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Review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific and issues pertinent to the subsidiary structure of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific: social development

Key social development priorities for Asia and the Pacific in the context of the Second World Summit for Social Development

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The present document contains a summary of key social development priorities and concerns in Asia and the Pacific, highlighting recent policy developments and best practices aimed at advancing the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, reducing poverty and addressing inequality. It also contains actionable, cross-cutting policy recommendations to bridge gaps in social development across the region that would be relevant for consideration at the Second World Summit for Social Development, to be held in November 2025.

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific is invited to review the issues and recommendations presented herein, provide guidance to the secretariat on future research and policy priorities, and consider requesting the support of the secretariat in enhancing the capacities of members and associate members to develop inclusive policies to ensure sustainable, inclusive and cohesive societies in the future.

I. Introduction

1. The Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, which was adopted in 1995 along with the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development,[1] has long served as a guiding framework for multilateral cooperation on social development. In it, Heads of State and Government pledged to place people at the centre of development and committed themselves to the goals of, among others, eradicating poverty, promoting full

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and productive employment and promoting social integration. They highlighted that economic development, social development and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development.

2. High and sustained economic growth in Asia and the Pacific has contributed to lifting 1.2 billion people out of extreme poverty since 1990. Progress has been made towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Governments across Asia and the Pacific have also made slow but steady progress in efforts to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all. The share of the population covered by at least one social protection scheme increased from 41 per cent in 2015 to 55 per cent in 2023.[2]

3. Yet, despite the significant progress made over the past three decades, global commitments to social development remain unfulfilled. The world is grappling with multiple converging crises – climate change, geopolitical conflicts, pandemics and escalating economic challenges – that severely undermine efforts to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality and that disproportionately affect persons in vulnerable situations, exacerbating social and economic disparities.

4. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offers a transformative framework for inclusive and sustainable social development, a concept that emphasizes equity, inclusion and the dismantling of structural barriers to ensure that all individuals, in particular those most marginalized, benefit from economic and social progress. However, persistent challenges, such as extreme poverty, food insecurity and climate-induced vulnerabilities, highlight the urgent need for multilateral cooperation and decisive action.

5. In this context, the decision[3] by the General Assembly to convene the Second World Summit for Social Development in 2025 provides a critical opportunity to renew commitments and foster global consensus on people-centred development. The Second World Summit for Social Development is aimed at addressing key priorities, including expanding social protection, reducing inequalities and advancing gender equality and intergenerational solidarity. Collaborative efforts among government, civil society and the international community will be indispensable in overcoming challenges and fostering inclusive social development for all.

II. Key priorities in the region

A. Poverty and inequality exacerbated by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis

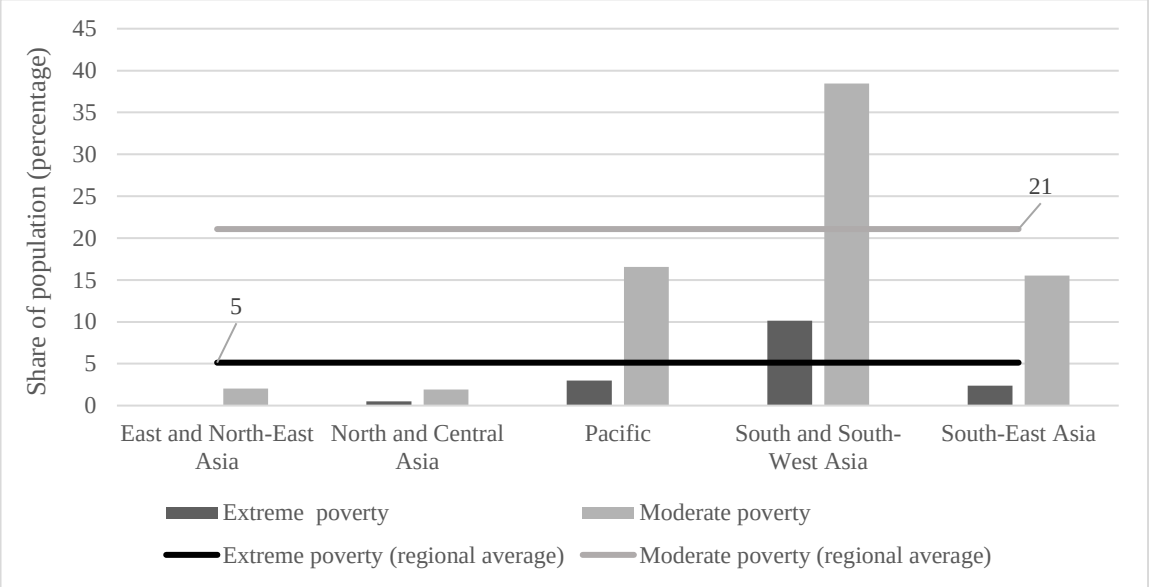
6. Across Asia and the Pacific, progress made in reducing monetary poverty in recent decades has been undone by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Using the $2.15 poverty line, it is estimated that an additional 42 million people in the region were pushed into extreme poverty in 2022 compared with the expected number

[2] *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific: Protecting Our Future Today – Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2024).

[3] General Assembly resolution 78/261.

based on pre-pandemic levels.[4] Using the $3.65 poverty line, an additional 156 million people are estimated to have fallen into moderate poverty. Regionally, moderate poverty is four times more common than extreme poverty. The moderate poverty rate is highest in South and South-West Asia, affecting over one third of the population in the subregion (see figure I).

Figure I
Share of the population living in extreme and moderate poverty, by subregion, latest available data



Source: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) calculations based on World Bank, Poverty and Inequality Platform. Available at https://pip.worldbank.org/ (accessed on 15 May 2024).

Note: Estimates are based on the most recent international poverty lines established by the World Bank, namely the extreme poverty line ($2.15 per person per day at 2017 purchasing power parity) and the moderate poverty line ($3.65 per person per day at 2017 purchasing power parity). A total of 26 countries for which data are available between 2017 and 2022 have been included. High-income countries have been excluded. Due to a lack of recent household survey data, values for India are based on projections by the World Bank.

7. Half of those living in multidimensional poverty, about 500 million people, live in the Asia-Pacific region.[5] The global multidimensional poverty index, which assesses non-monetary poverty by considering various hardships faced by households, shows that significant parts of the population have been left behind, especially in low-income and lower-middle-income developing countries in the region. In several countries, more than one third of the population lacks access to basic opportunities and resources.

8. Inequality has been rising in Asia and the Pacific. According to the World Inequality Database, the Gini coefficient for measuring income inequality ranged between 0.36 and 0.64 for countries in the region in 2023,

[4] Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) calculations based on World Bank, Poverty and Inequality Platform. Available at https://pip.worldbank.org/ (accessed on 15 May 2024).

[5] United Nations Development Programme, *Regional Human Development Report: Making Our Future – New Directions for Human Development in Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2024).

with an average of 0.55.[6] The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing disparities. During the period 2019–2022, income inequality increased in over half of Asia-Pacific countries and territories with available data compared with the period 2000–2019.[7] The level of wealth inequality is more severe than that of income inequality (see table). In 2022, the Gini coefficient for measuring wealth inequality ranged between 0.73 and 0.86 for countries in the region, with an average of 0.75. As wealth significantly contributes to future economic gains and power and can accumulate and be passed down through generations, wealth inequality can enlarge existing disparities and have more lasting effects than income inequality.

Average Gini coefficients for income and wealth inequality by subregion

Subregion	*Income inequality (2023)*	*Wealth inequality (2022)*
East and North-East Asia	0.519	0.748
North and Central Asia	0.547	0.752
Pacific	0.512	0.729
South and South-West Asia	0.561	0.765
South-East Asia	0.565	0.754

Source: ESCAP calculations based on World Inequality Database. Available at https://wid.world/ (accessed on 24 January 2025).

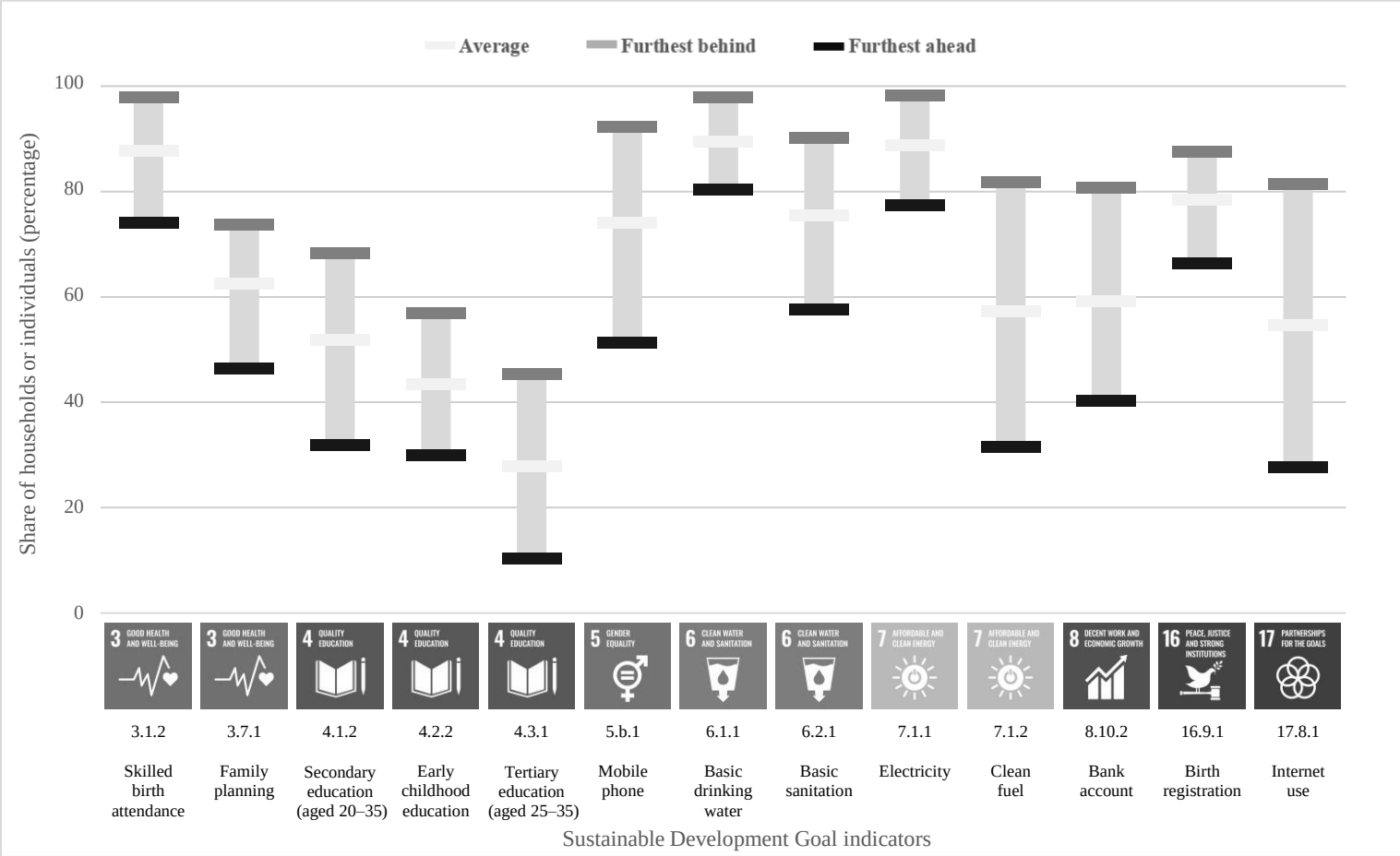
9. Inequality of opportunity manifests in disparities in access to basic services, education and health, among others. Despite overall progress in this regard in most countries in Asia and the Pacific, many individuals and groups – such as children, women, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants and ethnic, language and religious minority groups – still live in vulnerable situations and are being left behind. The methodology established by the secretariat for the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) "Leaving no one behind" platform[8] can be used to identify the groups that are furthest behind and those that are furthest ahead in terms of access to opportunities and resources. It can also be used to capture the intersectionality of individual and household characteristics associated with unequal access, such as age, gender, education, location of residence and poverty. The gaps between the groups furthest ahead and those furthest behind are largest in areas such as access to information and communications technologies and access to clean fuel for cooking (see figure II). Understanding the structural barriers and social norms that underpin inequalities of opportunity is essential; without a clear understanding, achievements made in closing equity gaps are at risk of being offset.

[6] The Gini coefficient is a measure of the inequality of income distribution in a society. It equals 0 when income distribution is perfectly egalitarian and 1 when inequality reaches its maximum level.

[7] ESCAP calculations based on data from the World Inequality Database. Available at https://wid.world/ (accessed on 14 December 2023).

[8] See https://lnob.unescap.org/index.php/methodology.

Figure II
Inequality of opportunity as measured by Sustainable Development Goal indicators, latest available data



Source: ESCAP "Leaving no one behind" platform based on the latest data from Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys during the period 2010–2022 for 30 countries. Available at https://lnob.unescap.org/.

B. Demographic transition towards smaller and older populations

10. About 4.8 billion people or 58 per cent of the global population reside in Asia and the Pacific. The population is projected to peak in 2051 and decline to 4.4 billion by 2100. Population growth is slowing, with some countries already experiencing declines. The region is undergoing a demographic transition towards smaller, older populations, with the number of older persons (aged 65 and above) expected to nearly double from 503 million in 2024 to almost 1 billion by 2050. Population ageing presents challenges to countries in terms of lower economic growth, declining productivity and increasing healthcare and overall care needs. Moreover, given the inadequate level of social and economic development in the region, older persons are often at risk of being left behind in terms of social protection, health and overall well-being.

11. While it is a regional megatrend in Asia and the Pacific, the timing, onset and speed of the demographic transition, as well as its effects on population ageing, differ from country to country. However, the general trend is clear: population growth is declining and population age structures are shifting towards a greater number and share of older persons. At the same time, half of the global population of youth and children reside in the region. In several countries, the share of youth (aged 15–24) in the total population is

greater than the share of youth at the global and regional levels.[9] As life expectancies increase, people of a wider range of age groups are living together for longer periods, making strong intergenerational relations crucial to achieving an inclusive and sustainable future for people of all ages.

12. Intergenerational relations are expressed in many different ways, including living arrangements, consumption and production patterns, economic activity, climate change responses, caregiving, lifelong learning and technology use. If policymakers and other stakeholders are to deliver prosperity to present and future generations, they must have the benefit of demographic foresight and forward-looking analysis that relate the effects of demographic change to the way societies of all ages function and evolve.

C. Persistent gender gaps that continue to impede development across sectors[10]

13. In the 30 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, progress has been made in the Asia-Pacific region towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, especially in closing gender gaps in education and increasing women's representation in legislatures and parliaments.

14. Nonetheless, women and girls continue to encounter critical challenges and experience marginalization. Legislative frameworks that provide a crucial foundation for addressing structural barriers remain largely inadequate in the region. Gender poverty gaps persist, and effective social protection coverage remains low and inadequate to meet the needs of most people, in particular women and girls. Limited progress has been made towards expanding the coverage of sexual and reproductive health services since 2015, and the region is not on track to meet Sustainable Development Goal target 3.1, which is focused on reducing maternal mortality rates.

15. In terms of women's representation in all three branches of government, the region still falls short of achieving gender parity. Women's engagement in the peace and security agenda and the increasingly pressing climate action agenda is also largely constrained. The gender-differentiated impacts of climate change, disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the vulnerability of women and girls. Rooted in gender inequality, the prevalence of violence and harmful practices against women and girls is alarmingly high in the region.

16. Across the Asia-Pacific region, women are far less likely to participate in the labour force than men. In 2024, the regional gender gap in labour force participation stood at 30 percentage points (73.6 per cent for men and boys and 43.9 per cent for women and girls aged 15 and above), a gap that has remained unchanged since 1995. More young women than men in the region are not in employment, education or training. When they are employed, women and girls are often confined to precarious, informal, low-skilled and labour-intensive work under unfavourable conditions.

[9] The top five countries in the region with a share of the youth population greater than the global and regional averages are Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, Marshall Islands, Tonga and Micronesia (Federated States of).

[10] Data and analysis in this section are drawn from *Charting New Paths for Gender Equality and Empowerment: Asia-Pacific Regional Report on Beijing+30 Review* (United Nations publication, 2024), which is a synthesis report based on data obtained from the Asia-Pacific SDG Gateway and various United Nations entities.

17. The disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work performed by women and girls has been one of the biggest contributing factors to the persistent gender inequalities in the region's labour market. In most Asia-Pacific countries and territories (13 out of 15 with official Sustainable Development Goal data based on time-use surveys), the time that women and girls (aged 15 and above) spend on unpaid care and domestic work is two to five times more than that spent by men and boys. The burden of unpaid care work was further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic due to school closures, working-from-home arrangements, the interruption of services at care facilities and the need to care for sick family members. For women and girls, the consequent time poverty continues to have a broad range of impacts on their education, labour force participation, income, career advancement, leadership and decision-making.

18. Gender gaps are particularly large and their determinants are particularly complex in South and South-West Asia. Throughout the region, women of working age who have young children are more likely to experience poverty. Adolescent girls and older women tend to face more stigma, stereotypes and gaps in obtaining access to sexual and reproductive health services. Women with disabilities tend to experience higher levels of multidimensional poverty, have less access to social protection benefits and have lower levels of labour force participation. Women with disabilities and Indigenous women are less represented in politics. Women migrant workers are more likely to be denied maternity protection, among other social protection benefits. These examples demonstrate the significant impacts of multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination attributable to biased gender norms that persist in the region, intersecting with other discriminatory norms based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, disability, migrant status and Indigenous identity.

19. As countries in the region are faced with a growing number of increasingly complex challenges in sustainable growth and social development, closing gender and equity gaps would enable them to tap into improved human capital, higher productivity and more diverse talent pools, as well as women's leadership and influence, to advance sustainable and inclusive development. However, progress in closing gender gaps has been gravely challenged by entrenched biased gender norms in the political, educational and economic spheres and in relation to physical integrity; limited financing for national gender equality action plans; and critical gender data gaps. In this context, strategies to reshape gender norms, boost gender-smart budgeting and financing and close gender data and statistics gaps are critical to enable gender-responsive planning and investment across sectors.

D. Persistent and widespread informal employment

20. The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis are having heavy impacts on the 1.3 billion informal workers in Asia and the Pacific, who make up two thirds of the employed population. The prevalence of informal employment is particularly high in South and South-West Asia and South-East Asia, where a significant number of contributing family workers are women. Agriculture is the largest sector for informal work. Informal employment keeps people vulnerable by denying them their rights and access to social protection. It is a major challenge that entrenches people in subsistence-level, low-skilled and low-productivity activities, as well as in working poverty. It results in a vicious cycle, leaving many employed persons unable to adhere to contributory pension systems, thereby contributing to old-age poverty.

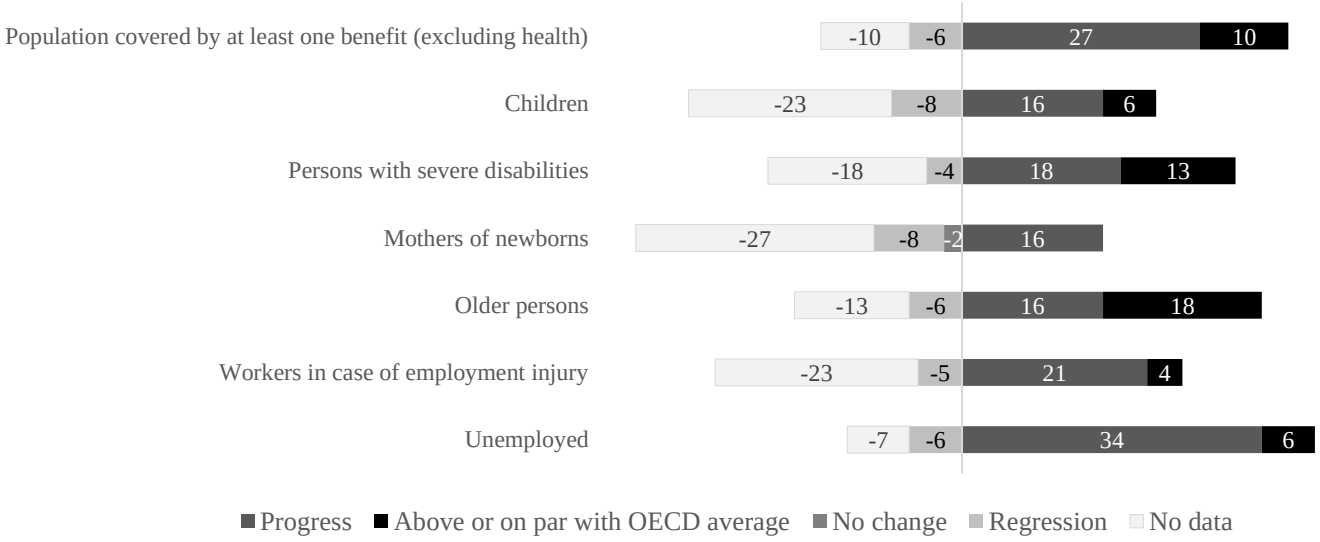
21. Reducing informality in labour markets offers significant benefits for individual welfare and broader economic stability and growth. Formalizing labour markets enhances access to social protection, which effectively reduces vulnerabilities and poverty. It promotes fairer wages, improves working conditions and ensures occupational safety, ultimately boosting worker productivity. In addition, formalization expands the tax base, allowing Governments to generate more revenue for essential public services. Lower rates of informality are also linked to better access to financing, technology and markets for firms, further increasing productivity and efficiency. To effectively address informality and promote inclusive social development, comprehensive policy measures are essential. Such measures include extending social protection coverage to informal workers and tailoring it to their needs, providing incentives for employers to register their employees, strengthening enforcement mechanisms and implementing public awareness campaigns.

E. Slow but steady progress on universal social protection

22. Governments across Asia and the Pacific are making slow but steady progress in their efforts to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all and achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable by 2030. Between 2016 and 2023, progress was made in extending coverage (excluding healthcare) for the main contingencies across the life cycle, covering children, persons with disabilities, people of working age and those in old age, in line with the concept of the social protection floor (see figure III). Clear progress has been made in ensuring effective coverage for unemployed individuals and workers facing employment injury, but coverage for mothers of newborns declined in nearly one third of Asia-Pacific countries with available data. At the regional level, older persons have the highest social protection coverage, followed by mothers of newborns. Overall, just 35.9 per cent of vulnerable individuals have access to some form of income security. Factors leading to exclusion from social protection include eligibility requirements, targeting methods, administrative and implementation challenges and weak enforcement.

23. Social protection systems in Asia and the Pacific are underfunded. The regional average level of investment in social protection is 12 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), below the global average of 19.3 per cent and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 25 per cent. The increasing intensity and severity of extreme climate events in Asia and the Pacific destabilizes progress in poverty reduction and exacerbates inequalities. Lower-income populations are highly exposed to climate change impacts but lack coping mechanisms to build resilience to them. Social protection is a powerful tool to build the resilience of individuals, reduce poverty and foster more peaceful societies. However, more than 50 per cent of the population lacks such coverage in over half of Asia-Pacific countries. Many countries therefore face pronounced risks from climate change due to low social protection coverage and significant population exposure to climate impacts.

Figure III
Number of Asia-Pacific countries and territories at different stages of progress in expanding social protection coverage, by contingency, 2016 versus 2023



Sources: ESCAP calculations based on International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates, 2024; ILO, World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; International Social Security Association, Social Security Programs Throughout the World; ILO, ILOSTAT; and national sources.

Note: The figure shows the change in effective coverage between 2016 (or the nearest year available) and 2023 (or the latest year available). The OECD average coverage level is used as a benchmark for a robust social protection system. "Progress" applies to countries where the latest coverage level is below the OECD average and there was a positive change between 2016 and 2023. "No change" applies to countries where the latest coverage level is below the OECD average and there was a change of less than or equal to 5 per cent between 2016 and 2023. "Regression" applies to countries where the latest coverage level is below the OECD average and there was a negative change of more than 5 per cent between 2016 and 2023.

F. Disparities in health outcomes

24. Health outcomes in Asia and the Pacific vary greatly between countries. At the regional level, scores for life expectancy at birth and maternal and infant mortality are better than the global average. However, life expectancies at higher ages, such as 65 years or 80 years or over, are consistently lower in Asia and the Pacific than at the global level. Another point to consider is that longer lives are not necessarily healthier lives. With the demographic and epidemiological transition under way, people with disabling illnesses or injuries are also living longer, and this is particularly true for women. The regional average infant mortality rate (20.8 per 1,000 live births) was lower than the global average (26.9 per 1,000 live births) in 2024.[11] Maternal mortality has declined by one third since 2000, with most reductions occurring between 2000 and 2015.[12] Despite some of these positive changes, the region is not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal target 3.1 of

[11] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects 2024*, online edition.

[12] ESCAP calculations based on data from ESCAP, "Indicators by SDG: 3.1.1 – Maternal mortality", SDG Gateway Data Explorer. Available at https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/ (accessed on 25 March 2024).

having a maternal mortality rate of less than 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030.[13]

25. The rate of skilled birth attendance was above 90 per cent in most Asia-Pacific subregions in 2021, except for South and South-West Asia, where it was estimated at 89.4 per cent. Yet averages often mask inequalities in access. In most countries, the gaps between the furthest behind and the furthest ahead persist, though they are declining. Women and adolescent girls who are poorer, less educated and give birth to two or more children are much less likely to have access to professional help during childbirth.[14]

26. Underlying vulnerabilities in food systems across Asia and the Pacific have been steadily increasing over the past 15 years. The region is now bearing the double burden of malnutrition, whereby both undernutrition and overnutrition exist. Just over 1 billion people in Asia and the Pacific faced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2022, roughly 44 per cent of the global total. [15] While undernourishment indicators for 2022 suggest that the Asia-Pacific average (8.4 per cent) is below the global average (9.2 per cent), the region's 370.7 million undernourished people accounted for about 50 per cent of the global total, and 85 per cent of them live in South Asia. Among children under five in the region, 23.4 per cent were stunted (too short for their age) and 13.6 per cent were wasted (too thin for their height) in 2022, both rates higher than the global average. Moreover, while the regional rates of overweight and obesity are lower than the global average, they are rising rapidly for all age groups.

27. Around two thirds of the population in Asia and the Pacific is covered by a social health scheme.[16] Although progress has been made in expanding social health protection coverage, substantial gaps persist. At the subregional level, the lowest rate of effective population coverage is in South and South-West Asia, where less than 25 per cent of the population is protected.[17] Higher coverage levels are being attained not only in high-income countries, but also in middle-income countries, such as China, the Russian Federation, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Türkiye, all of which have achieved effective health coverage levels of more than 98 per cent. But despite country-level advances in expanding social health protection coverage, the region is falling behind on the goal of achieving universal health coverage, and considerable hurdles remain to achieve social health protection targets.[18] The universal health coverage service coverage index (a measure of Sustainable Development Goal indicator 3.8.1) assesses the effective access to and usage of a set of essential health services on a scale of 0 to 100. The regional average for 2021 was 69, with Papua New Guinea at 30 and the Republic of Korea at 89. Out-of-pocket health spending is a burden in Asia and the Pacific. In 14 of 30 countries with available data, more than 10 per cent of the population incurs large household

[13] ESCAP/APPC(7)/INF/3.

[14] ESCAP, "Leaving no one behind" platform. Available at https://lnob.unescap.org/ (accessed on 2 August 2024).

[15] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Asia and the Pacific: Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2023 – Statistics and Trends* (Bangkok, 2023).

[16] ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – In Pursuit of a Better Future* (Geneva, 2021).

[17] Ibid.

[18] *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2024: Showcasing Transformative Actions* (United Nations publication, 2024).

expenditures on health,[19] as measured by Sustainable Development Goal indicator 3.8.2. Expenses are considered catastrophic if a household spends more than 10 per cent of its income on healthcare. These households suffer significant financial risk, which social health protection should safeguard against.

G. Slightly higher average learning outcomes in the Asia-Pacific region

28. The Asia-Pacific region has higher education completion rates than the global averages for primary school (regional average of 98 per cent) and lower secondary school (regional average of 88 per cent). However, it has a slightly lower rate than the global average for upper secondary school (regional average of 70 per cent), although there is more limited data availability for this measure. According to internationally harmonized test scores, average learning outcomes are slightly higher in the Asia-Pacific region than the global average. In most Asia-Pacific countries, girls outperform or perform equally to boys in school completion across primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels.[20] However, inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, lack of menstrual health support, and gender-based violence hinder girls' access to school, their retention in the education system and their academic performance.[21, 22]

29. Gender biases discourage women and girls from pursuing science, technology, engineering and mathematics education, driven by stereotypes about their suitability and capability. Even in high-income countries like Japan and the Republic of Korea, women's participation in such fields at the tertiary level remains low.[23] These biases extend to related fields, including research and the development of technologies, like generative artificial intelligence, which are often designed with male-centred perspectives.

H. International migration

30. In 2020, there were almost 67 million international migrants in the Asia-Pacific region, up from 50.2 million in 2000.[24] Almost 109 million migrants from Asia-Pacific countries were living outside their countries of birth, accounting for nearly 40 per cent of all the migrants in the world.[25] Most migration is intraregional, and in 2020, about 47 million migrants from Asia-Pacific countries moved to other countries within the region; thus, 71 per cent of international migrants in Asia and the Pacific came from within the region.[26]

31. International migration is generally driven by multiple, often intersecting, factors. While work remains the main driver, other factors that directly or indirectly motivate people to move include climate change,

[19] *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific: Protecting our Future Today.*

[20] *Charting New Paths for Gender Equality and Empowerment*.

[21] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO), *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools 2015–2023: Special Focus on Menstrual Health* (New York, 2024).

[22] UNICEF, "Rewriting the narrative for the second decade with and for adolescent girls" (Kathmandu, 2022).

[23] OECD, *The Role of Education and Skills in Bridging the Digital Gender Divide: Evidence from APEC Economies* (Paris, 2019).

[24] ESCAP, "2023 ESCAP population data sheet" (Bangkok, 2023).

[25] *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2020: Assessing Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration* (United Nations publication, 2020).

[26] Ibid.

environmental degradation, disasters, human rights violations, conflict, educational aspirations and family formation and reunification. With economic development and trade increasing, global migration is on the rise. The Asia-Pacific region is home to several labour migration schemes and programmes that facilitate labour mobility and decent work. Furthermore, additional pathways have been established on human rights and humanitarian grounds. Nevertheless, regular pathways to enable migrants to enter a country and remain are generally insufficient, and those that do exist are often difficult to access in practice and are frequently not gender-responsive.[27]

32. When it is well-managed, migration can make a substantial economic and social contribution. Countries of destination can benefit from migrants' skills, and migrants often fill gaps in labour forces, while communities in countries of origin can benefit from remittances and the connections migrants create between countries of origin and destination. Recognizing migrants as development actors will ensure that migration contributes to positive development outcomes and to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. However, migration is often unsafe and irregular, leaving migrants vulnerable to exploitation and exposing working migrants to high remittance costs and recruitment fees. The scale of climate-induced migration, both internal and cross-border, is significant in the region, with climate change intensifying the issue.[28]

III. Recent policy developments and best practices to respond to social development challenges

33. Social protection is an important tool for protecting people from life cycle risks and building resilience against emerging risks, and it is essential for preventing poverty, reducing inequalities and improving overall well-being. In October 2020, the Committee on Social Development endorsed the Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific,[29] which provides a shared strategy to build more inclusive and comprehensive social protection systems and a platform to strengthen regional cooperation. Across Asia and the Pacific, slow but steady progress has been made in implementing nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all.[30] Some countries have extended coverage of contributory schemes through voluntary membership schemes and subsidies for informal workers.[31] In addition, Governments in Asia and the Pacific are increasingly recognizing the need to review and adapt their social protection policies in response to climate change. In Nepal, the national social security allowance programme has been utilized as an anticipatory measure in regions affected by unseasonal rainfall and flooding. In Fiji, climate considerations have been integrated into the public work programme, in particular in the design of a cash-for-work initiative by including wetland protection, riverbank restoration and biodiversity enhancement activities. In India, a school feeding programme provides year-round support to children in drought-affected areas, including during summer breaks and emergencies, with climate considerations embedded in the programme's design.

[27] *Asia Pacific Migration Report 2024: Assessing Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration* (United Nations publication, 2024).

[28] *Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report 2023* (ST/ESCAP/3112).

[29] ESCAP/CSD/2020/3, annex III.

[30] *Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific*: *Protecting our Future Today*.

[31] ILO, *Extending Social Security to Workers in the Informal Economy: Lessons from International Experience* (Geneva, 2021).

34. Governments in the region have recognized population ageing as a regional megatrend and have devoted considerable attention to active and healthy ageing policies, programmes and action plans. At the Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, in 2022, members and associate members recommended developing, strengthening and implementing comprehensive and integrated policy frameworks that address population ageing and mainstream it into national development strategies and plans, adopting a human rights-based and people-centred approach.[32] According to an analysis conducted by the secretariat, almost all countries in Asia and the Pacific have some form of policy or action plan on older persons. Moreover, consideration is given to older persons in sectoral policies and programmes such as those focused on housing, lifelong learning and health. Furthermore, several member States have recognized the importance of fostering and strengthening intergenerational relationships and solidarity for building societies that meet the needs of people of all ages.

35. In response to the challenges of international migration, on 19 December 2018, the General Assembly adopted the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.[33] The Global Compact for Migration is a framework for cooperation to address all aspects of migration governance in a holistic and comprehensive manner. In 2021, the first Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was held, during which representatives highlighted the need to provide adequate support to migrants through social protection and other measures of social inclusion and engagement in society. Many representatives also highlighted the relevance of subregional, regional and international cooperation and partnerships on international migration.[34] Since the first Regional Review, a number of interregional dialogues between Governments and stakeholders have been organized, including the Asia-Gulf Cooperation Council Senior Officials' Dialogue on the Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, in 2023, and regular meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum, which provides the architecture for Pacific-wide cooperation, in particular with a view to addressing climate change-related migration. At the fifty-second Pacific Islands Forum, in 2023, the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility was endorsed, paving the way for members to address climate-related issues through an inclusive and collaborative regional approach. The Second Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, being held in February 2025,[35] will provide an opportunity to assess the progress made since 2020 in implementing the Global Compact for Migration and to formulate regional priorities to accelerate its implementation, which will then be discussed at the International Migration Review Forum to be held in 2026. The Global Compact for Migration is firmly rooted in the 2030 Agenda, and accelerating progress in implementing both instruments will help ensure that migration is safe, orderly and regular and that the world is on a sustainable and resilient development path.

36. Addressing the multifaceted impacts of the rising demand for care support requires a combination of policy action and investment in multiple sectors, as well as the application of a strong gender lens. In some countries in

[32] ESCAP/MIPAA/IGM.3/2022/3/Add.1.

[33] General Assembly resolution 73/195, annex.

[34] ESCAP/GCM/2021/3, annex II.

[35] For more information, see www.unescap.org/events/2025/second-asia-pacific-regional-review-implementation-global-compact-safe-orderly-and.

the region, commendable efforts have been made in improving care services, care-related social protection and employment-related care policies. The Governments of India, Pakistan and Timor-Leste have extended minimum wage guarantees for domestic workers, and in Viet Nam, domestic workers must have written contracts with minimum standards on working time and rest and must be paid a minimum wage equal to that of other workers. The Government of Pakistan has expanded workplace harassment protections to domestic workers and mandates occupational health and safety compliance. In Indonesia, legal protections exist for live-in domestic workers under its domestic violence law. In addition, care-sensitive and gender-responsive social protection systems are critical. The Government of China has piloted mechanisms allowing unemployed and self-employed women to contribute to social health insurance. In Armenia, Japan and Pakistan, care-related contribution credits have been introduced to reduce the impact of unpaid care work on women's contributory capacity and the duration of their contribution period to pension schemes.[36] Income supplements, cash-for-care arrangements and tax benefits can support people who provide care to children, persons with disabilities or elderly dependants.[37] In Kyrgyzstan and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, for cases where constant care is required, a supplement is paid on top of disability benefits, and in Australia, Malaysia and Viet Nam, financial supports exist for caregivers of persons with disabilities. The Government of the Philippines provides dependant supplements for persons with disabilities who have family responsibilities.

37. Programmes have been implemented in some countries to promote gender equality in science, technology, engineering and mathematics education. In Australia, the Women in STEM Decadal Plan was launched in 2019, covering six opportunity areas (leadership and cohesion; evaluation; workplace culture; visibility; education; and industry action) and designed to encourage stakeholders from government, academia, industry, the education sector and the broader community to act and drive change.[38] In China, the Government has introduced tailored interventions for girls living in remote and less resourced communities and affirmative measures to enable women to overcome career planning and development barriers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics sectors.[39] In other countries in the region, various policies and programmes have been implemented to support girls' school education. Menstrual health education is provided in 90 per cent of schools in Fiji, 73 per cent of schools in Solomon Islands and 72 per cent of schools in the Philippines, and menstrual hygiene products are provided in 87 per cent of schools in the Philippines.[40]

[36] Country examples are sourced from: ILO, *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers*; China, national report for the 30-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing, 2024), available at www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244, in Chinese only; World Bank, "Women, business and the law 2022: Armenia", (Washington, D.C., 2022); World Bank, "Women, business and the law: economy summary – Pakistan" (Washington D.C., 2022); World Bank, "Women, business and the law: saving for old age" (Washington, D.C., 2018); and OECD, *Pensions at a Glance 2023: OECD and G20 Indicators* (Paris, 2023).

[37] *How to Invest in the Care Economy: A Primer* (ST/ESCAP/3028).

[38] Australian Academy of Science, *Women in STEM Decadal Plan* (Acton, 2019).

[39] China, national report for the 30-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

[40] UNICEF and WHO, *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools 2015-2023*.

IV. Conclusion and future direction

38. The social development landscape in Asia and the Pacific is marked by significant challenges and opportunities, requiring a multifaceted approach to policy and legislative frameworks. In response to the growing challenges posed by climate change, rapid digitalization and ageing populations, a comprehensive and people-centred life-course approach is needed to reduce the risks of poverty and inequality. There are critical gaps, in particular in resource allocation and gender-responsive policies, which must be addressed to achieve inclusive and sustainable development outcomes in the region.

39. A key priority is strengthening legislative and policy frameworks, including by ratifying and implementing international conventions and integrating social protection with other social services, climate policies and care systems. Addressing the social protection funding gap is also crucial for expanding social protection coverage and ensuring that it contributes effectively to social development. Gender-responsive policies must be mainstreamed across all sectors, with targeted efforts to recognize, redistribute and reduce unpaid care work and foster women's participation and leadership. There is an urgent need for gender-smart financing.[41] Gender-responsive budgeting, fiscal policies and innovative financial instruments, such as social bonds, are essential for promoting gender equality.

40. In the context of climate risks and digital transformations, social protection systems must adapt to address emerging vulnerabilities. Governments should invest in technological solutions to enhance the delivery of social protection, promote ethical and inclusive digital ecosystems and build capacity to forecast and mitigate climate risks. Identifying and enhancing synergies between climate resilience and social protection measures and supporting a just and equitable transition to a sustainable and green economy are critical to build resilience against socioeconomic shocks, in particular for those in vulnerable situations.

41. Demographic shifts, particularly population ageing, demand urgent attention. Expanding contributory and non-contributory pension systems, promoting active and healthy ageing, and establishing people-centred and community-based long-term care systems that focus on physical, social and mental health needs are essential to support older persons. Moreover, societies must foster co-responsibility between households, the State, the market, families and the community in the provision of care. These efforts must be complemented by fostering intergenerational solidarity, supporting varied living arrangements and respecting different societal approaches to family and household structures.

42. Safe, orderly and regular migration must be strengthened to ensure that migration contributes to inclusive and sustainable development. Recognizing migrants as key development actors and safeguarding their rights are crucial for maximizing the economic, social and cultural benefits of migration.

43. Active labour market policies that equip the workforce with future-ready skills, in particular for vulnerable groups, are vital for building resilience and promoting economic mobility. Vocational training and education initiatives should prioritize inclusivity, ensuring that no one is left behind. Promoting the participation of women in the labour force, in the formal sector

[41] *Charting New Paths for Gender Equality and Empowerment*.

in particular, is of critical importance. Policies that promote active and healthy ageing should be implemented.

44. Achieving these goals will require collaborative efforts among government, civil society, the international community and the private sector. The Second World Summit for Social Development provides an important opportunity to give momentum to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Only through coordinated, inclusive and sustained action can the region address its social development challenges and realize the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda.

V. Issues for consideration by the Commission

45. The Commission may wish to reflect on the issues set out in the present document, which are linked to the multiple ongoing global crises that have created new obstacles to achieving the commitments of the first World Summit for Social Development.

46. The Second World Summit for Social Development in 2025 will create opportunities for reaching agreements that facilitate the significant transformations necessary for driving progress towards inclusive social development. The Commission may wish to provide guidance to the secretariat on priority areas of work to further support members and associate members to facilitate these transformations at the national, subregional and regional levels.