FIFTH SOUTH ASIA FORUM ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: BUILDING BACK BETTER FROM COVID-19 WHILE ACCELERATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGs IN SOUTH AND SOUTH-WEST ASIA

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Annex 1 – Programme of Fifth South Asia Forum on SDGs 40
The Fifth South Asia Forum on the SDGs (SAFS)\textsuperscript{1} was held in hybrid mode (both physical and virtual participation), from 15-16 November 2021 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, as a subregional preparatory meeting for the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) 2022, which in turn will contribute towards the annual High-Level Policy Forum (HLPF) to be held at the global level in July 2022. The Forum was jointly organized by the South and South-West Asia Office of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP SSWA) and the Sustainable Development Council (SDC) of the Government of Sri Lanka, in collaboration with member organisations of the South Asia Network on the SDGs (SANS). The Forum was attended by about 750 participants representing governments, academia, think tanks, civil society organizations, and other key stakeholders from South Asian countries.

The Fifth SAFS was inaugurated by Hon. Mahinda Rajapaksa, Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation, Sri Lanka. The Forum deliberated on inclusive, resilient and sustainable strategies towards COVID-19 recovery efforts and policy priorities to accelerate SDG implementation in South Asia. It drew upon a special report prepared by UNESCAP SSWA titled *Achieving the SDGs in South Asia: An Integrated Approach to Accelerate SDG Progress and COVID-19 Recovery*. Various South Asian countries presented on their experiences in carrying out their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and follow-up actions. National perspectives on the impact the pandemic have had on SDGs, policy responses taken and prospects for meeting the 2030 Agenda were also shared. Thematic discussions on progresses being made on Goals 4 (Quality education), 5 (Gender equality), 14 (Life below water), 15 (Life on land) and 17 (Partnerships for the goals) which will be reviewed at the HLPF in 2022 were held. Discussions focused on how the leveraging of partnerships and regional cooperation can be used to support countries in building back better and accelerate the achievement of SDGs were also conducted.

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\textsuperscript{1} The First SASF was held in 2017 in Kathmandu in collaboration with the National Planning Commission, Nepal. The Second SASF was organized by UNESCAP in partnership with the NITI Aayog, India and the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), on 4-5 October 2018 in New Delhi. The Third SASF was jointly organized by UNESCAP and the Government of Bangladesh on 8-9 December 2019 in Dhaka. The Fourth SASF was organized by UNESCAP in partnership with the Government of Maldives on 2-3 December 2020 in virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
South Asia urgently needs an accelerated SDG implementation pathway in the Decade of Action to achieve the SDGs. Review of SDG progress in South Asia revealed that, prior to the pandemic, South Asia had been making good progress on several targets related to Goal 1 (No poverty), Goal 2 (Zero hunger) and Goal 3 (Good health and well-being). Significant reduction in maternal and child mortality was noted in particular. However, the subregion has slipped back on some of these achievements due to COVID-19 impacts. While some progress has been made on Goal 7 (Affordable and clean energy), particularly in terms of increase in investments in renewable energy, their proportion in total energy consumption is not improving as needed. Alarmingly, the subregion is found to be regressing on Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and on key environmental Goals 13 (Climate action) and 14 (Life below water). Progress is either slow or stagnant on most of the remaining Goals.

COVID-19 has caused severe adverse socio-economic impacts, demanding concerted actions for building back better. The pandemic has put a burden on healthcare systems, disrupted economic activities, affected the education sector and widened economic and social disparities. The pandemic is triggering disproportionately larger socio-economic impacts on developing regions such as South Asia, with poor levels of preparedness, lower resource bases, weak health infrastructure and services, and budget constraints limiting the extent and reach of public support measures. It has exposed critical development gaps and vulnerabilities of the subregion, exerting adverse impacts as manifested across most of the SDGs indicators of the subregion. The impacts were most acutely felt by the poor and vulnerable groups of the subregion, particularly in the informal sector. Overcoming the impacts of the pandemic and implementation of the SDGs cannot be achieved by any country alone. Cooperation and partnerships between countries is needed to collectively take stock of SDG progress in the region, understand the challenges that confront all countries, and explore opportunities for stronger partnerships and concerted actions.

South Asia should adopt an integrated approach to SDG implementation and recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. A special report jointly prepared by UNESCAP SSWA and member of organisations of SANS titled “Achieving the SDGs in South Asia” was presented at the Forum. It highlighted that many of the policy interventions needed for crisis recovery, such as enhancing social protection and investing in human resources, which are also fundamental reforms required for long term sustainable development. Thus, there can be an integrated approach to accelerate SDG progress and COVID-19 recovery, ensuring that the resources deployed address both these objectives to the maximum extent possible. The report identified five priority areas, considering the specific development challenges of the subregion: (i) sustaining growth through economic diversification oriented on industrialization; (ii) raising investments in the core social sectors of health and education; (iii) expanding social protection, closing gender gaps and improving basic infrastructure; (iv) ensuring food security, agriculture and rural development; and (v) investing in clean energy and environmental sustainability. The report also presented key priorities and modalities for working in partnerships with various development partners for strengthening means of implementation in the subregion, focusing on key areas of institutional capacities, science, technology and innovation (STI), statistics and financing.

While COVID-19 recovery measures are underway in all South Asian countries, further efforts are needed to align them with the SDGs. The subregional countries are proactively responding to the crisis with hikes in social protection measures and fiscal stimulus packages. Funds are devolved to the
health sector, relief and social assistance for affected people through income and cash transfers, wage support, in-kind assistance and food vouchers. Other fiscal measures include the deferral of taxes, rents and interest payments. However, overall fund allocations for recovery, proportionate to respective GDPs, have been lower in South Asian countries (medial value of 2.5%) among Asia-Pacific subregions (regional median value of 5.4%). Stimulus packages must focus on employment creation, financial assistance for SMEs and improved social security coverage for the poor and vulnerable. Policy programmes must also be aligned with the principles of ‘green recovery’, investing more on areas of environmental sustainability.

**Presentation of VNRs of South Asian countries revealed significant progress made on mainstreaming the SDGs in national planning.** Efforts to align the SDGs with respective national development frameworks are underway in all subregional countries with notable progress. However, domestic policy alignment with SDGs in South Asia needs improvement in terms of corresponding budgetary allocation. Countries may have to undertake further financing needs assessments for the SDGs in the light of changes in requirements in the post-COVID-19 scenario.

**Better coordination leading to a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is needed for effective implementation of SDG plans and programmes.** While progress on institutional mechanisms for SDG implementation has been impressive, inter-departmental coordination remains a challenge. Results and outcomes-based approaches to SDG implementation need robust monitoring and evaluation systems. Localization of the SDGs, and greater and broader stakeholder participation, are some of the additional implementation priorities that demand attention in South Asia.

**Greater involvement of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is needed in the development, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of SDG policies and processes.** The importance of involving civil society in policy planning and implementation was highlighted throughout the Forum sessions. Inclusive and participatory approaches to planning and implementation can contribute to better policies and create greater buy-in for plans to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Opportunities exist to leverage CSO capacities for monitoring and evaluation of activities on the ground. CSOs also have expertise in running advocacy campaigns that can be tapped into for VNR and follow-up processes. A need for civil society to be better resourced for more meaningful participation in VNR processes was mentioned and the creation of a “Civil Society Forum” similar to the existing “Business Forum” at the HLPF would allow CSOs to come together to debate issues and agree on positions linked to the monitoring and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

**Improvements in statistical systems needed for monitoring progress.** Tracking the many SDG indicators continues to be challenging in South Asia without reliable data availability. More disaggregated data at the local level and integrated data systems at the international level are required to support sustainable development planning and monitoring. For facilitating evidence-based policy making, subregional countries need to channel more investments into developing national statistical capacities. South Asian countries must utilize capacity-building opportunities at the regional level to develop sufficiently robust data collection systems.

**South Asian countries must work together for diversifying and deepening financing for SDG implementation.** Improving development financing portfolios through an optimal mix of domestic and external sources is critical for the prudent management of SDG implementation. The scope of broadening and deepening the tax base remains underexploited in South Asia. For fending off debt vulnerabilities, improved domestic savings and the expansion of private capital, investments in the
composition of domestic financing portfolios are necessary. Introduction of new tax instruments such as progressive wealth-based tax and carbon tax components, enhancing the efficiency of tax systems, reforms for enabling a transparent, reliable and conducive regulatory environment to attract FDI, facilitation of private capital participation in development financing, and utilisation of blended financing are some of priority areas in this regard.

**Investments in science and technology capacities and innovation (STI) capabilities and digitization must be promoted as key enablers for SDGs implementation.** Success in acquiring STI strengths needs broad-based collaborations and long-term institutional build-up. Countries in the region with stronger capacities than others, such as India, can take the lead in promoting STI capacity development, training, as well as in R&D activities including through common facilities, incentives and support. Steps must be taken to bridge the digital divide for effective delivery of education and other critical social services.

**Review of progress on the cluster of Goals under review in the HLPF 2022 (SDGs 4, 5, 14 and 15) revealed need for broad-based policy interventions.** COVID-19 has widened gaps in current and expected levels of progress across all four select Goals. The Forum called for increasing investment in education with focus on improving access to education services through digital platforms and skill-development (SDG 4), adoption of broad-based gender-sensitive policies to address gender inequalities (SDG 5), and dedicated action plans to conserve marine and terrestrial biodiversity and natural resources for environmental sustainability (SDGs 14 and 15).

**South Asia needs collective regional actions in all areas of sustainable development to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of SDG interventions.** The subregion has important avenues to take advantage of the potential of regional cooperation for the SDGs. Potential gains from regional economic integration by way of enhanced trade in goods and services, and cross-border investment flows, are highly relevant for the SDGs. Initiatives for economic integration would also necessarily involve the creation of intra-regional transport connectivity infrastructure, communication networks and trade policy coordination, and improving cross-border trade facilitation, which would in turn lay out the blueprint for broader regional cooperation. Regional knowledge pools on good practices in public welfare programmes can steepen the learning curve and improve the efficiency of programme implementation. South Asia will have to also rely on its collective ability to mobilize investments in modern energy sources and energy trading infrastructure to meet the ever-increasing energy demand. COVID-19 has brought forth the importance of developing regional infrastructure for digital connectivity. Regional cooperation can yield benefits in combating environmental risks, given the shared and transboundary nature of such vulnerabilities. It can also help to improve the collective fiscal space of South Asia and reprioritize allocations for the SDGs in line with the demands of crisis recovery.

**The momentum for regional cooperation created by joint COVID-19 responses must be further consolidated.** South Asian countries have responded proactively to the COVID-19 crisis by creating the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund. Other initiatives cited throughout the two-days of discussion included allocations by the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) for COVID-19 related projects and work carried out by the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC). The report on Achieving SDGs in South Asia also noted initiatives for the setting up of an electronic platform called ‘SAARC COVID-19 Information Exchange Platform (COINEX)’ to exchange COVID-19 related health information and training, a dedicated COVID-19 website by the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) and actions for cross-border distribution of COVID-19 vaccines at affordable rates. These developments
provide a much-needed impetus for greater regional cooperation under the auspices of regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC.

The South Asia Network on the SDGs (SANS) can facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development in the subregion. SANS must play a vital role in sustaining regional cooperation initiatives through track-2 and track-1.5 (liaison between government and non-government stakeholders). The Network hosts a dedicated web portal as a space for different stakeholder groups to learn from and partake in SDG implementation. Cooperation for research and data sharing for evidence-based analysis, exchange of ideas and facilitation of joint actions for raising issues of common interest at global platforms are endorsed as some of the key roles for SANS.
Session 1 – Inaugural

The inaugural session, held at the official residence of the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, aimed to enhance awareness and understanding of key challenges and opportunities to implement the 2030 Agenda in the subregion in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and share recent regional and subregional developments. The Honourable Prime Minister of Sri Lanka inaugurated the Forum and officially launched Sri Lanka’s National SDG Data Portal. UNESCAP’s special report on *Achieving the SDGs in South Asia* was unveiled by the Honourable Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, the Executive Secretary of ESCAP and dignitaries on the stage.

Mr. Anusha Palpita, Secretary of the Ministry of Economic Reforms and Plan Implementation, Sri Lanka, welcomed all delegates to the Fifth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals co-organized by the Government of Sri Lanka and UNESCAP. He highlighted that South Asia has an important role for the global achievement of the SDGs as the sub-region has a relatively high level of poverty and socio-economic deprivation and the COVID 19 pandemic has put a burden on healthcare systems, disrupted economic activity, affected education and widened economic and social disparities. He noted that the national planning and budgeting processes in Sri Lanka are in line with SDGs and that the engagement of both government and non-government stakeholders is critical for SDGs achievement. Sri Lanka is strengthening its SDG monitoring and review processes through improved data governance and management systems and Sri Lanka is preparing its second Voluntary National Review for presentation at the HLPF in 2022. In closing, regional cooperation was deemed as crucial to overcome COVID-19, both individually and collectively. The Forum would be a useful platform for constructive deliberations, explore opportunities for partnerships to advance the SDG agenda and build back better for a sustainable future.

Mr. Adnan Aliani, Officer-in-charge, ESCAP South and South-west Asia Office, welcomed all participants to the Forum and expressed gratitude to the Government of Sri Lanka for co-hosting the event. The 2021 Subregional SDG Forum assumes special significance, as South Asian countries gradually emerge from the devastations caused by COVID-19 and urgently need to ensure that efforts for building back better also results in advancing the SDGs. The main objective of the Forum is to foster deepened and shared understanding of the opportunities and challenges for accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through inclusive dialogue and strengthened partnerships. The Forum also aims to reflect subregional perspectives on the SDGs into regional and global discussions. The outcomes of the Forum will feed into the Asia Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development (APFSD) and the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) to be held in 2022. He also highlighted that UNESCAP prepared a detailed Report titled “Achieving the SDGs in South Asia”, in partnership with the members of the South Asia Network on the SDGs (SANS), to facilitate discussions at the Forum.

Ms. Hanaa Singer-Hamdy, UN Resident Coordinator, Sri Lanka, welcomed all participants joining the Forum both in person and virtually. The COP26 that had just concluded was a compromise reflecting the state of political will in the world today, but that there is a need to push forward on a green path. The Global Commission on Economy and Climate has estimated that countries taking strong climate
action between 2018-2030 could by 2030 generate over 65 million new low-carbon jobs, generate $26 trillion in net global economic benefits and avoid 700,000 premature deaths from air pollution. Failure to take mitigating action against climate change and natural disasters will have a detrimental impact on economic growth and livelihoods of the most vulnerable. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many SDG indicators have had considerable setbacks. Globally, extreme poverty rose for the first time in over 20 years. In closing, three points were highlighted as being important for a green reset and recovery from COVID-19: (i) Need to address climate conscious agriculture as 60% of people in South Asia are involved in this sector; (ii) Incorporation of disaster risk reduction into land and infrastructure decisions, more sustainable urban planning practices, and low carbon development projects; and (iii) Importance of accurate and timely data to help us assess the current situation to help us in effectively and accurately mapping a way forward.

**Launch of the National SDG Data Portal of Sri Lanka**

The National SDG Portal was created as a unified and comprehensive platform for assimilation and dissemination of data on SDG indicators. It was produced through joint efforts of the Government of Sri Lanka, led by the Sustainable Development Council (SDC) of Sri Lanka, and various agencies of the United Nations Development Systems (UNDS) operating in Sri Lanka. The interactive online platform provides better data visualization and disaggregation capabilities, offering access to properly validated and reliable data collected from numerous sources. The Portal was inaugurated by Hon. Mahinda Rajapaksa, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka.

**Ms. Chamindry Saparamadu**, Director General of the Sustainable Development Council, Sri Lanka, presented the objectives for creating the National SDG Data Portal of Sri Lanka and introduced its content. She noted that weaknesses in data systems is one of the biggest challenges faced for SDG implementation. Data gaps constrains evidence-based decision-making, target setting and budgeting as well as affects proper monitoring and evaluation of SDG implementation. Within the official statistical system of Sri Lanka, many government institutions are engaged in primary data collection. However, they are operating based on fragmented mandates without proper coordination, which sometimes leads to duplication of efforts. As an integrated approach to data generation and management was needed, SDC took steps to strengthen data governance and management systems by developing the National SDG Data Portal. This central platform links together about 80 government institutions which are involved in primary data collection based on their respective mandates and functions. This allows a whole-of-government approach to data compilation and dissemination. The combined efforts of the SDC and the UNDS in Sri Lanka allowed for the unified platform to be created, promoting validity and reliability of data with better visualization tools and disaggregation. The process of integration helped to foster multi-institutional engagement and inter-departmental cooperation as well as cooperation for data mapping and validation processes. Availability of updated data will enable more effective SDG planning and implementation at the national level.

**Mr. Robert Juhkam**, Resident Representative, UNDP Sri Lanka spoke about the importance of data and how big data, if used wisely, can power policy decisions on important issues such as inclusive governance, greener economic growth, ecosystem conservation, food security and social services such as education and health. The COVID-19 pandemic had detrimental effects but is also an opportunity to protect lives and livelihoods if governments in South and Southwest Asia fast-track investments in data and analytics capabilities. The SDG portal just launched by the Honourable Prime Minister of Sri Lanka aims to help power the Decade of Action as big data that is used properly and in an integrated manner
can improve human development and accelerate all the SDGs. Research has shown that policies driven by data are better in that they are more tailored, more nimble, more experimental (i.e., allowing for real-time testing) and more risk informed. Using data in a smart way can enable governments at national and subnational levels to focus sectoral policies and budget expenditures more effectively, and better focus its services and programmes. The SDG portal was a collaborative effort of UNDP Sri Lanka with the Sustainable Development Council, Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, and UN Agencies working in Sri Lanka to provide a user-friendly, accessible and integrated platform. Mr. Juhkam congratulated Sri Lanka and SDC on the support provided and looked forward to seeing how the portal will be used.

**Release of the UNESCAP Report on Achieving the SDG in South Asia**

For facilitating informed discussions at the South Asia SDG Forum 2021, UNESCAP prepared a special report titled “Achieving the SDG in South Asia: An Integrated Approach to Accelerate SDG Progress and COVID-19 Recovery”. The Report was prepared in partnership with member organizations of the South Asia Network on the SDGs (SANS). The report highlights that many of the policy interventions needed for crisis recovery, such as enhancing social protection and investing in human resources. It argues that there can be an integrated approach to accelerate SDG progress and COVID-19 recovery and presents a five-point action agenda for achieving these twin goals. The report was unveiled by Hon. Mahinda Rajapaksa, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, the Executive Secretary of ESCAP and dignitaries on the stage.

**Mr. Rajan Ratna**, Deputy Head, ESCAP South and Southwest Asia Office, introduced the special report on Achieving the SDG in South Asia, highlighting its main message of the need for an integrated approach to accelerate implementation of the SDGs and COVID-19 recovery. Such an integration is necessitated by: (i) synergies between the short-term spending required for resilient recovery and the long-term investments for sustainable development; and (ii) optimal allocation and utilization of limited resources to meet both objectives. South Asia should adopt an implementation path with focused interventions in key areas that have maximum spill over benefits for all the SDGs. The report identifies five priority areas in this regard: (i) sustaining growth through economic diversification oriented on industrialization; (ii) raising investments in the core social sectors of health and education; (iii) expanding social protection, closing gender gaps and improving basic infrastructure; (iv) ensuring food security, agriculture and rural development, and (v) investing in clean energy and environmental sustainability. The Report also presents key priorities and modalities for working in partnerships with various development partners for strengthening means of implementation in the subregion, focusing on the key areas of institutional capacities, science, technology and innovation (STI), statistics and financing. For making effective progress in most of key areas of sustainable development, South Asian countries must join forces and work together through partnerships. The Report highlights the importance of regional cooperation and partnerships and how they can be leveraged in key areas such as trade and economic integration, regional connectivity, clean energy capacities, climate action and knowledge sharing on SDG good practices.

**Special Remarks**

**H.E. Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana**, Under Secretary General of the UN and Executive Secretary of ESCAP expressed her appreciation to the Government of Sri Lanka to co-host the Forum with
measures to guard against COVID-19. The annual South Asia SDG Forums are very important in the Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda and help ESCAP in planning and executing its work programme in South Asia. While South Asia was making good progress on Goals 1, 2 and Goal 3 with significant reduction in maternal and child mortality, the post-pandemic situation reveals that the subregion has slipped back on some of these achievements. The subregion is also regressing on Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and on key environmental Goals 13 (Climate action) and 14 (Life below water). She highlighted five critical areas of policy reforms to help countries achieve SDGs: (i) promote economic diversification, but focusing on sustainable industrialization; (ii) raise investments in human resources in health and education sectors to meet the workforce demands of economic diversification; (iii) ensure diversification opportunities are available to all with policies that promote inclusiveness; (iv) rural development be given special attention as South Asia is dependent on rural agrarian sectors that have higher incidences of poverty; and (v) increasing investments in clean energy infrastructure and promoting cross-border trade in renewal energy. She was encouraged to note that South Asian countries showed solidarity at the regional level by setting up the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund during the early stages of the crisis and reaffirmed ESCAP’s commitment to continue to support cooperation for sustainable development in South Asia, including through partnering with the South Asia Network on the SDGs (SANS) and the South Asia Peoples Forum.

H.E. Mr. Ersala Ruwan Weerakoon, Secretary-General of SAARC, drew attention towards the adverse socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 in South Asia. The impacts were most acutely felt by the poor and vulnerable groups of the subregion, particularly by dependents in the informal sector. He noted that the subregional Forum assumes greater significance against this backdrop as all SDGs have strong global, regional, national and local dimensions. SAARC accords high priority to regional cooperation for achieving the Goals. As a testimony to the political will for collective action, the SAARC Summit of 2007 adopted the SAARC Development Goals before the SDGs came into force in 2015. However, progress made on the Goals to date has lagged. In this regard, all stakeholders must work collectively, confronting the challenges to build back better. South Asia accounts for about a quarter of humanity and the global SDG targets cannot be met if the subregion is left behind. South Asia is increasingly becoming vulnerable to natural disasters and the need for enhanced investments for climate action is immense.

As all the countries in the subregion are faced with similar challenges, they should come together to pave a common path for socio-economic recovery. South Asian countries responded proactively, showing their solidarity against the crisis. India convened a virtual meeting of SAARC leaders as early as 15 March 2020, which saw the establishment of the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund. Many follow-up meetings have taken place subsequently. The SAARC planning ministers also met in September 2020 to discuss the theme “Achieving the SDGs in South Asia: Shaping the SAARC Vision 2030”. As South Asia attempts to build back better, there is a need to reorient the medium-term sustainable development targets. He mentioned that there is lot of scope for collaboration between UNESCAP and SAARC. The two institutions have had fruitful collaborations facilitated by a Memorandum of Understanding, and this must be continued. He complemented UNESCAP for creating the South Asia Network on SDGs (SANS) and asserted that regional cooperation is not only desirable but also indispensable because of the numerous challenges that transcend national boundaries. Regional actions triggered by the pandemic have generated a momentum for further cooperation.

H.E. Ms. Fathimath Niuma, Deputy Minister, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives recalled the process undertaken in Maldives to mainstream SDGs into national and sectoral development plans. Maldives was hit hard by the pandemic, particularly in the tourism and
construction sectors, with real GDP declining by 34% in 2020 and fiscal deficit increasing by 23% relative to GDP. In May 2020, a short-medium term National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP) was launched to provide a holistic approach to “build back better” and leave no one behind by accelerating and facilitating the economic diversification, seeking required finance, and addressing the most vulnerable groups by improving livelihoods. Maldives has seen a strong rebound in growth, but GDP remains 15.9% below pre-pandemic levels. The use of digital platforms allowed for the provision of services during the pandemic, but those with limited access to technologies may have been left behind during this crisis. Ms. Niuma emphasized that regional and sub-regional collaboration was vital for South Asia to overcome the effects of COVID and achieving the SDGs. Collaborations and investments in trade and research and the harnessing of new opportunities and innovation is necessary to increase resilience and adaptability to man-made and natural disasters. Expanding and exploring the fiscal space for financing and accelerating clean energy transition is also essential. A holistic and whole of society approach is the only way the goals of the 2030 Agenda can be achieved.

H.E. Dr. Biswo Nath Poudel, Vice Chairman, National Planning Commission, Nepal, stressed on the importance of regional cooperation for the SDGs given the interdependence of the world we live in. The interconnected Goals require concerted efforts of all stakeholders and regional cooperation is increasingly critical to address transboundary issues such as climate change, transport, energy, trade, and migration. Sharing highlights of SDG initiatives in Nepal, he mentioned that the central and subnational governments of the country have taken steps to mainstream the SDGs in their plans and programmes. Nepal prepared and presented VNRs in the 2017 and 2020 HLPFs. Considering the need for partnerships, the Government is working with various stakeholders including the private sector, civil society organizations and development partners. Nepal has managed to reduce the incidence of multidimensional poverty to 17.4% in 2019 from 30.1% in 2014. Outcomes related to food security and nutrition are also moving in the right direction. In the health sector, indicators show significant progress in reducing infant, child and maternal mortality rates. In the education sector, the net enrolment rates in primary and secondary education have increased. Progress has also been made on reducing gender inequalities, reflected by increasing women representation in central and provincial governments, accounting for about two-fifths of total representatives at the local level. The target of increasing access to basic drinking water has almost been achieved, and more than 88% of the population now has access to electricity. Industry and infrastructure sectors are growing, while social, economic and political empowerment indices are showing progress. However, progress is lagging on targets related to reduced inequalities.

Nepal is following local and community level adaptation plans to reduce and mitigate the impacts of climate change, but much remains to be done to achieve the targets by 2030. After registering economic growth rate of more than 6% consecutively for three years, Nepal faced growth of -2% in the fiscal year 2019-2020. The pandemic hit the poor and vulnerable population disproportionately, distressing the public health and social security systems. In response to the impacts of the pandemic, the Government of Nepal has taken several preventive and curative measures, including increased spending in the health sector, particularly for vaccination and enhancing access to health services and medical supplies. Several fiscal and monetary support measures have also been taken, including cash transfers, tax waivers and concessional loans. In the present context, regional countries should work together for resilient recovery.

H.E. Mr. Asad Umar, Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, Pakistan, noted in a video message that the Government of Pakistan placed an important priority on the SDGs with a special subcommittee of the National Economic Council being created with high level political
representation. When COVID-19 hit, the focus and priorities of the government changed to address issues presented by the pandemic. The health sector was strengthened with the development of a single database management system to enable better monitoring of the healthcare system in the country, enhancing Intensive Care Unit (ICU) capacities and investing in a large healthcare programme which has helped to create a health care system that is less fragile than before the pandemic. A large cash transfer programme, reaching almost half of the households in Pakistan, was initiated that helped to support those who had lost their livelihoods or seen a decrease in income. Pakistan tried to find a balance between saving lives and maintaining livelihoods as many depend on daily wages for their survival. With the use of digital technology, a testing, tracking and monitoring system was setup, and it is estimated that within six months, 90% of those who had lost their jobs were back at work. In closing, Mr. Umar invited UNESCAP to hold the next SDG Forum in Pakistan.

H.E. Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa, Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation, Sri Lanka, in his inaugural address (delivered by Mr. Ajith Nivard Cabraal, Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka), underscored the relevance of the theme of the South Asia SDG Forum 2021 “Building back better from COVID-19 while accelerating the implementation of the SDGs” in the context of the ongoing efforts to recover from the devastating consequences of the global pandemic. He took the opportunity to co-host the Forum to further reiterate the strong commitment of the Government of Sri Lanka towards achieving the SDGs. Presenting some of the key steps taken by Sri Lanka, he mentioned at the outset that the country has been making steady progress on the SDGs, as revealed in the 2021 Global Sustainable Development Report. Sri Lanka shows high human development outcomes, made possible by welfare policies implemented by successive governments. Health and educational outcomes are on par with some of the developed countries. The Government has prioritized the full vaccination of its population by the end of 2021 and with the success of the accelerated vaccination programme, the Government is confident that the country could be respired to the pre-pandemic normalcy in the near future.

The Government is also committed to ensure that the high human development outcomes are not reversed in the post-pandemic era. The education sector experienced multiple disruptions due to lockdowns during the last two years. Several initiatives have been taken to ensure the continuation of education through online learning platforms and services, while taking steps to bridge the digital divide for their successful delivery. Universal education and health services have been hallmarks of the State policy of Sri Lanka since independence and the country will continue to pursue this agenda in the same vigour. The challenge now is to revitalize the economy, and build inclusive and sustainable opportunities, by maintaining high investments in social and economic sectors while preserving the ecological balance.

The economy of Sri Lanka has been hit hard by the disruptions to businesses caused by COVID-19 restrictions. The Government endeavoured to preserve resilience of businesses and prevent loss of livelihoods through various concessionary measures and judicious application of labour laws. Looking forward, Sri Lanka is focused on reorienting the country towards an export economy and green development pathways. Specific policy commitments have been made to fast-track transition towards green economy. Two dedicated Presidential Task Forces have been established to find sustainable solutions for this transition towards sustainable agriculture. Sri Lanka has taken a resolution for reducing GHGs emissions by 14.5% by 2030, to achieve carbon neutrality in electricity generation by 2050, and overall carbon neutrality by 2060. The National SDGs Steering Committee has been established to provide leadership and guidance to the SDG implementation process in Sri Lanka and mobilize all stakeholders for this cause.
In conclusion, he emphasized that overcoming the impacts of the pandemic and implementation of the SDGs cannot be achieved by any country alone. Cooperation and partnerships between countries is needed to collectively take stock of SDG progress in the region, understand the challenges that confront all countries, and explore opportunities for stronger partnerships and concerted actions. We must also explore opportunities to further strengthen South-South cooperation, cross-border trade and investments, capacity-building and technology transfer. Sharing experiences through deliberations in the Subregional SDG Forum will contribute to informing and shaping regional and global SDG policies and practices.

Sessions 2 and 3 – National progress, achievements and challenges with respect to the 2030 Agenda in the context of COVID-19

Sessions 2 and 3 provided national perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on SDGs, and highlighted policy priorities being adopted to respond to the pandemic and for meeting the 2030 Agenda. South Asian countries also presented on their respective Voluntary National Review (VNR) experiences with the aim of providing opportunity for peer learning on SDG good practices.

Mr. Riccardo Mesiano, Sustainable Development Officer, Office of the Executive Secretary, UNESCAP presented some reflections on the value of the VNR processes being undertaken by countries, particularly when they are being undertaken for a second or third time. He noted that the national level reviews are the primary entry points for reflection on achieving the 2030 Agenda as they can track progress on SDGs, get different perspectives on setbacks and successes and identify concrete actions to be taken. He outlined important communication, dissemination and follow-up activities that are undertaken after a VNR has been presented and highlighted the fact that the VNR is an ongoing process whether a country is preparing a VNR or is implementing follow-up activities and action plan. The integration of VNRs into policymaking is key and requires strengthening of SDG monitoring institutions, data collection and analysis and integration of evidence into policy making as well as alignment of VNR with national policies, M&E processes and reviews. Links to online tools for countries undertaking second VNRs as well as policy briefs on follow-up actions to be taken after a VNR has been conducted were provided.

Mr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna, Deputy Head and Senior Economic Affairs Officer of the ESCAP Subregional Office of South and South-West Asia, made a presentation on how the region could accelerate SDG progress and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic through an integrated approach. He first noted the urgency of accelerating SDG implementation in South Asia given that the subregion was lagging in all 17 SDG goals. Despite some progress on Goal 1, 2 and 3, the subregion had regressed on Goal 11, 14 and 14, and had remained stagnant on the rest of the goals. He also observed the pervasive impacts of COVID-19 on all SDGs, which called for an integrated approach to building back better through a five-point action agenda. He then highlighted the impacts of COVID-19, including CGE projections, on growth and employment, poverty, food security, health and education, inequalities including gender disparities, and environment vulnerabilities.
To build back better, five recommendations were proposed in the report on *Advancing SDGs in South Asia*²: (i) sustaining growth through economic diversification; (ii) raising investments in the core social sectors of health and education; (iii) expanding social protection, closing gender gaps and improving basic infrastructure to address inequalities; (iv) ensuring food security, agriculture and rural development; and (v) investing in clean energy and environmental sustainability. If the reforms in the five proposed areas are adopted, its cumulative effects are estimated to double the gross domestic product of South Asia by 2030 over the 2020 level; South Asia will also reduce its poverty headcount ratio by more than 12 percentage points. Mr. Ratna then highlighted the importance of strengthening the means of SDG implementation, including through strengthening: (i) institutional reforms; (ii) science, technology and innovation; and (iii) data and statistics, and financing for developments. He also emphasized the importance for South Asia to leverage on regional cooperation. Finally, Mr. Ratna shared ESCAP’s framework for socioeconomic response, through which the Subregional Office will continue to support ESCAP member States and associate members in implementing the SDGs.

Sri Lanka, which is preparing for a second VNR, welcomed the opportunity to learn from the delegates gathered. In Sri Lanka the national policies, planning and budgeting processes are well aligned with the SDGs and there is a national Steering Committee headed by the Prime Minister to ensure a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to SDG implementation. Sri Lanka is providing free vaccines to its population and the provision of free education has resulted in a literacy rate of 92.3% and enabled Sri Lanka to achieve gender parity in education. Steps were taken to promote digital education to facilitate online learning and disseminate learning materials, but school closures increased risk of children in remote areas low income and vulnerable families to fall behind in their studies. To reduce the digital divide, the “Communication to the Village” programme was launched to give broadband coverage to all districts by the end of 2022. Five techno parks are also being established to increase IT-based business operations and budget has been allocated to improve vocational education. The Ministry of Justice is preparing action plans and programmes to eliminate gender-based violence.

Due importance has been given to transition to green economy and promoting sustainable blue economy. The country has a target for 70% of energy requirements met through renewable sources by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. NDC pledges to increase forest cover to 32% by 2030 have also been made. As Sri Lanka rebuilds from the pandemic, there is a hope to develop an export economy based on diversified industrial and agro-industrial processing with success dependent on access to international markets. Sri Lanka seeks support in enhancing opportunities for development financing particularly through debt relief, investments, trading opportunities, technology and knowledge transfer. Sri Lanka remains committed to forging partnerships and fostering international cooperation towards a resilient recovery and transition towards sustainable development.

Bhutan shared their experience in undertaking a VNR in 2021 and implementing the SDGs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Bhutan’s approach of implementing SDGs is within the country’s overarching objective of maximizing Gross National Happiness and through the country’s five-year plans. COVID-19 and travel restrictions made the second VNR process quite challenging, but Bhutan managed a highly participatory and inclusive process involving 65 agencies through in-person and virtual consultations, including new stakeholders that were not consulted in the first VNR. Bhutan presented on its current progress towards achieving Goals 1, 8 and 10. Prior to the pandemic, Bhutan had managed to reduce both rural and urban poverty as well as its multi-dimensional poverty incidence. However, COVID-19

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has seen unemployment reach its highest levels, with youth unemployment rate almost doubling from 2019 to 2020. GDP growth, originally projected to be at 6.9%, contracted by 10.08%. The Gini index, as well as rural and urban poverty rates have all increased. Females have worse unemployment rates than males, and gender parity in tertiary education has not been achieved.

Measures undertaken to mitigate the effects of the pandemic were also presented, including a monthly income support to individuals until June 2022, which has reached more than 37,000 individuals and their children. Bhutan has also drafted an economic contingency plan, national gender equality policy, national child policy, and national policy for persons with disabilities to support sectors and vulnerable groups most affected by the pandemic and a vigorous e-learning programme for students has also been launched. The impacts of COVID-19 and effectiveness of policy measures taken will be better observed through the findings of the upcoming Bhutan Living Standards Survey in 2022. Bhutan also expressed thanks to development cooperation entities for their support towards Bhutan’s socioeconomic development and combating COVID-19, including vaccination-related collaborations. Finally, he stated that Bhutan is now working on its upcoming five-year plan, which begins in 2023, and that findings from the VNR will be used as a core input for this planning cycle.

**Bangladesh** noted that it undertook its second VNR in 2020 and prior to the pandemic had seen decreases in poverty, hunger and under-five and neonatal morbidity rates. Gender parity in education at primary and secondary levels had improved and increases have been seen in access to electricity, annual growth rate of real GDP per employed person, manufacturing value-added as a proportion of GDP, and social protection budget allocation and coverage. While there are many factors for this success, including strong political commitments, COVID-19 has impacted negatively on GDP growth, exports and tax revenues which has resulted in increased fiscal deficit and inflation rates.

Bangladesh introduced several fiscal and monetary policy initiatives as well as investments in social protection programmes to respond to the economic challenges of COVID-19. In total, 28 stimulus packages amounting to 6.3% of GDP were launched with the aim to maintain supply-side economy and restore aggregate demand, create employment, and revitalize the rural economy and enhance social security. Every SDG goal has challenges, but the biggest issue facing Bangladesh is on dealing with the absolute number of poor people and not the percentage of people in poverty. On the way forward, several issues were listed with a particular emphasis on the need for Bangladesh to increase its tax base and coverage to mobilize domestic resources as well as dealing with climate change. The Eighth Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) has six priority areas addressing COVID-19, GDP growth, inclusiveness, resilience, institutions and LDC graduation and these are all linked to the SDGs. To advance industrialization in Bangladesh, the development of 100 economic zones is envisioned by 2030, with the hope that 10 million additional jobs can be created and lead to USD 40 billion worth of exports. High-tech parks are being developed as nucleus of innovation. Transformational infrastructure projects are being implemented (e.g., bridges, rail links, power plant constructions) which will lead to GDP growth. Foreign direct investment is also important, and measures are being taken to improve investment climate in Bangladesh.

**India** discussed its experience of SDG localization, with a focus on data and monitoring, and preparation process for VNR 2020. The Indian model of SDG localization, comprises a four-pillar approach:
(i) **Creating institutional ownership** with defined functions of actors at the national and subnational levels in coordinating SDG implementation, including NITI Aayog, federal ministries, legislative assemblies, and state administrative structures and planning departments.

(ii) **Driving competition through collaborative competition** with the development of a publicly available SDG index to benchmark SDG progress and rank subnational entities in India since 2018. NITI Aayog has further localized the measurement of SDG progress to the district level to further empower citizens-at-large to demand progress on the SDGs.

(iii) **Building capacities and outreach** including meetings with highest senior government officials at the subnational level to discuss current SDG implementation progress, as well as areas of reform and action plans on key SDGs; and

(iv) **Adopting a whole-of-society approach** where civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations and community organizations, alongside the private sector and academia, were consulted in India’s VNR process. NITI Aayog has also leveraged the VNR platform to forge partnerships between the private sector, international organizations and CSOs to strengthen the country’s pandemic response and management.

India also outlined ongoing efforts to develop a national multidimensional poverty index and measure multi-dimensional poverty in 700 districts. In closing, the importance of utilizing a multisectoral approach, improving and deepening monitoring and developing collaborations towards the realization of SDGs were highlighted.

**Pakistan** outlined challenges faced with the onset of the pandemic which were common to other countries including: (i) risks to gains made in poverty reduction; (ii) slashed consumption, investments, and international trade; (iii) agriculture hit due to prolonged lockdowns; (iv) interruptions in essential health services delivery and disrupted education systems; and (v) disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations. Measures taken to address these challenges were seen as an opportunity to build forward better and the SDGs were used as a central framework for Pakistan’s building forward strategy. Using smart lockdowns, Pakistan managed to achieve 4% economic growth in 2020-2021. Half of the population registered in a social protection programme providing emergency cash transfers and health facilities were upgraded and strengthened. On the education front, tele-schools and accelerated learning pods were launched to bring children back to schools. Gender mainstreaming was considered across the development agenda and a National Youth Roadmap developed.

Pakistan has mainstreamed SDGs with a multi-tiered institutional structure at national, provincial and district levels that will be used for the development of the VNR in 2022. Government programmes are being used as an SDG Accelerator and Ministries are measuring how their interventions are impacting SDG indicators, including the tagging of public expenditures to SDG goals and targets. Experience sharing with other countries is also important to learn and replicate successful approaches. Pakistan has also taken steps to strategically use universities by engaging them in priority research areas for SDGs and have them play an important role as technical and policy arms of the government. Some key challenges that exist are the disconnect between SDG targets and investments as well as gaps in data collection and reporting. Data systems are being strengthened and made available to researchers to help conduct analysis that can help guide government policy decisions.

**Maldives** presented on the progress and upcoming plans for the realization of the SDGs. While Maldives has achieved SDGs 1, 4 and 7, and has maintained momentum in progressing towards
SDGs 6, 11 and 16, there is also a need to refocus efforts on addressing SDGs 8 and 15, and to strengthen data systems for SDG reporting. While COVID-19 has devastated economies and livelihoods, it has also revealed important lessons, including the state of food insecurity in Maldives, its dependence on the tourism industry, and the increase of mental health concerns, gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse. The pandemic has also demonstrated the potential of utilizing ICT for more efficient delivery of public services and for enhancing the adaptability of the private sector. One-third of Maldives remains multidimensionally poor due to the geographical make-up of the country; efforts have been made to increase food security, reform higher education to address health sector shortages, strengthen national transportation, decentralize government services, and enhance investments in education and health ICT. The pandemic has created new forms of inequality, which disproportionately impact vulnerable groups such as women, children, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, and youth.

The Government of Maldives has developed a National Resilient Economic Recovery Plan to revive economic growth and realign the social sector to face new challenges. The Government is also strengthening the decentralization process with new local councils elected in 2020 that are empowered with more fiscal and legal autonomy and rolling out the Integrated National Public Ferry Network Project to facilitate connectivity by sea transport. The Maldives Bureau of Statistics has also formulated the National Strategy for Development Statistics to strengthen data management towards realizing national and international commitments. Maldives will need to accelerate the transition to renewable energy, protect its fragile ecosystems and build resilience against the impacts of climate change. Finally, continued support from international development partners for the second VNR in 2023 was needed.

Nepal presented on the efforts made to achieve SDGs. Nepal conducted its first VNR in 2017 and a second VNR in 2020. Their 14th and 15th Five-Year Plans are aligned with the SDGs. Support has been provided to sub-national governments to align activities with SDGs and this has been reflected in medium-term expenditure frameworks that have been developed. Nepal is facing challenges in data availability as 247 national SDG indicators were added to the global ones, resulting in data being available for only 44% of SDG indicators. Some goals have major data gaps and there are issues with periodicity, disaggregation, standardization, and quality of data that does exist. Based on findings of SDG Progress Assessment report 2016-2019, Nepal has seen satisfactory progresses in SDG 1 (ending poverty) and 10 (reducing inequalities) with declines in poverty and basic indicators of horizontal inequality. Moderate progress has been made in SDGs 4 (inclusive quality education), 5 (gender equality), 7 (clean energy), 15 (terrestrial system) and 17 (partnerships). Progresses in seven goals (SDGs 2, 3, 6, 8, 11, 12 16) has remained slow and needs to be expedited while no progress has been made in SDG 9 (industry and infrastructure) and SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production). COVID-19 has had serious impact on gains made in all SDGs, particularly on poverty, health, and education and a study is being undertaken to assess the impact of COVID-19 on SDGs.

Nepal is facing a variety of challenges such as a large financing gap for SDGs, weak institutional capacities for localizing SDGs, inadequate coordination between three tiers of government and other stakeholders as well as issues with the government M&E system, tracking of investments from private, cooperative, and civil society sectors, and the existence of too many SDG indicators. To address these issues some of the priority areas that Nepal needs to focus on include the need to: (i) identify additional resources to implement the SDGs; (ii) accelerate the internalization of SDGs at the provincial and local levels; (iii) strengthen partnerships with the private sector, cooperative, civil society and development partners to achieve the SDGs; (iv) apply SDG budget coding that has been developed at provincial and
local levels; (v) review and prioritize indicators based on data availability; and (vi) engage in regional learning and exchanges of resources with other countries in the region.

Dr. Ananda Mallawatani, Executive Director of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Sri Lanka, made remarks in response to the presentations made. He affirmed the commitment of all stakeholders in achieving the SDGs and highlighted gaps in obtaining inputs from communities. He pointed out that, with increased ICT connectivity and the proliferation of handheld devices, much more information could be obtained from the people for the ensuing use of big data towards policymaking and monitoring. He congratulated countries that had used digital technologies to capture progress towards the SDGs. The need for more data collected in a scientific manner across the SDG indicators was highlighted to track the state of SDG implementation and serve as an evidence base that could also be used for modelling and projections. Mr. Mallawatani then discussed funding for the SDGs in the context of other emerging issues including the COVID-19 pandemic. He observed that issues concerning biodiversity, disaster risk reduction, climate change and post-COVID-19 recovery are now often being discussed together – and how blended financing is utilized to address these issues in a comprehensive, cross-thematic manner. Finally, he highlighted the significance of energy issues in the context of SDG implementation, including the potential of green energy in contributing to SDG progress, and called for governmental action in this regard.

Ms. Jyotsna Mohan Singh, Asia Coordinator of the Asia Development Alliance, provided a CSO perspective on the importance of protecting human rights to ensure inclusive decision-making and participation in national SDG processes. The role of regional bodies, such as SAARC, to the strengthening of democracy in South Asia should be explored as Asia is one of the few regions which does not have a regional human rights review mechanism and the UN system is often compromised given the power of its Security Council. Countries have different institutional arrangements for implementation of SDGs, but VNRs provide little information on the impact that such arrangements have on decision making and coordination of overall policies and SDG implementation. From lessons learned in the VNR processes to date, many recommendations were made to strengthen follow-up and review processes at the national level.

To ensure VNR processes are nationally owned, analysis on the interlinkages between the various SDGs and institutions at national levels is needed to establish a “whole-of-government” architecture and multi-stakeholder working groups for individual SDGs can help to strengthen oversight. Draft VNRs should be debated and approved by national parliaments and multi-stakeholder forums prior to submission for HLPF peer review. The HLPF should also examine the extent to which VNR follow-up processes at the national level have been planned and such follow-up processes should also be discussed with national sustainable development committees or councils. Election bodies, national human rights institutions (NHRI) and anti-corruption agencies should be fully engaged at national level in the monitoring and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

To strengthen participation and human rights, subnational, national, and regional outreach strategies should be developed to ensure all stakeholders including marginalised groups can participate in the VNR process. VNRs should also examine how human rights can be incorporated to a much greater extent as human rights processes are currently overlooked when assessing SDG progress and there is a need to ensure that human rights defenders and victims of repression and abuse are protected.

The linking of national, regional, and global accountability processes was important and UN Regional Commissions can play a role to identify priority issues, systemic barriers and finding innovative and
progressive solutions based on regional cooperation. At the global level, insufficient time is allocated at the HLPF for meaningful dialogue on regional meeting outcomes and the regional outcome documents do not have sufficient political weight or connection to the Ministerial Declaration of the HLPF. Civil society also needs to be properly resourced to organize itself across national and sub-regional boundaries. At a global level, the HLPF should create a “Civil Society Forum” similar to the existing “Business Forum” where CSOs can come together to debate issues and agree on positions linked to the monitoring and implementation of the Agenda 2030.

In the open discussion session, questions were asked on how the recent surge in global prices has affected the realization of SDGs and how data protection is ensured in the data collection and management process. Mr. Ratna pointed out that the South Asia SDG report had evaluated the economic impact of such price increases, including how trade and other parameters has been affected, which has in turn impacted efforts to tackle unemployment and poverty. Accordingly, any such socioeconomic impact would in turn affect progress towards realizing the SDG. Specific to subsidies, Mr. Ratna highlighted that countries would need to have a stimulus package amounting to about 14% of GDP to build back better in South Asia. He also observed that the government would have to bear the cost of these subsidies and underscored the availability of other means to finance such subsidies beyond over-burdening the general population with excessive taxation. Mr. Mesiano stated that the indicators countries use for reporting on SDG progress calls for data analysis at the national and/or subnational levels and not at the individual level. Further, in gathering individual data for SDG assessments, e.g., surveys, individual responses are always kept private, and only aggregated data is used for reporting purposes.

**Session 4 – Subregional perspectives and review of selected Goals for HLPF 2022 in South Asia (SDGs 4, 5, 14 and 15)**

**Session 5 – Review of selected Goals for HLPF 2022 in South Asia: Reporting by the Working Groups and the Way Forward**

Sessions 4 and 5 deliberated on subregional perspectives on the cluster of Goals under review in the HLPF 2022 (SDGs 4, 5, 14 and 15). The impact on progress due to the pandemic, challenges, priorities, good practices, and policy proposals to accelerate progress in the selected Goals were discussed. In Session 4, separate break-out sessions on each of the four selected Goals were conducted. Subregional perspectives, policy issues and recommendations from each working group were presented by the respective conveners in Session 5. The plenary Sessions were chaired by H.E. Ms. Fathimath Niuma, Deputy Minister, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives.

**Plenary**

The subregional perspectives on the cluster of Goals selected each year for the HLPF are systematically incorporated into the regional level review process at the annual Asia-Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development (APFSD). A longstanding partnership between UNESCAP, UNDP and ADB called “Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership” facilitates deliberations at the APFSD through knowledge products
consisting of Annual Thematic Reports, SDG Outlook Reports and SDG Data Portal, along with thematic policy briefs and related research outputs.³

**Mr. Bishwa Tiwari**, Programme Specialist, UN Development Programme (UNDP) and **Ms. Smita Nakhooda**, Senior Results Management Specialist, Asian Development Bank (ADB), jointly presented an overview and outline of the forthcoming annual regional thematic report being prepared for 2022, as policy insights from the South Asia SDG Forum 2021 will be used as its inputs. It was highlighted that the thematic report of 2021 revealed worrying possibilities of a K-shaped recovery in the region, marked by a rise in inequality between the highest and lowest income/wealth strata; poor and vulnerable groups face risks of worsening socio-economic status due to job and income losses from prolonged economic depression in the informal sectors and continued deprivation of access to essential services and social protection. To prevent this pathway, the ‘build back better’ strategy must be oriented on people-centred development policies, renewed regional cooperation, improved digital connectivity, and enhanced financial cooperation.

The 2022 thematic report will further examine the effects of COVID-19 in Asia-Pacific, and will highlight good practices for a resilient, sustainable, and inclusive recovery. The report will also aim to identify policy pathways that can address inequalities within and between countries to help achieve the SDGs. It will analyze underlying factors shaping countries’ recovery trajectories based on available data. In terms of its intended focus on 2022 HLPF priority goals, the report will use country examples and in-depth cases studies to highlight the effects of COVID 19 on the selected Goals in particular. In this regard, the in-depth group discussions on the four selected Goals at the South Asia SDG Forum will provide valuable subregional insights on promoting inclusion in education (SDG 4), women empowerment (SDG 5), investments in marine ecosystems (SDG1 14) and nurturing biodiversity (SDG 15).

**Mr. Riccardo Mesiano**, Sustainable Development Officer, Office of the Executive Secretary, UNESCAP, introduced the objectives of the working groups (break-out sessions) on the four selected Goals and outlined the expectations from each group. Key highlights of the discussions by working groups are as follows:

**Working Group 1 – SDG 4: Quality Education**

*Convener: Prof. Nagesh Kumar, Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), India*

The Working Group on SDG 4 discussed on how quality education has been affected by COVID-19. South Asia is a youthful region with a youth bulge that is a demographic dividend. Investments in education are very important to ensure that this dividend does not become a demographic burden. Education was one of the worst-hit sectors by the COVID-19 pandemic and had profound impacts on the health and well-being, education and learning, livelihood, and the economy. The group noted that existing education challenges faced by the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in the region were further amplified during the pandemic.

School closures in South Asia affected approximately 434 million learners of which 34% have not been able to benefit from remote learning opportunities. All countries have offered remote learning (e.g.,

³ Resources are available at: https://sdgasiapacific.net/.
printed materials, mobile phone apps, TV and the radio), but learning gaps between the privileged and marginalized populations has grown. The digital divide that currently exists within countries exacerbated access to education during the pandemic due to lack of internet access and equipment, need to share devices as well as a lack of appropriate facilities in underprivileged schools and vulnerable communities. Girls were more adversely affected as parents often give preference to boys.

School closures have also caused long-term health, well-being, and developmental challenges. Younger children have particularly been affected in the development of their social skills and peer learning. Nutrition and health of children has been affected through the loss of a mid-day school meal, which for many children is the one nutritious meal they can get during the day, and deprived access to health services provided through schools. Children dropping out and not re-enrolling is a problem as parents have lost jobs or passed away and children may need to help to maintain livelihoods. Girls have been pushed to do household chores and issues of domestic violence have also been prevalent.

Public funding for education is already low and COVID-19 has placed government priorities on other areas. As withdrawal of funding from education does not have immediate repercussions, education is viewed as a soft priority, and this puts additional pressure on availability of funding for this sector.

Several initiatives to address the impact of COVID 19 on quality education were highlighted. The LEARN (Lanka Education and Research Network) in collaboration with Zoom developed a virtual education platform for children. While progress was very slow at the start, the development of a user-friendly platform has potential to reach out across borders. UNICEF has been supporting governments to build back better with development of more relevant teaching modalities and methodologies as well as curricula that develop critical competences including transversal skills required for employability in the fast-changing modern world. UNICEF Sri Lanka also supported the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education in developing and distributing 665,000 printed learning materials nationwide to all children in Grades 1 and 2.

Based on the discussions of subregional issues related to quality education, the Working Group proposed a few priorities that need to be considered to recover from the impacts of COVID-19 and accelerate progress to achieve SDG 4.

- Take into account credible data from multiple actors including government, multilateral organizations, development partners, academia, and civil society to ensure no one is left behind.
- Consider the development of national strategies on blended learning as online teaching requires special skills that should be included in teacher training.
- Need to institutionalize mechanisms for meaningful CSO participation not only at a national level, but also at regional levels.
- Need for robust monitoring systems with CSO participation achieve SDG4. Access (giving education), quality education and learning are three different things and there is a need for stronger accountability mechanisms to assess learning outcomes. Without better service delivery, using more money will not achieve better results.
- Realize education financing needs by meeting international education financing benchmarks of at least 4 to 6% of GDP and 15% to 20% of the national budget.
- Increase and sustain international funding support for education, particularly for low and lower-middle income countries, including debt cancelation and moratorium on debt servicing in favour of education, health care and social protection.
Consider improving access to libraries through regional cooperation to improve availability of online resources. Access to libraries has been problematic during the pandemic and regional cooperation to make library resources available online can be a way to pool resources and make learning materials more accessible.

Reflect on how more actors (e.g., parents and caretakers) can be involved in children education as it can tighten the community bond between the child, parent, and teacher.

Consider consultations with private sector to gain insight into skill gaps that exist. PPPs to improve educational skill gaps can be beneficial as it can lead to the creation of a greater pool of people with the necessary skills for the private sector to choose from.

Utilize partnerships to facilitate sharing of experiences/success stories and replicating them. Collaboration between government, education stakeholders, social sectors, media, and the international community can build stronger, better, and safer public education systems that are equitable, inclusive, gender-responsive and resilient within a lifelong learning framework.

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**Working Group 2 – SDG 5: Gender Equality**

*Convener: Ms. Pramila Acharya Rijal*, President, *South Asian Women Development Forum (SAWDF), Nepal*

The SDG 5 Group affirmed that gender equality was not an option but a necessity for achieving a sustainable, equal, and prosperous future for all. The group noted that gender parity would take 136 years and 195 years to achieve globally and in South Asia respectively, with gaps in political empowerment and in economic opportunities and participation being the first and second largest. The proportion of seats held by women parliamentarians in most South Asian countries remains low, as is the proportion of women holding managerial positions. Labour force participation rates for males and females in the subregion is at 77% and 24% respectively, and female unemployment stemming from the COVID pandemic range at 8% in South Asia, as compared to 4% in other parts of the world. Further, many working women in South Asia are engaged in the informal sector, without proper social protection and health benefits. While Bhutan and Nepal had made positive progress towards gender parity in 2021, progress in other South Asian countries was either stagnant or slightly reversed.

The group observed with concern that the COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened the plights and vulnerabilities of women. Women have been at the frontline of the pandemic, having had to bear additional unpaid care burdens due to school closures and care provision of other family members that cannot be outsourced due to the pandemic; women working in healthcare and social work have also had to shoulder additional mental and physical stress in their line of duty. Women and girls have also borne the brunt of violence and harassment online, offline and at home, stemming from stresses related to pandemic-induced lockdowns and financial insecurity. There have also been reports of early marriages and cohabitation as families attempt to reduce financial burdens of supporting the livelihood of their young daughters. Women from marginalized populations – including older women, indigenous women, Dalit women, and women with disabilities – have faced intensified health risks, food insecurity, loss of employment, labour and livelihoods, increased risk of gender-based violence, and attacks on lands and territories during the pandemic; limited access to vaccines, health services and information as well as participation in decision-making further undermine their wellbeing.

The group also noted that women and girls have been disproportionately affected by climate change, due to underlying gender inequality and socioeconomic disadvantage, particularly for those whose livelihoods are dependent on the climate and national resources.
The importance of building alliances in South Asia to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment and to exchange good practices for mutual learning was underscored by the group with several approaches and practices undertaken by South Asian governments, CSOs and international organizations to promote the cause being shared. The Government of Maldives, for instance, has operationalized accommodation blocks for survivors of gender-based violence, and is working closely with local councils and women’s development committees in the islands to form more transformative local partnerships to this end. The Government also worked with CSOs to develop an inclusive vaccine roll-out strategy to enable undocumented workers, including female workers, to be vaccinated in a safe environment. Income support applications from women who lost their jobs were fast tracked and female-headed households and single parent families in the distribution of resettlement grants for families who wish to move back to islands during the pandemic were prioritized. In Nepal, women’s organizations and networks formed coalitions to galvanize support for increased political participation and representation for women in decision-making bodies, and successfully advocated for a minimum of one-third female participation in parliament. In Sri Lanka, the National Committee on Women extended the operating hours of its toll-free hotline from office hours to 24 hours a day to ensure the protection of women despite office closures. It is also in the process of establishing a centre to equip female victims of domestic violence with the requisite skills to earn an independent living and to combat psychosocial challenges prior to their reintegration in society. In partnership with development partners and CSOs, the Government is also digitalizing services and ensuring that centres supporting victims of gender-based violence are open during the pandemic.

In the light of the discussions on the main subregional issues related to implementation of SDG 5, the Working Group put forward several policy recommendations:

- Need to foster wider recognition among both women and men that women possess the knowledge, experience, and skills to contribute to sustainable development. Female participation and representation, including from vulnerable groups, in decision-making bodies and social dialogues are critical to the process of building back better.
- Ensure governments genuinely engage and partner with civil society groups and women organizations to better understand the needs and experiences of women at the national and local levels, and to jointly develop policy responses and deliver services to mitigate challenges that women face.
- Need to enhance State capacity in implementing and enforcing laws concerning gender equality and women’s empowerment.
- Mainstream gender perspectives and concerns across government institutions, beyond the gender ministry, at the national and local levels, and thereby ensure that development policies and financing are inclusive and gender-responsive.
- Address the additional challenges that women and girls from vulnerable populations face because of the intersectionality of gender with age, race, ethnicity, caste, income, geographical location, and/or disability in the design and implementation of policies to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment, governments need to.
- Strengthen data management systems to enable the collection, generation and open dissemination of data disaggregated by sex, age, race, caste, ethnicity, geographical location, disability, and income across SDG indicators, to facilitate the tracking of progress towards gender equality, including of vulnerable groups.
- Consider when conducting studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the differentiated impacts, including secondary impacts, of the pandemic on different population groups, by collecting
disaggregated data and analyzing differential experiences by gender, age, disability, location, income, race, caste, ethnicity, and the intersection of these characteristics.

- Ensure that healthcare facilities are gender-sensitive, and that public health and other critical information, programmes and services are accessible through digital means to facilitate access to public services, including healthcare services by women in the context of COVID-19.
- Increase digital literacy of women and girls and ensure that they have access to virtual public services and skills development platforms.
- Continue to prioritize policies and measures to enhance women’s economic empowerment, including through investments in care infrastructure, care services as well as gender-transformative social protection and employment policies (including comprehensive and adequate social protection for women, and equal pay for equal work) to reduce and redistribute unpaid care burdens.
- Provide scholarships and transport stipends for female learners to improve educational outcomes for girls.
- Use an integrated approach on multiple fronts to eliminate gender-based violence and support survivors. There is a need to ensure that justice systems are free from systemic discrimination, stigmatization, and structural barriers; availability of safe avenues and spaces to report violence and house survivors; and proper case management and referral systems. These measures include having women-only police stations, fast-tracked and simple procedures, and information in different languages.
- Ensure that women and girls have access to accurate information, services, and healthcare facilities, to assist with family planning, safe pregnancies and deliveries as well as protect themselves against sexually transmitted infections. This will allow countries to realize universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Undertake reforms in the education sector to provide youths with comprehensive, accurate and age-appropriate sexuality education, including the removal of gender prejudices; there is also a need to promote open discussions on sexual and reproductive health, including with parents and teachers.
- Integrate the health needs of women residing in rural and remote areas into national planning and programmes, including through the allocation of budgets for specific subnational locations.
- Ensure that policy responses to climate change are gender responsive. Decision-making processes related to climate mitigation and adaptation should also include the participation of women, especially those most affected by climate change.

Working Group 3 – SDG 14: Life under Water
Convener: Mr. M.G.W.M.W.I.B. Dissanayake, Additional Secretary (Environment Policy and Planning), Ministry of Environment, Sri Lanka

The SDG 14 Group highlighted the overlap between the COVID-19 pandemic, marine life, and social health. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, SDG 14 was already on a reverse trajectory and the Goal was further impacted by the pandemic in several ways. Funding available for biodiversity initiatives have been diverted away to support health recovery plans necessitated by COVID-19. The group noted that COVID-19 resulted in an increase of single use plastic as well as medical waste generated from the disposal of non-reusable surgical masks, COVID-testing materials, and other Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) into the oceans. Local SDG 14 initiatives for coastal and beach clean-ups were postponed due to the pandemic further hindering SDG 14 action in the region.

On the economic front, South Asia with its long coast lines is densely populated with 400 million people relying on rivers and oceans for their food or livelihoods. The fishery industry has been heavily
impacted and as income for coastal fishermen is seasonal, they are already vulnerable to economic insecurity. In Bangladesh, for example, 70% of fishermen have lost 80% of their incomes. Without access to markets and finance, fishermen fall into debt traps and are often victims of forced labour. Pre-existing threats to marine life (including tropical cyclones, marine heatwaves, and coral bleaching) combined with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, have particularly impacted the tourism sector. National lockdown measures spurred a sharp decline in tourism and left many daily wage-earners heavily impacted financially or completely unemployed. Amongst those most impacted are already socio-economic vulnerable people, including the poor and women.

The increasing threat to and importance of coastal ecosystems such as mangroves and lack of transformative, systematic, and sustained roadmaps to protect them was also discussed. The Average Annual Loss (AAL) for tropical cyclones without mangroves in India is estimated around $13 billion and there is an observed overlap of poverty and degradation of mangrove cover in the Sundarbans mangrove area in the Bay of Bengal. Extreme weather events and marine disasters has exacerbated the impact of COVID-19 in the sub-region and rising marine heat waves is another emerging challenge to the coastal ecosystem which is projected to show effects in the coming years.

The group highlighted that oceans are a global common, and as such, governments cannot mitigate marine degradation alone. Plans for national Blue Ocean Economy policy integration needs to be complemented with collective action to achieve SDG 14, notably in science information sharing. Transboundary partnerships to promote access to inter-regional and sub-regional data, information and innovation is thus in high demand. The development of resilient and informed policy decisions will be made possible by streamlining and fostering an enhanced accessibility to climate technology and knowledge amongst local, regional, and national actors. The governments of India and Japan have already begun sharing scientific data to reduce marine litter, and future marine conservation efforts will only be strengthened by the replication of information-sharing initiatives such as this.

The working group recognised the criticality of SDG 14 and its strategic links to other goals. It recommended the following priorities to enable a more sustainable recovery from COVID-19:

- Strengthen sub-regional co-operation and integrated institutional mechanisms to bring about policy coherence, devise national action plans for blue economy, build a stronger science-policy interface for coastal protection and resilience and develop sub-regional marine disaster management system.
- Reprioritize strategic action plans with sub-regional perspectives to protect marine biodiversity especially mangroves and wetlands, coastal zone management with greater significance to conserving marine ecosystem services.
- Focus on developing ocean-economies integrated ecosystem-based governance for fisheries, aquaculture, and shipping.
- Recognize fisheries as an important area to invest in and initiate sub-regional actions on Sea and rivers sharing, initiatives to have access to markets and finance for the fishing communities.
- Promote PPPs in managing marine resources and establish locally managed marine areas for engaging the communities.
- Capitalize on the opportunities to bring about transformational shift in policy landscape, budgeting, regulations and pursue green development with specific focus on SDG 14.
- Fill the gaps in access to data, information, and knowledge with recent innovations including through recent IPCC’s interactive ATLAS and ESCAP’s risk and resilience portal to support risk informed policy decisions for building coastal resilience.
Explore the opportunities for landlocked countries—Nepal, Afghanistan, Bhutan to benefit from the SDG 14 and linkages to other goals.

Need for transboundary and regional actions on ecosystem-based economic recovery.

**Working Group 4 – SDG 15: Life on Land**

Convener: Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, Director General, Research, and Information System for Development Countries (RIS), India

The SDG 15 Group acknowledged causative impacts of most of the other Goals and targets on SDG 15, particularly for targets on sustainable economic growth (SDG 8), industry and infrastructure development (SDG 9), urbanisation (SDG 11), responsible production and consumption (SDG 12), clean energy (SDG 7). Environment friendly actions for meeting targets under these Goals can have positive outcomes for SDG 15, which in turn has implications for certain other Goals such as good health and well-being (SDG 3). Understanding such critical linkages and mainstreaming them in policy frameworks is important for the achievement of SDG 15. While rapid industrialisation, infrastructure development, mining, etc., are exerting direct impacts on terrestrial ecosystems, such actions also have indirect impacts on SDG 15 through climate change induced natural disasters.

Land degradation, desertification, salination in coastal areas, etc., experienced in many parts of South Asia are warning signs of regression on SDG 15. Increasing incidence of human-animal conflicts are indicative of loss of habitats for wildlife. Crimes related to illegal wildlife trafficking, poaching and encroachment into protected lands are becoming rampant. Uncontrolled industrial and municipal waste generation and pollution are causing land degradation at a faster rate. Trade and industrial policies have not been sensitive enough towards the need for transition towards carbon neutrality. While rules and guidelines are being established, stronger legislative reforms for protection of biodiversity are lacking in most of the subregional countries and enforcement of wildlife protection laws also needs improvement. Implementation of international accords such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) also needs more sensitisation and actionable measures in the subregion.

Along with the other key environmental Goals (SDGs 13 and 14), SDG 15 is among the Goals with the highest number of indicators with data deficiency. Reliable data is lacking on key indicators for land degradation, utilization of genetic resources, allocation for biodiversity conservation and forest management, protected species trafficking, etc. Even for those indicators for which data is available, such as share of forest cover, certain anomalies are noted. For instance, while almost all South Asian countries have improved share of forest cover in total land area, certain areas designated as forest areas are noted to have thinned and withered to become inhabitable for many species. It was noted that, even in the case of Nepal, a country which ranks high in terms of bio-diversity indices and registers improving Red List Index (trends in overall extinction risk for species), governmental interventions for preserving biodiversity in terms of both policies and resource allocation needs improvement.

The Group noted that public funds and resources as well as Official Development Assistance (ODA) channelled to environmental goals in general and bio-diversity conservation has declined following the outbreak of the pandemic as the health emergency and economic revival has taken priority. The pandemic is also leading to unsustainable generation of medical wastes (masks, PPEs, medical equipment, and supplies) without adequate recycling measures in place.
The Working Group concurred that the targets of SDG 15 are closely related to policy priorities for disaster risk reduction (DRR). The concerned issues of DRR and SDG 15 are essentially transboundary in nature and calls for increased regional cooperation and partnerships. Regional initiatives, such as the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters, assumes high importance in this context. Stakeholders must come together to foster and leverage regional cooperation, but the space for civil society actors and stakeholders in decision making related to SDG 15 is shrinking. The importance of respecting the rights of indigenous people is often ignored and opportunities for utilising traditional knowledge in forest and bio-diversity resources management is being missed.

In the light of the discussions on the main subregional issues related to implementation of SDG 15, the Working Group put forward several policy response priorities:

- Adopt an overarching PRP (protect-restore-promote) principle in policy approaches towards sustainable management of territorial eco-systems, forest, and bio-diversity resources.
- Employ green recovery strategies and adopt measures for faster transition towards a circular economy oriented on recycling and sustainable waste management, with stated targets and timelines.
- Reorient trade and industrial policies for transition towards carbon neutrality in production and consumption. Promote sustainable agriculture, organic farming, and agro-forestry as countermeasures for negative impacts of the agriculture sector.
- Adopt strong legislative and enforcement reforms for sustainable land utilization and prevent land degradation from activities such as mining, illegal encroachment, etc. and accelerate implementation of relevant international accords such as the CDB.
- Ensure environmental goals and targets get due priority in resource deployment and employ financing resource mobilisation plans. Utilise new instruments for cross-subsidization such as carbon tax.
- Promote regional cooperation for sharing resources, expertise, and technology for all targets under SDG 15.
- Improve data availability for SDG 15 indicators and engage in multi-stakeholder partnerships for collecting data from all sources available, while taking steps to improve access to data for wider research and analysis.
- Ensure implementation of regional initiatives for DRR such as the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters and build on existing regional institutional capacities such as the SAARC Disaster Management Centre.
- Adopt an inclusive approach to decision making related to protection and preservation of habitats, through formal consultative processes involving local communities and CSOs, honouring the rights of indigenous people, and utilising traditional knowledge resources and good practices.

**Session 6 – Leveraging partnerships and means of implementation for the SDGs: Finance, technology, capacity-building, and trade (SDG 17)**

Session 6 looked at the means of implementation identified under SDG 17 – which include finance, technology, trade, and capacity building. It discussed mechanisms for designing recovery strategies based on sustainable financing policies; leveraging public and private sources for financing COVID-19 recovery packages and achieving the SDGs; emerging capacity-building needs and advancements in digital technology and technology gaps; and opportunities for increasing intra-regional trade through
Dr. Shabnam Sarfaraz, Member (Social Sector & Devolution) of the Planning Commission, Pakistan, moderated the session.

Dr. Hamza Ali Malik, Director, Macroeconomic Policy and Financing for Development Division, ESCAP, underscored that economic recovery alone was not sufficient for achieving the SDGs and that there was a need for significant investments in people and the planet. He highlighted that it was possible to improve economic growth prospects and reap notable social and benefits simultaneously. He also emphasized that the role of the State, including political will and commitment, was central in leading the realization of SDGs. The private sector has a role to contribute, and several policy options were available in most countries to enhance fiscal space and generate financial resources to this end.

Dr. Malik then shared the economic growth trends in Asia and the Pacific, and observed that the region, including South and South-West Asia, is on the road to recovery, with growth prospects looking strong for 2022. However, robust economic recovery is insufficient for achieving SDGs or making economies more stable, resilient, inclusive, and sustainable in the long term – and that countries should therefore focus on the quality of economic growth and its integration with social and green development objectives. In this context, he introduced ESCAP’s “build back forward” policy package, which builds on three pillars: digital access (ICT investment, education spending); social services (access to health care, social protection floor); and green development (biodiversity, fuel subsidies, climate-resilient infrastructure, carbon tax, clean energy, and energy efficiency). Dr. Malik presented ESCAP’s projections for South Asia in terms of poverty, the Gini coefficient, carbon emissions and air quality under the scenarios of “ambitious investments” (where countries spend at the level sufficient to achieving the SDGs) versus “business-as-usual spending”, alongside the fiscal and public debt implications under the respective scenarios. Further, governments in Asia and the Pacific have run significant fiscal deficits due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and at the current rate of financial flows going to the SDGs, countries are not likely to meet the SDGs.

Dr. Malik advocated that policy options were available to enhance fiscal space such as by improving public spending efficiency, widening the tax base, improving tax administration, increasing progressivity of the tax system, relaxing fiscal rules, reducing illicit financial flows, incorporating catastrophic risks into fiscal planning, improving debt management, and engaging in debt relief and restructuring initiatives. There are also innovative and sustainable financing strategies that can be considered including the issuance of SDG-related thematic bonds and development of capital markets to this end, making debt-swaps for development meaningful, exploring diaspora bonds and offshore public bonds, facilitating private investments for the SDGs and climate action, supporting sustainable investing by public institutional investors, increasing the use of catastrophe insurances and bonds, and developing national emergency financing mechanisms. He also called for increased regional cooperation by: (i) establishing a regional debt architecture; (ii) promoting shared understanding and practices for financial instruments; (iii) expanding regional emergency funds and catastrophe risk-sharing initiatives; and (iv) stepping up technical assistance.

Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development, India, summarized the outlook for partnerships and means of implementation for SDGs in finance, technology, capacity building and trade. The pre-COVID era saw global partnerships clouded by several developments such as the new normal of subdued growth of the world economy, the rise in protectionism and trade wars, the retreat of multilateralism (termed “slobalisation”) and widening inequality.
UNCTAD research shows that flows in foreign direct investments globally having decreased by 33% and this has resulted in the slowing of development finance during the pandemic. The growth of the short-term capital flows is also being seen, which has resulted in volatility in the emerging markets of developing countries; more stable resources are therefore needed to ignite the investment cycle that has been affected due to the pandemic. Dr. Kumar stressed the need to curb illicit financial flows and transfer pricing manipulation and highlighted the potential of international financial transactions taxes in curbing the volatility of markets and serving as a new source of revenue for developing countries. Additionally, he observed the potential for South-South and South Asian cooperation in cross-border listings and currency swaps arrangements to improve economies during difficult times including the COVID-19 pandemic and mentioned South-Asian trade integration as a potential strategy to be explored further. Lastly, Dr. Kumar noted that the potential of leveraging technology has multiplied during COVID times and affirmed homegrown innovations that have developed during the pandemic; he called for the sharing of good practices and for joint solutions to common problems to be engineered and scaled up.

Dr. Ganeshan Wignaraja, Non-Resident Senior Fellow of the National University of Singapore and Senior Visiting Fellow of the Pathfinder Foundation, Sri Lanka, outlined emerging risks that could temper the post-COVID recovery of South Asia, namely the additional COVID-19 waves caused by mutations, rising inflation, an emerging market debt crisis, and income inequality exacerbating social tensions. Should these risks materialize, South Asia will have a tepid recovery, impeding progress towards the SDGs, especially for the smaller countries. He highlighted the need to look at the trade agenda, stating that a comprehensive approach is necessary to sustain the economic recovery in South Asia. He pointed that the trend of supply chains relocating out of China, particularly its labour-intensive aspects, served as an important opportunity for South Asia to engage in new forms of flexible manufacturing. However, South Asia has been grappling with challenges such as barriers at and behind borders as well as market failures. He raised the example of Southeast Asia, with their coherent subregional and national strategies, second generation reforms alongside stimulus packages, and free trade agreements with larger East Asian countries. He urged South Asian countries to consider engaging with these East Asian countries outside SAARC and BIMSTEC, including through the RCEP.

Dr. Wignaraja also listed the digital divide as becoming a bigger-than-expected impediment to modern service development in South Asia. Against the backdrop of youthful populations in most South Asian countries, digital literacy levels are very low, with incomplete digital infrastructure and limited national systems of digital innovation — all of which could exacerbate the digital divide. There is a need for a big investment thrust in the digital economy to ensure inclusion. Finally, Dr. Wignaraja cautioned about financing the SDGs through public-private partnerships (PPP) as evidence for PPP projects have been mixed, with some having worked under selected circumstances in India (with a larger market and more developed institutions compared to other South Asian countries), but the rest having failed in the subregion. A reason for such failures could be that the profit motive of the private sector is at odds with the societal motive of the public sector. For PPPs to work, three factors are required: strong political will (which requires awareness raising among policymakers of what PPP means); transparent and efficient institutions of governance; and strong technical teams within governments that understand and can implement PPP projects.

Professor Saj U. Mendis, Director-General (Bilateral)/Economic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka, emphasized the importance of breaking the psychological barrier, self-perception and external image among South Asia countries and populations that the subregion is poor, not developed and not integrated. He urged Sri Lanka to go beyond its perception of being a small country. He called
upon micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to not be constrained psychologically by their sizes and highlighted the importance of government support to nurture the growth of MSMEs. Finally, he highlighted that while the financial cost of achieving SDGs is high for the subregion, the benefits and returns are much higher and therefore worthwhile.

Dr. Abid Suleri, Executive Director of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute and Member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, endorsed Dr. Hamza Malik’s view that the realization of the SDGs will involve investing in people and the planet, beyond mere economic recovery. He observed that South Asian countries are all making efforts to this end, and that it would be helpful for the countries to learn from each other in a variety of areas, ranging from public distribution systems and the provision of fiscal stimulus to the financing of education and health.

Regarding regional trade and economic integration, he shared that much of the discussions will remain theoretical and non-functional unless South Asian countries take positive steps towards such integration. To this end, there is a need to give life to SAARC, including through the SAARC food bank and SAARC sustainable development funds. He highlighted that there were multiple forums and instruments available in the subregion to promote regional collaboration towards the SDGs. Dr. Suleri then cautioned about the looming humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the importance of leaving no one behind in this context. He urged SAARC to explore avenues to work directly with the Afghan people to support vulnerable populations, especially with the approaching harsh winter and famines, and underscored that the situation in Afghanistan would affect the progress of the subregion towards achieving the SDGs. Finally, Dr. Suleri requested for ESCAP and related partners to explore how the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals could be utilized to convene the subregion to discuss pressing thematic issues.

Ms. Pramila Acharya Rijal, President of the South Asian Women Development Forum, Nepal, provided a gender perspective to the discussion. She noted that even though there has been increased usage of technology and increasing intraregional trade, the inclusion of women in the trade sector has been minimal. She highlighted that up to 80% of women in South Asia are in informal employment and that their participation in trade is crucial for gender mainstreaming. Drawing a comparison between subregions, Ms. Rijal stated that women owned about 50% of micro enterprises and 59% of small and medium enterprises in East Asia and the Pacific compared to 10% and 8% respectively in South Asia. She stated that this gender gap in trade sector could be due to lack of inclusive policies. The gender gap in economic participation and opportunities remains the second largest gap for women.

Further, she shared that technological advancements and online trade platforms are providing more opportunities for women to bypass traditional trade barriers, expand entrepreneurial skills and enjoy flexible careers that enable them to manage both work and household responsibilities. However, the financing gap for women stands at six billion dollars in certain countries, while the internet user gender gap stands at 17% for the Asia-Pacific region. Ms. Rijal then discussed the potential of the service economy in offering new options for women in the post-pandemic world. She raised examples of exporting 3D animation to Hollywood from South Asia, digitizing textbooks for use in rural-remote areas, and making healthcare easily accessible and affordable through online platforms. Finally, she underscored the importance of partnerships and the need for governments to explore different partnership models to empower women to participate in the economy, including through development of one-stop hubs to enhance trade as well as special economic and industrial zones for women.
Dr. Selim Raihan, Executive Director of SANEM, Bangladesh, stated that the process of recovery from COVID-19 will be painful and long for South Asian countries, both economically and socially. Based on both ESCAP and other estimates, huge amounts of resources will be required to achieve the SDGs and the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation. For countries to recover from the pandemic and achieve the SDGs, Dr. Raihan agreed with Dr. Malik that financing the SDGs would be critical. At the same time, he underscored the importance of managing and monitoring the use of such finances. He observed that while most South Asian countries launched huge recovery packages to alleviate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the benefits of these packages were not enjoyed by a large section of the population or small-medium enterprises; he had also not seen any process or system in place to monitor the implementation of these packages. To this end, there is a need for institutional set-ups and reforms to strengthen the management and monitoring of SDG implementation.

Dr. Raihan also opined that it might not be realistic to expect South Asia to achieve the SDGs, and thus proposed the development of an “SDG-lite” approach to alleviate frustration among the people of not being able to achieve the SDGs. He also noted that governments in South Asia might be facing policy paralysis in undertaking reforms towards achieving the SDGs, which has since worsened due to the pandemic. Dr. Raihan then brought up challenges that might impact further integration of intraregional trade, including the premature decrease in trade-to-GDP ratio and premature industrialization. Finally, he called upon South Asian governments to conduct proper assessments of the impact of COVID-19 on SDG progress, to focus on the right priorities, and to act in a timely manner towards the achievement of the SDGs.

Mr. Choliya De Silva, Group CFO of the Heyleys Group, Sri Lanka, shared about the implementation of SDG 17 from a private sector perspective, based on his organization’s experience and expectations. He first discussed the issue of funding, observing that lending institutions focus more on project viability, returns and the payback period, rather than on sustainability; companies thus face challenges in implementing projects that focus on sustainability. Next, he highlighted that due to the lack of reporting systems that capture non-financial information, his company had to develop a software at its own cost to capture information related to sustainability. Further, the reporting also needs to be communicated to a wider audience, and there is a need for technology and mechanisms to enable such sharing. There is also a need to ascertain the accuracy of such information, involving audit parties.

Ms. Pooja Rangaprasad, Policy Director, Financing for Development, Society for International Development, opined that the United Nations financing for development process was meant to address global structural barriers that cannot be addressed at the national or regional level alone to ensure that developing countries have the fiscal and policy space to finance their development. In this context, she called upon South Asian governments to ensure more effective taxation of private and corporate wealth, assets and income; to coordinate and lead the establishment of a universal, intergovernmental tax body under the auspices of the UN and in negotiating a UN tax convention; to establish a transparent, binding and multilateral framework for debt crisis resolution under the auspices of the UN; to support a TRIPS waiver proposal to facilitate technological transfer and access to COVID-related medical products in developing countries; and to undertake strong and coordinated action at the WTO 12th Ministerial Conference to prevent major pushbacks on issues of interest to the developing countries.

During the open discussion, participants affirmed the importance of political commitment and good governance as critical for achieving the SDGs. The development of data systems to obtain reliable data on SDG progress, analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and prioritizing the implementation of specific SDGs in accordance to country contexts in the post-COVID era, the need of
partnerships and alliances in South Asia in finance and technology to achieve the SDGs and for effective climate action and the making of small incremental gains on multiple fronts of interventions in the process of SDG implementation were also crucial. On the topic of financing for development, one participant highlighted the importance of equity, rather than mere equality in financing, as being crucial for achieving the SDGs. The responsibility of the private sector in contributing to financing the SDGs was underscored as was the potential of taxing the digital economy to increase fiscal space. Trade, clean technology, and technology transfer were also listed as essential elements for development. The critical role of women as partners in development was also emphasized.

Session 7 – Strengthening means of implementation for the SDGs: Policy coherence, multi stakeholder partnerships and data, monitoring and accountability (SDG 17)

Session 7 explored strategies for the contextualization/localization of SDGs to enhance policy coordination and coherence. It examined the role of and opportunities for partnerships to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. Data gaps, and statistical preparedness, monitoring frameworks of countries in the subregion, emerging data needs in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic were explored as well as opportunities for statistical innovations and development of common data strategies.

Mr. Arman Bidarbakhtnia, Head of the Statistical Data Management Unit, ESCAP, gave an overview on SDG progresses and data availability in the Asia Pacific and South and Southwest Asia regions. SSWA is currently not on track to reach targets for any of the SDGs. Most progress has been seen in SDGs 1, 2 and 3, but a regression has been observed in goals 10, 11, 13, 14 and 16. In SSWA, data are available for over half of the SDG indicators and the situation has been improving. Countries are trying to fill the gaps with indicators that they have in their own national plans. Countries should have national SDG indicators and targets, as regional level targets may not be appropriate for all countries. National data is also more up-to-date or disaggregated. He then presented on a National SDG tracker tool (https://data.unescap.org) that has been developed to help assess progress against the SDGs at the country level. The SDG tracker provides data available at the global level and then allows countries to customize with functions to add/remove indicators and disaggregation’s, set national targets and provides SDG snapshots and dashboards that can be used for various reports. Seven countries are currently using the tracker and other countries that are interested can also consider its use. A brief demonstration on the use of the tool was also provided.

Ms. Noorjahan Khatun, Joint Secretary, Statistics, and Informatics Division (SID), Ministry of Planning, Bangladesh, shared insights on Bangladesh’s impressive development progress in recent times, leading up to the country’s qualification for graduation from LDC status. Bangladesh has benefitted from a people-centric approach towards sustainable development, benefitting from continued political stability and coherent development strategies adopted by the leadership. The 7th Five-year Plan of Bangladesh coincided with the advent of the SDGs. Taking advantage of this scenario, efforts were taken to integrate critical elements of sustainable development embodied in the SDGs with national development plan formulation and implementation. Expanding the reach of social protection coverage and welfare programmes was given special importance. Through this approach, Bangladesh could translate sustained high economic growth rates to positive human development outcomes. As part of strengthening the planning process, Bangladesh developed a national SDG-Tracker, compiling data from numerous sources, which has helped immensely in improving SDG programming, monitoring and evaluation processes in the country. A committee was established for collecting and validating data
generated by various government departments, agencies, and institutions. Another key area of improvement is enhancing stakeholder participation through better consultative processes.

**Dr. Sanjay Kumar,** Director (SSD), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, India, mentioned that SDGs are being monitored at a very high level in India and key development programmes, policies and resources are aligned with the SDGs. SDG implementation has been localized at the sub-national level, i.e., state and district levels, and state entities have prepared vision documents, identified indicators for SDG monitoring and tried to align State Indicator Frameworks with the National Indicator Framework which is in sync with the Global Indicator Framework. In total, presently there are 295 national indicators of which around 120 have been drawn from the Global Indicator Framework. Data is available for more than 90% of indicators. Multiple Indicator Survey was launched in January 2020 to collect data on certain SDG indicators, despite disruptions in field surveys due to COVID-19. The survey was completed successfully in August 2021. A similar kind of survey will be launched during the next year. Further, the existing national surveys have also been aligned with the data requirement of SDGs. Collaborations with research institutions, UN Agencies and Ministries are also taking place to examine global indicators and contextualize them to the national context. Usage of big data and geospatial data methods are also being explored to bridge the data gaps on SDG indicators. Technique of Small Area Estimation is also being explored to get data at district and sub-district levels. Capacity development of National Statistical Offices (NSO) and line Ministries is also being undertaken with UN support. NSO is also providing technical support to the states/UTs so that they can develop their own SDG monitoring frameworks at state and sub-state levels.

**Ms. Aishath Shahuda,** Chief Statistician, National Bureau of Statistics, Maldives, submitted that difficulties in generating data at a disaggregated level has been an issue faced by Maldives, as was reported by other subregional countries. Out of about 120 indicators for which data is available, only a small number has disaggregated data to monitor progress at the local/provincial level. COVID-19 imposed limitations on data collection through face-to-face surveys, because of which Maldives is gradually adopting digital data collection methods. Some recent assessments on COVID-19 impacts were carried out through computer-assisted telephonic and web-based interviews. Maldives is taking steps for modernizing its statistical systems. In fact, data collection using electronic platforms had started even before the onset of the pandemic, which proved to be an advantage in the current context. Maldives also now has the advantage of having strong legal frameworks, backed by the Maldives Statistics Act passed in July 2021. There is also a new statistical council called the Maldives Bureau of Statistics, which involves representation from both data users and producers. The advisory body of the Bureau has representatives from the private sector and NGOs, which provides opportunities to improve data systems through a consultative process. A National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) has also been adopted, which will consider a priority list of indicators to address existing data gaps, particularly addressing critical issues such as gender inequalities, environmental impacts, and climate change. Some of the main limitations faced by Maldives with respect to statistical systems are that of human resources (lack of qualified personnel for surveys and data processes) and financing gaps.

**Mr. Dilli Raj Joshi,** Deputy Director General, Central Bureau of Statistics, Nepal, presented on the national statistical system, challenges being faced for the collection of data for SDG monitoring and issues needing to be addressed. He highlighted that the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) is the country’s apex statistical agency for the collection, standardization, and quality assurance of data and that responsibilities at the provincial and local levels are to collect local level data, manage
administrative records and estimate labour and poverty statistics. He noted that Nepal faces major data gaps for tracking and monitoring SDGs, particularly for SDGs 2 (Hunger), 9 (industry, infrastructure), 12 (consumption and production), 13 (climate action) and 15 (life on land). Issues related to the periodicity of data, insufficient data disaggregation (by sex, age, ethnicity, administrative unit, location, and income group) as well as the reliability and quality of data that is available imposes limitations to the proper tracking and monitoring of SDGs. CBS works closely with national and international partners to carry out statistical surveys in areas of labour, health, agriculture, household, living standards and census surveys.

A National Strategy for Development of Statistics (NSDS) is being implemented to establish an effective national statistical system that can produce reliable data suited to the federal structure of Nepal to meet the needs of users and support evidence policy making. COVID-19 has, however, impacted statistical activities in Nepal by postponing planned surveys, delaying the publication and dissemination of statistical information, and affecting the rebasing of national accounts and statistical training programs. To address various issues facing the functioning of the national statistical system, several needs were identified including: i) use of latest technology for data collection and processing; (ii) conducting of statistical literacy programmes; (iii) production of data for SDGs indicators; (iv) strengthening of subregional cooperation and partnerships for the development of statistics; and (v) sharing of experiences among sub-regional countries related to statistical activities.

Mr. Muhammad Ali Kemal, Chief (SDGs), Ministry of Planning Development & Special Initiatives, Pakistan, highlighted that Pakistan embarked on national level capacity-building for SDG implementation following a parliamentary resolution on the SDGs in February 2016, which also led to establishment of parliamentary task forces. This was followed by the establishment of federal and provincial SDG units as part of a multi-stakeholder approach towards SDG implementation. The country adopted horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms with a Sub-committee of the National Economic Council (NEC) for oversight. Policy coherence has been promoted through an SDG-led growth strategy, mapping of development spending with the SDGs, innovative financing, and private sector engagement. An analytical report was prepared, identifying data gaps and potential data sources for bridging such gaps, and survey questionnaires were revamped accordingly. A three-tier system consisting of a lead ministry, reporting agencies, and identified data sources (consisting of surveys, institutional, international and global sources) was created to facilitate improvements in the national statistical system. He also introduced the Pakistan SDGs Status Report 2021, which was produced because of the initiatives for improving statistical systems.

Dr. J.S.N.P. Dharmawardhane, Senior Statistician, Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka noted that statistics play a central role in monitoring and evaluation. The Department of Census and Statistics collects census data, conducts sample surveys and uses administrative data. When additional information needs to be collected, additional modules are added to questionnaires. However, care needs to be taken to ensure questions being asked are in line with the purpose of the survey being conducted and make efforts to minimize burdens on the responder. The session has shown that there are many data gaps that exist for the monitoring of SDGs. The use of proxy indicators as well as online data collection tools should be considered to try to overcome data gaps that exist. In closing, while Sri Lanka and the SSWA region are not on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030, best efforts will be made to meet the targets that have been set.

Ms. Karin Fernando, Team Leader, Sustainable Development, Centre for Poverty Analysis, Sri Lanka, invited attention to the need for treating the SDGs as a whole package in the context of discussions on
policy coherence. Speaking on behalf of the Asia-Pacific Regional CSOs Engagement Mechanism (APRCEM), she emphasized that buy-in for the sustainable development principles should be promoted through inclusive and participatory approaches to planning and implementation. Lead ministries/departments alone cannot steer planning processes, without proper coordination between various parallel initiatives. Adoption of an integrated approach is therefore key to successful implementation. This integration must happen at the subnational level and internationally. While localization of the SDGs, by involving subnational entities and communities, is essential for inclusiveness, utilizing relevant international platforms is equally important for achieving policy coherence. For policy coherence, monitoring and evaluation systems also must be revamped to address the critical requirement of tracking the overarching progress on SDGs and assess progress in individual goals and targets.

Ms. Anita Gurumurthy, Executive Director of IT for Change participated virtually and spoke about the use of digital data which is crucial to the attainment of several SDGs and some learnings and way forward for CSOs and governments. She noted that while the ability to use big data is a measure of a knowledge society, self-reliance can be undermined by transnational big tech companies that can shape and control national data infrastructure. With COVID-19 and the use of contact tracing apps, concerns have also emerged on unjustifiable surveillance of citizens. The absence of public digital infrastructure makes the marketization of people’s data inevitable in the face of crisis and can entrench big tech opportunism. The risks of excluding vulnerable populations, such as women and migrant workers, is also increased as they lack digital literacy or access to digital technologies. Therefore, data systems in the region need to be people centric so that scientific advancements can benefit all. Policies and laws need to ensure that technological innovation in the region is based on human rights standards, equity, social justice, and public interest ideals. The mobilization of ODA investments for public data infrastructure in countries of the region is needed to protect and promote rights-based data regimes.

Open discussion: In the open discussion, it was noted that countries in the region face SDG data challenges and that there are countries in the region that are more advanced than others in terms of development, data availability and the use of technologies. A question was asked on how SAARC or even BIMSTEC can be used as a multi-stakeholder platform to exchange information, knowledge, and experiences with one another. The Chair noted that the representative from SAARC was unfortunately not able to attend this session, but that the question could be brought forward to them.

A question was also asked about how CSOs could support SDG monitoring and multistakeholder coordination. A participant responded that CSOs are partners in the SDG process and their knowledge and capacities can be used for monitoring and evaluation as they are working at the ground level. CSOs have a role to play in monitoring activities that they carry out. For data collection, there are citizen-led data collection processes which have not been integrated very well into the SDG process. CSOs also run huge advocacy campaigns and the use of this expertise is also another area for potential collaboration.
Commissions like UNESCAP, and the United Nations Development System can better support countries in the subregion to leverage regional platforms, including by promoting exchanges of good practices, knowledge and experiences, on relevant issues including the COVID-19 pandemic; enhance greater access to information and innovation; and harness technical and research capacities through knowledge networks and partnerships.

**Dr. Abid Suleri**, Executive Director of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, and Member of Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, stated that SANS must play a vital role in sustaining regional cooperation initiatives through track-2 and track-1.5 (liaison between government and non-government stakeholders), particularly when track-1 dialogues slow down or fail to deliver. Many targets under the SDGs cannot be pursued without cooperation, especially those addressing common threats such as climate change which requires a collective response. The coalition of think-tanks formed under SANS can help to leverage regional level planning and cooperation for greater economic integration. Three areas which must be priorities in the agenda of SANS are: (i) serve as a platform for development dialogues and exchange of ideas; (ii) promote joint action on climate change (SDG 13) and related environmental Goals (SDGs 14 and 15); and (iii) extend cooperation for sharing data and research. He stressed on the need for working together for the ambitious programmes put forward at the recently concluded COP26 (2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference). Promoting green technologies and carbon neutral pathways must be one of the focus areas for SANS in this regard.

**Dr. Fahmida Khatun**, Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh endorsed cooperation for research and data sharing for evidence-based analysis as well as the exchange of ideas and facilitation of joint actions for raising issues of common interest at global platforms as some of the key roles for SANS. Regarding joint actions at global platforms, South Asia needs better access to technology, finance, and capacity-building support. The importance of these three means of implementation elements comes to the forefront in the context of SDGs 11 to 14, which falls under the broad spectrum of environmental sustainability. Countries of the subregion are the victims of climate change, and they require resources and technology upgradation to undertake mitigation and adaptation measures, accompanied by capacity-building programmes to ensure optimum utilization of finance and technology for climate action. Trade proposals pursued at the multilateral level show that forming consensus for taking common positions at the relevant global fora is critical. For instance, common positions are required to safeguard trade interests of the subregion in the context of ongoing negotiations at the WTO for liberalisation of trade in environmental goods and services (EGS). Without proper definition of such EGSs, there are concerns of exclusion of certain EGSs that are sensitive for developing countries. The inclusion of carbon border tax and circular economy principles (SDG 12) also need to ensure that they address the concerns of developing countries.

**Dr. Nagesh Kumar**, Director of the Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), India, reemphasized the role of SANS as a forum for sustaining and taking forward the agenda of regional cooperation for sustainable development. There are many policy lessons that South Asian countries can adopt from each other. The initial objective of SANS was to promote such cross-learnings through knowledge sharing on SDG good practices. He highlighted some of the good practices being followed by various countries like direct cash transfers in India through *Jan Dhan* accounts, scholarships for girl students to bring them back to the schools in Pakistan and various COVID-19 recovery measures being adopted by all South Asian countries. Such policy practices should be shared and replicated across the region, adapting them to specific needs of each country. SANS should act as a repository and clearing house for SDG good practices. COVID-19 impacts again highlight the need for regional trade and
economic integration. Disruptions to global supply chains warrants a refocus on nearshoring and utilisation of market access opportunities within the immediate neighbourhood through formation of regional value chains (RVCs) and production networks. Governments are showing interests in improving connectivity, at least in the eastern part of South Asia, which is quintessential for RVCs. Many initiatives have taken place in recent years, such as under the BBIN framework, and such developments must be fostered to exploit market integration possibilities. SANS can play a vital role in advancing this agenda.

Dr. Sachin Chaturvedi, Director-General of Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), India, proposed inclusion of cooperation for development financing as a key focus area for SANS, given the criticality of resource mobilisation for implementation of the SDGs. He put forward the idea of forming cross-border districts (coalition and cooperation between transboundary areas) to take up critical transboundary issues such as climate change which have a collective impact on such districts. Think-tanks and CSOs can facilitate participation of stakeholders and communities at the local level in this regard, undertaking joint research and advocacy activities under SANS. Real-time monitoring of progress on SDGs is important and collective efforts are needed to conduct analyses based on a robust indicator framework. Such collaborative initiatives are particularly relevant for the achievement of goals and targets related to environmental sustainability. Highlighting the need for strengthening institutional cooperation, he took the example of coordination and cooperation among central banks of the subregional countries under the SAARC framework. A project led by RIS for fostering international cooperation for science, technology and innovation (STI) was also mentioned as an example of the need to leverage STI, data and institutional capabilities through broad-based development cooperation.

Mr. Chanchal Sarkar, Director of Economic, Trade and Finance, SAARC Secretariat, argued that sustained economic growth is essential for achievement of the SDGs, and SANS can make valuable contributions through programmes oriented on growth promotion. There are lots of avenues for economic growth through enhanced intra-regional trade and investments. Studies have shown that intra-regional trade potential remains grossly underutilised in South Asia. SANS may explore trade-led growth prospects, particularly focusing on measures needed for enhanced intra-regional trade. Similarly, policy insights are needed to explore how intra-regional investments can be channelled into productive sectors, while upholding green investment principles. SANS may take efforts to develop templates and regulatory reform requirements for promoting responsible cross-border investments. SANS must also undertake programmes to build on the momentum for regional cooperation generated by crisis-response initiatives by SAARC leaders including creation of the SAARC COVID Emergency Fund.

Dr. Puspa Sharma, Executive Director of South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), Nepal, emphasised the need for rekindling trust in regional cooperation through tangible outcomes. COVID-19 provides the context for greater cooperation for meeting needs such as vaccine distribution. There are many potential areas in which common targets and work programmes can be developed by SANS. An important priority among them is energy cooperation. Currently, Nepal has surplus electricity, while neighbouring India and Bangladesh face deficits. Greater trade in electricity generated from renewable sources can help to advance energy security in the region, while enabling the phasing out of reliance on non-renewables. SANS partners and stakeholders must be mindful of the underlying geopolitics which shape regional cooperation, such as increasing influence of China through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in South Asia.
Dr. Ganga Tilakaratna, Head of Poverty and Social Welfare Policy Research, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Sri Lanka, endorsed focus areas for SANS activities identified by other panellists, with specific emphasis on the Network’s role as a repository of best practices and knowledge products on SDGs. Partner organizations can contribute to this repository with respective research outputs produced by them that are relevant for implementation of the SDGs. Collaborative research will help to better understand common issues and challenges in implementation of solutions in areas like climate change, life below water, etc. SANS can also enable cooperation for capacity-building, particularly with respect to data and monitoring. Through greater collaboration in research, partner organisations of SANS can also contribute to capacity-building of other think-tanks and stakeholder groups from across the region.

Dr. Shahid Ahmed, Professor, Department of Economics, Jamia Millia Islamia University, India, recommended SANS to undertake initiatives for connecting universities and educational institutions of higher learning from the subregional countries. The Network can help to pool resources for research, while enabling sharing of innovations and cost-effective technologies. Linkages between institutions that are engaged in primary research and field studies can help to bridge data gaps and advance research capacities.

Representing CSOs associated with SANS, Arvind Kumar (President, India Water Foundation) and Daya Sagar Shrestha (Executive Director, National Campaign for Sustainable Development of Nepal) advocated for greater involvement of the civil society in SANS activities. COVID-19 outbreak has exposed pre-existing vulnerabilities, undermining the prospects of achieving SDGs. Recovery from the pandemic and getting back on track needs radical changes in the public policies and public service delivery systems. Attempts to build back better should address deep rooted barriers to sustainable development manifested in the form of social exclusion and discrimination faced by marginalized groups. To build greater resilience, governments should prioritise investments in public health and social protection. CSOs can help to promote grassroots level interventions and inclusive approaches to policy planning and implementation, by bringing stakeholders at the local and community level to take part in regional cooperation initiatives. SANS must encourage and facilitate participation of CSOs to strengthen the Network, making it more representative, inclusive and effective.

Wrap up and concluding session: The way forward

Mr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna, Deputy Head, UNESCAP-SSWA presented the key highlights of the discussions that took place during the two days of the Forum.

Ms. Chamindry Saparamadu, Director General of the Sustainable Development Council (SDC), Sri Lanka, noted that the importance of strengthening data systems, fostering of partnerships, multistakeholder and community engagements in SDG processes were particularly highlighted during the two days of discussions. The SDC has started work on these issues by the strengthening of the data ecosystem with the launch of the national SDG data portal and commencement of some work on public-private partnerships and private sector engagement. SDC is planning to look more closely at best practices from the region including the Responsible Business Framework in Pakistan and Green Taxonomy Framework in India. CSOs have expressed a need for private sector to get involved addressing issues facing vulnerable communities and SDC is keen on working on business and human rights and look at inclusive and sustainable business models. In addition, Sri Lanka’s foreign policy is based on a policy of non-alignment and regional cooperation so points raised at the Forum on trade
liberalization in the region, cross-border conservation plans and collective negotiations can help to inform foreign policy. In closing, Ms. Saparamadu thanked all the panellists, moderators and participants for the insightful presentations and discussions which were useful not only for Sri Lanka, but all the countries that had participated. She also thanked ESCAP for inviting Sri Lanka to co-host the event and expressed appreciation for all the efforts of the ESCAP Team and SDC staff to ensure the smooth running of the Forum.

Mr. Adnan Aliani, Officer-in-charge, ESCAP South and South-west Asia Office, remarked that the Forum had met two major milestones. Firstly, the meeting substantively focused on accelerating achievement of the SDGs in the context of COVID-19 recovery and was the first large meeting held on SDGs after COP 26 to discuss on climate change related issues in South Asia. He thanked all the participants for rich discussions, active participation and sharing of ideas and good practices. Secondly, the Forum was the first meeting in South Asia to use the hybrid modality and the Government of Sri Lanka should be credited for leading the way. The fact that the inaugural session was held at the Prime Minister’s House and that the Prime Minister inaugurated the event shows the importance that Sri Lanka places on SDGs and the Forum. Mr. Aliani thanked the SDC, Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation and the Ministry of Foreign Relations of Sri Lanka for hosting and organizing the Forum for which a tremendous debt of gratitude is owed. He thanked ESCAP colleagues for their efforts in supporting the event and looked forward to seeing everybody at the Sixth South Asia Forum to be held in Pakistan.

Admiral Professor Jayanth Colombage, Foreign Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Relations, Sri Lanka, noted the critical importance of the 2030 Agenda to the world and particularly for developing countries. For many countries, the full achievement of the SDGs by 2030 was already a challenging task and COVID-19 has made it more difficult with the negative economic impact that the pandemic has had on island countries like Sri Lanka. To build back better, there is a need to understand the consequences of the difficult COVID-19 period, learn lessons and make use of best practices. Regional organizations like UNESCAP have a greater responsibility to work in a cooperative manner and share knowledge to help overcome the pandemic. Sri Lanka has taken ambitious steps to set targets for economic recovery and establishing various task forces for economic recovery, poverty alleviation, educational reform, sustainable solutions to climate change and achieving good health and well-being. While tremendous progress has been made in some of these ambitions, limited finances make it difficult to sustain good initiatives. The South Asia SDG Forum provides a platform for discussion and sharing of ideas on how resources can be pooled for the common good and benefit for all countries. Climate change is also an important issue facing the world today and there is a need to be mindful of carbon neutrality, maintaining nitrogen balance and abandoning single-use plastics. Actions need to be taken by all countries to address climate and environmental issues. In closing, Admiral Professor Colombage expressed pride that Sri Lanka hosted the two-day event which brought minds from different countries to discuss matters that are of great concern to all. Cooperation among countries is important to address issues being faced and achieve the 2030 Agenda. He thanked the participants for their confidence in Sri Lanka to host the event as well as the organizational efforts of the SDC team. He emphasized that time goes by quickly and that concrete actions need to be taken by all to build back better from COVID-19.
Fifth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals
Building back better from COVID-19 while accelerating the implementation of the SDGs in South and South-West Asia

15-16 November 2021
Hybrid Mode
Venue: The Hilton Hotel, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Concept Note

Background and context

The South Asia Forum on the SDGs (SAFS) was conceived as the subregional preparatory meetings for the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD)⁴ to be held in March 2022, which in turn contributes towards the annual High-Level Policy Forum (HLPF). They have been organized by the South and South-West Asia office of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) in collaboration with South Asian member States, stakeholders and partners since 2017.⁵ The Forums facilitate dialogue and deliberations between Government officials, civil society, think-tanks, experts and other stakeholders on the themes of the annual APFSD and the HLPF, providing a unique opportunity to share information on subregional implementation efforts, highlight subregional priorities and share good practices. The outcomes and recommendations from the Forum feed into regional and global processes, in particular the annual APFSD and HLPF. The Fifth SAFS is being jointly organised by UNESCAP and the Government of Sri Lanka.

Countries of South and South-West Asia are not on track to achieve any of the 17 Goals without concerted efforts from all stakeholders to accelerate action in the Decade of Action for Achieving the 2030 Agenda. The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has undermined South and South-West Asia’s progress towards achieving the SDGs, making it critical for the subregion to build back better, aligned with the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. UNESCAP’s flagship SDG progress report 2021 finds that the South and South-West Asia subregion has made most progress on no poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), and good health and well-being (SDG 3).⁶ Among the priority areas that require

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⁴ The Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development is an inclusive regional intergovernmental forum which supports the preparations for the High-level Political Forum (HLPF). ESCAP resolution 73/1 indicates that the theme of the APFSD is aligned with the theme of the HLPF and will support an in-depth discussion of the cluster of goals under review at the HLPF.
⁵ The First SAFS was held in 2017 in Kathmandu in collaboration with the National Planning Commission, Nepal. The Second SAFS was organized by UNESCAP in partnership with the NITI Aayog, India and the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), on 4-5 October 2018 in New Delhi. The Third SAFS was jointly organized by UNESCAP and the Government of Bangladesh on 8-9 December 2019 in Dhaka. The Fourth SAFS was organized by UNESCAP in partnership with the Government of Maldives on 2-3 December 2020 in virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
urgent accelerated action to reverse negative trends are reduced inequalities (SDG 10); Sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11); climate action and life below water (SDG 13 and 14); and Peace, Justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). The far-reaching, mutually reinforcing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, poses further hurdles in the way of the subregion’s efforts to accelerate SDG implementation, making it critical to strengthen the means of implementation and partnership for the goals (SDG 17).

With a population of 1.8 billion (25% share in world population), the South Asian subregion (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) has a crucial role to play in the global achievement of the SDGs. Despite economic dynamism and steadily high rates of economic growth in the past decade, South Asia accounts for disproportionately high share (34 percent) of people living in extreme poverty and other multiple and often, intersecting socio-economic deprivations. With a global share of 37% in people who are undernourished and 40 million stunted children under the age of 5 years, South Asia accounted for almost 39% of children under 5 years of age suffering from stunting. With persistent development challenges, including low levels of intraregional trade, poor cross-border connectivity, wide infrastructure gaps, pervasive informality, lack of decent work opportunities and low rates of female labour force participation. The subregion remains particularly vulnerable and lacks adequate coping capacities to address the severe socio-economic effects of the pandemic. Recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic must focus on implementing the 2030 Agenda. ESCAP Resolution 77/1 calls for greater regional cooperation at all levels to build back better, for getting back on track to achieve the SDGs and to build resilience to future pandemics and crises.7

Against this background, the “Fifth South Asian SDG Forum” will focus on inclusive, resilient, and sustainable strategies towards COVID-19 recovery efforts and identify priorities to accelerate the Goals of the 2030 Agenda, with emphasis on climate- and environment-responsive approaches to building back better from the COVID-19 pandemic. The theme of the 2021 SASF is aligned with the theme of the 2022 HLPF and the APFSD, “Building back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Forum provides an opportunity to discuss how the South and South-West Asia subregion can cooperate to assess progress on the thematic SDGs for review by the HLPF 2022, i.e., **Goals 4 (Quality education), 5 (Gender equality), 14 (Life below water), 15 (Life on land) and 17 (Partnership for the Goals).**

As part of the follow-up and review process for the SDGs, all countries in the subregion submitted their first Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) by 2019. Turkey presented its second VNR in 2019, while Bangladesh, Nepal and India presented their second VNRs in 2020 and Afghanistan and Bhutan submitted their VNRs for the second time in 2021. Sri Lanka intends present its second VNR in 2022. In this context, this year’s Forum will focus on experiences of member States participating in voluntary national reviews, and focus on national and subregional perspectives on challenges, progress and achievements, lessons learned as well as, forward-looking dialogue on partnership to accelerate the progress of SDGs.

As a subregional preparatory meeting, the Forum seeks to bring together multiple stakeholders from the government, international community, civil society, academia, and the private sector on a common platform to discuss achievements and challenges in the process of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, assess progress on the thematic SDGs for review by the HLPF 2022 and advance regional cooperation to build back better from the pandemic.

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7 ESCAP/RES/77/1. See [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_RES_77_1_E.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/ESCAP_RES_77_1_E.pdf)
Objectives

The main objective of the Forum is to foster deepened and shared understanding of member States and other stakeholders on the opportunities for accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through inclusive dialogue and strengthened partnerships, as well as, to reflect subregional perspectives into the relevant regional and global processes.

To achieve this, the South Asia Forum for the SDGs aims to:

1. Enhance awareness and understanding on key challenges and opportunities for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Regional Roadmap to support and complement the subregional agenda through sharing of experiences and knowledge.
2. Provide a platform for expert discussions and reflections on subregional perspectives and good practices along with challenges related to means of implementation for achieving the SDGs.
3. Identify ways, through expert discussions to strengthen implementation efforts, stakeholder engagement, follow-up and review, linking national, subregional, regional and global processes, including through sharing of presentations and experiences of VNR countries at the HLPF.
4. Identify needs and opportunities for regional cooperation and delivery by regional and subregional bodies and the United Nations Development System.

Intended Participants

1. Government officials and representatives engaged in various aspects of implementing and monitoring the SDGs
2. VNR focal points and UNESCAP focal points for sustainable development
3. Representatives of UNCT, regional and subregional organizations that support SDG implementation
4. Representatives of civil society organizations and private sector organizations
5. Experts from think tanks and academia; and
6. Other stakeholders involved in SDG implementation at national, regional and global levels.

Organization

- The meetings will be conducted in English and all documentation will be in English.
- The meetings will include panel discussions on key topics. Depending on the session focus, presentations may be delivered by resource persons and experts.

Expected outcome

The outcome of the meeting will consist of a summary of proceedings of the key topics and issues raised by participants, as well as recommendations and presentations. The materials will be disseminated to the participants and be made available on the UNESCAP Website. The highlights of meeting will feed into the subregional report to the APFSD and HLPF, 2022.
# Programme

(Sri Lankan Time)

<table>
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<th>Day 1: 15 November 2021 (Monday)</th>
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<tr>
<td>This session will be held at PM House and the delegates will be taken in vehicle by local host. The delegates are expected to be in the Hotel Lobby by 08:00 AM. The last vehicle will leave at 08:10 AM.</td>
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**Session 1: Inaugural**

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| 09:30- 10:45 | **Opening Session**  
The session’s aim is to enhance awareness and understanding of the key challenges and opportunities for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the subregion in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and recent regional and subregional developments. The Session will provide inputs to discussions on the Regional Road Map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific.  

**Welcome Remarks:**  
- **Mr. Anusha Palpita**, Secretary, Ministry of Economic Policies & Plan Implementation, Sri Lanka  
- **Mr. Adnan Aliani**, Officer-in-Charge, ESCAP South and South-West Asia Office, New Delhi  
- **Ms. Hanaa Singer-Hamdy**, UN Resident Coordinator, Sri Lanka  

**Launch of Sri Lanka National SDG Data Portal (10-12 minutes)**  
- **Ms. Chamindry Saparamadu**, Director-General of the Sustainable Development Council, Sri Lanka – (Sri Lanka SDG Data Governance and Management System and the National SDG Data Portal)  
- **Mr. Robert Juhkam**, Resident Representative, UNDP Sri Lanka (Data in the context of SDGs)  

**Release of ESCAP South Asia SDG Report titled “Achieving the SDG in South Asia: An Integrated Approach to Accelerate SDG Progress and COVID-19 Recovery” (5 minutes)**  
- **Mr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna**, Deputy Head, ESCAP South and South-West Asia Office, New Delhi  

**Special Remarks:**  
- **H.E. Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana**, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCAP  
- **H.E. Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon**, Secretary-General of SAARC  
- **H.E. Ms. Fathimath Niuma**, Deputy Minister, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives  
- **H.E. Dr. Biswo Nath Poudel**, Vice-Chairman, National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal
H.E. Mr. Asad Umar, Minister for Planning, Development & Special Initiatives, Pakistan (video message)

Inaugural Address:
- Hon. Mahinda Rajapaksa, Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Policies and Plan Implementation, Sri Lanka

Vote of Thanks:
- Mr. Chaminda Udakumbura, Director (Operation), Sustainable Development Council, Sri Lanka

**11.00**
Departure from PM House to Meeting venue

**11.30-13.00**
Session 2: National progress, achievements and challenges with respect to the 2030 Agenda in the context of COVID-19
The session will help reflect on how the regional and subregional follow-up and review processes can strengthen the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level. It will provide national perspectives on impact of the pandemic on the SDGs and highlight priorities to reflect on the kind of policies being implemented to respond to the pandemic and its prospects for meeting the 2030 Agenda. To strengthen the capacity of countries in the subregion considering making presentations at the HLPF 2022, the session will feature interventions from countries who have recently participated in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the HLPF in the past years and provide peer learning for countries in the subregion.

**Moderator/Chair:**
Mr. R. H.W.A. Kumarasiri, Director General, Department of National Planning, Sri Lanka

**Presentations:**
- Reflections on Second Voluntary National Reviews in Asia-Pacific: Mr. Riccardo Mesiano, Sustainable Development Officer, UNESCAP (10 minutes)
- Accelerating SDG Progress in South Asia: Mr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna, UNESCAP SSWA (10 minutes)

**Presentations by Country Representatives:**

Countries Presenting VNRs at the HLPF 2022:
- Dr. Shabnam Sarfaraz, Member (Social Sector & Devolution), Planning Commission, Pakistan
- Mrs. Shashikala Rathnayake, Director (Development), Sustainable Development Council, Sri Lanka

Countries that Presented VNRs at the HLPF 2021:
- Mr. Phurba, Senior Planning Officer, Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC), Bhutan

Other SSWA Member countries:
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<td>Lunch</td>
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<td>14:00-15:15</td>
<td>Session 3: National progress, achievements and challenges with respect to the 2030 Agenda in the context of COVID-19 (Contd.)</td>
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<td>Moderator/Chair: Mr. R. H. W. A. Kumarasiri, Director General, Department of National Planning, Sri Lanka</td>
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<td>• Ms. Fathimath Niuma, Deputy Minister, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives</td>
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<td>• Dr. Kiran Rupakhetee, Joint Secretary, National Planning Commission, Nepal</td>
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<td>CSO Representative:</td>
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<td>• Dr. Ananda Mallawatantri, Country Representative, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Sri Lanka</td>
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<td>• Dr. Jyotsna Mohan Singh, Asia Coordinator, Asia Development Alliance</td>
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<td>15:15 - 15:30</td>
<td>Tea/Coffee Break</td>
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<td>15:30 - 17:30</td>
<td>Session 4: Subregional perspectives and review of selected Goals for HLPF 2022 in South Asia (SDGs 4, 5, 14 and 15)</td>
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<td>The session is expected to develop subregional perspectives on the cluster of goals under review in the HLPF 2022 in the form of impact on progress due to the pandemic, challenges, priorities, good practices, as well as propose solutions to accelerate progress by harnessing cross-border cooperation among other means. Through break-out sessions led by conveners of the working groups, this session will identify subregional priorities, reflect on opportunities for subregional responses, with focus on measures needed for vulnerable groups most affected by the pandemic to leave no one behind.</td>
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<td>• Identify the unique set of challenges and needs of countries and the subregion and discuss concrete collaborations that could be developed with partners.</td>
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<td>• Expand field of work to incorporate a subregional perspective to better support ESCAP member States; and</td>
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<td>• Gather information on priorities, policies, stakeholder-led initiatives and projects for possible inclusion in the 2022 SDG Partnership report that are related to the HLPF theme 2022 “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”</td>
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<td>Moderator/Chair:</td>
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<td>• H.E. Ms. Fathimath Niuma, Deputy Minister, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives</td>
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**Presentation: Key messages and findings from 2021 SDG Partnership Report and Introduction to theme of 2022 SDG Partnership Report (30 min)**

- **Mr. Bishwa Tiwari**, Programme Specialist, UN Development Programme (UNDP)
- **Ms. Smita Nakhooda**, Senior Results Management Specialist, Asian Development Bank (ADB)

**Comments from floor/Q&A**

**Presentation by ESCAP:**

- **Mr. Riccardo Mesiano**, Sustainable Development Officer, Office of the Executive Secretary, UNESCAP

**Break-out sessions: Working groups (Each group will consist of government officials, experts, UNRCO representatives, UNCT experts, CSOs etc.)**

Guiding questions to gather input for 2022 SDG Partnership Report

- How has COVID-19 affected quality education, gender equality, and biodiversity (marine and terrestrial) conservation?
- How are the above effects of COVID-19 and recovery measures different for groups within countries and between countries?
- Where are you seeing emerging possibilities, initiatives and priorities to invest in these goal areas to enable a more sustainable recovery? How have these issues been included or mainstreamed in the COVID-19 recovery measures of your government and institutions?

**Group 1. SDG 4: Quality Education**

**Moderator/Chair:**

- **Prof. Nagesh Kumar**, Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), India

**Panelists:**

- **Dr. Fahmida Khatun**, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh
- **Dr. Abid Suleri**, Executive Director, SDPI, Pakistan
- **Prof. Prashanthi Narangoda**, Director, SAARC Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka
- **Mrs. B.P. Withanage**, Director of Education, Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka
- **Mr. Christian Skoog**, UNICEF Representative, Sri Lanka
- **Prof. Shahid Ahmed**, Professor, Department of Economics, Jamia Milia Islamia, India

**CSO Representatives:**

- **Mr. Shantha Kulatunga**, National Coordinator, Coalition for Education Development
- **Ms. Susmita Choudhury**, Capacity Support and Advocacy Advisor, Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education
Group 2. SDG 5: Gender Equality

Moderator/Chair:

- Ms. Pramila Acharya Rijal, President, South Asian Women Development Forum (SAWDF), Nepal

Panelists:

- Mrs. Manel Jayamanna, Executive Director – National Committee on Women, Government of Sri Lanka
- Ms. Cai Cai, Chief of Section, Social Development Division, UNESCAP
- Ms. Athifa Ibrahim, EPIC Consulting LLP, Maldives
- Ms. Simrin C. Singh, Director, ILO, Sri Lanka
- Ms. Sharika Cooray, Gender Expert, UNFPA, Sri Lanka

CSO Representative:

- Dr. Kala Pieris, Director for Women’s Research Sri Lanka (CENWOR)
- Ms. Kamala Thapa, Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Manager, Centre for Indigenous Peoples Research and Development (CIPRED)

Group 3. SDG 14: Life under Water

Moderator/Chair:

- Mr. M.G.W.M.W.I.B. Dissanayake, Additional Secretary (Environment Policy and Planning), Ministry of Environment, Sri Lanka

Panelists:

- Mr. Sanjay Srivastava, Chief, Disaster Risk Reduction, ICT and Disaster Risk Reduction Division, UNESCAP
- Mr. Uchita de Zoysa, Chairman - Global Sustainability Solutions (GLOSS) and Executive Director - Centre for Environment & Development (CED), Sri Lanka
- Mr. Aman Khaleel, Planning Officer, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives
- Mr. Parackrama Karunarathne, Director General - Engineering, State Ministry of Coast Conservation & Low-Lying Lands Development, Sri Lanka
- Dr. Arvind Kumar, President, India Water Foundation, India
- Ms. Malin Herwig, Deputy Resident Representative, UNDP Sri Lanka

CSO Representative:

- Mr. Arjan Rajasuriya, Sri Lanka
- Mr. Md. Mujibul Haque Munir, Joint Director, COAST Foundation

Group 4. SDG 15: Life on Land

Moderator/Chair:

- Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, Director General, Research and Information System for Development Countries (RIS), India

Panelists:
### 19:30 Welcome Dinner hosted by the Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Relations, Government of Sri Lanka

#### Day 2: 16 November 2021

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<th>Time</th>
<th>Session</th>
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| 09:45 – 11:15 | **Session 5: Plenary- Review of selected Goals for HLPF 2022 in South Asia: Reporting by the Working Groups and the Way Forward**<br>The session will provide subregional perspectives on the cluster of goals under review in 2022, by the conveners of the Working Groups on the respective Goals based on the discussions in the previous session.  
**Moderator/Chair:**
- H.E. Ms. Fathimath Niuma, Deputy Minister, Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, Maldives  
**Reporting by Chairs of Working Groups (5 minutes for each group):**<br>Group 1. SDG 4: Quality Education  
Group 2. SDG 5: Gender Equality  
Group 3. SDG 14: Life under Water  
Group 4. SDG 15: Life on Land  
Discussion on the way forward:  
**Open discussion** |
| 11:15– 11:30 | Tea/Coffee Break |
| 11:30– 13:00 | **Session 6: Leveraging partnerships and means of implementation for the SDGs: Finance, technology, capacity-building and trade (SDG 17)**  
This session will focus on the means of implementation identified under SDG 17 – which include finance, technology, trade and capacity building. It will discuss means and mechanisms for designing recovery strategies based on sustainable financing policies; leveraging public and private sources for financing COVID-19 recovery packages and achieving the SDGs; emerging capacity-building needs and advancements in digital technology and technology gaps; and opportunities for increasing intra-regional trade through trade digitalization, harmonization and trade facilitation.  
**Moderator/Chair:** |
Dr. Shabnam Sarfaraz, Member (Social Sector & Devolution), Planning Commission, Pakistan

**Presentation:**
- Dr. Hamza Ali Malik, Director, Macroeconomic Policy and Financing for Development Division (MPFD), UNESCAP

**Panelists:**
- Prof. Nagesh Kumar, Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), India
- Dr. Ganeshan Wignaraja, Non-Resident Senior Fellow, National University of Singapore and Senior Visiting Fellow, Pathfinder Foundation, Sri Lanka
- Prof. Saj U. Mendis, Director General (Bilateral)/Economic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka
- Dr. Abid Suleri, Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, and Member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister of Pakistan
- Ms. Pramila Acharya Rijal, President, South Asian Women Development Forum (SAWDF), Nepal
- Dr. Selim Raihan, Executive Director, SANEM, Bangladesh

**CSO Representative:**
- Mr. Choliya De Silva, Group CFO, Heyleys Group, Sri Lanka
- Ms. Pooja Rangaprasad, Policy Director, Financing for Development, Society for International Development (SID)

**Open discussion**

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<th>13:00-14:00</th>
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<td>14:00-15:15</td>
<td>Session 7: Strengthening means of implementation for the SDGs: Policy coherence, multi stakeholder partnerships, and data, monitoring and accountability (SDG 17)</td>
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The session will explore effective strategies for contextualization/localization of SDGs to enhance policy coordination and coherence and examine the role and opportunities for multi-stakeholder partnerships, including public-private partnerships to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. It will explore the data gaps and statistical capacity preparedness, monitoring frameworks of countries in the subregion, identify emerging data needs in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and highlight opportunities for statistical innovations and development of common data strategies.

**Moderator/Chair:**
- Mr. R.M.P. Ratnayake, Deputy Secretary to the Treasury, Sri Lanka

**Presentation on SDG progress in the SSWA region**
- Mr. Arman Bidarbakhtnia, Head, Statistical Data Management Unit, ESCAP

**Panelists:**
- Ms. Noorjahan Khatun, Joint Secretary, Statistics and Informatics Division (SID), Ministry of Planning, Bangladesh
- Dr. Sanjay Kumar, Director (SSD), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, India
- Ms. Aishath Shahuda, Chief Statistician, National Bureau of Statistics, Maldives
- Mr. Dilli Raj Joshi, Deputy Director General, Central Bureau of Statistics, Nepal
**Mr. Muhammad Ali Kemal**, Chief (SDGs), Ministry of Planning Development & Special Initiatives, Pakistan

**Dr. J.S.N.P. Dharmawardhane**, Senior Statistician, Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka

**CSO Representative:**

**Ms. Karin Fernando**, Team Leader, Sustainable Development, Centre for Poverty Analysis, Sri Lanka

**Ms. Anita Gurumurthy**, Executive Director, IT for Change

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**Open discussion**

15:15-15:30 | Tea/Coffee Break

15:30-16:45 | **Session 8: Building Back Better and Accelerating SDGs Achievement- Priority Actions for Regional Cooperation [South Asia Network on SDGs (SANS)]**

This session will explore trends and importance of regional, subregional and South-South and triangular cooperation in supporting the achievement of the SDGs and discuss how regional commissions like UNESCAP and the United Nations Development System can better support countries in the subregion to leverage regional platforms, including by promoting exchanges of good practices, knowledge and experiences, on relevant issues including the COVID-19 pandemic; enhancing greater access to information and innovation; and harnessing technical and research capacities through knowledge networks and partnerships.

**Moderator/Chair:**

**Mr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna**, Deputy Head, ESCAP South and South-West Asia Office, New Delhi

**Panelists:**

**Dr. Abid Suleri**, Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, and Member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister of Pakistan

**Dr. Fahmida Khatun**, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh

**Prof. Nagesh Kumar**, Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), India

**Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi**, Director-General, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), India

**Mr. Chanchal Sarkar**, Director, Economic, Trade and Finance, SAARC Secretariat

**Dr. Puspa Sharma**, Executive Director, South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), Nepal

**Dr. Ganga Tilakaratna**, Head of Poverty and Social Welfare Policy Research, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka

**Prof. Shahid Ahmed**, Professor, Department of Economics, Jamia Millia Islamia, India

**CSO Representative:**

**Dr. Arvind Kumar**, President, India Water Foundation, India

**Mr. Daya Sagar Shrestha**, Executive Director, National Campaign for Sustainable Development

**Open discussion**
| 16:45-17:15 | **Wrap up and concluding session: The way forward**  
This last session will feature concluding remarks by the organizers, summarizing the key highlights, discussing the way forward, including the process leading to the APFSD and HLPF in 2022 and consolidating subregional inputs for the upcoming APFSD to feed into the HLPF 2022.  

**Key highlights of the meeting:**  
- **Mr. Rajan Sudesh Ratna**, Deputy Head, UNESCAP-SSWA  

**Concluding remarks:**  
- **Ms Chamintry Saparamadu**, Director General, Sustainable Development Council, Sri Lanka  
- **Mr. Adnan Aliani**, Officer-in-Charge, UNESCAP-SSWA  

**Keynote address by Chief Guest:**  
- **Admiral Professor Jayanth Colombage**, Foreign Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Relations, Sri Lanka |