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Asia-Pacific Region

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Social and economic context in Asia-Pacific

The Asia-Pacific[1] region includes around 60 percent of the total world population spread across a wide diversity of countries, and facing very different socio-economic environments. The region includes seven of the 10 most populous countries in the world as well as the smallest, some of the poorest countries and some of the fastest growing economies, some with very basic welfare systems and others which are highly developed.

The welfare outcomes of countries in the region have also been different: while several countries in South Asia have made some significant headway in socio-economic development, extensive poverty has persisted in some large countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Remarkable progress in improving social conditions has been achieved in many countries in East Asia and the Pacific, but in many parts of the region poverty, marginalization and social exclusion persist alongside enduring social and economic structural disparities (Shajahan, 2013).

The Middle East and parts of the Indian subcontinent continue to suffer from serious political conflict and development deficit. China and some other countries have seen rapid growth (up to around 8% per year). Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa have not suffered the extremes of financial crisis seen in some other developed economies, whilst the Japanese economy was adversely affected by the 2011 tsunami.

Inequality in wealth and income has increased within all countries. About 20 percent of total income went to the wealthiest 5 percent in most countries, and the share of income accruing to the richest households has increased more than three times in Asia's largest and most diverse countries: China, India and Indonesia (Asian Development Bank, 2012). From the onset of the 1990s to around 2010, the Gini[2] ratio has increased from 32 to 43 in China, from 33 to 37 in India, and from 29 to 39 in Indonesia (the higher figure indicates greater inequality). The Gini ratio has leapt across the whole region from 39 to 46 in the last two decades, signifying a big increase in inequality in the region. Analysis of consumption by groups also shows a significant increase for the wealthiest 10 percent, much slower increases for the middle and stagnation for the poorest 20 percent, also illustrating the growth in inequality. This picture is similar in other countries experiencing rapid industrialization and economic development, such as China, Indonesia and Vietnam.

The benefits of the dramatic economic growth in a number of Asian economies, far exceeding global averages, have been very unevenly distributed. In India, for example, the poverty line is defined as having 'sufficient to buy food providing 2,400 calories (rural) and 2,100 calories (urban), plus 20% of that amount for other basic needs' (Shajahan and Sharma, 2014). The percentage defined as below the poverty line has changed significantly. During 1950s to 1970s it fluctuated

around 50 percent of the population. Since that time, there has been some decline but even in the early 1990s it stood at over 30 percent for both rural and urban populations (Shajahan and Sharma, 2014). There has since been only a marginal decline according to governmental estimates, which are contested.

The socio-economic situation in the Middle East is strikingly different. Some national economies, particularly wealthy oil-exporters, rely heavily on migrant workers, who have very limited social rights. In other countries, political and economic instability affects the poorest most severely. Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa were not seriously affected by the financial crisis but, in common with other developed economies, governments have implemented austerity strategies and service reductions which impact on the poorest.

As in all contexts, those in this poorest segment of the population across the region, many of whom are members of minority or indigenous peoples, are typically excluded from participation not only in economic activity but also in political and social life and have limited opportunities for personal development (Shajahan and Sharma, 2014). The Asia-Pacific region contains 750 million young persons aged 15 to 24, 60 percent of the world's youth population. Rapid economic growth and expansion in education has meant that a substantial proportion of these young people are now in a better position to participate more fully in society when jobs are available. The opportunities open to this vast social group have been mixed, however, due to widening economic and social gaps which have deprived many of the fruits of economic development, leaving a significant proportion to suffer from chronic poverty, gender inequality, poor health and limited access to education.

The income security and social position of the rapidly growing elderly population is increasingly affected by changing family and intergenerational relationships, including evidence of weakening ties between young and old, as well as shifts in long-term familial commitments between them (Alam, 2010). The results of a survey in Delhi, India indicated the positive role played by socio-religious and moral factors in motivating people, especially younger siblings and children, to help the aged (Alam, 2010). Social workers tended to play an important role in the provision of such care, actively cooperating with family members.

Gender discrimination is a pervasive feature in the region; it has enduring implications for future generations and is the focus of many social work projects. Close to 100 million women in Asia are estimated to be 'missing' because of discriminatory treatment in access to health and nutrition, neglect, or pre-natal sex selection (ADB, 2012). Many Asian women report experiencing physical violence from their intimate partners: 30 percent of women in Vietnam, more than 40 percent in Bangladesh, Samoa and Timor-Leste and above 60 percent in Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. In South Asia more women die in childbirth than in any other region of the world except in sub-Saharan Africa (ADB et al., 2012).

The development of social work is also very varied within such a diverse region. Social work is formally regulated in Australia (Gray, 2013), New Zealand/Aotearoa, Japan and South Korea, with legislation being discussed in Singapore and Malaysia. There has been a rapid growth in the number of schools of social work in China, with a similar trend in Vietnam (Tan, 2013). India continues to produce a large number of qualified social workers but the profession of social work is not formally regulated and most social work practice is in the non-governmental sector. Middle Eastern countries, such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, are investing more in professional social work (Graham, 2013). The profession has low status in countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, although qualified social workers are employed, mainly delivering social services through NGOs. In some countries, the narrowly defined and tightly managed role of social workers, with limited resources, makes it difficult to envision how they could address the Global Agenda in daily practice (Nikku, 2014).

Agenda related activities

A number of Global Agenda-related events have been organized in the region. Annual government–NGO forums to discuss welfare and equity were held in Hanoi, Vietnam in 2012 and Siem Reap, Cambodia in 2013. The 2011 biannual APASWE/IFSW regional social work conference in Tokyo focused on the Agenda and a regional consultation in Indonesia on environmental issues and disaster response (an Agenda element) was held in 2013. A number of national workshops on the Social Protection Floor (SPF) and work with vulnerable groups took place, linked to Agenda themes. A regional conference on 'Social Protection: Perspectives and Policies' was held in Kuttikkanam, Kerala, India, in December 2012 (which included discussions regarding potential partnerships for monitoring the Global Agenda and equality promotion), and another one on long-term care of older persons was held in Seoul, Korea in June 2013. Preliminary discussions about strategic Global Agenda partnerships between regional members of the three global bodies have been initiated.

In a small survey of academics across the region, some reported apprehension about the ability of social workers to promote equalities, given the policies and expectations of governments, who are the major employers (Nikku, 2014). National organizations have also organized Agenda consultations, often linked with World Social Work Day. For example, social work bodies in Japan have systematically developed their national social work day to both energize the profession and to provide public information, with very successful outcomes (Japanese Coordinating Body for IFSW, 2014). New Zealand/Aotearoa,[3] Nepal, Republic of Korea and India are just some of the countries that have organized Global Agenda activities. The 2014 world conference in Melbourne, on the theme of 'Promoting Social and Economic Equalities', provides the Australian focus on the Global Agenda. A meeting in March 2014 of Arab social workers from North Africa and the Middle East, held in Cairo, discussed Agenda themes and began planning for a new regional network. The ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2011–2020) provides a regional focus for Agenda themes.

Notable actions have also been undertaken in different countries in the region, aimed at reducing inequalities. South Korea has developed significant social welfare services and Malaysia is moving in the same direction. The Asian Development Bank has recommended governments to confront growing inequality by supporting the creation of quality jobs, increasing spending on education and health and expanding social protection, including conditional cash transfers (ADB et al., 2012). The government of India has implemented a range of policies to stimulate employment and improve the economic position of the poorest communities.[4] A large number of social workers are engaged in policy-making, planning and implementation of all these programmes. Macro-policies such as this are essential but micro-initiatives are equally important in effectively reducing inequalities on ground.

Practice which promotes social and economic equalities

Across the region many projects involving social workers and social development agencies intervene to assist marginalized groups to find a voice and exert some influence over their circumstances and to promote greater social and economic equality. The curriculum of social work courses does not always prepare practitioners with skills needed to undertake this task (Nikku, 2014). The following examples illustrate some of the approaches adopted by practitioners and outcomes achieved.

A 'Low Level Panel' was convened in India during 2013, in conscious counterpoint to the High Level Panel established by the UN, to address the post-2015 development framework (Praxis, 2013). A small group including older people, people with disabilities, young people and people from the LGBT community, supported by the UN, reviewed the Millennium Development Goals

(MDGs) and developed their own vision for post-2015 priorities, including recommendations to the UN. The process was supported by social work and social development practitioners. The discussion was informed and grounded, the vision is rational and achievable and the recommendations are realistic and inspirational. The project illustrated the power of giving people space for discussion and reflection and that, when given the opportunity, people can make profoundly informed proposals for their own development.

A similar project involves tribal peoples in North India in a consultation about their future and their rights (John, 2014). The Katkaris are one of the three 'Primitive Tribal Groups' in Maharashtra, India, a fragmented and very scattered community of around 235,000 (GOI, 2012), highly dependent on others for their livelihoods and for a place to live. Some estimates show that almost 75 percent of the community has never been to school. Traditionally they lived on the collection and sale of forest products, hunting, fresh water fishing and agricultural labour. Most of the families now work, in effect, as bonded labourers in brick kilns and charcoal units. Several NGOs are using non-formal education, health care provisioning and skill building for better employability and improved livelihoods as strategies to reduce the multiple vulnerabilities of the community.[5] A social worker from the Prerana Charitable Trust concludes: 'tribal communities, like that of the Katkaris, uphold values of sharing and community stewardship of natural resources. Involving and empowering people at the grassroots is the key to sustainable development' (John, 2014). These findings are replicated all around the world in work with minority and excluded community groups.

Along with the increase in social welfare facilities in the Republic of Korea, the number of professional social workers engaged in the field of social welfare has grown to several thousands. Since 1980 the national spending on social welfare grew steadily from 1.0 percent of GDP in 1980, to 3.1 percent in 1990, 5.5 percent in 2000 and 9.4 percent in 2010 (Cha, 2013). An example of a citizen-based services is seen in the 'Good Neighborhood' scheme, established and operated by Korea National Council on Social Welfare (KNCSW, 2014). Local community volunteers reach out to those who fall through the social welfare net (finding themselves in the 'welfare dead zone'), for example homeless people. Social workers often make links between those needing assistance and the community volunteers. The project had been extended to 55 districts throughout the country in 2013, with substantial financial support. The community groups inform the social welfare services of individual needs and work with the people to find a more stable situation. The project aims to reduce inequality by involving local communities and ensuring access to appropriate services for people who are isolated and 'invisible'.

Disaster response has been a specific focus of the region, following recent experience of devastating earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and floods. There is clear evidence from disasters in Indonesia, Japan and The Philippines that, where local people (frequently supported by social workers) are directly involved in the clear-up, recovery and reconstruction of their own communities, including decisions about relocation where necessary, the recovery is quicker and more robust (Truell, 2014). When government or aid agencies impose technocratic solutions on devastated communities, recovery takes longer and people suffer greater long-term trauma (Tan, 2009; Tan and Rowlands, 2008).

Conclusion

These few examples illustrate the consistent finding across the Asia-Pacific region and beyond that involving people in their own development, trusting people to make sensible choices and respecting human dignity are fundamental to successful social development and also to economic growth (Mathbor, 2008). Social work and social development practitioners know that transforming com-

munities and individual opportunities requires the right mix of social policies and local interventions, as this chapter has sought to illustrate.

Submissions to the Global Observatory

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Notes

1. The Asia-Pacific region for the purposes of this report includes Asia, Australasia, the Pacific islands and the Middle East.
2. The Gini coefficient is a standard measure of inequality – the higher the figure the more unequal the population
3. http://anzasw.org.nz/social_work_practice/topics/show/377-the-global-agenda
4. India in the last few years has implemented significant policy changes within a rights and entitlements framework. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme aims at providing 100 days of assured wage employment to the rural poor and the Mid-Day Meal scheme provides cooked meal to children in government run schools to promote child education, arrest child labour as well as enhance the nutritional intake of children particularly from the poorer sections. National level missions such as National Rural Health Mission and National Rural Livelihoods Mission, also aim to systematically reduce inequalities in development achievements of vulnerable communities. Similarly, The National Food Security Act 2013 (known as Right to Food Act), aims to provide subsidized food grains to approximately two-thirds of India's population. Pregnant women, lactating mothers and certain categories of children are eligible for daily free meals.
5. The activities of the Prerana Charitable Trust are based on an empowerment and human rights approach, including education in human rights and citizenship; sharing information about Government programmes and how to obtain formal documents like birth certificates; leadership training for women, young girls and youth; training about bank loans and self-employment; preventative health programmes; regular women's meetings aiming to help them participate more fully in emancipating their own community; 26 children's parliaments with 400 members; supplementary education programs for children; and anti-alcohol campaigns, among other activities. Community members have developed mutual support through a collective micro-finance project and are more confident in challenging traders who had previously exploited them.

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