



Asian Perspectives

Paving the Road to the Second World Summit for Social Development

The Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) will take place at a critical juncture: Five years before the end date of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in a post-pandemic context of complex and urgent challenges. While since 1995 more than a billion people have been lifted out of poverty, multiple crises, including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, rising inequalities, and geopolitical tensions have created a challenging scenario for social development, democracy and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

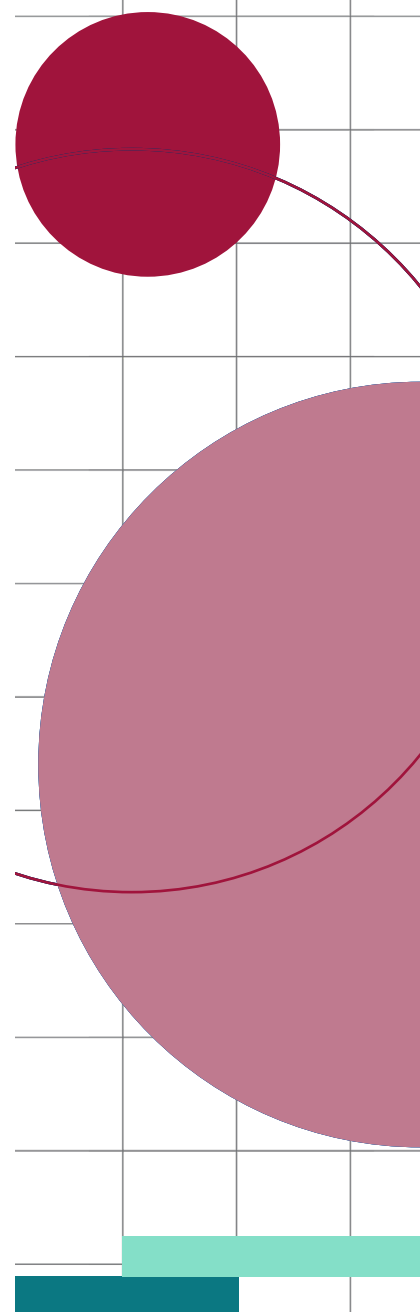
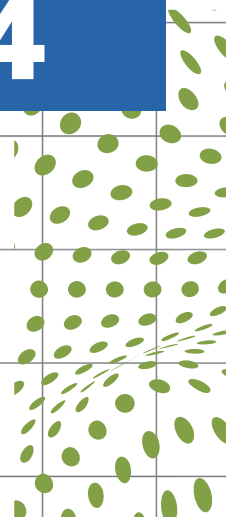
Despite notable advancements in social protection, environmental sustainability and gender inclusion, significant challenges in the Asian region remain unaddressed. These include income inequality, the digital divide, demographic pressures from aging populations and migration, persistent gender gaps, and vulnerabilities to climate change and environmental risks.

To ensure that every person can live in dignity and safety through advancing social development and SDG implementation in Asia, participants proposed to promote inclusive social protection systems, close the digital divide, invest in sustainable urban development and address gender inequality. Further, strengthening taxation systems, fostering regional cooperation, and leveraging multilateral efforts for climate adaptation and resilience were considered essential for sustainable and inclusive development.

Framing the dialogue: Regional insights for the WSSD

On 6 December 2024, UNRISD and the Korean Association of International Development and Cooperation (KAIDEC) convened an online consultation to gather insights from Asian stakeholders in preparation for the second WSSD (see box 1). The meeting aimed to evaluate progress on the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration and Plan of Action, identify emerging challenges, and explore the role of

the multilateral system in supporting regional efforts toward inclusive and just development transitions. This event brought together experts from academia, civil society, international organizations and policy makers to ensure diverse and regionally grounded perspectives to inform the Summit's outcomes (see → [List of participants](#)). What emerged is a call to action for renewed regional and global efforts to advance social development and strengthen international solidarity,



Box 1. Ensuring inclusive participation at the Second World Summit for Social Development

In 2025, the United Nations will convene the Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) to address ongoing social challenges and renew commitments made in the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action. The Summit will be an opportunity to reaffirm the objectives of the Copenhagen Declaration of poverty eradication, full and productive employment and decent work for all, and social integration, while identifying current challenges that need to be addressed. As the only research institute within the UN dedicated to research on the social dimension of development, UNRISD seeks to play a key role in preparing the road toward Doha, through research, stakeholder engagement and capacity-building, providing a space for critical thinking and a plurality of ideas and discussions on diverse perspectives, informed by voices from the global South and from less powerful constituencies. To ensure inclusive participation in the process leading up to the second WSSD, UNRISD, in collaboration with key partners, engaged its global, multi-sector network through the organization of regional consultation meetings that took place in November and December 2024. The objective was to understand key concerns and collect effective policy solutions that are tailored to regional, sub-regional and national contexts while reflecting a plurality of approaches and the needs of diverse communities and social groups. This brief captures key insights and discussions from the consultation and reflects the perspectives of participating experts. While it does not constitute a comprehensive analysis of regional challenges, it highlights priority issues and proposed solutions identified during the dialogue.

→ For a more comprehensive overview of the outcomes of all consultations carried out by UNRISD, please [visit here](#).

ensuring the fulfillment of social development goals and the acceleration of SDG implementation.

30 years after Copenhagen: Where do we stand?

The Copenhagen Plan of Action laid out an agenda to eradicate poverty, promote full and productive employment and decent work for all, and foster social integration. While transformative change has been hindered by structural barriers and external dependencies, participants highlighted notable progress in policy development and implementation in several key areas.

Since 1995, Asia has made considerable progress in expanding social protection

systems. Many countries have introduced or scaled up their social protection programmes, especially in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Several countries broadened social insurance coverage, provided targeted cash transfers, and implemented innovative measures to support vulnerable populations. For example, India launched the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme in 2018 and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005, while Bhutan introduced an income support initiative and Bangladesh successfully distributed cash transfers during the pandemic. Meanwhile, China and Vietnam expanded coverage of social insurance, with Vietnam reforming its Social Insurance Law in 2014 to reach more citizens. Although challenges

remain, such as gaps in coverage and implementation, these expansions have had an important effect on reducing poverty and inequalities.

Asia has also made significant strides in promoting productive employment and decent work for all in the past three decades. Countries like Indonesia have committed to advancing green job creation, focusing on sectors such as renewable energy, energy efficiency and sustainable agriculture to align employment strategies with environmental sustainability. South Korea has emphasized comprehensive policies that integrate skills development, social protection and labour reforms to promote decent work. Similarly, Vietnam has introduced labour reforms aimed at improving working conditions and increasing formal employment, recently signing the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Decent Work Country Programme for 2022-2026, which focuses on inclusive business practices, evidence-based policy making and enhanced social dialogue. Several countries have also sought to address wage stagnation and income inequality through substantial minimum wage reforms. For example, Malaysia introduced a new national minimum wage in 2013 to eliminate poverty and encourage businesses to move up the value chain, while Thailand implemented a considerable minimum wage increase in 2012. Despite these achievements, challenges remain in ensuring equitable access to opportunities and addressing disparities between formal and informal sectors.

Participants also agreed that Asia has made notable progress in advancing environmental sustainability alongside social development, with many countries embracing greener and more sustainable growth models. The government of Mongolia adopted "Vision-2050" in 2020, a long-term development policy that guides the country's economic, social and environmental progress over the next 30 years, emphasizing economic diversification, infrastructure development, improved governance and human capital enhancement. Bangladesh has developed a National Adaptation Plan (NAP) (2023-2050). This plan aims to establish a climate-resilient nation through inclusive and ecosystem-based adaptation, enhanced governance, climate finance and transformative capacity building. Meanwhile, India seeks to combine its energy transition with rapid economic growth. Additionally, experts noted that the Asia-Pacific region has seen significant growth in sustainable finance, with the issuance of sustainable bonds. These initiatives underscore Asia's commitment to embedding sustainability in its development agenda, although challenges persist in ensuring fair implementation and access to resources.

Since 1995, South Asia has taken steps to promote social integration, with efforts focused on marginalized groups and underrepresented populations. Nepal introduced constitutional reforms in the 2000s that aimed to uplift marginalized groups, including women, individuals from disadvantaged castes, persons with disabilities and people living in remote communities, marking significant progress

in social inclusion. Similarly, Thailand has seen increased gender representation in leadership roles within both public and private sectors. This progress is bolstered by organizational policies to enable women and other disadvantaged groups reach executive positions. Mongolia aimed to strengthen women's leadership through organizing several high-level meetings in 2024 that brought together female political leaders and the private sector from various countries and regions. However, significant challenges persist. Participants noted that Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities face widespread displacement and loss of traditional lands due to large-scale development projects, often without prior and informed consent or protection of their rights. Systemic discrimination against marginalized groups, including lower castes, remains prevalent in several countries.

Social development challenges in Asia and proposed solutions

Participants acknowledge that Asia confronts a complex set of social development challenges that threaten to stall or reverse progress in poverty reduction and social inclusion. These include lack of coverage of social protection, lack of access to public services, entrenched inequalities, demographic shifts, the widening digital divide and persistent governance issues. The dialogue identified key issues and proposed strategies to address them, emphasizing the importance of inclusive and sustainable approaches to advance social development across the region and to tailor policies to diverse country contexts.

Technological disruption and the digital divide

Asia has become a global leader in digital transformation, with significant progress in areas such as digital connectivity and infrastructure, e-commerce and digital payments, smart cities and urban innovation, and Industry 4.0 technologies in manufacturing. However, there are notable disparities in internet access, digital skills, as well as unequal distribution of the benefits that come from digital technologies, affecting in particular persons with disabilities, older persons, low-income groups and rural populations. Experts propose expanding rural internet infrastructure, promoting digital inclusion and reskilling workers to bridge this gap.

Climate change and environmental risks

Asia is becoming increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather events, disrupting agriculture, livelihoods and infrastructure. Countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and India face heightened risks of flooding and landslides. Recommendations discussed included integrating climate adaptation with social protection systems to increase social protection coverage, particularly in countries with high climate risks and low social protection coverage, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Further, implementing payments for ecosystem services (PES) can support adaptation measures by protecting the environment (for example reforestation, protection and planting of mangrove forests) while supporting people's livelihoods.

Aging populations and labour force shortages

It was noted that several Asian countries, including Japan, Singapore, China, South Korea, and Thailand, face aging populations, leading to rising pressures on healthcare, paid and unpaid care provisioning and pension systems. Some countries are taking measures to address aging populations. For example, Japan has revised its Guidelines for an Aging Society in view of creating a society where people of all ages can actively participate and where their physical and cognitive changes are recognized. Participants discussed further recommendations for creating age-friendly societies, including the adoption of policies to expand access to pensions, health care, and long-term care services. They emphasized the importance of employment initiatives for older workers, as well as family-friendly policies and incentives, such as parental leave. Other suggestions included implementing flexible working hours, part-time work options, job-sharing opportunities, and telecommuting. Additionally, they highlighted the need to adjust immigration policies to meet labour demands and to implement rights-based migration strategies, which would help balance demographic shifts and address regional labour force imbalances.

Rapid urbanization and internal migration

Asia's rapid urbanization, driven largely by internal migration, places significant pressure on infrastructure, employment, environmental management, and basic services, especially in secondary cities. Significant challenges discussed include

urban poverty, housing shortages, and limited access to sanitation. Experts proposed investing in sustainable urban development, including better public transport and affordable housing, to reduce congestion and enhance accessibility. Additionally, it was suggested that strengthening rural development can help balance migration inflows and alleviate pressure on urban centres. Strengthening the importance of reinforcing multilevel governance and empowering local governments to address urban challenges was also emphasized.

Gender inequality and gender-based violence

The dialogue highlighted significant disparities between men and women in the region, with an emphasis on labour market inequalities and rising gender-based violence. Experts stressed advancing gender equality as vital for social development and inclusive economic growth. Proposed solutions included integrating gender-mainstreaming across sectors such as health, human security, economic integration, digitalization and sustainability. Additional measures included promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives; addressing the gender pay gap through labour market reforms; increasing women's workforce participation through investments in care systems, education and family support; and challenging entrenched social norms that perpetuate the gendered division of labour, restrict women's mobility, and limit their employment opportunities.

Inefficient taxation systems and income inequality

Taxation inefficiencies and widespread income disparities were discussed as significant barriers to equitable development in Asia. It was stressed that countries like India, Bangladesh and Nepal have highly constrained tax bases, which hinders their ability to finance social protection programmes. Other countries face issues due to numerous tax exemptions and the lack of inheritance and capital gains taxes which further increases the already high concentration of wealth. Experts emphasized the need for domestic resource mobilization and redistribution through progressive tax reforms to ensure fair contributions, alongside strengthened regional coordination for tax justice, as critical steps to address these interlinked issues and support more equitable development.

Inadequate governance and political instability

Weak governance, corruption, authoritarian practices, and violent conflict undermine poverty eradication and social development across the region. Participants noted that persistent instability, governance failures, and humanitarian crises have led to severe resource constraints, exacerbated by public debt, regional inequalities and the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Democratic practices have eroded in several countries, through fraud elections and the suppression of opposition parties. According to the experts, the spread of authoritarian practices is diminishing public trust and inclusive policy making. Similarly,

it was noted that many countries face persistent corruption that weakens legitimacy and policy implementation. Meanwhile, ongoing civil conflicts have diverted attention and resources away from urgent social and economic priorities, deepening instability and impeding efforts to safeguard rights and meet basic needs. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening governance structures and fostering inclusive decision making. Participants emphasized that reconstruction efforts should be grounded in social and economic justice. They advocated for prioritizing grassroots participation and community-driven approaches, which can help lay the foundation for sustainable and just development, allowing affected populations to shape their own futures.

Social exclusion of Indigenous populations

While there has been some progress in social development for Indigenous peoples in various Asian countries, experts note that these groups still face the lasting impacts of colonialism, oppression, and exploitation. They continue to experience poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, and a lack of access to resources. There is an urgent need to achieve social, economic, and environmental justice for Indigenous peoples through recognition, redistribution, and restoration. Participants noted that the recognition and fulfillment of Indigenous peoples' rights, including their collective rights to their lands and territories, cultural and language practices, as well as incorporation of indigenous knowledge and practices in policy approaches, is crucial for

achieving inclusive and sustainable social development in the region.

The role of multilateralism in supporting regional social development strategies

The role of the multilateral system in supporting regional efforts and transitions in Asia has become increasingly crucial in recent years. The continent is grappling with intricate challenges, ranging from climate change, economic inequality to political instability. Multilateral cooperation offers a viable pathway to address these issues collectively and effectively. To fully leverage the potential benefits of multilateral engagement, the experts emphasized the importance of:

- Developing multilateral regulatory frameworks to address the societal impacts of digitization, including its implications for employment, ethics, and data privacy, ensuring that global standards promote equitable benefits and mitigate risks;
- Strengthening global frameworks for tax cooperation and establishing new development standards to address inequalities and foster inclusive growth;
- Enhancing coordination between local, regional, and global actors to implement sustainable development initiatives effectively and actively engaging cities as key actors in just transition processes;
- Leveraging multilateralism to promote universal social protection systems that integrate economic, social, and environmental objectives, with a focus on marginalized populations;

- Promoting climate adaptation and resilience through multilateral support, particularly for countries vulnerable to extreme weather events;
- Facilitating bottom-up approaches in conflict-affected areas through multilateral initiatives that prioritize justice, community empowerment, participatory governance frameworks and social integration;
- Advancing equitable and accountable aid frameworks free from hidden geopolitical or economic agendas, ensuring that aid focuses on fostering inclusive sustainable development;
- Promoting social dialogue and a human security approach that is based on protection, empowerment and solidarity, guaranteeing all people the right to live in freedom, dignity and safety; and
- Promoting knowledge sharing and capacity building within the region and fostering South-South learning and trilateral cooperation.

Conclusion

The consultation highlighted the urgent need for tailored and inclusive solutions to address Asia's pressing social development challenges. While significant progress has been achieved in areas such as social protection, employment reforms and environmental sustainability, critical issues persist. These include coverage gaps in social protection, the digital divide, income inequality, gender disparities, climate vulnerabilities, aging populations, rapid urbanization, political instability and social exclusion. Experts emphasized the



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importance of expanding universal social protection, bridging digital and urban-rural divides, addressing gender inequality, and implementing progressive tax reforms to ensure equitable development. Strengthened multilateral cooperation was identified as vital for fostering regional resilience, advancing climate adaptation, and enabling sustainable growth. By acting on these recommendations and leveraging the multilateral system, Asia has the opportunity to accelerate progress toward a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable future, ensuring alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the objectives of the WSSD.

List of participants

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The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is an autonomous research institute within the UN system that undertakes multidisciplinary research and policy analysis on the social dimensions of contemporary development issues. Through our work, we aim to ensure that social equity, inclusion and justice are central to development thinking, policy and practice.

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