Remarks at the 75th Session of UN ESCAP

09:00 28 May 2019, Bangkok, Thailand

Thank you for you warm introduction.
Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific,
UN ESCAP Members and Associate Members,

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great honor and privilege to speak to you this morning at the 75th Session of the UN ESCAP.

As one of the UN’s most important regional bodies, ESCAP’s synergistic role in promoting integration in Asia and the Pacific is particularly important to promote
multilateral cooperations against expanding nationalism and isolationism.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The SDGs' vision for our shared future is to ensure that no one is left behind. I firmly believe that our common endeavor to achieve the SDGs can pave the path to equality as well as overcome expanding division. In order to meet this noble aspiration for equality; cooperation, innovation, and engagement by all stakeholders is absolutely essential.

And the most important ingredients to ensure higher equality are inclusion and empowerment, which represent the shared theme of this Session and the upcoming 2019 High-level Political Forum in July.
Four years since their adoption, the SDGs have made tangible progress. But progress is uneven. Conflict, inequality, and climate change around the world are hindering the SDGs implementation. As such, we need to move forward with a renewed sense of urgency with only 11 years left to go.

To achieve the SDGs by their 2030 target date, we need an “all hands on deck” to harness ownership, participation from all sectors of society.

Crucially, we also need increased political will and policy changes to scale-up public investment for people in fields such as health, education, and social protection.

In this connection, today I will briefly highlight three critical focus areas where we must redouble our collective efforts to boost inclusion and empowerment for equality.
First, education, along with decent work and income, can help boost empowerment and inclusion at all levels.

One way to help bridge the equality gaps in our societies is to refocus our attention on quality education. Governments need to do more to provide the enabling environments.

As the world has become more interconnected, an innovative call for transformational changes in how we learn, think, and interact with others has emerged.

All people have rights and civic responsibilities that come with being a member of our globalized world.

I am still proud to have selected Global Citizenship Education (GCED) as one of the three priority areas of my 2012 Global Education First Initiative.
Expanding GCED at the local and regional levels is increasingly essential to ensure that no one is left behind. Indeed, GCED promotes the knowledge, skills, and guiding values required to construct a more inclusive, sustainable, and peaceful world.

Never before has there been a greater need to cultivate understanding and tolerance; peace and reconciliation; and sustainable and inclusive futures. The rising threats of nationalism, xenophobia, climate change, and other challenges give urgency to this work.

In this regard, in 2017 I launched the Ban Ki-moon Centre for Global Citizens in Vienna to continue my work and help forge a brighter, more inclusive, and more empowering future for the next generation.
I greatly look forward to future collaboration between the Centre and ESCAP.

Second, policy makers must do more to build inclusive societies to expand equality. Investing in inclusive planning in our cities represents an important opportunity for our sustainable future.

According to UN projections, 68 percent of the global population will live in cities by the year 2050. This is part of an unparalleled global transition that is bringing in seismic challenges to our economies and relationships.

However, this rapid urbanization can offer us new opportunities to achieve sustainable development; to tackle inequality; and to combat climate change.

Sustainable urbanization can help lift residents out of poverty, enhance social inclusion, and expand equality. It
can drive innovation and opportunity. It can improve public health.

I also believe that a healthy atmospheric environment is a prerequisite to ensuring inclusiveness and equality in the Asia-Pacific region.

According to the WHO, air pollution is believed to be accountable for 7 million deaths per year globally. 92% of Asia and the Pacific’s population – about 4 billion people – are exposed to levels of air pollution.

Families in developing countries are more dependent on burning wood, coal and kerosene for cooking and heating; making them more exposed and vulnerable to air pollution.

Air pollution itself is a global and regional challenge. We share the same atmosphere and we must share the
responsibility to address air pollution including micro
dust. Namely, we are one respiratory community.

No country alone can fully tackle the root causes of air
pollution by itself. Thus our actions must transcend all
frontiers.

Air pollution is also closely linked to climate change. The
main driver of climate change is fossil fuel combustion
which is also a major contributor to air pollution.
Therefore, mitigating air pollution will offer a "win-win"
strategy for both climate and health simultaneously.

Recently, the chair’s statement of the OECD Ministerial
Council Meeting was adopted to encourage further
international cooperation on transboundary air pollution.

I welcome the OECD’s efforts and call upon all ESCAP
members to cooperate in adopting the draft resolution to
“strengthen regional cooperation to tackle air pollution challenges in Asia and the Pacific” during this session.

We need to elevate solidarity among all international stakeholders and immediately take necessary steps to combat air pollution to ensure sustainable and an inclusive development for all.

Third, empowering women and girls and promoting gender equality is essential to spur equality and achieve the SDGs. We must strengthen our efforts to remove the barriers of gender inequality at the local, national, regional, and international levels.

If we continue to hold back half of the world’s population; it’s simply impossible to build equal societies. Therefore, we must do more to bolster the inclusion and empowerment of all women everywhere.
We must remember that only through women's full and equal participation in all areas of public and private life can we holistically address the numerous global challenges we face today.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Asia and Pacific region represents the vanguard of global efforts to build a sustainable future. This region has limitless potential in terms of its economic, cultural, and innovative vibrancy.

However, to ascend to this potential, leaders must do more to close the gaps and widen equality through inclusion and empowerment for all.

We must remember that in our increasingly interconnected world, global challenges inherently require global solutions. And regional cooperation, capacity-
building, and technical assistance remains critical to such global efforts.

We can create the future we want, one that is anchored in inclusion, empowerment, and sustainability for all people and our planet.

I thank you for your attention. /END/