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Accelerating the achievement of the Millennium
Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific

**Accelerating the achievement of the Millennium
Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: selected
issues and options**

Note by the secretariat

Summary

While the Asia-Pacific region has made significant progress in achieving some of the Millennium Development Goals, challenges remain. Given the large population, the region is still home to a majority of the world's most deprived individuals. Recent economic crises further hamper progress towards the Goals. Nonetheless, the region has not fully exploited opportunities to formulate economic policies that are inclusive and sustainable and able to accelerate the achievement of the Goals. The Committee may wish to consider the present document and recommend macroeconomic policy measures to accelerate the achievement of the Goals.

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I. Introduction

1. While significant progress has been made in achieving some of the Millennium Development Goals in the region, there still remain many challenges. The magnitude and areas of progress and challenges vary significantly across sectors, subregions and countries, and within countries. With only four years remaining until 2015, the initial goal date set for achieving the Goals, the present report takes stock of recent progress and the challenges encountered in achieving the Goals in the region and highlights some of those challenges while seeking guidance from the Committee regarding policies that would assist countries in accelerating progress towards the Goals.

II. Stocktaking of Millennium Development Goal performance in the region

A. Achievements

2. Four years remain until the agreed target date of 2015, and success is within reach for several key Millennium Development Goal targets. In the Asia-Pacific region, one of the greatest successes has been in moving people out of poverty, and the region as a whole has already surpassed the poverty goal of halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty. Since 1990, Asia and the Pacific has reduced the proportion of people living on less than \$1.25 per day from 50 per cent to 22 per cent – or from 1.57 billion to 871 million people as of 2010.¹

3. The region has achieved the targets for a number of other goals and is likely to achieve the goal of universal primary education by 2015, with 94 per cent of children in the region enrolled in primary education. Even in South Asia, which lags behind others regarding education, the enrolment rate reached 90 per cent in 2006 (see E/ESCAP/65/31). The Asia-Pacific region has also reduced gender disparities in primary, secondary and tertiary education, and the majority of countries in the region are early achievers in the two indicators on primary and secondary education. The region as a whole has also reached the goal of reducing the prevalence of HIV as well as tuberculosis. With regard to the environment-related indicators, the Asia-Pacific region has increased the proportion of land area that is covered by forests or has protected status, while reducing the consumption of ozone-depleting substances. Finally, at the household level, the region has more than halved the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water.

B. Remaining challenges

4. The region is still lagging in some major areas, such as completion of primary school, access to basic sanitation, or reduction of CO₂ emissions. Over 1.8 billion people in the region are still without basic sanitation, and the number has only been marginally reduced since 1990. Progress has also been slow in reducing the child mortality rate prior to age five, improving reproductive and maternal health-care services and reducing the number of maternal deaths related to childbirth. Although the number has dropped since 1990, currently, 4 million children in the region die before the age of five. Only a handful of countries have progressed in the area of under-5 mortality,

¹ The latest assessment will be provided in the 2011 regional report on the Goals.

and infant mortality rates are shown to be regressing in most countries of the region.²

5. Moreover, while in general Asia and the Pacific is making better progress towards the Millennium Development Goal targets than sub-Saharan Africa, it lags behind Latin America and the Caribbean. Due to the large population, the region is still home to a large percentage of the world's deprived people. For instance, although the number of underweight children under five has decreased from 134 million in 1990 to 83 million in the region, that number still represents 70 per cent of world's underweight children. The region also made remarkable progress in reducing the number of people without safe drinking water from 856 million people in 1990 to 466 million people. Nonetheless, the latter figure represents more than half of the people in the developing world who are deprived of safe drinking water.

6. Furthermore, overall achievement for the region as a whole does not necessarily represent progress across various subgroups. For instance, progress has been much slower in many of the previously described indicators for the region's 14 least developed countries, including poverty targets.

7. There are also significant differences between subregions. Of the 22 Millennium Development Goal indicators utilized in the forthcoming regional report,³ South-East Asia is already an early achiever on 10 and is on track for another 4. The North and Central Asian countries as a group are early achievers on 11 of the indicators. South Asia, which started from a low base on many indicators, has made good progress on 9 of them but is progressing slowly on many others. The Pacific island countries as a group have been successful in indicators related to gender parity in tertiary education, HIV prevalence, TB incidence, protected areas, CO₂ emissions and consumption of ozone-depleting substances. However, on five of the indicators, they have been advancing too slowly, and, on six others, they have been regressing or making no progress.

8. For all the differences seen in results between Asia-Pacific subregions, there are even greater disparities noted within subregions, and within countries. Clearly, progress at the national level does not automatically translate into progress for all subgroups. Persistent and increasing inequalities are emerging within countries between the rich and the poor, and between rural populations and urban populations. This affects in particular those disadvantaged as a result of geographic location, gender, age or conflict.⁴

² Regional report on the Goals, 2011/2012 (forthcoming), table 1.2.

³ Goal 1: (a) \$1.25 per day poverty, (b) Underweight children; Goal 2: (a) Primary enrolment, (b) Reaching last grade, (c) Primary completion; Goal 3: (a) Gender primary, (b) Gender secondary, (c) Gender tertiary; Goal 4: (a) Under-5 mortality, (b) Infant mortality; Goal 5: (a) Maternal mortality, (b) Skilled birth attendance, (c) Antenatal care; Goal 6: (a) HIV prevalence, (b) TB incidence, (c) TB prevalence; Goal 7: (a) Forest cover, (b) Protected areas, (c) CO₂ emissions, (d) Consumption of ozone-depleting substances, (e) Safe drinking water, (f) Basic sanitation.

⁴ See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Sixty-sixth Session, Supplement No. 1 (A/66/1)*, para. 9.

III. Challenges and opportunities

9. Despite significant progress towards reducing poverty in the past decades, the region still holds 870 million people living below \$1.25 a day, which represents almost 70 per cent of the world's deprived population. Dynamic growth experienced in the past decade has not been fully transmitted to poverty reduction. While the task of achieving the Millennium Development Goals appears daunting, some of the targets are still within reach before 2015. For instance, a number of countries in Central and West Asia could still meet the target by reducing their proportion of underweight children by less than one percentage point every year. All of the off-track countries in the region, including India, could meet the target if they could reduce the prevalence of underweight children by two percentage points per year. Most of the 20 countries currently off track in providing safe drinking water could reach the target by increasing their access rates by less than two percentage points per year. Even in the slowly progressing area of sanitation, the 30 countries that are off track could meet the target if they could extend access by less than one percentage point every year.⁵

10. Regional progress towards the Millennium Development Goals has been seriously undermined by the recent global economic crisis. Along with food-fuel price volatility and climate change, the global economic crisis has affected all economies, including some of the poorest and most vulnerable countries in the region, hampering their ability to progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. With increased integration into the global economy, many developing countries in the region are heavily dependent upon exports, foreign direct investment, remittances from migrant workers and/or official development assistance – the main channels by which the crisis has been transmitted to these economies (see E/ESCAP/65/31). The increase in unemployment, loss of income and lack of social protection have forced many people, especially vulnerable groups, back into poverty. Renewed concerns over food and fuel price increases require urgent attention.

IV. The way forward

11. In the outcome document of the High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals at its sixty-fifth session,⁶ Heads of State and Government called for increased efforts at all levels to enhance policy coherence for development and affirmed that achievement of the Millennium Development Goals requires mutually supportive and integrated policies across a wide range of economic, social and environmental issues. It requires all countries to formulate and implement policies consistent with the objectives of sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth, poverty eradication and sustainable development. The lessons learned and successful policies and approaches could be replicated and scaled up to accelerate progress towards achieving the Goals.

12. As reaffirmed by Heads of State and Government in the outcome document of the Millennium Summit, national ownership and leadership of development are a key determinant of progress in achieving the Millennium

⁵ Millennium Development Goals Report 2011/2012 (forthcoming).

⁶ See "Keeping the promise: united to achieve the Millennium Development Goals" (General Assembly resolution 65/1 of 22 September 2010).

Development Goals, with each country taking the primary responsibility for its own development.⁷

13. The increasing interdependence of economies in a globalizing world and the emergence of rules-based regimes for international economic relations have meant that the space for national economic policy, especially in the areas of trade, investment and international development, is now often framed by international disciplines, commitments and global market considerations. Thus, it is for each Government to evaluate the trade-off between the benefits of accepting international rules and commitments and the constraints posed by the loss of policy space.⁸

Policies to accelerate progress towards the Goals

14. While each country has to address its own specific needs and opportunities to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, there are a number of common concerns and priorities in the region which offer opportunities to strengthen the environment for achieving the Goals.⁹

(a) *Strengthening growth by stimulating domestic demand and intraregional trade.* Economic growth is important, though not sufficient, in achieving the Goals. In an era when demand from traditional markets is weakening, countries in the region need to rebalance their growth, basing it more on domestic consumption and greater levels of intraregional trade;

(b) *Making economic growth more inclusive and sustainable.* As emphasized in the outcome document of the Millennium Summit, economic growth needs to be inclusive – derived more from economic activities, such as agriculture, that benefit the poor, and especially women. The fruits of growth also need to be better allocated so as to contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goal targets. At the same time, economic growth should be consistent with sustainable development, and economic policies will need to set their sights on decoupling economic development from environmental pressures;

(c) *Strengthening social protection.* Countries will be better placed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals if they offer a minimum social floor that addresses extreme poverty and hunger and income insecurity, as it will minimize the risks and vulnerability from economic crises and natural disasters. It will also act as a “circuit breaker” for vicious intergenerational cycles of poverty and hunger as well as reducing widening disparities between the rich and poor;

(d) *Reducing persistent gender gaps.* Greater investments in women and girls have multiplier effects across all the Goals. Said investments have to be supported by the collection and analysis of gender-specific data as well as the legislative and other changes needed to ensure that women have greater control and ownership over assets, have equitable access to employment and all public services, and are fully represented in public and political life;

⁷ Ibid., para. 36.

⁸ Ibid., para. 37.

⁹ *Paths to 2015: MDG Priorities in Asia and the Pacific*, Asia-Pacific MDG Report 2010/2011 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.10.II.F.20), pp.1-2.

(e) *Ensuring financial inclusion.* Most of the poor in the region have little access to financial services. Governments can play their part by improving infrastructure and the regulatory environment while encouraging better service provision by non-governmental organizations, community-based groups and the private sector;

(f) *Supporting least developed and structurally disadvantaged countries.* While most of the resources for achieving the Millennium Development Goals must come from within the countries, continued assistance would be required for many of the countries with special needs to accelerate the achievement of the Goals;

(g) *Exploiting the potential of regional economic integration.* Regional economic integration can make the region more resilient to further crises and bolster the capacity of the poorest countries to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Agreements on economic integration, for example, could enable smaller countries in particular to extend their markets and reap efficiency gains. Opportunities for fruitful cooperation exist in finance and other areas.

V. Consideration by the Committee

15. The Committee may wish to consider the present document and recommend macroeconomic policy measures to accelerate the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.
