



SUMMARY FOR POLICYMAKERS

Accelerating progress: An empowered, inclusive and equal Asia and the Pacific

While millions of people in the Asia-Pacific region have prospered, there are groups, communities and families that remain disempowered, vulnerable and marginalized over generations. How can people be made agents of change of their own futures – become empowered – and how can barriers to equality be addressed?

The ESCAP-ADB-UNDP report *Accelerating progress: An empowered, inclusive and equal Asia and the Pacific* presents a framework for translating the aspiration of leaving no one behind into concrete policy action. The framework sets the foundations for a comprehensive policy agenda that cuts across sectors, development actors and thematic areas and is informed by the experiences of, and challenges facing the Asia-Pacific region.



Asia-Pacific
SDG Partnership



- ## Empowerment, inclusion and equality: a virtuous cycle

Why the disparity?

New types of marginalization or vulnerability can emerge where people are displaced, when social change fosters isolation, or with the emergence of new technologies that are not accessible to all.

The empowerment and inclusion framework

A close consideration of the barriers identified by participants combined with a review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets points to four interlinked and synergistic elements for strengthening empowerment and inclusion (Figures 1 and 2):

Each element of the framework enables and accelerates progress to achieve the SDGs (Figure 3).

Figure 1 A synergistic framework





SDG Targets 5.6,
5.a, 5.1, 8.8 and
1.4, among others



SDG Targets 5.3,
8.7 and 10.3,
among others



SDG Targets 5.5, 8.5, 9.2, 11.3, 4.3 and 16.7, among others



SDG Targets 3.1-3.9, 4.1-4.4, 11.1, 5.a, 5.b and 16.7, among others

Figure 6 Civic engagement positively impacts development outcomes



Citizen engagement was found to enhance development outcomes in

75/100 cases reviewed⁶

Figure 7 The way resources are mobilized and used has implications for social outcomes



Where women have a say in decision-making on major household purchases there are better outcomes for children in terms of reduction of stunting.⁹



Why is action urgently needed in Asia and the Pacific?

In some parts of Asia and the Pacific, a history of displacement, marginalization, inequality and unmet needs has provided fertile ground for conflict and human rights violations. Long-standing inaction on human rights, including economic, cultural and social rights, has fostered extreme levels of inequality and exclusion. In other places, new stresses are emerging such as those arising from an increased demand for resources, technological change and climate risks. Civil society organizations have raised concerns about natural resource access and use and the lack of rights of small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples and rural communities. In 18 out of 24 countries in the region whose legal frameworks were reviewed, existing laws do not address the issue of land rights of indigenous communities in protected areas.¹⁰

Adverse norms and discriminatory institutions persist in the region. In some parts, child marriage prevails to such an extent that over 30 per cent of girls are married before they turn 18.¹¹ Similarly, a disproportionate burden of domestic work continues to be placed on women and girls who face high instances of domestic abuse. In parts of the region, over 70 per cent of surveyed women face gender-based violence. This also has significant economic costs, in some places amounting to over two per cent of GDP.¹²

Some examples of discriminatory institutions and norms include inheritance laws with strong preference for male heirs, minimum wage legislation in many countries of the region that exclude groups such as domestic workers, and discriminatory labour laws in 23 countries (out of 46) in the region that prohibit women from being employed in certain sectors of the economy.¹³

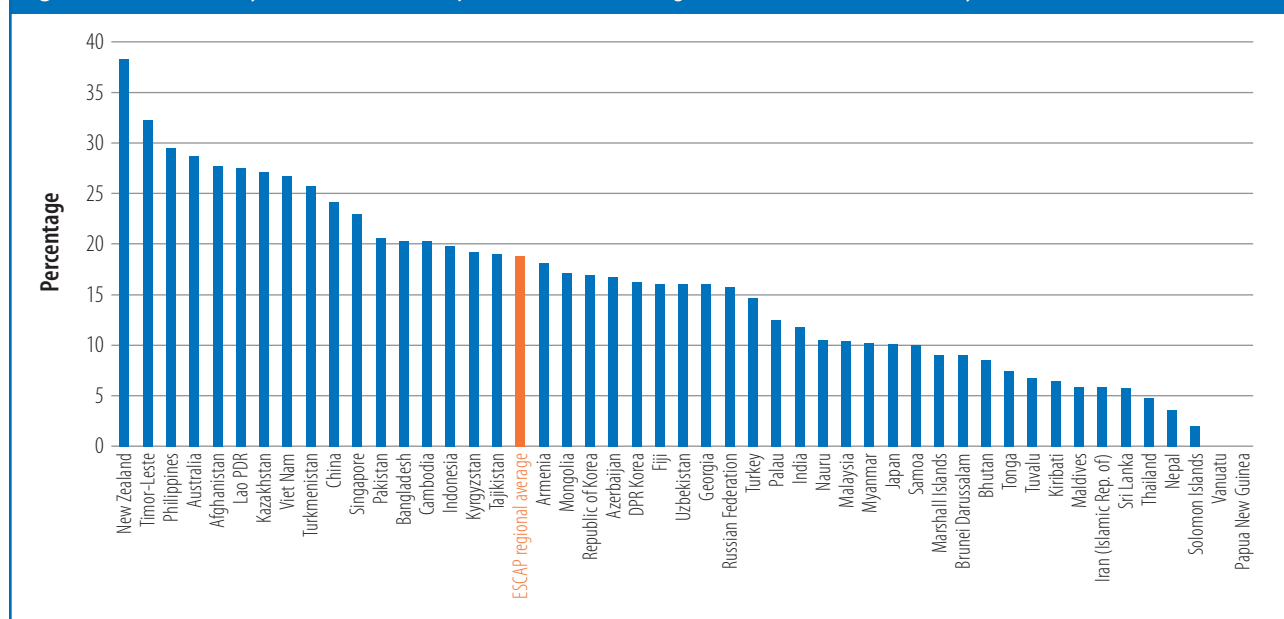
Significant barriers remain for participation in public and political life. For example, the proportion of polling stations accessible to persons with disabilities is less than 20 per cent in some countries, while the proportion of accessible government buildings is less than 30 per cent in parts of the region.¹⁴ Despite efforts that include affirmative actions and quotas, gender imbalance in political participation persists in the region, with only 19 per cent of seats in parliaments and local governments being occupied by women (Figure 8).

Household survey analyses reveal a huge disparity in access to bank accounts between the poorest and richest segments of the population: in many countries of the region this disparity is over 50 per cent.

The youth within the region continue to be deprived of employment and skills-development opportunities, with young women left furthest behind (Figure 9).

There is evidence that in some countries over 50 per cent of women are excluded from important household decision-making ranging from choice of health care to major household purchases (Figure 10).

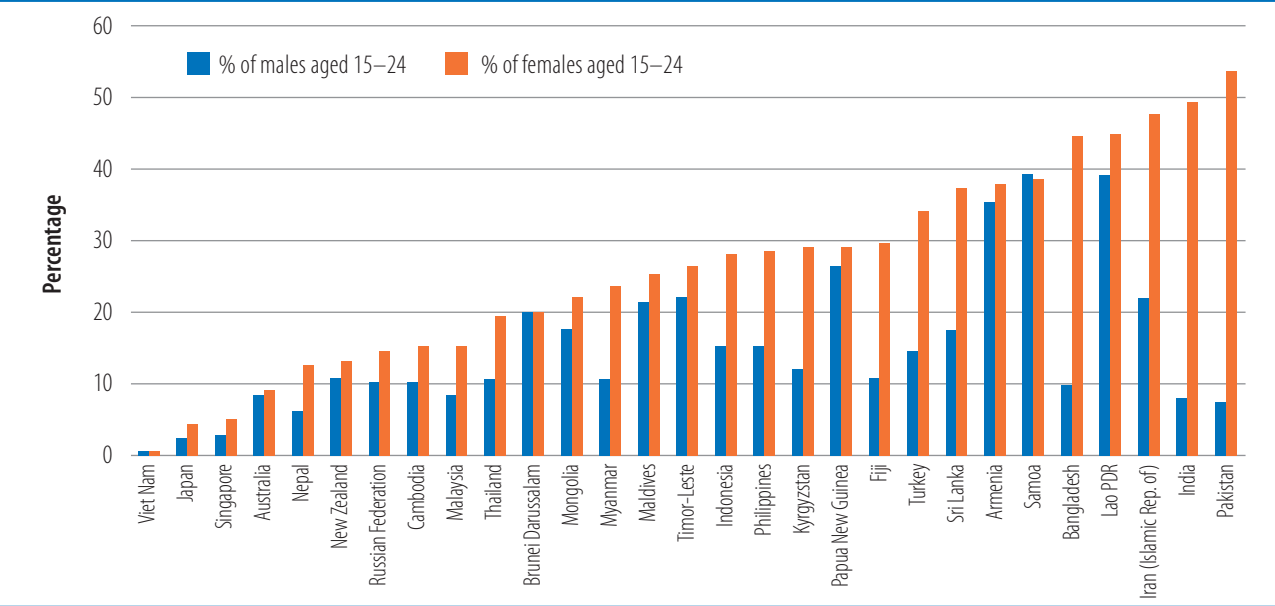
Figure 8 Seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments, latest available year, 2010–2018



Source: Compilation using data from SDG data portal



Figure 9 Percentage of youth not in employment, education or training by gender



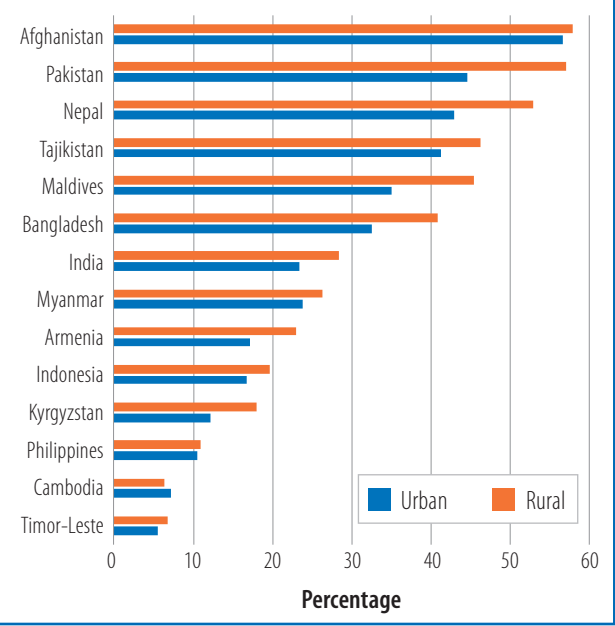
Source: Compilation using latest available data for 2010–2018 from the ESCAP statistical database, accessed 10 December 2018

Household data analysis from the region shows that, even though women engage in paid work, a sizeable proportion (as high as over 20 per cent) of women, especially in rural areas, are not involved in decision-making on their own earnings.¹⁵

11.2 per cent is the global average for the proportion of national gross domestic product spent on social protection.

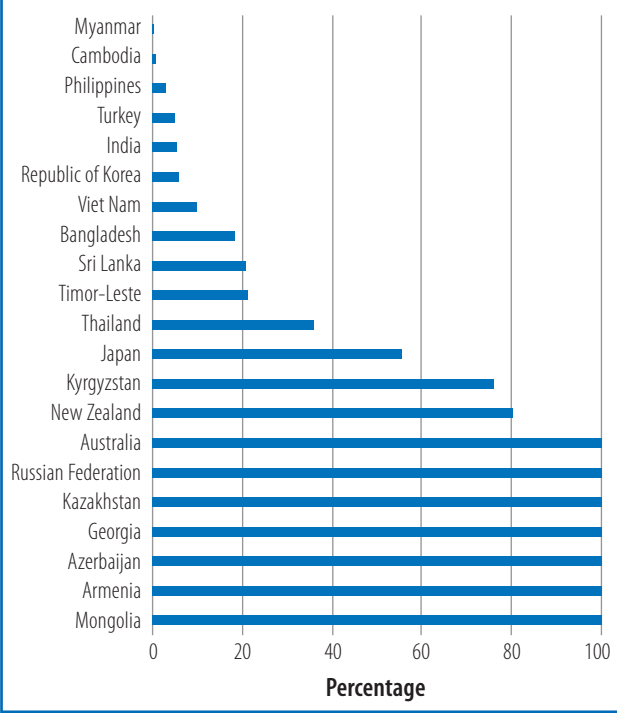
However, in Asia-Pacific this average expenditure is less than one-third of the global average. As a result, a large proportion of vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities are without any kind of social protection coverage (Figure 11).

Figure 10 Percentage of women (aged 15–49) not involved in major household purchasing decisions



Source: Calculations based on data from the Demographic and Health Surveys, and the multiple indicator cluster surveys, latest years

Figure 11 Percentage of people with disabilities covered by social protection systems, 2016



Source: Compilation using data from the SDG data portal

The framework in practice

This section elaborates the synergies between the four elements by applying the framework to some priority policymaking spheres in Asia and the Pacific that will likely define the region's success in achieving the 2030 Agenda – climate action, domestic resource mobilization, civic participation – and also violence against women and girls.

Climate action that empowers

The interactions of climate change with underlying drivers of inequality such as rural–urban divides and gender norms create new forms of vulnerabilities for many people (Table 1). Therefore, bringing climate action fully in line with sustainable development will require a deeper look at empowerment and inclusion.

Evidence suggests that an empowerment-and-inclusion approach can accelerate climate actions by hastening the transition to renewable energy, widening the uptake of climate-smart agricultural practices, creating climate-resilient communities and removing some of the key obstacles to realizing green economy benefits.¹⁶

Table 1 Examples of interactions between the drivers of inequality and climate change

Drivers of inequality	Interactions with climate change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural–urban divide Remoteness leading to limited developmental projects and investments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher vulnerability of certain remote rural areas to climate risks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Land-tenure insecurity and landlessness Exploitation of landless groups by elites Limited access to agricultural inputs, including financing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited access to reconstruction assistance due to lack of land tenure Increased exploitation as economic opportunities decline
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender norms Lack of participation of women in community planning Lack of livelihood alternatives for women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of participation by women in decision-making on climate adaptation Sources of livelihood for women that have higher exposures to climate risks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflicts Existing societal fault-lines and tensions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased competition over resources Unplanned migration induced by climate change

Actions that can strengthen empowerment and inclusion within climate action include:

- Ensuring the scope of climate actions integrates the four elements of the empowerment-and-inclusion framework, especially, incorporating rights-based approaches into climate actions such as rights mapping.
- Realigning institutional structures for decision-making on climate action to ensure that the groups most affected by the impacts of climate change have adequate representation and voice. This includes the documentation of traditional knowledge and indigenous values and supporting local organizations that enable participation of vulnerable groups in climate actions.
- Promoting context-specific research and disaggregated data to identify emergent vulnerabilities and tailor climate actions to meet diverse societal needs.

Resource mobilization strategies that recognize the perspectives of diverse social groups

Raising resources to realize the SDGs is a critical challenge in Asia and the Pacific. Despite broad recognition of the critical role of taxation in enabling the resource mobilization needed to achieve the SDGs as well as providing social services such as social protection coverage, tax revenues in Asia and the Pacific are among the lowest in the world (Figure 12).

Applying an empowerment-and-inclusion lens to taxation can boost resource mobilization efforts while also helping to address inequalities in the region.

A well-designed and administered tax system can promote inclusion, encourage good governance, stimulate investment and job creation, promote social justice, and advance an equal society.

Tax systems affect people differently depending on their social and economic realities. Fiscal policy and taxation systems should be developed and implemented in an inclusive and accountable manner with the needs of all people in mind, including the poor and vulnerable. The true development impact of domestic resource mobilization strategies can only be realized when concerted efforts are made to engage diverse actors and foster accountability within institutions that manage and administer resources and deliver public services. Actions that can enable this include:

- Harnessing new opportunities offered by information technology-related innovations to enable more



- Institutionalizing mechanisms and dialogue platforms for meaningful engagement with civil society actors, especially those representing the interests of groups left behind.
- Capitalizing on innovative avenues to strengthen civic engagement, including social entrepreneurship, applying human rights principles to business, social investment products and crowdsourcing.

Tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG)

VAWG is rooted in power imbalances and deeply entrenched practices of exclusion. Making the changes needed to address this issue entails action across all elements of the empowerment-and-inclusion framework and requires the involvement of all members of society – including significant changes to existing legal frameworks (Figure 14), among others. Some points of action include:

- Enhancing women's access to specific resources and their control over them to assist in increasing women's bargaining positions and balancing power relations.
- Strengthening women's participation and voice to allow for increased political participation such as through the creation of safe and inclusive spaces for women (virtual or otherwise) that encourage the formation of social networks and mobilization for action.
- Including men in the VAWG agenda as domestic violence is less likely in contexts where relationships are rooted in principles of gender equality.

In conclusion- towards empowerment, inclusion and equality

Empowering people and ensuring inclusion and equality can accelerate the progress towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Actionable recommendations have been presented to further empowerment, inclusion and equality in the context of climate change, resource mobilization and social accountability. The following emerge as common threads and cross-cutting enablers of empowerment, inclusion and equality:

- **Social dialogue and disaggregated data** are essential to expand understanding of existing and emergent vulnerabilities and vulnerable groups, and to explain 'outliers' in existing data sets.
- Existing tools are often inadequate to reach all vulnerable groups and new technologies need to be harnessed to tap into **next-generation development solutions**. These can significantly expand the options that governments have at their disposal for empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality.
- There is a need to inject **new vigour into civic-engagement** efforts, by institutionalizing engagement mechanisms and by building capacity of civil society organizations and increasing access to high-quality civic education. This will ensure that awareness of the right to participate and a culture of participation in civic life is built over the long term, and vulnerable groups can have adequate say in decision-making – and have the necessary capacity to engage.

Finally, greater regional collaboration to promote mutual learning, exchanging best-practices and establishing regional initiatives on empowerment and inclusion, such as institutionalized efforts to engage with civil society at the regional level, can also play a critical role in supporting progress.

Figure 14 Legal protection from violence against women and girls

In 2018, **6** countries in the Asia and the Pacific region (out of 50-plus) lacked any form of dedicated **domestic violence legislation**

as many as **27** countries were yet to **criminalize marital rape**


11 countries still lacked any form of **legislation against sexual harassment** and only 8 criminalized sexual harassment in public spaces



Source: World Bank (n.d.) Protecting Women from Violence

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The Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership

This summary for policymakers is based on the report *Accelerating progress: An empowered, inclusive and equal Asia and the Pacific* prepared under the Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Partnership produces a suite of knowledge products that meet the needs of different users and reflect the spirit of the SDGs. The themes of annual reports are aligned with the annual themes of the High-level Political Forum on sustainable development. Find more information on the Partnership and download the full report at:



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