific” and subregional efforts such as the Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member States (2021–2025) and the ASEAN Leadership Declaration on the Blue Economy (adopted 2021) are necessary.

29. **Improve data collection and sharing**: There is not enough data to track progress on Sustainable Development Goal 14. This highlights the urgency to collect more data, so that effective policies can address the challenges and accelerate progress. Marine resource databases should be
developed for the region. Additional work to enhance the availability of individual-level data and ocean accounting for better exploring how human activity contributes to ocean degradation and conservation is also necessary, including by capturing women and men’s differentiated roles. This work can include scaling up existing initiatives on the application of natural capital accounting to promote the Sustainable Blue Economy approach at the national and subnational level development planning processes by guiding decision-making processes.

D. Life on land: priority areas for regional action

30. **Promote nature-positive, regenerative, and resilient agricultural, fisheries and forestry systems:** Countries should catalyse a shift in agricultural practices that maintain pollinator habitats, minimize impacts on nature, restore soil productivity, sequester carbon, secure water supplies, minimize disease, and foster genetic and crop diversity. This includes prioritizing agroforestry and agroecological practices (i.e., sustainable land management and sustainable forest management) to ensure that the production of key commodities shifts to a sustainable basis, focusing on long-term productivity over short-term gains. These efforts should build on the outcomes of the United Nations Food Systems Summit held in September 2021 and should be integrated as part of the efforts towards implementing the national pathways to sustainable food systems.

31. **Engage in and implement relevant international environmental agreements:** Active participation and strong commitment towards the finalization and adoption of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework at part two of the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP15) as well as its effective implementation is essential. Governments should actively participate in relevant Paris Agreement and 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26) initiatives including the Glasgow Leaders’ Declaration on Forest and Land Use to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030 and integrate Sustainable Development Goal 15 action in nationally determined contributions.

32. **Apply the International Resource Panel’s four principles of natural resource management that can help countries effectively implement biodiversity policy:** Policymakers from local to national levels should incorporate the following principles: (a) know your true impact, (b) grow with nature, (c) value nature, (d) plan together. Important approaches to employ include value-chain transparency, integrated landscape planning, nature-based and circular solutions and recognizing nature’s benefits.

33. **Mobilize resources for nature from private, public and global funds:** Leveraging multiple avenues for mobilization and realigning financial resources for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use is key in the region. This includes redirecting and realigning public and private finance flows, domestic and international, to fund nature-positive and climate-adaptive investments as well as leveraging private sector investment and philanthropic finance for nature-based solutions.
34. **Increase stakeholder engagement and awareness**: Key strategies to increase protected areas and their effective management include expanding the role of the private sector, civil society, indigenous peoples and local communities through innovative and diverse participatory governance models. This includes increasing awareness of the contribution of biodiversity and ecosystems services to people’s lives.

35. **Enhance a holistic One Health approach in the post-COVID-19 world**: Increasing awareness and enhancing the knowledge base and understanding on the connections between zoonotic diseases and environmental integrity is essential. Adopting a One Health approach at all levels of decision making – from the global to the local – recognizing the complex interconnections among the health of people, animals, plants and our shared environment, and fostering cross-sectoral collaboration is essential for reducing the risks of future outbreaks of zoonotic diseases. To minimize the risks of future outbreaks, urgent actions are also needed to ensure that the post-COVID-19 recovery process will incentivize more sustainable and nature-positive activities and not augment environmental externalities such as carbon emissions and pressure on biodiversity and ecosystems.

36. **Foster women’s participation and decision making within environmental committees and organizations**: Increasing women’s ownership and decision-making power over land and forest is important to ensure women’s ability to contribute to, and benefit from, environmental sustainability. Women’s representation in forest committees and other forest management groups is essential to ensuring women play a role in natural resource management and conservation.

37. **Mainstream biodiversity across government sectors**: Recognizing the inseparability of Goal 15 and other goals, there is a need to integrate biodiversity considerations into decision making across government sectors. This warrants high quality data availability for decision making, including integrated land use planning by identifying areas important to protect and maintain to achieve nature-dependent development goals.

38. **Address the data deficit**: A recurring constraint is the lack of information and data to accurately assess the status, trends, risks, threats and conservation needs for Goal 15 in the Asia-Pacific region. Further capacity development action is needed including support from the relevant United Nations agencies and institutions who are the custodians for Goal 15 indicators.

**E. Partnerships for the Goals: priority areas for regional action**

39. **Re-design inclusive economies that prioritize human rights and equality**: Many developing countries in the region need fiscal space and liquidity to be able to invest in economic and social rights, and to uphold their minimum core obligations under international law. Reforming the international financial architecture, making tax systems progressive and introducing human rights compliant budget and economic policies would contribute to this, in addition to policies that promote decent work and gender-sensitive social protection. The participation of civil society is critical in trade, budget planning and monitoring, as well as for other economic policies, to facilitate accountability, curb corruption and promote trust and a new social order.

40. **Fulfil international commitments for foreign direct investment in least developed countries and official development assistance targets**: Modalities for development (North-South, South-South, and triangular cooperation) are all important and complimentary. Development partners in
the Asia-Pacific region including member States of the Global South, developed countries, the Regional Collaboration Platform, intergovernmental organizations, and the apex bodies of non-state actors should mobilize resources and scale up South-South and triangular cooperation.

41. **Increase public finance for COVID-19 recovery packages and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, especially for ensuring public goods and equity.** To enhance fiscal space, countries need to widen their tax base, increase tax progressivity, tackle tax evasion, strengthen tax administrations and increase expenditure efficiency. Regional and global tax cooperation are also crucial. Debt sustainability requires prudent debt management, innovative collaboration between monetary and fiscal authorities, more ambitious and broader debt relief and a review of debt conditionalities. Meeting quantitative official development assistance targets remains critical. Integrated national financing frameworks (INFFs) can help to align government budgets with national development plans and the Sustainable Development Goals and facilitate collaborative efforts to mobilize international public resources and leverage private Sustainable Development Goal-aligned innovative financing instruments and investments.

42. **Improve access to information and communication technologies.** Access to finance can be enhanced through digital technology. This could also facilitate a more inclusive digital economy, with targeted efforts to close persistent digital and financial gender gaps. To narrow the digital divide and bring universal reliable, affordable connectivity by 2030, policy makers should prioritize integrated corridor development and infrastructure co-deployment, which saves the cost of investments and contributes to improved energy, transport, and digital connectivity.

43. **Prioritize creating and maintaining a favourable investment climate through improved investment promotion and investment facilitation.** Governments should ensure openness and clarity of rules regarding foreign investment as well as establish a business climate that is conducive for investment in sustainability-related sectors. This would be particularly important to enhance the investment prospects of least developed countries. To this end, the development and implementation of investment policies and regulatory frameworks that are coherent, transparent and appropriately designed to mobilize investments that provide the greatest benefits in terms of sustainable development are critical. For example, rather than providing across the board tax deductions for foreign direct investment, tax and other incentives can target investments in environmentally sustainable sectors or in sectors that generate more jobs or other tangible development benefits. Investment liberalization policies should also be properly sequenced to ensure financial stability.

44. **Improve the collection and quality of data, particularly disaggregated data.** Investments in national data governance, stewardship and innovation, especially the integration of geospatial, citizen-led, and statistical information are critical to guarantee data accessibility, ownership and use to advance implementation of the 2030 Agenda and ensure equitable coverage of all people and geographical areas while maintaining consistency and comparability and deliver on agreed follow-up and review mechanisms. Investments should be made in universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems that facilitate realization of rights and support good governance, health and development including for the 2030 Agenda and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for populations hardest hit by the pandemic.
IV. Conclusion

45. A number of priority areas are proposed in this document. Many of these include greater cooperation among member States to ensure that action can be taken on a regional basis. These priority areas may serve a basis for discussion between member States and other stakeholders on opportunities to strengthen policy coherence in implementation efforts to achieve a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and build an inclusive and effective path for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.