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Committee on Social Development**Seventh session**

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Strategies for strengthening regional cooperation on social protection in Asia and the Pacific**Regional actions to support the implementation of the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

The Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific was endorsed by the Committee on Social Development at its sixth session, held on 20 and 21 October 2020, and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) affirmed its importance in its resolutions 77/1 and 78/1. With its overall purpose being to extend social protection to all, the Action Plan serves as a shared vision, strategy and platform for members and associate members of ESCAP to promote partnerships, peer learning and the sharing of good practices.

At the national level, Governments are called upon, in the framework of the Action Plan, to establish an intermediate target for social protection coverage by 2025 and to then measure progress towards achieving universal coverage by 2030. In order to achieve this objective, 12 measures to be taken at the national level have been laid out.

At the regional level, the ESCAP secretariat should, in the framework of the Action Plan, develop a regional platform to facilitate peer learning and the sharing of good practices. It should also consolidate national experiences on the implementation of the Action Plan into periodic progress reports and provide technical advice and capacity-building upon request.

The present document contains information on measures that have already been taken or that are being taken at the regional level to support the accelerated implementation of the Action Plan. In this regard, the Committee is invited to take note of the measures contained in the present document, to share information on the actions taken at the national level in line with the Action Plan and its 12 measures and to propose how action could be further accelerated at the national level.

* ESCAP/CSD/2022/L.1.

I. Introduction

1. Social protection is a core national strategy to prevent poverty and vulnerability. By ensuring an adequate standard of living, it is also a powerful tool for reducing inequalities and building the resilience of all people, throughout their lifetimes, against shocks and crises. By fostering shared prosperity, social protection can also increase social cohesion and boost economic growth.

2. Despite the significant potential of social protection to transform societies, less than half of the population of Asia and the Pacific is covered by any form of social protection. Many States in the region spend less than 2 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on social protection. This stands in sharp contrast to the global average of 12.9 per cent of GDP.

3. Recognizing the importance of social protection as both a fundamental right and an effective mechanism for promoting sustainable development, the Committee on Social Development endorsed the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific¹ at its sixth session, held on 20 and 21 October 2020. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) affirmed the importance of the Action Plan in its resolutions 77/1 and 78/1.

4. It is expected that the Action Plan, the first of its kind on social protection for Asia and the Pacific, will provide the impetus that States need to build an Asia-Pacific region that is more inclusive, prosperous and resilient and that leaves no one behind. For this purpose, the Action Plan contains 3 regional actions and 12 national actions.

II. Progress on regional actions to support the implementation of the Action Plan

5. At the regional level, the Action Plan serves as a shared vision, strategy and platform for ESCAP members and associate members to accelerate action, to promote partnerships, peer learning and the sharing of good practices and to identify capacity-building and technical assistance needs.

6. In order to review and facilitate progress towards the realization of the Action Plan, the ESCAP secretariat, in collaboration with relevant United Nations agencies, should take the following actions:²

(a) Consolidate national experiences on the implementation of the Action Plan into periodic progress reports;

(b) Develop a regional platform for members and associate members to facilitate peer learning and the sharing of good practices;

(c) Provide technical advice and capacity-building support to all members and associate members at the regional, subregional and national levels, upon their request.

7. To support members and associate members in implementing the Action Plan and to respond to the three recommendations above, the secretariat has taken the measures summarized below.

¹ ESCAP/CSD/2020/3, annex III.

² Ibid., para. 2.

A. Development of a regional platform on social protection

8. The secretariat has developed an online one-stop-shop platform on social protection. The platform hosts intergovernmental information, knowledge and information products, capacity-building resources, advocacy material and the ESCAP Social Protection Simulator. While the platform will be regularly updated with new materials and products, the current contents include the following:

(a) The user-friendly ESCAP Social Protection Simulator estimates the impact of introducing a variety of social protection schemes on poverty, inequality and household consumption and computes the relative cost of simulated programmes. The user is provided with different options for expanding the fiscal space for social protection and can customize a particular scheme to a country by setting parameters related to eligibility criteria, coverage levels and benefit amounts. The Simulator also allows users to combine different schemes and build a customized social protection package. In addition to simulating the impact in one country, users will also be able to compare social protection schemes of their choice within and across different countries. The results are easily interpreted through clear visuals and can, for example, be obtained for rural and urban populations, for different household configurations and by income deciles;

(b) A wide range of research and flagship reports, such as the biennial *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* series, the annual ESCAP theme studies and other publications that highlight social protection and related key social development issues in the region. Some of the reports also contain policy recommendations for realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The platform also provides access to policy papers on topics such as universality, labour-market informality and active labour market policies;

(c) Advocacy materials, including the social protection primer series, which is a comprehensive set of seven easy-to-digest policy guides developed to support policymakers and practitioners. The primers cover issues such as the sustainable financing of social protection, gender-sensitive schemes and how to develop more inclusive social protection systems. The primers are accompanied by seven videos to build capacity and awareness on social protection. A five-hour learning course is being developed that is focused on the importance of having life cycle schemes in place for children, working-age people and older persons and on how these schemes can be designed and financed in an effective and sustainable way;

(d) A member's corner with various kinds of information, including on the ESCAP-established regional network of National Government Social Protection Focal Points designated to coordinate technical inputs and support the implementation of the Action Plan. It will also consolidate information on national experiences and good practices. To support members and associate members in their efforts to extend the reach of their social protection coverage and build more inclusive and comprehensive social protection systems, the platform supports knowledge-sharing and regional cooperation.

B. Consolidation of national experiences

9. The secretariat is collaborating with four member States (Cambodia, Maldives, Mongolia and the Philippines) to take stock of their social protection systems, to assess how they fare in the regional context and to estimate what the impact would be of extending social protection benefits to children, older persons and persons with disabilities. This work will help to identify the

opportunities and challenges that may exist in extending social protection coverage in line with the recommendations in the Action Plan.

10. The secretariat has also initiated a comprehensive baseline survey involving all members and associate members to create a benchmark of where they stand in terms of their implementation of the Action Plan. This baseline survey will be followed-up by a more in-depth survey in late 2023 and early 2024. The results of these two surveys will be consolidated into a comprehensive report and be submitted to the Committee at its eighth session, to be held in 2024.

C. Provision of technical advice and capacity-building

11. To support members and associate members in building their capacity on social protection, the secretariat has developed a step-by-step guide on how to design and implement inclusive and sustainable social protection systems. The guide contains milestones closely linked to all the national recommendations in the Action Plan. The secretariat has also developed a guide to explain the core concepts of universal social protection coverage, what such coverage entails and how countries can achieve it.

12. Five interlinked one-hour online learning modules are under development to support members and associate members to better understand the core concepts of social protection. The purpose of this self-paced learning course is to deepen understanding of how to capitalize on social protection as a key policy instrument to achieve inclusive and sustainable development. It answers questions such as: What are the core objectives of social protection and why is it critical for families and societies? What are the main barriers to achieving universal social protection? What are the key options for extending social protection and how do they work? What are poverty-targeted measures and are they an effective and fair strategy? What should policymakers consider when designing and implementing a social protection system? The first learning module covers the design and implementation of an inclusive and sustainable social protection system. The second to fourth modules cover ways to build different schemes that allow all people to benefit from coverage and that incorporate life-course-specific contingencies for children, for men and women of working age and for older persons. The fifth module addresses ways of assessing the impact and cost of extending social protection by using the ESCAP Social Protection Simulator.

13. Results from the ESCAP Social Protection Simulator have been used to build understanding and raise awareness among member States, United Nations country teams and Resident Coordinator Offices. The secretariat has delivered presentations to broaden understanding of the core concepts of the Action Plan and the different components of the regional platform.

III. National actions to implement the Action Plan

14. Social protection systems are necessary for shielding people's incomes and well-being and for retaining social development gains. The ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has highlighted that well-designed, well-implemented and well-coordinated social protection systems have an important role to play in protecting and promoting resilience and well-being.

15. During the past decade, Governments in Asia and the Pacific have made noticeable efforts to expand social protection. Still, only a handful of countries in the region have relatively comprehensive systems with broad coverage and adequate benefit levels.

16. As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Governments have been mobilizing significant short-term relief measures, many of which have the potential to contribute to strengthening social protection systems in the long term. Well-resourced social protection systems built over time are far better equipped to respond to the unexpected and to shield the most vulnerable.

17. Social protection has also been identified as an enabler for implementing the 2030 Agenda. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and deliver on the commitments contained therein, most Governments in the region need to step up their efforts to build sustainable and reliable social protection systems. The Action Plan and its national actions will be helpful to Governments in making their social protection agenda more inclusive.

18. At the national level, in the Action Plan Governments are called upon to establish an intermediate target for social protection coverage by 2025 and to then measure progress towards achieving universal coverage by 2030. In order to achieve this objective, 12 measures to be taken at national level are set out in the Action Plan.

19. Through the consolidation of national experiences, the secretariat will help to gauge the readiness of States in Asia and the Pacific to implement these national actions towards more inclusive and comprehensive social protection systems. In this regard, the secretariat thanks those members and associate members that have completed the rapid baseline survey designed to take stock of overarching progress and challenges in implementing the actions outlined in the Action Plan³ and encourages those that have not yet completed it to do so at their earliest convenience.

IV. Issues for consideration by the Committee

20. The Committee may wish to share experiences on actions taken at the national level to extend social protection coverage with a view to implementing the Action Plan. The Committee is also invited to take note of the measures taken by the secretariat to support the implementation of the Action Plan and to provide guidance on the future work of the secretariat on social protection.

³ Available at <https://forms.office.com/r/2GF602qFAa>.