AN UNEQUAL FUTURE

ASIA'S STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE IN A WARMING, WIRED WORLD

OXFAM

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Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under
DOI: 10.21201/2025.000101

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Cover photo: Cover page and visuals are Designed by Sara Khan.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

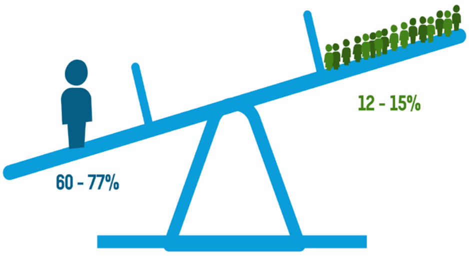
Asia today demonstrates stark inequalities across multiple dimensions, and they are rising sharply. Wealth is heavily concentrated: the top 10% now capture between 60% and 77% of national income in major Asian economies; the richest 1% hold 40.1% of national wealth in India and 31.4% in China. Meanwhile, the poorest 50% earn only 12–15% of total income, a share that has been shrinking since 2022, with over 70% of Asia's inequality occurring within, rather than between, countries. The combined wealth of Asia's richest 10 billionaires surpasses the annual GDP of several poorer Asian nations. However, gains for the bottom 50% have occurred in Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam – which have also, to some extent, reduced the share of the top 1%.

As of 2024, about 18.9% of the population in developing Asia remains poor, living on less than US$3.65 a day. At the higher vulnerability threshold of US$4.20 per day, over half a billion people in Asia are poor or at risk of poverty. Income inequality is deepening, with the expansion of informal labour leaving over 80% of workers in South Asia without contracts or social protection. Gender gaps remain entrenched – women in Asia perform two to four times more unpaid care work than men and are 41% less likely to use mobile internet in South Asia. Ethnic and caste hierarchies exacerbate exclusion, with Dalits and Indigenous peoples facing disproportionate poverty, hazardous work and barriers to land and services.

Key facts:

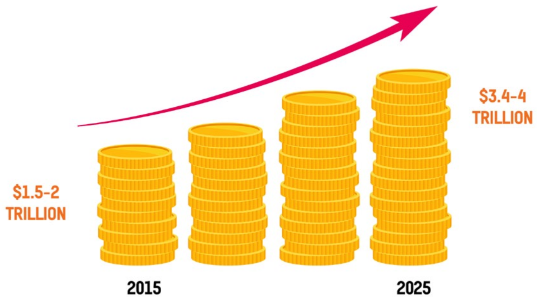
- The Richest 10% Take It All: Across major Asian economies, the richest 10% capture 60–77% of national income, while the poorest 50% receive only 12–15%.
- The 1% Own Nearly Half the Wealth: The richest 1% hold between 35–45% of national wealth in countries like the Maldives, Myanmar, India, and China, showing extreme concentration of assets across the region.
- Inequality Deepens Across the Region: Asia's income Gini rose from 0.40 (2013) to 0.42 (2025), while the wealth Gini climbed to 0.72, marking one of the highest inequality levels globally.
- Top 10% Control Most National Income: In India (58%), Thailand (52%), Indonesia (46%), Vietnam (43%), and China (43%), the top 10% capture nearly half or more of all national income.
- Bottom 50% Losing Ground: The poorest 50% have lost income share in China, India, Indonesia, and Korea.
- Billionaires' Wealth Skyrockets: The total wealth of Asian billionaires jumped over 120%, from US$1.5–2 trillion in 2015 to US$3.4–4 trillion in 2025.

Across Asia-Pacific countries, the average tax-to-GDP ratio was 19%, much lower than the OECD average of 34%.[124] In 2022, the tax-to-GDP ratio was at or above 30% in Japan, Korea and New Zealand, compared to around 10% in Lao PDR and Pakistan. Countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Korea and Japan take the lead in demonstrating the 'progressive fiscal model' — with high direct taxes, moderate VAT and strong social spending capacities. In contrast, countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam show continued reliance on VAT, hence the tax burden still falls disproportionately on poorer households, especially where exemptions are weak.



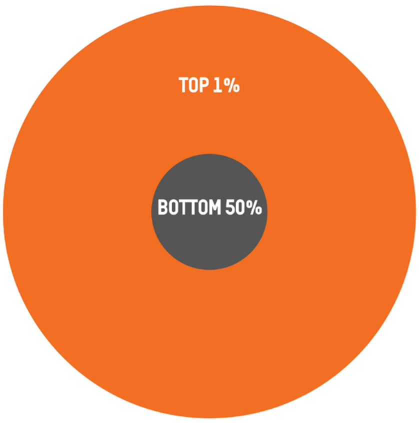
The **poorest 50% earns only 12–15% of total income**, a share that has been shrinking since 2022.

External public debt service by Asian low- and middle-income countries reached US$443.5 billion in 2022 and was projected to rise by 10% through 2024. Consequently, 25 of 28 Asian nations face spending cuts averaging 3% of GDP by 2027, often slashing social expenditures. Over 2.1 billion people now live in Asia-Pacific countries where net interest payments exceed education or health spending. Universal Health Coverage progress is highly uneven across the region – Thailand, China, Korea and Japan have over 80% coverage, while Bangladesh and Lao PDR remain below 50%. In 2022, public investment in education amounted to 8% of GDP in Bhutan and Kyrgyzstan, but less than 2% of GDP in Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Sri Lanka. Without action, the region risks missing all 17 SDGs by their 2030 deadlines, with some targets delayed until 2062.

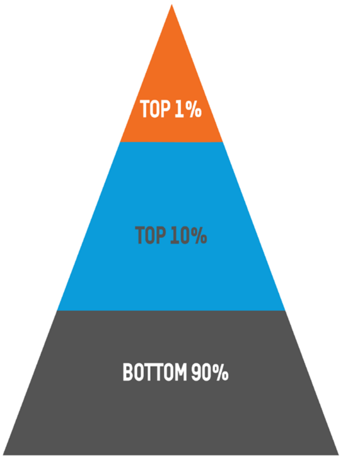


The **total wealth** of Asian billionaires surged by over **120%** in a decade, from **$1.5–2 trillion** in 2015 to **$3.4–4 trillion** in 2025.

Asia is on the frontlines of the climate crisis. Six of the world's most vulnerable nations are here, with over 1.2 billion people affected by disasters in the last decade. Floods, cyclones, droughts and heatwaves are escalating, causing US$65 billion in economic losses in 2023 alone—yet less than 10% was insured. Despite producing nearly half of global emissions, Asia's per-capita emissions remain lower than in the Global South – but the rich emit 44 times more than someone from the poorest 50%. Yet the richest are more insulated from the impacts of climate change while people living in poverty pay the heaviest price. The region requires US$1.1 trillion annually for mitigation and adaptation, but only a fraction is delivered—often in the form of loans that worsen debt burdens. In 2022, the lowest-income Asian countries paid nearly twice as much in debt service as they received in climate finance.



In 2023, the **top 1% own 28% of wealth**, while the **bottom 50% own just 4%** — a 7:1 disparity on average.



India's top 10% captured 58% of national income in 2023 — and the top 1% captured 23%, the highest concentration in Asia.

Digital divides also exist, with Asia-Pacific reporting 83% of its urban population online compared to 49% of the rural population. Around 60% of the 885 million women still not using mobile internet in low-and middle-income countries live in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. These regions also have the widest gender gaps in mobile internet adoption, at 32% and 29%, respectively[1].

Key drivers of inequality include the growing fragility of states and attacks on civic freedoms. Average democracy scores (used by V-Dem and The Economist) dropped 0.45 points from 2014–2024 in Asia, a steeper fall than the global average. The clean elections index and press freedom are at their lowest in decades, with one-fifth of countries suffering declines in electoral credibility in 2024 alone.

Asia's future depends on its ability to dismantle entrenched inequalities — economic, gendered, digital and ecological. This will require:

1. **National plans to reduce inequality**
   - Governments must adopt and implement National Inequality Reduction Plans (NIRPs) with measurable, time-bound targets.
   - Aim to reduce the income Gini coefficient below 0.3 and the Palma ratio below 1.
   - Incorporate regular monitoring, public reporting and community participation in assessing progress.
   - NIRPs should integrate fiscal, social, gender and environmental strategies, embedding a holistic equity framework within national development agendas.

As of 2024, about 18.9% of people in developing Asia live on less than $3.65 a day.

2. **Progressive taxation and fiscal justice**
   - Fiscal systems must shift from regressive consumption taxes to progressive income and wealth taxation, enabling governments to deliver rights-based public services.
   - Tax the richest 1% at minimum effective rates of 60% on both labour and capital income, with higher brackets for billionaires and multi-millionaires.
   - Implement wealth taxes at 2–5% on Asia-Pacific's ultra-rich – enough to boost regional health spending by 60%

Over **2.1 billion people** now live in Asia-Pacific countries where interest payments exceed education or health spending.

and fund universal healthcare and pandemic preparedness.

- Strengthen national tax authorities and establish high-net-worth units to curb evasion and illicit financial flows.

3. Universal and equitable public services

- Governments must guarantee free, universal and high-quality education, healthcare and social protection.
- Allocate at least 15% of national budgets to health and 20% to education, ensuring resources reach the poorest and most marginalized.
- Abolish user fees in essential services.
- Expand universal social protection to cover informal workers, migrants, people with disabilities and unemployed populations.
- Build climate- and crisis-responsive systems, integrating social protection with disaster response, food security and early warning mechanisms.

Around **45% of people** in Asia-Pacific lack adequate **social protection.**

4. Gender-transformative economic policies

- Closing gender gaps could add US$4.5 trillion to Asia-Pacific's GDP annually (a 12% boost).
  Governments must:
- Invest in the care economy (childcare, eldercare and healthcare) to create millions of decent jobs.
- Enforce equal pay and decent work standards in the garment, agriculture and electronics sectors.
- Expand women's access to land, credit and digital tools to support leadership in green and digital economies.
- Legislate against gender-based violence and ensure protections for migrant and domestic workers.
- Institutionalize gender budgeting and ensure women's representation in economic and climate policymaking.

5. Digital rights and inclusive technology

- Governments must treat connectivity as a public good while protecting digital safety.
- Expand rural broadband, subsidize devices and reduce data costs.
- Ban arbitrary internet shutdowns, regulate online harassment and ensure privacy in digital ID systems.
- Address labour exploitation in AI and platform economies, and mandate environmental and

In 2024, the Asia-Pacific saw **202 internet shutdowns in 11 countries** — the highest ever recorded in a single year.

human rights safeguards.

- Build inclusive, multi-stakeholder governance frameworks to ensure technology empowers marginalized communities, not corporations or surveillance regimes.

6. Climate justice and fair finance

- Asia faces escalating climate-induced inequality: the poorest communities are hit hardest by floods, droughts and heatwaves but receive minimal adaptation finance. Governments must:
- Prioritize adaptation and loss and damage (L&D). Scale up grant-based finance, not loans, for climate-vulnerable regions and frontline communities.
- Ensure historical polluters and high-emission corporations meet their obligations through predictable, non-debt funding.
- Reform global climate finance architecture — push the ADB and World Bank to democratize governance and allocate at least 50% of funds to adaptation.
- Embed gender-responsive and transparent monitoring systems to ensure funds reach women, Indigenous peoples and informal workers.
- Mobilize young people and civil society to demand accountability and inclusion in climate planning.
- Strengthen regional solidarity via ASEAN and SAARC to negotiate collectively for just, equitable climate outcomes.

By centring justice, accountability and participation, these measures form a comprehensive blueprint for equity in Asia — ensuring that prosperity is shared, not hoarded.

CHAPTER 1: INEQUALITY IN ASIA

Economic inequality has intensified worldwide in the last few decades, and Asia — having undergone rapid economic growth, industrialization and urbanization — is no exception, despite having paradoxically lifted over one billion people out of poverty.

The region has seen either a continued rise or stagnation in income and wealth disparities, along with deepening horizontal inequalities rooted in ethnicity, gender and geography. These multifaceted trends highlight increasingly uneven patterns of economic growth and unequal access to opportunities and resources across the region, even in countries that previously grew equitably.

In parallel to the rising income and wealth of Asia's top 1%, 5% and 10%, there is a large segment of the population who are either being pushed into poverty, or whose promise of being lifted out of poverty has remained unfulfilled. These two extremes cannot produce sustainable, inclusive and peaceful societies in Asia.

1.1 INCOME INEQUALITY[2]

Asia's economic inequality has deepened over the last decade. The average income Gini[3] rose above 0.42 in 2025 from 0.40 in 2013, 0.4% is the world bank threshold for high inequality.[4,5] The richest 10% now capture 60–77% of national income in major Asian economies.[6]. Meanwhile, the poorest 50% earns only 12–15% of total income, a share that has been shrinking since 2022, with over 70% of Asia's inequality occurring within, rather than between, countries.[7]

China and India have seen the steepest rises in inequality, with the rich capturing an ever-larger share of income and wealth. In South-East Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines experience persistent increases. East Asia stands out as a contrast: Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have achieved stable or slightly reduced inequality thanks to progressive fiscal policies, expanded public health, education services and redistributive taxation. Japan and South Korea maintain relatively low-income Gini coefficients (~32), with Taiwan also reducing inequality through expanded welfare and universal healthcare since the early 2000s.[8]

Figure 1: Income Gini coefficient of selected Asian countries

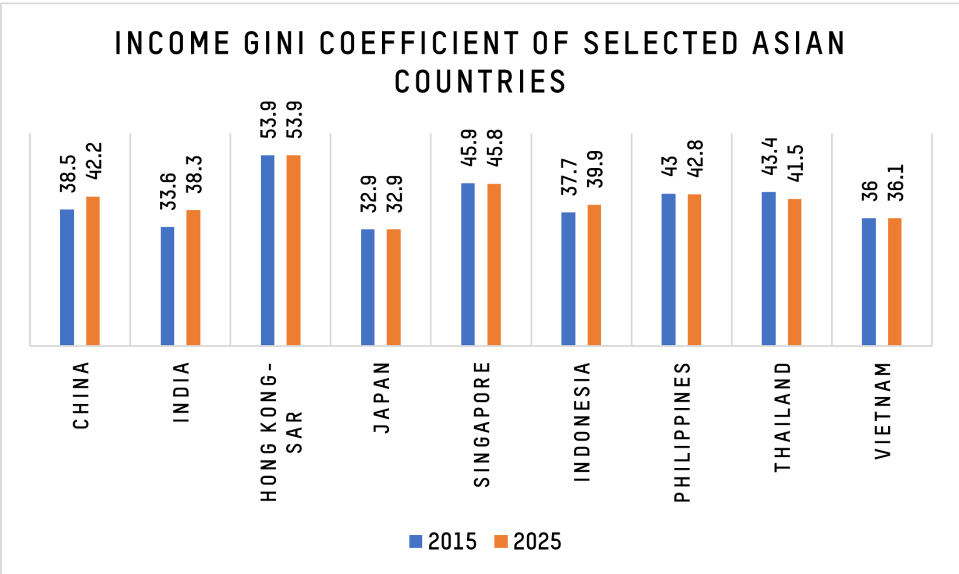
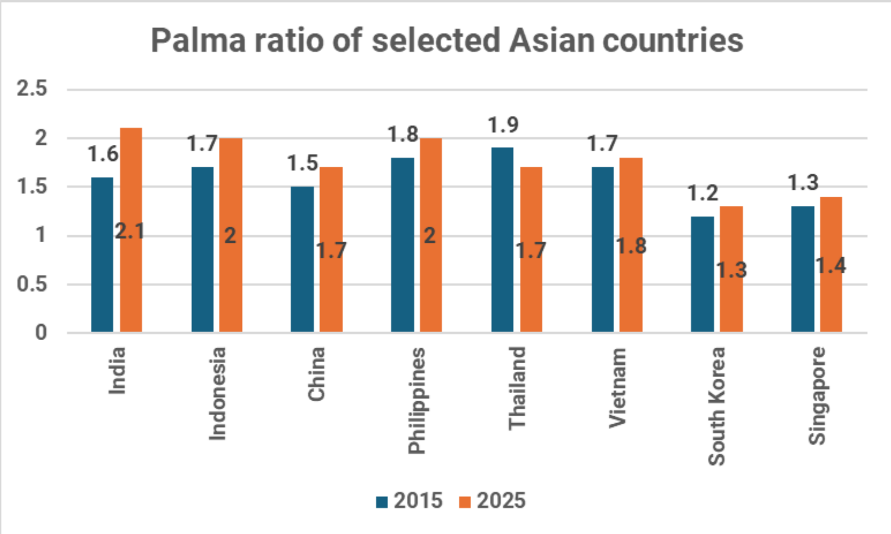
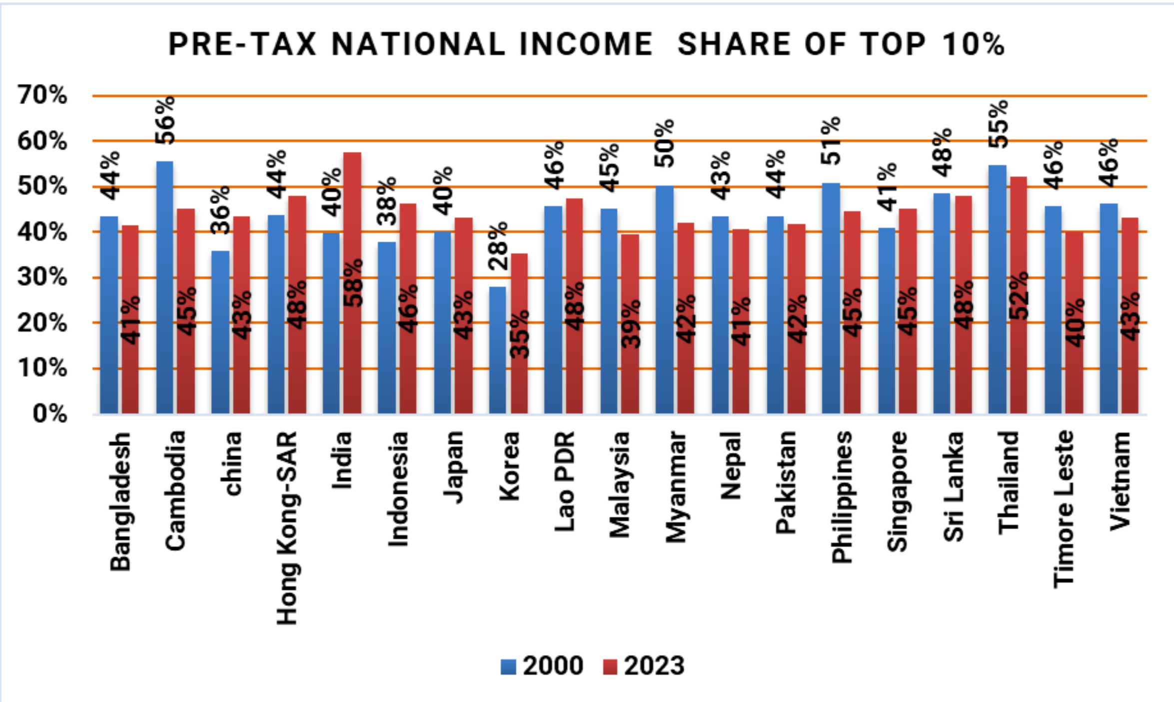


Figure 2: Palma ratio[9]



All major economies show a rise in the Palma ratio (the share of the richest 10% divided by the share of the poorest 40%) during the last decade. Despite all countries agreeing on SDG 10 to reduce the gap between the bottom 40% and top 10%, the ratio has grown for most Asian countries post-COVID, reflecting sharpened disparities and demonstrating that the benefit of economic growth is skewed toward the rich.[10]

Figure 3: Income share of top 10%



Source: Downloaded from wid.world on 11-10-2025

The top 10% of the population controls over 40% of national income in many countries across Asia. Despite a slight decline in their share over the last quarter century, there has not been any significant reduction in the income concentration among the top 10%. In India, Thailand, China, Indonesia and Vietnam, the top 10% captured 58%, 52%, 43%, 46% and 43% of national income respectively in 2023.

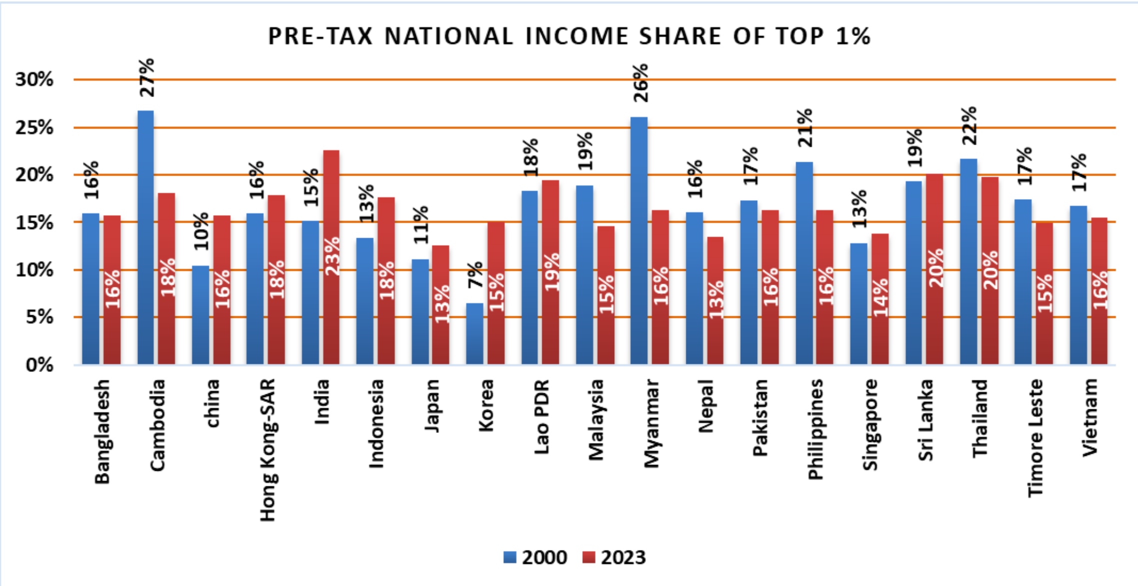
Except for Cambodia, where it has declined by 9 percentage points, no other country has achieved a notable reduction in the income share of the top 10% – only minor decreases of a few percentage points. This indicates persistently high levels of income inequality across the region.

1.1.2 INCOME CONCENTRATION AMONG THE TOP 1% IN ASIA

The top 1% of the population in 19 selected Asian countries has been a major beneficiary of economic growth. In most countries, their share of national income has either increased or remained stable over the past two decades, with only a few countries—such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines—showing a decline, In the case of Philippines, income measurements may underreport the degree of inequality. Between 39% and 42% of the economy constitutes the shadow or underground economy and the tax gap. A significant part of incomes and assets is hidden or underreported. Specifically, Cambodia's share fell from 27% in 2000 to 18% in 2023; Myanmar from 26% to 16%; Malaysia from 19% to 15%; and the Philippines from 21% to 16%.

In contrast, several large and fast-growing economies have seen significant increases. The top 1%'s share rose by 6% in China, 8% in India and 5% in Indonesia—reaching 16%, 23% and 18% respectively in 2023. Among all 19 countries reviewed, India at 23% stands out with the highest concentration of national income, while Thailand and Sri Lanka follow, with the top 1% in each accounting for about 20% of total national income.

Figure 3: Pre-tax national income share of top 1%



Source: Downloaded from wid.world on 11-10-2025

1.1.3 INCOME SHARE OF THE POOREST 50%

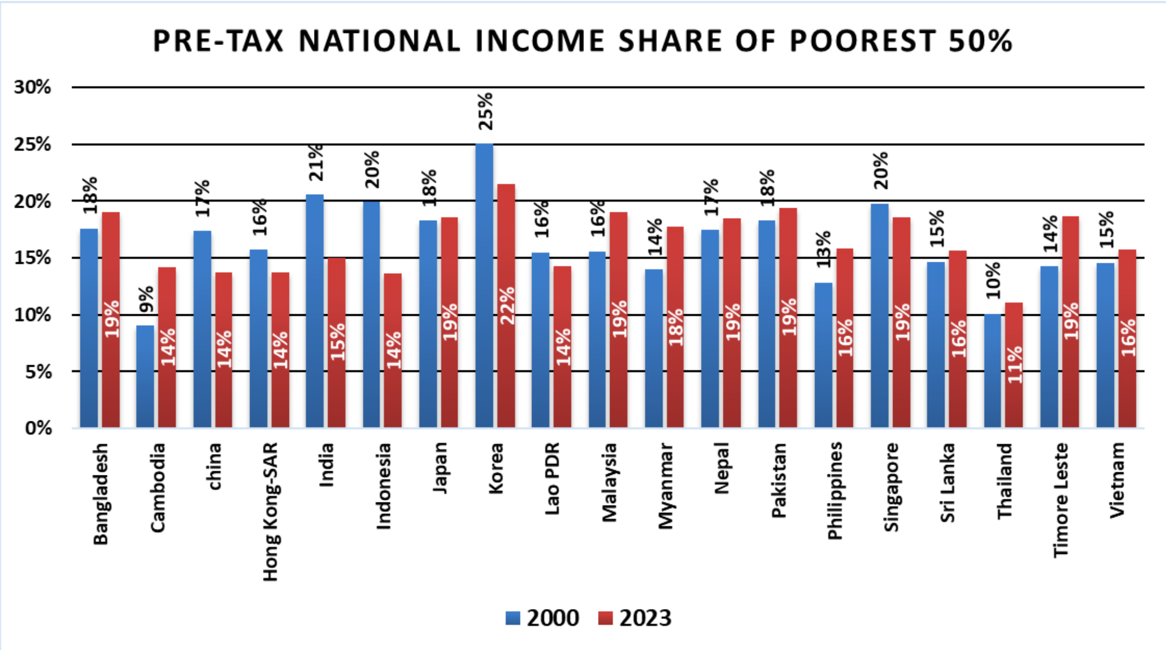
As of 2019–2025, 56% of the global poor were found in South and East Asia, especially when using poverty lines relative to each country's income.[11]

The income share of the poorest 50% of the population has not changed much in countries where the income of the top 1% continues to rise, demonstrating that economic growth without inclusive mechanisms tends to benefit those who are already rich.

The income share of the poorest 50% has declined in almost all countries shown in Figure 4 below, except Bangladesh, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam. The increase in these countries is also minimal, around 1%, except in Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Timor-Leste, where it has increased by 5%, 3%, 4%, 3% and 5% respectively over the last 23 years.

Meanwhile, the reduction in the income share of the poorest 50% is significant in China, India, Indonesia and Korea—by 3%, 6%, 6% and 3% respectively.

Figure 4: Pre-tax national income share of poorest 50%



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The figures below show that gains for the bottom 50% have occurred in Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam – the same countries that have, to some extent, also reduced the share of the top 1%. Conversely, a reduction in the income share of the bottom 50% has taken place in China, India, Indonesia and Korea, where the top 1% have made gains. These is a clear correlation between the rising income share of the top 1% and the reduced share of the poorest 50%.

Figure 5: Change in the share of poorest 50%

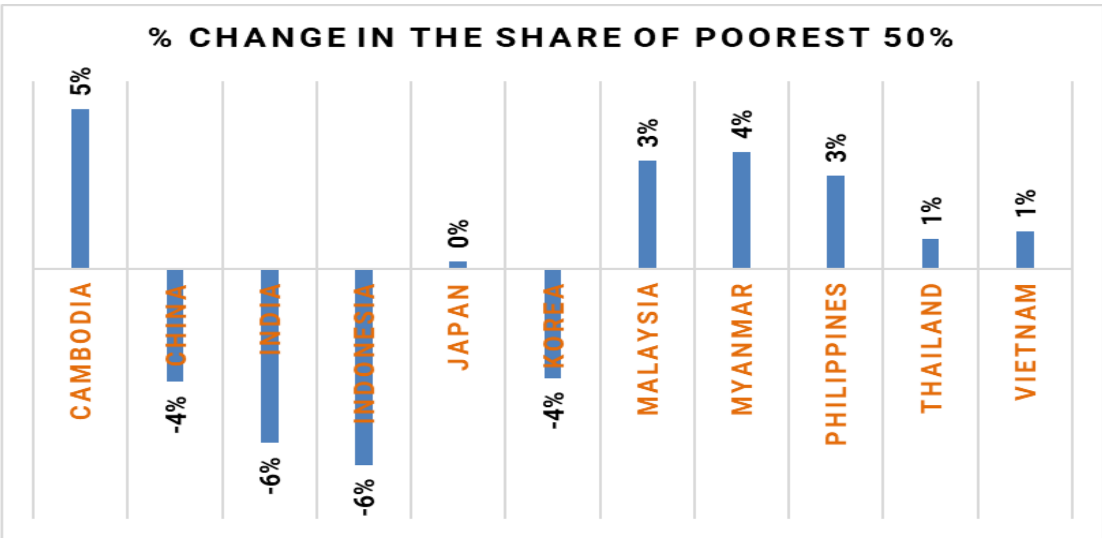
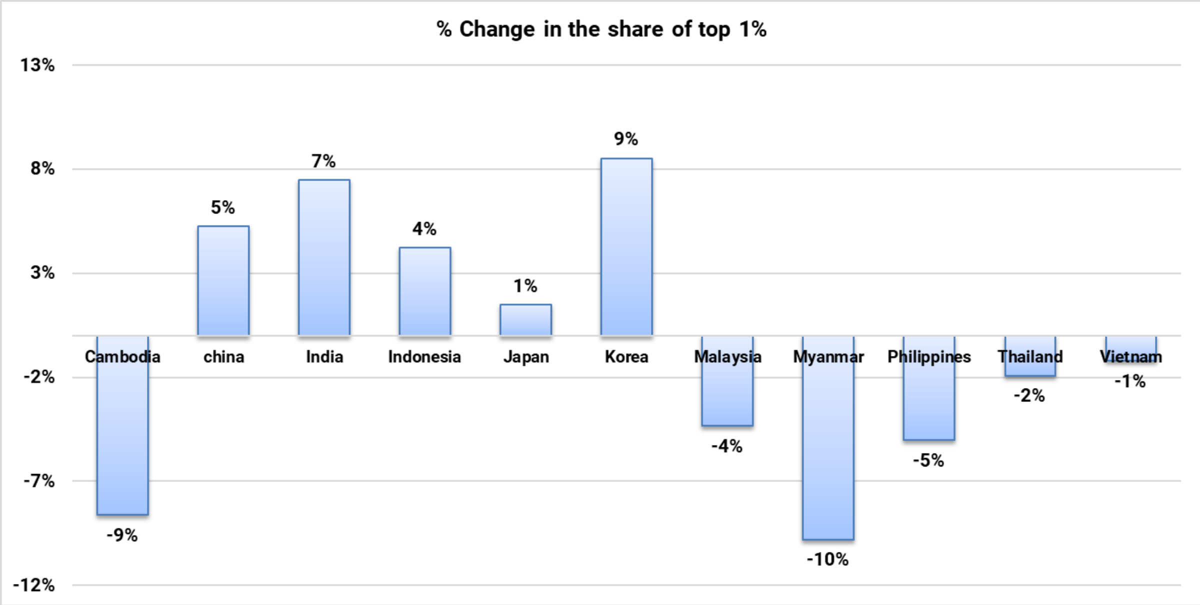


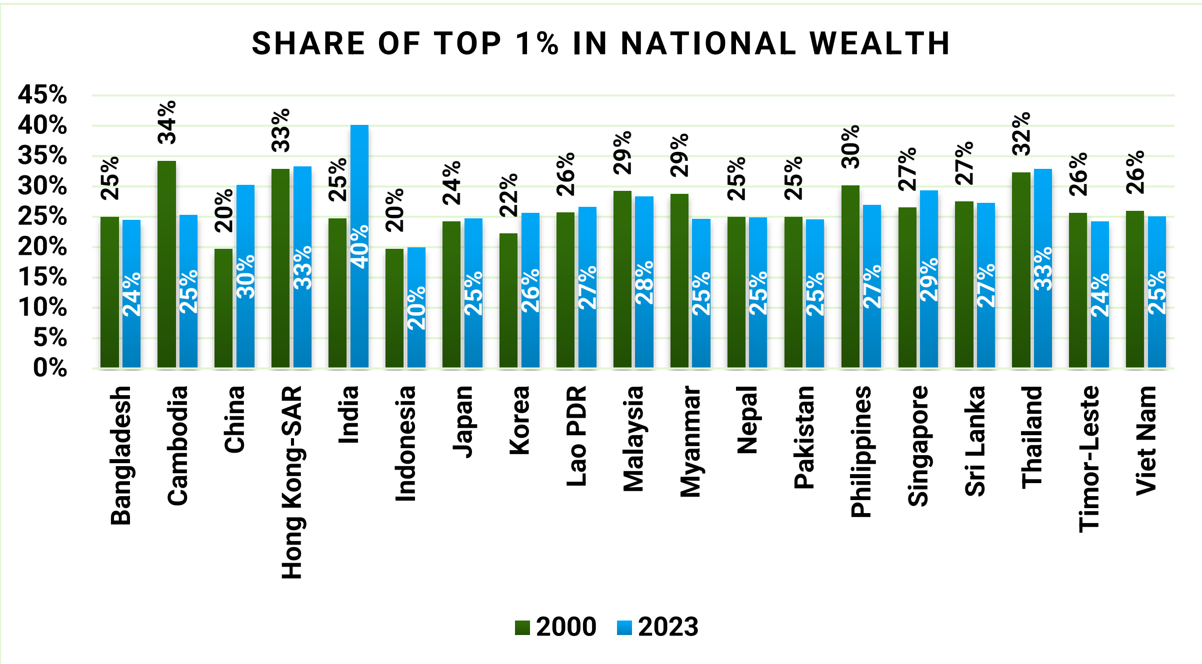
Figure 6: Change in the share of top 1%



1.2 WEALTH INEQUALITY[12]

Income disparities in the region have translated directly into wealth inequalities, with asset ownership (property, shares, businesses) even more concentrated than income.[13] while the wealth Gini stands much higher at about 0.72, reflecting the parallel boom in billionaire wealth. [14,15]

Figure 7: Share of top 1% in national wealth



With the richest 1% controlling 35–45% of wealth in countries like the Maldives, Myanmar, India and China.[16] The regional average for Asia is higher than most of Europe and comparable to – or even more pronounced than – North America in terms of top wealth concentration. Itis worth mentioning that official gini coefficients are too low- firstly because everywhere in the world they underestimate top incomes, secondly in Asia because they are consumption based and not income based. - income based estimates are far higher.

Figure 8: Share of poorest 50% in national wealth

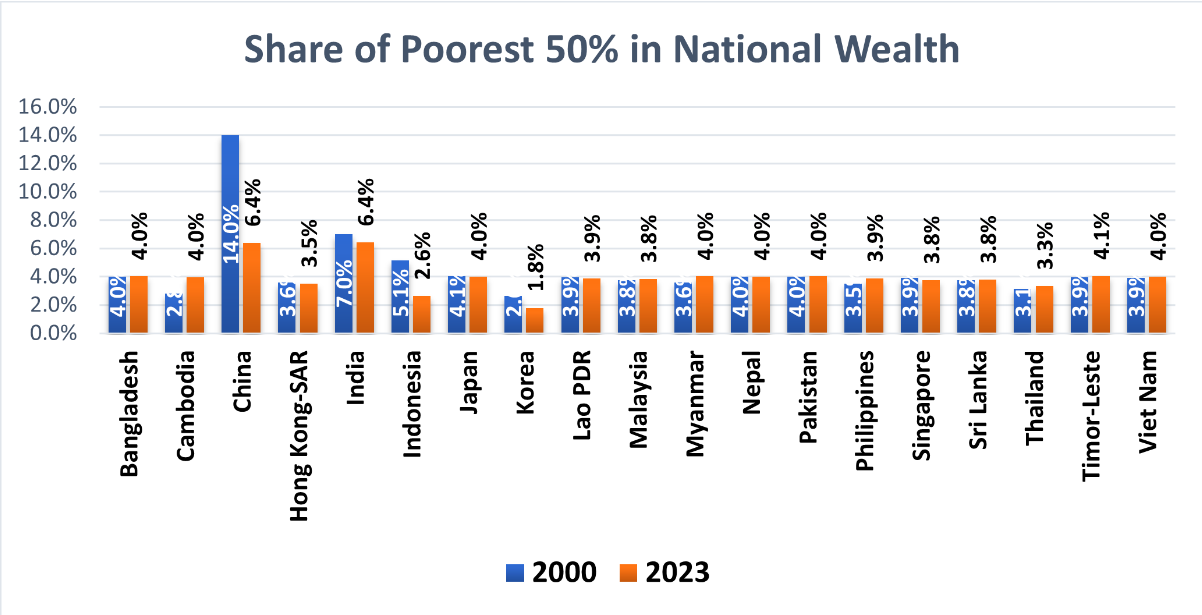
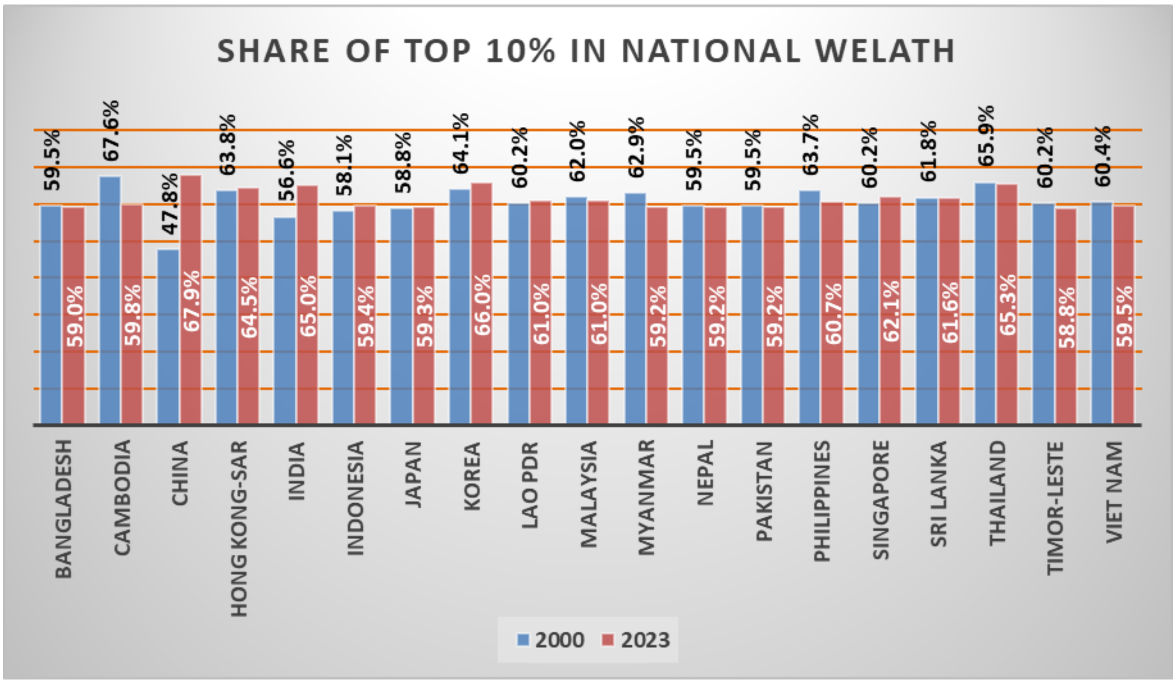


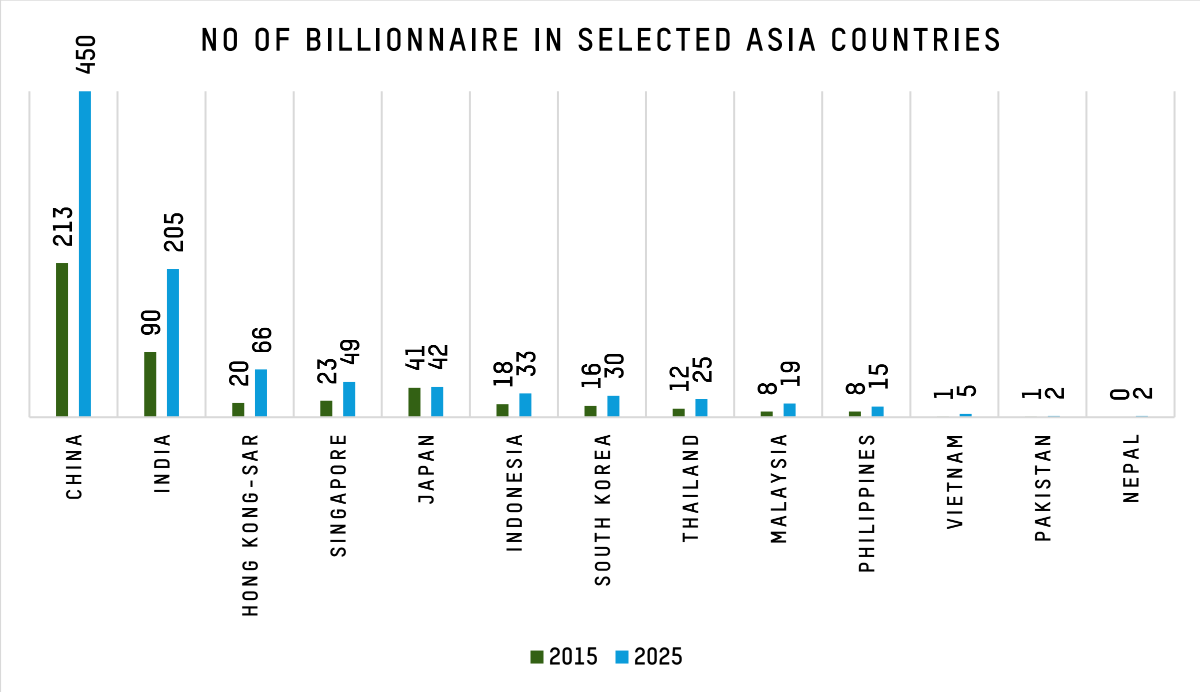
Figure 9: Share of top 10% in national wealth



Asian billionaires have seen their numbers, net worth and influence grow sharply, with their collective fortunes now representing a massive share of national and regional wealth.

1.2.1 Billionaires' Growing Wealth at the Expense of the Poor

Figure 10: Rising number of billionaires and their wealth in Asia, 2015 vs. 2025[17]



The total wealth of Asian billionaires has surged by well over 120% in the last decade, from about US$1.5–2 trillion in 2015 to US$3.4–4 trillion in 2025.[18] In the same period, the number of billionaires in Asia's leading countries has more than doubled – even as wealth remains highly concentrated in the Global North – highlighting the region's key role in global wealth despite intensifying concerns over inequality and elite power. Since 2015, China has tripled its billionaire count with over 300 new billionaires,[19] while the total number of billionaires in India has now crossed 350, six times more than 13 years ago.[20] Other East and Southeast Asian countries have seen smaller yet significant growth. In a reflection of both the billionaire surge and persistent inequality, Indonesia's richest four people now own more than the poorest 100 million citizens[21], while the combined wealth of Asia's richest 10 billionaires surpass the annual GDP of several poorer Asian nations.[22]

Incidentally, Asian women hold only 14% of regional wealth, and only one in 10 billionaires in China and India are women.[23] Gender gaps persist in wealth, income, asset ownership and business leadership.[24]

THE WIDENING INEQUALITY WITHIN ASEAN ECONOMIES

As a region of ten strong and rapidly growing economies, ASEAN plays a significant role in devising and implementing inclusive development policies. ASEAN is the third largest region in the world, with a collective population of 676.6 million people in 2023.[25] That year, ASEAN's economy reached a nominal GDP of US$3.8 trillion, positioning it as the fifth largest in the world and the third largest in Asia. Its policies therefore have a wide-ranging influence on other Asian countries.

ASEAN as a regional body, as well as leaders from different ASEAN countries, has committed to address the rising rich–poor divide. Similarly, leaders from many countries made commitments to work towards reducing inequalities. The below matrix summarizes a few of these promises.

Table 2: Statements on inequality from ASEAN leaders

COUNTRY	LEADER	STATEMENT
INDONESIA	President Joko Jokowi Widodo	'Reducing inequality is crucial in the era of globalization as it can trigger negative impacts from globalization.'[26]
	President Prabowo Subianto	'For the past 30 years, we have seen neoliberal and free-market thinking dominate. Many elites in Indonesia followed this approach, but it has failed to give fair opportunities for everyone.'[27]
THAILAND	Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra	'Besides the splendour, we are fully aware that much work remains to be done for the government to address our country's challenges and improve the well-being of our people, be it tackling economic inequality, disparities in opportunity, or ensuring the safety for all citizens in every dimension.'[28]
PHILIPPINES	President Rodrigo Duterte	'President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines urged on Tuesday all United Nations Member States to reverse course on inequality, saying the issue will define humanity's future.'[29]
VIETNAM	General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong	'We need a society in which development is truly for humans, not for exploitation and dehumanization for the sake of profit. We need economic development accompanied by social progress and equality, not an increase in the gap between the rich and the poor or greater social inequity.'[30]
MALAYSIA	Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim	'The stark reality is that there is gross inequality in Malaysia due to gross injustice, marginalisation, and neglect that we create within our societies.'[31]

These commitments align with the vision of the ASEAN Economic Community and the shifting public desire for fairer distribution of the benefits of economic growth. ASEAN countries have made strides in the last two decades to bridge the rich–poor divide, but not all countries have made equal efforts, and their progress is still uneven.

INCOME SHARE OF THE POOREST 50%

The poorest 50% of the population in many ASEAN countries continues to face economic struggle. In 2000, their share of pre-tax national income was already low, and by 2023, most countries show only a tiny improvement, or further reductions. Cambodia's rise from 9% to 14% reflects limited progress from a low base, while Indonesia's fall from 20% to 13.7% demonstrates that economic growth will not automatically translate into equality without proactive government measures.

Table 3: Pre-tax national income share of poorest 50%

Country	2000	2023	change
Cambodia	9.1%	14.2%	5%
Indonesia	20.0%	13.7%	-6%
Lao PDR	15.5%	14.2%	-1%
Malaysia	15.6%	19.1%	3%
Myanmar	14.0%	17.7%	4%
Philippines	12.9%	15.9%	3%
Singapore	19.8%	18.5%	-1%
Thailand	10.1%	11.1%	1%
Vietnam	14.6%	15.8%	1%

Table 4: Pre-tax national income share of top 1%

Country	2000	2023	change
Cambodia	26.7%	18.1%	-9%
Indonesia	13.4%	17.6%	4%
Lao PDR	18.3%	19.4%	1%
Malaysia	18.9%	14.6%	-4%
Myanmar	26.1%	16.3%	-10%
Philippines	21.4%	16.3%	-5%
Singapore	12.8%	13.8%	1%
Thailand	21.7%	19.7%	-2%
Vietnam	16.7%	15.5%	-1%

The information in the tables above shows that in almost all countries except Indonesia, the top 1%'s share of national income is declining. However, the fall is negligible everywhere but Cambodia, Myanmar and the Philippines, where the reduction is 9%, 10% and 5% respectively, though data from Myanmar could not be verified. Regardless, this decline in the top 1%'s share of national income has not totally translated into an increase in the share of the poorest 50%, therefore poverty remains a challenge in these countries.

Table 5: Pre-tax national income share of top 10%

Country	2000	2023	change
Cambodia	55.5%	45.2%	-10%
Indonesia	42.1%	46.2%	4%
Lao PDR	45.6%	47.6%	2%
Malaysia	43.2%	39.4%	-4%
Myanmar	50.4%	42.0%	-8%
Philippines	47.9%	44.6%	-3%
Singapore	42.3%	45.2%	3%
Thailand	55.3%	52.1%	-3%
Vietnam	47.7%	43.2%	-5%

The top decile captures nearly half of income in almost all nine countries, highlighting how the benefit of growth is disproportionately skewed towards the rich.

Indonesia, Singapore and Lao PDR show a rise in the income share of the top 10% over the last 23 years, while Cambodia and Malaysia show a decline – proving that targeted intervention can yield results.

The broader pattern is clear: economic gains will not trickle down unless governments act decisively to implement stronger taxation, investment in public services, financial transparency and labour protections. Without this, the top 1% and 10% will continue to control the rules of the game, undermining both democracy and social mobility.

WEALTH INEQUALITY

In many of ASEAN's growing countries, billionaires are booming year on year, with an ever-greater concentration of wealth. For example, 33 billionaires together have a net worth almost equal to Indonesia – ASEAN's largest country with a population of 35 million people. Similarly, 19, 15 and 25 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.7 million, 13.7 million and 12.5 million people in Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand respectively. In Singapore, 49 billionaires have a higher net worth than 1.7 million people (28% of the population).

Table 6: Billionaires in select ASEAN countries

Country	No. of billionaires	Net worth (US$ Billion)	Estimated GDP in 2025	Estimated population in 2025	Billionaires' net worth equivalents (in millions of people)
Indonesia	33	173.40	1432.8	286.6	35
Malaysia	19	57.3	414.1	34.2	4.7
The Philippines	15	53.7	456.9	116.8	13.7
Singapore	49	145.2	523.9	6.1	1.7
Thailand	25	93.5	538.1	71.6	12.5
Vietnam	5	14.7	448.8	101.6	3.3

The number of billionaires and their net worth has been taken from the Forbes list[32]; the rest has been calculated by author from ASEAN statistics.

These are stark realities that show economic growth is giving undue benefit to the richest, which only strong public policies around redistribution can remedy.

SHARE OF THE BOTTOM 50% IN NATIONAL WEALTH

The data shows that ASEAN's poorest 50% continue to receive a negligible share of national wealth, with the majority of countries seeing only minimal progress over the last two decades. Cambodia's rise from 2.8% to 4.0% is significant, but again, it is starting from a very low baseline. Meanwhile, Indonesia's sharp decline from 5.1% to 2.6% reveals a deepening inequality. Across Malaysia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam, the figures have hardly moved, underscoring how wealth accumulation remains confined to a tiny elite.

Table 7: Share of bottom 50% in national wealth

Country	2000	2023	change
Cambodia	34.2%	25.3%	▼ -9%
Indonesia	19.7%	20.0%	▲ 0.3%
Lao PDR	25.7%	26.6%	▲ 1%
Malaysia	29.2%	28.3%	▲ -1%
Myanmar	28.8%	24.6%	▬ -4%
Philippines	30.2%	27.0%	▬ -3%
Singapore	26.5%	29.3%	▲ 3%
Thailand	32.3%	32.9%	▲ 1%
Viet Nam	26.0%	25.0%	▲ -1%

Table 8: Share of top 1% in national wealth

Country	2000	2023	change
Cambodia	2.8%	4.0%	▲ 1.2%
Indonesia	5.1%	2.6%	▼ -2.5%
Lao PDR	3.9%	3.9%	▬ -0.1%
Malaysia	3.8%	3.8%	▲ 0.1%
Myanmar	3.6%	4.0%	▲ 0.4%
Philippines	3.5%	3.9%	▲ 0.4%
Singapore	3.9%	3.8%	▬ -0.2%
Thailand	3.1%	3.3%	▲ 0.2%
Viet Nam	3.9%	4.0%	▲ 0.1%

SHARE OF THE TOP 1% IN NATIONAL WEALTH

The concentration of wealth among ASEAN's elite is a pressing concern. In 2023, the top 1% still controlled between 25–33% of total wealth in many countries. While some declines have occurred, such as in Cambodia (a 9% drop), Singapore and Thailand show upward trends – their wealthiest continue to grow richer. This divergence underscores a regional paradox: the same globalization that drives prosperity also engrains inequality. Yet the modest declines in Cambodia, Malaysia and Vietnam hint at the potential of policy actions to make a dent.

1.3 POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

Figure 11: Billionaire Wealth and Poverty in Major Asian Economies, 2015 vs. 2025[33]

The graph underscores the widening wealth inequality in Asia—while billionaires' fortunes have surged dramatically, poverty reduction has been uneven, and large segments of populations in India, Indonesia and the Philippines continue to face significant poverty.

Poverty rates have generally declined but at different paces. China shows impressive poverty reduction from 7.0% to 3.5%, consistent with its sustained economic growth and social policies. India's poverty rate halved from 21.9% to 12.0%. Indonesia and the Philippines made modest improvements, with poverty rates decreasing but still relatively high (Indonesia from 10.9% to 9.3% and the Philippines from 23.5% to 18.3%). %). In the case of Philippines, economists have pointed out that the standard Family Income and Expenditure Survey tend to discount household wealth, demographic inequalities such as gender-based inequalities and often misses the wealthiest households. However, official statistics have been contested by the economists including the insight from Balisacan (2020) is that historically, Philippine growth has not resulted in a significant impact on poverty reduction. To quote Balisacan: "The high levels of economic inequality weaken the link between economic growth and the pace of poverty reduction[34].

However, as of 2024, about 18.9% of the population remains in poverty in developing Asia, living on less than US$3.65 a day.[35] At the higher vulnerability threshold of US$4.20 per day, over half a billion people in Asia remain poor or at risk of poverty, even as wealth among the richest has surged.[36]

In June 2025, the World Bank updated its global poverty line to US$3.00 per person per day (2021 purchasing power parity), up from US$2.15.[37] Using this new standard, while other Asian regions reported higher poverty levels compared to previous years, South Asia saw a technical poverty decline from 9.7% to 7.3% in 2025, largely due to revised data from India. However, this readjustment has faced methodological criticism from economists. Meanwhile, Pakistan's poverty rate is projected to remain high at 42.4%, with 1.9 million more people falling into poverty in 2025, concentrated mainly in rural and agriculturally dependent areas affected by climate shocks and economic stagnation.[38]

Across Asia we also see increasing urban–rural divides and regional imbalances, with metropolitan elites far richer than their rural and peri-urban counterparts. Rural areas and less developed provinces—such as eastern India, western China, rural Bangladesh, and remote Indonesian islands—continue to have the highest poverty rates.[39]

1.4 GENDER INEQUALITY

Women represent two thirds of the poor in Asia. Economic insecurity is part of a cycle of disadvantage for women, often caused by discrimination in employment and education .[40] This is in part attributed to disparities in health, education and employment. In 2022, men over 25 in Asia-Pacific economies spent on average 0.3 years more in education than women, a gap that is significantly wider in India (1.06 years) and Nepal (1.2 years). Women in Asia perform two to four times more unpaid care work than men,[41] a burden intensified during the pandemic when millions were pushed out of formal employment.[42] Through their labour and time, women subsidize the market economy and yet are left behind.

Advancing women's equality in the countries of Asia-Pacific could add US$4.5 trillion to their collective GDP annually in 2025, a 12% increase over a business-as-usual GDP trajectory.[43] Asia-Pacific nations have made progress in the past decade, driven by a combination of economic development, government measures, technological change, market forces and activism. Maternal mortality and gender gaps in education have declined in countries including Bangladesh, Cambodia, India and Nepal.

The Philippines stands out for its progress towards gender equality in work, followed by New Zealand and Singapore, while Bangladesh, India, Japan, Nepal, Pakistan and South Korea are furthest from gender parity in work. However, employment rate data from Philippines, shows that female employment consistently lags male employment, with women comprising only about 30-34% of the adult workforce, compared to 44-48% for men. The lower labor force participation among women suggests that a significant portion of the female population is either engaged in unpaid work or working in informal sectors not captured by the Labour Force Survey. Many countries have increased women's labour-force participation, but participation has fallen in Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka, a trend that may be linked to rising household income. In Asia-Pacific, there is only one woman in leadership positions for every four men.[44]

Gender inequality in Asia also intersects with the climate crisis and the digital divide, as explored in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 2: CLIMATE CRISIS AND VULNERABILITY IN ASIA

Asia faces two interlinked crises: widening inequality and a deepening climate emergency. Inequality precipitates climate breakdown as – without restraint – the wealthiest countries and individuals drive up emissions through their polluting consumption and investments.[45]

Asia contributes nearly half of global greenhouse gas emissions.[46] This is unsurprising as under the current neoliberal economic order, high-emitting manufacturing has simply been outsourced to countries in the Global South, while hyper-consumption is maintained in the Global North. A globally connected elite that is profiteering off the planet has risen as a result.

Beyond emissions, Asia is at the frontline of the global climate crisis, facing unprecedented environmental challenges that disproportionately affect its most vulnerable populations.[47] The World Meteorological Organization (2024) terms Asia the 'most disaster-hit region' from weather- and water-related hazards. The regions hosts five of the world's most climate-vulnerable nations – Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – with more than 500 million people exposed to red-zone climate risks such as flooding, drought and extreme heat.[48] Over the past decade (2014–2025), Asia has seen a rise in the frequency and intensity of disasters, with a total of 1,862 recorded events. Floods emerged as the single most frequent type of disaster, accounting for nearly half of all events across the continent.[49] Asia is warming nearly twice as fast as the global average, driving more frequent extreme weather and posing serious threats to lives, ecosystems and economies.[50] This exposure is compounded by rapid urbanization, environmental degradation and population density in climatically sensitive areas.[51]

The twin crises of inequality and climate breakdown are killing people and suffocating communities. Over 1.2 billion people in Asia were affected by disasters in the last decade (2014–2025) with 211 million of those in China. Out of the total number of affected people, over 150,000 lives were lost.[52] These deaths were most likely people from lower-income groups owing to their reduced capacity to withstand shocks.

The crisis is global and caused by the rich. Half of the world's emissions come from the richest 10% of people. The wealthiest 1% by income account for 16% of emissions – more than the poorest 66% of people in the world.[53] While those who lack resources cannot escape,[54] the rich can avoid the worst consequences of climate change. They are more mobile and can afford safer housing, insurance and healthcare, meaning they face far fewer casualties and damages are easier to repair.

At the other end of the spectrum, low-income populations are particularly susceptible to environmental shocks and gradual climate impacts, exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities.[55] These populations have limited resources for recovery due to historical exclusion and insufficient investment in adaptation measures.

The rich continue to emit carbon while low-income groups face these climate-induced losses. Table 1 shows the share of emissions and the CO2 emissions per person per year by income groups.

A person with an average income in East Asia and the Pacific emits 6.2 tons of carbon in a year. In this region, we see that someone from the top 0.1% emits 42 times more than an average person and 150 times more than someone from poorest 50% of people. We also see that someone from the richest 1% emits 12 times more than an average person and 44 times more than someone from poorest 50% of people.

A person with an average income in South Asia emits 1.4 tons of carbon in a year. In South Asia someone from the top 0.1% emits 70 times more than an average person and 203 times more than someone from the poorest 50% of people. We also observe that someone from the richest 1% emits 17 times more than an average person and 50 times more than someone from the poorest 50% of people.

Table 1: Share of CO2 emissions per capita and by income group

	East Asia and the Pacific		South Asia	
Income Group	Share of CO2 emissions (2022)	Per capita emissions in tons (2022)	Share of CO2 emissions (2022)	Per capita emissions in tons (2022)
Bottom 50	14%	1.7	16%	0.5
Middle 40	45%	6.2	30%	1.4
Top 10	41%	25	54%	7
Top 1	13%	77	26%	25
Top 0.1	5%	263	11%	102

Source: Oxfam and Stockholm Environment Institute, 2025

Despite their negligible emissions, low-income, rural, Indigenous and coastal communities are bearing the brunt of climate change through increased frequency and intensity of crop failures, flash floods, rising sea levels and water scarcity. Indigenous communities are among the most vulnerable to environmental and climatic changes due to their deep physical and spiritual connections with land, water and ecosystems,[56] and the fact that the average poverty rate of Asia's Indigenous peoples is three times higher than the Asian average while education, health and other social conditions are also much worse.[57]

Communities reliant on climate-sensitive sectors—agriculture, forestry and fisheries—also face heightened risks due to their work, living conditions and dependence on natural resources. Climate change’s impact on the health of vulnerable groups affects their ability to work and type of work, which limits their opportunities and risks perpetuating or further increasing the cycle of economic inequality.[58] For instance, heat impacts certain groups like construction workers, transport drivers, farmers and fishers disproportionately, with McKinsey projecting India could lose 30% of annual daylight working hours to heat stress, threatening livelihoods and food security.[59]

Crop yields will also suffer severely due to climate change, with India most vulnerable due to climate and crop patterns. While this is expected to result in higher food prices for consumers globally, low-income consumers are particularly at risk.[60] Crop losses and hunger caused by the emissions of the richest people will worsen an already unsustainable and unjust situation and further swell the ranks of those experiencing poverty and precarity.[61]

2.1 GENDER AND CLIMATE

Women are overrepresented among people living in poverty and in informal employment, face barriers to decision-making, experience disproportionate mobility challenges, are less likely to own productive assets and face unequal access to resources.[62] As a result of these factors, women are disproportionately affected by climate shocks and stresses such as heat, floods and displacement, with severe impacts on health, nutrition and livelihoods. For instance, in Bangladesh, 89% of women in flood-hit areas faced food insecurity, and 91% suffered malnutrition.

Social norms dictate that women gather food, collect water and fetch fuel for cooking and heating. The time and labour spent on these tasks is increasing as climate change diminishes the availability and quality of these resources, while climate events like floods, droughts, aridity and rising temperatures are directly linked to child marriage rates and adolescent births.[63]

2.2 ECONOMIC LOSSES

From 2011 to 2020, flood damage in Asia regularly exceeded US$30bn a year.[64] These damages also seem to be increasing each year – Asia saw around US$48.75bn in damages in 2022 from disasters and US$65bn in 2023.[65] These damages have a direct impact on people's incomes as well as government funds available for investments like public services and social protection.

Climate-induced disasters will lead to greater inequality between countries. Under high-emission scenarios, East Asian cities are projected to incur very high losses due to increased flooding risks.[66] As a result of the economic damage they accrue, countries in South Asia will lose 3.0% of their cumulative GDP by 2050 while South-East Asia will lose 2.4%.[67] This illustrates a profound injustice: countries with a large share of the world's super-rich 1% are made yet richer, while countries with a large share of the world's poorest 50%, who have done little to contribute to the climate crisis, are made yet poorer. [68]

2.3 CLEAN ENERGY: A PRIVILEGE

There are clear global inequities in financing clean energy. In 2024, high-income countries accounted for roughly 50% of global clean energy investment and China for 29%, while South-East Asia received just 2%. Furthermore, it is important to note that South-East Asia and the Pacific – particularly Indonesia and the Philippines – account for more than 55% of global nickel production.[69] These countries are resourcing the move towards clean energy, but the region at large is not seeing the benefits.

Inequitable access to energy resources and infrastructure, such as fossil fuels and electricity grids, can influence the capacities of countries, communities and individuals to transition to clean energy. Income inequalities also serve as a barrier, with financial support often marginalizing smaller projects and exacerbating existing inequalities. Clean energy initiatives emerging in urban areas, such as switching to electric vehicles and installing solar panels, are dependent on individuals' financial capacity, social position and living arrangements. These low-carbon technologies in turn reduce wealthier households' energy consumption costs and further exacerbate economic inequality.[70]

Higher-income individuals also have better access to and consume larger amounts of electricity, and can afford air conditioning, meaning they are more able to adapt to climate change.

Meanwhile, the people and groups most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, including natural disasters and rising sea levels, have the poorest access to and capacity for participation in adaptation and mitigation initiatives.[71] Vulnerable groups will also be disproportionately affected by government policies such as taxation on fuel and compulsory requirements for energy-efficient devices.[72] The existing approach primarily focuses on countries' aggregate emissions estimates, neglecting their level of development and the distribution of emissions and carbon tax offsets across different income groups within the national borders.[73]

2.4 CLIMATE FINANCE IS WORSENING INEQUITIES

Asia's mitigation and adaptation requirements vastly exceed what is currently being invested[74] – US$333bn/year compared to a need of US$1.1 trillion/year .[75] According to another estimate, the Asia-Pacific region needs US$102–US$431bn/year for adaptation during 2023–2030, yet only around US$34bn was committed in 2022.[76] Despite a growing pool of climate funds globally, adaptation finance covers less than half the estimated needs in Asia, particularly for frontline populations,[77] with only around 8% of climate finance in Asia and the Pacific going to adaptation.[78]

Although Asian governments and international organizations promote green recovery plans and climate finance initiatives, equity remains insufficiently prioritized. There is a growing 'climate debt' borne almost entirely by those who did least to cause the problem. According to Oxfam's Climate Finance Shadow Report 2023**,** many adaptation projects by ADB are overstated and much of the finance comes as loans rather than grants, increasing debt burdens for the most vulnerable countries.[79] In 2022, the lowest-income countries in Asia (Bangladesh, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Timor-Leste, Nepal and Afghanistan) paid around US$12bn in debt repayments and received US$7bn in climate finance. Thus, net loss (or debt load) outweighs the benefits.[80]

CHAPTER 3: DIGITAL DIVIDES-INEQUALITY ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Asia's digital transformation is impacting economies, livelihoods and social life at record speed. Yet access to digital technologies and opportunities remains uneven across the region. Urban elites enjoy the benefits of high-speed broadband and advanced technology, but millions—especially in rural areas, informal settlements, and among marginalized and vulnerable groups—remain fully or partially excluded. These growing digital divides threaten to reinforce old social hierarchies and create new forms of inequality.[81]

3.1 THE REALITY OF DIGITAL DIVIDES[82]

In 2024, 5.5 billion people were online, representing 68% of the world population, while 2.6 billion people, 32% of the global population, remained offline. In Asia-Pacific, 66% of the population was online, in line with the global average.[83]

Income is a decisive factor – globally, 93% of people use the internet in high-income countries compared to 27% in low-income countries. Beyond income-related limitations, reasons for being offline also include capacity (knowledge and skill) and lack of adequate free time. A 2024 study that surveyed six countries – including Cambodia and Bangladesh – identified three common reasons for being offline in the two Asian countries: cost and adequacy of the device; cost of the data; and lack of time to use and learn.[84]

Data indicate that the digital divides also reflect geography and social status. Globally, urban dwellers are up to twice as likely to use the internet as rural residents. In Asia-Pacific, the figure stands at 83% of the urban population compared to 49% of the rural population.[85] The urban–rural gap is smaller in high-income countries and significantly wider in low-income countries, with 46% of low-income urban populations using the internet compared to just 16% of low-income rural populations.[86] Asia also stands out for its generational gap – the ratio of young internet users (15-24) to the rest of the population – which is higher than the global average. In Asia, 81% of young people are internet users, compared to 66% of the rest of the population.[87]

The ICT Development Index (IDI) 2025 measures the universality and meaningfulness of connectivity across countries and regions. For Asia-Pacific the scores range widely—from 98 (out of a possible 100) in the best-performing country to 36 in the lowest.[88] Globally, the IDI shows the largest gaps in fixed broadband affordability, with high-income economies scoring 90 compared to 23 for low-income countries, followed by disparities in internet usage (96 vs. 28). However, mobile coverage gaps are smaller (99 vs. 65).

As well as affordability, speed also determines whether one can truly participate economically and socially in increasingly digitalized economies and societies.[89] Data shows wide variations across Asia. In 2025, South Korea recorded an average speed of 173 Mbps, higher than the USA (162 Mbps) and Canada (152 Mbps). Japan (140 Mbps), Taiwan (137 Mbps), Malaysia (82.5 Mbps), Thailand (67.8 Mbps) and India (65.5 Mbps) also report relatively high internet speeds, in sharp contrast to Afghanistan (3.11 Mbps) and Pakistan (7.85 Mbps), which rank among the lowest in the world.[90]

In 2023, Denmark led the world in mobile network reliability with a score of 934 on a 100–1000 scale, followed closely by Japan and South Korea.[91] In South East Asia, Singapore topped the rankings with 867 points, ahead of Thailand (841) and Indonesia (831), while Malaysia and the Philippines fell below 800. In South Asia, India scored 830, compared to Bangladesh (663) and Pakistan (636).

Asia has also strong variances when it comes to mobile connectivity, again reflecting income disparities among Asian countries. The GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index measures performance against key enablers of mobile internet adoption: infrastructure, affordability, consumer readiness, and content and services.[92] Singapore has the highest score in the world (93.4), while Afghanistan has the fourth lowest in the world (26.8). In South-East Asia, Timor-Leste ranks the lowest (47.9) with Malaysia (80.3) scoring the second highest after Singapore. In South Asia, the highest-scoring country is India (69.2) with Nepal scoring the second lowest (53.1) after Afghanistan.

3.2 GENDER AND MEANINGFUL CONNECTIVITY

As with internet use, gender parity across Asia is correlated with income levels. None of the countries in Asia categorized by the ITU as Least Developed Countries (LDCs) have achieved gender parity; in fact, among LDCs gender parity has decreased from 0.74 in 2019 to 0.70 in 2024.[93] However, the Asia-Pacific region overall is showing some progress on gender parity – the score has improved from 0.89 in 2019 to 0.95 in 2024. In terms of the gender digital divide, the gap is 3%, with 67% of men and 64% of women using the internet in Asia-Pacific.[94]

Out of the 885 million women in low- and middle-income countries who are still not using mobile internet, 330 million live in South Asia.[95] The region also reports the highest number of women who do not own a smartphone, at 365 million, with a gender gap of 40% – driven primarily by India. South Asia, which is home to 170.6 million adolescent girls, also records the world's largest gender gap in internet usage among young people aged 15–24, with 40% of young women using the internet compared to 67% of young men—a disparity of 27%.[96]

Literacy and digital skills are reported as the top barrier for South Asia's mobile internet adoption, with affordability also playing a key role for two other South-East Asian countries (Indonesia and the Philippines).[97] Safety and security concerns also continue to be a barrier, with technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) disproportionately affecting women, girls, and people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities.[98] When it comes to adolescent girls, the risk of TFGBV—including cyberbullying, harassment and online abuse—can discourage participation in online spaces.[99]

Access to the internet is not simply a matter of being able to be online. Meaningful connectivity is defined as having daily internet use with 4G-like speeds, owning a smartphone, and having an unlimited access point at home, work or a place of study. A 2024 study of Cambodia and Bangladesh highlights how gendered barriers continue to affect women's access to meaningful connectivity, such as limited time due to paid and unpaid care work, high costs of devices and data, and dependence on male family members to use devices. Geography also matters, as rural women are three times more likely to lack internet access compared to their urban counterparts.[100]

While digital transformation is creating demand for high-paying jobs in sectors such as tech, AI and fintech, these opportunities are largely captured by men from higher-income backgrounds. Thus, entrenched digital divides risk leaving women and lower-income groups systematically and structurally excluded from the digital economy. According to the World Economic Forum, advances in technology are expected to shape labour markets in Asia, and by 2030 as many as 80% of jobs in South-East Asia will require basic digital literacy and applied ICT skills. Globally, 86% of employers are expecting AI and information processing technologies to transform their business by 2030.[101]

Despite this outlook, across Southeast Asia the share of women in technology ranges from 34% to 40%.[102] In South Asia, the issue is more structural – as women are 31% less likely to use mobile internet, their ability to access employment opportunities in the growing digital economy is limited.[103]

3.3 THE IMPACT OF INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

A clear link has been observed between internet shutdowns – a complete or partial disruption of connectivity – and inequality.[104] Though often justified as measures to curb unrest or disinformation, shutdowns not only weaken civil society, encourage impunity and restrict human rights,[105] but also generate heavy financial losses, halt e-commerce, disrupt transactions and undermine business trust.[106] Shutdowns are reportedly more common in countries that have lower per capita incomes on average, and are associated with adverse changes in economic outcomes, such as an increased unemployment rate.[107] When taking these factors into account, the 2023 internet shutdown in Pakistan reportedly cost the country more than US$17m.[108]

The economic shocks triggered by internet shutdowns have long-lasting consequences. They worsen pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities and impact low-income populations asymmetrically. For example, in India, internet shutdowns have blocked access to welfare benefits like food rations and wage transfers, deepening poverty.[109] Shutdowns also curtail education, healthcare and support services, particularly for women and girls,[110] and erode accountability and human rights, undermining social and cultural entitlements essential for inclusive development and democratic participation.

Countries in the Asia-Pacific region imposed the most shutdowns in 2024, with a total of 202 internet shutdowns in 11 countries. This was the highest number of internet shutdowns ever recorded in a single year for the region.[111]

3.4 TRENDS AND NATIONAL INITIATIVES

Across Asia, governments have been slow to deliver truly equitable digital infrastructure, with investments often prioritizing urban centres or flagship ‘smart city’ projects while rural broadband and access to affordable devices lag behind.[112] At the same time, the absence of disaggregated data – by gender, region and income – makes it harder to hold leaders accountable or design targeted interventions.[113]

Emerging technologies can both provide solutions and reinforce structural inequalities. Artificial intelligence (AI) is hailed as transformative, yet its benefits are accompanied by hidden costs. AI systems demand vast energy, water and hardware resources, producing emissions and e-waste that strain local environments,[114] with marginalized communities bearing disproportionate burdens. Equally concerning is the human labour underpinning AI—content moderation and data annotation concentrated in low-income countries under weak protections.

This is exemplified by 'AI sweatshops' in the Philippines, where workers face minimal pay, piece-rate systems, stress and surveillance without social safeguards. Meanwhile, profits accrue to Global North tech firms.[115] This extractive model, especially in large language model-based AI systems, risks entrenching structural inequalities and deepening divisions in the digital economy.

Some countries have made progress on the equity front, though fundamental challenges persist. "Vietnam's digital roadmap envisions universal internet access by 2030, integrating digital technologies across all economic and social spheres. Plans include investing in broadband expansion, new international cable lines, IPv6 adoption, data centres, IT parks, and comprehensive cybersecurity. While connectivity and digital skill gaps persist, Vietnam's strong institutional readiness and governance capacity position it well to advance inclusive digital transformation."[116]

In India, the Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) stack is celebrated as a model for digital financial inclusion,[117] yet significant gaps persist. Aadhaar, the mandatory biometric ID, raises privacy concerns and exclusion risks.[118] Reports highlight failures in ration delivery under the Public Distribution System due to biometric mismatches, poor connectivity, or OTP-based hurdles that disadvantage elderly people, the digitally illiterate[119] or those without linked numbers.[120] These challenges underscore the need for inclusive policies and gap assessments to ensure digital ID systems reduce, rather than exacerbate, social and economic inequalities.

In the Philippines, while smartphone penetration is high in urban areas, rural and outlying islands still lag in terms of both device ownership and affordable data, resulting in one of Asia's widest urban–rural digital gaps.[121] Limited infrastructure investment, high costs of connectivity and frequent service disruptions further widen the gap. For many rural households, mobile data remains prohibitively expensive relative to income, restricting access to digitized essential services such as online education, e-governance and digital payments.

In 2024, Pakistan introduced its first Digital Gender Inclusion Strategy, led by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, to address persistent digital gender gaps around women's access and usage.[122] Complementing this, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) launched initiatives promoting behavioural change, inclusive policies, tailored digital content and strong monitoring frameworks.[123] Pilot programs in four districts with significant digital gender divides will target barriers to women's participation, with the aim of expanding their access nationwide.

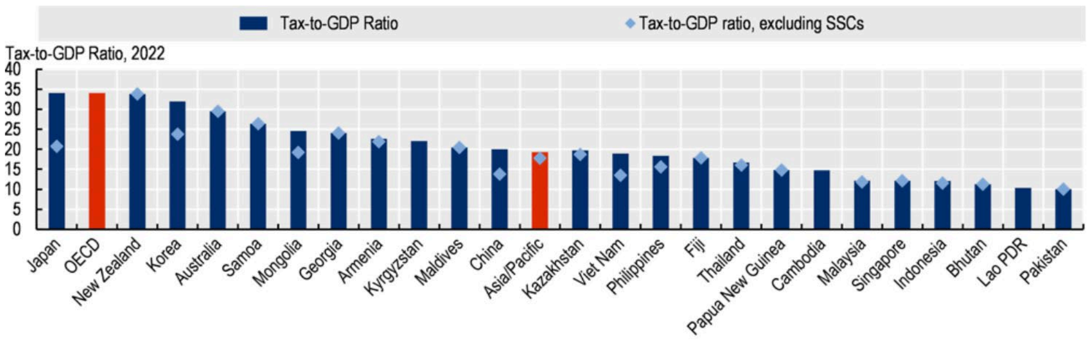
CHAPTER 4: DRIVERS OF INEQUALITY

Asia's inequality story is exacerbated by a lack of digital access for people living in poverty and vulnerable people, and the disproportionate impact of climate-induced disasters on the most marginalized. But it is also driven by certain structural factors, including the region's persistent high debt burden; a lack of progressive taxation, which prevents many countries from spending equitably on universal public services and social protection; and a lack of transparency in governance.

4.1 UNEVEN PROGRESS ON PROGRESSIVE TAXATION

Across Asia-Pacific countries, the average tax-to-GDP ratio is 19%, much lower than the OECD average of 34%. In most Asia-Pacific countries, social security contributions (SSCs) represent a very small portion of the tax-to-GDP ratio – averaging 2% of GDP across the region. However, SSCs were above 10% of GDP in Japan, and between 5–10% of GDP in China, South Korea and Vietnam. On average across Asia-Pacific countries, 47% of tax revenues were from taxes on goods and services, 41% from income taxes, 10% from social security contributions and 6% from other taxes.[124]

Figure 12: Tax-to-GDP ratios



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4.2 DEBT BURDEN AND SPENDING ON PUBLIC SERVICES

Asia's debt burden has intensified, and the region is marked by growing inequality, fiscal strain and risks to livelihoods. Global debt hit US$324 trillion in early 2025, with Asia contributing significantly through rising sovereign and corporate borrowing.[126] Developing Asia holds 24% of global public debt in 2025.[127]

External public debt service by Asian low- and middle-income countries reached US$443.5 billion in 2022 and was projected to rise by 10% through 2024.[128] In six South and South East Asian countries, debt servicing consumes about 20% of government spending, while 13 countries spend over 10% of revenue on interest payments alone.[129] Consequently, 25 of 28 Asian nations face spending cuts averaging 3% of GDP by 2027,[130] often slashing social expenditures. Indonesia, for instance, will pay nearly US$40 billion in debt interest in 2025, about 20% of central government spending.[131]

Over 2.1 billion people now live in Asia-Pacific countries where net interest payments exceed education or health spending.[132] Debt service often outweighs health spending by over three times and surpasses education budgets in many nations.[133] In lower-income Asian countries, debt payments exceed combined spending on education, health and social protection by 65%.[134] In Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, rising debt correlates with shrinking welfare budgets, increasing poverty.[135] The UN estimates an annual SDG financing gap averaging 5% of Asia's GDP, rising to 16% for the lowest-income countries.[136] Without action, the region risks missing all 17 SDGs by their 2030 deadlines, with some targets delayed until 2062.[137]

4.3 UNEQUAL SOCIAL PROTECTION

The World Bank's State of Social Protection highlights average coverage gaps across Asia-Pacific, with around 45% of the population lacking adequate social protection. These persistent shortfalls exacerbate inequality by leaving large vulnerable groups without safety nets against shocks.

Average public spending on social protection in the Asia-Pacific region is about one-third of the OECD average. Public social spending is around 25% of GDP in Japan and New Zealand, 10% of GDP in China and Mongolia and around 2% of GDP in Bangladesh and Lao PDR.[138]

The reduction in the Gini coefficient due to investments in social security is 20.7% in Mongolia, 16.7% in Georgia and 15.1% in Uzbekistan. The countries that spend very little on social security – Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Vietnam – see a minimal reduction in inequality.[139]

Within the South Asia region, the impacts of social security on inequality are much higher in Nepal – which has a universal old-age pension – than in the richer countries of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, which rely on poverty-targeted social assistance. The one country with the initial framework for a universal system but reduced effects on inequality is Vietnam. This is the result of a very high age of eligibility for its tax-financed old-age pension (at 80 years), which means that spending is limited.[140]

4.4 STATE OF PUBLIC SERVICES

4.4.1 HEALTH

Progress towards universal health coverage is highly uneven in Asia. Thailand, China, South Korea and Japan have over 80% coverage, while Bangladesh and Lao PDR remain below 50%. Even with high coverage, out-of-pocket costs persist – for example, 16% of China's population faces catastrophic healthcare expenses. Nearly half of Pakistan's population lacks access to essential healthcare, with rural and remote areas being the most underserved. Economic hardship further exacerbates the issue, as 30% of the population lives below the poverty line and many informal sector workers lack social security or health benefits. In India, despite an 8% increase in the rural population between 2015 and 2022, rural health infrastructure fell short by 6%, worsening healthcare access disparities.[141]

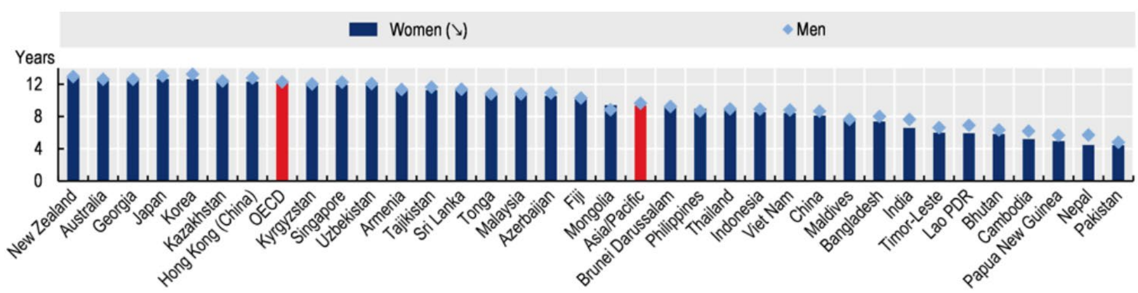
Marginalized communities, particularly Dalits in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, face barriers in accessing healthcare schemes. For instance, in Nepal, Dalit enrolment in health insurance is significantly lower (17%) than the national average (23%), with women being particularly disadvantaged. In Bangladesh, only 33% of mothers received maternity allowance despite 82% being aware of it. Dalits in Pakistan are often excluded from senior citizen allowances due to a lack of resources and accessibility.[142]

4.4.2 EDUCATION

Public spending on education is 4–5% of GDP on average across the Asia-Pacific and the OECD, but national variation is considerable. In 2022 (or latest year), public investment in education amounted to 8% of GDP in Bhutan and Kyrgyzstan, but less than 2% of GDP in Pakistan, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Sri Lanka.[143] On average, public spending on education is more than twice as high in OECD countries than in the Asia-Pacific region.

The population over 25 in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong (China) and New Zealand spent more years in education than the OECD average (12 years), while in Nepal and Pakistan, the average number of years spent in education is less than five.

Figure 13: Years in education



144

4.4.5 CIVIC FREEDOMS

One of the key drivers of inequality is the growing fragility of states and attacks on civic freedoms. Growing inequality in turn contributes to political and institutional fragility by strengthening elite capture, eroding the social contract and incentivizing pre-emptive repression.

In Asia, democracy is in retreat, with governments tightening restrictions on fundamental freedoms under the justification of national security, economic stability and public order. Average democracy scores (used by V-Dem, The Economist) dropped 0.45 points from 2014–2024 in Asia, a steeper fall than the global average.[145] The clean elections index and press freedom are at their lowest in decades, with one-fifth of countries suffering declines in electoral credibility in 2024 alone.[146]

Over 14 Asian countries now require onerous renewals and licenses for NGOs, with India imposing the strictest rules.[147] Violations of press freedom increased regionally, linked to new digital media codes and anti-fake news laws.[148] Between 2020–2025, protest bans doubled across Asia, with South Asia leading in the number of bans on street and digital protest. Interestingly, within the last three years alone, three critical countries within the region – Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal – have seen their governments toppled due to extreme public protests led by young people.

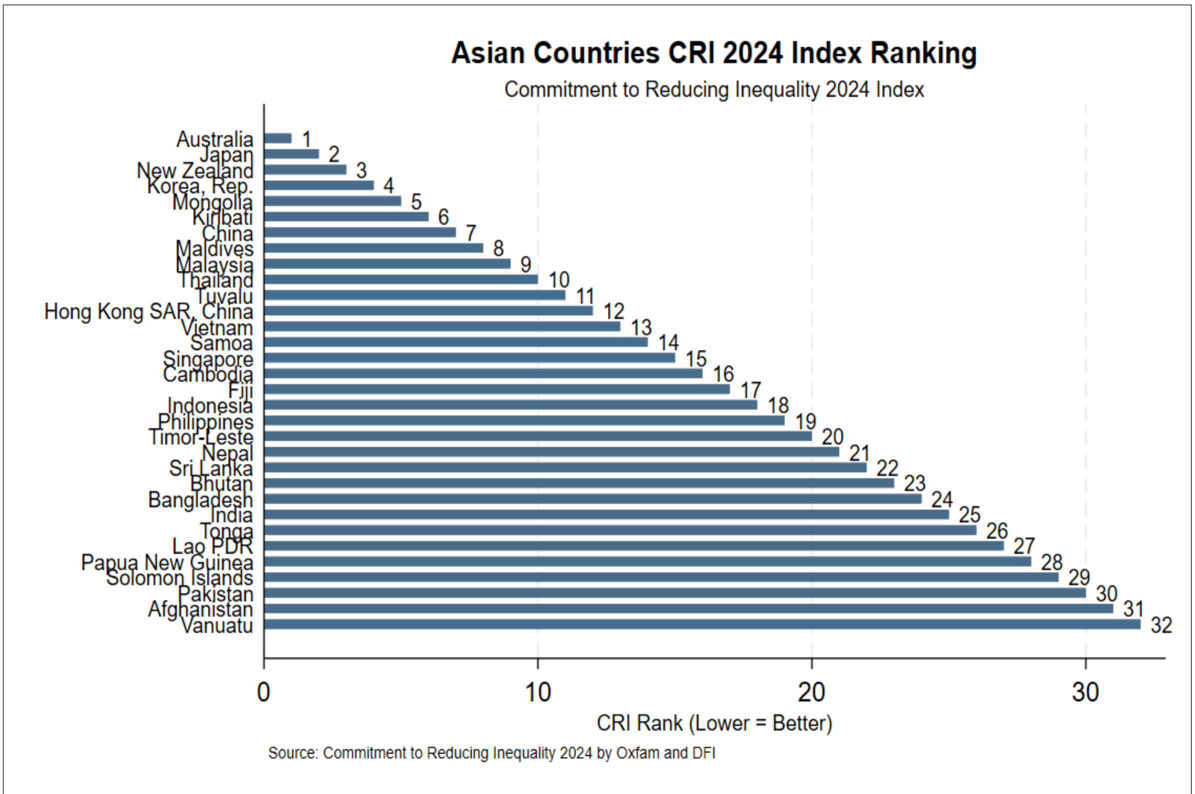
CHAPTER 5: TAKING STEPS TO ADDRESS ASIA'S INEQUALITY

Asia's experience with inequality and public investment presents a highly uneven picture that is shaped by policy choices around public services and tax justice – the inequities detailed in the previous chapters are not inevitable. Against a backdrop of global shocks, debt crises and austerity, the findings in this chapter underline that reducing inequality in Asia is ultimately a policy commitment—one that remains urgent but achievable with sustained investment and inclusive approaches.

5.1 THE CRI INDEX

The latest Oxfam Commitment to Reducing Inequality (CRI)[149] report for 2024 reveals deep divides across the region, with OECD Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand consistently outperforming peers through strong investments in education, health and social protection. [150] North and Central Asian countries like Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan exceed expectations given their income levels, demonstrating that inequality reduction is driven more by policy commitments than how much wealth a country generates.[151] In stark contrast, South Asia and much of South-East Asia lag significantly, hampered by persistently low social spending, fragmented public services and regressive tax systems.

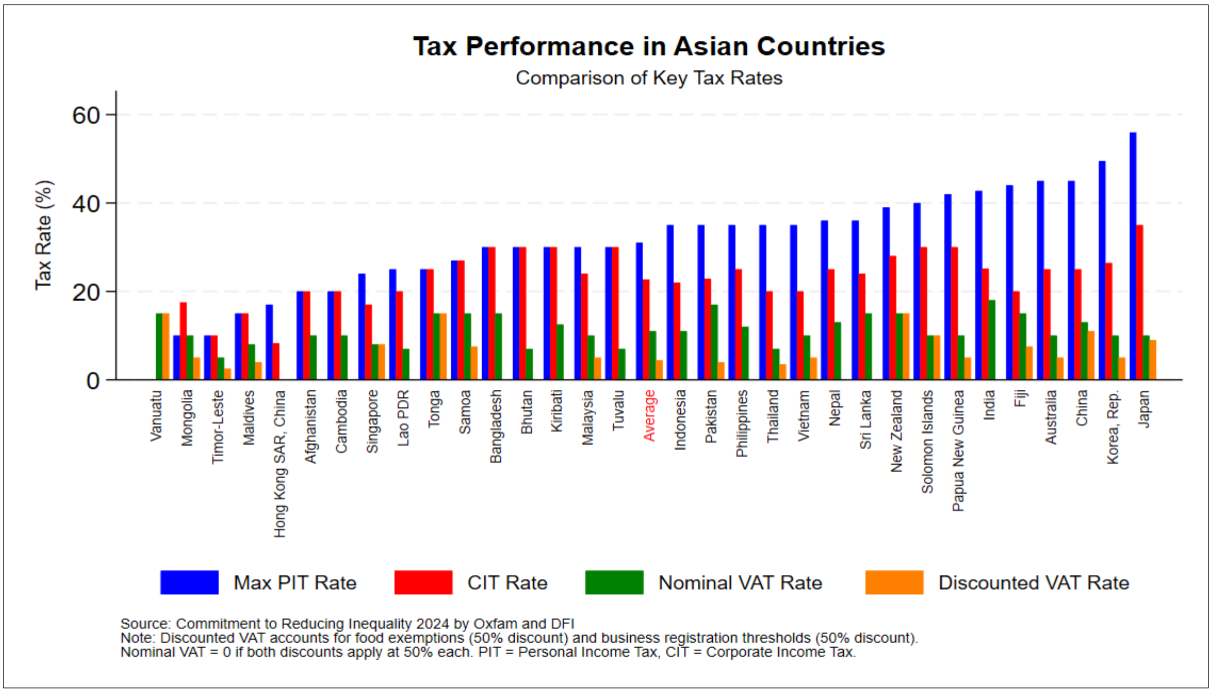
Figure 14: Asian countries CRI Index ranking



Asia overall remains the worst region for public service delivery. The report shows that between 2022–24, education budgets were cut in 56% of countries; health budgets were cut in 43% of countries; and social protection budgets were cut in 46% of countries.[152] Public services reduce inequality by just 6.1% in Asia, with only a few countries—Mongolia, Maldives, China, and Timor-Leste—achieving over 10% inequality reduction through effective social policies.[153]

5.2 TAX RATES

Figure 15: Tax performance in Asian countries

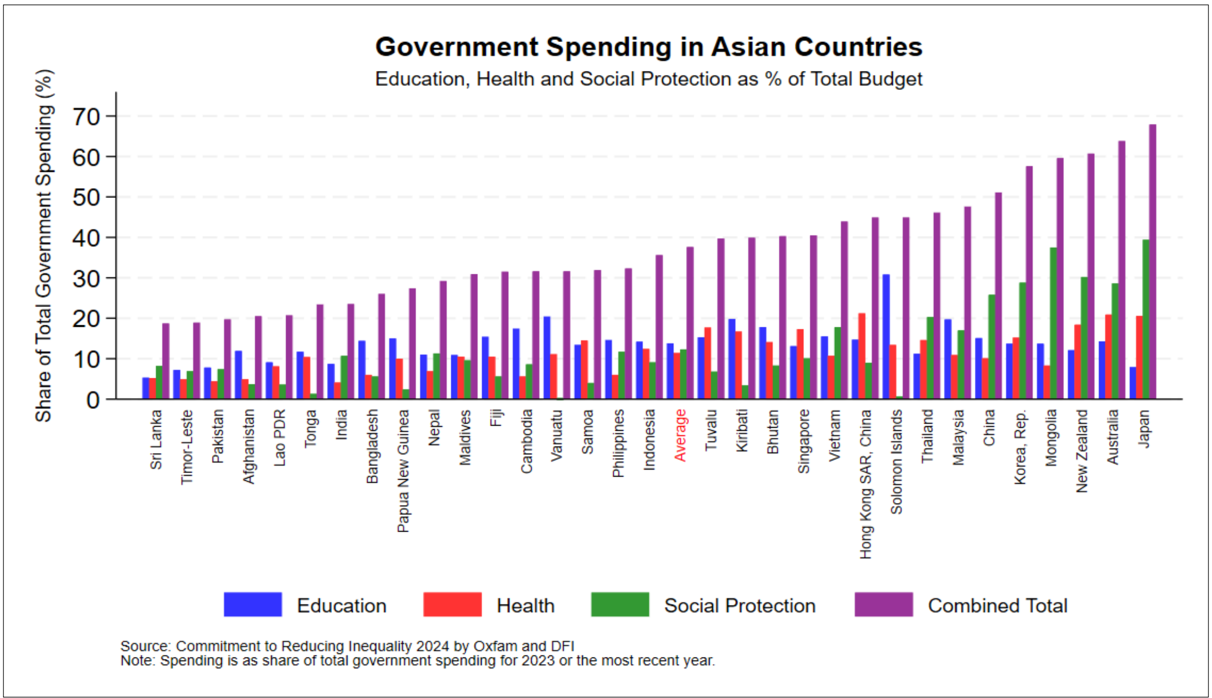


Looking at the chart above, the widening gap between direct (PIT/CIT) and indirect (VAT) taxation seems to be a critical challenge in Asia. Countries with higher PIT and social exemptions (Japan, Korea, Australia) tend to show lower income inequality and higher CRI scores while low-tax countries (in South and South-East Asia) risk deepening post-COVID inequality, as indirect taxes burden low-income groups while progressive revenue remains low.

Countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Korea and Japan demonstrate the ‘progressive fiscal model’ — high direct taxes, moderate VAT and strong social spending capacities. Meanwhile, countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam show continued reliance on VAT (green/orange bars), hence the tax burden still falls disproportionately on poorer households, especially where exemptions are weak. As the Oxfam report argues, ‘Most Asian countries still collect too little from the richest individuals and corporations — and rely too heavily on taxes that hurt the poorest.’[154]

5.3 GOVERNMENT SPENDING

Figure 16: Government spending in Asian countries



In the figure above, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Mongolia are the top spenders, dedicating over 50% of their budgets collectively to the social protection, health and education sectors, with Japan exceeding 70%. In contrast, countries like Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Pakistan and Afghanistan allocate less than 20%, well below the regional average, underscoring inequality and weaker public safety nets.

The blue bars show that some countries—especially Malaysia, Mongolia and Australia—prioritize education, allocating a significant share, whereas others, including Pakistan and Bangladesh, spend much less. Health allocations (red bars) vary but are generally highest in higher-income countries. For example, Japan, Australia and New Zealand lead in this regard, while poorer South Asian countries lag behind. Social protection (green bars) is particularly robust in countries like Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Australia and Mongolia.

In much of South and South-East Asia—such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines—expenditure remains low. This is a huge missed opportunity, as according to UN estimates, a 1% rise in social protection expenditure reduces inequality by 0.6%.[155]

5.4 SUCCESSFUL POLICIES

Many Asian countries are reforming tax systems to be more progressive: South Korea implemented a corporate tax with rates from 10–24% and adopted the OECD Pillar Two minimum tax in 2025.[156] China, Japan and Malaysia are enhancing anti-avoidance measures and improving tax compliance to better capture wealth and corporate profits.[157]

Mongolia has steadily expanded its flagship Child Money Program (CMP), a universal child grant covering nearly all children under 18. This program features automatic, inflation-indexed cash transfers and social insurance for informal workers. Consequently, social protection spending in Mongolia has exceeded 10% of GDP—one of the highest rates in the region. The CMP has significantly reduced child poverty and provided a crucial safety net, especially with rapid coverage expansion during the COVID-19 pandemic.[158]

Thailand's Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS), launched in 2002, has progressively expanded to provide nearly free healthcare access for the entire population. Public health spending rose to about 3.7% of GDP, achieving 99% coverage for essential medicines and inpatient/outpatient care. The UCS has significantly reduced catastrophic health expenses, increased life expectancy and narrowed inequalities in healthcare access.[159]

Vietnam has implemented a comprehensive 'Education for All' agenda, featuring targeted subsidies for poor and ethnic minority children alongside large-scale school meal programs. Its public education spending averages 4.2% of GDP—above the Asian average—with sustained investments in rural schools and infrastructure. These efforts have helped Vietnam achieve high global rankings in learning assessments and significantly narrow education gaps among rural, urban and minority populations.[160]

Timor-Leste has used petroleum revenues to fund the Basic Social Protection Program, including pensions for elderly people and persons with disabilities, and investments in education. Its social protection spending is above 11% of GDP, with a strong commitment to maintaining a social safety net despite fiscal transitions. It has shown visible improvement in educational attainment and poverty reduction among the most vulnerable populations.[161]

Nepal initiated expansion of universal old-age, disability, and widow pensions; school stipends for girls; and social health insurance. Its social protection spending is now consistently over 6% of GDP. As a result, it has witnessed notable reductions in the poverty and exclusion of marginalized groups and received positive international recognition for its legal frameworks.[162]

Philippines has enacted free college/university education and expanded a conditional cash transfer programme (4Ps) for poor families. Its education spending is at 4% of GDP; 4Ps currently reaches 4.4m households. The initiative has improved access to higher education and social mobility among the poorest.[163]

Overall, despite variations in performance across sub-regions and OECD countries, the examples cited above highlight the critical role states' commitment to universal public services, progressive taxation and re-distributive justice can play in addressing inequality.

CHAPTER 6: A BLUEPRINT FOR EQUITY-RADICAL SOLUTIONS FOR ASIA

INTRODUCTION

Asia's rapid growth has not resolved its stark inequality. While it is the fastest-growing region globally, with China, India, Vietnam and Indonesia fuelling extraordinary wealth creation, digital innovation and global influence, it is home to half of the world's poorest people. Wealth concentration is intensifying: the richest 1% hold 40.1% of national wealth in India and 31.4% in China.[164] while similar patterns emerge across Thailand, Indonesia and beyond.

This study argues that while inequality appears entrenched, Asia holds the tools to reverse these trends. Progressive taxation regimes, universal health and education programs, gender-responsive policies, inclusive digital initiatives and locally led climate finance experiments prove that more equitable models are possible. These examples offer a blueprint for equity, one that builds on existing good practices to embed bold, regionally coordinated reforms.

Oxfam recommends the following as priorities for governments and policymakers. These recommendations can be tailored to each country's existing achievements and income level.

1. **Ensure and implement clear national plans on reducing inequality**
    - All countries in Asia must set a national goal to end extreme wealth, and governments must adopt and implement National Inequality Reduction Plans (NIRPs) with measurable, time-bound targets.
    - Governments should aim for the total income of the richest 10% to be no more than the total income of the poorest 40% – a Palma ratio of 1.
    - They should incorporate regular monitoring, public reporting and community participation in assessing progress.
    - NIRPs should integrate fiscal, social, gender and environmental strategies, to embed a holistic equity framework embedded within national development agendas.
2. **Progressive taxation**
    - Increase progressive taxation by taxing the richest 1% at minimum effective rates of 60% on both labour and capital income, with higher brackets for billionaires and multi-millionaires.
    - The wealth of the super-rich should be taxed at rates high enough to reduce the concentration of extreme wealth, reduce inequality and lower power concentration.
    - A 2–5% wealth tax on Asia-Pacific's ultra-rich could raise an estimated US$792 billion annually by 2025—enough to increase health spending by over 60%, creating fiscal space for universal health coverage and pandemic preparedness.[165]
    - Governments should strengthen national tax authorities and establish high-net-worth units to curb evasion and illicit financial flows.

3. **Universal public services**
   - Governments must prioritize public spending on essential public services such as education, healthcare and social protection. All countries, particularly low- and lower-middle-income countries, should ensure their health budget is at least 15% of total public expenditure and education 20%. This spending must benefit the poorest people by improving access to and quality of education, health and social protection, so that countries maximize their progress towards universal coverage, as targeted by the SDGs.
   - Enact universal social protection programmes, beyond pensions, to ensure protection for the working poor, children, people living with disabilities, unemployed people, migrants and other vulnerable groups – and to protect citizens much more comprehensively against future pandemics and the impacts of climate change.
   - End user fees on education and health services to ensure they are free at the point of use and make contributory social protection systems more progressive to reduce the burden on the poor.

4. **Gender transformative policies**
   - Invest in care economies (childcare, eldercare and healthcare) to reduce unpaid work and create decent jobs.
   - Enforce equal pay and decent work standards, particularly in the garment, agriculture, and electronics sectors.
   - Expand women's access to land, credit and digital tools to strengthen participation in green and digital economies.
   - Ensure support for women-led enterprises, equal pay legislation, and representation in economic planning as essential.
   - Strengthen protections against gender-based violence, ensuring safeguards for domestic and migrant workers.
   - Institutionalize gender budgeting and ensure women's representation in economic and climate policymaking.

5. **Digital rights and inclusive technology**
   - Treat connectivity as a public good: expand rural broadband and subsidize devices and data for low-income users. Unconditional, safe, meaningful, voluntary and affordable access to a baseline set of ICTs is essential for participation in modern social, economic and political life.
   - Close the gender digital divide: invest in women's literacy, ensure platforms are inclusive and protect against tech-facilitated gender-based violence. Ensure policies are holistic and inclusive to address the risks and consequences of inequality in the digital age.
   - Ban arbitrary internet shutdowns, which undermine welfare, healthcare and education.
   - Build rights-based digital ID systems, protecting privacy and preventing exclusion.
   - Regulate AI and platform economies to prevent exploitation of workers in 'AI sweatshops' and ensure environmental safeguards.
   - Institutionalize multi-stakeholder governance in digital policymaking. People, professionals and communities from diverse backgrounds must have the right to actively engage and participate in the design and creation of digital tools, spaces

and systems that impact them.

- Prioritize digital literacy and safety to address all individuals' needs for access to information and services for education, healthcare, civic engagement and economic opportunity.

6. **Climate justice and finance**
    - Prioritize adaptation and loss and damage (L&D). Scale up grant-based finance, not loans, for climate-vulnerable regions and frontline communities.
    - Ensure historical polluters and high-emission corporations meet their obligations through predictable, non-debt funding.
    - Reform global climate finance architecture — push the ADB and World Bank to democratize governance and allocate at least 50% of funds to adaptation.
    - Embed gender-responsive and transparent monitoring systems to ensure funds reach women, Indigenous peoples and informal workers.
    - Mobilize young people and civil society to demand accountability and inclusion in climate planning.
    - Strengthen regional solidarity via ASEAN and SAARC to negotiate collectively for just, equitable climate outcomes.

CONCLUSION: CATALYZING A JUST FUTURE

Asia's trajectory is not predetermined. The same region marked by extreme inequality also demonstrates notable examples of progressive taxation, universal services, gender-responsive recovery, civic innovation, digital inclusion and community-driven climate resilience.

This report demonstrates that these are not utopian ideals but practical policies already underway in parts of Asia. Scaling and coordinating them across the region can create an Asia that uplifts the many, not just the privileged few.

Constructive engagement with governments offers an entry point for bold reforms that are grounded in existing successes. By pushing for progressive taxation, robust social protection, vibrant civic spaces, inclusive digital systems, gender equality and climate justice, Asia can take the lead in building equitable, resilient societies.

NOTES

[1] The mobilize gender gap report 2025. https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2025.pdf

[2] Income inequality is the difference in how income is distributed among the population. Income is defined as household disposable income in a particular year. It consists of earnings, self-employment and capital income and public cash transfers however, income taxes and social security contributions paid by households are deducted. Inequality is also described as the gap between rich and poor. See: OECD. (n.d.) *Income inequality*. https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/income-inequality.html

[3] The Gini index measures the extent to which the distribution of income (or, in some cases, consumption expenditure) among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality.

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[7] Claveria. (2025). *Income inequality and economic growth in Asian countries*, op. cit.

[8] UNDP. (2022). *Inequality and social security in the Asia-Pacific region*, op. cit.; World Population Review. (2025). Gini Coefficient by Country 2025. https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gini-coefficient-by-country ; OECD. (n.d.) *Income inequality*, op. cit

[9] The Palma ratio is a measure of inequality that divides the share received by the richest 10% by the share of the poorest 40%. Higher values indicate higher inequality. Inequality is measured here in terms of income before taxes and benefits. See: Our World in Data. (n.d.) *Income inequality: Palma ratio (before tax)*. https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/palma-ratio-s90s40-ratio

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[12] Wealth inequality refers to the unequal distribution of **stock of assets**—including financial assets (stocks, bonds, savings), non-financial assets (real estate, land), and liabilities—across individuals or households. It captures cumulative advantages and disadvantages that build up over time. It is usually measured **by wealth Gini coefficient, top 1% / top 10% shares, net worth ratios**. See: Inequality.org. (n.d.) *Wealth Inequality in the United States.* https://inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/

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[16] World Inequality Lab. (2025). Global Wealth Inequality on WID.World: Estimates and Imputations https://wid.world/document/global-wealth-inequality-on-wid-world-estimates-and-imputations-world-inequality-lab-technical-note-2025-01/. The countries where the first percentile of income holders shows the highest average shares over the last three decades are the Maldives, with 25.3%, and Myanmar with 24.7%. It should be noted, however, that both in the Maldives and in Myanmar, specifically since 2014, a downward trend in income concentration is observed. See: O. Claveria. (2025). *Income inequality and economic growth in Asian countries.* Research Institute of Applied Economics. https://www.ub.edu/irea/working_papers/2025/202505.pdf

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About Oxfam

Oxfam is a global movement of people who are fighting inequality to end poverty and injustice. We are working across regions in more than 70 countries, with thousands of partners, and allies, supporting communities to build better lives for themselves, grow resilience and protect lives and livelihoods also in times of crisis. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit www.oxfam.org.

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