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New UNDP report: Human development in Asia-Pacific region advances dramatically, but unevenly

New York, December 9, 2019 – The Asia-Pacific region has witnessed the steepest rise globally in human development. It leads the world in access to broadband internet and is gaining on more developed regions in life expectancy, education, and access to health care. Yet it continues to grapple with widespread multidimensional poverty, and may be vulnerable to a new set of inequalities emerging around higher education and climate resilience.

These are among the key findings of the [2019 Human Development Report, released today by the United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\) and entitled “Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: inequalities in human development in the 21st Century.”](#)

The Human Development Report (HDR), which pioneers a more rounded way to measure countries’ progress beyond just economic growth, says that as the **gap in basic standards is narrowing**, with an unprecedented number of people escaping poverty, hunger and disease, the necessities to thrive have evolved. The **next generation of inequalities** is opening up, particularly around **technology, education, and the climate crisis**.

“This is the new face of inequality,” says UNDP Administrator, Achim Steiner. “And as this Human Development Report sets out, **inequality is not beyond solutions.**”

The report analyzes inequality in three steps: **beyond income, beyond averages, and beyond today**, proposing a battery of policy options to tackle it.

Progress along a jagged trajectory

According to the report’s Human Development Index (HDI), no other region has experienced such rapid human development progress. **South Asia was the fastest growing region** (46 percent growth over the period 1990-2018), followed by East Asia and the Pacific at 43 percent. Of all countries on the HDI, **Thailand had the second-highest increase** after Ireland, moving up 12 ranks during 2013 - 2018. **Indonesia and the Philippines both joined the ranks of countries with high human development**. South Asia also saw the greatest leap in life expectancy and years of schooling.

Beyond these gains in basic standards and capabilities, however, the picture becomes more complex.

Describing the ‘next generation’ of inequalities likely to drive achievement further along the development spectrum, the report notes for example that in countries with very high human development, subscriptions to fixed broadband are growing 15 times faster and the proportion of adults with tertiary education is growing more than six times faster than in countries with low human development.

The region is in the vanguard of technological transformation. From 1987 to 2007 little changed in the global ranking of installed bandwidth potential, but at the turn of the millennium things started to change, with the expansion of bandwidth in East and North Asia. The report states that **China leads the world in installed bandwidth**, and **East Asia is projected to share with North America about 70 percent of the global economic benefits tied to artificial intelligence by 2030.**

But **tertiary education rates lag significantly behind wealthier countries**, with only 25 percent of the tertiary school-aged population in South Asia and 44 percent in East Asia and the Pacific enrolled in higher education.

And although millions throughout the region have escaped multidimensional poverty, the incidence of multidimensional poverty varies enormously across countries – from 0.8 percent in the Maldives to 56 percent in Afghanistan. **Out of the 1.3 billion multidimensional poor, 661 million are in Asia and the Pacific**, which shares almost half of the multidimensional poor living in 101 countries of the world. South Asia alone shares more than 41 percent of the total number of multidimensional poor. Despite India’s significant progress on the multidimensional poverty front in the past decade, it accounts for 28 percent of the 1.3 billion multidimensional poor.

Four in ten people in South Asia still lack access to sanitation facilities. And the report warns that the poorest communities remain vulnerable to climate change. Poor people are expected to be more exposed to droughts for warming scenarios above the 1.5°C rise in temperature in several countries in Asia. The rural poor in poor countries are at risk of a double shock: a negative impact on livelihoods and spikes in food prices resulting from drops in global yields.

“The rapid transformations in the region have brought us to an inflection point,” says Kanni Wignaraja, Assistant Secretary General and Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific. “While many have escaped poverty, many others remain without the opportunities or basic resources to access a decent life.”

Social exclusion, gender bias hinder progress

The report finds that despite progress, **group-based inequalities persist** on the Indian subcontinent, especially affecting women and girls.

The HDI reveals **marked contrasts** between South Asia and the wider region. **East Asia and the Pacific ranks second highest on the Gender Development Index**, with the Republic of Korea first in the region on the Gender Inequality Index. Yet worldwide among regions, South Asia has the widest gender gap on the HDI.

While Singapore has the region’s lowest incidence of intimate partner violence against women, the report states that a staggering **31 percent of women in South Asia have experienced intimate partner violence.**

Inequalities persist at the household level as well, the report says. Over 22 percent of under-five children in South Asia experience nutritional inequality at home – where one child in the household is malnourished while a sibling is not. In Pakistan, over a third of children under age five experience such intrahousehold inequality.

And while more than 10 percent of South Asian girls are out of school and living in a multidimensionally poor household (compared to 9 percent of boys), that average includes wide variation among countries: in Afghanistan, it is 44 percent of girls, compared to 25 percent of boys.

Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today

The report recommends policies that look at but also go beyond income, anchored in lifespan interventions starting even before birth, including through pre-labour market investments in young children’s learning, health

and nutrition. Such investments must continue through a person's life, when they are in the labour market and after.

The report also argues that taxation cannot be looked at on its own, but must be part of a system of policies, including **policies for public spending on health, education, and alternatives to a carbon-intensive lifestyle.**

Averages hide what is really going on in society, says the HDR, and while they can be helpful in telling a larger story, much more detailed information is needed to create policies to tackle inequality effectively.

Averages can be particularly misleading in the context of the **Asia-Pacific region, which includes countries spanning the full spectrum of human development groups, from low to very high.**

Looking beyond today, the report asks how **inequality may change in future**, particularly through the lens of **climate change and technological transformation** – two forces that seem set to shape human development outcomes into the next century.

“The report demonstrates both the seriousness and complexity of the challenge of inequality,” says Tharman Shanmugaratnam, HDRO Advisory Board Chair and Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for Social Policies of Singapore. “It gives us a much broader understanding of the factors shaping unequal life chances, from birth and through life. That wider picture is critical to mitigating inequality on a lasting basis, and achieving fair and inclusive growth.”

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2019 HDR Broadcast Package:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/vl0qjm3g1nvcg4k/AABXqgDA86UkT9MLTjURmGE4a?dl=0>

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