

**Thematic Review of the 2020 high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF)
Inputs from the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)**

16 March 2020

1. Building and supporting transformative pathways

At the current rate, the Asia-Pacific region as a whole and none of its sub-regions, are on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the next decade. Although people are wealthier, better nourished and better educated than 15 years ago, the region still has not found a sustainable and inclusive path. There is an urgent need to adopt new policies and interventions that drive transformation especially in relation to social inclusion, resource use, and investment flows.

Transformational change is supported by “mission-oriented” policies that create a sense of urgency and direction. This is reinforced by policies of ‘NO’ that set boundary conditions. Creative disruption brings new views and perspectives to the table and forces change on entrenched institutional and socio-economic systems that “lock out” innovation and change.

Transformational change needs to be supported by adequate budgeting. This can be achieved by linking budget allocations with SDGs and their Targets, adopting gender, disability and disaster responsive budgeting, enhanced transparency and accountability in public financial management, and using an SDG-focused result framework in assessing public sector performance. At the macro level, national planning and finance ministries can assess the overall investment needs to achieve the SDGs to inform fiscal planning and broader resources mobilization efforts. Financial innovation, risk-sharing modalities, and partnership also helps ready financial systems to attract and channel investments towards transformation.

Data and statistics are at the core of evidence-based policy making and governance. Comprehensive national monitoring frameworks that are fully integrated into national planning and budgeting processes are urgently needed.

2. UN ESCAP’s role

UN ESCAP supports member States to realize transformative change by (i) bringing countries and experts together including through intergovernmental processes – most notably, the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development¹, the regions preeminent annual multi-stakeholder platform for peer exchange related to follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda; (ii) undertaking cutting edge research and analysis of pathways for accelerating change demonstrated

¹ See <https://www.unescap.org/apfsd/7/>

in its 2020 reports on *Fast-tracking the SDGs: Driving Asia-Pacific's Transformations*² (with ADB and UNDP) and *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020*; (iii) supporting countries and UN Country Teams to test and implement solutions through technical cooperation work, including on follow-up and review, SDG data and statistics and developing and implementing VNRs and (b) the SDG Help Desk³ a web-enabled service which provides access to SDGs-related tools, knowledge products, data portals, expertise, and technical assistance. One of the foundational services of the Help Desk is building capacity for the integration of the SDGs into national policies. In addition to this, the Help Desk maintains a thematic area on the integration of the SDGs into national planning and links its nearly 20,000 users to a host of other relevant knowledge resources, tools and services. In 2019, further professional development on stakeholder engagement planning has also been incorporated in the services of the Help Desk.

3. Policy recommendations

UN ESCAP proposes to include the following recommendations on priority action areas:

(i) Fulfil commitments on existing environmental agreements

Asia and the Pacific hosts 17 of the 36 global biodiversity hotspots, 7 of the world's 17 megadiverse countries, the highest marine biodiversity in the world, with the longest and most diverse coral reef systems, more than half of the world's remaining mangrove areas and the highest seagrass diversity. The management of these shared resources requires cooperation amongst countries. Governments should adhere to and fulfil their to existing multilateral environmental agreements and resolutions commitments aimed at securing the global environmental commons (including under the Convention on Biodiversity and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification) and to raise ambitions in line with the latest science (especially under the Paris Agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change).

(ii) Nurture sustainable and just economies

Fast economic growth, rising population, rapid urbanization, expansion of manufacturing, and the changing consumption pattern of the emerging middle class in Asia and the Pacific have all contributed to increasing resource use in the region, which in turn has come with rising environmental pressure and threats to ecosystems. To accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda, governments should adopt ecological budgeting, implement tax reforms and remove perverse subsidies including those on fossil fuels to steer economies towards lower resource and emissions intensity. Faster progress towards sustainable and just economies can also be achieved by removing discriminatory laws and regulations; preventing violence and harassment against women; collecting data and carrying out research on gender norms and attitudes; and supporting women's leadership in decision-making and policy-making processes.

² See <http://sdgasiapacific.net/knowledge-product> for reports of previous years.

³ <http://sdghelpdesk.unescap.org/>

(iii) Build resilience to disaster risks

The increasingly frequent and intense disasters jeopardize the overall achievement of the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific which suffer annual average loss of 2.5% of current GDP to natural disasters through to 2030. Disaster risks often converge with critical socioeconomic vulnerabilities perpetuating intergenerational poverty and marginalization. Governments can break the vicious circle between disaster, poverty and inequality by (i) investing in building resilience including through robust social protection schemes; (ii) capitalizing on technological innovations in the reduction of, response to and recovery from disasters; and (iii) building on regional actions and systems to address the transboundary nature of disasters.

(iv) Promote clean, reliable and modern energy sources

In 2017, carbon emissions from Asia-Pacific consumption with respect to activities related to the combustion of oil, gas and coal alone made up nearly half of the world share of the respective emissions. The region's energy needs are expected to grow by 37 per cent between 2018 and 2030. Meeting these growing needs in a way that is compatible with net zero emissions by the middle of the Century requires a rapid switch to more sustainable energy sources. This will require major redirection of public and private investments into renewable energy. Trade is an important feature of the market for renewable energy-related goods and services. Trade-related policy tools can incentivize the transition to renewable energy generation and to help their industries to capture and retain part of the fast-expanding market for renewable energy goods and services. The transport sector is responsible for a quarter of global carbon emission and policies should be put in place for rapid and drastic decarbonization of the transport sector.

(v) Empower local governments and community groups

Asia-Pacific countries need to empower local governments and community groups to deliver against the SDGs in an integrated fashion. It has been estimated that 65% of the total SDG targets need to be delivered by local authorities and actors, but this is not matched with requisite decision-making authority. Effective decentralization including for taxation and expenditures ensures that local governments have the appropriate responsibility, authority and capacity to take action.

(vi) Build an inclusive social protection floor

Increased public spending from the low levels in Asia-Pacific (3.7% GDP) to match the global average in the area of education, health and social protection could lift over 350 million out of moderate or extreme poverty by 2030. An inclusive social protection floor is important to achieve the SDGs in the context of fast ageing population in many developing countries in Asia and the Pacific where social protection systems remain fragmented and under invested. Two converging accelerators have emerged, including (i) enhancing public spending on social protection at the national level, with a focus on the most vulnerable groups; and (ii) sharing good practices and building necessary regional modalities and frameworks for advancing cooperation on social protection.