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Item 4 (b) of the provisional agenda\*

**Review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific: social development****Key social development issues for consideration in 2022****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

In the past two years, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has swept the world, taking millions of lives, affecting jobs and incomes and creating widespread socioeconomic impacts. The ability of countries to respond to the pandemic has varied depending on health system capacities and the existence of comprehensive social protection schemes. Within countries, the shocks were disproportionately felt by certain populations in vulnerable situations, including the poorest, older persons, persons with disabilities and migrants.

The present document contains a summary of the key social development issues and priorities that contribute to the agendas of three upcoming intergovernmental meetings on social development to be held by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in 2022. The meetings will provide an opportunity for members and associate members of the Commission to deliberate on trends and needs related to social protection, population ageing and the rights of older persons, and the rights of persons with disabilities and determine the way forward in the Asia-Pacific region. The document serves to highlight the work of the secretariat in preparation for the meetings in consultation with member States.

The Commission may wish to take note of the findings contained in the present document and the preparations for the meetings and provide further guidance to the secretariat.

**I. Introduction**

1. By the end of January 2022, there were 364 million confirmed coronavirus disease (COVID-19) infections and 5.6 million deaths worldwide.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has had widespread economic and social impacts on the entire Asia-Pacific region, and groups in vulnerable situations, including older persons and persons with disabilities, have disproportionately borne the brunt of the pandemic, including its health and socioeconomic impacts.

\* ESCAP/78/L.1/Rev.1.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization COVID-19 Dashboard. Available at <https://covid19.who.int/> (accessed on 31 January 2022).

2. No country has been spared the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. Many Governments took immediate steps to provide income support to their populations through social assistance, other tax-financed benefits, or cash transfers. Other Governments are scaling up existing social assistance benefits or creating new ones. However, in countries with better-established and better-funded health and social protection systems, health care has been provided and the required economic and social support has been channelled in a more efficient and speedy manner. The pandemic has lent impetus and urgency to the task of implementing universal social protection and universal health coverage across the region.

3. In that context, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) will hold three key intergovernmental meetings related to social development, which provide important opportunities for members and associate members of the Commission to reflect on the progress made so far and steps to be taken to accelerate further progress in the areas of social protection, population ageing and the rights of older persons, and the rights of persons with disabilities. The following intergovernmental meetings will be held in 2022:

(a) Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, to be held from 29 June to 1 July 2022;

(b) Seventh session of the Committee on Social Development, to be held from 6 to 8 September 2022;

(c) High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Final Review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2013–2022), to be held from 18 to 20 October 2022.

4. The present document serves to provide an analysis of the policy issues of concern that will be on the agendas of the intergovernmental meetings and to describe the related preparatory work of the secretariat.

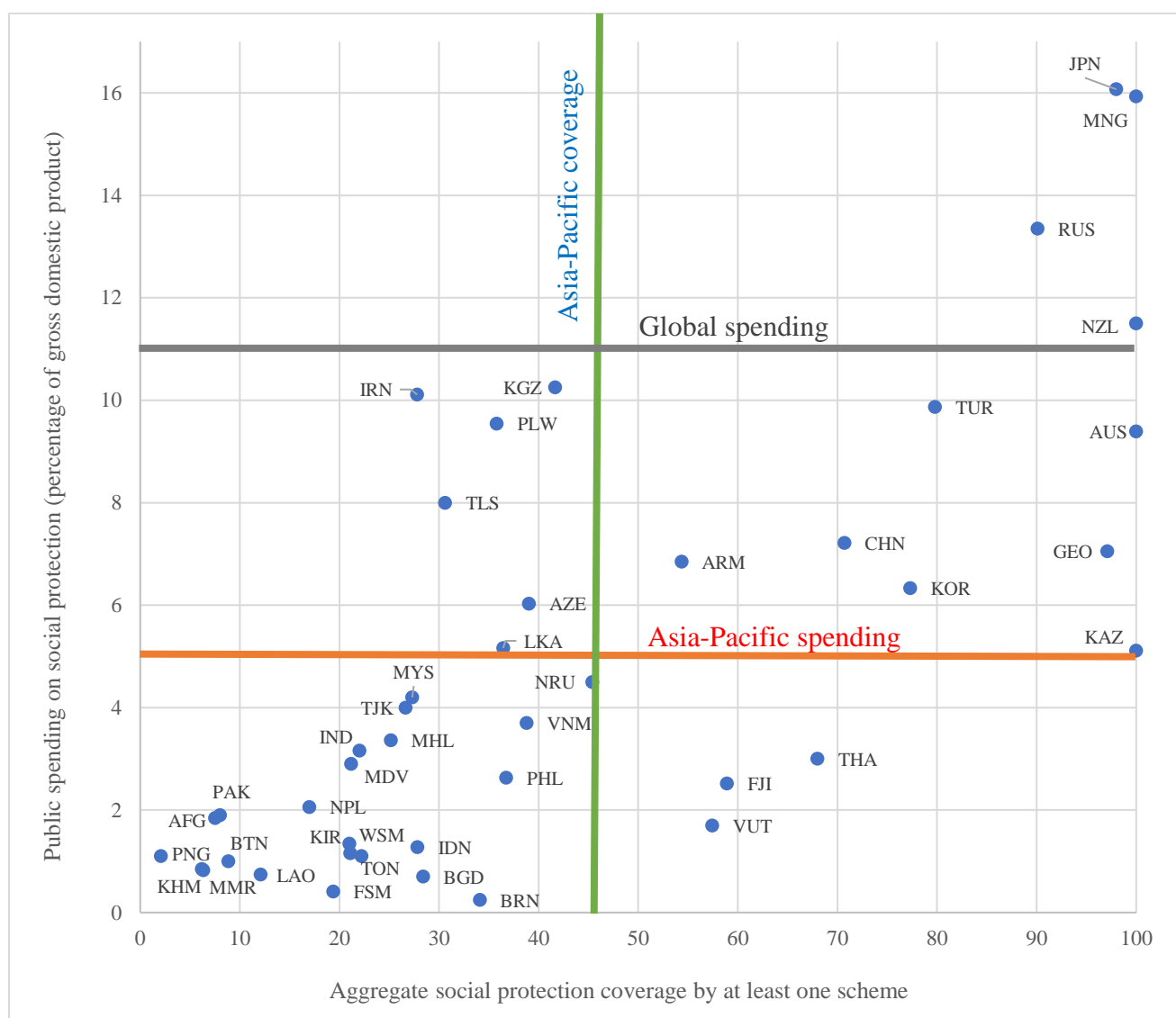
## **II. Strengthening social protection in the Asia-Pacific region**

### **A. Trends and progress made so far**

5. Social protection is a key enabler of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; it facilitates the building of more cohesive, resilient and sustainable societies. With less than a decade remaining to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, social protection for all is a policy imperative to secure the prosperity and resilience of the Asia-Pacific region.

6. More than half of the region's population is completely unprotected against any form of contingency throughout life (figure I). Many countries in the region spend less than 2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on social protection. On average, public spending on social protection in the region (excluding health) only reaches 4.9 per cent of GDP (figure I). This low level of investment stands in stark contrast to the global average of 11 per cent. Low coverage and expenditure levels are common in the region, with almost half the countries in Asia and the Pacific accounting for a smaller share of the population and spending less on social protection than the regional averages.

Figure I  
Relationship between social protection spending and coverage



Source: International Labour Organization (ILO), “Monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals: the ILO social security inquiry”, Social Protection Platform, available at [www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowTheme.action?id=10](http://www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowTheme.action?id=10) (accessed on 10 October 2020), and “Universal social protection: to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”, World Social Protection Data Dashboards, available at [www.social-protection.org/gimi/WSPDB.action?id=32](http://www.social-protection.org/gimi/WSPDB.action?id=32) (accessed on 10 October 2020).

Abbreviations: AFG, Afghanistan; ARM, Armenia; AUS, Australia; AZE, Azerbaijan; BGD, Bangladesh; BRN, Brunei Darussalam; BTN, Bhutan; CHN, China; FJI, Fiji; FSM, Micronesia (Federated States of); GEO, Georgia; IDN, Indonesia; IND, India; IRN, Iran (Islamic Republic of); JPN, Japan; KAZ, Kazakhstan; KGZ, Kyrgyzstan; KHM, Cambodia; KIR, Kiribati; KOR, Republic of Korea; LAO, Lao People’s Democratic Republic; LKA, Sri Lanka; MDV, Maldives; MHL, Marshall Islands; MMR, Myanmar; MNG, Mongolia; MYS, Malaysia; NPL, Nepal; NRU, Nauru; NZL, New Zealand; PAK, Pakistan; PHL, Philippines; PLW, Palau; PNG, Papua New Guinea; RUS, Russian Federation; THA, Thailand; TJK, Tajikistan; TLS, Timor-Leste; TON, Tonga; TUR, Turkey; VNM, Viet Nam; VUT, Vanuatu; WSM, Samoa.

7. Against this backdrop, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a harsh wake-up call regarding the need for well-designed and coordinated social protection systems. Social protection helps to mitigate the disruptive impact of a range of life circumstances and can act as an automatic economic and social stabilizer in times of crisis.

8. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have strengthened existing schemes and introduced ad hoc and temporary social protection measures. As such, the crisis has proven that countries can significantly expand social protection coverage in a short period of time. Most countries have also done so to address the social, economic and health impacts of the pandemic. Despite these efforts, the impact of the pandemic on people and societies has been devastating, leaving many families exposed to the sudden loss of income and access to health care.

9. Even prior to the pandemic, millions of children already lived in poverty with lifelong consequences on educational achievements, cognitive development, human capital and employment prospects. For women of working age, pregnancy and childbirth are risks to lives, livelihoods and chances to work. Unemployment pushes families into poverty, and there may be no support to find a new job. Falling ill means either losing employment or working while being contagious. A work injury may lead to disability or the loss of a breadwinner, yet there may be no compensation. People may be living in poverty because of a disability, without a job or dignity and with harsh impacts on the family. Without a pension, older persons must continue working or become dependent on other family members for their survival. Leaving old-age support to families alone is becoming increasingly unsustainable given the unprecedented levels and speed of population ageing in the region.

10. Without affordable health care, people do not seek treatment or they wait until it may be too late. Many countries in the region still rely disproportionately on out-of-pocket expenditure. When individuals forego care, including at younger ages, health conditions worsen and can result in a plethora of social and economic costs to individuals, families and society, including loss of income and productivity, and premature death. In many cases, unaffordable health care also results in catastrophic health expenditure. High out-of-pocket payments for health-care services can push households into poverty.

11. The ability of countries to respond to the pandemic depends on many factors, especially health system capacities and comprehensive social protection schemes. The region needs universal social protection systems that combine contributory and non-contributory schemes. It is also an ambition of the 2030 Agenda. In the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda”, the United Nations system was called upon to assist countries to renew the social contract between Governments and their people by deepening solidarity and trust.

12. Achieving this ambition requires strong national commitment and regional cooperation. To guide this process over the remainder of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, ESCAP members and associate members adopted the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific in October 2020.

13. Launched amid the pandemic, the Action Plan provides Governments in the region with a shared vision and strategy for broadening social protection coverage. It calls on Governments to establish an intermediate target of social protection coverage by 2025, and then measure progress towards achieving

universal coverage by 2030. The Action Plan contains an outline of a number of measures to be taken at the national level to achieve this objective.

14. It is expected that the first regional Action Plan on social protection for Asia and the Pacific will help to accelerate progress on social protection during the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development through sharing knowledge and strengthening capacity on building a stronger and more inclusive, prosperous and resilient Asia-Pacific region that leaves no one behind.

## **B. Implementation of the Regional Action Plan and the seventh session of the Committee on Social Development**

15. Given the instrumental role social protection plays in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the Commission welcomed the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific in its resolution 77/1. The Action Plan, which was adopted by the Committee on Social Development at its sixth session in 2020 and endorsed at the seventy-seventh session of the Commission in 2021, serves as a shared vision, strategy and platform for ESCAP member States to promote partnership and peer learning, share good practices and identify needs for technical assistance.

16. At the national level, the Action Plan consists of 12 voluntary measures for Governments to promote inclusive and comprehensive social protection systems by 2030. At the regional level, it calls on the secretariat to review and facilitate progress towards the realization of the Action Plan in collaboration with relevant United Nations agencies. In its resolution 77/1, the Commission requested the Executive Secretary to assist member States in their implementation of the Action Plan.

17. To meet this request, the secretariat is developing an online dynamic platform, the Social Protection Online Toolbox. The Toolbox will host knowledge and capacity development resources to support ESCAP member States in their implementation of the Action Plan as well as provide tools to advocate moving towards universal social protection coverage by 2030. The Toolbox will be launched on 6 September 2022, during the seventh session of the Committee on Social Development.

18. The Toolbox will consist of multiple components in support of policymaking, capacity-building, awareness raising and intergovernmental processes. To provide an evidence base for policymakers on the impact of investing in social protection and to strengthen capacity in this area, the Toolbox includes a user-friendly simulation tool to estimate how an extension of social protection benefits can reduce poverty and inequality while boosting household consumption in rural and urban areas, as well as how different household compositions would be impacted by a particular policy intervention. It will also estimate the investment needed for doing so. To build capacity in strengthening inclusive social protection systems, the platform will offer five separate self-paced online training modules on social protection schemes across the lifecycle and knowledge resources such as a step-by-step guide for developing an inclusive social protection system and information on national experiences in moving towards universal social protection. To support member States in their implementation of the Action Plan, the secretariat has initiated work with several countries to take stock of their existing policies and their readiness to implement the Action Plan. It is expected that this work will lead to informative policy reports on the current situation and future ambitions to

broaden social protection coverage, followed by national consultations. The secretariat, in collaboration with other United Nations entities, will also commence the work on a region-wide survey to track national progress and gaps in the implementation of the Action Plan.

19. In addition, the 2022 issue of the ESCAP flagship publication *Social Outlook* is under development and will be launched on 6 September 2022 as part of the seventh session of the Committee on Social Development. The forthcoming publication will focus on policies that foster a healthy, protected and productive workforce. These policies are often challenged by the predominance of informal jobs, limited access to affordable health care and low coverage of social protection, as recently accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

20. Income security, decent employment and access to health care will benefit all people in the workforce. They will also build solidarity and resilience across generations and socioeconomic groups, while increasing productivity and competitiveness of economies and companies. If policies are designed to use the benefits of population transitions, digitalization and climate change, and to minimize poverty and inequalities in income and opportunities, they will also help societies to better manage changes triggered by megatrends, as well as disruptions from future shocks and crises.

21. Recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic should therefore be used as an opportunity to renew the social contract. This requires rebuilding trust in systems as well as between people, anchored in mutual respect and human rights. For the social contract to be effective and sustainable, there is a need to understand who the furthest behind are and what they need. While action on a large range of areas is required, the forthcoming publication will discuss ways to do the following: (a) renew the social contract; (b) extend income security to all people; (c) support people to enter, re-enter and remain in employment, preferably through access to decent jobs; and (d) step up efforts for universal health coverage.

### **III. Population ageing and the promotion and protection of the rights of older persons**

#### **A. Trends and progress made so far**

##### **1. Demographic trends**

22. About 60 per cent of all older persons in the world reside in Asia and the Pacific. Population ageing is affecting all countries in the region. Between 2020 and 2050, the percentage of older persons aged 60 years or older is projected to rise from 14 to 25 per cent, whereas the share of the younger population aged 14 years or younger is projected to decline from 23 to 18 per cent. Moreover, population ageing is very rapid in the region. It took many developed countries more than a century to increase the share of the older population from 7 to 14 per cent. In Asia and the Pacific, developing countries are ageing very rapidly, and it will take many of them 30 years or less to increase the share of the older population from 7 to 14 per cent. As a consequence, many countries in the region will have little time to develop and adjust their policies. Because of longer life expectancy, the number of the oldest old persons aged 80 years or older is projected to more than triple from 76 million to 255 million between 2020 and 2050. Women will account for more than 60 per cent of the oldest old.

## 2. Challenges and opportunities of population ageing

23. Population ageing is a human success story, the result of improved public health, medical advancements and overall social and economic development. Although challenges and opportunities of population ageing have been addressed, some areas need continued attention, such as the provision of social protection and long-term care. Moreover, there are impacts on ageing from emerging issues such as climate change and COVID-19. Policies and action plans must be comprehensive and address the special needs of groups such as older women and the oldest old.

24. There are many synergies between the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002, and the 2030 Agenda. The call to leave no one behind complements the call to create societies for all ages. In addressing the priority directions of the Madrid Plan of Action, the relevant Sustainable Development Goals are also addressed.

25. For example, social protection is a prominent feature of both the Madrid Plan of Action and the 2030 Agenda that affects older persons in particular. Contributory pension systems reduce poverty among older persons and contribute to increased consumption and savings, promoting economic growth. However, in 27 out of 39 countries in the region for which data are available, less than half of the working age population is covered by mandatory contributory pensions systems. Often, pension benefits are available to a small section of the population. In some countries with pension coverage the benefits may be insufficient for an older person to live comfortably.

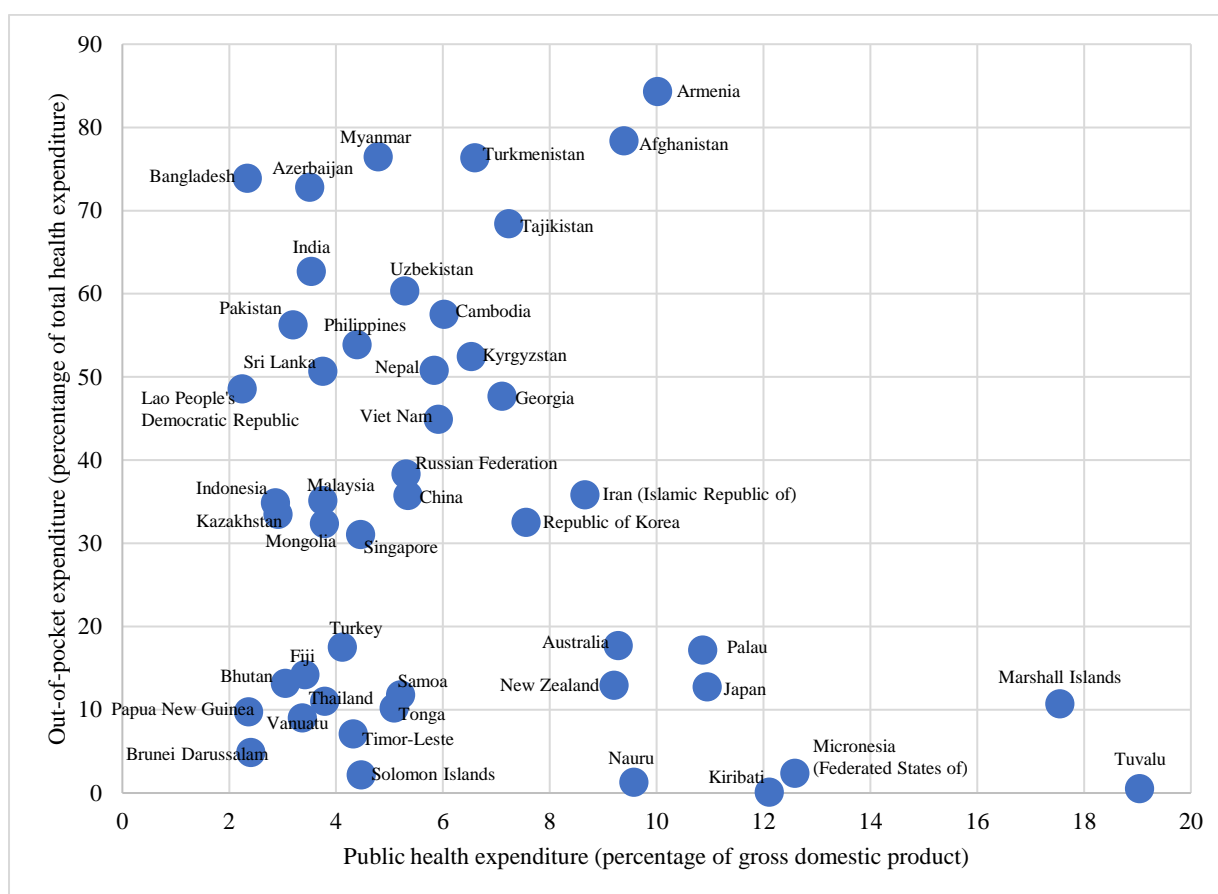
26. High unemployment, low wages and the dominance of the informal sector are barriers to the development of a universal pension system. For women, a lifetime of inequality reduces the likelihood that they will receive a pension in old age. Therefore, older persons are at an increased risk of living in poverty, and they are highly dependent on their families. Lower fertility and shrinking family sizes, urbanization and the migration of young people to cities and other countries have reduced family support. To survive, many older persons must therefore work in the informal economy in jobs that are hazardous, insecure and low paid.

27. The likelihood of illness and disability increases with age. About 63.4 per cent of the population of Asia and the Pacific is protected by a health-care scheme, leaving about 1.6 billion people unprotected.<sup>2</sup> Such aggregated figures hide inequalities within and across countries. With low public health spending, out-of-pocket expenditure for health care is often extremely high. Therefore, in many developing countries of the region, health-care costs are mostly borne by private households (figure II). Due to the lack of universal health care systems, older persons are not able to access health care and are at an increased risk of illness and death, including from COVID-19.

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<sup>2</sup> ILO, *Extending Social Health Protection: Accelerating Progress towards Universal Health Coverage in Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2021).

Figure II  
Out-of-pocket and public health expenditure, latest available year



Source: World Bank Open Data database. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/> (accessed 22 January 2022).

28. Given the increase in the number and share of older persons, including the oldest old, providing long-term care is a particular challenge. In the region, there is a long-standing tradition that care for older people is provided by the members of their families, in particular older women. However, reductions in family size, urbanization and migration leave many older persons without a caregiver. Often, community support systems or long-term care facilities are either non-existent, unaffordable or the quality of care is substandard.

29. Access to information and communications technology (ICT) is one emerging issue that affects older persons in particular. The Asia-Pacific region has been a driving force of ICT development and adoption over the past decade. During the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, ICTs have proven to be useful in facilitating access to health care and social services, and to help people to stay connected.<sup>3</sup> Yet, there are disparities across age, indicating a “grey digital divide”. In 2019, less than 10 per cent of older persons had access to the Internet in Cambodia, Georgia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Thailand and Uzbekistan.<sup>4</sup> Older women often have the least access.

<sup>3</sup> *Using Information and Communication Technologies to Address the Health-care Needs of Older Persons Managing Chronic Disease: A Guidebook and Good Practices from Asia and the Pacific* (ST/ESCAP/2972).

<sup>4</sup> International Telecommunication Union, *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database*, 23rd ed. (2019).



30. Another issue is environmental degradation, including climate change. Climate induced weather events are becoming more frequent, intense and unpredictable, and environmental degradation is increasing in the region.<sup>5</sup> Older persons are among those most affected by premature death, disruption of their lives and mental health problems. Some countries have developed disaster risk reduction strategies with a focus on older persons. For example, Cambodia prioritizes older persons in disaster evacuation. In the Philippines, the National Economic and Development Authority mandates the collection of age disaggregated data in its Disaster Rehabilitation and Recovery Planning Guide.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, older persons have knowledge, experience and resilience, making their participation, inclusion and leadership relevant to efforts to adapt to and mitigate the adverse effects of natural hazards.

31. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a devastating impact on older persons, in particular on those with underlying health conditions and a lower economic status. Sometimes, protective public health measures have introduced or exacerbated health, social and economic problems for older populations. Broadly speaking, older persons in Asia and the Pacific tend to bear the physical and mental health burden of COVID-19. Although age-disaggregated vaccination data are not available across the region, higher vaccination rates are seen in countries that had vaccination plans and programmes in place before the pandemic. Moreover, health and social policies to safeguard older persons from the negative impacts of the pandemic would be more effective if they were developed with input from older persons.<sup>7</sup>

32. The upcoming Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing provides an opportunity for member States and stakeholders to assess the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action during the past 20 years, identify remaining challenges and emerging issues and focus on accelerating its implementation.

## **B. Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing**

33. In accordance with resolution 2020/8 of the Economic and Social Council, ESCAP will hold the Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing from 29 June to 1 July 2022 in Bangkok, with the support of United Nations agencies and relevant stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific informal regional network of focal points on ageing. In preparation for the meeting, the member States nominated focal points on ageing who led national reviews of the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action. Coupled with capacity-building supported by ESCAP, countries also completed a survey. The secretariat plans to conduct additional consultations with member States and stakeholders on prevalent and emerging issues and on how to accelerate the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action.

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<sup>5</sup> *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2021: Resilience in a Riskier World – Managing Systematic Risks from Biological and Other Natural Hazards* (United Nations publication, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> A/HRC/47/46.

<sup>7</sup> *COVID-19 and Older Persons in Asia and the Pacific* (forthcoming).

34. The intergovernmental meeting will focus on the three priority directions of the Madrid Plan of Action: (a) older persons and development; (b) advancing health and well-being into old age; and (c) ensuring enabling and supportive environments. Emerging issues, such as COVID-19, climate change, the future of work and ICTs will be highlighted throughout the meeting. Gender considerations and the voices of older and younger persons will be mainstreamed. The meeting will identify synergies between the Madrid Plan of Action and the 2030 Agenda. Relevant Sustainable Development Goals and indicators will be discussed so that they can be used by member States in future reviews. These evidence-based reviews are essential for developing forward-looking policies and for creating societies for all ages.

## **IV. Promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities**

### **A. Key trends in disability-inclusive development**

35. Of the estimated 690 million persons with disabilities living in Asia and the Pacific, many encounter barriers to full and effective participation in society.<sup>8</sup> Among persons with disabilities, some groups face additional disadvantages and marginalization, including women and girls, older persons and persons living in institutionalized settings who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and encounter significant difficulties in exercising their rights.

36. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted persons with disabilities and hindered progress towards the full realization of inclusive and sustainable societies.<sup>9</sup> Governments in Asia and the Pacific have taken a variety of measures to assist persons with disabilities in accessing essential information, support and services.<sup>10</sup> To build a post-pandemic world in which no one is left behind, it is critical to strengthen policy measures and ensure the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in all stages of COVID-19 response and recovery.

37. With noticeable progress made in disability-inclusive development across the region, some new and emerging issues have been identified. In line with the spirit of “nothing about us without us”, the effective engagement of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations has increasingly become an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes that aim to advance disability rights and inclusion. This underscores the need for capacity-building and resource mobilization for organizations of persons with disabilities. The collection and analysis of disability-disaggregated data, including through the use of the Washington Group Short Set on Functioning, has gained momentum. Yet, more efforts are required to enhance disability statistics to inform evidence-based policymaking and programming. Addressing new priorities highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as promoting digital

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<sup>8</sup> *Building Disability-Inclusive Societies in Asia and the Pacific: Assessing Progress of the Incheon Strategy* (United Nations publication, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Ciara Siobhan Brennan, *Disability Rights during the Pandemic: A Global Report on Findings of the COVID-19 Disability Rights Monitor*, Steven Allen and others, eds. (COVID-19 Disability Rights Monitor, 2020); and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “The socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities (Geneva, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> ESCAP, “COVID-19 and disability inclusion in Asia and the Pacific”. Available at [www.maketherightreal.net/covid-19/responses](http://www.maketherightreal.net/covid-19/responses) (accessed on 29 December 2021).

accessibility for persons with disabilities and incorporating both gender and disability perspectives into COVID-19 responses, is also at the top of the agenda. The following section serves to present critical issues in areas that significantly impact the well-being of persons with disabilities.

## 1. Employment

38. There are an estimated 472 million persons with disabilities of working age in Asia and the Pacific. Available evidence demonstrates clear gaps in employment between persons with and without disabilities across the region (figure III). In the 18 Asia-Pacific countries or territories with available data, the median employment-to-population ratio<sup>11</sup> is 28 per cent for persons with disabilities and 51 per cent for those without disabilities. The intersection between gender and disability worsens the employment situation for women with disabilities. The median employment-to-population ratio is 19 per cent for women with disabilities compared with 36 per cent for men with disabilities.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a higher proportion of adults engaged in informal work and a higher share of youth neither enrolled in school nor in employment are observed among persons with disabilities compared with those without disabilities.<sup>13</sup>

39. Employment provides a means to sustain livelihoods and effectively participate in society. Large gaps in employment between persons with and without disabilities, coupled with challenges and opportunities brought about by the evolving world of work, underscore the significance of advancing disability-inclusive employment. Employment services, skills development programmes as well as access to financial services and technology should be enhanced to support workers and entrepreneurs with disabilities, in addition to enhancing laws and policies to address discrimination and barriers to employment. Building partnerships among employers, organizations of persons with disabilities, service providers and technical and vocational education and training institutions is key to improving employment prospects for persons with disabilities. Further, opportunities presented by new technologies, the rise of the gig economy, and economic and social reforms in response to COVID-19 should be leveraged to better serve the interests of persons with disabilities.<sup>14</sup>

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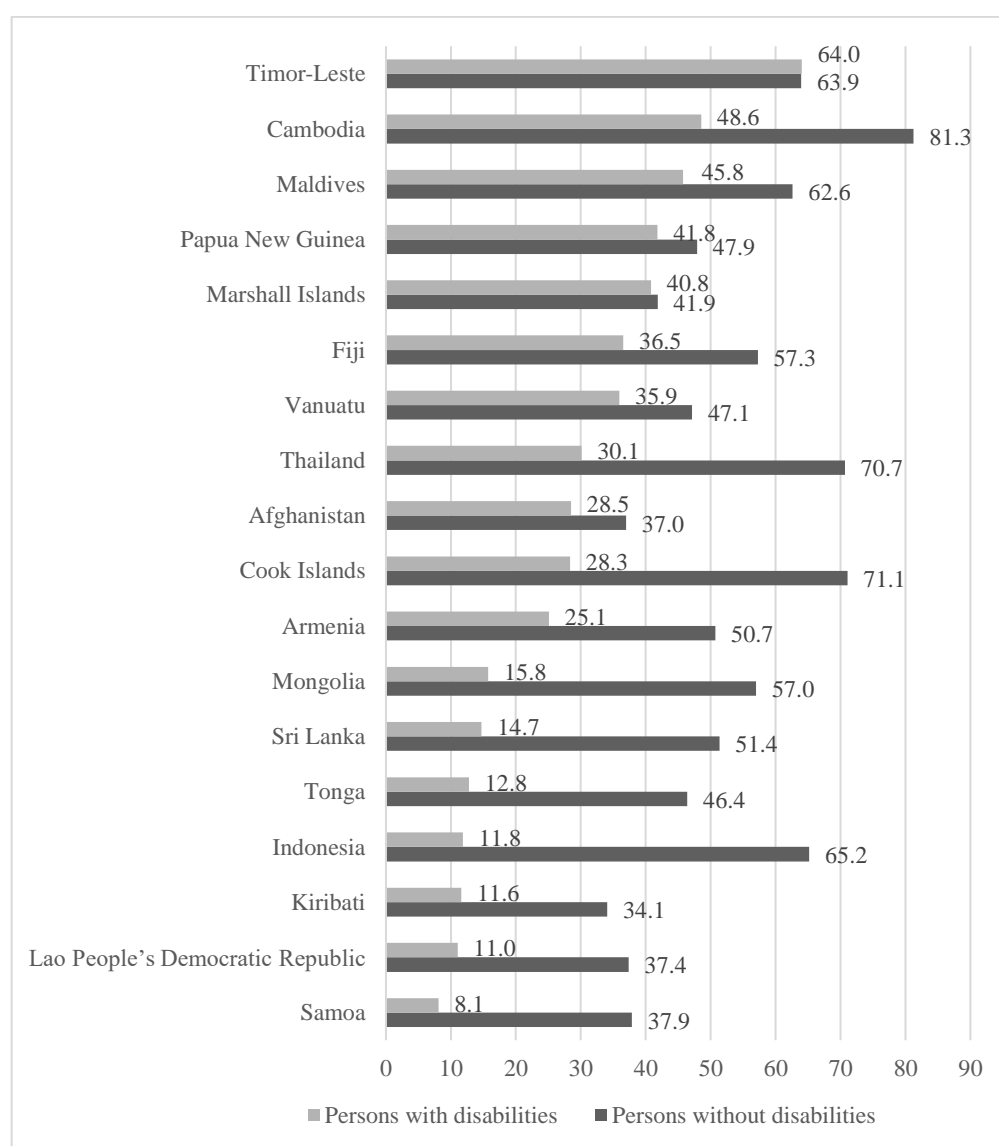
<sup>11</sup> A significant proportion of persons with disabilities remain outside the labour force because of barriers to participation. As the employment/unemployment rate only calculates those within the labour force, employment-to-population ratio is a better indicator to represent an accurate picture of the employment situation of persons with disabilities.

<sup>12</sup> *Disability at a Glance 2021: The Shaping of Disability-inclusive Employment in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Sophie Mitra and Jaclyn Yap, *The Disability Data Report 2021* (New York, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> *Disability at a Glance 2021: The Shaping of Disability-inclusive Employment in Asia and the Pacific*.

Figure III  
Employment-to-population ratio, by disability status



Source: ESCAP calculations based on data from ILO, ILOSTAT. Available at <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/> (accessed on 18 July 2021).

## 2. Social protection

40. A large proportion of persons with disabilities are not covered by social protection benefits due to factors such as the poor design of disability assessment systems, inaccessible information and facilities, and the concentration of persons with disabilities in the informal economy.<sup>15</sup> In Asia and the Pacific, only 21.6 per cent of persons with severe disabilities obtain

<sup>15</sup> Alexandre Côte, “Disability inclusion and social protection”, in *Handbook on Social Protection Systems*, Esther Schüring and Markus Loewe, eds. (Cheltenham, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; Northampton, Massachusetts, Edward Elgar, 2021).

disability cash benefits. The coverage rate of disability cash benefits stands at 6.8 per cent in South Asia.<sup>16</sup>

41. Inclusive social protection is essential for persons with disabilities to enjoy an adequate standard of living. Through cash transfers, in-kind support and concessions, only a few Governments in the Asia-Pacific region have adopted inclusive social protection schemes that offer basic income security, cover direct and indirect disability-related costs<sup>17</sup> and support access to health care and other essential services.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in some countries, concepts such as incapacity and unemployability still constitute key elements of the eligibility criteria for disability-related benefits. To support access to adequate social protection for persons with disabilities, accessibility criteria should be integrated into all schemes, with measures to help to defray the additional costs of living with a disability regardless of employment status.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Political participation

42. Persons with disabilities are commonly underrepresented in political participation and decision-making processes. Globally, the gap between persons with and without disabilities facing barriers to voting or engaging in politics exceeds 30 percentage points in some countries.<sup>20</sup> Data from 17 countries or territories in the region demonstrate that only 0.4 per cent of national parliamentarians have some form of disability. Women with disabilities account for only 0.1 per cent of parliamentarians.<sup>21</sup>

43. Inclusive political participation provides persons with disabilities with equal opportunities to fulfil their responsibilities as members of society and influence decision-making processes at the legislative, executive and judiciary levels. Persons with disabilities, especially persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, often face physical, attitudinal, institutional and legal barriers to participation in political processes and government decision-making bodies. There is an urgent need to adopt reasonable accommodation and

<sup>16</sup> ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – In Pursuit of a Better Future* (Geneva, 2021). Please note that the grouping of countries and territories by subregion differs between ESCAP and ILO.

<sup>17</sup> Direct costs refer to specific disability expenditure (assistive devices, personal assistance, vocational rehabilitation, workplace modifications, special vehicles) and extra expenditure on general items (health care, transportation). Indirect costs include fewer employment and education opportunities, lower earnings and loss of earning or education opportunities for family members who are caregivers. See Alexandre Côte, “Social protection and support to economic participation of persons with disabilities”, paper presented at the ESCAP Expert Group Meeting on Promoting Inclusive Employment for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, 29–30 July 2021. Available at [www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/Thematic\\_Spotlight\\_1\\_Alexandre\\_Cote.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/Thematic_Spotlight_1_Alexandre_Cote.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Alexandre Côte, “Disability inclusion and social protection”, *Handbook on Social Protection Systems*.

<sup>19</sup> ESCAP, “How to design disability-inclusive social protection” (Bangkok, 2021) and *Disability at a Glance 2021: The Shaping of Disability-inclusive Employment in Asia and the Pacific*.

<sup>20</sup> *Disability and Development Report: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations publication, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> *Building Disability-Inclusive Societies in Asia and the Pacific: Assessing Progress of the Incheon Strategy*.

affirmative action to facilitate the effective participation of persons with disabilities in political processes and public life.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Early intervention and education

44. Children with disabilities experience limited access to early identification and intervention services and quality education in Asia and the Pacific. At least one in three children with disabilities is not able to access any early intervention programme.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, available data from 14 countries reveal stark differences in education completion rates between persons with and without functional difficulty.<sup>24</sup> The median primary school completion rate is 29 per cent for adults with functional difficulty and 40 per cent for those without. At the secondary school or higher level, the median completion rates stand at, respectively, 12 per cent for adults with functional difficulty and 25 per cent for those without.<sup>25</sup>

45. Early identification and intervention services and quality education enable children with disabilities to develop their full potential. In many countries, access to early identification and intervention services remains a challenge, especially in hard-to-reach areas. Where such programmes are available, the accessibility and quality of services require further enhancement. While good practices on promoting inclusive education have been identified across the region, almost all countries follow a dual approach where both special/segregated and inclusive education are in place for children with disabilities. More efforts are needed to ensure the education system is inclusive at all levels and to develop accessible learning environments and capacity-building for teachers and education personnel.<sup>26</sup>

#### 5. Harmonization of national legislation with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

46. Adopted in 2006, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a milestone in advancing disability rights and inclusion. The Asia-Pacific region has seen widespread ratification of the Convention. As of 10 November 2021, 45 of 51 ESCAP members and associate members in the

<sup>22</sup> ESCAP, “Inclusive political participation of person with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific”, paper presented at the seventh session of the Working Group on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013–2022, Bangkok, December 2021.

<sup>23</sup> *Building Disability-Inclusive Societies in Asia and the Pacific: Assessing Progress of the Incheon Strategy*.

<sup>24</sup> Observations from the Disability Data Initiative data set measure functional difficulties in hearing, seeing, mobility, communication, cognition and self-care, therefore data on functional difficulty do not capture all persons with disabilities, specifically those with psychosocial and mental health disabilities.

<sup>25</sup> ESCAP, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and United Nations Children’s Fund, “Early intervention and quality education of children with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific”, Policy Paper (Bangkok, 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

region have ratified or acceded to the Convention.<sup>27</sup> Four member States are signatories but not parties to the Convention.<sup>28</sup>

47. To effectively implement the Convention, many Governments have conducted legislative reviews and reforms to align national laws with the concepts and principles of the Convention. Yet, in some countries the deficit-based biomedical model of disability still underlies national legislation, inconsistent with the social or human rights model promoted by the Convention. Moreover, additional efforts are required in some countries to ensure laws and policies are in line with the Convention in some crucial areas, such as prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of disability, recognizing the legal capacity of persons with disabilities and upholding the right of persons with disabilities to liberty and security of person.<sup>29</sup>

## 6. Work of the Commission on supporting disability-inclusive development

48. In 2012, ESCAP member States proclaimed the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013–2022 to uphold and advance the rights of persons with disabilities. To chart the course of action for the Decade, Asia-Pacific Governments adopted the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific and the Beijing Declaration, including the Action Plan to Accelerate the Implementation of the Incheon Strategy. These frameworks provide guidance for catalysing disability-inclusive development in the region.

49. In support of implementing the Incheon Strategy and Beijing Declaration and Action Plan, ESCAP has provided technical assistance to Governments and organizations of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Georgia, India, Indonesia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet Nam, to mainstream disability inclusion into development processes. These projects aim to strengthen institutional capacities in disability-inclusive policymaking and programming, covering the areas of accessibility, employment, technical and vocational education and training, social protection, disaster risk reduction and disability statistics, among others.

50. To enhance technical knowledge of ESCAP members and associate members on the goals of the Incheon Strategy, the secretariat has developed a series of knowledge products on the topics of employment, political participation, early intervention and inclusive education, gender equality and women’s empowerment, disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction, implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and disability inclusion in the context of the pandemic. Importantly, ESCAP launched the publication *Disability at a Glance 2021: The Shaping of Disability-Inclusive Employment in Asia and the Pacific* on the International

<sup>27</sup> The 51 parties include two associate members that are recognized as having independent treaty-making capacity (Cook Islands and Niue), but ESCAP member States beyond the Asia-Pacific region are not included (France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America).

<sup>28</sup> Bhutan, Solomon Islands, Tajikistan and Tonga.

<sup>29</sup> ESCAP, “Harmonization of national laws with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Asia-Pacific trends in selected topics in the ESCAP region”, paper presented at the seventh session of the Working Group on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013–2022, Bangkok, December 2021.

Day of Persons with Disabilities, 3 December 2021. It contains a regional review of the employment status of persons with disabilities and a range of concrete recommendations to governments and other stakeholders for promoting productive employment and decent work for persons with disabilities.

## **B. High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Final Review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2013–2022)**

51. Approaching the end of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2013–2022), a comprehensive final review of its implementation will assess the current state of disability-inclusive development and pave the way towards inclusive societies in Asia and the Pacific. The preparatory process comprises an analytical review and stakeholder consultations which will culminate in a high-level intergovernmental meeting to be convened in October 2022.

52. As part of the analytical review, a voluntary national survey was disseminated to ESCAP members and associate members in August 2021, following which a questionnaire for organizations of persons with disabilities and civil society organizations was disseminated in December 2021. Both surveys aim to gather information from a wide group of stakeholders on the overall progress made towards realizing disability rights and inclusion across the region, in particular the achievement of Incheon Strategy goals and targets. The findings of the analytical review will be presented in a regional synthesis report, to serve as a key background document for deliberations at the intergovernmental meeting.

53. The stakeholder consultations will be conducted from June to September 2022 to gather inputs from diverse stakeholders on the key strategies to be developed and implemented for the next phase of disability-inclusive development in Asia and the Pacific. Members and associate members of ESCAP, persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, United Nations entities and development partners, as well as other relevant stakeholders, will be actively engaged in the consultations on the final review of the implementation of the Decade.

54. The high-level intergovernmental meeting will be convened from 18 to 20 October 2022, to commemorate the conclusion of the Decade and galvanize commitments and support for disability rights and disability-inclusive development in the Asia-Pacific region. It is expected that an outcome document will be adopted to guide ESCAP member States towards strengthening disability-inclusive development and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

## **V. Issues for consideration by the Commission**

55. It is clear from the analysis provided in the present document that while some progress has been made, much more needs to be done to promote and protect the rights of people living in vulnerable situations, including older persons and persons with disabilities, in Asia and the Pacific. The region has a long way to go to achieve universal social protection and universal health coverage. The investment in social protection in terms of proportion of GDP must be enhanced beyond the current low levels, if the population is to be protected against future crises.



56. The present document has served to provide a short analysis of the most urgent, persistent and emerging issues to be addressed as part of the agenda of the forthcoming intergovernmental meetings on social development that ESCAP will hold in 2022. It has also served to outline the preparatory processes under way for the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Final Review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2013–2022).

57. The Commission may wish to take the following actions:

(a) Take note of the urgent and emerging issues that will be discussed during the intergovernmental meetings on social development to take place in 2022 and the progress made in the preparatory work;

(b) Share experiences and views on promoting and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities and older persons and extending universal social protection;

(c) Provide further guidance to the secretariat on the preparations for the intergovernmental meetings on social development to take place in 2022.

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