Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the subregional level

Note by the secretariat

Summary

In preparation for the Ninth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, the five subregions of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) convened their respective forums on the theme of building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The forums were held in the final quarter of 2021 and were held in online and hybrid formats. Stakeholders from government, academia, civil society and think tanks attended the forums to discuss key challenges and opportunities for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to share experiences and offer subregional inputs and perspectives. The present document provides a summary of the deliberations of the subregional forums, including implementation achievements and challenges, an update on voluntary national reviews and recommendations for accelerating progress on the Sustainable Development Goals in the five subregions of ESCAP.

The Forum may wish to take note of the document and provide guidance on ways Governments in the region could build back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

I. Introduction

1. Two years on, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic continues to disrupt the lives of people everywhere and has hindered sustainable development efforts globally and in the Asia-Pacific region. While the region was not on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals prior to the crisis, the pandemic has disrupted economic growth and exacerbated inequalities and threatens to reverse the development gains of recent years.

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** ESCAP/RFSD/2022/L.1.
2. Despite travel disruptions due to the ongoing pandemic, all five of the subregions in Asia and the Pacific succeeded in organizing their annual forums on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in preparation for the Ninth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, either in online or hybrid formats.

3. The subregional forums recognized that efforts to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were intertwined. They also recognized that the present crisis presented an opportunity to focus on sustainability through efforts to build back better. Regional cooperation and partnerships are essential for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as is the need to align COVID-19 recovery policies with the Sustainable Development Goals.

4. The aim of the present document is to inform participants of the Ninth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development on subregional perspectives on the theme of building back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region, as discussed during the subregional forums held in 2021.

5. The document is structured by subregion. Each section provides a brief background of the subregion in focus, followed by progress, national achievements and challenges with regard to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (including in the context of the pandemic) and the voluntary national reviews. The sections also include selected subregional actions for accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

II. South-East Asia

A. Subregional background

6. South-East Asia comprises 11 member States, representing a mix of economies in terms of levels of development.

7. Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, South-East Asia has witnessed a widening of existing inequalities. Policy measures to contain the spread of the virus have further entrenched inequality, ranging from income inequality to digital inequality, and deeply impacted the most vulnerable populations. Progress made on the 2030 Agenda is at risk of reversal, especially as the pandemic pushed millions back into poverty.

8. Despite the challenges, the crisis presents an opportunity to put sustainability back at the centre of national development trajectories, mainly through the efforts to recover more robustly and build back better from the pandemic.

B. Subregional progress and impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

9. South-East Asia is not on track to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, according to the Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021. However, there is evidence of some satisfactory progress on Goal 1 (No poverty), Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure) and Goal 15 (Life on land). There is a lack of progress on Goal 4 (Quality education), Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and
Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Concerning trends of regression have been observed on Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation), Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production), Goal 13 (Climate action) and Goal 14 (Life below water).

10. The subregion is making strides in building resilient infrastructure and promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization (Goal 9). In Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam, there is vast mobile network coverage of the population. Nevertheless, infrastructure development, research and development, and domestic technology advancements need to remain on course to achieve Goal 9. Furthermore, the pandemic has highlighted digital connectivity as a driver for recovery efforts, and enhanced investment in digital infrastructure will be crucial to bridging the digital divide within and among countries.

11. It appears that the subregion remains on track to eradicate poverty (Sustainable Development Goal 1) for individuals living below international and national poverty lines. However, the pandemic has impacted progress towards the objective as people’s lives and livelihoods are negatively affected. The continued lack of government spending on essential services (in particular health) has made disadvantaged groups even more vulnerable.

12. Meanwhile, regression trends affected Sustainable Development Goal 13 (Climate action), as increased greenhouse gas emissions and casualties from disasters have negatively impacted efforts. Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production) was adversely affected by an increased material footprint and material consumption and by fossil fuel subsidies as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) remaining high in some countries. Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation) also experienced a reverse trend due to increased water stress and the inability of governments to protect and restore water-related ecosystems. Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) was affected by road traffic deaths and disaster casualties, both in terms of human loss and infrastructure damage.

13. Despite unprecedented challenges, member States have collectively responded by implementing effective measures to overcome the pandemic. National strategies and regional initiatives, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Comprehensive Recovery Framework, will make meaningful development gains and progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

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

14. Almost all South-East Asian member States will have presented their voluntary national reviews by 2022. The Fifth South-East Asia Multi-Stakeholder Forum on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals provided a platform for stakeholders to present their reviews.

15. The Government of Brunei Darussalam presented its first voluntary national review in 2020. Its national vision, Wawasan Brunei 2035, focuses on building a dynamic and sustainable economy by 2035. The Government engaged stakeholders, including the private sector, civil society and academia through a special committee for the implementation of the Sustainable
Development Goals to better implement the global agenda and continue mobilizing whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches.

16. The Government of Cambodia presented its first voluntary national review in 2019. To ensure the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals into national plans and policies, a dedicated national framework was adopted. The voluntary national review report showed that Cambodia was on track to achieve more than 60 per cent of the Goals and was prepared to expedite progress on Goals not on track, through a review of identified challenges.

17. Since the third voluntary national review conducted by Indonesia, in 2021, there has been momentum to discuss the importance of applying the principles of the Sustainable Development Goals to policy reforms and emerging issues with stakeholders. The pandemic presented an opportunity to utilize extensive data analysis provided by partner institutions, such as research organizations and universities.

18. The Government of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic presented voluntary national reviews in 2018 and 2021. The second review report was developed on the basis of the principle of leaving no one behind, building on key recommendations from the first review report and the conclusion of the country’s eighth national socioeconomic development plan (2016–2020). The Government highlighted the need to engage in a whole-of-government approach; enhance the availability of relevant data on the Sustainable Development Goals and analytical capabilities; and promote partnerships with various stakeholders across sectors.

19. The Government of Malaysia presented voluntary national reviews in 2017 and 2021. The reviews are firmly based on the national plan to ensure that growth is anchored to people, thereby leaving no section of society behind. The review reports helped to identify areas that required further collaboration with stakeholders, including subnational governments, the private sector and civil society.

20. The Government of the Philippines will present its third voluntary national review in 2022, having presented its first in 2016 and its second in 2019. In preparation for its third review, the Government of the Philippines has updated its national and subnational development plans to incorporate strategies to address the impacts of the pandemic and transition to a “new normal”.


22. The Government of Thailand presented voluntary national reviews in 2020 and 2021. In its second review report, the Government highlighted a national vision of transitioning to a bio-circular-green economy model, representing the intertwining relationship and balance among three economic models needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

23. The Government of Timor-Leste presented its first voluntary national review in 2019. The review report reflected support for deepening the Government’s engagement with civil society and for promoting policy
discussion on advancing the Sustainable Development Goals at the local level. The presentation of the report reinvigorated financing for the Goals, the mobilization of resources towards areas that require further support and the incorporation of data monitoring and evaluation into the national and local development.

24. The Government of Viet Nam presented its first voluntary national review in 2018. It has nationalized the Sustainable Development Goals into 115 national targets in its national action plan for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Sustainable development priorities have also been mainstreamed into the country’s social and economic development strategy (2021–2030) and its social and economic development plan (2021–2025). The Government continues to develop measures to secure the interest of local people in joining its efforts to advance the Goals.

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

25. The Fifth South-East Asia Multi-Stakeholder Forum on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals discussed innovative mechanisms, including impact financing, public-private partnerships and institutional coordination, to ensure that the COVID-19 recovery is inclusive, gender-responsive and consistent with the 2030 Agenda.

26. **Build health infrastructure.** Health-care systems have crashed amid the pandemic. Investments need to be increased to strengthen these systems in the subregion and accelerate progress towards universal health care.

27. **Improve digital connection.** At the same time, the Forum agreed that more investment should be focused on addressing the digital divide across the subregion and further expanding support for digital awareness, literacy and access, especially for the most vulnerable groups, who have suffered the most throughout the pandemic.

28. **Enhance connectivity.** The pandemic has shown that the region’s connectivity remains fragile despite decades of work, but it also brought into focus areas for improving the region’s connectivity. These areas include investing in resilient transport connectivity; seamless trade that is an enabler for advancing the digital economy; energy connectivity that sets in motion the green electricity grids of tomorrow; and digital connectivity that goes hand in hand with bridging the digital divide within and among countries.

29. **Boost partnership.** With only eight years left to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, strong global, regional and subregional partnerships are crucial for sustainable recovery from the pandemic and for progress on the 2030 Agenda.

E. Conclusions

30. Recovering from the pandemic and advancing progress on the 2030 Agenda are interlinked. In addition, the Sustainable Development Goals are interdependent by design, which leaves room for synergies to be developed. For South-East Asia, recovering stronger and better from the pandemic requires recovery packages aligned with the national and subregional efforts to advance progress on the Goals.
31. Implementing the 2030 Agenda while recovering from the pandemic requires strong partnerships. Sustainable recovery and development result from solid cooperation and collaboration with stakeholders, including local authorities and representatives of the private sector, civil society, academia and youth.

32. Regional cooperation within and outside the subregion should also be intensely pursued to advance shared development objectives. South-East Asia could leverage existing regional cooperation mechanisms, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

33. In that regard, ESCAP has a crucial role in fostering and strengthening cooperation at the national, subregional and regional levels. As an intergovernmental platform, ESCAP supports member States to share challenges during the pandemic and good practices in promoting a recovery trajectory that is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

III. East and North-East Asia

A. Subregional background

34. The subregion includes five member States, accounting for more than half the total land area of the ESCAP region and more than 1.8 billion people. Despite significant achievements of socioeconomic development across the subregion, challenges remain in reaching many who are still left behind, including deep pockets of poverty and persons with disabilities who face disparity in poverty incidents, access to education and employment. In addition, demographic shift could potentially increase poverty among the older population, as the subregion is home to an ageing population that is the fastest growing (Republic of Korea), largest (China) and has the highest rate of ageing (Japan) in the world.

35. The subregion’s advances in socioeconomic development have also come at the cost of environmental sustainability. The subregion accounts for one third of global greenhouse gas emissions, even as it increases resource efficiency and moves towards decarbonizing energy systems and economies.

B. Subregional progress and impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

36. According to the Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021, the subregion is on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 1 (No poverty) and Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation) by 2030. Relatively good progress has also been made on Goal 2 (Zero hunger), Goal 3 (Good health and well-being), Goal 7 (Affordable and clean energy), Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure). Progress on Goal 5 (Gender equality) and Goal 10 (Reduced inequalities) is slow.

37. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has made disadvantaged socioeconomic groups more vulnerable. With regard to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality education), the quality of education delivery has been negatively impacted owing to limited access to facilities and supporting environments, in particular for low-income families and persons with disabilities.
38. Progress on Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender equality) has been impacted by job losses among women and other vulnerable groups, especially those holding temporary positions, which also causes an overall setback for Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and Goal 10 (Reduced inequalities). During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an unexpected increase in unpaid care work such as childcare, as well as in domestic violence.

39. The pandemic drew public attention to environmental challenges such as the relationship between nature and humans, as biodiversity conservation remains a significant challenge despite the expansion of forest cover and protected areas. Thus, a holistic approach to nature-based recovery is urgently needed to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure biodiversity conservation. There is also a clear emphasis on involving local stakeholders in the management of protected areas, thereby advancing the subregional progress on Goal 14 (Life below water) and Goal 15 (Life on land).

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

40. All East and North-East Asian member States have submitted their first voluntary national reviews, and two member States, China and Japan, presented second reviews in 2021. The North-East Asian Multi-stakeholder Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals, held on 28 and 29 October 2021, heard key elements of the second reviews and current national progress in achieving the Goals.

41. In 2021, the Government of China, in its second voluntary national review report, highlighted the integration of the 2030 Agenda into the thirteenth five-year plan and the whole-of-government approach involving government departments from the central to local levels. An interministerial mechanism was also established to coordinate 45 government agencies. The fourteenth five-year plan again recognizes the Sustainable Development Goals as an important part of economic and social development. With regard to core achievements, China officially eradicated extreme poverty in 2020, as measured according to its current poverty line.

42. The Government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, which presented its first voluntary national review in 2021, has formulated country-specific goals by localizing each Sustainable Development Goal and integrating it into national development goals and various sectoral plans. The localization process was overseen by a national task force on sustainable development, chaired by the State planning commission, and technical committees focused on six thematic areas to provide relevant ministries with assistance in the integration of statistics and indicators.

43. The Government of Japan has gone through a comprehensive review programme for its second voluntary national review, presented in 2021, by involving diverse stakeholder groups to provide feedback on initial drafts from the various ministries and inviting public comments on the final draft. It has also embarked on increasing local government participation in Sustainable Development Goal promotion to 39.7 per cent in 2020, with a target of 60 per cent by 2024, by conducting voluntary local reviews as codified in the guiding principles on the implementation of the Goals.
44. The Government of Mongolia has been proactive in pursuing a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. It has institutionalized a parliamentary subcommittee on Sustainable Development Goals and a national committee for sustainable development headed by the Prime Minister with the cross-sectoral coordination and localization of the Goals by the national development agency. The Government also launched the multi-stakeholder council for sustainable development to provide a platform for cohesive and coherent policymaking towards the country’s Vision 2050.

45. The Government of the Republic of Korea formulated national sustainable development goals in 2018 through an extensive process of stakeholder engagement and public participation. The national goals include additional targets and indicators to reflect the local context. On that basis, the Government launched its fourth basic plan for sustainable development (2021–2040) consisting of a situational analysis, vision and strategy, detailed policy tasks for each goal and priorities for the period 2021 to 2025, as well as a follow-up plan.

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

46. **Enhance social support programmes to reduce inequality.** As the COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on vulnerable socioeconomic groups, further expanding existing inequality as a result, Governments need to enhance social support programmes tailored to the specific context. More attention needs to be paid to establishing a stronger social protection system to ensure that societies are more resilient and capable of facing future crises.

47. **Enhance green recovery efforts following the pandemic.** The subregion has expanded forest cover and protected areas during the past three decades. The COVID-19 pandemic and various new epidemics that occurred in recent decades underscore the high risks of zoonosis, calling for a more integrated approach to nature and human health. Thus, nature-based recovery is needed to build back better from the pandemic by investing in the institutional foundations needed to implement nature-based solutions, develop various related business models and ensure multi-stakeholder participation.

48. **Utilize new ways of monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.** Data collection, monitoring and information systems are critical to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. However, there are significant gaps in data coverage and in the availability of accurate and timely information. In this regard, new methods, such as collecting big Earth data and geospatial data through satellites and sensors with further artificial intelligence or machine analysis, could help to supplement official data and statistics.

49. **Enhance the role of local government.** Local government involvement is a key means to implement the 2030 Agenda, as local governments have an intimate understanding of local challenges and strengths. Many local governments in the subregion have initiated efforts to localize the Sustainable Development Goals and conduct voluntary local reviews or similar programmes to establish a baseline from which to monitor status and progress and to engage stakeholders. Voluntary national reviews need to be further strengthened by the voluntary initiative of local governments with policy support from central governments and the proactive participation of stakeholders.
50. **Promote multilateral technical cooperation.** The subregion is well equipped with technical capacity and various sectoral and bilateral cooperation mechanisms directly relevant to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, but it lacks a multilateral mechanism that could facilitate dialogues and cooperation on sustainable development. Thus, the subregion could promote multilateral cooperation for sharing technology and practices among countries to mutually supplement national capacities.

E. **Conclusions**

51. Member States in the subregion have generally made overall progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant setbacks in various socioeconomic indicators, most notably in poverty, health, quality education, decent work and inequality. In particular, the pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on vulnerable socioeconomic groups and increased their size as well, since service and some manufacturing industries have not benefited from economic rebound in 2021. The impacts revealed the interconnections among the Goals as many simultaneously regressed and governments found it necessary to put in place new social protection programmes to combat the negative dimensions of the interconnections.

52. The pandemic has had implications of a different nature for environment-related Sustainable Development Goals. Most countries in the subregion have seen a reduction or stabilization of greenhouse gas and air pollution emissions due to decreased economic and social activities. However, countries have also experienced rapid surges in the generation of wastes, in particularly plastic waste. As a result, efforts to manage wastes and tackle other challenges related to Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production) have become excessively burdensome. Meanwhile, member States that are major emitters of greenhouse gases in the subregion have announced their commitments to carbon neutrality amidst the pandemic and initiated policies for green recovery.

IV. **South and South-West Asia**

A. **Subregional background**

53. The South and South-West Asia subregion comprises 10 countries and accounts for nearly one third of the world’s poor and food-deprived population, as well as nearly half of all undernourished children in the world. The subregion is one of the most disaster-prone in the world and faces increasing environmental risks and hazards related to climate change. Three out of four least developed countries from the subregion are graduating from that category. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many pre-existing vulnerabilities and developmental challenges. South Asia experienced the worst annual dip in GDP growth in 50 years, which severely affected livelihoods and pushed millions back into poverty. Substantial improvements on all indicators are needed.
B. Subregional progress and impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

54. The subregion has yet to reach projected levels of progress for 2021 across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Notable achievements were made on Goal 1 (No poverty), Goal 3 (Good health and well-being), Goal 4 (Quality education) and Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure). The fastest progress was seen on Goal 15 (Life on land), Goal 1 (No poverty) and Goal 3 (Good health and well-being). The subregion is regressing on Goal 13 (Climate action), Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production). The unprecedented impact of COVID-19 calls for urgent efforts to accelerate progress on the Goals.

55. Despite some progress on Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero hunger), the prevalence of undernourishment, malnutrition and stunting among children remains an acute challenge. More than 40 million, or 33 per cent, of children under 5 years of age in the subregion remain severely or moderately stunted – the highest rate among all Asia-Pacific subregions. The subregion is also in need of substantial improvements on critical targets under Goal 5 (Gender equality), Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation), Goal 7 (Affordable and clean energy) and Goal 10 (Reduced inequalities). Alarming, South Asia is regressing on key Goals related to environmental sustainability (i.e. Goals 13 and 14), which may in turn negatively impact other Goals.

56. According to a subregional office report, COVID-19 has had disproportionately larger impacts on the subregion. With poorer resource bases, weak health infrastructure and services, and budget constraints on public support measures, the crisis has translated into greater levels of socioeconomic distress compared to other subregions of Asia and the Pacific. Seventy million people in the subregion are estimated to have been pushed back into extreme poverty, accounting for close to 80 per cent of the total estimated surge in poverty at the regional level.  

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

57. All South and South-West Asian member States have submitted their first voluntary national reviews. Second reviews have been conducted in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Turkey, and are planned in Pakistan and Sri Lanka in 2022. The Fifth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals, held in Colombo on 15 and 16 November 2021, discussed challenges and measures taken to implement the Goals and respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

58. Bangladesh experienced decreases in poverty, hunger, and under-5 and neonatal morbidity rates prior to pandemic. There were increases in gender parity in education at the primary and secondary levels, access to electricity,
the annual growth rate of real GDP per employed person, manufacturing value added and social protection budget allocation and coverage. Many factors, including strong political commitment, were important in this success. A number of fiscal and monetary policy initiatives, as well as investments in social protection programmes, were introduced to respond to the COVID-19 challenges.

59. In Bhutan, the national approach to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals is integrated into the country’s objective of maximizing gross national happiness through five-year plans. Owing to COVID-19 and travel restrictions, the second voluntary national review process was quite challenging, but in-person and online consultations, including stakeholder consultations not held in the first review, allowed for a highly participatory process involving 65 agencies. The findings from the 2021 voluntary national review will be used as inputs for the upcoming five-year plan.

60. In India, the experience of Sustainable Development Goal localization and the well-defined functions of actors at the national and subnational levels created institutional ownership. A dedicated index, developed in 2018 and periodically updated, is used to monitor progress on the Goals and rank subnational entities in India. The measurement of progress on the Goals has been localized at the district level, and meetings with senior government officials at the subnational level are held to discuss progress, reforms and action plans. A whole-of-society approach has been taken in the voluntary national review consultation process.

61. In Maldives, Sustainable Development Goal 1 (No poverty), Goal 4 (Quality education) and Goal 7 (Affordable and clean energy) have been achieved, and momentum is stable for Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation), Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). Efforts to address Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and Goal 15 (Life on land) and to strengthen data systems for reporting are under way. A national strategy for development statistics has been formulated to strengthen data management, and a Sustainable Development Goal indicator framework has been developed to reduce dual reporting and to formulate mechanisms to collect missing data. The Government has worked on the localization and prioritization of the Goals and will prioritize them in all development processes, including local development plans. A second voluntary national review will be submitted in 2023.

62. In Nepal, five-year plans and subnational government activities are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and reflected in medium-term expenditure frameworks. Some Goals have major data gaps, and there are issues with periodicity, disaggregation, standardization and quality of data. Priority issues include identification of additional resources to implement the Goals; Goal localization; strengthening of partnerships; and review and prioritization of indicators on the basis of data availability.

63. The Government of Pakistan has mainstreamed the Sustainable Development Goals with a multi-tiered institutional structure at the national, provincial and district levels that will be used for its voluntary national review, in 2022. Government programmes are being used to accelerate progress on the Goals, and public expenditures are being tagged by Goal and target. A disconnect exists between Goal targets and investments, and there are gaps in data collection and reporting.
The Government of Sri Lanka is preparing for a second voluntary national review, in 2022, and its national policy, planning and budgeting processes are well aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. A national steering committee headed by the Prime Minister has been established, and the engagement of government and non-government stakeholders is deemed critical. A national Sustainable Development Goals portal was launched, linking approximately 80 government institutions involved in primary data collection to facilitate a whole-of-government approach to data compilation and dissemination.

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

65. The below actions were recommended by the Fifth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals.

66. **Concerted actions for building back better.** Mutual cooperation and learning among countries are needed to collectively take stock of Sustainable Development Goal progress in the region, understand the challenges and explore opportunities for stronger partnerships and concerted actions.

67. **Broad-based policy interventions.** Increased investments in education, with a focus on improving access to education services through digital platforms and skill development (Goal 4), adoption of broad-based gender-sensitive policies (Goal 5) and dedicated action plans to conserve marine and terrestrial biodiversity and natural resources for environmental sustainability (Goals 14 and 15) are required.

68. **Enhanced regional cooperation to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Sustainable Development Goal interventions.** Regional economic integration can enhance trade and investment flows. Sharing good practices in public welfare programmes can flatten the learning curve and improve the efficiency of programme implementation. Collective regional actions are needed to combat environmental risks.

69. **More financing for mainstreaming the Sustainable Development Goals in national planning.** Governments may have to conduct needs assessments for financing the Goals post COVID-19. The scope for broadening and deepening the tax base remains underexploited, and reforms to attract foreign direct investment, facilitate private capital participation in development financing and utilize blended financing are needed.

70. **Better coordination leading to a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach involving civil society organizations for effective implementation.** While progress on institutional mechanisms for Sustainable Development Goal implementation has been notable, interdepartmental coordination remains a challenge. Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals, monitoring and evaluation, and greater and broader stakeholder participation are some of the additional implementation priorities that demand attention.

71. **Improvements to statistical systems, investments in science, technology and innovation, and digitalization.** More investments are needed to develop national statistical capacities to facilitate evidence-based policymaking. Member States with stronger capacities than others can take the lead in promoting science, technology and innovation capacity development and training, as well as in research and development activities. Steps must be
taken to bridge the digital divide for the effective delivery of education and other critical social services.

E. Conclusions

72. The pandemic has burdened health-care systems, disrupted economic activities, affected the education sector and increased economic and social disparities. Challenges remain in improving the quality of statistical systems for Sustainable Development Goal monitoring and evidence-based policymaking, as well as the localization of the Goals and greater involvement of civil society.

73. Policy programmes need to be aligned with green recovery principles and investments in digital access and social services. Funding constraints need to be addressed by implementing measures to enhance fiscal space and utilize innovative and sustainable financing strategies.

74. Regional cooperation is needed to advance economic integration, tackle transboundary environmental issues and share good practices through the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals.

V. Pacific

A. Subregional background

75. While the Pacific small island developing States have been impacted to varying degrees by the pandemic, with some having no recorded cases of COVID-19, they have all suffered from its socioeconomic impact. The pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities in the subregion, which was already suffering some of the highest estimated losses as a percentage of GDP owing to climate-related disasters.

76. Meanwhile, the Pacific small island developing States are committed to preventing COVID-19 from undermining the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 13 (Climate action). In the lead-up to and during the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Pacific leaders said that COVID-19 should not delay global climate actions and that recovery should be focused on climate-smart investments and low carbon development paths.

77. Higher climate ambition is seen as essential to accelerating the recovery from COVID-19 and from climate-related disasters. The Pacific small island developing States recognize the essential need to remain strong as a collective while promoting stronger multilateralism and regionalism.

B. Subregional progress and impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

78. The Pacific was lagging too far behind to achieve any of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 even before the COVID-19 pandemic. None of the 17 Goals was close to being achieved, while some had regressed since 2015.
79. Some limited progress is evident on some of the Sustainable Development Goals, such as Goal 3 (Good health and well-being), Goal 7 (Affordable and clean energy), Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), Goal 15 (Life on land) and Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Significant gaps remain to achieve many Goals, and the Pacific is regressing on Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation), Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and Goal 13 (Climate action). However, key hindrances to progress are global and transboundary in nature, including climate change, pollution, the pandemic, trade and energy.

80. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, is expected to have severe negative impacts on the Sustainable Development Goals, with its serious socioeconomic fallout in the Pacific resulting in widespread job loss and hardships for the most vulnerable and those furthest behind. Despite the limited resources at their disposal, there is scope for the Pacific Governments to be more inclusive and intentional in seeking climate justice and a fairer allocation of global resources. The strong role that civil society organizations, including the private sector, could play in supporting governments should also be recognized.

81. The availability of robust and reliable data to measure progress on the Sustainable Development Goals remains a major challenge in the subregion; however, there have been good improvements in the past two years, such as the increase in the number of indicators with available data, from 60 (26 per cent) in 2019 to 88 (38 per cent) in 2021.

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

82. The secretariat organized the Fifth Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in hybrid format (online and in person in Sigatoka, Fiji, on 25 and 26 November 2021), which was co-hosted by the Government of Fiji. The Forum also included a capacity-building workshop for the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda with a focus on follow-up actions highlighted in voluntary national reviews.

83. By 2022, all 12 Pacific small island developing States will have submitted at least one voluntary national review report. In the reviews conducted to date, the Pacific small island developing States have shown ownership of the process, actively taking the lead in preparation while acknowledging the support rendered by the United Nations and regional organizations. The review process has proved to be an important opportunity for the Pacific small islands developing States to take stock of progress through multisectoral and multi-stakeholder consultations.

84. Some good practices in the voluntary national review process have been reported. The informal mechanisms for stakeholder engagement provided a starting point (e.g. in Tonga and the Marshall Islands), and the national planning processes were used to institutionalize the review mechanism and allow for ongoing engagement (e.g. task forces, working groups and committees), including in the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands (2021); Marshall Islands (2021); and Tuvalu (2022).

3 Samoa (2016 and 2020); Kiribati (2018); Fiji, Nauru, Palau, Tonga and Vanuatu (2019); Micronesia (Federated States of), Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands (2020); Marshall Islands (2021); and Tuvalu (2022).
Islands and Tonga. The voluntary national review reports also contributed to capacity-building for civil society, facilitating its effective self-organization, including in the form of umbrella regional organizations. The reviews encouraged the active engagement of local governments and other stakeholders in follow-up and implementation efforts (e.g. the Marshall Islands Council of Non-Governmental Organizations).

85. Challenges included limited staff capacity and financial resources for meaningful stakeholder consultations, especially given geographical spread and remoteness from the capital.

86. Tuvalu is the only country in the subregion presenting a voluntary national review in 2022. In preparation and consultations, the Government held a national workshop in October 2021 in partnership with the United Nations system (led by ESCAP and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) and the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific. Consultations will also be conducted for the outer islands to solicit stronger stakeholder views from remote parts of the country.

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

87. A key message that the leaders of the Pacific subregion took to the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties is that COVID-19 should not delay global climate actions and that recovery and Sustainable Development Goal implementation should be driven by climate-smart investment and based on low carbon pathways.

88. Climate ambition and action. The highest priority of the subregion is to actively promote higher global climate ambitions to limit carbon emissions and temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels. The Pacific small island developing States will also need to form a stronger collective and be a standard bearer in international forums, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the International Maritime Organization, where the Marshall Islands and Solomon Islands have been leading the proposal for a carbon levy on international shipping. A related initiative in need of regional and global support is the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership. In light of sea-level rise, the proposed regional framework on climate mobility (migration, displacement and relocation) also requires regional and global support.

89. Social protection and health. Recovery from COVID-19 and resilience-building require the establishment of social protection schemes that are responsive to gender, disability and disasters and encompass livelihoods, education and the informal sector. Social protection and health are two of the priorities for the Pacific subregion. Thus, there is a need to examine how regional collaboration could be strengthened for social protection and consider the nexus and intersection between climate, environment and health/pandemics.

90. Climate-smart trade and energy. The Fifth Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development considered the important role of climate-smart trade and renewable energy in the fight against climate change and in a green recovery from the pandemic. Issues noted by the Forum included the simplification of trade regulations and border processes; scaling up cross-border paperless trade, facilitation and digitalization; intraregional trade (Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement); and assessment of labour mobility arrangements. On renewable energy, there needs to be regional cooperation to
facilitate energy transition and strengthen institutional capacity for integrated energy policy and planning, including Sustainable Development Goal 7 road maps.

91. **Climate and disaster risk finance.** The climate finance available to developing countries is far from sufficient. According to the Pacific Islands Forum, only 0.28 per cent of the mobilized climate finance has flowed into Pacific small island developing States. There is a concern that climate finance is not adequately benefiting communities and vulnerable groups, and that the transformative potential of stakeholder participation in decision-making is not being realized. Some key and forthcoming initiatives in need of regional and global support include the Pacific Resilience Facility and a proposed regional debt conference, to be hosted by the Pacific Islands Forum and ESCAP.

92. **Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.** There is an ongoing need for statistical surveys to strengthen information and data, including gender and disability statistics. Reporting on the Pacific Road Map for Sustainable Development is an example of collaboration between all stakeholders (including member States, the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific, United Nations system and development partners), strengthening relationships and ensuring a coordinated approach. However, there is a need for more context-specific reporting at the regional level to ensure a balanced assessment of the drivers of poor performance. Institutionalizing stakeholder engagement in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway is critical in building ownership.

93. A review of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality education), Goal 5 (Gender equality), Goal 14 (Life below water) and Goal 15 (Life on land) in the Pacific subregion confirmed that COVID-19 has reinforced vulnerabilities linked to uneven or slow progress, and recognized the importance of digitalization and renewed regional cooperation.

E. **Conclusions**

94. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities that the subregion was already facing owing to uneven and slow progress or regression on the Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, it is of paramount importance to redouble efforts, especially on climate action, the sustainability of natural resources and the diversification of Pacific economies.

95. Indeed, there has been a resurgence of interest in and support for the important role that civil society organizations could play in recovery and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, a recurring theme in the voluntary national reviews and the Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development.

96. The subregion has a robust regional architecture of intergovernmental and stakeholder organizations which, with the support of the United Nations system and regional and multilateral partners, contribute extensively to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda under the Pacific Road Map for Sustainable Development and related regional strategies and frameworks, such as the forthcoming 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. The Pacific subregion has always seen its future within the context of regionalism, and ESCAP is mandated to work with and through Pacific regional architecture to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
VI. North and Central Asia

A. Subregional background

97. The North and Central Asia subregion comprises nine member States. It is a diverse subregion with large resource-rich countries, smaller and resource-poorer countries and a majority of landlocked developing countries.

98. The subregion has been struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic and its social, economic and governance impacts. Vaccination progress has been slow, but it accelerated towards the end of 2021. The pandemic’s impacts deepened pre-existing structural weaknesses and reduced countries’ sustainable development options. Inequality and poverty have grown among vulnerable groups, such as women, young people, children, older persons, migrants or persons with disabilities. It also increased vulnerabilities among population groups that were not poor previously.

99. Overdependence on commodity exports, migrant labour and remittances and the prevalence of informal sector employment pose challenges to the post-COVID-19 recovery. In addition, restrictive pandemic measures had negative impacts on trade and transport links, which are essential, especially for the landlocked developing countries. Substantial fiscal deficits have been recorded, adding to sovereign debt which was already a concern for some North and Central Asian countries.

100. North and Central Asian member States are increasingly applying digital technologies in many economic and social spheres, such as goods and services delivery. However, a digital divide persists for vulnerable social groups (e.g. older women or rural populations).

B. Subregional progress and impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

101. The Fifth North and Central Asian Multi-Stakeholder Forum on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals was jointly organized with the Government of Turkmenistan in October 2021. It reviewed the 2022 high-level political forum theme, Goals cluster and means of implementation, discussed progress and challenges and provided recommendations for the upcoming regional and global 2030 Agenda follow-up and review processes.

102. Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals was lagging in the subregion before the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021, accelerated actions are required to achieve most of the Goals in North and Central Asia.

103. Though the subregion appears to be on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 10 (Reduced inequalities) and Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), the picture is skewed by insufficient data on most indicators. With regard to Goal 2 (Zero hunger), food insecurity has been rising in recent years, in particular in Armenia and Georgia. On Goal 3 (Good health and well-being), maternal mortality, under-5 mortality and neonatal mortality have decreased, but the subregion is regressing on targets related to HIV infections and road traffic deaths. The subregion faces challenges in achieving many environmental targets. It is regressing on Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), Goal 13 (Climate action) and Goal 14 (Life below water), while progress on Goal 15 (Life on land) is far too slow and data is limited.
104. Progress on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality education) is mixed. Good progress was made on universal access to primary and secondary education, but the subregion is not on track to achieve targets on reading and mathematics, reducing education inequality, enrolment in pre-primary education, and teacher training.

105. Nor is the subregion on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender equality), and owing to prevailing gender roles, the pandemic has become a key structural barrier.\(^4\) Progress is slow on gender wage gaps, gender parity in years of schooling, and the number of women in positions of power. Progress has even reversed on gender parity in labour force participation and youth not in education or employment. Encouragingly, in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, approximately half of all COVID-19 response measures may be classified as gender-sensitive.\(^5\)

106. Debt (in proportion to GDP) has increased notably in 2020 and 2021, in particular in Armenia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. Overall, the subregion has regressed on the target related to domestic budgets funded by domestic taxes,\(^6\) which indicates extremely limited domestic opportunities for financing the Sustainable Development Goals.

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

107. All North and Central Asian member States have undergone voluntary national reviews: Armenia in 2018 and 2020, Azerbaijan in 2017, 2019 and 2021; Georgia in 2016 and 2020; Tajikistan in 2017; Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in 2019; and Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan in 2020. The Government of Kazakhstan is planning to submit its second review in 2022, and the United Nations country team, including ESCAP, is supporting the process.

108. All North and Central Asian member States have either established dedicated institutional mechanisms, such as interministerial bodies, or created mixed coordination mechanisms using existing institutional structures. They have integrated the Sustainable Development Goals into their long-term and midterm strategies (to differing degrees) or used them as the basis for new national and sectoral development strategies.

109. Meanwhile, given the need for a sustainable COVID-19 recovery, understanding and coordinating development finance has become even more crucial amid tightened fiscal space and private and international investment flows that have been impacted by the pandemic. Many North and Central Asian member States have embarked on conceptualizing integrated national financing frameworks with support from the United Nations system and other development partners to address this challenge.

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\(^4\) ESCAP, COVID-19 and the Unpaid Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific (ST/ESCAP/2967).


110. Member States in the subregion have invested into their statistical ecosystem for Sustainable Development Goal reporting and monitoring and are finalizing their adaptation of the global indicator framework to fit national contexts and priorities. In Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan, sets of national indicators have already been approved or ratified. Nonetheless, data gaps persist, as administrative and official data ecosystems remain weak. The secretariat is supporting the Governments of Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan to introduce a national Goals tracker.

111. The Government of the Russian Federation connects the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals with its 12 national projects and its comprehensive plan for the modernization and expansion of the country’s main infrastructure. The coordination of the Goals is facilitated by an inter-agency working group on climate change and sustainable development, at the administration of the President of the Russian Federation, under which the Russian Federal State Statistics Service provides the official statistical information on Goal indicators in the country through a dedicated web portal.

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

112. Deepening Sustainable Development Goal alignment and integration across the Goals. Planning and budgeting processes are key determinants of progress on the Goals. Governments should deepen coordination and governance to fully integrate national priorities with the universal Sustainable Development Goal framework and address functionality and effectiveness. North and Central Asian Governments and stakeholders should strengthen policies and activities to approach all the Goals in a more interconnected fashion.

113. Enhancing partnerships and collaboration among countries and stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic has spotlighted the importance of enhanced partnerships, collaboration and multi-stakeholder consultations. North and Central Asian landlocked countries depend on neighbouring countries and transit corridors to receive goods and services. Deeper digitalization to streamline cross-border trade processes, greening value chains, and investment promotion strategies that are sustainable and that can facilitate economic diversification and transformation are therefore fundamental. Local information and communications technology capacities also need strengthening to realize the potential of the fourth industrial revolution, as does targeted collaboration with the private sector, including small and medium-sized enterprises, with a view to aligning private investments with the Sustainable Development Goals.

114. Improving the collection and use of data and statistics. Efforts should be increased to produce timely, accurate and disaggregated data. North and Central Asian member States are comparatively advanced in data collection, but large gaps remain in measuring Sustainable Development Goal progress. Assessing those gaps, identifying relevant national data sources and upgrading national statistical plans would ensure that data for the Goal indicators could be regularly produced with proper disaggregation and accuracy. The lack of reliable gender-sensitive data, for example, obscures significant disparities and prevents policymaking from being based on clear evidence, which would help to identify the greatest gaps.
115. **Diversifying development finance.** Despite considerable variation within the subregion, innovative and green financing instruments and policies (e.g. thematic bonds, climate finance and debt-for-climate swaps) have significant potential to close the financing gap to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. It is important to enhance the capacity of all key stakeholders to develop enabling environments for the application of innovative finance. Moreover, addressing the national fragmentation of regulatory frameworks, standards and taxonomies at the regional or global level could be a game changer.

116. **Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality education).** Participants at the Fifth North and Central Asian Multi-Stakeholder Forum on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals called for the quality of education facilities and programmes to be improved, for education systems to be flexible and fit for purpose (including through digital literacy and quality teacher training programmes) and for expanded and targeted investment in education and increased collaboration with all key stakeholders.

117. **Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender equality).** Currently, women in the subregion disproportionately work in vulnerable, informal and part-time employment, and are therefore at risk during crises such as COVID-19. Increasing women’s labour force participation and economically empowering them would significantly boost countries’ GDP, thereby accelerating the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

118. **Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life below water) and Goal 15 (Life on land).** To achieve Goals 14 and 15, including protecting biodiversity and rehabilitating degraded soil, more legal, technical and financial collaboration among governments and stakeholders at the national and regional levels is needed. It could be useful to quantify the value and use of key resources such as water and land, breaking issues down in budgetary terms and showing how GDP would be affected if resources and ecosystems were further degraded.

**E. Conclusions**

119. Persistent challenges, from climate change to socioeconomic vulnerabilities and recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and political upheavals and conflict in several North and Central Asian countries, have shown the importance of reinvigorating efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals. North and Central Asian member States need to deepen their structural transformation and diversification to be less vulnerable to crises, enhance productivity and create decent jobs. Particular attention should be paid to those areas where the subregion is lagging or has large data gaps.

120. To build back better from COVID-19 and to leave no one behind, interventions should focus on an inclusive, resilient and green recovery, together with investments in digital access and social services. Deepened subregional collaboration and meaningful stakeholder involvement are key to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the fulfilment of other international commitments.

**VII. Conclusions and recommendations**

121. The Forum may wish to take note of the document and provide guidance on ways Governments in the region could build back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda.