Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific

Note by the secretariat

Summary

Progress towards the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 in Asia and the Pacific was off-track even prior to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The magnitude of the challenge now is even greater as the pandemic slows or reverses many of the region’s hard-won development gains. The poor and disadvantaged groups are at risk of falling farther behind.

The present document contains a review of the multidimensional impacts of the pandemic in Asia and the Pacific with a focus on vulnerable groups. Recovery strategies are needed to not only address differing levels of vulnerabilities within and between countries but to also re-ignite and accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. More systemic and integrated approaches to reshape the dynamics of recovery – with a focus on inclusion, empowerment and longer-term sustainability and resilience – through policy action in the following four areas are required:

1. Aligning national recovery strategies with the 2030 Agenda and leaving no one behind;
2. Protecting and investing in people and enhancing resilience, especially among women and vulnerable population groups;
3. Accelerating the transition to inclusive green economies;
4. Strengthening regional cooperation and partnerships.

Member States, major groups and other stakeholders may wish to review the document and share their perspectives as well as good practices for building a more inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery in the post-COVID-19 era and to renew regional efforts needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals so that no country is left behind.
I. Introduction

1. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in a global decline in human development and a rise in extreme poverty for the first time in a generation. In addition, prior to the pandemic, countries in Asia and the Pacific already were not on track to achieve any of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The magnitude of the challenge is even greater now as the wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic have slowed or reversed many of the region’s hard-won development gains.

2. Loss of livelihoods, together with disruption of essential services, have intensified multidimensional poverty and vulnerabilities. Many who were already vulnerable before the pandemic are at risk of falling even farther behind. A rise in domestic violence and in the cost of providing care, together with the gendered health and economic impacts of the pandemic, have widened inequalities between women and men. Given unequal access to remote learning and academic years lost, school closures have been detrimental to educational outcomes for children. In addition to being both a public health as well as socioeconomic crisis, the pandemic highlighted the intimate link between humans and nature, a link underscored in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

3. The present document contains information on the economic, social and environmental vulnerabilities and inequalities that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed in the region as well as the associated risks to an inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery that leaves no one behind. With a thematic focus on inclusion, empowerment and investing in nature, the analysis and policy recommendations for building forward together serve as an input to the Ninth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, the outcomes of which will inform the 2022 high-level political forum on sustainable development with its thematic focus of “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The following Sustainable Development Goals will be reviewed at the Forum in 2022 and are the focus of the present document: Goal 4 (Quality education), Goal 5 (Gender equality), Goal 14 (Life below water), Goal 15 (Life on land) and Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

II. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic reverses progress on the 2030 Agenda

A. Who are the most vulnerable and who are being left behind?

4. The COVID-19 crisis has widened and deepened existing inequalities within and between countries, particularly among vulnerable population groups already living at the margins of societies and economies, especially in rural and informal peri-urban and urban slum areas.1 Vulnerable groups have disproportionately suffered from the pandemic’s adverse impacts, and their ability to receive support or benefit from Governments’ emergency response measures varies and remains limited. If targeted and inclusive response and recovery measures are not instituted as a matter of priority, these already vulnerable groups are at risk of being left even farther behind.

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1 In the 2030 Agenda, vulnerable groups are defined as “all children, youth, persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80 per cent live in poverty), people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants.”
5. Policy debates about the pandemic have largely focused on more immediate concerns regarding the effectiveness of the short-term relief responses of national Governments, measures to contain the virus, and efforts to secure and distribute vaccines. The less visible but critically important side of the pandemic story is the complex and multidimensional relationship between the pandemic, pre-existing vulnerabilities and rising inequalities – and the implications for inclusive recovery and the region’s longer-term sustainable development prospects.

1. **Deep economic impacts**

6. The COVID-19 pandemic came as an unprecedented shock to the world economy with devastating economic impacts across Asia and the Pacific. These impacts include rising unemployment and sharp declines in income and household consumption due to lockdowns; shrinking spending as a result of a less optimistic and uncertain economic outlook; declines and even cessation in tourism and business travel due to border closures; spillover of weaker demand to other sectors and economies through trade and production linkages; and supply-side disruptions to production and trade. Based on the latest analysis by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), relative to a pre-COVID-19 baseline, output losses for developing countries in Asia amounted to 6.0 to 9.5 per cent of regional gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020 and 3.6 to 6.3 per cent of regional GDP in 2021.

7. In response to the economic shock of the pandemic, central banks and finance ministries swiftly advanced a range of fiscal and monetary measures to provide lifelines to the vulnerable, stimulate national economies, and maintain macroeconomic and external stability. However, many developing countries, especially the least developed countries, lacked fiscal space to address the virus, adequately protect the vulnerable and mount a sustainable recovery. Their situation was made even worse as pandemic panic resulted in a massive capital flight from many countries and exchange rates plummeted. Greater expenditure, coupled with declining tax revenues as economic activity contracted, decreased their fiscal space further and contributed to increasing levels of indebtedness, with external debt rising some 7.5 per cent in the region’s least developed countries while government expenditure grew by less than 1 per cent. This leaves even fewer resources to service and repay foreign debt.

8. As a result, many countries resorted to support from multilateral development banks and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Of the 16 countries in the region that received financial assistance from IMF, 14 were countries in special situations (least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and/or small island developing States). These economies tend to be particularly reliant on heavily impacted sectors such as tourism, agribusiness, raw materials and/or remittances by migrant workers.

9. The worsening economic environment and tightening financial conditions have been particularly hard on micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, which are a vitally important engine of inclusive economic growth and development in both the formal and informal sectors of developing economies due to their large share in total employment and their participation in production value chains and trade. Surveys in Indonesia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the Philippines and Thailand showed that at least

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40 per cent of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises suspended operations after the virus outbreak and a similar proportion were compelled to reduce their workforce. Those that remained open experienced significant production and supply disruptions and faced sharply reduced revenues due to declines in domestic demand. Most reported severe lack of funds to retain their business, due to a lack of cash or savings, and few were able to obtain bank credit. Many enterprises reported borrowing from relatives and friends to supplement their working capital. Women-owned micro-enterprises have been especially hard hit. Their businesses are often smaller, with less access to loans and start-up capital in the first place and fewer reserves compared to male-owned enterprises. Furthermore, as women-owned micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises are primarily informal and unregistered, many were unable to access financial aid and other benefits provided by governments to sustain businesses during the emergency.

2. **Rising poverty and inequality**

10. The economic impacts of the pandemic have exacerbated existing disparities among poor and vulnerable groups and could reverse years of progress towards the elimination of poverty in developing countries in Asia and the Pacific. Before the pandemic, the region was on a path of continued steady reduction in poverty rates and the number of poor. However, due to the pandemic’s adverse impacts on livelihoods – cutting into economic activity, earnings, remittances and consumption – nearly 90 million people may have been pushed into extreme poverty (less than $1.90 per day), and more than 150 million people were pushed under the poverty line of $3.20 a day and 170 million people to $5.50 a day.4

11. The pandemic has had a major impact on employment in the region and could worsen income inequality – already a major challenge – with disproportionate impacts on poor and vulnerable groups and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises. For developing countries in Asia and the Pacific, employment losses are projected to reach 109 million to 166 million jobs – or nearly 70 per cent of total employment losses globally. Wage income losses for the region are estimated to range from $348 billion to $533 billion, approximately 30 per cent of global losses. The most heavily impacted groups are unskilled workers, women, persons with disabilities, older persons, informal sector workers and foreign migrant workers.5 Workers in the informal sector, including care workers, are particularly at risk given low wages and lack of access to social protection and protection against the virus. Approximately 70 per cent of workers in the region are in the informal economy, and women are more likely to be in informal work than men. Countries in South Asia, where the majority are informal workers, and South-East Asia are at higher risk because of the crisis.6

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5 In economies that are heavily reliant on remittances, such as in Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Tajikistan and Tonga, remittance receipts account for at least a quarter of GDP.

12. The situation is even bleaker when indicators of multidimensional poverty are considered. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a steep decline in human development for the first time since 1990. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that the impact of the crisis on health, education and income will be equivalent to a loss of six years of gains in the human development index, and the attendant increase in deprivations may set poverty levels back approximately nine years, with nearly half a billion people falling into multidimensional poverty globally. Given that approximately half the world’s 1.2 billion poor currently live in Asia and the Pacific, it is estimated that the region will account for approximately 245 million of the new multidimensional poor. Millions of these will be children, who typically experience poverty differently from adults, with lifelong consequences and impacts that can extend across generations. Recovery will require the establishment of comprehensive social protection schemes that are gender-, disability- and disaster-responsive and that encompass the livelihoods of the most affected as well as the health, education and informal sectors and have links to environmental sustainability and climate change adaptation.

3. **Inequitable access to vaccines and testing**

13. Countries in the region are trying their best to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic by rapidly rolling out vaccination programmes and putting in place public health interventions to reduce its impact. By the end of 2021, there were approximately 291 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and almost 5.5 million deaths globally. Approximately 29 per cent of all COVID-19 cases and 26 per cent of all COVID-19 related deaths were in Asia and the Pacific.

14. The concentration of vaccine production in a select number of primarily developed countries, combined with the procurement and stockpiling of vaccines by some countries, led to large inequities in vaccine access across the world and hampered the efforts of many countries to contain the virus. Inequitable access to vaccines was exacerbated by a lack of effective mechanisms to transfer knowledge, technology and other needed resources. Multilateral mechanisms such as the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) initiative, on which many developing countries were dependent, were not provided adequate amounts of vaccines or resources. While most countries have scaled up their vaccine rollouts, progress continues to vary considerably. In some cases, vulnerable populations who should have priority access to vaccines lag behind in the vaccination process. Some population groups find it difficult to access any vaccine while other population groups have already received third and fourth doses. Many countries, particularly least developed countries, are lagging behind in vaccinating their populations (see figure). In 16 developing economies in Asia and the Pacific, less than half of the population is fully vaccinated. This vaccine inequity is prolonging the pandemic and leaving people in these countries susceptible to renewed outbreaks.
Percentage of population that has received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine

4. **Growing digital divide**

15. Having access to the Internet and the skills to navigate it has become increasingly critical as COVID-19 forces workers to work from home and children to attend school remotely, which has accelerated the process of digital transformation across countries and sectors. However, Asia and the Pacific is one of the most digitally divided regions in the world with approximately half the population lacking Internet access and large variations – by income, location, age group, gender and other characteristics – in the availability and affordability of digital connectivity. The digital divide is growing as the pandemic increases people’s reliance on digital means to pursue economic and educational activities and access essential information and services (such as those related to pandemic control, transfers of social protection benefits, sexual and reproductive health, and gender-based violence). This is rapidly increasing disparities, accelerating job polarization trends and widening wage inequality to the detriment of workers in labour-intensive, low-skill and informal jobs, and potentially widening education inequality. Vulnerable population groups, particularly those living in countries in special situations, are at risk of being left behind.

16. The shift to online learning during the pandemic and the need for information and communications technology (ICT) skills have increased the gender gap and effectively reduced the capacity of vulnerable women to adapt to restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Limited digital literacy hinders women’s access to online procurement of goods, services and information which could reduce time spent on daily household chores or provide economic relief through online financial services.

17. In addition to identifying the numerous barriers to eliminating the digital divide, other means of providing and delivering information, content and services across sectors should also be considered, including traditional non-digital ones to avoid further marginalization of groups with limited digital capacities and to accommodate different user habits. Experience shows that children of remote or disadvantaged groups have failed to access quality education and learning during the pandemic, even if provided with digital devices, due to lack of appropriate parental supervision and support at home. Similarly, older persons’ mobility and public participation become restricted as many of them do not access and use the digital tools put in place for pandemic control.

**B. Sustainable Development Goals in focus**

18. The 2022 high-level political forum on sustainable development, with a thematic focus on “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, will review progress on four Sustainable Development Goals: Goal 4 (Quality education), Goal 5 (Gender equality), Goal 14 (Life below water) and Goal 15 (Life on land) in addition to the regular review of Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). These four Goals are intimately related to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of its impacts as well as efforts to build forward together towards an inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery. They provide an analytic frame for the present document and proposed areas for policy action.
1. **Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality education)**

19. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Sustainable Development Goal 4 has been significant. The education sector was one of the worst-hit as a result of policies to close schools before other areas of the economy. While there are benefits to the accelerating digital transformation of the education sector, there is rising concern that long-term closures of educational institutions and the shift to remote learning could lead to lower skill levels and productivity among future employees and affect output and growth for years to come. More schools in the region were closed as of September 2021 compared to February 2021. Closures in South Asia increased from 18 to 25 per cent, and in East Asia and the Pacific from 6 to 21 per cent. An estimated 12 million children from pre-primary to university level could drop out of school in South and West Asia.\(^7\)

20. The unprecedented disruption to education systems has amplified the education challenges the most marginalized and vulnerable groups face. For example, school closures and remote learning access has disproportionately impacted female students. Girls were shown to be more likely than boys to experience mental health issues and stress from online schooling. More than 1.2 million girls from pre-primary to upper secondary level may drop out or may not have access to schooling in Asia and the Pacific due to the pandemic’s socioeconomic impacts, including the need to generate income and increased household and childcare responsibilities. Gender-based violence, such as child marriage, and teen pregnancies are expected to increase, threatening girls’ ability to access and pursue education.

21. The pandemic has also hindered the education of children and adolescents with disabilities and those from the poorest families who depend on school systems for additional nutrition, health and wellness services. Even before COVID-19, youth with disabilities were more likely to be unenrolled in an education programme and more likely to be idle (neither in school nor employed) compared to youth without disabilities, and those in rural areas were 1.5 times more likely to be idle than urban youth with disabilities. The intersectionality of disability and gender worsens the situation of women and girls with disabilities. Female youth with disabilities were more than 2.5 times more likely to be idle than male youth without disabilities.\(^8\) During the pandemic, many children and adolescents with disabilities have had limited or no access to rehabilitation, physical therapy and other services essential for supporting their learning.\(^9\) Across the region, the still limited accessibility standards of digital platforms and content also challenge children and young people with disabilities with regard to remote learning. The nutrition and health of children from the poorest families have been affected through the loss of school meals – for many the one nutritious meal they can count on during the day – and through reduced access to health services that are often provided through schools.

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22. Delivering quality education is a serious concern for schools and teachers that are adapting to remote and online education or adopting blended models. Previously existing gaps in relevant and regularly collected data on education outcomes before COVID-19 will need to be filled to better understand the impacts of these remote and blended learning approaches. Higher-income countries have pursued online education systems, while lower-income countries have sought to utilize print, televised and radio education. Other factors that impact quality of education include students’ and teachers’ access to digital technology and the Internet (only half the population in the region has reliable Internet access); whether schools provide proper, accessible and inclusive support and resources; and physiological stress and mental health issues that affect students’ ability to learn. Students who do not have access to distance education during government-imposed shutdowns are particularly likely to drop out. To achieve Goal 4 in the region, it will be crucial to target interventions to the groups COVID-19 has left most vulnerable: women and adolescent girls, children and youth living with disabilities, youth in rural regions with limited Internet access, and other disadvantaged groups.

2. **Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender equality)**

23. Addressing gender inequality is critical to achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals and requires ambitious policies across many areas, including education, health, social protection, economic growth, the environment and beyond. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the social and economic inequalities women and girls have long faced. For one, the pandemic has had a particularly significant impact on employment in the manufacturing and hospitality services sectors where women make up the major share of employees in many countries of the region, especially least developed countries.\(^\text{10}\) In addition, even before the pandemic, women and girls in the region spent on average up to 11 hours a day on unpaid care and domestic work (four times more than men). This has increased substantially due to COVID-19, further limiting women’s and girls’ opportunities for economic empowerment\(^\text{11}\) and heightening their vulnerability to physical and mental health challenges as they assume additional care responsibilities for children and elderly and sick family members as well as persons with disabilities.\(^\text{12}\)

24. Violence against women and girls, including domestic violence, child marriage and associated teen pregnancy, has increased dramatically during the pandemic. Reports of domestic violence increased by approximately 43 per cent in Malaysia and by 34 per cent in Singapore. An estimated 61,000 additional girls are at risk of child marriage in the region, and an additional 118,000 girls are at risk of adolescent pregnancy.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^\text{10}\) In Asia and the Pacific least developed countries, female employment in the manufacturing sector is 54 per cent, compared to 28 per cent in developed countries. International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT. Available at https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/ (accessed on 14 June 2021).

\(^\text{11}\) ESCAP, *COVID-19 and the Unpaid Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific* (ST/ESCAP/2967).

\(^\text{12}\) United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), “Unlocking the lockdown: the gendered effects of COVID-19 on achieving the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific” (Bangkok, 2020).

Greater investments are needed to ensure disadvantaged women and girls have access to quality health care, including sexual and reproductive health services; to ensure women and their families have access to quality public childcare, care for family members with disabilities and care services for older persons to transform the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities between women and men; and to close the digital gender gap. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), in Asia and the Pacific in 2019, only 41.3 per cent of women used the Internet, compared to 48.3 per cent of men.\textsuperscript{14} Steps should also be taken to increase women’s political participation and expand their leadership and economic opportunities. This entails creating and enforcing new gender-responsive policies and budgeting in COVID-19 response and recovery, including policies that support the many roles women play in agriculture and natural resource management; strengthening legal frameworks and workplace policies that support women’s labour force participation and provide opportunities for decent work; and support for women entrepreneurs. Improved data collection and analysis (disaggregated by sex, age and disability status) will be crucial to inform and monitor these policies. Targeted measures are also required to support even more vulnerable women and girls, such as those with disabilities, who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

3. **Sustainable Development Goals 14 (Life below water) and 15 (Life on land)**

In the initial phase of the pandemic, some temporary reduction of environmental pressure was observed, owing mainly to reduced economic activity, lockdown measures and associated reductions in energy use, transport and manufacturing. For instance, many major cities recorded their lowest levels of air pollution in recent years. The pandemic also created a small window for fish stocks to recover in the Pacific due to the global slowdown of the commercial fishing industry, access restrictions and closed ports, which contributed to a decline in active fishing vessels.

However, with economic recovery, environmental pressures are expected to return to pre-pandemic levels. The region remains off-track on Sustainable Development Goals 14 and 15 and other environment-related Goals and targets. There is no or insufficient data for many of the indicators for the environment-related Goals in the region, leaving gaps in vital evidence-based monitoring and planning. More than 40 per cent of coral reefs and 60 per cent of coastal mangroves already have been lost. While the number and sizes of protected areas have increased, 75 per cent of biodiversity remains unprotected. Biodiversity loss, deforestation, and forest and land degradation continue to be a major problem, with the region accounting for 10.6 per cent of the world’s total natural forest loss for agricultural purposes from 2000 to 2015. Freshwater ecosystems are threatened by pollution and overextraction for drinking water, energy production and irrigation. These trends, combined with the impacts of accelerating climate change, not only disproportionately affect the livelihoods, health and well-being of poor and vulnerable communities, they pose challenges to economic activity in resource-dependent sectors.

28. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fundamental link between ecosystem health and human health, and the need to view biodiversity and ecosystem conservation as a public health issue. Scientific research is improving understanding of the mechanisms by which land use change drives the transfer or spillover of zoonotic viruses that have pandemic potential into human populations. The primary drivers are changes in human demographics; the destruction of tropical forests; agricultural expansion and intensification, especially near human settlements; and wild animal hunting and trade. Further, researchers have pointed to the nexus between increasing climate change and the risk and spread of future pandemics, in particular shifting temperature and rainfall patterns that influence when and where pathogens appear.

29. An initial mapping of country stimulus spending and recovery plans in response to the pandemic across the region suggests a limited alignment of recovery measures with environment and climate goals, despite the acknowledged need for a green and resilient recovery. Unless reversed, the very limited support to date for a green recovery will have impacts for years to come as governments and local communities are forced to navigate the triple crises of pandemic prevention and recovery, biodiversity and ecosystem decline, and climate change.

C. Vulnerability, inequality and the dynamics of recovery

30. The deeply rooted vulnerabilities and inequalities in economies and societies exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts pose a major challenge to recovery efforts. Across the region, there is the high risk of a K-shaped recovery – a recovery marked by increasing divergence in economic and social outcomes within and between countries, particularly among countries in special situations. This would exacerbate pre-COVID-19 inequalities and leave behind the poorest and most vulnerable population groups in terms of income level, employment status, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location. When environmental degradation, increasing natural hazards and accelerating climate change are added to the mix, the Asia-Pacific region faces a complex risk landscape.

31. To address the disaster-climate-health landscape and the ensuing cascading risks that threaten the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, Governments need to adopt integrated strategies that move beyond the traditional focus on a hazard-by-hazard approach to a multi-hazard approach. In other words, in the absence of pro-poor, inclusive and sustainable recovery strategies, policies and investments, poverty and inequality in the region will only worsen and resilience further weaken.

32. While it is still early in the recovery process and hard data is lacking, key factors that will influence the dynamics of recovery across countries include access to vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics; national and local administrative and institutional capacities, including cross-sector policy coherence and coordination; fiscal space and debt burden; degree of labour market informality and mobility; quality and coverage of health-care and social protection systems; income and wealth inequalities; disparities in educational and health opportunities, digital access and financial inclusion, particularly among women and vulnerable groups; and ecosystem decline, climate change, natural hazards and other environmental stresses.

33. More and better data are needed to fully understand the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic and to inform decision-making. Nevertheless, going forward it is clear that avoiding a K-shaped recovery will require addressing not only economic factors but also interconnected social
and environmental drivers. More systemic and integrated approaches that can reshape the dynamics of recovery and avoid the entrenchment of existing vulnerabilities and inequalities are needed, as is a focus on inclusion (leaving no one behind), empowerment (advancing gender equality) and longer-term sustainability and resilience (greening development and coping with shocks).

III. Unlocking opportunities for an inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery

34. As countries in Asia and the Pacific and around the globe shift from an emergency response to the pandemic to longer-term recovery, governments and civil society face two overriding and intertwined challenges: how to ensure that pathways to recovery are inclusive, just and leave no one behind, while charting a new and more transformative course toward building sustainable and resilient economies and societies.

35. In addition to more immediate pandemic response measures – in particular equal access to COVID-19 vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics, which underpins countries’ prospects for recovery – this section lists key areas for policy action that can contribute to the region’s longer-term recovery and sustainable development while reigniting and accelerating progress towards implementation of the 2030 Agenda. These key areas are built on the framework developed by ESCAP to support recovery efforts of developing countries in the region, including through strengthened regional and subregional cooperation and collaboration to ensure a concerted regional approach for sustainable recovery that leaves no country behind. The overarching principle of the framework is to support efforts to build back better through integrated policy responses aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations Framework for the Immediate Socioeconomic Response to COVID-19 and the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific. These action areas are not intended to be exhaustive and will need to be tailored to specific country contexts.

A. Aligning national recovery strategies with the 2030 Agenda and leaving no one behind

36. Governments in the region and their development partners can draw on their extensive experience and lessons learned from mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals into national, sectoral and local development planning, budgeting and monitoring frameworks to ensure the integration and policy coherence of their national recovery strategies and associated investment priorities.

37. Governments could review, and as necessary revise, national recovery strategies to ensure alignment with the 2030 Agenda, national sustainable development strategies, goals and targets, medium-term expenditure frameworks and financing strategies – with an emphasis on the needs of women and vulnerable population groups. In addition, they could identify synergies and ensure alignment with nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement, national biodiversity strategies and action plans, and other relevant environmental, green growth and low-carbon development strategies and plans.
38. Governments could develop indicators and protocols for monitoring the progress and outcomes of national recovery strategies linked to national development and sectoral monitoring frameworks for tracking and reporting on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, including voluntary national reviews under the high-level political forum on sustainable development and nationally determined contributions.

B. Protecting and investing in people, especially women and vulnerable population groups, and enhancing resilience

39. The clarion call to leave no one behind is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, countries need to put in place policies and programmes as well as increase public investment aimed at helping the most marginalized groups to realize an adequate standard of living and enhance their resilience to external shocks. These groups include but are not limited to, women and girls in vulnerable situations, persons with disabilities, older persons and international migrants.

40. Countries should strive to ensure that access to vaccines and health technologies for fighting pandemics is equitable as a global public good. At the regional level, procurement of vaccines could be pooled and regional hubs either built or strengthened to expand vaccine development and manufacturing. Public-private partnerships can play a vital role in vaccine development, manufacturing and distribution and should be developed and scaled. Strengthened regional cooperation can further help countries to achieve vaccine self-sufficiency through increased transfer of knowledge, know-how, technology and resources between countries and the promotion of regional policy coherence through regulatory and normative systems to achieve quality and set standards.

41. Comprehensive social protection systems are required for all and access to health-care systems and basic services must be improved in line with the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. National coverage targets should be set and social protection systems should be gender-responsive and inclusive in delivering benefits and services in order to build the resilience of the most vulnerable to shocks, using a life-cycle approach. Access to essential health care, including maternity care, must be provided. The following types of income security are also needed for the following groups: children, including the provision of access to nutrition, education and other necessary goods and services; persons of active age who are unable to earn sufficient income due to sickness, unemployment, maternity or disability; and the elderly. Synergies with other sectors should be harnessed to simultaneously advance social protection and other development objectives and to increase social protection funding, for example to support programmes for improved natural resource management practices by low-income and vulnerable communities, particularly those living in marginal areas, engaged in fisheries (Sustainable Development Goal 14) and agriculture and forestry (Goal 15).

42. Resilience with regard to information, communication and technology must be strengthened, and the digital divide across and within countries must be addressed. Activities in the area include the co-deployment of fibre-optic cable along infrastructure networks to reduce costs and reach geographically remote communities, through the implementation of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative, as well as strengthening access of older
persons, persons with disabilities and other groups. Domestic ICT policies should be reformed to expand coverage and enhance access, for example by increasing competition in the telecommunications sector and increasing investment in digital infrastructure connectivity and education for all age groups that leads to higher digital literacy and Internet adoption.

43. Investment should be increased to improve the collection and analysis of data disaggregated by sex, age (without an age cap) and disability status and to enhance the use of data and evidence to strengthen disaster preparedness and response and resilience to shocks. This includes the use of geospatial data to identify communities vulnerable to crises such as COVID-19 and monitoring climate and disaster-related Sustainable Development Goal targets using integrated hazard, climate change, social, economic and health data.

C. Accelerating the transition to inclusive green economies

44. The massive investments in recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic provide an unprecedented opportunity for a clean, green and just transition to more nature- and climate-friendly economic systems that benefit all.

45. Countries could develop integrated policies to promote more inclusive, equitable and green infrastructure development to achieve decarbonization, energy efficiency and reduction of pollution and to accelerate climate change mitigation and adaptation. Transport planning in cities must be rethought and urban transport must be made environmentally sustainable, climate resilient, socially inclusive and resilient to disruptions. Investment in better solid waste management and universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene is required to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

46. Integrated landscape/seascape management, including through strengthened cooperation on ecosystem restoration and biodiversity conservation, should be implemented to protect and restore ecosystems and as a means of building resilience to climate change and to reduce the risk of future pandemics. A broad shift to agroecology and biodiversity and climate-smart agricultural practices should be promoted to strengthen the resilience of food systems and secure agricultural livelihoods.

47. Micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises must be restarted, rehabilitated and strengthened, with a focus on building the enabling environment for inclusive local green enterprise development, which has the potential to be a major contributor to an inclusive, sustainable and resilient economic recovery from the pandemic. Key enabling factors include access to business support services and finance; expanded digital skills; integration into global value chains; development of e-commerce; and support for youth and women entrepreneurs.

48. Public and private financial resources must be mobilized to strengthen sustainable development. This includes broadening tax bases and making tax administration and collection more efficient; reducing tax loopholes; increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of public expenditure; reforming

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15 The Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative aims to bridge the digital divide and accelerate digital transformation through regionally coordinated actions, promoting digital technology, digital connectivity and the use of digital data.

fiscal policies that impact the environment, including eliminating fossil fuel subsidies as well as pricing carbon; reforming public debt management and seeking debt service suspensions if necessary; introducing debt-for-nature and debt-for-climate swaps; pursuing sovereign bond financing; fostering sustainable investing by institutional investors; and expanding access to global environmental and climate finance.

D. Strengthening regional cooperation and partnerships

49. Strengthened regional cooperation among member States and multi-stakeholder collaborations would enhance the provision of regional public goods that cannot be managed by any one State or actor alone and allow a more concerted approach for sustainable recovery from the crisis.

50. Proposed priority areas for policy action include the following:

   (a) Leveraging the ADB, UNDP, ESCAP Sustainable Development Goals partnership and other intergovernmental platforms of ESCAP – the Commission and the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development as well as its ministerial conferences and committees – to forge a common vision for building forward together and to share emerging good practices and lessons learned within the region to support and accelerate a more sustainable recovery aligned with the 2030 Agenda;

   (b) Expanding and scaling effective multi-stakeholder partnerships and partnership platforms with development partners, the private sector, think tanks, academia and civil society to advance inclusive partnership approaches at the national and regional levels, contribute to the provision of regional public goods and deliver solutions that can be scaled and replicated to meet the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals;

   (c) Engaging with United Nations entities, including the United Nations resident coordinators and United Nations country teams, for expert policy advice and capacity development services for coordinated support of country-led approaches to sustainable recovery.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

51. The COVID-19 pandemic is taking a heavy toll on countries in the Asia-Pacific region and reversing progress on the 2030 Agenda. It has exposed the profound development challenges countries face and highlighted their economic, social and environmental vulnerabilities. The pandemic has also highlighted differences among member States in their abilities to respond to its impacts, bringing to the fore the importance of stronger cooperation among Governments to overcome challenges and narrow development gaps in order to prevent an uneven and K-shaped recovery.

52. The Asia-Pacific region and the international community have the collective experience and knowledge to create the transformations and integrated solutions needed to build forward together from the pandemic and forge an inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery that leaves no one behind. The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as related global and regional agreements and policy frameworks, provide the road map for moving forward. It is up to Governments and civil society to mobilize the collective will needed to undertake such transformative changes and to put in place the enabling policies and institutional capacities that will be required for successful implementation.
53. Member States, major groups and other stakeholders may wish to take the following actions:

(a) Review the present document with a view to sharing national and stakeholder perspectives on the issues raised as well as good practices with regard to building back better while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda;

(b) Discuss the proposed priority areas for consideration and reflect on opportunities for cooperation to support efforts to build an inclusive post-COVID-19 Asia and the Pacific, adhering to the overarching principle of leaving no one and no country behind.