



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
15 January 2020

Original: English

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

Seventh Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development

Bangkok, 20 May 2020

Item 2 of the provisional agenda*

Regional perspectives on accelerating progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Acceleration along transformative pathways to deliver sustainable development

Note by the secretariat

Summary

With only 10 years left to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the next decade is crucial. Although there have been gains in some areas, no country in the Asia-Pacific region has achieved sufficient progress across all areas. The 2020 high-level political forum on sustainable development will focus attention on the need to accelerate transformations. Based on a review of successful regional efforts, the present document serves to point the way towards initiating and sustaining transformations for the achievement of the Goals.

The acceleration of transformation requires a compelling sense of direction and urgency, a bold commitment to remove systemic barriers, a readiness on the part of institutions and diverse groups in society to innovate and sustain change, and an upgraded and updated approach to policymaking.

I. Introduction

1. No member State of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals 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 path. Climate change, plastic waste, water scarcity and resource security are increasingly on political agendas. For example, people and economies are severely impacted by air pollution across Asia and the Pacific, home to 99 of the 100 most polluted cities in the world.¹ Rising sea levels and wildfires are displacing people and taking lives. Deprivation persists in the midst of plenty. Transformations are urgently needed.

* ESCAP/RFSD/2020/L.1/Rev.1

¹ IQAir AirVisual, “2018 world air quality report: region and city PM 2.5 ranking”. Available at www.airvisual.com/world-most-polluted-cities/world-air-quality-report-2018-en.pdf (accessed on 10 December 2019).

2. Institutional capacities to drive and effectively manage change are increasingly important, in particular in relation to social justice, resource use patterns, investment flows and economic structure.² Governments are confronted with disruptive technological advances, a connected but increasingly fragmented public, declining trust in institutions, slowing economic activity and changing demographics, among other challenges.

3. These challenges set the stage for the coming decade, a crucial period for delivering on sustainable development and the aspiration of leaving no one behind. In the political declaration of the 2019 high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly,³ world leaders took note of the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019*, in which the following six transformative entry points or areas were identified to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals: human well-being and capabilities, shifting towards sustainable and just economies, building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns, achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy, promoting sustainable urban and peri-urban development, and securing the global environmental commons (see box).⁴ These areas have strong linkages across the Goals. Each of these entry points is explored in document ESCAP/RFSD/2020/INF/2.

² See *Transformations for Sustainable Development: Promoting Environmental Sustainability in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.16.II.F.5).

³ General Assembly resolution 74/4, annex.

⁴ Independent group of scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development* (United Nations, New York, 2019).

Six transformative entry points for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

Human well-being and capabilities are at the heart of the transformations envisaged in the 2030 Agenda. Health, education and life free from deprivations such as poverty play a critical role in determining the capabilities of people to make and realize life choices. Also important are the societal institutions and rule of law that enable a peaceful society. As the region is home to more than 60 per cent of the global population, this transformative area is crucial for harnessing the region's abundant human potential.

Shifting towards sustainable and just economies is fundamentally about promoting equality; ensuring economic opportunities, especially jobs, for growing populations; and decoupling economic systems from detrimental environmental outcomes. The region still uses double the quantity of material resources to produce each dollar of economic output compared to the global average.^a In parts of the region, the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training is more than 40 per cent, while pension systems only serve approximately 58 per cent of the pensionable population.^b There is an urgent need to ensure that economic systems work for all vulnerable groups.

Feeding an ever-increasing population with limited resources is a persistent challenge of the present era. Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns is particularly relevant for a region where close to 489 million people remain undernourished^c yet rates of obesity continue to rise, with an associated cost upward of 0.78 per cent of regional gross domestic product, or \$166 billion annually.^d

Achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy is the key to economic development and social well-being in the digital era, but the energy sector remains the main contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in the region. In many parts of the region, renewable energy is already becoming the cheapest source of power generation,^e setting the stage for rapid transitions to cleaner energy systems.

In light of the fact that the region became majority urban for the first time in history in 2019, with 2.3 billion urban residents, promoting sustainable urban and peri-urban development is crucial. Ensuring habitat sustainability for the majority population offers potential for further sustainable development in the region.

Securing the global environmental commons is about respecting planetary boundaries and preserving the Earth's shared resources and global ecological systems. The region is a hotspot of biodiversity, accounting for more than half of the world's remaining mangrove areas and enjoying the highest levels of marine biodiversity and seagrass diversity in the world.^f The region is also extremely vulnerable to climate change, and a high percentage of its population is exposed to unhealthy levels of air and water pollution. Securing the environmental commons is a question of survival in the region.

^a ESCAP Statistical Online Database. Available at http://data.unescap.org/escap_stat/ (accessed on 10 December 2019).

^b Ibid.

^c Ibid.

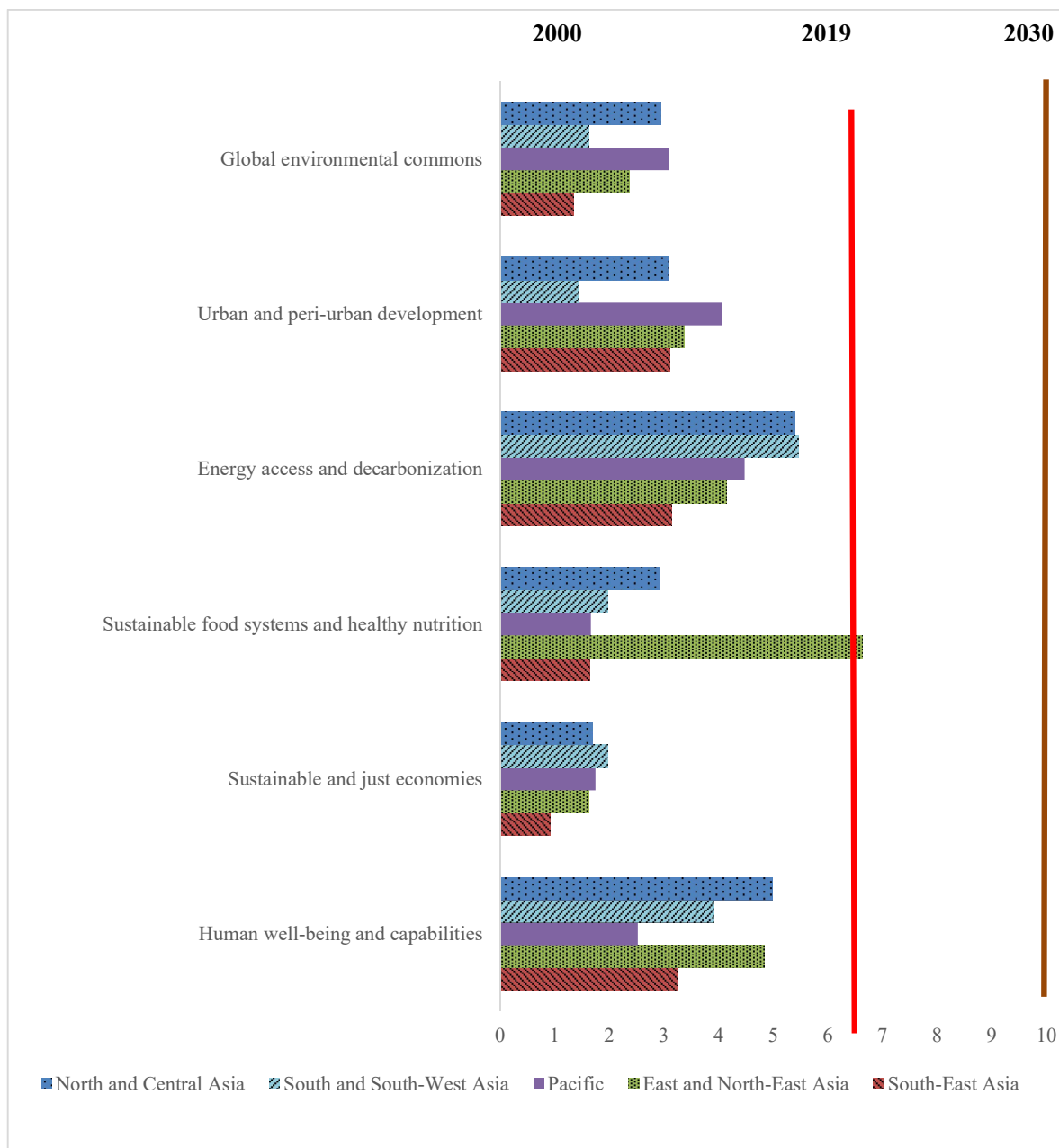
^d Matthias Helble and Kris Francisco, "The imminent obesity crisis in Asia and the Pacific: first cost estimates", ADBI Working Paper Series, No. 743 (Tokyo, Asian Development Bank Institute, 2017).

^e See Anadolu Agency, "India leads with lowest renewable cost in Asia Pacific", 29 July 2019.

^f See ESCAP/CED/2018/1.

4. Given these transformative entry points, the need for a collective, holistic approach is clear. A closer look at each of the entry points shows that, for some of the relevant Sustainable Development Goal targets and indicators, there are important shortcomings in progress to date. Average regional progress since 2000 in the six transformative areas is traced in the figure.⁵ This further underlines the need to think about strategies for accelerating transformation.

Snapshot of regional progress



Source: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) calculations based on methodology from *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020* (forthcoming) and data from the ESCAP Statistical Online Database. Available at http://data.unescap.org/escap_stat/ (accessed on 10 December 2019).

⁵ See ESCAP/RFSD/2020/INF/2 for further details on levels of progress in the six transformative areas.

5. In the present document the types of actions that promote rapid, transformative change are identified and recommendations are made based on an analysis of the rates of change and levels of achievement across the region in each of the six transformative areas. These findings are drawn from the forthcoming Sustainable Development Goal Partnership report, prepared jointly by ESCAP, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

6. Section II contains highlighted experiences of the countries that, according to the analysis, are sprinting ahead of others in the region. Section III contains a discussion of factors that have contributed to accelerated progress. Looking to the future, section IV contains recommendations for accelerating transformations that can be used in dealing with the complex challenges of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

II. Accelerating progress: lessons learned

7. Country-level data on progress in each of the six transformative areas reveal some interesting insights on acceleration. Here, acceleration is understood as the ability of any country to defy the average historical trajectories of progress charted by the rest of the world for any given indicator. On the basis of data analysis from the Asia-Pacific Sustainable Development Goal Partnership, countries of the region are placed in four broad groups (see the annex for a summary of the methodology used in the analysis):

(a) Aspirants: countries with low levels of achievement that are making relatively slow progress and that urgently need to accelerate their rate of progress;

(b) Fast risers: countries with low levels of achievement that are making fast progress relative to others at the same level of achievement and that still have some way to go, but may be poised for long-term success if momentum can be maintained;

(c) Sprinters: countries with relatively high levels of achievement that are making fast progress as compared to the rest of the region and that have covered ground very quickly in terms of their level of achievement with regard to the transformative entry point;

(d) Last-milers: countries with relatively high levels of achievement that are facing slowing progress because of the last-mile challenges of attaining hard-to-reach policy targets and beneficiaries.

8. Although limited by the data and indicators available, the analysis helps countries to situate themselves among their neighbours and to point to areas of relative strength or points for improvement. Emerging insights are summarized in the present section.

A. Presence of strong synergies across transformative areas

9. Although there are no sprinters across all six entry points, the analysis shows that fast risers and sprinters on one entry point are, on average, likely to perform well on other entry points; likewise aspirants in one area are likely to be aspirants in others. There is high correlation between the performance of countries across the transformative entry points. This provides a hint that the kinds of policy interventions and investments made in countries that are proven to accelerate and sustain progress in one transformative area often translate, by their very nature, to rapid and sustained progress in other areas.

B. No consistent sprinters across all six transformative areas

10. Despite the correlation between performance across entry points, there are no countries that are consistently sprinting ahead on all six transformative entry points. There are only 11 countries, namely Armenia, Australia, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Turkey, that are sprinting forward in three or more areas. Only two countries, namely Indonesia and Malaysia, were found to be sprinters in four areas.

11. It is possible that this is due to differing and, at times, competing priorities set at the national level. It could also be that some of the transformative areas that are lagging behind have not been given adequate national attention. Another reason could be that there are inherent trade-offs created by the approaches taken in various transformative areas that impede simultaneous acceleration. It is also possible that some transformative areas benefit more than others from an effective portfolio of policies, interventions, resources and partnerships. Regardless, it is important that Governments conduct deeper national performance analyses to understand what works in some areas but not in others, and why.

C. Income is not a silver bullet

12. Higher income (reflected in higher gross domestic product) is not a silver bullet for addressing Sustainable Development Goal challenges and achieving acceleration. The data analysis reveals that even low-income countries⁶ and lower-middle income countries⁷ frequently appear in the sprinter or fast riser groups (see table 1). A portfolio of coordinated solutions, including the effective use of data and technology and innovative partnerships, likely contributes to their success. Possible success factors are discussed in more detail in the next section.

⁶ ESCAP list of low-income countries: Afghanistan; Bangladesh; Bhutan; Cambodia; Democratic People's Republic of Korea; India; Kyrgyzstan; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Myanmar; Nepal; Pakistan; Papua New Guinea; Solomon Islands; Tajikistan; Timor-Leste; Uzbekistan; Vanuatu; and Viet Nam.

⁷ ESCAP list of lower middle-income countries: Armenia; Azerbaijan; Fiji; Georgia; Indonesia; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Kiribati; Marshall Islands; Micronesia (Federated States of); Mongolia; Philippines; Samoa; Sri Lanka; Thailand; Tonga; Turkmenistan; and Tuvalu.

Table 1
Low-income and lower-middle income countries that have achieved significant acceleration

<i>Transformative area</i>	<i>Countries</i>
Strengthening human well-being and capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Armenia • Georgia • Iran (Islamic Republic of)
Shifting towards sustainable and just economies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bangladesh • India • Indonesia • Philippines • Sri Lanka • Thailand
Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democratic People's Republic of Korea • Indonesia • Iran (Islamic Republic of) • Lao People's Democratic Republic • Papua New Guinea • Sri Lanka • Uzbekistan • Viet Nam
Achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bhutan • Fiji • Indonesia • Iran (Islamic Republic of) • Kyrgyzstan • Tajikistan • Viet Nam
Promoting sustainable urban and peri-urban development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sri Lanka • Turkmenistan
Securing the global environmental commons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Armenia • Bangladesh • Georgia • Indonesia • Marshall Islands • Myanmar • Nepal • Tajikistan • Turkmenistan • Tuvalu • Uzbekistan

D. Sprinting ahead despite special needs

13. Countries with special needs⁸ also emerge as sprinters in several transformative areas (see table 2). For example, Maldives, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu emerge as sprinters in securing the global environmental commons. Bhutan, a landlocked developing country, has excelled in the transformative area of energy access and decarbonization, along with Fiji, a small island developing State. These successes indicate that there are multiple pathways for overcoming the limitations and unique circumstances of countries with special needs to accelerate sustainable development, as discussed in the next section.

Table 2

Countries emerging as sprinters despite special needs status

<i>Transformative area</i>	<i>Countries</i>
Strengthening human well-being and capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Armenia • Kazakhstan
Shifting towards sustainable and just economies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bangladesh • Kazakhstan
Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lao People's Democratic Republic • New Caledonia • Papua New Guinea
Achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Armenia • Bhutan • Fiji • Kazakhstan • Kyrgyzstan • Nauru • Singapore • Tajikistan
Promoting sustainable urban and peri-urban development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turkmenistan
Securing the global environmental commons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Armenia • Bangladesh • Maldives • Marshall Islands • Myanmar • Nepal • Tajikistan • Turkmenistan • Tuvalu • Uzbekistan

⁸ Least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States.

E. Human well-being and capabilities play a fundamental role

14. The analysis of interlinkages among the transformative areas also shows that countries that have made rapid progress (sprinters or fast risers) on the human well-being and capabilities entry point are more likely than others to be sprinting ahead or rising quickly in other transformative areas as well. The level of achievement of countries in this transformative area is strongly linked with achievements in other areas, and it is worth noting that fast progress in the area of human well-being and capabilities is an especially strong predictor of fast progress in the area of sustainable and just economies. Investing in human capital, particularly in education and health, to pave the way for sustainable and just economic growth is a tried and tested strategy in some of the most successful economies in the region.

15. Three of the sprinters on the human well-being and capabilities entry point, namely Singapore, Japan and the Republic of Korea, occupy the top three spots in the Human Capital Index of the World Bank.⁹ Since the 1960s, great emphasis has been placed on the development of a skilled work force in these three countries. This, combined with industrial and trade policies, paved the way for a virtuous cycle whereby rising incomes and industrial upgrading stimulated further investment in education and skills, which contributed to productivity increases, technological progress and the achievement of equitable growth.¹⁰ Other countries in the region are following this approach as reflected in the recent Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) High-level Meeting on Human Capital Development.¹¹

F. Foundational effects of energy infrastructure and equitable economic growth

16. Among all of the six entry points, accelerated progress in the energy sector seems to be linked with accelerated progress on the highest number of additional entry points. The co-benefits attached to energy access, as well as the multiplier impacts of decarbonization on the global environmental commons, help to explain these links. Viet Nam is a good example in the region of the co-benefits of electrification. Access to electricity increased in the country from less than 5 per cent in the 1970s to 98 per cent by 2014. This focus on rural electrification was a significant contributor to economic growth, poverty reduction and increased school enrolment.¹² Similarly, the analysis shows that progress in the area of sustainable and just economies is also strongly correlated with progress in other areas. Two countries in the region that have defied historic economic growth trajectories are India and China, where economic growth translated to a significant reduction in poverty together with improvements in human well-being.

⁹ See World Bank, Human Capital Index and Components, 2018. Available at www.worldbank.org/en/data/interactive/2018/10/18/human-capital-index-and-components-2018 (accessed on 10 December 2019).

¹⁰ Lee Jong-Wha, “Human capital development lessons from East Asia”, *Bangkok Post*, 18 February 2019.

¹¹ See “ASEAN policy makers commit to accelerating human capital development”, United Nations Children’s Fund, 9 September 2019. Available at www.unicef.org/eap/press-releases/asean-policy-makers-commit-accelerating-human-capital-development.

¹² David Stern, Paul Burke and Stephan Bruns, “The impact of electricity on economic development: a macroeconomic perspective”, Energy and Economic Growth (EEG) State-of-Knowledge Paper Series, No. 1 (Oxford Policy Management, 2017).

G. Significant last-mile challenges in urban and peri-urban contexts

17. The analysis shows that on the transformative entry point of urban and peri-urban development, a significant number of countries in the region are in the last-mile challenge quadrant, with very few countries emerging as sprinters. The analysis relied mostly on access to urban basic services (electricity, safe drinking water and sanitation) and exposure to air pollution. This implies that although many countries have managed to expand these basic services to cover a significant majority of the urban population, significant numbers remain unable to access quality services within urban areas that need urgent attention. Given this finding, it is not surprising that despite improvements for urban areas at the national aggregate level, the region is home to more than half a billion slum dwellers, which constitutes more than half of the world's total slum population.¹³ Data on intra-urban inequalities and data comparing indicators for slum versus non-slum areas constitute an important way forward, not only to leave no one behind but also to leave no place behind in the region. Data on peri-urban areas are often overlooked and problematic, despite high growth rates in the region. Although these areas are part of the functional city or metropolitan area, they often fall outside of the administrative boundaries and are counted as part of rural populations.

18. The regional population reached the milestone of becoming majority urban in 2019 and is expected to rise to more than 2.8 billion in 2030 and nearly 3.5 billion in 2050.¹⁴ Hence, the last-mile challenge of providing quality, affordable, resource-efficient and resilient infrastructure to this expanding urban population is poised to become even more significant in the future. At the same time, the region needs to make faster progress in environmentally sustainable urbanization, which is of particular concern given the growing pollution, notably air pollution, in urban centres of the region.

III. Factors contributing to accelerated progress

19. A closer look at the countries identified in the analysis as sprinters, in particular those which recorded the fastest progress,¹⁵ highlights a number of characteristics.

20. Successful countries demonstrated the capacity to mobilize various stakeholders around a common goal. For example, in Fiji, policy and institutional action to mainstream green growth are supported by a multi-ministry, multi-stakeholder panel on sustainable development.

21. In some cases, innovative and targeted measures were deployed to empower and incentivize specific institutions and stakeholders. There were also cases in which information proved to be a powerful tool. For example, a pan-India electronic portal was created to remove information asymmetry between buyers and sellers and promote real-time price discovery based on actual demand and supply in agricultural markets, thereby promoting a more unified market for agricultural commodities.

22. Comprehensive measures were found to target diverse sectors and actors and improve policy coherence and coordination. In Kazakhstan, for example, an employment initiative linked training and infrastructure development to support

¹³ See A/CONF.226/11.

¹⁴ *The Future of Asian and Pacific Cities: Transformative Pathways towards Sustainable Urban Development* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.20.II.F.1).

¹⁵ The analysis draws on experiences in three of the six transformative areas: sustainable and just economies; human well-being and capabilities; and energy decarbonization and access.

business start-ups and address skill mismatches while subsidizing labour. Comprehensive policies were often accompanied by institutional strengthening.

23. Strategic experimentation enabled learning and provided the confidence needed to scale up. As an example, in China, strategic experimentation with special economic zones leveraged geographic location and the opening of the economy as part of a wider plan to scale up successful projects to support economic expansion. This allowed the Government to experiment with market-oriented reforms and resource allocation. In the most successful cases, researchers were deployed in parallel to track impact and point the way towards improvement.

24. Specific action to shift barriers opened the door for change. The barriers dismantled in cases of acceleration were often systemic, including regulatory constraints and mismatches, power imbalances between stakeholder groups, and sociocultural norms that constrained the flow of resources. In the Republic of Korea, for example, some 10,000 regulations were reviewed, revised, reformed or eliminated to smooth the way for innovation and enable the implementation of protective measures for workers and the environment.

25. Successful measures for addressing last-mile challenges helped to focus attention on breaking down barriers and engaged partnerships to attain hard-to-reach policy targets. The last-mile challenges of providing access to education for girls and employment for women and ethnic minorities were taken on by several countries. These barriers could involve geographic, ethnic, linguistic, sociocultural or socioeconomic factors, or they could exist because of limited access to resources or capacities.

26. Diverse approaches were employed in countries with special needs, including putting in place innovative measures to achieve major shifts and unlock resources, committing to ambitious policy goals and implementing comprehensive policy agendas, as well as making fundamental investments. In Uzbekistan, for example, employers were required to pay salaries using a card system, which provided employees in the formal sector with access to financial services. Armenia and Kazakhstan are among the countries with the highest spending on social protection, education and health care in the region.¹⁶ Bhutan is among the countries that experienced the fastest expansion in electricity access in the world between 2006 and 2016, overcoming the challenges of its mountainous terrain. The Government prioritized off-grid renewable energy projects in its five-year plans to attain 100 per cent electrification ahead of its target of 2020.¹⁷ The emergence of Bangladesh as a sprinter in the area of sustainable and just economies can be attributed to the significant expansion of manufacturing value added and integration into global value chains, which resulted in higher economic growth. This was driven by the country's focus on promoting private-sector-led manufacturing and incentivizing foreign investments. In addition, the country's labour act was amended in 2013 to strengthen the overall protection of workers' rights.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific: Poorly Protected* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.II.F.2).

¹⁷ Eric Mackres, Dimitrios Mentis and Anila Qehaja, "Bhutan has achieved 100% electricity access: here's how", World Economic Forum, 15 February 2019.

¹⁸ See ADB, "Sector overview", *Sustainable Projects in the Textile and Garment Sector: Faster Approach to Small Nonsovereign Transactions (FAST) Report* (2016). Available at www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/50197-001-so.pdf (accessed on 10 December 2019).

IV. Accelerating transformation

27. In the 2030 Agenda, it is emphasized that bold and transformative steps are required to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path.¹⁹ Transformation necessarily involves some element of disruption, as new ways of doing things displace the old. Transformative processes change how different forms of capital (whether natural, financial, human or physical) are created, allocated and used.

28. The region's accumulated policy experience provides a solid foundation for moving forward, especially where there is a strong track record of progress and policy goals are relatively straightforward. However, transformational approaches are needed to deal with complexity, in particular where a persistent failure to advance can be attributed to marginalization, elite capture,²⁰ social conflict, institutional inertia or harmful sociocultural norms.

29. Transformations require both bottom-up action and leadership from the top. Working to direct, mobilize, scale up and sustain the momentum for transformation requires competence and innovation in governance,²¹ coupled with a shift in social values and moral norms towards sustainability, inclusion, people-centred development and transparency. The capacity to constructively deal with conflict and disagreement also smooths the way for progressive change. Generative disagreement, wherein conflicting positions and ideas can lead to the creation of new knowledge and solutions, is an essential element for change.

30. Country experiences in applying the Millennium Development Goals Acceleration Framework,²² extensive desk research, including a dedicated literature review on transformation, and consultations with those directly involved in innovation and change helped to frame a blueprint for initiating and sustaining transformations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

31. The recommendations contained in the present document are framed around three areas for acceleration action and a fourth component on a policy revolution which supports each of the three action areas.

32. These action areas can have a bearing on any of the six transformational entry points, or any nationally or locally defined priority. Action in one area alone is unlikely to mobilize the broad support, creative energy, value shifts and institutional and human capacity needed to sustain transformation in the long run. The recommendations build on and complement the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019*, in which four levers of change are identified: governance; economy and finance; individual and collective action; and science and technology.

¹⁹ See General Assembly resolution 70/1.

²⁰ Elite capture is the process by which the combination of power relationships in society and weak institutions results in the diversion of public goods to the benefit of the elite.

²¹ World Economic Forum, "Agile governance: reimagining policy-making in the Fourth Industrial Revolution", White Paper, January 2018 (Geneva, 2017).

²² The Millennium Development Goals Acceleration Framework, in which bottlenecks and selected multi-partner acceleration solutions were identified and the planning and monitoring of the implementation of selected solutions were addressed, offered Governments and their partners a systematic way to progress towards the Millennium Development Goal targets.

A. Mission orientation and mobilizing stakeholders

33. Mission orientation based on a narrative for change serves to create a broad social alliance with a bold agenda. Mission orientation involves the purposeful crafting of a suite of interventions ranging from agenda-setting to supporting policies, and the creation of strategic networks and knowledge economies, that compel or nudge various actors towards a desired objective.²³ Partnerships among non-governmental organizations, social movements and campaigns help to strengthen political mandates and further set the stage for the establishment of coalitions or platforms for change.

34. The six transformative entry points of the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019* are important missions for national consideration. The need for the region to accelerate transformations in relation to inequality, education, increasingly complex health challenges, the agricultural sector and food systems, and water resources has been underlined in past regional reports.²⁴ Climate action is now more urgent than ever.

35. Platforms for change can foster new and unlikely partnerships for action. For example, the Grand Challenges Thailand initiative, jointly led by the National Research Council of Thailand and the Thailand Research Organization Network, brings together research, development and the innovation community to tackle key issues for development and global health. The Right to Education campaign in Pakistan urges government officials to enforce the right to education set forth in the Constitution and aims to mobilize parents, teachers, students and youth, and civil society to demand free and compulsory education for all children. In India, the Rally for Rivers was an unprecedented awareness campaign that brought together experts, representatives of academia, environmentalists, government officials and others to develop a set of recommendations and support pilot and policy action for the country's dying rivers.

36. Enacting bold legislation to send a message of “no” in the face of undesirable activity communicates a sense of commitment, urgency and purpose; inspires innovation; and helps to frame stakeholder actions and investments and shift social values. Banning overseas investment in coal-fired power plants or making child marriage unlawful, for example, can create opportunities for stakeholder action to support wider missions around climate action or gender inequality. Examples of such legislation are found across the region and include the following: bans on plastic bags (in Bangladesh and other countries), greenhouse gas emission caps at the city level (in Japan) and constitutionally mandated forest cover targets which have halted deforestation (in Bhutan). Sometimes, the legislation can be positively framed and just as compelling. For example, in 2019, the Government of Bangladesh granted all of its rivers environmental personhood in an effort to protect the world's largest delta from further degradation resulting from pollution, illegal dredging and human intrusion. This followed the granting of legal personhood by the Government of New Zealand to one of its longest rivers and the identification of indigenous people and the Government as legal custodians.

²³ See United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *New Innovation Approaches to Support the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals*, UNCTAD/DTL/STICT/2017/4 (United Nations, New York and Geneva), page 7.

²⁴ See, for example, ESCAP, ADB and UNDP, *Asia-Pacific Sustainable Development Goals Outlook* (Bangkok, 2017).

B. Aligning systems with a view to transformation

37. Creative disruption shifts entrenched institutional and socioeconomic systems, in which a locked-in state of affairs locks out innovation and change. Creative disruption drives both the creation of new ways of doing things and the destruction that alters, removes or replaces informal or formal systems that define the way in which various forms of capital are accessed and used.

38. Specific targets for action include those systems that frame social justice, investment flows, economic structure and natural resource use.²⁵ Past regional assessments have pointed to the need for urgent action to address structural incentives for corruption in public administrations and to eliminate discriminatory legislation and harmful sociocultural norms that negatively affect women and other marginalized communities.²⁶ Dismantling barriers to accessing resources, voice and participation, and rights and justice is the key to empowering vulnerable and marginalized groups and driving change.²⁷ There is a need to tackle the persistent institutional systems that enable ineffective transparency measures, illicit financial flows and tax evasion, inadequate assessments of sustainability-related risks and opportunities, and perverse incentives that lead to short-termism. As an example of the power of transparency measures, a study of an anti-corruption programme in road building in one country showed that suspected corruption levels were 8 per cent lower when independent audit results were read at open community meetings. This cost-effective approach was found to be more influential than provisions for administrative actions against corruption.

39. Disruption can be enabled by bringing new views and perspectives to the table. In Bangladesh, for example, women's involvement in service provision (in particular in the health sector) inspired new modes of service delivery, bringing to the table new ideas and ways of doing things that enhanced the equity and accessibility of essential services. Women's engagement in the workplace as leaders and implementers improved social acceptance of the mobility and work of young women. Microfinance programmes targeting women were also expanded, empowering women in decision-making with regard to resource use and negotiation in health and family planning.

40. Financial innovation, risk-sharing modalities and partnerships help to ready financial systems to attract and channel investments towards transformation. Despite progress, existing financial systems are not sufficiently aligned with Sustainable Development Goal implementation. Targeted financing for accelerating transformations will necessarily involve the following: (a) share risk on more favourable terms with investors to promote entrepreneurship and investment in social and environmental capital; (b) enable partnerships with key actors to increase accountability and transparency and access to resources; and (c) digitize financing as a way to increase access to financial services for marginalized communities. As an example, actions to share risk in the form of attractive profit-sharing agreements and matched funding helped to make Singapore fertile ground for start-ups and inventors in the region, with the number of start-ups in the country more than doubling between 2003 and 2016.

²⁵ See *Transformations for Sustainable Development: Promoting Environmental Sustainability in Asia and the Pacific*.

²⁶ See, for example, ESCAP, ADB and UNDP, *Asia-Pacific Sustainable Development Goals Outlook*.

²⁷ ESCAP, ADB and UNDP, *Accelerating Progress: An Empowered, Inclusive and Equal Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2019).

41. Enabling social enterprises and partnerships through public policy helps to diversify pathways for resource flows in the economy and for the uptake of technological innovation, in particular at the grass-roots level. An example of how technological innovation can extract value from waste and create social and economic value at the grass-roots level is provided in Malaysia, where a new technology is turning rice husk waste into food packaging, and a network enables rice producers to sell the husks directly to packaging companies, thereby converting waste into a productive source of income.

42. Paying specific attention to systemic barriers is critical to addressing the last-mile challenges faced by all countries, including developed countries. In one country, a national project on micro-irrigation broadly targeting a group considered lower income only reached wealthier farmers, owing in part to land ownership regimes. Data show that across the region, young men and young women have widely differing levels of access to employment, education and training. In countries where youth access to employment, education and training is already low, such as Bangladesh, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, women's access is generally much lower than men's. However, some relatively developed countries, such as Singapore and Japan, have gender gaps in access similar to the gaps found in less developed countries, such as Nepal, Indonesia and the Philippines.²⁸

C. Sustaining the momentum for change: readying people and institutions for continued progress

43. Momentum for change is created by mission orientation and mobilizing stakeholders. However, ensuring that society will be able to sustain change in the long term means ensuring that institutions are ready to enable and respond to change at all levels of governance, and that people are also ready for change, particularly young people.

44. Effective decentralization ensures that local governments have the appropriate responsibility, authority and capacity to take action. Local government action and effective decentralization sustain and multiply opportunities for change at the local and community levels, fostering localized innovation and partnerships. In Malaysia, the local government of Penang has partnered with start-ups to teach children to code, cutting down on tuition fees and the cost of training teachers. Skill acquisition led to some starting their own enterprises. This partnership was so successful that it attracted corporate social responsibility funding from private sector partners, thus expanding the funding available to the programme over time.

45. Education remains fundamental. Civic education enables young people to participate in public life and promote social accountability. Education, in particular quality education, empowers and equips people to effect change. Linking civic education to real-life problem solving makes for more effective secondary school students and adults. For example, Project Citizen Philippines provided a civic education programme for more than 300 secondary school students from the National Capital Region, allowing them to take part in community problem solving. Participants scored higher in efficacy (namely, beliefs about their own capabilities, including influence on government action) and attitude (namely, appreciation of citizens' roles, voting behaviour and trust in institutions).

²⁸ Based on the most recent available data from the ESCAP Statistical Online Database for the period 2010–2018; see also ESCAP, ADB and UNDP, *Accelerating Progress*.

46. Organizational learning is a proactive means of seeking continuous improvement in functions and services. When institutions incorporate functions such as foresight and policy innovation into formal structures, they build their capacity to adapt to, initiate and scale up change. Public policy labs have been established around the world as part of government infrastructure to institutionalize the ability of governments to respond effectively to complex policy challenges. The labs enable policy impact to be tracked and policies to be adjusted, deployed or scaled up.

47. “Beyond-GDP” indicators of progress aligned with national change narratives help to guide policymaking and budgetary allocations over the long term. Building on the example of the gross national happiness index, global happiness rankings are now supported by well-developed indicators, survey tools and policy. In New Zealand, the 2019 national budget will make leaders accountable for the impact that national economic performance has on well-being.

D. A policymaking revolution: key elements and tools

48. The experiences of countries that have successfully accelerated progress underline the power of implementing the right policies. In many places and in many sectors, solutions and approaches are well known and well tested. However, when dealing with complexity, risk and persistent structural barriers to change, a fresh approach to public policy that supports agile governance is needed.

49. Applying systems and design thinking helps to tackle complexity; reveal the interactions between sectors, actors and issues; and identify opportunities to strengthen coherence and prioritize leverage points. Systems thinking reveals areas in which policies and institutions can be linked and partnerships forged. The Government of Mongolia utilized systems thinking in its analysis of its policy environment and refined and extended the analysis as a basis for its voluntary national review, which addressed the issue of air pollution. It was one of the few Governments to take a themed approach to its voluntary national review report.

50. Policy can enable creative and destructive disruption. Disruption is both a creative and a destructive process. Creative disruption is especially needed to allow new solutions to emerge and take root in situations where trade-offs have stymied progress. Trade-offs between food production and environmental protection, or between environmental protection and tourism, require creative disruption enabled by policy. Creative disruption is also needed to deal with persistent systemic obstacles such as corruption, other sources of elite capture, and gender and other discrimination.

51. Policy tools for disruption include the following: (a) removing subsidies, contracts and disparities that have allowed incumbents (for example technologies, groups and companies) to dominate, thus opening and levelling the playing field; (b) making the legal and regulatory changes needed for specific innovations to thrive under a given policy or in another domain; and (c) sunseting old technologies and processes to allow viable and tested solutions to thrive.²⁹ Levelling the energy playing field by adopting legislation on independent power production has enabled households and other entities to become players in energy markets in several countries. The legislation has often been complemented by sunseting, or withdrawing funding for fossil fuel sources and creating incentives for investments in renewable energy. These policy actions were complemented by increasing consumer awareness and advocacy around climate action and, in some cases, financing.

²⁹ See World Economic Forum, “Agile governance: reimagining policy-making in the Fourth Industrial Revolution”.

52. Creative disruption requires shifts in behaviour. Public policy instruments that apply behavioural economics and psychology have been found to be cost-effective and complementary to regulation and advocacy, acting quickly to prompt behavioural change in key actors.

53. Inclusive policymaking and decision-making models and processes can help to balance public and private interests and deal with trade-offs. Inclusive models of decision-making help to engage with the public, strengthen the science-policy interface, balance power where needed and diversify perspectives in deliberating on trade-offs and creating solutions.

54. Experimentation in policy enables governments to innovate and learn from failure. Policy labs feature prominently among several policy approaches identified as necessary to a more dynamic and agile form of governance. Such labs have enabled experimentation to rapidly test and scale up solutions and have helped to draw lessons from failure. Focusing on the end-user experience, applying data analytics and gathering, balancing and synthesizing information from various institutionalized resources across the academic, political, and commercial domains to inform policy are all approaches employed in the policy innovation process.

55. In order to harness the data revolution, efforts are needed to bring together traditional and new data sources (including big data) for better and faster data on sustainable development, developing new infrastructures for data development and sharing (such as a world statistics cloud), and supporting innovations that improve the quality and reduce the costs of producing public data. Better policy targeting through detailed and disaggregated longitudinal studies can benefit from the use of big data and analytics that track individuals through the life cycle and across generations to facilitate understanding of intergenerational links in deprivations.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

56. More people in the Asia-Pacific region are living better lives compared to just a decade ago as a result of gains in health care, education and employment, but threats such as inequalities, climate change and air pollution will undo these gains if no appropriate policy action is taken. Political, technological and financial solutions are within reach, but much greater leadership and rapid, unprecedented transformations are needed.

57. Systemic barriers continue to stand in the way of progress. The analysis presented points to several countries that are aspirants on the six transformative entry points. These countries not only remain at a relatively low level of progress but are also advancing relatively slowly. The analysis also identifies countries that are fast risers, where progress is more rapid than average but there remains quite a long way to go. The needs across the region are also especially great in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals on which there is slow progress or regression. For example, there has been slow progress or regression in one or more subregions on gender equality (Goal 5), sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), climate action (Goal 13), life below water (Goal 14) and life on land (Goal 15). Partnership for the Goals (Goal 17) also falls within this group, and is of particular concern.³⁰

³⁰ See ESCAP/RFSD/2020/2 for key findings from the *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020* (forthcoming), which is based on the most recent data on the Sustainable Development Goal indicators for ESCAP and its five subregions.

58. Accelerating transformation requires a more compelling sense of direction and urgency, a bold commitment to remove systemic barriers, a readiness on the part of institutions and diverse groups in society to innovate and sustain change, and an upgraded and updated approach to policymaking to be able to deal with complexity.

59. Member States, major groups and other stakeholders may wish to consider the following actions:

(a) Review the present document with a view to sharing national and stakeholder perspectives on the issues raised and best practices for accelerating sustainable development;

(b) Discuss opportunities for regional cooperation to support national efforts to achieve transformative acceleration.

Annex

Methodology for analysis of speed of progress and levels of achievement in six transformative areas

1. The following methodology was used to quantify the relative acceleration of countries in each of the six transformative areas identified in *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future Is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development*. First, a set of indicators for each transformative area was selected. The purpose of the methodology is to compare, for any given measurable indicator, the recent rate of progress of any country (from 2010 to 2018) to the historically observed average rate of progress for the relevant level of performance exhibited by rest of the world.
2. For example, access to electricity is an indicator under the transformative area of energy access and decarbonization. Relying on historical data, the methodology is used to estimate the average rate at which countries expanded their electricity coverage annually for each level of electricity coverage.
3. The current performance of countries, namely the speed of expansion of their electricity coverage, is then compared to the corresponding historically observed rates of progress. The analysis helps to identify which of the countries are defying the historically observed path of progress and hence can be categorized as best performers in terms of acceleration.
4. Subsequently, by aggregating performance on selected indicators in each of the transformative areas, it is possible to identify some of the top performing countries in each transformative area. At the same time, this provides countries suggestive evidence of how their performance in transformative areas, in terms of speed of progress and level of achievement, compares to other countries in the region.
5. This paves the way for a deeper analysis of these countries to yield lessons on acceleration. In addition, the countries were clustered into the following four quadrants on the basis of their relative rates of progress and levels of achievement for further analysis: (a) aspirants; (b) fast risers; (c) sprinters; and (d) last-milers.
6. The full results are presented in the forthcoming Sustainable Development Goal Partnership report, prepared jointly by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, which will be made available at <http://sdgasiapacific.net>.