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Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: review of social development issues and challenges in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals

Challenges in implementing the social dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals

Note by the secretariat

Summary

In September 2015 States Members of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is a holistic agenda seeking to shift the world onto a more sustainable and resilient path, focusing on people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. Its key features include a strong focus on reducing inequalities and promoting gender equality and its emphasis is to reach the people who are the farthest behind.

The Asia-Pacific region faces several key social and demographic trends, which are well addressed in the 2030 Agenda. The region faces rising inequalities in spite of income poverty reduction. Gender inequality persists. The region is also confronted with demographic trends such as population ageing and international migration, which need to be addressed adequately. Social protection, a key feature in the 2030 Agenda, is still relatively limited in many parts of the region.

The present document provides an analysis of current social and demographic trends in the Asia-Pacific region and of how these trends need to be addressed in view of the 2030 Agenda. It also highlights the key actions that need to be taken within the social dimension to achieve sustainable development in a balanced and integrated manner. The Committee on Social Development is invited to review the issues and recommendations in the present document and provide the secretariat with guidance on its future work in the area of social development.

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I. Introduction

1. The Millennium Development Goals were a milestone in global and national development efforts and changed the development paradigm by shifting the focus of stakeholders to specific and critical areas of action.

2. By 2015, the deadline for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, the Asia-Pacific region had registered significant progress on almost all of the Goals. The region performed particularly well in reducing income poverty and in efforts towards achieving universal primary education and gender parity in primary education. However, considerable unfinished business remains in achieving gender equality as a whole and reducing malnutrition and maternal mortality, as well as ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health. The marked reductions in income poverty have not always translated into overall improvements in health status or the reduction of malnutrition or gender equality. In several cases, inequalities of income, as well as of outcomes and opportunities, have increased in the Asia-Pacific region.

3. In the discussions leading up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, Member States called for a comprehensive development framework that took into account the critical areas of concern in economic, social and environmental development in a balanced and integrated manner. In September 2015, Member States adopted a new

development agenda, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is a holistic agenda seeking to achieve a balanced integration of the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainable development and to shift the world onto a more sustainable and resilient path, focusing on people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership.[1]

4. As the world is now embarking on this comprehensive and ambitious new development agenda, it is opportune to assess key social development trends in the context of the 2030 Agenda and identify key areas to support its implementation.

II. Social development in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

5. With the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals, which were adopted as part of the 2030 Agenda, Governments across the Asia-Pacific region committed to a more comprehensive approach to tackling inequalities, including gender inequalities. With its reiteration of the phrase "for all" in almost all the Goals, the 2030 Agenda puts inclusion at its centre. Countries have collectively expanded the shared development focus, from enhancing capabilities and outcomes in areas such as health, education and employment, to embracing matters of resources, decision-making authority and the spectrum of human rights, so as to address the structural underpinnings of inequality.[2]

6. In addition to the stand-alone Goal 5, achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, Governments in the region have recognized that combating inequalities in general and achieving gender equality specifically is a cross-cutting issue and, as such, is a prerequisite for the realization of the other Goals.

A. Social development in the Sustainable Development Goals

7. The Sustainable Development Goals seek to integrate the key economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, and therefore there are many synergies across several of the Goals with related targets contributing simultaneously to different Goals. The Goals and targets are an interlocking and interdependent framework where the achievement of one Goal is dependent on several others. Though all the Goals address social development in one way or another, the following Goals have a strong social development dimension:

(a) Goal 1, end poverty in all its forms everywhere, calls for eradicating absolute poverty, reducing poverty in all its dimensions for all men, women and children, and emphasizes that all men and women, including the poor and the vulnerable need to have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance (target 1.4).

(b) Goal 3, ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, sets clear targets in reducing maternal mortality, communicable and

[1] General Assembly resolution 70/1.

[2] United Nations, Chair's summary of the 53rd session of the Commission for Social Development, panel discussion on emerging issues: contributions of social development to the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals, 6 February 2015 (New York, 2015). Available from www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/2015/chairsummary-emerging.pdf.

non-communicable diseases, and substance abuse as well as deaths from road accidents. The Goal also calls for universal access to sexual and reproductive health services (target 3.7), universal health coverage and access to quality essential health-care services (target 3.8). It emphasizes the need to reach "all at all ages".

(c) Goal 4, ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, calls for the provision of free and equitable quality education for all boys and girls and equitable access to tertiary education and vocational training as well as an increase in the supply of qualified teachers. The role of education in changing lifestyles and attitudes is emphasized through its call for the provision of education on sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, and global citizenship (target 4.7) and for building or upgrading facilities so they are child, disability and gender sensitive (means of implementation 4.a). Promoting lifelong learning opportunities will also be of particular importance for older people.

(d) Goal 5, achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, aims at ending all forms of discrimination, harmful cultural practices and violence against women (including human trafficking) and ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. It also seeks to ensure universal access to reproductive health services in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences (target 5.6). Means of implementation 5.a encourages reforms to ensure women's equal access to resources and 5.b calls for the enhanced use of enabling technology, in particular, information and communications technology.

(e) Goal 8, promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, integrates economic targets, such as sustaining per capita economic growth and increasing productivity, while emphasizing the need for equality in the labour market, by calling for full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value (target 8.5) and promoting safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, and in particular women migrants (target 8.8).

(f) Goal 10, reduce inequality within and among countries, seeks to promote income growth of the bottom two income quintiles (target 10.1), to empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status (target 10.2), and to ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome. Social protection is considered a policy to promote equality (target 10.4). Further, the Goal seeks to facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies (target 10.7). Reducing transaction costs of remittances are mentioned as a means of implementation of this Goal (10.c).

(g) Goal 11, make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; while most targets under this Goal focus on transport and environmental issues, target 11.7 specifically focuses on providing access to green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities, which emphasizes the importance of inclusion.

(h) Goal 16, promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; this Goal calls for enabling conditions and formulates inclusive societies as a goal in itself. The Goal seeks to eliminate all forms of violence (target 16.1) and also calls for promoting transparency, eliminating corruption, and ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children (target 16.2).

(i) Goal 17, strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development; while the 2030 Agenda provides specific means of implementation under each Goal, Goal 17 focuses on the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda in general. Targets 17.13 to 17.15 emphasize the need for policy and institutional coherence, which calls for integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development. Targets 17.1 to 17.5 specify financing mechanisms for the Agenda and build on the Agenda's emphasis on sound policy frameworks and innovative financing mechanisms, which are in some cases specified under selected Goals, such as means of implementation 3.c, which focuses on health financing. Targets 17.6 to 17.8 focus on using and providing access to technologies generally as a means for implementation of the Agenda, while 5.b specifically mentions it as a means of implementation for the empowerment of women.

III. Key social development trends and challenges in Asia and the Pacific

8. As countries position themselves to address the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda, they need to address the unfinished agenda of the Millennium Development Goals, as well as other critical challenges related to persisting and widening inequalities, including gender inequality, demographic change and unsustainable lifestyles. Some of these challenges are outlined below for the consideration of the Committee on Social Development.

A. Persisting or rising inequalities

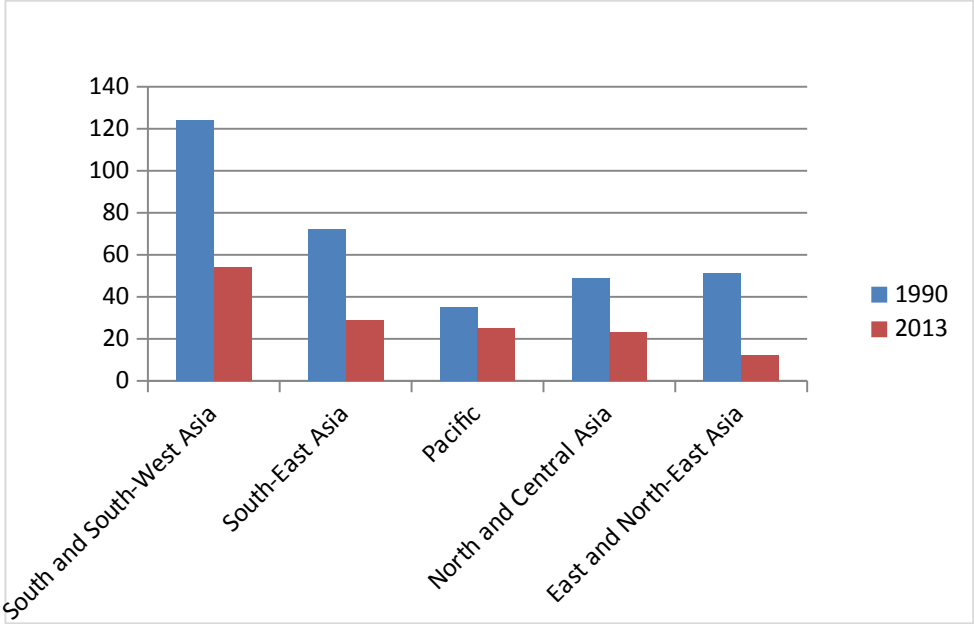
9. Over the previous two decades, the region has seen sustained economic growth, which has raised living standards and lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty. However, there are persisting inequalities across and within countries. In spite of improvements, South and South-West Asia, as well as the least developed countries, still lag behind in terms of social development. Income inequalities persist in many countries, in spite of poverty reduction, and have even increased in some instances. Inequalities in Asia and the Pacific jeopardize further poverty eradication and pose a key challenge to delivering the promise of the 2030 Agenda. Inequalities are multidimensional, are impacted by income and access to opportunities, and are also horizontally determined by, for example, gender, age, ethnicity, disability and migrant status.

1. Poverty

10. Although all subregions made significant progress in poverty reduction, in South and South-West Asia as well as in the least developed countries significant proportions of the population still live in poverty. For example, 43 per cent of the population in Bangladesh in 2010 and 30.3 per cent in the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 2012were living on less than $1.25 a day. Moreover, reductions in income poverty have not always

translated into similar reductions in malnutrition and child mortality. In several countries of the region, approximately one quarter of the population was malnourished in 2012.[3] Similarly, despite overall reductions across the region, infant mortality is almost twice as high in South and South-West Asia compared to South-East Asia (figure 1). In some countries in South and South-West Asia as well as in the least developed countries, extreme poverty rates are particularly high, with a large percentage of the population exposed to multiple dimensions of poverty.[4]

Figure 1
Under-five mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births) by subregion, 1990 and 2013



Source: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) calculations based on the ESCAP online statistical database. Available from www.unescap.org/stat/data/statdb/DataExplorer.aspx (accessed 15 January 2016).

2. Increasing income inequality

11. In spite of the success in poverty reduction, recent decades are also associated with a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Over the past 20 years, the Palma ratio – the ratio of the income share of the top 10 per cent to the bottom 40 per cent of a country's population – increased from 1.0 to 2.1 in China and from 0.8 to 2.0 in the Russian Federation. Even in countries where inequality is showing a downward trend, the ratio remains high. In many countries, the richest 10 per cent have almost twice as much income as the poorest 40 per cent (figure 2).

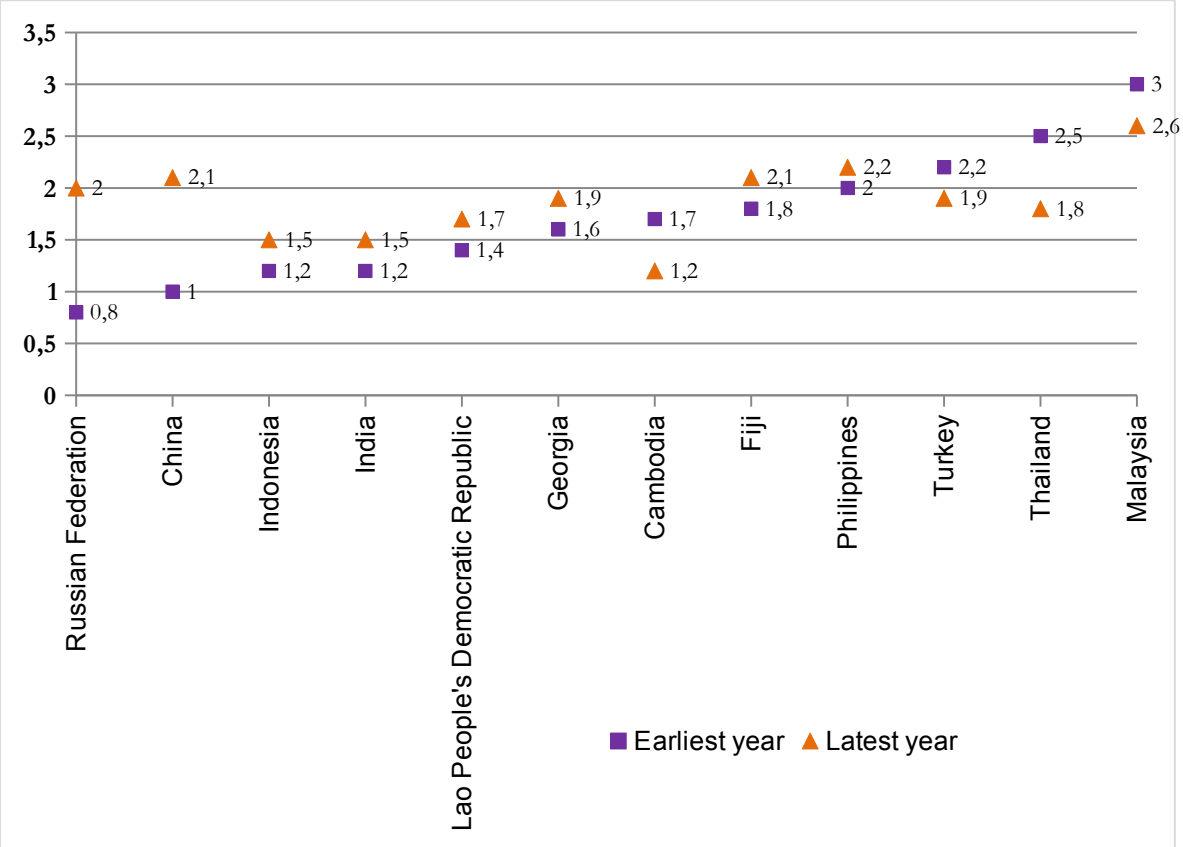
12. In some countries, rising inequalities are caused, inter alia, by economic transformation accompanied by cuts to social protection. In other countries, rising inequalities are due to economic growth policies that have not been adequately accompanied by social policies. Countries where inequalities have been reduced, such as Thailand, made significant progress in strengthening social protection, including by promoting universal health-

[3] United Nations, Millennium Development Goals Indicators database. Available from http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Data.aspx (accessed 6 July 2015).

[4] Sabina Alkire and others, "Brief methodological note and results", Multidimensional Poverty Index – Winter 2014/2015 (Oxford, University of Oxford, 2015).

care coverage. However, much more needs to be done in the efforts for more equal societies in the region.

Figure 2
Palma ratio: income share of the top 10 per cent to the bottom 40 per cent of a country's population



Source: ESCAP calculations, based on World Bank, World development indicators database. Available from http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators (accessed 10 December 2015).

13. Many marginalized social groups as well as women face inequalities of opportunity, which refers to unequal access to the chances required to sustain and improve livelihoods and lead meaningful lives, such as access to health care, water and sanitation, and education. Access to health care is particularly a concern in most of South and South-West Asia as well as in most of the least developed countries in the region.

3. Health

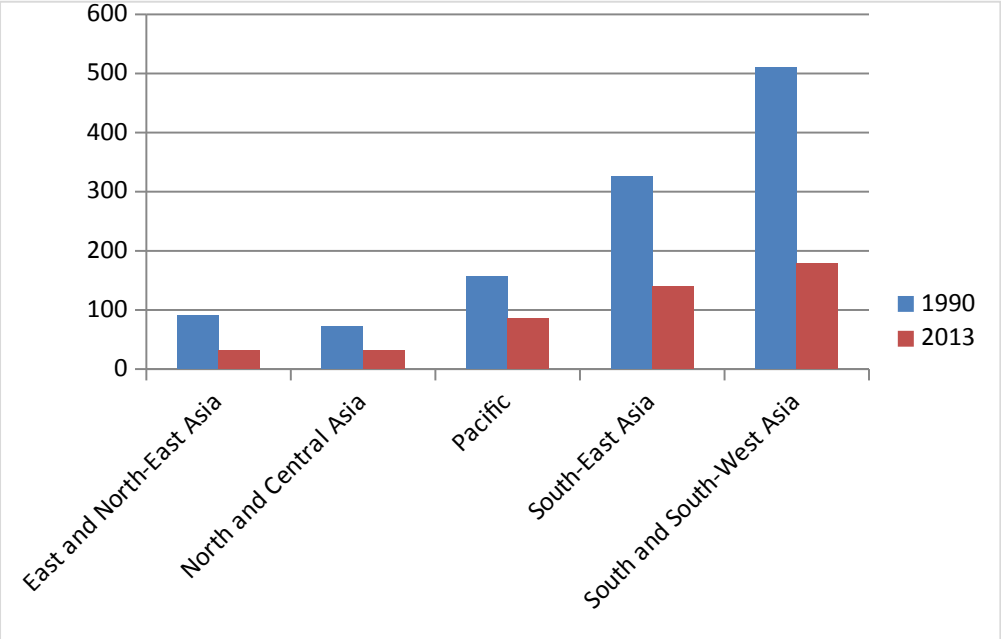
14. Health is a key determinant of well-being, and approximately 80 per cent of the population in Asia and the Pacific lack access to affordable health care, particularly in the least developed countries. Out-of-pocket health expenditures in some countries in the region are among the highest in the world, and such expenditures limit people's access to health care and result in detrimental reductions to other basic needs, particularly for the poor.[5] Although there have been gains in overall access to reproductive health services, those gains are primarily due to better access among the highest income groups. Overall, access to skilled birth attendance is largely determined by income status. While the availability of skilled birth

[5] *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2013* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.13.II.F.2).

attendance has increased in many countries, the cost of those services is still a barrier to access. Moreover, in many countries, and particularly among low income quintiles, there is still a lack of awareness of the need for skilled birth assistance.[6]

15. As a result of limited access to skilled birth attendance as well as other factors, maternal mortality remains high in South and South-West Asia, while outcomes are mixed in South-East Asia (figure 3). Overall, least developed countries lag behind, but there are also some non-least developed countries with high maternal mortality. For example, in 2013, in Afghanistan, maternal mortality was 400 per 100,000 live births, in the Lao People's Democratic Republic 220 and in Myanmar 200. In India and Indonesia, for the same year, maternal mortality was as high as in Nepal, 190 per 100,000.

Figure 3
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births) in Asia-Pacific subregions, 1990 and 2013



Source: ESCAP calculations based on the ESCAP online statistical database. Available from www.unescap.org/stat/data/statdb/DataExplorer.aspx (accessed 15 January 2016).

4. Water and sanitation

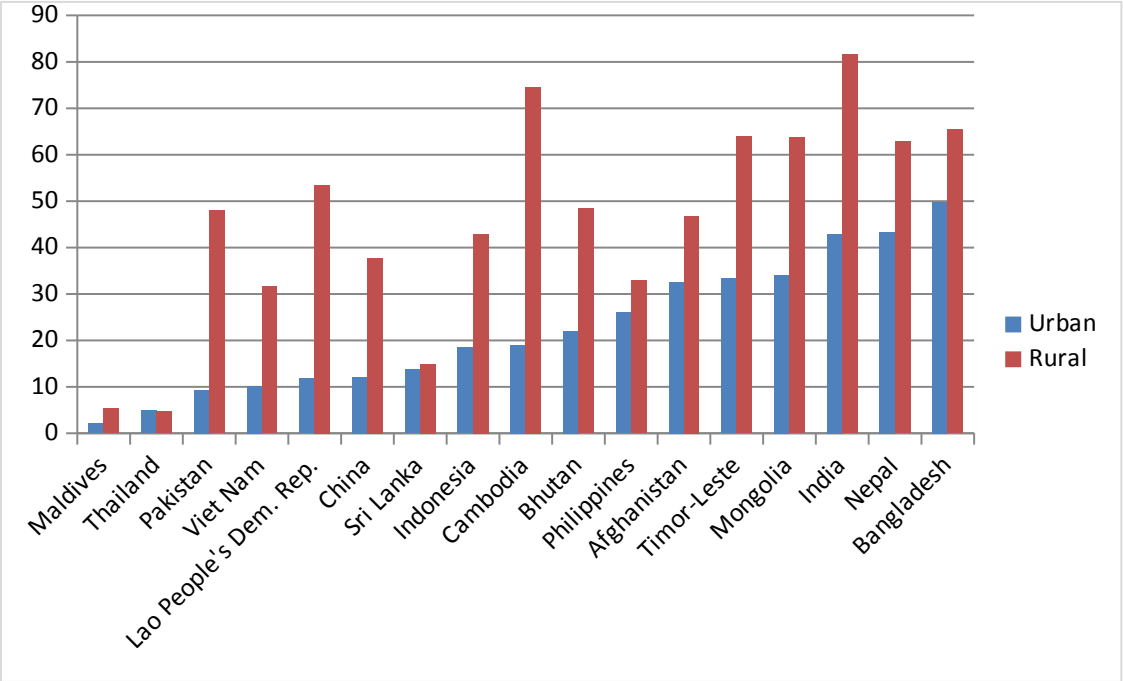
16. Access to safe water and sanitation is closely linked to health outcomes, security and livelihood. While access to water and sanitation has greatly increased in the region, large inequalities remain between and within countries. The vast majority of people with inadequate access to drinking water and sanitation are poor and living in rural areas, particularly in the least developed countries. Across Asia and the Pacific, 75 per cent of people living in urban areas in the region have access to improved sanitation, compared to only 46 per cent of those living in rural communities.[7] This is particularly the

[6] *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2015* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.15.II.F.7).

[7] United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2014* (ST/ESCAP/2704).

case in many countries in South and South-West Asia as well as in least developed countries (figure 4).

Figure 4
Percentage of population deprived of access to sanitation, urban and rural areas, select countries, most recent years



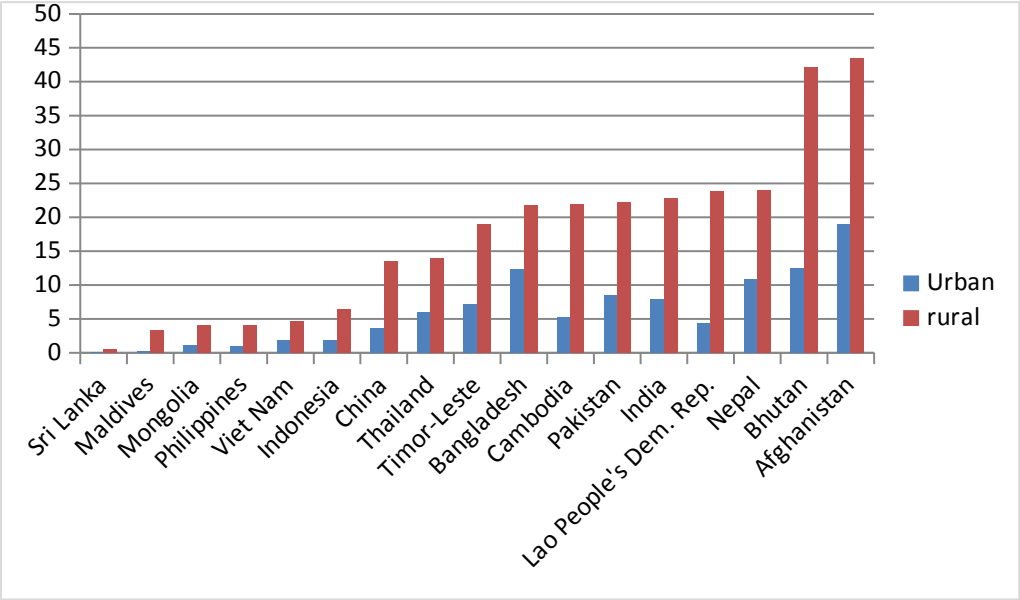
Source: ESCAP calculations, based on Sabina Alkire and others, "Brief methodological note and results", Multidimensional Poverty Index – Winter 2014/2015 (Oxford, University of Oxford, 2015). Available from www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/MPI-2015-Brief-Methodological-Note_June.pdf?90c0eb.

5. Education

17. Inequalities are also pervasive in education and are particularly pronounced in the least developed countries. While the Asia-Pacific region has witnessed progress in primary school enrolment, inequalities persist, particularly with regard to educational completion. Low-income groups tend to have lower rates of educational completion, particularly in times of crisis, when poor households are often forced to take their children out of school owing to financial constraints. For most Asian and Pacific countries, average years of education tend to increase with income level. For example, in several countries, children from the top quintile of family income attend school for four or five years more than children from the bottom quintile. In some countries, the gender gap in average years of schooling is larger in lower income quintiles and smaller in higher income quintiles.[8] School completion also varies between different regions of a country, with significantly lower educational completion rates in less developed and peripheral regions than in more developed regions (figure 5). In some countries, large disparities between girls and boys remain in terms of enrolment and completion, especially in levels of education above primary.

Figure 5
Households deprived of education, urban and rural areas, selected countries

[8] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Deprivation and Marginalization in Education database. Available from www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/GMR/html/dme-1.html (accessed 9 March 2014).



Source: ESCAP calculations, based on Sabina Alkire and others, "Brief methodological note and results", Multidimensional Poverty Index – Winter 2014/2015 (Oxford, University of Oxford, 2015). Available from www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/MPI-2015-Brief-Methodological-Note_June.pdf?90c0eb.

Note: A household is considered deprived of education if no household member has completed five years of schooling.

6. Social protection

18. Social protection and decent work reduce vulnerabilities and play a key role in reducing inequalities. Recognizing the importance of social protection, Governments in Asia and the Pacific are strengthening their efforts to broaden social protection coverage. Out of the 26 developing countries in the region for which data are available, 21 countries recorded an increase in social protection spending as a share of total government expenditures during the past two decades, but the overall percentage still remains low in many countries.[9]

19. Despite increased spending in social protection, the region needs to close important social protection coverage gaps, as only 10 per cent of unemployed people receive out-of-work benefits[10] and more than one billion workers are in vulnerable employment.[11]

B. Addressing the impact of population dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region and related issues

20. Population dynamics provide the contours to, and are shaped by, the three dimensions of sustainable development. The structural and long-term nature of population trends means they need to be well understood and

[9] United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Time for Equality: The Role of Social Protection in Reducing Inequalities in Asia and the Pacific* (ST/ESCAP/2735).

[10] Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Asian Development Bank and United Nations Development Programme, *Asia-Pacific Aspirations: Perspectives for a Post-2015 Development Agenda: Asia-Pacific Regional MDGs Report 2012/13* (Bangkok, 2013).

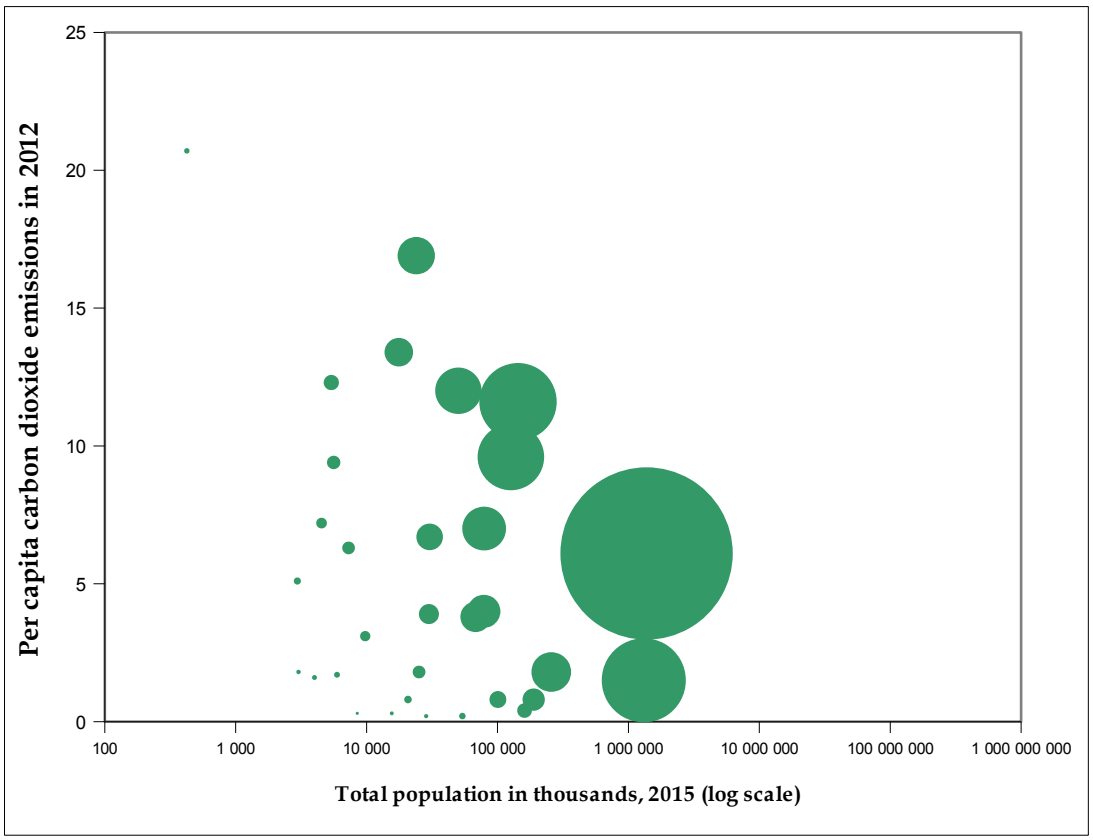
[11] *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2013* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.13.II.F.2).

addressed for a successful and evidence-based implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

1. Population and sustainable development

21. Demographically speaking, the Asia-Pacific region is one of the most diverse regions in the world, containing the countries with the largest and smallest populations, as well as countries at various stages of the demographic transition.[12] Population size matters when considering the overall impact of human consumption on the environment and assessing food security and infrastructure needs. However, per capita consumption often reaches very high levels in less populous and more developed countries (figure 6), which points to the importance of changing production and consumption patterns. Population size must be analysed hand-in hand with factors affecting individual behaviour.

Figure 6
Population and carbon dioxide emissions (per capita and total)



Source: ESCAP calculations based on United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World population prospects: the 2015 revision, http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/dvd/, and Asia Pacific Energy Portal, www.asiapacificenergy.org/.

2. Urbanization

22. Population growth is low in most of the region (0.9 per cent annually in 2015), and some populations are shrinking as a result of low fertility rates and international migration. Due to better opportunities in cities, population growth throughout the region is concentrated in urban areas, where nearly half of the population of the region lives. At the current urban growth rate of 2.2 per cent per year, the region's urban population will double in 32 years.

[12] The demographic transition refers to the change from high to low fertility and mortality rates.

Urban growth rates are particularly high in several least developed countries; for example, the Lao People's Democratic Republic has an urban growth rate of 4.7 per cent and the Solomon Islands 4.1 per cent. High urban growth rates show the need to achieve sustainable cities, including access by all urban dwellers to water, sanitation, employment opportunities and services such as health care and education – all of which issues are covered under the Sustainable Development Goals.[13] They also highlight the importance of creating more equality of opportunities between rural and urban areas within countries.

3. Population ageing

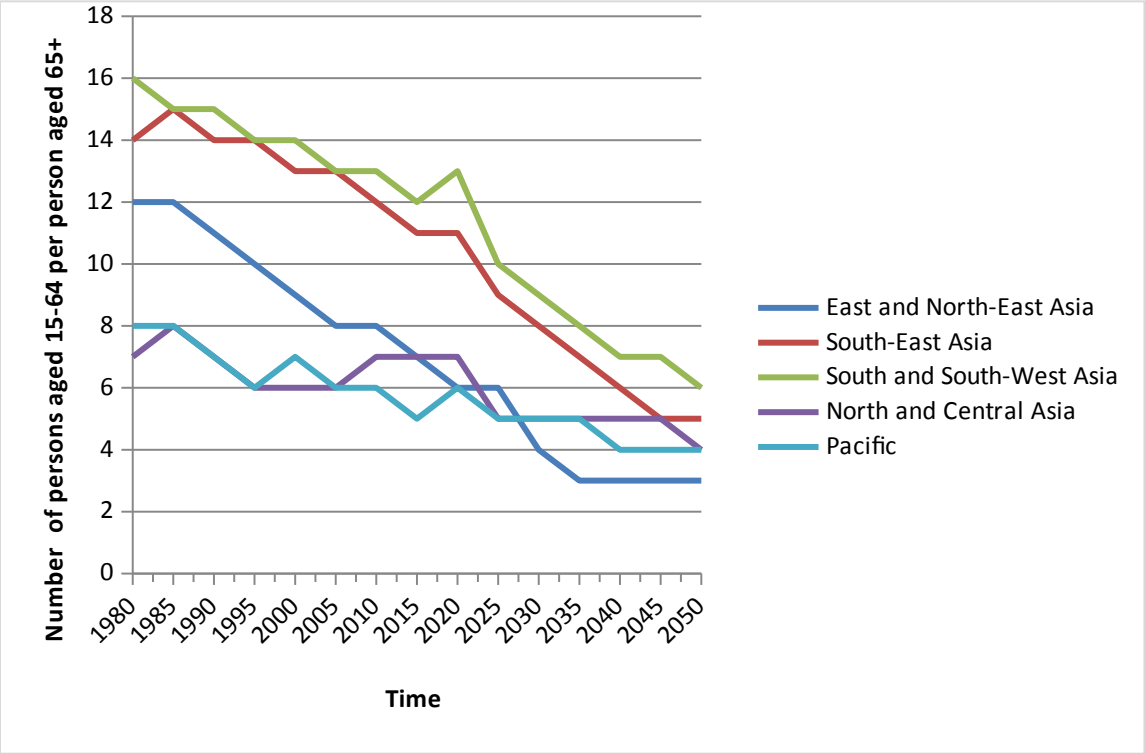
23. Population ageing is one of the most salient demographic trends in the Asia-Pacific region and must be addressed accordingly in the context of the 2030 Agenda. The combination of low fertility rates (at a regional average of 2.1. children per woman in 2015) and increased life expectancy, which is currently reaching 72 years, is leading to a sharp increase in the proportion of older persons in Asia and the Pacific, making it the fastest ageing region in the world. With 12.1 per cent of the region's population aged 60 or older, the region as a whole is currently considered to be at an ageing stage and will be considered an aged region by 2050.[14] As of 2015, Japan is already hyper aged, while Australia, New Zealand and the Russian Federation have aged populations. Due to women's higher life expectancy, there are significantly more older women than men, a trend even more visible in the age group above 80, which is itself steadily increasing.[13]

24. A serious challenge for economic sustainability is posed by the sharp decrease in the old age support ratio, which is the number of persons between 15 and 64 (therefore considered of working age) per person above the age of 65 (figure 7). The decrease in the old age support ratio means that there are fewer persons in the labour force to socially and economically support an increasing number of older persons, who are themselves at higher risk of falling into poverty. Key challenges faced by countries in the region to address shrinking working-age populations include increasing labour force participation as a whole and of women in particular and increasing productivity and promoting active ageing policies, including facilitating work for older people who need or would like to work. This is also critical to finance the costs associated with population ageing, such as increasing health-care costs, and to increase the sustainability of pension systems.

Figure 7
Old age support ratio in Asia and the Pacific, 1980-2050 (projected)

[13] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, Key Findings and Advance Tables* (New York, 2015). Available from http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Publications/Files/Key_Findings_WPP_2015.pdf.

[14] According to United Nations categorization, a population is considered ageing, aged, very aged and hyper aged when the population aged 65 and over accounts for 7 to 9.9 per cent, 10 to 19.9 per cent, 20 to 29.9 per cent, and 30 per cent of the total population, respectively. When age 60 is considered the threshold, the population is classified as ageing, aged, very aged and hyper aged at 10, 20, 30 and 35 per cent, respectively.



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World population prospects: the 2015 revision. Available from http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/.

25. There is a high risk of older people falling into poverty as a result of limited access to income support in old age, including through contributory and non-contributory pension systems, particularly in South and South-West Asia, as well as in the least developed countries (figure 8). Moreover, specific regulations, such as mandatory retirement ages or discrimination in the job market, make it difficult for older persons who would be willing and able to work to contribute to the labour force. The risk of falling into poverty is particularly pronounced for older women, who tend to be more financially dependent than men due to lower labour force participation and sex-based pay gaps.

4. Youth

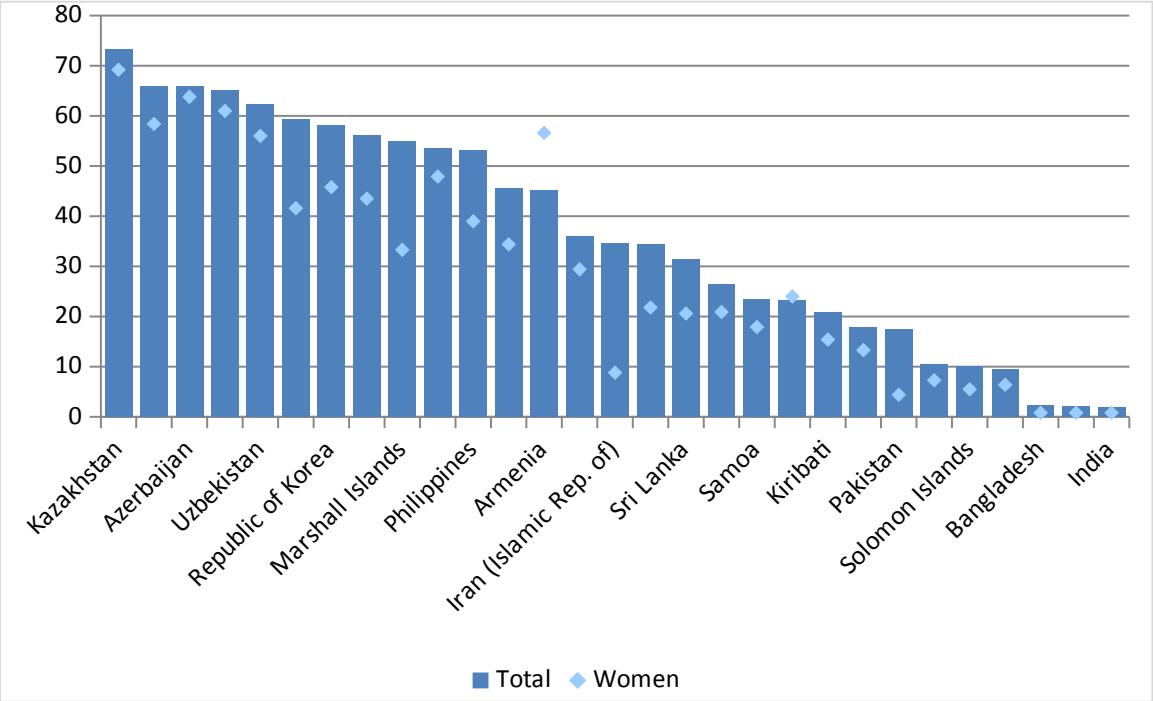
26. Although ageing is the leading demographic trend in the region, 710 million young people aged 15 to 24 live in the Asia and Pacific region.[15] South and South-West Asia, as well as most Pacific island countries and the region's least developed countries, still have large youth populations. Youth unemployment in the region, at approximately 10 per cent,[16] is more than twice the level for the total labour force, and young people face obstacles transitioning from school to work, as education and training systems often do not match modern labour market demands.[17] Also, rates of adolescent childbearing in Asia and the Pacific remain among the highest in the world, particularly in South and South-West Asia, largely due to the practice of early marriage for girls.

[15] ESCAP calculations, based on World population prospects: the 2015 revision. Available from http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/.

[16] International Labour Organization. *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2015: Scaling Up Investments in Decent Jobs for Youth* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2015). Available from www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_412015.pdf.

[17] E/ESCAP/CSD(4)/3.

Figure 8
Statutory coverage of contributory mandatory pensions as a percentage of the working-age population, select countries, latest available year



Source: International Labour Organization, *World Social Protection Report 2014-2015: Building Economic Recovery, Inclusive Development and Social Justice*, annex IV (Geneva, 2014).

27. Most countries in South and South-West Asia as well as Pacific island countries with large youth populations can still reap the demographic dividend, provided adequate health, educational and employment policies are put in place. While there is still much progress to be made, Governments across the region are realizing how young people can be powerful agents of change, using innovative means to get their messages across and shape their future. In this regard, the note by the secretariat on regional trends regarding education and employment, particularly the challenges arising from the transition from school to work, provides a comprehensive analysis of, and proposes solutions for enhancing, the school-to-work transition for youth in the region.[17]

5. Migration

28. Another key trend shaping the Asia-Pacific region, and also prominently featuring in the 2030 Agenda, is international migration. An estimated 95 million people from the Asia-Pacific region lived abroad in 2013.[18] While people migrate for a number of reasons, temporary labour migration, often to countries in Western Asia, but also within the Asia-Pacific region, is currently the most salient trend. Labour migrants move through both regular and irregular channels to fill labour shortages in the countries of destination. Through their work and remittances, they contribute to the economies and societies of countries of origin and destination. In spite of their contributions, they often lack access to social protection in countries of

[18] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, International migrant stock 2013: by destination and origin. Available from www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimatesorigin.shtml.

destination.[19] One of the potential risks of migration is increased vulnerability: some migrant workers become victims of human trafficking, forced labour and other human rights abuses; in particular, migrant domestic workers (mainly women) often experience limited rest time, isolation, low wages and abuse. Facilitating regular channels for international migration would increase the protection of migrants as would ensuring basic labour standards for all workers.

29. Remittances have been instrumental for the development of many countries of origin for migrants, particularly some least developed and landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, by contributing to poverty reduction and indirectly leading to better health and educational outcomes. The region as a whole received approximately $249 billion in remittances in 2015.[20] In eight countries in the region, remittances constitute more than 10 per cent of the gross domestic product, even exceeding the level of official development assistance or foreign direct investment flows.[21] However, the development impact of remittances is often limited by high costs of remittances and recruitment.

30. An increasing number of people also migrate because their livelihoods are threatened as a result of environmental degradation, natural disasters and climate change. In most cases such migration is within a country, but can also be abroad.

C. Addressing the persistent inequality between women and men, girls and boys in the Asia-Pacific region

31. Gender equality and women's empowerment are recognized prerequisites for the realization of all development goals and central to inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. In addition to the 2030 Agenda, Governments across the region have committed to a more comprehensive approach to tackling inequalities between women and men, girls and boys, through the adoption of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in November 2014.

32. Gains towards gender equality can particularly be seen in education, with a mixed picture in reproductive health. In spite of substantive improvements, maternal mortality remains stubbornly high, particularly in some countries in South and South-West Asia.[22] With respect to education, gender parity is evident in primary, and increasingly secondary, school enrolments. Notwithstanding, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, significantly fewer girls than boys are enrolled in both primary and secondary education.[23]

[19] Asia-Pacific RCM Thematic Working Group on International Migration including Human Trafficking, *Asia-Pacific Migration Report: Migrant's Contributions to Development* (ST/ESCAP/2738).

[20] World Bank staff calculations based on data from the International Monetary Fund's Balance of Payments Statistics database and data releases from central banks, national statistical agencies, and World Bank country desks.

[21] World Bank, World development indicators database. Available from http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators (accessed 10 December 2015).

[22] E/ESCAP/71/20.

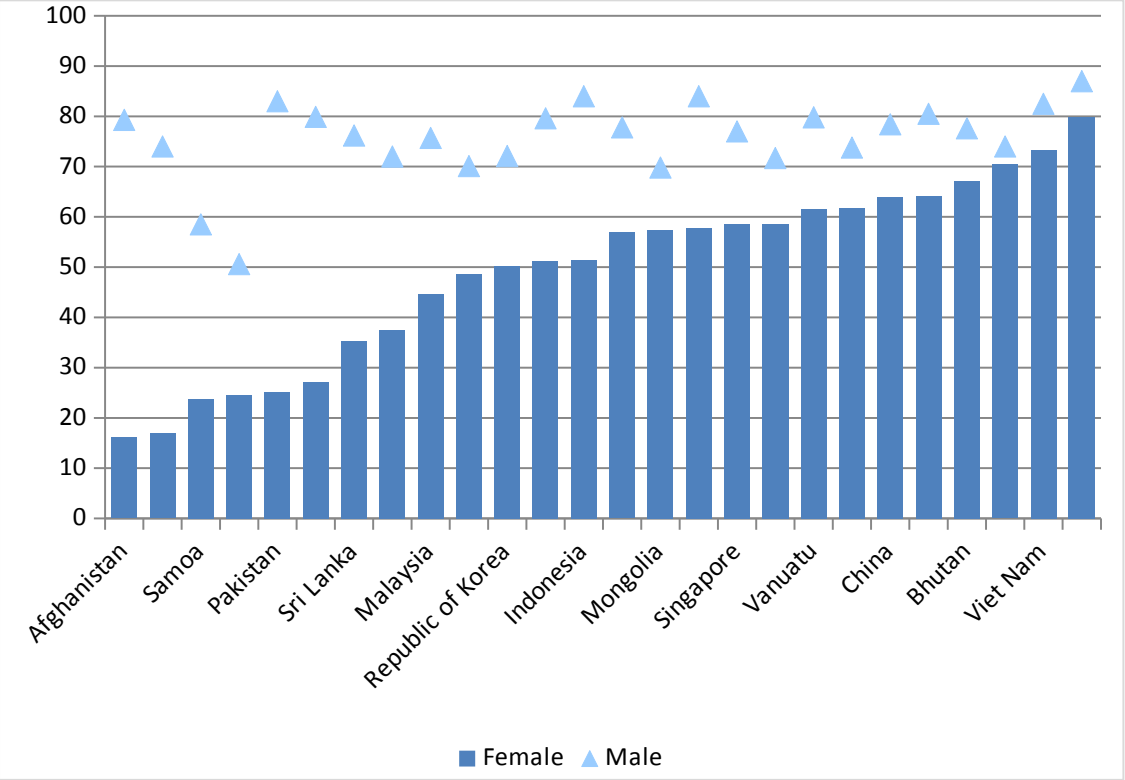
[23] United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF data: monitoring the situation of children and women. Available from http://data.unicef.org/education/overview.html (accessed 19 December 2015).

In Pakistan, the gender gap is particularly pronounced in rural areas, as well as in provinces such as Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.[24]

33. Enrolment in tertiary education is more varied. Tertiary enrolment rates for women still lag behind those of men in all countries in South and South-West Asia, with the exception of Sri Lanka. In other subregions, young women outnumber young men in many countries.

34. In spite of achievements in education, gender gaps persist in economic participation. Women continue to be less likely to be in paid employment than men. Since 1991, female employment as a proportion of male employment in Asia and the Pacific has hovered between 61 and 65 per cent. Among all subregions, the largest gender gap has been observed in South and South-West Asia, where, in 2013, approximately 30 percent of the female population was employed, compared to more than 70 per cent of the male population. Overall, female labour force participation remains low in many countries of the region and significantly lower than men's labour force participation (figure 9). In Nepal and Papua New Guinea, as well as several other least developed countries, where female labour force participation appears high, women work primarily in agriculture. Overall, agriculture is still the largest employer for women, particularly in South and South-West Asia, where 62 per cent of women in the labour force are in agriculture – often without pay.[25]

Figure 9
Female and male labour force participation (percentage) in select countries in Asia and the Pacific, 2015, projections



Source: International Labour Organization, Key indicators of the labour market

[24] Madeeha Gohar Qureshi, "Profile of educational outcomes by gender: an age cohort analysis", PIDE Working Papers, No. 125 (Islamabad, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2015).

[25] United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2015* (Bangkok, 2015)

2015. Available from www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/research-and-databases/kilm/WCMS_422090/lang-en/index.htm.

35. When they are employed, women are, relative to men, more likely to be engaged in vulnerable employment. For instance, more women than men are contributing family workers, particularly in low and lower-middle income countries where 30 to 40 per cent of employed females are classified as such. Contributing family workers are those workers who hold self-employment jobs as own-account workers in a market-oriented establishment operated by a related person living in the same household. Available data also reveal the persistent gender pay gap in the Asia-Pacific region, where the earnings of women are, on average, 20 per cent less than those of men.[26]

36. Control and management of productive resources is also integral to women's empowerment. Yet restrictions against property ownership, including land, are encountered by women and girls across the region.[26] These restrictions, reflected in inheritance legislation or customary practices, create barriers to women's access to bank loans and limit their opportunities to establish and grow an enterprise.

37. With respect to participation and leadership in public and political life, women constitute a minority of the holders of national and subnational political office, as well as of senior-level public and private sector positions. The regional average of seats held by women in national parliaments is 19 per cent, just below the global average of 23 per cent. Only three countries – Nepal, New Zealand and Timor-Leste – have reached a representation of 30 per cent women in national parliament. In approximately one third of countries in the region, in particular those in South and South-West Asia and the Pacific, women constitute less than 10 per cent of national parliamentarians. Progress in this area is not dependent on the income level of countries: indeed, Afghanistan and Nepal have succeeded in increasing the representation of women in their parliaments, reaching 28 and 30 per cent of seats in national (lower house) parliaments, whereas the figures for Japan and the Republic of Korea remain low at 10 and 16 per cent respectively.[27] Through such measures as affirmative action, quotas and capacity-building, countries in Asia and the Pacific have sought, and are seeking, to increase the political participation of women and their assumption of decision-making posts. Prejudicial sociocultural norms, partial implementation of policies and legislation, insufficient resources and lack of capacity, for example, are all reported impediments that need to be overcome in order to achieve the equal representation of women and men in leadership and decision-making positions.

38. In order to achieve gender equality and realize the shared vision, articulated in the 2030 Agenda, of a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination, of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity, a sound understanding of the nature, causes and occurrence of discrimination against, and subjugation of, women and girls is needed, accompanied by policy responses that result in the desired transformations in gender relations.

[26] Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Development Centre, Social institutions and gender index database. Available from http://genderindex.org/data#restricted-resources-and-assets.

[27] Inter-Parliamentary Union, Women in international parliaments database. Available from www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm.

D. Key trends relating to the integration of vulnerable groups into society in the Asia-Pacific region

39. Vulnerable groups are populations that face heightened exposure to physical, economic, social and environmental risks as a result of their socioeconomic status and social identity.[28] These groups can include, among others, persons with disabilities; persons living with HIV; survivors of human trafficking; internally displaced people and refugees; and older persons, children and young persons, as well as many women and girls. They are most likely to be among those "left behind" and therefore receive special attention in the 2030 Agenda.

40. The impacts of vulnerability are often coupled with discrimination and are felt in numerous ways, including reduced access to education, health care, safe drinking water, sanitation, social infrastructure and decent work opportunities. Despite their diversity, one theme common to many vulnerable groups is their disproportionate risk of poverty. In order to more concretely explore key trends relating to the reduction of causes of vulnerability among groups in the Asia-Pacific region, the category of persons with disabilities is used as an example in this document.

1. Persons with disabilities

41. Persons with disabilities are at a disadvantage compared to the general population across several dimensions of social and economic well-being.[29] In Asia and the Pacific alone there are 650 million persons with disabilities – that is, 15 per cent of the region's total population. Persons with disabilities are disproportionately marginalized and discriminated against in legal, political, social and cultural structures, and this is borne out in their experiences accessing employment, education, social protection and legal representation.

42. Persons with disabilities are often victims of a vicious cyclical relationship between disability and poverty: disability may increase the risk of poverty by excluding individuals from education and work, and poverty may also increase the risk of disability through malnutrition or poor living and working conditions.[30] Data from 59 countries surveyed in the World Health Survey, 2002-2004, of the World Health Organization showed that, in low income countries, 22.4 per cent of all persons with disabilities were in the poorest wealth quintile, compared to 13.3 per cent in the richest quintile.[29]

43. Persons with disabilities tend to have lower employment rates than those without disabilities (figure 10). They may be prevented from working due to inaccessible transportation services, inaccessible workplaces, the lack of accessible information and communication services, and the preference of employers for candidates without disabilities.

44. In many developing economies in Asia and the Pacific, the majority of persons – regardless of whether or not they have a disability – work in the informal sector where there is little job protection or stability. For most persons with disabilities in the region, self-employment or informal employment is a necessity, rather than a choice. Women with disabilities are

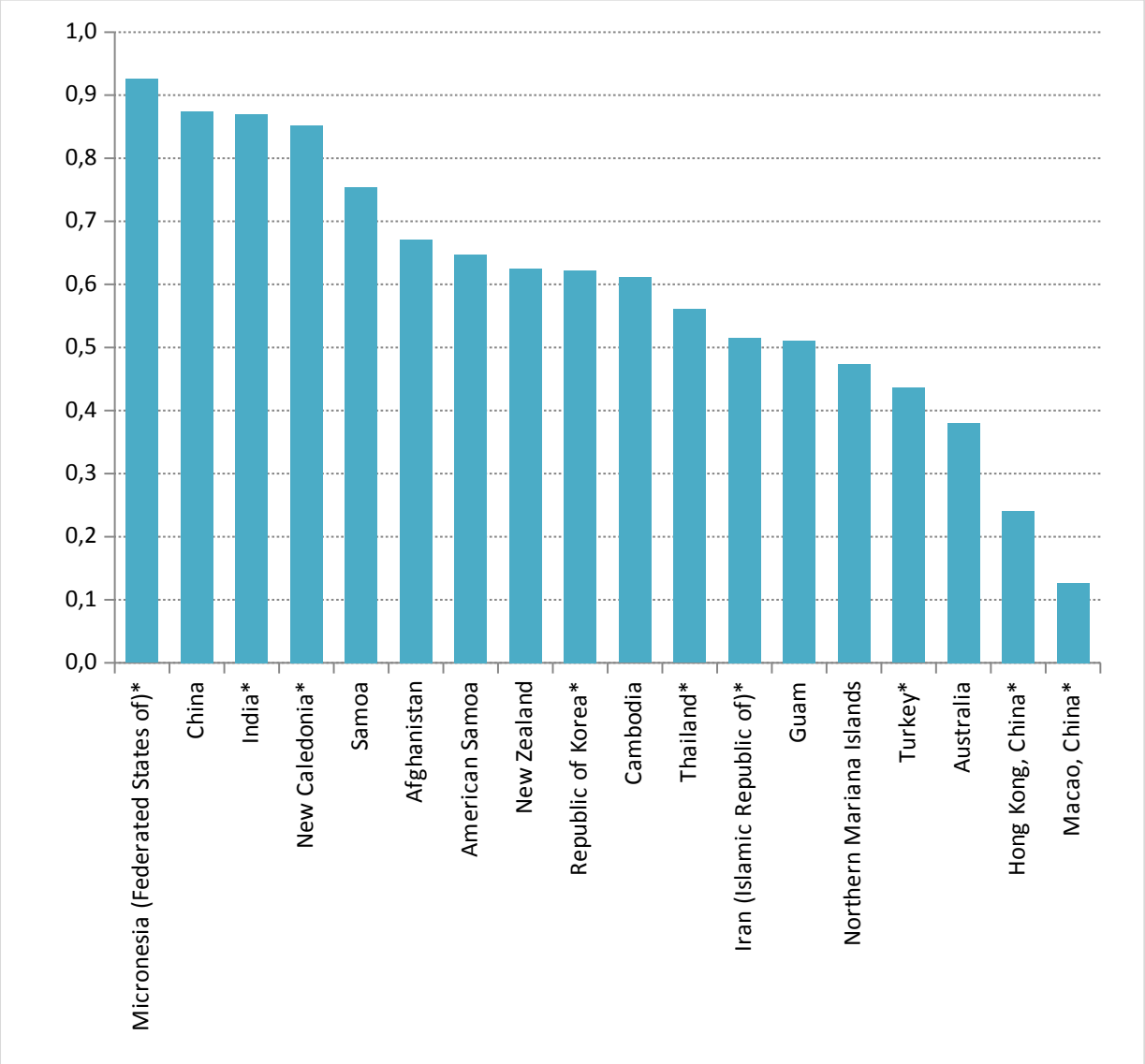
[28] E/CN.5/2015/6.

[29] World Health Organization and World Bank, *World Report on Disability* (Geneva, 2011). Available from www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report.pdf.

[30] The Lancet Editorial, "Disability: beyond the medical model", *The Lancet*, vol. 374, No. 9704 (November 2009), p. 1793.

even less likely to be employed than men with disabilities and also earn less when they are employed.[29]

Figure 10
Ratios of employment rates of persons with disabilities to employment rates of persons without disabilities



Source: United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Disability at a Glance 2015: Strengthening Employment Prospects for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific* (ST/ESCAP/2736). Available from www.unescap.org/resources/disability-glance-2015-strengthening-employment-prospects-persons-disabilities-asia-and.

Note: A ratio below 1 means that persons with disabilities are not integrated into the labour market to the same degree as persons without disabilities.

* For countries that have no employment data for persons without disabilities, the employment rate for overall population is used as a proxy.

IV. Adopting an integrated approach to sustainable development while focusing on the social dimension

45. As stated above, the 2030 Agenda has a clear focus on inclusive development, on reaching all vulnerable groups and on promoting equality as a cross-cutting issue. It is therefore an important next step in addressing the unfinished business of the Millennium Development Goals, as persisting inequalities, including gender-based inequalities, are among the main reasons

for limited progress in some areas.[31]

A. Integration in a balanced manner

46. Implementing the 2030 Agenda requires an approach that addresses the three dimensions of sustainable development in a balanced manner and acknowledges their interdependence and linkages. Countries in the region will have to work towards integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development, particularly the linkages between the social and the environmental dimensions, the integration of the use of technology and the identification of adequate and innovative financing mechanisms for social development.

B. Achieving social sustainability

47. Achieving social sustainability is a key requirement for achieving overall sustainable development. Socially sustainable societies are cohesive societies that empower and actively integrate marginalized groups. They generally display low levels of inequalities and a high degree of social solidarity across population groups and across generations. Socially sustainable societies face a low likelihood of social unrest and are able to deliver social services effectively, which is key to boosting economic development and to achieving consensus on environmental protection.[32]

48. Linkages between the social and other dimensions of sustainable development were recognized in 1995 in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development. It emphasized that economic development, social development and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development, which is the framework for efforts to achieve a higher quality of life for all people.[33]

C. Effective social policies

49. Social policies, such as promoting quality education and health care, lay the foundations of a sustainable economy and will lead to greater long-term growth. Economic growth can increase existing imbalances if not supported by social policies that ensure equitable distribution of newly gained wealth, as has been observed in certain parts of the Asia and Pacific region in the past two decades.[34] Moreover, studies have also shown that high inequality reduces the poverty-reducing effects of economic growth.[35]

50. In addition, social policies may also be required to mitigate the effects of environmental policies. Renewable energies will have to be made accessible to all and redistributory policies and pricing policies can play a role in this.[36] It will also be important that green jobs are also decent jobs and

[31] E/ESCAP/71/20.

[32] E/CN.5/2015/6.

[33] *Report of the World Summit for Social Development*, *Copenhagen 6-12 March 1995*, (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.8), chap. I, resolution 1, annex I.

[34] E/ESCAP/CSD(3)/1.

[35] Martin Ravallion, "Growth, inequality and poverty: looking beyond averages", *World Development*, vol. 29, No. 11 (2001), pp. 1803-1815.

[36] Jonathan M. Harris, "Basic principles of sustainable development", Global Development and Environment Institute Working Paper, No. 00-04 (Medford, Massachusetts, Tufts University, 2000). Available from www.ase.tufts.edu/gdae/publications/working_papers/Sustainable%20Development.PDF.

that they are accessible to all, for example by providing access to skills required for green jobs.[37]

D. Addressing inequalities

51. There are also linkages between inequalities and environmental outcomes. For instance, studies have shown that societies with higher inequality tend to have larger carbon footprints than countries with similar income levels with lower levels of inequality. This is attributed to the lifestyles of higher income groups, which often produce large carbon footprints through mobility and energy consumption. Other studies have also shown that in countries with high levels of inequalities, decisions are typically geared towards the needs of higher income groups.[38]

52. Existing inequalities can be further exacerbated by environmental degradation and vice versa. Many poor households living in rural areas depend on subsistence or small-scale agriculture or fishing and heavily depend on natural resources for their livelihoods, which are then threatened by environmental degradation.[37] But poverty and inequality can also aggravate environmental degradation. Sometimes, the poor are compelled to exploit environmental resources for their survival. This increases both the risk and their own exposure to disasters such as floods, droughts and landslides.[39] Thus, social policies promoting equal access to social services, pro-poor economic growth and sustainable agriculture can contribute to reducing pollution and exposure to and risk of disasters and environmental degradation.

E. Comprehensive whole-of-government approach

53. Addressing sustainable development therefore requires a comprehensive approach that includes social policies in the design of economic and environmental policies. A whole-of-government approach, wherein consciousness, commitment, capacity and collaboration contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies, legislation, action plans and services that support the achievement of equality and the integration of marginalized groups into society is critical to this end. Further requirements include comprehensive, valid and reliable data and statistics for evidence-based action, and effective follow up and review.

54. In this regard, as part of the broader framework of the regional road map towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) will strive to support countries in addressing the following issues which are vital to the achievement of Goals and the 2030 Agenda.

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[37] E/ESCAP/71/20.

[38] S. Nazrul Islam, “Inequality and environmental sustainability”, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Working Paper No. 145, (New York, United Nations, 2015).

[39] United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, “Natural disasters and sustainable development: understanding the links between development, environment and natural disasters”, background paper presented at the 2nd meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, New York, January-February 2002.

F. Issues vital to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

1. Addressing inequalities within and between countries

55. Providing decent work and social protection throughout the life course plays a pivotal role in reducing inequalities and vulnerabilities. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, providing a social protection floor, which includes universal access to health care and basic income security, is of key importance to reducing inequalities, strengthening the resilience of individuals and households vis-à-vis falling into poverty, and improving health outcomes. Providing decent work for all will be key to sustainably reducing poverty, particularly for groups that have difficulties entering the labour market, such as young people, women, persons with disabilities and older persons. This means increasing the capacity of all countries to collect domestic resources for development and increasing the size and efficiency of social spending will be essential. A socially and gender responsive tax system with redistributory elements and effective and transparent tax collection and tax administration are essential tools in this regard.

2. Addressing the impact of demographic change

56. The region is going through a process of rapid demographic transition. Many subregions are ageing rapidly and do not have the requisite capacity within their social protection and health systems to address the needs of the rapidly growing number of older persons. Related to the point mentioned in paragraph 55, countries in the region must invest in sustainable income security and health systems geared to meet the needs of older persons and adopt policies to mitigate the potential impacts of shrinking labour forces. At the same time, youth still make up a large proportion of other countries and subregions. Countries need to take steps to enhance youth participation in political processes, enhance their school-to-work transition and ensure decent work for young people if countries are to take advantage of the demographic dividend.

3. Reaching the farthest behind

57. The 2030 Agenda seeks to ensure that marginalized people are integrated into societies and receive the support they need, in a manner that is underpinned by human rights. Without their active integration, there will always be a bottom billion left behind who are likely to remain in poverty, without access to health-care services, quality education or other opportunities that enable lives of dignity. These groups include, among others, persons with disabilities, key populations at higher risk of HIV and AIDS, and migrants and their families. Several groups face specific barriers to accessing social services or find that existing services do not address their needs. Thus, empowering marginalized persons and strengthening their rights, as well as targeted action to enhance their access to social services and reduce vulnerabilities, will be of key importance to realizing the 2030 Agenda.

4. Implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to realize gender equality and women's empowerment

58. The key to the region achieving the Sustainable Development Goals lies in ensuring gender equality and the empowerment of women. Increasing female labour force participation by ensuring the economic empowerment of women and decent work; ensuring equal participation of women in all sectors of the economy and society; and addressing violence against women is vital to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. The global blueprint for realizing gender equality and empowering women was provided in the Beijing

Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted in 1995, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. At the regional level, countries in Asia and the Pacific should also use the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, of November 2014, as a framework for accelerating implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, including by strengthening institutions, enhancing accountability, increasing resources, forging stronger partnerships and supporting regional cooperation.

V. Conclusions

59. As countries position themselves to implement the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, they face a range of interconnected and complex challenges. These challenges are institutional and infrastructural and related to financial and human resources.

60. One of the key challenges relates to the structure and functioning of institutions within and outside government. The effective integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development will require reforms within Governments to adopt a more comprehensive approach whereby policies and programmes being implemented in one dimension also take into account the impact on the other two dimensions of sustainable development. This institutional reform will need to take into account the increasing focus on decentralized action at the subnational levels and the need for strengthening institutions at all levels for sustainable development to take root.

61. Financial resources remain a key constraining factor for development. In an era of competing priorities and shrinking international funding, increased collection and equitable allocation of domestic resources for development is critical. At present, many countries in the region have a low revenue base and can do much better in this regard. Existing resources can be more effectively spent through better targeting and by eliminating redundancies. In addition, new resources can be raised by strengthening tax collection and administration, but also by reaching out to partners, such as the private sector and civil society, including philanthropists. New forms such as social impact investing or social entrepreneurship can also be promoted.

62. Enhancing human resources, including by improving education, matching skills to demand, promoting healthy lifestyles and ensuring decent work, is another challenge that all countries in the region face in one way or another.

63. Last but not least, improving governance and ensuring accountability to all sections of the population has to be at the core of any solution to implement the 2030 Agenda. The challenges of the twenty-first century cannot be met by using the ideas and solutions used in the twentieth century. In this age of rapid globalization, mobile populations and rapidly evolving technologies, the solution must be innovative and pragmatic and address the needs of the most excluded.

64. The background paper of the secretariat on regional trends regarding education and employment, particularly the challenges arising from the transition from school to work, looks at how member States are positioning themselves to address the above challenges, provides suggestions for strengthening institutions and shares innovative solutions for achieving a balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development.[40]

[40] E/ESCAP/CSD(4)/3.

65. The findings and recommendations contained in that document may also be considered in addressing the questions below.

1. In light of the above, the Committee is invited to deliberate on the following based on the experience of member States:

(a) How do countries seek to address the social trends highlighted in the present document?

(b) What are the challenges to integrating the social dimension into the other dimensions of sustainable development?

(c) What are the data and research gaps in the area of social development and how could they be narrowed?