

# Building Forward Together

Towards an inclusive and  
resilient Asia and the Pacific



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## **Building Forward Together: Towards an Inclusive and Resilient Asia and the Pacific**

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# Foreword

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Since the emergence of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) led to the closure of borders, lockdowns and economic and public health crises across the Asia-Pacific region, the pandemic has taken many twists and turns. As a result, the region's prospects of achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 are much diminished. The odds of meeting many of them were already low before the pandemic, in the face of intensifying climate and financial shocks.

The pandemic further widened existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. Evidence also shows the reversal of hard-won gains in poverty reduction in several countries in the region. All this is happening alongside intensifying environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and the continued onslaught of natural hazards and climate change. Consequently, the risks to developing countries, and poor and vulnerable populations, have not abated, but are on the rise.

In 2021, our partnership report highlighted the risk of widening social and economic divergence in Asia and the Pacific—and the threat of a so-called “K-shaped recovery”. This report takes a closer look at the implications of the pandemic for attaining the SDGs, and countries' responses to pandemic-induced shocks and rising social and economic stresses. It considers the key factors that are influencing the dynamics of recovery in parts of the region, and what we can learn faster and apply further, from what works.

Critical to countries' ability to cope have been vaccination coverage, access to diagnostics, and COVID-19 therapeutics. Generally, richer countries have made faster progress in inoculating their populations. Yet some poorer countries in the region, such as Cambodia, Bhutan and small island developing states, have also managed to achieve high vaccination coverage. Despite these successes, greater vaccine equity remains vital to getting the region's economies and societies back on track as fast as possible. On this score, every day matters.

The pandemic has sped up the digitalization of economic and social activity in the region. Even countries with limited access to the internet before the pandemic, have found ways to reap the benefits of accelerating technological change. Yet for the most part, the poorest and most vulnerable people continue to be excluded. This must change: ensuring an equitable digital future for all is critical to accelerating progress on the SDGs.

Social protection systems in the region, despite their fragmentation and weaknesses, have saved lives during the pandemic. But it is paramount to ensure they are strengthened further. Countries with a standing social protection architecture have been better able to protect people, and take an inclusive, all-of-population approach, rather than relying on ad-hoc emergency measures that are put into gear only when disaster strikes.

Last but not least, this report considers the economic structures and fiscal positions that have shaped the pandemic's impact in individual countries. Economic concentration has proved a major weakness, and diversification, with a focus on more sustainable and inclusive economic activity, will be vital for faster recovery. Public debt and fiscal stresses have increased significantly in

most countries, adding to an already daunting SDG financing gap. It has never been more urgent to mobilize development finance from a wider range of sources, particularly capital markets. The business case for the SDGs must be made in bolder ways, and better data and impact metrics can be used to demonstrate the high value proposition this offers.

In this context, the region faces an urgent and intertwined question: can countries use the economic, social and environmental policy and financing instruments and reach to make the recovery green, while also building sustainable and resilient economies and societies that leave no one behind. A wealth of good practices to promote both inclusion and environmentally sustainable recovery have already emerged. We must raise the ambition and scale of these efforts without delay.

We are pleased to issue this joint report under our Asia-Pacific Sustainable Development Goals Partnership, as we support efforts to build back along these lines, and do so together.



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# Key messages

## Chapter 1. COVID-19 reverses progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals

- The pandemic has led to a deterioration of economic, social and environmental conditions throughout Asia and the Pacific, and has exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities within and between countries.
- Poor and disadvantaged groups, already vulnerable before the pandemic, have suffered the most and are at heightened risk of falling further behind.

## Chapter 2. Key factors influencing recovery from COVID-19

- There are signs of a so-called “K-shaped recovery” marked by a widening divergence in economic and social outcomes within and between countries of the region, especially among countries in special situations. Such a skewed recovery carries the risk of leaving behind the poorest and most vulnerable population groups.
- The dynamics of recovery are shaped by at least six factors: vaccination (including access to diagnostics and therapeutics), social protection, digitalization, economic structure, environmental risks, and fiscal space. To avoid a “K-shaped recovery”, these factors need to be considered carefully in the design of national recovery strategies.

## Chapter 3. Policy priorities for inclusive and resilient recovery

- As countries shift from delivering an emergency response to long-term recovery, they face two principal and intertwined challenges: how to make the recovery inclusive and leave no one behind, while charting a transformative path toward building sustainable and resilient economies and societies and achieving the SDGs. This calls for more systemic and integrated approaches that can reshape the dynamics of recovery, overcome pre-existing vulnerabilities, and drive transformative change.
- Three interrelated thematic areas at the core of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda are highlighted for urgent policy action: **inclusion** (ensuring social protection and quality education for all), **women's empowerment** (advancing gender equality), and **environmental sustainability** (building inclusive green economies). In each of these areas, good practices already are emerging from recovery efforts.

## Chapter 4. Building forward together: Putting policies into action to achieve the SDGs

- Governments should review and, as necessary, raise the ambition of their national recovery strategies to ensure they are aligned with the 2030 Agenda, integrated with national sustainable development goals and policy frameworks, and focused on gender equality and the needs of poor and vulnerable population groups.
- Governments have a growing array of new and evolving financing strategies, mechanisms and tools that they can tap to mobilize the significantly greater financial resources—public and private, domestic and international—needed for sustainable development and achieving the SDGs.
- Moving forward, regional cooperation and multi-stakeholder partnerships must play a critical role in supporting necessary policy and institutional reforms and in scaling up practical solutions that make countries' recovery inclusive, resilient and sustainable.

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