

APEC: Post-COVID-19 Recovery. Inclusive, Sustainable and Low-carbon Growth

*APEC: Recuperación poscovid-19. Crecimiento
incluyente, sustentable y bajo en carbono*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the APEC goals related to sustainability, which are a key point of the post-COVID-19 recovery and could be driven by the use of market instruments, but also by a regulatory framework and public, private and social cooperation that promote innovation in business, as well as socio-cultural changes. The authors also explain the relationship between economic growth in the region and women's participation.

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Resumen

Este artículo se enfoca en las metas del APEC relacionadas con la sustentabilidad, que son punto clave de la recuperación poscovid-19 y que podrían estar impulsadas por el uso de instrumentos de mercado, pero también por un marco regulatorio y de cooperación pública, privada y social que promuevan la innovación en los negocios, así como los cambios socioculturales. También sus autoras explican la relación entre el crecimiento económico de la región y la participación de las mujeres.

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Keywords

APEC, just transition, COVID-19, sustainability, Putrajaya 2040 vision, MSMEs, SMES, inclusive growth, women

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Palabras clave

APEC, transición justa, covid-19, sustentabilidad, visión Putrajaya 2040, mipymes, pymes, crecimiento incluyente, mujeres

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Introduction

After two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, high inflation rates, food shortages and fluctuations in hydrocarbon prices, the first forecasts of economic recovery and development in the world for 2023 are compromised. Recognizing structural problems of inequality and unsustainability between and within countries and regions in this historic situation, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is betting on new strategies to ensure sustainable, inclusive and low-carbon growth.

APEC, founded in 1989, is an intergovernmental forum of 21 Pacific Rim economies promoting free trade throughout the region. As the region's economy has grown substantially since its first conference, with more than two decades of integration, its trade policies have acquired increasing global relevance. The economic and commercial purpose for which the Forum was created is now making considerable progress, but it is still a long way from its ultimate goal. This article refers to APEC's goals related to sustainability, which are a key point of the post-COVID-19 recovery, and which could be driven by the use of market instruments, but also by a regulatory framework and public, private and social cooperation that promote innovation in business, as well as socio-cultural changes. In turn, the relationship between the region's economic growth and women's participation is explained, as limiting their participation in the labor

force across the Asia-Pacific region can cost the economy tens of billions of dollars each year.

The article is divided into five sections. The first presents a discussion of the need for a just and inclusive transition to a low-carbon economy in the post-COVID-19 era that reduces greenhouse gas emissions and leads to more sustainable production and lifestyle practices. The second introduces the background to APEC's environmental and climate policies and actions. In the third section, the main objectives of the Putrajaya Vision 2040 and the pathways for its implementation are presented. The fourth section explores APEC's strategy to promote the development of sustainable and innovative micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). The fifth section explains APEC's vision of inclusive growth to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment. The article ends with some concluding remarks.

APEC and just transition in the post-COVID-19 era

In 1994, APEC member economies announced the Bogor Goals, which are linked to the challenges of environmental degradation and, specifically, climate change, setting 2020 as the deadline for achieving them.¹ Recently, APEC reaffirmed its commitment to promote trade and investment liberalization, facilitating trade and technical cooperation as crisis resolution mechanisms, with an even greater emphasis on environmental issues and climate action, as set out in the Putrajaya Vision 2040 and the Bangkok Goals on Bio-Circular Green Economy.²

The Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has once again highlighted climate change as a pressing

¹ "What are the Bogor Goals?", in APEC, September 2021, at <https://www.apec.org/about-us/about-apec/fact-sheets/bogor-goals> (date of access: July 13, 2023).

² "Bangkok Goals on Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy", in APEC, at [https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/leaders-declarations/2022/2022-leaders-declaration/bangkok-goals-on-bio-circular-green-\(bcg\)-economy](https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/leaders-declarations/2022/2022-leaders-declaration/bangkok-goals-on-bio-circular-green-(bcg)-economy) (date of access: February 2, 2023).

global challenge.³ The need for innovative solutions to address the risks posed by climate change is especially urgent for economies located in the Indo-Pacific region. According to the APEC Regional Trends Analysis Report, the region suffers more than 70% of global natural disasters, with related losses amounting to USD 100 billion annually. Furthermore, it is estimated that without effective policy action to address climate change, the APEC region could experience climate-related economic losses amounting to 18.3% of GDP by 2050.⁴

Increasingly, the adverse impacts of fossil fuel dependence on socioeconomics and the environment confirm the need to accelerate the transition to a low-carbon economy. This will undoubtedly imply new economic opportunities, but it will also negatively affect existing assets, jobs and livelihoods.⁵ One element to consider is the needs of those most likely to be affected by the transition; for example, regions that still have abundant fossil fuel assets may face significant direct and indirect job losses.

Early recognition of industrial, regional, social and individual vulnerabilities, as well as active engagement on these issues, will help ensure that the benefits of a transition to a more sustainable economy are widely shared and that the most vulnerable are protected. This support has become even more important as the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic led to

³ Hans-Otto Pörtner, Debra C. Roberts, Melinda M. B. Tignor, Elvira Poloczanska, Katja Mintenbeck, Andrés Alegría, Marlies Craig, Stefanie Langsdorf, Sina Löschke, Vincent Möller, Andrew Okem and Bardhyl Rama (eds.), *Climate Change. 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability: Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, at <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844> (date of access: May 3, 2023).

⁴ Glacer Niño A. Vázquez and Rhea Crisologo Hernando, *Transitioning to a Sustainable Economy while Ensuring Inclusion*, Singapore, APEC Policy Support Unit (Policy Brief, 54), December 2022, at https://www.apec.org/docs/default-source/publications/2022/12/transitioning-to-a-sustainable-economy-while-ensuring-inclusion/222_psu_transitioning-to-a-sustainable-economy-while-ensuring-inclusion.pdf?sfvrsn=1dfa7c7a_2 (date of access: February 4, 2023).

⁵ "Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration", at https://cop24.gov.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/Solidarity_and_Just_Transition_Silesia_Declaration_2_.pdf (date of access: March 21, 2023).

a sharp economic contraction, higher unemployment and reduced fiscal space, all of which could undermine any green measures.⁶

A just transition means ensuring that substantial benefits are shared broadly while simultaneously supporting those who stand to lose financially, whether they are countries, industries, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), communities, workers or consumers. This is reflected in several global commitments to address the challenge of climate change and sustainability, including the 2015 Paris Agreement, which recognizes “the imperatives of a just reconversion of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities.”⁷

Any transition, including energy transition, implies taking a position on the origins of the problem and the ways to act. In the case of APEC economies, one option to boost their recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 is the Green Initiative,⁸ whose characteristics, although not new, are of great contemporary importance. The intention is that policies aimed at sustainable recovery will reduce the likelihood of future economic crises, increase the region’s resilience to the impacts of climate change and accelerate the transition to a low-emission economy.

While the lack of sustainability implies solving broad structural problems at the global level (as well as at the national level), there is no doubt that, for the APEC region’s recovery to be dynamic and resilient, policies must be designed with inclusion and sustainability in mind. The COVID-19 pandemic has widened existing divides and disproportionately affected those who were already economically marginalized. In this regard, economic recovery must not leave behind MSMEs, women, youth and seniors,

⁶ Antonina Ivanova Boncheva, “Finance for Climate Action: Postcovid-19 Recovery Challenges”, in *The Mexican Journal of Economics and Finance*, vol. 17, no. 2, April-June 2022, e717, at <https://doi.org/10.21919/remefv17i2.717> (date of access: February 14, 2023).

⁷ Paris Agreement, p. 2, at https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf (date of access: March 30, 2023).

⁸ APEC SME Innovation Center, *The Green Initiative: Second Cycle of Daegu Initiative. Final Report*, Singapore, APEC, July 2012, at https://www.apec.org/docs/default-source/Publications/2012/8/The-Green-Initiative-Second-Cycle-of-Daegu-Initiative/2012_sme_Green-initiative.pdf (date of access: June 4, 2023).

rural areas and indigenous peoples in Asia-Pacific.⁹ This is not just a matter of principle, but an economic priority, as a recovery that unlocks the full collective potential of everyone in society can provide an essential foundation for the region's future growth prospects.

As a forum that integrates several of the world's largest economies, APEC has the capacity to consider the development of economic policies and incentives that can drive decarbonization, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and lead to more sustainable practices.¹⁰

Harnessing market-based measures—represented by the idea of a green economy—to address environmental challenges and, in particular, climate change, is an alternative policy supported by APEC. However, in this context it is also important to recognize the imbalances created by market forces. Therefore, member economies must make seven policy choices to implement this transition: (1) actively encourage decarbonization, (2) avoid new sources of carbon lock-in, (3) generate opportunities to preserve economic stability, (4) provide assistance to workers and communities affected by change, (5) address environmental damage, (6) implement supporting measures to mitigate economic and social inequalities, and (7) ensure an inclusive and transparent planning process based on social dialogue.

APEC Sustainability Policies: Background

The Declaration on Climate Change, Energy Security and Clean Development (Sydney Declaration) begins with the statement that economic growth, energy security and climate change are fundamental and inter-related challenges for the APEC region. It mentions that APEC's economic

⁹ "28th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting 2021-Declaration", at https://mddb.apec.org/Documents/2021/AELM/AELM/21_aelm_dec.pdf (date of access: December 14, 2021).

¹⁰ Ana Bertha Cuevas and Antonina Ivanova, "Agenda ambiental y climática en el APEC a la luz del desarrollo sustentable", in Carlos Uscanga and Juan José Ramírez (coords.), *El Foro de Cooperación Económica de Asia Pacífico APEC: tres décadas de trayectoria y escenarios para el futuro*, Mexico, UNAM (Colección Universitaria de Estudios sobre Asia y África, 5), 2020, pp. 223-247.

growth has reduced poverty and improved living standards, but that success is tied to energy supply affecting air quality and generating greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Therefore, the statement concludes with a commitment to secure energy needs while reducing GHG emissions.¹¹ In 2022 the National Center for APEC highlights the opportunities and challenges of the Forum in the face of climate change.

Since 2010, APEC has undertaken world-leading work on reforming environmentally harmful subsidies, focusing on fossil fuel and fisheries subsidies.¹² Evidence suggests that such subsidy reforms, which incentivize sustainable consumption and production, can lead to better economic, social and environmental outcomes.¹³ In 2016, APEC declared its support for the implementation of the U.N. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Its members also adhered to the Paris Agreement on climate change. Its commitment was to the transparent and effective implementation of a transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy.

The global importance of APEC economies presents an opportunity for them to bring economic efficiency to the environmental response through further liberalization of environmental goods and services as part of their broader trade liberalization policy. The APEC Environmental Goods List is one of APEC's most important trade and environmental achievements, reducing tariffs to 5% or less on 54 goods.¹⁴ Building on this foun-

¹¹ National Center for APEC (NCAPEC), "Addressing Climate Change: APEC Opportunities and Challenges", December 16, 2021, at <https://ncapec.org/addressing-climate-change-apec-opportunities-and-challenges/> (date of access: March 5, 2023).

¹² A. Ivanova, Ernesto Rangel, Roberto Celaya and Alba Gámez, *APEC: más allá del comercio. Cómo el Mecanismo de Cooperación Económica Asia-Pacífico contribuye al desarrollo sustentable, la ciencia y la formación de recursos humanos*, Mexico/La Paz/Colima, Senado de la República/Universidad Autónoma de Baja California Sur/Universidad de Colima, 2012.

¹³ Wayne Chen, "Strengthening Economy-Ecology Alignment and Incorporating Social Aspect for APEC Green Growth", at http://bascc.berkeley.edu/ascc/papers/Chen_Paper.pdf (date of access: November 4, 2021).

¹⁴ A. Ivanova Boncheva & Ana Bertha Cuevas Tello, "Cómo las políticas de mitigación del mecanismo de Cooperación Económica de Asia-Pacífico (APEC) contribuyen a alcanzar la meta de 1.5 °C", in José Clemente Rueda Abad (ed.), *Aún estamos a tiempo para el 1.5 °C? Voces y visiones sobre el Reporte Especial del IPCC*. 2019, Mexico, Programa de Investigación en Cambio Climático-UNAM, 2019, pp. 35-50.

dation will allow APEC to continue to use trade and economic incentives to drive sustainable growth.

APEC also adopted the Declaration on Quality Growth and Human Development.¹⁵ APEC countries' policy commitments to address challenges and opportunities for free trade and investment are specified, with complementary priorities such as food security, climate change and access to water. Member countries strengthen their cooperation in this area through the Food Security and Climate Change Program. Likewise, their governments committed to intensifying efforts to mitigate the impacts of droughts, floods and climate-related disasters on food production and food security. On the other hand, APEC promotes cooperation for the sustainable use and integrated management of water resources; another of its commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is to increase the fight against illegal wildlife trafficking. In addition, to advance the SDG, the Forum is committed to strengthening efforts to ensure decent work and a quality working life for all, especially for socially vulnerable groups. This, through access to inclusive education and quality vocational training, the promotion of entrepreneurship and improved social protection and cooperation for the transfer of clean technology among member economies.

Putrajaya Vision 2040

APEC's Putrajaya Vision 2040¹⁶ aims to create an open, dynamic, resilient and peaceful Asia-Pacific community by 2040 in order to achieve prosperity for present and future generations. That purpose, according to the document, will be achieved by pursuing three economic goals:

¹⁵ "APEC Leaders Highlight Food Security, Climate, Water for 'Quality Growth'", in SDG Knowledge Hub, November 2016, at <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/apec-leaders-highlight-food-security-climate-water-for-quality-growth/> (date of access: November 3, 2022).

¹⁶ "APEC Putrajaya Vision 2040", in APEC, at https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/leaders-declarations/2020/2020_aelm/annex-a (date of access: March 10, 2023).

- *Trade and Investment.* To ensure that the Asia-Pacific region continues to be the most dynamic and interconnected regional economy in the world, there is an urgent need for a free, open, fair, non-discriminatory, transparent and predictable trade and investment environment. This means providing a well-functioning multilateral trading system as well as promoting the stability and predictability of international trade flows. Progress toward the Bogor Goals and economic integration in the region will be pursued in a market-driven manner, including through work on the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) agenda, which contributes to comprehensive, high-level regional development. Important components are the promotion of seamless connectivity, resilient supply chains and responsible business conduct.
- *Innovation and digitization.* Foster an enabling environment supported by the digital economy and innovation to empower all people and businesses to participate and grow in an interconnected global economy. Structural reforms and sound economic policies are key to promoting innovation, improving productivity and dynamism. In this context, it is necessary to strengthen digital infrastructure, accelerate digital transformation, reduce the digital divide, as well as cooperate to facilitate the flow of data and strengthen consumer and business confidence in digital transactions.
- *Strong, balanced, secure, sustainable and inclusive growth.* To ensure that the Asia-Pacific region is resilient to crises, pandemics and other emergencies, quality growth must bring tangible benefits and improved health and well-being for all, including MSMEs, women and other groups with untapped economic potential. Inclusive human resource development will be intensified, as will economic and technical cooperation to better equip people with the skills and knowledge for the future. Economic policies, cooperation and growth must support global efforts to comprehensively address all environmental challenges to a sustainable planet, including climate change, extreme weather and natural disasters.

The Aotearoa Plan of Action sets out individual and collective actions and targets to achieve the Vision, which also include evaluating prog-

ress. Member economies will periodically review and adapt the Aotearoa Plan of Action to ensure that it remains comprehensive, balanced and relevant to all elements of the Vision. It is designed to be a living and responsive document. Also, in implementing the Putrajaya Vision 2040, member economies will build on APEC's foundational documents, including the 1994 Bogor Goals and the 1995 Osaka Action Agenda. APEC economies remain committed to APEC's mission and its voluntary, non-binding, consensus-building principles and the spirit of equal partnership, shared responsibility, mutual respect, common interest and common benefit.¹⁷

An important instrument for advancing the Putrajaya Vision are the Bangkok Goals on Bio-Circular Green Economy: (1) support global efforts to comprehensively address all environmental challenges, including climate change, extreme weather and natural disasters, for a sustainable planet, particularly in terms of climate mitigation, adaptation and resilience; (2) advance sustainable and inclusive trade and investment and ensure mutual support of members in environmental policies; (3) promote environmental conservation, sustainable use and management of natural resources, as well as halt and reverse biodiversity loss; and (4) advance resource use efficiency and sustainable waste management.

APEC strategy for sustainable and innovative MSMEs

MSMEs represent 97% of the total number of enterprises and generate employment for 40-60% of the workforce in the 21 APEC economies,¹⁸

¹⁷ "Annex: Aotearoa Plan of Action", in APEC, at <https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/leaders-declarations/2021/2021-leaders-declaration/annex-aotearoa-plan-of-action> (date of access: April 4, 2023).

¹⁸ A. Ivanova Boncheva and José Antonio Martínez de la Torre, "Fomento de la pequeña y mediana empresa en México y países selectos del sudeste asiático", in Ernesto Henry Turner Barragán and José Ernesto Rangel Delgado (coord.), *Estrategias de desarrollo, políticas públicas y competitividad en México y Asia-Pacífico*, Mexico, UAM-Azcapotzalco, 2021, pp. 447-474.

which explains the statements in favor of policies and actions to promote their development. The Green Initiative, adopted in 2012, aims to create an enabling economic and policy environment to facilitate green growth of SMEs in the Asia-Pacific region and identify cooperative actions on the basis of voluntary reviews and sharing of policy experiences among economies.¹⁹

The strategy also outlines future plans for green and sustainable MSMEs promotion activities by various APEC fora. Understandably, given their size and financial capacity, smaller companies tend to focus primarily on economic benefits, but a better understanding of social and environmental impacts can be helpful.²⁰ Therefore, APEC recommends its member economies to promote environmental awareness among SMEs by:

- Providing adequate information and guidance on the benefits and ways to go green.
- Encouraging larger companies and successful green businesses to share best practices on the adoption of a green business model for MSMEs, in order to increase their opportunities to participate in international markets where green standards are widely accepted.²¹
- Educating the younger generation about the green economy, environmental awareness and sustainable development to improve their understanding and demand for green products and services.
- Providing training and skills development.

Currently, most MSMEs lack the capacity to adopt green economy practices and are digitally illiterate and ill-skilled in the use of green and innovative technologies. Governments can play a key role in improving the ability of MSMEs to better access innovation and technologies, compete inter-

¹⁹ Koji Takahashi, *Green Action Plan of Japan. APEC Green Initiative Workshop II*, Tokyo, SME Agency-Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), 2012.

²⁰ "APEC Strategy for Green, Sustainable and Innovative MSMEs", in APEC, at https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/sectoral-ministerial-meetings/small-and-medium-enterprise/2017_sme/annex-b (date of access: April 20, 2023).

²¹ "A Digitally-Enabled Recovery", in APEC, at <https://www.apec.org/2021-new-zealand-priorities/a-digitally-enabled-recovery> (date of access: March 20, 2023).

nationally and participate in global value chains. In turn, governments together with large companies can help bridge the digital divide by providing the necessary training programs and courses, as well as less onerous certification systems,²² whose high costs are often an obstacle for MSMEs, and by facilitating their access to inputs and financing.

Inclusive growth and the economic empowerment of women

Women's economic empowerment is high on the APEC agenda, as their contributions to the region's economy remain untapped.

Alicia Frohmann points out that APEC “has been a pioneer in incorporating gender issues into its agenda. [...] it has developed the necessary institutional mechanisms and generated databases and studies to address gender issues. Like most APEC initiatives, the gender cooperation programs are not binding”.²³

Michèle Tertilt, Matthias Doepke, Anne Hannusch and Laura Montenegro show that there is a positive correlation between women's rights and development.²⁴ Countries where women enjoy more rights have a per capita income of over USD 10 000, while those where women have fewer rights tend to experience greater poverty. There are a few exceptions of rich countries with low scores for women's rights, most of which are countries that owe their wealth to the exploitation of natural resources such as oil, as shown in Table 1.

²² *Idem.*

²³ Alicia Frohmann, *Género y emprendimiento exportador. Iniciativas de cooperación regional*, Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2018, pp. 5 and 17, at <https://biblioteca.olade.org/opac-tmpl/Documentos/cg00584.pdf> (date of access: February 14, 2023).

²⁴ Michèle Tertilt, Matthias Doepke, Anne Hannusch and Laura Montenegro, “The Economics of Women's Rights”, in *Journal of the European Economic Association*, vol. 20, no. 6, December 2022, pp. 2271-2316.

Table 1. Women's rights and percentage of countries by high and low income

The right to...	Country percentage by income		
	All	Low	High
Be elected	96.7	100	88.9
Sign a contract in the same ways as a man	95.8	88.5	100
Obtain a passport in the same ways as a man	75.3	69.2	82.5
Working night shift the same way as a man	68.9	61.5	80.7
Working in industrial job the same way as a man	41.1	23.1	45.6
Legal protection against domestic violence	24.2	0	45.6

Source: Taken from M. Tertilt, M. Doepke, A. Hannusch and L. Montenbruck, *op. cit.*, p. 2273.

This trend can also be identified in A. Frohmann's research, which makes a regional comparison of economic losses due to gender discrimination, as can be confirmed in Table 2.

Table 2. OECD countries and regions: income loss related to gender discrimination, 2016 (billions of USD)

Region	Losses
OECD countries	6116
East Asia and Pacific	2440
South Asia	888
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	733
Latin America and the Caribbean	658
Middle East and North Africa	575
Sub-Saharan Africa	340
Global	11 750

Source: Taken from A. Alicia Frohmann, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

The expansion of women's rights has developed gradually over time. Beginning in the 19th century, women began to be granted basic economic rights in most high-income countries, such as the right to own property. Subsequently, political rights were recognized, especially the right to vote, introduced in many high-income countries in the first half of the 20th century. Recently, laws concerning equality in the labor market have come into force, but rights over their own bodies and protection against domestic violence and marital rape have yet to be recognized.

On the other hand, Rick Geddes, Dean Lueck and Sharon Tennyson²⁵ conducted an empirical study on the relationship between human capital accumulation and women's economic rights. The study suggests that women's economic rights can be explained by the relationship between legal institutions, property rights and economic activity, as securing property rights increases incentives for investment and leads to higher economic growth. The substantial change in the economic status of married women that occurred in many countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the result of changes in women's economic rights. In turn, they point out that education is also fundamental to decision-making in a democracy and to facilitating economic growth. In the early 20th century, the increase in the number of women with secondary education and the acquisition of human capital allowed them to move from piecework and domestic work to administrative positions.

Geddes, Lueck and Tennyson argue that for society as a whole to realize returns on human capital investments, they must be made during the early life stage owing to the longer remaining life span. They argue that changes in expected life span will lead to changes in investments. For example, if parents identify that education will enable girls to more effectively exercise the rights granted to them through laws, they will respond by increasing investments in girls' human capital.²⁶ It was also discovered that investment in girls will be lower than in boys, a decision based on the assumption that childbearing reduces the life expectancy of women compared to men and

²⁵ Rick Geddes, Dean Lueck and Sharon Tennyson, "Human Capital Accumulation and the Expansion of Women's Economic Right", in *The Journal of Law & Economics*, vol. 55, no. 4, November 2012, pp. 839-867.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 844-845.

that it also reduces expected returns due to time constraints, health effects or other implications present during childrearing and childcare.

Greater recognition of women's economic rights has been characterized a change in the household decision-making regime, which has traditionally been determined by men, and under these new conditions, investments in human capital allow women to obtain greater benefits within the household; if they increase their bargaining power, then families increase investments in the human capital of girls.

The efforts of the international community began in 1975 in a schematic and global manner when, within the U.N., 133 governments of the world defined a plan of action to achieve gender equality, eliminate gender discrimination, promote the full participation of women in development and generate a greater female contribution to world peace. Since then, there have been a number of global, regional and national efforts to advance women's human rights agendas. Table 3 identifies the most outstanding global efforts in terms of economic rights; Table 4 is the Asia-Pacific regional efforts within the framework of the First World Conference on Women, while Table 5 represents APEC's efforts to identify women's issues and enhance women's economic participation in the region.

The report of the International Women's Year World Conference put forward the Plan of Action for the Integration of Women in Development adopted for the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific region, the result of meetings held May 13-17, 1974, in Bangkok, where the regional consultations for Asia and the Far East on the integration of women in development with special reference to demographic factors were held. The Plan of Action outlines the agreements of the consultations:

While recognizing that the situation of women in urban areas required urgent attention, the Consultation was of the opinion that the highest priority should be accorded by governments to integrated programmes for the advancement of women in rural areas. Programmes should be designed so that women as well as men would be motivated and given possibilities to improve their productivity and quality of life and devote a share of their increasing income to improve the economic, social and cultural infrastructure of the location in which they were living. Such integrated programmes should aim at rural modernization and should

Table 3. Global initiatives in the post-war period recognizing women's economic rights

Initiative	Content or results
First World Conference on Women, Mexico City, 1975.	The Declaration resulting from the Conference stressed that it was incumbent upon all States to create the necessary conditions for the equal recognition of women's and men's rights, since conditions of inequality had hindered economic and social development. A global plan of action was defined to achieve the objectives of International Women's Year (1975).
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, New York, 1976.	Its third article establishes that men and women have the same right to the enjoyment of all the provisions of the Covenant.
Second World Conference on Women, Copenhagen, 1980	Adoption of stronger national measures to ensure women's ownership and control of property was agreed, as well as to introduce improvements in the protection of women's inheritance, child custody and nationality rights.
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, New York, 1981.	It subscribes that Member States shall ensure the economic development of women for the fulfillment of their human rights. Article 11, Paragraph 1D, states that women have the right to equal pay and benefits, while paragraphs 2A and 2B refer to the right to paid maternity leave and the prohibition of dismissal for pregnancy. In turn, Article 14 recognizes the importance of rural women's work as a key part of their family's economy, including the non-monetary sectors.
Third World Conference on Women, Nairobi, 1985.	It is committed to promoting gender equality at the national level and the participation of women in peace and development initiatives.
Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995.	It marks a turning point for the global agenda on gender equality with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, unanimously adopted by 189 States.
Beijing + 5 – Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century, New York, 2000.	This initiative arose during the twenty-third special session of the U.N. General Assembly to generate new measures for the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.
49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, New York, 2005.	The ten-year evaluation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform was carried out.

54th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women New York, 2010.	The five-year assessment was carried out contemplating the new measures for the comprehensive implementation of the Beijing Platform.
59th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, New York, 2015.	Dialogue on the opportunities for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in the post-2015 development agenda, later known as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
64th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, New York, 2020.	The implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was evaluated, as well as the results of the twenty-third special session of the U.N. General Assembly. The challenges impacting the implementation of the Platform for Action, gender equality and women's empowerment were evaluated. A dialogue was held on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda under a gender approach.

incorporate land reform, vocational guidance, education and training, creation of job opportunities for women, health and nutrition, and family planning, as well as rural services and amenities for working mothers.²⁷

Proposals for action were also presented in areas where measures were needed. These areas were organized into programs aimed at the advancement of women, integrating their activities with those of men in all sectors so that women are not isolated in their activities (see Table 4).

In 1999, with the APEC Women's Integration Framework, APEC recognized gender as a cross-cutting issue for the first time, as activities related to trade and investment liberalization, as well as technical and economic cooperation, have more implications for women. APEC defines *gender* as the socially determined differences between men and women, including roles, attitudes, behaviors and values, as opposed to sex, which indicates biological differences. That is, while sex is genetically determined, the roles, attitudes, behaviors and values associated with gender are learned, vary

²⁷ United Nations, "Plan of Action for the Integration of Women in Development adopted for the region of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific", in *Report of the World Conference of the International Women's Year, Mexico City, 19 June-2 July 1975*, New York, U.N., 1976, p. 52, at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/586225> (date of access: January 12, 2024).

across cultures and over time, and are therefore time sensitive. *Gender* is a relational term that includes men and women.²⁸

The APEC Senior Officials Meeting (SOM), through the Steering Committee on Economic and Technical Cooperation, coordinates the ECOTECH agenda defined in the Osaka Action Agenda through a set of portfolios,²⁹ among which is the Political Partnership for Women and the Economy, which states that there are 60 million women in the labor force in the region, 60% of them are in the formal sector. Given this, it is essential for APEC to promote their participation in the labor market, also considering that the COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate economic and social impact on women and girls in the region.

The APEC Women and the Economy Forum was held in La Serena, Chile, during September and October 2019.³⁰ This forum identified two central aspects of social reality for APEC: SMES and women's participation, since the business sector can significantly boost its leadership through advances in interconnectivity. The declaration of the Forum points out that the economic integration of women in the region is a task that began 20 years ago in APEC and identifies five pillars of the Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy (PPWE): (1) access to capital and assets; (2) access to markets; (3) skills, capacity building and health; (4) leadership, voice and agency; and (5) innovation and technology.

²⁸ *Framework for the Integration of Women in APEC*, Singapore, APEC, 1999, p. 5, at https://www.apec.org/docs/default-source/Publications/1999/12/Framework-for-Integration-of-Women-in-APEC-1999/99_gfpn_framework_integratiion.pdf (date of access: January 13, 2024).

²⁹ Agricultural Technical Cooperation Working Group (ATCWG), Anti-Corruption and Transparency Expert's Working Group (ACTWG), Emergency Preparedness Working Group (EPWG), Energy Working Group (EWG), Experta Group on Illegal Logging and Associated Trade (EGILAT), Health Working Group (HWG), Human Resources Development Working Group (HRDWG), Oceans and Fisheries Working Group (OFWG), Policy Partnership on Science, Technology and Innovation (PPSTI), Policy Partnership for Women and the Economy (PPWE), Small and Medium Enterprises Working Group (SMEWG), Telecommunications and Information Working Group (TELWG), Tourism Working Group (TWG), Transportation Working Group (TPTWG). See "SOM Steering Committee on Economic and Technical Cooperation", in APEC, at <https://www.apec.org/groups/som-steering-committee-on-economic-and-technical-cooperation> (date of access: February 15, 2024).

³⁰ "2019 APEC Women and the Economy Forum Statement", in APEC, October 4, 2019, at https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/sectoral-ministerial-meetings/women/2019_women (date of access: December 8, 2023).

Table 4. Structure of the programs proposed in the Plan of Action for the Integration of Women in Development adopted for the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific region

Sphere	Contents
<i>Education and training</i>	A definite correlation has been found to exist between women's educational level and lower childbearing in developing countries but the effect of education on fertility is often reduced when female education does not lead to paid employment.
<i>Employment</i>	It is often argued that when jobs are scarce, priority should be given to men, overlooking the fact that the percentage of female heads of household is high and that women are entitled to general access to the labor market on equal terms.
<i>Health, dietary and other social services</i>	Programs relating to health, dietary and other social services should be integrated into overall development programs. While social and economic development is their primary objective, they have significant effects on fertility and population growth.
<i>Population</i>	Altering the norm whereby women are denied full participation in the development process entails, among other things, a change in certain crucial demographic variables.
<i>Research, compilation and analysis of data</i>	Despite a wealth of both demographic and socioeconomic data, there are no social indicators of women's status or data that would provide a more concrete and clearer picture of their situation.
<i>Legislative and administrative measures</i>	Although values and attitudes are products of a long process of socialization, governments can greatly influence people's behavior by adopting legislative and administrative measures, and this will gradually bring about changes in attitudes.
<i>Non-governmental organizations</i>	Non-governmental organizations, especially women's organizations, national family planning and other population organizations, welfare agencies, trade unions, and cooperative and religious bodies, are important resources for development and vehicles for change.
<i>Exchange of information and experience</i>	The planned coupling of mass media with change agents is necessary for effective supportive communication. All proposed projects and operational programs for the integration of women in development should have, as an integral part, an adequately researched communication component, including the corresponding budget.

Source: United Nations, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-72.

Iniciative	Content o results
Framework for Integration of Women in APEC, Auckland, 1999.	Gender is recognized as a cross-cutting issue for the APEC agenda. Three elements are identified: (1) gender analysis in deliberations and recommendations, (2) collection and use of sex-segregated data, (3) women's participation in APEC.
Political Partnership on Women and the Economy (PPWE), Big Sky, Montana, 2011.	Identifies obstacles for women in the economic sector and encourages them to fulfill their potential. It works on 5 key pillars that impact women's empowerment in the economy: access to capital, market access, capacity and skills development, women's leadership and organization, and innovation and technology.
APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard, Manila, 2015.	A 95-indicator tool that studies the status of women in APEC economies. It aims to measure and communicate progress in reducing economic barriers for women under the 5 key pillars of PPWE. It has been implemented annually since 2015.
APEC Support Fund-Sub-Fund on Women and the Economy, Nha Trang, 2017.	It aims to institutionalize and provide ongoing support for increasing women's participation in the economy in order to further APEC's objectives by supporting new initiatives.
La Serena Roadmap on Women and Inclusive Growth, 2019	It addresses systemic barriers slowing the inclusion of women in the economic sector. It also encourages the collection, analysis and dissemination of data on the subject. In turn, contributes to inclusive growth. It ensures access to decent work and to reduce the inequality gap around economic development, especially rural and remote areas, assisting in gender equality and women's economic empowerment in accordance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It has 5 key action areas: empowering women through access to capital and markets; strengthening women's workforce; promoting women in leadership positions at all levels of decision-making; supporting women's education and skills development; and advancing women's economic empowerment through databases and analysis.

The Forum recommends that member economies develop public policies addressing the cultural, social, structural and other barriers that women from diverse backgrounds often face when trying to access capital and participate in formal labor markets. The importance for APEC centers on the fact that these challenges have a negative impact on economic

growth and hinder the prosperity of women, their families, communities and the region.

Moreover, women are disproportionately involved in unpaid work, such as domestic and care work, or engaged in low-wage or less secure jobs. In response, the goal is to bolster their participation in high-growth industries with more competitive wages, including science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields.

Finally, the *APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard*³¹ is a document that compiles data on the status of women in the region on a biennial basis and aims to institutionalize and provide ongoing support to increase women's economic participation. The *APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard 2021*³² showed a decline in areas that hinder women's access to opportunities and markets during the 2008-2020 period and that barriers stemming from weak policies and socio-cultural gender biases persist in relation to women's access to credit, employment, education, technology and institutions. The main findings are:

- Women's rights to property and equal inheritance are recognized by most APEC economies, providing women with assets that could be used to start a business or used as collateral for bank loans.
- Female participation in the labor market is supported by laws prohibiting the dismissal of pregnant women and sexual harassment in the workplace, as well as granting paid maternity and paternity leave, but there is still a marked inequality in pay between men and women performing work of equal value.
- The region has almost achieved parity between women and men in terms of literacy and education, except in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

³¹ The first edition of the Dashboard was published in 2015 and is updated every two years to reflect changes in the socioeconomic status of women in the region.

³² See R. Crisologo Hernando and Carlos Kuriyama, *The APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard 2021*, Singapore, APEC, 2021, at https://www.apec.org/docs/default-source/publications/2021/9/the-apec-women-and-the-economy-dashboard-2021/221_psu-apec-women-and-the-economy-dashboard-2021.pdf (date of access: December 9, 2023).

- The percentage of the population using mobile telephony has improved, but the percentage of women in the region with internet access is still low.³³

Most of the indicators in the *2021 Dashboard* reflect available information, except for the average time women spend on unpaid work, the percentage of companies with female owners and senior managers, and women's participation in STEM and research and development (R&D) fields.

Regarding the *2023 Dashboard*³⁴, it compiles data collected after the onset of the pandemic, which allows us to identify challenges possibly generated by the pandemic: women's access to finance and credit has improved despite the pandemic, possibly due to the expansion of digital options in trade and finance stemming from the confinement. However, there is a reduction in women's labor force participation, in part because many of the service jobs in which they work were affected, either being temporarily or permanently suspended, or because they chose to prioritize caring for the sick and infants in their families. It is possible that this trend will improve in the upcoming years and that women will re-enter the labor market. A decline in the growth of MSMEs, many of which are managed or owned by women, was also identified due to the temporary closing of borders; this is also expected to be a pandemic-related situation and to return to a positive trend in the following years.

The *Dashboard* recognizes that there are still significant challenges, for example, in terms of health issues, as not enough data is collected. Only the maternal mortality rate and some figures related to maternity are available. Challenges are also identified in terms of gender discrimination in the

³³ The data are obtained from international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations, the World Bank (WB), the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), among others.

³⁴ See R. Crisologo Hernandez and C. Kuriyama, *The APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard 2023*, Singapore, APEC, 2023, at https://www.apec.org/docs/default-source/publications/2023/8/223_psu_apec-women-and-the-economy-dashboard.pdf?sfvrsn=bf5084d_2 (date of access: March 27, 2024).

region, and it is therefore suggested that curricula include the topic of gender equity from basic education onwards.

Final considerations

For the APEC region's recovery to be dynamic and resilient, policies must be designed with the goals of inclusion and sustainability in mind. The COVID-19 pandemic has widened existing divides, disproportionately affecting people who were already economically marginalized. Economic recovery must not bypass SMEs, women, youth, the elderly, rural areas and indigenous peoples in Asia-Pacific. This is not just a matter of principle, it is an economic priority. Just transition unlocks the potential of all members of society and can provide an essential foundation for the region's future growth prospects.

As APEC members seek to recover from the impact of COVID-19, there is an opportunity to promote a green recovery, both on an individual and collective basis. Policies aimed at sustainable recovery will reduce the likelihood of future economic shocks, increase the region's resilience to the impacts of climate change, and accelerate the transition to a low-emission economy.

It should be noted that although the APEC proposal has been criticized by some actors in the international community as being lax and lacking in commitment, especially due to the lack of binding or obligatory goals, APEC's work on climate change and a healthy environment has been ongoing and, in recent years, much more effective. An important step in this direction was the avoidance of tariff barriers to trade in environmental goods and services among member economies, which also encouraged the production and consumption of environmental goods and services in most countries. At the same time, investment and the transfer of green technology on the rise in the region.

As an economic forum, APEC is well positioned to consider shaping policies and economic incentives that can drive decarbonization, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and lead to more sustainable practices. APEC should therefore leverage market-based measures to address our most serious environmental challenges, particularly climate change. In implementing

a just transition framework, member economies prioritize the well-being of society and communities. This vision needs to be reflected in the actions of governments and guide policies toward building a sustainable and inclusive future for all.

Therefore, a commitment to social dialogue and stakeholder engagement is critical to a successful transition. Because the goal is to ensure inclusion and promote equity, these dialogues and engagements should include vulnerable and underrepresented groups.

For example, the participation of women in SMEs is an essential aspect in APEC, as it is the core of inclusive development and contributes to the prosperity of families, in addition to strengthening women's leadership. The inclusive development sought by APEC in the Putrajaya Vision 2040 aims to achieve an Asia-Pacific community where women of this and future generations are economically integrated. Gender equity and women's integration in APEC are relevant to the Forum as the potential of women's contributions to Asia-Pacific has yet to be explored, and human capital investments in women lead to their economic empowerment and gender equity.

The *APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard* represents a significant regional achievement that builds on existing statistical information on the progress of women's economic participation, however, not all member countries collect this information. With the existing data, it can be noted that there is progress in economic opportunities and market access for women in APEC economies, but there are barriers arising from weak policies and socio-cultural biases that prevent women's contributions from reaching their potential.