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Review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific**Subregional cooperation for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

The present document serves to elaborate on the importance of cooperation within and across subregions for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific, and contains an analysis of key challenges and opportunities in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the five subregions of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and priority areas for accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda in each subregion.

The Commission may wish to review the document and provide guidance on the future work of the secretariat.

I. Introduction

1. With just 10 years left to achieve the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals and realize the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, there is an urgent need to accelerate action and develop solutions to address some of the region's and the world's most pressing challenges. Through the decade of action for the Goals and delivery for sustainable development, launched at the Sustainable Development Goals Summit in September 2019, Member States committed to accelerate common efforts to achieve the Goals by 2030.

2. Given the transboundary and shared nature of many of the challenges facing countries in Asia and the Pacific, such as climate change, disasters and widening inequalities, regional cooperation will be indispensable to support accelerated action. At the same time, the region's vast diversity in levels of socioeconomic development, challenges, opportunities and priorities, in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals, calls for a subregional approach.

* ESCAP/76/L.1/Rev.1.

3. The present document serves to elaborate on the importance of cooperation within and across subregions for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific, and contains an analysis of key challenges and opportunities in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the five subregions of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and priority areas for accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda in each subregion.

II. Leveraging subregional cooperation for accelerated action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals

A. East and North-East Asia

1. Context

4. The East and North-East Asia subregion accounts for one-quarter of the global population. It is diverse in political systems, economic paths and development levels, natural resources endowments, religions, and languages. Although the majority of the countries are advanced in many of the socioeconomic indicators such as poverty reduction, maternal health, and education, there are still significant challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the subregion.

5. The subregion is home to key players in global economic and political affairs, who account for one quarter of global trade, and plays a major role in development cooperation, owing to its ability to contribute financial and technological resources and the similarity between its development experiences and those of recipient countries. However, the subregion is responsible for a considerable proportion of environmental externalities. For example, it emits one third of global greenhouse gases. In addition, the subregion is the global front runner in population ageing, which is of imminent concern for the sustainability of the economy and society. Moreover, the subregion is characterized by a limited number of initiatives for regional integration and weak institutionalized regionalism; thus, despite a variety of multilateral programmes and bodies, there is no single subregion-specific entity covering all the countries in the subregion.

6. While there are interests and initiatives to promote cooperation among subsets of countries in the subregion (for instance, trilateral cooperation among China, Japan and the Republic of Korea), the continuity of these efforts is significantly influenced by domestic political climates. In such contexts, ESCAP, as a politically neutral body, can play a catalytic role in facilitating dialogue, policy learning and coordination, and cooperation on issues pertinent to the subregion.

2. Challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

7. Given the context above, the subregion faces a distinct set of challenges with regard to regional cooperation in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals as compared to other subregions.

Lack of engagement in multilateral cooperation mechanisms

8. There is no high-level multilateral mechanism in place that can provide overall guidance and direction for subregional cooperation despite the significant potential benefits. While the majority of its members and associate members belong to the high or upper-middle income category, the subregion faces many challenges in pursuing sustainable development. Notable examples

include air quality, disaster risk reduction, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and natural resource management. Owing to their transboundary nature, many of these challenges are more effectively addressed through coordination and collaboration among neighbouring countries.

Existing or increasing gaps in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

9. All the countries in the subregion are ahead of other subregions in achieving many of the Goals, such as poverty reduction, access to basic services and school enrolment, although the degree of achievement varies from country to country. However, behind such achievements, the subregion is relying on resource-intensive, environmentally degrading economic growth. According to an ESCAP assessment of current progress towards the attainment of the Goals, the subregion is regressing on Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), Goal 13 (Climate action) and Goal 15 (Life on land). This regression reflects the challenges in environment-related performance on such targets and indicators as air quality measured by fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) concentration (target 11.6), road traffic (target 11.2), sustainable use of natural resources (target 12.2), management of chemical waste (target 12.4) and protection of forests and ocean health (indicators 15.1.1 and 14.2.1). For instance, the total volume of material footprint (targets 8.4 and 12.2) in the subregion more than doubled since 2000, a pace that exceeds even the fast-growing material footprint in the ESCAP region as a whole.¹

Increasing environmental challenges and disaster risks

10. The subregion has been experiencing increasing environmental risks emanating from the failure of environmental management to respond to the path and speed of economic development. Transboundary air pollution has been one of the most serious environmental challenges in the subregion, owing to the heavy consumption of fossil fuels; insufficient application of abatement technology; lack of effective policy enforcement; and geographical proximity among the countries. The degradation of the marine environment and depletion of marine resources in ecosystems in transboundary areas that are important habitats for endangered species also depict the threats to the ecosystem and well-being of the population in the subregion. Furthermore, the subregion is vulnerable to natural disasters, aggravated by the increasing intensification of climate-related disasters. Between 2000 and 2016, the subregion sustained \$547 billion in economic damage, or over 70 per cent of the total economic damage in Asia and the Pacific, affecting almost 1.7 billion people.

Insufficient harnessing of potential complementarities and lack of cross-border infrastructure

11. Despite the active pursuit of export-led economic growth in North-East Asia, intraregional trade has not reached its full potential to go beyond key trade players and involve emerging markets in the subregion. The subregion is also confronted with political obstacles, persistent segmentation of intraregional transport connectivity and high intraregional trade costs. The opportunities and synergies in trade and transport facilitation have not been jointly promoted to amplify the benefits of seamless subregional connectivity. For instance, cross-border institutional coordination and cross-border information exchange need to be fully considered in an integrated manner across government units at the national level and in a subregional context. In addition to enhancing trade ties, the development of cross-border infrastructure (such as transport and energy

¹ *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2019* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.9).

infrastructure) needs to be promoted as a top priority. The potential for energy trade and the prospects for renewable energy are particularly high in the subregion where the world's major consumers and producers of energy are co-located.

Lack of joint efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the East and North-East Asia subregion's contributions to the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

12. The subregion enjoys advanced economic development and is home to major players in development cooperation. Thus, the subregion is uniquely positioned to play an active role in facilitating the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, although current development assistance efforts by individual Governments are rarely coordinated or harmonized. This represents a missed opportunity for more effective and impactful development cooperation for the benefit of developing partners. The subregion is also home to leaders in science, technology and innovation, with proven capacity and interest in the dissemination of their knowledge and experiences to other developing countries.

3. Priorities for accelerated action

13. In view of the challenges described above, priority areas of subregional cooperation for sustainable development include sustainable connectivity, environmental sustainability and leveraging innovation for inclusive and resilient societies.

Facilitating subregional connectivity in trade, transport, energy, and information and communications technology

14. Sustainable connectivity requires policy coherence among connectivity initiatives, such as pursuing an integrated approach to trade and transport facilitation. Thus, the secretariat supports the member States by facilitating policy dialogues among them on connectivity in trade, transport, energy and communications technology through regional and subregional platforms. These include, among others, support for the implementation of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement, the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific, the implementation of the Intergovernmental Agreement on International Road Transport along the Asian Highway Network (among China, Mongolia and the Russian Federation), and the establishment of the North-East Asia Regional Power Interconnection and Cooperation Forum.

Ensuring environmental sustainability

15. While the member States in the subregion are addressing the pressing environmental challenges at the country level, regional and subregional cooperation could be more effective in addressing common environmental challenges, particularly by coordinating the actions of stakeholders and Governments. In this context, the secretariat supports the strengthening of subregional platforms for environmental sustainability, including the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation and its North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership. The Partnership led to the Commission's adoption of resolution 75/4 on strengthening regional cooperation to tackle air pollution challenges in Asia and the Pacific at its seventy-fifth session, held in 2019. The resolution further inspired the adoption of General Assembly resolution 74/212, in which 7 September was designated the International Day of Clean Air for blue skies.

Fostering science, technology and innovation, and building resilience to natural disasters

16. The combined challenge of population ageing and disaster risks increases the socioeconomic and environmental vulnerability of the subregion. Advances in science, technology and innovation can potentially help in addressing these challenges. Knowledge-sharing can maximize the benefits of such opportunities in the subregion, as well as for the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. Thus, the secretariat's support is focused on fostering innovative solutions for sustainable development, promoting gender equality and inclusion in the technology industry, developing and implementing science, technology and innovation policies for sustainable development, and promoting the exchange of knowledge and innovations for sustainable development. Ongoing initiatives include the Citypreneurs programme which supports young start-ups; the knowledge platform on science, technology and innovation policies for sustainable development of the Asia-Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade; and enhanced monitoring of droughts in Mongolia as a showcase for the wider application of science, technology and innovation.

Cross-cutting means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

17. In addition to addressing the subregional priorities, the secretariat also promotes joint efforts by Governments and stakeholders in the subregion to implement the 2030 Agenda and dialogue to support other countries in that implementation through development cooperation. To that end, the secretariat facilitates dialogue among various stakeholders including Government, academia and civil society in various forums.

B. North and Central Asia

1. Context

18. The North and Central Asia subregion consists of nine countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. All these countries have economies in transition, and seven are landlocked. The unique location of North and Central Asia at the crossroads between Asia and Europe provides good opportunities to strengthen subregional cooperation, promoted by both ESCAP and the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE). Both regional commissions have been working closely within the framework of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia which was launched to facilitate economic cooperation in the region and the integration of the countries into the world economy. Thematic working groups were formed to address priority issues that could benefit from strengthened regional cooperation, such as water, energy and environment, sustainable transport, transit and connectivity, trade, innovation and technology for sustainable development, and statistics, as well as gender and the Sustainable Development Goals.

19. Among the countries of North and Central Asia, subregional cooperation was initiated mainly in the areas of economic integration, trade and infrastructure connectivity. The development of regional cooperation in these targeted areas expands the scope of cooperation to countries in other regions as well. Several regional organizations with initiatives in these areas of interest include the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Economic Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Commission, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Programme. These regional organizations not only bolster cooperation among North and Central

Asian countries but also promote connectivity between the subregion and countries from South and South-West Asia, South-East Asia, and East and North-East Asia. The secretariat continues to foster partnerships with these regional organizations and collaborate through joint actions and projects in specific areas of interest, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

2. Challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

20. The challenges for North and Central Asia are (a) to ensure readiness and build capacity within the subregion to incorporate digital technology as an integral part of bolstering sustainable economic growth and connectivity and (b) to mainstream social and environmental aspects into economic transformation policies within the subregion. As connectivity and economic transformation remain key aspects of national and regional development strategies for North and Central Asia, policies and initiatives in these areas need to integrate a holistic approach to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

21. Owing to their landlockedness, many North and Central Asian countries have limited modes of connectivity to other world markets. These geographical factors and the ensuing high costs of trade and transit erode the competitive edge and hinder the economic integration of countries in the subregion. Improved connectivity through strengthened trade, transport and digital infrastructures remains an extremely important objective that could dramatically improve prospects for economic development and integration in the subregion. Current transport connectivity initiatives are focused on cross-border road and rail infrastructure and increasing efforts to utilize technology to streamline operations and modernize maintenance. Trade connectivity projects, including the promotion of paperless trade, are aimed at reducing non-tariff barriers. Given the importance of connectivity and its implications for economic development, the challenge lies in ensuring readiness and building capacity within the subregion to incorporate digital technology as an integral part of bolstering connectivity.

22. Economic growth for countries in North and Central Asia has been driven mainly by the expansion of extractive industries and spurred on by high natural resource prices. Weak linkages with the rest of the economy and limited positive spillovers highlight the need to move beyond a resource-dependent economy. The dependence on natural resources also limits national capacities to promote sustained and inclusive economies and to ensure environmental resilience. Structural economic transformation was identified in the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014–2024 as a priority area that could be beneficial for the subregion’s ability to fully utilize the potential of its productive capacities through increased value addition and economic diversification. Despite evidence of structural transformation unfolding in the subregion, there is a possibility that countries in North and Central Asia could go through premature deindustrialization before realizing their full productive capacities. The greatest challenge is to mainstream social and environmental aspects into economic transformation in an integrated manner.

3. Priorities for accelerated action

23. Priorities for accelerated action in North and Central Asia include (a) to enhance sustainable connectivity through digital technology, (b) to mainstream social and environmental aspects into economic transformation and (c) to strengthen regional cooperation and integration.

24. To enhance sustainable connectivity through digital technology, the ESCAP Subregional Office for North and Central Asia, in cooperation with relevant substantive divisions, will facilitate subregional dialogues on utilizing new technologies and digital transformation for more efficient transport and trade systems. This work is expected to contribute to increased readiness and national capacities to leverage new technologies and digital transformation for the facilitation of trade and transport in the subregion. The demand for connectivity in North and Central Asia has been spurred on by global and regional interest in the subregion in recent years and compounded by the need to increasingly link the subregion with global supply chains.

25. Another priority for accelerated action in North and Central Asia is to mainstream social and environmental aspects into economic transformation. Recognizing the need for a holistic approach to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the ESCAP Subregional Office for North and Central Asia, in cooperation with relevant substantive divisions, will conduct analytical studies on key sectorial drivers that could bridge the economic and environmental gaps as well as accelerate economic development to support national economic transformation efforts. This work is expected to result in an enhanced understanding of policy options for economic transformation in the subregion while taking into account social and environmental aspects, in line with the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals and the priorities of the Vienna Programme of Action. This will build on the recognition expressed by the Economic Forum of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia that the acceleration of structural economic transformation was a fundamental condition for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and for increasing shared prosperity.²

26. Strengthening regional cooperation and integration in North and Central Asia constitutes an important area for accelerated action. Acknowledging the importance of partnerships in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the secretariat will continue to facilitate knowledge-sharing and dialogues among countries in North and Central Asia through such platforms as the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia and the North and Central Asia Multi-stakeholder Forum on Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, in close collaboration with other United Nations entities, the private sector and civil society. Specifically, ESCAP will continue to assist in the follow-up and review of the progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in North and Central Asia with a view to improving knowledge-sharing and cooperation among member States for the preparation of their voluntary national reviews. The secretariat will also work closely with member States in the subregion to strengthen their ownership of the Special Programme as called for during the thirteenth session of the Governing Council.³

² ESCAP/75/24.

³ Ibid.

C. Pacific

1. Context

27. The Pacific subregion covers 21 Pacific island countries and territories including Australia and New Zealand,⁴ with a combined population of 11.6 million dispersed over a vast ocean space. A subgroup made up of 12 fully independent island countries, known as Pacific small islands developing States, is the focus of the secretariat's work. In the political declaration of the high-level meeting to review progress made in addressing the priorities of small island developing States through the implementation of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway, the international community reaffirmed that small island developing States remained a special case on account of their geographical remoteness, the small scale of their economies, high costs, and the adverse effects of climate change and natural disasters. The international community concluded that sustained high levels of economic growth in small islands developing States had not been achieved, owing in part to their vulnerabilities to the ongoing negative impacts of environmental challenges and external economic and financial shocks.⁵ In 2020 and 2021, the secretariat will support the priorities of small island developing States laid out in the political declaration.

2. Challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

Increasing vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters

28. The prosperity and livelihoods of Pacific communities are increasingly at risk owing to the dual threat of climate change and natural disasters. Of major concern are sea level rise, ocean acidification and the increasing severity of natural disasters which will impact the well-being and livelihoods of thousands of coastal communities as well as biodiversity and culture in the subregion. The latest assessment of progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the Pacific reveals that economic and infrastructure losses as well as loss of human life resulting from climate-related natural disasters are the highest priorities for course correction. The assessment further reveals that the Pacific subregion experiences annual losses of \$1 billion; countries such as Palau, Tonga and Vanuatu are in the extreme range of population and economies at risk. A person living in the Pacific is three to five times more at risk than a person living in South-East Asia or South Asia.⁶

Geographical remoteness, smallness of scale and high costs

29. The geographical dispersion of islands and communities underpins a major operational challenge to sustainable development in the Pacific. Fiji and Papua New Guinea, which are the best-connected countries in the subregion, have connectivity scores that are still far below the regional average, and international transport costs also remain high for the subregion, at 10 per cent or

⁴ Pacific States members of ESCAP include the following: Fiji; Kiribati; Marshall Islands; Micronesia (Federated States of); Nauru; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Samoa; Solomon Islands; Tonga; Tuvalu; and Vanuatu. Pacific associate members include the following: American Samoa; Cook Islands; French Polynesia; Guam; New Caledonia; Niue; and Northern Mariana Islands.

⁵ General Assembly resolution 74/3.

⁶ *The Disaster Riskscape across Asia-Pacific: Pathways for Resilience, Inclusion and Empowerment – Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2019* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.12).

more of import value. In addition, in light of the growing contribution of the shipping sector to global emissions, it is imperative that initiatives for enhanced maritime connectivity not come at the expense of the health of the marine ecosystem and the security of people.

30. While there is potential to improve trade flows in the Pacific, binding constraints remain for these countries, including their narrow production bases, smallness of scale and remoteness from major markets. Notably, the inclusion and monitoring of trade's contributions to sustainable development in regional trade agreements is not a common or comprehensive practice. There are also concerns related to poverty, exclusion, non-communicable diseases and high dependence on imported fossil fuels. Tourism is regarded as a growth industry, with tourism spending in the Pacific island countries and territories estimated at \$3.35 billion in 2017; however, there are no data to assess the level of sustainability. Remittances are a significant contributor to the gross domestic product; however, their transition costs are as high as 12 per cent in the Pacific, compared to the 3 per cent called for in Sustainable Development Goal target 10.C.

31. Information and communications technology (ICT) is critical for the Pacific to overcome the challenges of geographical remoteness and isolation. While progress has been made in developing the ICT infrastructure, quality of coverage and affordability remain major challenges. In many countries, a high proportion (9–10 per cent) of gross national income is spent on broadband services. There are also concerns related to cybersecurity and the need to better use technologies to address transnational crime, biosecurity risks and the threats to public health posed by communicable diseases.

Increasing levels of hardship and risk of exclusion

32. The overall level of extreme poverty in Pacific small islands developing States has fallen; however, the elderly, women and people living with disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable to poverty and are more likely to suffer hardship. One in every four Pacific islanders live below their national poverty lines, and there are significant gaps in social protection. Unemployment is a major concern, especially among women and young people, with youth unemployment at 23 per cent. Gender equality remains an issue in the Pacific, which has the lowest rates of women's participation in parliament and some of the highest rates of violence against women globally. An estimated 17 per cent of people in the Pacific are living with some form of disability. While the positive contribution of culture to sustainable development is rightfully recognized in the 2030 Agenda and the Samoa Pathway, the cultural aspects of violence against women and of the exclusionary norms and practices persisting in societies must also be addressed.⁷

Challenges of monitoring

33. Monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Samoa Pathway remains a significant challenge for the Pacific. Only one third of the 232 indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals have sufficient data for progress assessment and most of the targets and indicators of particular interest to the Pacific cannot be measured.

⁷ See A/73/382, annex, annex I.

3. Priorities for accelerated action

34. The priorities of the Pacific subregion are well established in the Pacific Road Map for Sustainable Development, which integrates the Samoa Pathway and the Framework for Pacific Regionalism with the 2030 Agenda. These priorities have been updated through the midterm review of the Samoa Pathway which identified actions for acceleration in the remaining four years. The contributions of the secretariat to accelerating action on these priorities are highlighted below.

Climate change and disaster risk reduction

35. Building on its long-standing work on disaster risk reduction and the multi-agency work related to climate change migration and human security in the subregion, the secretariat's actions will focus on supporting countries to manage the dual risks of climate change and disaster including by supporting the following: (a) the paradigm shift towards low-emission and climate-resilient development pathways; (b) the development and implementation of comprehensive subregional and national frameworks for financing for development, especially climate finance, and making better use of sustainable finance and investment; (c) subregional modalities including the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific: An Integrated Approach to Address Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management, which serves to address the impacts of climate change and the links between displacement and disasters; and (d) multi-stakeholder cooperation and the enhancement of institutional capacities for disaster risk management including the capacities to adopt innovative technologies, including ICT, in disaster risk reduction efforts.

Sustainable management and use of the ocean

36. Healthy and resilient oceans are intrinsically linked to the sustainable development of small islands developing States. Actions the secretariat will support include the following: (a) the development of comprehensive frameworks and strategic pathways for promoting sustainable blue economies, especially through the adoption of inclusive circular economy approaches to address the growing issue of marine plastic pollution; (b) regional and subregional cooperation and multi-stakeholder dialogues in the planning, implementation, and follow-up and review of the implementation of global and regional frameworks, norms and standards relevant to the sustainable use of ocean resources; and (c) strengthening the subregional and national data ecosystem to produce harmonized and integrated ocean data and use them for comprehensive policy planning, implementation and monitoring.

Regional integration and connectivity

37. Geographical remoteness and isolation constrain the potential of the Pacific small island developing States to take advantage of growth opportunities and improve the well-being of their communities. To accelerate progress, the secretariat will focus on the following actions: (a) assisting the Pacific small islands developing States in developing viable transition strategies for graduation from the category of least developed countries, including by facilitating the regional and subregional exchange of experience in managing transitions and graduation; (b) strengthening the objectives of inclusivity, affordability and sustainability in the institutional and regulatory environment for macroeconomic policies and development financing, trade arrangements and investment, maritime transport, ICT connectivity and innovation, and energy policies; and (c) expanding the reach of the ICT-based training, expertise and tools made available by ESCAP, including its regional institutions.

Social inclusion

38. Highlighted in the Samoa Pathway and in national development strategies of the Pacific small island developing States is the vision for social inclusion and equality of opportunities. In realizing this vision and accelerating progress, ESCAP will work with Pacific countries and subregional organizations, partners and the other United Nations agencies to accomplish the following: (a) implement and monitor the relevant international norms and standards in the area of social inclusion such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, the Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration; (b) develop and implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for the poor and marginalized; and (c) promote gender equality and women’s economic empowerment and the participation of people with disabilities.

Data and policy coherence

39. The multiple global agendas and regional and subregional frameworks present unprecedented demands for authoritative data and statistics and genuine partnerships for transformative actions. To meet these increasing demands, the secretariat will focus its actions in the Pacific on the following: (a) strengthening national and subregional statistical systems and monitoring frameworks to produce high-quality and disaggregated data, including dedicated support for adopting tools to ensure policy coherence by integrating statistical work into national planning and policymaking; and (b) facilitating peer learning and reporting on the 2030 Agenda and the Samoa Pathway through voluntary national reviews, the Pacific Road Map for Sustainable Development, and other sustainable development forums including a forum for the Pacific subregion and the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development.

D. South-East Asia

1. Context

40. In South-East Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a successful and inspiring model of regional development cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. Since its inception in 1967, ASEAN has grown stronger through a deeper integration in political, economic and sociocultural spheres. Furthermore, the spirit of development cooperation is deeply rooted in ASEAN.

41. ASEAN has also grown into the sixth largest economy in the world with the potential to become the fourth largest by 2030 according to some projections. In accordance with the commitment of ASEAN towards further economic integration, economic and social challenges need to be overcome to ensure economic growth is inclusive and sustainable across the subregion.

42. Subregional cooperation for achieving sustainable development provides useful insights for reorienting modalities of partnerships across regional organizations and institutional frameworks. To make subregional cooperation more cohesive, collaborative and coherent, ASEAN member countries should be encouraged to utilize international and regional policy forums such as ESCAP to share best practices and lessons learned, especially with regard to translating the practical actions contained in the *Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: A Framework for Action* and the forthcoming Plan of Action to

Implement the Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Partnership between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the United Nations (2021–2025) into concrete outcomes, as well as fostering partnerships for sustainable development.

2. Challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

43. The *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2019* included a mixed review of South-East Asian progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, while South-East Asia leads other subregions on Goal 4 (Quality education), Goal 7 (Affordable and clean energy) and Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), many targets under these Goals will not be achieved, notably on renewable energy (target 7.2). Subregional progress on Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and Goal 13 (Climate action) is lacking. Several social and environmental indicators require immediate action to reverse negative trends, including the trend of shrinking above-ground forest biomass (target 15.2).

44. As achieving the Goals involves several players in various sectors, ESCAP can use its position as a regional commission to facilitate and improve coordination in addressing cross-sectoral and cross-pillar issues among ASEAN member countries and beyond by organizing intergovernmental meetings and engaging in regional cooperation.

45. A strengthened partnership with ASEAN for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda warrants further attention, as it is an important aspect of helping member countries to meet the aspiration of becoming resilient societies.

46. Strengthened cooperation with ASEAN in the form of increased engagement with its secretariat and relevant sectoral bodies and committees, as well as with their dialogue and external partners, will help to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Priorities for accelerated action

Contribution of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to a decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals

47. ASEAN countries need to accelerate action across the Sustainable Development Goals. While ASEAN has been doing well in the areas of education and poverty reduction, it is doing less well and even regressing in areas such as Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth), Goal 13 (Climate action) and Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). The United Nations and ASEAN have clearly identified the complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the 2030 Agenda. Poverty eradication, augmented connectivity, better management of natural resources, sustainable consumption and production, and resilience-building provide a platform for scaling up collaboration. The above-mentioned framework, formulated under the leadership of Thailand and supported by ESCAP and United Nations entities, serves to implement joint work in these critical areas, including through the newly established ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue and the ASEAN Resources Panel. The ASEAN Resources Panel, one of the flagship initiatives of the framework, is being set up to accomplish the following: (a) provide independent, coherent, authoritative and policy-relevant scientific and evidence-based assessments on the sustainable use of natural resources in the ASEAN region, and (b) contribute to advancing national action and regional cooperation on decoupling economic growth from environmental

degradation, thereby contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The ESCAP and ASEAN secretariats jointly serve as the Panel's secretariat.

Building resilience to climate-related disasters

48. The ASEAN region is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters which are becoming more intense, frequent, unpredictable and costly. Building resilience to a changing climate and recurring natural disasters and alleviating the burden of disasters on poor people and communities are a priority for ensuring that the hard-won development gains of ASEAN are not reversed. The work of the United Nations is guided by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations-United Nations Joint Strategic Plan of Action on Disaster Management. The partnership can be further enhanced by promoting preparedness to slow-onset disasters such as drought that bear a high cost for ASEAN countries, especially for the more than 100 million people employed in the agricultural sector in those countries.

Decarbonizing the economies of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

49. It is essential that ASEAN play its part in mitigating climate change, especially moving away from high dependence on and continued investments in coal, towards more green, decarbonized energy sources. The member countries of ASEAN are not on track to reach their stated aim to increase the renewable energy share to 23 per cent by 2025, let alone the 35 per cent needed by 2030 to align with the Paris Agreement. In order to support the raising of ambitions, the secretariat is supporting countries in developing national Goal 7 road maps to chart actions and investments needed in renewable energy, energy efficiency and access.

Supporting the people-centred approach of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

50. Social protection will be a vital part of leaving no one behind in ASEAN and reducing growing inequalities in ASEAN member countries. It will help to address the needs of ageing populations and other vulnerable and marginalized groups or supporting the millions of people, especially women, working in micro-, small, and medium-sized enterprises. The ESCAP secretariat is looking to scale up support for the people-centred initiatives of ASEAN, especially the implementation of commitments contained in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Ageing: Empowering Older Persons in ASEAN, the ASEAN Enabling Master Plan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Women's Empowerment Principles.

E. South and South-West Asia

1. Context

51. Despite its economic dynamism, the South Asia subregion remains a global hotspot for poverty and hunger and suffers from a number of development gaps. Compared to its 25 per cent share of the global population, the subregion hosts a disproportionately high share (34 per cent) of people living in extreme poverty and hunger in the world. The subregion suffers from wide gender gaps, poor productive capacities, inadequate opportunities for decent employment and rising income inequalities. South Asian countries lag behind in providing universal access to such basic amenities as education, health, sanitation and electricity, especially in rural areas. Despite being a contiguous landmass, South Asia has not been able to harness the potential of regional economic cooperation,

owing to poor transport connectivity and facilitation at the borders. Although its per capita emissions of greenhouse gases are low by global standards, South Asia is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and natural disasters. Three out of four least developed countries in South Asia are in the process of graduation from the category of least developed countries, which will bring additional challenges in the coming years.

52. The 2030 Agenda constitutes a unique opportunity in South Asia to eradicate hunger and poverty and provide a life of dignity to all within a generation. The world cannot achieve the Sustainable Development Goals if South Asia fails to achieve them, given its high share of global population and poverty and hunger. Success in achieving the Goals for the subregion depends on the strengthening of the means of implementation, including subregional cooperation. Given common challenges and shared vulnerability to climate change, subregional cooperation can complement national actions and assist in accelerating the achievement of the Goals. However, the institutional framework for subregional cooperation remains weak in South Asia. Through its intervention, the secretariat seeks to supplement the institutional mechanisms for subregional and regional cooperation for sustainable development.

2. Challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

Leaving no one behind and gender gaps

53. Economic growth in South Asia is not trickling down to the poor and vulnerable sections of the population. While agriculture's share in gross domestic product has declined rapidly to less than 15 per cent, the sector continues to sustain nearly half of the work force because of the subregion's inability to harness the job-creating potential of manufacturing.⁸ The subregion also suffers from many other gaps, including in providing adequate social and physical infrastructure for such services as education, health, drinking water, sanitation, social protection and modern energy to all. Furthermore, it lags behind in gender equality and women's empowerment as evidenced by the low labour force participation rate of women. At 27.6 per cent in 2018, this rate was already lower than half the developing country average rate of 69.3 per cent and has declined further since then.⁹

Poor transport connectivity and economic integration

54. South Asia is often described as one of the least integrated subregions in the world, with its poorly developed surface transport networks and inadequate transport facilitation measures. As a result of poor integration, the costs of intraregional trade are much higher than the costs of trade with distant regions like North America, denying locally produced goods the benefits of geographical proximity and contiguity. The secretariat's research has shown that intraregional trade in South Asia has reached less than one third of its potential, with more than \$50 billion in lost trade opportunities each year.¹⁰ Fully harnessing the potential of regional connectivity and intraregional trade could lead to the creation of millions of jobs, thereby contributing to poverty reduction.

⁸ *Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in South Asia: Key Policy Priorities and Implementation Challenges* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.17.II.F.12).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Unlocking the Potential of Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in South Asia: Potential, Challenges and the Way Forward* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.17.II.F.14).

Capacity gaps and graduation from the category of least developed countries

55. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal are classified as least developed countries owing to their development and capacity gaps and vulnerabilities. Among these capacity gaps is the poor analytical capacity to conduct evidence-based research to assist in policy formulation for sustainable development. Three of the four (Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal) will be graduating from the category of least developed countries following the 2021 triennial review and thus face additional challenges such as the loss of preferential market access and a likely reduction in the flow of concessional development resources.

Vulnerability to disasters and climate risks

56. South Asia is highly vulnerable to natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, droughts and cyclones, which have led to loss of life and hampered development. The secretariat's analysis shows that annual economic losses due to disasters in South and South-West Asia are exponentially higher than previous estimates, at \$153 billion.¹¹ There is not enough recognition of the transboundary nature of disasters, climate change and environmental commons, or of the importance of subregional cooperation to address them. Subregional cooperation, including through subregional energy grids and pipelines, could also assist the subregion, which is highly dependent on energy imports, in its transition towards renewable energy and enhanced energy access.¹²

3. Priorities for accelerated action

57. The secretariat has devised its intervention in the subregion to address the above-mentioned challenges and gaps, especially by leveraging the potential of subregional cooperation as summarized below.

Subregional platform for sharing development experiences on sustainable development

58. The secretariat supports accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by providing a subregional platform for policy analysis, the exchange of development experiences and good practices, and follow up and review. The annual South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals has emerged as an important subregional multi-stakeholder platform for sharing knowledge, including analytical inferences and policy lessons, and for subregional follow-up and review for accelerating achievement, in addition to contributing to the subregional perspectives at the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. To further facilitate the sharing of development experiences and good practices on the Goals, the South Asia Network on the Sustainable Development Goals will be launched at the fourth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals in 2020. The secretariat is also supporting its member States in designing and implementing country-specific policies that accelerate the achievement of the Goals, including support for the United Nations country teams in preparing common country assessments and for the development and implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework.

¹¹ ESCAP, *The Disaster Riskscape across South and South-West Asia: Key Takeaways for Stakeholders* (ST/ESCAP/2879).

¹² ESCAP, *Integrating South Asia's Power Grid for a Sustainable and Low Carbon Future* (ST/ESCAP/2830).

Subregional cooperation for women's economic empowerment

59. To contribute to regional cooperation for women's economic empowerment, ESCAP has been working with networks of women entrepreneurs and subregional organizations, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation secretariat, the Gender Policy Advocacy Group and the South Asian Women Development Forum. In collaboration with the associations of women entrepreneurs, ESCAP has launched an initiative to enhance the capacity of women-led micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises to leverage e-commerce and digital marketing tools, with a focus on South Asian least developed countries. This work is expected enhance the knowledge and capacity of women entrepreneurs in South Asia to leverage e-commerce platforms to expand their business opportunities and participate in local, regional and global value chains.

Strengthening transport connectivity in South Asia to harness intraregional trade potential

60. The secretariat will continue to build on proposals to extend surface transport corridors in South Asia with a view to strengthening connectivity in the subregion, especially for landlocked countries (Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal). Past results in this area include the implementation of partnerships and cooperation between member States on regional railway connectivity such as the memorandum of understanding between container companies in India and Bangladesh to establish a container train service between Kolkata, India, and Dhaka. Further explorations and technical assistance will be carried out to identify barriers to the operationalization of such corridors and to their extension to cover additional countries.

Subregional cooperation for the clean energy transition in South Asian countries

61. The secretariat will collaborate with stakeholders to identify constraints and policy lessons to foster the clean energy transition and policies to harness the renewable energy resources of South Asian countries through subregional cooperation.

Subregional forum on the Sustainable Development Goals and sustainable graduation of South Asian least developed countries

62. The secretariat has been assisting the three South Asian member States that are graduating from the category of least developed countries to respond to graduation-related challenges through analytical work, technical assistance and a series of subregional capacity-building activities where policymakers from the three countries discussed and identified specific sustainable graduation challenges and shared their experiences, concerns and policy lessons and strategies in mitigating them. In addition, the secretariat is assisting the fledgling think-tanks of Afghanistan and Bhutan to build national analytical capacities to support the process of sustainable development through evidence-based policy analysis.

III. Issues for consideration by the Commission

63. The Commission may wish to provide guidance to the secretariat on priority areas of work, approaches and partners for subregional cooperation and accelerated action on the Sustainable Development Goals, so that its initiatives are better targeted and delivered.