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

This summary

- Describes the virtuous cycle of empowerment, inclusion and equality
- Presents and explains the four synergistic elements of an empowerment and inclusion framework to accelerate progress to achieve the SDGs
- Outlines how empowerment, inclusion and equality are reflected in the targets of the SDGs
- Applies the framework to some of the region's most pressing challenges – climate change, civic participation, resource mobilization and violence against women and girls
- Identifies three cross-cutting enablers for further policy attention and agenda setting

Empowerment, inclusion and equality: a virtuous cycle

Some people are fully empowered – with freedom of choice and action, control over resources and decisions that affect them, self-reliant and able to fully exercise their rights. Others are vulnerable, marginalized and disempowered, without access to the opportunities, resources, knowledge, social capital and the intangibles that constitute agency – and lacking the ability to define their own goals and act on them, and other factors that enable upward social mobility.

Why the disparity?

The interactions of individuals with the formal and informal rules of society and its institutions determine their inclusion and influence in society. These sociocultural norms influence power relations within and among societal groups and at different levels of governance. They define how opportunities and resources are used, allocated and accessed – and, in turn, how participation in civic life is defined.

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.

Policies and actions that ensure inclusion and equality in access to assets, capabilities and opportunities, and that strengthen social cohesion, are critical. Inclusion creates empowerment, and inclusion is itself strengthened by empowerment, working from 'below' to create voice and demand for a change to more equal societies. More equal societies lay a foundation for empowerment and inclusion. More equal societies also pave the way for faster economic growth, reduced poverty, strengthened social contracts and, in the long run, enduring peace and stability.

The empowerment and inclusion framework

Barriers to empowerment and inclusion were identified in a series of consultations with over 600 participants. Participants included government officials, representatives of civil society and think tanks from across the region.

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

Figure 2　Elements of an empowerment and inclusion framework

Encompassing knowledge and protection of one's rights, why they matter and how to ensure access to justice

Rights and justice

Participation and voice

Freedoms to participate in political activity and community life, to access public resources and services, and to contribute to decisions that impact an individual, as well as the ability of individuals and groups to represent themselves and be heard

Essential and productive resources including social protection and safety nets, as well as capabilities to control them and have a choice in their use

Resources and capabilities

Norms and institutions

Informal rules, practices, and shared social expectations that shape individual and societal attitudes and behavior, as well as formal structures, laws and regulations that underpin societal functioning

Figure 3　Unpacking empowerment, inclusion and equality in the 2030 Agenda

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

5 GENDER EQUALITY

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

13 CLIMATE ACTION

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

A review of the SDG target and indicator framework points to the globally agreed priority areas of action for advancement on empowerment, inclusion and equality.

SDG 5 focuses on the empowerment of all women and girls and contains entry points for furthering empowerment and overcoming barriers related to **regressive sociocultural environments** and **lack of resources**. These include ensuring **rights to economic resources** (Target 5.a), **reproductive rights** (Target 5.6), **enhancing access to technology** (Target 5.b), **eliminating harmful social norms and practices** such as female genital mutilation and child marriage (Target 5.3), and **ensuring participation and voice** of women in public life (Target 5.5). Targets with a focus on inclusion – under various SDGs, such as SDG 4 (inclusive education), SDG 8 (inclusive growth), SDG 11 (inclusive cities) and SDG 16 (creating inclusive societies) – include actionable elements for an inclusiveness approach to policymaking. Ensuring **access to resources** (Targets 4.1–4.4 for education, Target 11.1 for housing), ensuring labour **rights** (Target 8.8), eliminating harmful practices such as modern slavery and child labour (Target 8.7), and promoting **participatory approaches** to human settlement management (Target 11.3) and to decision-making more broadly (Target 16.7) help tackle barriers such as lack of transparency, accountability and **opportunities to participate**.

Targets under SDG 10 (reducing inequality) recognize empowerment and inclusion as a way to address inequality (Target 10.2), and also highlight the roles of **improved access to resources through social protection** (Target 10.4) and **elimination of discriminatory institutions** (laws, policies and practices) (Target 10.3). Target 13.b recognizes the need for mechanisms for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries, including **focusing on women, youth, local and marginalized communities**.

RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

Human rights analysis gives an insight into the distribution of power. Identifying groups lacking effective rights – and groups that may be denying the rights of others – can highlight avenues for reducing vulnerability. Rights-based approaches have had positive impacts in tackling the underlying causes of poverty and disadvantage, leading to sustained changes. For example, in India, a rights-based approach to the provision of public work increased employment opportunities for women, and resulted in a substantial increase in their control over household decisions, and also in the probability of daughters staying in school.[1] Rights-based projects have linked citizens and states in new ways, created networks of partnerships and alliances that provide support to the poor and marginalized, strengthened accountability and access to justice, and significantly reduced vulnerability.[2] Scaling up these benefits from specific project contexts to the wider society has significant potential for improving development outcomes. The recognition of environmental rights has also been positively linked with better environmental outcomes (Figure 4).

NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS

Norms and institutions develop over long periods of time. Therefore, influencing them is a long-term, complex endeavour. Yet education, institutional reform, structured dialogue, use of media, livelihood interventions and capacity development can be effective entry-points and often prerequisites for empowerment and inclusion. It was found that where social norms support lower frequency of child marriage, there is also higher female enrolment in secondary school. Social norms that are detrimental to marginalized groups in one respect can have knock-on effects and hamper progress towards development goals in other ways. For example, a one per cent increase in the prevalence of child marriage has been found to reduce female enrollment in secondary education by 1.1 per cent (cf. SDG Target 4.1) (Figure 5). Legislative changes also play an important role in framing social norms. The Marshall Islands, for example, has overhauled its legislation to strengthen the inclusion of people with disabilities, and India has removed discriminatory legislative provisions aimed at same-sex relationships.

Figure 4 Environmental rights and average environmental performance index (EPI) scores, 2018[3, 4]

On average, environmental rights provisions in constitutions and/or legislation are linked to better environmental outcomes

Figure 5 Relationship between prevalence of child marriage and female enrolment in secondary education[5]

1%
Increase in prevalence of child marriages

is associated with

1.1%
reduction in female enrolment in secondary education

PARTICIPATION AND VOICE

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

Beyond supporting the exercise of human rights, facilitation of participation and voice has several positive impacts on development outcomes: more effective and environmentally, socially and economically sustainable decisions; improved service delivery; greater trust in governments; and a more informed and capacitated citizenry (among others). Analyses of a sample of 100 cases of various forms of citizen engagement reveal that in almost 75 per cent of these cases they advanced developmental outcomes, the accountability of governments, and the development of inclusive and cohesive societies (Figure 6).[6] Capacitated and resourced organizational infrastructure is a core requirement of institutionalized participation. In Vanuatu, civil society action has helped to establish a policy on integrity in public life and increased the public's role in combating corruption. In Indonesia, participation has been strengthened in the context of decentralization efforts, and governance audits have included reviews of performance in terms of engaging stakeholders, participatory planning and budgeting.

RESOURCES AND CAPABILITIES

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

Strengthening access to resources and capabilities requires the domestic mobilization of resources. The way in which resources are mobilized and spent has implications for social outcomes. Most countries in the region have been expanding social protection and spending on education and health since 2000.[7] In addition to high-income countries of the region, countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal and Uzbekistan have established social protection floor policies comprising a set of social security guarantees to ensure, as a minimum, that everyone has access to essential health care and to basic income security throughout their lives.[8] However, access to resources does not automatically lead to empowerment. In fact, it is the availability of choices or control in terms of the actual usage of resources that matters more in terms of empowerment. In the context of resources, the aspect of individual freedom and capacity for action, broadly understood as 'capabilities' manifests partly in the form of actual control of resources and participation in decision-making within households (Figure 7).

Figure 6 Civic engagement positively impacts development outcomes

Citizen engagement was found to enhance development outcomes in

75/100 cases reviewed[6]

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
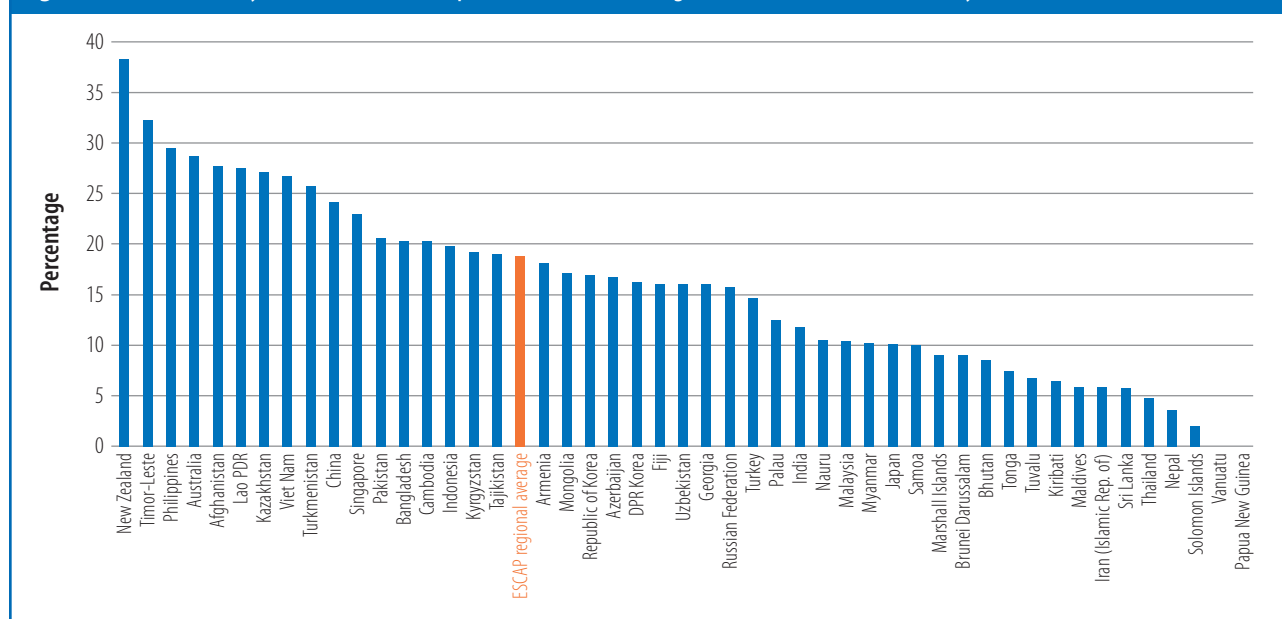
Source: Compilation using data from SDG data portal

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

% of males aged 15–24 **% of females aged 15–24**
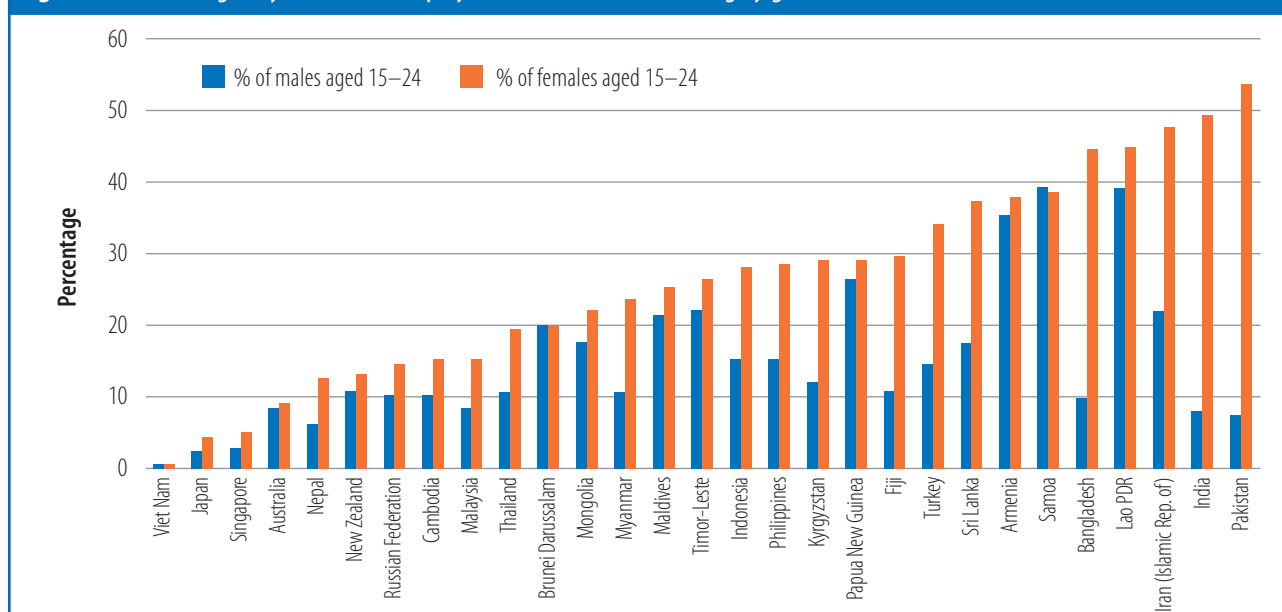
Source: Compilation using latest available data for 2010–2018 from the ESCAP statistical database, accessed 10 December 2018

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

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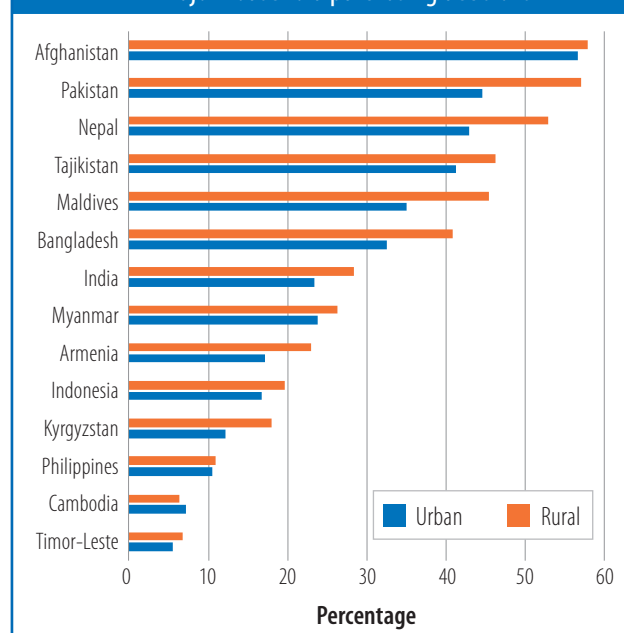
Source: Calculations based on data from the Demographic and Health Surveys, and the multiple indicator cluster surveys, latest years

Figure 11 Percentage of people with disabilities covered by social protection systems, 2016
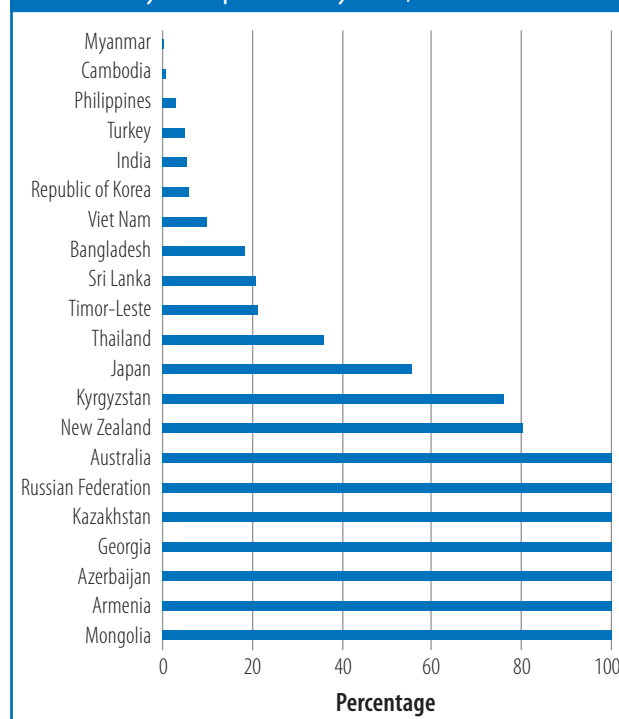
Source: Compilation using data from the SDG data portal

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
• Rural–urban divide • Remoteness leading to limited developmental projects and investments	• Higher vulnerability of certain remote rural areas to climate risks
• Land-tenure insecurity and landlessness • Exploitation of landless groups by elites • Limited access to agricultural inputs, including financing	• Limited access to reconstruction assistance due to lack of land tenure • Increased exploitation as economic opportunities decline
• Gender norms • Lack of participation of women in community planning • Lack of livelihood alternatives for women	• Lack of participation by women in decision-making on climate adaptation • Sources of livelihood for women that have higher exposures to climate risks
• Conflicts • Existing societal fault-lines and tensions	• 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

Figure 12 Tax revenue by types of tax as a percentage of gross domestic product, 2016 or latest available year

Legend: Developing Asia-Pacific, OECD

Categories (top to bottom): Taxes on international trade and transactions; Taxes on payroll and workforce; Taxes on property; Income tax – individuals; Income tax – corporate; Taxes on goods and services

X-axis: Percentage of GDP (0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12)
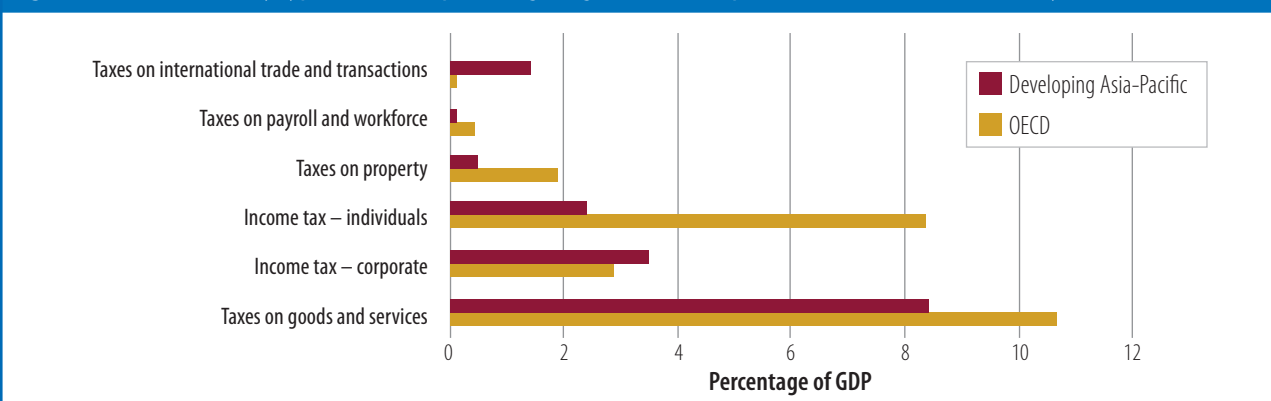
Source: ESCAP, based on International Monetary Fund (2018) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018)

Notes: The data for the Asia-Pacific region shown in this figure are based on a subset of 22 developing countries in the region with data available for each of the tax categories. Taxes on goods and services include excise taxes

progressive and targeted approaches to tax policy design and implementation.

- Engaging informed and empowered citizen groups and critical stakeholders in tax policy formulations.
- Building enforcement capacity within tax administration for promoting inclusion and equality.

Strengthening civic engagement for wide participation and voice

Strengthening the participation and voice of people, through enhanced civic engagement, can improve accountability and trust in institutions while ensuring responsive decision-making across the SDG framework. It can also improve governments' delivery of essential services particularly to marginalized and vulnerable groups. Civic engagement strengthens the social contract that binds state and society, helping to ensure that state institutions and related actors fulfil their obligations. It also builds momentum for progressive change through legislative or institutional reform and can curb harmful social norms and practices by inspiring behavioural or policy changes. Civic engagement enables a diverse range of individuals and groups to meaningfully participate in decision-making, strengthening the local ownership of solutions and responsibility for their implementation. Civic space is under threat in many parts of the region (Figure 13). Volunteerism is an important aspect of civic engagement and can be promoted by a functional, appropriate and inclusive volunteer "infrastructure" that provides protection for volunteers, along with incentives to engage in voluntary action. Other actions that can enhance civic engagement include:

- Ensuring an enabling legal and regulatory environment for individuals and organizations alike to engage in public life.

Figure 13 Assessment of civic space in Asia and the Pacific

Number of countries by status of civic space November 2018 / **Change from March 2018**

- Open — 9 — no change
- Narrowed — 4 — -2
- Obstructed — 15 — +2
- Repressed — 6 — no change
- Closed — 4 — no change

Top 10 violations: Asia and the Pacific

- Censorship
- Human rights defenders detained
- Restrictive laws
- Excessive force
- Protest disruption
- Harassment
- Torture/ill treatment
- Protesters detained
- Criminal defamation
- Intimidation

Based on analysis of civic space updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor since 24th October 2016; updates for the Asia-Pacific region. The numbers above represent the percentage of reports in which that violation was referenced

Source: (Top) Adapted from CIVICUS (2018a); *(Bottom)* CIVICUS (2018a). Reproduced with permission

- 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.

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

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.

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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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