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Regional perspectives on progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Empowering people for a more inclusive and equal Asia and the Pacific

Note by the secretariat

Summary

Empowerment and inclusion are necessary approaches to reduce inequality and accelerate progress towards many of the Sustainable Development Goals. The present document contains a discussion of the elements of the empowerment and inclusion framework, which may assist policymakers in promoting empowerment and inclusion. Case studies from the region reveal how specific interventions can strengthen empowerment and inclusion and contribute to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The present document provides an assessment of the relevance of this approach for the case of climate action and the conclusion highlights areas for policy attention and action.

I. Introduction

1. Despite important development gains, inequality is on the rise in Asia and the Pacific. It remains an important impediment to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its call to “leave no one behind,” as well as the achievement of enduring peace and stability. Inequality is undermining poverty reduction efforts in the region, leading to less inclusive growth and less pro-poor growth. While many people have escaped extreme poverty, they remain trapped at a level of low and vulnerable income.

* ESCAP/RFSD/2019/L.1/Rev.1.

2. Regional trends are worrying. For example, in some countries, the top 10 per cent of earners make more than 40 per cent of the national income.¹ Just in the past 20 years, income inequality, measured by the Gini coefficient, grew in approximately 40 per cent of the countries in the region, with an increase of more than 5 per cent in the region overall. In countries where inequality fell, this often happened from relatively higher levels, suggesting the need for further improvement.²

3. Beyond income and wealth, inequality also pervades critical social and environmental domains. Even in upper-middle-income countries of the region, nearly 40 per cent of the population lacks access to safely managed sanitation facilities.³ In least developed countries in the region, approximately 26 per cent of the population lacks access to electricity, approximately 49 per cent of the rural population lacks access to safely managed water and nearly 47 per cent of births are not attended by skilled health personnel. Attendance rates in secondary education for the poorest quintile in a third of the countries in the region remains below 30 per cent, with four countries at 10 per cent or below. Meanwhile, attendance rates for children from the upper quintile in these countries can be as high as 80 per cent. While the region is witnessing rapid urbanization, 27 per cent of the urban population resides in irregular settlements with inadequate access to water and sanitation facilities. Many segments of the population confront multiple deprivations in terms of access to basic social services and the disproportionate burden of environmental degradation.

4. Empowering people, especially vulnerable groups, and promoting inclusion is enshrined in the 2030 Agenda. New empirical research conducted for the present document reveals that the empowerment and inclusion of vulnerable groups can result in significant acceleration of many of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets. For instance, empowering citizens through a constitutional guarantee of environmental rights is associated with improved environmental performance as measured by several of the core environment-related Goals, especially Goals 12, 13, 14 and 15. In households where women have a say in decision-making on major household purchases, a proxy for their empowerment and inclusion in household decision-making, there are better health outcomes for children (target 2.2). Further, curbing disempowering practices, such as child marriage, can significantly augment female educational attainment (target 4.1), while empirical results have shown that exposure to media is instrumental in influencing societal norms.

5. The present document contains a discussion on empowerment and inclusion and provides specific options for member States, drawn from a joint report for the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development prepared by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme. The present document also contains a discussion of the links between empowerment, inclusion and inequality, and a framework to understand ways to promote empowerment and inclusion to address inequalities. The framework

¹ Facundo Alvaredo and others, *World Inequality Report 2018* (World Inequality Lab, 2017).

² *Inequality in Asia and the Pacific in the Era of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.18.II.F.13).

³ Statistics reported in this paragraph have been taken from the ESCAP Statistical Online Database (accessed on 15 November 2018) and reported in *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific: Poorly Protected* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.2).

is applied to the case of climate change and the conclusion provides actionable policy interventions that can help empower people and ensure inclusiveness and equality.

II. Linking empowerment, inclusion and equality in the context of the 2030 Agenda

6. Empowerment and inclusion are integral to the transformations needed to address deep-rooted inequalities spanning across the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Tackling the underlying power relations in the society by empowering vulnerable groups is essential to address inequality. These power relations are expressed in the forms of “power to”, such as the power to make decisions, “power with”, referring to organizing and taking collective action, and “power within”, referring to self-confidence or dignity.⁴ Having these powers can lead to opportunities for change and it can influence development outcomes and the underlying inequalities. At the same time, inequality cannot be addressed without the meaningful inclusion of those that are left behind in all facets of policymaking and development processes.

7. While empowerment is highly context-specific and is understood differently across cultures, it can be broadly defined as expansions of an individual’s freedom of choice and action to increase control over resources and decisions that affect one’s life. Empowerment can occur at multiple levels, including the individual, family, organization and community levels. Definitions of empowerment highlight notions such as control, self-reliance, choice, living in dignity in accordance with one’s values, the capability to fight for one’s rights and awareness, to mention a few.⁵ It is closely related to the notion of agency, which is the ability of an individual to define one’s own goals and act upon them.⁶ The degree of empowerment can be seen as the outcome of the influence of formal and informal norms and institutions of society on the “opportunity structure” of agency and the ability of an individual to take self-defined action. In 2011, upon an initiative of the Government of Bangladesh, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted resolution 66/224 on the interlinked relationship between people’s empowerment and development processes.

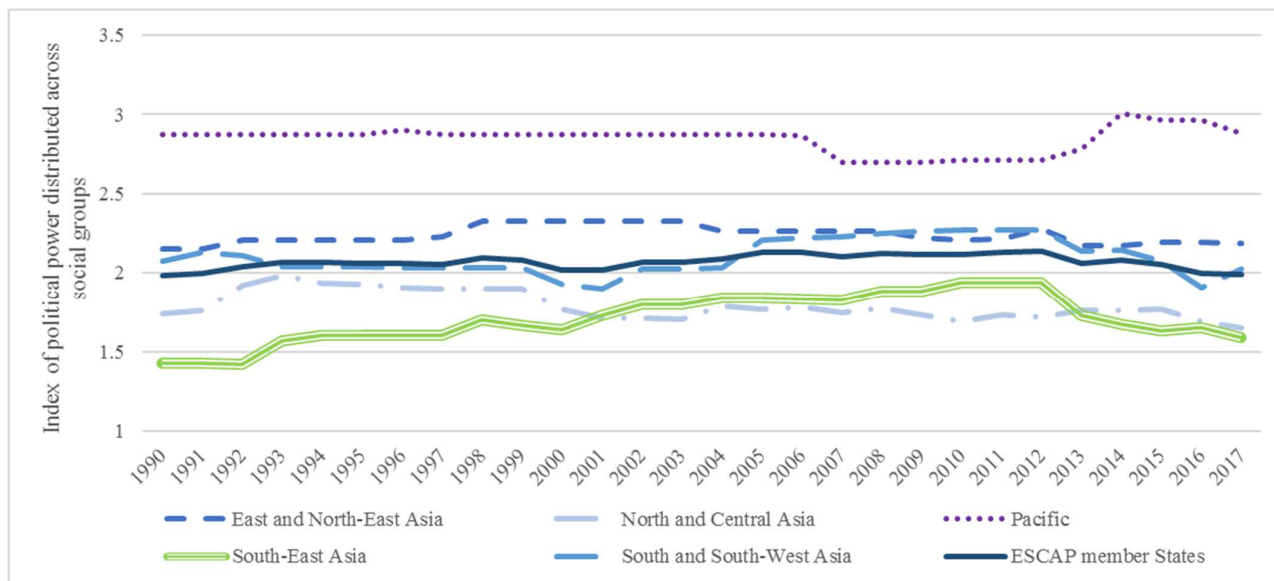
8. Power relations can manifest in different contexts. Figure I illustrates trends in the distribution of political power of various social groups in Asia and the Pacific and its subregions from 1990 to 2017. For the region as a whole, there has been very little change in the distribution of political power, which has been monopolized by certain social groups within societies. Political power relations are especially skewed in Central Asia and South-East Asia, where certain social groups seem to wield disproportionately higher political power. Hence, there is great potential to level political power relations among different social groups by empowering those left behind.

⁴ Maro Pantazidou, “What next for power analysis?: a review of recent experience with the powercube and related frameworks”, IDS Working Paper, No. 400 (Brighton, United Kingdom, Institute of Development Studies, 2012).

⁵ World Bank, *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook* (Washington D.C., 2002).

⁶ Naila Kabeer, “Resources, agency, achievements: reflections on the measurement of women’s empowerment”, *Development and Change*, vol. 30, No. 3 (July 1999), pp. 435–464.

Figure I
Distribution of political power in Asia and the Pacific and by subregion, 1990–2017



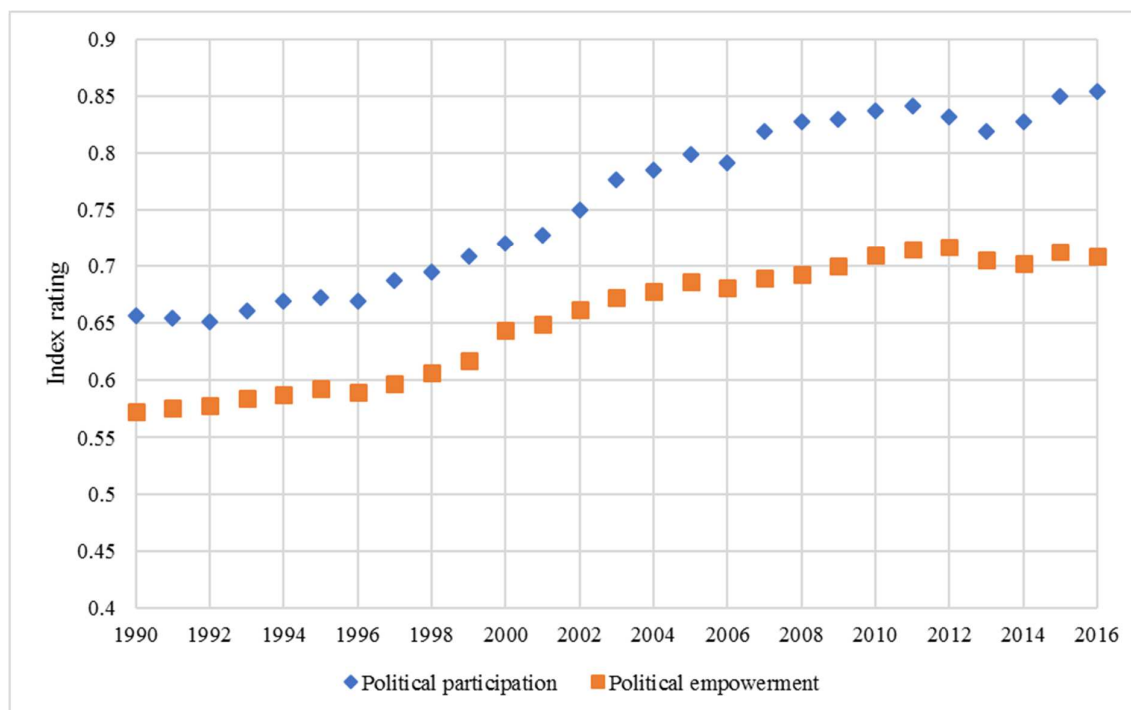
Source: ESCAP calculations based on data from Varieties of Democracy database, University of Gothenburg. Available at www.v-dem.net/en/ (accessed on 8 January 2019).

Note: Social groups are differentiated within a country by caste, ethnicity, language, race, region, religion, or some combination thereof. A rating of 0 represents a monopoly, where a minority of the social groups monopolizes political power, while a rating of 4 represents all social groups having equal political power.

9. Inclusion, a concept complementary to empowerment, captures the spirit of the central aspiration of the 2030 Agenda, to “leave no one behind”. Inclusion would bring about system-level institutional reform and policy change and remove inequities in access to assets, capabilities and opportunities. The 2030 Agenda calls for social, political and economic inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, economic or any other status (target 10.2). By integrating vulnerable groups and issues surrounding their vulnerability into political processes, inclusion helps to promote development pathways and policies with wider ownership. Social inclusion of vulnerable groups strengthens the social fabric, while economic inclusion ensures vulnerable groups have access to resources critical for realizing their aspirations. Greater inclusion of vulnerable groups in social, economic and political realms can significantly contribute to their process of empowerment as well as create more equal societies.

10. Figure II provides indices of women’s political participation and women’s political empowerment in Asia and the Pacific to illustrate the difference between inclusion and empowerment. While women’s political participation, which can be understood as their inclusion in political processes, has been improving, women’s overall political empowerment, measured by their broader civil liberties and overall participation in civil society, is found to be substantially lower. This demonstrates the need to look at empowerment and inclusion jointly, and it underscores their complementarity.

Figure II
Women's political participation and women's political empowerment in Asia and the Pacific, 1990–2016



Source: ESCAP calculations based on data from Varieties of Democracy database, University of Gothenburg. Available at www.v-dem.net/en/ (accessed on 8 January 2019).

Note: A rating of 0 represents the absence of participation or empowerment, while a rating of 1 represents full participation or empowerment.

11. There is a virtuous, interlinked and reinforcing relationship between empowerment, inclusion and equality. At their respective levels of influence, empowerment acts from below on individuals, households and communities, while inclusion acts from above on broader societal structures. Empowerment of vulnerable groups and greater inclusion of them in social, economic and political realms can promote equality of outcomes catalysed by the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. At the same time, societies that are more equal lay the foundation for greater empowerment and inclusion. For example, more equality in societies promotes greater trust in institutions and further strengthens social cohesion. Hence, it is crucial to recognize the intricate and reinforcing nature of the relationship among empowerment, inclusion and equality.

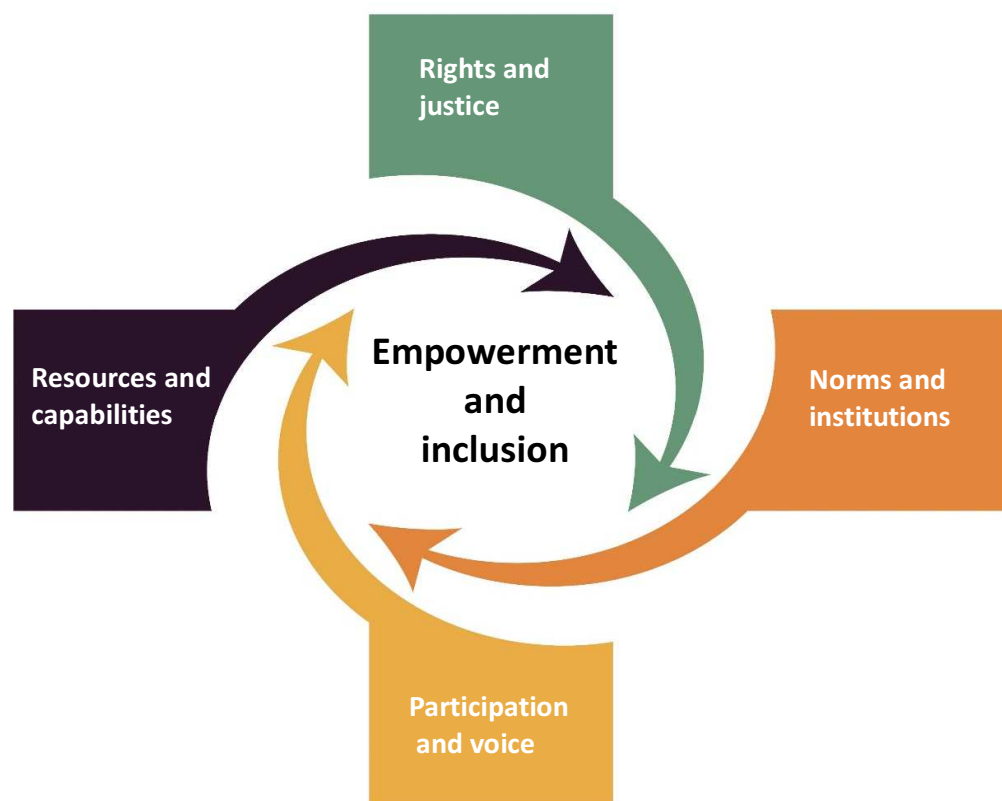
III. A framework for strengthening empowerment and inclusion in the 2030 Agenda

12. In the subregional consultations that informed the present document,⁷ stakeholders highlighted several barriers to the empowerment and inclusion of vulnerable groups. Some indicative examples include: the absence of data to support targeted interventions; strained institutional capacities and resources; scarce opportunities for participation in policy processes; poor policy coherence and institutional arrangements; regressive sociocultural environments; limited political will, transparency and accountability of government; insufficient awareness; weak rule of law; erosion of social cohesion and greater conflict; shrinking civic space; and gender inequalities. Any policy approach for the region with a focus on empowerment and inclusion should take these barriers into consideration.

13. The Sustainable Development Goals and targets relevant to empowerment and inclusion and the barriers mentioned above can be logically placed within the empowerment and inclusion framework, which includes rights and justice, participation and voice, norms and institutions, and resources and capabilities (figure III and box I). Each of these elements are elaborated below.

Figure III

Elements of the empowerment and inclusion framework



⁷ Subregional preparatory meeting for the 6th Session of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, Bangkok, September 2018. Available at <https://www.unescap.org/events/subregional-preparatory-meeting-6th-session-apfsd>.

Box I**Elements of the empowerment and inclusion framework and corresponding Sustainable Development Goals and targets****Rights and justice**

Human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequently elaborated through covenants, declarations and conventions form universal legal guarantees protecting individuals and groups against actions and omissions that interfere with fundamental freedoms, entitlements and human dignity. Rights-based approaches to development, which work to preserve these critical rights, are foundational to empowerment and inclusion as they emphasize the equality of all human beings. Access to justice is intimately linked to the exercise of rights by ensuring effective and timely remedies to those whose rights are denied. Rights and justice are important elements of targets 1.4, 5.1, 5.6, 5.a and 8.8, among others.

Norms and institutions

Social norms comprise informal rules, practices and shared social expectations that shape individual attitudes and behaviour.^a They fulfil a range of functions in society, such as coordinating action, allocating resources and expressing local beliefs or cultural or religious values, and they are sometimes a means of upholding social order.^b Institutions are the structures within society, including laws and formal rules, that underpin its functioning. They are fundamental in determining whether a person or community is excluded from or included in development and progress. Norms and institutions are reflected in targets 5.3, 8.7 and 10.3, among others.

Participation and voice

Participation encompasses the freedom to participate in political activities and community life, to access public resources and services, and to contribute to decisions that impact an individual. Voice refers to the ability of individuals and groups to represent themselves and to be heard. Participation and voice inform targets 4.3, 5.a, 8.5, 9.2, 11.3 and 16.7.

Resources and capabilities

Resources include essential resources, such as housing, water and sanitation, as well as productive resources, such as finance, technology and skills, and also access to social protection, such as pension schemes and health insurance. Resources are critical for empowerment and inclusion. At the same time, the capability to control these resources and make choices about their use is an important determinant of empowerment. Resources and capabilities are singled out as key inputs in targets 4.1–4.4., 5.5, 11.1 and 16.7.

^a Huma Haider, “Changing gender and social norms, attitudes and behaviours”, K4D Helpdesk Research Report Series (Brighton, United Kingdom, Institute of Development Studies, 2017).

^b Rachel Marcus and others, “Social norms, gender norms and adolescent girls: a brief guide”, Knowledge to Action Resource Series 2015 (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2015).

A. Rights and justice

14. The year 2018 marked the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which underscores the equal dignity and worth of every person. Human rights, including access to justice, are enshrined in declarations and conventions and are operationalized through global and national mechanisms, treaty bodies, special procedures and measures taken by Governments and other actors. Access to justice is intimately linked to the exercise of all human rights, by ensuring effective and timely remedies to those whose rights are denied. Rights-based approaches to designing and managing development programmes are guided by human rights and aim to strengthen the realization of human rights.

15. Projects that have adopted rights-based approaches to development have had positive impacts in tackling underlying causes of poverty leading to sustained change, as compared to projects that did not adopt rights-based approaches. Rights-based projects have also been found to link citizens and States in new ways, create networks of partnerships and alliances that support the poor and marginalized, and strengthen accountability. Other benefits of rights-based approaches include increased access to justice and a significant reduction of vulnerability, where vulnerability is addressed as a structural issue in society connected to inequitable power relations, rather than as a symptom of poverty.⁸ Scaling up these benefits to the societal level holds significant potential for improving development outcomes.

16. Currently, 16 countries in the region provide substantive environmental rights that guarantee citizens a clean, ecologically balanced, healthy, sustainable environment. Six countries guarantee procedural environmental rights, which entail provisions related to information, participation and access to justice in environmental matters. Building on global evidence that constitutional environmental rights can lead to better environmental outcomes, empirical analysis for the region reveals that, on average, countries with substantive environmental rights achieve greater progress in environmental performance.⁹

17. Rights-based approaches are effective in enhancing access to resources while delivering development co-benefits. For example, the Government of India guarantees its citizens 100 days of employment through one of the largest public works schemes in the world. This has increased women's access to paid employment, which has, in turn, substantially increased their control over household decisions, resulting in a higher probability of their daughters staying in school.¹⁰ In the case of labour rights, 6 out of 16 countries globally that ban formal trade unions are in the region.¹¹ Empirical evidence has shown that providing minimum wages and unionization can help in reducing income

⁸ Sheena Crawford, *The Impact of Rights-based Approaches to Development* (UK Interagency Group on Human Rights Based Approaches, 2007).

⁹ Yale Centre for Environmental Law and Policy, Environmental Performance Index. Available at <https://epi.envirocenter.yale.edu/> (accessed on 30 November 2018).

¹⁰ Fernanda Bárcia de Mattos and Sukti Dasgupta, "MGNREGA, paid work and women's empowerment", Employment Working Paper, No. 230 (Geneva, International Labour Organization, 2017).

¹¹ Oxfam International and Development Finance International, *The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2018* (Oxford, United Kingdom, Oxfam GB, 2018).

inequality, especially as there is a strong negative relationship between unionization and top earners' income shares.¹²

18. The realization of human rights calls for the consolidation of legislative and institutional foundations. As examples, the Government of the Marshall Islands has overhauled its legislation to mainstream the rights of persons with disabilities and the Government of India has removed discriminatory legislative provisions aimed at same-sex relationships and increased protections against sexual violence against children. The Government of Malaysia has increased the separation between the executive, legislative and judicial functions, increasing access to free and fair justice. Despite progress in recognizing some rights, the rights of some vulnerable groups are not adequately protected through existing legal systems. In 18 out of 24 selected countries in the region, existing laws do not address the issue of land rights of indigenous communities in protected areas.¹³

19. Legislative strengthening needs to be complemented by education, capacity-building and advocacy to build social accountability for the realization of human rights. It must involve the public, civil society, the private sector, parliament, the education system, the judiciary and law enforcement, among others. In Indonesia, the Better Work programme has had measurable nationwide impact on pay, the quality of worker dialogue and rights awareness, and antenatal health care for workers. In Vanuatu, traditional leaders have been brought together with young women to discuss the sociocultural practices that constrain young women from exercising their human rights. In Mongolia, the Open Government Partnership is working with civil society and the local and central governments to mainstream social accountability and promote legal education. In Malaysia, the right to citizenship and legal identity has been realized for more than 1,500 stateless people by a partnership between the Government and civil society.

20. In some places, long-standing inaction on human rights has resulted in extreme levels of inequality and exclusion. Histories of displacement, marginalization, inequality and unmet needs have provided fertile ground for conflict and for egregious human rights violations. More attention needs to be paid to emerging trends, such as the ubiquitous use of technology and potential threats to human rights. In several reports, ESCAP has identified the implications of the demand for resources, economic uncertainties, technological change and environmental risks, including climate risks on vulnerability and marginalization. Civil society organizations have raised concerns regarding access to and use of natural resources and the rights of smallholder farmers, indigenous peoples and rural communities.

21. Human rights-based approaches hold the potential to address these emerging challenges. Overall, the realization of rights and access to justice varies within countries and requires targeted approaches at different levels of society beyond a narrow focus on high-level indicators.

¹² Florence Jaumotte and Carolina Osorio Buitron, "Inequality and labor market institutions", IMF Staff Discussion Note, No. SDN/15/14 (Washington, D.C., International Monetary Fund, 2015).

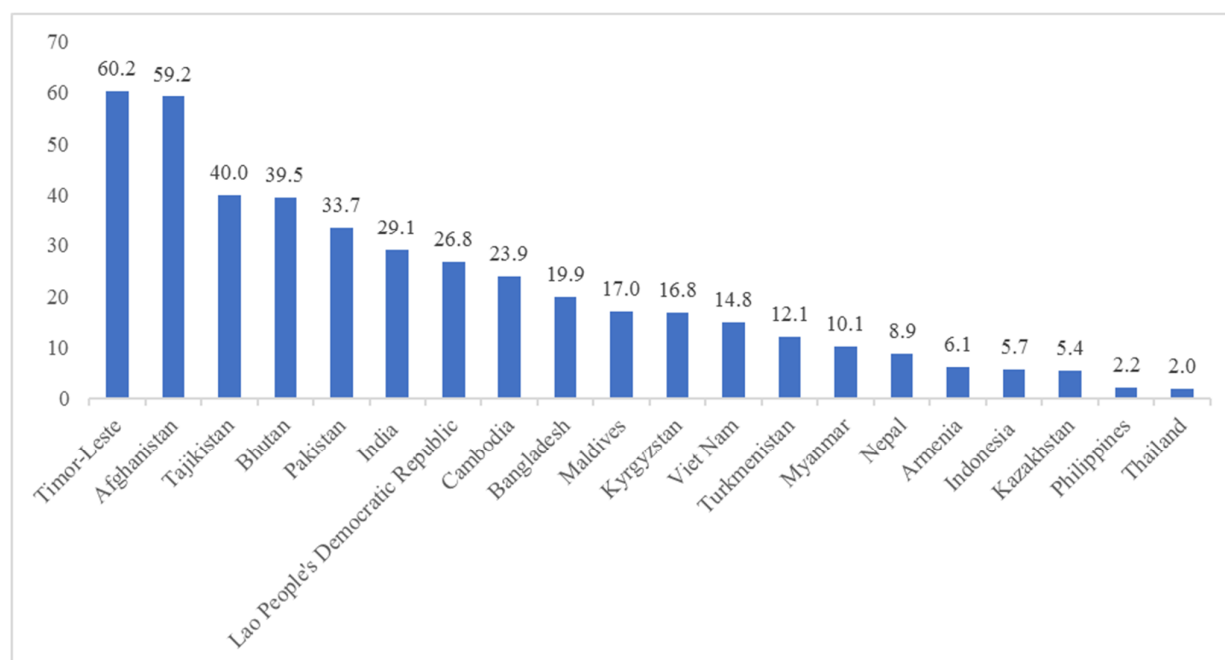
¹³ ESCAP calculations based on data from F. Dubertret and L. Alden Wily, "Percent of Indigenous and Community Lands", LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. Available at www.landmarkmap.org/data/ (accessed 30 November 2018).

B. Norms and institutions

22. Social norms and institutions determine the rules that exclude or include people and govern power relations in society. Dismantling social norms and practices that disempower women and other vulnerable groups also improves their access to better development opportunities. For example, social norms perpetuate domestic violence; in some countries of the region, more than 50 per cent of women agree that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife if she argues with him (figure IV).

Figure IV

Percentage of women aged 15–49 who agree that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife if she argues with him, selected countries



Source: ESCAP calculations based on data from the Demographic and Health Survey, latest years, available at <https://dhsprogram.com/data/available-datasets.cfm> (accessed on 30 September 2018); and the multiple indicator cluster surveys, latest years, available at <http://mics.unicef.org/surveys> (accessed on 30 September 2018).

Note: Survey years differ across countries.

23. Gender norms that place a disproportionate burden of domestic work on women and girls pose a significant barrier to their professional aspirations. Child marriage prevails to such extent that more than 30 per cent of girls in some countries are married before they turn 18.¹⁴ Similarly, legal frameworks can entrench disempowerment. Examples of this include inheritance laws that are biased towards male heirs and minimum wage legislation that excludes groups such as domestic workers. An analysis of 46 countries in the region found 23 countries have discriminatory labour laws that prohibit women from being employed in certain sectors of the economy.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the region

¹⁴ Based on data from United Nations Population Fund, World Population Dashboard. Available at www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard (accessed on 15 November 2018).

¹⁵ ESCAP calculations based on data from World Bank, “Women, Business and the Law” dataset. Available at <http://wbl.worldbank.org/> (accessed on 15 November 2018).

has witnessed targeted legal and institutional reforms that have empowered people. For example, the Republic of Korea reformed its financial regulations and provided migrant workers with greater access to the financial system. Therefore, it is paramount to identify and analyse the impact of norms and institutions on specific vulnerable groups.

24. Influencing deeply rooted norms and formal rules arising from institutions is a complex endeavour, yet it can be an effective entry point, and it is often a prerequisite for empowerment and inclusion. Recent research has shown that increasing the dialogue between men and women; using media for continuous sensitization; combining economic interventions, such as microcredit with health interventions, such as training on HIV; using contraception and family planning; and sensitizing people against domestic violence; can positively influence social norms regarding gender roles.¹⁶ Access to information is an important resource that can help address regressive social norms that disempower people. Empirical analysis reveals that the exposure of women to television is associated with a reduction in the probability that they will agree with social norms that condone domestic violence. However, the use of mass media to influence norms and institutions has its limits, especially in some countries in the region where more than 50 per cent of women in rural areas do not have access to a television or radio set. Similarly, in some parts of the region, the participation of children and adults in democratic processes, such as children's parliaments or youth urban consultations, has been found to make political institutions more inclusive for youth.

C. Participation and voice

25. Public participation and voice play a crucial role in promoting social accountability. They provide the conditions for the realization of human rights and the right to development. The extensive human rights framework covers many aspects of participation. In fact, the right to participation is interlinked with other human rights such as the right to peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression and opinion and the right to education and information.

26. Beyond supporting the exercise of human rights, increased participation and voice have practical benefits. They lead to more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable decisions, improved service delivery, greater trust in government and a more informed and capacitated citizenry. The benefits of increased public participation and voice in designing public policy and enhancing service delivery are such that these processes should be legislated and further institutionalized.

27. An important way to foster the participation of people from diverse backgrounds is through volunteering, as it can help promote social inclusion by providing a wider range of opportunities for varied groups. It can also empower people with the confidence, skills and knowledge they need to take the first step towards long-term involvement in development. At the same time, promoting volunteerism requires institutional and policy infrastructure (box II).

¹⁶ Huma Haider, "Changing gender and social norms, attitudes and behaviours" (see box 1, footnote (a)).

Box II**Volunteer infrastructure**

Volunteer infrastructure, as defined by the United Nations Volunteers programme, consists of three building blocks, namely, (i) an enabling environment, consisting of policies and legislation along with other established social norms and practices related to volunteerism; (ii) operational structures, such as schemes through which volunteers are mobilized, deployed and supported; and (iii) implementation capacities, including assets and readiness of countries and entities within to design and implement interventions that take advantage of the opportunities provided by volunteerism.

28. The influence of voice is also seen at the household level. Regional household data analysis reveals that in households where women have a say in major purchases, a proxy for their participation and voice in household decision-making, there are improved child health outcomes, particularly a reduction in stunting (target 2.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals).¹⁷ At the macro level, an analysis of a sample of 100 cases of various forms of citizen engagement reveals that in almost 75 per cent of these cases, it contributed to building more responsive and accountable States, and more inclusive and cohesive societies.¹⁸

29. However, the barriers to participation and voice are substantial. They include formal and informal norms and institutions that reinforce discriminatory practices, shortcomings in the realization of other human rights, limited individual or group capacities and inadequate institutional mechanisms and capacities. Participation starts at the level of household decision-making on themes ranging from women's health-care options to making decisions regarding household purchases. In some countries in the region, more than 50 per cent of women are excluded from such decisions. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda has also exposed important gaps between the expectations of civil society and the capacities of Governments to enable public participation. For example, in some countries, less than 20 per cent of polling stations and less than 30 per cent of government buildings are accessible, which seriously limits opportunities for the participation of persons with disabilities.¹⁹

30. There are successes in overcoming barriers to participation, despite the hindrance of social and cultural norms. Elections in Pakistan in 2018 saw the success of historically marginalized minorities,²⁰ which is central to improving development outcomes. Other broader conditions for participation and voice include legislative mandates for participation, safe and accessible physical spaces, access to technology, trustworthy and fact-based media, and robust civic education. Through informal polls, participants at the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in 2016 expressed that civic education was the most notable enabler of participation that was missing in their country.

¹⁷ ESCAP calculations based on national household surveys of 11 countries from the region. See figure IV for full data source.

¹⁸ John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett, "Mapping the outcomes of citizen engagement", *World Development*, vol. 40, No. 12 (December 2012), pp. 2399–2410.

¹⁹ *Building Disability-Inclusive Societies in Asia and the Pacific: Assessing Progress of the Incheon Strategy* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.18.II.F.4).

²⁰ Mehreen Fatima and Fatima Hasani, "All the glitters that shine brighter in Pakistan elections 2018", *Dunya News*, 2 August 2018.

31. Ensuring meaningful participation of all stakeholders in policy processes requires the institutionalization of engagement by providing adequate resources and strengthening capacities and the organizational structure. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is developing guidelines to operationalize the right to public participation. Many municipal and state governments in Australia have established policies and operational guidelines for soliciting public input on clearly identified decisions. This includes adopting core organizational values that maximize participation and providing robust communication and accountability channels for public engagement. As a result of civil society action in Vanuatu, a policy on integrity in public life and anti-corruption measures has been adopted, institutionalizing the public's role in combating corruption.

32. Lessons on public participation from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda underline the need for a focus on the quality of stakeholder engagement. In New Zealand, the Government can be held accountable in court for the quality of its mechanisms and processes for engaging with the public and with stakeholders. Various quality standards for public participation exist and are necessary for efforts to institutionalize public participation. ESCAP and the International Association for Public Participation have established a framework of indicators for planning and assessing effective stakeholder engagement.²¹ In Indonesia, participation has been strengthened in the context of decentralization efforts, and recent governance audits have included stakeholder engagement reviews.

33. Creating an enabling environment for civil society organizations is critical for expanding participation and voice. In keeping with the principle “nothing about us without us”, there is a need to institutionalize dialogue platforms that regularly connect the Government with civil society actors, especially those representing the interests of people left behind. However, the declining space for civil society in the region has been well noted. Social movements, such as the recent #MeToo movement, have played a significant role in promoting the participation of vulnerable groups and helping them raise their voice against disempowering practices, such as sexual harassment. Governments need to pay adequate attention to such movements and respond by providing legal reforms and further enabling the environment for such movements.

D. Resources and capabilities

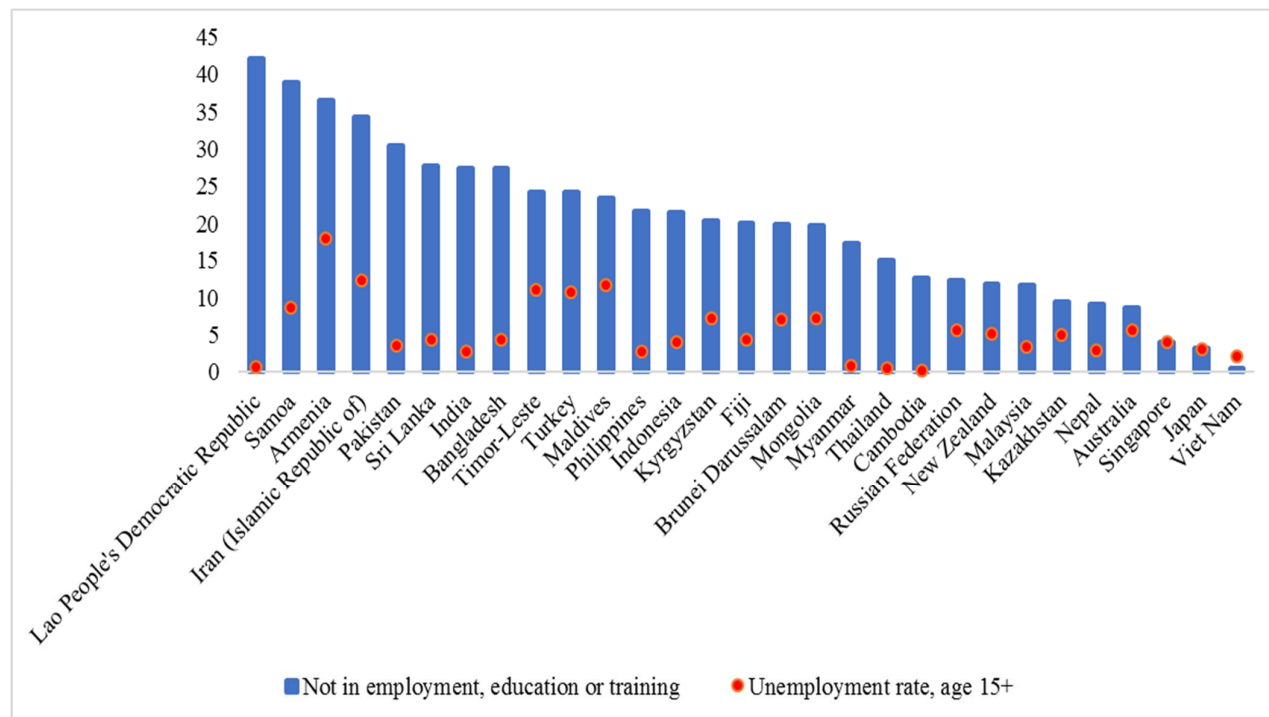
34. Access to resources is a critical dimension of empowerment, and it ranges from access to financial resources, housing and sanitation, public services and social protection, to productive resources such as land and technology. Marginalized groups often lack access to these resources, which is a key barrier to their empowerment. Household survey data have shown a great disparity in access to bank accounts between the poorest and richest population segments, and in many countries this disparity is more than 50 per cent.²² Access also has a strong gender dimension. For example, the percentage of women (aged 15–49) who do not own a house or land ranges from 13 per cent in Timor-Leste to more than 90 per cent in countries such as Nepal and Pakistan. In most countries in the region, more than 30 per cent of women do

²¹ See www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Stakeholder%20Engagement%20Indicator%20Framework%20Brochure_180518_0.pdf.

²² See figure IV for full data source.

not own a house or land. Statistics are equally grave for youth. In some countries in the region, more than 30 per cent of youth are not in employment, education or training, and these figures are often much higher than average unemployment rates (figure V), exposing a disproportionate lack of access to productive resources among youth. Identifying specific resources that various vulnerable groups are lacking and implementing strategies to improve access is a crucial step towards empowerment.

Figure V
Comparison of national unemployment rates and percentage of youth not in employment, education or training



Source: ESCAP calculations based on latest available data, 2010 to 2018 from ESCAP Statistical Online Database.

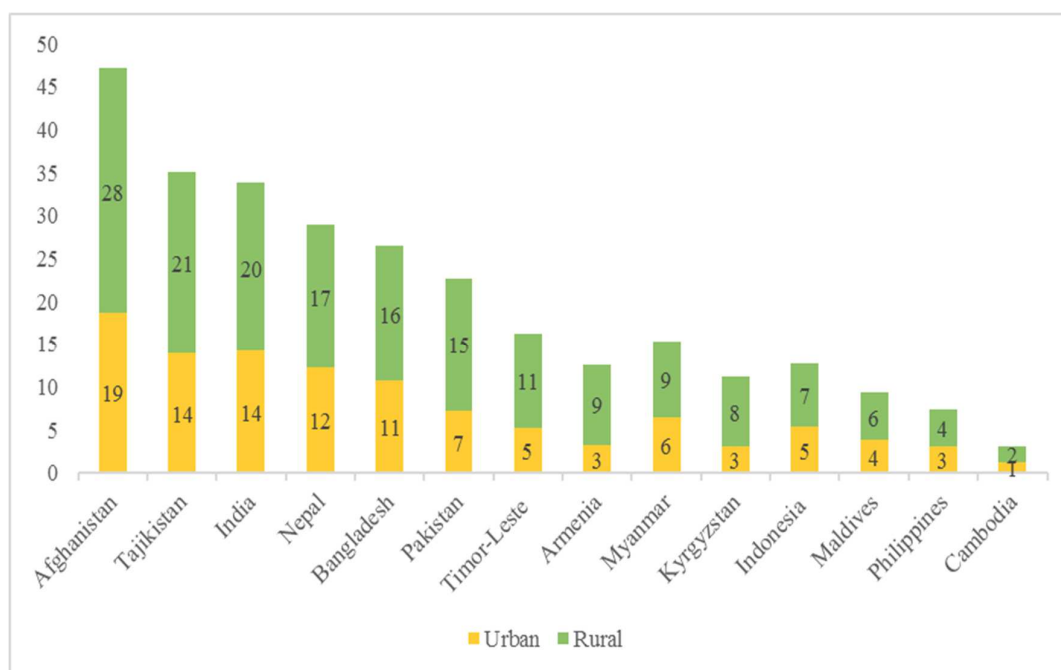
35. Rights-based approaches are far more empowering than charity-based approaches. In compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and in line with the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, many countries have adopted rights-based approaches for increasing access to critical resources.²³ Governments have a significant role to play in providing essential resources by partnering with the private sector and other stakeholders. Research has shown that increased spending by Governments in the region on education, health and social protection to match global averages can contribute to lifting approximately 328 million people out of moderate poverty and 52 million people out of extreme poverty. Since the year 2000, most countries in the region have expanded social protection systems and increased spending on education and health. In addition to high-income countries in the region, countries such as Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal and Uzbekistan have been successful in establishing a social protection floor, comprising a minimum set of social security guarantees to essential health care and basic

²³ *Building Disability-Inclusive Societies in Asia and the Pacific.*

income security throughout the life cycle. However, there is enormous potential to improve social protection, as most countries in Asia and the Pacific spend less than one third of the global average of 11.2 per cent of gross domestic product on social protection.²⁴

36. Access to resources does not automatically lead to empowerment. In fact, the ability to control the use of resources matters more. The aspect of individual freedoms and capacities for action are broadly understood as “capabilities”. In the context of resources, this manifests partly in the form of actual control of resources and participation in decision-making within households. The analysis of household survey data from the region has shown that many women, especially in rural areas, who engage in paid work, lack control of their individual earnings (figure VI).

Figure VI
Percentage of urban and rural women who lack control of their individual earnings, selected countries



Source: ESCAP calculations based on data from the Demographic and Health Survey, latest years, available at <https://dhsprogram.com/data/available-datasets.cfm> (accessed on 30 September 2018); and the multiple indicator cluster surveys, latest years, available at <http://mics.unicef.org/surveys> (accessed on 30 September 2018).

Note: Survey years differ across countries.

IV. The empowerment and inclusion framework in practice: the case of climate action

37. Applying the empowerment and inclusion framework to any policy process can be helpful in addressing the negative impacts of inequalities in society. To illustrate this message, the present section provides a deeper look at the application of the empowerment and inclusion framework to climate action, which comprises a broad array of policies and initiatives taken to adapt

²⁴ Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific: Poorly Protected.

to and mitigate the impacts of climate change. The latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change elaborates the urgency of climate action and the need for rapid and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society to respond to the impacts of climate change. This requires an understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationship between climate change impacts and inequality, and the need for an empowerment and inclusion approach.

A. Inequality multiplies the impacts of climate change

38. The same forces that deepen inequality also multiply the impacts of climate change, which further exacerbates inequalities, as illustrated by the interaction between inequalities in land ownership and climate change impacts and related conflicts. The absence of land tenure is an important feature of inequality in the region. Studies from northern Pakistan indicate that those with land tenure were better able to use reconstruction assistance for the repair of their homes following climate hazards compared to those who lacked legal ownership.²⁵ Those without legal tenure were either denied assistance or were compelled to channel a significant portion of reconstruction funds towards legal proceedings and court appearances in a judicial context that is inaccessible to rural populations and women. Further, stresses created by climate change combined with factors such as inequitable economic growth, increasing population, weak governance, and lack of land tenure can create conflict or intensify tension along existing societal fault lines.²⁶ This includes competition over resources, particularly land and water, food insecurity and unplanned migration. There is emerging evidence that conflict will further exacerbate existing inequalities.²⁷

B. Towards climate action that empowers people and ensures inclusiveness

39. Existing inequalities can exacerbate the impacts of climate change. Applying the empowerment and inclusion approach to climate action can counteract the multiplier effects of climate change and prevent conflict. Further, evidence reveals that the empowerment and inclusion approach can accelerate climate actions by hastening the transition to renewable energy, promoting wider uptake of climate-smart agricultural practices, creating climate resilient communities and removing some of the key obstacles to realizing green economy benefits. The elements of the empowerment and inclusion framework in relation to climate actions are elaborated below.

1. Rights and justice

40. The redistributive benefits, costs and opportunities of climate action can amplify inequity and scarcity, pit one user against another and threaten social alliances and coherence. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change emphasizes that parties should fully respect human rights in

²⁵ Omer Aijazi, “A Social Repair Orientation to Disaster Recovery: Evidence from Northern Pakistan”, 2015. Available at https://kipdf.com/download/a-social-repair-orientation-to-disaster-recovery-evidence-from-northern-pakistan_5ac36fe11723dd9245ed4e1a.html.

²⁶ United Nations Environment Programme, *Livelihood Security: Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict in the Sahel* (Geneva, 2011).

²⁷ Global Education Monitoring Report, “Conflict exacerbates already existing inequalities”, World Education Blog, 25 June 2015.

all climate-related action. Even so, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights observed that some climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts had counterproductive human rights impacts, particularly on the most marginalized. Evidence suggests that existing international mechanisms are dealing with human rights and climate change as separate issues, with only 30 per cent of countries reporting on linkages between human rights and climate change to both the Human Rights Council and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.²⁸ Only three countries from the region, Georgia, the Marshall Islands and the Philippines, referred to human rights as a guiding principle in their nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement.²⁹ Therefore, there is a need to enhance collaboration between human rights experts and climate change policymakers in the preparation of national reports under the universal periodic review of the Human Rights Council, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and related national responses.

41. Given the redistributive character of climate action, a strong human rights perspective can help reduce the effects of climate change as well as the negative multiplier effects of policy responses. Evidence from analyses of human rights practices of 59 major renewable energy companies reveals that failure to respect human rights results in project delays, legal procedures and costs, which can delay the overall critical transition to renewable energy. The research also found that the current human rights practices of these companies are not yet strong enough, underscoring the urgency of strengthening human rights due diligence in the renewable energy sector.³⁰ The application of nature-based solutions, such as reviving mangrove forests, has been effective in building resilience to climate change. This stands in contrast to less effective interventions, such as building seawalls that deny fishing communities their livelihood. Rights mapping is another successful strategy for ensuring that climate actions maintain the rights of stakeholders. It helps to spatially represent the different entitlements held by various stakeholders at the community, national or regional level, including overlapping and shared rights, and how they are likely to change as a result of climate actions. Further, it provides a systematic understanding of how climate actions can create conflict between different rights holders and draws attention to long-standing structural inequities that may have been previously ignored and increase vulnerability to climate change. This can help improve outcomes for groups previously discriminated against or excluded. For example, the Forest Rights Act of India of 2006, aims to restore and recognize the traditional rights of forest communities, and rights mapping has been useful in the implementation of the Act. To create an accurate reflection of the range of vulnerabilities, rights mapping needs to be participatory and locally accountable.

²⁸ Tara Shine, “Rights for action – putting people at the centre of climate action”, paper presented at the twenty-fourth session of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Katowice, Poland, December 2018. Available at <http://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/06122018%20PCCB%20presentation%20a.pdf>.

²⁹ Human Rights and Climate Change Working Group, “Integrating Human Rights into the Paris Commitments – (I)NDCs”.

³⁰ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, “Renewable Energy Risking Rights and Returns: an analysis of solar, bioenergy and geothermal companies’ human rights commitments” (2018).

2. Norms and institutions

42. Social and cultural norms elevate the risk of climate change for certain sections of society. For example, social norms restrict women's access to information and skills crucial for climate change adaptation and limit their mobility patterns. In certain contexts, climate change can further entrench harmful social norms in the form of early, child or forced marriage or dowry payments.³¹ Climate actions can be ineffective if these social and cultural norms are not sufficiently understood. For example, in many parts of the region, men use forest areas for timber harvesting, whereas women use forests to produce non-wood forest products and gather food and medicinal herbs. A programme aimed at conserving forests must provide alternative livelihoods not only for timber harvesters, but also for other types of users, otherwise the intervention will result in a disproportionate negative impact on women.

43. At the same time, existing social norms and institutions can support the cause of climate action. For example, evidence indicates that local institutions and norms can facilitate the adoption of climate-smart agriculture by smallholder farms, especially by promoting the dissemination of information and supporting the coordination of collaborative action.³² Another example is the use of local religious or spiritual traditions in the fight against climate change. Evidence indicates that integrating more culturally rooted contributions into climate change scenario-building can strengthen future thinking using climate model outputs.³³ Much of the literature on climate action in Pacific States narrowly approaches coastal vulnerability without adequately understanding the social systems and values of island societies, leading to ineffective adaptation and mitigation policies.³⁴ New climate action initiatives are emerging, however, and they make provisions for creating repositories of the knowledge of indigenous peoples and harnessing the same for ecosystem management by emphasizing intergenerational learning. Faith-based organizations and networks in the region have a long tradition of providing services in contexts of climate change and inequality.

3. Participation and voice

44. Many vulnerable groups who are most at risk of climate change are often left out of decision-making processes. Actively engaging them in the planning and design of climate strategies can promote collective vision, ownership and social cohesion. Through a quasi-experimental set-up, unique research in Myanmar provides strong evidence that engaging communities in planning and prioritization of activities appears to be more effective in building climate resilience.³⁵ The exclusion of such perspectives can have negative effects. For example, coastal buffer zone policies designed without the participation of local communities in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean

³¹ Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, *Feminist Participatory Action Research Regional Report on Climate Justice, Women Warming Up* (2015).

³² Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "Module 12: Local institutions", in *Climate-Smart Agriculture Source Book* (2017).

³³ Renata Tysczuk and Joe Smith, "Culture and climate change scenarios: the role and potential of the arts and humanities in responding to the '1.5 degrees target'", *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, vol. 31 (April 2018), pp. 56–64.

³⁴ John Campbell and Jon Barnett, *Climate Change and Small Island States: Power, Knowledge and the South Pacific* (Routledge, 2010).

³⁵ Gil Yaron and others, *Measuring changes in household resilience as a result of BRACED activities in Myanmar* (n.p, n.d.).

tsunami in Sri Lanka paid disproportionate attention to reducing exposure to future tsunamis at the expense of addressing the underlying social, economic and institutional factors that influenced sensitivity to the hazard in the first place.³⁶ This led to the massive relocation of affected populations and resulted in further social, economic and environmental problems that threatened the well-being of poor coastal communities.

45. An important component of strengthening participation and voice is building and supporting robust local organizations. A global analysis of climate actions, including 58 cases from the region, reveals that local organizations play a critical role in strengthening climate adaptation initiatives.³⁷ Local organizations can support communities in resolving differences and tensions around the use of resources that are made increasingly scarce by climate change. For example, studies from Bangladesh and Nepal have shown that local organizations play a valuable role in managing resource scarcity and competition by providing opportunities for social learning, local dialogue, conflict resolution and cooperation.³⁸ Learning within community organizations also encourages collective action and locally driven innovations. For example, the forest and farm producer organizations across the region create a collective voice especially of smallholder farmers and educate them in climate resilient and sustainable farming practices. They can also provide opportunities for communities to pursue locally valued, traditional modes of governance, which may lead to further equitable outcomes in resource distribution and mitigate risks of potential conflict.

4. Resources and capabilities

46. Resources such as technology, infrastructure, information, knowledge and skills, institutions, equity, social capital and economic development contribute to climate resilience. For example, after the 2010 monsoon floods in Pakistan, a livelihood intervention provided financial assistance to rural beekeepers to support the repopulation of bee stocks and the replacement of lost equipment. However, access to resources alone does not guarantee empowerment. The above-mentioned intervention failed to empower small-scale honey producers to obtain fair market prices for their product, leaving them entrenched within existing relationships of inequity where the power of setting prices rested primarily with wholesale purchasers.³⁹ By contrast, a social enterprise in Malaysia provides not only necessary resources for women farmers, but also opportunities to develop the capabilities needed to effectively leverage resources. It also provides important rallying point for women to advocate against sexual and gender-based violence in their households and communities. Another example is the transition to a green economy where the emphasis should not be only on the creation of new jobs, but also on

³⁶ Jane C. Ingram and others, “Post-disaster recovery dilemmas: challenges in balancing short-term and long-term needs for vulnerability reduction”, *Environmental Science and Policy*, vol. 9, No.7–8 (December 2006), pp. 607–613.

³⁷ Arun Agrawal, “Local institutions and adaptation to climate change”, in *Social Dimensions of Climate Change*, Robin Mearns and Andrew Norton, eds. (Washington D.C., World Bank, 2010).

³⁸ Parvin Sultana and others, “Transforming local natural resource conflicts to cooperation in a changing climate: Bangladesh and Nepal lessons”, *Climate Policy* (9 October 2018).

³⁹ Omer Aijazi, “Social repair and structural inequity: implications for disaster recovery practice”, *International Journal of Disaster Resilience in the Built Environment*, vol. 6, No. 4 (November 2015), pp. 454–467.

empowering workers with the resources and capabilities to manage the negative implications of this transition. The International Labour Organization estimates that 14 million new jobs will be created in the region by 2030 as part of climate actions under the Paris Agreement, yet their global survey of 27 countries, including 10 countries from the region, identified skills mismatches as a major obstacle to the greening of the economy. Skills development programmes, therefore, would be crucial to accelerate climate action while simultaneously empowering people with access to jobs.⁴⁰

V. Conclusions and recommendations

47. Empowering people and ensuring their inclusion can help accelerate progress towards many of the Sustainable Development Goals. Existing economic, social, political and environmental inequalities interact with emerging challenges, such as climate change, to create new vulnerabilities. There is a need to identify these emerging vulnerabilities and vulnerable groups at national and subnational levels through disaggregated data generation, context-specific research and constructive social dialogue. Further, the elements of the empowerment and inclusion framework, namely, rights and justice, norms and institutions, resources and capabilities, and participation and voice, can provide entry points to simultaneously address emerging vulnerabilities and underlying inequalities. All four elements of the framework are mutually reinforcing; no single element can be considered or operationalized in isolation of the others. Examples of best practices from across the region in terms of policy actions across these four elements suggest there is great potential for mutual learning within the region. Further, the elements of the empowerment and inclusion framework can be applied to all regional cooperation initiatives, including transboundary projects, to ensure that such initiatives have an empowering effect on all stakeholders.

48. Rights-based approaches to development are effective in empowering people and ensuring their inclusion. Therefore, it is relevant to map the rights of all stakeholders that are potentially under threat due to emerging challenges, such as climate change. Participatory and locally accountable rights mapping is a useful strategy for member States and development partners to consider when designing policies and interventions. Further, ensuring that these rights are guaranteed through constitutions and legislations and ensuring people have access to legal institutions to proactively claim their rights can further accelerate development outcomes. Civic education and public awareness are critical aspects of empowerment; people need to understand their rights to be able to exercise them. Technical training for judges, lawyers and advocates on rights, raising public awareness about how to access legal services and supporting public interest law firms are essential.

49. Policy interventions that consider existing norms and institutions will be more effective in promoting empowerment and inclusion. Documenting local norms and institutional structures and their influence on diverse groups of stakeholders is a crucial step to harness these norms in the design of impactful policies. Some of the ways to influence social norms are through access to education and exposure to media that spread new attitudes towards norms.

⁴⁰ International Labour Office, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2018: Greening with jobs* (Geneva, 2018).

50. It is paramount to ensure the participation and voice of all stakeholders, especially those who have often been left behind, are well reflected in all policy processes. Strengthening local organizations, such as forest and farm producer organizations, that give voice to marginalized communities and groups is important. Social movements, such as the #MeToo movement, targeting specific disempowering practices in society and giving voice to affected vulnerable groups, need to be encouraged and responded to with legislative reforms and concrete policy actions. Strengthening volunteer infrastructure can promote social inclusion by providing a wider range of opportunities for varied groups. It is important to expand civic space by creating an enabling environment for civil society organizations to operate and capacitating them with resources and skills for self-organization.

51. Governments should explore innovative ways of providing resources to vulnerable groups that strengthen the agency of individuals and create capacities to address the structural barriers that impede their social inclusion. In this regard, social enterprises can be an innovative means to provide resources, including finance, employment and skills, while addressing the underlying power relations and fostering social change. Where possible, Governments should adopt rights-based approaches to providing critical resources, because such approaches have a more empowering effect on vulnerable groups. Countries in the region have enormous potential to establish a social protection floor and improve social protection spending as a means to overcome entrenched inequalities and to promote empowerment.

52. Member States, major groups and other stakeholders are invited to do the following:

- (a) Review the present document with a view to sharing national and stakeholder perspectives on the issues raised and best practice responses to strengthening empowerment and inclusion;
- (b) Discuss opportunities for regional cooperation to support national efforts to empower people and ensure inclusiveness and equality.