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Regional cooperation

Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2022–2023

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith a summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific for the period 2022–2023.



Summary of the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2022–2023

Summary

While the Asia-Pacific region faces significant challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, compounded by the cascading socioeconomic repercussions of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, geopolitical conflicts, natural disasters and the climate crisis, efforts by countries that have demonstrated commitment and progress towards the Goals highlight the pathways for further progress in the years ahead. To realize the Sustainable Development Goals, it is imperative to intensify efforts to assist countries in regaining their footing and restoring the region's economies.

The present report provides the most recent data and analysis and an overview of the work undertaken by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in the past year in advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including in the context of Our Common Agenda, and in accelerating climate action in the region.

The Economic and Social Council may wish to comment on the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and take note of this report.

I. Introduction

1. In 2022, the Asia-Pacific region encountered significant challenges while striving to attain the Sustainable Development Goals. Those challenges were compounded by the cascading socio-economic repercussions of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, geopolitical conflicts, natural disasters and the climate crisis. To realize the Sustainable Development Goals, it is imperative to intensify efforts to assist countries in regaining their footing and restoring the region's economies.

2. In this regard, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) supported the efforts of its members and associate members in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At its seventy-eighth session, the Commission adopted four resolutions and 14 decisions, including the Bangkok Declaration Commemorating the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific: A Common Agenda to Advance Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific,¹ reaffirming the region's commitment to promoting multilateralism and international cooperation, strengthening partnerships for sustainable development and upholding the principles of international rights and the Charter of the United Nations.

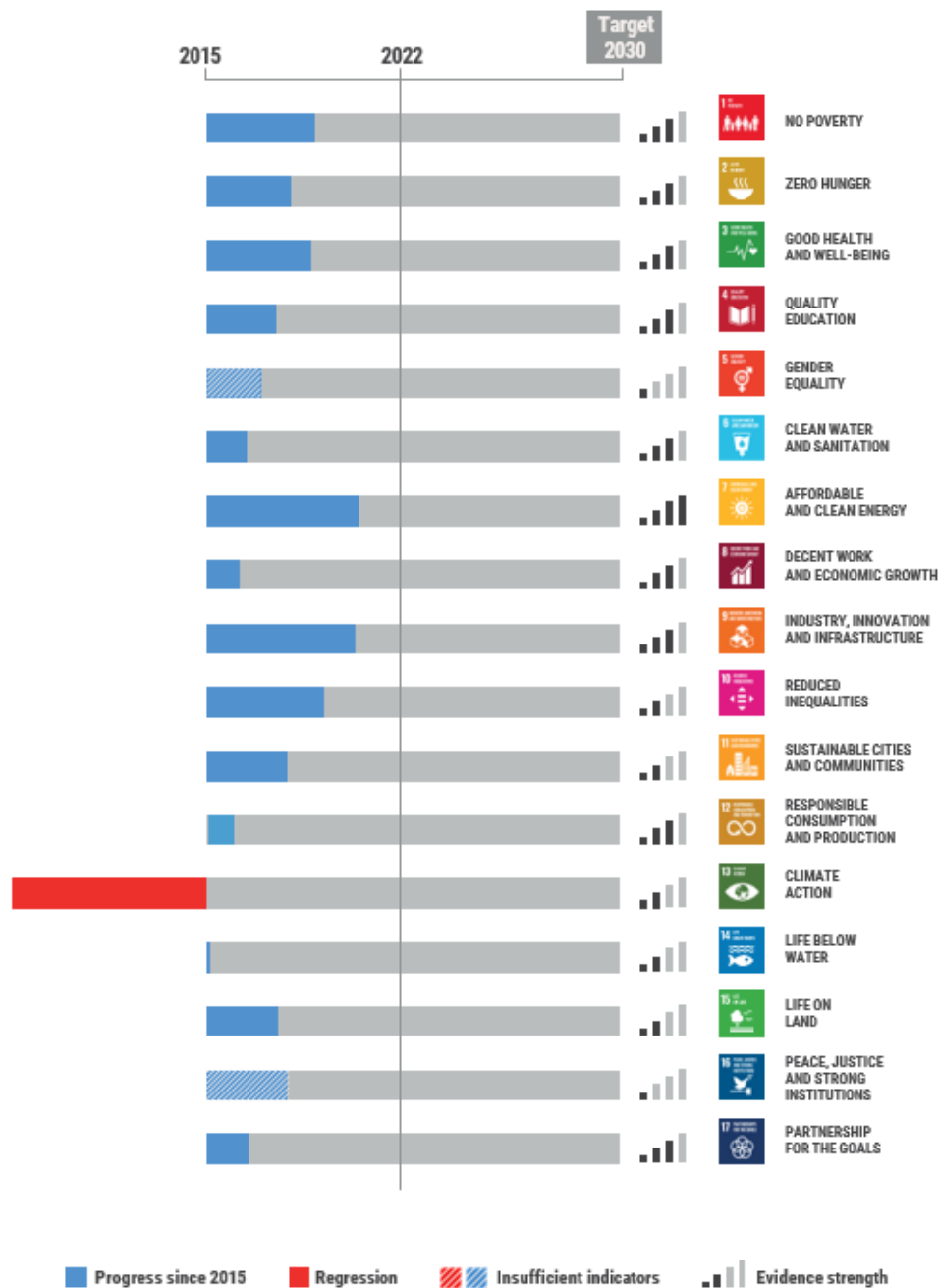
3. The Declaration sets out a common agenda for promoting sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific region based on priority areas identified during country consultations and negotiations. The Governments reaffirmed their commitment to leave no one behind and to protect the planet.

¹ ESCAP/78/RES/1.

II. Advancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the region

A. Regional progress on Sustainable Development Goals

Snapshot of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific



Source: *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2023: Championing Sustainability Despite Adversities* (United Nations publication, 2023).

4. The 2023 *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report* shows that at the midpoint of advancing towards the 2030 target year, overall progress has reached only 14.4 per cent. The strongest progress in the region has been on affordable and clean energy (Goal 7) and industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9). The other Goals will be missed unless progress accelerates and a reversal of trend is needed for Goal 13 on climate action. The region also needs to address the large inequalities between and within countries in the region, in order to leave no one behind.

5. While overall progress is slow, there are many reasons to celebrate impressive country achievements across the 17 Goals. Efforts by countries that have demonstrated commitment and progress towards the Goals illuminate the pathways for further progress in the years ahead.

6. At the Tenth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, countries were called upon to make radical changes at the midpoint for implementation of the 2030 Agenda or risk an evaporation of their slim chances of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

7. At the Forum, an in-depth review was undertaken of the region's progress on Sustainable Development Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation), Goal 7 (affordable and clean energy), Goal 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and Goal 17 (partnership for the Goals).

8. In the Asia-Pacific region, the cost-of-living crisis has deprived 400 million people of safe and nutritious food. Climate-related catastrophes, coupled with biodiversity loss and pollution, are taking lives and causing immense hardship and suffering. Food and energy prices have left Governments struggling to protect their people. Fiscal space is constrained; borrowing costs are sky-high, and rising; and debt burdens are unsustainable.

9. At the Forum, ESCAP, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) jointly launched the latest edition of the Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership Report, entitled *Delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals through Solutions at the Energy, Food and Finance Nexus*.² The report points to clear solutions for confronting the multiple crises and regaining ground for achievement of the Goals, ranging from transforming agriculture towards climate resilience to accelerating a just energy transition and increasing the fiscal space and public investment towards the Goals.

B. Social development

10. The latest ESCAP analysis shows that the region's workforce remains ill equipped to respond to the ongoing and emerging megatrends of climate change, ageing societies and digitalization.³ During the pandemic, the lack of affordable health care and social protection led to the falling into poverty of 243 million people.⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has provided evidence of the consequences of the lack of social security.

11. The population of the Asia-Pacific region is ageing faster than that of any other region in the world. The region has been experiencing rapid population ageing, with

² United Nations publication, 2023, Available at <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/publications/delivering-sustainable-development-goals-through-solutions-energy-food-and-finance-nexus-2023-asia-pacific-sdg-partnership>. <http://www.unescap.org/kp/2023/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report-2023>.

³ See *The Workforce We Need: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2022).

⁴ Ibid.

the share of the older population projected to increase further, from 13.6 per cent in 2020 to 25.0 per cent in 2050.⁵ The rapidity of this growth means that many countries have little time to adapt to the consequences of demographic ageing. Moreover, as more than 700 million persons with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific still face significant barriers to full and effective participation in society, there is an urgent need to chart the way forward for disability-inclusive development in the region.

12. In this context, member States raised the level of ambitions to protect those furthest behind. In November 2022, at the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Final Review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013-2022, ESCAP member States adopted the Jakarta Declaration on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2023–2032 by, which features a novel gender-responsive life cycle approach to disability inclusion in the region.⁶ There have been renewed momentum and actions at the Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. Governments and stakeholders in the region committed to investing in social protection and access to universal health care, fostering lifelong learning opportunities and enhanced digital literacy for older persons, and addressing age-based discrimination and barriers.

13. The Committee on Social Development at its seventh session further discussed regional strategies for building a healthy, protected and productive workforce. The Committee reviewed policies and good practices related to further strengthening social protection, the situation of older persons and disability-inclusive development in the region.⁷

14. To support countries in the implementation of the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP launched the Social Protection Online Tool. The platform hosts a data-driven Social Protection Simulator, e-learning courses on inclusive social protection and advocacy materials, as well as research and policy papers.

15. Moreover, the secretariat is collaborating with four member States (Cambodia, Maldives, Mongolia and the Philippines) with respect to taking stock of their social protection systems, to assess how they fare in the regional context and to estimate what the impact would be of extending social protection benefits to children, older persons and persons with disabilities. This work will help to identify the opportunities and challenges that may exist in extending social protection coverage in line with the recommendations in the Action Plan

16. In partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Government of Canada, the secretariat launched a policymakers' tool kit for "Strengthening women's entrepreneurship in national micro, small and medium enterprise policies and action plans", designed as a practical tool to enable policymakers involved in promoting women's entrepreneurship to assess gaps, take stock of opportunities and design gender-focused interventions through national policies aimed at advancing women's entrepreneurship in the ASEAN region.

C. Environment and development

17. While contributing increasingly to global greenhouse gas emissions, Asia and the Pacific is home to some of the world's most vulnerable cities. The latest ESCAP analysis highlights that the region accounts for over 55 per cent of global greenhouse

⁵ ESCAP/MIPAA/IGM.3/2022/1.

⁶ ESCAP/APDDP/2022/3/Add.1.

⁷ ESCAP/CSD/2022/5.

gas emissions, the level of which has grown continuously between 2010 and 2022. The region is collectively responsible for over three quarters of global coal-fired power generation and 94 per cent of the global total capacity of proposed coal-fired power stations. As a result, nearly 90 per cent of the population of the Asia-Pacific region regularly breathes air considered by the World Health Organization to be unsafe.⁸

18. In this context, member States gathered at the seventh session of the Committee on Environment and Development, convened at the ministerial level, and discussed priorities for regional cooperation to advance climate action such as the protection of oceans and ecosystem, sustainable urban development, and principles of environmental rights.⁹ The Committee adopted the Ministerial Declaration on Protecting Our Planet through Regional Cooperation and Solidarity in Asia and the Pacific and the Regional Action Programme on Air Pollution.¹⁰ The Regional Action Programme, as the region's first intergovernmental framework for tackling air pollution, aims towards strengthening science-based and policy-oriented cooperation to improve air quality management through improved air quality standards, open data exchange, best practices and capacity-building. The High-level Forum on Clean Air, held in March 2023 and organized by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of Mongolia, ESCAP and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), further elaborated areas and modality of cooperation for the Action Programme while strengthening connections among existing subregional initiatives. Moreover, in collaboration with the Climate Action Team of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, ESCAP mobilized policymakers in China, Japan and the Republic of Korea to share policy practices and explore collaboration on the transition to carbon neutrality.

19. Moreover, ESCAP is partnering with the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to develop a framework for assessing multidimensional risks in food systems in Asia and the Pacific. ESCAP, FAO and WFP are also helping member States share good practices and knowledge in combating soil degradation, climate-smart agriculture, support for smallholder farming and application of "smart" technologies.

20. ESCAP also worked with UNEP, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in supporting the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights in the development of a regional framework on environmental rights, including substantive and procedural rights. The collective inter-agency efforts include analysis of environmental impact assessment procedures in the ASEAN region and a series of dialogues on the establishment of a working group and workplan towards a regional declaration on environmental rights in ASEAN. As a result, an interim ASEAN working group on environmental rights is now in place to drive the development of the ASEAN framework, with the participation of experts, civil society, academia and youth representatives.

21. In the context of preservation of oceans and marine resources, the Asia-Pacific Day for the Oceans remains the regional platform for multi-stakeholder discussion and partnerships. Perspectives of the region were presented at the second global United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, held in 2022. Also in 2022, under the Group of 20 Presidency of Indonesia, ESCAP, together with the Intergovernmental

⁸ *Protecting our Planet Through Regional Cooperation and Solidarity in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2022).

⁹ ESCAP/CED/2022/4/.

¹⁰ ESCAP/CED/2022/4/Add.1.

Oceanographic Commission of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, provided technical assistance to the Climate Sustainability Working Group, addressing the priority issue of enhancing land- and sea-based actions to support environment protection and climate objectives.

D. Disaster risk reduction

22. ESCAP analysis, based on the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, shows that the Asia-Pacific region will be most impacted by heavy precipitation under all climate change scenarios. Moreover, ESCAP has expanded the scope of global warming models to the Asia-Pacific region and its subregions. The subregional reports under the 2022 *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report for ESCAP Subregions* demonstrate how each ESCAP subregion is affected by various risk parameters within the framework of new climate models based on common socioeconomic pathways and where new hotspots of impact and vulnerability to climate-induced cascade scenarios of multiple hazards are created.¹¹

23. ESCAP estimates the annual costs of adaptation to natural and biological hazards under the worst-case climate change scenario for the Asia-Pacific region and its subregions. Adaptation gaps are critical in vulnerable subregions, which are also likely to be severely affected by 1.5°C and 2°C warming scenarios.

24. As transboundary climate-induced environmental disasters, sandstorms and dust storms are adversely affecting the sustainability and resilience of communities and are becoming a rising concern for affected countries. Under the Regional Plan of Action on Sand and Dust Storms in Asia and the Pacific, adopted at the seventy-eighth session of the Commission, member States are being assisted in improving their understanding of the socioeconomic impact of sandstorms and dust storms, enhancing monitoring and early warning systems with an impact-based focus and putting in place coordinated regional actions in most at-risk and exposed geographical areas.

25. The Asia-Pacific Risk and Resilience Portal provides a universal tool that allows for the analysing of natural and biological hazards, climate change, social, economic and health data so that countries can use them to monitor the Sustainable Development Goals in relation to climate and natural disasters and make effective risk-based decisions in all sectors.

26. Leveraging the expertise of the space agencies of China and Thailand, ESCAP is enhancing the capacity of lower Mekong River basin countries to access and use early warning information to identify climate-resilient agricultural practices for rice crop production, mitigate climate change-related manifestations and improve georeferenced agricultural production forecasts.

27. The pan-Asia partnership for geospatial air pollution information implemented by ESCAP is building the capacity of eight countries to process and develop digital-based application techniques for using integrated surface and satellite-derived data from the Pandora spectrometer instrument and the Geostationary Environment Monitoring Spectrometer aboard a satellite to improve air pollution monitoring and management.

28. The ESCAP trust fund for tsunamis, disaster and climate preparedness is a dedicated regional trust fund which delivers coordinated financial and technical support for addressing unmet needs and gaps in early warning systems in Asia and the Pacific.

¹¹ See *Asia Pacific Riskscape @1.5C: Subregional Pathways for Adaptation and Resilience – Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2022 for ESCAP Subregions* (United Nations publication, 2022).

29. ESCAP continues to collaborate with ASEAN to advance the ASEAN Declaration on the Strengthening of Adaptation to Drought as a starting point for shifting disaster management towards a more risk-informed system. Three national case studies for strengthening adaptation to drought were developed for the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Indonesia and Thailand and further syntheses will produce advice on advancing the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Adaptation to Drought. In that regard, the Risk and Resilience Portal will be customized to inform ASEAN member States of subregional adaptation priorities through use of transboundary data to analyse risk scenarios, measure losses and identify vulnerable areas in the Mekong River basin.

E. Energy

30. A significant number of countries in Asia and the Pacific have announced increased aspiration to create more sustainable energy systems through ambitious renewable energy and net-zero emissions targets. At the same time, there are numerous efforts in the region to increase cross-border power system connectivity.

31. As regards the implementation of the regional road map on power system connectivity: promoting cross-border electricity connectivity for sustainable development, the latest ESCAP analysis shows that increased electricity connectivity in the north-east Asia subregion can yield a number of benefits, including enabling the integration of higher shares of renewable energy resources, lower energy costs and improved energy security.

32. ESCAP is working on a green power corridor road map for North-East Asia. The green power corridor is intended to provide a common language and vision for regional cooperation on power grid connectivity. It supports national emissions reduction and renewables development goals and is being developed in coordination with national energy strategies, power grid development plans and regulatory frameworks.

33. ESCAP has developed a national expert tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the field of energy planning and has supported countries in developing national Sustainable Development Goal 7 road maps in Bhutan, Kiribati and Pakistan. Moreover, ESCAP has supported the provinces of Surat Thani, Udon Thani and Chiang Rai in Thailand; and the cities of Borongan and Ormoc in the Philippines in developing subnational-level sustainable energy transition road maps.

34. ESCAP has collaborated with UNEP in developing and applying a national cooling action plan methodology to support countries, including Cambodia, Indonesia and Viet Nam, in assessing their cooling sectors and developing a comprehensive framework for action to mitigate rising cooling demand and the associated energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Following the launch of the national cooling action plan of Cambodia, ESCAP, in partnership with UNEP, is supporting the Government through a pilot demonstration of passive cooling strategies as the first step in the plan's implementation.

F. Transport

35. ESCAP has been implementing various activities of the Regional Action Programme for Sustainable Transport Development in Asia and the Pacific (2022-2026), with the objectives of advancing efficient and resilient transport and logistics networks and mobility for economic growth, environmentally sustainable transport systems and services, and safe and inclusive transport and mobility in the region. The activities, which are directly or indirectly relevant to the Sustainable

Development Goals, emphasize the ways in which transport is not just an enabler of the Sustainable Development Goals but, in many ways, also a prerequisite of success.

36. At the seventh session of the Committee on Transport held in Bangkok in November 2022, government officials, representatives of international organizations and civil society and other stakeholders took stock of the status of regional transport and discussed strategic issues of transport development and the formulation of regional policies to advance sustainable, safe, resilient and low-carbon transport in the region. The Committee welcomed the latest achievements in regional transport connectivity, including the finalization of the guidelines for harmonization of national laws on multimodal transport in Asia and the Pacific and the revision of the Model Subregional Agreement on Transport Facilitation, as a means of addressing the issue of crisis-related provisions in road transport agreements. The Committee endorsed, in principle, the draft elements of the guiding principles for sustainable freight transport in Asia and the Pacific. The development of infrastructure and operational connectivity along the Asia-Pacific regional transport network will be reviewed and discussed at the upcoming meetings in June and September 2023 of the intergovernmental Working Groups on the Asian Highway, Trans-Asian Railway Network and Dry Ports.

37. The Committee welcomed the establishment of the regional cooperation mechanism on low carbon transport and noted with appreciation the development of the Asia-Pacific initiative on electric mobility to accelerate the transition to electric mobility for public transport in the region. As a result, consultation and capacity-building workshops on low carbon transport for all ESCAP subregions have been conducted in 2022 and 2023 to identify common low carbon transport policy priorities and to determine a cooperation framework moving forward. ESCAP is assisting its members States in formulating national policies and strategies for effectively transitioning towards electric mobility in public transport fleets, including in Cambodia, Fiji, Georgia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Nepal and Thailand.

38. The Committee welcomed the Regional Plan of Action for Asia and the Pacific for the Second Decade of Action for Road Safety 2021–2030, which will guide and support efforts by member States to reduce road traffic deaths and injuries by at least 50 per cent between 2021 and 2030 and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal targets related to road safety, particularly target 3.6, by 2030. In supporting member countries in their efforts to improve road safety, the secretariat is currently implementing, jointly with implementing partners, five United Nations Road Safety Fund projects: to improve the driver licensing system in the Lao People's Democratic Republic; strengthen capacity of the Iranian National Road Safety Commission as the lead national road safety agency in the Islamic Republic of Iran; enhance safe and inclusive road design in countries of Central Asia; improve motorized two-wheeler safety in Thailand; and promote the use of motorcycle anti-lock braking system in the member States of ASEAN. The secretariat also co-implemented a project with UNDP Nepal to improve road safety management in Nepal.

39. ESCAP has extended capacity-building support to member States and cities in the planning of integrated, sustainable, inclusive and resilient urban public transport systems. Furthermore, a pilot project has been established on enhancing the integration of public transport systems by using digital technologies covering the target cities of Chattogram (Bangladesh), Lautoka (Fiji), Almaty (Kazakhstan), Dushanbe (Tajikistan) and Bukhara (Uzbekistan). In order to assess the level of sustainability in urban transport, ESCAP has continued to apply its sustainable urban transport index assessment framework in various cities to summarize, track and compare the performance of cities in sustainable urban transport and in implementing related Sustainable Development Goals. To date, ESCAP has conducted assessments in more than 20 cities in 12 member States.

III. Strengthening the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda

A. Financing for development

40. Preliminary analysis by ESCAP of the multifaceted socioeconomic implications of the war in Ukraine suggests that several Asia-Pacific countries, many of which are countries in special situations, could be harder hit because their economic structure and conditions are more exposed to higher energy and food prices, smaller external financial inflows and/or rising financing costs.¹² To reduce the immediate impacts of the war and increase resilience to future economic and price shocks, Governments could ensure that existing government assistance and subsidy schemes benefit those in need, accelerate the transition towards renewable energy, explore additional transport routes and leverage modern technology for seamless cross-border connectivity.

41. Amid rising government debt levels, higher financing costs and uncertain economic outlook, the risk of public debt distress would be considerable in coming years. In this context, the *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2023: Rethinking Public Debt for the Sustainable Development Goals* calls for a significant shift in thinking about the public debt-development nexus, arguing that public debt can be a powerful sustainable development tool if used judiciously and with a long-term horizon.¹³ To support this new thinking, ESCAP proposes an “augmented” approach to assessing public debt sustainability in the long term, which duly incorporates national Sustainable Development Goals-related spending needs and financing strategies as well as government structural development policies. The quantitative analysis in a pilot country (Mongolia) shows that public indebtedness trends downward after consideration of a wide range of Sustainable Development Goal financing strategies and the sizeable socioeconomic and environmental benefits of investment in the Sustainable Development Goals.

42. At the same time, countries of the Asia-Pacific region should strike a balance between attaining the Sustainable Development Goals and maintaining public debt sustainability through enhanced debt management, effective revenue mobilization and greater public spending efficiency and effectiveness. Countries facing elevated debt distress would benefit from pre-emptive, swift and adequate debt restructurings. To this end, ESCAP calls for the international community to accelerate progress towards establishing common international debt resolution mechanisms and restructuring frameworks.

43. To help Sri Lanka build forward better from the ongoing economic and fiscal crisis, ESCAP partnered with the country’s Sustainable Development Council, Ministry of Finance and central bank to conduct a technical assistance project on macroeconomic modelling for sustainable development. The national study shows that a package of public policies aimed at enhancing fiscal resources and fostering inclusive and green development would not only help bring down government debt but also reduce poverty and income inequality, cut carbon emissions and improve air quality.

44. ESCAP works to catalyse climate investment by supporting the development and deployment of financing instruments, such as green bonds. In the Asia-Pacific

¹² ESCAP, “The war in Ukraine: impacts, exposure and policy issues in Asia and the Pacific”, policy brief, May 2022.

¹³ *Economic and Social Survey for Asia and the Pacific 2023: Rethinking Public Debt for the Sustainable Development Goals* (United Nations publication, 2023).

region, ESCAP provided technical assistance to Governments for developing a green bond framework, green bonds issuance and other climate finance instruments. This includes ongoing support to the development of the Green Bond Framework of Bhutan and the sustainable and green finance strategy and guidelines on thematic bond issuance under the National Bank of Cambodia. ESCAP is also working with Governments in exploring innovative financing mechanisms for the Sustainable Development Goals, such as a debt-for-climate swap in Sri Lanka.

45. ESCAP provided support to member States in the use of data analytics and digital technologies in tax administration to combat tax avoidance and tax evasion and improve tax compliance. This has included a regional dialogue on the digitalization of tax administrations in Asia and the Pacific for policymakers and experts from the region, technical and capacity support to tax officials in Bhutan and the online publication of a policy manual on the use of digital tools for enhancing tax administration effectiveness. Technical support was also delivered to help countries explore policy options for taxing the booming digital economy. This has included a regional dialogue for policymakers and experts on the taxation of the digital economy and capacity-building for the National Board of Revenue of Bangladesh.

46. ESCAP and its partners, the Association of Development Finance Institutions in Asia and the Pacific, the Global Reporting Initiative, the United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative and the World Wide Fund for Nature, launched the Finance Flows' Sustainable Banking Academy. The Academy is a certification programme, based on online instruction, that focuses on mainstreaming green banking and environmental, social and governance dimensions in the operation of financial institutions.

B. Technology

47. In most countries, including those in Asia and the Pacific, many daily activities are now being measured digitally and conducted more precisely. An estimated 96 per cent of the population in Asia and the Pacific is now covered by mobile broadband. Latest ESCAP analysis argues that to stay ahead of the curve of digital transformation, countries need to look beyond connectivity infrastructure. In the new digital-by-default paradigm, the choice is no longer about whether to opt into digital transformation, but rather about how to improve its adoption and performance.¹⁴

48. In this context, the Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation, at its fourth session, examined the opportunities of digital transformation for people, Governments and businesses and the widening digital divide both between and within countries in the region. The Committee endorsed the Action Plan for Implementing the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative, 2022–2026. The Committee also highlighted the need for regional cooperation to continue so as to increase access to and leverage of innovative digital applications of geospatial information to further strengthen the contribution of space applications to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁵

49. At the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Space Applications for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific, member States adopted the Jakarta Ministerial Declaration on Space Applications for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific.¹⁶ The Declaration reflects the strong commitment of countries to using

¹⁴ *Asia-Pacific Digital Transformation Report 2022: Shaping Our Digital Future* (United Nations publication, 2022).

¹⁵ ESCAP/CICTSTI/2022/6.

¹⁶ ESCAP/MCSASD/2022/3/Add.1.

innovative space applications to address the outstanding and emerging development challenges of persistent poverty, food security, threats to global health and increasing vulnerability to disasters, climate change and environmental degradation. Member States agreed to accelerate phase II of the Asia-Pacific Plan of Action on Space Applications for Sustainable Development (2018–2030)¹⁷ under the guiding theme “Space+ for our Earth and future”, comprising four core elements: leveraging innovative digital applications; engaging end users, including the private sector and youth; managing data and information more effectively; and enhancing partnerships with national, regional and global stakeholders.

50. ESCAP helped support innovations in digital finance, including through the creation of a fintech app in Bangladesh to support rural farm entrepreneurs, the promotion of digital tokens in Nepal to enhance accessibility of funding and promotion of technology-based solutions for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises to facilitate their access to finance. Other outcomes of support, for example, in developing gender-smart finance and investment instruments, include the world’s first women’s livelihood bond, listed on the Singapore stock exchange; a women-focused impact investment fund for Asia; and a guarantee fund to de-risk the perceived risk of investing in women-led enterprises. ESCAP also supported the Hi-Tech Park Authority of Bangladesh in integrating a gender perspective into the Bangladesh start-up ecosystem; and the Reserve Bank of Fiji in integrating a gender perspective into the Fiji National Financial Inclusion Strategy.

C. Trade, investment and innovation

51. Regional trade has been recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and is expected to grow further in 2023, albeit at a slower pace than in 2022. Reflecting the accelerating digital transformation in many economies, digital trade rose sharply during the pandemic, with significant implications for regional trade. Nevertheless, many uncertainties lie ahead, including trade frictions, recession risks and geopolitical tensions, and it remains to be seen how longer-term changes in value chains will evolve as countries rethink their trade and investment policies post pandemic. In this regard, the first session of the Committee on Trade, Investment, Enterprise and Business Innovation shared views on how opportunities can be leveraged to accelerate progress for sustainable development.¹⁸

52. ESCAP has provided its members States with significant technical assistance and capacity-building support on digital trade facilitation and digital trade. It has supported 18 countries in the region in completing national readiness assessments for cross-border paperless trade and developing initial action plans and conducted multiple webinars and in-person capacity-building events. ESCAP continued to provide secretariat support for the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific¹⁹ and welcomed six new parties to this United Nations treaty in 2022. Its work is increasingly used as a global reference, as exemplified by the cross-border paperless trade tool kit released jointly by ESCAP, the World Trade Organization and the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law.

53. As requested by member States, ESCAP has deepened its research on digital trade. Based on the regional digital trade integration index developed jointly with the Economic Commission for Africa and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, ESCAP published the Asia-Pacific Digital Trade Regulatory

¹⁷ ESCAP/75/10/Add.2.

¹⁸ See ESCAP/CTIEBI(1)/8.

¹⁹ United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 3387, No. 56556.

Review 2022,²⁰ analysing the digital trade policy circumstances of 21 economies. A report on digital trade and investment for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific is under preparation in collaboration with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization.

54. ESCAP has provided capacity-building support to member States in the areas of strengthening trade resilience and sustainability, trade policy analysis for pandemic recovery, sustainable development provisions in trade agreements, and non-tariff measures and sustainable development. Together with UNCTAD, the other regional commissions and other partners, ESCAP has organized courses on trade negotiation in times of a pandemic or other types of crisis and in this regard developed a handbook and an associated “model chapter on trade in crisis situations in regional trade agreements”.²¹ Assistance in trade negotiation is provided increasingly through the online Trade Intelligence and Negotiation Adviser.²²

55. ESCAP is working with investment promotion agencies in the region to build their capacity in promoting and facilitating foreign direct investment (FDI) in three key areas related to sustainable development, namely, promoting gender equality, bridging digital divides and addressing climate change. ESCAP has worked with Invest Bhutan, the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority, the Investment Promotion Division of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Cooperatives of Kiribati, the Board of Investments of the Philippines and Investment Fiji in developing proactive investment attraction strategies in those areas. ESCAP provided three capacity-building workshops on active investment promotion for sustainable development to countries of the region in special situations and supported ASEAN in hosting a sustainable FDI investment opportunities roadshow during the ASEAN Leaders Summit.

56. The Third Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific, organized by ESCAP in partnership with ADB, emphasized the need for political leadership to support trade, investment, growth, employment, connectivity and inclusivity. While infrastructure networks have improved, regional integration through trade, value chains and financial markets has not advanced sustainably. At the Conference, the importance of multilateralism and regional cooperation in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals was stressed, as well as the need for streamlined cross-border trade procedures, harmonized standards and inclusive platforms. Recent crises have exposed deficiencies in international cooperation, underscoring the need for regional cooperation in improving access to essential goods and minimizing supply chain disruptions.²³

57. ESCAP has supported ASEAN member States in developing national policies to promote inclusive business. This work has included conducting national inclusive business landscape studies in Cambodia, Malaysia and Viet Nam and developing a road map for promoting inclusive business in wellness tourism in Indonesia. ESCAP has provided advisory services to the Philippines, which resulted in the filing of two inclusive business bills for deliberation in the country’s upper and lower houses of Congress.

58. In collaboration with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, ESCAP is supporting the promotion of inclusive business models in agriculture and food

²⁰ *Asia-Pacific Digital Trade Regulatory Review 2022* (United Nations publication, 2022).

²¹ United Nations publication, 2022. See www.unescap.org/projects/imp.

²² See www.tina.trade.

²³ See United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Report of the Third Ministerial Conference on Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Asia and the Pacific (28–30 September 2022) (ESCAP/MCREI/2022/5).

systems in India, Thailand and Viet Nam. Such support will include policy advisory services, for example, related to developing an inclusive business accreditation system in Viet Nam and conducting landscape studies of inclusive business in India and Thailand. Support will also include providing business coaching to 30 enterprises in India and Viet Nam that are seeking to develop or expand an inclusive business line.

59. The ESCAP Sustainable Business Network continues to engage and establish partnerships with the private sector. The ESCAP Sustainable Business Network, which consists of private sector entities from the region, has committed to advancing sustainable development. The Network acts as a platform for highlighting Asia-Pacific business leadership on sustainability to drive businesses towards implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In August 2022, the Network launched the Asia-Pacific Green Deal for Business,²⁴ which calls upon businesses to commit to the necessary green transformation of the economy by taking action in the following areas: green energy, green infrastructure and logistics, green finance, green innovation, production and consumption, and waste.

60. ESCAP launched the Infrastructure Financing and Public-Private Partnerships Network of Asia and the Pacific in 2018. As a result of the Network's robust engagement with member States through the InfraPPPnet web portal initiative²⁵ and capacity-building events, ESCAP has received responses reflecting strong interest and requests from member States for developing and strengthening public-private partnerships, capital market development and related knowledge products on infrastructure financing. ESCAP is working directly with the Governments of Bhutan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and Tajikistan on technical assistance requests related to public-private partnerships and infrastructure financing.

61. ESCAP achieved several milestones in the context of the Infrastructure Financing and Public-Private Partnerships Network over the previous year (2022–2023), including the launch of the first technical training series in January 2022 based on a technical assistance request from the Government of India and the hosting of the seventh meeting of the Network in Thailand in June 2022. ESCAP partnered with the Presidency of Egypt of the twenty-seventh session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the high-level champions for climate action and organized a regional forum in August 2022 followed by the eighth meeting of the Network in Istanbul, Türkiye, in January 2023. The Network highlighted climate-resilient and gender-inclusive considerations in project implementations and consolidated over 80 regional infrastructure projects across 12 sectors with an investment value of 25.7 billion United States dollars through the newly revamped InfraPPPnet web portal.

²⁴ See www.unescap.org/projects/gd.

²⁵ See ppp.unescap.org.

D. Data and statistics

62. There has been significant progress achieved by the national statistical systems of the Asia-Pacific region on approximately one third of the performance indicators contained in the document entitled “Advancing official statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community”²⁶ and the Declaration on Navigating Policy with Data to Leave No One Behind²⁷ for statistical development to support the 2030 Agenda. The number of Sustainable Development Goal indicators with sufficient data to measure progress doubled between 2017 and 2022. Moreover, many countries have made significant progress towards achieving the goals and targets under the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. There has been significant progress made by the national statistical systems of the Asia-Pacific region on approximately one third of the performance indicators listed in the above-mentioned Asia-Pacific collective vision document and achieving the goals under the above-mentioned Declaration on statistical development to support the 2030 Agenda.

63. In this context, at the eighth session of the Committee on Statistics, discussions were held on statistical development in the region, regional cooperation and the formulation of regional positions to advance official statistics in line with the collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community. The session also had dedicated interactive dialogues on emerging issues of relevance to statistical systems in Asia and the Pacific such as data governance and measuring progress beyond gross domestic product (GDP).²⁸

64. ESCAP contributed to developing globally agreed guidance on various topics, including disaster-related statistics and ocean accounts, through co-chairing of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Disaster-related Statistics under the Statistical Commission and the multi-stakeholder Global Ocean Accounts Partnership.

65. ESCAP has supported 11 countries in the region (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Mongolia, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand and Vanuatu) in creating Sustainable Development Goals progress assessments using national targets and indicators. The results of the exercise fed into national development planning processes and the development of voluntary national reviews.

66. ESCAP has provided technical assistance to countries on a range of issues, including to Bangladesh in the development of an indicator framework and the identification of data sources for disaster risk management; Maldives in the development of a data dissemination platform; Mongolia in improving statistical business processes and the development of an online training platform for official statistics; Palau and Samoa in developing pilot ocean accounts; Nepal on data integration and a climate change impact survey; and Nepal and Sri Lanka on disaster-related statistics. ESCAP has supported a range of countries on strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems.

67. With the support of ESCAP, a network of young professionals has been established for the countries of Central Asia to promote the adoption of new data sources and methods for producing official statistics. ESCAP has supported Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan on the measurement of illicit financial flows and Kyrgyzstan on the development of an indicator inventory.

²⁶ Note by the ESCAP secretariat (E/ESCAP/CST(5)/1).

²⁷ ESCAP/CST/2018/7.

²⁸ ESCAP/CST/2022/8.

68. The United Nations Statistical Institute for Asia and Pacific continues to provide dedicated capacity-building exercises to the national statistical systems. For instance, the Institute collaborated with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Statistics Korea to deliver regional training for Goal 4 monitoring using Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey data.

69. The regular online webinar series entitled “Asia-Pacific Stats Café” continued to facilitate exchanges of practices and advice between United Nations entities and entities encompassing national statistical systems. Throughout 2022, in its 22 sessions, the series brought together an audience of over 1,900 participants to explore a wide range of topics aligned to country priorities and requests for assistance such as calculating the economic cost of disasters, estimating illicit financial flows, children on the move, and mainstreaming gender in official statistics.

70. As the convener of the Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals Data and Statistics under the Regional Collaborative Platform, ESCAP organized a series of online engagements, called statistics clinics, which have been at the core of strengthening the capacity of country teams in the collection and analysis of specific indicators, with a focus on areas, such as decent work, migration, gender and women empowerment, education, and food and agriculture, where data gaps exist in the region.

71. Through ESCAP, the data and statistics working groups provided ad hoc country-based support at the request of the resident coordinators and country teams in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

E. South-South cooperation

72. In 2022, South-South cooperation remained a key modality through which member States could advance sustainable development and address transboundary issues such as response to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and geopolitical conflicts. The secretariat facilitated coordination and cooperation between member States by providing high-profile engagement platforms and mainstreaming good practices.

73. At the fourth Asia-Pacific Directors-General Forum in 2022, under the theme “Mapping multilateral support via South-South and triangular Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific: getting back on track to realize the 2030 Agenda”, regional South-South cooperation needs were discussed and ideas were exchanged on improving the access to available South-South and triangular cooperation support and resources, including assistance to new and emerging technical assistance providers

74. The eleventh edition of the Global South-South Development Expo, an event highlighting innovations of the South in tackling cross-cutting challenges, was co-organized by the Government of Thailand, ESCAP and the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation and held from 12 to 14 September 2022. The event brought together over 4,000 participants globally, including more than 30 United Nations entities, 150 Governments, international organizations, civil society, the private sector and academia.

IV. Raising the level of ambition for climate action in Asia and the Pacific

75. The current level of climate ambition falls far short of what is needed to avoid catastrophic climate change. Analysis by ESCAP, UNEP and UNICEF shows that, even if countries deliver on existing commitments in nationally determined

contributions, it is estimated that in 2030, greenhouse gas emissions will have increased by over 16 per cent compared with 2010.²⁹ A total of 39 countries have made carbon-neutrality pledges, doubling the number of pledges recorded for 2021 after the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. In this context, ESCAP, in collaboration with the regional United Nations development system, provides technical support to countries in assessing the level of ambition of their nationally determined contribution commitments to support a 1.5°C pathway.

76. Engaging private sector, investments and finance is key to accelerating the net-zero transition. At the Asia-Pacific Business Forum in August 2022, the ESCAP Sustainable Business Network launched its latest initiative, the Asia-Pacific Green Deal for Business, which calls upon businesses to commit to the necessary green transformation of the economy.

77. Together with other regional commissions, ESCAP worked with the high-level champions for climate action and the presidency of the twenty-seventh session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to present investment opportunities for private sector climate finance at the twenty-seventh session and beyond. A pipeline of 26 climate-aligned investment opportunities in the region in a wide range of areas, such as green grids, energy transition, sustainable transport and climate-resilient agriculture, was identified and introduced at that session.

78. At the country level, ESCAP is working with the Global Green Growth Institute and the Securities and Exchange Regulator of Cambodia to accelerate financing towards green, sustainable and net-zero projects in that country. As part of this partnership, the Cambodia Sustainable Bond Accelerator: Empowering Issuers through Technical Assistance programme was also launched, in collaboration with the Credit Guarantee and Investment Facility and GuarantCo, which is part of the Private Infrastructure Development Group.

79. The Ministry of Environment of Cambodia announced its new national cooling action plan for Cambodia, the first to be developed in South-East Asia. ESCAP, in partnership with UNEP under the framework of the Cool Coalition and with the support of Energy Foundation China, jointly developed a national cooling action plan methodology, which was piloted in Cambodia to support the Ministry of Environment in identifying climate-friendly and low-energy cooling pathways.

80. The momentum will be continued at the seventy-ninth session of the Commission as government leaders from across Asia and the Pacific and other key stakeholders gather to discuss policy options and areas for the regional cooperation required to accelerate climate action in the region and beyond. The session will allow the identification of opportunities and the sharing of solutions and facilitate engagement of a broad set of partners and stakeholders, to both reduce the risks and impacts of climate change and foster ambitious climate action in Asia and the Pacific towards net-zero pathways and the limiting of global temperature rise to no more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

V. Leveraging partnerships for sustainable development

81. In 2022, ESCAP continued to work with various regional and subregional partners. As a result of ongoing cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to strengthen the complementarity of the ASEAN Community

²⁹ 2022 Review of Climate Ambition in Asia and the Pacific: Raising NDC Targets with Enhanced Nature-based Solutions (United Nations publication, 2022).

Vision concept for the period up to 2025 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as part of its sixth high-level Sustainable Development Goals dialogue, ESCAP identified ways to accelerate the implementation of the Goals. The two organizations jointly organized the fifth ASEAN Inclusive Business Summit, at which the progress made in promoting a more enabling environment for inclusive business in various ASEAN countries and around the world was reviewed. There were discussions on opportunities for cooperation in the field of policy promotion tools, such as business coaching, accreditation, impact monitoring and joint reporting, as well as risk reduction, and on financing, and an exchange of views on women's economic empowerment and climate change adaptation solutions through inclusive business. The Summit provided a common forum for sharing experiences and learning from innovative and inclusive business cases in the region.

82. The ESCAP secretariat supported collaboration within the United Nations development system at the regional level in its convening and secretarial role under the Regional Collaborative Platform in Asia and the Pacific. Under the auspices of the Regional Collaborative Platform, the issue-based coalitions and groups have facilitated the channelling of regional expertise and knowledge assets to ensure policy coherence, mobilize regional actions and support national interventions in cooperation with the resident coordinators and United Nations country teams.

83. The issue-based coalition on raising ambitions on climate action, led by ESCAP and the United Nations Environment Programme, analysed the region's progress in limiting global warming to 1.5°C. The results served as the basis for dialogues with resident coordinators and United Nations country teams to enable discussion of required actions related to the twenty-seventh session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and a multi-stakeholder discussion at the session. The coalition also produced climate science literacy materials and commemorated the International Day of Clean Air for Blue Skies to advocate for climate action.

84. The coalition on inclusive economic and COVID-19 recovery exchanged knowledge and data with economists at the offices of resident coordinators to help United Nations country teams understand the impact of the energy, food and fuel crisis and strengthen social protection systems. The issue-based coalition on building resilience supported United Nations country teams in building capacity for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, as exemplified in Papua New Guinea and Maldives.

85. The Sustainable Development Goals Data and Statistics Working Group, co-led by ESCAP and the United Nations Population Fund, continued to offer technical support to resident coordinators and United Nations country teams in the area of data and statistics. The group's popular online series, entitled "Sustainable Development Goals statistics clinics", has been instrumental in building the capacity of United Nations country teams by equipping them with the necessary knowledge and tools for the collection and analysis of specific indicators. The Working Group provided country-based support to resident coordinators and United Nations country teams in Bangladesh and Pakistan to strengthen their national data systems and fill indicator gaps.

VI. Conclusions

86. While the Asia-Pacific region faces significant challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, compounded by the cascading socioeconomic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical conflicts, natural disasters and the climate crisis, efforts by countries that have demonstrated

commitment and progress towards the Goals highlight the pathways for further progress in the years ahead. Intergovernmental discussions in the region in the past year have allowed the strengthening of commitments and the building of momentum in key areas such as leaving no one behind, protecting the planet and leveraging the means of implementation. Midway through the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and in the lead-up to the 2023 SDG Summit, ESCAP has continued to work in evolving and innovative ways to support member States in countering the interlocking and complex crises and advance the 2030 Agenda, through mobilizing the United Nations development system and engaging a wide range of partners and stakeholders, thereby accelerating action towards the achievement of the Goals.
