

# Strategies to combat poverty and generate decent employment in the Asia - Pacific region

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## A. Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region has made major strides in overcoming poverty<sup>1</sup> during the period of implementation of the MDGs and attained the MDG target of halving the incidence of poverty between 1990 and 2015. The pace of progress in reducing poverty has been more rapid than the world as a whole, particularly in the case of the East Asia and Pacific sub-region, although South Asia has also

Figure 1.

witnessed rapid decline since the mid-2000s (Figure 1).

However, despite this rapid progress in

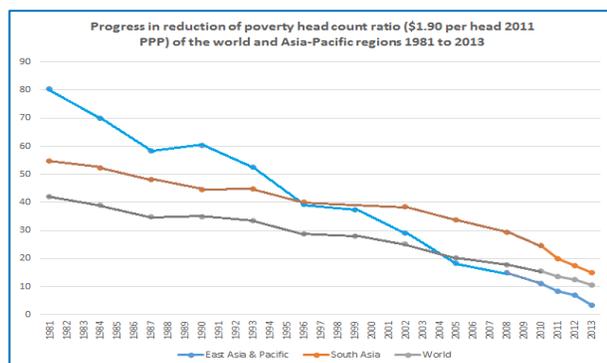
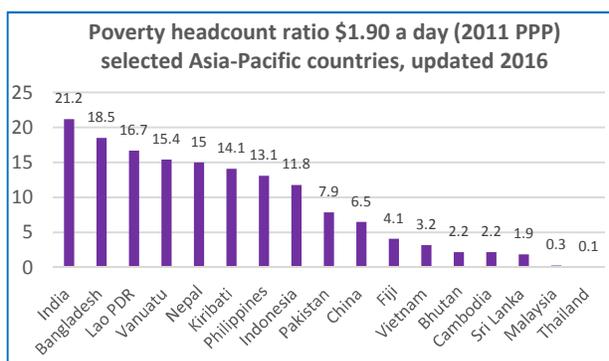


Figure 2.



Development Indicators

poverty reduction, major hurdles still remain in the path of attaining total eradication of poverty by 2030 which is aimed at under the Sustainable Development Goals. Around 375 million people still remain mired in poverty in the region and many countries continue to have high poverty incidence (Figure 2) particularly in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Moreover, twice this number (about 750 million<sup>2</sup>) comprise the near poor who have escaped poverty and remain vulnerable to reverting to that state if they face economic or environmental shocks.

This paper examines first, the major factors that drove poverty reduction during the MDG period and the lessons learnt with implementing various poverty reduction strategies. Thereafter, the paper discusses four emerging threats to the region that will have major ramifications on poverty reduction – and poses particularly a threat to the vulnerable poor – and decent employment generation during the SDG implementation period and steps that must be taken to address them.

## B. Poverty reduction strategies : what has worked in Asia-Pacific

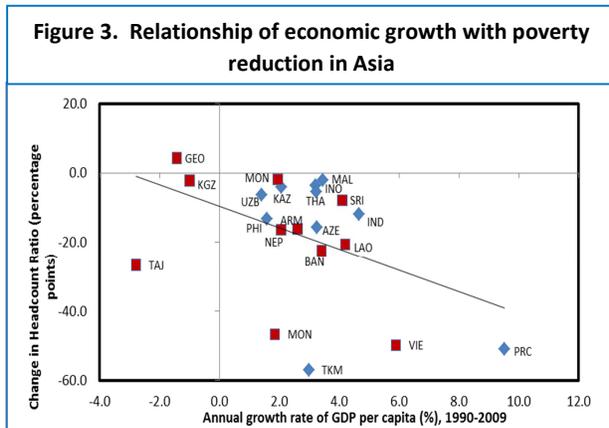
<sup>1</sup> Discussion of poverty in this paper has been focused on the vital income poverty area only rather than dealing also with the wider concept of poverty concerning capability deprivation *a la* Sen, A.K. (1999) etc. which involves non-income poverty as well.

<sup>2</sup> The difference between those in \$3.0 a day poverty and those in \$1.25 a day poverty (2011 PPP) estimated from WDI tables.

The Asia-Pacific region’s exemplary performance during the MDG implementation period in reducing poverty holds many lessons. What were the major factors that helped move millions out of poverty and what are still holding several millions back? This paper discusses three sets of key drivers that have played a major role: (i) promotion of broad-based and inclusive economic growth; (ii) proactive public action to reduce poverty; and (iii) improving the delivery of public services to the poor.

**1. Promoting inclusive growth.**<sup>3</sup> Rapid economic growth, particularly if it is broad based, i.e. widely participated in by all segments of the population, generates employment and improves the livelihood of the poor, is essential for reducing poverty. The role of growth in reducing poverty has

been well recognized by scholars.<sup>4</sup> Asia-Pacific’s success in reducing poverty dramatically owes much to the higher growth rates it has achieved compared to other developing regions. The scatter plot in Figure 3 shows a clear negative relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction during the period 1990 to 2009 in selected Asian countries.

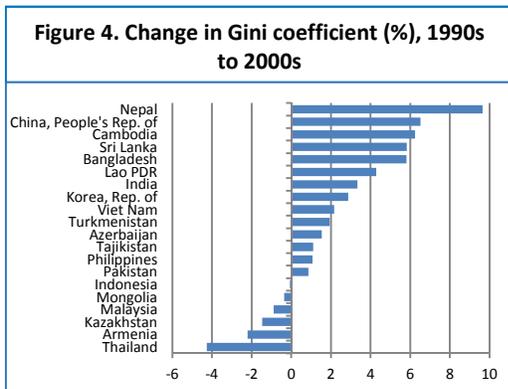


Rapid growth works both directly and indirectly in reducing poverty. Growth can impact directly if it generates large scale

employment of poor households or adds substantially to incomes from their existing work. It can act indirectly by potentially improving resources with Governments, provided such resources are garnered through effective taxation, and spent wisely on remedying gaps in basic services such as education, health, water and sanitation which improve the productive capacities of the poor.

Source: Chatterjee (2014)

However these transmission mechanisms from growth to poverty require growth to be inclusive, without which the efficacy of growth as an important driver of poverty reduction could



reduce. This reduction in efficacy is happening as witnessed by growing income inequalities in countries of Asia (Figure 4). The poverty elasticity of growth nearly halved, for Asia as a whole, between the earlier and later halves of 2000.<sup>5</sup>

If the pace of poverty reduction is to be maintained in the Asia-Pacific region, all efforts must be made to try and make growth as inclusive as possible. This will not happen automatically if left to market forces and public policy towards this intent will be necessary. attempted?

What are the main ways that this can be

First, merely trying to promote

Source: Zhuang and Ali (2010)

inclusive

<sup>3</sup> For details see Chatterjee (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Beginning with writers such as Dollar, D and A. Kray, (1991) others have demonstrated the relationship.

<sup>5</sup> Although Wan et al (2014) found this for Asia as a whole, some countries bucked this trend, such as India where the elasticity in fact increased.

growth is not enough. Specific goals and targets for poverty reduction and employment generation to be achieved within a definite time frame must be established by countries. In this respect, the unanimous acceptance by all countries successively of the MDGs and now of the SDGs have been vital steps as they (a) set out monitorable, time bound targets for poverty reduction and employment generation and forced action towards their implementation; (b) enabled monitoring of progress towards these definite targets together with assessments as to whether the inclusive growth and supplementary strategies and actions to attain them are working or not.

To make growth more inclusive several measures must be adopted. Some of the more critical ones (this list is not exhaustive) are discussed below in turn.

*Generating productive employment of the poor.* As the poor have been (and still are in some countries such as India) usually concentrated in rural areas with farming as their major avocation, policies that focus on raising the productivity of farming particularly of small farmers and of rural non-farm activities will provide major spinoffs in terms of reducing poverty. Early focus on raising agricultural productivity in China (such as more investments in irrigation and R&D, more compared to India (Table 1) contributed to faster poverty reduction in China compared to India.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, China was much more successful than India in undertaking a structural transformation of its economy (Table 2) and drawing millions of workers from the relatively unproductive primary sector to more productive (with higher wage) secondary and tertiary sectors, thereby providing a

**Table 1. Agricultural growth and investments PRC and India**

	Average Agricultural Growth	Period	Proportion of land irrigated	Year
PRC	4.0	1978-2002	50	2007
India	2.9	1981/82- 2002/03	43	2007

Source: Wan, Zhu and Chatterjee (2014)

skilled workers to run manufacturing units (a topic also discussed later in this paper).

Encouraging growth in the economy of the poor, in farm and off-farm activities such as small and micro-enterprises would require focused attention on the economy of the poor as workers, entrepreneurs and consumers. The poor represent a large generally untapped market which can support viable enterprises if tailored to this segment of the population, which would provide mutual gain for poor consumers and producers of goods and services. But incentivizing the private sector to operate in this market of the poor and near poor will require policy and institutional changes on the part of the public sector as well as attitudinal and organizational changes on the part of the private

**Table 2. Comparative Structural change in PRC and India**

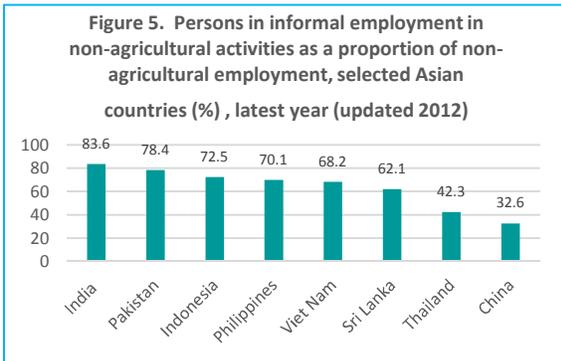
Sector	Share of GDP (%)				Share of Employment (%)			
	PRC		India		PRC		India	
	1990	2010	1994	2010	1990	2008	1994	2010
Agriculture	27.1	10.1	29.3	19	60.1	39.6	61.9	51.1
Industry	41.3	46.8	26.9	26.3	21.4	27.2	15.7	22.4
Services	31.5	43.1	43.8	54.7	18.5	33.2	22.4	26.5

Source: ADB (2011)

major boost to poverty reduction. India's slower progress – particularly failure to create jobs in the manufacturing sector – has meant that its primary sector continues to house large numbers of potentially surplus workers. Although major efforts are now being made, India still faces a major manufacturing conundrum – both due to insufficient incentives for manufacturing as well as lack of sufficient

<sup>6</sup> See Chatterjee (1995) for a comparative analysis of poverty reduction in China, Indonesia and India in the pre-MDG period

sector. Recently these “bottom of the pyramid” approaches have been receiving attention but need to be expanded.<sup>7</sup>

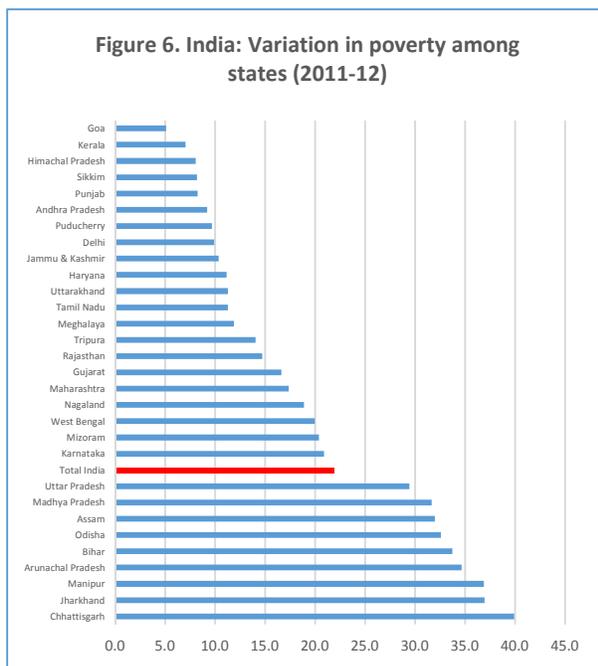


Source: ILO 2012

*Expanding decent employment.* For poverty reduction to result, not only must the poor be provided employment, but such employment must be “decent” which requires payment of wages high enough to lift households out of poverty. However, much of Asia’s poor are in such low paying occupations that they may be deemed to be “working poor.” A major reason for this even in non-agricultural occupations is that a large proportion (exceeding half for all developing Asia) of such activities take place in the informal unorganized sector (Figure 5).

In India, for example, more than 80% of non-agricultural activities take place in the informal sector characterized by long working hours, lack of protections and benefits, and low productivity and wages which keeps most such workers in the category of the “working poor.” The focus therefore should be both on expanding decent formal sector employment as well as increasing the productivity and working conditions of those in informal employment.

*Encourage development of poorer regions.* If the poor are concentrated in certain parts of the country, then focusing on growth of these poorer regions would be a powerful anti-poverty measure as well.



In India, for example, most of the poor live in a few states with high poverty incidence (Figure 6). States below the all-India average have very high incidence of poverty and many of them such as UP and Bihar have large populations of the poor. They are also among the least developed in the country. Such pockets of the poor are present in all countries of the region also (Mindanao in Philippines, Eastern islands of Indonesia etc.). Focusing development efforts in these areas would foster inclusive growth and poverty reduction.

Such “geographical targeting” is commonly used and as a targeting technique has many advantages such as providing clear criteria for identifying target populations and excluding those

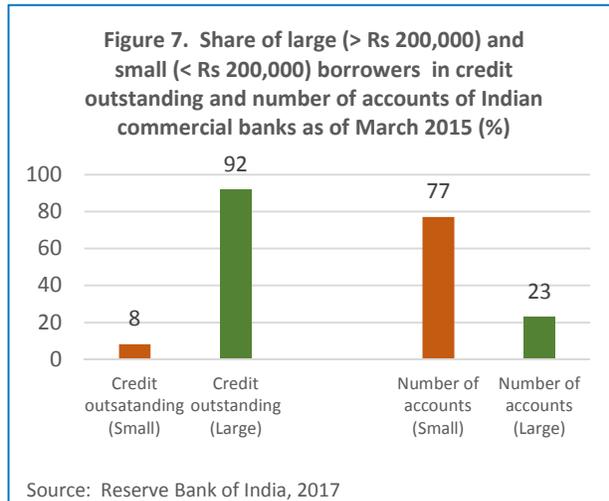
Source: India Planning Commission

Source: Planning Commission India 2013

not intended to receive benefits.

<sup>7</sup> Such as advocated by Prahlad (2004)

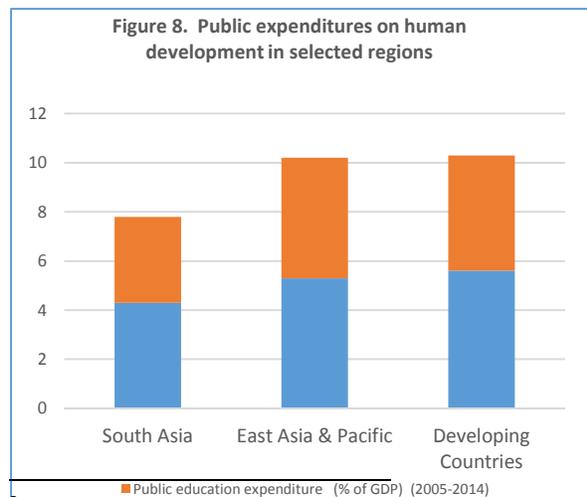
*Promoting inclusion of deprived groups.* Just as certain geographical pockets have high concentration of poverty, so do certain social groups who face deprivations disproportionately compared to the general population. Social discriminations based on gender<sup>8</sup>, caste, minority status, ethnicity and other demographic characteristics have led to these groups having fallen behind in countries of the Asia-Pacific region. Focusing development efforts towards these groups so that they can be brought within the mainstream of national development efforts is an essential plank of an inclusive growth strategy.



*Promoting financial inclusion.* Lack of access to finance is a major impediment for the poor – whether in farm or off-farm activities – and several developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region have found that easier access such as through provision of microfinance for women’s self-help groups has had a powerful impact in reducing poverty. Availability of finance remains highly skewed in most countries as the Indian example in Figure 7 illustrates. Although small borrowers outnumber large ones nearly 4:1, they obtain about less than a tenth of finance from banks in India.

But lending effectively to the poor is not easy as they lack collateral and are considered risky. High interest rates to cover risk and high administrative costs of managing small accounts are issues that need to be tackled and are being addressed by countries in a variety of ways. Outright subsidies as was originally provided for the early generation of microfinance may not be sustainable and other methods to reduce costs for poor borrowers (such as specialized microfinance banks) need to be explored.

**2. Proactive public action towards inclusion.** Attempts to promote economic growth towards inclusive patterns need to be supplemented by proactive public action at inclusion such as by



the government acting as direct provider of basic services for the poor, employer of the poor in public works and facilitator in livelihood generation activities of the poor.<sup>9</sup> To perform this function, however, the Government must have access to larger resources by making much better use of the opportunities provided by growth.

*Better generation of public revenues and more focused spending for inclusion.* Governments in the Asia-Pacific region can play a more proactive role only if they makes more efforts to garner

<sup>8</sup> See McGill (2014) for a discussion of gender discriminations in Asia-Pacific.

<sup>9</sup> While encouraging inclusive growth the government merely uses its facilitative capacities and its policy instruments including fiscal and monetary instruments to encourage the market to produce a growth pattern which is inclusive, as a proactive actor at inclusion it directly provides goods and basic services and are necessary: direct interventions to reduce poverty cannot by themselves be effective to reduce poverty. Source: Human Development Report 2015

revenues through taxation and other means. However, developing countries in the region have been performing relatively poorly in this respect. The tax to GDP ratios in countries in the region are far below the world average.<sup>10</sup>

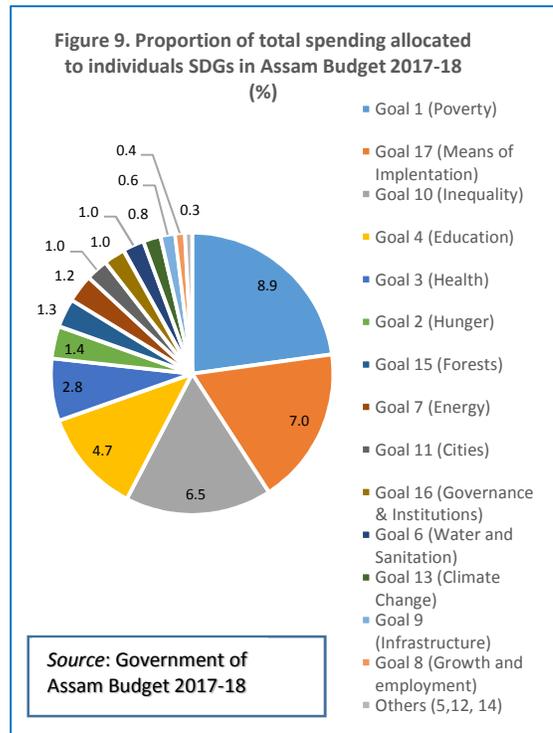
Equally important, is to spend in an inclusive manner. Provision of basic services in health and education for poorer segments of the population is necessary to build up the human capital of the poor and provide them opportunities to improve their income augmenting capacities. However, countries in Asia-Pacific spend insufficiently on human development as shown in Figure 8. East Asia and the Pacific spends only just as much as all developing countries (who spend insufficiently) and South Asia far less.

In general, countries in Asia-Pacific need to align the allocation of their public expenditures more appropriately to the needs of their citizens focusing on outcomes and results. Priorities established worldwide such as the SDGs to which all countries have committed could be a starting point. The state of Assam in India has recently adopted an outcome budget based on the SDGs tying expenditures to each of the SDGs (Figure 9). A monitoring mechanism is also being established to

assess progress towards the SDGs which will provide a guidance on whether the inter-se priorities indicated in the initial allocations need to be revised during the course of implementation.

Tying expenditures to priorities more closely will also help in freeing resources from relatively lower priority areas so that budgets can be made more efficient instruments for achieving inclusion.

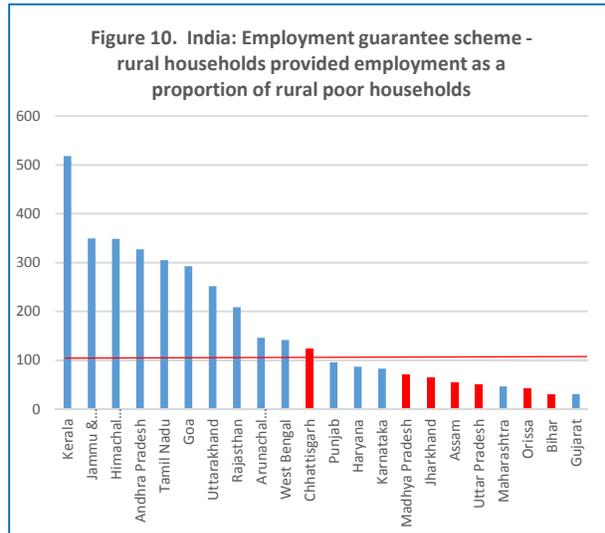
*Focused employment generating and anti-poverty programs.* Governments may need to act proactively as employers of the last resort to reduce poverty when growth fails to bring sufficient employment for the poor. One of the best and successful examples is India's massive rural employment generation program through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA). The MNREGA which was universalized all over India in 2005 after an initial piloting in Maharashtra, helped directly by providing 12 billion person days of employment at minimum wages between 2006-12 and indirectly by increasing rural real wages. Many scholars attribute India's sudden improvement in the pace of poverty reduction (and increase in poverty elasticity of growth) since 2005 to the MNREGA.<sup>11</sup> Given the importance MNREGA has played as a powerful instrument of rural



<sup>10</sup> According to WDI, the tax revenue to GDP for the world stood at 14.8%, while for East Asia and the Pacific and South Asia it was 12.1% and 10.9% respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Wan et al (2014) for example found that although the poverty elasticity of growth declined for the Asia-Pacific region as a whole in the 2005-2008 period compared to the previous 2002-2005 period, it increased in the case of India. This increase in the elasticity is due to direct anti-poverty measures such as the MNREGA, and expansion of basic services such as in health (through the National Rural Health Mission) and nutrition (Integrated Child Development Scheme) etc. See Chatterjee et al (2015) for the India case.

poverty reduction, successive Indian Governments have continued to support and even expand allocations for the scheme.



Source: India Ministry of Rural Development; and Planning Commission

Employment generation schemes have many advantages: they enhance employment and incomes of the poor in times of need such as droughts and crop failures or seasonal drop in employment demand, and are self-targeting as the most in need make use of them. However like such schemes elsewhere, MNREGA has suffered from deficiencies. Targeting to the poor needs much more improvement as Figure 10 indicates. Much of the employment benefits went to better off states while the poor in the less developed states with high poverty (shown in red) were not provided sufficient employment under the scheme (shown as those below the red 100% line, which indicates coverage proportionate to the poor in the state). Also, the quality of rural works created under it have left much to be desired.

Apart from employment generation schemes, other schemes with potential high anti-poverty impact can also be facilitated by the state (such as supporting self-help groups). However such schemes have often not succeeded – such as in India – owing to insufficient finance (considering their high risks) and poor capacities. These constraints will need to be removed if interventions of this type are to succeed.

*Provision of basic infrastructure.* Public provision of basic infrastructure is known to have major poverty reducing effects. Rural roads and electrification, for example, expand the income earning opportunities of the rural poor. They work both directly (by for example raising productivity of rural farms and off farm activities and enable the poor to better access the labor market beyond their immediate vicinity; in urban areas, mass transit systems have enabled the poor similarly to travel inexpensively while living in peri-urban areas); as well as indirectly by expanding growth and employment demand.

As anti-poverty measures basic infrastructure creation works best in conducive pro-poor policy environments (e.g. location in areas of poverty concentration; pricing of services to allow access by the poor etc.).<sup>12</sup> Also, typically basic infrastructure that most benefits the poor are those that need to be provided by local governments with weak capacity and finances. All these policy and institutional hurdles need to be overcome if basic infrastructure is to be used as an important instrument to overcome poverty.

<sup>12</sup> See Chatterjee (2005) for evidence on impact of infrastructure on poverty.

### Box: Universal Basic Income (UBI)

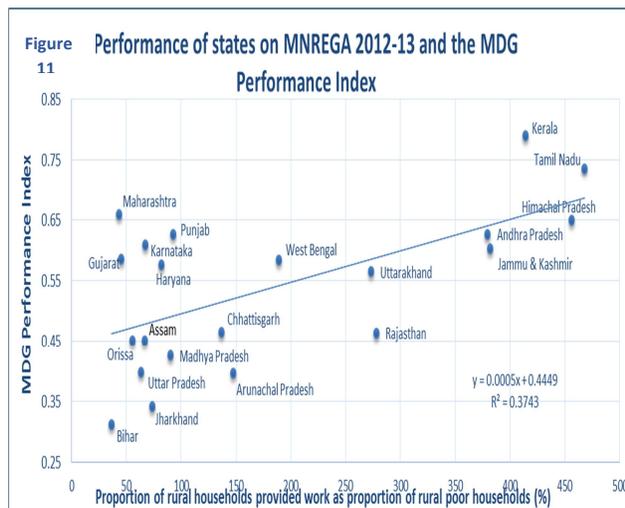
UBI schemes have recently emerged as alternatives to direct public action to remove poverty through cumbersome administrative measures such as employment generation schemes. In the context of insufficient job creation despite high growth and continuous increases to the labor force, India appears to be seriously considering a UBI scheme to replace many of its anti-poverty measures through direct unconditional bank transfers to citizens<sup>13</sup>.

The advantages of UBIs are that (i) they avoid the difficulties of implementing large scale anti-poverty programs; (ii) unconditional UBIs enable the poor to determine their own spending priorities; (iii) they do not suffer from targeting failures that other programs are prone to – as, if universal, all poor persons would receive the benefit; (iv) UBI provides an income guarantee at the time of uncertain employment generation.

A possible problem with UBIs is that it could cause disincentives for work. In addition, paying for a UBI would require removal of existing welfare schemes and subsidies. While providing cash transfers to the poor in lieu of services or subsidies would seem analytically appealing, in many cases, if basic services such as health and education are not made available on the ground physically, the poor may not be able to access them simply by possessing cash. Non-availability of basic services is a real problem, for example, in rural areas. Also, transferring cash in without requiring work in return would be wasteful as the employment generated could have been used to create social assets.

**3. Improving the efficiency of public services serving the poor.** Basic public services catering to the poor such as education, health, employment generation etc., in countries of the Asia-Pacific region suffer from a variety of inefficiencies that often leads to wastage and poor quality of services. These arise from poor capacities as well as governance and institutional failures. The latter include lack of accountability, transparency and participation.

The impact of lower efficiency in provision of services on outcomes for the poor is demonstrated in Figure 11 by taking an example from India where a proxy index of efficiency (proportion of rural poor households provided work as a proportion of all rural poor households in a state) is seen to be positively associated with an index of overall MDG performance<sup>14</sup>.



Participation particularly of those who are the intended beneficiaries of public programs can help if participants are closely involved in their monitoring and implementation. A general measure to improve participation is to decentralize public services to lower levels of government which actually implement such programs allowing the poor greater voice in oversight and monitoring of such schemes and programs. The process of effective decentralization is, however, still an incomplete project in the region and needs to be advanced on priority.

<sup>13</sup> See Government of India 2017.

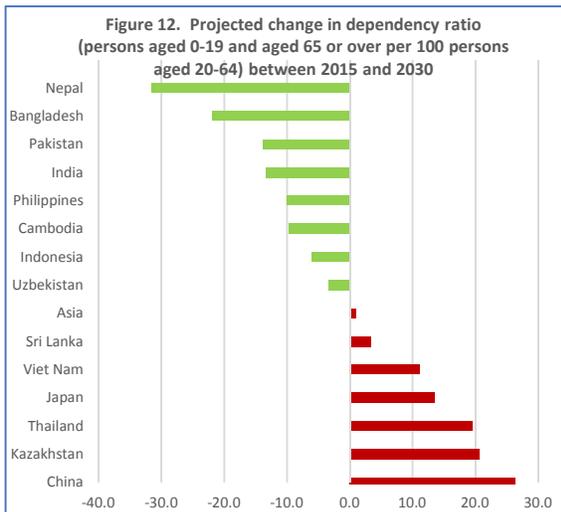
<sup>14</sup> See Chatterjee et al 2015 for MDG performance index which measures relative performance of Indian states.

Source: MDG Performance Index from Chatterjee et al (2015) and MNREGA data from Government of India, MNREGA website

### C. Coping with emerging opportunities and threats that could affect poverty reduction efforts in the future.

In the years to 2030, the rapid pace of poverty reduction which the Asia-Pacific region has experienced could be affected by developments which appear very likely to condition the region's future prospects. Among these this paper examines the following more important ones which could impact on the region's progress in eliminating poverty.

**1. Demographic change and implications for poverty and employment.** The demographic profile of the region is changing and the dependency ratio is like to move unfavorably for some countries and favorably for some others. Figure 12 illustrates the projected changes for selected countries in the region between 2015 and 2030. Those countries that see a deterioration (shown in red) are likely to face a decline in savings rates and high costs of looking after the aged and children.

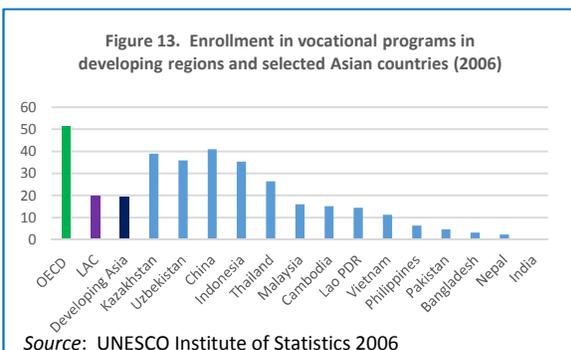


poorly paying jobs which could add to growing social problems.

Two major concerns will need to be addressed to ensure that near poor among the aged do not revert to poverty: attention to ensuring adequacy of pensions and other social security measures; and making the costs of health care affordable for such groups.

As far as countries in the region which face a favorable change in the dependency ratio is concerned, their potential "demographic dividend" can be realized only if the large cohorts of youth who join the expanding labor force are actually provided with gainful employment. If not, they could well join the masses of unemployed or the working poor in

Source: UNDESA World Population Ageing 2015



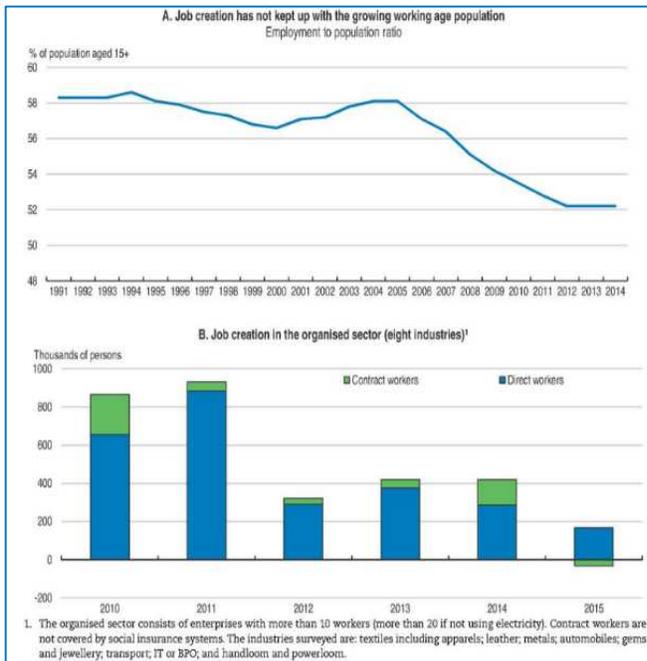
In this context the emphasis on skills development assumes importance. The Asia-Pacific region (particularly South Asia and some countries in Southeast Asia) appears to have placed less emphasis on building skills than other regions as demonstrated by the low enrollments in vocational education (Figure 13). Focus is needed in groups who have lower participation in the work force such as women and other historically neglected and deprived groups.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See Prakash and Chatterjee (2014) for a discussion youth unemployment and skills development in the region.

In addition to domestic policies to address the problems posed by demographic change, Asia-Pacific region should also consider regional cooperation to free regional restrictions to labor mobility across borders so that mutually beneficial outcomes through migration from labor surplus to labor short economies could be considered.

**2. Technological change and impact on poverty and employment.** A major concern that is spreading in the Asia-Pacific region is the threat on employment generation caused by labor saving technology resulting in a growing wedge between growth and employment creation. This is becoming

quite apparent in countries such as India as illustrated in Figure 14. The ratio of employed persons to those aged above 15 years has continued to fall since the 1990s but particularly significantly after the mid-2000s. This has happened despite the robust growth that India has experienced. Much of this is ascribed to growth being focused in sectors of high technology such as IT. Job creation in the organized sector in the last few years has been particularly dismal as shown in the lower part of the figure.

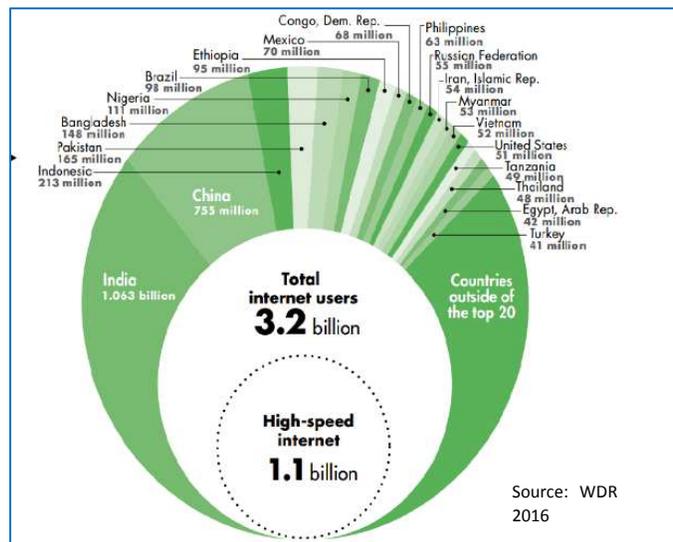


In order to overcome this problem, efforts should be focused on industries that have the potential to create a large number of decent jobs. The government has identified small enterprises in the garment and leather footwear sectors which employ large numbers and where India’s potential for export is immense.

Source: OECD Economic Survey India 2017

But technology also affords opportunities if properly utilized and could assist poverty reduction efforts. Technology ICT platforms are being used increasingly to bring basic services such as education and health to those deprived populations still without access. Such platforms have aided in the development of identification systems (such as India’s Aadhar cards) to identify the poor and those lacking amenities and provide benefits directly to them without leakages. Technology has also brought a rapid increase in access to banking in rural India with the banking correspondence system which does away with the need for

Figure 15. Population without access to internet



physical branches.

However basic infrastructure for such platforms to function requires much better access to the internet than the region possesses at present. In India and China for example, 1.8 billion people still remain without access (Figure 15). In addition substantial segments of the region's population still do not have the basic education and skills to make use of the technology even though they have come to possess access such as through mobile phones.

**3. Climate change and its impact on poverty and employment.** Climate change is expected to impact severely on countries in the region, particularly South Asia (Figure 16)<sup>16</sup>. This will have major implications on agricultural yield, for instance owing to increasing water shortages, greater frequency of droughts, floods and other climatic events such as cyclones. Crop production could fall significantly (Figure 17) with concomitant implications for rural incomes and poverty.

Figure 16. Countries vulnerable to climate change in Asia

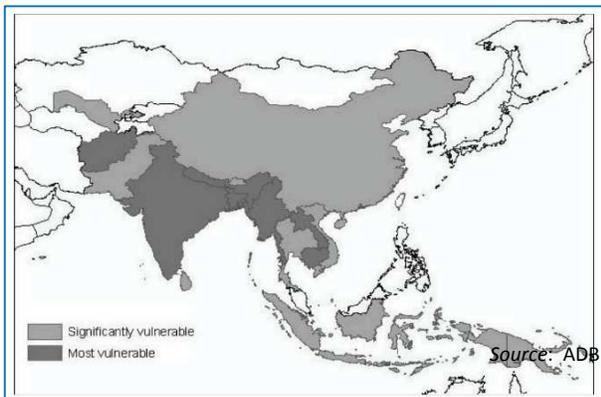
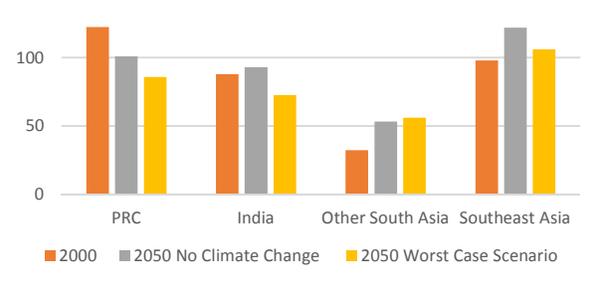


Figure 17. Projected rice production levels in 2050 with and without climate change compared to 2000 levels (million tonnes)



Countries in the region will therefore have to prioritize efforts to strengthen resilience to adverse climate trends and events. These would include increased R&D on climate resistant crops; climate proofing of infrastructure including flood control measures; protecting farmers through making available affordable crop insurance; and social protection to rural households. As the poor are likely to be hit the hardest, special focus should be provided on adaptation interventions targeted to them.

Apart from climatic change, impacts of demographic shifts such as urbanization could also impact on the environment affecting the poor. The environments of cities and urban sprawls of the region where soon the larger proportion of the region's population will live are turning adverse making living and earning livelihoods particularly of the poor more arduous. Improving urban environments with a focus on the needs of the poor should be a priority.

**4. Impact of growing protectionism on growth, poverty and employment.** The global trade environment appears to be turning protectionist. The UK Government's decision to leave the European Union, and the new US administration's discomfort with trade agreements such as TPP could lead to retaliatory trade action and impact global trade adversely in the coming years. Already antidumping duty cases against the region's exporters had increased from 181 in 2011 to 279 in 2015. Global value chains are also weakening.

<sup>16</sup> See ADB and IFPRI (2009)

For much of Asia-Pacific, exports to the rest of the world could be affected and reduce its growth. Given that growth is a necessary – if not a sufficient – condition for poverty reduction, this could slow the pace of poverty reduction too and also lead to unemployment, particularly in export intensive sectors.

In order to counter such trends, however, the Asia-Pacific region could attempt stronger trade and economic integration than it has achieved so far. As shown in Figures 18 and 19, the levels of trade integration as measured by the share of intraregional trade to total while increasing for Asia as a whole, is still significantly below EU, and if China is excluded, the share of intra-regional trade for Asia without China drops to half as that including China.<sup>17</sup>

In case of intra-sub-regional trade in Asian sub-regions, some sub-regions hardly engage in intra sub-regional trade at all. The share of South Asian countries' intra-sub-regional trade is just about 5% of their total trade.

The picture as far as financial integration (i.e. portfolio and other financial investments) is weaker still.

Asia can become more resilient to global protectionist trends by forging greater regional partnerships and cooperation which will prevent external threats such as these from affecting its future efforts at poverty reduction and decent employment generation.

Figure 18. Intra-regional trade shares Asia, EU & North America

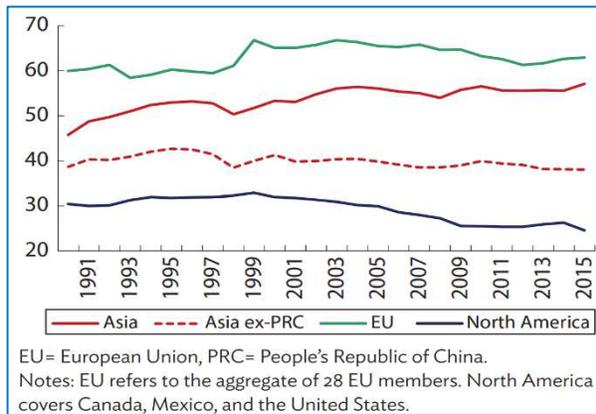
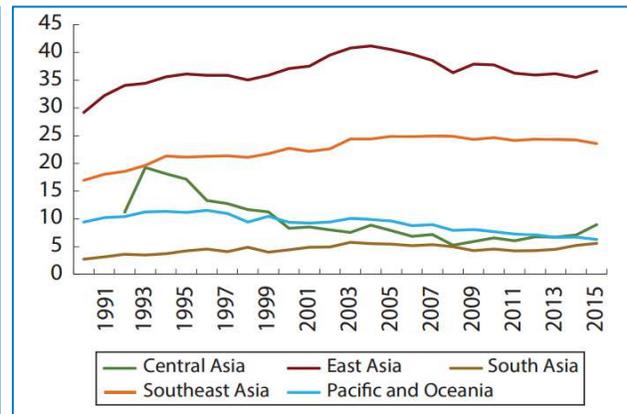


Figure 19. Intra-sub-regional trade shares, Asian sub-regions



Source: ADB. Asian Economic Integration Report 2016

<sup>17</sup> See ADB (2016) for a discussion of these trends.

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