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Item 4 (b) of the provisional agenda*

Review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific and issues pertinent to the subsidiary structure of the Commission: social development

Key social development issues for consideration in 2024

Note by the secretariat

Summary

Asia and the Pacific has made good progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, but significant gaps remain. Multiple global crises, including climate change, coupled with rapid demographic changes and digital transformation in the region, have created challenges in the areas of gender equality and the empowerment of women, social protection and access to affordable health care, and maintaining a healthy and productive labour force.

The present document contains a summary of the key social development issues and priorities that were discussed at the Seventh Asian and Pacific Population Conference, held in Bangkok and online from 15 to 17 November 2023, and that are to be addressed at three intergovernmental meetings on social development to be convened by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in 2024 and 2025. The meetings provide an opportunity for members and associate members of the Commission to discuss trends and needs related to demographic change and migration, social protection, gender equality and the empowerment of women, and leaving no one behind. The present document highlights the work carried out by the secretariat in relation to these meetings in consultation with member States.

The Commission may wish to take note of the findings contained in the present document and provide further guidance to the secretariat.

* ESCAP/80/1.

I. Introduction

1. Heads of State and Government and high representatives met at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 18 and 19 September 2023, at the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly, to review progress and accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the political declaration that was adopted,¹ they acknowledged that the cascading global crises had highlighted and exacerbated existing gender inequality, such as unequal access to health care, education, social protection, decent jobs and economic opportunities. They pledged to take action to combat inequalities within and among countries and pursue policies that stem the tide of rising inequality, including through social protection systems. They pledged to act now, for present and future generations, turning the world towards a sustainable and resilient path by 2030 and leaving no one behind. They looked forward to the proposed world social summit in 2025 and emphasized that the possible summit outcome should have a social development approach and give momentum towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. They also looked forward to the Summit of the Future in 2024 as an important opportunity to, inter alia, accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals.

2. In this context, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) will hold three key intergovernmental meetings related to social development in 2024 and 2025, providing important opportunities for its members and associate members to reflect on key social development trends and challenges in the region. The meetings will provide a forum for experiences and good practices to be shared in order to inform evidence-based, rights-based, people-centred and forward-looking action to advance the Sustainable Development Goals and to prepare for the Summit of the Future, to be held in the second half of 2024, and the proposed world social summit, in 2025. The ESCAP meetings are: (a) the eighth session of the Committee on Social Development, to be held in the fourth quarter of 2024; (b) the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+30 Review, to be held from 19 to 21 November 2024; and (c) the Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, to be held in the first quarter of 2025.

3. In the present document, the secretariat provides an analysis of the policy issues that will be on the agendas of the intergovernmental meetings and describes the preparatory work of the secretariat.

II. Placing people at the centre of inclusive and sustainable development

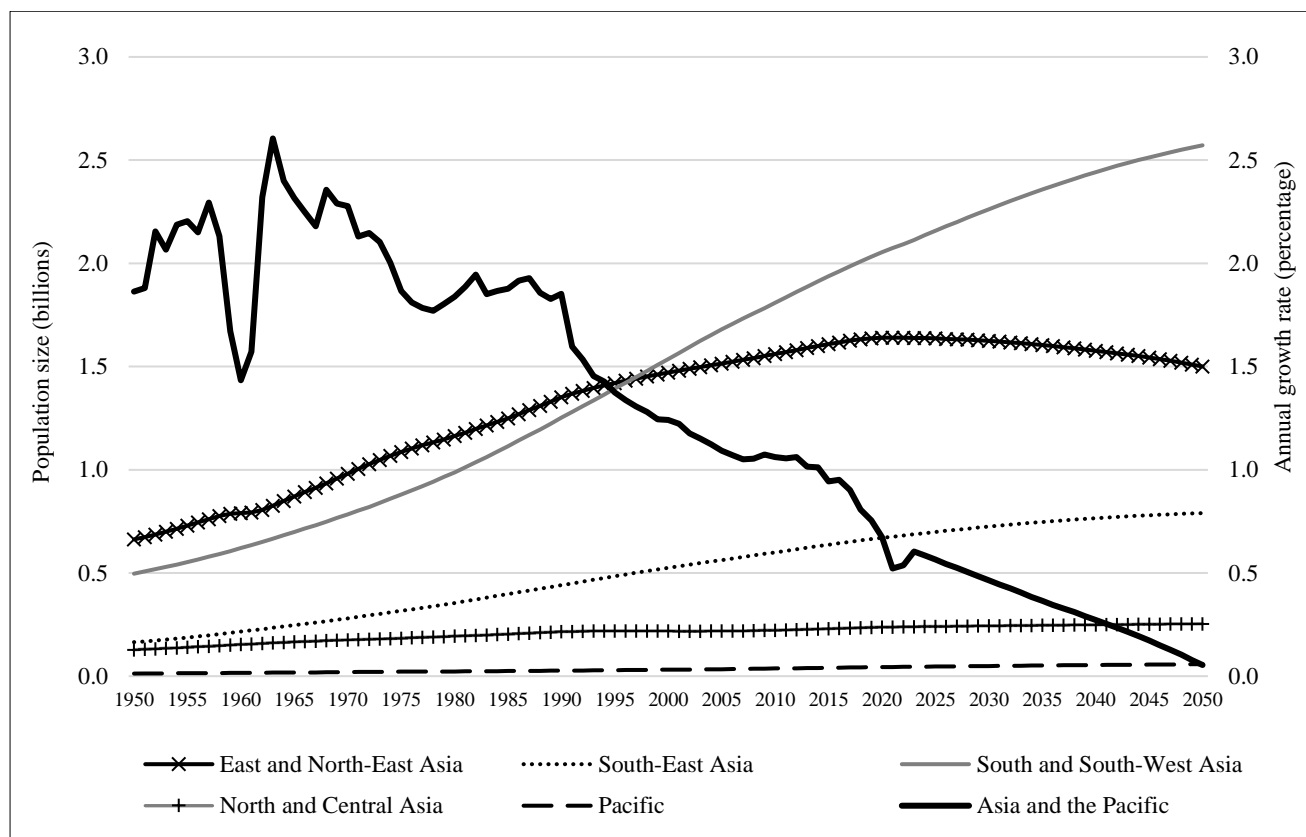
A. Demographic trends

4. About 4.7 billion people, or 60 per cent of the world's population, currently reside in Asia and the Pacific. That number is projected to increase to 5.2 billion by 2050. However, the rate of population growth has been declining in recent years, a trend that is projected to continue (see figure I), with some countries already experiencing an outright population decline. Whereas in the mid-1960s, the population in Asia and the Pacific was growing

¹ General Assembly resolution 78/1, annex.

at a rate that would see it double roughly every 30 years, at the current rate, doubling will take over 110 years.

Figure I
Population size by Asia-Pacific subregion and annual growth rate for Asia and the Pacific, 1950–2050



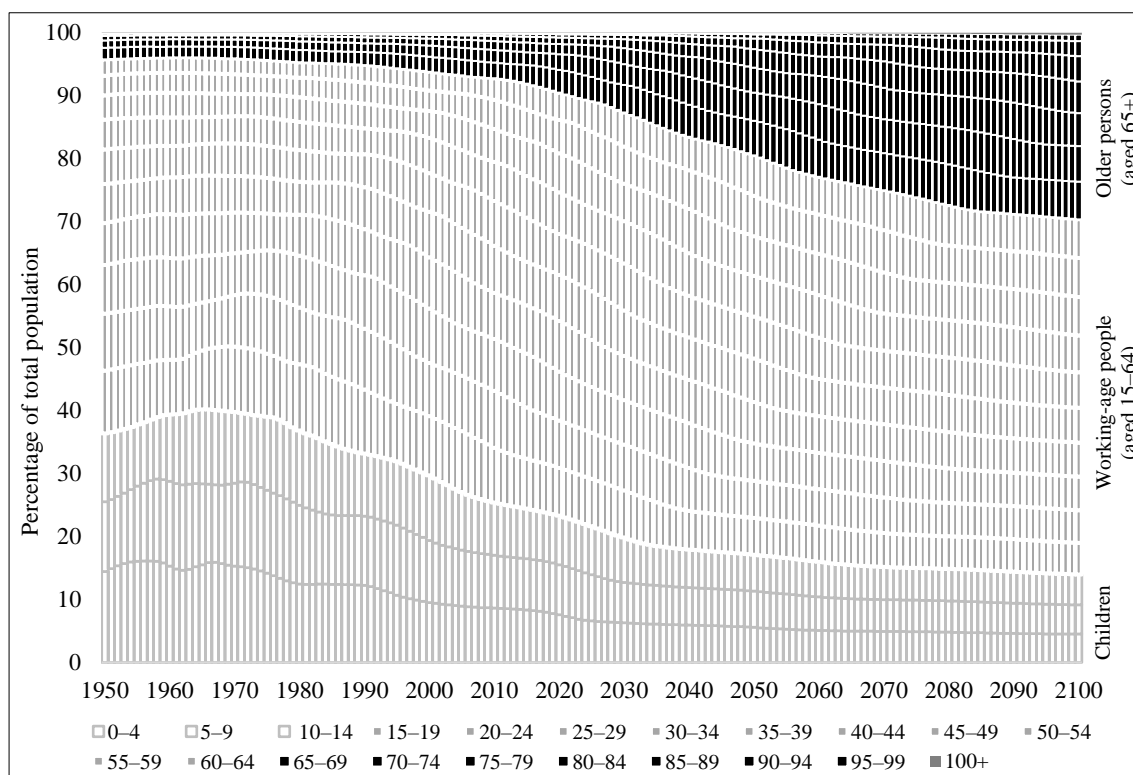
Source: ESCAP calculations based on United Nations, *World Population Prospects 2022*, online edition.

5. Underlying these trends is the demographic transition, which refers to a decline in mortality and fertility rates – in other words, longer lives and smaller family sizes. In many countries of the region, this transition has occurred rapidly, providing little time for societies to adjust to the slowdown in population growth and the changes in population age structures.

6. As a result of these demographic changes, the number of children (aged 0–14) and working-age people (aged 15–64) began to increase in the 1950s, growing almost continuously. The number of children peaked in the mid-1990s and has been declining since, and the number of working-age people will peak in the mid-2030s. In contrast, the number of older persons (aged 65 and above) has been growing continuously since the 1950s and is projected to double from 489 million in 2023 to 1 billion in 2050.

7. The countries in Asia and the Pacific are changing in fundamental ways, transitioning towards societies that are older and more multigenerational. Due to the demographic transition, there is a virtually irreversible trend towards both absolute and proportionate increases in the number of older persons, most of whom are women. As life expectancies increase, people of a wider range of age groups are living together for longer periods (see figure II), making strong intergenerational relations crucial to achieving an inclusive and sustainable future where no one is left behind.

Figure II
**Population age structures in Asia and the Pacific (by five-year age groups),
 1950–2100**



Source: ESCAP calculations based on United Nations, *World Population Prospects 2022*, online edition.

8. Intergenerational relations are expressed in many ways, including living arrangements, consumption and production patterns, intergenerational equity, social protection and care, sustainable development practices, and approaches to education, learning, reskilling and upskilling. Intergenerational solidarity, generally understood as social cohesion between generations,² including future generations, has long been a cornerstone of sustainable development, and encompasses the principles of intergenerational equity and justice.³

9. Given the aforementioned demographic changes, the future of the Asia-Pacific region will be shaped by relations between generations, in areas including the economy, health care, education, services, technology, well-being and sustainability.

10. At the same time, countries in Asia and the Pacific have experienced increased internal and international migration, with more people living in urban areas and outside their countries of birth. In 2020, international

² A/68/322.

³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Intergenerational solidarity and equity for future generations of older persons through a human rights lens”, discussion paper prepared for the joint expert group meeting on older persons and intergenerational solidarity, Bangkok, October 2023. Available at <https://social.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Draft%20PreMeeting%20Discussion%20Paper.pdf>.

migration numbers for the region stood at 66.6 million immigrants and 108.7 million emigrants.

11. Migration between Asia and the Pacific and other regions is dominated by labour migration, but people also migrate for other reasons, including education, family formation, permanent settlement and retirement, political and armed conflicts, food insecurity, climate and environmental change and disasters. Return and circular migration are common. Irregular migration, including the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons, also occur but are difficult to quantify. There are also high numbers of refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons and internally displaced persons in and from the region.

12. Migrants have been recognized as accelerators of sustainable development, but they face challenges in their countries of origin, destination and transit. Most migration in Asia and the Pacific is intraregional, highlighting the importance of regional approaches to addressing the challenges and opportunities of increased mobility.

13. Many of these demographic changes can be seen as positive consequences of aspects of socioeconomic development such as improved health, education, medicines, greater agency of women and increasing interconnectedness. However, if these changes occur very rapidly, countries are left with little time to prepare and put forward-looking policies in place to protect the interests of current and future generations.

14. Beneath the regional trends, there is much variation within and between countries. For example, while many countries are undergoing rapid population ageing, others still have a high fertility rate or a large and growing youth population. And at the subnational level, there can be stark differences in poverty levels, with rural areas tending to have a higher proportion of people living in poverty than urban areas. Thus, a one-size-fits-all policy approach does not work, and policies must be tailored to the particular circumstances of the people and places in Asia and the Pacific and to the different time periods, rates and scales of demographic change across countries.

B. Seventh Asian and Pacific Population Conference

15. It is against this backdrop that 43 ESCAP member States, about 90 civil society organizations and various United Nations entities attended the Seventh Asian and Pacific Population Conference, which was held in Bangkok and online from 15 to 17 November 2023. The Conference was organized by ESCAP in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Pursuant to ESCAP resolution 74 (XXIII) of 17 April 1967, the Conference is a statutory organ of ESCAP, to be convened every 10 years.

16. The report on the Seventh Conference⁴ was submitted to the Commission on Population and Development at its fifty-seventh session to inform the assessment of the status of implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and its contribution to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda during the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.

⁴ ESCAP/APPC(7)/4.

17. The Conference reviewed the implementation of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development in the region. The Conference reaffirmed its commitment to the implementation of the Programme of Action.

18. Participants highlighted improvements in education and in access to health care, including access to maternal and sexual and reproductive health care, as well as reductions in poverty. However, there were emerging and persistent challenges, including a lack of decent work for all, high youth unemployment, gaps in universal health coverage, low fertility rates, population ageing, relatively high and stagnating rates of maternal mortality, violence against marginalized groups and gender-based violence. Too often, migration was not safe, orderly or regular, and migrants faced human rights violations. Climate change, conflicts and disasters were having a disproportionate effect on populations in vulnerable situations. Increased digitalization provided opportunities for inclusion, but privacy concerns and the digital divide were considered obstacles to making progress on population and development issues.

19. In order to address some of the challenges, participants called for strengthened collection of disaggregated data, good governance, dialogue and genuine engagement with people, including civil society organizations. They highlighted the importance of life-long social protection and of policies that promote healthy and active ageing.

20. Given age structure changes related to the demographic transition, Governments called for strengthened intergenerational relations and demographic foresight. It was important to build inclusive and sustainable societies for all ages and to make investments to address the needs of all age groups with regard to access to affordable health care, quality education, training, reskilling and age-friendly work and living environments.

21. Strengthening gender equality would reduce poverty and contribute to more inclusive and productive societies. Population and development issues should be addressed not by focusing on numbers alone, but by also considering rights, attitudes and the sharing of knowledge and experiences. Any discussion or action related to sustainable development should place people at its centre.

22. In follow-up to the Seventh Asian and Pacific Population Conference, ESCAP will work with UNFPA to continue to build the capacity of its member States and of civil society organizations by developing knowledge products and tools to help address the challenges and opportunities of population change. Given the importance of age structure changes affecting all aspects of society, the focus will be on population ageing, intergenerational relations, climate change and increased digitalization.

C. Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

23. In accordance with General Assembly resolutions 73/195, 73/326 and 76/266, ESCAP, with support from the Regional United Nations Network on Migration for Asia and the Pacific, will hold a second Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in the first quarter of 2025. The intergovernmental meeting will inform the second International Migration Review Forum, to be held in 2026.

24. The aim of the Regional Review is to assess the status of implementation of the 23 objectives of the Global Compact for Migration, with a focus on areas that are particularly important to countries in the region, including labour migration, remittances, climate change and smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons. It will be held against the backdrop of the demographic change taking place in the region, with some countries facing population stagnation and decline and others experiencing continued population growth. The role of migration in overall population change and changing population age structures will also be discussed.

25. ESCAP, with support from the Regional United Nations Network on Migration for Asia and the Pacific, will draft the Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2024, which will be released by the end of 2024. The conclusions and recommendations set out in the report will be presented at the Regional Review for the consideration of ESCAP members and associate members to facilitate a wider discussion and arrive at a shared understanding of migration and development, and to promote regional cooperation to make migration safe, orderly and regular in the region.

26. In addition, in keeping with the whole-of-society approach envisaged in the Global Compact for Migration, ESCAP and the Regional United Nations Network on Migration for Asia and the Pacific will seek meaningful, diverse and inclusive engagement from all relevant stakeholders, including through the organization of stakeholder consultations in preparation for the Regional Review.

III. Advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in the Asia-Pacific region

A. Key trends in gender equality and women's empowerment

27. Central to realizing the 2030 Agenda and building a better world for all, the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment is the unfinished business of our time.⁵ While significant strides have been made across Asia and the Pacific in recent decades in the areas of women's education and health, progress in many other areas appears to be slowing, stagnating or even regressing in some instances. Women in the region continue to face the consequences of strong-rooted discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes, unacceptably high levels of gender-based violence, a heavy and disproportionate unpaid care and domestic work burden and inadequate levels of political will to address the issue of gender inequality, which has an impact on the achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals.⁶

28. Moreover, patterns of increasing economic and social inequalities have resulted in women being disproportionately affected by the polycrises that are expected to continue or worsen in the absence of accelerated action. For instance, the brunt of the socioeconomic fallout of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the triple planetary crisis (climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss) and the food security and energy crises is being borne by

⁵ See António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, "Secretary-General's message on International Women's Day", New York, 8 March 2018; and A/75/982.

⁶ ESCAP, "SDG 5: gender equality", policy brief (Bangkok, 2022). Available at www.unescap.org/kp/2022/sdg-5-gender-equality.

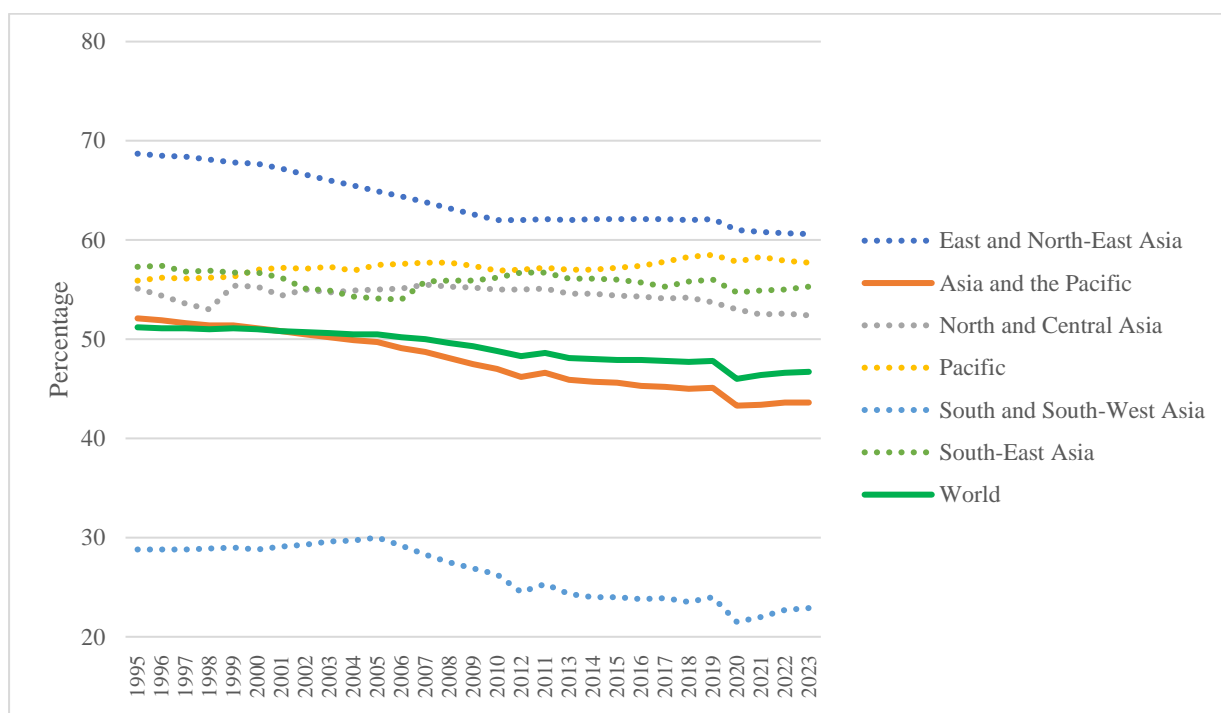
women, with marginalized and vulnerable population groups being hit first and hardest.⁷

29. To accelerate action towards achieving gender equality and building resilience to these challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, advancing women’s economic empowerment, eliminating gender-based violence and strengthening women’s political participation and leadership are key priority areas for action.

1. Women’s economic empowerment

30. Women in the Asia-Pacific region continue to face significant and sometimes growing barriers to their economic empowerment and access to decent work.⁸ The rate at which women participate in the labour force has been declining, falling from 49.7 per cent in 2005 to 43.6 per cent in 2023. The female labour force participation rate in Asia and the Pacific was below the world average of 46.7 per cent in 2023.⁹

Figure III
Female labour force participation, age 15 and older



Source: ESCAP, “Indicators by theme: labour force participation – labour force participation (aged 15+) (International Labour Organization estimate) (% of female aged 15 and above)”, SDG Gateway Data Explorer. Available at <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed on 27 December 2023).

⁷ United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023* (New York, 2023).

⁸ International Labour Organization (ILO) and Asian Development Bank (ADB), *Where Women Work in Asia and the Pacific: Implications for Policies, Equity and Inclusive Growth* (Geneva, 2023).

⁹ ESCAP, “Indicators by theme: labour force participation”, SDG Gateway Data Explorer. Available at <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed on 27 December 2023).

31. Since 2001, the gap in female labour force participation rates between the Asia-Pacific region and the world average has been increasing, on average by 0.14 percentage points per year (see figure III). Especially low levels can be seen in South and South-West Asia, where the female labour force participation rate remains below 25 per cent. Across all subregions, the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was clearly responsible for driving a dip in participation rates, which have since been slowly increasing as part of a modest recovery.

32. Large gender gaps in the number of young people (aged 15–24) not in education, employment or training are also evident in the region.¹⁰ In all but a few Asia-Pacific countries, the rate of young women and girls who are not in education, employment or training is substantially higher than that of young men and boys, with a gender gap of 9.2 percentage points on average, although there is a large degree of variation among countries. At the subregional level, the gender gap is the widest in South and South-West Asia and the narrowest in the Pacific.¹¹ Research indicates that the gender gap in Central and Southern Asia has expanded in recent years, with the rate of women and girls estimated to be three times higher than that of men and boys in 2022.¹²

33. Structural barriers, including discriminatory gender stereotypes and norms, lie at the centre of women’s relatively low levels of economic participation in the region. Another compounding factor is the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work borne by women in the Asia-Pacific region: on average, women and girls spend up to 11 hours a day on unpaid care work, over four times more than men and boys.¹³ A related root cause of inequality is that women incur a motherhood penalty in the labour market due to cultural and social expectations that emphasize women’s roles as caregivers.¹⁴ Technical support provided by ESCAP to Governments has catalysed policy development in several countries in the Asia-Pacific region to value unpaid care and domestic work and enhance investments in the care economy, with a particular focus on care infrastructure, care-related social protection, care services and employment-related care policies. When women in the region do participate in the economy, they are likely to work in sectors associated with poor working conditions, low pay and high levels of informality. This includes the agriculture, retail and accommodation and food service sectors, where over half of women in Asia and the Pacific are employed.¹⁵ While the female informal employment rate for the overall region appears to have declined in recent years,¹⁶ it remains high at around 55 per cent on average. There is also a large degree of variation between countries, with national rates ranging from 26.6 to 92.8 per cent and four of the top five

¹⁰ UN-Women and United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals*.

¹¹ ESCAP, “Indicators by Sustainable Development Goal: 8.6.1 – youth not in education, employment or training”, SDG Gateway Data Explorer. Available at <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed on 27 December 2023).

¹² UN-Women and United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals*.

¹³ *How to Invest in the Care Economy: A Primer* (ST/ESCAP/3028).

¹⁴ ESCAP, “Female labour force participation and the care economy in Asia and the Pacific”, policy paper (Bangkok, 2022).

¹⁵ ILO and ADB, *Where Women Work in Asia and the Pacific*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

countries being located in South and South-West Asia.¹⁷ Given the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in sustaining and upscaling their businesses, including a lack of access to finance and digital tools, women-owned businesses are more likely to be informal.¹⁸ Through the ESCAP programme on catalysing women’s entrepreneurship, which works to create an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs to start up and expand their businesses, some 176,000 women entrepreneurs have benefited directly to date.

34. Women also face significant obstacles preventing them from taking full advantage of opportunities in the digital and green economies, which account for a growing share of economic growth and employment in Asia and the Pacific. For example, structural barriers that prevent women and girls from obtaining access to digital technologies have resulted in a gender digital divide, with rates of Internet usage between men and women differing by 6 percentage points in the overall region (61 per cent for women and 67 per cent for men).¹⁹ Cultural and social norms also underlie the underrepresentation of women and girls in science-, technology-, engineering- and mathematics-related fields in the region, preventing women and girls from acquiring skills that are in demand in both the digital economy and the green economy. Coupled with discriminatory practices against women, skill disparities are fuelling occupational segregation and contributing to denying women equal access to emerging high-skill and high-wage opportunities, including in the information and communications technology (ICT) and green jobs sectors. As a result, gender disparities are perpetuated in income levels and access to decent work opportunities.

35. To promote inclusion and gender equality in the Asia-Pacific labour market and remove deep-rooted gender barriers, it is critical to adopt a holistic and whole-of-government approach that includes gender-responsive budgeting, investment and social protection measures.

2. Gender-based violence

36. Gender-based violence can take several forms, including intimate partner violence, sexual violence and harassment, femicide, trafficking in women and girls, female genital mutilation, child marriage and forced marriage. Eliminating gender-based violence remains a priority for the Asia-Pacific region, where alarmingly high rates of gender-based violence continue to constitute a serious threat to women’s health and well-being. Furthermore, the impacts of violence against women are far-reaching and contribute to driving social, economic and political gender disparities.²⁰

¹⁷ ESCAP, “Indicators by Sustainable Development Goal: 8.3.1 – informal employment”, SDG Gateway Data Explorer. Available at <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed on 4 January 2024).

¹⁸ *The Long Road to Equality: Taking Stock of the Situation of Women and Girls in Asia and the Pacific for Beijing+25 – A Synthesis Report* (United Nations publication, 2020).

¹⁹ ESCAP “Leveraging digital innovation for inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific”, Social Development Division Working Paper, No. 2023/02 (Bangkok 2023).

²⁰ *Inequality of Opportunity in Asia and the Pacific: Intimate Partner Violence against Women – Exploring Shared Circumstances behind Higher Prevalence in Asia and the Pacific* (ST/ESCAP/3109).

37. Emerging evidence suggests that violence in all forms against women and girls has intensified since the pandemic. For example, lockdown measures implemented to curb COVID-19 transmission led to significant spikes in domestic violence cases. Online abuse and misogynistic online content also increased during the pandemic.²¹ Other harmful practices, such as child marriage, also remain prevalent and have been exacerbated by the pandemic.²²

38. Improving the availability of data on violence against women to shed light on the magnitude of the problem is an urgent need in the Asia-Pacific region. For instance, while the number of countries with data availability on intimate partner violence is growing, the official figures for Sustainable Development Goal indicator 5.2.1 (Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months) are dated to 2018. There is a particular need to shed light on the gender-based violence faced by marginalized and vulnerable groups, for whom data is especially lacking.

39. Despite the limited data availability, existing data paints an alarming picture. For example, Asia and the Pacific is the region with the highest absolute number of intimate partner or family-related femicides (18,100 in 2021).²³ Among ESCAP member States, the proportion of women who have experienced physical and sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the preceding 12 months ranges from 2.4 to 34.7.²⁴ Recent reports also show that the proportion of women who have reported intimate partner violence in their lifetime varies significantly across the region, with rates ranging from 11 to 64 per cent.²⁵

3. Women's political participation and leadership

40. In the political sphere, the proportion of women in leadership roles is increasing. However, with an average of 20.8 per cent of parliamentarians being women, the region is still below the global average of 26.5 per cent and far from achieving parity (see figure IV). While progress is being made, the Asia-Pacific region is not progressing as quickly as the rest of the world in this area. Furthermore, there are large variations between ESCAP countries, with the proportion of parliamentarians who are women ranging from 1.7 to 50 per cent.²⁶

²¹ UN-Women, UNFPA and Quilt.AI, “COVID-19 and violence against women: the evidence behind the talk” (2021).

²² ESCAP, “SDG 5: gender equality”.

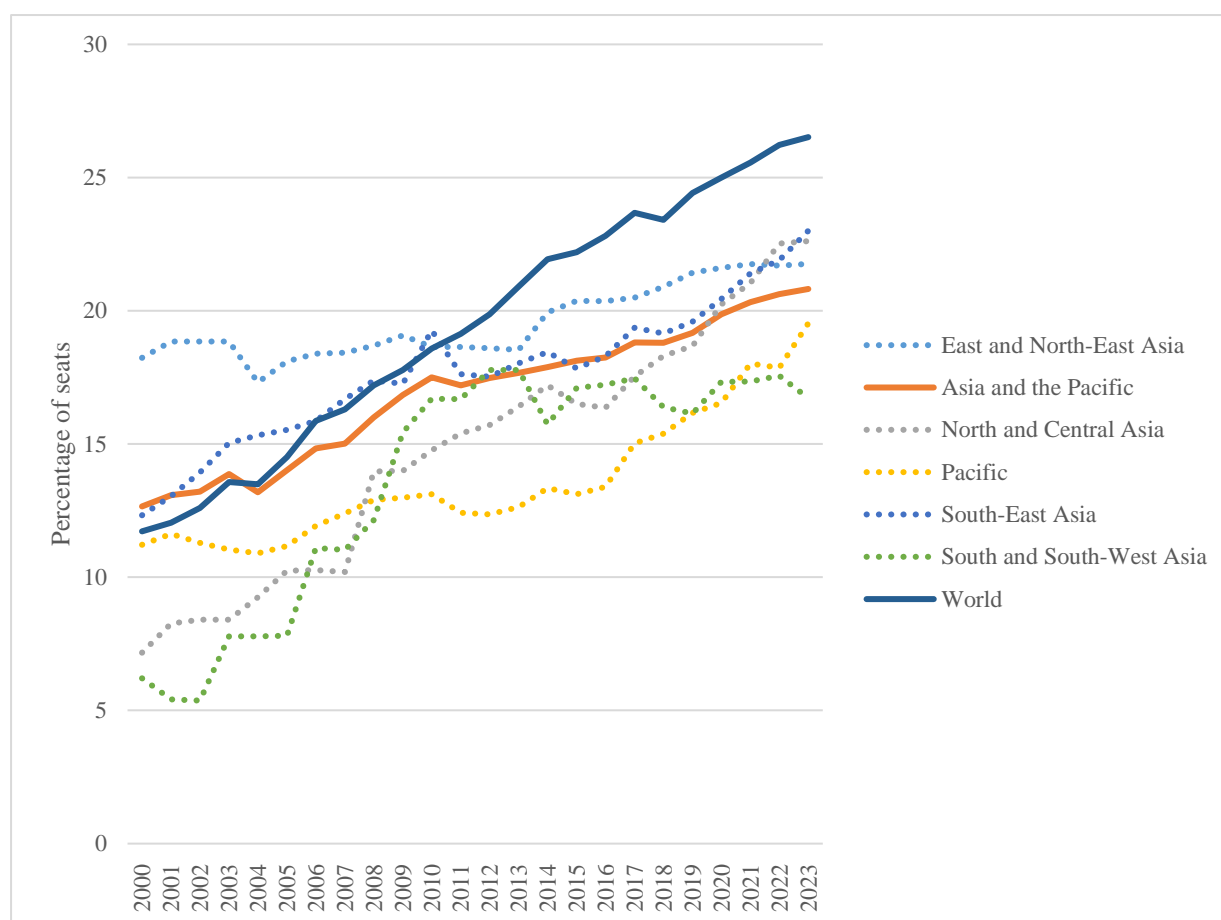
²³ This figure can be compared to 17,200 in Africa, 7,500 in the Americas and 2,500 in Europe. See United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and UN-Women, “Gender-related killings of women and girls (femicide/feminicide): global estimates of gender-related killings of women and girls in the private sphere in 2021” (Vienna, 2022).

²⁴ ESCAP, “Indicators by Sustainable Development Goal: 5.2.1 – violence against women (by intimate partner)”, SDG Gateway Data Explorer. Available at <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed on 17 December 2023).

²⁵ UNFPA, “Women who experience intimate partner violence, 2000–2023: 2023 regional snapshot” (2023). Available at <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/knownvawdata-violence-against-women-asia-pacific-report-2023.pdf>.

²⁶ ESCAP, “Indicators by Sustainable Development Goal: 5.5.1 – seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments”, SDG Gateway Data Explorer. Available at <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed on 7 January 2024).

Figure IV
Seats held by women in national parliaments, 2000–2023



Source: Author’s calculations based on ESCAP, “Indicators by Sustainable Development Goal: 5.5.1 – seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments”, SDG Gateway Data Explorer. Available at <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/> (accessed on 7 January 2024).

41. At the executive levels of government, gender imbalances are also pronounced. In only five countries in the Asia-Pacific region are more than 25 per cent of cabinet seats held by women, and in several countries there are no women ministers at all.²⁷ Furthermore, recent analysis for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations showed that, when women do lead ministries, it tends to be the ministry of gender equality; they are rarely given other portfolios, such as finance or defence.²⁸

42. At the local government level, around half of Asia-Pacific countries with available data report that women account for more than 25 per cent of deliberative bodies. Eight countries and territories (Azerbaijan, Fiji, India, Maldives, Nepal and New Zealand as well as New Caledonia and Northern Mariana Islands) report rates above the global average of 35.5 per cent.²⁹

²⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN-Women, “Women in politics 2023” (2023).

²⁸ UN-Women and Women Count, “Women’s leadership in the ASEAN region: data snapshot” (2022).

²⁹ ESCAP, “Indicators by Sustainable Development Goal: 5.5.1 – seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments”, SDG Gateway Data Explorer.

43. Across all levels of political participation, due to intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion, women and girls belonging to the most marginalized groups are being left furthest behind from the progress that has been achieved to date. In order to strengthen women's political participation at all levels, there is a need to address the discriminatory social norms that prevent women's political participation, including women's time poverty and perceptions of politics being the domain of men.³⁰

B. Regional review of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+30 Review

44. In its resolution 2022/5, the Economic and Social Council mandated ESCAP to lead the Asia-Pacific regional review, in preparation for the global 30-year review, of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. ESCAP will conduct the regional review in collaboration with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and other entities of the United Nations system in the region.

45. The regional review is aimed at reviewing the progress made and the challenges currently faced in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, with a view to accelerating actions to realize gender equality, empower all women and girls and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific.

46. The regional review will employ a three-track approach: (a) research and data analysis; (b) stakeholder consultations; and (c) an intergovernmental conference at the ministerial level.

47. The research and analysis track will examine progress, gaps, challenges and good practices in relation to achieving the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in the Asia-Pacific region and provide the substantive data and analysis that will inform discussions at the Ministerial Conference. As part of the review process, in addition to being asked to complete an online questionnaire, member States have been invited to undertake comprehensive review processes and produce national reports that take stock of progress and identify gaps and challenges encountered in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the national level. In addition to inputs from member States, desk-based research and data analysis will also be conducted to support the preparation of background documents for the Ministerial Conference, as well as a regional synthesis report that will take stock of and analyse progress made in advancing gender equality in Asia and the Pacific.

48. For the stakeholder consultation track, a broad-based consultation mechanism will be established to coordinate the contributions of community-based, civil society, youth, workers' and not-for-profit organizations, academic institutions, private entities and other stakeholders in the regional review process.

49. For the intergovernmental track, ESCAP, in collaboration with UN-Women, will convene the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+30 Review, to reinvigorate political commitments to accelerate and realize gender equality and the empowerment of women in Asia and the Pacific.

³⁰ *The Long Road to Equality: Taking Stock of the Situation of Women and Girls in Asia and the Pacific for Beijing+25.*

The Ministerial Conference will directly engage ESCAP member States in the regional review in order to identify and take stock of priority actions to accelerate the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women in the region. The Ministerial Conference will be held in Bangkok from 19 to 21 November 2024.

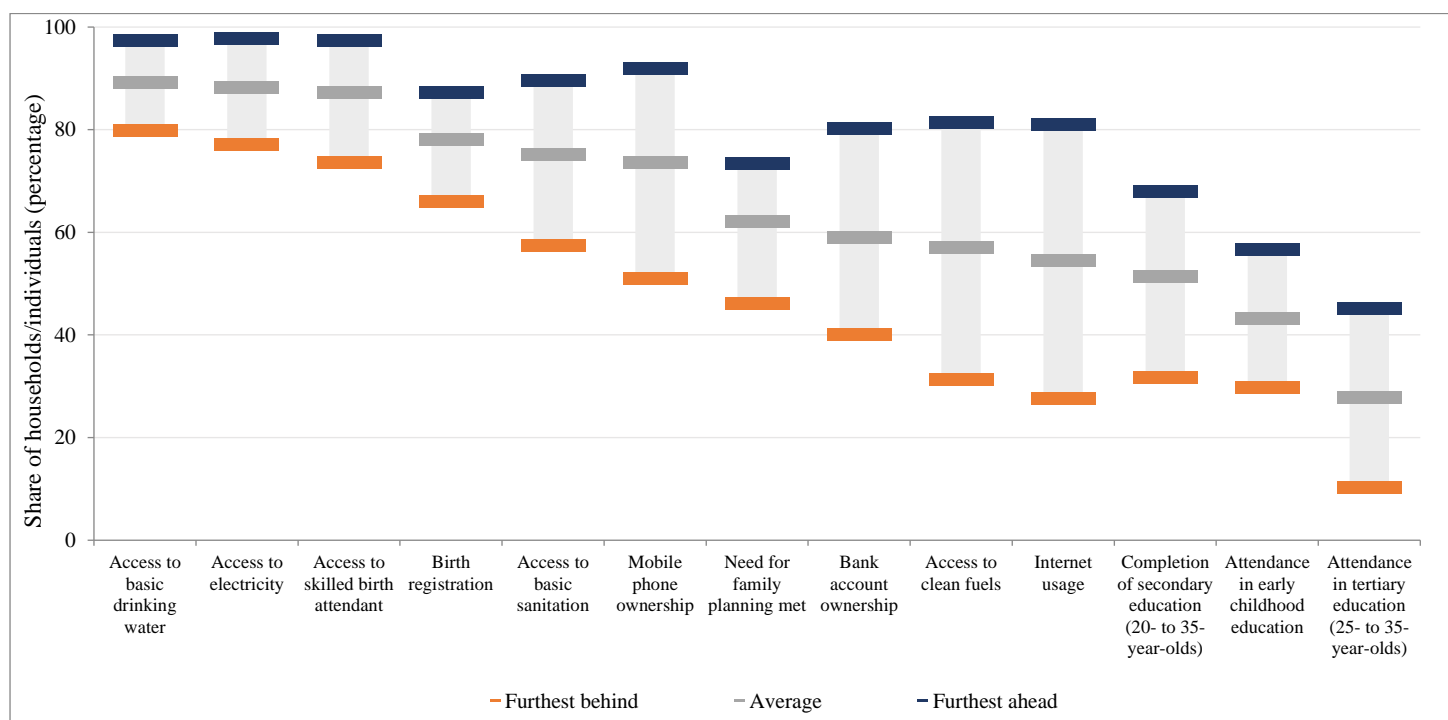
IV. Strengthening social protection in the Asia-Pacific region

A. Key trends and challenges ahead

50. Inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific is threatened by cascading and compounding risks emanating from the megatrends that affect everyone, including demographic trends, climate change and digitalization.

51. Notwithstanding the international legal and normative frameworks in place, millions of individuals and groups – including children, women, young people, older persons, persons with disabilities and ethnic, language and religious minority groups – continue to live in particularly vulnerable situations on the margins of society. The gaps between those furthest ahead and those furthest behind remain wide for many targets of the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific (see figure V).

Figure V
Gaps in progress towards selected Sustainable Development Goal targets in Asia and the Pacific



Source: ESCAP calculations based on latest available data from Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (2010–2022) from 30 countries. Available at <https://lnob.unescap.org> (accessed on 1 November 2023).

52. The rapid demographic transition in Asia and the Pacific presents challenges for Governments, such as a shrinking labour force, and puts heightened pressure on health-care and social security systems. Adequate pension systems are crucial not only for preventing older persons from falling into poverty but also for promoting consumption, which is vital for continued economic growth in ageing societies.

53. Achieving inclusive and sustainable development will become even more challenging as the impacts of climate change manifest themselves across Asia and the Pacific. Climate change disproportionately affects populations in vulnerable situations and creates new intersecting vulnerabilities across different groups, including marginalized groups based on factors such as gender, age, race, geographical location and disability.

54. Due to the heightened frequency of climate change-related disasters and the covariant nature of the disaster risk landscape, climate change is having a profound impact on the types of disruptions faced by all populations in the region. Workers in the informal economy, including in the agriculture, fisheries, construction and tourism sectors, are especially vulnerable and are being left without access to social protection.

55. While digitalization could be leveraged for building more agile and responsive social protection systems with enhanced efficiency and effective delivery of support schemes in times of need, digital technologies could also exacerbate existing inequalities, given the wide disparities that remain in terms of ICT skills. The majority of the population in Asia and the Pacific lacks basic and standard skills in this area.³¹ Even among high-performing countries, up to 40 per cent of the population lacks basic ICT skills, as measured by basic computer-based activities. It is therefore critical to close the digital divide through active labour market policies and reskilling of labour and to build a human-centred digital future that is anchored in universal human rights and can buttress social protection systems.

56. The cost of inaction is rising, with severe impacts disproportionately falling on unprotected individuals in vulnerable situations, particularly in emerging and intensifying hotspots of multi-hazard risk. Social protection instruments such as unemployment insurance, social health protection, old-age pensions, cash benefits and public employment programmes provide income security, access to health care and job and income-generation opportunities. Social protection systems not only have the potential to reduce poverty and inequality but also promote resilience, inclusive growth and environmental sustainability. Robust social protection systems are effective tools for addressing life-cycle and climate-related risks and contingencies and are essential in safeguarding vulnerable communities.

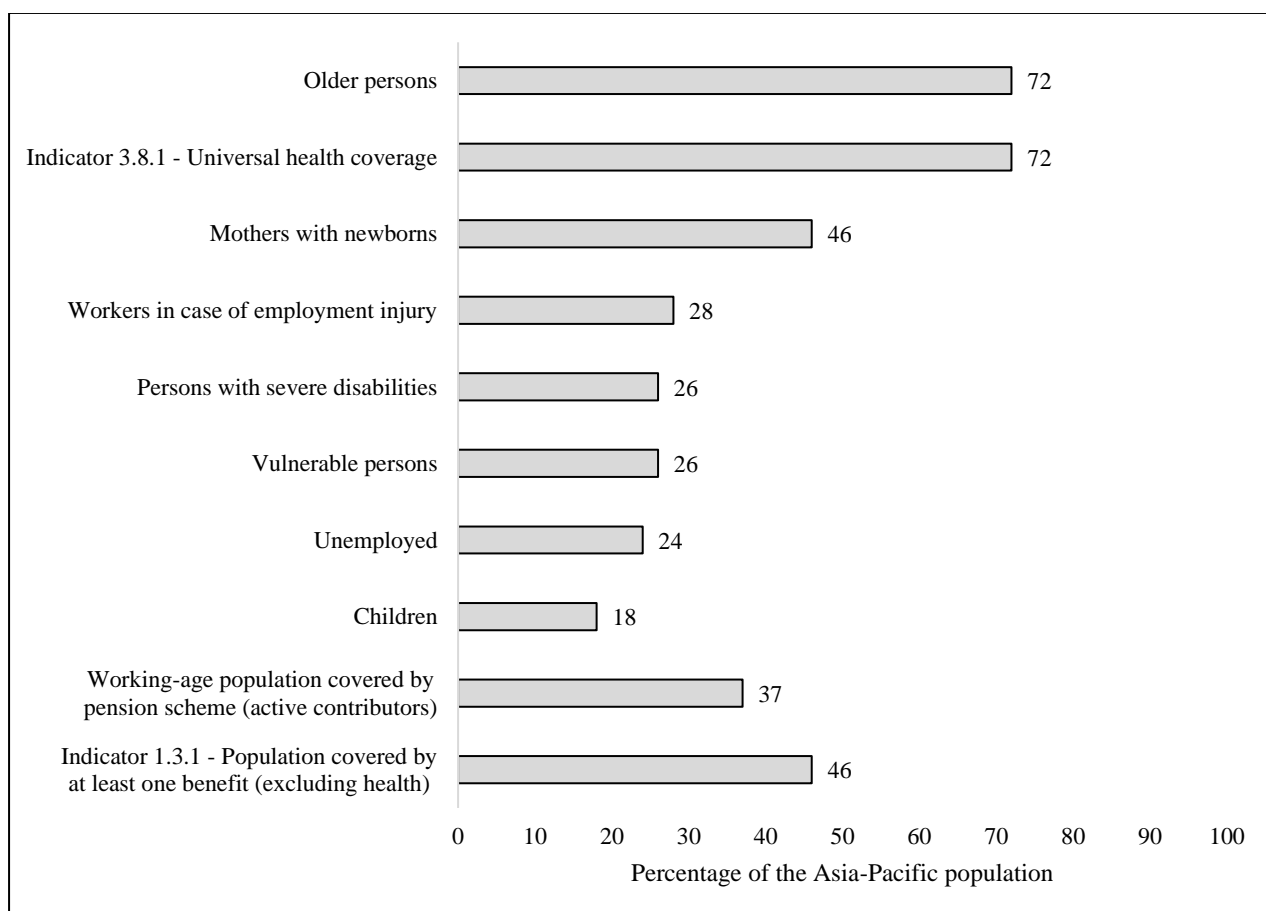
57. ESCAP member States have made noticeable progress in promoting more inclusive social protection systems. Old-age pensions have the strongest coverage: several member States have achieved universal old-age pension coverage and, on average, 70 per cent of people in the Asia-Pacific region aged 65 and above are receiving an old-age pension. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for more robust coverage of working-age populations and catalysed efforts to introduce and strengthen contributory work-related schemes, such as unemployment benefits. Furthermore, innovative approaches to data collection and beneficiary identification in lower-income communities

³¹ *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific: The Workforce We Need* (United Nations publication, 2022).

have been adopted, showcasing the value of digitalization in creating more efficient social protection information and payment systems.

58. However, nearly 55 per cent of people in Asia and the Pacific are still not covered by any kind of social protection scheme. Only about one in four vulnerable persons, defined as those neither contributing to nor benefiting from contributory schemes, receive some form of non-contributory benefit (see figure VI). Coverage for unemployment, employment injury and severe disability benefits is below one third, with slightly higher coverage for maternity benefits. Child benefit coverage is particularly low, despite children representing the future workforce, tax base and source of caregivers in the context of an ageing population. Although old age is the only contingency for which the majority of the population is covered, too often the adequacy of such benefits remains low, with women’s access to old-age income security much lower than that of men.

Figure VI
Effective social protection coverage by group of people, as well as Sustainable Development Goal indicators 1.3.1 and 3.8.1, 2020 or latest available year



Source: International Labour Organization, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – In Pursuit of a Better Future* (Geneva, 2021).

59. Despite recent efforts by member States to expand social protection schemes to migrant and informal workers, challenges remain. Migrant workers face exceptionally high levels of exclusion from social protection as they are typically employed in sectors with high informality, and they lack access to social protection programmes owing to their residency or migration status. With the prominence of informal employment in the region, approximately 1.3 billion informal workers are estimated to be left unprotected, without access to contributory mechanisms or poverty-targeted non-contributory benefits.

60. Other critical barriers to building inclusive social protection systems persist. Legal frameworks continue to limit the participation of certain categories of workers in social protection schemes, leading to particularly low coverage among vulnerable workers, such as self-employed individuals, workers in micro- and small enterprises and domestic workers. Many non-contributory schemes still rely on poverty targeting through proxy means testing to identify beneficiaries, resulting in high rates of exclusion. Rates of effective coverage significantly lag rates of legal entitlement to coverage owing to inadequate implementation and enforcement, lack of policy coordination, insufficient financing and weak institutional capacity to effectively deliver benefits and services.

61. Bold policy commitment and action are needed to build agile and effective social protection systems. The region must urgently initiate a shift away from overstretched and uncoordinated social protection systems coping with multiple shocks towards agile systems that engage different actors, provide anticipatory and post-shock transfers and facilitate longer-term inclusive, sustainable and net-zero development. Expanding social protection is essential, with a need to focus on vulnerable groups, including informal workers, migrants, people with disabilities and marginalized communities. To be effective, social protection systems must be comprehensive and rights-based, provide adequate benefits and uphold the principles of universality and solidarity.

62. In the absence of universal social protection, many people in the Asia-Pacific region have not been able to recover from recent shocks and are becoming chronically poor and vulnerable to future shocks. Millions will be left behind. Despite fiscal and debt sustainability pressures, stronger and more flexible social protection systems are needed to support transformative adaptation and a just transition and build resilience for all. Stronger efforts are required to mitigate intersecting vulnerabilities among people living in poverty and in marginalized situations. Reconceptualization and enhancements are needed to strengthen social protection systems and align them with climate change efforts to help future-proof inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific.

B. Implementation of the Regional Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific and the eighth session of the Committee on Social Development

63. Concerted efforts are needed to broaden the reach of social protection systems in view of demographic change and climate change impacts, to cover people who are more exposed to vulnerabilities, such as children, persons with disabilities, older persons, women, informal workers and migrant workers.

64. Acknowledging the pivotal role of social protection in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, at its sixth session, in 2020, the Committee on Social Development endorsed the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific.³² The secretariat, in collaboration with relevant United Nations agencies, was called upon to review and facilitate progress towards the realization of the Action Plan. In its resolution 77/1, ESCAP requested the Executive Secretary to assist member States in their implementation of the Action Plan.

65. To meet that request, the secretariat developed an online dynamic platform, the Social Protection Online Toolbox,³³ consisting of multiple components in support of policymaking, capacity-building, awareness-raising and intergovernmental processes. The Toolbox includes a user-friendly social protection simulation tool, which was recently expanded to include a feature for assessing the impact that non-contributory maternity benefits can have on reducing poverty and inequality and boosting household consumption, as well as the investment needed to introduce such benefits. The Toolbox also offers five self-paced online training modules on social protection schemes throughout the life cycle, designed to help build the capacity of ESCAP member States to strengthen their social protection systems and make them inclusive. The social protection simulation tool was presented in workshops in five member States – Cambodia, Georgia, Maldives, Mongolia and the Philippines – to build capacity for examining data-driven policy options for social protection.

66. To support member States in their implementation of the Action Plan, the secretariat also hosted national consultations in five member States (Cambodia, Georgia, Maldives, Mongolia and the Philippines) and a multi-stakeholder review meeting in Türkiye to take stock of their existing policies and readiness to implement the Action Plan. The consultations served as a valuable forum for discussion, bringing together stakeholders from diverse line ministries and international organizations to reflect on and discuss the social protection systems of the participating member States. This work led to holistic national policy reports and recommendations on social protection, jointly issued by ESCAP, the member State and the United Nations country team in the member State, examining the current situation and future ambitions to broaden social protection coverage.

67. Furthermore, the 2024 issue of the ESCAP flagship publication *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* is being developed and will be launched in the fourth quarter of 2024 to coincide with the eighth session of the Committee on Social Development. The forthcoming publication will focus on policies that future-proof social protection in the face of complex global shocks and megatrends, specifically demographic trends, climate change and digitalization, by engaging with different actors, providing anticipatory and post-shock transfers and facilitating longer-term inclusive, sustainable and net-zero development.

³² ESCAP/CSD/2020/3, annex III.

³³ See <https://spot.unescap.org/>.

68. Synergies with climate change measures open new opportunities for investments aligned with commitments made in the Paris Agreement. Coupled with domestic resource mobilization efforts, these synergies have the potential to help gradually build comprehensive social protection systems that can provide adequate benefits and sufficiently respond to current life-cycle contingencies, as well as to new and exacerbated risks in the face of a changing climate. In this context, the forthcoming publication will also highlight new opportunities for member States to leverage financial resources, including fiscal resources, as well as public-private partnerships and official development assistance at home and abroad to future-proof their social protection systems while ensuring fiscal and debt sustainability.

V. Issues for consideration by the Commission

69. The Commission may wish to take the following actions:

(a) Take note of the urgent and emerging issues in relation to social development in the region, and take note of the progress made in the preparatory work for the intergovernmental meetings on social development to be held in 2024 and 2025;

(b) Share experiences with and views on promoting policies that address challenges related to population and development, that strengthen social protection in the context of existing and emerging challenges and that promote gender equality and the empowerment of women across all sectors of government and society;

(c) Provide further guidance to the secretariat on the preparatory work for the intergovernmental meetings on social development to be held in 2024 and 2025.