

Human Development and Service Delivery in Asia

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Summary

Asia's rapid economic growth over the past decade masks stark and growing inequities in human development. Home to the world's fastest-growing economies, fueled by surging manufacturing and service exports that require highly productive and skilled people, Asia exhibits some of the worst levels of human deprivation on the planet. No country exemplifies this better than India, which exports computer software, high-tech medical services and pharmaceuticals, and yet has levels of child under-nutrition nearly double those in Sub-Saharan Africa. Other rapidly-growing countries, such as Pakistan and Cambodia, are making very slow progress on child survival, primary enrolment--especially for girls--and other dimensions of basic human development. These countries are unlikely to meet any of the human-development Millennium Development Goals by 2015. In India and China, the unevenness in economic growth is reinforced by even more unequal human development. Four states in India account for half the child deaths in the country, while five are home to 71 percent of India's out-of-school children. Child mortality rates in the western provinces of China are three to five times higher, and falling more slowly, than in the coastal provinces.

Meanwhile, countries that have made progress in basic human development—Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand—are facing significant second-generation problems of quality and equity. In Sri Lanka, despite universal primary enrolment, two-thirds of the students completing primary school lack basic language and mathematics skills. As populations age and consumption rises, Asian countries are seeing a rapid increase in rich-country health problems--obesity, diabetes, cancers--putting new pressures on public health systems. Asian tertiary education consumes large amounts of public resources and, with some exceptions such as the IITs in India, delivers poor-quality training. Finally, killer diseases such as malaria, HIV/AIDS and avian flu threaten to undermine recent gains in living standards. Unless there is a significant improvement in these health and education outcomes, Asian countries are unlikely to be growing rapidly in 2015.

This paper offers a common framework for addressing Asia's varied human-development challenges by observing that, for the most part, they stem from a systematic failure in the delivery of services--health, education, water, sanitation, and electricity--especially to poor people. We argue in section II that the reason for poor service delivery is a failure of accountability at different points in the service-delivery chain. In section III, we describe various efforts by Asian countries to strengthen accountability in order to improve service delivery and hence human-development outcomes. While there are some encouraging early results, these efforts have also turned up some new challenges in addressing Asia's human-development problems. In section IV, we consider three of those challenges--politics, decentralization, and the role of impact evaluation. Section V concludes.