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## Regional cooperation

# Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2023–2024

## Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith a summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific for the period 2023–2024.



## Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2023–2024

### *Summary*

An upturn in the average economic growth rate in 2023 demonstrated the robust economic resilience of the Asia-Pacific region. Underlying the projections of steady growth for 2024 and 2025, however, are issues such as subdued job creation, weakened purchasing power and increased poverty and socioeconomic inequalities across the region, coupled with climate risks and heightened geopolitical uncertainty.

While the region remains off track to meet the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, policy actions by countries in the region have demonstrated how a long-term vision can be transformed into reality. To realize the Goals, concerted efforts are needed, especially to expand social protection, accelerate the energy transition, leverage digital innovations and strengthen climate action.

The present report provides the most recent data and analysis and an overview of the work undertaken by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in the past year in advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Economic and Social Council may wish to comment on the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and take note of the present report.

## I. Introduction

1. The 2024 *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report* shows that the region's overall progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals stands at just 17 per cent.<sup>1</sup> While there has been some progress on Goal 1 (End poverty in all its forms everywhere) and Goal 9 (Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation), implementation of Goal 13 (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts) has continued to regress. Challenges to achieving the Goals remain, including gender inequalities, inadequate social protection coverage, youth unemployment and the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. At the same time, an increasing number of developing countries in the region are facing high risk of debt distress, which is constraining Governments' ability to invest in the Goals.

2. Governments in the Asia-Pacific region must intensify efforts to achieve the Goals and ensure that no one is left behind. Concerted efforts and increased investment are urgently needed, especially to expand social protection, accelerate the energy transition, leverage digital innovation and strengthen climate action. Initiatives include strengthening early warning systems for climate-induced disasters, promoting a sustainable and just energy transition, accelerating the transformation of the transport sector, implementing inclusive and sustainable financing options and enhancing data availability. Partnerships, including South-South and triangular cooperation, play a vital role in advancing progress towards the achievement of the Goals in the region.

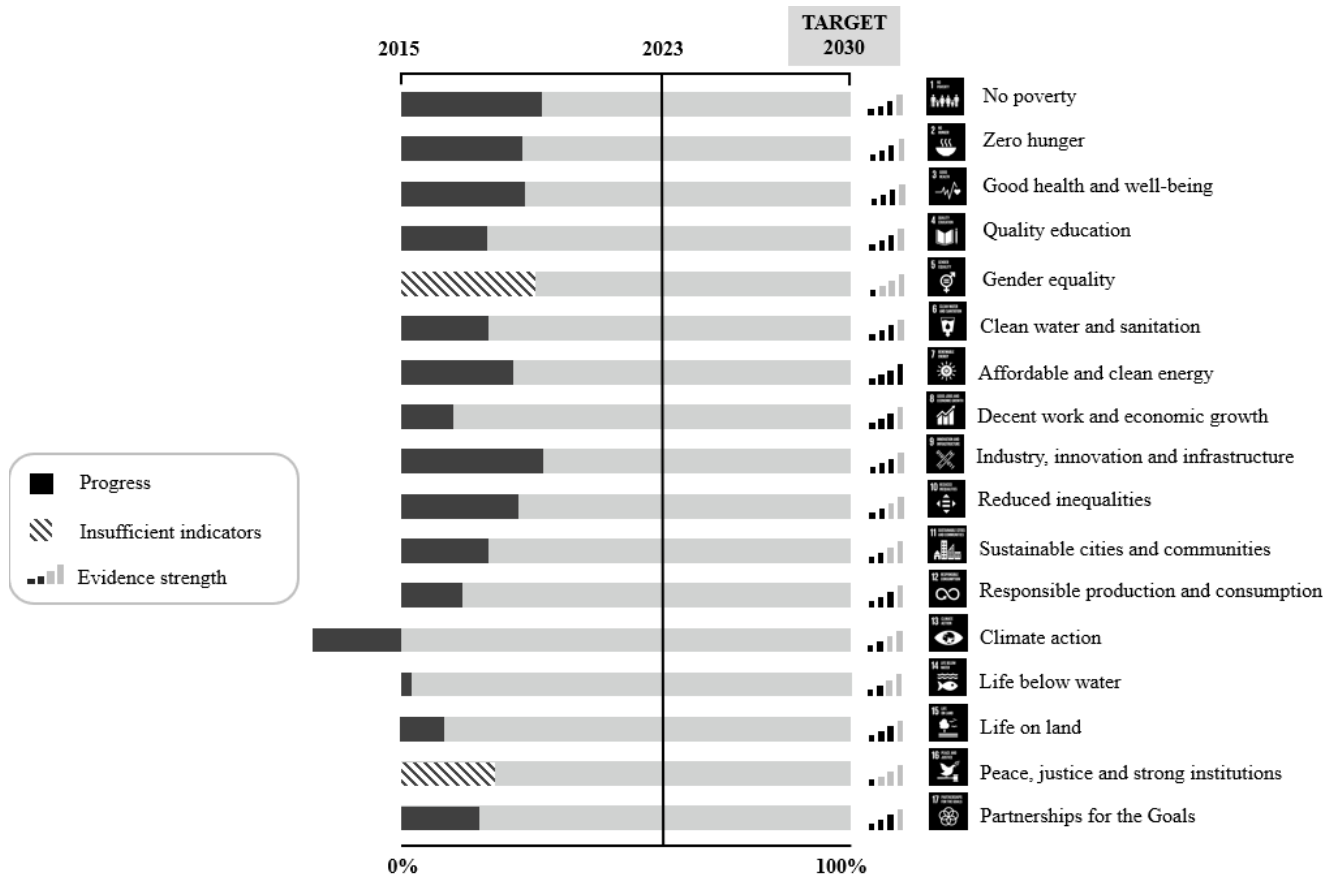
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<sup>1</sup> For information on the methodology used to measure progress, see *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2024: Showcasing Transformative Actions* (United Nations publication, 2024), annex I.

## II. Advancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the region

### A. Regional progress on the Sustainable Development Goals

Snapshot of progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific



Source: *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2024: Showcasing Transformative Actions* (United Nations publication, 2024).

3. The 2024 *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report* shows that the average progress towards achieving all Goals has risen incrementally, standing at just 17 per cent in 2023. Positive strides have been taken towards Goals 1 and 9. Reversing the regression on Goal 13 is an immediate priority for the region. Small island developing States stand out as the most in need of support, as they face significant challenges. There is also a need to address the significant inequalities between and within countries in the region to ensure that no one is left behind.

4. While overall progress has been slow, success stories in individual countries illustrate how further progress can be made in the years ahead, for example by strengthening data systems and policies to improve biodiversity and nature conservation, public digital infrastructure, social protection and access to education.

5. At the Eleventh Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, an in-depth review was undertaken of the region’s progress on the Goals that would be under review at the 2024 high-level political forum on sustainable development, namely Goal 1 (End poverty in all its forms everywhere), Goal 2 (End hunger, achieve food

security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture), Goal 13 (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact), Goal 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels) and Goal 17 (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development).

6. Discussions at the Eleventh Forum were informed by the 2024 *Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership Report*,<sup>2</sup> in which the interlinked challenges of climate change, poverty and hunger were highlighted, with vulnerable groups facing disproportionate impacts owing to limited adaptability and resources. Practical solutions to tackle such challenges include adopting sustainable agricultural practices and food system approaches; devising inclusive employment policies for green and decent jobs; and strengthening and broadening social protection systems aimed at sustaining livelihoods and building resilience.

7. At the Eleventh Forum, States members of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and stakeholders highlighted the need for urgent and accelerated action to achieve the 17 Goals. Such actions needed to be supported by strong and sustained multilateral cooperation and inclusive and networked multilateralism, especially in follow-up to the 2023 Sustainable Development Goals Summit and in the lead-up to the Summit of the Future, to be held in September 2024. The Eleventh Forum was also an opportunity for member States and stakeholders to share information on transformative policy actions to accelerate the implementation of the Goals, including those highlighted in voluntary national reviews.

## B. Social development

8. Asia and the Pacific, which is home to about 60 per cent of the world's population, is an economic powerhouse but faces significant disparities and challenges in social development that affect all aspects of society. The gaps between those furthest ahead and those furthest behind remain wide for many targets of the Sustainable Development Goals. Challenges include rapid demographic shifts, gaps in universal health-care coverage, youth unemployment, lack of decent work and gender inequalities. The region faces climate change impacts, environmental degradation and increasing greenhouse gas emissions. Comprehensive, people-centred, life-course and rights-based approaches are crucial for harnessing population dynamics for sustainable development, necessitating inclusive partnerships and political commitment. Investments in health and education are essential for creating inclusive, just and sustainable societies. Concerted efforts are needed to broaden the reach of social protection systems in view of demographic and climate change impacts in order to cover people who are more exposed to vulnerabilities, such as children, persons with disabilities, older persons, women, informal workers and migrant workers.

9. Over the past 10 years, life expectancy, access to contraceptives and girls' school enrolment have risen in Asia and the Pacific, while maternal mortality has declined. In this context, over 400 representatives of Governments, civil society organizations and youth groups gathered at the Seventh Asian and Pacific Population Conference, held in November 2023, where they emphasized the importance of forward-looking policies, regional collaboration and data-driven progress for sustainable, inclusive and prosperous societies. Megatrends with economic, social and environmental impacts, such as shifting population dynamics, the intensifying climate crisis, increasing migration, growing urbanization and rapid digital

<sup>2</sup> *People and Planet: Addressing the Interlinked Challenges of Climate Change, Poverty and Hunger in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024).

advancement, were highlighted. In the context of declining fertility and rapid population ageing, representatives called for strengthening intergenerational relations and noted persisting inequalities and social injustice.

10. The Conference reaffirmed its commitment to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development. It recommended that ESCAP and the United Nations Population Fund continue to support ESCAP member States in implementing the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development, as well as the Programme of Action and the outcomes of its reviews, within the context of the 2030 Agenda. The Conference also requested ESCAP, in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund and all relevant partners, to conduct a regional intergovernmental review meeting of the implementation of the Ministerial Declaration, as well as the Programme of Action and the key actions for its further implementation in Asia and the Pacific, in 2028. Moreover, it decided to transmit the report on the Seventh Conference to the Commission on Population and Development at its fifty-seventh session, to be held from 29 April to 3 May 2024, to help inform the assessment of the status of implementation of the Programme of Action within the context of the 2030 Agenda.

11. ESCAP collaborates with organizations of persons with disabilities through a multi-donor trust fund and technical cooperation projects to promote disability rights in the region. This includes the Working Group on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2023–2032, whose membership, which consists of representatives of Governments and civil society organizations, is designed to ensure that the voices of persons with disabilities are integrated into regional disability-inclusive development initiatives. ESCAP actively involves organizations of persons with disabilities in intergovernmental processes. This includes the comprehensive review that was undertaken of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013–2022, as part of which insights from diverse disability groups were used to inform the Jakarta Declaration on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2023–2032.

12. The ESCAP secretariat is spearheading work to value unpaid care and domestic work and invest in the care economy in the region, including in Cambodia, China, Indonesia and the Philippines. For example, it continues to provide technical support to Governments for the design and implementation of policy initiatives at the national and subnational levels that recognize, reduce and redistribute the unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities of women and girls and promote the participation of women in the labour force. In the Philippines, for example, a caregiver welfare act was signed into law in 2023 and a provincial ordinance on care has passed its final formal reading. In both Cambodia and the Philippines, national frameworks for investing in the care economy are being developed through a whole-of-government approach.

13. In response to General Assembly resolution [78/177](#) and resolution [2023/15](#) of the Economic and Social Council, the secretariat is continuing to support ESCAP member States in drafting and revising policies and action plans on older persons. A repository of good practices on such policies and action plans was launched and is used for capacity-building.<sup>3</sup>

14. Acknowledging the pivotal role of social protection in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the Committee on Social Development at its sixth session in 2020 adopted the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific. In support of its implementation, the secretariat developed a dynamic online platform, the Social Protection Online Tool, consisting

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.population-trends-asiapacific.org](http://www.population-trends-asiapacific.org).

of multiple components in support of policymaking, capacity-building, awareness-raising and intergovernmental processes. It includes a user-friendly social protection simulation tool and self-paced online training modules on social protection schemes across the life cycle to build the capacity of ESCAP member States in strengthening inclusive social protection systems. The secretariat has also hosted national consultations in Cambodia, Georgia, Maldives, Mongolia and the Philippines and a multi-stakeholder review meeting in Türkiye to take stock of Governments' existing policies and their readiness to implement the Action Plan.

15. In its resolution 74/11 on strengthening regional cooperation to tackle inequality in all its forms in Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP requested that technical assistance and capacity-building activities continue to be provided to member States on policies and programmes that address inequality in all its forms. To deliver on this mandate, the ESCAP secretariat organized introductory and technical capacity-building workshops in 2023 in Cambodia, Fiji, India, Nepal, Mongolia, Tonga and Turkmenistan. In addition to raising awareness on the pledge in the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind, these workshops were focused on localizing innovative methodologies and building capacity and skills to measure inequality of opportunity and identify those left furthest behind in the achievement of the Goals using national data. They also provided unique opportunities to work with member States in the region that were presenting their voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development in 2023. The Governments of Cambodia, Fiji, Maldives and Mongolia were consequently able to include empirical evidence on those furthest behind in their voluntary national reviews, monitor progress over time and identify policy responses.

### **C. Environment and development**

16. Over the past 60 years, temperatures in the region have increased faster than the global mean. Extreme, unpredictable weather events and natural hazards have become more frequent and intense, displacing communities, damaging people's health and pushing millions into poverty. Of the 10 countries most affected by tropical cyclones, heatwaves, floods and droughts, 6 are in the Asia-Pacific region, where food systems are being disrupted and economies and societies undermined.

17. In order to accelerate climate action and reduce the vulnerability of communities in the region to the impacts of climate change, at its seventy-ninth session in May 2023, ESCAP adopted resolution 79/1, in which it urged all its members and associate members to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; reaffirmed the need to immediately curb greenhouse gas emissions; and encouraged all its members and associate members to strengthen regional and subregional cooperation to accelerate climate action, including by promoting clean energy technologies, regional power system connectivity, low-emission mobility and early warning systems and by taking a whole-of-government approach to strengthening the collection and use of climate change-related statistics.

18. In collaboration with the World Food Programme, ESCAP developed a comprehensive assessment framework and index that provides insights into multidimensional risks to three food system outcomes: human health and nutrition; ecosystem health and sustainability; and shared prosperity. To strengthen sustainable and climate-smart agriculture, ESCAP provided technical support to agriculture sector stakeholders in Cambodia, Indonesia and Nepal to better manage straw residue and improve air pollution monitoring.

19. To tackle the persistent challenge of air pollution in the region, ESCAP continued to facilitate collaboration across countries and among stakeholders through

the implementation of the Regional Action Programme on Air Pollution. The High-level Forum on Clean Air in Asia and the Pacific, held in Ulaanbaatar in 2023, brought together member States and stakeholders across the region to operationalize the Regional Action Programme by further exploring areas and modalities of cooperation, strengthening connections among existing initiatives and creating the opportunity to share knowledge and expertise.

20. ESCAP delivered an online course on climate-smart trade and investment for sustainable development based on analysis that it had conducted jointly with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the United Nations Environment Programme. The secretariat also provided analysis on food loss in international supply chains and possible mitigation measures through national case studies.

21. The region is home to 54 per cent of the world's urban population. Even prior to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, Asia-Pacific cities had difficulty keeping pace with the rate of urbanization, which is often unplanned. This has led to long-standing challenges such as urban poverty, multidimensional inequalities and environmental degradation.<sup>4</sup>

22. In this context, ESCAP, in collaboration with the city of Suwon, Republic of Korea, and the country's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, convened the Eighth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum in October 2023 in Suwon. The Eighth Forum was attended by over 1,800 participants from 28 countries, representing over 80 cities. Over 50 parallel sessions and associated events were organized to discuss persistent and emerging issues related to sustainable urban development in the Asia-Pacific region.

23. At the Eighth Forum, ministers and senior officials released a high-level communiqué on sustainable urban development in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>5</sup> In addition, various voluntary commitments for sustainable urban development were made and five stakeholder assemblies were held. The second edition of the CityNet-ESCAP SDG City Awards was also held, with awards presented to five cities in the region.

#### **D. Disaster risk reduction**

24. The Asia-Pacific region is facing a rapidly escalating threat from climate change-induced disasters. In 2022 alone, the region experienced over 140 disasters, leading to devastating consequences. These disasters claimed the lives of more than 7,500 people, affected over 64 million individuals and caused an estimated \$57 billion in economic damage. In climate change scenarios contemplating temperature rises of 1.5°C and 2°C above pre-industrial levels, an absence of immediate action will cause disaster risk to outpace resilience beyond the limits of feasible adaptation and imperil sustainable development. Furthermore, the future cost of inaction today far exceeds the current cost of climate-disaster related losses, with average annual losses increasing from \$924 billion currently to almost \$1 trillion under a 2°C warming scenario, or from 2.9 to 3 per cent of regional gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>6</sup>

25. To enhance the region's resilience to disaster risk, the Committee on Disaster Risk Reduction at its eighth session in July 2023 recommended several key actions. These include the development of a regional strategy to achieve early warnings for all by 2027 and the facilitation of cooperation on adaptation. Specifically, the

<sup>4</sup> *Crisis Resilient Urban Futures: The Future of Asian & Pacific Cities 2023* (United Nations publication, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Available at [www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/Communique-final.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/Communique-final.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> *Seizing the Moment: Targeting Transformative Disaster Risk Resilience* (United Nations publication, 2023).



Committee endorsed the secretariat's proposals to further develop a regional strategy in support of the global and country-level implementation of the four pillars of multi-hazard early warning systems. The Committee also recommended that the secretariat support the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 at the regional level, taking into account the critical role of the health sector in addressing disaster challenges, and strengthen regional and subregional cooperation mechanisms to unlock financing, including through the private sector, for resilience-building.

26. As the only regional funding mechanism supporting shared learning on disaster preparedness in Asia and the Pacific, the ESCAP multi-donor trust fund for tsunami, disaster and climate preparedness was acknowledged by the Committee on Disaster Risk Reduction as being in a unique position to catalyse action in the region to make sure that everyone is covered by early warnings by 2027 and build transboundary synergies. Established in 2005 in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, the trust fund will continue to mobilize support for a regional strategy to achieve early warnings for all.

## E. Energy

27. The Asia-Pacific region is responsible for more than 40 per cent of the energy consumed and over 50 per cent of the greenhouse gas emissions produced globally, and demand for energy is poised to continue to grow rapidly in the coming years. This creates challenges for countries trying to maintain the security and affordability of energy supplies while continuing to make efforts to mitigate climate change and the associated environmental impacts.<sup>7</sup>

28. Delivery of the targets for Goal 7 (Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all) on universal access to modern energy, energy efficiency and renewable energy hinges on scaling up investments in clean energy technologies and diverting investment away from fossil fuels. While significant progress has been made in recent years, much of the investment has been concentrated in a relatively small number of countries. One of the most critical remaining Goal 7 challenges is the lack of access to modern energy services. Millions of people in the region still do not have access to electricity or clean cooking fuels, which produces a series of negative consequences, including health impacts, environmental degradation and economic hardship.

29. In this context, in October 2023 the participants in the Third Asian and Pacific Energy Forum adopted the Ministerial Declaration on Building a Secure, Sustainable and Interconnected Energy Future for Asia and the Pacific. In the Ministerial Declaration, the Ministers of energy and other high-level representatives of countries in the region expressed their determination to address energy poverty and reduce energy inequality in Asia and the Pacific; reaffirmed their commitment to facilitate access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; reaffirmed the importance of energy connectivity and the potential contribution of cross-border energy trade to attaining Goal 7; invited member States to promote further regional power system connectivity and trading to implement the strategies of the Regional Road Map on Power System Connectivity: Promoting Cross-border Electricity Connectivity for Sustainable Development; acknowledged the need to maintain reliable, responsible and sustainable supply chains for minerals, materials and technologies critical for energy transitions; and invited member States and other

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<sup>7</sup> *Closing the Gap for SDG 7 in the Asia-Pacific Region: Regional Trends Report on Energy for Sustainable Development 2023* (United Nations publication, 2023).

relevant stakeholders to consider the possibility of taking appropriate measures to ensure the application of the United Nations Resource Management System.

30. The participants in the Third Forum encouraged States, regional organizations and other stakeholders to actively engage in collaborative initiatives and in knowledge-sharing and capacity-building activities to bridge the gaps and to support those countries lacking the means to accelerate progress in the energy transition, in particular least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States.

## F. Transport

31. Countries in Asia and the Pacific are continuing to experience increasing passenger and freight transport demand, leading to high transport costs; frequent delays; growing energy use and emissions; congestion; and road fatalities.

32. Activities conducted under the regional land transport connectivity and logistics thematic area of the Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific (2022–2026) have supported ESCAP member States in coordinating their efforts on the development of the regional land transport network, composed of the Asian Highway Network, the Trans-Asian Railway Network and dry ports, as well as their maritime linkages.

33. The Working Group on the Asian Highway, at its tenth meeting, held in June 2023, extended the geographic coverage of the Asian Highway Network in South-East Asia and discussed the progress made towards: efficient and resilient transport and logistics networks and mobility for economic growth; environmentally sustainable transport systems and services; and safe and inclusive transport and mobility. The Working Group also called for greater collaboration among Governments, international organizations, academic institutions and private sector entities in promoting, as appropriate, national and regional initiatives aimed at achieving low-carbon and resilient Asian Highway routes.<sup>8</sup>

34. The Working Group on the Trans-Asian Railway Network, at its eighth meeting, held in September 2023, decided to add a new annex to the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network to facilitate electronic information exchange along the network. It also adopted the Strategy 2030 on Accelerating Rail Digital Transformation in the Asia-Pacific Region and acknowledged the ongoing efforts made by member States in improving rail transport operations. Discussions were focused on ways to strengthen the implementation of the Agreement, including by identifying missing links for regional transport connectivity, enhancing integration with the Asian Highway Network and maritime ports, encouraging electronic information exchange, strengthening multimodal linkages and accelerating rail digital transformation. Furthermore, the Working Group expressed support for the development of a regional instrument to further strengthen the contribution of rail to addressing climate change, with recommendations on ways to achieve zero rail emissions by 2030.<sup>9</sup>

35. The Working Group on Dry Ports, at its fifth meeting, held in September 2023, reaffirmed the continued need to develop a more comprehensive approach to the development of dry ports as components of multimodal transport corridors, including those providing connections between Asia and Europe and between different subregions in Asia and the Pacific. In its discussions, the Working Group considered the following matters: increasing the efficiency of dry ports and strengthening their

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<sup>8</sup> ESCAP/AHWG(10)/6.

<sup>9</sup> ESCAP/TARN(8)/6.

interconnections with land transport networks and inland waterways; the digitalization of dry ports so as to enhance their resilience to external shocks; and the role of dry ports for landlocked developing countries. The Working Group emphasized the need for enhanced practical cooperation between dry port operators located in different countries. It called upon the parties to the Agreement to establish a dedicated platform for the coordination and exchange of relevant information on the operations of dry ports.<sup>10</sup>

36. For the implementation of the Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific (2022–2026), the ESCAP secretariat worked with member States in the areas of road safety and inclusive transport and mobility. Over 30 countries participated in subregional consultations and a regional dialogue on low-carbon transport and shared priorities and challenges. The secretariat worked with the Economic Commission for Europe to bring Governments and stakeholders together for a high-level dialogue at the twenty-eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to evaluate efforts to decarbonize the transport sector and bolster climate resilience, as part of efforts to implement a regional cooperation mechanism on low-carbon transport. Twenty countries and four organizations have joined the Asia-Pacific initiative on electric mobility. A regional plan of action for road safety has been developed. For inclusive transport and mobility, regional guidelines are being finalized to enhance the capacity of transport policymakers and other key stakeholders in planning for accessible, safe, socially inclusive and innovative urban transport systems with different social groups in mind, including women, older persons, low-income transport users and persons with disabilities.

37. To support the digitalization of transport and regional cooperation for the wider deployment of sustainable and resilient smart transport systems, the secretariat developed a regional road map, guided by the Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific (2022–2026). The road map outlines major strategies and corresponding policy plans that Governments in Asia and the Pacific can refer to when devising or updating their policies, plans and strategies on smart transport systems.

### **III. Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

#### **A. Financing for development**

38. While there was relatively steady economic growth and moderating inflation in the Asia-Pacific region in 2023, pointing to robust economic resilience, the rebound was uneven and limited to a few large economies.

39. At the global level, there are significant financing gaps preventing Governments from effectively pursuing the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and fulfilling climate ambitions. For instance, the estimated annual requirement of between \$4 trillion and \$6 trillion for the global transition to a low-carbon economy far exceeds available financial resources. Similarly, the financing gap faced by developing countries to meet their nationally determined contributions from 2023 to 2030 is enormous. These financing challenges are compounded by difficult macroeconomic conditions globally, including in Asia and the Pacific, characterized by weaker economic growth, higher inflation, elevated interest rates, constrained fiscal space and rising public debt distress and vulnerabilities.

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<sup>10</sup> ESCAP/DP(5)/5.

40. Policymakers need to navigate these immediate macroeconomic concerns while continuing to pursue long-term sustainable development objectives. To address the formidable challenge of financing the transition to a low-carbon economy and achieving net-zero emissions, Governments, regulators and private finance institutions are increasingly recognizing the need for comprehensive policy, regulatory and financial system transformations. The most immediate step for policymakers is to ensure that nationally determined contributions are supported by concrete, targeted and coherent national financing strategies.<sup>11</sup>

41. In this context, at its fourth session, held in November 2023, the Committee on Macroeconomic Policy, Poverty Reduction and Financing for Development assessed the impacts of increasing investments in the Sustainable Development Goals on public debt sustainability. The aim was to increase understanding of the need for, and the policy implications of, a long-term public debt sustainability approach that takes into consideration investments in the Goals and climate action. The Committee also reviewed the note by the secretariat on 10 principles underpinning the actions needed to scale up sustainable finance in Asia and the Pacific and discussed their policy implications.<sup>12</sup>

42. The secretariat provided technical support to build national capacity in harnessing innovative climate and financing instruments for the Goals. This included a collaboration with the securities and exchange regulator of Cambodia to launch a sustainable bond accelerator programme to support private green bond issuers to prepare for and comply with relevant market best practices, as well as work supporting the development of public green bond frameworks in Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Tajikistan.

43. In Sri Lanka, the ESCAP secretariat provided training to government officials and private sector representatives to build capacities in sustainable and climate finance, including climate risk management and disclosure reporting policymaking. It also conducted a needs assessment on a possible debt-for-nature or debt-for-climate swap as part of the country's debt restructuring. The secretariat also provided technical support to build national capacity in integrated national financing frameworks in Samoa (focusing on integrated national climate financing strategies) and in Pakistan (focusing on domestic resource mobilization through increased tax revenues from digital tax systems). Furthermore, the secretariat is providing technical support to the central bank of Mongolia on integrating climate risks into its financial stability analysis.

44. In 2023, ESCAP collaborated with all regional commissions and with the Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance, led by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, to assess the state of public debt around the world and its impact on development and to explore policy options. The collaboration resulted in a global policy brief, a side event during the Economic and Social Council forum on financing for development follow-up in 2023 and a global public debt dashboard highlighting the main debt trends at the global and regional levels and policy priorities for addressing the global debt challenge and achieving sustainable development.

## **B. Technology**

45. The shift to a digital economy provides opportunities and poses challenges for implementing the 2030 Agenda. As the use of digital technology became more

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<sup>11</sup> *Sustainable Finance: Bridging the Gap in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> ESCAP/CMPF(4)/6.

widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic, it gave rise to new digital dividends but also widened digital divides.

46. In this context, ESCAP adopted resolution 79/10, entitled “Promoting digital cooperation and inclusion through the Action Plan for Implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Initiative, 2022–2026”, recognizing the initiative as a useful regional platform for the promotion of cooperation to bridge the digital divide and advance digital transformation. ESCAP also welcomed the offer of the Government of Kazakhstan to host a ministerial conference on digital inclusion and transformation in 2024 and noted with appreciation the initiative of the Government on establishing a digital solutions centre for sustainable development to provide practical digital solutions in Central Asia and beyond.

47. Advanced technologies such as machine learning, cloud computing and geospatial data analytics are driving innovations in geospatial information applications that are making space-derived data more available, accessible, affordable and actionable.

48. In light of the potential that such innovations offer for the achievement of the Goals, ESCAP adopted resolution 79/9, entitled “Implementation of the Jakarta Ministerial Declaration on Space Applications for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific”. In response, the secretariat has been supporting countries in customizing and applying geospatial tools and systems, through South-South and triangular cooperation, for applications in areas such as agricultural resilience; air pollution monitoring and mitigation; urban planning; flood and wildfire hotspot mapping; and drought management. The secretariat and the three regional service nodes of the Regional Cooperative Mechanism for Drought Monitoring and Early Warning delivered a webinar series on the impacts of the El Niño phenomenon. The geospatial good practices database and dashboard continues to be updated to facilitate regional knowledge-sharing. In 2023, more than 3,000 people enhanced their capacities to apply innovative tools by completing free online courses offered by ESCAP and its partners.

### C. Trade, investment and innovation

49. International trade has been a key engine of growth and development in Asia and the Pacific in recent decades, supporting economic growth and lifting over 1 billion people out of poverty. The latest analysis by the secretariat shows that digital trade has become an important component of global trade, with Asia and the Pacific emerging as a dynamic player.<sup>13</sup> There is a need for more cooperation and harmonization in developing digital trade regulatory frameworks. In addition, it is important for countries in the region to accelerate the digitalization of procedures to make trade more inclusive and reduce its negative impact on the environment.

50. In this context, at its first session, held in February 2023, the Committee on Trade, Investment, Enterprise and Business Innovation focused on: making trade more competitive, sustainable and inclusive; advancing public-private partnerships to accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals; mobilizing investment for the Goals; enabling business innovation for inclusive and sustainable development; and promoting regional cooperation in new and emerging technologies for achieving sustainable development.

51. In addition, the Committee made recommendations in the following areas, all with the aim of accelerating progress on the 2030 Agenda: making trade more competitive, sustainable and inclusive; further enhancing cooperation on cross-border

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<sup>13</sup> *Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Report 2023/24: Unleashing Digital Trade and Investment for Sustainable Development* (United Nations publication, 2023).

paperless trade; engaging the private sector; mobilizing impact investment and foreign direct investment (FDI); promoting enterprise and business innovation; and scaling up innovations.

52. As the coordinator of the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation for 2023, the ESCAP secretariat issued a series of reports highlighting the importance of trade facilitation in reducing supply chain vulnerabilities and overall trade costs, including joint reports with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and a report dedicated to the seven countries participating in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia. According to the findings of the reports, notable progress was made in implementing trade facilitation measures in times of pandemic or other types of crisis. However, much remains to be done in reducing the use of paper in trade transactions and ensuring the effective participation of small and medium-sized enterprises and women in trade.

53. ESCAP continued supporting the implementation of the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific, which entered into force in 2021. As at the end of 2023, 13 countries had ratified the treaty.<sup>14</sup>

54. ESCAP also provided support for the negotiation of more inclusive and sustainable trade agreements and issued a handbook on options and provisions that could be incorporated into trade agreements. The Trade Intelligence and Negotiation Advisor, an online tool, was enhanced to provide more insights on the environmental impact of different negotiating positions.

55. The Sixth ASEAN Inclusive Business Summit, held in Indonesia and online in August 2023, had a focus on inclusive business models for sustainable development. With technical support from ESCAP, outcomes of the Summit included a declaration on promoting inclusive business models by the Ministers responsible for the development of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises in ASEAN member States and a plan of action for the promotion of inclusive business for the period 2023–2027, providing a framework for inclusive business development in the region.

56. The ESCAP Sustainable Business Network continues to engage in and establish partnerships with the private sector, in particular for the implementation of the Asia-Pacific Green Deal for Business. The Asia-Pacific Business Forum held in November 2023 included a focus on driving the green transformation as part of the Asia-Pacific Green Deal for Business. A digital platform dedicated to the Asia-Pacific Green Deal for Business was officially launched in May 2023 to help companies, especially micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, collect data on their carbon footprints and to encourage their reporting on sustainability.

57. Asia and the Pacific has been the largest source and destination of FDI since 2019. Given the significance of FDI in the region, ESCAP has been working with its member States to better enable them to attract and channel FDI into three key areas: digital transformation, climate action and gender equality. This has involved working with 15 Governments over the past two years on developing and implementing practical and realistic action plans and FDI policies to bring in the right type of investors within five years. With technical support from ESCAP, the Government of Bhutan is developing a new policy and regulation for FDI, which is expected to be finalized in the second quarter of 2024. Work is also being carried out with subregional organizations, such as ASEAN, the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia and Pacific Trade Invest, to develop regional investment promotion action plans to target investments in value chains across

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<sup>14</sup> Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan and Tuvalu.

subregions. The first of these action plans will be launched at the ESCAP-ASEAN Investment Forum, to be held during the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in October 2024.

58. In Fiji, ESCAP supported the implementation of 15 FDI initiatives with a focus on gender equality, as part of which three women entrepreneurs received investment and obtained export contracts for their businesses in the span of five months in 2023 and 2024, including one female-owned business that secured a \$600,000 export contract. In Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka and Tajikistan, work has been started to help digital start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises to identify, target and pitch to foreign direct investors. This will continue in 2024 through a series of initiatives to enable firms to utilize FDI as a means of working capital and to expand digital service exports.

59. In cooperation with the United Nations development system and partners, the secretariat brought together women entrepreneurs, investors, financial service providers, policymakers, thought leaders and representatives from civil society and women's grass-roots organizations for the first Feminist Finance Forum in August 2023. Discussions helped spotlight innovative financial solutions for women's empowerment and paved the way for a regional vision for feminist finance. Building on the success of the Women's Livelihood Bond Series, implemented in partnership with the United Nations Capital Development Fund and ESCAP, Impact Investment Exchange launched its orange bond, an asset class built for and by the Global South as a solution to financing gender equality, which is aimed at unlocking \$10 billion to empower 100 million women.

#### **D. Data and statistics**

60. On average across the Asia-Pacific region, 52 per cent of Sustainable Development Goal indicators have two or more data points. However, 39 per cent of indicators have no data at all. Despite a positive trajectory for data availability over time, the pace of progress has slowed. Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) and Goal 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels) continue to be those with the least available data. That said, more data have become available for Goal 7 (Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all), Goal 15 (Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss) and Goal 17 (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development), with coverage reaching over 60 per cent of indicators.<sup>15</sup>

61. More countries in the region adopted the use of progress assessment dashboards for their voluntary national reviews in 2023. The secretariat provided technical support to countries presenting voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2023, which included Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam. This support included the National SDG Tracker tool, which Governments can use to assess their own progress in implementing the 17 Goals.

62. For the implementation of the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP provides technical and capacity-building support to relevant national stakeholders, such as in Bangladesh, Fiji, the

<sup>15</sup> *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2024*.

Lao People's Democratic Republic, Pakistan, the Philippines and Samoa. The support has allowed national stakeholders to carry out inequality assessments using secondary data sources and build national capacity for demographic analysis in order to undertake inequality assessments.

63. Significant progress has been made in tackling civil registration and vital statistics inequalities through capacity-building initiatives, inequality assessments and policy dialogues. Positive impacts have been observed, such as in Fiji, where economic incentives for birth registration have been shown to be effective. Similarly, an inequality assessment in the Lao People's Democratic Republic enabled key barriers to registration to be identified and actionable recommendations for improvement to be proposed. These efforts are aligned with the Ministerial Declaration on Building a More Resilient Future with Inclusive Civil Registration and Vital Statistics and the Regional Action Framework, in recognition of the urgency of achieving universal registration and addressing disparities.

64. Significant progress was made in 2023 in enhancing the capacity of member States to measure development progress using "beyond GDP" metrics. Specific technical support was provided to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Fiji, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Palau, Philippines, Samoa, Sri Lanka and Türkiye. The support allowed national statistics systems to enhance their capacity to measure development progress beyond GDP, including on ocean accounts, ecosystem accounts, forestry accounts, and disaster-, climate change- and environment-related statistics.

65. To promote knowledge-sharing, ESCAP established a community of practice for data integration, providing a forum for member States and international experts to share country experiences on various aspects of big data in the areas of economic, financial, social, gender-related, environmental, and population-related statistics. Guidelines were developed on using Earth observation data for official statistics. Regional training seminars and webinars were dedicated to helping national statistical offices to better use big data, machine learning and advanced data visualization in official statistics. There were improvements in the capacity of national statistical systems to develop and use new sources of big data, including geospatial data and mobile phone records.

## **E. South-South and triangular cooperation**

66. Partnerships, in particular through South-South and triangular cooperation, remained a key modality for member States to advance sustainable development and address transboundary issues. The secretariat has facilitated coordination and cooperation through its capacity-development work, by providing high-level engagement platforms and by collecting and mainstreaming good practices, case studies and lessons learned.

67. In November 2023, the Asia-Pacific Directors General Forum for South-South and Triangular Cooperation convened its fifth session with a focus on digital innovation and South-South cooperation. The session brought together Directors General and heads of agencies and units responsible for international development cooperation to discuss challenges and opportunities for advancing South-South cooperation in an increasingly digital world, especially for emerging technical assistance providers. It also provided an opportunity for countries to showcase recent innovative development solutions and promote replicable digital innovation solutions through South-South cooperation.

68. In 2023, the Governments of Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand and Viet Nam, with the facilitation of ESCAP, formally agreed to develop a South-South and triangular collaboration programme on science, technology and



innovation, underscoring their commitment to collective growth and sustainable development. The programme includes five proposals: (a) scale-up readiness programme for regional start-ups; (b) human capital development: expanding technology and digital skills in the workforce and science, technology, engineering and mathematics education; (c) regional alliance of technology transfer and adoption centres; (d) science, technology and innovation platform for closed-loop plastic packaging; and (e) policy design and implementation support for the sustainability of the cassava value chain. The initiative represents a strategic effort to leverage collective knowledge and resources to jointly address regional development challenges.

#### **IV. Promoting a just energy transition in Asia and the Pacific**

69. The Asia-Pacific region is home to more than half of the world's population, accounts for more than 40 per cent of global energy consumption, produces more than 50 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions and is a global economic growth leader, powered by fossil fuels. It faces a complex energy landscape, characterized by a growing demand for energy, reliance on fossil fuels, concerns over energy security and environmental degradation, and increasing impacts of climate change on economies and societies. The transition from conventional energy sources to sustainable alternatives is essential to combat climate change, tackle pollution and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, not least because Asia-Pacific is regressing on Goal 13 (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts).

70. At its fifth session, held in conjunction with the twenty-eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement called upon all parties to contribute to, inter alia, tripling renewable energy capacity globally and doubling the global average annual rate of energy efficiency improvements by 2030 and transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems.<sup>16</sup>

71. Governments in the Asia-Pacific region are facing a number of challenges to achieving a just energy transition, including the need to accelerate investments in renewable energy resources and grid infrastructure in the context of rising demand, increased financing costs and rising indebtedness. Countries in special situations (i.e. least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States) are not fully benefiting from the rapid declines in the costs of energy transition technologies, with most of the deployment of renewable energy resources occurring in developed economies and the larger developing economies. As countries seek to accelerate, finance and guide their national energy transitions in support of sustainable development ambitions, it is essential that the process also prioritize environmental protection and social equity, ensuring that vulnerable communities are not left behind and economic disparities are minimized.

72. ESCAP has endeavoured to take an integrated and holistic approach to work with Governments to address the fundamental enablers of successful energy transitions, including the consideration of supply- and demand-side dynamics within the context of Goal 7 (Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all), the role of connectivity and the growing importance of critical energy transition minerals.

73. With support from ESCAP, Governments have been able to develop evidence-based scenarios for their energy transitions through the national road maps for Goal 7, which have been completed for 16 countries and eight subnational jurisdictions.

<sup>16</sup> See FCCC/PA/CMA/2023/16/Add.1, decision 1/CMA.5.

These road maps set out policy and technology recommendations for Governments to bridge the remaining gaps to achieve Goal 7 by 2030.

74. The Regional Road Map on Power System Connectivity: Promoting Cross-border Electricity Connectivity for Sustainable Development contains nine strategies to guide the utilization of cross-border power system integration as a tool to enable the energy transition.<sup>17</sup> Strategy 9 of the Road Map is focused on the importance of ensuring that connectivity enables sustainable development. ESCAP has been working to implement this and other strategies at the national, subregional and regional levels. For example, in 2023 ESCAP launched a green power corridor road map for North-East Asia, for which modelling of cross-border connectivity scenarios was used to demonstrate the value of increased power trade and which provides practical and relevant advice on how to leverage connectivity to accelerate progress on power system decarbonization and the achievement of net-zero targets. In South-East Asia, ESCAP has been working closely with stakeholders to support the development of the ASEAN Power Grid, including by providing capacity-building for regulators and utilities, supporting institutional development and enabling multilateral power trading to support the integration of renewable energy resources.

75. ESCAP has increasingly been supporting efforts to develop secure and sustainable value chains for energy transition technologies. In 2023, it worked with the ASEAN secretariat to develop principles for sustainable minerals development, which were endorsed at the ministerial level by ASEAN member States. In addition, the ESCAP secretariat, as part of the Working Group on Transforming the Extractive Industries for Sustainable Development, led the development of a web-based toolkit for United Nations resident coordinators and country teams for the secure and sustainable development of critical energy transition materials.

76. To ensure sustainable finance for development, ESCAP is working with Governments and stakeholders to build national capacity, develop the necessary frameworks for green and sustainable finance and, through the Asia-Pacific Green Deal for Business, generate momentum in the private sector to transition to a net-zero economy.

## **V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development**

77. ESCAP has supported ASEAN in the implementation of both the ASEAN-United Nations Plan of Action for 2016–2020 and the Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Partnership between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the United Nations (2021–2025). ESCAP is the lead coordinator for the United Nations for the economic cooperation, sociocultural cooperation and cross-sectoral cooperation components of the Plan of Action. Initiatives have been expanded beyond the areas of disaster risk management, social development and women's economic empowerment to include activities on sustainable finance and investment. These new areas of collaboration present Governments with innovative opportunities to fund their efforts for a COVID-19 pandemic recovery and towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

78. ESCAP continues to support ASEAN member States in the implementation of the Association's complementarities road map, in coordination with the Government of Thailand, which is the ASEAN lead for sustainable development. An annual high-level brainstorming dialogue, co-organized with Thailand and the ASEAN secretariat, serves as a platform for member States and partners to discuss the challenges faced by the subregion in achieving the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the 2030

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<sup>17</sup> ESCAP/CE/2021/4, annex.

Agenda. The ESCAP and ASEAN secretariats continue to work together through the Plan of Action to ensure that initiatives and outcomes support and contribute to member States' efforts to achieve sustainable development in the region.

79. ESCAP actively supported the development of the Pacific Road Map for Sustainable Development, in alignment with the objectives of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. In 2023, ESCAP provided support to the 10-year review of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway to inform the discussions at the SAMOA Pathway meeting in Tonga in August 2023. ESCAP also signed a significant memorandum of understanding with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in May 2023 to further collaborate in four priority areas: (a) promotion, implementation and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals in the Pacific; (b) strengthening climate action and resilient development; (c) improving social inclusion and equity; and (d) increasing regional economic and trade cooperation opportunities in the Pacific.<sup>18</sup>

80. ESCAP continues to support the implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014–2024. Jointly with the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States and the Economic Commission for Europe, in 2023 ESCAP held a high-level meeting to review the implementation of the Programme of Action in Asia and Europe. The review highlighted the progress made in enhancing physical infrastructure, such as transport, energy and information and communication technology infrastructure, across the region. Despite these advancements, the review identified a significant gap in the development of soft infrastructure, which is key for the facilitation of transit and trade, underlining a critical need for bolstered regional connectivity and cooperation. The insights derived from the review will contribute to ongoing global discussions and preparations for the Third United Nations Conference on Landlocked Developing Countries, to be held in Kigali in June 2024.

81. The ESCAP secretariat supported collaboration within the United Nations development system at the regional level through its convening and secretarial role in the Regional Collaborative Platform for Asia and the Pacific. The issue-based coalition on raising ambitions on climate action, led by ESCAP and the United Nations Environment Programme, carried out the annual assessment of nationally determined contributions and emissions gaps to inform discussions among resident coordinators and Governments in the lead-up to and during the twenty-eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The issue-based coalition also spearheaded advocacy efforts, such as engaging youth in climate action and building partnerships through the Climate and Clean Air Conference.

82. Through its role leading the working group on Sustainable Development Goals data and statistics, the secretariat provided capacity-building support to the United Nations at the country level, as well as to Governments. In response to rapid ageing in the region, the working group galvanized system-wide support for the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

## VI. Conclusions

83. The Asia-Pacific region faces significant challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The region continues to grapple with the

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<sup>18</sup> United Nations, Subregional Office for the Pacific, “Advancing Pacific Priorities 2023”, report, 29 December 2023.

socioeconomic repercussions of multiple crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, natural disasters and the climate crisis. However, Asia and the Pacific is also a region where integrated policy responses have illustrated how Governments can accelerate the implementation of the 17 Goals, such as by strengthening data for development, harnessing the potential of technology and innovation and leveraging digital transformation.

84. Intergovernmental discussions in the region in the past year have highlighted commitments to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and existing momentum in key areas such as mobilizing financing for development, accelerating the inclusive energy transition, building resilience to disasters and addressing the demographic shift. ESCAP has continued to facilitate dialogue on issues critical to sustainable development in the region, endeavoured to provide integrated policy support to member States in addressing the interlinked challenges to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and, in doing so, strengthened partnerships with the United Nations development system, international organizations, academic institutions, private sector entities and civil society organizations in the region.

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