Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

7th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development
Written inputs by Sri Lanka

- Sri Lanka appreciates the hosting the 7 APFSD for the first time in its history as a virtual meeting, demonstrating the importance of collective deliberations and action within multilateral framework, and is pleased to be elected by acclamation as the Chair of the Session.

- The assessment of progress in the Asia Pacific Region on realizing the SDGs, presented in the Secretariat report ESCAP/RFSD/2020/1, informs the need to accelerate the commitments as no country in the region is on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030, despite certain progress on some SDGs. This reminds all of us to identify the challenges and recalibrate the priorities at national level, keeping human wellbeing at the core of all policies and programmes. This will be particularly important as almost all States in the region will need to revisit their national strategies and programmes to take into account the impact of the ongoing health crisis posed by COVID-19.

- With COVID-19 pandemic continuing, and as predicted by WHO, if it’s going to stay longer than anticipated, most countries in the region will have to face unprecedented levels of socio-economic downturns. Characterized by multiple uncertainties and challenges in the social and economic spheres that has rolled back the hard gained progress in many countries, Governments will be forced to make hard choices, and so would be the private sector partners. Collapse in the economic progress brought about by lockdowns and reductions in demand and supply in major global markets has caused significant damages to the small and vulnerable markets, particularly in the developing countries. Drawbacks in key economic sectors that generated several millions of jobs and foreign exchange to the national economies such as tourism, migrant workers and apparel industry has affected severely. Hence, the current session on “Accelerating action for and delivery of the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific”, will also need to look into what innovative and collaborative measures that the Region could consider to boost the socio-economic situations.

- The Government of Sri Lanka has been successful in preventing the spread of COVID-19 within the society by strict implementation of health and social distancing regulations, quarantine procedures, testing and treatments. The continuous investments on universal access to free health care has helped Sri Lanka to successfully face the current pandemic with a very low rate of deaths as well as high recovery rates. However, in the medium and long run, the country will need to respond swiftly to several socio-economic problems including addressing income generation and getting
back to sustainable path of growth and development. However, accelerating progress towards achieving 2030 agenda within next decade will depend mostly on our socio-economic resilience.

- Considering the human wellbeing and capabilities to be at the center in the transformation envisaged in accelerating SDGs, it is imperative to create new jobs to compensate the massive job losses and to prevent the numbers that will fall below the poverty lines. More support for building entrepreneurship skills, access to quality education and universal health care are crucial investments that Governments in the Asia and Pacific region will have to pay serious attention.

- The government of Sri Lanka has granted financial relief to over six million affected families and vulnerable people covering all affected groups in the country. A COVID – 19 Healthcare and Social Security Fund has been set up to strengthen the mitigation activities to control the COVID-19 spread and social welfare programmes. To support businesses, the Central Bank has reduced policy rates and implemented a concessionary refinancing programme to provide low cost credit. In adjusting to the new realities, the government of Sri Lanka has devised an Economic Revival Strategy that identifies new opportunities posed by the health challenges. This includes following new work guidelines by businesses while maintaining the social distancing requirements and offices providing essential services functioning with minimum staff, work on rotations while non-essential staff function from homes, and using more digital communication systems etc. Online education is becoming increasingly popular in Sri Lanka and universities and certain schools have adopted it. However, this could increase inequalities as the accessibility is low or near zero for poor families. Lack of basic ICT skills also a major barrier to successfully implement online education. Regional and Global cooperation is essential to develop digital connectivity and electronic platforms in the education sector to face any pandemics of similar nature.

- Maintaining the balance between human interactions and environmental sustainability is a lesson that became so obvious during the lockdown periods that forced countries and societies to limit their engagements and to think doing business differently. Any revival of human activities must take into account ways of reducing the carbon print. The symbiotic relations with man and nature is something that cannot be glossed over when transforming towards sustainable and just economies in the post COVID 19 situation, and it is also an opportunity to gear for green and sustainable growth, through more investments in research and innovations.

- In strengthening institutional structures for realizing SDGs, Sri Lanka has enacted the legislative framework for SDGs by passing in the Parliament the Sustainable Development Act No. 19 of 2017, which also established a central focal agency-the Sustainable Development Council, to coordinate, facilitate, monitor and report on the SDG implementation. GoSL also established a Parliamentary Select Committee for Sustainable Development to provide parliamentary supervision. Moreover, the GoSL and UN signed the UN Sustainable Development Framework (UNSDF) 2018-2022, which
provides the overarching framework for the work of the UN in Sri Lanka, in line with the national priorities. It aims to support the Government to achieve peaceful, just, inclusive and equitable development. Sri Lanka is now in the process of finalizing the policy and strategic framework for implementation of SDGs, through an inclusive mechanism of stakeholder consultations.

- Sharing experience in the region on supporting the Covid-19 affected vulnerable countries and societies could accelerate their return to normal. The platform created by UNESCAP to share experience on preparation for VNRs is a good opportunity for peer reviews on voluntary basis. The government of Sri Lanka presented its VNR in June 2018, and will be willing and ready to share its experience and challenges to support our collective efforts in the Region.

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