DIGITALES ARCHIV

Book

Accelerating progress : an empowered, inclusive and equal Asia and the Pacific

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Accelerating progress:
AN EMPOWERED, INCLUSIVE AND EQUAL ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

UNITED NATIONS
ESCAP
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SDG Partnership

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Preface

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledges to leave no one behind. At the heart of this ambition is a commitment to empower people, reduce inequalities and promote social, economic and political inclusion. This commitment defines the theme of the 2019 United Nations High-level Political Forum: 'Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality'. It is directly relevant to countries in Asia and the Pacific.

Progress has been achieved on many fronts. Yet despite governments' efforts, wide disparities remain in a rapidly changing region. Additional action is imperative and the inclusion and participation of marginalized groups such as women and youth must be part of our response. These are central to the region's productivity and future. Giving them a voice and improving their prospects can make a major contribution to more prosperous societies.

To help translate aspiration into concrete policy actions, this report identifies four elements necessary to advance inclusion, empowerment and equality: rights and justice; norms and institutions; resources and capabilities; participation and voice. These are four areas where governments, development partners and the United Nations system can work with society more effectively to further empowerment, inclusion and equality.

Building on analyses, case studies and consultations, this report recommends that action should focus on three main areas. First, investment in research, disaggregated data and constructive social dialogue to address vulnerabilities. This will help refine our understanding of these groups, identify barriers and shape solutions. Second, the current unprecedented opportunity to harness new technologies and innovation, in particular information and communication technologies. Third, the urgent need to strengthen the participation and voice of people in the region. Enhanced civic engagement, which institutionalizes civil society participation across government structures, is critical to ensure that the interests of the most vulnerable are considered.

More agile, innovative and responsive approaches are needed to tackle risks, such as climate change, that disproportionally impact marginalized communities. Recognition of the rights and perspectives of these communities is integral to an effective climate response. Resources and financing will be critical to realizing these aspirations. More equitable approaches to domestic resource mobilization through taxation and public expenditure to meet the needs of those who are left behind can also play a critical role. While much work remains to be done, countries across the region are taking steps to modernize, simplify and extend tax administration systems.

The 2030 Agenda needs creativity and dedication from all sections of society. By harnessing the expertise, technology and financial resources of the private sector, financial community, academia and civil society, we can advance equality. We are pleased to issue this joint report as a contribution to the ongoing national, regional and global dialogues on opportunities to empower people, ensure their inclusion and advance equality.

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Abbreviations

ACT! AP	Activists' Coalition on TB Asia-Pacific
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AsiaDHRRA	Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas
COMANGO	Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the Universal Periodic Review Process
COP	Conference of the Parties
CSO	civil society organization
EPI	environmental performance index
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
G20	Group of Twenty
GDP	gross domestic product
GST	goods and services tax (India)
ICT	information and communications technologies
LGBTIQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer/questioning
LVC	land value capture
Musrenbang	Musyawarah Pembangunan Daerah
n.d.	no date
NGO	non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
Rep.	Republic
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SMEs	small and medium-sized enterprises
TB	tuberculosis
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VAT	value added tax
VAWG	violence against women and girls
VNR	Voluntary National Review

Explanatory notes

The Asia-Pacific region, unless otherwise specified, refers to the group of members and associate members, within the geographical region of Asia and the Pacific, of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). (The Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, partners in this publication, have different regional compositions.) Some countries are referred to by a shortened version of their official name in the figures, as indicated in brackets in the listing below.

Geographical subregions in this report are defined (unless otherwise specified) as follows: **East and North-East Asia**: China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPR Korea), Japan, Republic of Korea, Mongolia; **South-East Asia**: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Viet Nam; **South and South-West Asia**: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Turkey; **North and Central Asia**: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan; **Pacific**: American Samoa, Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.

Least developed countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Kiribati, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tuvalu, Vanuatu. Samoa was part of the group of least developed countries prior to its graduation in 2014. **Landlocked developing countries**: Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Nepal, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan. **Small island developing states**: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.

Developing Asia-Pacific: ESCAP region excluding Australia, Japan and New Zealand.

Developed or industrialized Asia-Pacific: Australia, Japan and New Zealand.

Symbols and units
- References to dollars ($), unless otherwise stated, are to United States dollars.
- The dash (–) between dates signifies the full period involved, including the beginning and end years.
- Percentages may not add up to 100 per cent because of rounding.

Executive summary

Empowering people, ensuring inclusiveness and equality is fundamental to realizing sustainable development. What change is needed to strengthen empowerment and promote inclusion and equality of all people within our efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda, including its central aspiration to leave no one behind? This report helps to answer that question, by proposing a framework of four synergistic elements that can promote these intertwined objectives.

Elements of an empowerment and inclusion framework

Encompassing knowledge and protection of one's rights, why they matter and how to ensure access to justice.

Rights and justice

Participation and voice

Freedom to participate in political activity and community life, to access public resources and services, and to contribute to decisions that impact an individual, as well as the ability of individuals and groups to represent themselves and be heard.

Essential and productive resources including social protection and safety nets, as well as capabilities to control them and have a choice in their use.

Resources and capabilities

Norms and institutions

Informal rules, practices, and shared social expectations that shape individual and societal attitudes and behavior, as well as formal structures, laws and regulations that underpin societal functioning.

The framework is grounded in a review of relevant SDG targets, and consultations with more than 600 participants in a series of workshops held in Nadi, Ulaanbataar, Bangkok, New Delhi and Tbilisi , including government officials, representatives of civil society, business, think tanks and other stakeholders.

Empowerment, inclusion and equality can accelerate progress towards SDGs

The report illustrates how each element of the framework contributes to better Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) outcomes. It finds that where social norms support women's participation in household decisions there are also better health outcomes for children. Similarly, reduced frequency of child marriage is associated with higher female educational attainment. It also shows that constitutional recognition of environmental rights is associated with improved environmental performance across the core environment-related SDGs.

The report applies the framework to three important policymaking spheres in Asia and the Pacific that will likely define the region's success in achieving the 2030 Agenda – climate action, domestic resource mobilization, civic participation – and also takes a look at violence against women and girls.

Towards climate action that empowers

The interactions of climate change with underlying drivers of inequality such as rural–urban divides and gender norms create new forms of vulnerabilities for many.

The report underscores the importance of incorporating rights-based approaches into climate actions through rights mapping, documenting traditional knowledge and indigenous values to harness social norms, and promoting local organizations to enable participation of vulnerable groups in climate actions. Evidence suggests that an empowerment-and-inclusion approach can accelerate climate actions by hastening the transition to renewable energy, widening the

uptake of climate-smart agricultural practices, creating climate-resilient communities and removing some of the key obstacles to realizing green economy benefits. Such approaches underline the need to ensure that the perspectives of the most vulnerable help to shape institutional structures for decision-making on climate action. More context-specific research to understand the impacts of climate change on various social groups can help identify emergent vulnerabilities and tailor climate action to meet the needs of different groups.

The report recommends:

✓ Ensuring that the scope of climate actions integrates the four elements of the empowerment-and-inclusion framework. Especially, incorporating rights-based approaches into climate actions.

✓ Realigning the institutional structure for decision-making on climate action to ensure that the groups most affected by the impacts of climate change have adequate representation and voice.

✓ Promoting context-specific research and disaggregated data to identify emergent vulnerabilities and tailor climate actions to meet diverse societal needs.

Resource mobilization strategies that recognize the diverse perspectives of different groups in society

Raising resources to realize the SDGs is a critical challenge in Asia and the Pacific. Applying an empowerment-and-inclusion lens to taxation can boost resource mobilization efforts while also helping to address inequalities in the region. Yet, despite broad recognition of the critical role of taxation in enabling the resource mobilization needed to provide fiscal space spending to achieve the SDGs, tax revenues in Asia and the Pacific are among the lowest in the world. A well-designed and administered tax system can promote inclusion, encourage good governance, stimulate investment and job creation, promote social justice, and advance an equal society.

Tax systems affect people differently depending on their social and economic realities. Fiscal policy and taxation systems need to be developed and implemented in an inclusive and accountable manner with the needs of all people in mind, including the poor and vulnerable. The report takes a closer look at examples of interventions that can strengthen the development impact of domestic resource mobilization strategies, with an emphasis on the steps to engage diverse actors, and stressing the need to develop accountable and effective institutions to manage and administer resources and deliver public services. The effective management of tax revenues can be enhanced by harnessing new information management technologies, and engaging and empowering critical stakeholders and citizen groups.

The report recommends:

✓ Harnessing new opportunities offered by information technology-related innovations to enable more progressive and targeted approaches to tax policy design and implementation.

✓ Engaging informed and empowered citizen groups in tax policy formulations.

✓ Building enforcement capacity within tax administration for promoting inclusion and equality.

Strengthened civic engagement that enables wide participation and voice

Strengthening the participation and voice of people, through enhanced civic engagement, can improve accountability and trust in institutions while ensuring responsive decision-making across the SDG framework. It can improve governments' delivery of essential services particularly to marginalized and vulnerable groups. Civic engagement protects the social contract that binds state and society, helping to ensure that state institutions and related actors fulfil their obligations. It also builds momentum for progressive change through legislative or institutional reform and can curb harmful social norms and practices by inspiring behavioural or policy changes. Civic engagement enables a diverse range of individuals and groups to meaningfully participate in decision-making, strengthening the local ownership of solutions and responsibility for their implementation.

The report focuses on the vital contributions of civil society to development in the region, and highlights opportunities to create an enabling regulatory environment that supports and protects civic actors. The report also advocates for the

institutionalization of dialogue and participation mechanisms, the need for investment in civic education, and the capacity-building of government officials in effective stakeholder engagement. Additionally, it draws attention to emerging and innovative avenues for civic engagement, as well as the potential of alternative and citizen-generated data.

The report recommends:

- ✓ Ensuring an enabling legal and regulatory environment for individuals and organizations alike to engage in public life.
- ✓ Institutionalizing mechanisms and dialogue platforms for meaningful engagement with civil society actors, especially those representing the interests of groups left behind.
- ✓ Capitalizing on innovative avenues to strengthen civic engagement, including social entrepreneurship, applying human rights principles to business, social investment products and crowdsourcing.

Tackling violence against women and girls

The special feature on violence against women and girls shows how pervasive sociocultural norms are manifested in practices that undermine the rights of women and girls, and incur wide and substantial social and economic costs. In parts of the region, over 70 per cent of surveyed women face gender-based violence. This also has significant economic costs, in some places amounting to over two per cent of GDP. Making the changes needed to address this issue entails action across all elements of the empowerment-and-inclusion framework, and requires the involvement of all members of society.

Conclusions

Empowerment of vulnerable groups and their greater inclusion in social, economic and political realms can accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but requires a comprehensive policy agenda that cuts across sectors, development actors and thematic areas. Creating an equal society in all its different dimensions requires whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches anchored in coordinated action.

There are three cross-cutting enablers to be tapped in moving forward. First, partnering for innovative contextual research, social dialogues and disaggregated data is essential to expand understanding of vulnerabilities and vulnerable groups, and to explain 'outliers' in existing datasets. Second, tapping into next-generation development solutions, especially involving technology and innovation, can significantly expand the options Governments have at their disposal for empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality. Finally, there is a need to inject new vigour in civic-engagement efforts, by institutionalizing engagement mechanisms and building capacity of civil society organizations and increasing access to high-quality civic education.

Greater regional collaboration to promote mutual learning, exchange best-practices and establish regional initiatives on empowerment and inclusion, such as institutionalized efforts to engage with civil society at the regional level, can also play a critical role in supporting progress.

1 Understanding empowerment, inclusion and equality

What changes are needed to empower people and promote inclusion and equality for all?

This chapter makes the case for four elements of a policy-intervention framework.

1.1 Introduction

Differences among social groups exist in every society. But where differences in language, ethnicity, gender, religious belief, age, sexual identity or other factors result in widely differing incomes, wealth, access to basic services and participation in civic life, they become sources of division. As a result, while millions of people in the Asia-Pacific region have prospered, there are families, groups and communities that remain disempowered, vulnerable and marginalized over generations.

How can people be made agents of change of their own futures – become empowered – and how can we address barriers to equality?[1]

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a call for action to 'leave no one behind'. The theme of the 2019 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and the theme of this report speak to the will of the global community to tackle these divides head on – to shape societies so that they empower, include and provide equal opportunities for all. This expression of global solidarity now needs follow-up.

This report explores how promoting empowerment, inclusion and equality can accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It considers some of the key elements of an empowerment-and-inclusion approach to policymaking, with the help of case studies from across the Asia-Pacific region. It draws out policy messages on how an empowerment-and-inclusion approach to policymaking can be fostered.

1.2 Empowerment, inclusion and equality: a virtuous cycle

More equal societies pave the way for faster economic growth, reduced poverty,[2] strengthened social contracts and, in the long run, enduring peace and stability. The establishment of more equal societies in which people and communities prosper is a central aspiration of the 2030 Agenda. The Agenda specifically recognizes vulnerable groups, which it commits to empower,[3] and calls for the social, political and economic inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status.[4]

Although the Universal Declaration on Human Rights affirms the dignity and equality of all people, in practice some may be 'more equal' than others. Some people are fully empowered – with freedom of choice and action, control over resources and decisions that affect them,[5] and the ability to be self-reliant and to fully exercise their rights.[6] Others are vulnerable, marginalized and disempowered, without access to the opportunities, resources, knowledge, social capital and the intangibles that constitute agency – the ability to define one's own goals and act on them,[7] and other factors that enable a person to 'move up' within society.

Why the difference? Both the formal and informal rules of society and its institutions determine to a great extent how people are included – how individuals interact within families and communities, and the interactions of families and communities with wider society, and in the economic and political realms.[8] These sociocultural norms influence power relations within and among groups in society and at different levels of governance. They help to define how opportunities and resources are used, allocated and accessed – and, in turn, how those people who are included then feel in society, and how their participation in civic life is defined.

Policies and actions that ensure inclusion and equality in access to assets, capabilities and opportunities, and that strengthen social cohesion, are critical – but they must also evolve. New types of marginalization or vulnerability can emerge where people are displaced, when social change fosters isolation, or with the emergence of technologies.

Inclusion creates empowerment, and inclusion is then itself strengthened by this empowerment, working from 'below' to create voice and demand for a change to more equal societies.[9] More equal societies lay a foundation for empowerment and inclusion.

1.3 A four-element framework for empowerment and inclusion

How can empowerment and inclusion be promoted? Often it is not easy to understand the implications of these concepts for policies and programmes. A close review of the SDG targets that are most relevant to empowerment and inclusion (Box 1.1) points to four interlinked and synergistic elements of a framework for strengthening empowerment and inclusion (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Elements of an empowerment-and-inclusion framework
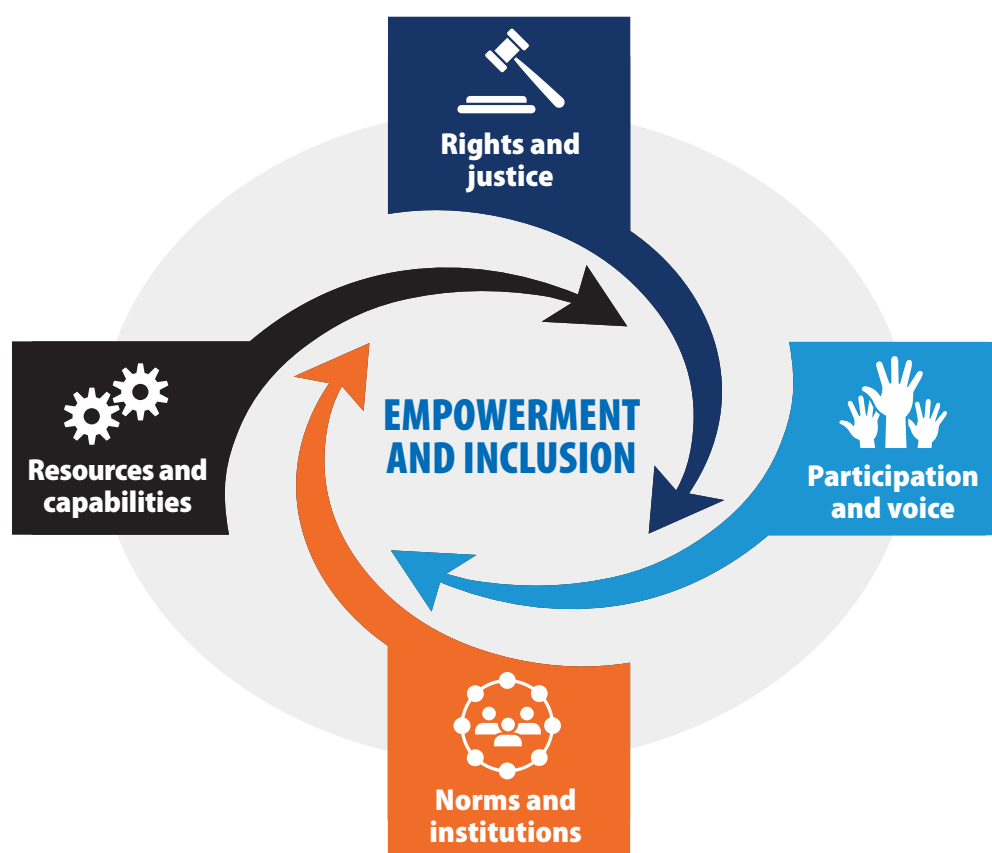
		SDG Targets
RIGHTS AND JUSTICE	Human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and its related legal framework, identify fundamental entitlements, including participation in civic life, and access to resources and capabilities, for all persons. Access to justice protects rights.	SDG Targets 5.6, 5.a, 5.1, 8.8 and 1.4, among others
PARTICIPATION AND VOICE	Participation in civic life, accessing public resources and services, and contributing to decision-making are covered in this element. 'Voice' enables individuals and groups to represent themselves and to be heard. Both are essential for asserting rights and influencing norms and institutions.	SDG Targets 5.5, 8.5, 9.2, 11.3, 4.3 and 16.7, among others
NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS	Sociocultural norms comprise informal rules, practices and shared expectations, while institutions comprise more formal rules and structures. Together they determine the 'rules of the game', excluding or including people, and governing the power relations in society.	SDG Targets 5.3, 8.7 and 10.3, among others
RESOURCES AND CAPABILITIES	Resources include basic services and productive resources. At the same time, the capability to control these resources and have choice in their usage are important determinants of empowerment.	SDG Targets 4.1–4.4, 11.1, 5.a, 5.b and 16.7, among others

1.4   Exploring each of the four elements

These four elements resonated with the barriers to empowerment and inclusion that were identified in a series of consultations held for the preparation of this report, with over 600 participants – government officials, and representatives of civil society and think tanks from across the region.[10] These barriers included *issues of governance*: strained institutional capacities and resources; policy incoherence and institutional arrangements; and limited political will, government transparency and accountability. Participants also pointed to several barriers that prevent *access to resources*: geographical remoteness and awareness, as well as lack of education.

Lack of *opportunities for participation*, particularly in policy processes, was highlighted in the consultations while the importance of the most vulnerable having their own voice in issues that concerned them was also raised, and concern was expressed regarding shrinking civic space. *Regressive and discriminatory sociocultural environments and harmful social norms* were cited across the region, including gender inequality, and discrimination against individuals identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer/questioning (LGBTIQ). Shortcomings with respect to *human rights and access to justice* were also cited from Central Asia to the Pacific. People expressed the sense of increasing divisions in society and concern around conflict – both long-standing and emerging conflict.

The key issues that underpin the four elements and their potential impacts across the 2030 Agenda will now be explored in this report.

RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

Human rights lie at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. The 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development targets "constant improvements in ... well-being" through "active, free and meaningful participation in development" and "fair benefits from development processes". Access to justice is intimately linked to the exercise of all human rights identified in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and related covenants,[11] declarations[12] and conventions[13] – ensuring effective and timely remedy to those whose rights are denied. By laying out a common standard for all people, universal human rights are foundational to empowerment and inclusion, as they underscore the equality of all human beings.

In some places, long-standing inaction on human rights, including economic, cultural and social rights, has fostered extreme levels of inequality and exclusion. A history of displacement, marginalization, inequality and unmet needs has provided fertile ground for conflict and for human rights violations.[14] In other places, new stresses are emerging. Past reports in this series have pointed to the implications of the demand for resources, technological change and climate risks for vulnerability and marginalization.[15] Civil society organizations have raised concerns about natural resource access and use and about the lack of rights of small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples and rural communities. In 18 out of 24 countries in the region whose legal frameworks were reviewed, existing laws do not address the issue of land rights of indigenous communities in protected areas.[16]

The legislative and institutional foundations for the realization of human rights are, however, being consolidated. In Mongolia, for example, the Open Government Partnership is working with local authorities and the central government to mainstream social accountability and to promote aspects of civic education. In Malaysia, the right to citizenship and legal identity has been realized for more than 3,000 stateless people by a partnership between the government and civil society.[17] Action is also being taken on other fronts. Indonesia has pioneered a nationwide 'Better Work Programme' that has had measurable impact on pay, quality of worker dialogue and rights awareness, and antenatal health care for workers.[18] In Vanuatu, traditional leaders have been brought together with young women to discuss the sociocultural practices that constrain the exercise of human rights.

Human rights analysis gives an insight into the distribution of power. Identifying groups lacking effective rights – and groups that may be denying the rights of others – can highlight avenues for reducing vulnerability.[19] Rights-based approaches have had positive impacts in tackling the underlying causes of poverty and disadvantage, leading to sustained changes. For example, in India, a rights-based approach to the provision of public work increased employment opportunities for women, and resulted in a substantial increase in their control over household decisions, and also in the probability of daughters staying in school.[20] Rights-based projects have linked citizens and states in new ways, created networks of partnerships and alliances that provide support to the poor and marginalized, strengthened accountability and access to justice, and significantly reduced vulnerability.[21] Scaling up these benefits from specific project contexts to the wider society has significant potential for improving development outcomes.

The analysis of environmental rights provision in national constitutions and legislation (see Figure 1.2) finds that recognizing environmental rights can improve environmental performance. Yet, many environmental defenders live under constant threat as discussed in Chapter 4.

Ensuring rights and justice can strengthen environmental outcomes

Analyses for this report[22] explored the relationship between environmental performance and environmental rights. Environmental rights include rights to an environment of a certain quality (clean, healthy, etc.), rights to information, participation and to access to justice in environmental matters, and fundamental rights relating to dignity, health and life that include implicit protection of derivative environmental rights. Several countries in the region recognize various forms of environmental rights.[23]

On average, environmental rights provisions in constitutions and/or legislation are linked to better environmental outcomes[24]

Recognition and protection of environmental rights is also linked to faster improvements in environmental quality

Figure 1.2a Environmental rights and average environmental performance index (EPI) scores, 2018
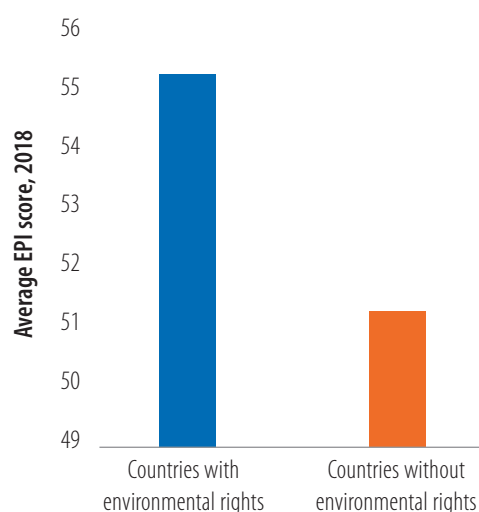
Figure 1.2b Environmental rights and improvements in EPI scores from 2014 to 2018
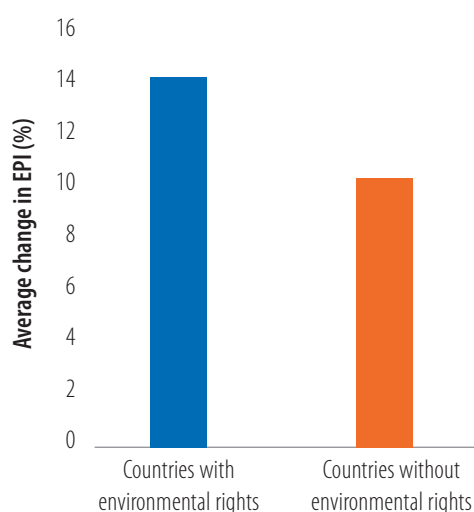
Source: Analysis by Jeffords and Gellers (2019)[25]

Fulfilment of environmental rights helps to strengthen domestic legal frameworks and provides citizens with a mechanism for achieving environmental justice, supporting the achievement of several environment-related SDGs. Online platforms that catalogue best practices in environmental rights (e.g. the Environmental Rights Database[26]) can help in the sharing of information on environmental rights. Technical training for judges, lawyers and advocates; raising public awareness about environmental rights and how to access legal services; and funding public-interest environmental law firms are all critical for the translation of rights into enhanced environmental performance in reality.

NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS

Social norms comprise the informal rules, practices and shared social expectations that shape individual attitudes and behaviour.[27] They fulfil a range of functions in society: to coordinate action, allocate resources, express local beliefs and cultural and religious values, and sometimes as a means of upholding social order.[28] Institutions are the more formal structures within society, comprising the laws and formal rules that underpin its functioning, and the organizational units that contribute to its governance. Both are fundamental in determining whether development and progress include or exclude a person or community. Both formal and informal rules play a significant role in the empowerment and inclusion of vulnerable groups through their effect on individual as well as societal behaviours at large. These formal and informal rules tend to co-evolve, with informal rules sometimes complementing, competing with and substituting for formal institutions.[29]

While both norms and institutions are important in advancing development, adverse norms and discriminatory institutions can lead to the persistence of exclusion and disempowerment. Gender norms of society, for instance, that lay a disproportionate burden of domestic work on women and girls pose a significant barrier for them to pursue professional aspirations. Child marriage prevails to such an extent that over 30 per cent of girls are married before they turn 18 in parts of the region.[30] A 1 per cent increase in the prevalence of child marriage seems to be associated with a 1.1 per cent reduction in female enrolment in secondary education (cf. SDG Target 4.1) (see Figure 1.3). Social norms can perpetuate domestic violence: in some parts of the region over 50 per cent of women believe that the "husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife if she argues with him" (see the special feature, pages 42–46, on violence against women and girls).

Similarly, social norms that entrench informality can act as a barrier to the economic mobility of vulnerable groups. For example, norms can entrench the role of intermediaries in different settings, leading to exploitative relationships, while norms that dissuade people from payment of taxes can further weaken the overall capacity of the state to provide essential public goods and services. Similarly, institutions in the form of legal frameworks can entrench disempowerment. Inheritance laws with strong preference for male heirs, minimum wage legislations in many countries of the region that exclude groups such as domestic workers, and discriminatory labour laws in 23 countries (out of 46) in the region that prohibit women from being employed

in certain sectors of the economy[31] are some examples of such institutions. It is therefore paramount to identify and analyse the impact of norms and institutions on specific vulnerable groups.

Since many of these norms and institutions have developed over a long period, influencing them is a long-term, complex endeavour. Yet education, institutional reform, structured dialogue, use of media, livelihood interventions and capacity development can be effective entry points and often prerequisites for empowerment and inclusion.

Legislative changes also play an important role. The Marshall Islands, for example, has overhauled its legislation to strengthen the inclusion of people with disabilities, and India has removed discriminatory legislative provisions aimed at same-sex relationships. This report shines a spotlight on some successful ways to influence and harness norms and institutions to promote empowerment and inclusion.

Figure 1.3   Relationship between prevalence of child marriage and female enrolment in secondary education
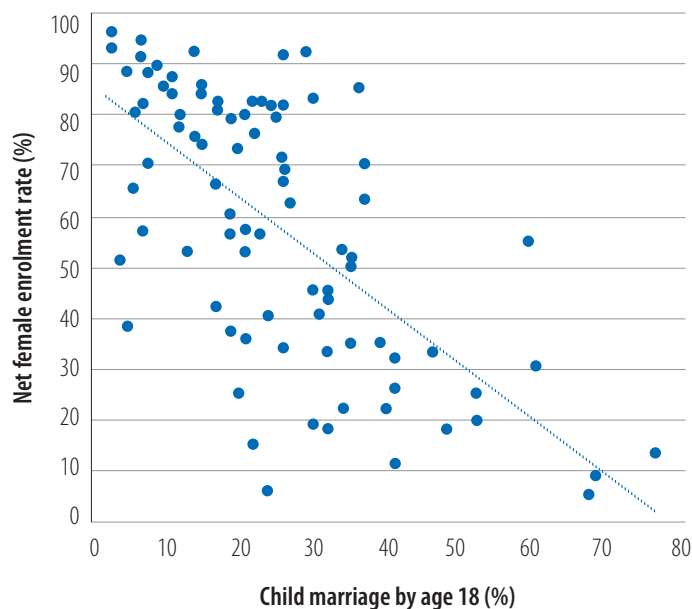
Source: Analysis using data from United Nations Population Fund 2018[32]

1% Increase in prevalence of child marriages

is associated with

1.1% reduction in female enrolment in secondary education
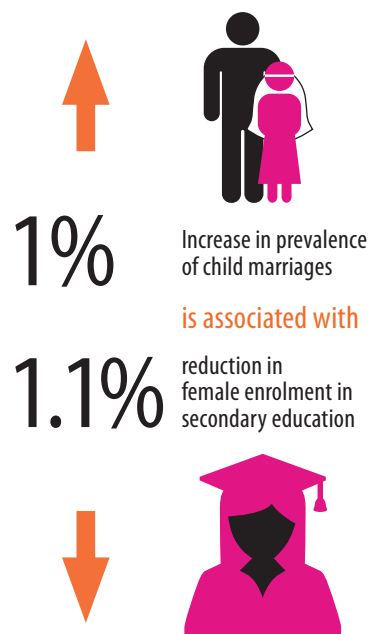
Figure 1.4   Percentage of women (aged 15–49) not involved in major household purchasing decisions
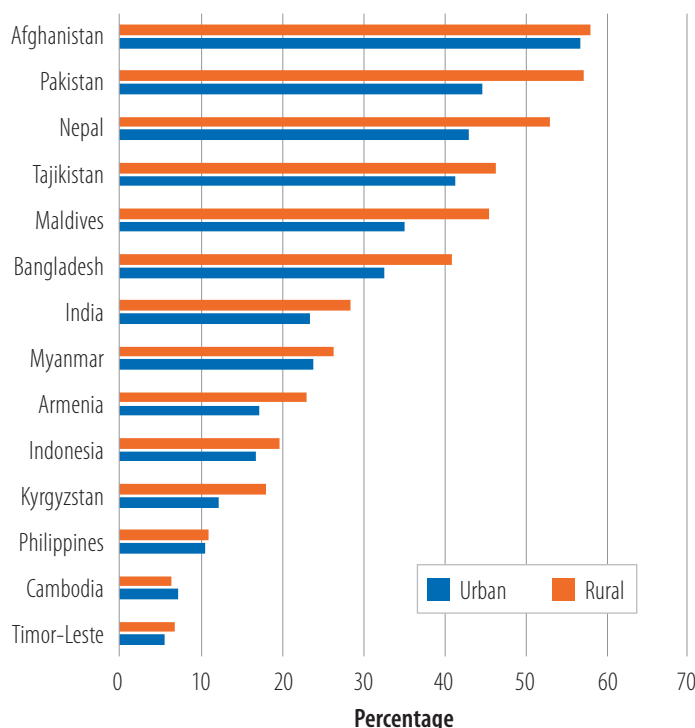
Source: Calculations based on data from the Demographic and Health Surveys, and the multiple indicator cluster surveys, latest years[34]

Social norms influence women's participation in household decision-making and health outcomes for children

Where women have a say in decision-making on major household purchases there are better health outcomes for children in terms of reduction of stunting (SDG Target 2.2)[33]

PARTICIPATION AND VOICE

Participation encompasses the freedom to voluntarily participate in political activity, to participate in community life, to access public resources and services, and to contribute to decisions that impact an individual. Voice refers to the ability of groups and individuals to represent themselves and to be heard. Public participation and voice play crucial roles in promoting social accountability, providing the conditions for the realization of human rights and the right to development. Many aspects of participation are covered in the framework of international agreements on human rights. The right to participation is interlinked with other human rights such as the rights to peaceful assembly and association, to freedom of expression and opinion and to education and information.

The barriers to participation and voice are substantial. They include formal and informal norms and institutions that reinforce discriminatory practices; shortcomings in the realization of other human rights, individual or group capacities; and inadequate institutional mechanisms and capacities. As an illustration, the proportion of polling stations accessible to persons with disabilities is less than 20 per cent in some countries of the region, while the proportion of accessible government buildings is less than 30 per cent in parts of the region.[35] Despite efforts that include affirmative actions and quotas, the gender imbalance in political participation persists in the region,

with only 19 per cent of seats in parliaments and local governments in the region being occupied by women (see Figure 1.5). Participation and voice at the household level are also important. There is evidence that in some countries over 50 per cent of women are excluded from important household decisions ranging from choice of health care to major household purchases (see Figure 1.4).

Beyond supporting the exercise of human rights, facilitation of participation and voice has several positive impacts on development outcomes: more effective and environmentally, socially and economically sustainable decisions; improved service delivery; greater trust in governments; and a more informed and capacitated citizenry (among others). Analyses of a sample of 100 cases of various forms of citizen engagement reveal that in almost 75 per cent of these cases they advanced developmental outcomes, the accountability of governments, and the development of inclusive and cohesive societies.[36]

Capacitated and resourced organizational infrastructure is a core requirement of institutionalized participation. Experiences from developed countries in the region are also instructive. Municipal and state governments in Australia have established policies and operational guidelines for public participation that spell out, among other things, the decisions on which public input is sought, the organizational core values to which participation responds, and the communication channels, responsibilities, and modalities for engagement. In Vanuatu, civil society action has helped to establish a policy on integrity in public life and anti-corruption measures increasing the public's role in combating corruption. In Indonesia, participation has been strengthened in the context of decentralization efforts, and governance audits have included reviews of performance in terms of engaging stakeholders, participatory planning and budgeting context, known as *Musrenbang*.[37]

The Declaration on the Right to Development refers to "active and meaningful participation". In New Zealand, the government can be held accountable in court for the quality of its mechanisms and process for engaging with the public and stakeholders. Various quality standards for public participation exist and are necessary for efforts to institutionalize public participation,[38] including a framework of indicators for planning and assessing quality engagement developed by ESCAP and the International Association for Public Participation.[39]

Figure 1.5 Seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments, latest available year, 2010–2018
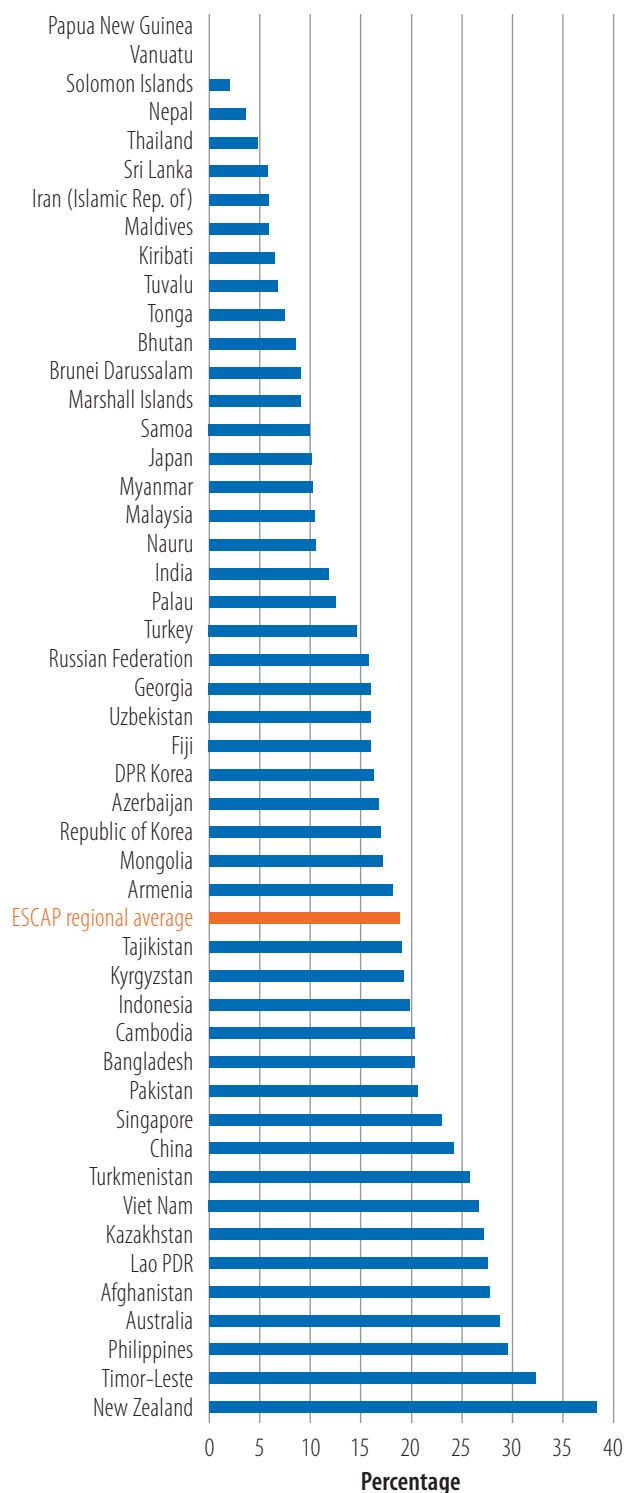
Source: Compilation using data from SDG data portal[40]

Gender imbalances persist in political participation

On average only 19% of seats in national parliaments and local governments in the region are occupied by women

Civil society participation is beginning to decline

Figure 1.6 Civil Society Participation Index for Asia and the Pacific
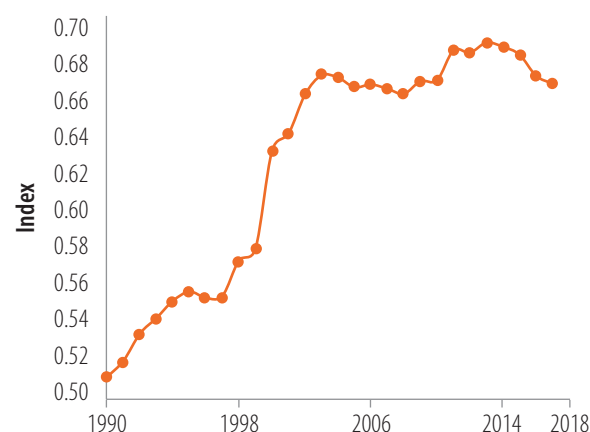
Source: Compilation using data from V-Dem Institute.[41]

Note: The civil society participation index integrates aspects such as: Are major civil society organizations (CSOs) routinely consulted by policymakers? How large is the involvement of people in CSOs? Are women prevented from participating? Is legislative candidate nomination within party organization highly decentralized or made through party primaries?[42]

Access to resources is a critical dimension of empowerment. These resources range from financial resources, through housing, sanitation, access to public services, social protection, to access to productive resources such as land and technology. Marginalized groups often lack access to these resources, which in turn acts as a key barrier to their empowerment. Household survey analyses reveal that there is huge disparity in access to bank accounts between the poorest and richest segments of populations: in many countries of the region this disparity is over 50 per cent.[43] Similarly, gender disparity prevails in access to resources, with the proportion of women (aged 15–49) who do not own a house or land ranging from 13 per cent in Timor-Leste to over 90 per cent in countries such as Nepal and Pakistan; in most countries, over 30 per cent of women do not own either.[44] The youth within the region continue to be deprived of employment and skills-development opportunities, with young women left furthest behind (see Figure 1.8). Identifying the specific resources that the different vulnerable groups are lacking and adopting ways to extend the provision of these would be a crucial step in the process of empowerment.

In the provisioning of critical resources, a rights-based approach can be far more empowering than charity-based approaches. Many countries have adopted rights-based approaches, especially in the provisioning of resources to people with disabilities, in compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and in line with the Incheon Strategy.[45]

Strengthening access to resources and capabilities takes resources, which will need to be mobilized largely domestically. The way in which resources are mobilized has implications for social outcomes (discussed in Chapter 3). The way in which resources are spent is also important. Most countries in the region have been expanding social protection and spending on education and health since 2000. In addition to high-income countries of the region, countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal and Uzbekistan have established social protection floor policies comprising a set of social security guarantees to ensure, as a minimum, that everyone has access to essential health care and to basic income security throughout their lives. Yet most countries in the Asia-Pacific region spend, on average, less than one third of the global average of 11.2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on social protection.[46] As a result, a large proportion of vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities are without any kind of social protection coverage (see Figure 1.7).

However, access to resources does not automatically lead to empowerment. In fact, it is the availability of choices or control in terms of the actual usage of resources that matters more in terms of empowerment. In the context of resources, the aspect of individual freedom and capacity for action broadly understood as 'capabilities'[47] is manifest partly in the form of actual control of resources and participation in decision-making within households. Household data analysis from the region shows that, even though women engage in paid work, a sizeable proportion (as high as over 20 per cent) of women, especially in rural in parts of the region, are not involved in decision-making on their own earnings.[48]

Figure 1.7   Percentage of people with disabilities covered by social protection systems, 2016
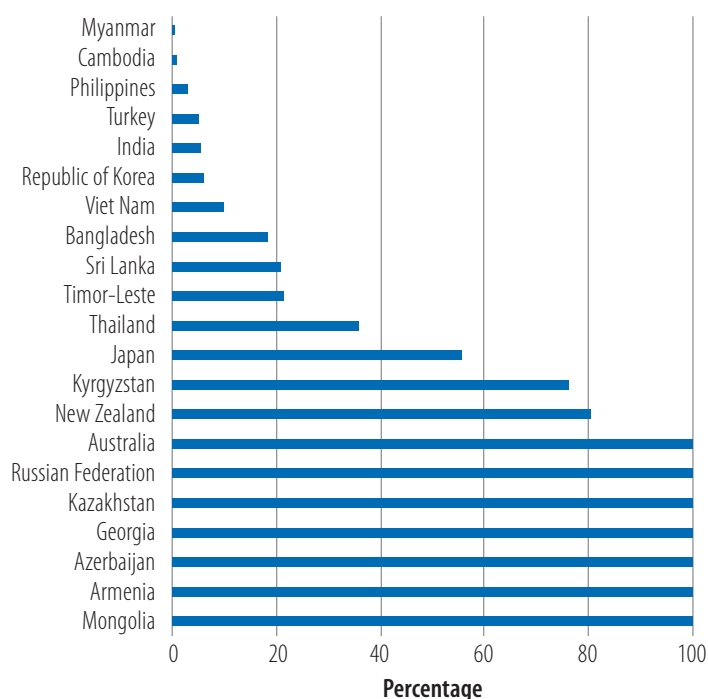
Over 90% of people with disabilities are excluded from social protection systems in several countries

Source: Compilation using data from the SDG data portal[49]

Young men and women have different levels of access to employment, education and training

Figure 1.8   Percentage of youth not in employment, education or training by gender
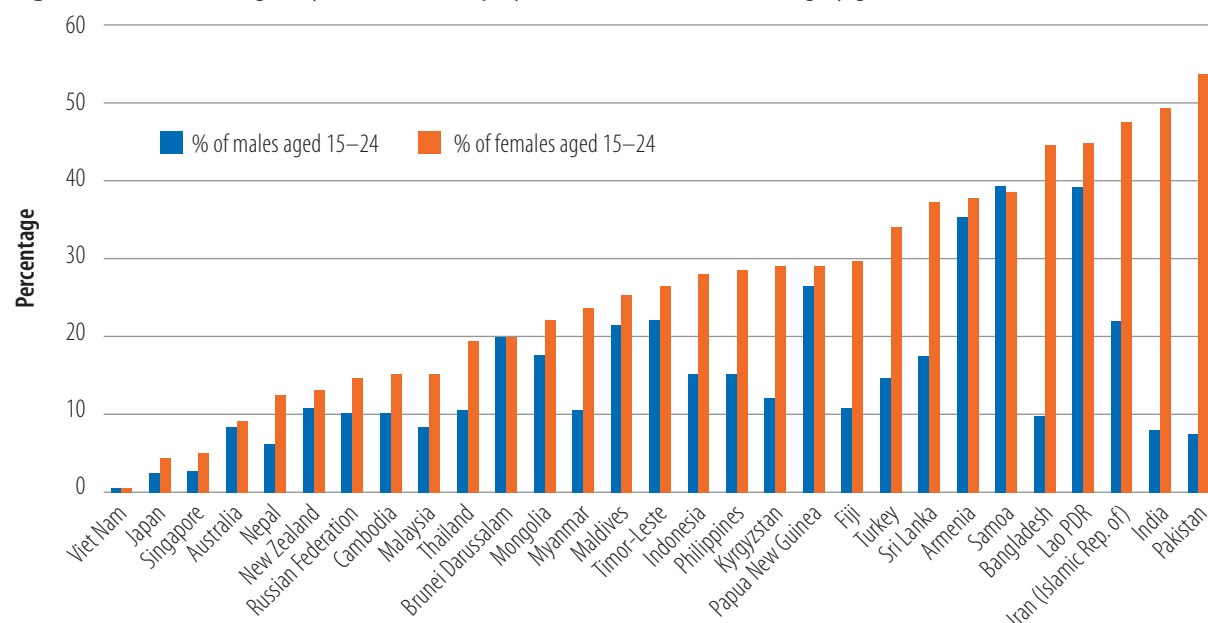
Source: Compilation using latest available data for 2010–2018 from the ESCAP statistical database, accessed 10 December 2018

1.5 Overview of the report

This report explores how the four elements of an empowerment-and-inclusion approach to policymaking described earlier can accelerate progress on the SDGs: (1) rights and justice; (2) norms and institutions; (3) participation and justice; and (4) resources and capabilities.

The synergies between the four elements are illustrated by a deeper look at three pivotal challenges confronted by the region: (1) climate change, its nexus with inequality and the potential to create new vulnerabilities; (2) the urgent need to boost domestic resource mobilization for investment in sustainable development; and (3) regional opportunities to strengthen civic engagement.

Chapter 2 (climate change) shows how the four elements work together to mitigate the drivers that reinforce and entrench exclusion and inequality. Chapter 3 (taxation) and Chapter 4 (civic engagement) look more closely at specific elements of the framework – resources and capabilities, and participation and voice, respectively – while highlighting links to other elements of the framework. The special feature on violence against women and girls, pages 42–46, shows that the four elements shape effective responses. Chapter 5 concludes the report by returning to the framework and recommending interventions to promote progress on all four elements.

Both the elements of the empowerment-and-inclusion framework and the focal topics of the chapters of this report have been raised consistently for the attention of regional governments and stakeholders at successive meetings of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. They also resonate with the SDGs under review at the 2019 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: ensuring quality education (SDG 4); sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth (SDG 8); combating climate change and its impacts (SDG 13); and ensuring peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16); along with partnerships and means of implementation (SDG 17).

Climate action through the lens of empowerment, inclusion and equality

2

This chapter argues that empowerment, inclusion and equality should be at the heart of climate actions in the Asia-Pacific region. Widening inequalities significantly exacerbate climate change impacts, entrenching existing inequalities or creating new ones.

2.1 Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region remains extremely vulnerable to climate change, given its large rural population, the pervasiveness of resource-dependent livelihoods and poverty, and the region's unique geographical and hydrological features.[1] Even if global warming remains limited to 1.5–2°C above pre-industrial levels (as reflected in the Paris Agreement), climate change will still have complex and far-reaching consequences.[2] These include increasing intensity and frequency of climate hazards such as typhoons, and riverine and coastal flooding. When combined with various factors that affect inequality, such consequences can culminate in unequal exposure to the risk of hazards.[3]

Bringing climate action fully in line with sustainable development will require a deeper look at empowerment and inclusion. Strategic decisions on climate actions are often taken by those with access to and control over resources and political power. Exclusion of the concerns of vulnerable and marginalized groups of society – frequently those most affected by the negative impacts of climate change – can result in widening inequality and further disempowerment.

This chapter discusses the elements of the empowerment-and-inclusion framework, introduced in Chapter 1, in the context of climate actions, and identifies entry points for policy actions.

2.2 The convergence of inequality and climate change

The drivers of inequality also worsen the impacts of climate change. There is overwhelming evidence that the effects of climate change – such as those on agriculture, nutrition, water resources and health – intersect with existing drivers of inequality, to deepen inequality or create new drivers and forms of inequality.[4] This section provides specific examples of the interaction between climate change and inequality in terms of race and gender, rural–urban divides, access to land tenure and the climate change–conflict nexus.

The impacts of climate change have been noted to intersect particularly with race and gender.[5] For example, lower-caste families, women and other marginalized groups in Himalayan villages in north-west India and Nepal are more susceptible to the effects of climate change and less able to adapt successfully.[6] Similarly, a large proportion of people living in the precarious settlements that are increasingly prone to the effects of climate change also belong to disadvantaged groups. For example, the Irrawaddy Delta in Myanmar, which lies in the path of tropical cyclones, is also home to predominantly ethnic minority farmers.[7]

Gender inequalities magnify climate risks for women farmers, whose abilities to reduce risks to their livelihoods and agricultural practices are already constrained by social and cultural norms. A study from Northern Thailand reveals that the dominance of men in community-level water management decision-making limits the ability of women fish farmers to adapt to climate change despite understanding its risks.[8] Another study from flood-prone areas in Bangladesh shows that, due to domestic responsibilities, women are disproportionately exposed to the effects of contaminated water.[9]

Rural–urban inequality is also exacerbated by climate extremes.[10] In general, rural areas are economically underdeveloped; remote, with little or no access to market systems; face a greater risk of drought; lack basic services and infrastructure; and are rarely prioritized for sustainable development. In Pakistan, underdevelopment has become institutionalized in many flood-prone regions of southern Punjab with the justification that any intervention will be dismantled by repeated flooding. However, due to the absence of zoning or relocation policies, many communities continue to reside in these marginal areas and accumulate the recurring costs of climate change.[11]

Absence of land-tenure security increases marginalization in rural areas where tenants are exploited by landowners for agricultural labour in exchange for a right to stay. The same can be said for informal settlements in urban areas where residents face a high risk of eviction. In both cases residents have less incentive to invest in measures to make their housing resilient. Similarly, studies from northern Pakistan indicate that those with land tenure, compared with those without, more effectively utilized reconstruction assistance to build resilient housing following floods and earthquakes.[12]

Over time, these factors can work to reinforce various forms of inequality, which can in turn activate the climate change–conflict nexus – creating the potential for increased conflict in the future. Stresses created by climate change such as crop failure and diminished access to water, combined with factors such as inequitable economic growth, increasing population, weak governance and weak land tenure, can catalyse new conflicts or intensify existing societal fault-lines.[13]

Interlinked pathways through which climate change can catalyse conflict include competition over resources (particularly land and water), food insecurity and unplanned migration.[14] Complex interlinkages can be further intensified when traditional knowledge systems and coping mechanisms are disrupted or when social roles and identity are eroded, with resulting changes in values and norms.[15] Some of the most contentious and complicated land-related disputes in the region have arisen over the question of

customary title when there is climate-induced displacement of populations that typically impacts indigenous peoples and local communities excluded from governance and decision-making systems.[16] The situation of populations being displaced due to the interactions of vulnerability and climate illustrates well the kinds of vulnerability that can emerge. Displacement can create vulnerability to human trafficking, communicable diseases, exclusion from social services, and loss of livelihoods and social networks. Examples of the impacts of interactions between the drivers of inequality and climate change are shown in Table 2.1.

2.3 Applying an empowerment-and-inclusion framework for climate actions

Climate change interferes with the timely achievement of many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). An empowerment-and-inclusion approach to climate actions (strategies, policies and projects) can mitigate the multiplier effects of climate change and inequality discussed in section 2.2.

This approach includes improving the provision of public services, promoting social cohesion and diversity, addressing grievances arising from resource use, as well as ensuring equal opportunities and the meaningful participation of disadvantaged communities, women, indigenous peoples, and ethnic, sexual, gender and other minorities.[17] Such an approach to climate action also calls for innovations in resource governance and resource-sharing agreements, institutional accountability and robust multi-scale conflict-resolution mechanisms. Understanding the interlinkages between inequality and climate change will enable us to take more effective climate action. By centering an empowerment-and-inclusion approach

Table 2.1   Examples of interactions between the drivers of inequality and climate change

Drivers of inequality	Interactions with climate change
• Rural–urban divide • Remoteness leading to limited developmental projects and investments	• Higher vulnerability of certain remote rural areas to climate risks
• Land-tenure insecurity and landlessness • Exploitation of landless groups by elites • Limited access to agricultural inputs, including financing	• Limited access to reconstruction assistance due to lack of land tenure • Increased exploitation as economic opportunities decline
• Gender norms • Lack of participation of women in community planning • Lack of livelihood alternatives for women	• Lack of participation by women in decision-making on climate adaptation • Sources of livelihood for women that have higher exposures to climate risks
• Conflicts • Existing societal fault-lines and tensions	• Increased competition over resources • Unplanned migration induced by climate change

within climate action, there is an enhanced opportunity for achieving climate resilience as well as the SDGs.

The elements of an empowerment-and-inclusion framework in relation to climate actions are elaborated on the following pages.

An empowerment-and-inclusion approach can help to accelerate climate actions

RIGHTS AND JUSTICE
- Only 3 countries from the region (out of 50-plus countries) reported human rights as a guiding principle in their nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement.
- Attention to human rights in the renewable energy sector can speed up the transition to renewable energy.

PARTICIPATION AND VOICE
- Engaging communities in the planning and prioritization of activities, and working with local organizations is more effective in building climate resilience than not taking these steps.

NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS
- Adoption of climate-smart agriculture by smallholders can be accelerated through working with local norms and institutions.

RESOURCES AND CAPABILITIES
- Equipping people with skills is a prerequisite to realize over 14 million new jobs through climate action in the region by 2030.

RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

Only 31 countries report to both the Human Rights Council and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change on their linkages between human rights and climate change, as of 2018.[18] Just three countries from the region (Georgia, the Marshall Islands and the Philippines) reported human rights as a guiding principle in their Paris Agreement contributions.[19]

An analysis of the human rights practices of 59 major renewable energy companies suggests that the failure to respect human rights results in project delays, legal procedures and costs, delaying the overall transition to renewable energy.[20] This points to the urgent need to increase attention to rights and social impacts in infrastructure governance, including for clean energy.

However, proposals for integrating human rights standards in the guidelines for implementing the Paris Agreement were met with resistance at the 2018 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 24), as this approach emphasizes progressive improvements in existing rights and greater accountability.[21]

Poorly designed climate actions have counterproductive human rights impacts, particularly on the marginalized.[22] Rights mapping is a successful strategy that spatially represents the different entitlements held by various stakeholders, and how they may change due to climate actions.[23] It provides a systematic understanding of how climate actions can create conflict between different rights holders and draws attention to long-standing inequalities, improving outcomes for previously excluded groups.

Rights mapping for the implementation of India's Forest Rights Act

In 2006, India passed the Forest Rights Act to restore the traditional rights of forest communities eroded during India's colonial period.[24] The Act aims for the restitution of forest rights across India. Rights mapping has been used for its implementation, in supporting individual and communal claims over forest resources, including land, of otherwise 'invisible' indigenous and forest communities.[25]

NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS

Harmful norms and institutions exacerbate the impacts of climate change, especially those on children and women. In certain contexts, climate change can hasten early, child or forced marriage.[26] Climate actions can be ineffective if social and cultural norms are not sufficiently understood and addressed. For example, forest conservation programmes that fail to recognize the differential use of forests by men (timber harvesting) and women (food and medicinal herbs) adversely impact women if they provide alternative livelihoods only for timber harvesters.[27]

Conversely, social norms and institutions can be harnessed to the cause of climate actions. Evidence indicates that the adoption of climate-smart technologies by smallholders can be facilitated, especially by promoting the dissemination of information through local institutions and supporting the coordination of collaborative action.[28] Similarly, integrating more culturally rooted contributions into climate change scenario-building can strengthen future thinking beyond climate model outputs.[29] The Community-led Landscape Ecological Connectivity Project (see below) is an example that incorporates local and indigenous norms (e.g. learning from elders and mutual accountability) into ecosystem management.

Community-led Landscape Ecological Connectivity Project (Tonga, Cook Islands and New Zealand)

The community-led landscape ecological connectivity initiative creates repositories of knowledge for indigenous peoples and harnesses the same for ecosystem management by emphasizing intergenerational learning. It works in partnership with conservation departments, as well as 13 community and indigenous groups connected to 4 indigenous forests. Knowledge exchange takes place in an intergenerational setting where the youth learn from elders, and families are given hands-on experience in using environmental monitoring tools. In line with Maori traditions, the project places mana (a metaphysical source of inner strength) at the core of managing the responsibilities of working in a partnership.

Source: Unitec Institute of Technology, case study information provided in November 2018

Engaging communities in the planning and design of climate strategies can promote collective vision, ownership and social cohesion. A study in Myanmar found that climate resilience activities are more effective when local communities are engaged in their planning and prioritization.[30] Conversely, exclusion can have the opposite effect.

Coastal buffer zone policies designed in Sri Lanka without the participation of coastal communities worsened social, economic and environmental problems.[31] Similarly, much climate action in the Pacific states approaches coastal vulnerability narrowly without adequately understanding the social systems and values of island societies – this leads to ineffective adaptation and mitigation policies.[32]

Local organizations also enhance participation and voice. An analysis of climate actions, including 58 cases from the region, revealed that local organizations play a critical role in strengthening climate adaptation initiatives.[33] They enable communities to pursue locally valued modes of governance, increase the likelihood of equitable resource distribution and minimize conflict.[34] The Molinete Farmers Association is a good example of a local organization providing a platform for the participatory decision-making and grass-roots engagement that is essential for successful climate action (see below).

Molinete Farmers Association (Philippines)

The association was formed in a village in the Province of Batangas, the Philippines. It serves as a platform for small-scale farmers to advocate for their rights, improve their collective planning and advocacy skills, and gain confidence in self-representation and negotiation. It has been very successful in collectivizing farmers and amplifying their voices and concerns to be heard by local government units and line agencies. Thanks to its success, the association now works in partnership with the local government and has been entrusted with the stewardship of various government- and non-government-led projects and programmes.

Source: Department of Community Development, University of the Philippines-Dilman, case study information provided in November 2018

Resources such as technology, knowledge and skills contribute to climate resilience.[35] However, access to resources alone does not guarantee empowerment. Livelihood interventions after the 2010 monsoon floods in Pakistan, for example, provided financial assistance to rural beekeepers but failed to empower small-scale honey producers to obtain fair market prices from wholesale purchasers.[36] 'Everything Pineapple' offers a contrasting example of a social-enterprise model that provides not only the resources needed but also opportunities to develop the necessary capabilities to leverage them effectively (see below). Resources to support the transition to a green economy are another example. A survey among 27 countries (including 10 countries from the region) identified skills mismatches as a major obstacle to the greening of the economy. Skills development programmes are thus crucial for accelerating climate action while simultaneously empowering people to benefit from the 14 million jobs expected to be created in the region through implementation of the Paris Agreement.[37]

'Everything Pineapple' (Malaysia)

'Everything Pineapple' is a social enterprise in a pineapple-producing community in northern Malaysia. The initiative provides employment opportunities and encourages pineapple farmers (the majority of whom are women) to adopt sustainable farming practices.

The women farmers are set up as a social enterprise that processes pineapples farmed in the community into jams, chutneys and juices. In this way, intermediaries are removed from the picture, enabling farmers to secure a higher market price for their produce. The programme has increased solidarity among women, taught them hands-on entrepreneurship skills, and instilled confidence and independence in participants. It has become an important forum for women to advocate against sexual and gender-based violence in their households and communities, and expects to provide employment to unemployed youth in the community in the near future.

Source: Good Shephard Services, case study information provided in November 2018

2.4   Conclusion and policy recommendations

An empowerment-and-inclusion approach aims to address the many detrimental structures that exacerbate the effects of climate change. The various examples of successful interventions in section 2.3 demonstrate that climate actions grounded in an empowerment-and-inclusion framework can be more effective in combating climate change than other actions. They show that an empowerment-and-inclusion approach can accelerate climate actions by hastening the transition to renewable energy, widening the uptake of climate-smart agricultural practices, creating climate-resilient communities and removing some of the key obstacles to realizing green economy benefits. Based on these discussions, this chapter offers the following recommendations.

Ensure the scope of climate actions integrates strategies that explicitly address the four elements of the empowerment-and-inclusion framework:

- Linkages between climate-related decision-making and rights-based approaches should be strengthened and can help enhance the effectiveness of climate actions. Countries can highlight the interlinkages between climate change and human rights in their national reporting, both to the universal periodic review mechanism of the Human Rights Council and in the Paris Agreement follow-up and implementation processes. Experts on rights, inclusion and good governance can provide valuable insights and support to the preparation of national-level climate actions. This means going beyond the recognition of rights to identifying how they can be fulfilled through policy and practice. Rights mapping can be a useful tool to ensure that climate actions are conflict-sensitive and that climate strategies, policies and projects are periodically reviewed in the light of changing conflict dynamics.

- The creation of local organizations (e.g. agricultural associations) can play an important role in ensuring the participation and voice of vulnerable groups. Enhancing participation and voice is an excellent way to ensure climate actions are conflict-sensitive. This includes the resolution of ongoing or chronic conflicts that pose structural challenges to the implementation of strategies for climate adaptation, resilience and mitigation.

- Documenting traditional knowledge and indigenous values, and integrating them into policy processes, as well as promoting peer learning and support, can help to harness norms and institutions for more effective climate actions.

- Countries must explore innovative ways to provide access to resources for building climate resilience that simultaneously create capabilities in vulnerable groups, to tackle drivers of inequality. In this regard, this chapter has highlighted the potential role of social enterprises.

Promote context-specific research and disaggregated data to identify emergent vulnerabilities and tailor climate actions to meet diverse societal needs. Systematic and context-grounded research should be conducted on the interplay of climate change and inequality to enhance the knowledge base on how inequality multiplies the effects of climate change, and how climate change, in turn, can deepen existing inequalities or create new ones. As highlighted in this chapter, climate change results in new forms of vulnerability and vulnerable groups. For example, climate change affects some women more than others, such as women belonging to minority groups, those who are heads of their households or those who rely on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods. Therefore, in the context of climate action, it is necessary to ask: (1) who is being targeted by the climate action and who is being left out? (2) what are the explicit or implicit assumptions about these different social groups that inform the climate action? and (3) are there any other aspects of identity that should be considered?[38]

Similarly, more systematized evidence should be collected on the effectiveness of integrated climate actions to reduce inequalities. Increasing the evidence bank (which may be organized nationally, subregionally or regionally) on the effectiveness of climate actions to reduce inequalities will enable the timely uptake of integrated climate–inequality strategies. These efforts can be supported by disaggregated data and micro-level research that provide a deeper appreciation of the impacts of climate change on various social groups and of the factors behind the uneven distribution of vulnerability within the same group.

Create inclusive institutional structures for decision-making on climate action: Communities most affected by climate actions are often excluded from the exiting decision-making process on climate actions. There is a need to realign the institutional structure for decision-making on climate action to ensure that the groups most affected by the impacts of climate change have adequate representation and voice.

Tax, inclusion, empowerment and equality 3

This chapter presents an overview of key features of inequality and taxation in the region. It considers selected case studies of emerging tax policy efforts and reflects on the opportunities to strengthen resource mobilization through taxation and other complementary measures to promote empowerment, inclusion and equality.

3.1 Introduction

Taxation is a critical element of fiscal policy for sustainable development and equality. First, it enables the mobilization of the fiscal resources for funding public programmes that promote equality, such as spending on education, health care and social protection systems. Second, taxation can also be used to enable direct income and wealth redistribution and to mobilize the revenues necessary to support progressive public expenditure. For example, progressive personal income taxes can be used to mobilize resources from the richest people in society to finance wider development aims and address the needs of the poorest.

These two roles can be advanced through sound tax policy and strong tax administration. As inequality proves a persistent and growing problem in the developing parts of Asia and the Pacific, there is growing recognition of the need to better understand and address the links between taxation and inequality. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) framework, particularly SDG 17 on strengthening the means for implementation and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, recognize these important roles for tax.[1] Yet taxation revenues in developing countries in Asia and the Pacific are some of the lowest in the world.[2]

The focus of this chapter is on opportunities to strengthen the tax base and to better address the needs of different segments of society. Whether taxation affects inequality will depend critically on the extent to which it is linked to effective fiscal spending that favours the poor and advances sustainable development, but the focus of this analysis is on the revenue side of the equation.

Tax policy needs to be developed and implemented in an inclusive and accountable manner, not least because tax systems affect people differently as they interact with individuals' social and economic realities.[3] The aspiration of the 2030 Agenda to 'leave no one behind' adds even greater impetus to this imperative. An effective tax system can help to promote inclusion, can encourage good governance, stimulate investment and job creation, promote social justice, and advance a more equal society.[4]

This chapter starts by presenting an overview of the key features of taxation in the region. Next, it considers selected case studies of emerging tax-policy efforts that can help to address inequality: ongoing efforts to capture land value, particularly in South-East Asia; measures to bring higher-income people into the formal taxation system in Indonesia in the context of strengthening national social protection systems; and India's experience with reforming its indirect

tax through the adoption of a unified government sales tax. The chapter concludes with reflections on the opportunities to develop tax policies that can help empower people, ensure inclusion and promote equality.

3.2 Taxation and fiscal policy in the context of inequalities in the Asia-Pacific region

Asia and the Pacific is known to have some of the lowest tax revenues and tax rates in the world. These trends interact with a complex set of dynamics related to inequality, particularly income inequality, as described in Chapter 1. Wealth inequality is particularly pronounced, with the region now home to the largest population of the super-rich and producing billionaires at some of the fastest rates worldwide.[5]

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) estimated that in 2016 the central government tax revenues of the developing countries of Asia and the Pacific averaged 16.1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP),[6] somewhat below the global developing country average of 18.1 per cent of GDP and substantially lower than averages in the richer countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), where revenues averaged 25.1 per cent of GDP. Rates are also lower than those in Latin America and the Caribbean, which otherwise has many economic similarities with the region.

On the other hand, there is also evidence to suggest that, overall, absolute tax revenues in Asia and the Pacific have been rising over time, although trends vary substantially across countries and subregions (Figure 3.1). Tax levels are generally higher in North and Central Asia and in the Pacific subregion, and lower in South and South-West Asia.

Tax composition in the region is part of the challenge (see Figure 3.2), and reliance on indirect taxes, combined with relatively low tax rates on high-income groups and very little taxation on landholdings, can make tax systems less progressive.[8] In general, the role of direct taxes (which can have a redistributive effect and might be more progressive) remains to be fully developed.[9] For example, personal income taxation levels are low in developing countries in the region, accounting for only 2.4 per cent of GDP compared with 8.4 per cent in OECD countries.[10]

Property tax systems are also less established. Taxes on capital gains and inherited wealth are also relatively limited, although some countries in the region – including China, India and Thailand – have begun experimenting with such approaches. In addition, experience with targeted taxation

Figure 3.1 Tax revenue as a percentage of gross domestic product

Tax-to-GDP ratio (%)

Georgia, Nepal, Maldives, Viet Nam, Vanuatu, Azerbaijan, Thailand, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Mongolia, Japan, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Myanmar, European Union, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, OECD members, World

■ 1997 ■ Latest

Source: International Monetary Fund (2016)[7]
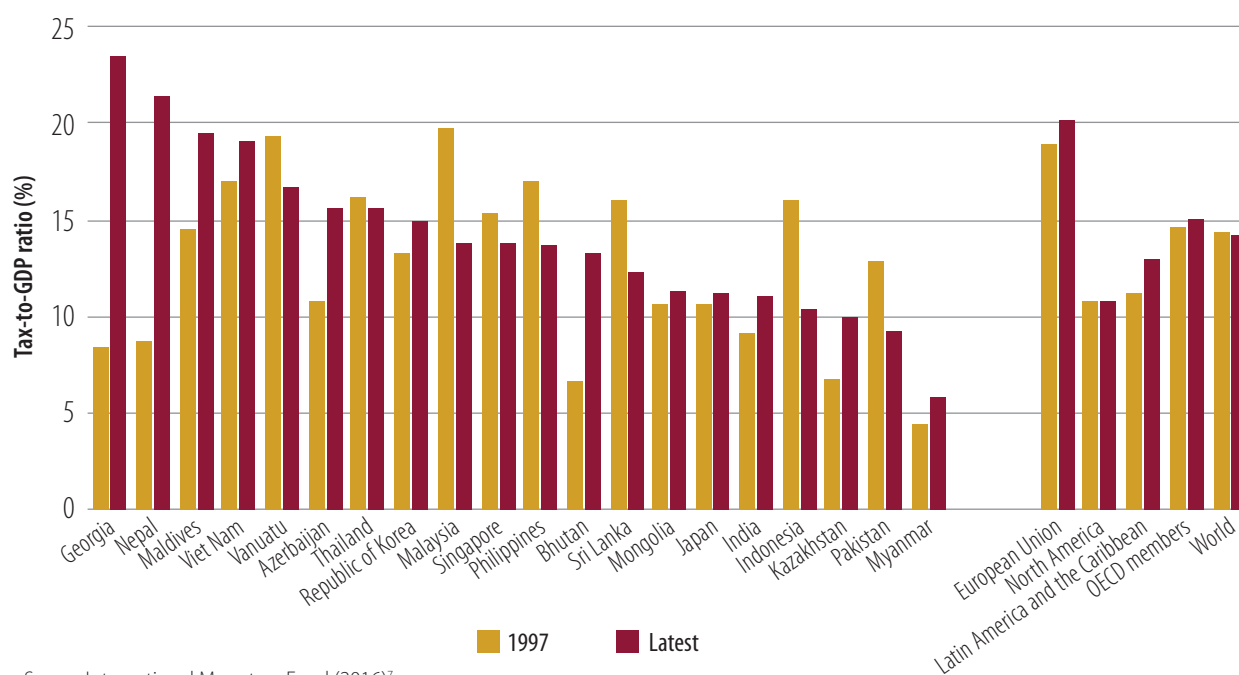
Figure 3.2 Tax revenue by types of tax as a percentage of gross domestic product, 2016 or latest available year

Taxes on international trade and transactions

Taxes on payroll and workforce

Taxes on property

Income tax – individuals

Income tax – corporate

Taxes on goods and services

Percentage of GDP

■ Developing Asia-Pacific
■ OECD

Source: ESCAP, based on International Monetary Fund (2018) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018)[14]

Notes: The data for the Asia-Pacific region shown in this figure are based on a subset of 22 developing countries in the region with data available for each of the tax categories. Taxes on goods and services include excise taxes

seeking to send a social signal (e.g. taxation of alcohol, tobacco or environmental externalities) is relatively limited, although there have been some promising experiments in recent years (see Box 3.1). The feasibility of scaling up such measures may, however, pose political issues[11] in addition to practical administrative challenges such as developing and administering income, property and other asset records.[12]

Tax collection and administration systems in the region have often been inefficient,[15] and tax avoidance rates are generally high.[16]

The emergence of electronic tax management and filing systems, and the potential to harness big data for tax administration hold substantial promise in the region, and many countries are beginning to take steps in this direction, although progress is uneven.[17] Some countries in the region, including several vulnerable small-island developing states, have taken important steps to modernize and upgrade their systems over the past decade.[18] Mongolia has established an electronic valued added tax (VAT) administration system, for example, and Maldives invested in an information-technology-driven system to establish simpler electronic payments for taxpayers and to enhance voluntary tax compliance.

The informality of many Asian economies makes it even more challenging to design and target effective policies. There is also a large shadow economy in most Asian countries that deliberately seeks to operate outside of formal regulations and avoid paying taxes.[19]

In this context, tax-base erosion and profit-shifting have been identified as a major risk to global efforts to raise tax revenues and develop fair taxation systems. Rapid globalization, digitization and market liberalization have all been enabling factors. International organizations and national governments are thus taking action to reduce cross-border tax avoidance and increase transparency, including through the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes led by the OECD, and through G20 initiatives.

3.3 Promoting equality and inclusion through more effective domestic financing for the SDGs

Strengthened revenue mobilization can create greater fiscal space for progressive spending and transfers, supported by improved accountability to ensure that the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable are addressed. But raising revenue through tax is only one variable. Expanded progressive taxation may also enable, for example, greater spending on social protection coverage and systems. Indeed, countries in the region have made substantial effort in recent years to increase support for social protection systems and expand coverage and access.[20]

The effective design and targeting of social protection systems, however, is paramount. Social protection systems in the region have often been limited in scope, narrow in coverage, and not always designed to meet the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable. Unemployment benefits, for example, have often been restricted to those in formal employment rather than also being accessible to the large proportion of people working in informal sectors. Pensions have historically been available only to a relatively wealthy minority of the population.[21] Furthermore, overarching weaknesses in governance, including leakages and corruption, often impede the effectiveness of such redistributive public spending efforts.[22]

Effective tax policies that result in effective public spending can reinforce more inclusive, representative and accountable governance.[23] In turn, strengthened tax institutions with improved governance, particularly in efforts to reduce corruption, can substantially improve tax systems. Before reviewing the examples of efforts to expand taxation as part of fiscal policy moves to address equality, this chapter considers the relevance of the empowerment-

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Box 3.1 Sugar taxes in the Philippines[13]

As part of its 'Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion' programme launched in 2018, the Philippines introduced a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages for the first time. The tax was designed to help address a major health challenge in the country, which suffers from some of the highest rates of diabetes in the region, and where obesity rates are rising rapidly. Under the guidelines, beverages with caloric or non-caloric sweeteners (or a mix of both) will be levied a tax of 6 pesos per litre (about $0.11). Drinks with high-fructose corn syrup are taxed at an even higher rate of 12 pesos per litre. The prices of sugar-sweetened beverages, such as colas, have risen by about 13 per cent since the taxes were introduced in 2018. Potential revenue gains from the tax are estimated at 47 billion pesos per year (about $900,000).

A World Health Organization study estimated that the tax could help to avoid 24,000 premature deaths over the next 20 years and create health-care savings of about $627 million, alongside annual revenues of $813 million. As such, the tax has the potential to deliver social benefits and improved health outcomes.

and-inclusion framework presented in Chapter 1 for this thematic area. The elements of the framework can help to strengthen the design of tax policies that advance inclusion, empowerment and equality in the context of the SDGs.

Fundamentally, tax policies can help to mobilize the resources necessary for the *realization of economic, social and cultural human rights*.[24] In turn, the consideration of rights- and justice-related issues can help to inform priorities in devising and implementing such policies. For example, rights to equality and non-discrimination reinforce the notion that tax policy should not discriminate against individuals or groups (based on race, gender, disability or economic and social status, for example), or perpetuate discrimination and inequality.[25] This strengthens the case for governments to consider the different impacts of existing and proposed tax policies on different groups, including those affected by structural discrimination.

The *rule of law and access to justice* underpin effective tax policy, including the establishment of the policy (in which taxation takes place according to the rule of law), as well as its administration and enforcement.[26] The ability to enforce and review tax-related law, including through access to institutions of justice, is a critical element in strengthening effective taxation in the region. In addition, tax laws interact with other laws: frameworks for taxing property, for example, are closely linked to legal frameworks that govern property ownership.[27]

Institutions and norms shape the establishment of fiscal policies and taxation systems that promote sustainable development and that target inequality effectively, and they enable the effective administration of such systems.[28] The creation of strong, capable and responsive institutions to implement and administer tax regimes in the region is an ongoing challenge and area of concern. In turn, norms influence the effectiveness of these organizations. They influence, for example, how citizens and other stakeholders engage and interact with official systems, including from a compliance perspective. Indeed, establishing the payment of taxes as a norm is an ongoing challenge in many countries in the region.

Public participation and voice can play a vital role in informing tax policy design and supporting administration, including the identification and targeting of the needs of different groups – especially the most vulnerable – and the creation of links to wider fiscal policy systems, including the budget process.[29] Efforts to create space for citizen and stakeholder input in tax policy processes can be designed in a way that recognizes the diversity of capacities, awareness, perspectives and access to information across stakeholder

groups to enable constructive participation, by making technical information accessible and understandable.

At the same time, the technical capacity of citizen groups and non-governmental organizations to engage effectively on tax issues is often constrained. As discussed in the next section of this chapter, where citizen groups have been able to mobilize such capacity, they have been able to strengthen attention to issues related to inclusion, empowerment and equality in the design and implementation of tax policy.

As noted at the outset, tax policy helps to mobilize the *resources and capabilities* necessary to advance sustainable development. In turn, however, effective resourcing and capacity development for tax institutions are fundamental to enabling the effective design, implementation and oversight of tax policies that promote greater inclusion and equality. The capacity of tax administration institutions to implement taxes in a progressive, transparent and accountable manner is a central consideration.[30]

The case studies of ongoing efforts across Asia and the Pacific to strengthen tax-related systems to address equality seek to highlight emergent good practices, with reference to the four elements of the framework.

1. Property taxation and land value capture: Thailand's emerging experience

Context: Implementing progressive property tax systems
The rise in property values has been a major source of wealth inequality in the development of Asia and the Pacific, as there is a high concentration of land ownership among the wealthier segments of society. As noted in the preceding discussion, property tax administration systems are relatively weak in the region, although many countries are recognizing the opportunity for reform. Innovative land-based financing mechanisms known as land value capture (LVC) have also attracted interest for their ability to raise revenues for sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific, particularly at the city and subnational levels. LVC mechanisms can help to motivate property tax reform while also providing a non-tax mechanism for sharing the property value gains associated with public investment in land development and infrastructure (Box 3.2). Many countries in the region, including China and India, have explored such approaches as a complement to addressing underlying property tax regimes.

Taking steps to reform property taxation – the Thai experience
Introducing taxes on landowners and relatively wealthy segments of society requires political know-how. In Bangkok, an Asian megacity undertaking vast changes to its urban transit network, a new property tax law (the Land and

Building Tax Act) and a proposed change to property tax law (the Property Windfall Tax) would increase the tax burden on wealthy landowners, as well as those who develop land for commercial or mixed use and have benefited from public improvements that increase the value of their land. Proper targeting of increased taxes – combined with the protection of low-income landless populations and a commitment to earmarking the increased tax revenue for efficient social spending – could increase the ability of the new and proposed tax laws to reduce urban inequality.

The previous building and land tax law in Thailand imposed a flat-rate tax of assessed rental income or land value for all property except owner-occupied homes. The new Land and Building Tax Act (approved in November 2018 and in effect from January 2019) levies different taxes based on land use. While the proposed ceiling tax rates for agriculture (0.2 per cent) and residential property (0.5 per cent) are quite low, rates are higher for commercial or industrial (2.0 per cent) and unused land (5.0 per cent).[32] While the Land and Building Tax Act is not technically an LVC mechanism, it seeks to implement a progressive property tax, where commercial property and vacant land held for speculative purposes carry a higher tax burden as their owners are capable of paying more and the value is presumably made higher by public investment in urban infrastructure.

The Property Windfall Tax is a draft bill proposed by Thailand's Fiscal Policy Office in 2018. The goal of the proposed tax is to alleviate the infrastructure spending burden on the government budget by recouping a portion of development costs through a levy on property value that has been inflated as a result of transport infrastructure projects. Between the start of construction and the completion of a nearby infrastructure project, both individual and corporate owners of commercial and condominium developments will be charged a fee every time ownership is transferred. The catchment area (the area under which property is subject to the levy) is in the range of 2.5–5.0 kilometres around the new infrastructure, depending on whether the infrastructure is a railway, express road, airport or seaport.[33]

Both the Land and Building Tax Act and the proposed Property Windfall Tax target only the top 1 per cent of landowners in Thailand: properties assessed at 50 million Baht (about $1.4 million) or less are exempt from taxation.[34] The question of how tax exemptions should be set is sensitive in all countries, and there is a strong case for ensuring that households with a limited ability to pay are protected when developing progressive policy. Nevertheless, when floors for property taxation are set high, substantial potential revenue for development purposes is foregone. An additional consideration is that property owners may pass taxes on to others by increasing rents. Finally, given that the proposed Property Windfall Tax is a transaction-based tax rather than an annual property tax paid by landowners, a low volume of property transactions would limit prospective increases in land-based tax revenue for the government. Over time, it may be helpful to review implementation and explore options to expand coverage.

Improving capabilities to design and implement innovative property tax mechanisms and tax-based land value capture
For an LVC programme to work and be effective in increasing revenues and resources and promoting equity, the public sector must have the resources and capabilities to identify potential gains from better implementation of property taxation. This includes updated, accurate land and property value assessments that attempt to measure the increases in property values over time. When property values are properly assessed, an upward trend in land prices over time should result in greater tax revenues even under the same rate of taxation.

LVC seeks to identify land value gains attributable to public investment and to differentially tax those gains. Beneficiaries must be identified, and fees levied (on top of standard taxation) that reflect improvements in land value related to public investment. An urban metro system that increases transit accessibility, for example, will increase the value of property for residents who live near stations, even when these residents do not privately invest in the improvement of their land. Revenues from such fees can be used to advance development goals and address equity.

> **Box 3.2** Implementing a land value capture mechanism[31]
>
> To implement land value capture, governments make regulatory decisions or infrastructure investments that trigger an increase in land values with a process to capture and share all or part of the additional land value generated by the investment. These proceeds can be used to finance infrastructure, offset the negative impacts of development or to implement public policies to promote equity, including social protection programmes and other social spending on health and education. For example, in urban areas governments can use land value capture mechanisms to negotiate with developers to provide affordable housing in centrally located areas, where people living in these housing units have equitable access to quality urban transit. Such approaches can help to address urban inequality and increase access to housing for people with low incomes.

Public infrastruture investments add value to land and property in Bangkok. Photo credit: *ADB*

Implementing such programmes requires additional capacity, however, including the ability to evaluate the source, value and recipients of property value gains in order to tax these gains. Governments also need to combine changes in property tax law with appropriate safeguards for the vulnerable populations that might be affected by these changes. One example of such protections is to use rent control provisions to protect low- and middle-income renters from bearing significant costs from a land or property tax increase.

Ideally, property tax and tax-based LVC mechanisms could be leveraged to reduce the negative effect of increased property values on wealth equality. Other LVC mechanisms that directly charge property developers for development rights or that make other pro-poor provisions a condition of property development are therefore also of interest to policymakers, as they may avoid some of the political barriers to wider property tax reform.

2. Tax amnesty programme and base expansion efforts: Indonesia's experience with addressing tax avoidance

Context

Tax avoidance has been a major issue in Indonesia, where ratios of tax to GDP are substantially lower than in other countries of similar income status, and have declined since 1996.[35] As mentioned earlier in this chapter, globalization has also created new opportunities for tax avoidance, tax-base erosion and profit-shifting, by creating opportunities to invest in other countries for higher returns or at lower tax rates. The Government of Indonesia has also recognized the growing challenge that inequality poses for the country's long-term economic development. It has launched a range

of spending programmes to address these challenges, including strengthening and improving systems for the coverage of social protection, and access to services such as infrastructure, all of which requires increased revenue.

Addressing tax avoidance by incentivizing expanded participation

The government initiated programmes to expand the national tax base and encourage a greater number of Indonesia's relatively wealthy population to participate in the tax system. From July 2016 to March 2017, it implemented a tax amnesty, offering incentives and immunity from prosecution to tax evaders who chose to declare and repatriate funds (although a small penalty had to be paid).

The goal was to make it attractive for tax evaders to participate in the national tax system and encourage the repatriation of funds to Indonesia. Those who chose to repatriate assets were offered an even lower tax rate (starting from 2 per cent) than those who simply chose to declare assets (who were charged a rate starting at 4 per cent). To encourage early engagement, the rates escalated steeply the later into the programme former evaders participated. The government created investment instruments to receive repatriated funds, including government and state-owned enterprise bonds, and real-estate investment trusts.[36] Funds that were repatriated were required to stay in the country for at least three years.

About 970,000 people joined the programme and $366 billion worth of assets were declared,[37] exceeding government expectations. The Indonesian authorities collected about 135 trillion rupiah ($10.2 billion) in penalties.[38] However, the repatriation of funds fell short of programme targets for a range of reasons, including the limited terms for repatriation

and the opportunity for better returns for assets left overseas. In addition, while participation was impressive, it fell short of the government target of bringing 2 million people into the system. The programme has nevertheless been recognized as a notable achievement[39] and a marked improvement over similar programmes implemented in 1964 and 1984.[40]

Stakeholder engagement to manage trade-offs and agree on shared norms

Any such initiative against tax avoidance poses trade-offs. The amnesty programme offered those who had been evading taxes a lower nominal tax rate than the (admittedly small) number of Indonesian taxpayers who had been fulfilling their obligations, and much lower than the general tax rate for the highest income bracket (30 per cent).[41] These relatively wealthy individuals were being taxed at rates lower than those imposed on lower-income households.[42]

This raised difficult questions related to fairness and the perception that those who had committed tax crimes in the past were being rewarded. The success of the programme in bringing new taxpayers into the system is associated with the establishment of effective communication strategies, backed up by processes and systems to support its administration.

Access to justice and effective institutions

The design and administration of the programme also came with costs, while the waived fees resulted in foregone income. The programme proved so controversial that some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and labour unions sought a judicial review with the Indonesian Constitutional Court on the grounds that the programme protected tax evaders and sent the wrong signals on tax payment. The court ultimately ruled against the filing in mid-December 2016. This helped to reinforce the legitimacy of and confidence in the programme.

Government commentators have highlighted the need to ensure stronger enforcement of the established tax system after the end of the amnesty period, initiating new efforts to crack down on those tax evaders who did not take advantage of the amnesty, and to continue to seek progressive improvements in the tax system.[43] In this context, in May 2017 the government introduced new regulations granting tax authorities better access to information on domestic financial institution operations, including bank accounts, as it continues to work towards its goal of increasing the ratio of tax to GDP to 15 per cent by 2020.

Critically, to have a positive effect on equality, a continuation of Indonesia's reform agenda is needed, including a deepening of tax policy and tax administration reforms. Such measures should be accompanied by efforts to spend better

A commercial centre in Indonesia. Photo credit: *ADB*

through the expansion of social protection programmes and investment in infrastructure.

3. Strengthening indirect taxation systems to advance development: India's experience with sales tax reform

Context: simplifying indirect taxation and expanding the tax base

In July 2017, after more than a decade of efforts and deliberation, the Government of India introduced sweeping reforms to its sales tax systems. Before the reform, each state set its own VAT structures, resulting a highly fragmented system with different rates for similar goods.[44] The multiple levels of taxation involved a lot of paperwork, and often enabled tax evaders to find loopholes to avoid payment. The new tax arrangement was intended to simplify systems and create a common policy and administrative framework across the country, alongside efforts to help formalize the economy. Described by government proponents as a proposal for a "good and simple tax",[45] they hope that the new goods and services tax (GST) can help to reduce bureaucratic burdens related to taxation, curb corruption, enhance domestic trade, broaden the tax base and increase tax revenues.[46]

An iterative process to design a more effective system

The central pillar of the new GST system is the introduction of four standard tax bands: 5 per cent, 12 per cent, 18 per cent and 28 per cent.[47] Many goods that serve a development function, and may be of particular importance to poor people, have been exempted from GST, including basic food products, contraception, as well as education and health care services. In addition, there is a 0.25 per cent tax on precious stones, and 3 per cent on precious metals such as gold. Additional fees above the peak rate of 28 per cent are charged on certain luxury goods or goods discouraged for social purposes, such as tobacco products, pan masala and some motor vehicles.

Taxation when goods cross state borders within India has been eliminated. A range of exemptions from taxation have also been introduced for social and economic reasons. Tax-exempt goods include unbranded foods, public services, education services and NGO activities. States retain the authority to tax goods such as alcohol and petroleum, which are a substantial source of state income.[48] The government established a GST Council, chaired by the Minister of Finance, to provide oversight of the roll-out of the programme and make adjustments as needed. The effect of the GST reform on small and medium-sized enterprises has also been a topic of much reflection (see Box 3.3).

Harnessing technology to create a more transparent and accountable tax system

All GST filings are managed through a web-based system called the GST Network. This provides a common portal where taxpayers file returns, and authorities track and match inputs.[50] At the same time, the amended Indian income tax also requires taxpayers to be registered in the Aadhar programme (biometric identification), and Aadhar identities are linked to individual bank accounts as part of efforts to trace tax avoidance and to formalize the economy. The roll-out of the web-based system suffered from a range of technical issues, however, including the unavailability of key forms and the challenging user interfaces,[51] but efforts have been made to strengthen and improve the system. A survey using GST Network data suggested that the new system helped to bring 3.4 million new taxpayers into the system within six months of the adoption of the new policies.[52]

There has been extensive public debate and engagement in India about the need for additional tax exemptions that provide a public good, and the need to manage trade-offs with the overarching goal of radically simplifying the system. There is a recognized ongoing need to continue to strengthen and simplify the framework, while promoting equality and protecting the most vulnerable.

3.4 Conclusion and policy recommendations

Efforts to strengthen taxation systems to help advance equality in Asia and the Pacific are intertwined with the development of accountable and effective institutions to manage and administer resources. Both more progressive taxation and more effective and progressive spending are needed to create more inclusive, empowered and equal societies. In theory, raising taxes and encouraging compliance with existing policies should create incentives for governments to be more responsive and accountable, while also encouraging taxpayers to hold governments to account and make more demands on them.[53] In practice, much more could be done to realize the potential of such a virtuous cycle in Asia and the Pacific.

Box 3.3 India's goods and services tax reform and small and medium-sized enterprises[49]

Governments strive to achieve multiple objectives in developing taxation policies that relate to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The policies aim to include such entities in the formal economy and to include them appropriately in the tax base, as collectively they can be a critical source of public revenue. They also seek to create incentives to encourage and nurture the growth of such enterprises, seek to minimize tax compliance burdens and seek to address possible economic distortions.

The effects of the new goods and services tax (GST) system on SMEs in India has been a hot topic. Overall, there is a broad sense that the new system is simpler and easier to navigate than its predecessor, making it easier for new businesses to start up and engage. The system has also created tax exemptions for small businesses with revenues of less than 2 million rupees ($28,000), reduced from the previous threshold of 5 million rupees. The ceiling was lower for poorer states such as those in the north-east of India. It has also been argued that as SMEs participate in the web-based GST system, reporting on business transactions and registration in the formal tax system can help improve their creditworthiness and access to finance. Nevertheless, the system is relatively complex, and compliance can create additional burdens for SMEs. There have been complaints from some small-business stakeholders, with political costs for the government. Furthermore, the costs of collection and administration at these levels are relatively high compared with the volume of revenue collected from such industries. At the beginning of 2019, the GST Council announced a doubling of the GST exemption limit to 2 million rupees for north-eastern states and 4 million rupees in the rest of the country. The council also allowed the state of Kerala, which was heavily affected by flooding in 2018, to charge a 1 per cent calamity fee on intra-state sales for up to two years.

While challenging to achieve, countries in the region can explore opportunities to establish a more progressive mix of tax policies that reflects their particular social, economic and political circumstances. Policy proposals should be based on a sound understanding of their potential effects on different segments of society and for national sustainable development objectives as a whole. This goal can be enabled through transparency, accountability

and inclusion with respect to both the collection and the use of tax revenues to address inequalities, and by the empowerment of critical stakeholders and citizen groups (including the poorest) to engage with relevant processes in an informed and effective manner.

The case studies reviewed in this chapter highlight the following lessons for policymakers.

Information technology-related innovations are creating new opportunities to enable more progressive and targeted approaches to tax policy design and implementation. India's GST experiences demonstrate how web-based information systems can make it easier to collect taxes, bring more people into the tax system, and implement and administer such systems for diffuse actors. The effective roll-out of such information technology is neither simple (as electronic systems need to be well designed, executed and supported on both a technical and a human level) nor a panacea (as they only serve to enable the implementation of progressive policy objectives). Such innovations can be harnessed to enable the development and implementation of more progressive forms of taxation with express targeting of inequality, in addition to widening the overarching tax base in order to enable increased spending that advances equitable development. For example, good information on property registration, rights and values is critical for effectively strengthening property tax systems and enabling land value capture mechanisms, as Thailand and other countries in the region are attempting. Information technology could help to support and enable the roll-out of expanded tax programmes.

Administration and enforcement capacity is essential for tax policies that increase inclusion and advance equality. Investing in stronger data-collection systems and statistics for taxation is a crucial part of the solution. More effective implementation of reforms related to property tax and LVC mechanisms would, for example, be enabled by establishing robust and regularly maintained and updated databases on property values. There is also a related need for capacity to translate this information into new policies that advance equality and address the needs of the poor and vulnerable. The effects of tax proposals on poor and vulnerable communities need to be anticipated where possible, using the best available information, and managed. Even and complete enforcement of tax policies also plays a vital role in establishing their legitimacy with critical stakeholders and in creating new norms for participation in these systems. In the case of the Indonesian tax amnesty programme, for example, exemptions from rules to bring people into the system had created a strong need to re-establish the relevance of those rules through improved and balanced enforcement.

Informed and empowered citizen group engagement is vital. Citizen groups have had an important role to play in informing tax policy development, implementation and spending processes, and in demanding accountability for critical elements of new policy proposals in the examples reviewed. Such interactions provide an important complement to the official systems of representation built in the development of legal frameworks for progressive taxation.

They have drawn attention to important issues in addressing the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable. They have also highlighted the normative implications of policies. Moral concerns raised around the tax amnesty programme in Indonesia, for example, helped to increase the political focus on the need for fair administration and enforcement of tax laws following the end of the amnesty. Processes for public engagement need to be well managed, and structured in an open and transparent manner, to allow diverse groups to engage. It is also essential, however, to support citizen groups to develop the required technical expertise and full understanding of the implications of proposed approaches, to enable productive and constructive interactions.

Participation and voice: Empowerment and inclusion through civic engagement

4

Civic engagement is a process that enables participation and voice as a means to include and empower. This chapter provides an overview of the current status and trends, shows how civic engagement works to ensure that no one is left behind and supports a whole-of-society approach, and points to opportunities to advance its use in policy- and decision-making.

4.1 Introduction

Effective civic engagement is both a driver and an enabling factor for inclusion and empowerment. It lies at the intersection of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and it is a key ingredient for the implementation of all the other SDGs.

Civic engagement performs a protective function, and strengthens social accountability: regulating the social contract that binds the state, society and its various actors; helping to ensure that state institutions and other actors fulfil their obligations under existing normative frameworks; and improving the delivery of services to marginalized groups. Civic engagement can also have a transformative function: building momentum for change through legislative or institutional reform and, through social awareness, facilitating changes in harmful cultural norms and practices or encouraging behavioural or policy changes that support broader aims for social or environmental sustainability.

The right to directly and indirectly participate in political and public life,[1] as outlined in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in other international legal frameworks, is a core element of human rights-based approaches that aim to eliminate marginalization and discrimination. Participation rights are inextricably linked to other human rights that support civic engagement – such as to peaceful assembly and association, to freedom of expression and opinion, and to education and information. The fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights is also dependent on the ability of people to participate in various forms of civic engagement.

Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual volunteerism, community engagement and participation in elections, to work within democratic movements, organizations or institutions. It is broader than the notion of participation, as it is "a process, not an event, that closely involves people in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives".[2]

Different population and social groups experience civic engagement differently, and can be marginalized or excluded from civic life. While institutions responsible for enabling civic engagement need the capacity to fulfil their role, those seeking to exercise voice need the individual and collective capacities to do so. These capacities include independent and organized civil society infrastructure, facilitation capacity and robust civic education. The context, or civic space, is also important for engagement; this includes enabling political and legal frameworks, a sociocultural environment with

Civic engagement is the "process through which individual and collective actors undertake voluntary action in the civil society domain – as opposed to the spheres of the family, the state and the market – with the aim of achieving socially relevant goals"

– United Nations Development Programme (2016)[3]

accepted notions of rights and justice, and institutionalized means for different members of society to exercise their civil and political rights. Civic space also includes safe, accessible physical and online spaces, broader access to technology, and access to information and trustworthy, fact-based media.[4]

Governments are grappling with an evolving context for managing their engagement with the public. There is a need to balance public and private interests in the face of an increasing diversity of actors, meeting the rising expectations of stakeholders regarding participation, accountability and transparency, while being aware of the public's near-instant access to information. With some exceptions, civic engagement is not seen as a specific goal or important tool for implementing and making progress towards the SDGs, even though the SDG framework includes specific indicators related to the right to information, related to corruption and discrimination, and to the work of the media and human rights defenders.[5]

The wide scope of the 2030 Agenda and its integrative nature requires institutional collaboration, innovation and incentive systems that facilitate action and accountability across sectors and actors. No one stakeholder can meet the Agenda's ambition on its own, particularly its promise to leave no one behind. The required whole-of-society approach emphasizes the need to establish mechanisms, institutions and processes that enable people and civil society to articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights and obligations, and mediate their differences to promote cohesive and peaceful societies, and to support SDG achievement.

4.2 Challenges to strengthening civic engagement in Asia and the Pacific

There is progress on strengthening civic engagement and exercising the rights for public participation in several countries in Asia and the Pacific. The impetus to implement the 2030 Agenda and its framework of SDGs has prompted constructive dialogue between civil society and governments, and sparked government interest in strengthening

the capacity to engage with stakeholders. While stakeholders are involved in a wide range of SDG-related mechanisms and institutional frameworks,[6] they describe their engagement in SDG-related processes as often rushed and under-resourced and their trust in the genuine intention of governments to engage as low.[7]

In many other countries of the region, however, the trend is negative both in terms of a disenabling environment and the limited capacity of civil society actors to engage in this space. This is particularly true for specific groups; and, for some groups, this compounds already disadvantaged starting points for their civic engagement.

The freedom of people – and the organizations representing their interests – to protest, mobilize and voice their concerns is being contested and restricted throughout Asia and the Pacific. This is manifested in challenges ranging from legal frameworks that civil society organizations (CSOs), human rights defenders, journalists and the media find increasingly restrictive, to attacks, threats and reprisals. An assessment of 22 countries in Asia on a spectrum of civic space shows that 94 per cent of people live in countries with closed, repressed or obstructed civic spaces (see Figure 4.1). The report rates 4 countries as "closed", 6 as "repressed" and 10 "obstructed". Even in some developed countries in the region, civic space is found to be "narrowed", the second most open category after "open".[9] Almost one third of laws passed worldwide since 2013 to regulate CSO operations and funding, protests, free

speech and access to information on the Internet are in Asia and the Pacific.[10,11]

The groups particularly under threat include journalists and media professionals,[12] business and human rights activists, labour activists, environmental activists,[13] and others who challenge the interests of states and corporations. In some countries in South Asia, restrictions have targeted civil society's ability to access resources, particularly foreign funding. In others in South-East Asia regulations have centred on limiting operations.

Critical drivers of shrinking civic space in Asia and the Pacific[14] disproportionally affect vulnerable and excluded groups, but also political opposition and the public at large. Key drivers include:

- an increasingly polarized political landscape, especially in the context of perceived national security threats, terrorism and responses to extremism;

- tensions on national identity issues, anti-migrant/ refugee sentiment, increasing religious intolerance often overlapping with national, racial, ethnic or other forms of discrimination, and hatred distinctly targeting vulnerable and marginalized segments of society;

- governance and democratic gaps[15] in both functioning democracies (e.g. growing disconnect between elected officials and the people) and non-democratic regimes (e.g. suppression of political opposition), and the

Figure 4.1 Assessment of civic space in Asia and the Pacific

Number of countries by status of civic space November 2018

Change from March 2018

Top 10 violations: Asia and the Pacific

Open — 9 — no change
Narrowed — 4 — -2
Obstructed — 15 — +2
Repressed — 6 — no change
Closed — 4 — no change

Censorship
Human rights defenders detained
Restrictive laws
Excessive force
Protest disruption
Harassment
Torture/ill treatment
Protesters detained
Criminal defamation
Intimidation

Based on analysis of civic space updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor since 24th October 2016; updates for the Asia-Pacific region. The numbers above represent the percentage of reports in which that violation was referenced

Source: (Left) Adapted from CIVICUS (2018a); *(right)* CIVICUS (2018a).[16] Reproduced with permission

increasing power of some private sector and private interests, including in issues of public interest. These governance and democratic gaps include crackdowns on protests and the displacement of populations, as well as conflicts related to the drive for natural resources, land-grabbing, extractive industrial investments, major infrastructure developments, and developer investments in fast-developing cities.

Youth participation in political processes and public life is low and declining due to a combination of factors. Despite their demographic importance in the region,[17] young people have not benefited equally from the region's dynamism. On average, the youth unemployment rate stands at more than double that of the adult working population, with young women being left furthest behind. The impact is felt strongest at the local level, manifesting in social and political exclusion, inequitable provision of services and in access to employment, variable access to justice, and unresolved human rights violations. Those particularly affected include the indigenous youth, young persons with disabilities, and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer/questioning (LGBTIQ).

Across the region, gender inequalities continue to reflect a disparity in young women's participation, politically, socially and economically.[18]

The Asian Barometer Survey conducted in 12 countries in the region[19] to understand youth political participation identified that youth voter turnout was commonly lower than that of other age groups and – while many kept abreast of political news and are knowledgeable of their country's development – young people were less active in public affairs than older generations.[20] Despite greater access to information through the use of media, new technologies and networking tools, many young people lack the capacity to effectively engage policymakers and be an actor in their own development, due to a mix of social, economic and cultural factors as well as limited levels of civic education. [21]

People and the organizations representing their interests are also affected by internal challenges, including against financial sustainability, in gaps in organizational and technical capacities, and in monitoring their own accountability. While it is hard to estimate the impact for civil society in Asia and the Pacific, there is also a trend of

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Box 4.1   Unleashing the power of youth civic engagement in Asia and the Pacific

The United Nations – in close collaboration with youth networks and leaders – has led several efforts to expand civic space, build capacities and promote the role of young people as partners, leaders and innovators in the implementation of the SDGs. For instance, the Case4Space[22] initiative promotes political participation and the protection and expansion of civic space for young people, including by focusing on issues related to the protection of digital spaces and freedoms while ensuring online safety. Youth Co:Lab[23] focuses on developing young people's skills, supporting youth-led start-ups and social enterprises across 20

During the event, 'Improving Human Development Index in West Papua with SDGs' (2018), SDG advocate Nur Hayyu Supriatin engaged the public to complete offline ballots for the ASEAN MY World 2030 survey. Photo credit: *UNDP BRH*

countries in the region, and promoting policies that will enable young people to develop new solutions to social and environmental problems in their communities. Youth4Peace[24] supports and advocates for young people's meaningful participation in peacebuilding and security efforts. The members of the 2030 Youth Force[25] and the ASEAN MY World 2030 Advocates[26] are initiating conversations about the SDGs in their communities, using platforms such as the MY World 2030 Survey[27] to capture the priorities and the perceptions of progress on SDG implementation. The Asian Development Bank's Youth for Asia[28] initiative facilitates engagement among governments, civil society organizations and the youth to collaborate actively in development and policy discussions.

Source: ASEAN MY World 2030 programme, UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub.

lower certainty in amounts, sources and modes of funding from traditional donors. International funding has continued to rise in response to natural disasters, in Nepal and the Philippines for instance.[29] Meanwhile, as a result of previous designations of middle-income status, foreign funding for CSOs in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand has continued to decline while no major sources of domestic resources have arisen to fill the gap.

At the same time, rising inequalities and a sense of insecurity and political disenfranchizement have led people to raise their concerns, taking to the streets across the region to demand change.[30] Social movements of, for example, peasants, fishers, indigenous peoples and those groups discriminated against through work and descent, often have strong organizations. These have helped to amplify the voices of the marginalized to tackle the causes of discrimination and promote equal rights and access to services on a range of issues, including welfare, refugees and migrant workers, legal services, gender, counselling, trafficking, and entrepreneurship.

Perhaps in response to some of the tensions and threats to human rights and livelihoods described above, in some countries civil society has "grown in size, diversity and influence".[31] Among the seven countries analysed – notwithstanding that the number of registrations does not equate to the number of active non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or the number of constituents that each represents – Nepal, the Philippines and Bangladesh have the highest numbers of registered CSOs and philanthropic associations per capita (Table 4.1).[32]

Table 4.1   Registered civil society organizations and philanthropic associations[33]

Country	Registered non-governmental organizations	Registered NGOs per 1,000 people
Nepal	300,000	10.40
Philippines	279,499	2.73
Bangladesh	250,000	1.53
Indonesia	250,000	0.96
Cambodia	5,000	0.32
Thailand	14,000	0.21
Sri Lanka	1,500	0.07

There is great heterogeneity among civil society actors though. Some civil society groups are small, understaffed and underfunded, while others (such as BRAC based in Bangladesh) are some of the largest non-governmental development organizations in the world.[34]

4.3 Promoting empowerment, equality and inclusion through effective civic engagement

Achieving the level of inclusion required by the commitment to leave no one behind will depend, at least in part, on recognizing the need for the genuine empowerment of marginalized and excluded groups at the community level – and that civil society in all its diversity can help people to achieve empowerment and take control of their future.[35]

Civic engagement directly supports empowerment and inclusion by strengthening participation and voice and has important interactions with the other components of the empowerment-and-inclusion approach outlined in Chapter 1. This section aims to provide practical examples of the ways in which civic engagement advances empowerment and inclusion and thereby the equality of outcomes of SDGs in Asia and the Pacific.

Civic engagement promotes norms and institutions that support human rights and strengthen social solidarity

In their role as watchdogs, civil society actors act as advocates for equality, inclusion and justice. They create rights awareness and help citizens to exercise their rights (to, critically, information and freedom of association, for instance). Civil society actors also facilitate access to accountability mechanisms – including state institutions such as parliaments, ombudsmen, and anti-corruption, human rights and electoral commissions – to public consultations, non-state mechanisms such as the media, and to multi-stakeholder processes.

Civic engagement also fosters stronger and more democratic societies and communities. Sociocultural norms and unequal power relations fundamentally shape whose voices are heard and at what level processes are participatory, inclusive and representative. Several targets in SDGs 5 and 10 show how norms particularly affect women and girls who are systematically under-represented in most government institutions, civil society, media organizations and the private sector, reducing their capacity to promote their own interests.

At the individual and community levels, civic engagement influences social norms by fostering a sense of personal responsibility for citizens to engage actively, and a sense of obligation to their community, building a social solidarity

that contributes to the inclusion and empowerment of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups.

With their access to key populations, especially at the local and grass-roots levels, civil society actors play a vital role in awareness-raising and civic education, and in addressing harmful sociocultural norms and practices that impede sustainable development, including the discrimination and marginalization of groups most at risk of being left behind. Civil society actors play a critical role in achieving both downstream local development and upstream policy impact by engaging and positively influencing institutions on how they view civil society, and by helping them to design and implement people- and community-centred policies.

The benefits of civil society's involvement extend beyond service delivery. Its presence in and understanding of local communities and its capacity to deliver critical services and policy advice allows civil society to also mobilize grass-roots support, to earn the trust of and/or to represent vulnerable groups, and to influence cultural norms – all of which makes it a vital partner in empowering people. The impact of empowering and including disaster-impacted communities by working with civil society was shown when typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines (see Box 4.2).

Participation promotes inclusion and access to resources and capabililities, through social accountability

Participation and voice are essential building blocks for accountability as they enable communities to arrive collectively at common values and norms of justice and equality – against which the actions of power-holders will be judged. However, people need agency and effective voice to participate in political and decision-making processes in a meaningful way. The role of civil society is "evolving from being a watchdog to constructively engaging with the executive branch and the accountability institutions to complement their roles and actions".[36]

Social accountability initiatives aim to improve the efficiency of service delivery, for instance through citizen scorecards, community monitoring, participatory planning tools and social audits. They also help to promote two-way dialogue between citizens and the state, address social exclusion and support people to claim their rights through tools such as participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, gender budgeting, citizen juries and other forms

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Box 4.2 Fostering trust and building resilience in a post-disaster setting in the Philippines[37]

Josephine Egana with her bountiful harvest, from the integrated, diversified, organic farming system through AsiaDHRRA's livelihood recovery project after typhoon Haiyan. She was a housewife before the Philippines typhoon; now she is a champion farmer in Mercedes, Eastern Samar. Photo credit: *AsiaDHRRA*

In Asia and the Pacific, the world's most disaster-prone region, local and community-based civil society organizations are playing an indispensable role in disaster relief and recovery, which has been acknowledged by governments across the region and has provided them with great social legitimacy. The Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (AsiaDHRRA), for example, mobilizes resources, financing and technical support to local, membership-based organizations representing a wide range of groups, from farmers and fishers, people displaced by disasters and those threatened by climate change, to indigenous peoples. These groups are then in a better position to deal with and respond to post-disaster situations, to rebuild their communities and sources of livelihood, improve their productivity and bolster their connections to markets.

Typhoon Haiyan affected 44 provinces of the Philippines, caused thousands of deaths, tens of thousands of injuries, and cost an estimated 89.6 billion Philippine pesos (about $1.7 billion). In the aftermath, AsiaDHRRA's work helped to foster trust among stakeholders, and empowered local actors to work together and with national and subnational authorities, to rebuild people's lives.

New, more resilient farming systems were put in place, which helped local farming economies in disaster-prone areas to adapt. AsiaDHRRA's actions also helped to foster the empowerment of associations of women and young farmers. These organizations were encouraged to work together to change institutional norms and practices around governance and ensure their relevance. New cooperatives were formed, bringing together diverse groups of farmers, and allowing people who are often otherwise left behind to increase their ability to stand up for themselves.

Source: AsiaDHHRA, case study information provided in November 2018.

of deliberative democracy. Participatory monitoring of commitments to advance the SDGs and to report to international treaty-monitoring bodies is also an important social accountability mechanism.[38]

Enabling people to participate in political and decision-making processes strengthens their ownership of solutions and their responsibility for implementing them; it also provides for diverse voices to be heard and fosters a sense of "belonging and empowerment that helps ensure choices about development will take root and be sustained over time".[39] Participatory approaches to decision-making can promote more effective policies and improve implementation.

The case of Indonesia shows a practical example of how including people through participatory approaches can support social accountability at the local level and support decentralization processes (see Box 4.3).

Civic engagement supports skills and capacity development and enables people to self-organize

Civic engagement provides opportunities for individuals to develop civic and political skills – through formal channels such as citizenship education, but also through informal channels such as political participation and volunteerism. Formal education, in particular, is strongly associated with boosting levels of social capital and is a strong predictor of civic engagement.[40]

Civic engagement also enables people and organizations to self-organize and to come together with a shared agenda, progressing on to the ability to enter arenas from which they had previously been excluded, to be able to influence political and development outcomes. Governments are more likely to respond to people's needs when demands are clearly articulated. For instance, as members of regional and global networks, civil society actors support coalition-building among collective and individual civil society actors, and across the state–civil society divide, which contributes to strengthening awareness-raising, advocacy, rights-based approaches and partnerships on a range of issues (see Box 4.4).

The Malaysian Government's action to provide space for civil society coalition-building in the context of SDG implementation worked to improve the articulation of issues that were critical for civil society, despite the challenges faced (see Box 4.5).

Box 4.3 Participatory processes for programme development and budget planning in Indonesia[41]

Indonesia has a well-established practice of deliberative and multi-stakeholder processes for programme development and budget planning at local and national levels, *Musyawarah Pembangunan Daerah*, or *Musrenbang*. This decentralized, bottom-up approach complements public hearings and scales up participatory planning. It identifies and selects community development priorities, by negotiating and reconciling different interest groups, and includes citizens and a range of local and community-level stakeholders in the discussions. Meetings are organized annually with public officials throughout the country, to discuss the proposals for the following year's development programmes and budgets to be included in the government workplan. The process of forums starts in each village, continues to subdistricts, districts/cities and provinces, and ends in the capital city; it provides a crucial opportunity for the government to acquire valuable inputs into local and subnational budget-formulation processes.

Such participatory processes have encouraged a sense of local ownership in community projects, built and sustained democratic local institutions, reduced conflicts and achieved a range of development objectives. Electronic budgeting and planning by the government, *e-Musrenbang*, was introduced in 2015 for the capital city Government of Jakarta, and will be extended throughout Indonesia. Proposals for community programmes and budgets can now be entered on a dedicated website and the process has already helped to avoid redundant programmes, and will ultimately improve service delivery for citizens.

The development of *Musrenbang* was an intrinsic element of the administrative reforms dating from 1999, and was most recently strengthened through the 2013 Village Law. These political transformations over almost two decades have provided support for inclusion. At the same time, however, women and vulnerable groups are often excluded, the level of meaningful public participation is considered low, and the process is influenced by traditional patron–client relations. The foundation is set, but building the capacity for meaningful engagement remains an important need.

The Asia-Pacific region is home to 12 of the 30 high-burden tuberculosis (TB) countries, with Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and the Philippines accounting for almost two thirds of the new TB cases in 2017.[42] The work of the Activists' Coalition on TB Asia-Pacific (ACT! AP) – the first regional convening of national and local NGOs and affected TB and/or HIV communities – enabled communities to collectively strategize and participate in regional and global processes relating to TB in a more cohesive manner. The coalition amplified the voice of marginalized and vulnerable communities (people living with TB and/or HIV, but also slum/shack dwellers, informal sector workers, LGBTIQ groups, migrants, and remote and outer island communities), creating the means to advocate as a collective and to engage meaningfully in the national and regional TB responses.

Source: Asia Pacific Council of AIDS Service Organizations, case study information provided in November 2018.

Anticipating the need for a co-ordinated civil society voice on what the 2030 Agenda should look like for Malaysian society, and despite limited resources, self-organizing among civil society organizations (CSOs) led to the establishment of the Malaysian CSO-SDG Alliance in October 2015. When the government established its National SDG Steering Committee, five alliance members – including representatives from women's and youth groups – were in-

The Malaysian CSO-SDG Alliance meets with the Speaker of the Malaysian Parliament (House of Representatives), His Excellency Dato' Mohamad Ariff bin Md Yusof.
Photo credit: *Malaysian CSO-SDG Alliance*

vited to join the social, human rights and environment working groups. The Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the Universal Periodic Review Process (COMANGO), which was not deemed a legally constituted entity previously, was also invited to join.

The alliance grew to include 3 umbrella platforms and 27 individual organizations, with a reach of more than 200 CSOs, and representing development, human rights and environmental CSOs, think tanks and a broad range of actors (e.g. women, young people and indigenous peoples) working on SDG implementation in Malaysia. Focused on networking, cooperation and liaison with the government towards effective SDG implementation, the Malaysian CSO-SDG Alliance is organized in working groups focused on awareness raising, grant providers, capacity-building, policy advocacy, community development and societal watchdogs.

In 2017, the alliance was invited to participate in what it considered "open and useful" thematic groups for the preparation of, under Agenda 2030, the Malaysian Voluntary National Review (VNR) and the National SDG Roadmap. Inputs from the alliance were focused on cross-cutting economic, social and environmental concerns in Malaysian society, especially those faced by vulnerable groups such as indigenous groups, urban poor communities, women and other marginalized people. The alliance's positive role was mentioned in the official government report in July 2017, which showed that involving CSOs in the early stages of SDG implementation, especially in the design and planning stages, constitutes good practice.

Nonetheless, the alliance has concerns that its contributions, including recommendations to reduce inequalities in leaving no one behind, did not receive sufficient consideration to make an impact on the VNR report and policymaking process. The alliance also regretted the missed opportunities in terms of joint networking, coordination and lack of sustainable funding for the alliance. Other concerns included that the engagement with CSOs was limited to the federal level and in the capital, and that CSOs from Sabah and Sarawak, the majority of which are indigenous organizations and predominantly represent poor and marginalized communities, were not adequately represented in meetings with the government, likely due to resource constraints.

Source: UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub (based on previous work with the Malaysian CSO-SDG Alliance).

4.4 Emerging areas and opportunities for civic engagement in Asia and the Pacific

The ability to self-organize and to create new forms of social mobilization have been facilitated especially by connectivity and digital space. Online platforms that enable interaction on social issues have the potential to reach people who have been left behind in democratic processes. Information and communications technologies (ICT) have opened the door for new means of participation, and also have the potential to help restore trust and support higher voter turnout (through voter authentication systems such as fingerprint-encoded cards).

Technology can also provide a means for individual citizens to participate. An increasing number of governments are developing innovative tools to encourage people to interact with through e-participation mechanisms. In the Asia-Pacific region, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore are ranked in the top 10 of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) e-Participation and e-Government Development Index.[44] While the relationships between digital inclusion and civic engagement need to be fully understood, Asia and the Pacific does constitute the fastest-growing region for mobile and Internet penetration, with, for instance, over 52.3 per cent of the world's fixed broadband subscribers in 2015.[45] It is the region where Facebook – the most common source for news about government and politics, especially for urban young people – saw the biggest increase (to 396 million daily active users in 2016), especially in countries such as India and Indonesia.[46]

Alongside this new connectivity, "new sources of finance are emerging, such as the rise of emerging market philanthropists, social entrepreneurs, and social investment products".[47] New and alternative channels of finance to enable innovation, creativity and inclusion – such as crowdsource funding and online peer-to-peer lending platforms – have emerged, for instance, in China, the Republic of Korea and Malaysia.[48] Many of these new financing sources have the potential to promote civic engagement but will not necessarily do so by default.

Rising interest in civic activism may also be responding to a shifting landscape – a range of highly significant issues may constitute new entry points for members of society to engage their decision makers. For instance, there are renewed commitments to open data, accountability and transparency that enable civil society actors to engage both governments and businesses on their human rights responsibilities. Several Asian countries, such as India,

Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines and Singapore, have made strides to create meaningful open data through multi-stakeholder dialogue, and for public institutions to align the data they produce with the needs of civil society groups, citizens and other users.[49] The Open Government Partnership[50] also provides a good model in this regard, in which governments and the civil society of participating countries agree on national action plans that specifically include support to civic participation in decision-making and policy formulation.

This is also illustrated by the strong momentum in support of national dialogue and action around business and human rights in many parts of Asia, supporting the drive to create due diligence protocols, strengthen judicial and non-judicial grievance mechanisms, and raise awareness of business and human rights principles and human rights law. A series of regional- and national-level initiatives by the United Nations, governments, national human rights institutions, civil society, foundations and the private sector have emerged in recent years on this topic, championed by countries such as India, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand and Viet Nam.[51]

There are also linkages between civil society dynamism and entrepreneurship and innovation, which have socioeconomic and development implications. At community, local and national levels, there is growing recognition that social entrepreneurship can offer insights and strategies to advance sustainable development. Social entrepreneurs operate across the public, private and civil society sectors, balancing the imperative of creating social impact with the need for financial sustainability. In a region with around 700 million young people under 25 years of age, and youth unemployment rates at around 10.9 per cent,[52] social entrepreneurship can enable young people to develop life skills, enhance their employability and learning outcomes, practise and exercise citizenship, and contribute to sustainable development.

Finally, volunteerism is now being looked at with a fresh eye and is being actively encouraged[53] by some governments, including in places where volunteerism already has significant cultural value (see Box 4.6). One of the ways individuals often "begin to actively engage in their community and become empowered to realize their rights is through volunteerism."[54] Volunteerism increases an individual's agency and social capital by allowing them to take on new roles and responsibilities within a community and, in doing so, can prompt their social inclusion. Volunteers can be brokers of engagement, connecting institutional initiatives with volunteer action and the community, and can strengthen local governance.

Box 4.6 Volunteerism in Asia and the Pacific[55]

The Asia-Pacific region is home to almost 29 million volunteers, and estimates put the global informal and formal volunteer workforce at 109 million full-time-equivalent workers. Yet, despite the 2030 Agenda explicitly naming volunteer groups as actors in their own right among the means of implementation, the potential of volunteerism rarely receives attention. Only a few countries design and implement interventions that take advantage of the opportunities provided by volunteerism.

To address that, in 2018 several governments in the region undertook a national situation analysis on the state of volunteerism. Cambodia, China and India reported the presence of national policies and regulations that promote volunteerism, particularly among young people. They also institutionalized mechanisms to acknowledge and incentivize volunteerism (e.g. through financial rewards, internship placements). Afghanistan and Sri Lanka currently have draft policies on volunteerism, which are awaiting final cabinet approval. There are functioning national schemes that mobilize and support volunteers, set priorities and mobilize resources for voluntary action in Afghanistan, China and India.

Unsurprisingly, implementation capacity varies significantly between countries. Sri Lanka, for example, reported having no specific budget allocation to promote volunteerism as there were no policies or legislation to target it. China, on the other hand, requires local government entities above the county level to incorporate volunteer service into economic and social development plans and to arrange funding accordingly.

A functional, appropriate and inclusive volunteer infrastructure can endow individuals with stronger protection and incentives to engage in voluntary action. To strengthen volunteer infrastructure in the region, countries should initially aim to: (1) have appropriate legislative instruments in place that promote volunteerism, and (2) identify and empower (through adequate budget allocation) a central coordinating agency in charge of promoting volunteerism. Volunteerism is context-specific and policymakers need to be responsive to competing needs and be mindful of inherent contradictions, such as ensuring policies and programmes do not exclude any particular groups. Finally, for any attempt to be effective in strengthening volunteer infrastructure, policymakers need to ensure strong multi-stakeholder partnerships are in place that promote participation across a diverse array of actors at an early stage.

Source: Samiuddin Ahmed, ESCAP and Emiliya Asadova, UN Volunteers Asia-Pacific.

Volunteers in India raising awareness about the SDGs among young people.
Photo credit: *UN Volunteers*

4.5 Conclusion and policy recommendations

The 2030 Agenda asks for a renewed focus on engaging people in development. A long history of experiences shows that such engagement can strengthen development outcomes. Building on these experiences, this chapter has outlined how civic engagement is critical for the empowerment and inclusion of people and also constitutes an objective in itself. By focusing on these concepts as an approach, civic engagement can promote equality. The chapter has highlighted various avenues for promoting and strengthening civic engagement in the region with this approach, and these are now summarized.

First, a strong emphasis should be placed on ensuring there is an enabling legal and regulatory environment for individuals and organizations alike to engage in public life in line with international human rights standards and with accountability mechanisms for violations. The rights to participation, information, freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression need to be guaranteed, and restrictive laws, policies and actions need to be abolished. This should be coupled with providing the capacity and ability for members of society to engage in public life – through the promotion of high levels of civic education, for instance.

Furthermore, there is a need to institutionalize mechanisms and dialogue platforms for the meaningful participation of individual and collective civil society actors, especially those representing the interests of groups left behind, including throughout the SDG implementation process. Ideally, such stakeholder engagement mechanisms should be mainstreamed as part of the normal business of government. Institutionalized engagement processes, however, require a shared understanding of what quality engagement entails and how to maintain it. The experience from Indonesia with *Musrenbang* offers important lessons in this regard. New means of participation opened up through ICT should also be fully utilized.

Consequently, it is important to enhance the capacity of government officials to lead effective stakeholder engagement processes, develop the capacity of other development and civil society actors to engage meaningfully, and to understand and promote the positive role that civic engagement can play at the grass-roots, local and national levels for the effective implementation of the SDGs.

Promoting and supporting self-organized CSO coalitions, for instance, has the potential to enable the full range of civil society actors to participate in SDG policy research, implementation, monitoring, advocacy and data collection. As in the example from Malaysia, governments can proactively engage with such coalitions.

At the same time, **supporting and working with local and community-based civic actors**, such as in the example from AsiaDHRRA on disaster relief, is also critically important. The inclusion and empowerment of marginalized individuals and groups needs to start here. This is particularly true for the youth: promoting their civic engagement, including through volunteerism for example, can have multiple benefits for individuals, communities and the society at large.

To assess such benefits, and to get a better and more nuanced understanding of civic engagement, governments need to **address data gaps of relevance to civic engagement. They also need to explore the full potential of alternative data and data generated by civil society and citizens**, which can provide an avenue for strengthening civic engagement as well as a source. of important information and insight Further strengthening of commitments to and action on open data initiatives should also play an important role.

Finally, there are several promising, innovative avenues emerging for the strengthening of civic engagement. The increasing attention on social entrepreneurship, the interest in applying human rights principles to business, and the potential new sources of financing such as social investment products and crowdsourcing all have potential and should be further explored to determine the extent to which they could positively influence civic engagement.

Violence against women and girls: Addressing a societal problem through empowerment, inclusion and equality

Violence against women and girls is a pervasive challenge in Asia and the Pacific. Globally, one in every three women reports experiencing gender-based violence in their lifetime.[1] The costs to the entire society are high; empowerment and inclusion can make a difference.

Introduction

The stories from women across Asia and the Pacific of the violence that they experience in their everyday lives are alarming.[2] For the majority of women, life is not safe. Sixty per cent of women who have ever been in a relationship surveyed in Vanuatu, for example, have experienced violence at the hands of their partner;[3] and in Nepal, husbands are the most common perpetrators of sexual violence, according to 87 per cent of ever-married women.[4] Almost half of women surveyed in Pakistan who have ever been pregnant report being slapped, hit or beaten by their husbands during pregnancy.[5] In Samoa, more than 60 per cent of women surveyed have experienced gender-based violence by a non-partner, the perpetrators of violence are often outside the home.[6]

Making gender relations central to the nexus of economic growth and human development is crucial to the development agenda.[7] Violence against women and girls has repercussions for physical and mental health, and for productivity. It impacts job performance, stability and earnings across generations, as well as the likelihood to engage in violent behaviour.[8]

The economic cost of lost productivity is high – up to 3.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in some countries – more than double what most governments spend on education.[9,10] In Bangladesh, violence against women and girls costs 2.05 per cent of GDP.[11] These high costs reflect women's triple role of making a living and caring for the family and community.

Women exposed to intimate partner violence earn less. They are employed in greater numbers in casual and part-time work; in formal employment, they earn 60 per cent less than women who do not experience such violence.[12] In Viet Nam, for example, the direct costs of domestic violence represent 21.0 per cent of women's monthly incomes, and domestic violence survivors earn 35 per cent less than women not abused.[13]

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) also has a financial impact on business productivity and profitability due to higher turnover, lost time and lower productivity. In Papua New Guinea, each employee loses on average 11 days of work a year because of gender-based violence,[14] and in Australia, domestic violence is projected to cost businesses Aus$609 million annually by 2021.[15]

Learning from what works – towards a holistic empowerment-and-inclusion approach

Gender inequality remains the underlying cause of VAWG, influenced by historical and structural gendered power imbalances, which exist to various degrees around the world.[16] These inequalities cut across public and private spheres of life, and across social, economic, cultural and political rights, and are manifest in the normalization of gender-based violence and limitations on women's freedoms, choices and opportunities.

In addition to gender inequality, a range of factors put women and girls at greater risk of violence than men and boys, including weak legislative and policy frameworks; the impunity of perpetrators of violence; and widespread cultural acceptance of violence.[17] Therefore, initiatives focused on economic empowerment can be more effective when framed to consider these aspects of the wider sociocultural context and relations of power.[18] Growing evidence suggests that economic empowerment initiatives for women can reduce violence against women and girls in the long run when they take express measures to promote gender equality.[19,20]

A holistic empowerment-and-inclusion approach that is gender-transformative, evidence-based, specific to context and culture, and addresses the root causes of violence can better lay the foundations for action on VAWG. Each of the elements of the framework for empowerment and inclusion helps to inform specific areas for action, as discussed in this section.

Recognize and protect the rights of women in accordance with international commitments

Vulnerability to violence is often a condition created by the absence or denial of rights.[21] Within the United Nations, the establishment of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women marked an explicit recognition of VAWG as a human rights concern.[22] According to the special rapporteur, the state's due diligence obligation under international human rights law consists of preventing, investigating and punishing acts of violence against women, protecting women from violence, and providing an effective remedy and reparation to victims of violence.[23] This builds on a long-standing recognition of these issues in human rights practice. More efforts need to be taken by governments in the Asia-Pacific region to fulfil these obligations. It should be noted that laws and legislation to end VAWG are often weak, and the legal system may also be affected by the same gender biases and harmful social norms that lead to many women not reporting violence in the first place, as well as impunity for perpetrators when cases are reported.[24]

Take adequate institutional and legislative reforms, including those to address harmful norms

It is critical to create supporting institutional and legislative frameworks that can catalyse shifts in negative norms and attitudes; can improve access to resources (e.g. education and land), which increases women's bargaining power within the household, their ability to negotiate gender power relations and leave violent relationships; and can foster shifts in attitudes and gendered power relations at the societal level.[25] In 2018 still, 6 countries in the Asia-Pacific region lacked any form of dedicated domestic violence legislation, as many as 27 countries were yet to criminalize marital rape, 11 still lacked any form of legislation against sexual harassment, and only 8 criminalized sexual harassment in public spaces.[26] There is a need to ensure that women have appropriate access to justice, and that legal systems are set up to accommodate their needs and constraints.

There is also a need to reshape societal and cultural norms to reduce VAWG. Many existing norms serve to constrain individual behaviours, through social enforcement or the sanctioning of certain behaviours based on the implied consequences of not complying with the implicit sanction.[27] In addition to economic empowerment, evidence points to education and access to media as effective entry points for shifting societal norms around domestic violence. In India,

engaging schoolchildren in dialogue about gender roles increased boys' contributions to housework and shifted perceptions of gender roles.[28] There is a direct correlation between a lack of formal education and women's beliefs about domestic violence (see Figure 1): women with higher levels of formal education are less likely to be tolerant of domestic violence.

Further, empirical analyses for this report using household survey data revealed that women with access to media (television and radio) also are less likely to accept norms around domestic violence.[29] However, a large proportion of women (especially in rural areas) seldom have access to television (see Figure 2).

Social norms around VAWG often make it difficult for victims to report it and to seek justice, and these harmful norms are often replicated within the very institutions that are designed to safeguard women's well-being.[30] Emerging evidence indicates that interventions that aim to transform gender inequalities and the unequal power relations that sustain VAWG are far more successful than those that merely address individual attitudes and norms.[31]

Strengthening legal reform, and strengthening public awareness and social mobilization, are two of five outcome areas of the United Nations Secretary-General's UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign.

Legal protection from violence against women and girls[32]

In 2018, **6** countries in the Asia and the Pacific region (out of 50-plus) lacked any form of dedicated **domestic violence legislation**

as many as **27** countries were yet to **criminalize marital rape**

11 countries still lacked any form of **legislation against sexual harassment** and only 8 criminalized sexual harassment in public spaces
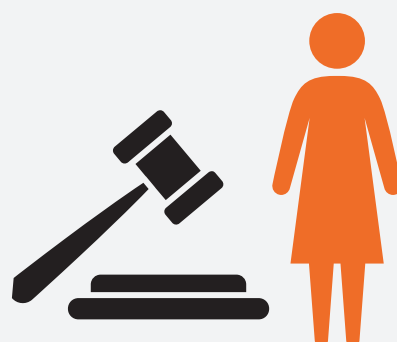
Education can shift social norms

Figure 1 Percentage of women who believe that the husband is justified in beating their wives if they argue, by educational level, latest year available (2009−2017)
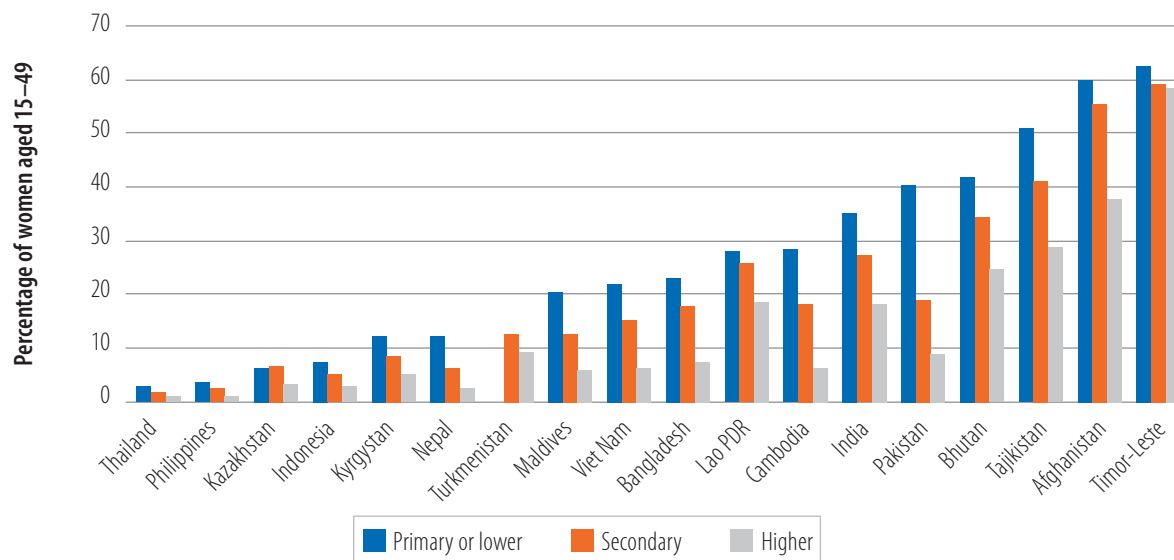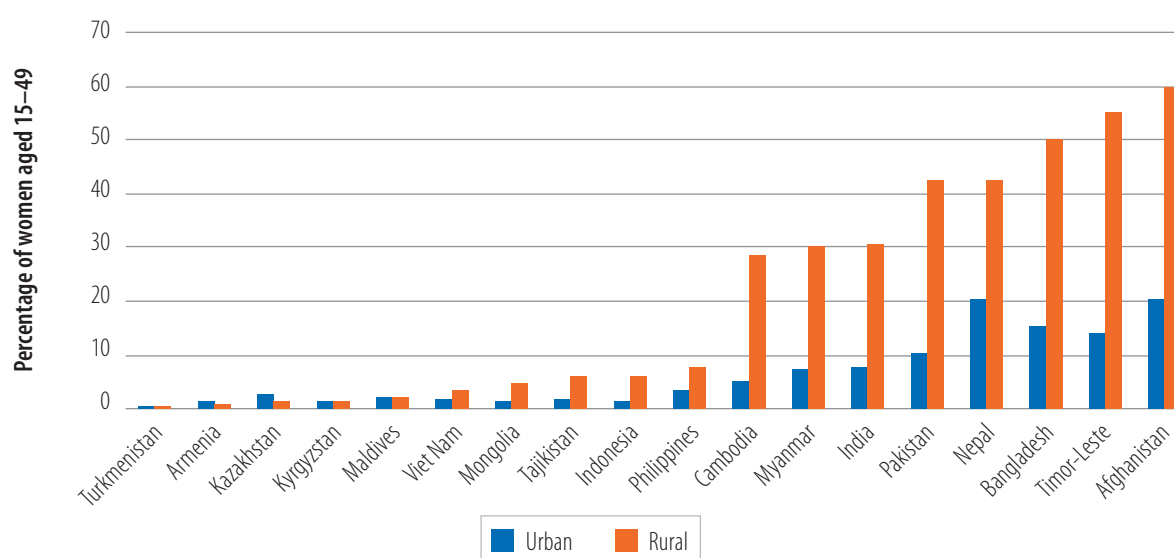

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Demographic and Health Surveys, latest years, and the multiple indicator cluster surveys, latest years[33]

Note: Survey years differ across countries

Access to mass media can facilitate social change, yet many women do not have access

Figure 2 Proportion of women who report having no access to television

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Demographic and Health Surveys, latest years, and the multiple indicator cluster surveys, latest years[34]

Note: Survey years differ across countries

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Enhance access to resources and control over them

Giving women access to specific resources and control over them also seems to be helpful in preventing VAWG, by increasing women's bargaining positions and balancing power relations. While gender-disaggregated data on land ownership is still lacking for most countries in the region, the evidence that is available shows large gender gaps in land ownership.[35] A study from India shows that women's ownership of land and property is strongly associated with a reduction in violence, as resource ownership increases the possibility of exiting an abusive relationship, strengthens marital bargaining power, and acts as a deterrent to violence.[36]

In rural Bangladesh, women's participation in a livelihoods programme contributed to reducing domestic violence through economic avenues – by reducing household poverty, increasing the recognition of women's financial contributions to the household, and decreasing women's financial dependence on men. And the programme's education and training components raised women's and men's awareness of the negative consequences of violence against women.[37] In fact, instead of solely focusing on employment creation for women, some have even argued that the all-round development and creation of jobs for both men and women can have better results for VAWG reduction.[38]

Strengthen participation and voice

The increased political participation of women can have positive results. A rise in women voters has been linked to better policy regulations for their protection. In northern India, for example, politically active women have successfully lobbied for an alcohol ban to reduce domestic violence.[39] Social movements (e.g. the #MeToo movement)

have also played a significant role in empowering women and reducing violence against them, in terms of both raising awareness and catalysing concrete action. Another example is the 'Girls at Dhabas' movement in Pakistan which encourages women to "repossess" their access to streets and public spaces.[40] These movements indicate the importance of creating safe and inclusive spaces for women (virtual or otherwise) that encourage the formation of social networks and mobilization for action, enhancing women's participation and voice.

Include men in the VAWG agenda

Studies have shown that domestic violence is most likely in contexts where gender roles are rigid[41] and less likely in relationships rooted in principles of gender equality.[42] The empowerment of women cannot therefore be decoupled from a relational understanding of gender that focuses on both men *and* women.[43] Recent work to promote healthy masculinities and to include men in programmes targeted at reducing VAWG have shown encouraging results.[44]

Conclusion

VAWG is rooted in power imbalances and deeply entrenched practices of exclusion. A holistic empowerment-and-inclusion approach to policymaking provides entry points for addressing these root causes.

This special feature has highlighted the following: recognizing and protecting the rights of women; taking adequate institutional and legislative reforms, including efforts to address harmful norms; enhancing access to resources and women's control over them; and strengthening women's participation and voice, while including the enhanced participation of men, are pathways to reducing VAWG.

Conclusions **5**

5.1 Accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality is critical to realizing sustainable development. The report presents four elements of a framework that can help translate this aspiration into concrete policy action: namely, rights and justice, norms and institutions, participation and voice, and resources and capabilities.

The report has also emphasized that these four elements are mutually reinforcing, and that empowering people, ensuring inclusion and promoting equality involves a comprehensive policy agenda that cuts across sectors, development actors and thematic areas. In other words, creating a more equal society requires whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches anchored in coordinated actions.

The need for action on all four fronts is illustrated by a deeper look at three pivotal challenges confronted by the region: (1) climate change and its potential to exacerbate inequality; (2) the urgent need to boost domestic resource mobilization; and (3) the need to strengthen social accountability and civic engagement.

Chapter 2 concerning climate showed how all four elements could work together to mitigate the drivers that reinforce and entrench exclusion and inequality. Chapters 3 and 4, on taxation and civic engagement respectively, look more deeply into specific elements of the framework – resources and capabilities, and participation and voice – and illustrate critical linkages with rights and access to justice, and highlight good practices emerging across the region. The special feature on violence against women and girls highlights opportunities to apply the framework to make a change.

This report has demonstrated how empowering people, and ensuring inclusion and equality can help to accelerate the progress towards multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In households where women's participation and voice are enhanced in terms of household decisions, for instance, there are better health outcomes for children (SDG Target 2.2). Curbing harmful norms such as child marriage can significantly augment female educational attainment (Target 4.1).

Strengthening the participation and voice of people, through enhanced civic engagement, improves accountability and trust in institutions while ensuring responsive decision-making (Targets 16.5–16.7). This report has also noted the link between the fulfilment of human rights and the potential to hasten the transition to renewable energy (Target 7.2); connected enhanced participation to the wider uptake of climate-smart agricultural practices (Target 2.4) and community climate-resilience (Targets 13.1 and 11.b); and highlights the need to invest in new capacities and skills in order to realize the benefits of the green economy in terms of green jobs (Targets 8.5 and 8.6).

Empowering people through the constitutional recognition of environmental rights can improve environmental performance across the core environment-related SDGs (especially SDGs 12–15). The report has also shown how applying an empowerment-and-inclusion lens to policies concerning resources for the implementation of the SDGs, such as taxation (Target 17.1), can boost resource mobilization efforts in a manner that promotes equality.

5.2 Cross-cutting enablers

The report identifies specific actionable policy recommendations to further empowerment, inclusion and equality in the context of climate change, resource mobilization and social accountability. This section captures some of the common threads that act as cross-cutting enablers of empowerment, inclusion and equality that emerge from the analysis.

First, we need better understanding of emerging forms of vulnerabilities and who the vulnerable groups are in specific contexts – **partnering for innovative research** is critical. Second, existing tools are often inadequate to reach all vulnerable groups: we need to harness new technologies to **tap into next-generation development solutions**. Third, we need to **raise the bar on civic engagement** so that all vulnerable groups have adequate say in decision-making and have the necessary capacity to engage.

Partnering for innovative research

Socioeconomic inequalities are interacting with emerging challenges such as climate change to create new risks and vulnerabilities with uncertain impacts on various population groups. Context-specific research that deepens an understanding of how socioeconomic and environmental changes impact different groups is needed. Social dialogue between and among stakeholders, including government institutions, is also essential to reveal and address these changing vulnerabilities. Closer collaboration and innovative partnerships between vulnerable groups, scientific communities and policymakers can be fostered. As this report has noted, participatory and locally driven rights-mapping efforts can help to generate qualitative data that address the needs of particular groups and communities, and support social dialogue on the opportunities to

strengthen inclusion and empowerment.

Generating disaggregated data and harnessing innovative sources of data, such as big data and data generated by civil society and citizens, is paramount in this regard. Countries in the Asia-Pacific region should continue to strengthen their national statistical systems to produce trustworthy, relevant data from traditional and non-traditional data sources and methods, in order to support policy formulation and enable regular monitoring to address emergent vulnerabilities. Further, innovative partnerships on data are needed. Initiatives such as the Pulse Lab Jakarta (a partnership between the Government of Indonesia and the United Nations) and the Global Centre for Disaster Statistics demonstrate the potential for such partnerships. Open-data initiatives are a critical part of the equation, and can increase civic engagement and promote transparency and accountability.

Tapping into next-generation development solutions

The potential of technology, including social media, can be better harnessed to empower people and ensure their inclusion. Governments can work with diverse players involved in technological innovation – including grass-roots innovators, start-up companies, the scientific community and venture capitalists – to better channel the potential of technology to empower and include people. Technology can be used to support and complement social dialogue and research to identify and understand the needs of vulnerable groups, and can give citizens greater voice in policymaking. It can also facilitate the more effective implementation of policies, and provide new pathways to adopting policies. This report has discussed a range of practical examples of how technology has been used to increase civic engagement by enabling stakeholder participation, documenting and raising awareness about rights, and helping to modernize tax systems in Asia and the Pacific.

Technologies and the ability to use them are an increasingly important part of the resources and capabilities element of the framework. Access to mobile phone technology, for example, is altering the power relations between farmers and intermediaries by empowering farmers through access to regular information on prices and alternative market access.

There is also ample evidence showing how digital technology is supporting the poor and vulnerable groups to build their resilience, such as through the use of the Internet and mobile phones to help people to manage risks, by enabling access to early warnings of hydro-meteorological disasters. For example, the Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme has introduced an interactive early-warning system based on voice-response technology, enabling more than 110 million mobile phone users in Bangladesh to receive early warnings directly.

These innovations have the potential to unlock the next generation of development solutions, and to help transform societies in the Asia-Pacific region by promoting inclusion. The application of technologies and their adoption in policy processes should, however, consider the persistent technological divides within societies in the region. Groups of people who might not be able to access or use new technologies effectively should be identified, and efforts made to provide alternative means of access and engagement. Partnerships between governments and the technology and innovation community can help to minimize technological divides. With rapid mobile and Internet penetration and a large population of young people actively making use of new technologies and social media, the region certainly has the potential to emerge as a front runner in harnessing technology to empower citizens.

Raising the bar on civic engagement

The 2030 Agenda and the issues explored in this report emphasize the critical role that well-capacitated civil society and citizen groups can play in promoting a more inclusive and empowered approach to development that helps to promote equality. Civic education is critical to building an active, informed citizenry who understand and exercise their rights and participate in civic life. Civic education lays the foundation for effective citizen groups, political and legal systems that help to fulfil human rights, and empowered societies. Tapping into social media and partnering with civil society can help to expand the coverage of civic education, while attention is needed to both the quality and scope of that education, including addressing harmful and discriminatory sociocultural norms.

In drawing attention to the needs of the most vulnerable and advocating for more inclusive approaches to policy, this report has highlighted the critical role of a diverse range of citizen groups. These include local and community-based organizations, such as forest and farm producer organizations, labour unions and policy experts, as well as youth organizations and human rights advocates. Investments in developing these organizations can promote vital capacities, such as the ability to tap into new and sustainable models of financing, to understand and engage with bureaucracy, engage with technical and policy issues, navigate complexity, ensure good governance, harness new technologies for advocacy, and to build reliable partnerships.

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At the same time, complementary action is needed to strengthen the enabling environment for participation, and for the enrichment of civic life. This includes capacity and legal and policy frameworks – to deliver on the increased expectations for institutionalized civic engagement and to promote volunteerism. Further action is also needed to create a safe space for dialogue with diverse groups, especially those representing the interests of the groups left behind, and to build trust.

5.3 Looking ahead: Realizing the potential of regional cooperation

Regional cooperation can play a role in accelerating the implementation of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* through empowerment and inclusion because of the huge scope for mutual learning, commonalities in challenges and social norms, and the potential to boost global commitments at the subregional, regional and national levels. The elements of the empowerment-and-inclusion framework described in this report may guide regional cooperation initiatives, transboundary projects and South-South cooperation efforts. This report has highlighted many notable efforts to empower and include people, making a case for enhanced mutual learning within the region. There are lessons to be shared on rights-based approaches in providing access to decent work, education and social protection schemes such as public health insurance. Platforms such as the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development can enable such efforts, as well as support self-organized civil society coalitions and institutionalized regional-level mechanisms for dialogue and engagement with civil society and other actors.

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Chapter 1

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