

Collaboration, Cooperation and Commitment: Post-Pandemic Recovery Strategies in Asia

COVID-19 has not spared any country nor community on this earth. Felt at different levels, the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the global, regional and national economies. On the one hand, it has interrupted the everyday lives of people at the community level. On the other hand, there has been severe crippling of the economies of countries; businesses have been badly affected and the ordinary person has faced job and livelihood losses. At the personal level, lives have been at risk as people have been taken ill, and in some cases, deaths have resulted among the less fortunate.

As much as other regions of the world, development has been uneven in the Asia Pacific to the extent that the more affluent economies are more likely to be able to bounce back from the pandemic more successfully than lower income countries. The seventy-seventh session of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) held from 26 to 29 April 2021 was aimed at discussing the necessary steps countries in Asia and the Pacific should anticipate taking to rebuild their economies in the aftermath of the pandemic. The theme of the meeting, “Building Back Better from Crises through Regional Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific”, focused on several key dimensions. First, the presentations by representatives of the members and associate members of ESCAP and multilateral organisations spoke to how states should work collaboratively in an effort to recover from the ongoing pandemic. Second, it was highlighted that recovery efforts must be inclusive so that those whose lives have been worst hit by the pandemic will benefit from targeted interventions.

The strategies discussed at the meeting covered the following areas:¹ (a) the importance of regional cooperation to address the socioeconomic effects of pandemics and crises; (b) the importance of health resilience by emplacing universal health coverage (UHC) by 2030 and establishing nationally determined appropriate spending targets for quality investments in public health services; (c) the importance of investing in inclusive national social protection systems to promote access to essential services, resources, human capital development and decent jobs to prevent poverty and vulnerability; (d) the importance of furthering connectivity for sustainable development; (e) the importance of investing in micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises and the tourism and creative sectors in the region; (e) the importance of enhancing international cooperation at all levels, including North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; (f) the importance of triangular cooperation interventions to capitalise on relevant knowledge networks, partnerships, and technical and research capacity by exchanging best practices, experiences, information and innovation on relevant issues including the COVID-19 pandemic; (g) the importance of addressing the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; (h) the importance of designing recovery strategies based on risk-informed, sustainable financing policies, supported by integrated national financing frameworks; (i) the importance of furthering regional cooperation on trade and investment, tourism and creative economy, connectivity and energy; (j) the importance of promoting the digital economy, including through the Commission’s regional cooperation mechanisms, frameworks and agreements; (k) the importance of sharing experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with regard to building back better from the COVID-19 pandemic through inclusive, resilient and sustainable recovery

strategies and investments aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; and (l) the importance of closing connectivity gaps, strengthening digital connectivity, and promoting the digital economy to enhance regional supply chain connectivity and diversification, as well as to facilitate recovery and to ensure resilient connectivity during crises.

Countries in Asia and the Pacific have utilised trillions from their respective reserves to fund emergency health response efforts and relief measures for households and businesses. These efforts and interventions, while crucial during crisis situations, have been extremely costly for economies, raising national debt levels. On their road to recovery, economies in the Asia and Pacific will require significant and continuing fiscal support and stimulus, bolstered by relevant policy measures so that countries will be on track to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

On the ground, of great concern to governments is that the pandemic could push 89 million people from Asia and the Pacific back into extreme poverty (measured at \$1.90 per day) – the majority from South Asia (79 million) and East and South-East Asia (5.1 million).² Women and girls as well as persons with disabilities, older persons, youth and children, as well as the poor, vulnerable and marginalised segments of the population, including indigenous peoples and the LGBT, are disproportionately affected by the ongoing pandemic, and thus in facilitating recovery and building resilience, relevant interventions targeted at these groups are vital.

In Asia and the Pacific, sadly more than half of the people lack access to national social protection systems. Even before the pandemic, many countries struggled to emplace social protection systems.³ But in moving forward towards recovery, social protections are ever more needed to benefit women and other vulnerable groups since it is these groups who lack safety nets to help them cope during a crisis. As Mr Guy Ryder, Director-General, International Labour Organisation emphasised: the region is “at the crossroads” and “there is no alternative”. Gender-sensitive interventions include financial assistance to women working in female-dominated labour sectors; cash transfers to pregnant women and mothers with young children; provisions of food and hygiene kits to female-headed households; grants to help women entrepreneurs; and extra leave days to caregivers of COVID-19 infected family members. Mention was also made of ensuring increased access to financial mechanisms and capacity-building for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. In this regard, women can expect to be helped since most micro and small enterprises in particular are female-owned. Furthermore, recovery strategies should focus on the informal economy since women are disproportionately represented in this sector.

Despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, member and associate member states of ESCAP have declared their commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Implementation efforts towards achieving these goals have continued and advanced. Presentations by member and associate member states detailed past and upcoming initiatives to achieve recovery from the pandemic. Some states described their recovery efforts within the framework of development justice, including redistributive justice, economic justice, social and gender justice, environmental justice and

accountability to their peoples. Others described their efforts in responding to climate change and preserving biodiversity: although there is room for improvement since by and large coronavirus policy responses in the region do not sufficiently promote green recovery and development.

An exception, however, can be found in the Maldives. National efforts on the part of the government were discussed at the parallel side event, “Building Resilience to Future Pandemics and Climate Change through the Protection of Nature – An Urgent Issue for the Maldives and the Rest of the World” on 27 April. It is inevitable that strategies to build back better and cleaner in the country include initiatives related to the preservation of the environment and addressing climate change since its people are dependent on a range of biodiversity-based sectors for their food and livelihood: underscoring the importance of the natural environment to the country’s economic survival. Accordingly, every effort to preserve the environment is beneficial to economic survival both at the national and household levels. In the past years, various programmes have been rolled out by the Maldives government to achieve this end. In response to the presentation by Miss Muhsina Abdul Rahman, Senior Conservation Officer from the Environment Management and Conservation Department of the Maldives government, as SI UN Representative I asked how these programmes might have been socially inclusive and if thought had been given to ensure gender was mainstreamed into these programmes.⁴ Because the wetlands and mangroves are a rich source of food and livelihood for the womenfolk (e.g. the production of coir rope as an industry is undertaken by women)⁵, any effort to preserve the ecosystem assures that women have a means to food and an income. Moreover, women play a significant role in the sustainable management of these key habitats since they possess first-hand experience on best practices to preserve the environment through traditional knowledge.⁶ Notable among the government programmes aimed at recognising women’s role in the sector are small grants distributed through the Mangroves for Future and UNDP-GEF Small Grants programme to revive and support these livelihood activities.

Going forward, countries in Asia and the Pacific should ensure that policy responses to COVID-19 should be aligned to the 2030 Agenda. The need for cooperation and commitment cannot be ignored. In fact, cooperation and commitment are especially critical during these times since the economies of member states of the region have contracted by 1.0 per cent in 2020, which is 4.7 percentage points lower than earlier estimates at the beginning of 2020 and 5.2 percentage points lower than the region’s average GDP growth rate in 2019;⁷ suggesting that the road to recovery can only come about if countries work together, as former Prime Minister of New Zealand Ms Helen Clarke opined. As governments are focused on getting their economies back on track; equal attention should be given to being committed to implementing policies aimed at preserving human rights. To this end, pre and post-pandemic policy initiatives must be aimed at inclusive and green growth to the extent that recovery priorities should be focused on the twin aims of being people-oriented and planet-focused.

Authored by: Dr Theresa Devasahayam, SI UN Representative for Bangkok
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¹ For details, see Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2021) Annual Report, 22 May 2020 – 29 April 2021. Supplement No. 19. New York: United Nations.

² Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2021) “Economic policies and financing strategies to build resilient, inclusive and sustainable economies.” [Note by the secretariat].

³ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2021) “Summary of the theme study on building back better from crises through regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific.” [Note by the secretariat].

⁴ This question led to an invitation to Soroptimist International from the Embassy of Mexico in Thailand to participate in the regional webinar “Women Economic Empowerment”, aligned with the Generation Equality Forum, along-with the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the Embassy of France and UN Women Asia-Pacific; on 6 May 2021 to which President Sharon Fischer attended on behalf of SI.

⁵ “An overview of traditional coir rope making in the Maldives.” Friday, 16 December. URL:<
<http://maldivianislands.blogspot.com/2011/12/overview-of-traditional-coir-rope.html>>; Dawson, Gabriella (2017) “Coir rope and thatch weaving in Raa Atoll,” *Destination Guides*, 29 November. URL:<
<https://www.maldives.com/destination-guides/coir-rope-making-raa-atoll/>>

⁶ Miss Muhsina Abdul Rahman, Senior Conservation Officer from the Environment Management and Conservation Department of the Maldives government, Personal communication, 29 April 2021.

⁷ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2021) “Economic policies and financing strategies to build resilient, inclusive and sustainable economies.” [Note by the secretariat].