

Asia Pacific Coalition Against Discrimination (APCAD)

Regional Perspective Paper

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Urban development in the Asia-Pacific region

Accounting for over 60% of the global population including six out of the 10 most populous countries in the world and yet also some of the world's smallest island nations, the Asia and Pacific region has long been considered a melting pot of civilizations, cultures and customs¹. This region has experienced a net population growth of 11.6% over the past 10 years, with the current overall population of 4.37 billion people expected to rise to 5 billion by 2050.

Across the region, the population is increasingly urban, with the majority of the 33 countries in the Asia-Pacific region now with more than 50 percent of people living in urban areas, including all of the East and North-East sub-region and the majority of countries in Central and North Asia and the Pacific. The region comprises diverse forms of urban environments, from the small and medium cities that are home to 1 billion people across the Asia-Pacific, to its growing number of 18 megacities (up from 7 in 2005).²

Emerging from this significant and prolonged population growth is the critical need to address the social and cultural aspects of development driven by the convergence of diverse Asian and Pacific populations towards increasingly dense urban agglomerations. With closer proximity also escalates the potential for inequalities, crime, violence, exclusion and discrimination, as citizens navigate the contested realities of their new and changing social environments. The challenges of ensuring that the complex and rapid processes of urbanization in cities across the region are as inclusive and sustainable as possible further highlight the foundational relevance of APCAD in fostering peaceful, just and equitable societies within the region.

With the scale and pace of urbanization across the region expected to continue rising, the need for open, tolerant and socially inclusive societies has never been more pronounced.

The Asia-Pacific Coalition Against Discrimination (APCAD)

Today, the Asia-Pacific Coalition Against Discrimination (APCAD) is celebrating the 10-year anniversary of its official launch, which took place during the “Regional Conference of Cities for an Inclusive Urban Society”, held in Bangkok, Thailand, in October 2006. Since its creation, APCAD has served as a pre-eminent regional platform for local government and municipal associations to gather and discuss key

¹ [UNESCAP](#)

² The majority of urban residents in the region live in cities with population under 1 million; in 22 countries, the largest city has a population under 300,000 (UNESCAP)

social inclusion issues facing the region and exchange priorities and strategies towards achieving inclusive societies free of discrimination.

As one of seven regional and national Coalitions of the International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities - ICCAR, APCAD is committed to strengthening the engagement of city authorities in the common struggle against racism and all forms of discrimination, building more inclusive, peaceful, tolerant and equitable societies. As a member of the global ICCAR platform, APCAD is committed to enhancing the connections between action at local level and exchange, solidarity and advocacy at a global scale.

A review of regional opportunities and challenges conducted in the context of the Coalition's 10-year anniversary activities identified the following key insights and priority areas for APCAD:

1. The spatial expansion of cities in the past few decades has resulted in blurring the urban-rural divide, merging of previously distinct municipalities and the conversion of surrounding ecosystems with subsequent environmental impact.
2. The region has had a largely positive, upward economic trajectory with steady increases in national GDPs and a growing middle class, however inequality persists and the standard of living in many impoverished communities remains low. Equity and social inclusion need to be prioritized as urbanization trends continue across the region.
3. Economic policies on infrastructure and housing, linked with urban planning, are necessary to address current and growing challenges of sprawl, inequality and sustaining economic growth. Inclusive policies and programs to address these economic, institutional and structural aspects of inequality, especially housing and land tenure are the foundation of improving the livelihoods of the most vulnerable urban dwellers.
4. Marginalized communities, including women, youth, the elderly, migrants, and ethnic minorities, need to be involved in the development of policies and implementation of programs and policies to ensure that their needs and priorities are addressed.
5. Cities need to focus efforts to build resilience on the most vulnerable areas but should have the opportunity to yield multiple benefits as interventions to add resilience can also address issues identified as necessary for improved social inclusion.
6. Inclusive, participatory governance is fundamental to improving urban planning so that cities are accessible and functional for all residents.

Overview of key challenges facing urban areas in the Asia-Pacific region

Inclusive responses to migration

The Asia-Pacific is a vibrant and rapidly changing region with great diversity yet with deep connectedness, through trade and migration over centuries. The region includes both "receiving" countries, who rely on migrants to bolster their workforces, such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Australia and Japan, and there are "supply" countries from where migrants travel in significant numbers seeking employment, such as the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Myanmar and the Pacific islands.

However, it is not only mobility across borders that is transforming the demographics of Asian and Pacific countries, but internal movements of people, usually from rural to urban areas, that are changing the nature of many cities, particularly in large countries such as India and China. Of the first 30 megacities³ globally, 16 are in Asia. Several other second tier cities are approaching megacity status. Internal migration is a significant feature of rapidly expanding urbanization in all of these cities.

³ A megacity is defined as a metropolitan area with a total population of more than 10 million people <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Megacity>

The majority of migrants are attracted to urban areas to find better access to services and employment opportunities. A large number of them are poor and have not received a good education. Others are escaping conflict, oppression or discrimination. Hence the economic and social aspects of migration are closely intertwined. This means that within the migrant population, there is a significant level of vulnerability. Some of the most vulnerable are those affected by statelessness (for example Rohingya migrants from Myanmar), those who are undocumented, migrants who are illiterate and have limited skills for employment, children either moving on their own or left behind by migrating parents, as well as elderly people left behind in rural areas without the normal social support networks of extended family.

Urban governance and planning mechanisms are faced with significant challenges in adapting to rapid population change, including congestion, air quality, informal settlements, homelessness and crime. Simply providing basic services such as energy, water, sanitation, transport, housing, schools and health services is a complex task for city authorities. Another layer of complexity arises from the diversity of ethnic/national groups with different languages, cultural practices and needs, and levels of access to the services that are available.

Whilst cities can promote the rich contribution of migration and diversity to cultural life in cities, as in Auckland, New Zealand, which celebrates festivals from Diwali to the Lantern Festival, indigenous Maori and Pacific arts to a feast of different foods and experiences around the city and its wider environs, significant challenges remain in ensuring migrants' full inclusion within and participation in city life, with, for example, many new arrivals to urban areas in the region experiencing poor access to basic services such as health and education, and facing exclusion and discrimination.

The responses of cities have been varied. Some take an active role in promoting the assimilation and integration of new arrivals, whilst others face significant challenges in providing such support, such as the lack of data or mechanisms to enable the participation of migrants in planning processes. To respond to these challenges, APCAD members exchange perspectives and experiences on how to address the persistent rural-urban gap, and collaborate on the development of approaches that enable incoming migrants – both from rural areas and from other countries – to retain their senses of culture and identity, contributing to their new communities and facilitating their full integration into city life.

Combating HIV-related stigma

From the start of the AIDS epidemic, stigma and discrimination have fuelled the transmission of HIV and have greatly increased the negative impact associated with the epidemic. HIV-related stigma create major barriers to preventing further infection, alleviating impact and providing adequate care, support and treatment.⁴

Though the Asia-Pacific region has not experience the high prevalence rates of other regions with only Thailand and Papua-New Guinea reaching HIV epidemic status, nearly every country in the region is affected.

HIV-AIDS disproportionately affects populations living in poor and otherwise disadvantaged areas. People without safe and secure housing, electricity, water and livelihoods are more likely to be exposed to unsafe behaviours that lead to transmission of the virus. Local governments and municipalities play a key role in provision of health care services, and need to take into account these factors, which are inter-connected with many aspects of city/community planning, in developing adequate responses.

Over the last decade, the Asia-Pacific region has experienced a major reduction in new infection rates, though deals with the legacy of a large population carrying the infection. Mayor Annabelle C Tangson,

⁴ HIV - Related Stigma, Discrimination and Human Rights Violations, UNAIDS 2005
http://data.unaids.org/publications/irc-pub06/JC999-HumRightsViol_en.pdf

President of the Lady Municipal Mayors Association of the Philippines stated “Our intent is to build a caring society. We cannot solve problems like HIV AIDS by perpetuating stigma and discrimination. The least we can do is build, in our own municipalities a caring environment. Let us also strive to work with NGOs and the National Government so that we can prevent and protect the people who are affected and who may be at risk.”⁵

Over the last decade a growing attention to and understanding of vulnerable groups in the region has highlighted the need for action to address stigma and discrimination on a much wider scale.

Inclusive responses to climate change and disaster risk reduction at city-level

The Asia Pacific region has extensive coastlines including thousands of islands, major low lying river deltas and a large number of large coastal cities. A large number of the region’s 4.5 billion people are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters (47% of the world’s disasters in 2015⁶), with more populous countries and large cities facing particular problems such as the need for major infrastructure upgrades and adaptation to cope with possible for mass evacuations and casualties. South Asia alone accounted for 64% of global casualties from natural disasters occurring in 2015.⁷ Many of APCAD’s members have had first-hand experiences of significant disasters over the last decade.

Specific dimensions of vulnerability with respect to disasters and climate change are also starting to be better documented. The elderly, disabled, carers, women living in communities with limited freedom of movement, slum dwellers, and migrants are amongst the populations that have been identified. People that are not mobile are especially vulnerable, as are those that do not receive or understand warning messages.

City governments play a critical role in ensuring preparedness through adaptation and disaster risk reduction, as well as response during and after storms and other events. There is also a crossover in city government responsibilities in areas such as disability services and elderly care, making it essential for different divisions within local government to work cooperatively and actively engage community in dialogue and action.

The inclusion of people living with disabilities in urban areas

One in every six persons in Asia and the Pacific has some form of disability: 650 million men, women and children. The number is expected to rise over the next decade due to population ageing, natural disasters, chronic health conditions, road traffic injuries, poor working conditions and other factors.⁸

People living with disabilities are affected by physical barriers in accessing services and employment, social barriers such as isolation from the community, as well as psychological barriers creating by stigma and discrimination. The barriers often start at home with people living with disabilities being hidden away from the community. Understanding their needs to live a fulfilling life, from local transport, to a livelihood, and a social network, requires the development of targeted participatory approaches that work with

⁵ A Sub Regional Dialogue and Training Workshop on Reducing and Eliminating HIV-Related Stigma and Discrimination in South East Asia, UNESCO 2011

http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/shs/Energyethics/Final_Report_-_Sub-regional_Dialogue_and_Workshop_on_Reducing_and_Eliminating_HIV-Related_Stigma_and_Discrimination_in_South_East_Asia_in_Decembe.pdf

⁶ Disasters in Asia and the Pacific: 2015 Year in Review, ESCAP 2016 <http://www.unescap.org/resources/disasters-asia-and-pacific-2015-year-review>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ ESCAP <http://www.unescap.org/our-work/social-development/disability>

disabled people, their carers and families, to not only understand their needs, but involve them in the design of solutions.

City governments set standards for transport routes, building design and planning of public spaces; they provide public transportation services as well as health care and education; they also support livelihood promotion schemes. This role is important in both prevention (i.e. reduction of road traffic accidents) and implementation of services. Many local governments and municipalities in the region have fostered and developed strong relationships and programs for people living with disabilities, but many more, particularly in rural and remote areas, least developed countries and lower middle income countries, have not yet been able to address this growing need.

Affordable housing

The very poorest of people in cities often live in slums with little or no access to public services. Slums exist even in wealthy cities and are found across Asia and the Pacific. Asia is home to the largest number of slum dwellers with over 60% of the world's slums in 2010.⁹ Sustained and rapid urban growth, coupled with rising income inequality migration means that slums continue to grow in many cities.

Housing affordability is an issue not only in poorer countries, but also an escalating problem in all countries across the region. The gap between rich and poor continues to grow globally, and is especially being felt in Asia and the Pacific, even as economic growth has propelled many countries into middle income status, and continues to grow. In particular, a dearth of foreign investment in rural areas has resulted in urban-dominated economic growth and creating high levels of migration to cities¹⁰ putting additional pressure on housing and access to services. Escalating property prices in cities also impact on lower and middle class citizens' access to affordable housing.

Strategies to respond to rapidly growing urban populations include developing core infrastructure from public transport solutions to stormwater upgrades, opening up new land for settlement and increasing housing density in established areas of the city.

APCAD's commitment: Fostering inclusion, participation and solidarity for sustainable cities

APCAD's approach to these urban challenges is to embrace cultural diversity, tolerance and inclusiveness. Increasing opportunities for community participation from representatives of a wide range of sectors including people living with disabilities, elderly persons, LGBT communities, ethnic minorities, migrants and young people is a core strategy of APCAD members. Active campaigns to address stigma and discrimination, promoting gender equality and taking new approaches to developing policies and regulations are key strategies developed and shared by members through the Coalition.

As a symbol of the shared commitment of APCAD members to building and expanding the Coalition's outreach and leadership in the region, the *Bangkok Declaration*, adopted at the Coalition's International Conference in June 2016, outlined cities' dedication to ensuring "the full and active mobilization of the Asia Pacific Coalition of Cities against Discrimination, strengthening collaborative action, the exchange of good practices, advocacy and joint initiatives; such as citizen-generated data, collection of case studies on good practices and an advocacy package for the region." Building on the experience and achievements of

⁹ The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003 Revised and updated version (April 2010) http://unhabitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2003/07/GRHS_2003_Chapter_01_Revised_2010.pdf

¹⁰ Worldwatch <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/5322>

the Coalition to date, APCAD member cities also expressed their commitment to taking a leading role in implementing the *New Urban Agenda* in the Asia Pacific region.