

Original Paper

Role of Asia-Pacific Regions in Partnering UN SDGs

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Abstract

The research paper identifies broad strategies for accelerating transformative change processes in the form of mission orientation and mobilizing the public and stakeholders, aligning systems, readying institutions and people for change, policy making for managing complexity which are considered to be the building blocks in the Asia Pacific region. The focus of the research study is on the growth, development, economics of peace, role and impact of SDGs on the economies and societies in general including justice, peace building, developing strong institutions and in transforming the region into an international hub to achieve the SDGs and the broader agenda of UN 2030 including the overall development of the Asia-Pacific region in the long run.

The paper studies the aspects of the inter-linkages between Governments and other stakeholders to deliver the 'decade of action towards SDG', particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19. It is observed that COVID-19 pandemic has created many gaps in social protection systems and wider policies for delivering public goods with devastating effects on the poorest and utmost vulnerable in the Asia-Pacific region. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Summit held in 2019 had identified six transformative areas to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. In fact, these transformative areas present development challenges that are interlinked, complex and integrate goals and targets across the SDG framework which are strengthening human well-being and capabilities, shifting towards sustainable and just economies, securing the global environmental commons. A proposed action plan with regional interventions in the Asia-Pacific region, alignment with the goals and outcomes of the UNFPA strategic plan 2018-2021 and the Roadmap of PIFS in accelerating the SDGs have been delineated in the study.

Keywords

unsdgs, pifs, covid-19, ldc, asia-pacific region

1. Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region has been globally acclaimed as the region which has been successful in implementing the UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030. The groups of countries which form the region have also been identified as the corner stone for achieving the SDGs. More importantly, the region is adapted to and has been instrumental in identifying suitable and broad strategies not only for

accelerating transformative change-processes but also act as a unique region of change agent interfacing with various segments i.e. government, civil society and private stakeholders thereby developing country-specific plans suitable to the needs and requirements of individual countries and in integrating the specific goals of the countries of the Asia-Pacific region into the broader and overarching framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The region has also been instrumental in implementing the ‘Decade of Action towards SDG’ in the present context of the global pandemic.

2. Identifying Broad Strategies for Accelerating Transformative Change-processes

As per Asia-Pacific Report 2020, the broad strategies need to be identified for accelerating transformative change in the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, mention is made of the four “building blocks” to help identify broad strategies for accelerating transformative change-processes in the region which are enumerated below:

2.1 Mission Orientation and Mobilizing the Public and Stakeholders

Governments, civil society and private sector stakeholders must focus their efforts on green, inclusive and resilient recovery, with a renewed focus on the SDGs, work in unison and close coordination with other international organizations, concerned stakeholders and their counterparts and integrate these country-level goals and efforts with the overarching concept of SDGs so that the decade of action and the UN SDGs could be achieved in the long-run and by the turn of 2030.

2.1.1 Aligning Systems

The aligning of systems, particularly in the context of the ensuing pandemic has exposed the severity of gaps in some of the systems the SDGs pledged to strengthen such as health and social protection, among others. The need for a fundamental re-alignment to four most basic systems with the values underpinning the SDGs has become increasingly clear, so that the region can truly “build back better”. Coordination, system-wide alignment and institutional integration are central to an effective response. In fact, the concept of ‘building back better’ applies to the Asia-Pacific region and the region is yet to integrate with the developed regions of the world particularly in the context of achieving the SDGs which seems to be a difficult proposition in the light of the ongoing global pandemic which the region has been reeling with.

2.1.2 Ready Institutions and People for Change

SDG acceleration will require strategic innovation and developing new skills and methodologies for an integrated response, including outreach and capacity-building for government and continuing investment in innovative systems. Digital transformation, enhanced local governance, increased transparency and anti-corruption measures, the promotion of accountability, strengthened social contracts, greater inclusion and gender equality, and improved access to justice and human rights can all help to deliver public services for the welfare of humankind/societies. The Asia-Pacific region needs to develop effective mechanisms to ready its institutions for the benefit of people at large in the region

and in promoting the SDGs.

2.1.3 Policy Making for Managing Complexity

Policy making processes must be adapted and upgraded to better manage complexity, deploy open policy making approaches and apply systems and design thinking to strengthen impact and integration, while expanding government's ability to plan for a range of possible threats and stresses.

As governments and other stakeholders ready themselves to deliver on a 'Decade of Action towards SDG' achievement within the new reality of COVID-19, the six entry points and the four building blocks for accelerating transformation can help get the region on track.

Human development continues to be mainly understood as a function of economic growth. Negative externalities of growth have often been tolerated or ignored. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many gaps in social protection systems and wider policies for delivering public goods, with devastating effects on the poorest and most vulnerable in the region.

Efforts to respond to and recover from the global pandemic could also create a unique opportunity for rethinking business as usual by strengthening social solidarity, and for shifting gears to ensure that no one is left behind. A renewed focus on fast-tracking the transformations necessary to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is urgently needed. This task has been described as nothing less than "the largest human endeavor of all time". Its success will determine the future of humanity, including that of nearly two-thirds of the world's population who live in the Asia-Pacific region.

At the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Summit in 2019, world leaders identified six "transformative areas" to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. These areas present development challenges that are inter-linked, complex, and integrate goals and targets across the SDG framework. They are viz; (i) Strengthening human well-being and capabilities, (ii) Shifting towards sustainable and just economies, (iii) Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns, (iv) Achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy, (v) Promoting sustainable urban and peri-urban development and (vi) Securing the global environmental commons.

(i) Strengthening human well-being and capabilities

Taking into account the complexity of the issues covered by the transformative entry point of "strengthening human well-being and capabilities", there is reliability on the transparency, simplicity and popular resonance of Human Development Index indicators, rather than SDG indicators. However, the indicators are:

- a) Life expectancy at birth;
- b) Mean years of schooling;
- c) Expected years of schooling;
- d) Gross national income(GNI) per capita

(ii) Shifting towards sustainable and just economies

Making economies more sustainable and just requires a more equal distribution of income, a higher labor share of GDP, a more efficient use of natural resources, and better access to finance. It also

requires a shift towards economies that pollute less and do well on other aspects of sustainability. Aside from resource-efficiently, environmental indicators do not feature prominently, they do in other transformative areas, such as achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy and securing the global environmental commons. The indicators used are:

- a) Real GDP per employed person
 - b) Unemployment rate
 - c) Domestic material consumption per unit GDP
 - d) Manufacturing value-added as a share of GDP
 - e) Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns
 - f) Achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy
- (iii) Promote sustainable urban and peri-urban development

To assess progress and attainment in building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns a bundle of indicators can be taken into account, including those covering undernourishment, crop production, the environmental impact of food systems, and the level of public spending on agriculture. There are few SDG indicators that reflect progress in the asia-pacific region. This creates the need to use proxy indicators such as cereal yields and greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture. The indicators are:

- a) The share of under nourished people in the total population;
 - b) Cereal yield per hectare; Greenhouse gas(GHG) from agriculture
 - c) The Agriculture Orientation Index(AOI) for Government Expenditures(defined as the share of government expenditure divided by the agriculture value added share of GDP).
- (iv) Securing the global environmental commons

Progress in ‘securing the global environmental commons’ area is measured by assessing countries actions that affect the biosphere. The actions relate to resource efficiency, hazardous waste generation, ocean health and marine biodiversity, forest cover, and efforts to protect threatened species. The selected indicators include several proxy measures where data for official SDG indicators are unavailable.

- (a) Resource efficient and sustainable consumption and production patterns, assessed by material footprint(per unit of GDP),domestic material consumption (per unit GDP) and hazardous waste generated per capita;
- (b) Ocean Health Index;
- (c) Share of key biodiversity areas that have protected-area status;
- (d)Important sites of mountain biodiversity under protection;
- (v) Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns

Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns is particularly important and has to be developed in the Asia-Pacific region. Feeding the world’s growing population with a limited stock of resources threatened by climate change is a persistent challenge in the present time. Some 489 million

people in the region are under nourished and the number of obese people is quickly catching up with the number of those who are under weight. Sustainable food systems are needed to cut food waste and loss, reduce the use of chemicals, energy and water, and mitigate the climate impacts of food systems. The importance of resilience in food systems has been underlined by the disruptions in supplies and impact on accessibility of food for those living in places that have been locked down to contain the virus, particularly the poorest.

(vi) Achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy

Achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy is essential for economic development and human well-being in the Asia-Pacific region. The energy sector remains the main contributor to green house gas emissions in the region and a driver of increased climate-induced risks. The impacts of those risks are disproportionately higher on the poor than the rich. But there are signs of progress. Renewable energy is fast becoming the cheapest source of energy in many parts of the region, increasing incentives for investing in cleaner energy systems. Record low oil prices coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic pose grave questions for future decisions about energy and infrastructure as part of recovery and stimulus packages.

3. Review of Literature

The research study has relied upon latest UN reports such as the (i) UNESCAP, 2020 (Joint Report on Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership by UNESCAP, ADB and UNDP, report on ‘Decade of Action and the SDGs 2020’ by Clemens Griinbiihel, Sr. Research Fellow, Stockholm Research Institute, Sweden, Ivonne Lobos Alva, Research Fellow, SEI, Sweden, Kuntun Melati, Research Fellow, Stockholm Research Institute, Latin America, Ortiz Diaz, SDG Research Associate, Stockholm Research Institute, Asia and Natalia Ottiz, Communications Officer, Stockholm Research Institute, Latin America, (ii) Pacific Report, 2019 on ‘SDG 16 in the Pacific: Strengthening and Legitimizing Institutions to Achieve Sustainable Development’, (iii) Report of Institute for Economics and Peace, Sydney, Australia on ‘Action Brief (2020) on Women, Peace and Security and COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific, UN Women Regional Office for Asia and Pacific, Bangkok, Thailand’ and (iv) UNFPA Report on ‘Regional Interventions Action Plan for Asia and the Pacific 2018-2021’ and Asia Pacific SDG Report 2020, UNESCAP, Bangkok, Thailand. The aspects which have been covered in these reports are viz; SDG indicators i.e. SDG 5, SDG 11, SDG 12, SDG 13, SDG 15 and SDG 16 developed in the Asia-Pacific regions, resource mobilization and developing strategic and effective partnerships in the region for achieving the UN SDGs, decade of action towards SDG in the present context of the global pandemic, identifying broad strategies for accelerating transformative change in the regions, six transformative areas to accelerate progress towards the SDGs in the region. The other aspects included in the review are challenges in urban and per-urban contexts in the region, country-specific analysis and kinds of interventions linked to rapid progress in the region, aligning systems and institutions, mechanisms and initiatives to deepen the learning from the pandemic for accelerating transformation for the SDGs,

statement made by Executive Secretary, UNESCAP mentioned in ESCAP report findings on fostering sustainable use of natural resources, improve the management of chemicals and wastes, increase its resilience against natural disasters and adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change through integrated policies.

4. Research Questions

The research questions that emerged from the literature review of the research study are reflected as under:

- (i) Whether the Asia-Pacific regions can be transformed into an international hub to achieve the SDGs and the broader agenda of UN 2030?
- (ii) What are the inter-linkages between national governments and other stakeholders to deliver the 'decade of action' towards SDG, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19?
- (iii) What are the integrated policy approaches to be undertaken in the Asia-Pacific regions to foster sustainable use of natural resources and to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change?
- (iv) What is the scope and prospects of Pacific Island Forum Secretariat(PIFS) for sustainable development and in achieving the 2030 Agenda slated by United Nations?
- (v) What are the broad strategies needed for accelerating transformative change in the Asia-Pacific region?
- (vi) What are the systems and mechanisms in place to align systems & institutions in the Asia-Pacific region to achieve development outcomes & reforms?
- (vii) Whether COVID-19 crisis is a threat or an opportunity to reinforce SDG achievement by helping the region to build-back better?
- (viii) What are the regional interventions undertaken in the Asia-Pacific regions to realize the vision of the SDGs?
- (ix) Whether the Asia-Pacific regions suffer from limited/scarce resource allocations/utilization in order to strengthen and legitimize institutions to achieve SDGs, more particularly SDG 16?
- (x) What are the transformative roles of national governments, regional organizations and international organizations in promoting SDGs and the broader agenda of UN 2030 in the Asia-Pacific regions?

5. Theoretical Framework

The research paper is based on theoretically sound and robust framework as it addresses various issues of global importance and their implications in the development of Asia-Pacific regions in the context of the broader/overarching global agenda of UN SDGs. The focus of the research to address the research questions are on the following aspects viz;

- (i) The study covers the growth, development, economics of peace, role and impact of SDGs on the Asia-Pacific economies/countries and societies in general including justice, peace building, developing strong institutions in the Asia-Pacific region.
- (ii) The Asia-Pacific regions when transformed through strong and vibrant institutions would become an international hub to achieve the SDGs and the broader agenda of UN 2030 which would ultimately lead to overall development of the region.
- (iii) The study focuses on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the development of the region in general and in identifying gaps in social protection systems and in developing wider policies for delivering public goods which would lead to overall development of the region, despite the global pandemic.
- (iv) The study has delineated the identification of six transformative initiatives/entry points in the region to accelerate progress towards the SDGs which is a welcome step in this direction.
- (v) Based on the performance of the Asia-Pacific regions in the present context vis-à-vis the global scenario, a proposed action plan with regional interventions is required to be developed to carry forward the long-term UN Agenda of 2030 on SDGs.

6. Research Methodology/Data Formulation/Collection/Collation/Lack of Consistent Data

Across the Pacific some of the data measuring SDG16 is either not available or not regularly updated. Most of the information that is not currently available could be measured using surveys. There are some indicators that do not have an established methodology. Nevertheless, it is likely that once these methodologies have been established they will be able to be measured across the world with a consistent methodology. A lack of funding for data collection is a consistent issue across the Pacific region, with many Pacific Island countries and territories relying on donors to fund even the most basic of data collections. Expert assessments or surveys are often used to gather information where objective data is either not available or of poor quality, or where the nature of the quantity of interest does not lend itself to straight forward measurement. However, the process of developing an ideal list of indicators for the region provides a discussion point to focus and prioritize efforts on collection of this data across the Pacific. The work allows further debates on how Pacific nations can build the capacity and implement programs aimed at collecting data on SDG16. It also allows for localization of efforts to ensure data collection is relevant to the context of the region. For example, while indicators relating to the rule of law and strength of institutions are important, such measures in the Pacific could consider developing some way of recognizing alternative and informal modes of governance that operate in the region. Hence, collection/collation and analysis of time series macro data on the SDGs indicators is of critical importance and is difficult to fetch from published sources due to lack of consistent data and data limitations.

Table 1. Transformative Areas of Development in Asia-Pacific Regions

Transformative Areas of Development	Countries
Shifting towards sustainable and just economies	Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Philippines
Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns	Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Papua New Guinea, Uzbekistan, Vietnam
Achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy	Bhutan, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Vietnam
Promoting sustainable urban and peri-urban development	Turkmenistan
Securing the global environmental commons	Bangladesh, Indonesia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

Source: Regional SDG Report, 2020, UNESCAP.

7. Major Challenges in Asia-Pacific Region

The measurement of progress in the region relies heavily on data on access to urban basic services and people's exposure to air pollution. Despite an expansion of basic services to people who live in cities, significant groups remain without quality services.

Despite tremendous social and economic progress, the Asia-Pacific region remains home to over half a billion slum dwellers and accounts for over one half of the world's slum population. Adequate data on intra-urban inequalities and the conditions of slum versus non-slum areas are needed for better planning in order to 'leave no one behind'.

8. National Strategic Plans and Region-Wise Countries Classification

In order to develop the 'National Strategic Plans' in the Asia-Pacific regions the geographic sub-region wise classification of countries are enumerated below :

I. Geographic sub-regions are defined as follows:

(i) East and North-East Asia:

China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea(DPR Korea), Japan, Mongolia, Republic of Korea, South-East Asia: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic(Lao PDR), Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Vietnam; South and South-West Asia : Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Turkey, North and Central Asia: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan; Pacific: American Samoa, Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.

(ii) **Least developed countries:**

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Kiribati, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Nepal, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu. Samoa was part of the group of least developed countries prior to its graduation in 2014. The landlocked developing countries are: Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mongolia, Nepal, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

(iii) **Small Island Developing States:** Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

II. Developing Asia-Pacific:

ESCAP region, excluding Australia, Japan and New Zealand.

III. Developed or industrialized Asia-Pacific: Australia, Japan and New Zealand.

9. Examples and Kinds of Few Interventions linked to rapid progress: Country-specific Analysis

The Governments of countries in the Asia-Pacific region mobilized and partnered with internal and external stakeholders around a common goal, of which, few interventions are viz;

(i) Kazakhstan's Employment Roadmap 2020, incentivized employers to hire youth and provide training opportunities for people with disabilities, institutions involved in infrastructure development and the Public Employment Service. In total, some 800,000 people accessed support measures, and two thirds of them subsequently found a job. The vast majority of the 5,200 disabled persons who joined Roadmap 2020 programmes found job placements, with an additional 8,000 placed through the regional Comprehensive Employment Plan.

(ii) India's electronic National Agricultural Market(eNAM), an online trading platform, is an instrumental tool in the government's push to double farmers' income by 2022. The Small Farmers Agribusiness Consortium, an institution under the Ministry of Agriculture, manages it and engages stakeholders along the supply chain, including traders, buyers, processors and exporters.

(iii) China's mission to reduce poverty in rural areas was supported by interventions in several policy areas including providing adequate food, compulsory education, basic medical care and housing for the poor; raising incomes of poor peasants more quickly than average national incomes and closing gaps in access to basic public services and other development indicators. The 'Sunshine Project', the world's largest multi-pronged intervention for rural labor transfer training, complemented these interventions along with other actions to create win-win partnerships between different regions in China. It is supported by the action research of social science researchers and educators to address exclusion and capacity.

(iv) Fiji's energy "Conservation and Efficiency Programme" mobilized a range of small organizations, prompted energy solutions and fostered changes in energy use. The programme's toolkit included awareness-raising, energy audits, energy standards and labelling, finance incentives for energy

efficiency measures and school competitions, as well as a minimum energy performance standard and labeling programme for appliances.

(v) Georgia's flagship programme 'Produce in Georgia' boosted innovation and entrepreneurship by bringing vocational and entrepreneurial training together, introducing new funding mechanisms and strengthening labor market institutions to retrain workers. Run by the Entrepreneurship Development Agency, the programme also improved the coordination of institutional support and sectoral development plans.

(vi) Singapore approached the advent of digital technology and associated labor market challenges with big investments in the education sector. A critical review of curricula and the use of teaching informed a 2004-2045 programme called 'Teach Less, Learn More'. The programme supports students' holistic development and focuses on greater accountability and professionalism in the teaching sector and educational research. It builds on along track record of educational interventions and investments in institutions of learning that have created one of the world's best education systems.

(vii) In Kazakhstan, the "Inclusive and Equitable Local Development Programme"(IELD) addresses structural impediments keeping women from entering the labor market by facilitating local public and private investments, with a particular emphasis on unlocking domestic capital for women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship. IELD works with local governments to build their capacities on gender-responsive economic policy to identify, together with local stakeholders, practical and innovative solutions.

(viii) Malaysia's 'Renewable Energy Net Energy Metering Programme' has prompted home renewable energy installation by allowing residential solar installations to be compensated for energy provided to the grid. Investments accelerated from 2016 onwards, with upward adjustments in the compensation shown to dramatically increase investments.

(ix) Japan's feed-in tariffs obliged electric power companies to purchase electricity from renewable energy sources on a fixed-period contract at a fixed price with a nationwide energy surcharge financing these contracts. The fixed price reduced the risk for investors and increased installed solar photo voltaic capacity more than twelve-fold. Concerns around the burden on consumers reduced government investments by 22 percent in 2019. Recent smart energy network investments, though still in an experimental phase, are expected to further scale-up renewable energy deployment using block chain technology to efficiently manage decentralized micro-transactions in energy and to allow larger numbers of external parties to contribute to the local power market.

(x) In Cambodia, a partnership between the government and NGOs helped promote the use of clean fuel, creating a biogas market for clean cooking technology for small holder farms. More than 120,000 people benefitted directly from the programme, and more than 21,000 kitchens became smoke-free by February 2016. The programme's focus on developing people's skills for maintaining the technology has helped ensure a high uptake and continued maintenance.

(xi) Lao People's Democratic Republic's economic growth has historically been driven by the hydro power and mining sectors. More recently, tourism has become one of the country's top earners, creating jobs, reducing poverty and improving services and infrastructure. The 'Public Financial Management Programme' has strengthened the public revenue administration by introducing electronic tax payments. Improvements were also made to the regulatory environment for small and medium enterprises through the development of SMEs via a strategy, a special office and the SME Promotion and Development Committee.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development presents a wide-ranging and integrated challenge. It addresses, head on, complex challenges and often politically sensitive issues. The progress in the Asia-Pacific region show that in all areas of the 2030 Agenda, progress is not fast enough to achieve the SDGs by 2030. It is in all these areas that transformational rather than incremental progress is needed.

10. Accelerating Transformation: Responding to COVID-19 and Beyond

(i) Speeding up progress towards the SDGs requires a strong mission orientation of governments and the involvement of the private sector, civil society and others. Decades of research emphasize the importance of crafting a shared strategic vision of change. This allows governments to galvanize the public, the private sector and other institutions into action, and can help to dramatically slow the transmission of COVID-19.

(ii) Platforms for change can foster new(and unlikely) partnerships for action Partnerships between non-government organizations, social movements and campaigns can help mobilize the political, social and intellectual capital needed for transformation. In Pakistan, the Right to Education campaign urges the application of education laws enshrined in the constitution and aims to mobilize parents, teachers, youths and civil society towards creating the conditions for "free and compulsory education" for all children between the ages of five and sixteen. The Rally for Rivers, a movement to save India's rivers, brought together scientists, environmentalists, government officials and others to develop a set of recommendations and actions for the country's most gravely polluted rivers. "Grand Challenges Thailand," a joint initiative by the National Research Council of Thailand and the Thailand Research Organization Network, brings together researchers, development practitioners and innovators to tackle key issues in the areas of development and global health.

(iii) Bold legislation signals commitment to real change and can protect public goods and transform social values Bold legislation can also protect under-valued public goods. For example, Bangladesh in 2019 granted its rivers environmental personhood in a bid to protect the world's largest river delta from further degradation from pollution, illegal dredging and human intrusion. Two years earlier New Zealand had granted legal personhood to the Whanganui River, one of the country's longest river, with indigenous people and the national government as legal custodians. Such bold policy actions require a high degree of political capital and effective collaboration of various stakeholders. They have the power to shift social values.

11. Aligning Systems and Institutions

Transformation requires change at the system level, where new ways of doing things are developed and systems and institutions that have failed to deliver the desired development outcomes are dismantled or reformed. Especially important targets for further examination are systems that define the way in which finance, information and other resources and services are accessed and used. Specific targets for action include systems that frame social justice, investment flows and the use of natural resources, in particular land, water and energy.

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have driven home the risks created by gaps in social protection, health, education, communication and other systems in many countries of the Asia-Pacific region. Uneven access to digital technology and infrastructure has hampered access to information and communication critical for containment efforts and supporting households, communities and business. In many cases, these gaps have been overlooked due to prevailing social values, discriminatory socio-cultural norms, poor targeting of social protection systems, or the prioritization of private interests over the public good.

12. Aligning COVID-19 Responses with Accelerating Transformation for the SDGs

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed new challenges to development on all fronts. The devastating consequences for people across the Asia-Pacific region reinforce the interconnected and integrated nature of development, and the critical importance of the holistic aspirational 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is becoming apparent that the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs now hinges on how the disruptions of the COVID-19 crisis will be managed. The unprecedented crisis could be a significant stumbling block for accelerating the SDGs, or an opportunity to reinforce SDG achievement, by helping the region to “build back better”.

13. Mechanisms and Initiatives to Deepen the Learnings from the Pandemic, and Applying Them to the Six Entry Points for Accelerating Transformation for the SDGs will be Essential

The COVID-19 pandemic has driven home the importance of understanding the performance of existing systems of service delivery and identifying measures that can help address the most critical gaps. Institutional learning mechanisms are likely to define which countries and communities will most effectively rise to this challenge.

14. Regional Interventions in the Asia and the Pacific

The regional interventions in the Asia-Pacific has proposed regional interventions action plan, 2018-21, which is aligned with the goals and outcomes of the UNFPA strategic plan, 2018-21. It is guided by the regional reviews and consultation undertaken and the lessons learned under the regional interventions, 2014-2017. The proposed action plan would focus on renewing political support across the region for accelerating the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on

Population and Development with particular attention to safeguarding the reproductive rights of women and girls including in humanitarian settings through evidence-based policy dialogue and advocacy. It will aim to realize the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals in the context of ensuring that sexual and reproductive health information and services reach those “furthest behind”, in particular adolescents and youth at high risk. The UNFPA Asia and the Pacific regional office would assist countries in this regard in the delivery of their country programme objectives by providing policy advice, offering evidence-based solutions and innovative practices to address persistent bottlenecks, and mobilizing technical support to build institutional capacities. To achieve these objectives, the UNFPA Asia and the Pacific regional office will broaden its partnership base to engage with a more diverse range of stakeholders to help strengthen and promote integrated and multi-sectoral approaches, and would play a stronger convening role in selected areas of work to facilitate greater policy coherence. The UNFPA Asia and the Pacific regional office will also strengthen its technical contributions toward supporting countries to effectively implement existing policies, with particular emphasis on reaching those ‘left behind’. Last but not the least, the Asia and the Pacific regional office will strengthen and expand the reach of communication both at the regional and country level promoting a climate of opinion supportive of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. While the regional interventions action plan, 2018-21, will cover diverse areas of activity, UNFPA will strive to ensure coherence of all activities around advancement of human rights, particularly (a) the reproductive rights of women and girls; (b) inclusive development and respect for difference and solidarity with those left ‘furthest behind’; and (c) evidence-based and participatory policy making that promotes consensus and collective effort among diverse sectors of society.

15. Asia-Pacific SDG Indicators and UNESCAP Report

As per UNESCAP Asia-Pacific Report 2020, the region is yet to achieve the most on SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) and SDG 13 (climate action). The report titled, ‘Asia and Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020,’ assesses the region’s progress towards the 17 Goals. A major finding is that the region is degrading and depleting its environmental resources. On SDG 13, the region emits half of the world’s total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and its emissions have doubled since 2000. On SDG 15 (life on land), 35 percent of countries in the region have continued deforestation trends. In addition, progress has been slow on SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities). It is predicted that conditions in 2030 may worsen on 20 percent of the SDG indicators without immediate actions to reverse the current trends. The report predicts that the Asia-Pacific region is unlikely to meet any of the SDGs without concerted efforts from all stakeholders. In addition, conditions in 2030 are likely to be worse on 20 percent of SDG indicators than they were in 2015 unless immediate actions are taken on this count. Although the region has made

progress on income, poverty, it is likely to miss all measurable SDG targets related to other forms of poverty, hunger and gender equality and reduced inequalities within and between countries by 2030. Still, the report emphasizes promising progress on targets related to food security, women's role in decision-making, and access to basic sanitation services. These trajectories provide the region with a strong basis for future acceleration.

The region is most likely to meet SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). On SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), the region has increased access to electricity across all five sub-regions (although the region has one of the lowest shares of renewable energy globally, at 16%). On SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), the region's real gross domestic product (GDP) per capita growth was more than double the world average in 2017. In addition, on SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), at least 18 countries are experiencing less income inequality.

The progress across Asia-Pacific's are enumerated below:

- On SDG 2 (zero hunger), East and North-East Asia have made the most progress, while the Pacific lags behind the rest of the region.
- On SDG 10, North and Central Asia is considered on track, and has progressed more than any of the other sub-regions. In contrast, South-East Asia has regressed on SDG 10.
- On SDG 12, the Pacific is the only sub-region on track. South and South-West Asia show considerable regression.
- On SDG 16, North and Central Asia have made the most progress while the Pacific, South-East Asia, and South and South-West Asia are moving further from achieving the Goal.

UNESCAP report also observes that data availability for the SDG indicators has substantially increased from 25 percent in 2017 to 42 percent in 2020. Data is still unavailable for over half of the SDG indicators, including several SDGs with slow progress. Data is available for only a very few of the SDG 13 and SDG 14 (life below water) targets. In view of this, ESCAP calls for urgently strengthening the policy-data nexus in the region.

The call is for the region to accelerate SDG action to reverse negative trends and to redouble efforts to strengthen the means of implementation, including mobilizing additional financing for development (FfD) and supporting the region's least developed countries (LDCs) to access global markets and build their capacity for statistical development.

According to ESCAP Executive Secretary, the ESCAP report's findings "sound the alarm for the region to urgently foster sustainable use of natural resources, improve the management of chemicals and wastes, increase its resilience against natural disasters, and adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change through integrated policies." **(Statement made by Executive Secretary, UNESCAP).**

16. SDG 16 in the Pacific: Strengthening and Legitimizing Institutions to Achieve Sustainable Development

Strengthening and increasing the legitimacy of institutions and the rule of law is fundamental for development outcomes in the Pacific region. This is especially true with significant changes projected relating to the environment, demographics and socio-economics. Strong institutions are essential to respond to these changes.

However, institution building can be slow and challenging and resources are limited. Measurement of progress will help guide decision making and prioritization. There are challenges to measurement in the region including vast geographic spreads, high cultural and linguistic diversity, small and sometimes remote populations and relatively low internal capacity. This necessitates innovative approaches to measurement.

The Pacific region faces both unique structural and societal challenges. The pace of change is expected to increase through shifts in demographics, urbanization, migration and socio-economics. This is on top of shifts in the international order, increasing transnational organized crime, cyber attacks and changes in the environment including climate change. Accordingly, Pacific Island leaders have adopted an expanded concept of security reflecting the diverse threats the Pacific faces today and will face tomorrow.

17. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS)

The Pacific region, through facilitating groups such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat(PIFS) and the Pacific Community(SPC), has established the Pacific Roadmap for Sustainable Development to assist and support Pacific Islands in the 2030 Agenda. The Pacific SDG Taskforce, which was created to develop the roadmap, is also responsible for implementing the roadmap. The task force has facilitated a process of prioritizing indicators across the region. There were 132 indicators selected by the Pacific SDG Taskforce from the 244 indicators in the SDGs. The goals with the biggest proportional coverage include: SDG5, which relates to gender equality and empowering all women and girls; and SDG14, which relates to the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. These are unsurprising priorities of the region given high rates of violence against women and the threat posed by climate change. The goals that have the least relative coverage include: SDG6, concerned with clean water and sanitation; SDG9, focused on industry, innovation and infrastructure; SDG12, which relates to responsible consumption and production; SDG16, concerned with peace, justice and strong institutions.

18. SDG 16 Relevance in the Pacific Region

For the Pacific SDG16 focuses on promoting peace and strengthening institutional capacity to deal with changes and challenges, while also addressing the areas of change that could be drivers for future armed conflict and violence. These include increases in displacement, migration, urbanization,

exclusion and inequality, as well as environmental factors such as climate change and natural disasters and broader security issues in the Pacific region. Peace and security issues in the Pacific are unique and the region's approach to sustaining peace would benefit from reflecting this. Generally, relations with neighboring countries in the Pacific are strong with limited historical tension. In part, this is due to the structural advantages of having no shared land borders that can be areas of contestation. Issues regarding exclusive economic zones are generally not catalysts for interstate tension. There is significant flow of people and trade between the countries and territories in the Pacific and interstate conflict has not occurred. However, there have been internal conflicts and political instability, which has largely been due to tribal tensions. Deaths have occurred due to conflicts in Bougainville and the Highlands in Papua New Guinea, as well as in Solomon Islands. Global experiences highlight that both Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, as conflict-affected countries, need to remain vigilant to prevent reoccurrence of conflict. There have been accounts of political unrest in Tonga, Vanuatu and Fiji. There have also been concerns raised about referendums triggering violence in New Caledonia and Bougainville. The majority of these uprisings have not resulted in conflict-related deaths. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and peace building efforts, such as in Solomon Islands, have been cited as assisting in prevention.

The Pacific is known for relatively high levels of social resilience. However, displacement and migration, urbanization, youth unemployment, unstable governance, rising socio-economic inequalities, poor resource management and land disputes are all potential sources of conflict. Broader geopolitical risks including climate change, violent extremism and transnational crime also represent security challenges in the Pacific. There are a range of emerging threats that could be potential challenges to stability and peace in the Pacific region. These changes include:

- environmental, such as natural disasters and the effects of climate change;
- socio-economic and demographic, such as displacement, migration, urbanization and increasing inequality;
- broader geostrategic competition in the region, such as disputes in the South China Sea as well as shifts in regional power balances. Regional leaders have referred to this as “a dynamic geopolitical environment leading to an increasingly crowded and complex region.”

Pacific leaders have recognized these drivers through the Boe Declaration. The Boe Declaration calls for recognizing climate change as the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of the peoples of the Pacific. As well as climate change, other profound changes occurring in the Pacific are likely to exacerbate current tensions relating to resources and access and use of land.

19. Traditional Knowledge Systems in Asia-Pacific Regions and Connecting the SDGs

There is scope for traditional knowledge systems to build resilience and sustain peace in the Pacific region. The importance of maintaining cultural heritage has been recognized across the Pacific and is enshrined in national plans. The National Sustainable Development Plan of Vanuatu, for example,

includes the goals to protect and promote traditional knowledge and traditional safety nets. The plan includes the goal for “a vibrant cultural identity underpinning a peaceful, just and inclusive society.” (SDG-16). The Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems program from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization promotes using indigenous and local knowledge to contribute to understanding, mitigating and adapting to climate change, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss. Along with SAMOA Pathway, there are several initiatives for furthering the use of local knowledge for policy making in Small Island Developing States. The use of local knowledge as well as traditional governance more generally is an opportunity for greater localization of the SDGs which has ramifications for development of SDGs at the national and international level.

Another area of opportunity for the Pacific region is through connecting the different SDGs to emphasize the unique ways in which they interact and interface. The Pacific region has already experienced connecting different goals and prioritizing a range of interacting areas. The Boe Declaration includes recognition that there are multiple, interconnected security issues facing the Pacific. There is already recognition that oceans are linked to other development goals in the Pacific. These inter-linkages are also important across the whole framework of the 2030 Global Agenda. As another means of localizing and prioritizing the SDGs, the Pacific region can show how the SDGs are interlinked in the Pacific. There is clear recognition that all 17 SDGs are interconnected. As such, across the SDGs, 36 targets describe some part of peace, inclusivity, or access to justice. Two thirds of these targets are included in goals other than SDG16. These 36 targets makeup SDG16, which form the starting point of the SDG’s principle goal, to “ensure that all human beings can fulfill their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment.”

20. Innovation in the Pacific Region

The Pacific has an opportunity to be leaders in innovative data collection methods, especially for measures tailored to the region. There is also innovation across the Pacific in tying program execution with data collection to inform policy making as well as actually implementing the 2030 Global Agenda. An example of this is in the ‘Women’s Weather Watch’, coordinated by Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict Pacific’s regional secretariat ‘femLINKpacific’. This project is a model for providing real-time information about approaching storms and disaster management at the community level with a strong emphasis on including women before, during and after natural hazards. This links the relevant SDGs through emphasizing gender inclusive preparedness and humanitarian response during disasters. The intention is to include women in decision making (SDG16.7) and increase access to public information(SDG16.10).

21. National Sustainable Development Plans in the Pacific Region

The National Sustainable Development Plans formulated for the Pacific regions would definitely help in achieving the plan in the short run given the period of the plan and in turn would lead to achievement

of the SDGs in the long run i.e. by the turn of 2030 as advocated by the United Nations. The following national action plans exist, few of these plans have been completed and few are in operation/ongoing in the Pacific regions viz;

Table 2. National Action Plan in Asia-Pacific Region

Country/Region	Measure/Plan	Period of National Plan
Cook Islands	National Sustainable Development Plan	2016-2020
FSM	Strategic Development Plan	2004-2013
Fiji	5-Year & 20-Year National Development Plan	2017-2021
Kiribati	Kiribati Development Plan	2016-2019
Marshall Islands	National Strategic Plan	2015-2017
Nauru	National Sustainable Development Strategy	2005-2025
Niue	Niue National Strategic Plan	2009-2013
Palau	The Medium-Term Development Strategy	2009-2014
Papua New Guinea	Development Strategic Plan	2010-2030
Samoa	Strategy for the Development of Samoa	2016-2019
Solomon Islands	National Development Strategy	2016-2035
Tokelau	Tokelau National Strategic Plan	2016–2020
Tonga	Tonga Strategic Development Framework	2015-2025
Tuvalu	National Strategy for Sustainable Development	2016-2020
Vanuatu	National Sustainable Development Plan	2016-2030

Source: Pacific Report, 2019.

22. Women Peace and Security in Asia Pacific

Crisis and conflict have profound and disproportionate impacts on women and girls, amplifying pre-existing inequalities. In wartime, women and girls experience a lack of food and housing security, loss of livelihoods, a heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, and an increased burden of unpaid care work. The challenges brought by COVID-19 threaten to replicate these vulnerabilities.

In Asia-Pacific, COVID-19 policy and legislative responses are being led predominantly by male decision-makers and political leaders. In contexts including Nepal, Timor-Leste and Bougainville, women's leadership has been proven time and again to support peace building and recovery. These lessons should be replicated in the recovery from COVID-19. Furthermore, COVID-19 has strong potential to act as a driver of conflict and to inflame discrimination against those perceived to be carrying the virus, and women must be supported to promote social cohesion in this time of social distancing. Women play an essential role in peace and security activities, including in accelerating economic revitalization in the aftermath of conflict and in contributing to sustainable peace. This has

been borne out by a range of evidence, and endorsed by the 2000 adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) as the catalytic moment for the formation of the women, peace and security agenda. There is potential for human rights violations, including gender-based harassment, and extortion. Law enforcement in Asia and the Pacific is predominantly male, with the proportion of women in the police and military in Southeast Asia ranging from 6 percent in Indonesia to 22 percent in Lao PDR. Not only does the enforcement of lockdowns by the security sector and surveillance have serious implications for women's human rights, these are further amplified by the under representation of women in military and policing.

23. UNFPA Strategic Action Plan in the Asia-Pacific

The strategic action plan 2018-21 of UNFPA which aims at accelerating and in achieving the UN SDGs will support the following outcomes:

- (i) Every woman, adolescent and youth everywhere, especially those furthest behind, has utilized integrated sexual and reproductive health services and exercised reproductive rights, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.*
- (ii) Every adolescent and youth, in particular adolescent girls, is empowered to have access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, in all contexts.*
- (iii) Gender equality, the empowerment to fall women and girls, and reproductive rights are advanced in development and humanitarian settings.*
- (iv) Everyone, everywhere, is counted, and accounted for, in the pursuit of sustainable development.*

24. Results and Discussion of Research

The global issues that has emerged from the research study covers aspects on developing strong and robust institutions building mechanism, transforming the Asia-Pacific region into an international hub, strong interfaces including multi-stakeholder ship approaches amongst line institutions functioning in the region, strengthening role of national governments, donor institutions and international community. It is observed that establishment, growth and development of PIFS and the Pacific community is a tremendous effort/initiative in this direction which is underway in the region to strengthen institutions in the region to respond to the increased pace of change the region is facing. The results which are based on the research questions and contingent upon detailed literature review, include the following viz; (i) prioritizing measures of institutional capacity, (ii) increase involvement of civil societies to develop strong institutions in partnering Asia-Pacific development with UN SDGs, (iii) continue to build a strong robust macro database on a continuous basis on these SDGs indicators which could be accessible to people at large in the region.

25. Concluding Observations and Policy Implications

The research paper highlights the policy issues and prescribes policy recommendations for all actors and institutions in the Asia-Pacific region. There is also scope to build in traditional knowledge systems to ensure resilience and sustain peace in the region. The importance of maintaining cultural heritage has been recognized across the Pacific and is enshrined in national plans to foster a vibrant cultural identity underpinning a peaceful, just and inclusive society. Another area of opportunity in the Pacific regions is connecting the SDGs. The targets embedded in the SDGs describe some aspects of peace, inclusivity or access to justice. There is a scope for innovation and innovative data collection in the Pacific through tailor made approaches. However, there is lack of availability of consistent data amongst the region which could be analyzed through adoption of effective and robust methods and logical approaches. Such indicators and data sets relating to rule of law and strength of institutions are important which could help in effective governance in the region. The issues relating to women, peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region in the light of COVID-19 pandemic and the policy implications have been discussed at length in the research study. It is observed that crisis and conflict have profound and disproportionate impacts on women and girls amplifying pre-existing inequalities. The challenges brought about by COVID-19 threaten to replicate these vulnerabilities. The Asia-Pacific Regional office of UN would act as an interface and facilitator and work closely with UN partners to support coherent policy and programme responses and look for opportunities for joint interventions and joint resource mobilization. The Asia-Pacific regional office also promotes and advocates exchanging knowledge, expertise and resources with other developing countries thereby expanding the range of capacity-building options. One of the key strategies in the Asia-Pacific region has been the proposed regional interventions to step up policy and advocacy efforts to mobilize political support and leverage domestic financing for the achievement of the SDGs in the regions. The region would also explore opportunities for engaging with private foundations, high-net-worth individuals and fund raising from the public. Women play an essential role in peace and security activities including in accelerating economic revitalization in the aftermath of conflict and in contributing to sustainable peace. This has been endorsed by the 2000 adoption of UN Security Resolution(UNSCR) as the catalytic moment for the formation of the women, peace and security agenda. The national sustainable development plans covering roughly the period from 2016 to 2030 in the Pacific Region include SDG indicator, measure and period of plan have also been highlighted in the research study. There are a range of emerging threats that could be potential challenges to stability and peace in the Pacific region. These include environmental and the effects of climate change, socio-economic and demographic, such as displacement, migration, urbanization and increasing inequality, broader geostrategic competition in the region and shifts in regional power balances. The call in the region is basically to accelerate SDG action to reverse negative trends and to redouble efforts to strengthen the means of implementation, including mobilizing additional financing for development and supporting the region's least developed countries(LDCs) to access global markets and build their capacity for statistical development.

The study has found that mechanisms need to be in place and initiatives need to be adopted to deepen the learning from the global pandemic and applying them to the transformative areas for accelerating transformation of the SDGs would be of utmost importance.

The research paper has brought out that there is a need of renewing political support across the region for accelerating the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development with particular emphasis on protecting the reproductive rights of women and girls including in humanitarian settings through evidence-based policy dialogue and advocacy. As per *UNESCAP Asia-Pacific SDG Report 2020*, the Asia-Pacific region is yet to achieve the desired goals/targets on most SDGs indicators viz; SDG 5, SDG 11, SDG 12, SDG 13 and SDG 15 respectively. The conditions on development of few SDGs may worsen by 2030, unless immediate actions are taken to reverse the current scenario in the region. There is an urgent need to foster sustainable use of natural resources, increase resilience against natural disasters and adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change through integrated policies.

SDG 16 is very much relevant in the context of UN Agenda 2030 and is being promoted in the Pacific region through strengthening and legitimizing institutions to achieve sustainable development. It is observed that the Pacific region encounters both unique structural and societal challenges. The pace of change is expected to increase through shifts in demographics, urbanization, migration and socio-economics.

The scope and prospects of the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat(PIFS) have also been highlighted in the study. The PIFS has established the Pacific Roadmap for Sustainable Development to assist and support Pacific Islands in achieving the 2030 Agenda slated by the United Nations. The resource mobilization and developing strategic and effective partnerships in the Asia-Pacific is of paramount importance and needs to be nurtured and strengthened for achieving the UN SDGs and the overarching goal of 2030 Agenda.

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