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Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2018–2019

Summary

Despite remarkable progress in recent years, countries in Asia and the Pacific need to urgently accelerate progress if they are to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The present document provides the latest data and analysis and an overview of the work undertaken by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in the past year in advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the region.

The Economic and Social Council may wish to comment on the work of ESCAP and take note of the present document.

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I. Introduction

1.   The pace of change in Asia and the Pacific has captured the imagination of the world. Entrepreneurship, hard work and innovation have powered phenomenal economic growth and transformed societies. Incomes and opportunities for education have greatly increased and longer, healthier lives are being led. Half the world's middle class now lives in this region. From cutting edge technologies to bold infrastructure projects, Asia and the Pacific is leading from the front.

2.   The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has supported its member States on this transformational journey. ESCAP is now helping its member States keep the momentum and accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A regional road map for its implementation has been adopted and a regional forum established to monitor progress. Through the Commission's intergovernmental platforms, countries have put in place the foundations to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including by developing a modality on social protection to reverse the growing trends of inequality and vulnerability in the region and concluding ministerial agreements on using space applications for sustainable development and on transforming national statistical systems in support of the 2030 Agenda. These examples illustrate the leadership of ESCAP in knowledge generation, policy integration and technical assistance across sectors and across geographies in support of the accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

3.   The present report provides an overview of the work undertaken by ESCAP in the past year in partnership with all relevant stakeholders, including governments at all levels, entities within the United Nations development system, development banks, civil society, communities and the business sector.

II. Advancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region

A. Snapshot of progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific
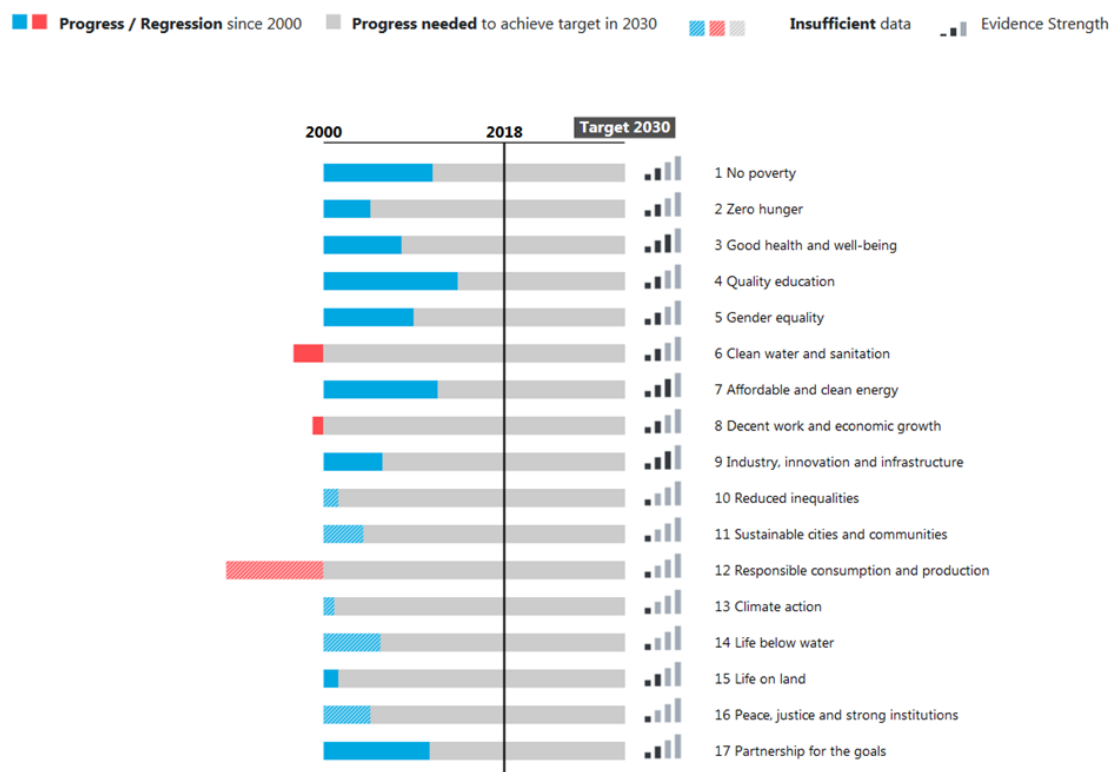
4.   The Asia-Pacific region has experienced remarkable progress in recent years. Between 1990 and 2012, 1.1 billion people lifted themselves out of extreme poverty and the region had the greatest reduction in maternal mortality globally. Healthier lives are being led, well-being has increased and innovation is powering new industries and infrastructure.

5.   However, against a backdrop of great progress, especially in terms of overall economic growth, ESCAP analysis shows that the region's best efforts to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are falling short.[1] As figure I shows, at the current rate of progress, no Sustainable Development Goal will be met in Asia and the Pacific by 2030. The region needs to accelerate progress on every goal and in some cases reverse current trends if it aims to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

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[1] *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2018* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.9).

Figure I
**Snapshot of progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia
and the Pacific**

Source: ESCAP, Asia-Pacific SDG Gateway, April 2019.

6.   Since 2000, Asia and the Pacific has made the biggest progress on Sustainable Development Goals 4 (quality education) and 7 (affordable and clean energy), but even in those Goals, almost every measurable target requires intensified efforts. At minimum, the region has to reverse trends in areas such as pre-primary education and renewable energy. Despite great effort, progress is insufficient on Goals 1 (no poverty), 3 (good health and well-being), 5 (gender equality) and 17 (partnership for the Goals). Regrettably, the region has made negative progress on three Goals: clean water and sanitation (Goal 6), sustainable consumption and production (Goal 12) and climate action (Goal 13).

7.   Notably, 30 per cent of indicators that require intensified improvements or course correction to meet 2030 targets are environmental. The region is feeling the full force of climate change, disasters are outpacing efforts to build resilience, greenhouse gas emissions remain much too high and environmental degradation, including air pollution, is undermining development.

8.   Widening inequalities are also particularly striking, both within and between countries. Income inequality has increased in 40 per cent of countries. Inequality in terms of access to education, health and sanitation are also evident. And a new front in inequality is opening up: inequality of impact. Exacerbated by climate change, disasters are killing 20 times more people in the Asia-Pacific region than elsewhere and have a heavier impact on poorer countries and poorer populations.[2]

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[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).

B. Accelerating progress: regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific

9. Mindful of the urgency to accelerate progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, in 2017 ESCAP member States adopted the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific.[3] The road map was agreed at the fourth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development and endorsed at the seventy-third session of the Commission.

10. The road map identifies priority areas for regional cooperation in implementing the 2030 Agenda. These priority areas include thematic issues that reflect the key challenges faced by the region, including leaving no one behind, disaster risk reduction and resilience, climate change, the management of natural resources, connectivity and energy. They also include the means of implementation and relevant partnerships, including data and statistics, technology, finance, policy coherence and North-South, South-South, international and regional partnerships.

11. The present section provides an overview of the work of ESCAP in support of member States' efforts with regard to selected thematic issues, while chapter III provides an overview for the means of implementation and partnerships.

Leaving no one behind

12. Despite high and enduring economic growth and significant progress in terms of poverty eradication, inequality persists in the Asia-Pacific region and in some instances has intensified. Growing disparities in income and wealth, as well as in inequality of opportunity, disproportionately affect women and vulnerable groups. These barriers require transformative measures to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

13. Towards this end, ESCAP has continued to promote regional dialogue, cooperation and capacity-building to close gender gaps, address ageing issues, fight youth unemployment and promote the rights of persons with disabilities and migrants.

14. Since the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the adoption of its associated Programme of Action, ESCAP has supported regional reviews and follow-up in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund. In 2013, at the Sixth Asian and Pacific Population Conference,[4] member States adopted the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development,[5] which highlighted region-specific policy directions and priority actions to ensure the effective implementation of the Programme of Action in the region. Ministers and senior policymakers across Asia and the Pacific gathered in Bangkok from 26 to 28 November 2019 for the midterm review of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development[6] to focus on population dynamics at a crucial time for the region.

15. Participants at the midterm review emphasized the importance of putting people and their rights at the heart of development, noting that gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as the concerns and needs of older persons, youth and migrants, were indispensable to more inclusive, equitable and sustainable societies. A summary of the discussions[7] highlighted that, while the region had experienced a reduction in both income and multidimensional poverty, and an improvement in life expectancy, poverty in some countries had increased. Participants

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[3] E/ESCAP/73/40-E/2017/39.

[4] See https://www.unescap.org/events/sixth-asian-and-pacific-population-conference.

[5] E/ESCAP/APPC(6)/3.

[6] See https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/MTR-APPC.

[7] ESCAP/APPC/2018/5, annex II.

also recognized declines in maternal and infant mortality as some of the major achievements across the region, with several delegations attributing these reductions to improved access to quality maternal and child health care.

16. Developing countries in Asia and the Pacific spend only about 3.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on social protection, compared with the world average of 11.2 per cent. This underinvestment is the reason why 60 per cent of the population in the region has no protection if they fall ill, have a disability, become unemployed or pregnant or grow old. With 1.2 billion people living on less than $3.20 per day, social protection is an essential strategy to tackle poverty and deprivation. ESCAP analysis shows that some 328 million people would be lifted out of moderate poverty and 52 million would move out of extreme poverty if countries in the region matched the global averages of spending on education, health and social protection.[8]

17. Taking these challenges and opportunities into account, the Committee on Social Development, which held its fifth session in Bangkok from 28 to 30 November 2018,[9] acknowledged social protection as a powerful tool to break cycles of poverty, protect vulnerable groups from falling into poverty and promote inclusive development. Importantly, the Committee recommended strengthening regional cooperation on social protection and encouraged the ESCAP secretariat, in coordination with relevant United Nations agencies, to explore and develop a modality for regional cooperation to support member States in this regard.[10] As a result, the secretariat established an open-ended Group of Experts for Strengthening Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. Support for policymakers to build inclusive social protection systems is also provided through the "Social Protection Toolbox", which comprises knowledge resources as well as tools for online skill development.[11]

18. ESCAP has acted as the regional engine to promote disability rights and disability-inclusive development since 1993, and has implemented three successive Decades of Persons with Disabilities. At the core of the Commission's work is the Incheon Strategy to "Make the Right Real" for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific,[12] adopted in 2012. With its 10 goals and 27 targets, the Incheon Strategy has become the guiding framework for disability-inclusive development in the Asia-Pacific region, and a foundation for the regional implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Beijing Declaration, including the Action Plan to Accelerate the Implementation of the Incheon Strategy,[13] adopted in 2017, gave a further boost to regional cooperation to ensure that persons with disabilities are not left behind. The Working Group on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013–2022, comprising representatives of both member States and civil society organizations, meets regularly to monitor progress and provide recommendations to expedite the implementation of the Incheon Strategy and the Beijing Declaration and Action Plan. The Commission's work has always been guided by the principle of "nothing about us without us", involving persons with diverse disabilities and civil society organizations in all activities.

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[8] *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific: Poorly Protected* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.2).

[9] See https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/committee-social-development-fifth-session.

[10] ESCAP/CSD/2018/4.

[11] See https://www.socialprotection-toolbox.org/.

[12] E/ESCAP/APDDP(3)/3.

[13] E/ESCAP/APDDP(4)/5.

Disaster risk reduction and resilience

19.   Asia and the Pacific is the region most affected by natural disasters. A person living in the region is five times more likely to be affected by natural disasters than a person living elsewhere. Between 1970 and 2016, the region lost $1.3 trillion in assets. ESCAP analysis of future impacts during the period 2020–2030 suggests that at current rates of progress most Asia-Pacific countries at higher risk will make limited progress in terms of reducing either fatalities or the number of people affected.[14]

20.   Human and asset losses tend to be greater in the poorest communities living in places and conditions that expose them to natural hazards. Disasters destroy many of their already meagre assets, trapping them in poverty that can be transmitted from one generation to the next. The vulnerability of the region to natural disasters represents, therefore, a huge challenge for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the promise to leave no one behind.

21.   At the same time, scientific and other advances have increased the potential for building disaster resilience and ensuring that even in the most extreme circumstances people can survive the effects of disasters and rebuild their communities and livelihoods. Space applications and innovation, for example, have the potential to boost progress on the Sustainable Development Goals by leveraging space-based data. Yet many countries in the region still face challenges in terms of access, coordination and the use of geospatial information.

22.   To address the gaps, and build upon decades of investment in space applications, the third Ministerial Conference on Space Applications for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific,[15] co-organized by ESCAP and the Government of Thailand and held in Bangkok on 10 October 2018, brought together ministers and high-level officials from both spacefaring and non-spacefaring countries to advance regional cooperation and leverage the use of space applications to achieve the 2030 Agenda, including for disaster risk reduction. The Conference agreed on the Asia-Pacific Plan of Action on Space Applications for Sustainable Development (2018–2030)[16] – a regionally coordinated blueprint that harnesses space applications and digital innovations to support countries, particularly those with special needs, in achieving the 2030 Agenda.

23.   The Regional Space Applications Programme for Sustainable Development is a unique regional mechanism that pools regional resources in the form of satellite-derived data, knowledge products, tailored tools, timely services and a training network. This mechanism showcases the use of South-South and triangular cooperation to share knowledge and technical resources to benefit countries in the region. The mechanism is supported by 25 member States and implemented in collaboration with research entities. Mongolia, one of the pilot countries of the regional drought mechanism, established its own drought monitoring system in September 2018, with technical support provided by regional service nodes in China, India and Thailand.

24.   Regional cooperation on disaster risk reduction in Asia and the Pacific was also boosted by the inauguration of the Asian and Pacific Centre for the Development of Information Disaster Management in Tehran on 19 December 2018. The Centre serves as a knowledge and information repository for all disaster-related data in the region

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[14] *The Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2017 – Leave No One Behind: Disaster Resilience for Sustainable Development* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.17.II.F.16).

[15] See https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/third-ministerial-conference-space-applications-sustainable-development.

[16] ESCAP/MCSASD/2018/2, annex II.

and will deliver information services on cross-border disasters to countries and organizations of the region. The Centre also provides capacity development through knowledge management tools such as e-learning platforms and training modules.[17]

Climate change and management of natural resources

25. The Asia-Pacific region remains the most resource-intensive in the world, and urban areas in the region are generating growing amounts of waste. There has been no progress – and even regression – across the region since 2015 with regard to protecting, restoring and promoting the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems and conserving biodiversity, and ocean health continues to decline. The region accounts for over half the world's greenhouse gas emissions, and the level of emissions is continuing to increase.

26. These environmental challenges translate into significant economic costs and have a negative impact on human health and livelihoods as well as on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, as noted by the Committee on Environment and Development, which held its fifth session in Bangkok from 21 to 23 November 2018.[18] The Committee underlined the benefits of regional cooperation in several areas, including sustainable consumption and production, ecotourism, transboundary air pollution, ocean governance and natural disasters, and suggested creating a platform for resource efficiency.[19] The Committee highlighted the importance of achieving the objectives and priority areas identified in the Ministerial Declaration on Environment and Development for Asia and the Pacific, 2017,[20] adopted at the seventh session of the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific/Asia-Pacific Ministerial Summit on the Environment, which was convened by ESCAP and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in September 2017 under the theme "Towards a resource efficient and pollution-free Asia-Pacific". The United Nations, development partners, non-governmental organizations and donors were called upon to further support national strategies and means of implementation.

27. To reverse the rapid decline of the health of the region's oceans, ESCAP has launched a series of partnerships and initiatives. The secretariat established an Ocean Accounts Partnership to ensure coordinated support for statistical and governance capacity. It also led the development of a statistical framework and guidance manual for ocean accounts in collaboration with UNEP, which was noted by the United Nations Statistical Commission at its forty-ninth session.[21] The secretariat engaged more than 80 experts to contribute to the manual and obtained funding from the United Nations Development Account to support further methodological development and national pilot projects.

28. In addition, the secretariat established a network of practitioners called "Friends of Ocean Cities", encouraging experts in the fields of ocean governance, marine and coastal ecosystem conservation, urban resilience and climate change in Pacific small island developing States to adapt sustainable urban development to island systems. The pilot project "Closing the Loop" supported national and local governments in India and Thailand in reducing the amount of plastic waste entering oceans. The secretariat also organized, in cooperation with custodian agencies of the Community of Ocean Action and the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean, the first

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[17] See https://apdim.unescap.org/.

[18] See https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/committee-environment-and-development-fifth-session.

[19] ESCAP/CED/2018/4. Available at https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/CED5_4E.pdf.

[20] E/ESCAP/MCED(7)/6.

[21] E/2018/24-E/CN.3/2018/37.

Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean to follow up on the voluntary commitments made in the region with respect to the United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 and to accelerate action for healthy oceans.

29.   To tackle the growing challenge of air pollution, members of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation launched the North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership in October 2018.[22] The Partnership serves as a voluntary framework to address transboundary air pollution in North-East Asia, covering multiple pollutants, and is expected, among other things, to promote science-based and policy-oriented collaboration and knowledge on the environmental and health aspects of air pollution and contribute to the development of relevant national and subregional policies.

Connectivity for the 2030 Agenda

30.   Regional integration and cooperation has been a key driver of progress in the Asia-Pacific region in the past decades and can play a critical role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Connectivity represents a key element of regional integration and cooperation and its promotion can support the region in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Promoting connectivity requires an integrated and comprehensive approach towards the liberalization of trade and investment in goods and services, trade facilitation and the development of sustainable transport, information and communications technology (ICT) and energy infrastructure networks. It requires the coordination of regional and national policies, the filling of gaps in infrastructure, the harmonization of technical standards, the synchronization of operational procedures, the development and deployment of ICT and the alignment of cross-border transport rules and regulations. The paragraphs below provide an overview of the work of ESCAP in relation to trade and investment, transport and ICT.

Trade and investment

31.   The Asia-Pacific region remains the largest trading partner globally for trade in goods, accounting for 39.8 per cent of global merchandise exports and 36.5 per cent of global merchandise imports. In 2017 the region again surpassed global trade growth and registered double-digit growth rates of 11.5 per cent for exports and 15 per cent for imports. The increase in trade tensions, however, has damaged trade and investment climates, raising uncertainties and volatilities in the global markets and slowing down merchandise trade in 2018.[23]

32.   ESCAP analysis shows that the current trade tensions will have detrimental impacts globally and regionally. Trade flows are expected to slow, particularly in the short term, if geopolitical tensions disrupt existing supply chains and dampen investor confidence. Countries in the Asia-Pacific region are expected to be affected by a significant loss of demand from China for intermediate products and commodities. Global GDP could fall by nearly $215 billion and the region's GDP by approximately $60 billion. In the case of prolonged trade tensions, the cost of adverse impacts could increase to approximately $400 billion at the global level.[24]

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[22] NEASPEC/SOM(22)/8. Available at http://www.neaspec.org/article/neaspec-22nd-senior-officials-meeting-som.

[23] *Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Report 2018: Recent Trends and Developments* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.3).

[24] Ibid.

33.   Against this backdrop, the Committee on Trade and Investment held its sixth session in Bangkok from 13 to 15 March 2019,[25] noting that the Asia-Pacific region could weather worsening trade tensions and global policy uncertainties through continued regional integration accompanied by efforts to simplify and digitalize trade and improve the business environment.[26] Complementary policies, such as social protection, labour and education policies to support people negatively affected by trade frictions, must also be placed high on policymakers' agendas for the region in order to continue its progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. The Committee noted that trade development in some countries was constrained by limited product diversification, isolation from global markets, weak infrastructure, limited access to finance, the lack of testing facilities to comply with non-tariff measures, poor ICT connectivity and the lack of an enabling environment to support the development of trade, in particular paperless trade and e-commerce.

34.   In order to accelerate the implementation of digital trade facilitation measures, ESCAP members adopted the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific.[27] The Framework Agreement was designed to be an inclusive instrument accessible to countries at all levels of development to further their capacity to engage in cross-border paperless trade. Full implementation of cross-border paperless trade could help reduce trade costs by more than 25 per cent on average across the region, resulting in savings of approximately $1.2 trillion. Trade cost reductions may range from 10 to 40 per cent, depending on each country's state of implementation of digital trade facilitation measures.[28] Azerbaijan was the first country to accede to the Framework Agreement, in March 2018. Five ESCAP member States that had signed the Framework Agreement by September 2017, namely Armenia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China and the Islamic Republic of Iran, are currently going through domestic ratification processes. The secretariat provides support to member States that are interested in becoming parties to the Framework Agreement and has sponsored the participation of officials from interested countries in training activities and workshops.

Transport

35.   Transport is critical to economic development. The creation of wealth in the past few centuries has happened concurrently with the rapid strides made in the transport arena. Though transport continues to contribute to economic development, its negative externalities have become increasingly apparent. Transport contributes to a quarter of global emissions, of which emissions from road transport constitutes three quarters. Road accidents remain a major challenge: in the Asia-Pacific region, one person is killed in a road crash every 40 seconds. Time losses and transport costs from road congestion impose an economic cost of 2 to 5 per cent of GDP in the region every year. Levels of air pollution in most countries in the region routinely exceed the thresholds of the World Health Organization, posing significant risks to health. These challenges clearly show the need to make transport more sustainable in order to contribute effectively to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

36.   In order to address these challenges, the Committee on Transport held its fifth session in Bangkok from 19 to 21 November 2018.[29] The Committee recognized that

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[25] See https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/committee-trade-and-investment-sixth-session.

[26] ESCAP/CTI/2019/9. Available at https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/CTI_9%20Committee%20report_E.pdf.

[27] United Nations, C.N.598.2016.TREATIES-X.20 (Depositary notification).

[28] *Digital Trade Facilitation in Asia and the Pacific*, Studies in Trade, Investment and Innovation No. 87 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.18.II.F.10).

[29] See https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/committee-transport-fifth-session.

efficient transport connectivity was critical to enhancing the region's position in global trade and supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Committee noted that innovation and the use of emerging technologies could play an important role in achieving sustainable connectivity. It also highlighted that a modal shift to more environmentally friendly modes of transport, such as rail and inland waterways, could reduce fossil fuel demand in the transport sector, contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution and promote intermodality. [30]

37.   Towards this end, the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network,[31] the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network[32] and the Intergovernmental Agreement on Dry Ports [33] provide a comprehensive institutional framework within which related policies and actions can be collectively defined and implemented. The three intergovernmental agreements were negotiated under the auspices of ESCAP with a view to creating a greater collective convergence of purpose in the realization of multilateral global and regional programmes, including the Sustainable Development Goals. ESCAP administers these agreements, convenes the working groups established in accordance with the legal requirements of each and develops tools, projects and guidelines for their implementation. ESCAP also facilitated the signing of the Intergovernmental Agreement on International Road Transport along the Asian Highway Network among the Governments of China, Mongolia and the Russian Federation.

38.   In order to help national and local governments develop more sustainable transport systems in the rapidly growing urban areas in the region, ESCAP has developed the sustainable urban transport index. The index helps summarize, track and compare the performance of sustainable urban transport systems in cities. The index is based on 10 indicators that represent social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable urban transport and cover elements of planning, access, safety, quality and reliability, affordability and emissions. The secretariat provided training to support its application in 10 cities in Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam. Recognizing the value of the sustainable transport index, the Committee on Transport at its fifth session recommended its continued development and further promotion throughout the region.

Information and communications technology

39.   ICT is a "meta-infrastructure", a growth industry and a critical development enabler. ICT-enabled financial, transport and trade facilitation infrastructure, applications and services are the foundation of the digital economy, encouraging innovation and qualitative societal transformation. ICT is also widely appreciated for its capacity to reach remote and rural areas by means of mobile and satellite devices and to deliver essential services, such as health, education, agricultural information and time-critical disaster alerts. It has been used to improve the monitoring and understanding of environmental degradation, natural resource use and climate change-related incidents. ICT is a critical infrastructure, industry and instrument for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and of leaving no one behind.

40.   However, fixed-broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in the Asia-Pacific region are still far lower than in Europe and North America and remain below the world average of 12.4. Advanced economies in the region have increased their subscriptions and the quality of their broadband networks. However, 18 ESCAP

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[30] ESCAP/CTR/2018/8.

[31] United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 2323, No. 41607.

[32] United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 2596, No. 46171.

[33] United Nations, *Treaty Series*, No. 53630.

members still have fewer than two fixed-broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, and this has not changed much over the past decade. [34]

41.   Bearing these challenges in mind, the Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation held its second session in Bangkok from 29 to 31 August 2018[35] and called for the needs of the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States to be prioritized in the promotion of regional ICT connectivity. [36] In this regard the Committee recognized the importance of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative.

42.   The Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative aims to increase the availability and affordability of broadband Internet across the region by strengthening the underlying Internet infrastructure. The initiative, administered by ESCAP, encompasses regional Internet maps, developed with the International Telecommunication Union, and policy analysis to support countries in developing a regional seamless information and communications space. ESCAP members have developed a Master Plan for the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway to guide and accelerate its implementation. The Committee has now given approval for an update of the Master Plan for the next four years (2019–2022) as a blueprint to guide the next stage of implementation.

III.   Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda

A future within reach: assessing the cost of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific

43.   As shown in the previous chapter, rapid economic growth in Asia and the Pacific has come at the cost of rising inequalities and considerable environmental degradation, and the region is unlikely to reach most of the Sustainable Development Goals under a business-as-usual scenario. Change is needed in mindset and policy direction, moving away from a sole emphasis on economic growth or "prosperity" to investing in "planet" and "people".

44.   The latest research by ESCAP shows that the investment needs to implement this change are high, but achievable. The Commission's *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2019: Ambitions beyond growth* provides a comprehensive assessment of the investment needed to reach the Sustainable Development Goals in the region by 2030 and estimates an additional $1.5 trillion per year is needed to end poverty and hunger, provide basic health care and quality education, enable infrastructure and clean energy for all and secure humanity's future through climate action and living in harmony with nature. [37] This is equivalent to approximately 5 per cent of the region's GDP in 2018, or about 4.1 per cent in terms of the annual average GDP for the period 2016–2030. As shown in figure II, this means investing:

   • $669 billion per year in people to end poverty and hunger and meet health and education goals

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[34] Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, "Artificial intelligence and broadband divide: state of ICT connectivity in Asia and the Pacific – 2017". Available at https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/StateofICT2017_16Jan2018.pdf.

[35] See https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/committee-information-and-communications-technology-science-technology-and-innovation-second.
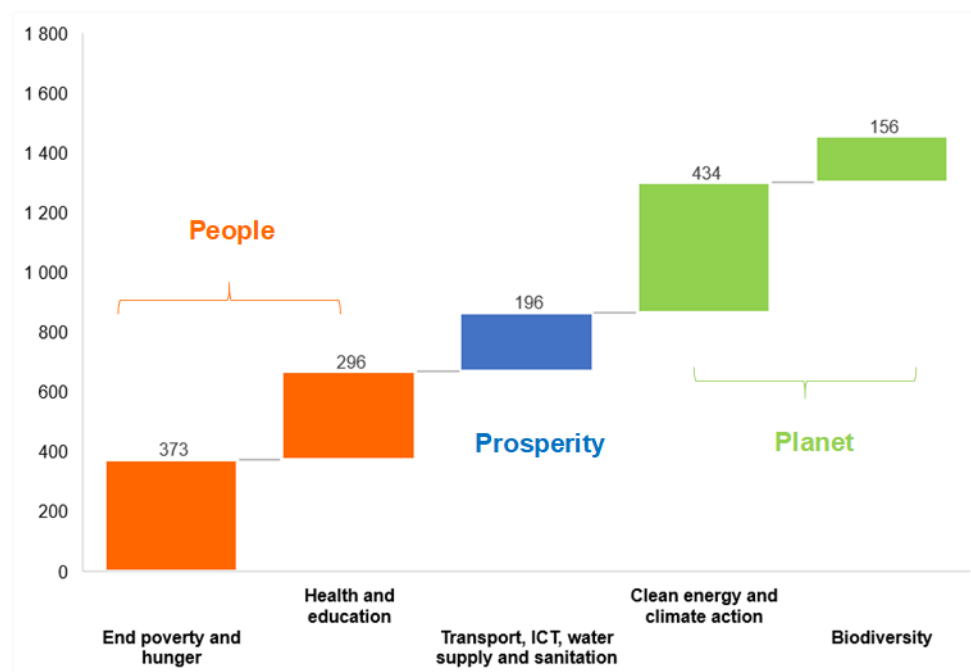
[36] ESCAP/CICTSTI/2018/9.

[37] United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.6.

• $590 billion per year in the planet to ensure clean energy, sustained action to combat climate change and environmental protection

• $196 billion a year to deliver the basis for future prosperity underpinned by sustainable transport and improved access to ICT and water and sanitation services

Figure II
Total investment gaps for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: annual average investment gap, 2016-2030

(Billions of United States dollars in 2016 constant prices)

Source: ESCAP.

45.   These "ambitions beyond growth" are largely affordable for most countries in the region, given available public and private resources. On average, it means investing less than one dollar a day per person. These costs will, however, not be shared evenly. Least developed countries need to invest at least more than twice as much as the regional average – between two and three dollars a day per person. Strong development partnerships and regional cooperation are essential to ensure that all countries complete this important journey.

Leveraging the means of implementation through the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific

Data and statistics

46.   Official statistics are an indispensable element of the information system of a democratic society, providing Governments, the economy and the public with data about the economic, democratic, social and environmental situation. Official statistics are at the core of indicators monitoring the progress of the 2030 Agenda, and demands on national statistical systems are intensifying, with urgent calls for reform and capacity development to meet the growing demands of United Nations Member States for the 2030 Agenda.

47. Recognizing the need for whole-of-government support to strengthen official statistics for the 2030 Agenda, the Committee on Statistics, which held its sixth session in Bangkok from 16 to 19 October 2018,[38] adopted the Declaration on Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No One Behind[39] based on the collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community for advancing official statistics for the 2030 Agenda.[40] The declaration calls on Governments to make nine commitments to strengthen and transform national statistical systems in support of the 2030 Agenda. It also calls on development partners to support national statistical systems and on ESCAP to facilitate its implementation.

48. In response to this urgent call, ESCAP has been at the forefront of providing support to member States and United Nations country teams with regard to strengthening their statistical systems and capacity for reporting on Sustainable Development Goal indicators, as well as environmental accounting. It provides this support through regional advisory services and capacity-building workshops at national, regional and subregional levels. In Bhutan, for example, ESCAP has been supporting the Government in using more reliable and timely evidence regarding people at risk of being left behind for evidence-based policy and decision-making as part of the agreed outcomes of the United Nations Sustainable Development Partnership Framework for Bhutan (2018–2021).

49. ESCAP member States have also adopted the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific.[41] Civil registration and vital statistics provide individuals with the official recognition and documentation necessary to establish their legal identities, family relationships and civil status. This documentation is essential for individuals to exercise various legal, economic, social and political rights and enables access to services such as health, education and social protection. This Regional Action Framework was facilitated in collaboration with the United Nations system and other development partners, as well as civil society. The implementation is monitored by a steering group comprising 22 Governments and eight development partners and coordinated by ESCAP.

Technology

50. As the fourth industrial revolution begins – a revolution defined by technological breakthroughs such as artificial intelligence, robotics, 3D printing and the Internet of things – it will be critical that such frontier technologies be put to work for society and the environment if the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are to be achieved.

51. Frontier technologies offer a multitude of opportunities. From an economic viewpoint, the adoption of technologies and innovations in production processes could increase overall productivity and expand production possibilities. In terms of social impact, frontier technologies could transform public service delivery, reduce inequality and support inclusion. From an environmental perspective, they can be used to pre-emptively address evolving environmental changes. However, there are challenges with respect to the impact of frontier technologies on jobs and the future of work, ethical issues, regulatory considerations and the current and potentially widening digital divide that is causing further disparities.

52. Asia and the Pacific is a leading region in the development of frontier technologies and is forecast to be a prominent "market of the future". Governments in the region have also been at the forefront of innovative policymaking on this

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[38] See https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/committee-statistics-sixth-session.
[39] ESCAP/CST/2018/7.
[40] E/ESCAP/CST(5)/1/Rev.1.
[41] E/ESCAP/RES/71/14.

agenda. This prominent position means that Governments in the region have the opportunity to shape the role and scope of frontier technologies.

53.   While recognizing these opportunities, at its second session the Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation warned that limited resources and human and institutional capacity in many developing countries were challenges to taking advantage of frontier technologies. In that regard, the Committee asked the secretariat to support member States in developing their science, technology and innovation policies, strategies and road maps for the Sustainable Development Goals in order to effectively harness science, technology and innovation for sustainable development.[42]

IV.   Spotlight on the regional follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

54.   Effective follow-up and review is a key pillar of the 2030 Agenda. Paragraphs 79, 80 and 82 of the 2030 Agenda emphasize the principles for follow-up and review at all levels. The principles state that national Governments have the primary responsibility for follow-up and review, which are to be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent as well as rigorous and informed by country-led evaluations and data.

55.   In Asia and the Pacific, the cornerstone of the regional follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda is the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. The inaugural Forum was convened in May 2014, and its terms of reference were adopted in 2017 after extensive consultation. That year, ESCAP, through its resolution 73/1, added the Forum to its conference structure. The Commission also adopted resolution 73/9 on the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific.

56.   The theme and review of the Sustainable Development Goals at the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development have been aligned with and feed into the high-level political forum on sustainable development. Round tables on the specific Goals under review each year are coordinated and organized by various United Nations entities. The Forum includes exchanges between countries preparing and those that have already presented voluntary national reviews. It also reviews progress on the regional road map.

57.   The Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development is organized by ESCAP in collaboration with the Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism, which comprises more than 30 United Nations bodies and affiliated entities. The follow-up and review process is also strongly supported through the collaboration of the secretariat with governments and stakeholders, including businesses, local governments and civil society. The Asia-Pacific Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism[43] has enabled the representation and contribution of stakeholders in successive sessions of the Forum. The Forum is also informed by subregional inputs and processes, which help harness various development agendas across the region, such as the frameworks of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and of the Pacific Islands Forum.

58.   The deliberations of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development are informed by key analytical products, such as the Commission's "Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report", which uses unique statistical methodologies to review current

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[42] ESCAP/CICTSTI/2018/9.

[43] See http://asiapacificrcem.org/.

and anticipated progress on the Sustainable Development Goals at the regional and subregional levels, as well as a thematic report jointly prepared by ESCAP, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

59.   The thematic report for 2019, *Accelerating progress: An empowered, inclusive and equal Asia and the Pacific*, proposed a framework of four synergistic elements necessary to advance inclusion, empowerment and equality, including rights and justice, norms and institutions, resources and capabilities, and participation and voice. The authors of the report found that interactions of climate change with underlying drivers of inequality created new forms of vulnerabilities. In financing for development, applying an empowerment-and-inclusion lens to taxation could boost resource mobilization efforts while helping to address inequalities in the region. Enhanced civic engagement could improve accountability and trust in institutions while ensuring responsive decision-making. The authors concluded that promoting empowerment and inclusion were necessary approaches to reduce inequality and accelerate progress towards a broad array of Sustainable Development Goals; however, a comprehensive policy agenda was required.[44]

60.   In March 2019, ESCAP launched the "Asia-Pacific SDG Gateway",[45] a website that provides publicly available access to available data and statistics on indicators of the current status and progress towards the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in the regional member States of ESCAP. By clearly identifying areas where progress is being made, where acceleration is needed and where the region is moving in the wrong directions, the Gateway serves as a critical resource for all stakeholders to better prioritize their policy, programmes and investments towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, the "Sustainable Development Goals Help Desk"[46] is a one-stop online service providing access to tools, knowledge products, expertise, advice and opportunities for peer-learning and regional South-South cooperation through thematic areas, covering a multitude of topics.

61.   At the national level, ESCAP partners with United Nations country teams to support countries in conducting voluntary national reviews in order to follow up on and review the 2030 Agenda at the national, regional and global levels. This includes supporting the participation of all stakeholders in the review process at the national level. Technical assistance was delivered in 2018 and 2019 to national processes, in collaboration with the Bangkok Regional Hub of UNDP, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat and Resident Coordinators, to support the development of voluntary national reviews in Cambodia, Fiji, Kazakhstan, Kiribati, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mongolia, Nauru, Palau, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Turkmenistan, Vanuatu and Viet Nam. Such assistance has facilitated participatory processes that have mobilized a wide range of stakeholders from different line ministries and civil society organizations on building capacity and intersectoral linkages conducive to an effective national follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

62.   In 2019, the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda took centre stage at the annual session of the Commission. Having decided that, in those years in which the high-level political forum on sustainable development meets under the auspices of both the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, the Commission and the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development would share the same theme, the seventy-fifth session of the Commission will be held from 27 to 31 May 2019

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[44] United Nations, Asian Development Bank and United Nations Development Programme, *Accelerating progress: An empowered, inclusive and equal Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2019).

[45] See http://data.unescap.org/.

[46] See http://sdghelpdesk.unescap.org/.

under the theme "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality".[47] Deliberations will be informed by a theme study entitled *Closing the Gap: Empowerment and Inclusion in Asia and the Pacific*.[48] The report focuses on three of the six Sustainable Development Goals under review in 2019, namely, Goal 4 on quality education, Goal 8 on decent work and Goal 10 on reducing inequality. Drawing on data analysis from 27 ESCAP developing member States, the authors of the report found few indications of underlying empowerment among disadvantaged groups. In countries where such indications were found, they were more prominent in education rather than in employment and income. The authors also found that strong institutions and legal frameworks were essential for promoting inclusion and empowerment, whereas the level of economic development did not necessarily determine a country's potential to achieve equality for all.

V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

63.   Member States have highlighted the importance of partnerships for achieving sustainable development both as a key principle of implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the preamble, as well as in a specific Sustainable Development Goal (Goal 17). Member States in Asia and the Pacific further recognized partnerships, and in particular North-South, South-South, international and regional partnerships, as critical in the pursuit of sustainable development in the region in the regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific. Acknowledging that partnerships lie at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, ESCAP continued to expand partnerships with all relevant stakeholders, including governments at all levels, entities within the United Nations development system, development banks, civil society, communities and the business sector.

64.   ESCAP supports member States in their resolve to strengthen subregional multilateral cooperation. In South-East Asia, for example, ESCAP and ASEAN have strengthened collaboration and scaled up support for delivering inclusive and sustainable development through the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. ASEAN members have endorsed a report on the complementarities between the two development agendas[49] prepared by ESCAP in partnership with the Government of Thailand and the ASEAN secretariat, and have started implementing its recommendations. In Central Asia, countries participating in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia have reaffirmed their ownership of the Programme by positioning it as a platform for supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Governing Council of the Programme, at its thirteenth session held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on 21 September 2018,[50] agreed to further strengthen the Programme by realigning the goals and targets of its six Thematic Working Groups with subregional priorities to implement the 2030 Agenda, the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014–2024 and other internationally agreed goals.

65.   The commitment to partnerships in the region is also reflected in the increased momentum for South-South and triangular cooperation and in greater support for multilateral action to meet technical or financing challenges. With support from ESCAP and the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, an Asia-Pacific forum of Directors General on South-South and triangular cooperation was

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[47] See https://www.unescap.org/commission/75/index.

[48] United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.8.

[49] United Nations, *Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: A Framework for Action* (Bangkok, 2017).

[50] See https://www.unescap.org/events/thirteenth-session-speca-governing-council.

established. The forum provides a platform to better coordinate the channelling of technical assistance to other Southern partners in the region. The first meeting of the forum was held in June 2018,[51] in conjunction with a regional consultation to review South-South cooperation trends, challenges and opportunities, which were jointly convened by ESCAP, the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation and the Government of Thailand. Building on the outcomes of the inaugural session, an informal session of the forum was convened in partnership with the Government of Indonesia at United Nations Headquarters in New York in November 2018 as a part of the Global South-South Development Expo for 2018, to discuss the region's priorities in the lead-up to the second High-level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation.

66.   The Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism, comprising 34 United Nations bodies and affiliated entities, including ADB and the World Bank, is the main mechanism for leveraging partnerships within the United Nations development system at the regional level. Since May 2018, the meetings of the Mechanism have been organized jointly or back-to back with those of the regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group. The Mechanism focuses on key areas of regional cooperation through seven Thematic Working Groups,[52] which correspond to relevant clusters of the Sustainable Development Goals.

67.   For example, the Thematic Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women initiated a regional review of gender data and situation analysis for girls in Asia and the Pacific and delivered a series of training workshops on gender statistics to enhance national capacities to collect disaggregated statistics on the gender-related aspects of all Sustainable Development Goals. The Thematic Working Group on Sustainable Societies conducted mapping exercises on regional and multi-country activities related to youth, population ageing, international migration and urbanization, which is expected to lead to more coordinated and effective support to member States. The Thematic Working Group on Resource-Efficient Growth developed joint projects to support the implementation of the ASEAN-United Nations Environment and Climate Change Action Plan (2016–2020).

68.   In order to galvanize the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, ESCAP has strengthened its partnership with the private sector. The main mechanism for engagement with businesses is the ESCAP Sustainable Business Network,[53] which brings together executives and representatives of leading businesses across the Asia-Pacific region. The Network acts as a force of change for businesses and a dialogue partner with Governments and provides feedback and advice to the ESCAP secretariat on the business perspectives of its activities. The Network has approximately 140 members and implements activities identified through its six task forces on banking and finance, disaster and climate risk reduction, the digital economy, green business, innovation and competitiveness, and youth and women entrepreneurs.

69.   ESCAP and its Sustainable Business Network co-organize the Asia-Pacific Business Forum each year.[54] Since its inception in 2004, the Forum has provided an opportunity to discuss the role of business in sustainable development and showcase the solutions business can offer to meet the development needs of the Asia-Pacific region. The multi-stakeholder setting of the Forum has enabled effective engagement

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[51] See https://www.unescap.org/events/inaugural-session-asia-pacific-dg-forum.

[52] The Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism comprises Thematic Working Groups on: Statistics; Sustainable Societies; Inclusive Development and Poverty Eradication; Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women; Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience; Resource-Efficient Growth; and Education 2030+.

[53] See https://esbn.unescap.org/.

[54] See https://apbf.unescap.org/.

among policymakers, business representatives, international agencies, civil society organizations and academics. The Forum for 2019 will be held in Port Moresby on 21 and 22 June 2019, and guided by the theme "Global Goals, Local Opportunities".[55] The Forum will discuss the sustainable solutions business can offer to meet the needs of rural and urban communities alike in Asia and the Pacific.

70.   ESCAP has also strengthened partnerships with civil society organizations, in particular in the context of its repositioning to deliver on the 2030 Agenda. The Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development has benefited from strong participation and engagement of civil society from the outset. In this context, the secretariat has worked closely with the Asia-Pacific Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism, which comprises more than 540 members, to enable the representation and substantive contributions of stakeholders in the Forum. ESCAP has also promoted civil society participation in the national processes of the preparation of voluntary national reviews. For example, ESCAP helped the Governments of Pacific small island developing States in mobilizing stakeholder participation for their voluntary national reviews in 2019.

71.   ESCAP also provides a link between research institutions and policymakers in the region. The Asia-Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade,[56] for example, is an open network of research and academic institutions with a strong interest in trade and investment policy and facilitation issues. To date, 75 research and academic institutions from 25 countries in the Asia-Pacific region are active members of this Network, which is managed by ESCAP in partnership with core partners: the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the World Trade Organization, UNDP, the French Development Agency and the International Development Research Centre in Canada. Its 12 associated partners include the World Bank and ADB. The Network organizes training workshops and online training and publishes technical papers, reports and publications on trade and the Sustainable Development Goals. Members of the Network draw from, and contribute to, a number of regional and global databases, including, for example, the Asia-Pacific Trade Indicators Portal, the Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Agreements Database and the ESCAP-World Bank Trade Cost Database.[57]

VI.   Conclusions

72.   Despite remarkable advancement in recent years, the Asia-Pacific region needs to accelerate progress, and in some cases reverse current trends, if it aims to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Given the magnitude and nature of the task, no country will be able to achieve the 2030 Agenda on its own. The key issues and trends shaping the region are transboundary in nature and require collective responses. Enhancing connectivity to boost economic growth, strengthening social protection to respond to changing demographics and building resilience to address climate change and natural disasters all require regional and subregional cooperation.

73.   The United Nations regional commissions, ESCAP among them, constitute a key bridge between the global and national levels for the implementation, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. The regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific adopted by ESCAP member States is helping to galvanize regional cooperation, while the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development has established itself as a vital multi-stakeholder platform to, on the one hand, help countries prepare for and introduce regional

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[55] See https://2019.apbf.online/.
[56] See https://artnet.unescap.org/.
[57] See https://artnet.unescap.org/data.

priorities into the high-level political forum on sustainable development and, on the other, bring stakeholders together to share expertise and experiences that can accelerate implementation at the national level. ESCAP is also at the forefront in leading the data revolution required to effectively track progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, providing easy access to available data through the Asia-Pacific SDG Gateway while strengthening national statistical systems to address existing data gaps.

74. Looking ahead, the Commission's conference structure provides the regional intergovernmental platform to tackle multi-country, transboundary and subregional and regional challenges, and the secretariat provides integrated policy advice, normative support and technical capacity to the region and its countries in support of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. ESCAP will continue to support member States in the Asia-Pacific region with regard to accelerating progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda, building on its multidisciplinary expertise to act as an integrating entity at the regional level and leveraging partnerships with the United Nations development system and a wide array of other stakeholders.

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