

REGIONAL OVERVIEW: YOUTH IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC



HIGHLIGHTS

- Youth make up about 19% of the region's total population.
- Over 60% of the world's youth live in Asia-Pacific. This translates into more than 750 million young women and men aged 15 to 24 years.
- Significant strides have been made with respect to educational attainment. The region is on track to meet MDG 2 on universal primary education. Net enrolment in secondary education has also been steadily increasing and is now at 64.1%, slightly above the world average of 62.5%.
- Transition to the labour market remains a major challenge as youth unemployment is more than double the rate of the total working age population. The proportion of adolescent and youth migrants in the total international migrant population is 19% in Asia and 13% in the Pacific, most of them are women.
- Gender inequalities have been reduced at all education levels, primary, secondary and tertiary, with the exception of some countries. Young women, however, are underrepresented in the labour market, and are thus an untapped resource for future economic growth and development.
- Rates of adolescent childbearing have dropped significantly in most countries of Asia and the Pacific in the past two to three decades, but they still remain high.

The Asia-Pacific region contains 60 per cent of the world's youth population, or 750 million young persons aged 15 to 24 years. In 2010, India alone had 234 million young people, the highest number of any country in the world (representing 19 per cent of the country's total population), followed by China with 225 million (representing 17 per cent of the total population). By comparison, Japan only had 12 million young people or 10 per cent of the population. Bangladesh and the Philippines both also had very high shares of youth – around 20 per cent of the total population.¹

Asia-Pacific youth have benefitted from the region's social and economic dynamism. Youth unemployment remains the lowest among all regions of the world, at 11 per cent. Secondary and tertiary education enrolment rates have also increased to 64.1 and 25.3 per cent respectively.²

Nevertheless, significant numbers of youth across the region still face a variety of obstacles in their access to employment, education and healthcare. Transition between education and employment is one of the main obstacles facing youth of the region, especially those from South and South-West Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific. Access to adequate healthcare is also hampered by

¹ United Nations World Population Prospects, the 2010 Revision. Available online at: <http://esa.un.org/wpp/>

² ESCAP Statistical Yearbook, 2012. Available online at: <http://www.unescap.org/stat/data/syb2012/>





economic, social or sometimes legal barriers. Furthermore, Asian and Pacific youth often remain at the margins with regard to participation in the creation of development policies.

Across the region, several countries have well-developed and stand-alone national youth policies. Some have youth policies embedded in their constitutions, and others still lack coherent youth policies, with different ministries and departments charged with covering different youth issues. Few of these national youth policies have been developed and implemented in a manner that draws upon the specific needs of young people, including those most at risk.

Nonetheless, more and more countries are recognizing the need to put comprehensive youth policies into place. In addition, United Nations entities in the Asian and Pacific region are establishing partnerships to position young people as a cross-cutting priority. The newly established Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) – United Nations Development Group (UNDG) Thematic Working Group on Youth is working to develop analytical products, but also to raise awareness and build capacity among policymakers and youth leaders, for more effective participation of youth in decision-making.

Major issues faced by youth in the region

Education

Significant achievements have been made in education during the last decade. Primary school enrolment ratios have increased in most economies, and the majority of the Asian and Pacific countries are likely to meet the Millennium Development Goal on attainment of universal primary education by 2015. Net enrolment in secondary education has also been steadily increasing and is now at 64.1 per cent, slightly above the world average of 62.5 per cent.

Furthermore, gender inequalities have been reduced at all education levels, primary, secondary and tertiary, with the notable exception of some countries, such as Afghanistan, where roughly one woman for every four men is enrolled in tertiary education (or a gross tertiary enrolment female to male ratio of 0.24). Overall, in South and South-West Asian countries, 8 girls for every 10 boys are enrolled in secondary education, while 3 women for every 4 men are enrolled in tertiary education, representing lower female to male enrolment ratios than any other subregion. Barriers to female education include negative social and cultural attitudes, lack of appreciation of the value of female education, the burden of household work, and long journeys to school. Girls from poor families, rural areas, urban slums and ethnic and language minorities are much less likely to complete full education cycles. Special efforts are required to address this imbalance, and they should include the recruitment of female teachers and the provision of targeted support for poor families in order to make schools more girl-friendly.

Barriers also remain in accessing education due to persistent rural-urban disparities, rising socio-economic inequality and continuing exclusion of children with disabilities, which contributes to a large number of out-of-school youth.

The transition between secondary and tertiary education also remains a significant challenge, closely linked to overall development levels. The probability of obtaining tertiary education depends heavily on the national income level. Among high-income economies, the tertiary gross enrolment ratio (GER) was 71 per cent, compared with only 10 per cent for the low-income group. Among all





subregions, the highest tertiary GERs were in North and Central Asia at 56 per cent, followed by 54 per cent in the Pacific. The lowest tertiary GERs were in South and South-West Asia at 14 per cent.

Even after completing formal education, many young people face obstacles in their transition from school to work. Education and training systems often do not match modern labour market demands. The mismatch creates a sub-population of discouraged and excluded youth that are outside the educational system and are also unemployed. In Indonesia and the Philippines, for example, around 25 per cent of youth are “not in education, employment or training” (NEET). This figure increases to almost one-third for young women and girls. This group of young people needs particular attention since they are more prone to entering a vicious circle of poverty and exclusion.

Employment

Young people have borne the brunt of the global economic crisis and the subsequent sluggish recovery. Youth unemployment rates have stayed at peak levels across the world. Currently, the average rate of youth unemployment in Asia and the Pacific is estimated to be around 11 per cent, more than double the rate of the total working age population.

Compared to the youth unemployment rate in the OECD area, the youth unemployment rate in Asia and the Pacific is relatively low. However, this rate masks the key underlying concern that most young people in the region cannot afford being unemployed, because of absent unemployment benefits and other support measures.

As it is, youth employment is already often precarious. Young people abound in vulnerable employment where jobs are characterized by insecurity, low wages, poor working conditions and lack of social protection. As a result, working poverty is significantly higher for young workers than for their older counterparts.

Long-term unemployment among youth is another challenge, with several countries in the region reporting that 30 to 75 per cent of all unemployed youth have been out of work for more than one year.³ Often times these youth are discouraged and stop looking for work altogether. This prolonged inactivity threatens their future prospects as well.

Young women are particularly underrepresented in the labour market, and are thus an untapped resource for future economic growth and development. Wide subregional discrepancies prevail in that respect. Among youth in North and North-East Asia, women’s labour force participation rate (60.5 per cent) is actually two percentage points higher than men’s, a trend driven by China.⁴ This is despite the fact that gross tertiary enrolment female to male ratio in China is 1.01, meaning that the same number of young women and men are also attending higher education.⁵ On the other hand, in South and South-West Asia, only 23 per cent of young women between 15 and 24 years old participate in the labour force, less than half the rate for young men, at 57 per cent.⁶ Unlike in China, however, fewer young women also attend university (approximately three women to four men).⁷

³ ILO Key Indicators of the Labour market, available online at:

<http://kilm.ilo.org/2011/Installation/Application/kilm7install.htm>

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⁵ ESCAP Statistical Yearbook 2012. <http://www.unescap.org/stat/data/syb2012/>

⁶ ILO Key Indicators of the Labour market, available online at:

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In search of better living conditions, many young people choose to migrate. The proportion of adolescent and youth migrants in the total international migrant population is 19 per cent in Asia (on par with Latin America and the Caribbean) and 13 per cent in the Pacific (on par with Europe and North America). In Asia, 46 per cent of all migrants between 10 and 24 years of age are females, whilst in the Pacific there is parity among the proportion of male and female migrants of these ages.⁸ Many youth migrants, however, are undocumented and some are trafficked, including for sex work.

For young people, jobs provide a source not only of income, but also dignity and self-respect. In the absence of decent work, young people subsist in the margins of the economy and are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, which breeds political instability.

The need for youth policies oriented toward decent employment is becoming ever more urgent, especially because the potential youth labour force in South and South-West Asia – one of the world's poorest regions – is increasing at a fast pace: 1.0 million additional young people are expected to enter the labour market every year between 2010 and 2015.⁹

Health

Rates of adolescent childbearing have dropped significantly in most countries of Asia and the Pacific in the past two to three decades. However, the recorded teenage pregnancy remains high in many countries of South and South-West Asia, the rate being 35 per cent in Bangladesh, and 21 per cent in Nepal and India.¹⁰ Many Pacific nations are still recording high rates of unwanted teenage pregnancies, indicative of unprotected sex and shortfalls in basic sex education. In the Marshall Islands and the Cook Islands, teenage pregnancies account for 20 per cent of total deliveries.¹¹

Adolescent childbearing rates remain high in some countries because of the persistent prevalence of child marriage. Child marriage is disproportionately high in Asia and the Pacific, in particular South Asia, where 30 per cent of all 15-19 year old females are in a married union, compared to a world average of 22 per cent.¹² Also in that subregion, the percentage of 20-24 year old women who gave birth to their first child before the age of 18 is 22 per cent, higher than the world average of 20 per cent, and almost triple the rate of East Asia and the Pacific, at 8 per cent. Child marriage is associated with a high likelihood of complications in pregnancy and childbirth and is among the leading causes of death for girls between the ages of 15 and 19 worldwide. It is also associated with an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies.

However, the leading cause of death among adolescents around the world is accidents, most of them road traffic accidents, accounting for almost 400,000 deaths per year globally. Boys and young men especially those living in urban areas, in developing countries, are more prone than girls to injury and death from such accidents. The poorest regions of the South and South-West Asian sub region are most affected.

⁸ http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/GMG_-_Factsheet_UNICEF-FINAL.pdf

⁹ ILO Global Employment Trends for Youth, 2010. Available online at: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_elm/---trends/documents/publication/wcms_143349.pdf

¹⁰ < <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCY/Data/20333440/YIN-SA.pdf> >

¹¹ < www.unicef.org/eapro/10_pacific.pdf >

¹² UNICEF State of the World's Children, 2011. Available online at: <http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/>





Mental health is another concern among young people, as adolescence is the age when such problems first surface. Young people, especially young men, are at greater risk of dying of suicides and violence than people of older ages.¹³ Many countries are also seeing increase in cases of depression and eating disorders – particularly among girls. Depression is the single largest contributor to the global burden of disease for people aged 15–19, and suicide is one of the three leading causes of mortality among people aged 15–35.¹⁴ Tobacco consumption and drug and alcohol use is another growing health concern.

A persisting challenge, compromising health outcomes among youth, relates to the dire hygiene and sanitation conditions, as 58 per cent of the region's population still lacks access to improved sanitation facilities. The Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) measure of diarrheal incidence per 100,000 people is higher than 1,000 in most South and South-West Asian countries and some South-East Asian countries, indicating high health costs and a significant loss in productive potential among all, including young people.¹⁵

Globally, young people also account for 40 per cent of all new adult HIV infections. However, significant progress has been made in reducing these new infections. Between 2001 and 2011, prevalence of HIV—a proxy indicator of new HIV infections—fell by nearly 27 per cent among youth globally. The largest progress was seen in South and South-East Asia where HIV prevalence among young men and women fell by 50 per cent.¹⁶ As a result, HIV prevalence among young people in all of Asia and the Pacific has fallen to approximately 0.1 per cent, compared to the world average of 0.4 per cent.¹⁷

Participation in the Decision-Making Process

A lack of structured and institutionalized opportunities continues to limit the role of youth in decision-making processes. Youth's aspirations, however, are increasingly finding space through the use of new media, access to information and networking tools. Through these tools, young people across the region have the opportunity to also become more politically active and get involved in volunteerism to promote the development of their countries and communities.

Over the past decade, there has been growing recognition of the urgent need to fully integrate youth perspectives into national development, strengthen investments in youth, and enhance their participation in economic, social and political processes. In several parts of Asia and the Pacific, forums are being provided so that youth can exchange experiences and ideas to enhance their participation in the process of social and economic advancement, especially around issues important to them, including health, education, employment and corruption.

While there is still much to be achieved, governments across the Asia-Pacific region, especially given recent experiences in the Middle East, have realized how young people can be powerful agents of change, using innovative means to get their messages across and to shape their future. This realization has stimulated action to enhance youth participation. United Nations entities are also

¹³ <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs345/en/>

¹⁴ UNICEF State of the World's Children, 2011. Available online at: <http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/>

¹⁵ ADB, Asian Water Development Outlook, 2013. Available online at: <http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/pub/2013/asian-water-development-outlook-2013.pdf>

¹⁶ UNAIDS World AIDS Day Report, 2012. Available online at: http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/epidemiology/2012/gr2012/JC2434_WorldAIDSday_results_en.pdf

¹⁷ UNICEF State of the World's Children, 2011. Available online at: <http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/>





playing an important role in harnessing the energy, creativity and aspirations of young people to promote economic and social advancement in the region.

The United Nations System's Approach to Youth in Asia and the Pacific

United Nations entities in the Asia-Pacific region have been increasingly working on youth issues. At the regional level, as Chair of the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM), ESCAP in cooperation with the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) Asia-Pacific jointly established in late 2012 the "RCM-UNDG Asia-Pacific Thematic Working Group on Youth." The newly established group, comprising ESCAP and all other entities of the United Nations system, integrates the United Nations' regional policy and normative expertise with its operational capacity to ensure a stronger and more coherent regional youth agenda.

The Thematic Working Group is mandated to support member states in the implementation of internationally agreed commitments on youth and development, including those identified in the 2012 Secretary-General's Five-Year Action Agenda: employment, entrepreneurship, political inclusion, citizenship and protection of rights, and education, including on sexual and reproductive health.

ESCAP is implementing this Agenda in coordination with the Inter-agency Network on Youth Development (IANYD), through the recently established System-Wide Plan of Action on Youth (SWAP-Youth). The SWAP-Youth framework emphasizes the value of partnerships among United Nations agencies, to maximize the impact at the regional and country levels.

Additionally, ESCAP is initiating a research programme on the situation of youth in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly addressing the five priority areas in the Secretary-General's Five-Year Action Agenda. Through this analytical work, ESCAP aims to identify and collect good practices of youth participation in decision-making, for further study and adaptation across the region. ESCAP is also committed to establishing and strengthening regional partnerships for decent work for youth, to place employment of young people in both rural and urban areas at the centre of the development agenda. These partnerships will include governments, employers' organizations, the private sector, institutions of education at all levels, youth organizations and civil society.

ESCAP is also leading work in the field of disability, where perspectives of children and youth have been integrated. The Incheon Strategy to 'Make the Right Real' for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific was adopted in November 2012 and is the world's first set of regionally-agreed disability-inclusive development goals. The Strategy contains specific time-bound goals and targets, among others, to halve the gap between children with disabilities and children without disabilities in enrolment rates for primary and secondary education.

Furthermore, ESCAP is working to identify and analyze good practices in the field of social protection, focusing on policies and tools that enhance the well-being and the educational, as well as employment perspectives of youth. ESCAP work in this field is researching successful interventions that are either targeted at young people themselves, or at their families, schools and communities.





Regional and National Efforts in creating Youth Policies

Hindrances in tackling Youth issues in the region:

- Lack of reliable data concerning youth
- Insufficient political will and earmarked resources
- Lack of coordination among government ministries and involvement with NGOs, the private sector and academia.

For policies and programmes to be effective, reliable evidence on the situation of young people is necessary. In Asia-Pacific, however, lack of data remains a major constraint in understanding the problems faced by youth and identifying ways to address them. Other constraints include insufficient political will, limited earmarked resources, and a lack of coordination among government ministries and involvement with NGOs, the private sector and academia.

Coordination across government ministries, civil society organizations and United Nations agencies has proved essential for shaping effective new youth policies. In Timor-Leste, six national consultations took place among all stakeholders, including youth and youth organizations, in preparation of the youth policy, which was endorsed by the Parliament in 2007. Currently the youth policy is coordinated and evaluated by the Secretary of State for Youth and Sports. In drafting its youth policy, Bhutan ensured participation of all major stakeholders, including youth representatives, the Department of Youth, Culture and Sports, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Education and Non Formal Education, along with Save the Children and several United Nations entities. The country's youth policy specifically addresses young people who are most-at-risk. In Cambodia, a long list of partners and stakeholders also ensured that youth voices from across the country were heard. In 2013, the Government of Afghanistan also engaged with regional organizations and UN entities in the drafting of its first comprehensive youth policy.

Some countries in the region have long-established youth policies and dedicated agencies. In Malaysia, the government works closely with the Malaysian Youth Council, a civil society organization formed in 1948 and acting as the coordinating body for all youth organizations in the country, in the implementation and evaluation of youth policy. The government emphasizes cooperation with youth organizations and makes use of their inputs.

In other countries, emphasis has been placed on specific sectors. For example, in India, where the country's National Youth Policy was put into effect in 2003, training and employment have been identified as key sectors of youth concern. Also in 2003, the Government of Indonesia set up the Indonesia Youth Employment Network. The ILO has been active in this initiative which involves senior policymakers addressing problems associated with youth employment, including the transition from school to work in formal jobs.

In all of the above cases, it should be noted that an underlying yet crucial consideration of the policy process is leadership. Commitment at all levels is fundamental to overcoming a variety of barriers, initiate and implement a policy process and muster sufficient resources.

The Way Forward

Despite some progress, the full potential of young people in Asia and the Pacific remains untapped. Employment needs special attention, even more in South and South-West Asia, where the youth





labour force is expected to grow in an environment where economic growth is not necessarily matched by growth of employment opportunities.

To address these challenges at the national level more policies targeted at youth need to be developed and implemented. For this to become a reality, governments across the Asia-Pacific region, many of which have yet to formulate comprehensive national youth policies, need to commit themselves to investing more in young people, working with other relevant stakeholders and creating opportunities for young people to more actively contribute to the development process in the region.

Investing in young people makes economic sense. Linking education and training programmes to future labour market demands can help countries tap into the productive potential of youth. By increasing government spending on quality education and training, governments can reduce the number of out-of-school youth and help build a more skilled future labour force.

An opportunity also lies in enhancing inter-generational contracts. By focusing on generating decent jobs for youth, in the formal sector, young people can contribute towards the well-being of a rapidly ageing population in most Asia-Pacific countries. Furthermore, formal sector jobs, preferably green jobs, can generate tax revenues and set the foundation of a sustainable tax-benefit system. Such jobs also hold the key for promoting universal social protection, through a life-cycle approach.

To identify investments in youth with the highest returns, relevant and reliable data and evidence from analytical studies are needed. Governments also need to invest time and resources in understanding the problems and needs of youth, by engaging young people themselves in the policy process and building leadership among young people themselves.

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