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Paper for UN DESA, for submission to the Commission for Social Development for the ten-year review of the implementation of the Programme of Action adopted by the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995.

The present document examines the regional implementation of the Programme of Action adopted by the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995. Section I presents a short summary of the initiatives taken by UNESCAP to contribute to the implementation of the commitments contained in the Copenhagen Declaration and the resolution adopted at the 24th Special Session of the General Assembly. Section II gives an overall assessment of the degree of implementation of the commitments and Section II provides a number of social development issues of particular relevance to the UNESCAP region that ought to be further pursued, taking into account the Millennium Declaration and other United Nations conferences on development.

I. UNESCAP’S INITIATIVES TOWARDS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME OF ACTION

UNESCAP had also been involved in implementing the Programme of Action, as well as other international and regional agendas addressing issues of specific population groups in relation to the key areas of the Programme of Action, viz. poverty alleviation, employment and social integration. These issues include population ageing, international migration, disability, women’s empowerment and gender equality, human resources development, drug abuse demand reduction and HIV/AIDS. Specific projects and programmes included development of social development management information systems; strengthening policies on social safety nets for socially vulnerable groups; promoting social protection for all; and advocating public-private partnerships, where possible, in delivering social services, including employment creation for the poor.

With regard to poverty eradication, UNESCAP has:
(a) Undertaken studies of poverty reduction policies and programmes and their contribution to reaching the Millennium Development Goals;
(b) Assisted local Governments in enhancing their capacity and reviewing their decision-making mechanisms in order to facilitate involvement of the poor;
(c) Collected and disseminated innovative practices, assisting countries in adapting and replicating these practices and testing innovative approaches to emerging issues in poverty reduction;
(d) Pushed for better-quality data from the region, particularly for improved poverty statistics essential to monitoring progress towards achieving the MDGs

Some key projects in this area include the Human Dignity Initiative, which organizes communities to improve their living environment, raise their productivity, create employment, and raise incomes by farm and off-farm activities; pro-poor public-private partnership projects, on delivering services that benefit the poor; and specific regional networks, to enhance further the circulation and impact of the best practices identified.

UNESCAP, in partnership with UNDP has delivered a regional analysis of the Asia-Pacific region’s progress towards achieving the MDGs, which not only provides a platform for follow-up action by Governments and civil society but also enables countries of the region to learn from each other’s experience.
UNESCAP is also refocusing its annual *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific* to address poverty-related issues with analysis of such topics as the role of the public sector in providing education and health services and the links between poverty and the environment.

UNESCAP is also providing a range of training courses to promote the development of the private sector, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). As part of a drive to promote contacts between private sector institutions, UNESCAP has helped to set up a network of regional boards of investment, among them the Greater Mekong Subregion Business Forum noted above, to foster understanding of each sector’s concerns and constraints. Improving information and access to it are critical to the ability of developing countries to be competitive in international business and to profit from globalization.

Tourism is often on the frontline of the battle against poverty, particularly through projects outside main commercial centres that can help to boost incomes in small local communities. Under the Plan of Action for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Asian and Pacific Region adopted in 1999, ESCAP’s priorities are (a) human resources development (b) the economic impact of tourism (c) environmental management (d) infrastructure development and investment (e) facilitation of travel and (f) regional and subregional cooperation.

UNESCAP is also assisting member countries in applying Information Communication and Space Technology to the tasks of reducing poverty and promoting development by building capacity, framing sound policy and creating a regional platform for the exchange of knowledge, skills and experience. The main focus is to increase the capacity of countries to exploit the digital opportunities afforded by ICSTs to create an information society and achieve the MDGs, particularly reducing poverty, protecting the environment and promoting health and education.

UNESCAP’s programme on environment and sustainable development promotes better water resources management by building up human and institutional capacity in Asia-Pacific countries and at the regional level. It has provided training for officials in planning, organizing and implementing public awareness campaigns to promote water conservation. ESCAP interventions have strengthened national capacity to formulate and implement pro-poor water supply and sanitation policies.

In response to the challenges posed by population ageing, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPA) adopted at the Second World Assembly on Ageing, convened by the United Nations at Madrid in April 2002, ESCAP conducted a regional survey on national policies and programmes on ageing 2002. Following upon the survey and the adoption of the Shanghai Implementation Strategy, ESCAP has followed up with specific activities towards enhancing advocacy and raising awareness of the challenges of population ageing, strengthening policy dialogue, capacity building and mainstreaming ageing into development policies and programmes.

In the area of migration, ESCAP organized the Fifth Asian and Pacific Population Conference, in 2002, which saw a number of specific recommendations on international migration in its Plan of Action on Population and Poverty. Among other things, the Plan of Action urged Governments to incorporate desirable aspects of international migration into national economic and social planning in both sending and receiving countries. It also called for combating trafficking in persons, especially women and children and strengthening regional cooperation to better manage the flow of all types of migration for the benefit of the sending and receiving countries and the migrants themselves.

ESCAP in collaboration with UNFPA, is executing the regional population programmes, to address emerging issues of population ageing, international migration, mortality and fertility and provides assistance to Governments and NGOs in formulating economic and social policies and programmes to influence those factors and the impact they have on other social and economic variables. Capacity-building is carried out through ESCAP training courses on population issues and demographic analysis and technical assistance to regional and national demographic training courses organized by others (e.g., the UNFPA/country support teams, SIAP and national training institutes).
Since the launch of international action in 2000 towards the development of an international convention to protect and promote the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, ESCAP has played a lead role in facilitating regional support of the international preparatory process for the elaboration of the proposed convention. Noteworthy is the role of women with disabilities in formulating an ESCAP region consensus statement and recommendations, which were submitted to the Working Group commissioned by the Ad Hoc Committee on a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities. Accordingly, ESCAP has promoted access to the built environment, transport, information and opportunities for education, training and employment in mainstreaming disability concerns into the development process, with special emphasis on the participation of women and girls with disabilities.

Since 2001, ESCAP has used the opportunity presented by four intergovernmental forums, including three consecutive annual Commission sessions and a regional youth meeting, to undertake advocacy on HIV/AIDS. Advocacy focused on raising the priority accorded in the regional development agenda to tackling HIV/AIDS as a development challenge. Additionally, to promote the integration of youth health issues, especially those related to HIV/AIDS and substance use, into mainstream youth policies and programmes. Child and youth victims of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation are at high risk of being lured into substance use habits and falling prey to HIV infection. Training materials and approaches have been developed and courses conducted in several countries for psychosocial and medical service providers to respond to the needs of the child and youth victims, as well as on monitoring progress in combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and youth.

UNESCAP has promoted the implementation of, and follow-up to, the outcomes of United Nations regional and global conferences on women’s issues and gender equality. Included in the review are the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol, the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000), and other relevant global conferences and reviews. The most recent was the UNESCAP High-level Intergovernmental Meeting to Review Regional Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and its Regional and Global outcomes, in September 2004. In all these, the programme works closely with Governments, civil society organizations, and other entities of the United Nations system, constantly urging action to address persisting and emerging barriers that hinder women’s full and equal participation in the development process, and raising alerts on the consequences of inaction. The gender and development programme promotes the ratification of CEDAW and works with Governments and NGOs on strengthening the links between the legal frameworks and the policy process.

II. OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME OF ACTION

A. National environment favourable to the eradication of poverty

Most countries in the region have developed their own national poverty reduction strategies and programmes. A number have also prepared or are in the process of preparing poverty reduction strategy papers as a framework for poverty reduction. Several Governments have established inter-ministerial coordinating committees to devise and implement coordinated strategic national plans and actions aimed at achieving the social development targets. However, translating poverty reduction strategy papers and other national poverty reduction strategies into effective policies and programmes to tackle the various dimensions of poverty simultaneously with limited resources has become a challenging task for many countries.
On a positive note, an ESCAP review revealed that some countries in Asia and the Pacific have already achieved remarkable reductions in income poverty (ESCAP, 2003). In fact, several countries have already achieved the Millennium Development Goal target on poverty reduction and have raised their sights, setting even higher targets for poverty and some of the other Goals. These targets, called “Millennium Development Goals Plus”, incorporate higher minimum standards of living, educational attainment and health care and also aim to reduce disparities between different population groups.

Impressive as it is, however, this progress remains fragile and is susceptible to faltering long-term growth, increases in income inequality and external shocks such as the Asian financial crisis. Although some countries in the region have now achieved the status of middle- or high-income economies, many others have moved more slowly. Some of the least developed countries, a number of landlocked countries, some small island developing States and other vulnerable economies have yet to see significant reductions in poverty. Indeed, in a few cases poverty and hunger have actually increased.

The ESCAP regional reviews leading up to the first review of the World Summit for Social Development at the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly, in 2000, also seem to apply to the second review, which is planned to take place 10 years after the Summit, in 2005. The constraints to progress in meeting the social development goals include: (a) the lack of coherence in policy planning and implementation; (b) poor coordination, decentralization and devolution, meaning that social development goals and targets had not been properly disseminated or advocated at all levels, national, regional and local of Government and administration; (c) an inadequate level of resources and budgets to meet social development and social protection needs; (d) the lack of consistency among government units in the allocation and utilization of resources to ensure the provision of basic services and priorities targeted at poverty alleviation, social integration and employment promotion; and (e) the lack of participation of the private sector, non-governmental organizations and other civil society organizations as partners in development. It is necessary to pay more attention to such issues of governance as they are prerequisites for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of social programmes.

B. Full employment

The post-1995 developments in the Asian and Pacific region have been shaped by an accelerated process of globalization and market-oriented reforms in most countries, and by the Asian financial crisis.

It is clear that the developments since 1995 constitute very serious setbacks to progress towards full employment in virtually the whole of the Asian and Pacific region. Severe setbacks were suffered by the fast-growing economies of East and South-East Asia, precisely the economies that had made steady progress towards full employment during the preceding decade. Economic prospects in transition economies, where the long-term trends in employment had not been favourable, were adversely affected by the Asian crisis. In both transition economies and South Asian countries, economic reforms have exposed problems of labour redundancy, carried over from the past, which threaten to increase levels of open unemployment.

In gender terms, the available evidence shows that, even in 1996, the participation of women in the labour force was universally lower than that of men. The male-female differential in labour force participation was smallest in the transition economies and largest in South Asian and Pacific countries; the differential in the fast-growing economies of East and South-East Asia and in the advanced industrialized countries was somewhere in between the two extremes; among the advanced industrialized countries, it was largest in Japan. At the same time, women predominate in those categories of the labour force that are not officially recorded in most countries, for example subsistence agriculture.
Another noticeable trend has been that of the growing international mobility of women workers. Faced with limited employment opportunities in their own countries, a growing number of women workers from Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka have sought employment in other countries of Asia and the Pacific, as well as the Middle East, Europe and North America.

According to UNESCAP’s *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2004*, employment performance in the region did not improve in several countries in 2003 despite a pickup in economic growth after a two-year slowdown following the financial crisis. For example, the Republic of Korea’s labour market has deteriorated with the number of unemployed workers and the unemployment rate both on a rising trend. In particular, the unemployment rate of 8 per cent in November 2003 for those aged between 15 and 29 is of considerable concern.

A comparison between youth and adult unemployment, in the East Asia subregion shows an unsettling picture. In 2003, youth unemployment was at 7.0 per cent, over twice as high as overall unemployment. Youth unemployment is higher among men than among women by 2.3 percentage points.

As for South-East Asia, even after a sharp increase in unemployment during the past five years, the unemployment rate remains comparably low for the region, at 6.3 per cent in 2003. Once again, however, the unemployment rates only shed light on part of the picture. In some economies, notably Indonesia and the Philippines, underemployment remains a serious concern and therefore the relative rate of working poor remains high.

The rate of youth unemployment is much higher than adult unemployment rates and has undergone a dramatic increase, almost doubling during the past 10 years. While youth unemployment is a major issue for both young men and women, young women are generally much more affected by unemployment than young men. In 2003, the youth unemployment rate for women was 17.6 per cent compared with 15.5 per cent for men. Overall, roughly 10 million young people were without work and looking for work in 2003.

Slowing labour force growth will take some pressure off South-East Asian and Pacific labour markets. Labour force growth rates are expected to slow down to 1.8 per cent annually between 2003 and 2015, compared with 2.4 per cent annually in the past 10 years. Nevertheless, between 2003 and 2015, over 5 million people will enter the region’s labour market each year. This is nearly the same as in the 1990s, when the region did well in terms of reducing the number of working poor. Even if success in reducing the working poor rate is to be repeated, the region needs to create new employment opportunities to avoid stagnation in unemployment rates in the future. This is especially the case in Fiji, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, given their higher than regional average unemployment rates. In addition, Singapore has to ensure that its expected recovery is translated into new employment opportunities, bringing the economy back to its historically low unemployment rates. Some economies in the region, including Fiji, Malaysia, Thailand and Viet Nam, have a good chance to halve working poverty and unemployment by 2015. Whether or not the region as a whole reaches this target depends very much on developments in those economies with the highest incidence of extreme poverty.

The situation in South Asia is marked by a labour force that has been growing at a strong annual average of 2.3 per cent during the past 10 years, mainly reflecting high population growth rates but also the slightly expanding labour force participation rates, particularly those of women. However, labour force participation rates remain relatively low compared with other regions of the world. These low rates are partly due to the enormous discrepancy between the reported rates for women and men, the former being as low as 16.3 per cent in Pakistan and 28.1 per cent in Maldives.

In spite of steady and robust gross domestic product (GDP) growth during the past 10 years, the overall employment situation has not changed. Even though the total number of employed increased by 112 million, this was only about enough to absorb the 11.9 million new entrants to the labour force every year during the same period. In Maldives, for example, the labour force grew more quickly than the population during the period 1985-2000 and the number of persons in the 15-19 year age group was expected to peak in 2006.
What may be more alarming is that the number of working poor increased during the period and now accounts for 40 per cent of the total number of employed. Most of the employment was created in the informal economy, which accounts for more than 90 per cent of the total economy in India, for example (ILO, 2003a).

Given the limited opportunities for employment at home, there are a very large number of people from least developed countries working abroad. Estimates suggest that 3 to 3.5 million Nepalese migrant workers (or over 10 per cent of the population of Nepal) are in India, the Middle East, and South-East and East Asia.

Female unemployment rates are generally higher than male unemployment rates in South Asia, a particularly worrying trend in countries where labour force participation rates are already low for women. Women in these economies have limited employment opportunities. In addition, if they are employed they generally earn far less than their male counterparts.

Although youth unemployment rates are lower than in 1995, they are still almost three times as high as total unemployment rates. Being young and female is associated with the highest risk of being unemployed; with an overall youth unemployment rate of 13.9 per cent in 2003, the female unemployment rate was 15.9 per cent compared with 13.0 per cent for male unemployment.

In Central Asia, the labour markets have been strongly affected by the adjustment process from centrally planned to market-oriented economies. Owing to the deep transitional crisis and subsequent large structural changes in their economies, the labour markets in Central Asia have been in a state of flux. High unemployment is a primary concern and large numbers of workers are being excluded from the formal economy. They join the ranks of the informal economy and make their living by means of informal entrepreneurship, petty trade and other services. Since 1993, the labour force has been increasing but youth have lower labour force participation rates and higher unemployment rates than the population as a whole. The share of youth in the population is as high as 39 per cent in some of the Central Asian countries.

As a result of higher unemployment and underemployment, the number of people living in poverty, in the subregion, was estimated to range from more than 10 per cent in Kazakhstan, to 20 per cent in the Russian Federation, to 25 per cent in Uzbekistan, and to more than 50 per cent in Armenia, Georgia and Tajikistan.

C. Social integration in the ESCAP region

In the past decade, Governments in the region have initiated a number of measures towards realizing the goals and objectives of the World Summit for Social Development vis-à-vis social integration. Many have formulated and implemented comprehensive social development programmes either sectorally or intersectorally. Some countries revised existing laws and regulations or introduced new legislation to strengthen or upgrade measures for vulnerable groups. Viet Nam revised its legislation based on the 1991 Strategy for socio-economic stabilization and development by the year 2000. The Republic of Korea replaced its Livelihood Protection Act, which had been in effect until 1999, with the Basic Livelihood Security Law of August 1999, which took effect in October 2000. Further, it introduced the Basic Law for the Development of Youths in the early 1990s and Basic Law for the Development of Women in 1996 and revised its decades-old Child Welfare Act in 2000.

Countries in the region also made institutional arrangements and established focal points and coordinating bodies to supervise and monitor governmental and non-governmental social development activities. Some countries took steps to devolve legislative and administrative control and power closer to the people by introducing autonomous local government systems and deployed, to the local grassroots level of administration, the functions, responsibility and personnel necessary for the more effective delivery of basic social services.

Governments defined the target population with respect to each of the areas of social concern within the framework of the Agenda for Action on Social Development in the ESCAP Region (ESCAP, 1998) and established time-bound achievement targets to ensure cost-efficiency and
maximum programme impact. In that connection, Governments conducted surveys to collect data disaggregated by age, sex, ethnic group and poverty level. Bangladesh, Fiji, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Malaysia, Niue, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam had organized and were establishing social development information systems.

III. PERSISTENT AND EMERGING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES IN THE UNESCAP REGION

From the UNESCAP reviews on the implementation of the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development, and the resolution adopted at the 24th Special Session of the General Assembly, it is to be noted that several of the regional social development targets had not been met. Among them were the targets of attaining education for all, health for all and shelter for all, creating a barrier-free environment for all and the formulation of an overall policy framework for basic social protection.

Following are a number of pertinent social development issues of particular relevance to the region that demands further action.

A. Persistent Human Poverty

One of the most significant successes in the UNESCAP region has been in income poverty reduction. Between the early and late 1990s, the countries of Asia and the Pacific as a whole are estimated to have reduced the overall incidence of income poverty from 34 to 24 per cent. If they continued this trend until 2015, the region could be expected to achieve the target of 17 per cent and may even be able to far exceed it, reducing the incidence of income poverty to around 10 per cent.

However, on many aspects of human poverty, the outlook is less promising. Hunger is a case in point. Between the early and late 1990s the proportion of underweight children fell from 35 to 31 per cent, but this pace of reduction would not be rapid enough to achieve the nutrition target. The situation is similar for the proportion of people whose intake of food is insufficient to meet their minimum daily energy requirements; for the region as a whole between the early and late 1990s the proportion is estimated to have fallen from 20 to 16 per cent and at this rate again the target is likely to be missed.

Just as important, countries should increase their investments in education and health to address other aspects of human poverty such as ill health and illiteracy. Education will be particularly important for women, increasing their status within the family and within society in general. Again this is a matter of basic human rights. Education brings huge benefits for the economy, increasing productivity, standards of health and nutrition and unlocking the creative potential of half the population.

Social and economic development is a shared responsibility. The first requirement for attaining the international development goals is strong national commitment. Governments should also be able to rely on support from regional and global partners. These include the United Nations system, regional organizations, other countries in the Asian and Pacific region, new global funds, bilateral donors, private foundations, NGOs and international private firms. The national counterparts include government, civil society and the private sector. These partnerships could also include more sharing within the region of social science research and knowledge. They could, for example, strengthen and expand existing policy networks.

B. Increased population movement

As the opportunities created by globalization are concentrated in certain regions and countries, and in particular economic sectors, one of the most obvious responses on the part of those most threatened with exclusion or marginalization is to migrate, whether within countries or abroad. Over
the past few decades, this phenomenon has become an important element in the livelihood strategy of millions in the Asian and Pacific region. As for rural-urban migration trends, in the ESCAP region as a whole, nearly 40 million people are added to the urban population each year, with about half, or approximately 20 to 25 million people, moving to urban centres in search of a better life.

As with the revolution in communications technology, migration both integrates and divides. Some migrants are successful, and some find the departure from their place of origin a form of liberation from oppressive obligations. In all too many instances, however, migration remains a harsh necessity, a last resort involving privation and, not infrequently, the danger of physical harm.

Undocumented migrants reportedly face high levels of abuse and exploitation, raising the issue of migrant protection. There is also a risk that these migrants, especially if they are unskilled and undocumented, often are placed in high-risk, low-paying jobs. They are forced to accept jobs that are dirty, dangerous and difficult and which local workers refuse. Migrant workers, therefore, are exposed to a higher risk of occupational hazards than are native workers. Migrant workers are seldom aware of their rights because of their lack of familiarity with the country, culture and language.

The demographic transition that is currently under way in most countries of the region is generating an ever-increasing cohort of young people, a trend that is likely to continue during the coming decades. This trend, together with increasing education, access to information and improvements in transportation, is likely to augment the volume of migration. Moreover, migration is becoming more complex, and its pattern is undergoing change. No longer a one-time move by an individual, it comprises multiple moves, often involving other family members.

The important factor in the sustainability of female migration is the demand for domestic workers, caregivers and entertainers. As the number of women, migrating as domestic workers has increased, so have reports of discrimination, exploitation and abuse of these workers at their destinations. It has been noted that female migrants, especially domestic workers and entertainers, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation because of the nature of their work.

Human trafficking, as a form of irregular migration, has become an issue of growing concern in the region. Across the region, millions of children, young women and men are lured from their homes and villages by sophisticated crime syndicates and forced into labour where the conditions are exploitative and even slave-like. Poverty is a critical “push” factor for many victims. In Asia, where cross-border trafficking in humans occurs on a large scale, many victims are forced to work in the sex industry, as well as in other illegal activities, under the threat of violence and intimidation.

C. Ageing of the population

The growth rate and structure of the population in the ESCAP region has undergone a substantial change over the past few decades. Several countries and areas, such as Hong Kong, China; Japan; and Singapore, have completed the demographic transition and brought their fertility and mortality rates down to low levels. Others, such as the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Nepal and Pakistan, still have high fertility and mortality rates. One implication of this demographic transition to low fertility and mortality, owing to better health-care technologies and nutrition, is population ageing in the region. The proportion of the population aged 65 and older is expected to triple between 1995 and 2050 in the ESCAP region.

Not every country will achieve a high level of economic and social development before the proportions of ageing population surpass the 20 per cent mark (for example, like Japan, Singapore and to a lesser degree the Republic of Korea). Several other countries will grow old before they achieve relative economic affluence and social development. The more affluent economies in Asia are struggling to meet the requirements of their elderly population; for countries at the pre-, core- or advanced-transitional stages, the fate of old persons ranges from bleak to uncertain. This is mostly because both governments and populations are facing too many fiscal and resource constraints to ensure an adequate standard of living, benefits and protections for old persons.
The constraints that face countries in the region on improving the conditions for older persons are numerous ranging from income insecurity, limited public and family provisions to uncomfortable or even hostile living environments; and from generic and qualitative constraints such as epidemiological demands of old age to social such as discrimination, poverty, and negative images in society. Further, there are also structural constraints, often relating to lack of integration between the programmes of the many agencies and departments involved in housing, local services and environments for old persons. Furthermore, there are traditional and deeply ingrained belief in the value and ability of the family to care, which in and of itself provide a mode of self-denial of the growing needs of the aged.

The current ageing-related preoccupation in most countries is focused on long-term health care coverage, pensions and social security protection. However, increasingly, other issues are also receiving attention. These include the protection of the enjoyment of old person's rights, their participation in decision-making; their contribution to society's development; research on ageing; older women in emergencies or conflict situations; intergenerational issues; and international migration.

D. Women in development

The efforts at promoting and integrating the role and status of women in development have led to the following achievements, among others: greater de jure equality, closer gender parity in school enrolment ratios in many countries, increased participation in the labour market and business, better recognition of women’s unpaid work and initiatives taken to quantify such work in alternative national and domestic accounting systems, and increased political participation. Important mechanisms and institutions, such as equal employment laws, have been established; revisions in inheritance, property and succession laws and other family laws to accord women equal rights in matrimonial and family affairs; national machineries to advocate and coordinate strategies and plans for women’s empowerment and gender quality in the household, economy and polity; national policies and action plans to integrate women in development at all levels; measures to prevent or penalize discrimination in employment practices and sexual harassment at places of work and violence against women.

Yet many obstacles remain, blocking fuller social participation by women because of legal and customary barriers, including family and labour laws, and deep-rooted sociocultural perceptions and practices. In many developing countries, gender disparities are still prevalent in indicators of health, literacy, education, income and employment. Women face difficulties in elections and appointment to public office, retaining rights of guardianship over children and receiving fair judgement as victims of domestic and sexual violence.

E. Disability

Progress made during the first Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 1993-2002, was uneven, and most of the key goals of the Biwako Millennium Framework (BMF) will pose serious challenges in the years ahead. The defining feature of BMF is the major paradigm shift that it has effected away from dispensing charity and welfare to “the disabled” to a rights-based approach, and recognizing them as participants in economic and social development.

The establishment of national statistical databases is essential to provide accurate information on people with disabilities and their situation. Without this information, it is almost impossible to plan appropriate services and monitor progress towards the achievement of the goals.

Strengthening the capacities of women with disabilities and their organizations must be a priority if persons with disabilities (both men and women) are to take responsibility for their own development in a participatory manner and in a sustainable and mutually reinforcing partnership with Governments and NGOs.

An important challenge in the near future is the creation of a unified regional effort on the elaboration of a new international convention for persons with disabilities and its ratification and implementation at the regional level, a process that might take several years.
Strong commitment by the Governments of the region, with full regional cooperation, is needed to break the vicious cycle of poverty and disability and to ensure that the equal rights of all people with disabilities, including the right to participate in development and decision-making, are fully achieved in Asian and Pacific societies by 2012. It is hoped that the goals of the Biwako Millennium Framework will largely have been achieved by then also.

F. HIV/AIDS epidemic

HIV/AIDS has become a key issue for human security in the Asian and Pacific region. While the epidemic was late in coming to the region, there is growing concern over the marked increases registered in some of the world’s most populous countries. More than 60 per cent of the world’s population lives in the ESCAP region, where some of the fastest growing epidemics are located. At this time, the relatively low HIV prevalence rates in the region are deceptive, as low rates in the populous Asian and Pacific region still translate into massive numbers of people infected.

Until recently, only Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand had documented significant nationwide epidemics. Globally, however, India is second only to South Africa in the number of people living with HIV/AIDS, that is, 3.5 million. In China, Ministry of Health data indicate that HIV infections rose by 67.4 per cent in the first six months of 2001 compared with the previous year. It is estimated that China has as many as 10 million people living with HIV/AIDS by 2010, if prevention programmes are not scaled up.

The main modes of HIV transmission in the region are heterosexual sex and intravenous drug use. The most vulnerable group is made up of young people below the age of 24 years, who account for more than 50 per cent of new infections. Of particular concern within the region is that an increasing volume of migration may encourage the spread of HIV/AIDS. Clearly, it is not so much the movement itself that is most important, but the behaviour of those persons that move at the areas of origin and destination. It must be recognized that the very fact of moving may make them liable to engage in high-risk behaviour, in which they would not normally engage at home.

In large parts of the region, HIV/AIDS prevention programmes are poorly funded and resourced. Small-scale projects tend to be scattered and do not acquire the scale and coherence required to halt the rapid spread of the epidemic. A central concern is the serious political hurdles to prevention, as some of the behaviours leading to HIV/AIDS remain taboo, and even criminalized, in many parts of the region.

G. Social development issues in the Pacific Island developing countries

Poverty of opportunity is a more encompassing image of poverty in the Pacific. This is borne out in many ways, such as rapid emigration from some countries, high but disguised unemployment and a small but emerging subculture of youth crime and despair, including an extraordinarily high level of youth suicide in some parts of the subregion. In Fiji, for example, suicide has claimed more lives than traffic accidents and drowning combined in recent years. Domestic violence is widespread in the Pacific and is often linked with poverty.

The patterns of HIV transmission are a cause for concern in the subregion. HIV prevalence is high and increasing in certain areas of Papua New Guinea, in particular Port Moresby. The next highest reported HIV prevalence rates are in Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu. The reported HIV prevalence rate remains low in other Pacific island developing countries. It is almost certain, however, that prevalence rates in the subregion are much higher than identified through testing and reporting. Heterosexual transmission is the primary mode of transmission, although there is transmission through intravenous drug use in some countries.

In most countries of the subregion, the current known HIV prevalence is relatively low. However, the prevalence of significant risk factors for HIV transmission is high, particularly in relation to the prevalence of other sexually transmitted infections. It is well established that sexually
transmitted infections, such as genital ulcer diseases, gonorrhoea and chlamydia, greatly increase the risk of sexual transmission of HIV.

The increasing need for urban management looms as one of the most significant development issues for Pacific island developing countries in the twenty-first century. Approximately 45 to 50 per cent of the populations in these countries currently live in urban areas, a trend that continues to rise.

Population growth and the rapidity of urban growth have brought about spatial patterns in cities and towns that are distinctive in the Pacific. High population growth is either concentrated in one or two key islands, such as Majuro in the Marshall Islands, Funafuti in Tuvalu or Apia in Samoa, or dispersed over a number of centres, such as those in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The most vulnerable and at-risk populations live in the cities and towns of the atoll nations of Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu. The constraints underlying the growth of cities and towns in these Pacific island developing countries, namely restricted land areas, high population growth rates, rising sea levels and climate change, overcrowding, poor transport infrastructure and land-holding patterns, pose fundamental barriers to social integration.

Land tenure, supply and availability, combined with the continuing strength of traditional attachment by families to land as a communal resource, are the dominant factors shaping cities and towns in Pacific island developing countries. There are three common types of land tenure, namely customary or native lands, freehold lands and State or public or crown lands. Customary and native lands dominate the land tenure pattern in all of these countries.

The extent of informal and squatter developments in Pacific island developing countries, including substandard housing, indicates that access to affordable land is a problem. Lack of access to land that is scarce to begin with not only drives land prices up but also contributes significantly to the expansion of squatter and informal developments in all of the cities and towns of Pacific island developing countries. In Fiji, the Ministry of Local Government, Housing, Squatter Settlement and Environment has estimated that, in 2003, there were 82,000 squatters nationally, of whom 60,000 were located within the greater Suva metropolitan area.

It is evident in all cities and towns that the infrastructure systems, especially water works, sewerage, roads, electricity and waste management, are inadequate for the demands of a rapidly increasing urban population. The uneven distribution of services in urban areas and the variation in coverage and reliability, along with the infrastructure problems, affect the quality of life of the population, in particular the urban poor, and ultimately the productivity and efficiency of the urban economy. The water pressure and supply, for example, continues to be poor in all towns because water is lost through illegal connections and leakage.

References

