



Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in South Asia

Key Policy Priorities and Implementation Challenges





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PREFACE

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the world leaders in September 2015 represents a transformative framework to spur national actions to end poverty and hunger and build an inclusive and sustainable world. Encompassing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets, the ambitious Agenda presents a historic opportunity to make development more inclusive, equitable and sustainable and to end extreme poverty and provide a life of dignity to all within a generation. It is of particular relevance to South Asia, a region accounting for 36% of the world's poor and nearly half of undernourished children.

Given the weight of the subregion in the world population, extent of poverty, hunger and other deprivations, global progress on the SDGs would depend on their achievement by South Asia.

South Asia's economic dynamism and promising prospects provide confidence in the subregion's ability to transform itself and build a sustainable future for all. A determined political will is, however, required if the subregion is to expeditiously adopt and implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. To do so, the subregion will need to mainstream the SDGs into national development plans and budgets as well as reorient growth frameworks to be inclusive, equitable and promote low-carbon development pathways.

To achieve the 2030 Agenda, South Asia must promote an industry-oriented structural transformation for creating decent jobs without jeopardizing environmental sustainability. As per capita incomes rise and the middle-income demographic grows, targeting manufacturing sector development will become even more critical to meet the increasing domestic demand. The lack of export orientation of some economies also carries the risk of external account vulnerabilities. Structural transformation therefore needs to focus on nurturing higher value-added and new and innovative products and services for domestic, regional and global markets. Sustainability in South Asia must therefore, rest on a core foundation of diversification and competitiveness.

Recognizing the host of challenges faced by South Asia, UNESCAP has attempted to unpack the 2030 Agenda at the subregional level in this Report, and outlined tangible, high priority and relevant policy actions that are critical for the implementation of sustainable development. The Report identifies seven key priorities that can help accelerate the SDG achievement in South Asia by leveraging the relationships between the Goals. Among others, our policy simulations and evidence offer insight into how a regionally coordinated sustainable industrialization strategy in South Asia could generate more than 56 million new jobs by 2030 and lift 71 million additional people out of poverty, relative to a business-as-usual scenario.

The subregion's success in implementing the SDGs, however, hinges on addressing current capacity gaps and strengthening the means of implementation. Mobilizing diverse sources of finance is imperative to the subregion in this respect. This includes, but is not limited to, domestic resource mobilization, official development assistance, and harnessing private sector investments and public-private partnerships for sustainable development. Science, technology and innovation agendas in the subregion must also be aligned with the new sustainable development paradigm and the countries must strengthen their capabilities and capacities in the sector. This requires conducive policies and legal and regulatory frameworks, supported regionally and globally by favourable technology transfer provisions, a global technology facilitation mechanism, and a technology bank for least developed countries. Regional and subregional cooperation would play a critical role.

This Report will be useful for analysts and practitioners of development policy in the subregion and beyond, in stimulating a debate on the ways and means of bringing sustainable prosperity to all in South Asia and help it, at last, harness its latent development potential.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) present a unique opportunity for South Asia to eradicate poverty and provide a life of dignity to all its people. Despite their economic dynamism and remarkable achievements with regards to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), South Asian countries still account for 36% of the world's poor, nearly half of its malnourished children, and suffer from a number of development and infrastructure gaps. A disproportionate concentration of the deprived populations in the subregion that accounts for a quarter of the world's population means that the global achievement of the SDGs will not be possible without South Asia achieving them.

While there has been progress, many Sustainable Development challenges remain in South Asia

South Asian countries have achieved many of the MDG targets but progress has been uneven across and within countries. The SDGs are an opportunity to carry forward the unfinished MDG agenda (specifically under Goals 1-7) and build on it. The new set of goals address cross-cutting issues such as economic growth, job creation, industrialization, inequality, and peace and justice (SDGs 8, 9, 10, and 16), and the ecological sustainability related goals (SDGs 11-15), in addition to a reinvigorated global partnership to improve implementation (SDG 17).

Key policy priorities are emerging for the SDGs in South Asia

To address the key development challenges faced by South Asian countries, the *Report* identifies the following seven strategic policy priorities:

- 1. Create jobs through balanced economic transformation through sustainable industrialization:** Industrialization (SDG 9) and robust economic growth, including the creation of productive jobs (SDG 8), are critical enablers for poverty alleviation (SDG 1) and other SDGs. South Asia has emerged as one of the fastest growing subregions in the world, but this growth has not been creating adequate jobs for its youthful population, and 80% of the workforce remains in the informal sector. The economies in South Asia have seen a shift from agriculture towards services, largely bypassing the industrial sector and its job-creating capacity. An industry-oriented structural transformation in South Asia could generate more than 56 million additional jobs and lift 71 million additional people out of poverty, compared with a business-as-usual strategy. A regionally coordinated sustainable industrialization strategy could leverage the spillovers of manufacturing across borders, creating productive capacities across South Asia through regional value chains.
- 2. Provide essential basic services to all and accelerate sustainable infrastructure development:** South Asian countries are characterized by wide gaps in transport infrastructure (SDG 9), basic infrastructure, such as drinking water and sanitation (SDG 6), electricity (SDG 7), and ICT (information and communications technology), costing the subregion 3-4% of GDP and affecting the achievement of other SDGs. Estimates suggest that South Asia per capita incomes would increase roughly 1% for each percentage point increase in infrastructure availability.
- 3. Provide universal access to education and health to harness South Asia's youth bulge:** Investing in universal health coverage (SDG 3) and quality education and vocational training opportunities for all (SDG 4), will enable South Asia to reap a demographic dividend from its youthful population. Such investments will also allow the subregion to bridge the projected global skills deficit. Governments in South Asia are adopting rights-based approaches to provide universal education but need to pay attention also to the quality of education and training.

4. **Provide universal social protection and financial inclusion:** Social protection strategies and financial inclusion are effective investments for accelerating poverty reduction (SDG 1) and reducing inequality (SDG 10). South Asian countries can scale up models of social protection that have evolved over the past decade, including those based on income support, employment guarantee and conditional cash transfers. Besides expanding microfinance programmes, Governments may also leverage new innovations, such as branchless banking and mobile-based financial services to improve financial inclusion.
5. **Address food security and hunger with sustainable agricultural productivity improvements:** Food security and the eradication of hunger (SDG 2) is a key development challenge in South Asia, which accounts for nearly two thirds of the world's undernourished people. South Asian countries could strengthen their collective food security through operationalizing the SAARC Food Bank, liberalizing intra-regional food trade and enhancing joint research and development (R&D) on productivity. Doubling agricultural productivity in South Asia could increase food security and lead to increases of up to 16% in GDP, 14% rise in exports, and 11% in household incomes. Enhancing agricultural productivity could lift 16 million additional people out of poverty and create nearly 13 million additional jobs, relative to a baseline of business as usual.
6. **Promote gender equality and women's entrepreneurship:** Despite achieving gender parity in education, South Asia lags in economic and political empowerment of women, as well as other dimensions of gender equality (SDG 5). Estimates suggest that gender equality could add up to \$3.4 trillion to the subregion's combined GDP by 2025. Women's entrepreneurship can be promoted through gender-responsive policies including one-stop advice centres, incentivized credit schemes, and capacity-building, as well as the regional sharing of good practices.
7. **Enhancing environmental sustainability through low-carbon climate-resilient pathways:** For South Asia, environmental sustainability is an essential element of closing development gaps and promoting economic growth. Environmental degradation, for example water quality and availability, has already become an impediment to development, and the subregion is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, extreme weather events and natural disasters. Measures to boost access to energy and reduce air pollution would address social needs but also increase economic competitiveness. These measures include increasing the use of renewable energy sources, namely hydro, solar and wind; moving towards cleaner gas-based fuels; and employing new technologies to reduce emissions from conventional electricity generation. Industry also needs to decouple its growth from resource use and pollution through energy efficiency, recycling, and cogeneration, which are all becoming increasingly viable. Lifestyle changes, including the "3-Rs" of reduce, reuse and recycle and sustainable solid waste management, need to be adopted as a part of sustainable consumption. The projected rapid rise in urban population over the next three decades provides South Asia with opportunities to leapfrog over some of the less sustainable technologies and urban patterns of the last century, in favour of smart cities with greener and more resilient buildings and infrastructure, including transport systems. Mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in development planning also would be critical for South Asia given its vulnerability to disasters.

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