

**Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific****Seventy-eighth session**

Bangkok and online, 23–27 May 2022

Item 2 (a) of the provisional agenda*

Theme topic, “A common agenda to advance sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific”: general debate**Summary of the theme study on a common agenda to advance sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

Over the past two decades, millions in the region have been lifted out of poverty, and in most countries, citizens have many more opportunities to live longer, healthier, more productive and secure lives. In a richer but riskier world, these achievements are threatened by three overlapping crises. First, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has cost many lives, brought economies to a standstill and pushed an estimated 85 million people back into extreme poverty, defined as living on \$1.90 or less per day. Second, rapid economic growth has caused devastating environmental harm by exhausting natural resources, generating dangerous levels of pollution and contributing to global climate change. The threat of climate change is existential. Third, natural disasters recur with increasing frequency and intensity, causing countless damages.

The topic of the present document is how Governments can best respond to complex and cascading risks from large-scale crises. Building on the declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 75/1, the theme study *Reclaiming Our Future: A Common Agenda for Advancing Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific* contains a description of pathways to achieve a more inclusive and sustainable post-pandemic recovery. It serves to identify elements for a common agenda for present and future generations centred on protecting people and planet, leveraging digital opportunities, trading and investing more together, raising financial resources and managing debt. It serves to underline the need to listen to and work with youth and place women at the centre of crisis-prepared policy action and new people-centred partnerships, with the assistance of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

The Commission may wish to review the issues and recommendations contained in the present document and provide the secretariat with guidance on its future work in that regard.

* ESCAP/78/L.1/Rev.1.

I. A richer but riskier world

1. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is commemorating its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2022. Guided by the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations in which the peoples of the United Nations resolved to combine their efforts to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples, the United Nations is a common endeavour to achieve a better world.

2. As the regional arm of the United Nations in Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP membership comprises 62 members and associate members, compared to just 10 when it was founded. Its evolution is embedded in the development of the region. Since its establishment in 1947, countries in the Asia-Pacific region have witnessed extraordinary progress. When ESCAP was established, the countries of the region had mainly agrarian economies and they were suffering from the ravages of the Second World War. Today, Asia and the Pacific stands out globally for the richness of its cultures, the durability of its systems of philosophy and the diversity of its forms of governance – and as the home to some of the largest and most dynamic economies on Earth. The Asia-Pacific region has emerged as a pacesetter of global economic growth that has lifted millions of people out of poverty.

3. But these achievements are now threatened by three overlapping crises that have exposed the fault lines in a richer but riskier world. The first and most immediate is the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which has cost many lives, brought economies to a standstill and pushed an estimated 85 million people back into extreme poverty, measured at \$1.90 per day. Second, rapid economic growth has had devastating environmental consequences, by exhausting natural resources, generating dangerous levels of pollution and contributing to climate change. An existential threat from climate change looms large. Third, natural disasters recur with increasing frequency and intensity, causing countless damages. These crises are examined in detail in the following paragraphs.

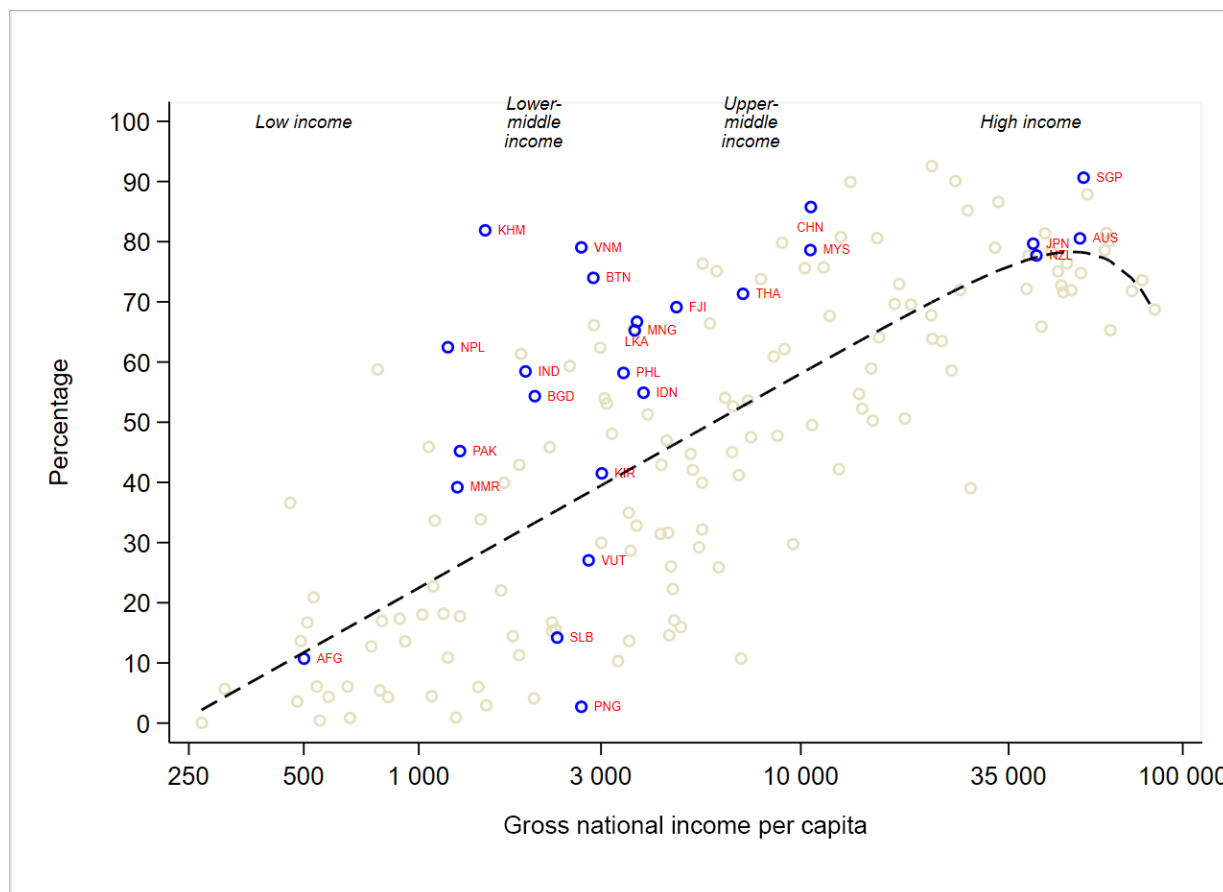
4. Furthermore, in the past month, the crisis in Ukraine has evolved rapidly with wide-ranging global impacts. In Asia and the Pacific, higher inflation is expected to disproportionately affect the purchasing power and food security of the poor. Poverty and deep inequalities will thus once again compound impacts. Slowdown in economic activities is expected to disrupt trade, supply chains and remittances from migrant workers. Shipment of containers through northern Eurasian land transport corridors will be disrupted. If the crisis is protracted and energy prices remain high, interest in the further development of alternative corridors may grow. The mix of energy sources is also likely to change, with some countries opting for cheaper fossil fuels while others will be incentivized to accelerate their transition to renewable sources. Nevertheless, it is too early to make accurate and specific projections of the impacts and the above assessment is preliminary.

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) exposes fault lines

5. First, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities that already existed due to environmental degradation, climate change and natural disasters, and it exposed millions of vulnerable people to additional socioeconomic challenges. The pandemic has brought suffering and loss to every country in the region and affected all aspects of their societies and economies. As of early March 2022, there were 252 million cases of COVID-19 in Asia and the

Pacific with 2.9 million deaths, representing approximately 57 per cent and 48 per cent, respectively, of official global totals. In terms of access to vaccines, diagnostics, therapeutics and medicines, COVID-19 is a pandemic of inequalities within and between countries and communities (figure I).

Figure I
Vaccine coverage and gross national income per capita, selected countries, March 2022



Abbreviations: AFG, Afghanistan; AUS, Australia; BGD, Bangladesh; BTN, Bhutan; CHN, China; FJI, Fiji; IDN, Indonesia; IND, India; JPN, Japan; KHM, Cambodia; KIR, Kiribati; LKA, Sri Lanka; MMR, Myanmar; MNG, Mongolia; MYS, Malaysia; NPL, Nepal; NZL, New Zealand; PAK, Pakistan; PHL, Philippines; PNG, Papua New Guinea; SGP, Singapore; SLB, Solomon Islands; THA, Thailand; VNM, Viet Nam; VUT, Vanuatu.

Note: Fully vaccinated refers to two doses of a vaccine approved by the World Health Organization.

6. No one has escaped the impact of the pandemic but the poor have been hit hardest. In addition to the devastating impact on human health and survival, the economic shutdowns have hurt those with the least to fall back on, making them even poorer and further widening inequality.

Climate change and ecological destruction

7. Second, over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has coincided with a crisis that is likely to have even more serious ramifications over time – the changing climate. Asia and the Pacific is at the forefront of this existential challenge, in terms of both causes and consequences. Eight members of the Group of 20 from the Asia-Pacific region are responsible for

approximately half of global greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, the Asia-Pacific region has countries and communities that are among the most affected by the impacts of climate change and climate-induced disasters.

8. In the region, resource-intensive growth has pushed many natural systems beyond the point of irreversible damage, leading to ecosystem degradation and climate disruption. Moreover, governments continue to offer taxes and subsidies that promote brown economies rather than green economies or blue economies.

9. As a result, the decline in biodiversity and ecosystems in the region is now more severe than ever while deforestation and marine degradation rob local communities of their futures, and heavily polluted air and water kill millions of people every year. All these pressures have a disproportionate impact on the poor.

Disasters ahead

10. Third, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and environmental destruction have added to a daunting spectrum of hazards emanating from natural and human-made sources. Indeed, the region is the most disaster-prone in the world. As a result of global heating, climatic extremes involving heatwaves, floods, droughts and tropical cyclones will be unprecedented in magnitude and frequency. Such dangers are emerging in regions that previously had been unaffected, threatening human and economic destruction on an alarming scale. The difference between 1.5°C and 2°C of global warming is quite substantial in terms of the damage it would cause. Climate change also contributes to the emergence and re-emergence of infectious diseases and pathogens. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Governments have recognized the need to anticipate and prepare more effectively for large-scale, cascading, interconnected and complex crises.

11. Each of the three crises are compounded by the extent and deepening of inequality. Inequality is usually measured in terms of income or wealth, but often inequalities in access to opportunities are more important. Families who are unable to benefit from basic health care, education or social protection will find it difficult to improve their lives and are likely to fall further behind those who were able to benefit.

12. The dissimilarity index (D-index) is used to demonstrate the extent to which some households are missing out. In Asia and the Pacific, the highest index figures, and thus the greatest inequalities in access to basic services and opportunities, are found in the Pacific, followed closely by countries in South-East Asia and in South and South-West Asia. Taken by sector, the largest inequalities are found in completion of higher education and access to clean fuels and the Internet.

13. Clearly, more challenges nowadays are interconnected, generating systemic crises of increasing complexity and uncertainty. The impacts on health, employment and education affect the most vulnerable people disproportionately, leading to a vicious downward cycle. However, this is not inevitable. People who are disadvantaged will try to catch up through their own efforts, but they need to be supported by public policies. Furthermore, systemic crises know no boundaries, which underlines the importance of countries working together around a common agenda designed to leave no one behind and build cross-border resilience along a shared path to sustainable development.

14. The present document provides a summary of the theme study entitled *Reclaiming Our Future: A Common Agenda for Advancing Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific* and serves to highlight how Governments can best respond to complex and cascading risks from large-scale crises.

II. Protecting people and planet

15. The most immediate action must be to strengthen health and social protection systems. At the same time, Governments should take measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and to protect the precious planet while defending people from disaster impacts. The main issues include health care, social protection, environmental measures, climate change and natural disasters.

16. Many health services typically have insufficient resources and too few staff, and they can be overwhelmed by the growing burden of noncommunicable diseases and pandemics. To address the overall threats to human health and respond better to emergencies, Governments should aim to provide universal health-care coverage. In disaster hot spots in particular, they can shift to a more comprehensive lateral public health approach, which is a transdisciplinary, grass-roots approach that facilitates community-based participation in decision-making, preparedness and response, with multisectoral interventions such as those designed to reduce poverty and inequality.

17. Better health care that can respond more effectively to pandemics should also be part of a broader programme to reinforce social protection. Governments will need to move this issue to the top of the political agenda and aim to provide universal social protection for everyone, whether rich or poor. This sounds expensive, but it need not be. A basic universal social package in Asia and the Pacific consisting of old-age pensions and child, maternity and disability benefits – estimated to cost between 2 and 6 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) – is eminently affordable for most countries, in particular when compared to the huge cost of doing nothing.

18. To fulfil the human right to a clean and healthy environment and preserve the sustainability of the planet for the prosperity of all, societies across the region must redefine their relationship with nature and shift to greener, more resilient and sustainable development pathways. Doing so will involve new ways to address the interconnections between environmental threats, whether from ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss or climate change. In addition, there are opportunities that combine environmental, social and economic objectives. Addressing sustainability is about finding pathways to prosperity within planetary boundaries, now and in the future.

19. Climate change is widespread, rapid and intensifying, and some trends are now irreversible, but there is still time to limit the impact of climate change. The secretariat estimates that Asia-Pacific countries would need to spend an additional 3.2 per cent of GDP per year on average to deliver a policy package that comprises investments to enhance energy access and efficiency, ensure climate-resilient infrastructure and preserve biodiversity. Together with abolishing fossil fuel subsidies and introducing a carbon tax, such a green development package could help to reduce carbon emissions in the region by approximately 30 per cent in the long run. Governments face three questions in devising such strategies: first, how will they contribute to GDP growth; second, how will they help to achieve cost efficiency in areas such as energy, water, transport, agriculture and supply chain management; and third how will

international credibility be enhanced, which in turn may exert peer pressure on companies and other countries to capture opportunities for growth in the transition to the green economy?

20. Furthermore, countries in Asia and the Pacific could establish a regional coalition that would put low carbon transformation on track, phase out the use of coal, stop fossil fuel subsidies and use carbon pricing while promoting renewable energy and boosting energy efficiency.

21. To tackle air pollution, countries need to work towards establishing and implementing national legislation, as well as reaching mutual agreements and harmonizing standards, sharing data and taking regional action. To protect marine ecosystems, countries in Asia and the Pacific should support the objectives of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development.

22. Environmental decision-making should also be rights based, with clear flows of information and broad public participation, especially by women and youth. A regional framework agreement on rights-based approaches could be suggested by ESCAP member States, which should include the right to access environmental information, to participate, and to access remedies in environmental matters.

23. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to a daunting spectrum of hazards emanating from natural and human causes. The resulting cascade of compounding events has put huge pressure on health and disaster management systems. No one knows which extreme event will come next; it could be another pandemic, a rapidly evolving environmental disaster or a disaster driven by transport, industrial, technological or scientific accidents. Nevertheless, Governments should have strategic foresight to manage systemic risk across crises (figure II). Rather than being considered as a specialized sector, systemic risk management should be considered as part of strengthened national and local governance supported by regional and subregional frameworks.

Figure II
Strategic foresight to manage systemic risk



24. Risk governance must be supported by new digital technologies that unlock innovative solutions. Digital systems using high-resolution satellite and drone imagery, along with big Earth data analytics, smartphone applications and website portals can monitor and track dangers from forest fires, flooding, air pollution and many other climate-related disasters.

25. In the region, Governments must improve their management of systemic risk. The secretariat supports members and associate members by promoting principles-based frameworks to manage systemic risk, notably through subregional partnership networks.

III. Digital by default

26. The pandemic has simultaneously accelerated the adoption of digital technologies and exacerbated the digital divide. On the one hand, digitalization has offered new socioeconomic development opportunities and new ways of coping with everyday activities. On the other hand, as the world becomes digital by default, the extension of these technologies has further widened inequalities between genders, rural and urban areas, generations and vulnerable groups.

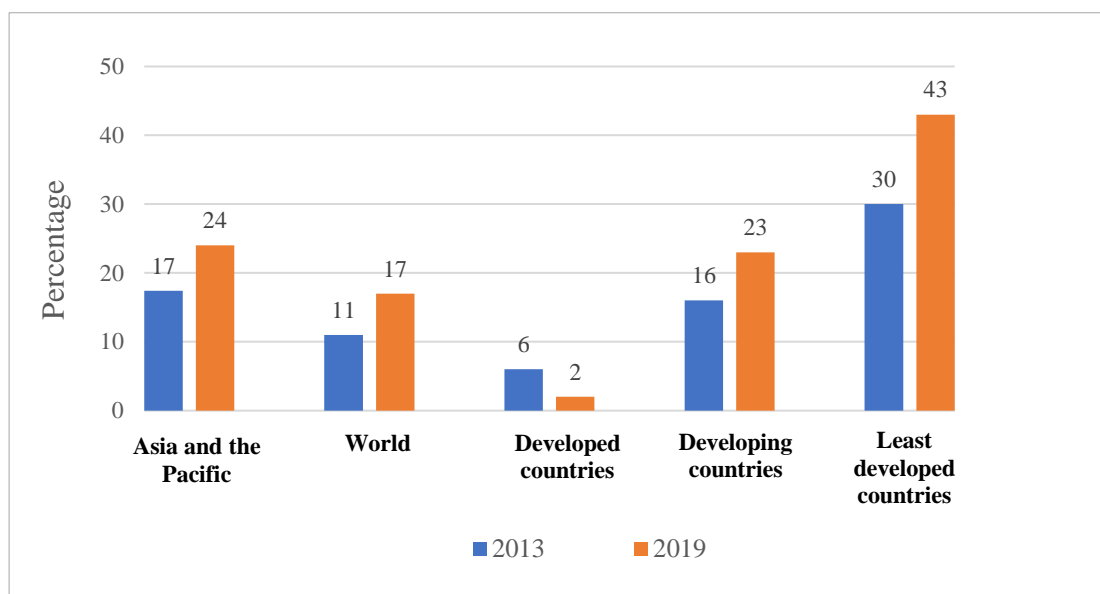
27. One of the first priorities is to expand the coverage of digital services. In Asia and the Pacific on average, mobile-broadband subscriptions are around 80 per 100 inhabitants, though notably higher in North and North-East Asia and lower in the Pacific. In the period 2015–2017, average bandwidth per capita in the Asia-Pacific region was 38 kilobits per second, but the levels were far lower in small island developing States (32 kilobits per second), least developed countries (14 kilobits per second) and landlocked developing countries (12 kilobits per second). There is also a considerable gender gap. In 2019, in Asia and the Pacific 55 per cent of men used the Internet compared to only 41 per cent of women – and the gender gap seems to be widening, as shown in figure III.

28. Internet service quality can be improved by increasing the number of Internet exchange points. The costs of information and communications technology infrastructure deployment can be reduced through infrastructure sharing: Internet cables can be laid, for example, when constructing roads, highways, railways, power transmission lines and oil or gas pipelines.

29. An effective way to enable regular and more equitable Internet use is through government and business sector collaboration that provides free Wi-Fi at public offices, schools and hotspot areas, especially in developing countries. A complementary option in locations commercial operators do not consider economically viable is to establish self-managed community networks.

30. Government and business collaboration is a critical enabler of skills formation. Because digital transformation is more about people than technology, the development of user-friendly platforms and applications that diverse groups of people can easily understand and use can enhance equitable Internet access. Furthermore, universal digital identification that makes all people digitally identifiable can improve access to a wider range of government and non-governmental services, enhance transparency and help to identify those most likely to be left behind.

Figure III
Gender gap in Internet users, world and selected country groups, 2013 and 2019



Source: International Telecommunication Union and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *The State of Broadband 2020: Tackling Digital Inequalities – A Decade for Action* (Geneva, 2020).

Note: According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the gender gap represents the difference between the Internet user penetration rates for males and females relative to the Internet user penetration rate for males, expressed as a percentage.

31. Digital commerce platforms are dynamic. They have enabled small and medium-sized enterprises to engage in the digital economy and earn additional revenue, and to offer jobs in the gig economy such as delivery and taxi services, and they have spurred the adoption of mobile wallets and contactless payment systems. The crisis has also brought forward the idea of central bank digital currencies for more inclusive financing, using the same digital ledger technology as cryptocurrencies but backed by central banks.

32. These innovations are not without risk. Nevertheless, supported by a robust policy and regulatory framework that protects data, privacy and cybersecurity, digitalization can become a foundation for maintaining the trust of the people in their Governments to fulfil the commitment to prepare for crises and ensure no one is left behind.

33. Partnerships are critical. The secretariat and its partners have collaborated on digital connectivity and transformation through the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative. The action plan for the next phase of implementation of the Master Plan for the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway, for 2022–2026, has been drafted as a regional framework consisting of three pillars related to connectivity, digital technologies and applications, and digital data.

IV. Trading and investing together

34. International trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) have been key engines of growth in Asia and the Pacific, helping to lift millions of people out of poverty. But the multilateral trading system has come under increasing

strain, contributing to a proliferation of regional trade, investment and economic partnership agreements.

35. Over the period 2010–2019, the region has become more integrated, though more in terms of finance and infrastructure and the digital economy, and less in terms of the movement of people.

36. Trade interdependencies and efficient supply chains have a major influence on the production, distribution and administration of vaccines. These have not always worked smoothly, and bottlenecks have resulted from shipment delays and poor trade facilitation and coordination.

37. Asia and the Pacific and the rest of the world are now looking for ways to improve the production, distribution and administration of vaccine supplies. This should include exchanging scientific knowledge and data, establishing production capacity in developing countries as well as sharing part of the investment risk. There is also scope for South-South and triangular cooperation by facilitating cross-border mobilization of medical supplies, vaccines and vaccine intermediates, and procurement of vaccines could be pooled. Harmonized regulations and trade policies should also prevent imports of substandard and falsified vaccines.

38. The road to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will be challenging and gradual. One of the first measures should be to simplify and digitalize trade procedures. Full digital facilitation could cut average trade costs in Asia and the Pacific by more than 13 per cent. To move forward, Governments in the region could take advantage of the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific.

39. There are also opportunities to expand sustainable cross-border e-commerce. At present, digital trade has mostly been managed through domestic regulations and various regional agreements. Instead, there should be greater cooperation among countries, as well as between international organizations and the private sector.

40. Trade must be climate smart. Increasingly, as companies headquartered outside the region adopt green strategies, the competitiveness of the global value chain sourced in the Asia-Pacific region is likely to be affected. In-depth sector-specific assessments are needed to better quantify the impacts, opportunities and corporate and government response strategies that can capture this potential. Furthermore, while there has been little global progress on reducing tariffs on environmental goods, some gaps have been filled by regional measures. To enhance effectiveness, climate-related provisions should specify more precise, measurable and binding commitments, and these agreements should have credible mechanisms of enforcement.

41. Trade digitalization, including electronic cargo tracking with automatic customs systems, can help to reduce the impact of trade on the environment. At the same time, countries in the region need to address the negative externalities generated by freight transport, including carbon dioxide emissions.

42. Trade is deeply linked with FDI, and it will be an especially important resource in the pandemic recovery as public financing will be tight. Since 2018, the Asia-Pacific region has been the largest source of global FDI flows, and for the first time in 2020 the region was both the largest source and the largest recipient of global FDI flows. However, while overall FDI flows to the

Asia-Pacific region are expected to register small, positive growth in 2022, they are likely to remain below pre-crisis levels in the medium term.

43. An ongoing challenge is to make investments in sustainability even though markets are small and technology is new and has uncertain returns. Often such challenges can be addressed at the local level by the people most directly affected. It is therefore important to empower local government to build green partnerships with civil society organizations, businesses and knowledge providers. Reforms in the governance of international investment along with political commitment and regional cooperation to keep countries open to investment will also be needed. These measures to promote linkages between the value chain and FDI can be supported by the ESCAP network of investment promotion agencies across the region.

V. Raising financial resources and dealing with debt

44. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on human well-being and demonstrated the urgent need for new more inclusive and sustainable development pathways. This shift will require additional fiscal and financial resources, and Governments in the region can explore a number of options. In terms of national policies, for example, they may reform public expenditure and taxation; develop deeper capital markets; issue innovative financing instruments, including green bonds or sustainability bonds; and arrange debt swaps for development. Governments will also need to work together to accelerate the financing of climate action to facilitate multi-stakeholder debt discussions and combat illicit cross-border financial flows and tax evasion.

45. Responding to the pandemic, Asia-Pacific Governments have invested large sums of tax revenue in social protection schemes to save lives and livelihoods and reinvigorate economic activity. As a result, between 2019 and 2021 the average fiscal deficit among Asia-Pacific developing countries increased from 1.2 to 6.2 per cent of GDP. For most countries, debt servicing remains sustainable. For others, debt is becoming a serious concern, but Governments should not try to reduce necessary fiscal expenditure, as this could hamper economic recovery and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Instead, they should create more fiscal space and raise additional financial resources by curbing non-developmental expenditures and aligning them with the Sustainable Development Goals and climate priorities. Governments can also seek to remove untargeted and unnecessary subsidies, in particular those on fossil fuels, and improve efficiency of government expenditure.

46. More financial resources can be raised through equitable taxation which would reduce reliance on indirect taxes and enhance progressive income taxes. Well-designed personal income taxes should exempt the poorest and minimize loopholes for the rich, but much depends on the capacity of tax administrators to ensure compliance. The rich in developing countries could also pay their fair share through taxation on types of wealth that are easy to find, value and liquidate.

47. The costs of public debt servicing can also be reduced through better debt management which covers issues such as what types of debt to issue and for what purpose, and requires strong legal and accounting frameworks and risk assessments, and regular reporting. The best way to effectively manage debt is through a separate and accountable public debt management office.

48. Developing countries have increasingly been raising funds through thematic bonds, such as green bonds, social bonds and sustainability bonds, issued on the condition that they are used for projects with social and environmental benefits. To be effective and ensure that the proceeds are used for intended purposes, thematic bonds should follow international standards and be subject to third party verification.

49. Governments can sell diaspora bonds to investors who have emigrated to other countries to enable them to support their home country while also earning returns. Several Asia-Pacific countries receive a large volume of remittances and have an opportunity to sell diaspora bonds. Nevertheless, several policy actions need to be in place, such as developing domestic capital markets, and Governments must understand the willingness and ability of their diaspora populations to invest in diaspora bonds.

50. Donors can also help to increase fiscal space through debt-for-climate adaptation swaps, which are agreements to write off debt in exchange for commitment to specific actions such as measures for climate mitigation or adaptation. Such swaps can provide valuable funds though they are likely to be complex and carry high transaction costs. A successful swap requires broad consultation between the Government, its creditors and other domestic stakeholders, including indigenous and local communities, and it also requires an effective monitoring, reporting and verification framework.

51. Multinational enterprises and wealthy individuals can exploit the internationalization of business and the easy mobility of capital and wealth around the world to evade or avoid taxation. To combat tax base erosion and profit shifting by multinational enterprises, for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has created a framework for Governments, though only half of ESCAP member States are members of the framework.

52. There is also scope to engage ministries of finance and planning in international processes to promote climate action, deal with debt distress and tackle illicit cross-border financial flows and tax evasion. In this regard, the Sustainable Development Goals offer a comprehensive framework for multi-year planning and value creation that enhances returns, reduces risk and brings impact at scale. The Commission can use its convening powers and ability to provide technical advice to support such engagement.

VI. A common agenda for sustainable development

53. The recommendations for a common agenda to advance sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific are inspired by the declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations which states that there is no other global organization with the legitimacy, convening power and normative impact of the United Nations, that gives hope to so many people for a better world and can deliver the future envisioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

54. This necessarily involves political will and leadership through reinvigorated multilateralism based on values of trust and solidarity. In the aftermath of the ravages of the Second World War, from which only a few countries in the region emerged as independent nation States, the countries in the Asia-Pacific region, albeit to varying degrees, have advanced together in dealing with crises while gradually building up systemic resilience.

55. Within the framework of the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda”, which is a global vision for accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the common agenda proposed in the following paragraphs is focused on advancing sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific region. The principles of this common agenda are guided by the need to be prepared, leave no one behind, protect the planet, place women and girls at the centre, listen to and work with youth, improve digital cooperation, boost partnerships and ensure sustainable financing.

A richer but riskier world

56. No one knows which extreme event will come next. Governments therefore need to be prepared through strategic foresight that encompasses national and local systemic risk management, supported by regional frameworks and backed by computational innovations that integrate digital and geospatial big data analytics with behavioural science insights. For example, through its Regional Space Applications Programme for Sustainable Development, ESCAP could facilitate a coalition of space-faring countries that would provide high resolution satellite imagery and big Earth data analytical tools for consistent natural disaster risk monitoring and reduction, with a focus on countries with special needs.

Protecting people and planet

57. In most countries, being poor is the most important factor for being left behind. More than half of the population of the region is unprotected against any form of contingency throughout their life. A central solution is to provide social protection systems as these systems help to mitigate a range of life contingencies, including those associated with raising children, getting sick or acquiring a disability, losing a job or becoming a breadwinner, and growing older. Universality is key to reaching those who need support when they need it. The Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific calls on members and associate members to establish an intermediate target of coverage by 2025, for the achievement of universal coverage by 2030.

58. The region needs to phase out the use of coal, stop fossil fuel subsidies and make use of carbon pricing while moving to renewable resources, integrating actions on biodiversity, ecosystems, air pollution and climate change into national policies and ensuring that such measures are also integrated into trade agreements. Asia and the Pacific needs to accelerate adaptation and resilience, possibly through a regional coalition. The aim should be to mend the broken relationship with nature through rights-based environmental management. In this regard, there is scope to develop a regional cooperation modality on air pollution.

59. Centring women and girls is critical to fulfilling their rights and empowerment. Women’s active participation in decision-making and the design and implementation of policies and programmes will also contribute to inclusive and sustainable solutions. The design of adequate social protection for poor women matters for gender equality. The need to recognizing and rewarding the care of children and older people, through subsidized services, has become urgent in the context of rapidly ageing societies where women live longer than men and where women are primary caregivers.

60. Future generations are underrepresented in decision-making. For intergenerational equity, Governments can create seats for young parliamentarians and citizen assemblies in which the youth have equal

representation, for example. In particular, young people should be involved in developing sound environmental regulations that articulate the needs of future generations. There is scope to establish committees for the future or appoint future generation commissioners to advise Governments and public bodies, as has already been done in some countries.

Digital by default

61. Accelerating digital transformation in a post-COVID-19 economy and society has exposed the compelling need to achieve universal access to affordable, reliable and safe broadband Internet by 2030. A big push in infrastructure investments is needed, using blended public-private investments in remote rural areas. There are opportunities for Governments to reduce infrastructure costs by coordinating the deployment of new cables along transport and energy corridors. Government investments in universal national digital identification can help to identify those most likely to be left behind and enhance their inclusion in social protection systems for better crisis preparedness, while more digital job opportunities for the youth of the region can be created through government-business partnerships that match training programmes to market requirements. Through implementation of the next phase of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative, for the years 2022–2026, the Commission will help to improve digital cooperation on these matters.

Trading and investing together

62. International trade and foreign investment have been key engines of growth in Asia and the Pacific, but trade procedures need to be simplified and digitalized. To move forward, countries in the region could take advantage of the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific. At the same time, attention must be paid to building up productive capacities, such as digital innovation, climate readiness and epidemic resilience, to ensure regional trade and investment meet emergency needs in a more inclusive and sustainable way. In all aspects of trading and investing, Governments need to work closely with the private sector, academia, development banks and community groups. With a growing demand from investors of all sizes for investment-ready opportunities that support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, ESCAP can provide a platform for commercially viable, environmental, social and corporate governance projects, for example, through regional Sustainable Development Goals investment fairs that match project sponsors with private investors and/or public development banks.

Raising financial resources and managing debt

63. To create sufficient fiscal space, it will be important for Governments to curb non-developmental expenditures, move to more progressive forms of taxation and raise funds through thematic bonds, diaspora bonds and debt swaps for development. In terms of strengthening regional cooperation, Governments can promote climate action through fiscal policy, engage in inclusive dialogue on debt issues and combat illicit cross-border financial flows and tax evasion.

The Commission is ready to serve

64. Having reached its seventy-fifth anniversary, ESCAP has served the region as the most inclusive intergovernmental platform with an ambitious vision and broad, open-ended programme of work. As an impartial and credible convener, ESCAP has developed and implemented a number of regional cooperation agreements and frameworks focused in particular on enhancing transport as well as trade integration. While these upstream normative interventions have provided valuable guidance for the implementation of more coordinated downstream operational interventions aligned with standards and good practices promoted by the United Nations, future cooperation frameworks will need to put the peoples of the region at the core.

65. With people at the centre, there is further scope to strengthen the role of ESCAP as a marketplace for knowledge, ideas and projects. In particular, ESCAP should engage the enthusiasm of a younger generation on climate change issues and environmental, social and corporate governance. Across all sectors, ESCAP must invest more in improving data collection, analysis and dissemination, and raising the visibility of vulnerable groups in statistical data, as well as in developing strategic foresight to manage systemic risk and in behavioural sciences that deepen understanding of policies that incentivize all individuals and private sector companies towards protecting people and the planet.

66. The Commission may wish to review the issues and recommendations as contained in the present document and provide the secretariat with guidance on its future work in that regard.
