



# Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism

Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (APRCM)  
Position Paper to the Theme of APFSD and HLPF 2022

## Confronting Corporate Capture and Demanding State Accountability for Just and Equitable Recovery for COVID-19

### Regional Progress and Systemic Barriers to the Implementation of 2030 Agenda

The Asia and the Pacific CSOs believe that we are still amidst major global crises and unless structural reasons and systemic barriers are addressed, building back better from the pandemic will remain a pipedream. **Inequality, emissions and hunger has been rising consistently; civic space, democratic freedoms and participation of the CSOs has been declining since we signed the 2030 Agenda.** Rate of poverty reduction has been declining. Efforts towards a sustainable recovery have failed people, and more than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the humanity is yet to get the first shot of the vaccine. **The pandemic has made stark the structural fault lines of our economy, governance and society.** The circumstances demand an unprecedented response for recovery from the pandemic and expediting implementation of the SDGs through **stronger, inclusive and cooperative multilateralism, and national efforts.**

The Asia and the Pacific report on the progress of the SDGs released by **UNESCAP recently shows that SDGs will not be achieved in the region before 2072 at the current pace. No sub region or no country is in the position to achieve the SDGs by 2030 at the current pace.** There is continued regression on the Sustainable Consumption and production (**SDG 12**) and climate action (**SDG13**); however, many more goals **show a trend of regression or lack of progress.** Agenda 2030 is a failed promise for girls in the rural areas, women, refugees, people with disability and race, caste and ethnic groups who are at the bottom of the pyramid.

**Majority of the countries in the region** have witnessed unsustainable **mounting sovereign debts and increased illicit financial flows and shrinking ODA** and access to trade thereby losing fiscal and policy space and are struggling for recovery. The onerous trade agreements with provisions like **ISDS are further bleeding states with impunity. The crisis has induced increased corporatization and hegemonization of natural resources through a slew of neoliberal policies, dilution of environmental and social safeguards; social protection has further weakened and women's unpaid care work has increased manifold.** Scarce jobs have further consolidated exploitation of labour. For many millions the advent of the decade of action signals a false dawn.

The region is also at the receiving end of runaway climate crisis and disasters, rapid biodiversity loss and air pollution as well as plastic pollution. Asia accounts for one-third of the weather, climate, water related disasters, accounting for nearly half of the deaths and one-third of economic losses during 1970-2019. A large majority of the population in the region is dependent on climate sensitive sectors. Asia Pacific is the richest region in biodiversity, however, according to recent projections, **42% of biodiversity in South East Asia may be lost by the end of the century. East Asia and Pacific and South Asia are the most polluted sub regions accounting for 2 million deaths in each every year.** SIDS and especially

pacific countries also bear the brunt of plastic pollution even though they contribute negligibly through altered marine ecosystems and economy, reduced income from oceans and micro plastic pollution.

We are dismayed that these regional priorities never figure in the global thematic discussions in the HLPF and there are no commensurate efforts in the Agenda 2030 to address these urgent concerns.

**While the resources are scarce for making a sustainable and resilient comeback from the crisis, the region is also witnessing increased militarization and ever looming threat of war.** Many countries are in perpetually militarised state and engage in wanton violation of human rights, rights of indigenous peoples and marginalised populations as well as deploying patriarchy as a political tool. The aggression of Russia on Ukraine has legitimised possession of nuclear weapons as deterrence and **the presence of eight nuclear powers in the region, with extremely low thresholds for use of nuclear weapons, does not bode well for peace.** Countries in the region associate with rival imperialist groups and increased geo-political tensions put dark shadows over achievement of lasting peace, eradication of poverty and hunger, and sustainability in the region. Establishment of peace remains a sine qua non for achieving Agenda 2030 in the region.

**The VNR process** needs to go beyond the capitals and **needs to be more inclusive** with participation of a broad range of stakeholders including the affected and marginalised populations. **The HLPF needs to ensure that member states understand the importance of having national and regional processes.** Despite the fact that the majority of countries have already presented their VNRs, the “peer learning function” of the VNR is unfulfilled as countries only discuss their best efforts, glossing over critical challenges, failure and policy gaps. As we are moving towards the third cycle of the VNRs the “National” character of the VNR needs to take centre stage.

**The Ministerial Declarations of the HLPF have largely failed the aspirations of the people** by being traditional rather than calling for transformative change, lack of ambition and outcome oriented actions. The member states have questioned settled concepts and agreed language on fundamental issues of human rights, child rights, gender empowerment, and have been divided when more ambitious efforts are called for.

We, the 610 civil society organisations from 18 constituencies and in 38 countries across Asia and the Pacific, recognise that the pandemic is a tragedy of unprecedented proportions and will require responses unlike any governments are accustomed to. The crises have changed our societies, our economies, and our political systems forever. We cannot rely on existing systems to solve them and business as usual is dead. The crisis has exacerbated the prevalent inequalities of wealth, power and resources exposing the violence of neoliberalism, corporatisation and capitalist hegemony hijacking our democracies. The crisis has exposed the lack of political will across key strategic sectors like health, education and social protection, a decent standard of living, and a safe eco system. The crisis has exposed the failure of globalised capitalism to deal with any crises. **Unless we deal with the systemic failures that render exploited groups more vulnerable, there will be no recovery.**

## 1. **Asia Pacific CSOs position on Goals 4, 5, 14, 15, 17**

Our analysis and concrete recommendations for the goals reviewed in 2021 is rooted in the Development Justice lens:

### **SDG 4:**

The impacts brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic on education systems has drastically affected the progress of SDG 4. Even before the crisis, the world was not on track to achieve the Goals by 2030. Now, progress is being further derailed. Education is being shaped and defined by the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic- from the deep, structural inequalities and the massive acceleration of technology amidst wide digital divides to the threats posed by climate change now and in the future and the

ever-present geopolitical challenges and threats to human rights and democratic systems in the Asia Pacific region and beyond, all fuelled by conflicts, populism, fundamentalism, and polarisation.

**School closure and learning loss.** Globally, 93 per cent of countries closed their schools fully or partially at the end of March 2020. At the peak of the school closures, more than 1.6 billion learners were affected by these full and partial school closures that lasted an average of 224 days (World Bank et al., 2021). It was reported that of the 1.6 billion, 1 billion were in low- and middle-income countries. In Asia and the Pacific, 90 per cent of the countries were forced to do the same, with 3.1 million institutions shut down. This disrupted the education of more than 1.2 billion students, according to the UIS (2021). Data released in March 2021 revealed that more than 168 million children- excluding those who have dropped out of school because of the pandemic- were out of school globally (UNICEF, 2021). Now, schools are gradually reopening, but it is worrying to note that there remain 117 million students who are still not in school (UNESCO, 2021). Children and youth who were already vulnerable due to poverty, geography, ethnicity, language, and other factors are more likely to remain out of school (UNESCO, 2021).

Multiple and intersecting factors, such as socioeconomic status, gender identity and sexuality, ability, geographic location, migrant status, identity, language, ethnicity, religion, and caste, among others, affect one's access to education. With the shift to online and remote learning modalities, more and more marginalised learners are unable to continue their education. A digital divide exists between the privileged and the underprivileged, between urban and rural areas, between high-income and low-income countries, and between those fluent in the languages most represented in the online world and those who are not. It was found that, across all regions, including Asia-Pacific, there is a wide gap between the percentages of individuals using the Internet by location. For instance, over 95 per cent of students in several European countries versus 34 per cent of students in Indonesia have computers at home (ITU, 2021). These figures are a stark reminder that digital access is often out of reach for learners with marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Impact on NFE and ALE programs reaching out to the marginalised sector.** Learning centres and facilities were also subject to closures, thereby affecting the marginalised groups that benefit from these spaces. The Global Alliance for Literacy (GAL) meeting in 2020 raised concerns around the suspension of 90 per cent of 49 literacy programmes and the fact that only seven out of 29 GAL member countries had included youth and adult literacy in their initial national education response plans (UIL, 2020). In Bangladesh, for example, all schools, including non-formal learning centres, were closed, so the government had to initiate distance learning programmes, mostly through television and radio. Troublingly, however, learners in non-formal education programmes, who are based in remote rural areas and belong to low-income households, have little to no access to devices and could not continue their education. Prolonged closures of non-formal learning centres and the reduced opportunities for informal learning will affect employment prospects and skills development of low-skilled workers. In 2017, UNESCO estimated that 617 million children and youth would never acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills—a situation made worse by the pandemic (UNESCO, 2017).

**Continuing skills and education for decent work of marginalised women and youth.** The pandemic's impacts on employment and the labour market have affected women (5 per cent) more than men, according to an ILO report (2021). Young workers have also been reported to be particularly hard hit as they lost jobs (8.7 per cent as opposed to 3.7 per cent for adults), dropped out of the labour force entirely, or have been delayed entry into it. Losses in post-support labour income were also relatively larger for the same groups- women, young workers, the self-employed, and low- and medium-skilled workers. The pandemic underscored the importance of continuity of learning and skills development for better employment prospects and overall quality of life. Skills for life and decent work that are attentive to the learning needs of marginalised youth and adults should be pursued at different levels of education, not only ensuring that learners' employability is increased but also ensuring they are equipped with the necessary life skills and values of peace, democracy, active citizenship, and respect for diversity, human rights, and the planet.

**Teachers' sector impact.** Teachers are also confronted with the impacts of the pandemic on the ways of teaching and learning and on their rights as workers. About 63 million primary and secondary school

teachers globally, including 43 million teachers in the Asia Pacific region, have been affected by the school closures (UNESCO -International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2020a; UIS, 2021a). Due to the ill-preparedness of schools, the lack of training for effectively employing distance learning pedagogies, and the lack of necessary infrastructure, connectivity, and devices, teachers encountered challenges in continuing to teach during the pandemic. Adapting teaching materials for online and distance instruction at short notice has been also been a challenge as few teachers have been equipped with digital and ICT skills. The school closures and the demands of distance teaching-learning also affected the terms of employment and working conditions of teachers and education support personnel, delaying and cutting their salaries and benefits, if not dismissing them from their jobs, extending their working hours and areas of work, and risking their mental health and well-being and physical safety. Most significantly affected were education workers in private institutions, higher education personnel and researchers, supply/substitution teachers, early childhood education workers, and immigrant teachers (EI, 2020). Despite these and more, the teachers persisted and adapted to the rapid transition to distance learning. Teachers remain essential in learning processes and should thus be provided with the necessary training, tools, and materials for their continuous development.

**Mental health and gender-based violence.** The closures of educational institutions and markets have reportedly led to a rise in several shadow pandemics, according to the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Marginalised Youth (ASPBAE, 2020). These include the worsening mental health and increase in gender-based violence, among many others. Clearly, the pandemic has had an immeasurable toll on the mental health and well-being of all, including learners, teachers, parents, and guardians. The looming concerns around the virus, uncertainty about the future, lack of access to education, prolonged isolation, lack of opportunities to socialise and meet peers, the loss of income and livelihoods all contributed to increasing levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness among youth. Women and girls, in particular, are on the frontlines of the COVID-19 recovery and response. Increased domestic responsibilities, including childcare, on top of work have resulted in women carrying a much heavier burden, which affects their mental health.

The alarming increase of all forms of gender-based violence, including early and child marriages, during the pandemic, is also a cause of concern. In Indonesia, for instance, domestic violence remains prevalent, doubling in number during the pandemic, at a time when restrictions posed on mobility force girls and women to stay in their homes, close to the perpetrators. The number of underage or child marriages in the country surged, with the number of marriage dispensations granted increasing significantly in 2020. This is the same case for many other countries in the Asia Pacific (UNESCAP, 2021). Pre-pandemic, the persistent bullying of gender minorities, eve teasing and other gender-based violence in schools, and now in online education platforms, need to be addressed urgently.

**Education financing and governance.** Prior to the pandemic, education systems in most countries in Asia-Pacific were grossly underfinanced. The region has consistently been the lowest education spender in comparison to other global regions, with the spending level way below the global benchmark on education. With the onset of the pandemic, tremendous pressure has been exerted on the education budgets due to the contraction of the economy, the reduction of government revenues, and the huge spending to combat COVID-19.

The pandemic has further highlighted the urgency of addressing the financing gap in education given the narrowing fiscal space, prompting several governments to reduce spending on education. This is further compounded by increasing debt servicing which reached historic levels, affecting especially heavily indebted countries. The pandemic has further exacerbated existing inequities in education affecting most especially rural girls and women from the poorest income groups.

The pandemic also witnessed the increasing role and influence of the private sector, particularly transnational IT firms, in delivering technology-based learning platforms at huge cost and with hardly any monitoring of compliance to existing regulations. More alarming, in many countries, there are no regulations for the private sector engaged in education and where regulations exist, data privacy and ownership are not covered. This reality and the aggressive marketing of Edtech companies will further push the privatisation and commercialisation of education and widen inequities in education access.

Forty per cent (40%) of the global population do not have access to education with the language they understand—their mother tongue. This includes indigenous, ethnolinguistic minorities, and migrant people. This contributes to the growing divide educationally, socially, and economically between those who have the linguistic capital needed to flourish and those who do not. This directly prevents the realisation of SDG 4's vision of inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2016).

### **Policy Recommendations**

1. Progressively increase public funding for the provision of equitable, quality, resilient, and gender-transformative public education systems, ensuring accountability and transparency in public finance. Prioritise education in national recovery stimulus packages to include allocations to support learning continuity and the provision of skills development to the most marginalised. Negotiate for debt cancellation, particularly those incurred under onerous terms, and ensure debt-free support to education, health, and social protection in the post-pandemic recovery period.
2. Mobilise additional resources for education and the social sector mainly through tax justice initiatives, including the adoption of strict measures to stop tax evasion/avoidance and illicit financial flows.
3. Prevent the corporate capture of digital learning and other education delivery modalities, and ensure strict enforcement of regulation governing private sector engagement in education, consistent with the principles on equitable, accessible, non-discriminatory and inclusive education.
4. Develop and mainstream multiple flexible learning modalities within formal, non-formal, and informal education systems that are contextually appropriate. Facilitate blended learning opportunities for community-based youth and adult learning programmes to reach the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups, such as women, persons with disabilities, refugees and migrants, indigenous peoples, learners in rural and remote areas, LGBTIQ learners, among others.
5. Provide priority funding for learning modalities that are most appropriate to reach out and ensure learning continuity to marginalised learners, including provision of free and open access to the appropriate technologies and tools.
6. Promote lifelong learning opportunities for all through robust lifelong learning policies and systems in public education and improved access to flexible learning strategies for quality, transformative informal and non-formal education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and skills development for decent work. Promote public provisioning and support for non-formal and informal education, as well as community-based education and community hubs, such as community learning centres (CLCs), including recognition of the importance of intergenerational learning in relation to health and social cohesion and how it cuts across the SDGs.
7. In light of the alarming increase in human rights violations, extremism, authoritarianism, gender-based violence, and hate speech, it is high time to strengthen the implementation and mainstreaming of SDG 4.7 in education curriculum at all levels, including formal, non-formal, and informal, youth and adult education, and teachers' education. Doing so will require a paradigm shift in education, integrating transformative approaches into the whole education system, putting in place pedagogies for transformative learning, and engaging stakeholders involved in the learning process and part of the wider community.
8. Considering the interlinked and integrated nature of the SDGs, SDG 4, along with the rest of the Goals, must be framed within a development justice lens. This entails urgently addressing the existing structural inequalities, such as poverty, gender discrimination, the unequal access to

quality education, health care, employment, and basic social services, such as water, sanitation, and decent housing, and the subjugation of knowledge systems, among others. Without which, it would be impossible to achieve sustainable development.

9. Prioritise teachers' sustained, practical, and appropriate education and professional development, including upskilling and reskilling, which are contextualised in subject learning, targets specific skills, and meet a minimum duration, in all forms of education, including formal, non-formal, and informal education systems. Safety must be ensured for all teachers, including the provision of health insurance and medical assistance. They must be well-compensated with adequate benefits, including allowances for difficult tasks rendered especially during emergencies. Education and professional development should aim to build their capacities in delivering distance education, including enhanced digital literacy skills, that are learner-centred, innovative and creative. Comprehensive policies and strategies, including socio-emotional support programmes, should also be developed and put in place to ensure teachers' health and well-being.
10. Ensure decent terms of employment and working conditions of all education workers at all times and guarantee their right to social protection in all contingencies throughout their life cycle.
11. Ensure transparent and participatory governance in education as well as in other sectors by providing ample spaces for the participation of the most marginalised learners and by significantly strengthening the capacity of all stakeholders for meaningful engagement in policy development, budgeting and monitoring of education and SDG 4 progress. Put in place institutionalised mechanisms for teachers, learners, and parents' participation in education government in schools and in non-formal and informal education systems for their meaningful participation in policy-making decisions.
12. Reinforce sexual and reproductive health rights as central to promoting gender equality, fulfilling the right to reproductive self-determination and bodily integrity, strengthening the participation and empowerment of women, girls, and non-binary individuals, especially those who come from marginalised backgrounds. Develop and implement policy and legislative changes that support a human rights- and gender-based approach in strengthening both health and education systems, and integrate comprehensive, evidence-based, and responsive sexual and reproductive health programmes and services into formal, non-formal, and informal systems of education. Comprehensive sexuality education must take a rights-based approach and include all seven essential components to ensure that it covers different aspects, such as gender, sexual and reproductive health and HIV, diversity, and relationships, among others. Consent must also be taught at all education levels, starting from late primary school to adult education, to relevant age groups.
13. Invest in and institutionalise support for targeted and sustained mental health and psychosocial support services and programmes integrated into education, including all schools and educational institutions, in-person or virtually, for the well-being and development of all learners, teachers, parents, and guardians.
14. Education policies should recognise the importance of mother tongue learning. Optimally, six years of mother tongue instruction along with a systematic transition to national/international languages are needed so that gains from teaching and learning in the mother tongue can be sustained. This necessitates the recruitment and training of teachers from indigenous and ethno-linguistic minority communities who share the same mother tongue as their students, as well as the provision of language-appropriate teaching and learning materials created through partnership between educators and community representatives (UNESCO, 2020).
15. **Enhance** national gender disaggregated data collection on the adverse impacts of the pandemic to marginalised groups, such as women and girls, LGBTIQ and gender-diverse people, in the educational systems as a part of the effort to measure and monitor progress towards the achievement of education for all.

## SDG 5: Gender Equality

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the unprecedented multidimensional crises that existed long before the onset of the global health crisis. This caused the Asia Pacific region to suffer the sudden economic contractions leading to widespread job losses, debt burden, austerity, increased privatization, and deepening inequalities of wealth, resources and power. The UN ESCAP report 2022<sup>1</sup> highlights that even during the global crisis, the current neoliberal capitalist model of development is favoring the rich. It states that the wealthiest 5 percent of the population is controlling close to 70 percent of total wealth in the region. The data is giving us clear evidence of the pre-existing inequalities and exposes the failure of the current development model in delivering people's basic needs including universal healthcare, particularly equitable access to vaccines against COVID-19 and social protection within and across countries. Countries in the global south are facing tremendous challenges in responding to the crisis. Decades of neglect of the public health sector accompanied by intensive liberalization of public health care services has further worsened the peoples' situation during the pandemic. These countries are also now facing high-interest rate loans from different international financial institutions resulting in generations of debt servicing.

The pandemic has been greatly impacting women, particularly, grassroots women from marginalized communities as well as trans and gender diverse people, particularly at the intersections of multiple marginalisations. The pandemic has further exhausted the embedded patriarchy stigma in social and cultural norms as well as economic policies, restricting women's bodily autonomy, mobility, work, decision making power and opportunities, and disproportionately impacting the women and girls in the region. War, conflicts and occupations continue affecting women, girls, gender minorities and other marginalized groups. It has worsened gender-based inequalities and exacerbated the discrimination among women and girls, including intersectionalities of these. It has further disrupted the already challenged access to health including sexual and reproductive health rights, education, basic food security, decent work, and nutrition for women and girls in all their diversity. It also increased maternal mortality, early and unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion, female genital mutilation/ cutting, human trafficking, and child, early and forced marriages and gender-based violence.<sup>2</sup>

### *Regressing in targets*

The progress around gender equality (SDG 5) has been too slow and uneven in the Asia Pacific region and is marked by disparities within and across countries on the basis of intersectional barriers that women and girls face and going against the principle of leaving no one behind. The 2022 SDG Gender index also indicates that the region is characterised by dramatic intra-regional gaps among countries in the region. Notably the region's progress on SDG 5 was slower than the rest of the world even before the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> In the last 2 years of the pandemic, we have seen great setbacks in the achievement of the goals. We have seen how gender inequality has been further widened and exacerbated by economic inequalities and worsening conditions of the peoples. Job insecurities and discrimination in the workforce also worsened, and more women were forced out of the workforce. According to ADB, women comprise the majority of the workforce in the manufacturing sector in Southeast Asia wherein almost 91% suffered job losses in the course of 2 years.<sup>4</sup> Job discrimination especially among pregnant women and those with young children also suffers a lot in the pandemic as burden of childcare and domestic responsibilities

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/commission/pdf/52/regional\\_events/escape/APC2.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/commission/pdf/52/regional_events/escape/APC2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BelWISea5gkYXwBugbmyHMRlhbOCSVFC87jdwPqtYiA/edit>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.equalmeasures2030.org/2022-sdg-gender-index/regions-2/asia-and-the-pacific/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://blogs.adb.org/blog/pandemic-has-pushed-women-out-work-these-policies-can-help>

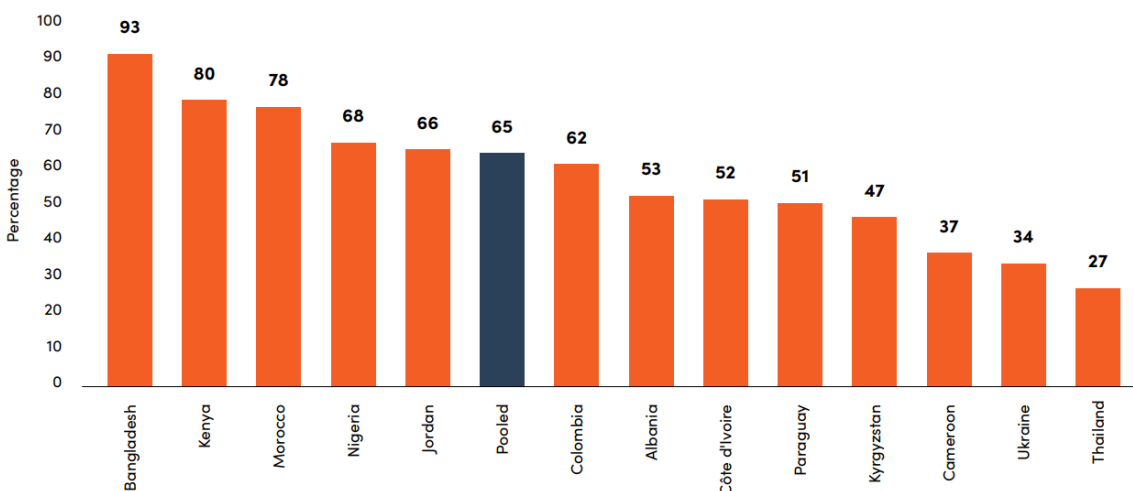
disallow them to participate in the work facilities. The pandemic has also led to fewer or declining working hours of women compared to men as more women are likely to be pushed out of work (ILO 2020).<sup>5</sup>

According to the UN ESCAP 2021 SDG Progress Report, the progress for SDG 5 is very slow. This is alongside the lack of sufficient data to assess and track the achievements under the goal.<sup>6</sup> In the report, ESCAP noted that there are gaps in addressing violence against women and girls, early marriage, unpaid care and domestic work, reproductive health access and rights, equal economic rights, technology for women empowerment, and gender equality policies.<sup>7</sup> In particular, violence against women and girls have worsened due to the series of lockdowns in many countries in the region. Unpaid care work has also increased prohibiting further women to participate in other activities leading to the widening gender inequality.<sup>8</sup>

### *Increasing gender-based violence*

Increase in VAW is also alarming as quarantine lockdowns in many parts of the region extend, more women and girls are experiencing violence at home and in the hands of their own family members.

**Proportion of women who reported ever having experienced a form of VAW or knowing another woman who experienced it, by country, April–September 2021**



Above figure is extracted from the report by UN women which states that before the pandemic globally, one in three women were subjected to violence. While since the pandemic, the violence against women has increased to one in two women reported having experienced violence or knowing the woman who has.<sup>9</sup> It shows that COVID-19 has exacerbated the pre-existing crisis. It is further backed up by UN ESCAP SDG progress report 2022 that reveals the increase of internet usage during the lockdown, and searches related to intimate partner violence, such as “domestic violence signs” and “experiencing sexual violence”. Calls to helplines have increased five-fold in some countries during the pandemic. However, it

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_763819/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_763819/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>6</sup>

[https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/ESCAP\\_Asia\\_and\\_the\\_Pacific\\_SDG\\_Progress\\_Report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/ESCAP_Asia_and_the_Pacific_SDG_Progress_Report_2021.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unescap.org/kp/2021/covid-19-and-unpaid-care-economy-asia-and-pacific>

<sup>9</sup> <https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Measuring-shadow-pandemic.pdf>



is also reported that less than 40% of women experiencing violence seek help of any sort.<sup>10</sup> These daunting facts show the status of women and girls in the Asia Pacific region who are neither safe at home nor in public which limits their well-being at home, freedom, movement or willingness to engage in private and public sphere.

Gender based violence is a major issue faced by LBQ women and trans and gender diverse persons and this has worsened during the pandemic exacerbating poor mental health and reduced well being. However, compounding the issues of discrimination and violence, is the lack of systematic data collection. The binary language of Goal 5 enables states to not have any obligation to collect data on gender based violence faced by LBQ women, trans and gender diverse people. In the region where most countries still criminalise consensual same sex relationships and offer no legal gender recognition, and practices such as conversion therapy, abandonment by natal families, discrimination and stigma exacerbates violence and harmful practices that LBQ women, trans and gender diverse persons face, particularly those who live at the intersection of multiple marginalisations. The binary language of SDGs and particularly Goal 5 gives an easy out to state parties who do not want to document state imposed discriminations and the state's lack of action in combatting gender based violence against sexual and gender minorities in the region.

### *Child and early marriage*

As per UNICEF report, 2020 saw the largest increase in child marriage rates in 25 years.<sup>11</sup> It also highlights that the impact of the pandemic is likely to be felt for at least the next decade, also raising the risk of early marriage for girls who are now young. Additionally, due to inaccessibility of sexual and reproductive health services during the pandemic had a direct impact on teenage pregnancy and subsequently on marriage.<sup>12</sup> Early marriage and lack of agency among young girls to negotiate for consent in marriage also acts as a barrier for access to higher education and skills that enable women to enter paid work which is remunerative. This linkage between inequitable access directly links SDG 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 on equal access to education and skills with outcomes of SDG 5.5

As per a joint statement issued by the multiple UN agencies, children “face bullying, discrimination or expulsion from schools on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, or that of their parents”.<sup>13</sup> This has to be urgently addressed to arrest drop out rates as well as worsening mental health outcomes among children belonging to sexual and gender minorities<sup>14</sup>.

### *Unpaid care and domestic work*

Globally, women undertake more than three-quarters of unpaid care and make up two-thirds of the paid care workforce. Women in Asia and the Pacific work the longest hours in the world. On average, women in the region worked 7.7 hours daily, of which only 3.3 hours are paid, and the rest are dedicated to unpaid care work. If included in measurement of GDP, unpaid care work undertaken by women in Asia Pacific would add 3.8 trillion USD to the regional total GDP<sup>15</sup>, and globally would add 10.8 trillion USD annually. The target to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work required public investment to facilitate

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<sup>10</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021). [Killings of women and girls by their intimate partner or other family members Global estimates 2020](#)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/covid-19-places-half-million-more-girls-risk-child-marriage-2020>

<sup>12</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Discrimination/Joint\\_LGBTI\\_Statement\\_ENG.PDF](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Discrimination/Joint_LGBTI_Statement_ENG.PDF)

<sup>14</sup> <https://blogs.unicef.org/east-asia-pacific/reflections-from-copingwithcovid-lives-of-lgbtq-youth-during-the-lockdowns>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/PP\\_2019-02\\_Unpaid%20Work.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/PP_2019-02_Unpaid%20Work.pdf)

the transfer yet countries have not reported on efforts to invest in public care systems that will alleviate the burden.

There is also the overrepresentation of women and racial/religious/other gender minorities in care economy working under discriminatory work and pay conditions, facing high occupational segregation, and have little to no social protection/security, or industry regularization. Many are not even recognized or counted as workers.

#### *Widening inequality in economic rights and access to social services*

As a response to the pandemic, World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and other international financial institutions provided COVID-19 Response Fund in the form of loans to the countries in Asia-Pacific. These measures further pushed their debt into an unsustainable territory due to their increasing burden of public external debt and more waves of austerity measures coming in. Cuts in public spending also lead to reductions in the availability of essential public services, which interferes with women's enjoyment of their rights in several ways: women rely more than men on public services and social security guarantees, and women are left to fill the gaps in provision that occur when services are reduced. Policy conditionalities that require governments to privatise utilities or services have similar consequences for women.

Unjust trade and investment agreements also lead to deregulation and liberalisation which perpetuates devaluation of women's work, increasing vulnerability among informal, migrants and domestic women workers. Privatisation of public services as well public private partnership (PPP) further denies women's rights. A recent study found that a "10% increase in private health expenditure relates to a 4.3% increase in COVID-19 cases and a 4.9% increase in COVID-19 related mortality."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the more privatised a health system, the worse its response to COVID-19. Weak public health systems disproportionately impact women, especially poor women, women with disability, and women in rural areas.

#### *Hunger and worsening poverty*

Lockdown measures imposed by the governments to avoid the spread of COVID-19 virus caused the disruption in the food system which is a failure of corporate-controlled centralized food production, processing and distribution. This has resulted in inflation with increasing prices of food commodities while there is no significant movement in wages of workers. Decreased number of meals a day led to disproportionate hunger where women bear the brunt of difficult everyday choices of where to get food and what to feed her children. According to the 2021 Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition by FAO and UNICEF, the state of food and nutrition has worsened with over 375 million people hungry by the end of 2022—a 50 million increase from pre-pandemic.<sup>17</sup> Coupled with loss of livelihood, women face the brunt and multiple burdens of poverty.

#### *Climate change and disaster vulnerabilities*

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<sup>16</sup> Corporate Europe Observatory. "Health care privatisation and austerity left EU-countries ill prepared to deal with pandemic."

<https://corporateeurope.org/en/2021/01/health-care-privatisation-and-austerity-left-eu-countries-ill-prepared-deal-pandemic>

<sup>17</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/number-hungry-asia-pacific-swells-more-50-million-arrival-covid-19>

Women are among the most vulnerable and are confronting the worsening climate crisis on a daily basis. Many countries in the Pacific including Fiji and the Marshall Islands are trying to survive despite having more uninhabitable Islands. The countries reported that women have lost income from traditional livelihoods due to drought and have been internally displaced due to climate induced natural disasters. These conditions have been worsened by the pandemic as exacerbating impacts of the climate crisis are felt in the most marginalized communities in countries with least capacity to adapt and mitigate climate change impacts. As per UNESCAP SDG progress report 2022, changing weather patterns will affect agricultural production and yields, but access to drinking water and firewood for cooking may also become limited. This will particularly affect the women as nearly 64 per cent of employed women in Lao People's Democratic Republic, 60 percent in Nepal and 50 percent in Bangladesh are engaged in agriculture.

### *State oppression and gender equality policies*

The pandemic has deepened gender inequalities coupled with state-led oppressions. According to IDEA, 37% of countries in Asia and the Pacific declared a national state of emergency which gave additional powers to the government, including its military and police, purportedly, to curb the spread of the virus. However, it also recorded the decline in democracies and freedom of expression and association, where citizens and human rights defenders critical of state pandemic response face various forums of human rights violations often committed by state forces. There is an increase in pushback against feminist and women's movement evident in political persecutions, harassments of women activists and even killings. In Asia and the Pacific, there were at least 54 human rights defenders (including women) killed in 2020.<sup>18</sup> Many more are under threat or continually threatened with violence, offline and online. The UN Women recognises the significant role that women human rights defenders play in addressing the COVID-19 crisis. According to their Action Brief released in 2020, "WHRDs are supporting a human rights-based approach to the pandemic, providing checks and balances to emergency powers, and laying the groundwork for creating resilient gender-equal cultures going forward. However, COVID-19 has also provided a cover under which WHRDs are being targeted for their work, resulting in harassment, intimidation, violence, incarceration, and even disappearance."<sup>19</sup> In many cases, the pandemic is used by authoritarian governments, through their armed groups, religious political parties, paid trolls, televangelists, to silence and curtail movement of women human rights defenders further disrupting their ability to engage in many development processes including Agenda 2030. These conditions also disregard decades of struggle for gender equality and freedom of expression, and fails to recognise gender equality policies and its applications in today's context.

Research<sup>20</sup> from across Asia and the Pacific revealed that trans and gender diverse people faced harsher treatment from the state during lockdown. For instance, trans and non-trans sex workers were charged and arrested for soliciting sex (sex work) and arrested for breaching curfew violations in Fiji. However, the closure of the courts during lockdown delayed proceedings and resolution with many remaining in detention far longer than necessary. In Malaysia, homeless trans people were rounded up by state actors and forced into temporary shelters, unable to leave. The shelters were sex segregated and transgender women were placed with men and were only able to use the male bathrooms. The lack of gender responsive programmes such as these increased their experiences of abuse and harassment.

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<sup>18</sup> [https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/flid\\_global\\_analysis\\_2020.pdf](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/flid_global_analysis_2020.pdf)

<sup>19</sup>

[https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2020/07/FINAL-COVID-19%20WHRD\\_FINAL.pdf](https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2020/07/FINAL-COVID-19%20WHRD_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> [https://weareaptn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Trans-Resilience-Report\\_COVID-FINAL-Web.pdf](https://weareaptn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Trans-Resilience-Report_COVID-FINAL-Web.pdf)

All the abovementioned systemic barriers and challenges in the context of COVID-19 bring an urgent need to address the systemic, historical, and structural root causes such as extractive based neoliberal capitalism, unjust financial, trade and investment agreements, land and resource threats, militarism, patriarchy and fundamentalism, religion, as well as patriarchal authoritarian governance to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs) through the lens of Development Justice.

## Recommendations

1. Put women's human rights and gender equality at the heart of the efforts of COVID-19 response, preparedness to future pandemics and sustainable development policies by upholding the rights of women, adolescents and girls, Indigenous women, gender non-conforming, women with disability, women living with HIV, migrant/mobile women and girls, sex workers, and transgender women and not just be focused on aspects of finance and economic growth.
2. Take a human rights-based approach (both individual and collective rights) to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its related crises.
3. Reconsider macroeconomic policies that benefit only a few corporations and disadvantages the majority of the population, including women in all their diversities.
4. Ensure women and girls', in all their diversity, access sexual and reproductive health and rights and bodily autonomy through engagement and leadership, access to comprehensive sexuality education, and SRH services that do not discriminate against or stigmatise women, girls (including LBQ women), trans and gender diverse people.
5. End discrimination and stigma faced by LBQ women, trans and gender diverse people and children in every aspect of life including access to education, health, housing, social protection, criminal justice and asylum and detention settings. Criminalise harmful, dehumanising and violent practices such as conversion 'therapy', as well as granting legal gender recognition and decriminalising same sex relationships.
6. Expand data to include women's unpaid care work, leadership and economic issues as important indicators of GDP to help formulate policies. Also, There is need for adequate investment in a care infrastructure by the state and industry i.e creches, shelters, half-ways houses, and transition homes which can facilitate women to enter and sustain skill training, higher-education and work participation
7. End gender-based discrimination and gender-based violence, including violence and harassment at work. Ratify and implement key legal instruments aimed at fostering equality and eliminating violence and harassment, such as ILO Convention 111 on discrimination and ILO Convention 190 on violence and harassment.
8. End gender pay gap to ensure women's full and equal participation in work and life. Ending the gender pay gap requires effective laws on equal pay, pay transparency and anti-discrimination, inclusive labour market policies, and policies that uphold work-life balance and reduce and redistribute unpaid care work.
9. Treat COVID-19 vaccines as a global public good. Abandon vaccine nationalism, the stockpiling of vaccines, and support the TRIPS COVID-19 waiver. Women, trans and gender diverse people need to be central to equitable and inclusive recovery from COVID-19 through vaccine equity, public investments in the care economy and introduction of gender responsive social protection mechanisms.
10. Invest in public services and social infrastructure including gender responsive budgets and progressive taxation policies.<sup>21</sup>
11. Establish a regional tax body to reform taxation architecture and synergise regional cooperation on taxation.

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<sup>21</sup><https://www.equalmeasures2030.org/2022-sdg-gender-index/>

12. Support and create provisions for women's rights to land and productive assets and their control and ownership over the assets to address poverty reduction, food security and gender equality.<sup>22</sup>
13. Dismantle the unjust economic systems that perpetuate and deepen inequalities between and within countries. Allocate adequate resources and technology transfer to strengthen data and statistical systems and collect disaggregated data
  - a. Debt cancellation to enable governments to use their fiscal and monetary instruments to provide basic services and social security for the peoples.
  - b. Adopt a human rights-based approach to the promotion of food sovereignty and agroecology centering the realisation of the human rights of women and girls in hunger, food, and nutrition policies.
14. Recognize collective rights and principles of indigenous women in all aspects of lives impacting them and recognize their knowledge and skills as a climate change adaptation and mitigation.
15. Take urgent measures to dismantle the root causes of climate injustices. Immediate fossil fuel phased out, holding polluters accountable for their historical and ongoing responsibility. Promote energy democracy that upholds women's human rights for just and equitable transition from the current climate crisis.
16. Prevent further losses and damages, and provide financing facilities based on the principles common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) to assist developing countries in coping with impacts. Support must be based on the needs, consent and determined direction of the countries in need.
17. Support community based climate solutions, strengthen the ambitions and implementation of the National Determined Contributions (NDCs), ensure meaningful participation, leadership and reflection of women's voices and priorities in all stages including the planning and implementation of climate solutions.
18. Promote the leadership, participation and voice of girls and women requiring the creation of a gender-just ecosystem to support women's participation in education and skills. This also includes gender-sensitive infrastructure like hygienic toilets for women in public spaces, work and educational spaces, creches in communities, safe-houses etc.
19. Develop and implement gender responsive policy and budgeting to promote women's human rights and gender equality and create an enabling environment for grassroots women to demand accountability at all level
20. Recognize and support the contribution of women human rights defenders in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. Ensure a safe and enabling environment for their work. Hold perpetrators accountable for violations against WHRDs.

## **GOAL 14: Life Below Water**

The marine ecosystems contribute \$1.5 trillion annually in value-added to the economy.<sup>23</sup> The ocean also supports the well-being of coastal communities by providing jobs and food, sustaining livelihoods and regulating the climate. The value of the ocean is fundamental to the lives, jobs, and livelihoods of people around the world. This clearly underlines the critical need to use, manage, and conserve the ocean - for the wellbeing of everyone. Marine Protected Areas management is a cornerstone of a sustainable blue economy. Moreover, global and comprehensive, integrated and collaborative initiatives are required to conserve and sustainably manage the ocean for present and future generations. To this end, it is crucial to get strong outcomes from the upcoming Kunming conference on a post 2020 global biodiversity framework.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.womensmajorgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/BFW-statement-for-G20-2021.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/oceans-fisheries-and-coastal-economies#1>

## Marine Resources and Life below water in Asia

Ocean related activities create more than 60 million jobs globally. A majority of these are small-scale, artisanal fishers and fish producers in developing underdeveloped countries. Globally, more than 3 billion people rely on marine and coastal resources for survival.<sup>24</sup> According to FAO estimates, global fisheries and aquaculture produced 179 million tons in 2018, with a "first sale" value of US\$401 billion, earning over US\$164 billion in exports, with 60% of it coming from poor countries. In 2017, fish provided about 20% of the average animal protein diet for about 3.3 billion people, with a higher proportion in many poor nations.<sup>25</sup>

Asia also makes a vital contribution to the global food supply as well as being a shipping hub. A policy brief of The Energy and Resource Institute of India highlights among others the significance of the ocean in the region<sup>26</sup>:

- The Asia- Pacific region is a major world producer of fish and fisheries products, and Asia (excluding China) occupies around 34% of the global fishing and aquaculture market. Fish farming is also dominated by the Asian countries that have produced 89% of the global total in volume terms in the last 20 years.
- Asia has consistently been accounting for almost two-thirds of the global inland water production since the mid-2000s and accounted for 57% of total inland water catches in 2018. The world's top six inland waters capture production is in Asian countries, out of which China produces almost 16% of the world's inland water capture fisheries, followed by India (14%), Bangladesh (10%), Myanmar (7%), Cambodia (4%) and Indonesia (4%).
- The Asia-pacific region is the backbone of Global Maritime trade with major Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) within its region. 64% of the container port traffic occurred in the Asian region alone. Among the top 50 global container ports, 9 of the 10 are located in Asia, and 7 of the top 10 are from China.
- Global ship production is dominated by the three Asian countries — Republic of Korea, China, and Japan — representing 90% of the global shipbuilding activities. In the ship-breaking sector, Asian countries like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan lead in the maritime supply chain where Bangladesh made 47.2% of this segment followed by India at 25.6% and Pakistan at 21.5%.

Asia also contributes the highest numbers of workers, 85% of the global fisheries sector.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Excerpted from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/oceans-fisheries-and-coastal-economies#1>

<sup>25</sup> UN Chronicle,  
<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/achieving-sdg-14-role-united-nations-convention-law-sea>

<sup>26</sup> Mani Juneja, Christina De Souza, Asha L Giriyan and Swati Ganeshan (2021), *Contextualising Blue Economy in Asia-Pacific Region — Exploring Pathways for a Regional Cooperation Framework*, The Energy and Resource Institute.

<sup>27</sup> FAO. 2020. *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020. Sustainability in action*. Rome.  
<https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9229en>

Thus the oceans and its resources provide a key lifeline to the development of the region.

That lifeline, however, is not sustainable. Marine resources also face severe threats due to fisheries - overfishing, illegal, unreported or unregulated fishing (IUU fishing), disregard of regulations, lack of enforcement and management. Thus today we face serious challenges, related to fisheries management, regulation, access and control. These issues span from community level - between different types and scales of fishers and other users all the way to resource sharing and political motivations between countries. As resources continue to diminish, and as climate change increases its impact, the tensions increase and urgent attention is needed to manage these tensions and increase sustainable harvesting and management of fisheries. Another massive threat to our oceans comes from various sources of pollution - with plastic pollution, oil and nitrogen loading being critical areas.

Asia and the Pacific produces half of global plastic pollution and uses approx. 40% of it with more than 80% of plastics ending up landfills. However, approx. 10 million tons end up in oceans every year. With projections of plastic production tripling in the next 3 decades, plastic pollution in oceans can reach up to 90 million tons a year. Plastic production and use has multiplied manifold during the Covid pandemic and the countries which were planning to ban plastics have postponed it in the wake of the pandemic. In addition, microplastics are now being detected in our blood, which shows the extent of the problem. It is crucial to tackle plastics pollution not only once it is already in the oceans, but to take a life-cycle approach and address land-based pollution, as well as minimise plastics production using other products where possible.

### **Progress of SDGs in the Region**

While we are encouraged by South Asia's efforts and progress toward SDG 14, we are equally concerned by the -'regression' of the sub-region's in achieving goals. First and foremost, we are unable to accurately assess progress due to a lack of data against the targets. In Bangladesh, for example, data is only available for three goals, up from one in 2018. The information we are receiving is not what we want. According to a UNESCAP assessment, the subregion of South and South-west Asia is regressing on five SDGs, one of which is SDG 14.

The Sustainable Development Report 2021, published by Cambridge University says data on the trends against 4 out of 10 indicators are available in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, and the Maldives. There is no data from Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan. So, we don't have adequate data on the trends of the SDGs in South Asian countries right now. Based on the available data, the aforesaid report of Cambridge, says that the progress of SDGs 14 in Bangladesh is 'Stagnating'. Of the 4 indicators where data is available, Bangladesh is stagnating against 3, on Track 1, trends in India is Moderately Improving. Stagnating 2, On Track 2, Pakistan is Stagnating, against available data against 4 indicators, stagnating 2, Regressive 1, Improving 1.

In Sri Lanka the overall trend is Stagnating, stagnating 2, regressing 1, On track 1, Maldives: Improving, Stagnating 1, regressive 1, on track 2. In Sri Lanka the status was also further shaken by the worst maritime disaster in the region (the fire and sinking of the MV Xpress Pearl) that has shown weaknesses in terms of adequate measures to deal with such disasters - in terms of assessment, clean up, claiming and distributing compensation.

In the Philippines, the government only adopted one target i.e., 14.5 - conservation of coastal and marine areas yet allows the conversion of coastal areas for private business to flourish and make way for

environmentally destructive infrastructure projects like the Bulacan Aerotropolis and Manila Bay Reclamation Project. Demolitions are happening even amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the policies for fisheries under the Philippine Development Plan 2017 to 2022 - the Philippine government's roadmap for SDGs implementation - prioritize the interest of large-scale commercial fishing and encourage importation of marine products even if these are abundantly harvested in Philippine territorial waters. This example highlights the dangers or biases of blue economy models that do not favour small scale fisheries.

For small island developing (SIDs) nations in the region, they are particularly vulnerable as their reliance on the oceans dominate economic wellbeing. Small scale and local businesses in these regions compete with larger more well resourced external entities for both fisheries and tourism businesses and also compete with other infrastructure projects that is driven by the blue economy. Thus ocean governance and equity of benefit sharing are serious concerns.

## **Recommendations**

1. We call on countries in the region to support a 30% target in the global biodiversity framework that is already being negotiated. Understanding that we cannot easily make 30% of oceans off-limits for human activities and livelihoods of people in the region. We must therefore establish areas that deliver both protection and SD under what is commonly called Other Area-based Conservation Mechanisms (OECMs). These will contribute to livelihoods and conservation objectives, which may help us in sustaining long term ocean health without jeopardising livelihoods.
2. We must treat pollution and the resultant degradation of marine resources as a critical global problem that has to span multipronged and multi stakeholder initiatives. This is a global to local problem, one that needs land based and ocean based action and one that needs support politically, technologically, financially and in terms of lifestyles.
3. The enacted treaties, conventions must be enforced as expected between countries - for fisheries, for pollution control, shipping etc.
4. The inclusion of small scale fishers as key stakeholders must also be ensured to protect their livelihoods, to ensure that they also gain from the blue economy and are central to accomplishing SDG 14.
5. We request all governments and stakeholders to ensure access to finance, markets, technical support, protection from disasters and other shocks and also access to legal protection for the SSF from competition with industrial trawlers, and commercial fishing. Intergovernmental initiatives need to be set up or established initiatives on transboundary issues must take action - beyond political motivations.
6. Greater efforts are needed to enhance fishing fleets to have resilience to climate change. Stricter monitoring and prevention of destruction of mangrove areas are necessary to also protect coastal communities from storm surges and ensure steady supply of marine food for local food self sufficiency



7. Ensure that there is better enforcement of fisheries laws and environmental regulations - for marine and coastal development and blue economy activities are followed. Also that they do not discriminate against small scale fishers.
8. Improve efforts towards the conservation and sustainable utilisation of natural resources rather than destructive resource extraction and depletion.
9. Improve coordination and collaboration amongst government agencies with shared and overlapping mandates as well as non government agencies for better management and use of coastal and marine resources.
10. Improve research, data gathering/monitoring and sharing efforts are in place to ensure that adequate and timely data /information is available
11. Adopt a co-management concept for: managing MPAs and all coastal management plans so that there is a greater responsibility by all relevant stakeholders resource governance.

## **SDG 15:**

In its annual SDG progress reports, the UNESCAP has consistently shown how the region is falling behind on achieving the SDGs, and especially so on the environmental aspects.

SDG 15 is a case in point.

Like the global trend, this region shows that some countries seem to perform well on the SDGs. However it is always those countries that have the highest Ecological Footprints and international spillovers that seem to perform the best. This means two important things, namely (i) that some countries are performing well on SDGs by displacing their negative environmental footprints to others countries through trade, and (ii) that the development patterns promoted by Agenda 2030 still are largely interpreted as MDG type of unsustainable development. This has not only detrimental environmental but also social impacts on vulnerable people across the region. Therefore, even SDG 15 is one of the environmental goals it can and should not be viewed in isolation from social justice.

**Environmental protection AND its destruction directly affects millions of people in the region, most of all Indigenous Peoples, farmers and local communities who directly depend on land and natural resources** for their existence and have contributed significantly to the conservation of land and natural resources.

Almost all Asian governments have attempted to replace the customary institutions of natural resource management and livelihood systems with land reform policies for agricultural modernisation, corporate food, agricultural, livestock and dairy sector policies. All of these have led to widespread destruction of natural resources and biodiversity and have also jeopardised lives and livelihoods of people, especially Indigenous peoples, farmers and local communities. Large-scale infrastructure and industrial developments encroach and impose new threats for territories and culture of Indigenous peoples, farmers and local communities. Some examples include: (1) the development of the petrochemical extractive industries; (2) mega-infrastructure projects like highways, ports, airports often labelled as “green infrastructure” (3) the dams that have submerged many settlements and led to forced migration; (4) a land change programmes (pasture to farm); and (5) large scale plantation projects.

In the face of threats and challenges over the past decades, the resilience of Indigenous peoples, farmers and local communities and their deep sense of belonging to their territories and their efforts to preserve spiritual, economic, socio-cultural and environmental values of their territories of life is remarkable. Unfortunately, despite the increased awareness about the territories of life of Indigenous peoples, farmers and local communities and their values for nature conservation due to valuable actions among people, peasant civil society organisations and grassroots movements; newer approaches to development emerge that encourage dispossession, deforestation, land grab, and land and forest degradation.

Besides traditional challenges, challenges on peoples' access to land also emerge from so-called "solutions" in general and Nature, climate or/ and land based Solutions in particular. These seek to enhance capture of land, forests and other natural resources by state and corporate interests in the guise of providing solutions for multiple crises including climate, biodiversity, food, pollution and disaster and diverting from the urgent task of system change and deep decarbonization. NbS along with the mad rush for "net zero" commitments by countries and corporations, make a perfect recipe for further destruction of land and natural resources and lives of the people dependent upon them.

We have been hearing about these conversations about nature based solutions, nature positive actions, nature climate solutions for the last couple of years and now understand that net zero along with nature based solutions present a deadly combination for people, planet and especially the farmers. This is a new form of colonialism where nature is under burden to offset luxury emissions of the rich world, putting the millions of poor peoples' livelihoods in the global south and also in the sun region. This is a new threat that we must resist to make a true sense of life on Earth and the SDG 15.

There has been much talk about conserving 30% of land and sea by 2030. These ambitious targets are needed to preserve biodiversity for the coming generations. But they cannot result in displacements of those people that have lived on lands for generations, Therefore we recommend that governments apply effective area- based conservation measures (OECMs) to complement protected areas. OECMs include socio-ecological production landscape and seascapes (SEPLS), where people and nature co-exist and complement one another. This would be a more realistic and socially inclusive way to work towards achieving 30by30 targets of the global biodiversity framework, and other relevant targets under SDG 15.

With an urgency to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the effects of climate change, a transition to a more sustainable and equitable ecosystem has been emphasized as important in words, and on paper, but not yet in reality. More importantly, such transition can never be sustainable if it forces displacement of indigenous communities from their territories who increasingly host renewable energy projects; and so often without their universal right to their Free Prior and Informed Consent.

At the same time, Indigenous communities globally have their renewable energy solutions maintained by indigenous communities and farmers. They could be major contributors to solving problems around energy access and clean energy. Corporations, States and other multi-stakeholders must move ahead in partnership with Indigenous communities where there would be multiple-co benefits including community wealth and cohesion. The future energy transition should be reimagined with indigenous communities.

## **Recommendations:**

- SDG performance must take into account international dimensions, and countries with an ecological and social debt need to own up to what and whom they are leaving behind.
- Indigenous peoples and local communities must receive customary rights to their territories, their Indigenous and local knowledge, skills, institutions and rules for their governance and management in the conservation of land and natural resources
- The governing institutions of Indigenous peoples, farmers and local communities need active participation in policy- and meaningful decision-making processes to their territories of life and natural resources as key rights-holders;
- Governments should apply effective area- based conservation measures (OECMs) to complement protected areas. OECMs include socio-ecological production landscape and seascapes (SEPLS), where people and nature co-exist and complement one another. This would be a more realistic and socially inclusive way to work towards achieving 30by30 targets of the global biodiversity framework, and other relevant targets under SDG 15.
- Participatory planning and implementation of programmes should improve, strengthen and revitalize the relational structures between Indigenous peoples and local communities and nature within the territories of life and enhance the sense of community ownership of territories;
- The intellectual property rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities and their collective governance and knowledge systems should be respected and recognised;
- Efforts should be made to review and reverse inappropriate policies and programmes for natural resource management such as nationalization of natural resources as well as top-down policies and programmes;
- The legally established rights on the protection of the migration routes of nomadic tribes as part of their territories of life should be respected, protected and fulfilled; and
- Participatory conservation of national plant and animal genetic resources should be promoted and based on the combination of Indigenous knowledge and modern science with the active participation of Indigenous peoples and local communities in their territories of life (in situ conservation).
- Studies document the adverse impact of land based/ Nature based Solutions (REDD, REDD Plus and Climate Smart Agriculture etc.) on indigenous populations pushing communities towards displacement, migration and rooting them out from their ancestral lands. NbS must be designed, implemented and with full consent and participation of people that are impacted by them, especially Indigenous communities including women.
- Hydropower dams are often presented as a clean and Renewable Energy source. However, they flood forests, [destroy habitat](#) and increase the release of [greenhouse gases](#) as vegetation decomposes. Dams also [displace](#) millions of people globally - submerging homes and indigenous territories. Long-term and cumulative impact assessments are needed to better understand how infrastructure projects can be designed in a way that is resilient, provides long-term benefits, and avoids harm to people and fragile ecosystems.

### **3. Strengthening Means of Implementation and Financing for 2030 Agenda (goal 17)**

Asia-Pacific's progress on SDGs was poor even before the pandemic, as ESCAP's SDGs Report 2021 confirmed that out of 104 measurable targets, the region is on track with only 09 - essentially failing on all the SDGs. The improved availability of data, on almost 53% indicators, in ESCAP's 2022 report does not compensate for the fact that the region's progress against the SDGs continues to be bleak.

COVID 19 has amplified the challenges further with an increased number of people caught amid poverty & hunger, inequitable access to health, education and social protection services; growing gender disparities, massive job losses, rocketing inequalities within and among countries, and accelerated

climate change. The situation requires a paradigm shift to mobilise means of implementation guided by the principles of solidarity, equity and justice for building a fairer future for all.

### i. Debt Distress

COVID 19 enforced economic downturn, combined with increased deficit financing, led to higher debt to GDP ratio rising to almost 49% in 2021 among the developing countries in the Asia Pacific. Globally, almost 108 developing countries are facing a protracted debt crisis with almost 32 of them having to allocate over 20% of their GDPs in debt servicing alone in 2020.<sup>28</sup> UNCTAD projections revealed that in 2020 and 2021 developing countries' repayments of public external debts alone will rise between 2.6 to USD 3.4 trillion.<sup>29</sup> In GDP terms, average debt ratios were projected to rise by 10% of GDP in emerging economies and about 7% of GDP in low income countries.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, almost 40 countries in Asia and the Pacific region experienced unprecedented debt distress with Fiji and Maldives among the most severely affected with debt ratios climbing by 30 percentage points of GDP caught amidst recovery efforts and SDGs advancement.[6] However, the business as usual approach for International Financing Institutions (IFIs) continues. The very lesson from COVID 19 is to strengthen public healthcare systems but almost 76 out of 91 IMF loans negotiated in 2020 pushed for further belt-tightening resulting in deeper cuts to public healthcare and social protection systems. Despite the collapse of global health systems, mainly enfeebled by IFI induced conditionalities enforcing massive privatisations, IFIs are using the pandemic as a justification to expand privatisation initiatives in the guise of good governance in healthcare.

Historically, the IFI conditionalities have played a major role in constraining developing countries' fiscal capacities to invest in strategic sectors, mainly health, education and social protection. The recent increase in debt to GDP ratios could further impose austerity measures reducing the prospects for rebuilding the already down-trodden public sectors.<sup>31</sup> This is evident from the fact that the region's social protection expenditure at 28.1% is already low compared to the global average of 34.9%. Nepal's public debt, for instance, is projected to rise from 30.1 to 43.8 percent of GDP by 2023 forcing the government to devote almost 28.5% of the government finances to debt servicing alone in 2022 leaving virtually no fiscal space for investment in healthcare or social protection systems. Similar trends are being projected for other low-income countries in the region with Myanmar and Bangladesh<sup>32, 33</sup> where the additional debt

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<sup>28</sup> Munevar, D. (2021, 15 September). *A Debt Pandemic: Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis in Developing Countries*. Eurodad. Retrievable from,

[https://www.eurodad.org/a\\_debt\\_pandemic\\_impact\\_of\\_the\\_crisis\\_in\\_developing\\_countries](https://www.eurodad.org/a_debt_pandemic_impact_of_the_crisis_in_developing_countries)

<sup>29</sup> UNESCAP. (2020, Nov). *An Assessment of Fiscal Space for COVID-19 Response and Recovery in Asia and the Pacific Developing Countries*. Retrieved from,

[https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/xPB116\\_Assessment%20of%20fiscal%20space%20for%20COVID-19%20response%20and%20recovery%20in%20AP%20developing%20countries.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/xPB116_Assessment%20of%20fiscal%20space%20for%20COVID-19%20response%20and%20recovery%20in%20AP%20developing%20countries.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> UNICEF Office of

Research – Innocenti. (2021). *COVID-19 and the Looming Debt Crisis. Innocenti Policy Brief series, Brief 2021-01, Protecting and Transforming Social Spending for Inclusive Recoveries*. Retrievable from, [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Social-spending-series\\_COVID-19-and-the-looming-debt-crisis.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Social-spending-series_COVID-19-and-the-looming-debt-crisis.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> UNESCAP. (2020, Nov). *An Assessment of Fiscal Space for COVID-19 Response and Recovery in Asia and the Pacific Developing Countries*. Retrieved from,

[https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/xPB116\\_Assessment%20of%20fiscal%20space%20for%20COVID-19%20response%20and%20recovery%20in%20AP%20developing%20countries.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/xPB116_Assessment%20of%20fiscal%20space%20for%20COVID-19%20response%20and%20recovery%20in%20AP%20developing%20countries.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Munevar, d. (2020). *Arrested Development: International Monetary Fund lending and Austerity Post COVID-19*. Retrieved from,

<https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/eurodad/pages/1063/attachments/original/1608122652/arrested-development-FINAL.pdf?1608122652>

<sup>33</sup> Eurodad. (2021, 16 March). *Bangladesh, COVID-19 and Debt*. Retrieved from, [https://www.eurodad.org/bangladesh\\_covid\\_19\\_and\\_debt](https://www.eurodad.org/bangladesh_covid_19_and_debt)

service payments are expected to be higher than their average COVID 19 response package every year between 2023 to 2030.<sup>34</sup> Developing countries like Lao PDR, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka could only afford to dedicate fiscal packages of less than 2% of GDP for COVID 19 recovery while pressed by escalating social protection needs in the absence of livelihoods.<sup>35</sup> IMF advised austerity measures require a reduction in the government's primary budget by 5% until 2025, wage cuts and freezes (31 countries), introduction/increase of Value Added Taxes (14 countries), and General public expenditure cuts (55 countries).<sup>36</sup> The trend continues despite clear warning signs, like the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States warned in 2020 that learning from the 2008 economic crisis, austerity cannot be an option.

While the IFIs and MDBs have responded swiftly to provide emergency relief to developing countries, evident of the fact that almost 96% of the support to Asian Pacific countries in 2020 were loans, with meager amounts in grants or debt relief. Moreover, the least developing countries in the Asia-Pacific need to pay USD 4.1 billion in debt servicing in 2021-2022, leaving little to no net inflows.<sup>37</sup> The recently promoted green and sustainability bonds by the IFIs for development and climate financing are merely repackaged loans and only serve to further exacerbate debt distress among countries. Such programs are also counterproductive for both people and the planet due to lack of inclusive and transparent approach in the absence of adequate accountability mechanisms. The narrative with the IFIs needs to shift from rebuilding a healthy global economy to rebuilding a healthy globe.

## ii. Trade and Investment Agreements

Hegemonic Trade and Investment Agreements amplify the continued flow of wealth and resources from developing countries through illicit financial flows, tax evasions, capital flows, asset stealth, trade mispricing, and profit shifting by multinational corporations. The data shows that developing and emerging economies have lost over \$7.8 trillion in illicit financial flows alone between 2004-2013, with the outflows increasing at 6.5% every year - twice as fast as global GDP.

Notwithstanding COVID 19 as a wake up call, the new normal cemented corporate capture with the private sector's engagement in decision making processes. Despite multiple campaigns to waive TRIPS on the vaccines, the patents were not removed which caused vaccine inequity resulting in several mutations of the virus affecting millions around the world. The Big Pharma accumulated profits from the pandemic and rich countries hoarded the vaccines while the poorest of the world couldn't access a single dose.

Trade rules bent on liberalization and deregulation measures are schematized to reduce state obligation for protection of citizen rights and provision of essential services, constrain governmental oversight to safeguard its national resources, prevent the development of local industries, maintain market monopoly on goods and services, and, sustain corporate capture of governance and resources around the globe. This is compounded by biased arbitration mechanisms like Investor State Dispute Settlement, designed to leverage businesses over communities, to plunder nation states of vital resources leaving virtually no fiscal space for COVID 19 recovery or SDG priorities.

## iii. Official Development Assistance

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> UNESCAP. (2020, Nov). An Assessment of Fiscal Space for COVID-19 Response and Recovery in Asia and the Pacific Developing Countries. Retrieved from, [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/xPB116\\_Assessment%20of%20fiscal%20space%20for%20COVID-19%20response%20and%20recovery%20in%20AP%20developing%20countries.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/xPB116_Assessment%20of%20fiscal%20space%20for%20COVID-19%20response%20and%20recovery%20in%20AP%20developing%20countries.pdf)

Official Development Assistance continues to be a testament to the lack of multilateral resolve with more than half the countries failing on their ODA commitments, while developing countries are faced with a financing shortfall of over \$2.5 trillion per year in core SDGs priority areas. ODA reached “new heights” amounting [USD 161.2 billion in 2020](#) but still failed to reach even half of the expected financing of USD 350 billion, as per the 0.7% of GNI commitments. Almost [22% of gross bilateral ODA was disbursed in the form of loans and equity investments](#), increasing from 17% previously, further increasing the debt distress of the developing countries. Moreover, a major chunk of [almost USD 3.2 billion of net ODA flows](#) was coursed through the private sector cementing corporate capture, circumventing state policy space for transparency and accountability. Most of such aid was routed through IFIs with severe question marks on aid efficiency due to its adverse effects on [development, human rights, peace & security, and the environment](#).

The lack of meaningful action on the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities continues to persist while the Asian-Pacific countries’ vulnerability to climate crises increases despite meagre carbon footprints. This is compounded by the use of ODA to catalyse private sector engagement, achieve trade, military and political objectives of donor countries, and ODA’s substitution with climate financing, refugee costs or debt relief, affecting the efficiency of both COVID 19 recovery and SDG priorities. Parallely, the business as usual continues while the developing countries grapple with fiscal and monetary measures to contain COVID 19 and ease the shocks to jobs and minimum standards of living at a varied pace.<sup>38</sup>

#### iv. Technological and Digital Solutions

The continued emphasis on digitalization as the way forward needs to be reconsidered for its implications across several domains. Increased corporate control of data and concentration of tech innovation in the hands of a few technology giants could compromise privacy, hinder technology transfer, marginalise human workforce, and undermine local knowledge systems, among others.

Multinational corporations have thrived with digitalization of the economy and services gaining unprecedented access to data and control over connectivity. Increasing digitalization patterns pose serious existential threats to micro, small and medium enterprises as they are pit against multinational corporations monopolising the virtual domain. While multilateral institutions continue to promote digitalization as a solution, it is important to address underlying challenges of digital divide and lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms to avoid the tech take-over of people and their resources.

#### v. Multi-Stakeholderism and Partnerships

The spirit of partnerships for Sustainable Development should neither ignore nor legitimise actors who have historically been part of the problem. The involvement of the private sector in decision making processes, in the name of multistakeholderism, poses serious threats to our multilateralism. In the absence of clear compatibility impact assessment, we must realise that the private sector’s involvement in the process is driven by profits and not by piety, evident of the history of tax evasions, profit shifting, asset stealth and illicit financial flows, and, therefore, does not merit the messiah status on negotiation tables.

During the pandemic, civil society around the world mobilised its resources in urgent response measures to COVID 19 to cater to the most marginalised. CSOs have contributed to the recovery processes as well as monitored the recovery measures by other development actors including governments to enhance

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<sup>38</sup> ILO. (2020). *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Sixth edition*. Retrieved from, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_755910.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_755910.pdf)

their efficiency and outcomes for the most marginalised. It is high time that we ensured sufficient civil society representation across processes to balance the interests of people and the planet.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

Building Back Better has already shown clear signs of failure in ignoring the redress of systemic issues by legitimising the neoliberal instruments responsible for the multidimensional crises. Its emphasis on multistakeholderism continues to normalise the private sector and IFI's strangulation of nations, peoples and their resources around the world, contradictory to the transformative ambition of the Agenda 2030. People of the Asia Pacific propose Development Justice as an alternative to ensure a holistic COVID-19 recovery centering human rights and well-being, with an intersectional focus on redress of systemic issues, guided by international solidarity, multilateralism and democratic values based on equity and justice to leave no one behind.

We propose the following recommendations to build back fairer, justly, differently and sustainably.

#### **ODA and Development Finance**

1. Meet and exceed the 0.7% GNI target without further delay and separate from in-donor refugee costs, debt cancellation and principal purpose projects for climate finance
2. Meet the 0.2% GNI commitment to LDCs and other countries in chronic conflict and state of fragility
3. Establish a human rights-based framework and anchor all forms of development finance on the four development effectiveness principles
4. Increase country programmable aid, grants, demand-led technical cooperation, and support for domestic resource mobilisation rather than loans, informal and formal tied aid
5. Deploy ODA only in projects/activities directly related to building capacities of developing country private sector, i.e. small-scale enterprises that support the creation of decent jobs and livelihoods
6. Stop shaping humanitarian and development strategies according to their own foreign policy, geopolitical and security interests
7. Respond to the climate emergency without diminishing ODA and/or provision of loans for these purposes.

#### **Technology**

1. Respond to the climate emergency without diminishing ODA and/or provision of loans for these purposes.
2. Corporate control of data, as the raw material for the 4th industrial revolution, and concentration of technological innovation in the hands of a few technology giants, must not be allowed to compromise privacy, hinder technology transfer, impede the capacity of developing countries to develop their technological capacity, marginalise human workforce, or undermine subalternize local knowledge systems.
3. Policy emphasis on digitization and technological advancements must ensure a thorough review of the potential adverse effects on livelihoods, the economy, environment, society, culture, and civil & political rights of the people.
4. The UN technology facilitation mechanism established in the Agenda 2030,[14] needs to be strengthened to provide policy guidance in participatory assessment of actual and potential impacts of new technologies including digital technologies . In line with the aspiration of Rio+20 to develop regional, national and local capacity to evaluate the impacts of new and emerging technologies, it is imperative to enable civil society led participatory technology assessment platforms to ensure that STI supports the achievement of the SDGs.
5. The UN should capacitate global, regional and national institutions to have thorough understanding of the implications of the 4th industrial revolution on peoples, society, economy, rights and the environment, and enable efforts on democratic governance of the technology sector to ensure equity, transparency, accountability, fairness and inclusiveness.

## Partnerships

1. Waive TRIPS as a minimum, and even abrogate it, together with other neoliberal trade and investment rules of the WTO.
2. Reverse the shrinking and closing space for CSOs as development actors and rights-holders.
3. Promote the use of CSO or citizen-led data collection and monitoring, as a way to address the lack of transparency and accountability of other development actors.

## 4. VNR, Accountability and Linking National, Regional and Global level

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) serve as instruments to augment the holistic and interdependent nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national Level and have been fundamental in maintaining the 2030 Agenda as a key priority at the national, regional and international levels especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The VNRs support the delivery of the 2030 Agenda and the pledge to leave no one behind.

The VNRs are supposed to promote open dialogue among countries and stakeholders on national implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and in this way, they can serve to promote national reviews that are focused, evidence-based, conducive to peer learning and experience-sharing and that identify gaps and good practices and forge partnerships. The issues of multi-stakeholder engagement , however, are missing in many countries even among the second or third term presenting countries.

The 2022 High Level Political Forum is entitled 'Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', In addition to the 45 VNRs, the 2022 session of the HLPF will review in-depth the following five SDGs: 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), 14 (life below water), 15 (life on land), and 17 (partnerships for the Goals).

The VNR countries for 2022 also vary in terms of their previous VNR experience. The list includes **eight first-time presenters** (Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Suriname, and Tuvalu), **26 second-time presenters** (Andorra, Belarus, Botswana, Cameroon, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Greece, Italy, Jamaica, Jordan, **Kazakhstan**, Latvia, Liberia, Luxembourg, Mali, Montenegro, the Netherlands, **Pakistan**, Senegal, **Sri Lanka**, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates), **three third-time presenters** (Argentina, **Philippines**, and Switzerland), and two fourth-time presenters (Togo and Uruguay). The 2022 session will be the first time a country has presented a fourth VNR.

Altogether 5 countries in Asia- Pacific (Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Philippines and Tuvalu) are presenting the VNR in 2022.

The 2022 VNRs will allow countries to learn from their respective past experiences to improve implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, which serve as a global blueprint for sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The VNRs will also contribute to national sustainable recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, while shifting to a track to realise the sustainable development goals (SDGs) during the Decade of Action and Delivery.

In his letter to Member States, Collen Vixen Kelapile, President of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has reiterated his intention to "maximise the value of the VNR process" by scheduling sufficient time for interactive discussions. He writes that this aims to ensure<sup>39</sup>:

- Adequate feedback to the presenting countries,
- Enhanced sharing of experiences, and
- Peer learning among countries.

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<sup>39</sup> <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/four-time-presenters-on-2022-list-of-voluntary-national-reviews/>



Please refer to [link to see the details of VNR countries](#)

### **Role of Civil Society Organizations in VNR**

An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2021 calls on countries to “include forums for meaningful participation by civil society and other stakeholders” through efforts to strengthen major groups’ and other stakeholders’ engagement mechanisms<sup>40</sup>.

The report identifies both positive and concerning trends.

1. The number of VNR reports that reported the formal **inclusion of non-state actors** in governance arrangements **dropped from 70% in 2019 and 2020 to 64% in 2021. Only 1 of the 42 VNR reports presented in 2021 recognized the occurrence of shrinking civic space**, while none mentioned the ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists. Conversely, several national civil society reports have categorically mentioned these issues in various countries.
2. Fewer VNRs reported conducting baseline and gap assessments, selecting national priorities, integrating the SDGs into national policies, and selecting national targets and indicators to inform SDGs implementation;
3. More VNRs referred to the transformational nature of the 2030 Agenda, with the principle of leaving no one behind as the main focus of 2021 reports;
4. All 2021 full reports (41 countries) identified groups that are being left behind or at risk of being left behind, including children and youth (98% of reports), persons with disabilities (95%), women and/or girls (95%), and the elderly (76%);
5. **There has been an increase of the number of countries pointing to human rights-based approaches, inter-generational responsibility, and planetary boundaries;** and
6. **Only 50% of VNR reports assessed all 17 SDGs in 2021, while in 2020 this figure was 70%.**

The above finding also reaffirms the worries of the civil society about the authoritative regimes in many countries amplified during the last two years of COVID Pandemics and the continued shrinking civic space, all over the globe and so in the Asia-Pacific region. The top ten violations captured by the CIVICUS Monitor 2020 include : (i) Protestors detained (ii) Harassment (iii) Censorship (iv) Detention (v) Attacks on Journalists (vi) Protest Disruption (vii) Restrictive Laws (viii) Journalists detained (ix) Excessive Force used (x) Human Rights Defenders Detained. Technology advances have brought increased surveillance on civil society and created new risks for civic space.

Moreover, the civil society parallel reports provide important information on how civic space is being closed in different countries, but these reports have no status in official VNR processes at national, regional or international levels. In order to have effective implementation of the SDGs ,an enabling environment & open civic space are essential conditions.

### **Assessment of Architecture and the implementation of 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific**

**The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) released its 2021 progress report on the SDGs during the 75th Commission session.**

Some of our key analysis in regards to the architecture and implementation of 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific are as follows:

- **Whole of Society Approach** : reporting on multi-stakeholder engagement outside governance arrangements has increased though, reporting on formal processes for stakeholder engagement, such as multi-stakeholder forums, youth councils or annual events. However, information presented in VNR reports does not assess the quality of formal processes for multi-stakeholder

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<sup>40</sup> <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/ngo-coalition-identifies-trends-in-national-sdg-reporting/>

engagement. Countries should develop indicators to measure the extent of non-state stakeholder engagement at the national level.

- In Sri Lanka, Selected stakeholders are invited to few consultations minus engaging them in the steering committee or VNR delivery process. There is no published methodology for the VNR so far in the country.
- In Philippines, the partnerships are diverse and multi-level. The government engages international development partners (multilateral, bilateral cooperation) and the private sector to fund its development projects in various modes of partnerships to finance its development programmes and the SDGs. The government also engages CSOs in specific projects related to SDGs, however, whilst the SDG SubCommittee announced the SDG Stakeholders' Chamber in 2019, applications for membership were announced only in February 2022.
- In Pakistan, partnerships among the private sector and civil society sector is witnessed and many collaborative actions are being done at various levels. Private sector does not have the capacity to fully understand the opportunities available through SDGs therefore measuring their interventions and translating their policies into actions is a little difficult.

- **State of progress in implementation and reporting -**

VNR reports for 2021 continued the upward trend around reporting on several aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation. For example, reporting on the means of implementation improved for information on challenges (98% of the countries), international public finance (95%), impacts of COVID-19 (91%), technology (90%), systemic issues (88%), capacity development (86%), trade (74%), best practices (69%), lessons learned (62%), and learning from peers (38%).

Another increase was observed in reporting on partnerships to realize the SDGs, with 93% of the countries recognizing the role of non-state actors and including their contributions towards implementation. Reporting on efforts at the local level (or localization) shows a steady result (83%), but in Pakistan, the non-functional local governments are creating major impediments towards the implementation of SDGs. Local governments have been non-functional for the last ten years therefore actual implementation at grassroots level is weak.

The government wishes to engage with other stakeholders including the private sector, however the opportunities are not effectively being launched with coordination. Also, this year the government is more proactive and has been inviting CSOs, HROs, constituency groups like transgenders and farmers, laborers and others for consultations on the VNR process. Pakistan Development Alliance is leading the Voluntary Local Review process across Pakistan with the support of CSOs and INGOs and global forums like A4SD. The Government has also invited PDA and other related stakeholders to contribute to the national VNR report. The process is more inclusive than before.

In the Philippines, grassroots based CSOs observed that local government units (LGUs) have not really internalized the SDGs and communities have no knowledge about the SDGs and what the SDGs are for.

- **Data Gaps in reporting -**

Most of the countries indicated their approach to 2030 Agenda implementation had been informed by a baseline or gap assessment around policies, data, or both. Although some countries might have presented this information in previous VNR reports, they should refer to previously done assessments for comparison purposes and continuous progress tracking.

In Pakistan, the national census held in 2017 after almost 18 years was rejected by the stakeholders due to flaws. The Planning Commission of Pakistan was struggling to have a centralized database for all the SDGs however seven years have passed since the inception of SDGs no validated data for measurement of progress is available. The civil society has not been invited to compliment the data gaps. **Once the report is available by the end of March 2022 there is a possibility that the draft will be shared with CSOs.** However it may not be possible for CSOs to challenge the data mentioned by the governments.

In the **Philippines**, Monitoring is done by the Philippine Statistical Authority (PSA) which maintains a dashboard (SDG Watch) that monitors progress on the goals. The government has identified indicators and targets based on conceptual clarity, established methodology, availability of data, and the regularity of data gathering as identified by the tier classification of IAEG SDGs. In May 18, 2017, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) approved the set of SDG indicators consisting of 155 indicators; 102 global SDG indicators, 28 proxy indicators and 25 supplemental indicators. However, the civil society has not been invited to discuss or compliment the data gaps. Similarly, in SriLanka, the statistics system has not progressed and does not have a proper mechanism for disaggregated data collection and analysis. Subnational governments are marginalised in the process, where a 'few' CSOs were handpicked to discuss the monitoring and review process for 2022 VNR, however, the majority of the right based organisations were excluded.

In all these countries, the civil society has been preparing their independent monitoring reports in the past and preparing the independent shadow reports in 2022 as well.

- **incorporation of the 2030 Agenda in national frameworks, institutional mechanisms,**  
Continuing the trend in the past 5 years, most countries reporting in 2022, are making use of new or existing councils, committees or specialised offices to govern 2030 Agenda implementation. For example, in **Sri Lanka**, its Sustainable Development Council (SDC),,however, without a policy framework and having no Integration of SD dimensions. In the **Philippines**, its National Economic and Development Authority under the Office of the President and the SDGs are part of the Philippine Development Plan. The plan emphasises the synergies between government and non-government actions to ensure inclusiveness and equality. In **Pakistan**, the Planning Commission of Pakistan leads the implementation of SDGs in Pakistan. SDGs Units are established at all regional and provincial levels for planning, policy reforms and implementation. National Priority Framework was approved in March 2018 by the National Economic Council under the Prime Minister of Pakistan, whereas Provincial Priority Frameworks are also developed and being followed by the national and provincial governments
- **Lack of focus on tackling systemic barriers and little engagement in the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda**  
So far, hardly any VNR reports systemic reforms with transformative potential, identifies structural barriers to them and they also lack self-critical reflection with focus on their development successes. Structural obstacles to development – such as violent conflicts, corruption, institutional barriers that perpetuates and worsens inequality including discrimination, and inhumane work – hardly find any place in the reports. The same applies to systemic problems and negative spill-over effects in the financial and trade sectors and in unsustainable consumption and production patterns.  
The VNRs need to expose both progress and implementation gaps at national level in order to allow for corrective actions and change of policies, programmes and institutions. This needs to ensure an adequate analysis of the root causes and systemic determinants of slow progress in all areas including gender inequality, social protection and the global division of labour, hindering factors to environmental justice and socio-economic transformation. This requires special attention to situations of developing countries, global economic trade, tax, monetary and financial frameworks; as well militarism and social and cultural norms such as patriarchy, fundamentalism, racism, casteism, etc
- **Lack of policy and process coherence.**  
Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an integrated and coherent set represents a major challenge to all countries. Addressing interactions between economic, social and environmental goals in a balanced manner, while avoiding negative effects on the wellbeing of people here and now, elsewhere and later, has been recognised by many countries as one of

the most difficult challenges to implementing the SDGs<sup>41</sup> with most countries pointing to climate-related commitments but having a limited focus on agreements for delivery of effective international assistance. More VNR reports revealed an analysis of both domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally, even if fewer countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation.

In **Pakistan**, 27 ministries at federal level and planning & development boards at provincial level form a coordination committee for policy reforms and coherence. However, the meetings of the coordination council are not frequent. The Coordination Council meets around VNR usually. Also, the policy approach clearly recognizes the integration of SDGs as per their respective priority frameworks at national and provincial level. Three pillars of SD are inter related with seven pillars of vision 2025 . In **Sri Lanka**, however, very few policies or Institutional coherence are in place.

**Indonesia** has integrated the three pillars (social, environmental & economic) of SDGs. Bappenas has attempted to divide the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs into four pillars, taking into account the linkages and support between the pillars;

1. Social development pillars: covering Goals 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5
2. Economic development pillars: covering Goals 7, 8, 9, 10 and 17
3. Environmental development pillars: covering Goals 6, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15
4. Law and Governance pillars: Goal 16

Some best practices like, synchronizing Formulation and Implementation of a Strategic Environmental Assessment (KLHS) for the Preparation Local Medium Term Development Plan (RPJMD). GOI is also currently drafting an academic paper for the 2020-2045 Long-Term Development Plan that includes renewable-based energy transition initiatives.

#### **Focused efforts to leave no one behind still receive insufficient attention -**

While the pandemics have badly hit the progress and implementation of the SDGs, not much efforts were taken from the government to engage stakeholders except reporting specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from an LNOB perspective which is one of the underlying principles of sustainable development. The pandemic has significantly affected sustainable development progress, and in the context of meeting the commitments to a [Decade of Action and Delivery](#) and the United Nations Secretary-General's [Our Common Agenda](#), heads of state and government urgently need to accelerate actions and promote transformative change to achieve a just recovery. In **Pakistan**, this year the government is more proactive and has been inviting CSOs, HROs, constituency groups like transgenders and farmers, labourers and other for consultations on the VNR process. The Government has also invited PDA and other related stakeholders to contribute to the national VNR report. The process is more inclusive than before. In the **Philippines**, whilst the SDG SubCommittee announced the SDG Stakeholders' Chamber in 2019, no progress has been achieved in comparison to the last two reports. Most of the independent civil society-led review, however, analysed countries' actions towards progressing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

#### **Good practices -**

In **Philippines** , the VNR emphasised the synergies between government and non-government actions to ensure inclusiveness and equality.

SDG4– Alternative Learning System

SDG6 – Green Jobs Act and Mentor Me program

SDG10 – Conditional Cash Transfer, Magna Carta for Persons with Disability and Assistance to Disadvantaged Municipalities

SDG13 – Climate Risk Management Framework, Project NOAH, and Sustainable Consumption and Production Action Plan

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<sup>41</sup><https://www.oecd.org/gov/pcsd/oecd-recommendation-on-policy-coherence-for-sustainable-development.htm>

In **Pakistan**, the progress on implementation is slow but steady. COVID 19 has hampered the progress much, however clear progress is witnessed on SDG1,2,3,4,5, 8 and 13. The Ehsaas Program, Kamyab Jawan Program, clean green program and Billion Tree Tsunami Programs are instrumental in achieving the aforementioned SDGs. Some new laws namely Anti rape Act2021, women courts and transgender empowerment laws and polices are also worth mentioning.

In **Indonesia**, the contributions and initiatives that stakeholders have made in supporting the SDGs include:

1. Organizing the World Parliamentary Forum, which was initiated by the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) (since 2017).
2. Collaboration between philanthropists and business actors who are members of the FBI4SDGs (Indonesian Philanthropy and Business for SDGs) supports SDGs financing through a blended finance scheme.
3. The establishment of SDGs centres in various universities, both public and private universities. As of September 2020, 19 SDGs Centers has been formed;
4. Formulation of 27 Governor Regulations for Regional Action Plans (Per September 2020)
5. Establishment of the SDGs Financing Hub initiated by the Ministry of National Development Planning / BAPPENAS and launched by the Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia in 2019<sup>42</sup>

In the context of development, several achievements in Indonesia include

1. In 2019, The President stopped granting new permits for land clearing in natural forests and peatlands, otherwise known as a permanent forest moratorium. This effort could save 66.2 million hectares of natural forest and land peat from damage (the size of France)<sup>43</sup>
2. The Central Statistics Agency (BPS) released the poverty rate in Indonesia in March 2018 at 9.82 percent, the first time it was below two digits since 1998<sup>44</sup>. This percentage continues to improve, 9.22 percent in September 2019.
3. Since the Human Development Index (HDI) was launched in 1990, Indonesia entered the high development category for the first time in the HDI in 2018. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) gave a score of 0.707 (ranked 6th in Southeast Asia)<sup>45</sup>.

Sustainable Development, which is reflected as ‘Sustainable & Equitable Socio-Economic Development’ in **Bhutan’s** case, is one of the pillars of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan. And the Environmental Conservation that has the highest place in the Constitution of Bhutan is another GNH pillar.

The Policy formulation of Bhutan is run through the screening tool to assess proposed public policies are aligned to the principles and goals of sustainable development. This ensures effective policy coherence.

## **Lesson Learnt and Recommendations to Strengthen Follow Up and Review in the National Level**

### **On Interlinkages and Coherence**

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<sup>42</sup> <http://sdgs.bappenas.go.id/dokumen/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://wri-indonesia.org/id/blog/jokowi-telah-berlakukan-permanen-moratorium-izin-hutan-ini-tiga-keuntungan-nya-bagi-indonesia>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20180716122541-4-23730/untuk-kali-pertama-jokowi-bawa-kemiskinan-d-i-ri-single-digit>

<sup>45</sup> <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/datapublish/2019/12/12/indeks-pembangunan-manusia-indonesia-masuk-kateg-ori-pembangunan-tinggi>

- A strategic vision for implementing the 2030 Agenda underpinned by a clear political commitment and leadership and political will to enhance policy coherence for sustainable development.
- Effective and inclusive institutional and governance mechanisms to address policy interactions across sectors and align actions between levels of government.
- A set of responsive and adaptive tools to anticipate, assess and address domestic, transboundary and long-term impacts of policies.
- Governments should develop an overarching and cross-cutting National Implementation Plan for the 2030 Agenda generally and ensure that agreed processes are developed for redesigning existing policies or ensuring that new policies and programmes embed the SDG targets, and especially those of SDG16.

### **Awareness-Raising & Capacity Building**

- Recognise SDGs as the best framework to set the agenda for capacity building of different stakeholders including civil society, and to address issues of human rights, criminal justice, and upholding the rule of law. This kind of training should be made available to empower grassroots communities and various movements
- National governments to organise regular regional and national workshops to engage grassroots communities and to support them in developing indicators for the implementation of SDGs, and to support effective monitoring and tracking
- Provide extensive capacity building to popular movements working in conflict zones on how to use existing human rights mechanisms, including enlisting support from UN special rapporteurs, from the UN Human Rights Council etc.
- Ensure ongoing capacity building is provided for different stakeholders, to educate communities at the grassroots level (+ for young people) and to support the involvement of experts, especially those with expertise on the rule of law, crime prevention, criminal justice, democracy and human rights
- Strengthen capacity building courses/tools available to different stakeholders, including civil society in terms of the rule of law, crime prevention, criminal justice, democracy and human rights and encourage learning about the benefits of multi-stakeholder engagement where diverse partners share their experience and expertise
- There is a need to rebuild the public sector's capacity to deliver the public services needed by the people
- There is a need to shift government attention and spending in support of poor communities
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### **Participation**

- Strengthen mechanisms for inclusive public participation in the monitoring & implementation of the 2030 Agenda through localisation and inclusive approaches, especially through the inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable communities
- The governments across the Asia-Pacific region need to follow and promote the inclusion of the most marginalized communities in public decision-making processes especially Women, Children, Persons With Disabilities, LGBTQ+, indigenous and ethnic minorities, especially in those processes linked to achieving SDGs. Hence we also cross-reference the 2021 Rome Civil Society Declaration to this document and call for further endorsement of this important declaration by civil society across the globe.
- We call for people centric VNRs with ensuring the availability of adequate processes for citizens' dialogue not limiting to a time bound participation
- Establish direct partnerships and networks and promote coordination among social movements, local communities with LGUs, and the civil society
- Importance of imparting SDG knowledge to the younger generation and engaging them as a foundation to build back better
- Create enabling environments for strengthening the agency, participation, and leadership of indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups

- Support civil society organisations through public financing, consultation, collaboration, and the creation of broader spaces to amplify their voices and express their advocacies without threat of cooptation

### **Enabling Environment**

- Today authoritarian regimes from East to West Asia are abusing the language and instruments of democracy to continue reducing civic space for civil society organisations, from the Philippines to India. We salute the courage of Afghan women who have been since the Taliban took over Afghanistan. The remarkable people power that has been so evident in the region has continued to challenge draconian laws, for example in Hong Kong in recent times. We are at an historic moment for societies across Asia and Pacific who must continue to call for the commitment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - to which their governments are signatories - to inform all public policy and decision-making in the region
- The role of regional bodies such as ASEAN, SAARC etc. should be explored in relation to the upholding and strengthening of democracy in East and South-East Asia and South Asia

### **Human Rights**

- Asia remains one of the few regions which does not have a regional human rights review mechanism, which would serve to hold governments more accountable for the commitments they have made under various international human rights treaties to which they are signatories.
- Governments should include Rights based agendas that are usually restricted in the VNRs in order to promote civic rights situation

### **Data**

- Officially include citizen's led data in the VNR to supplement the data gaps

### **Linking National, Regional and Global accountability processes.**

There are 33 references to the term "regional" in the Agenda 2030. **The HLPF specifically mandates regional cooperation and dialogue**, through the *regional fora convened under the HLPF*. Member states have also recognized that **Regional and subregional frameworks can facilitate the effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete action at the national level**. Member states committed to follow and review mechanisms at the regional level in four separate paras (73, 77, 80, 81) and yet some states appear to be backtracking on that commitment.

#### **Regional process has much to offer in many ways:**

First, it creates **proximity and accessibility for local and grassroots communities** to directly engage in regional discussions and work closely with their governments at the national or local level.

**Second, Identifying regional priority issues vis a vis addressing systemic barriers requiring multilateral resolve to propose specific solutions at the regional level which may be difficult at global level. Such as** mobilising MOI through regional cooperation on taxation architecture; tracking of ODA commitments; curbing illicit financing, review of trade & investment agreements, and a technology review mechanism for SDGs Compatibility Impact Assessment through regional entities involving governments and civil society.

The role of regional forums could be better defined in the follow-up and review process, which can be done through:

- **Regional VNR** - submission of interim VNRs to the regional forums for comments and inputs, and subsequently submit the final reports to the HLPF. The year after countries report, a follow up report is submitted to the regional forums – this will lead to greater accountability
- **More sessions of the HLPF should be dedicated to systematically integrate regional forum perspectives to inform global processes.** To further enhance the process, a **continuous**

**feedback loop should be created to flow back from HLPF into regional, sub-regional and national levels** to track the implementation of recommended actions.

- **The recommendations should also be directed at the national and regional level UN systems** (including Resident Coordinators, specialised agencies and country missions), for complementarity and accountability.
- **The outcome document from the regional processes (report and Chair summary) should be integrated with the ministerial declaration of the HLPF.**
- Lastly, ***participation of civil society in regional follow-up mechanisms should be systematically enhanced through allocations of spaces as well as financial resources.***

COVID 19 has reinforced our foundational narrative that the current neoliberal development model combined with capitalist globalisation, patriarchal authoritarianism and militarism is inherently flawed. And, that it is possible (if we have the political will) to realise a rights-based people-centred development model that addresses inequalities of wealth, power and resources within and among countries, between rich and the poor, and between men and women as well as other marginalised groups. It is time for Development Justice - that strives for redistributive, economic, environmental, social and gender justice, and accountability to peoples.

## **5. Peoples' Movements Initiatives to address COVID-19 Crisis**

The Development Justice fact sheets on the goals related to pandemic recovery illustrate a colourful picture how peoples' movements, civil societies and social movements in Asia and the Pacific have been at the forefront of COVID-19 responses-- from community kitchen, the production of Peoples Masks and personal protective equipment to direct provision of healthcare services to better communicating key health information, policy influencing and governance in the little spaces provided. Peoples' movements, civil society and social movements play a role in services: delivery of services to working with various stakeholders, including government, to deliver human and social services at scale and raising funds. Peoples' movements, civil society and social movements also have faced challenges and would need to be supported during this time of assisting the poor and marginalised recover from the pandemic.

To deliver Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, peoples movements, civil society and social movements in Asia Pacific commit to Development Justice ensuring redistributive, economic, social and gender, environmental justice and accountability to peoples. The peoples of Asia Pacific have the answers on how to accelerate transformation towards sustainable development. All over the region, grassroots communities are coming up with solutions. Indigenous peoples can show us the ways on how to manage and equitably share resources. Workers and social enterprises have initiatives on sharing and caring enterprises. People have the solutions for sustainable development. However, governments' action and protection of people's rights are key if these solutions are to contribute to the acceleration towards sustainable development within this decade.