



## Regional Overview: The State of Youth in Asia and the Pacific

- The Asian and Pacific region is home to over 45 % of the world's youth, amounting to around 700 million young people.
- Within this region, a number of subregional disparities exist:
  - South Asia is the most youthful subregion: it is home to 26% of the entire world's youth, with youth representing up to 20% of its population.
  - In South-East Asia and the Pacific, youth constitute 18% of the population.
  - In East Asia, 17% of the population qualifies as youth.
- While this region is presently the most dynamic in the world in terms of economic development, many young people still lack adequate employment opportunities:
  - Regional youth unemployment rates are over 10 %, and are 3 times greater than those of adults.
- In the region, those aged 10 to 24 face high health risks related to drugs and reproductive issues, in fact, they account for about 1 in 2 of all new HIV infections.

The Asian and Pacific region has been experiencing rapid development in its social and economic spheres over the course of recent decades. It is home to great diversity and tremendous opportunities, and many young people have managed to benefit from such social and economic dynamism. The fact that the East Asia subregion is home to the world's lowest level of youth unemployment (8 per cent) demonstrates this reality quite plainly.

Nevertheless, significant numbers of youth across the region face a variety of obstacles in their access to employment, education, health care, and other resources. Transition between education and employment is one of the main obstacles facing youth of the region, especially those from South-East Asia and the Pacific. Asian and Pacific youth often remain at the margins with regard to participation in the creation of development policies. Such a lack of inclusion in the decision-making process could partially explain why large numbers of Asian and Pacific youth engage in risky behaviour. With the right policies and programmes in place, however, Governments might be able to stem this trend.

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





Nonetheless, more and more countries are moving in the right direction, and are working to secure the type of high-level economic and political will that is necessary to put comprehensive youth policies into place.

In addition, United Nations entities in the Asian and Pacific region are establishing partnerships to position young people as a cross-cutting priority. They are working not only to develop effective analytical products, but also to build capacity, a process which includes the development of youth leaders, to the benefit of young people and society at-large.

## State of youth in the region – major issues faced by youth in the region

### Education

During the last decade, primary school enrolment ratios have increased in most economies, and the majority of the Asian and Pacific countries is likely to reach the second of the Millennium Development Goals (the attainment of universal primary education) by 2015. Moreover, in most economies for which data are available, more than 95% of 15–24-year-olds are literate.

In the field of education, while gender inequalities have abated at the primary level, gender imbalances at the secondary and tertiary levels of education indicate that girls and young women still lag behind their male counterparts in terms of representation. These differences become even more glaring at the higher levels of education.

Indeed, the transition between lower and upper secondary education remains a significant challenge, as does the low level of enrolment in tertiary education, which only reaches 25 per cent in Central Asia, 26 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific, and 13 per cent in South and West Asia.

Girls from poor families, rural areas, urban slums and ethnic and language minorities are much less likely to complete full education cycles. Barriers to female education in Asia and the Pacific include negative attitudes toward female education in general, the burden of household work, and long journeys to school. Special efforts are required to address this imbalance, and they should include the recruitment of female teachers, and the provision of targeted support for poor families in order to make schools more girl-friendly.

While formal education is important, in Asia, traditional apprenticeships and on-the-job training appear to be the more prevalent routes toward workforce skills development among the majority of youth. However, regarding formal education, the most significant challenge facing the region is the transition from education to the labour market.





Enrolment in technical and vocational education is especially low in South and South-West Asia, where it represents merely 2 per cent of total enrolment in secondary education, and only 27 per cent of those students are girls. In East Asia and the Pacific, the share of technical and vocational education in secondary enrolment is higher, at 14 per cent, and it is also more encouraging from the gender perspective, with nearly half of the students being women. In Central Asia, the share of technical and vocational education, at 12 per cent, is almost as high as it is in East Asia and the Pacific.

## Employment

Young people account for almost half of the jobless population in Asia and the Pacific, in spite of the fact that merely one in five workers is between the ages of 15 and 24. Looking at the region as a whole, young people, with a 2010 unemployment rate of 13.1 per cent, are at least three times more likely to be unemployed than adults.

Significant sub-regional differences can be observed, and turning more specifically to South-East Asia and the Pacific, the unemployment rate among young people is up to five times the adult rate. There, the youth unemployment rate came close to 15% in 2009. On the other hand, according to ILO's 2010 report, youth in East Asia have the highest probability of working compared to those of

### *Key Regional Figures in Youth Unemployment:*

- *1 in 5 workers is aged 15 to 24.*
- *In South-East Asia and the Pacific, the youth unemployment rate is 5 times that of adults.*
- *Young people in East Asia are more likely to be employed than youth anywhere else in the world.*

Regarding unemployment and gender variations, the greatest differences between males and females are found in South and South-West Asia. However, gender variations related to unemployment are generally less significant than those regarding opportunities for female and male youth to become leaders in the wider social, economic and political spheres.

In addition to the issue of unemployment, many young people who do work are self-employed and tend to engage in informal sector economic activities. Under such circumstances, in which poor working conditions and elements of social exclusion are common, existing social protection frameworks are inadequate. More attention should be paid to including informal workers, especially young ones, into the chain of services provision enjoyed by the formal sector.

Moreover, a consequence of such limited opportunities and widespread poverty is that growing numbers of disaffected youth are being associated with, inter alia, an escalation in urban crime, outbursts of ethnic violence, and political unrest.





The need for efficient youth policies oriented toward employment is becoming ever more urgent, especially because the youth labour force in South Asia – one of the world’s poorest regions - shows little likelihood of slowing down: according to ILO’s 2010 report, 1.0 million young are expected to enter the labour market every year between 2010 and 2015.

## Health

While many young people live in conditions where hygiene and sanitation contribute to compromised health outcomes, those in the age group 10 to 24 face high risks related to drug use and lack of knowledge about reproductive health and rights.

Young people of these ages account for about 50 per cent of all new HIV infections in the Asian and Pacific region.

In the region, the young people who are most marginalized, who use drugs, or who are sex workers are disproportionately represented in this regard. Such young people need to be brought to the centre of attention in HIV prevention, and should be targeted with messages, services and programmes that are age-appropriate and youth-sensitive.

### *Understanding drug use among youth in the region:*

Drug use among young people in the region has been increasing, levying an impact on crime and delinquency. While many countries have punitive laws, policies and practices that discriminate against those using drugs or engaged in certain sexual activities, there have been some signs of progress. Notable examples are found in Malaysia and China, where recent reforms have meant that more young drug users and those infected with HIV have been provided with more youth-friendly services. However, certain obstacles remain, such as methadone maintenance treatment only being allowed for those aged 20 and over, which in turn excludes a large proportion of youth.

## Participation in the Decision-Making Process

In many countries of the region there is often the challenge of young people trying to make their voices heard because of some cultural barriers. In addition, in many settings the local media frequently portrays young people, especially those who are activists for social change, as troublemakers. Nevertheless, there has been considerable progress across the region in many regards and it is very likely to continue. Indeed, young people across Asia and the Pacific are getting actively involved in volunteerism to promote the development of communities, including relief efforts and reconstruction following natural disasters such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which affected several countries, and the earthquake and tsunami of early 2011 in Japan.





On another hand, in several parts of Asia and the Pacific, forums are being provided so that youth can exchange experiences and ideas to enhance their participation in the process of social and economic advancement. Several countries of Central Asia have been doing this in the context of enhancing youth participation in the development and decision-making processes for reaching the Millennium Development Goals and to resolve issues important to them, including health, education, employment and corruption.

In many countries across the Asia-Pacific region, youth councils have been developed and Model United Nations entities have been established to encourage participation of young people. In Malaysia, for example, youth participation is encouraged in youth councils from the national level to those at the state level and those dealing with specific issues or certain segments of society. In March 2011, the World Model United Nations was held in Singapore to enhancing networking between young people and build their capacity to articulate their views on issues of international concern. Similar activities are regularly held in many countries across Asia and the Pacific.

In Nepal, initiatives to involve young people in research have been promoted to develop skills and provide benefits to wider society. Through recruiting, training and supporting young people from both rural and urban areas to be effective researchers, many have developed the capacity to express themselves more openly, to participate in professional roles in organizations and to establish solid bonds with local NGOs. In Viet Nam, the Government and NGOs have had consultations with young people to include their views in the development and implementation of poverty reduction strategy papers resulting in these having greater emphasis on youth issues.

While there is still much to be achieved, governments across the Asia-Pacific region, especially given recent experiences in the Middle East, have been realizing how young people can be powerful agents of change, using innovative means to get their messages across and to shape their futures. This realization has been stimulating action to enhance youth participation and, as seen below, United Nations entities are playing important roles in harnessing the energy, creativity and aspirations of young people to promote economic and social advancement in Asia and the Pacific.

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

United Nations entities in the Asia-Pacific region have been increasingly involved in working on youth issues, recognizing the importance of this group.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and its partners in the region have been undertaking analytical work and policy advocacy that seeks to engender more youth-friendly programmes and address, inter alia, the issues and challenges outlined above.





ESCAP acts as the chair of the Asia-Pacific Interagency Group on Youth, and works closely with other members of the Group, including FAO, ILO, IOM, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNMC and UNODC.

This permits United Nations entities to effectively promote the sharing of information, and enhance cooperation and coordination, as well as the dissemination of innovative good practices and lessons. Regional cooperation of the aforementioned nature has permitted several useful activities, particularly in celebration of the International Year of Youth.

With regard to carrying out research and analytical studies on the priority areas of the United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY), ESCAP and partners are engaged in a number of activities. Additional research is being carried out by the Working Group on Coordinated Youth Research (WG-CYR), of which ESCAP is also a member.

Among the most important UN-driven programmes on youth in Asia and the Pacific are the work by ILO to promote youth employment; work by ESCAP and UNESCO developing guidelines covering youth policy formulation, implementation and monitoring and evaluation; work by FAO to address the risk of food insecurity and exploitation of vulnerable children and youth due to low levels of income or agricultural production within households; and work by UNFPA and UNICEF promoting evidence-based programming and policy development to address the important issues regarding sexual and reproductive health among young people.

Concerning capacity building activities aimed at strengthening responses to challenges young people face, ESCAP has been working with partners including ILO, on developing youth leadership in Asia and the Pacific.

## Regional and National Efforts in creating Youth Policies

For policies and programmes to be effective it is important to have reliable evidence on the circumstances of young people and what can be done to ameliorate these. However, one significant issue in Asia and the Pacific is a lack of reliable data. This is a major constraint in understanding what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively.

Other constraints are insufficient political will and earmarked resources, and a lack of communication between the various stakeholders including numerous government departments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and academia.

Coordination across government is an essential criterion. In Timor-Leste, in preparation to the formulation of the youth policy, which was endorsed by Parliament in 2007, six national consultations took place involving all stakeholders including youth and youth organizations. Currently the youth policy is coordinated and evaluated by the Secretary of State for Youth and Sports.





## *Hindrances in tackling Youth issues in the region*

- *Lack of reliable data concerning youth*
- *Insufficient political will and earmarked resources*
- *Lack of communication between the various stakeholders (government, NGOs, private sector, academia)*

In a similar vein, Bhutan ensured wide participation in the drafting of its youth policy involving all major stakeholders including youth representatives, the Department of Youth, Culture and Sports, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Education and Non Formal Education, along with Save the Children and several United Nations entities. The case of Bhutan is interesting in that the country's youth policy specifically addresses young people who are most-at-risk.

Cambodia, which deserves specific attention, as it has been spending the last few years developing its youth policy with a wide range of stakeholders, has been setting up a coordination mechanism regarding fund allocation and the monitoring of progress among the various ministries involved in issues concerning young people. In Cambodia, a long list of partners and stakeholders ensured that voices were heard from all parts of the country. Technical support was provided to the Government of Cambodia by the United Nations Country Team.

Other countries have long-established youth policies and entities dealing with them, though they may not have undergone the same processes as those described above:

In Malaysia, the government works closely with the Malaysian Youth Council, a civil society organization formed in 1948 and acting as the coordinating body for all youth organizations in the country, in the implementation and evaluation of youth policy. In Malaysia, the government emphasises cooperation with youth organizations and making use of their inputs. This allows young people to play a role in developing the country through, among other means, gaining access to opportunities in the government and in civil society organizations.

In some countries, emphasis when addressing issues considered important to youth, has been on specific sectors:

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





- While many countries still lack youth policies, some are working to close the gaps in formulating and putting into effect youth policies like the Russian Federation, the Solomon Islands and Vietnam.

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

## The Way Forward

It can be seen that, while progress has been made, much still needs to be done in Asia and the Pacific to harness the potential of young people.

Employment needs special attention, even more in South Asia, where the youth labour force is expected to grow in an environment where economic growth is not necessarily matched by growth of employment opportunities. Risk is high to testify an increase of under-employment and working-poor youth.

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

Furthermore, evidence from relevant analytical studies is needed to support policy development and implementation. This, together with technical enhancement, institutional development, coordinated implementation and appropriate funding constitute the current challenges that need to be overcome by governments in order to take full advantage of the region's youth potential.

For United Nations entities work still needs to be done to more comprehensively map youth policies and develop a repository of good practices that can be analysed and then disseminated across the region and even beyond.







## For further information:

- Youth and UNESCAP <http://www.unescap.org/sdd/issues/youth/youth.asp>
- Understanding Youth issues in selected countries in the Asian and Pacific Region, UNESCAP, 2007 <http://www.unescap.org/esid/psis/publications/YouthRep/Youth%20Report.pdf>
- UNESCAP other resources and publications on youth <http://www.unescap.org/esid/hds/resources/publications.asp>
- UNESCO's contribution: Empowering youth through national policies, unesco, 2004 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001345/134502e.pdf>
- Youth Civic Participation in Action 2010, meeting community and youth development needs worldwide, ICP, Washington DC, 2010. <http://icp2.org/ycpworldwide2010/browse>
- Youth Participation in Development: a guide for Development Agencies and Policy Makers, DFID-CSO Youth Working Group, London, March 2010. Available at <http://www.restlessdevelopment.org/file/youth-participation-in-development-pdf>
- UN Millennium Development Goals Indicators Database online <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Default.aspx>
- Global employment trends for youth, ILO, August 2010 [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_150440.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms_150440.pdf)

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