

**A FUTURE WITHIN REACH: RESHAPING INSTITUTIONS
IN A REGION OF DISPARITIES TO MEET
THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS
IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**

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In September 2000, at the Millennium Summit in New York, leaders of the world's Governments signed the Millennium Declaration and committed themselves to a series of targets that came to be known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), most of which are to be achieved by 2015. Five years later, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have published a report that examines the progress so far in achieving the MDGs. Though much progress has been made, the first chapter realistically highlights areas where improvement can still be made. Service delivery is emphasized in chapter two, where barriers to public services are identified as a key deterrent to realizing MDGs. In the final chapter, the report encourages international cooperation, especially to assist the poorest countries in the region.

The MDGs consist of 8 aspirations: (1) eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; (2) achieving universal primary education; (3) promoting gender equality and empowering women; (4) reducing child mortality; (5) improving maternal health; (6) combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; (7) ensuring environmental sustainability; and (8) developing a global partnership for development. While there has been a massive and unprecedented reduction in poverty worldwide since 1990, led by Asia in particular, the first chapter provides facts which require urgent action if the region wants to achieve the MDGs by 2015. Over half the children in South Asia and 38 per cent of children in South-East Asia are underweight. More than one third of all child deaths occur in South Asia, and this subregion has the lowest level of professional care at birth in the world. Southern and Eastern Asia have the largest number of urban slum dwellers in the world. The number of hungry people increased by tens of millions in South Asia-caused mostly by growing populations and poor agricultural productivity. Southern and Western Asia have

the world's lowest girls' secondary school enrolment ratios in relation to boys. HIV/AIDS is still spreading fast in several parts of Asia.

The report is of the view that one of the most direct ways in which Governments can address poverty – and meet the MDGs – is by ensuring the availability of services, either providing them directly or adopting a framework for provision through the private sector and/or civil society. This chapter identifies the following barriers to service delivery: (1) financial barriers; (2) legal barriers; (3) sociocultural barriers; and (4) political barriers. To overcome these barriers the report suggests the countries in the region broaden the range of service providers, establish standards, plan linkages and upgrades, devise relevant regulations, decentralize and relegate tasks to local governments, and empower users.

In the last chapter the report proposes that regional cooperation is key to building or making changes to institutions that will ultimately promote the MDGs. Greater regional cooperation enables the pooling of resources to address the lack of finances currently pushing many countries off track on several MDG indicators. An eight-point action plan has been proposed to provide a framework for enhancing regional cooperation among members of the Asia-Pacific community. It consists of increasing interregional trade; encouraging Asian monetary cooperation; regularizing labour migration; creating an Asia-Pacific grain security system; tackling diseases, especially the HIV/AIDS pandemic; promoting environmentally sustainable “green” growth; improving governance; and building upon the existing regional cooperation frameworks. This action plan includes some existing initiatives and also some new ones that would promote the provision of international public goods.

A Future Within Reach looks at the realities of where the Asia and Pacific region stands along the path towards the MDGs. The report identifies key institutional barriers to achieving MDGs and proposes a comprehensive plan of action to revitalize service delivery at the national level and provide international public goods through regional cooperation. If put into action, the report concludes, the MDGs will be within reach for the countries in Asia and the Pacific.