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2011 Human Development Report: Inequalities and environmental challenges threaten progress in Asia, Pacific

Copenhagen, 2 November 2011—Pollution, deforestation and rising sea levels threaten development in island nations of Asia and the Pacific, while South Asia must overcome acute poverty and internal inequalities to maintain current rates of progress, warns the 2011 Human Development Report, released here today by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).



The 2011 Report—*Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All*—argues that environmental sustainability can be most effectively achieved by simultaneously addressing health, education, income and gender disparities within and among countries.

Environmental challenges fueled largely by rapid industrial development and deforestation sharpen inequalities within many countries and across Asia and the Pacific, according to the Report.

The region as a whole is by far the largest contributor to the global increase in greenhouse gas emissions in recent decades, even though East Asia's per capita emissions are still low, says the Report.

China's high sulphur-dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants contribute to smog and acid rain that have critical effects on health. Pollution is blamed for 300,000 deaths and 20 million cases of respiratory illness annually in the country, the Report says.

South Asia has among the world's highest levels of urban air pollution, with cities in Bangladesh and Pakistan suffering from especially acute air contamination, the Report shows.

“The remarkable progress in human development over recent decades, which the Human Development Reports have documented, cannot continue without bold global steps to reduce both environmental risks and inequality,” UNDP Administrator Helen Clark says in the foreword.

Many Asian nations have overcome war or dictatorship in little more than a generation to become some of the world's most open and dynamic societies.

Two Asian countries, Japan and the Republic of Korea, rank #12 and #15 respectively in the Human Development Index (HDI), the Report's annual ranking of national achievement in health, education and income. Afghanistan, by contrast, at #172 in the HDI, ranks as the world's least developed nation outside sub-Saharan Africa.

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The 2011 HDI includes 187 nations and territories, the most comprehensive coverage since UNDP began publishing the Human Development Report in 1990.

The rankings of several developing nations in the region rise significantly when the HDI is adjusted for inequality: Mongolia, #110 in the HDI, rises 15 places in the rankings; Viet Nam, #128, goes up 14; and Indonesia, at #124, rises by eight in the Inequality-Adjusted HDI (IHDI).

Still, progress across the region, both within and between countries, has been far from equal.

Timor-Leste, Pakistan, Bhutan and Nepal all rank among the 20 most unequal nations in educational attainment, according to the IHDI, which was introduced by the 2010 Report and corrects for the standard HDI's reliance on national averages to reflect disparities in living standards and social services.

When IHDI measures are used the Republic of Korea, for example, slides from #15 to #32 in the HDI, due to generational disparities in education.

In the 2011 Report's Gender Inequality Index (GII), South Asian women are shown to lag significantly behind men in education, parliamentary representation and labour force participation.

Of the 146 nations ranked in the GII, Afghanistan (#141) was the region's most unequal in gender terms, followed by Papua New Guinea (#140) and India (#129). Malaysia (#43), Viet Nam (#48) and the Maldives (#52) were the region's top GII performers.

To assess acute poverty levels, the Report's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) examines factors such as health services, access to clean water and cooking fuels, plus basic household goods and home construction standards, which together offer a fuller portrait of poverty than income measurements alone.

India, for example, has by far the largest number of multidimensionally poor, according to the Report – 612 million, more than half the country's population, and larger than the total number of people measured according to the same criteria in all sub-Saharan countries.

Environmental hazards contribute greatly to multidimensional poverty, MPI figures show.

In South Asia, 97 percent of the multidimensionally poor lack access to clean drinking water, toilets, or modern cooking fuels—and 18 percent lack all three. More than 85 percent of the multidimensionally poor that in South Asia also lack access to modern sanitation facilities.

The Report's authors warn that deteriorating environmental conditions and increasingly extreme weather conditions—such as the severe floods that have hit Pakistan for two years in a row—could undermine economic progress in many countries in the region.

Asian and Pacific nations are the most vulnerable to projected sea-level rises, with more than 100 million people at risk, says the report, noting that average sea levels have risen 20 centimetres since 1870, and the rate of change has accelerated, threatening to swamp populous, low-lying areas in, for example, Bangladesh, as well as island nations in the Pacific.

The Report suggests that by 2050, Bangladesh alone is likely to lose about 11 percent of its land, affecting an estimated 15 million people, under a projected 0.5-metre rise in sea level.

The 2011 Report strongly endorses the UN Secretary-General's recent call to provide electricity service to the 1.5 billion people now off the power grid, mainly in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. This could be achieved for about one-eighth of current global spending on fossil fuel subsidies, estimated at US\$312 billion in 2009.

The Report adds its voice to those urging consideration of an international currency transaction tax to help fund the fight against global warming and extreme poverty. Some \$105 billion is needed annually just to finance adaptation to climate change, especially in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

The Report highlights other possible challenges in Asia and the Pacific including a scenario in which, within 40 years, the average HDI would be 12 percent lower in South Asia (and 8 percent overall) due to effects of global warming on agricultural production, access to clean water, and pollution.

Under an even more adverse “environmental disaster” scenario—with vast deforestation and land degradation, dramatic declines in biodiversity and accelerated extreme weather events—the global HDI would fall 15 percent below the baseline projection for 2050.

In addition, challenges related to use of forest resources for subsistence and income and projected reductions in fish stocks could have a devastating impact populations in the region.

Despite the challenges, there has been progress to improve forest cover and protect biodiversity with Bhutan, China, India and Viet Nam, for example, now increasing rather than decreasing the size of their national forests.

India increased its reforestation rate from 0.2 percent a year between 1990 and 2000 to 0.5 percent a year between 2000 and 2010, the Report notes; while Bhutan has pledged to keep at least 60 percent of the country remains forested in perpetuity.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT: The annual Human Development Report is an editorially independent publication of the United Nations Development Programme. For free downloads of the 2011 Human Development Report in ten languages, plus additional reference materials on its indices and specific regional implications, please visit: <http://hdr.undp.org>.

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