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Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

Seventh Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development

Bangkok, 20 May 2020

Agenda item 5

Review and adoption of the report of the Forum

Draft report

1. The Seventh Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), was held on 20 May 2020.

2. Due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, it was a fully virtual event, using the KUDO platform.

3. More than 730 participants registered for the event, including representatives of Governments, intergovernmental organizations, United Nations bodies, international organizations, civil society organizations and other entities.

4. The Forum was attended by representatives of the following members and associate members of ESCAP: Afghanistan; Armenia; Australia; Azerbaijan; Bangladesh; Bhutan; Brunei Darussalam; Cambodia; China; Cook Islands; Democratic People's Republic of Korea; Fiji; France; Georgia; Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Japan; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Malaysia; Maldives; Marshall Islands; Micronesia (Federated States of); Mongolia; Myanmar; Nauru; Nepal; New Zealand; Northern Mariana Islands; Pakistan; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Philippines; Republic of Korea; Russian Federation; Samoa; Singapore; Sri Lanka; Tajikistan; Thailand; Timor-Leste; Tonga; Turkey; Turkmenistan; Tuvalu; United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; Uzbekistan; and Vanuatu. Representatives of Germany; Sweden; and Switzerland attended as observers.

5. Under agenda item 1 (a), the Chair of the Sixth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, Mr. Fidelis Magalhaes, Minister for Legislative Reforms and Parliamentary Affairs, Timor-Leste, made a statement on behalf of the Bureau on the outcome of the Sixth Forum. Welcome messages were delivered by Mr. Don Pramudwinai, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, and the Executive Secretary of ESCAP. The Deputy Secretary-General made a statement. Remarks were also delivered on behalf of civil society.

6. Under agenda item 1 (b), the Forum elected the following Bureau members:

- (a) Chair: Ms. Samantha K. Jayasuriya (Sri Lanka)
- (b) Vice-Chair: Ms. Rosemarie Edillon (Philippines)

7. Under agenda item 1 (c), the Forum adopted the following agenda:

- 1. Opening of the Forum:
 - (a) Opening statements;
 - (b) Election of officers;
 - (c) Adoption of the agenda.
- 2. Regional perspectives on accelerating progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- 3. Linking national, regional and global dimensions of the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- 4. Other matters.
- 5. Review and adoption of the report of the Forum.
- 6. Closing of the Forum.

8. Agenda item 2 provided an opportunity for representatives to share perspectives on actions supporting the global decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific, focusing on the transformative processes needed to face the complexity of the socioeconomic, cultural and institutional barriers to change, especially in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Underscoring the urgency to accelerate action and to align policies for a timely realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, sessions organized under this agenda item illustrated the successful implementation of strategic policies in the region.

9. The secretariat introduced the theme of the Forum by delivering a presentation entitled “Acceleration along transformative pathways to deliver sustainable development”. A keynote address entitled “Trends to watch” was also delivered.

10. A panel was held to discuss opportunities and entry points for accelerated action, including on the following topics: the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda; leaving no one behind: reducing inequalities to prevent internal displacement and migration; moving towards sustainable and just economies; enhancing agricultural and food value chains; and securing basic energy services in Asian cities while advancing the transition to renewable energies.

11. Agenda item 3 provided an opportunity to share national and regional perspectives on strengthening follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda.

12. Countries delivering their voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2020 were provided a platform to share lessons, with a focus on peer review, including the twinning arrangement facilitated by the secretariat, experiences from conducting second-time voluntary national reviews and voluntary local reviews.

13. Information was provided on the system-wide results of the United Nations' efforts at the regional level in support of the 2030 Agenda and on the outcome of consultations with the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission, within the context of the open-ended working group on the review of the conference structure of the Commission in respect of strengthening the follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda at the regional level. The Chair of the Sixth Forum shared a statement developed in consultation with the Bureau of the Sixth Forum summarizing the outcomes of virtual consultations¹ – a Chair's statement as a non-negotiated document (ESCAP/RFSD/2020/5) – as well as additional inputs provided through an online survey. The Chair requested that the Forum annex the above-mentioned document to the present report.

14. Under agenda item 4, no other matters were discussed.

15. Under agenda item 5, the Forum adopted the present report on 20 May 2020. The statement of the Chair of the Sixth Forum, as contained in ESCAP/RFSD/2020/5, is annexed to the present report.

16. The Asia-Pacific Sustainable Development Goal Partnership, between ESCAP, the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, released the publication *Fast-tracking the SDGs: Driving Asia-Pacific Transformations*.

17. The Forum concluded that the present report, including its annex, should be brought to the attention of the Commission, at its seventy-sixth session, and to the global dialogues on sustainable development, including in particular the upcoming high-level political forum on sustainable development, which would be held in New York in July 2020.

¹ For more information see www.unescap.org/events/virtual-discussion-series-accelerating-transformation-asia-and-pacific.

Annex

Chair's statement: summary of the technical discussions in preparation for the Seventh Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development as developed by the Bureau of the Sixth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development

I. Introduction

1. Due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Seventh Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development could not be held as planned. It was postponed to May 2020, as a one-day virtual event. To facilitate an exchange of views and experiences, the secretariat organized a series of seven virtual consultations before the Forum, targeting member States from Asia and the Pacific and other stakeholders, with a focus on the theme of transformation and exploring the entry points for acceleration identified in the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development*. Based on the outcomes of these virtual consultations¹ and the pre-session documents, as well as additional inputs provided through an online survey (in which almost 100 pages of text were submitted), the Bureau of the Sixth Forum prepared a Chair's statement to provide information on the wealth of experiences and large volume of ideas shared by member States, international organizations, and representatives of major groups and other stakeholders.

II. Accelerating transformations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in the midst of persisting and new challenges

2. Across Asia and the Pacific, good progress has been reported in respect to the institutionalization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including a better understanding of data needs, the mapping of governments' strategic action plans to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the leveraging of public-private partnerships, and the prioritization and localization of the Goals, as well as the strengthening of capabilities of institutions to work on integrated solutions and the recognition of the importance of involving businesses, civil society and science institutions in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Some countries have introduced legal provisions, making it compulsory to mainstream the Goals into institutional plans. Others have successfully embarked on a journey from civil unrest and conflict to a democratic nation focused on state-building and accelerating progress on sustainable development.²

3. Yet, an assessment of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, especially those related to the environment, has yielded a mixed picture³ and, overall, prospects for achieving them by 2030 are not encouraging due to the persistence of systemic barriers, including in relation to the precariousness of livelihoods, low levels of social protection, and the impact of discrimination and inequalities on access to social services. Progress on gender equality is too slow. Across the region, there continue to be concerns around data, inter-agency coordination, institutional capacity, governance systems, service quality, rates of military spending, violence and extremism. Lack of

¹ See www.unescap.org/events/virtual-discussion-series-accelerating-transformation-asia-and-pacific.

² See ESCAP/RFSD/2020/INF/1.

³ See ESCAP/RFSD/2020/2.

transparency and participation restricts public scrutiny of policies and finances and undermines good governance. Financial constraints and recurring spending cuts particularly affect marginalized and excluded groups. Misuse of public funds and inequitable allocation of resources perpetuate and widen inequality.

4. The COVID-19 pandemic may have further profound and negative effects on sustainable development efforts in the region. The future will be dictated by how everyone responds to the pandemic and how well these responses towards acceleration of transformations are aligned with the 2030 Agenda. A greener and equal world for all is desired. The region is at an important junction to make the post-COVID-19 world sustainable, resilient and inclusive.

III. Six transformative entry points can accelerate progress

5. The six transformative entry points are derived from the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019* and have been adapted for Asia and the Pacific. These six entry points have the potential to provide leverage for interlinkages and to accelerate progress across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals globally.⁴

A. Human well-being and capabilities

6. Enhancing human well-being and capabilities requires political commitment and sustained investments in health care, social protection and education. It also requires access to basic services, such as water and sanitation. The ongoing crisis demonstrates that countries with functioning and universal health care and social protection systems are better positioned to address the pandemic, particularly in mitigating the impact on vulnerable individuals and households, including on migrants, persons with disabilities and older persons.⁵

7. Currently, fewer than 4 in 10 people in the Asia-Pacific region have access to social protection and only 6 in 10 have access to affordable health care.⁶ Building strong institutions, underpinned by good governance and multi-stakeholder and multisectoral collaboration as well as regional cooperation, can provide a foundation on which these gaps can be closed and human well-being and the capabilities of all can be improved. The majority of people, often the majority of women, remain unprotected with low, irregular incomes and limited access to basic services. Responses must therefore include gender-sensitive approaches and must address stigmatization and discriminatory norms and practices, including unpaid care work.

⁴ See ESCAP/RFSD/2020/INF/2.

⁵ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), “Summary of discussion on human well-being and capabilities”, 1 April 2020. Available at www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Human%20wellbeing%20and%20capabilities.pdf.

⁶ Ibid.

8. Extreme poverty must be eradicated and the number of people living at all levels of poverty must be reduced, supported by a more robust way to measure poverty. Particular attention could be paid to conflict-prone areas and increasing the well-being and capabilities of people there as well as to regions that have a high number of immigrants from such areas. Emergency response frameworks could be strengthened to better address pandemics such as the current one.

B. Sustainable and just economies

9. The region's success in boosting its economic growth over the last few decades has been accompanied by substantive environmental degradation and a widening social divide. The recent lockdowns and social distancing measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have hit vulnerable and informal workers the hardest and highlighted the importance of encouraging informal workers to transition to formal employment and the need to provide social protection to all throughout the life cycle. The pandemic has also exposed the vulnerability of migrant workers, suggesting the need to include protection of migrants' rights in trade agreements and migration policies. The pandemic has also increased the vulnerability of women, due to their high participation in the informal economy, which suggests the need for policies to enhance women's skills to facilitate their access to decent jobs in the formal sector.⁷

10. To move the region further in the direction of sustainable and just economies, it will be necessary to implement fiscal, monetary and wage policies as well as social protection measures to promote inclusive economic growth. These policies could be implemented together with policies that ensure the inclusion and empowerment of poor and vulnerable population groups, including women and disadvantaged groups. There is also an urgent need for implementing policies to internalize social and environmental costs and benefits in the valuation of goods and services. Digital technologies have a huge potential, but focus should be not only on the development of a highly skilled digital workforce but also on infrastructure investment and education policies to make sure that everybody has access to digital technologies as well as the skills needed to make use of them. Steering the region's economies towards greater sustainability and fairness requires a fundamental rethink of the current development process, and the COVID-19 crisis is instilling a sense of urgency for doing so.

C. Food systems and nutrition patterns

11. Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns is particularly relevant for Asia and the Pacific, which is the region with the highest number of undernourished people in the world, with unacceptably high rates of stunting, wasting, anaemia and micronutrient deficiencies, while a simultaneous increase in human body weight and obesity is costing the region upwards of \$166 billion annually.⁸

⁷ ESCAP, "Summary of discussions on sustainable and just economies", 3 April 2020. Available at www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Sustainable%20and%20just%20economies.pdf.

⁸ ESCAP, "Summary of discussion on food systems and nutrition patterns", 2 April 2020. Available at www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Food%20and%20Nutrition%20Patterns.pdf.

12. The regional approach to agriculture emphasizes an increase in food production which, coupled with the impressive economic growth, has enhanced food security and incomes in the past decade. However, improvements in nutrition are lagging in many countries. Unhealthy diets underpin all forms of malnutrition and have become the leading risk factor for the global burden of disease. Malnutrition will not diminish unless action is accelerated to reshape current food systems to achieve healthier diets. Ensuring nutrition sensitivity at every stage of the supply chain is therefore crucial. The wider adoption of a holistic food system approach that enables food security and nutrition and promotes economic, social and environmental sustainability is even more urgent.

13. The accomplishments of some countries in improving nutrition indicators have their origin in investments made in areas closely linked to nutrition, such as maternal care, infant and young child feeding, gender issues and social protection. Governments can help to reduce hunger, improve nutrition and transform food systems through community programs, behaviour change communication and the mainstreaming of nutrition through multiple sectors, including through agricultural, trade and development policies, combined with an emphasis on food safety and universal health coverage. The COVID-19 outbreak has brought to the fore the importance of local food production and the need to prioritize the well-being of small food farmers, including women farmers, and ensuring social safety nets, insurance and social protection systems for all, including landless farmers.

D. Affordable and clean energy

14. There are several opportunities to achieve clean and affordable energy for all, including strengthening political commitment for enhancing power grid connectivity; phasing out of fossil-fuel subsidies; strengthening regional cooperation on power transmission policies, planning and operations; ensuring that adequate finance, trade and innovation agreements are in place; building capacity in relevant technical and policy domains; and sharing lessons learned. In addition, as the world emerges from the COVID-19-driven downturn, recovery funding could be directed towards sustainable energy infrastructure. Such investments, including at the city level and in hydroelectric, wind, solar and biomass energy, could provide economic stimulus as well as the long-term benefits of enhanced clean and low-carbon energy generation.⁹

15. Policy responses must be tailored to ensure the last-mile connectivity needed to provide equitable access to clean and affordable energy and its benefits, ensuring that no one is left behind. Other important actions that could be considered include the development of innovative climate-proof infrastructure for efficient use of energy, the adoption of circular economy principles for the energy sector, and the allocation of funds, including through the green climate fund, to implement mitigation and adaptation actions in small island States. The shipping industry could be decarbonized, and the use of electric-powered vehicles promoted.

⁹ ESCAP, “Summary of discussions on enhancing power grid connectivity to achieve affordable and clean energy for all”, 7 April 2020. Available at www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Enhancing%20power%20grid%20connectivity%20to%20achieve%20affordable%20and%20clean%20energy%20for%20all.pdf.

E. Urban and peri-urban development

16. The path to sustainable development runs through cities, towns and human settlements. Key to addressing urban poverty and inequality in all its forms is recognizing the barriers to social inclusion and equity that prevent the upgrading of informal settlements at scale and of livability in all urban communities, including by vulnerability analysis. Integrated urban and territorial planning that is participatory and inclusive is necessary for communities to address institutional inequalities and environmental concerns. Rethinking planning processes to better manage long-term city development in an equitable and sustainable manner, under a systems approach utilizing people-centred smart technologies, will break down barriers to accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁰

17. Planning also allows for leveraging sound investments when considering urban finance needs. A broad policy agenda, deepening fiscal devolution processes, valuing green infrastructure and prioritizing participatory budgeting is necessary for cities to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals. Securing investments in a low-carbon, resource-efficient, resilient urban future that works with both built and natural systems requires concrete and coordinated national and municipal policies which co-produce solutions with all urban citizens. An expanded focus on urban resilience is ever more critical given that Asian-Pacific cities and local governments are at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis.

18. Urban and peri-urban development, if linked effectively with rural infrastructure development, can also help reduce rural poverty. Thus, urban development could be regarded as an integral part of the solution to leave no one and no place behind.

F. Global environmental commons

19. Securing the global environmental commons entails living within planetary boundaries and conserving and sustainably managing globally shared resources and ecosystems. Asia and the Pacific hosts tremendous biodiversity and rich and diverse ecosystems, however, it faces devastating environmental degradation. Although there has been some regional progress in achieving the environment-related Sustainable Development Goals, countries are not on track to achieve targets by 2030.¹¹

20. Political commitments could be strengthened for the integrated management and protection of the environment. This could be accompanied by adequate governance systems, allowing for the integration and coherence of just environmental policies across the board, as well as participation and accountability. Adequate policies, grounded in the commitment to sustainability, including in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, could be adopted, including government stimulus packages and financing strategies, which at the same time could promote decarbonization and the greening of the economy and address environmental and social safeguards. Preservation of wildlife and habitats needs increased global, regional and transboundary

¹⁰ ESCAP, “Summary of discussions on urban and peri-urban development”, 7 April 2020. Available at www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Urban%20and%20peri%20urban%20development.pdf.

¹¹ ESCAP, “Summary of discussions on global environmental commons”, 6 April 2020. Available at www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Global%20Environmental%20Commons.pdf.

cooperation to collectively ban the illegal trade of wildlife, stop land degradation, reduce plastic pollution and combat water scarcity. Efforts could be made to mainstream biodiversity across public and private sector planning and financing processes.

21. Finally, science and technology provide an opportunity to strengthen national and citizen-led data capacities for multidimensional poverty measures and the environment-related Sustainable Development Goals. With prioritization and foresight for the health of the environment, and by taking action and collaborating, these collective efforts will see Asia and the Pacific accelerate towards securing the global environmental commons.

IV. Stronger follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda needs to be part of the solution

22. Multilateral stakeholders play an important role in review processes at the national, subregional and regional levels, and the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development has provided the regional platform for such engagement. There is a call for stronger links between the regional and global processes for reviewing the 2030 Agenda, in particular through the voluntary national reviews, which provide a way for countries to present their concerns, issues and lessons learned.¹² Voluntary local reviews led by local and subnational governments and with civil society engagement could also be supported.

23. Major groups and other stakeholders view the voluntary national review process as an important advocacy space. Through well-defined engagement mechanisms, the contribution of stakeholders can be embedded into a whole-of-society approach. Across the region, different approaches to stakeholder engagement were reported which could be shared as lessons learned and as part of peer exchange, especially where limits to engagement are observed, as is the case for indigenous communities who report a lack of involvement. Shadow reports, including data collection and analysis from civil society perspectives, could also be reflected in final reports. Supreme audit institutions could work closely with civil society organizations in ensuring accountability in government spending. Parliaments could be encouraged to actively exercise effective oversight of Governments' Sustainable Development Goal commitments.¹³

24. Peer-to-peer learning opportunities facilitated, inter alia, by the Forum and other mechanisms of the regional follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda allow member States to review their reports before submitting them to the high-level political forum on sustainable development. Different peer-learning mechanisms are reported, including in the Pacific, facilitated by the Pacific Islands Forum, and in Central Asia, where a twinning arrangement is facilitated by ESCAP.¹⁴ The Group of 20 member countries have also initiated a voluntary peer-learning mechanism for mutual learning in the implementation process of the 2030 Agenda.

¹² See ESCAP/RFS/2020/3.

¹³ See ESCAP/RFS/2020/INF/4.

¹⁴ Ibid.

V. Amid the coronavirus disease pandemic, Asia and the Pacific readies itself for a global decade of action

25. The region's accumulated policy experience provides a solid foundation for moving forward.¹⁵ While there are concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic and its unprecedented effects might reverse hard-won sustainable development gains, many inspiring examples of action from around the region can be observed.

26. These examples include a focus on holistic approaches, implementation of whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches, and the organization of stakeholder meetings, including by creating spaces for innovation, linking climate action with conservation of the ocean, developing community-based businesses, strengthening social protection systems, localizing the Sustainable Development Goals and using public-private partnerships.

27. At the Sustainable Development Goals Summit in September 2019, Heads of State and Government adopted the political declaration entitled "Gearing up for a decade of action and delivery for sustainable development" and pledged that rapid change was possible with a commitment to transformation and accelerated implementation.¹⁶ To deliver on the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals, Governments should aim to avoid going back to business as usual and encourage thinking outside the box to unlock new opportunities, drive new growth and deliver new efficiencies. To accelerate progress, Governments could craft strong action plans with adequate budget allocation and continuously review strategies and frameworks, including the interlinkages between the Goals. Enhanced accountability creates an enabling environment for transformation, and effective institutions can be considered the fourth dimension of sustainable development. A Goals-driven tax reform is also recognized as a transformative response, as is the necessity to strengthen Goal 17 and to work towards a holistic implementation of the Goals.

28. A shared space for all stakeholders, including volunteers, is critical. Effective engagement for responsive policies, based on institutionalized, effective engagement with communities and formal engagement of civil society organizations allows for meaningful involvement and can be strengthened through awareness-raising, coordination and facilitation. Resources could be allocated in coordination with stakeholders to ensure optimal use. Young people have urged Governments to provide opportunities for their participation in national development processes.

29. Data monitoring systems could be more rigorous with triangulation of national data with civil society and independent technical experts at the national level. Gender-, age- and disability-disaggregated data can improve the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of gender equality policies, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as laws, programmes and gender-sensitive budgeting.

30. Countries could take control of technological futures, including by crafting a digital compact for inclusive development that puts people at the centre of the digital future and by identifying opportunities for digital tools to

¹⁵ See ESCAP/RFSD/2020/1.

¹⁶ General Assembly resolution 74/4, annex, para. 28.

improve the effectiveness, efficiency and reach of public administration and service delivery.

31. The appreciation of environmental quality and the increased awareness of planetary health is important for long-term survival. The convergence of health, wellness and economic issues is an important opportunity for accelerating the transformations needed for the 2030 Agenda.

32. The current crisis has shown that in many places, social solidarity is alive and well. Eliminating harmful social stigmas and norms can be put on the agenda for social transformation. Among these, action on gender equality and women's empowerment must be mainstreamed. Different groups of people will be impacted differently by the pandemic. Further marginalization, especially of young people, should be avoided, and attention should be paid, especially to such impacts that will multiply over generations.

33. Regional collaboration should be part of the response, especially in respect to climate action, which, if not urgently addressed at the regional and global levels, could have devastating effects. Other areas that require regional responses are ocean governance, including with a focus on clean seas, the sustainable use of ocean resources, and combating marine litter and microplastics; and disaster risk reduction and dealing with sand and dust storms; as well as migration, crime, conflicts and financing for development.

34. As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, in an interconnected world, infectious diseases are no longer the domain of a single country's Government but require inter-country collaboration. Regional action to improve preparedness for the next epidemic is in the interest of all countries and will be supported by regional mobilization of resources, joint action plans and shared expertise. Regional cooperation is also essential to establish early warning systems and reduce economic impact by opening markets and creating a fair-trade environment.

35. To implement the 2030 Agenda and deliver on the global decade of action, a strong, coordinated, inclusive and coherent global response under the multilateral coordination framework is needed. Further, it must be supported, at the country level, through concerted action by all institutions and members of society, ranging from central Governments and local administrations to the private sector, from non-governmental organizations to academia, from older persons to youth. Additionally, the ongoing United Nations development system reform is necessary to support this transformation.