



Update of the 2024 Asia-Pacific Regional Human Development Report

By Sudyumna Dahal, Raymond Gaspar and Philip Schellekens¹

March 13, 2024

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¹ This note updates the findings of the 2024 Asia-Pacific Regional Human Development Report (RHDR) following the release of the global Human Development Report on March 13, 2024. It also updates all charts of the 2024 RHDR that are affected by the update to the HDI and related indices. Sudyumna Dahal is Regional Economist at the Bangkok Regional Hub of UNDP, Raymond Gaspar is Policy Research Specialist at the Bangkok Regional Hub of UNDP, and Philip Schellekens is Chief Economist for the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific of UNDP.

1. Key highlights

Below are the highlights of the global update to (1) the Human Development Index (HDI) for Asia-Pacific, its subregions and countries, (2) the HDI adjusted for inequality, (3) the Gender Inequality Index, and (4) the HDI adjusted for planetary pressures.

HDI at the regional level:

- Following an unprecedented dip, the Human Development Index (HDI) markedly improved in 2022, with Asia-Pacific now overtaking the Arab States. The HDI rebounded to 0.72, exceeding the pre-pandemic level of 0.71.
- Even if the HDI rebounded to pre-pandemic values, this should not be interpreted as a complete recovery. The latest HDI value remains well below what it could have been if there had not been a crisis. In this sense, the pandemic period has produced lasting consequences.
- Viewed over a longer period, Asia-Pacific still stands out as the region with the most rapid progress in human development. Between 1990 and 2022, its HDI increased by 20 percentage points – the highest increase in the world.

HDI at the subregional level:

- With hindsight, East Asia managed to minimize the disruptions of the pandemic particularly well, where the revised historical HDI data reveal that this subregion barely registered a blip. Other subregions saw marked volatility. In 2022, South Asia bounced back significantly, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. The Pacific has also managed to rebound above 2019 values. South-East Asia remains below the HDI level before the pandemic.
- The recovery in education and health outcomes remains overdue in some parts of the region. In the Pacific, we see a regression in education. In both South Asia and South-East Asia, we see that the health component of the HDI remains below its 2019 value.

HDI at the country level:

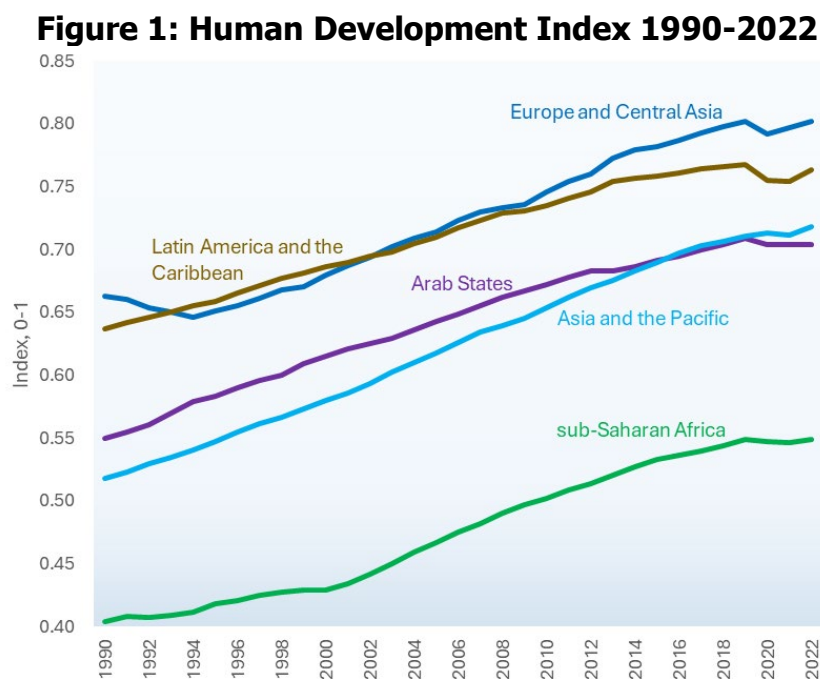
- Twenty-one countries and territories in Asia-Pacific have rebounded to levels above their pre-pandemic HDI values. However, two countries were at the 2019 level in 2022, and fourteen still remained below. Afghanistan, Timor-Leste, and Samoa remained significantly below the pre-crisis values; they registered a worrying regression in the HDI.
- The gap in HDI values between the best and worst performers in the Asia-Pacific region widened in 2022. In 1990, the gap between Japan and Afghanistan was 57 percentage points. By 2021, that gap had narrowed to 44 percentage points. But in 2022 the gap rose to 46 percentage points.

Other indices of human development:

- Within-country inequality continued to see a worrying trend. South Asia's loss in the HDI due to inequality is among the highest in the world (after sub-Saharan Africa). The Pacific also saw a large decline.
- The improvement in gender equality has stalled in the Asia-Pacific region in recent years. The region saw the slowest improvement in 2022 in 20 years - a trend that began during the pandemic years.
- The planetary pressures-adjusted HDI continues to point to considerable environmental costs, carried mainly by East Asia. We saw fast growth in especially South Asia, even though for most subregions 2022 saw some levelling off.

2. Headline trends in the Human Development Index

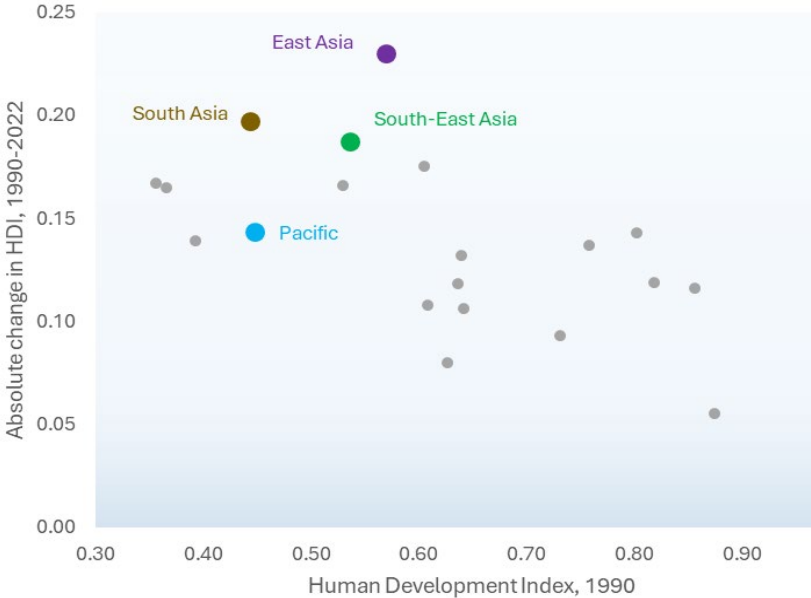
The Asia-Pacific region's HDI climbed above the pre-pandemic level of 0.71 in 2019, reaching 0.72 in 2022 (Figure 1). The latest data updates reveal that the disruption to the HDI for Asia-Pacific during the pandemic was smaller than estimated earlier. As a result, Asia-Pacific has overtaken Arab States and has further closed the gap with Latin America and the Caribbean.



Source: HDRO. HDI database.

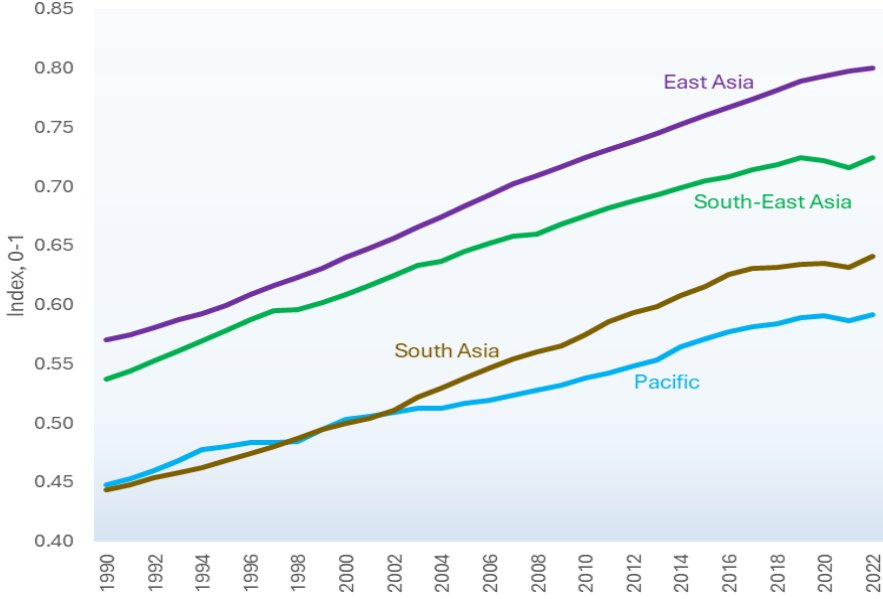
Since 1990, East Asia has continued to have the largest HDI increase globally, with 23 percentage points between 1990 and 2022. South Asia and South-East Asia also made considerable progress, improving 20 and 19 percentage points between 1990 and 2022, respectively. Progress in the Pacific has been the slowest within the region, at only 14 percentage points (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

Figure 2: HDI progress in global subregions, Asia and the Pacific and the rest of the world



Source: HDRO. HDI database.
 Note: Subregions based on UN geographic regions (M49 Standard).

Figure 3. HDI in Asia and the Pacific, by subregion, 1990-2022



Source: HDRO. HDI database.

Figure 4. Average annual growth in HDI, by subregion



Source: HDRO. HDI database.

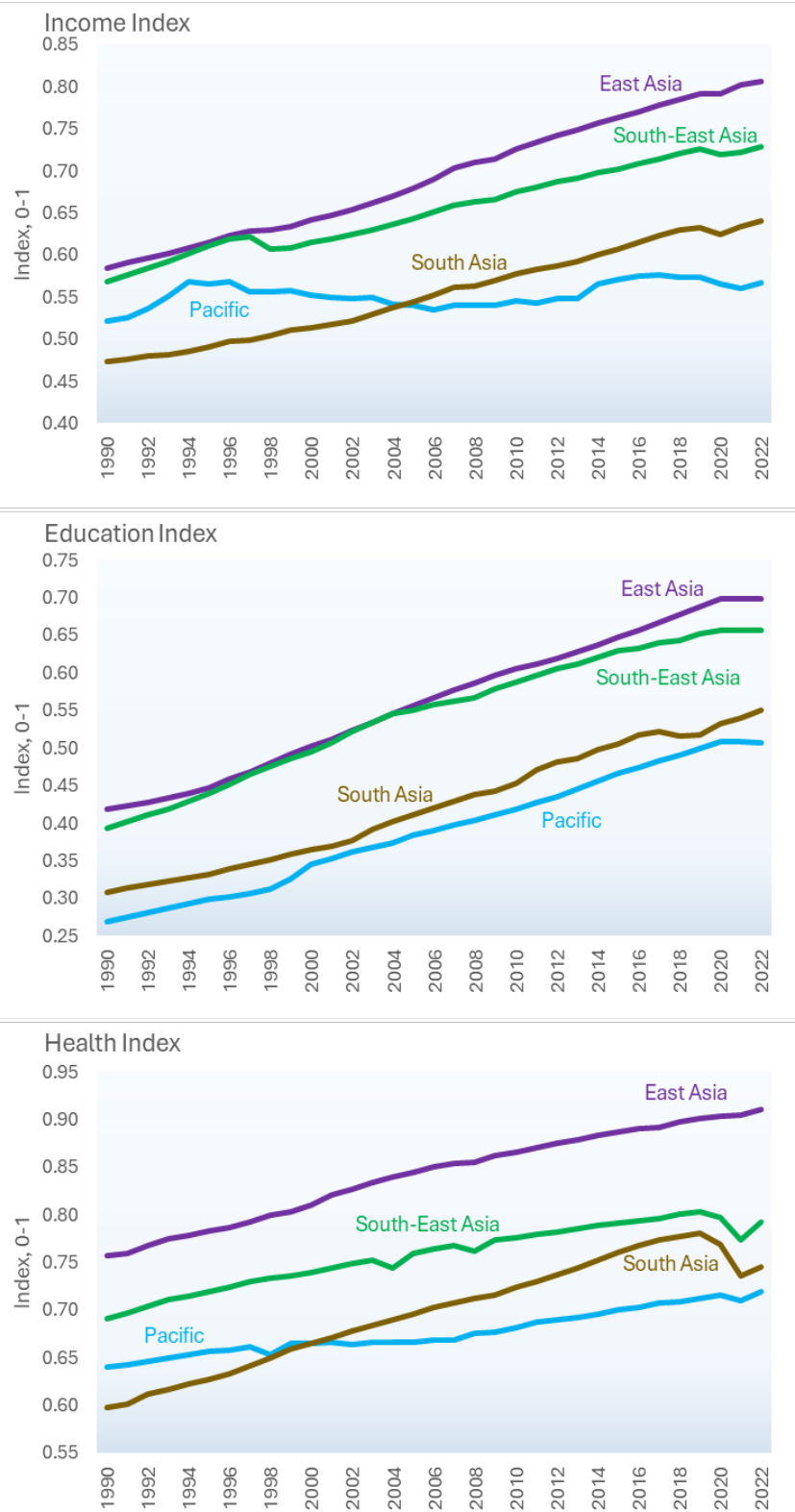
While HDI has rebounded in Asia-Pacific, the region suffered disruptions along with the rest of the world. In 2020 and 2021, the overall average HDI saw no improvement in Asia-Pacific because of the pandemic and other crises (Figure 4). In East Asia, however, the average HDI continued to increase in 2020-2021, while all other subregions saw a decline in HDI. The impact of the crises was the highest in South-East Asia, which saw the largest decline in HDI from 2020 to 2021 among the Asia-Pacific sub-regions.

Figure 5 delves more deeply into the subcomponents of the HDI by subregion.

- The income component sees the least disruption in East Asia. In other subregions it registered a relatively swift recovery.
- Worryingly, the education component flatlined in East Asia and South-East Asia, while it regressed in the Pacific. In South Asia it saw a rebound, mostly thanks to improved education outcomes in India.²
- The health component fluctuated strongly everywhere except in East Asia. The rebound in other regions varied. In South Asia and South-East Asia it remained well below pre-pandemic values of 2019.

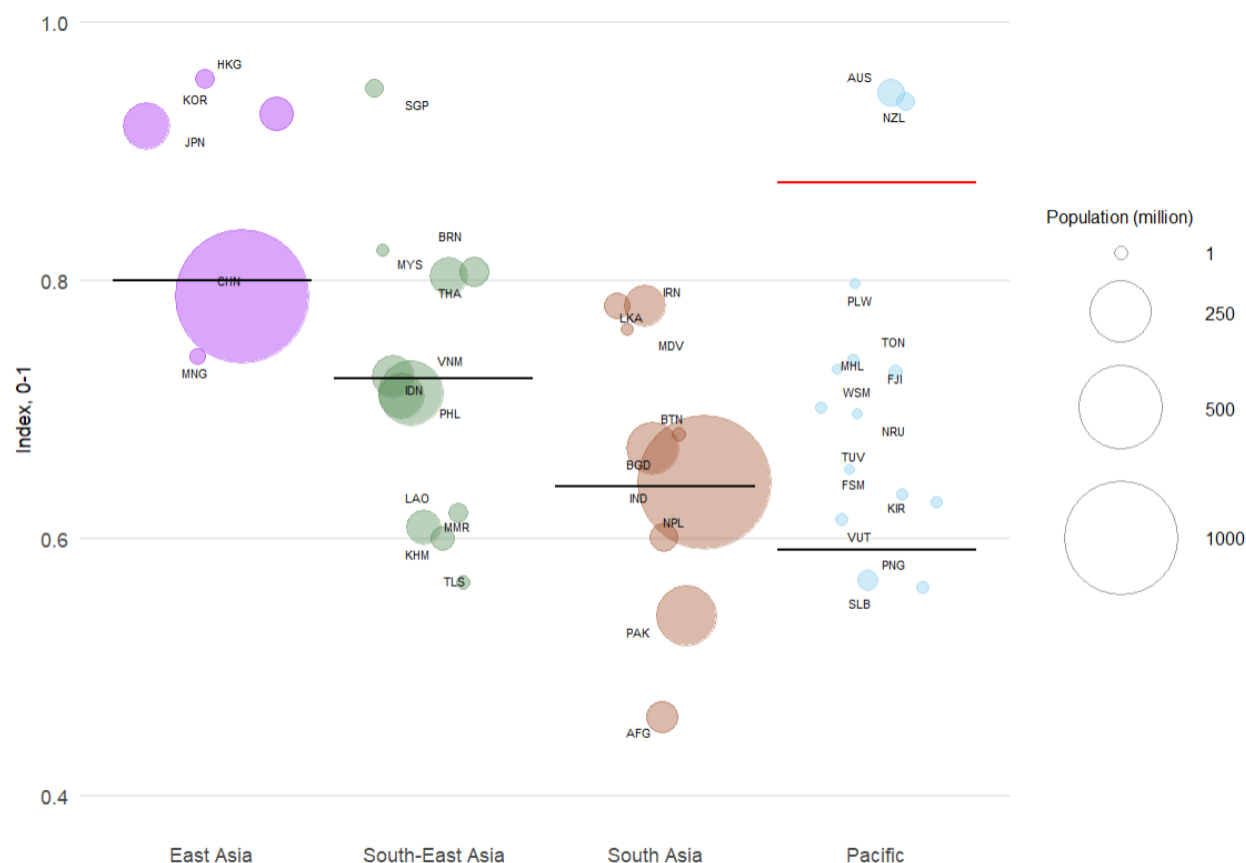
² India's expected years of schooling increased to 12.6 years in 2022 from 12 years in 2021, its largest improvement since 2012.

Figure 5. Components of the HDI by Asia-Pacific subregion, 1990-2022



Source: HDRO. HDI database.

Figure 6. Human development index in Asia and the Pacific, by country, 2022



Source: HDRO. HDI database.

Note: Horizontal lines are the population-weighted average of the HDI for each subregion during the period. For the Pacific subregion, the black line includes Pacific Island Countries only, whereas the red line covers Oceania, thus including Australia and New Zealand.

We continue to see an enormous diversity in 2022 HDI values not only between subregions but also within them (Figure 5). Shown here are all country values, with the bubbles referring to population size and the horizontal bars to the subregional population-weighted average. For the Pacific we show two averages: one for Pacific Island Countries only (black) and one for Oceania including also Australia and New Zealand (red).

We can also characterize the dispersion between the best and worst performer in the region, which appears to have widened in 2022. Note that in 1990, Japan had the region’s highest HDI value, Afghanistan had the lowest, and the gap between them was 57 percentage points. By 2021, that gap had narrowed to 44 percentage points. Unfortunately, in 2022, it increased to 46 percentage points. If we only compare developing countries, Malaysia had the highest HDI in 1990, and the gap with Afghanistan was 37 percentage points. By 2021, that gap was reduced to 33

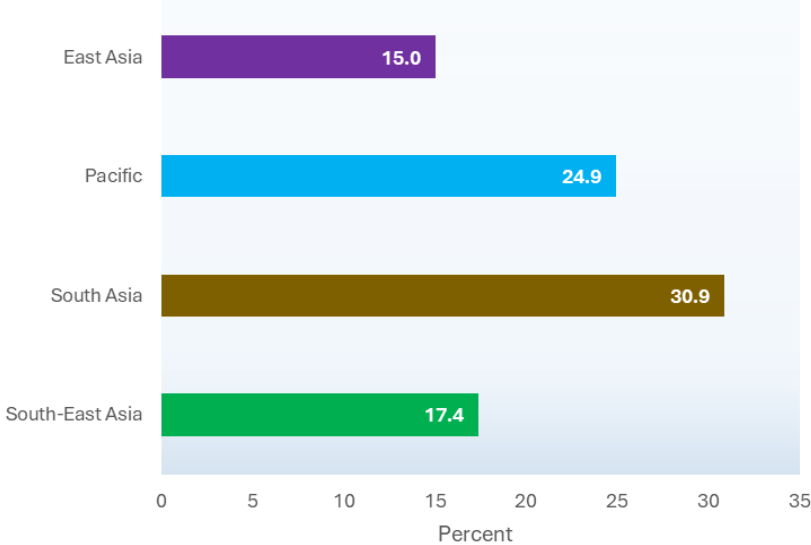
percentage points, but recent developments in Afghanistan have widened the gap to 35 percentage points.

As further documented in Annex 1, twenty-one countries and territories within Asia-Pacific rebounded to pre-pandemic HDI values in 2022, two were at their 2019 level (Myanmar and Vanuatu), and fourteen were still below 2019. Afghanistan, Timor-Leste, and Samoa were significantly below pre-crisis values and registered a worrying trend of regression in the HDI.

3. Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index

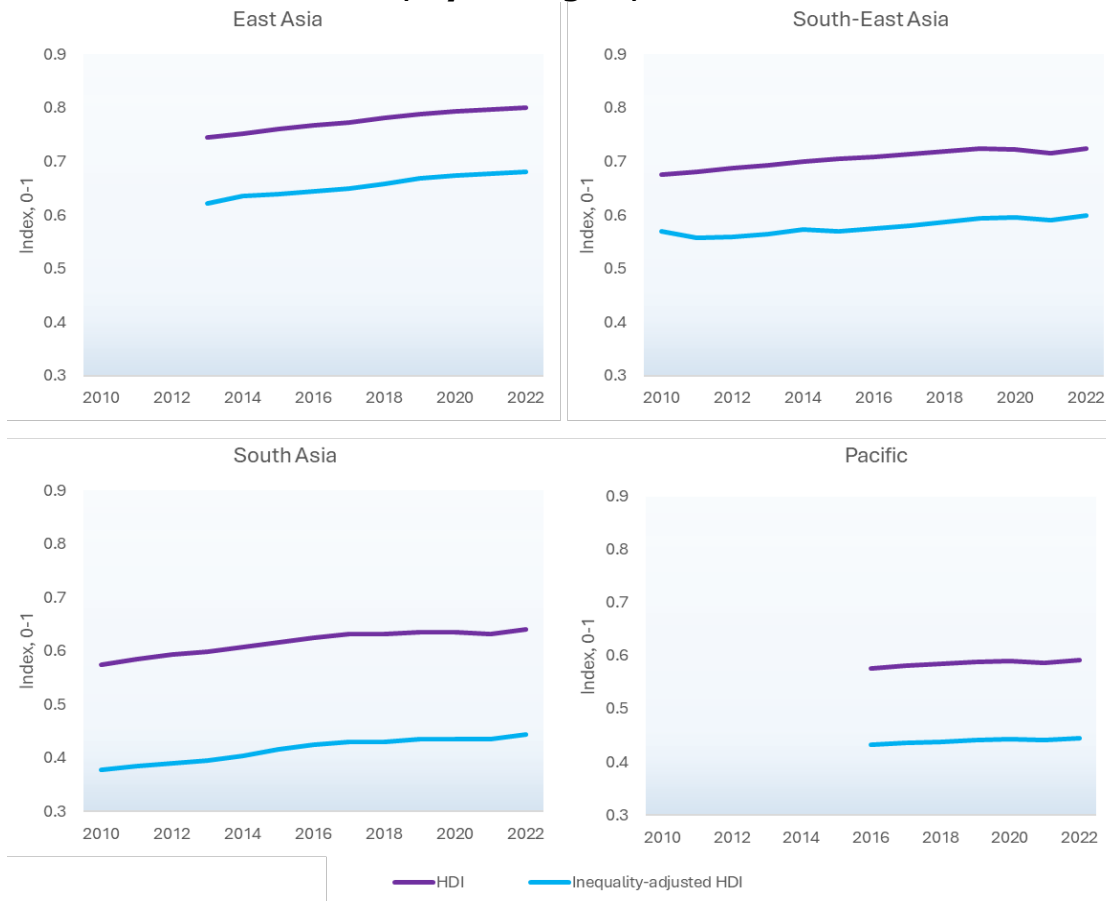
Inequality within countries remains a major challenge in the Asia-Pacific region. Once adjusted for inequality, the picture of human development in the region is more sobering, as the inequality-adjusted HDI (IHDI) continues to illustrate. The IHDI marks down the HDI according to the extent of inequality observed in its components. Figure 7 shows that this discount is the largest in South Asia and second-largest in the Pacific. Among subregions. Compared to the rest of the world, South Asia’s discount in the HDI is the second largest after sub-Saharan Africa. As Figure 8 illustrates, this pattern has been remarkably persistent over time.

Figure 7. HDI loss due to inequality by Asia-Pacific subregion, 2010-2022



Source: HDRO. HDI database.

Figure 8. Inequality-adjusted human development index in Asia and the Pacific, by subregion, 2010-2022



Source: HDRO. HDI database.

Note: Calculated using the geometric mean of the adjusted dimensional indices, the IHDI discounts the average value of each dimension based on its degree of inequality. Hence, as inequality increases, the IHDI falls beneath the HDI value.

4. Gender Inequality Index

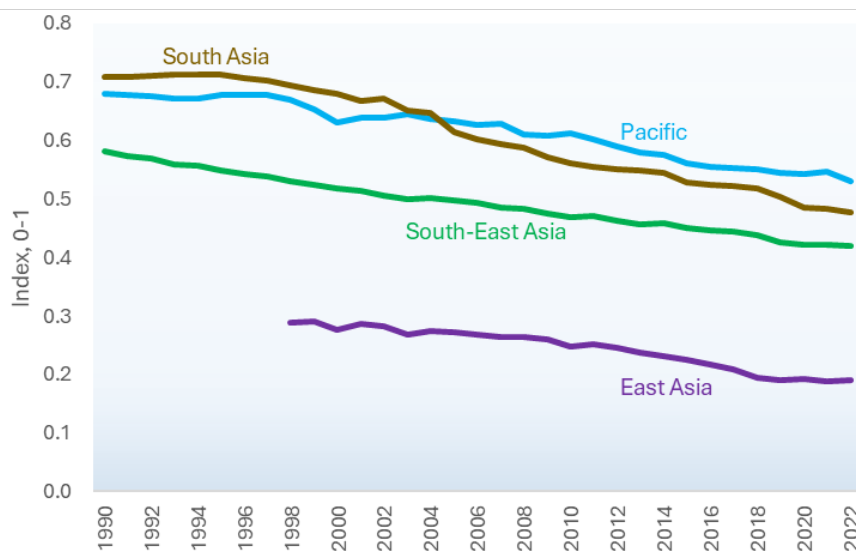
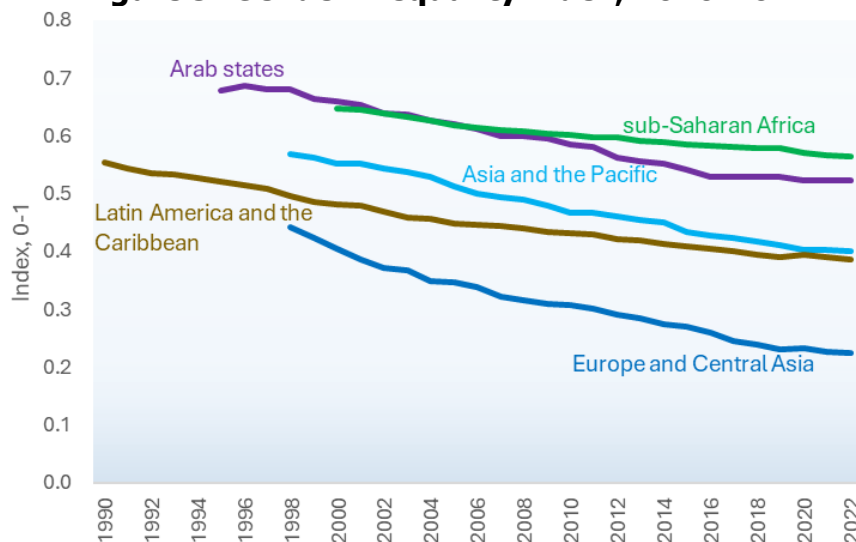
The latest data reveal the momentum of improvement in gender equality stalled in the Asia-Pacific region (Figure 9). The slowdown in momentum became already apparent during the pandemic years (Figure 10). While the Pacific improved in 2022, other subregions saw slower progress or a decline compared to the pre-pandemic era.

- While the Pacific has the highest gender inequality in the region, it made some progress in reducing GII in 2022 due to the increase in women's representation in parliament and the decline in adolescent birth rates.
- South Asia had the second-highest gender inequality in the region, even if it continued making progress over the years. Despite gender backsliding in Afghanistan, the subregion made progress for several reasons: the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) was revised upwards in India, and the share of

seats in the parliament held by women increased in India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Secondary enrolment of females in India increased during the period.

- South-East Asia's GII is lower than South Asia and the Pacific's, but in 2022, slower progress in reducing gender inequality was observed. This is mainly due to a reduction in the share of seats in the parliament held by women in countries like Cambodia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore.
- East Asia has the lowest gender inequality in the region. Still, some setbacks were observed in 2022: the decline in women's representation in parliament in some countries (for example, the Rep. of Korea) and increase in adolescent birth rates in China.

Figure 9. Gender inequality index, 2010-2022



Source: HDRO, HDI database.

Note: GII is a composite metric of gender inequality using three dimensions: reproductive health, political empowerment, and participation in the labour market. A high GII value indicates high inequality between women and men, and vice versa.

Figure 10. Average annual growth in gender inequality index by subregion



Source: HDRO. HDI database.

Note: GII is a composite metric of gender inequality using three dimensions: reproductive health, political empowerment, and participation in the labour market. A high GII value indicates high inequality between women and men, and vice versa. Hence, a negative change reflects improvement while positive change indicates deterioration.

Table 1: Asia-Pacific countries with the lowest and highest gender inequality in the Asia-Pacific region

Asia-Pacific countries with lowest GII levels (2022)	
Singapore	0.036
Republic of Korea	0.062
Japan	0.078
China	0.186
Malaysia	0.202
Asia-Pacific countries with highest GII levels (2022)	
Afghanistan	0.665
Papua New Guinea	0.604
Pakistan	0.522
Bangladesh	0.498
Nepal	0.495

Source: HDRO. HDI database.

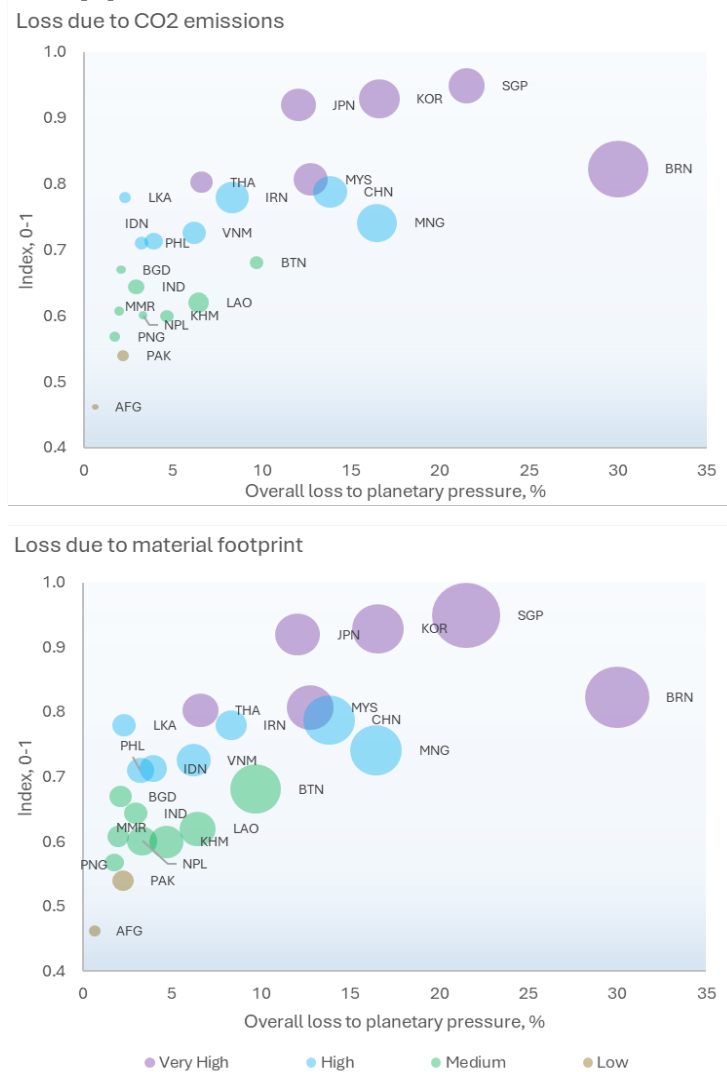
Note: GII is a composite metric of gender inequality using three dimensions: reproductive health, political empowerment, and participation in the labor market.

5. Planetary pressures-adjusted Human Development Index

Figure 11 highlights the evident strain on the planet as countries pursue progress. This pursuit often translates into a heightened demand for natural resources, leading to an increased material footprint (i.e., resources consumed to satisfy domestic needs) and greater CO2 emissions.

Countries with very high HDI in East and South-East Asia exhibit the largest ecological footprints and emissions. However, within the region, there is a wide spectrum of countries, with Brunei Darussalam at the top end and Afghanistan at the bottom.

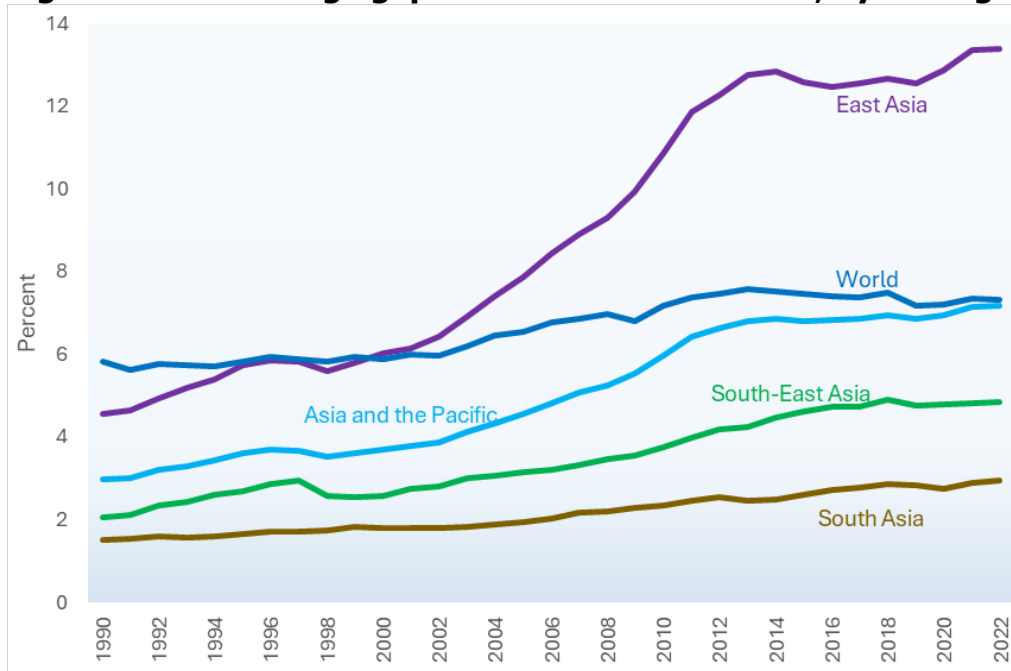
Figure 11. Planetary pressures increase with levels of human development



Source: HDRO. HDI database.

Note: Bubble size reflects country variations in CO2 emissions per capita (chart above) and material footprint per capita (chart below). HDI levels classification is based on 2022 HDI values.

Figure 12. Percentage gap between HDI and PHDI, by subregion



Source: HDRO. HDI database.

The East Asian countries in the region exert considerable environmental cost. This is evident in the subregion’s widening disparity between HDI and PHDI³ (Figure 12), which exceeds the global average by nearly half and surpasses other Asia and Pacific subregions. The latest year however seems to indicate some levelling off. While this gap continues to widen in South-East Asia, it appears to have stabilized in recent years. Meanwhile, South Asia demonstrates the lowest gap but exhibits the fastest growth since 2021.

³ The region’s human development progress must be qualified by the damage to the planet. To take this into account, UNDP has produced a planetary-pressures-adjusted human development index (PHDI), which corrects for environmental impact. The largest adjustments are for countries at the highest levels of human development, which also tend to have higher per capita emissions and larger material footprints.

Annex 1

Table 1. Human Development Index by country in Asia and the Pacific, 2019 and 2022, grouped by direction of change

Asia-Pacific countries with HDI higher than pre-pandemic (2019) levels in 2022

Country	2019	2022
Bangladesh	0.646	0.670
Nauru	0.680	0.696
China	0.775	0.788
Bhutan	0.668	0.681
Marshall Islands	0.722	0.731
Maldives	0.753	0.762
Viet Nam	0.717	0.726
Republic of Korea	0.922	0.929
India	0.638	0.644
Papua New Guinea	0.562	0.568
Palau	0.792	0.797
Sri Lanka	0.775	0.780
Cambodia	0.596	0.600
Singapore	0.945	0.949
China, Hong Kong SAR	0.953	0.956
Nepal	0.598	0.601
Pakistan	0.537	0.540
Lao PDR	0.617	0.620
Japan	0.918	0.920
Malaysia	0.805	0.807
Thailand	0.801	0.803

Asia-Pacific countries with HDI remain below pre-pandemic (2019) levels in 2022

Country	2019	2022
Timor-Leste	0.627	0.566
Afghanistan	0.492	0.462
Samoa	0.712	0.702
Mongolia	0.749	0.741
Kiribati	0.636	0.628
Micronesia (Fed. States of)	0.640	0.634
Solomon Islands	0.568	0.562
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	0.785	0.780
Indonesia	0.718	0.713
Brunei Darussalam	0.827	0.823
Philippines	0.714	0.710
Fiji	0.730	0.729
Tonga	0.740	0.739
Tuvalu	0.654	0.653

Asia-Pacific countries at pre-pandemic (2019) levels in 2022

Country	2019	2022
Vanuatu	0.614	0.614
Myanmar	0.608	0.608

Source: HDRO. HDI database.