Subregional Perspectives on Building Back Better from Crises through Regional Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific

10:00-11:00 (GMT+7), 28 April 2021
Virtual Meeting

Concept Note

The 75th Commission session launched the subregional dialogue to facilitate the exchange of views and practices on the commission theme topic within and across ESCAP subregions. Under the theme of “Building back better from crises through regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific”, the subregional dialogue of the 77th Commission session will focus on sharing lessons learned from responses to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in each subregion as well as identifying potential cooperation areas across subregions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the Asia-Pacific subregions over different timescales and with varying severity. The Pacific subregion was largely spared by the pandemic, with very limited cases before their borders were closed. While East and North-East Asia was the first subregion hit by the COVID-19 outbreak, the situation has been largely stabilized. Apart from the Pacific, it is the subregion with the lowest number of cases. In contrast, South and South-West Asia has experienced the greatest burden in terms of both confirmed cases and related deaths. Despite recording its first confirmed cases later than other subregions, North and Central Asia trails South-East Asia in reported deaths from COVID-19.

In view of the unprecedented challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical to promote wider regional cooperation with the subregional organizations which are playing pivotal roles and have contributed to developing multilateral strategies for mobilizing resources and coordinating member States’ responses to the devastating socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. For example:

- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted the Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 in April 2020 and the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) in November 2020, which articulates ASEAN response through the different stages of recovery and identifies measures for recovery in line with sectoral and regional priorities.

- In the Pacific, Foreign Ministers of the Pacific Islands Forum endorsed the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 (PHP-C) to facilitate the delivery and deployment of medical equipment and personnel in April 2020, followed by the meeting of the Forum Economic Ministers in August 2020 which highlighted and agreed on measures for addressing, the substantial flow-on impacts of the restrictions on movement of people, trade and essential goods and services across the region.

- In North and Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Commission and the Economic Cooperation Organization formulated a set of practical guidelines on cross-border and transit traffic facilitation measures under conditions on COVID-19 for their member States. Concrete actions were developed to stabilize agri-food markets and ensure food security.

- As for East and North-East Asia where such comprehensive intergovernmental mechanism is not placed yet, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) together with ESCAP East and North-East Asia Office has supported dialogues among its member States on responses to COVID-19, e.g., organizing a webinar to share the best practices and supporting the 13th Tripartite Health Ministers’ Meeting.

- In South Asia, a COVID-19 Emergency Fund was established within the SAARC framework in March 2020 with voluntary contributions of USD 21.8 million. Member States of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-
Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) also expressed their commitment to strengthen cooperation to combat the impact of COVID-19 and to work together to enhance the resilience across the subregion.

Considering new strategy and investment required for recovering from unprecedented socio-economic disruptions, the UN and various multilateral organizations advocated ideas and policies to build back better, utilizing the recovery for transformation towards equitable, resilient and greener societies. In this connection, ESCAP has promoted policies and regional cooperation in the four priority areas, i.e., economic recovery; strengthening supply chains and connectivity; protecting people; and protecting and restoring ecosystems, as presented in the theme study report. The subregional organizations are undertaking and actively promoting subregional response and recovery initiatives in these priority areas and will, no doubt, continue to facilitate dialogues among their respective member States on recovery programmes and multilateral support and refine subregional priorities and actions for building back better.

Based on the first-hand experience on COVID-19 responses, this dialogue will, thus, exchange perspectives of subregional organizations on subregional approaches and coordination for building back better. Furthermore, the dialogue could identify specific areas of cooperation among the subregional organizations in collaboration with ESCAP and the broader United Nations system.

**Provisional Programme**

I. Opening Remarks by the Executive Secretary of ESCAP (5 minutes)

II. Panel Discussion (40 minutes)

*Secretary-Generals or Heads of the subregional organisations will share their perspectives on building back better and propose key areas for possible cooperation among the subregional organizations in collaboration with ESCAP. Each speaker will have 4-5 minutes.*

Panellists:

1. H.E. Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary-General, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS)
2. H.E. Dato Lim Jock Hoi, Secretary-General, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat
3. H.E. Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon, Secretary-General, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)
4. H.E. Mr. Vladimir Norov, Secretary-General, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)
5. H.E. Mr. Mikhail Myasnikovich, Chairman of the Board, Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC)
6. H. E. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell, Secretary-General, Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Secretariat
7. H.E. Dr. Hadi Soleimanpour, Secretary-General, Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)
8. Mr. Andrey Smorodin, Director, Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI) Secretariat

III. Interventions from member States (13 minutes)

IV. Closing Remarks by the Executive Secretary of ESCAP (2 minutes)