

2010 Human Development Report: Asian countries lead development progress over 40 years

China, Nepal, Indonesia, Laos among top HDI performers since 1970; ‘multidimensional’ poverty, gender gaps, rising inequality identified as region’s big challenges

United Nations, 4 November 2010—The 20th anniversary edition of the UN Development Programme’s (UNDP) *Human Development Report*, launched today in a ceremony with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, UNDP Administrator Helen Clark and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, spotlights countries that made the greatest progress in recent decades as measured by the Human Development Index (HDI), with China, Nepal, Indonesia, Lao PDR and Republic of Korea all making the Report’s “Top 10 Movers” list.



The HDI, a composite measure of human development covering health and education as well as income, was devised by the late Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq for the first Human Development Report in 1990. The new 20th anniversary edition of the Report, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development*, revisits that original analytical exercise, using new methodologies and international data sources, also looking back to 1970.

40-year trends

East Asia and the Pacific had by far the strongest overall HDI performance of any region in the world, nearly doubling average HDI attainment over the past 40 years, according to the Report’s analysis of health, education and income data for the 135 countries where complete and comparable information was available. The countries in the 40-year analysis include most of Asia and more than 90 percent of the world’s population.

China, the second highest achiever in the world in terms of HDI improvement since 1970, is the only country on the “Top 10 Movers” list due to income rather than health or education achievements. China’s per capita income increased a stunning 21-fold over the last four decades, also lifting hundreds of millions out of income poverty. Yet China was not among the region’s top performers in improving school enrolment and life expectancy.

“One important finding from several decades of human development experience is that for lasting improvements on the quality of life of citizens, economic growth alone does



United Nations Development Programme contacts:

New York

Mr. William Orme
Tel: +1 212-906-6763
Cell: +1 917 607 1026
william.orme@undp.org

Ms. Sandra Macharia
Tel: +1 212 906 5377
Cell: +1 917 213 0671
sandra.macharia@undp.org

Mr. Wynne Boelt
Tel: +1 212-906-3668
Cell: +1 917 930 4802
wynne.boelt@undp.org

Bangkok

Ms. Cherie Hart
Tel: +662 288 2133
Cell: +66 8 1 918 1564
cherie.hart@undp.org

Geneva, London and Paris

Mr. Adam Rogers
Tel: +41 22 9178541
Cell: +41 798490679
adam.rogers@undp.org

Copenhagen

Ms. Stine Kirstein Junge
Tel: +45 35467158
Cell: +45 2144 8918
Email: stine.junge@undp.org

Stockholm

Ms. Monica Lorensen
Tel: +46 (0)8 545 232 50
Cell: +46 (0) 768 83 96 56
monica.lorensson@undp.org

Tokyo

Mr. Toshiya Nishigori
Tel: +81 3 5467 4875
Cell: +81 90 7200 3295
toshiya.nishigori@undp.org

New Delhi

Ms. Surekha Subarwal
Tel: +91 11 46532346
Cell: +91 98 10153924
surekha.subarwal@undp.org

Johannesburg

Ms. Maureen Mundeia
Tel: +27 11 6035513
Cell: +27 716718734
maureen.mundeia@undp.org

Dakar

Ms. Maimouna Mills
Tel: +221 33 869 0653
Cell: +221 77 529 12 98
maimouna.mills@undp.org

Cairo

Mr. Noeman Al-Sayyad
Tel: +20 2 27 70 22 42
Cell: +20 10 181 187 6
noeman.alsayyad@undp.org

Bratislava

Mr. Zoran Stevanovic
Tel: +421 2 59337428
Cell: +421 908 729 846
zoran.stevanovic@undp.org

Panama

Mr. Pablo Basz
Tel: +507 305 4864
Cell: +507 6674 2224
pablo.basz@undp.org

Washington

Ms. Sarah Jackson-Han
Tel: +1 202 331 9130
Cell: +1 202 674 7442
sarah.jackson-han@undp.org

not automatically bring improvements in health and education,” said Jeni Klugman, the lead author of the *Human Development Report*.

Significant progress in human development was also found for most of the nine South Asian countries in the trends analysis—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Nepal and Pakistan.

Nepal emerges as one of the world’s fastest movers since 1970, coming in third out of the 135 countries studied. A child born today in Nepal can expect to live 25 years longer than a child born in 1970; more than four of every five children of school age in Nepal now attend primary school, compared to just one in five 40 years ago.

“This is perhaps surprising in light of Nepal’s difficult circumstances and record of conflict,” said Jeni Klugman. “But Nepal’s impressive progress in health and education can be traced to both public policy efforts and substantial remittance inflows from emigrant workers over many years.”

HDI trends since 1990 show that Bangladesh and Cambodia have been the best performers in the region.

Life expectancy in East Asia and the Pacific climbed to an average of 73 years in 2010 from 59 in 1970. In South Asia, life expectancy is now estimated at 65 years, compared to 49 in 1970, though with wide national variations. Over the past 40 years life expectancy increased by 23 years in Bangladesh, 18 years in Iran, 16 years in India, and 10 years in Afghanistan. One big factor has been the gradual decline in South Asia’s infant and child mortality rates, which now stand at 56 and 73 per 1,000 live births, respectively. This is still much higher than the global averages of 44 and 63 per 1,000 live births, however. Afghanistan has the region’s highest infant and under-five mortality rate, at 165 and 257 per 1,000 live births.

In education, literacy in South Asia increased to 66 percent in 2010 from 31 percent in 1970, still below the global average for the 135 countries assessed of 83 percent. In East Asia and the Pacific, the region’s literacy rates rose to 94 percent in 2010 compared to 53 percent in 1970.

2010 HDI update

The 2010 HDI, which features some technical adjustments in method and indicators, illustrates the wide range of development achievements in the region.

The Republic of Korea ranked highest among the countries grouped on the HDI as part of East Asia and Pacific—number 12 in the world, which is in the “very high human development” category, followed by Hong Kong, China (SAR) (21) and Singapore (27). Afghanistan (155) ranked lowest amongst Asian countries out of the 169 countries assessed. This year’s HDI should not be compared to the HDI that appeared in previous editions of the *Human Development Report* due to the use of different indicators and calculations.

The 2010 *Human Development Report* also introduces three new indices that capture multidimensional poverty, inequality and gender disparities.

The Multidimensional Poverty Index—which identifies serious overlapping deprivations in health, education and income at the household level—is applied to 104 countries. South Asia is home to half of the world’s multidimensionally poor population, or 844 million people. Eight Indian states, with poverty as acute as the 26 poorest African countries measured, are home to 421 million multidimensionally poor people, more than the 410 million multidimensional poor people living in those African countries combined.

Rates of multidimensional poverty are, however, relatively low in most of East Asia and the Pacific, including China and Thailand, though more than half of Cambodians are estimated to be multidimensionally poor.

“The Multidimensional Poverty Index captures widespread deprivations, revealing the magnitude of poverty beyond the standard monetary measures,” Jeni Klugman commented.

The Report’s new Inequality-adjusted HDI, measuring the effect of inequality in 139 countries, shows South Asia with an average 33 percent loss due to inequality in health, education and income—the second largest for a developing region after sub-Saharan Africa. India, for example, loses 30 percent overall on the Inequality-adjusted HDI, including 41 percent in education and 31 percent in health. In East Asia, most countries have higher income inequality today than was the case a few decades ago, due in part to widening gaps between rural areas and the rapidly industrializing cities.

Inequality for women remains a major barrier to human development throughout Asia, the 2010 Report shows. The new Gender Inequality Index—which captures gender gaps in reproductive health, empowerment and workforce participation in 138 countries—shows that six countries of East Asia and the Pacific fall in the lower half on gender inequality, with Papua New Guinea among the bottom ten.

Several countries in East Asia and the Pacific have little or no female representation in parliaments, although the Philippines and Indonesia have elected women leaders in recent decades. South Asia is characterized by relatively weak female empowerment with an inequality loss of 35 percent compared with 16 percent in developed countries.

Note to editors: For HDI calculations and other purposes, the *Human Development Report* includes 24 countries in its “East Asia and Pacific” region: Cambodia, China, Fiji, Indonesia, Kiribati, Korea (Republic of), Lao PDR, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Viet Nam. The nine countries included in “South Asia” are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

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For more information on the 20th anniversary *Human Development Report* and the complete press kit please visit: <http://hdr.undp.org/>

ABOUT THIS REPORT: Since its inception in 1990, the *Human Development Report* has provided fresh insights into some of the most pressing challenges facing humanity. The *Human Development Report* is an independent yearly publication of the United Nations Development Programme. Jeni Klugman is the lead author of the 2010 Report, which is translated into more than a dozen languages and launched in more than 100 countries annually. The Report is published in English by Palgrave Macmillan. Complete texts of the 2010 Report and all previous Reports since 1990 are available for free downloading in major UN languages on the Report website: <http://hdr.undp.org/>

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