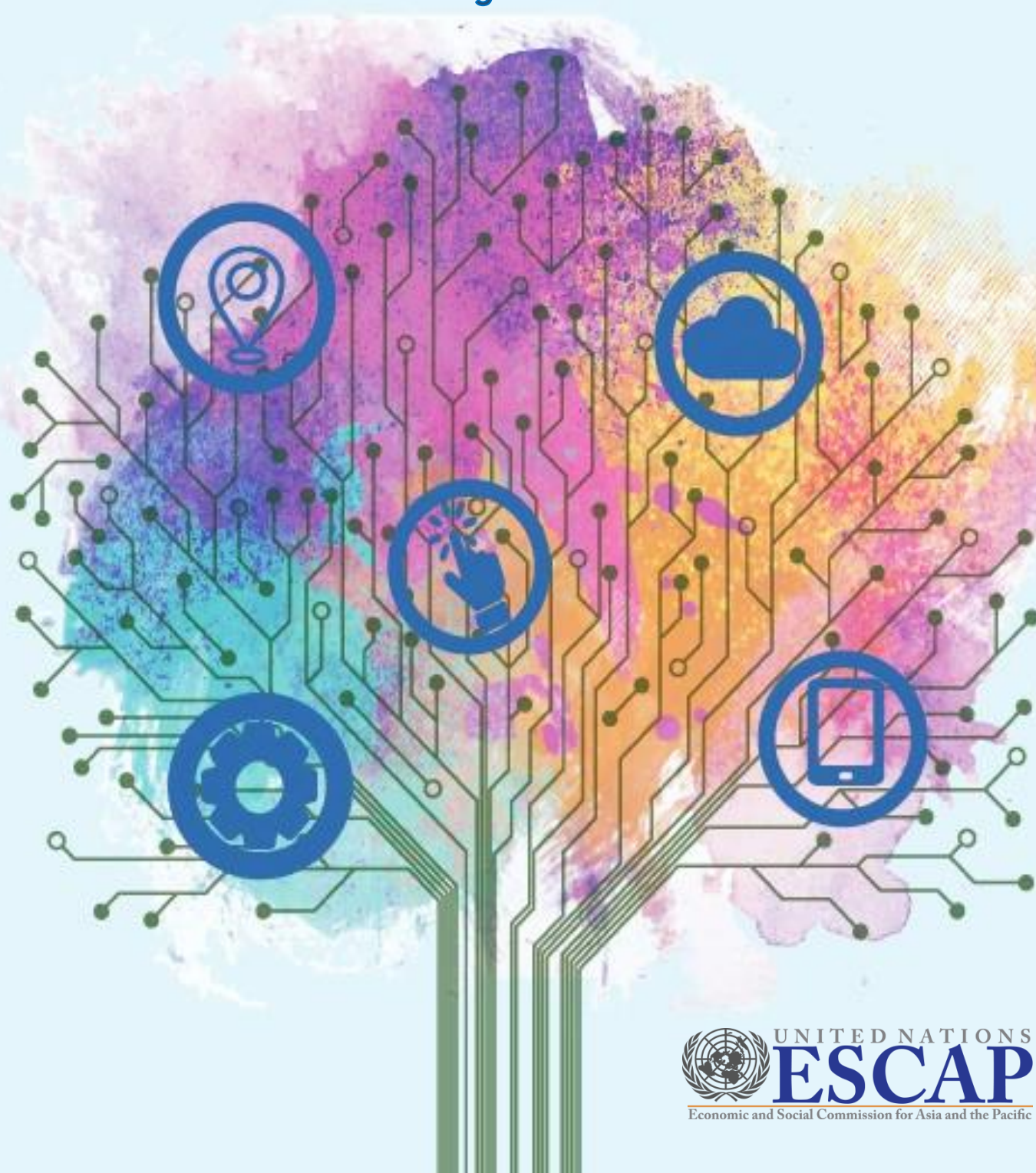


Regional integration for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific:

ESCAP Digital and Sustainable Regional Integration
Index and Indicator Framework

DigiSRII 1.0



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Acknowledgements

This report has been produced as part of the delivery of the United Nations Development Account Project on “Measuring, monitoring and improving performance in regional integration within ECA, ESCWA and ESCAP regions (2018-2021)”. The project aims to provide new and improved tools for policymakers and researchers to evaluate the performance of economies while also facilitating cross-economy comparisons.

The report was prepared by Witada Anukoonwattaka and Richard Sean Lobo under the guidance of Yann Duval and the overall supervision of Mia Mikic, all from the Trade, Investment and Innovation Division (TIID) of ESCAP. Ms. Nattabhon Narongkachavana, TIID, ESCAP formatted the report for release.

The authors are grateful to Simon Mevel of the African Trade Policy Centre of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and his colleagues for organizing the Expert Group Meeting on Methodologies of Regional Integration Indexes, held on 25 and 26 September 2018 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.¹ The report greatly benefited from the information and insights shared by experts during that meeting.

¹ <https://www.unescap.org/events/expert-group-meeting-methodologies-regional-integration-indexes>.

Executive summary

The ESCAP Digital and Sustainable Regional Integration Index (DigiSRII), is an attempt to bring together the various dimensions of regional integration while also accounting for the growing importance of digital and sustainable development. Rather than emphasizing methodological issues related to developing the index and aggregating very different indicators, the work focuses on developing a global indicator framework for digital and sustainable regional integration, inspired by the indicator framework established to monitor progress of implementation of the sustainable development goals. The approach of DigiSRII recognizes that policymakers in different economies and regions may prioritize different areas of regional integration. As such, very simple aggregation techniques are adopted in building the index, making it as transparent as possible, and providing a basis for policy analysts and policymakers to develop their own version using the underlying data, as they see fit.

Building on the regional integration indices developed by ECA and ADB, a new 7-by-2 matrix structure is adopted for DigiSRII. The seven core dimensions are: trade and investment integration; financial integration; regional value chains integration; infrastructure integration; the movement of people; regulatory cooperation; and digital-economy integration. In order to mainstream sustainable development through the entire index, each of these dimensions include two components: a set of conventional integration indicators and a set of sustainable development focused indicators. The sustainable development focused indicators emphasize how regional integration is pursued, particularly taking into account the need for inclusivity and environmental protection. This structure enables policymakers to monitor to what extent they are taking into account sustainable development when progressing along each of the seven dimensions.

The results from DigiSRII shows that the Asia-Pacific region's performance in regional integration varies widely across dimensions. Overall, investment in infrastructure and the proactive FTA strategies of economies in the region have been key drivers of integration in the Asia-Pacific over the past ten years. In contrast, little progress has been made in freeing the movement of people. Trade and investment integration, as well as RVC integration, have also not significantly deepened for the region between 2010-13 and 2014-2017, probably because these conventional forms of economic integration have reached their limits - The digital transformation of trade and investment based on emerging technologies may push these limits, however.

DigiSRII results also vary greatly by country and subregions. They confirm that economies in South-East Asia (SEA) and East and North-East Asia (ENEA) are among the most regionally integrated. These economies have also made the most progress over time. On the other hand, economies in South and South-West Asia (SSWA) and North and Central Asia (NCA) are among the least regionally integrated and have made the least progress. Among other factors, the relatively deeper integration in ENEA and SEA economies is driven by their active participation in regional production networks, with production integration deepening during the past decade. As shown at the dimensional level, economies in these two subregions have been relatively strongly connected in regional trade, investment, value chains, infrastructure and regional cooperation arrangements.

In terms of sustainable regional integration, Japan and the Republic of Korea emerge as regional leaders. The region as a whole appears to be able to manage its financial integration

prudently, and to enable broad and inclusive access to infrastructure. Improvements in inclusive access to infrastructure as well as in the digital economy drove progress in sustainable regional integration in the Asia-Pacific region during 2010-2017. DigiSRII results suggest that more efforts are needed to enable movement of people as well as in developing regulatory cooperation for sustainable development.

In terms of regional digital economy integration, the Asia-Pacific region's performance varies considerably across the underlying indicators of that dimension. The results highlight the need for improvement in regulatory harmonization in order to support digital trade in the region, trade in ICT goods and utilizing e-commerce platforms. In addition, from the perspective of sustainable integration in the digital economy, the Asia-Pacific region has made immense progress in expanding women's participation in e-commerce as well as in increasing household access to the Internet. Meanwhile, cybersecurity remains a major stumbling block for deepening sustainable regional integration in the digital economy.

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