

Chapter 1

Asian youth in the context of rapid globalization

In Asia, as in other world regions, globalization has generated extraordinary opportunities. New avenues for education and employment have been created; improvements in technology have helped to raise the productivity of individuals as well as manufacturing and agricultural output; and many people, including youth, are reaping the benefits of major public health breakthroughs and interventions. The rapid processes of change and adjustment associated with globalization have, however, intensified poverty, unemployment and social disintegration in certain areas, especially among the most vulnerable populations. Factors such as the changing nature of work, a shrinking demand for young workers (who are more likely to be unskilled), and the emergence of new and less secure forms of employment are seriously undermining the ability of young people to contribute meaningfully to, and benefit fully from, the global economy. Young people often lack the financial resources necessary to access the opportunities and withstand the pressures created by globalization. Many are restricted by inadequate education and poverty, or are outside the reach of basic information and communication and of the goods and services that have become available with globalization.

Affluence and poverty have always coexisted, but globalization has had a polarizing effect, widening inequalities within and between countries and population groups. Perhaps nowhere has this change been as evident as in Asia, where, despite impressive achievements, substantial differences in social and economic development are apparent across subregions, and where globalization has contributed to increased marginalization and vulnerability for many groups. In Asia, as elsewhere, globalization is characterized by unprecedented economic interdependence driven by cross-border capital movement, rapid technology transfer, and information and communication flows. Non-governmental organizations and civic groups, which can complement and sometimes challenge State authority, have emerged as key players, as have global firms, production networks and financial markets. Governments are increasingly being pressured to conform to new international standards of governance, transparency and accountability and to ensure the fair and consistent application of the rule of law. In addition, a Western-leaning international culture has emerged, sparking concerns about the erosion of national identity and traditional values in Asian countries. This complex transformation process has produced dramatic economic, social and cultural changes in Asia during the past two to three decades. Young people in the region have benefited from the positive aspects of these developments, but many have been left vulnerable to the negative repercussions of modernization.

This chapter explores how young people in Asia have fared in the context of globalization, focusing particularly on whether they have the capacity and opportunity to participate more fully in their communities at the social and economic levels. It is argued that because Asian countries have been able to take advantage of a very large pool of young labour, youth in the region have been a strong, positive force in the development of their societies. Young people have, in turn, profited from a number of positive developments, including expanded educational opportunities, better health care, access to information and communication

technologies, and enhanced leisure possibilities. Girls and young women have been given increased opportunities to contribute to development. The chapter acknowledges these important gains but also provides an assessment of the remaining obstacles and constraints and their consequences for youth development in the region.

It should be noted that many of the trends explored in this chapter reflect the interplay of multiple forces and factors associated with globalization, not all of which are addressed in the present context.

The demographic context: numbers matter

An estimated 738 million youth between the ages of 15 and 24 lived in Asia in 2007, accounting for more than 18 per cent of the region's population. The situation of Asian youth must be considered within the context of a substantial demographic shift that has both influenced and been affected by the social and economic transformation of the region (Hugo, 2005a). Changes in fertility and, to a lesser extent, mortality have had a profound impact on the age structure. During the second half of the twentieth century, high fertility dominated the demographic picture in the region, producing large cohorts of children that evolved into sizeable youth cohorts over the years. This trend peaked in 1985, when youth accounted for an all-time high of 22 per cent of the total population of Asia (see table 1.1).

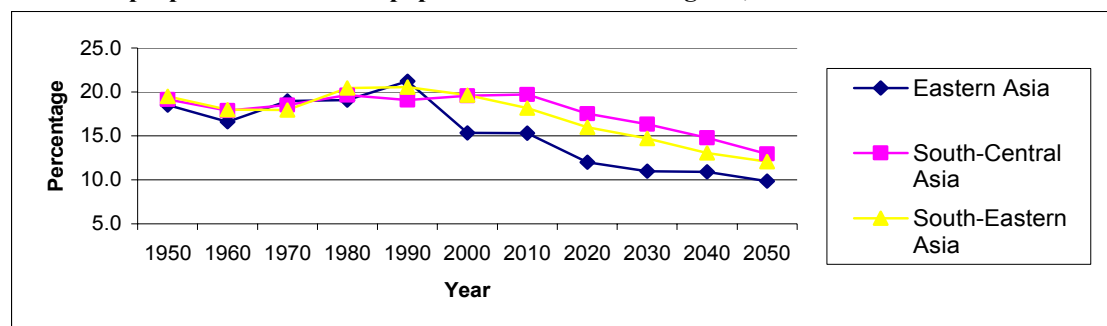
Table 1.1
The youth population in Asia and its subregions, 1960-2050
(in thousands and as a proportion of the total population)

Year	Asia		West Asia		South-East Asia		East Asia		South-Central Asia	
1960	294 380	18.5	11 486	18.4	40 110	19.2	131 486	17.8	111 298	19.2
1965	325 702	18.4	12 781	17.8	43 086	18.2	149 465	18.4	120 370	18.5
1970	398 680	19.9	16 064	19.5	51 462	19.1	187 093	20.2	144 061	19.8
1975	460 113	20.4	19 520	20.4	63 082	20.8	206 080	20.0	171 431	20.9
1980	514 153	20.8	23 009	20.9	73 414	21.7	224 854	20.5	192 875	20.9
1985	591 992	22.1	26 591	21.1	82 478	22.1	268 174	23.3	214 748	20.8
1990	643 035	21.8	29 947	21.0	90 570	22.2	285 267	22.9	237 250	20.5
1995	645 844	20.1	33 577	20.9	96 683	21.6	251 609	19.2	263 977	20.4
2000	663 246	19.3	37 784	21.1	102 216	21.2	226 397	16.8	296 850	20.9
Change (1960-2000)	368 866	0.8	26 298	2.8	62 107	1.9	94 911	-1.1	185 552	1.8
2005	720 859	19.7	41 254	21.0	106 941	20.7	243 728	17.3	328 937	21.4
2010	749 527	19.2	43 944	20.4	108 953	19.7	243 697	16.4	352 933	21.3
2015	735 023	17.9	46 077	19.6	107 356	18.4	221 084	14.5	360 506	20.3
Change (2005-2015)	14 164	-1.8	4 823	-1.4	416	-2.3	- 22 644	-2.8	31 569	-1.1
2020	714 618	16.6	47 184	18.6	106 659	17.4	201 051	13.0	359 724	19.1
2025	709 765	15.8	48 958	17.9	107 631	16.7	188 238	11.8	364 939	18.3
2030	718 880	15.4	51 296	17.6	106 209	15.8	189 567	11.7	371 809	17.7
2035	719 875	14.9	52 612	17.0	103 152	14.9	191 729	11.7	372 382	17.0
2040	706 101	14.2	52 878	16.3	100 330	14.0	188 789	11.5	364 104	16.0
2045	681 642	13.5	52 421	15.4	98 288	13.4	180 420	11.1	350 513	14.9
2050	655 470	12.7	51 974	14.6	96 329	12.9	169 106	10.4	338 060	13.9

Source: United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision* (New York: 2007).

The proportion of youth in the total population of Asia has slowly begun to shift downward in all subregions. The attenuation of the “Asian youth bulge” is evident in figure 1.1, which projects a consistent decline in the share of the youth population after 2010. The actual number of young people in the region is expected to slowly decrease to around 706 million in 2040, with youth comprising 14 per cent of the total population.

Figure 1.1
Youth as a proportion of the total population in Asian subregions, 1950-2050



Source: United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision* (New York: 2007).

The size of the youth population in Asia gives the region a major advantage in terms of development potential. Table 1.2 shows that of a global youth labour force of 633 million in 2005, some 353 million (55.7 per cent) lived in Asia. By 2015, the Asian youth workforce is expected to increase to 361 million. Countries in the region have been able to reap a “demographic dividend” from the production capacity of a labour force that is sizeable in relation to the dependent population; indeed, it is estimated that one third of East Asia’s economic miracle (occurring between 1965 and 1990) can be attributed to this phenomenon (Bloom and Canning, 2003). The extent to which Asian economies will continue to benefit from this demographic picture will depend critically on how they develop and harness the potential of the youth population.

Table 1.2
Global and regional estimates and projections of the youth labour force, 2005 and 2015 (thousands)

	Youth labour force in 2005	Youth labour force in 2015	Change (2005-2015)
Developed economies	64 501	61 167	-3 334
Central and Eastern Europe (non-EU) and CIS	29 661	23 989	-5 672
East Asia	154 511	139 596	-14 915
South-East Asia and the Pacific	61 490	72 889	11 399
South Asia	136 616	148 293	11 677
Latin America and the Caribbean	57 149	56 649	-500
Middle East and North Africa	33 174	34 039	865
Sub-Saharan Africa	96 153	120 587	24 434
World	633 255	657 209	23 955

Source: International Labour Office, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2006* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, August 2006).

One of the most important factors influencing whether and how Asian economies benefit from their sizeable youth population is how much of an opportunity young people have to participate in development, which includes strengthening their capacities through education, improved health care and productive employment. Maximizing the demographic dividend requires a favourable policy environment for human capital development (Bloom, Canning and Sevilla, 2003).

Youth participation in education

Developments in education represent perhaps the most important of the factors that have positioned Asian economies to take advantage of the demographic dynamic and globalization.

Access to quality education has expanded in many parts of Asia, making it possible for a much broader range of youth to contribute meaningfully to economic and social development. Improvements have occurred across the education system, though the gains are particularly noticeable at the primary level. Many countries in the region, including Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam, have implemented curricular reforms, while others, such as the Maldives and Thailand, are preparing for major curriculum changes (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006a). In line with the growing trend towards resource rationalization and cost recovery in the social sectors, many countries in the region have also begun to explore ways to make their education systems more efficient and effective.

Formal education

While youth are generally not enrolled in primary education, analysis of trends in this area is important from a youth development perspective. It is during the primary cycle that literacy, numeracy, and other fundamental skills and knowledge are obtained, providing the foundations for further education at the secondary and tertiary levels and ultimately for active participation in society.

Today, as a result of both demographic conditions and increased investment in education, more children than ever before are attending school in Asia. Gross primary enrolment ratios exceed 100 per cent in many countries, reflecting the participation of many children outside the official primary school age range (see table 1.3). Figure 1.2 indicates that between 2000 and 2004, net primary enrolment increased sharply in South Asia and West Asia and rose slightly in Central Asia; in East Asia and the Pacific, where this ratio has traditionally been high, a marginal decline (from 96 to 94 per cent) was registered.

Table 1.3
Gross primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment ratios* in selected Asian countries, by sex, 2004

	Total	Primary		Secondary			Tertiary		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
East Asia									
China	118	118	117	73	73	73	19	21	17
Hong Kong SAR**	108	111	105	85	86	83	32	33	32
Macao SAR**	106	110	101	96	94	98	69	84	54

Japan	100	100	101	102	102	102	54	57	51
Mongolia	104	104	105	90	84	95	39	29	48
Republic of Korea	105	105	105	91	91	91	89	109	67
South-East Asia									
Brunei Darussalam	109	109	109	94	91	96	15	10	20
Cambodia	137	109	109	29	35	24	3	4	2
Indonesia	116	117	115	62	62	61	16	18	14
Lao People's Democratic Republic	116	124	109	46	52	39	6	7	5
Malaysia	93	93	93	70	67	74	29	25	33
Myanmar	97	96	98	41	41	40	11	..	..
Philippines	113	113	112	84	80	88	29	26	33
Thailand	99	101	96	77	77	77	41	38	44
Viet Nam	98	101	94	73	75	72	10	11	9
South Asia									
Afghanistan	93	127	56	16	35	5	1	2	—
Bangladesh	109	107	111	51	49	54	7	9	4
India	107	111	104	52	58	46	11	14	9
Islamic Republic of Iran	103	98	108	82	84	79	22	21	24
Nepal	113	118	108	46	49	42	6	8	3
Pakistan	82	95	69	27	31	23	3	4	3
Sri Lanka	102	102	101	81	79	83	..	..	..

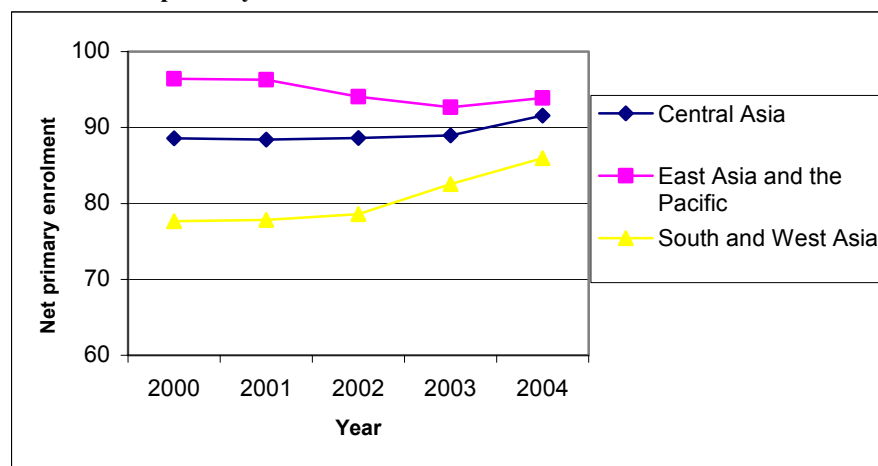
Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Global Education Digest 2006: Comparing Education Statistics Across the World* (Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006) (UIS/SD/06-01).

Note: Two dots (..) signify that an item is not available. An em-dash (—) indicates that an amount is nil or negligible.

*Gross enrolment ratios can exceed 100 per cent if a substantial number of pupils are not in the official age range, thus overstating the actual share of the school-age population participating in school.

** SAR: Special Administrative Region of China.

Figure 1.2
Trends in net primary enrolment



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Institute for Statistics (data accessed from www.uis.unesco.org on 18 January 2007).

After decades of relative exclusion, girls are increasingly benefiting from the gains in primary education. India and Nepal have nearly achieved gender parity at this level; between 1998 and 2002, the proportion of girls enrolled in primary education rose from 84 to 96 per cent in the former and from 78 to 92 per cent in the latter. Parity had already been reached in Bangladesh, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Maldives and Sri Lanka by 1998. A few countries have made less significant progress in this area. Afghanistan has the world's widest gap between boys and girls in primary education, and in Pakistan the primary enrolment rate for girls is only 73 per cent (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005b).

Improvements in primary enrolment in Asia are due to many factors, including State, private sector and international community commitments and investments in education. In most Asian countries, increases in government expenditure on primary education have meant that basic facilities and materials such as classrooms and textbooks are often provided free of charge, making school attendance possible for a broader segment of the target population. Countries such as Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand have adopted a free and universal system of basic education and literacy, which has allowed more children to transition into youth with the fundamental knowledge and skills required to participate effectively in society.

While statistics clearly indicate overall improvement in primary enrolment in the region, critical gaps remain. Bangladesh, India and Pakistan each have more than 1 million children not in school (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005a). In many parts of Asia, enrolment and retention in primary school are adversely affected by poor teaching and learning environments. Poverty often compels all fit members of a household to contribute to the family income, preventing many children from attending school. In half of the countries for which data are available, fewer than 78 per cent of pupils continue to the fifth grade. While grade repetition in Asia is low overall, in Nepal more than one fifth of all pupils are repeaters (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2004). Quality and relevance remain key concerns; youth in Asia, as in other parts of the developing world, continue to be poorly prepared for work and life (World Bank, 2006).

Of even greater significance is the fact that the near-universality of primary education suggested in table 1.3 comes too late for many of today's youth, who should have been in primary school some 10 to 20 years ago. The educational situation of young people in Asia is illustrated by data from household demographic and health surveys conducted in various countries. Table 1.4 highlights the disparities in early educational attainment among young women in the region, indicating that while in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam fewer than 10 per cent of young women aged 15-19 years received no primary education, the same is true for over half of the young women in India and Nepal. More limited data suggest a somewhat better picture for males, with only Bangladesh showing more than 40 per cent of young men between the ages of 15 and 19 with no primary education. Reflecting improved participation rates in recent years, males aged 15-19 years have achieved a higher level of education than their counterparts in the 20-24 age group.

Table 1.4
Highest educational attainment of young females in selected Asian countries (percentage)

	Year	Females aged 15-19 years			Females aged 20-24 years		
		No education	Primary education	Secondary or higher education	No education	Primary education	Secondary or higher education
Bangladesh	1993/94	48.7	33.0	18.3	53.3	28.1	18.6
	1996/97	40.8	34.3	24.8	49.8	26.9	23.3
	1999/2000	29.0	34.2	36.8	37.6	29.6	32.8
	2004	15.3	33.2	51.4	26.5	29.1	44.4
Cambodia	2000	18.8	56.6	24.6	27.4	51.8	20.8
India	1992/93	64.7	17.0	18.0	58.2	15.9	25.7
	1998/99	53.4	18.8	27.8	47.4	16.2	36.3
Indonesia	1987	8.1	76.2	15.7	12.5	67.4	20.1
	1991	5.3	77.1	17.7	7.6	66.1	26.2
	1994	3.9	73.3	22.8	5.5	62.2	32.3
	1997	2.8	72.0	25.3	3.3	60.5	36.1
	2002/03	1.5	51.6	46.9	1.7	49.4	48.9
Nepal	1996	69.0	19.1	12.0	68.1	15.7	16.2
	2001	52.2	26.1	21.7	59.2	18.2	22.6
Pakistan	1990/91	81.0	10.9	8.1	75.3	12.6	12.0
Philippines	1993	1.2	17.9	80.9	1.7	21.1	77.2
	1998	0.5	16.1	83.4	0.8	17.4	81.8
	2003	0.6	13.2	86.3	0.5	14.3	85.2
Sri Lanka	1987	15.8	24.1	60.1	11.4	29.9	58.5
Thailand	1987	7.5	83.3	9.2	5.9	79.8	14.3
Viet Nam	1997	7.3	41.6	51.1	6.5	25.3	68.2
	2002	6.6	40.6	52.8	8.8	31.0	60.2

Source: MEASURE DHS, STATcompiler (available from <http://www.measuredhs.com>; accessed 23 February 2007).

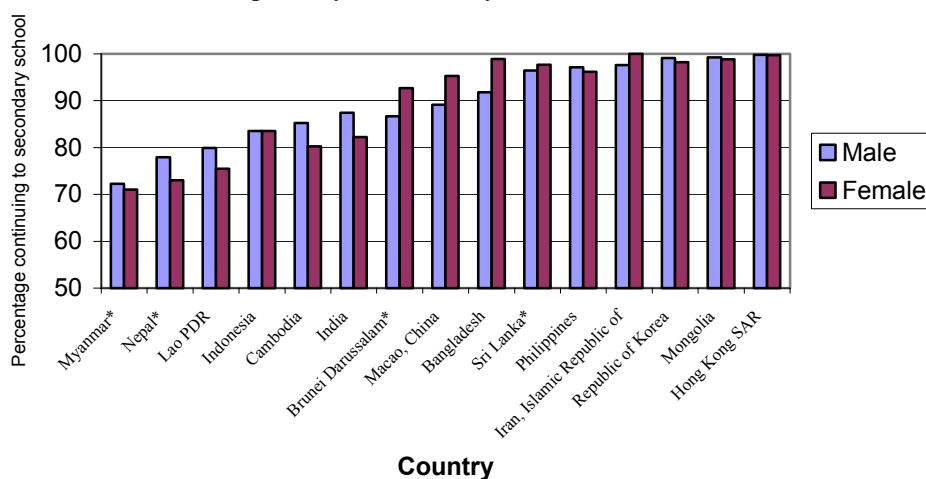
Children in Asia are better served by the educational establishment now than ever before. Primary enrolment figures are higher for those currently attending school than for the present youth cohort; however, there are indications that improvements were initiated early enough to benefit many of today's young people. In the countries in table 1.4 for which data exist for several points in time, the proportion of young women without any education has declined. The situation in the Philippines is particularly striking; by 2003, virtually all of the country's youth had been enrolled in primary school at some point, with males reportedly lagging slightly behind females in terms of early educational attainment.

Secondary education greatly improves employment prospects, providing an effective means for young people to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes that will make it much easier for them to enter and remain in the labour market. In the context of globalization, secondary education has increasingly become the lowest level of schooling required for formal, productive employment. Asian countries have increased their investments in secondary education, and many have been successful in raising secondary enrolment rates. In just two generations, the Republic of Korea has made enormous strides and is now ranked among the world's top countries in terms of educational performance, as evidenced by its superior level of achievement within the framework of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). Young women, who have typically had

comparatively limited access to education in the region, have made considerable progress in obtaining secondary schooling. Table 1.4 indicates that secondary enrolment among young women rose dramatically over a relatively short period in virtually all of the countries for which multiple-year data were available; the Philippines, which registered the most modest increase, had already achieved a secondary school enrolment rate of 81 per cent for young women aged 15-19 years by 1993 but was able to raise the proportion further, to 86 per cent, by 2003.

In spite of these successes, there is much yet to be done. Table 1.3 reveals that secondary enrolment ratios are still low in a number of Asian countries, especially in the southern part of the region, and table 1.4 indicates that for many, educational attainment has not extended beyond primary schooling. There are countries in which a significant proportion of young women have not even had the benefit of a primary education. Educational coverage has improved considerably since the 1980s throughout much of the region, and differences in educational attainment among different age groups can be extreme. In Indonesia, for example, access to primary schooling is nearly universal today, but statistics for 2002/03 suggest that half of the country's young women aged 15-19 years had completed only primary schooling. As shown in figure 1.3, primary to secondary school transition rates vary greatly in Asia. In most countries boys are more likely than girls to move from primary to secondary education, though in Brunei Darussalam, Macao Special Administrative Region of China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Islamic Republic of Iran, transition rates are higher for girls.

Figure 1.3
Rates of transition from primary to secondary education for selected countries, 2002-2004



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Institute for Statistics (data accessed from www.uis.unesco.org on 18 January 2007).

Note: The full country names for those in shortened form are Lao People's Democratic Republic and Macao Special Administrative Region of China.

* UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimate.

Even in countries with high primary to secondary school transition rates, participation in lower and upper secondary education is characterized by significant disparities. East Asian countries, in particular, have achieved high gross lower secondary enrolment ratios. These ratios are below 40 per cent in Afghanistan and Pakistan but are over 90 per cent in the Republic of

Korea and Malaysia and as high as 98 per cent in Sri Lanka. Brunei Darussalam, China and Japan have gross lower secondary enrolment ratios exceeding 100 per cent. At the upper secondary level the figures decline sharply, with gross enrolment standing at 51 per cent for East Asia and the Pacific and only 40 per cent for South Asia and West Asia (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006b).

Besides the gains in primary enrolment, the most impressive development in educational attainment in Asia has been the dramatic upsurge in enrolment at the tertiary level. Globally, the number of students in tertiary education doubled between 1990 and 2004, reaching 132 million. East Asia and the Pacific led the trend with an increase of 25 million students during this period. In China alone, the number of students in tertiary education doubled between 1998 and 2002 and again between 2001 and 2004. By 2004, China had 19 million tertiary students, the largest number of any country and 15 per cent of the world total (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006b). The number of students enrolled at the tertiary level also doubled in South Asia and West Asia. India is mainly responsible for the increase in tertiary participation in South Asia, having registered annual growth rates averaging 13.4 per cent in the late 1990s. While tertiary expansion has proceeded at a more moderate pace in other countries, the overall picture reflects a tremendous numerical increase in post-secondary enrolment across Asia.

The substantial growth in Asian tertiary enrolment is largely a response to demographic exigencies, as countries have had to invest heavily in the education sector to meet the growing demand for schooling among members of the youth bulge. Larger numbers of students are choosing to continue their education, partly in response to high levels of unemployment and the need to gain a competitive edge through the acquisition of higher-level knowledge and marketable skills. Governments have also become more cognizant of the economic and social benefits of higher education. The OECD has estimated that among member countries the long-term effect on economic output of one additional year of education is between 3 and 6 per cent (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006).

Increased private financing has also contributed to expanded access to tertiary education across the region. In countries such as India, most tertiary institutions are still financed by the public sector, but private provision of tertiary education is relatively widespread in East Asia. In Japan and the Republic of Korea about 80 per cent of post-secondary students are enrolled in independent private institutions, and in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Macao Special Administrative Region of China, the share is above 60 per cent. Access to private, often high-quality higher education is often the prerogative of the privileged elite, though in a few countries this is not the case; as suggested by the relatively high ratio of private tertiary enrolment, Japan and the Republic of Korea are among the exceptions (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006b).

Tertiary education in Asia has become increasingly attractive to foreign investors interested in providing various “transnational” study options; among the most popular are matriculation at an established facility or branch in the beneficiary’s country, distance education, and Internet-based e-learning (Mohamedbhai, 2002). A benefit of these new configurations is increased access to tertiary education at no or low cost to Governments. Training young people

in their home countries reduces the likelihood of brain drain. The Governments of countries such as China, India, Malaysia and Singapore have become increasingly aware of the advantages associated with these educational alternatives and are allowing prestigious foreign universities to set up local “branch campuses” or “subsidiaries”; indeed, many are actively seeking to establish such relationships (United Nations, 2006a). The downside of transnationally delivered private tertiary education is that profit—rather than the overall economic, social and cultural development of the host country—often constitutes the primary objective (Mohamedbhai, 2002). Quality control mechanisms must be established to ensure that the graduates of such systems are adequately prepared to compete in the job market. It is also necessary to provide equivalent opportunities for those in the public system who may not be able to afford options tailored to the privileged elite.

Vocational and technical education

In both developed and developing regions, vocational and technical education provides important job-related skills that are typically not acquired through academic studies. In Asia, such education is particularly critical in the less developed countries, where significant numbers of youth have had no access to formal education or have dropped out of primary or secondary school. These young people need alternatives to prepare them for the workforce and improve their opportunities in life.

There is limited information on the range of vocational and technical education opportunities across Asia. The Government of India, in collaboration with various non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations, runs the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana for youth in both rural and urban areas. These schemes focus on self-employment through vocational training and entrepreneurship development. Industrial training institutes and upper secondary schools also provide vocational training courses both for youth who are in school and for those who have dropped out. The skills young people learn help them start and operate small businesses (Kingra, 2005). In some countries, education has become increasingly commercialized, with priority given to technical training for high-performing students. In China, vocational and technical education opportunities tend to be concentrated in cities; young people from rural and/or poor backgrounds are often at a clear disadvantage in terms of access (Xiaoying, 2005).

Successful vocational and technical education programmes focus on building practical skills but are also involved in employment promotion, ensuring that students learn job-search strategies and participate in internships. Graduates must possess broad competencies, transferable skills and relevant knowledge that will enable them to function effectively in today’s flexible work environment (Alvarez, Gillies and Bradsher, 2003). Both the public and the private sector have a vital role to play in the development and provision of vocational training, with particular attention given to increased investment in internships, apprenticeships, and other opportunities for practical experience. When expanding the provision of vocational and technical education, Governments and policy makers should guard against investing in ad hoc crash-training courses aimed at addressing rising youth unemployment (Asian Development Bank, 2004). These often represent stopgap solutions and typically have no long-term impact. Finally,

steps must be taken to ensure that disadvantaged youth have access to vocational and technical learning options.

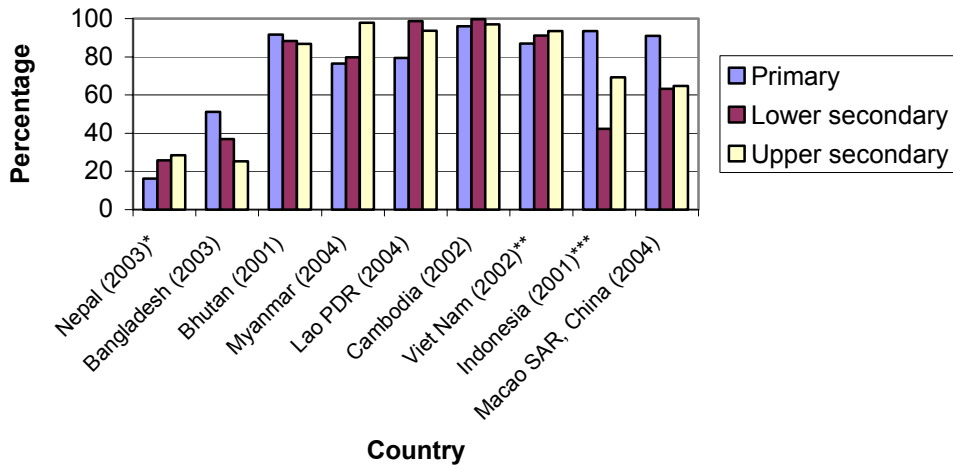
Quality issues

According to a comparative study undertaken by the OECD, education systems in East Asia outperform those in other parts of the world. In 2003, the six East Asian countries participating in PISA, which measured the performance of 15-year-old students in mathematics, were ranked among the top ten in the final evaluation (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006).

The quality of education tends to be high in East Asia but is somewhat uneven in other Asian subregions. Many countries that have achieved near-universal enrolment in basic education have substandard school, library and laboratory facilities, and learning environments are often less than optimal. Such conditions produce adults who are inadequately prepared to participate fully in society. The World Bank (2006) notes that in Nepal, for example, among the 30 per cent of 15- to 19-year-olds who never made it past the third grade, fewer than 60 per cent can read a sentence.

The lack of adequately trained teachers contributes to the poor quality of schooling in many parts of Asia. A considerable number of primary school teachers, particularly in rural areas, have only obtained a secondary education themselves. As illustrated in figure 1.4, the percentage of trained teachers at the secondary level varies widely from one country to another. In some countries, such as Bangladesh and Bhutan, the proportion of qualified teachers decreases at higher levels of education. The opposite is true in Myanmar, Nepal and Viet Nam, where the share of trained teachers increases with the level of education; this may be a reflection of the lower numbers of students at higher levels and the consequent need for fewer teachers. Priority must be given to strengthening teacher motivation and dedication. In many countries, teaching is one of the less economically rewarding jobs, so incentives might be needed to improve overall levels of commitment and performance. Governments could make teaching more attractive by raising salaries but also by introducing or strengthening opportunities for further training and career advancement. Better facilities and working conditions and improved access to teaching aids and materials would also enhance teacher performance.

Figure 1.4
Percentage of trained teachers in primary education and in lower and upper secondary education, selected countries in Asia



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Institute for Statistics (data accessed from www.uis.unesco.org on 18 January 2007).

Notes: Statistics for each country reflect the latest available data. The full country names for those in shortened form are Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Macao Special Administrative Region of China.

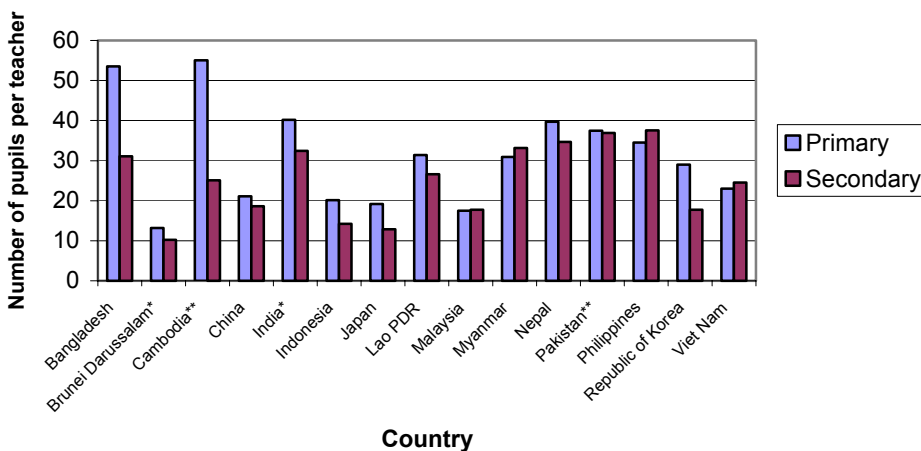
*Statistics for upper secondary education are based on 2002 data.

**Data for upper secondary education are estimates from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

***Data for all types of education are estimates from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Large class sizes and high student-teacher ratios are common in many Asian countries. Despite evidence suggesting that reducing class size does not necessarily influence student performance (World Bank, 2005), it is unlikely that the quality of education is completely unaffected by the ratio of pupils to teachers. As indicated in figure 1.5, Bangladesh, Cambodia and India have relatively high student-teacher ratios in primary education, ranging from an average of 40 to 55, whereas Brunei Darussalam, China and Malaysia report much lower ratios of between 15 and 21. Similar disparities are evident at the secondary level.

Figure 1.5
Student-teacher ratios in primary and secondary education in selected countries in Asia



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Institute for Statistics (data accessed from www.uis.unesco.org on 18 January 2007).

Notes: Statistics for each country reflect the latest available data. The full country names for those in shortened form are Lao People's Democratic Republic and Macao Special Administrative Region of China.

*UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimate for primary education.

**UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimate for secondary education.

Content is a critical factor in determining the quality of education. The importance of a solid academic curriculum is undisputed, but there are other aspects of educational content that require consideration as well. It has been observed that rather than emphasizing pluralism and ensuring access and tolerance for all, education is at times excessively politicized and unduly influences young people's identity formation and political affiliations. This can contribute to the creation of segregated communities along ethno-linguistic and religious lines (Hettige, 2005).

Public expenditure on education is largely restricted to the primary level; as education at the higher levels has become increasingly privatized, public spending for tertiary and technical education has declined (Rizvi and others, 2005). While primary school enrolment has increased tremendously across the region, rates of investment and enrolment at the secondary and higher levels lag far behind. As a consequence, large numbers of young Asians are transitioning to adulthood lacking the knowledge and skills necessary to participate fully in their communities and in the global economy.

The impact of globalization

Globalization has improved the accessibility of a good education for many young people in Asia. Large numbers of previously unserved youth are benefiting from a wide range of innovative educational options, including opportunities originating outside their national borders; distance education is particularly important within this context. Many countries in the region are relying on information and communication technologies (ICT) to improve access to schooling. ICT-based distance education has been used to overcome time, space and geographic restrictions, allowing teachers and students to interact and share learning materials. In China, there are 2,735 radio and television universities at the national, provincial, prefecture and county levels offering more than 18,000 classes. In 2001, these universities produced 174,300 new graduates and enrolled 216,000 new students. According to incomplete statistics, at least 10 million students have successfully completed their studies through these university programmes (United Nations Development Programme, 2004). Young people pursuing their education through less traditional means are often better able to acquire knowledge and skills that will allow them to function effectively in a growing global economy driven by technology. Modern educational alternatives are generally positive for those who are able to benefit; however, they have also given rise to new inequalities, as youth from privileged families tend to be better placed to take advantage of the relevant opportunities.

The impact of globalization on the education sector is also evident in the increased demand for skills in science and engineering. Many Asian education systems have responded to this demand. In 2002, almost 650,000 science and engineering degrees were conferred in Asia, compared with approximately 357,000 in Europe and 100,000 in North America. The same year, Asian tertiary institutions granted twice as many degrees in the social and behavioural sciences

as their European counterparts and about 160,000 more than North American institutions. Asian youth are also increasingly able to access higher education opportunities outside their national borders, competing successfully for places in science and engineering programmes abroad. Between 1983 and 2003, institutions of higher learning in the United States awarded 141,826 doctoral degrees to persons of Asian origin; of this number, 120,698 were in science and engineering (National Science Foundation, 2006). Asian youth able to take advantage of these opportunities are well prepared for entry into an international labour market in which science and engineering dominate as fields of specialization. Essentially, many young people in Asia are improving their ability to participate in the global economy by training in fields that currently have some of the lowest rates of unemployment.

Ultimately, the subjects studied and the qualifications obtained by students are a reflection of the socio-economic opportunities available to individuals or particular segments of society in each country. For example, poorer students cannot always afford programmes with higher unit costs. The divide frequently becomes apparent at the lower levels, where the quality of education may not be adequate to properly prepare students for tertiary studies. Schools in low-income countries, especially in rural areas, often have poorly equipped science facilities or no such facilities at all, limiting student choices with regard to fields of study. Rural-urban disparities persist, and poorer students in outlying areas are more likely than others in their age group to choose fields that have little relevance within the globalization framework.

New global production systems require a workforce that is skilled, flexible, and adaptable to rapid change in the business environment (United Nations, 2006b). Significant progress is being made in building such a workforce, but action must be taken to reach those who remain outside the education system, as they will be unable to transition successfully into gainful employment or to participate effectively in the global economy.

Aspects of inequity in access to education

In almost all Asian countries, regardless of development status, there are marked inequalities in access to education at all levels. Education is an indicator of social class and an avenue for upward social mobility and therefore plays a key role in determining social position. A university graduate is frequently perceived to have a higher social standing than a skilled worker (even one with vocational schooling), and a trained worker is ranked higher in the social hierarchy than someone without an education (Hettige, 1998). Easier access to schools and the ability to pay private tuition as well as after-school tutoring fees give well-to-do children a distinct advantage over their poorer peers. The result is considerable inequality in the level of preparedness among young adults to make the transition to productive adulthood characterized by active socio-economic, political and civic involvement.

Statistics showing wide income-based disparities in educational attainment confirm that poverty is a major barrier to schooling in Asia. Poor parents are often forced to involve their children in livelihood work and to choose which among them to educate. In the Philippines, more than 70 per cent of the shortfall in universal primary education consists of children from poor households. In India, the median number of years of schooling completed by 15- to 19-

year-olds is 10 years higher among the richest 20 per cent than among the poorest 40 per cent (United Nations Population Fund, 2002).

Factors other than poverty also interfere with the educational participation of various socio-economic groups in Asia. Those living in rural areas, females of all ages, youth with disabilities, indigenous youth and ethnic minorities, and young people who are refugees or have been displaced by war or natural disasters often have limited access to education; because this places them at a social disadvantage, they tend to be excluded from household, community, and national decision-making processes.

Rural youth

In terms of educational opportunities, rural children and youth are particularly disadvantaged. Infrastructure and facilities are often substandard in rural areas, schools are fewer and farther away from the target population, and qualified teachers are reluctant to move to outlying districts. In developing countries, good schools tend to be scarce in remote locales. Access to well-equipped schools may depend on their affordability and on the availability of reliable transportation, neither of which is assured for most rural children in developing countries. Distance learning is rarely available outside the major cities. Educational disparities between rural and urban areas are far greater in less developed Asian countries such as Cambodia, India and Sri Lanka than in more developed countries such as Japan and the Republic of Korea.

Levels of academic performance tend to be considerably higher for urban students than for rural learners, particularly in science and mathematics, ICT education, and foreign language studies. Even in basic skills such as literacy, significant rural-urban disparities exist. In Pakistan, the adult literacy rate is 44 per cent in rural areas and 72 per cent in urban areas; however, the rural-urban ratio of 0.61 is nearly double the 1972 ratio of 0.34, suggesting that some progress is being made in bridging the rural-urban gap in literacy (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005a).

For many among the rural poor, personal circumstances preclude a sustained commitment to education. As rural incomes are often seasonal, poorer rural families may have to sacrifice their children's schooling for the family's sustenance. During harvest time, older children are sometimes needed to work in the fields or to care for younger siblings. In times of bad harvest or flooding, parents may be forced to pull their children out of school. Children who are poorly educated make the transition into youth and young adulthood with very limited job prospects; most inherit poor livelihoods, remaining unskilled and unprotected labourers for the rest of their lives. One of the dangers of such marginalization is radicalization.

Young women

Gender disparities in access to education underlie the tendency for women to have fewer opportunities to contribute to decisions affecting them and their households. Long-standing cultural barriers, social customs and beliefs, and discriminatory practices place many girls and young women at a disadvantage in terms of educational access. Gender gaps tend to be greater at the secondary and tertiary levels; typically, fewer girls than boys remain in the education system

once they have completed primary school. In some countries, however, girls are more likely than boys to continue their education. At the secondary level, female enrolment exceeds male enrolment in Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Macao Special Administrative Region of China, Sri Lanka, and the Islamic Republic of Iran (see figure 1.3). In Brunei Darussalam, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines and Thailand, females outnumber males in tertiary education (see table 1.3).

Young men and young women are often steered into particular fields of study. Between 2 and 39 per cent of Asian university graduates in the countries highlighted in table 1.5 received degrees in science-and-technology-related fields, including traditional sciences, engineering, manufacturing and construction, with males constituting a clear majority in almost all cases. Asian females tended to pursue studies in disciplines such as health, humanities, education and social sciences; however, in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Lao People's Democratic Republic, males were also predominant in these fields of study. Mongolia is the only country in which females outnumbered males in science and technology (if only slightly), though this may derive from the fact that with 65 per cent of all graduates being women, young Mongolian females are significantly better represented than their male counterparts in tertiary education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006b).

Table 1.5
Graduates by sex and field of education in selected Asian countries, 2004 or most recent data
(percentage of the total)

Country	Science and technology fields	Percentage female	Other fields	Percentage female
Bangladesh	13	24	85	34
Brunei Darussalam	11	42	88	67
Cambodia	15	12	85	32
Hong Kong SAR	28	26	47	68
Islamic Republic of Iran	37	30	60	56
Japan	22	15	73	59
Lao People's Democratic Republic	7	21	93	39
Macao SAR ^a	2	..	98	..
Mongolia	16	51	84	68
Philippines ^b	21	47	72	68
Republic of Korea	39	31	61	61
Viet Nam	18	14	77	52

Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Global Education Digest 2006: Comparing Education Statistics Across the World* (Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006) (UIS/SD/06-01).

Note: Two dots (..) indicate that the item is not available.

^a SAR: Special Administrative Region of China.

^b Provisional data.

There appears to be no correlation between national per capita income and gender disparities in education, which supports the assertion that economic development alone does not translate into full access to education for females (Filmer, King and Pritchett, 1998). Where gender disparities have been reduced, policies and interventions have included provisions for economic investment but have focused primarily on eliminating cultural, social and ideological barriers to female education. The international community has placed the problem of gender

disparities in education high on the development agenda, adopting international targets for improvement. The third Millennium Development Goal, for example, calls for the elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels by no later than 2015. The 2005 target has clearly been missed, and much greater effort is needed to achieve the objectives for 2015 in many parts of Asia.

Youth with disabilities

For youth with disabilities, inequalities in access to education are extreme. Reliable data on children and youth with disabilities are scarce, and many countries do not provide enrolment figures for this group. Estimates suggest that globally about 35 per cent of all out-of-school children have disabilities, and that less than 2 per cent of children with one or more disabilities are enrolled in school (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005b). Available statistics indicate that in the Asia-Pacific region less than 5 per cent of children with disabilities are enrolled in school (Jonsson and Wiman, 2001).

Some Asian countries are taking steps to improve educational access for children and youth with disabilities. In China, for example, children with physical disabilities are mainstreamed into regular schools, and 80 per cent of those between the ages of 7 and 16 who are blind or deaf or have intellectual disabilities are receiving a formal education. In the Republic of Korea, 83.6 per cent of children and youth with disabilities (aged 6-18 years) are enrolled in either special or regular school programmes at the primary or secondary level.

Although measures have been taken in some countries to facilitate the education and training of children and young people with disabilities, in many parts of Asia significant gaps remain. In the Philippines, for example, only 2 per cent of school-age children and youth with disabilities are enrolled in formal educational institutions (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2006a).

In December 2006, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol. Article 24 of the Convention recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to an inclusive education at all levels on an equal-opportunity basis. Inclusive education enables persons with disabilities to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to participate effectively in a free society while also allowing students without disabilities to experience diversity in various forms. The Convention requires States Parties to fulfil certain obligations. It is necessary to ensure that teachers receive adequate training and possess the requisite skills to provide quality education in inclusive settings. In addition, there must be “reasonable accommodation” of individual learners’ needs, which means, inter alia, that the school environment must be characterized by full accessibility in all possible respects; this may involve, for example, providing both stair and ramp access to all physical learning sites, producing educational materials in accessible formats, and facilitating the learning of Braille and sign language. The Convention is currently in the process of signature and ratification, and several Asian countries have signaled their willingness to accept its terms.

Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities

Many Asian countries have multi-ethnic populations. In fact, over 60 per cent of the world's indigenous peoples live in Asia. India alone is home to 90 million indigenous people distributed among approximately 400 tribal groups (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005b). Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child officially recognizes the right of children of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and persons of indigenous origin to use their respective languages, but the lack of bilingual and culturally sensitive formal learning opportunities prevents many young people from obtaining a decent education; children or youth who want to learn but are unable to understand or communicate well in the primary language of instruction are far less likely to succeed (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1999). Because relatively little effort is made to accommodate their linguistic and cultural needs, indigenous children tend to complete fewer years of schooling than non-indigenous children, and their educational performance is frequently substandard. Many indigenous children live in remote areas with poor infrastructure, making access to schooling difficult or impossible. Dropout, repetition and failure rates are high in indigenous schools. Since education services in indigenous areas are generally underfunded, materials and facilities tend to be inadequate. In most cases, formal education systems are not well adapted to traditional ways of learning, and the curriculum does not address the histories, knowledge, technologies and value systems of indigenous peoples. This lack of adaptation and accommodation not only distances students from their own cultures but may also contribute to low self-esteem and the feeling of being unable to cope in a modern world (United Nations, in press).

Improved collection and appropriate disaggregation of data on indigenous peoples would make it easier to identify and address the obstacles faced by the younger members of this group in obtaining an education. Precise data on educational attainment among indigenous peoples are scarce, but the limited statistics that are available point to significant disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous populations. The results of the 1991 census in Bangladesh indicated that only 18 per cent of the country's indigenous peoples were literate, compared with a national figure of 40 per cent. Viet Nam has a national literacy rate of 87 per cent, though for some indigenous groups the corresponding rate is as low as 4 per cent (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005a). These data on literacy apply to entire populations, but one important implication is that indigenous youth often lack the basic skills they need to function effectively in their communities.

Because of cultural, social and economic barriers, young indigenous females are at a greater disadvantage than their male counterparts in terms of educational access. Statistics indicate that among indigenous communities in two Cambodian provinces the literacy rate is only 2 per cent for women but 20 per cent for men, and in Rajasthan, India, the corresponding rates are 8 and 39 per cent (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005a).

Youth participation in the labour market

Many countries in Asia have been able to take advantage of their large supply of young, cheap labour to develop vibrant export-oriented manufacturing sectors. Industrial development opportunities have expanded as foreign companies ranging from medium-sized enterprises to

large transnationals, especially from OECD countries, have been forced by domestic production costs to move offshore in order to remain competitive. This is particularly the case for the production of goods such as shoes, clothes, toys and electronic appliances, for which low-skill, labour-intensive work is required (Oxfam, 2003). Industrial expansion has created millions of new job opportunities in Asia, initially in the vibrant economies of Hong Kong Special Administration Region of China, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan Province of China; later in China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand; and more recently in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Viet Nam. Young people are a major resource in these labour markets. They may be more flexible and industrious, more willing to relocate for work, and better attuned to modern technology. Because they must contend with competition from other youth as well as from older and more experienced members of the labour force, young workers are more likely than older workers to accept short-term contracts, low wages and minimal benefits.

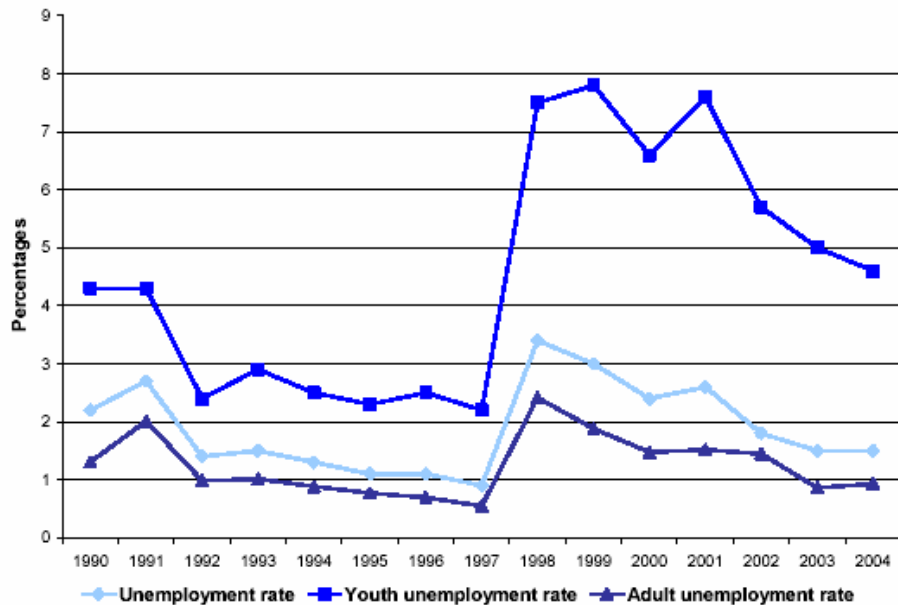
Younger workers constitute a ready supply of inexpensive labour and have played a key role in helping Asian economies meet the global demand for an ever-expanding array of goods. Many of the new job opportunities created by globalization, especially in manufacturing, have been in occupations dominated by women. Encouraged by improved prospects for employment, millions of young rural women have moved to urban areas, securing jobs in factories producing goods such as electronics, clothing and toys. Available data suggest that females represent an important part of rural-to-urban migration in Asia. Historical and cultural factors have combined with specific developments in the industrial and service sectors of cities to expand employment opportunities for women (Lim, 1993). At a broader level, young people in particular have helped the urban informal economy to diversify and become an integral part of the economy of Asian cities. More than half of Asian workers are employed in the urban informal economy (Hugo, 2003).

Unemployment, underemployment and the poor quality of work

Although large numbers of young Asians are better prepared than ever before to enter the labour force, many are unable to find a job. Unemployment is a major problem among youth, as opportunities for securing decent work remain limited. Employers may discriminate against young workers for various reasons, the most obvious being that youth are often at entry levels and lack the experience and knowledge needed in the workplace. In South-East Asia and the Pacific youth are five times more likely than older workers to be unemployed, and in South Asia and East Asia they are almost three times more likely to be without a job (International Labour Office, 2006). It should be noted that employment and unemployment figures mask problems of underemployment and poverty among working youth.

Since the dynamics of economic growth help determine a country's capacity to absorb new entrants to the labour market, employment prospects for young people are more sensitive to economic growth than are those for older workers (Morris, 2006). Figure 1.6 shows that the surge in unemployment in Thailand following the Asian economic crisis of 1997/98 was much higher for youth than for adults, and that while the post-crisis recovery saw a return to pre-crisis levels of unemployment for the population as a whole, youth unemployment declined only slightly, remaining five times higher than the adult level.

Figure 1.6
Youth, adult and total unemployment rates in Thailand, 1990-2004



Note: Youth are defined as persons in the 15–24 year age group. After 2001 the “relaxed” definition of unemployment is used to include young people who are without at least one hour of work and available for work.

Source: Elizabeth Morris, “Globalization and its effects on youth employment trends in Asia”, a paper presented at the Regional Expert Group Meeting on Development Challenges for Young People, Bangkok, 28-30 March 2006.

The Asian crisis had a similar impact on unemployment trends in other countries in the region. The most significant jump in youth unemployment between 1995 and 2005 occurred in South-East Asia and the Pacific, where the number of jobless young people rose by an astounding 85.5 per cent, compared with an increase of 14.8 per cent globally (International Labour Office, 2006).

Although it would appear that levels of educational attainment, employment and remuneration are positively correlated, this is not always the case in Asia. Unemployment levels in the region tend to be higher among those with a secondary or higher education than among those who have not made it past the primary level. Low levels of technology use translate into weak demand for better educated youth, resulting in unemployment in skilled categories (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2006b). This has certainly been true for Indonesia; in the years just before and after the Asian crisis, unemployment rates were highest among those with a senior high school or university education (see table 1.6). To some extent, this may reflect the willingness of better educated people to spend additional time looking for work commensurate with their expectations. Additionally, those who have obtained a higher-level education may find it easier to forego “employment at any cost” because they often come from better-off families (Ahmed, 1999). The unemployment of educated young people may also indicate a mismatch between their training and the types of jobs that are available.

Table 1.6
Unemployment trends in Indonesia by level of education, 1994-1998 (percentage)

Level of education	Unemployment rate			
	1994	1996	1997	1998
No schooling	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.4
Primary school not completed	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.3
Primary school	2.3	2.5	2.5	2.7
Junior high school (general)	6.3	6.8	6.0	7.5
Junior high school (vocational)	6.2	6.9	5.6	7.4
Senior high school (general)	16.9	14.9	14.1	15.3
Senior high school (vocational)	11.0	11.3	11.3	13.3
Diploma I/II	8.8	8.5	6.8	6.4
Diploma III	10.6	10.2	9.7	11.8
University	14.8	13.9	11.8	12.2

Source: Iftikhar Ahmed, “Additional insights on Indonesia’s unemployment crisis”, a paper presented at the Workshop on Food and Nutrition, Jakarta, 10-12 May 1999.

The figures in table 1.6 relate to open unemployment, but such data represent only the tip of the iceberg. Underemployment is also a major problem in Asia—one to which youth are particularly vulnerable. Unlike their more affluent peers, young people from poorer families cannot afford to be unemployed and are compelled to take whatever jobs are available. They often work part-time or intermittently and tend to become actively involved in the informal economy; their chances for upward mobility are generally limited. While short periods of job search are expected for new entrants to the labour force, extended periods of unemployment and economic non-participation can have serious consequences for national development in general and for young people in particular, resulting in a loss in production and an increase in poverty among youth (Morris, 2006). Many young people who are unable to find work become frustrated and discouraged and eventually give up and drop out of the labour force altogether. Others stay in the education system much longer than they intended. Providing young people with chances to obtain decent employment early in their working lives would help many avoid the vicious circle of chronic unemployment or underemployment, low income and poor working conditions, and social exclusion and despair.

Because of the demands of the labour market and intense competition, many young people who are able to obtain employment in the formal economy end up doing menial work, are vulnerable to abuse and job insecurity, and may face various workplace risks owing to the lack of occupational safety. In China, for example, 38 per cent of youth work without the protection of employment contracts and are therefore defenceless against job loss and exploitation (International Labour Office, 2006). Furthermore, foreign companies, which are often the primary source of the increased demand for labour, do not necessarily have long-term commitments to a particular country; as wages in the host country rise, many relocate to areas offering cheaper labour. In recent years a number of companies have moved from South-East Asian countries such as Malaysia to East Asian countries such as China and Viet Nam, where labour costs are lower.

In certain areas of the region, especially South Asia, young women are much less likely than young men to be part of the workforce. With labour force participation rates of 29.1 per cent for young women and 64.2 per cent for young men, South Asia has the largest gender differential in labour force participation in the world. This is largely a reflection of cultural constraints and the absence of opportunities for women to combine work and family roles.

Young women find it especially difficult to secure decent work (Morris, 2006). Those who do earn wages are likely to be employed in the informal economy. They are typically paid less than men and also do a disproportionate share of unpaid work at home. The labour market transformation brought on by globalization has exposed women to higher risks of exploitation in the workplace. Many new jobs are targeted at young women because they are perceived to be more amenable to control, more nimble-fingered, and cheaper to employ than their male counterparts. In many cases, young women work long hours in substandard conditions for subsistence wages, are subjected to sexual abuse, and are routinely discharged if they marry, become pregnant or grow “too old” (Hancock, 2000).

It is important to note that in response to youth employment challenges in the region, many Governments in Asia have encouraged the development of entrepreneurship and self-employment among young people. However, relatively few microfinancing initiatives specifically target this group. Those that do tend to be implemented by non-governmental organizations or private banks, and many initiatives are too small in scale and lacking in resources to make a noticeable dent in youth unemployment (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2006b). Consequently, even if youth are interested in establishing their own enterprises—an option that could help lift other youth out of poverty—relatively few will be able to obtain the resources necessary to do so.

Urbanization and related issues

Urban residents in Asia—more than 270 million of whom are youth—currently account for almost 50 per cent of the world’s total urban population. By 2030, the number of youth living in urban areas in Asia is expected to climb to 533 million; the region’s total urban population is projected to increase from 1,553 million to 2,663 million, with the proportion of urban residents rising from 40 to 55 per cent of the overall population (United Nations, 2005b). Many youth were born in cities, while others migrated there from rural areas either alone or as part of a family unit. East Asia is the most urbanized part of the region and South-Central Asia the least urbanized, with city-dwellers accounting for 41.6 and 29.8 per cent of the respective populations. At the subregional level, two in three residents in East Asia and almost one in two residents in South-Central and South-East Asia are expected to live in urban areas. Projections indicate even greater variations between individual countries (Hugo, 2003).

Although opportunities for education and employment are generally better in urban areas than in rural areas, inflexible labour markets and education systems have not always been able to adequately absorb urban youth, making the members of this group more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. In Asia, as in other regions, the process of urbanization has been accompanied by increased deprivation among certain groups. Poverty ranges between 12 and 40 per cent in urban

areas, and in many Asian cities, 30 to 40 per cent of the population live in slums. In 2005, the slum populations of South Asia and East Asia were estimated at 276 million and 272 million respectively; with figures such as these, it is no surprise that the slum population in Asia far exceeds that in any other region of the world. In slums, residents of all ages commonly deal with challenges relating to inadequate shelter and the limited availability of public services such as water and sanitation; youth in such situations are at a particular disadvantage, given their insecurity of tenure, relatively poor job prospects, and often insufficient incomes. The anger and despair arising from these circumstances lead some youth to engage in crime, violence and other antisocial behaviour (Hugo, 2003). The emergence of various forms of delinquency, including the formation of youth gangs, is often a reaction to exclusion and marginalization in urban areas. According to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, developing countries have seen an overall increase in urban crime, and youth crime has risen exponentially. In crimes involving youth, young people are as likely to be the perpetrators as the victims. Young female migrants in urban areas are particularly at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse (Hugo, 2003).

The impact of globalization and urbanization on youth culture, values and social lives

Globalization, urbanization and the changes they have precipitated have brought about a profound transformation in the values, culture and everyday lives of young people. The openness of Asian economies and the exposure of youth to foreign goods, services and information have encouraged the development of an international youth culture and facilitated the spread of Western cultural practices, not all of which are positive. Rapidly developing communication technologies have enabled many young people from countries large and small to access information that may otherwise have been unavailable. Youth more readily challenge traditional authority structures that sometimes constrain or guide their development, but they also experience disorientation and anomie caused by the day-to-day experience of clashes between traditional and modern norms and values (Yap, 2004).

At the kinship level, the focus has shifted away from traditional extended families to more nuclear structures. This has been associated with a reduction in patriarchal power and control over younger family members. Young people in Asia today have greater autonomy than previous generations of youth, particularly with regard to choosing a partner. It has been asserted that no aspect of family life in Asia has changed more than matrimonial conventions (Jones and Ramdas, 2004). In the past, parents tended to play an active role in the selection of a spouse and the arrangement of the nuptials; today, however, the “love-marriage” paradigm is dominant. There have been significant increases in single-parent families and in single and two-person households. With rates of international migration on the rise, transnational families have also become more prevalent (Hugo, 2006). These changes in the family structure have contributed to the erosion of many of the traditional constraints imposed on young people, with mixed repercussions; young people have been given the opportunity to exercise their independence, but the support systems they were once able to rely upon in times of difficulty have weakened. As traditional norms are increasingly challenged and superseded by contemporary mores and values, new lifestyles are emerging that place many young people at risk in their personal and social lives.

The role of risky personal behaviour

Although information on sexual and reproductive health is readily available in most Asian countries, many young people engage in risky sexual practices and are therefore vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, and the dangers of unsafe abortions. A double standard prevails in the region whereby sexual promiscuity is accepted and even encouraged among men but strictly prohibited for women.

Early pregnancy, with its attendant high risks of maternal and child mortality, remains a problem in the region. In 2004, 33 per cent of the teenagers in Bangladesh and 21 per cent in Nepal were pregnant or had borne a child. The average age of first exposure to intercourse is low in Asia, contributing to early childbearing patterns; in some countries the vast majority of young people experience sexual intercourse before the age of 20. The results of a recent demographic and health survey indicate that more than 60 per cent of young women in Nepal have engaged in sexual intercourse by the time they are 18 years old, and almost 80 per cent have done so by the time they reach the age of 20 (see table 1.7).

Table 1.7
Age at first sexual experience for young women in selected Asian countries

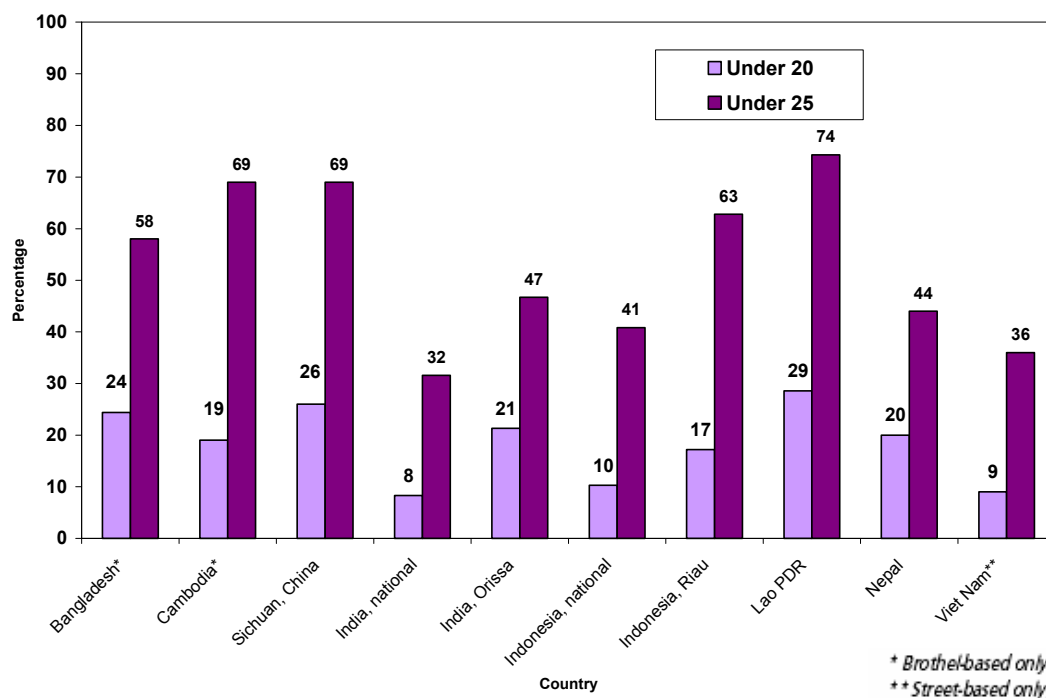
Country	Year	Age by which first sexual intercourse occurred (percentage of those surveyed)					Never had intercourse
		Age (years)					
		15	18	20	22	25	
Cambodia	2000	3.5	28.0	50.8	65.8	75.8	16.3
Indonesia	2002/03	6.7	27.8	45.9	60.9	75.4	13.9
Nepal	2001	16.7	61.3	78.6	86.8	91.8	4.5
Philippines	2003	2.8	14.8	33.6	49.3	68.2	18.3

Source: MEASURE DHS, STATcompiler (available from <http://www.measuredhs.com>; accessed on 28 March 2007).

Note: The women surveyed ranged from 25 to 29 years of age.

In several countries in the region, especially in South Asia, one third to one half of all childbearing occurs before the age of 25, and in rural areas the proportions are even higher. Early childbearing is associated with reduced participation in higher education and formal employment. Many engage in sexual intercourse and bear children at a relatively young age because of early marriage, but premarital sex is also increasing in the region despite strong cultural opposition (Gubhaju, 2002). Associated with this trend are heightened risks of sexual exploitation and disease transmission. In some countries, the sexual abuse of teenage girls and the increase in the proportion of sex workers under the age of 25 constitute serious problems (Haub and Huong, 2003); as shown in figure 1.7, young women in the latter group make up the majority of female sex workers in Asian cities.

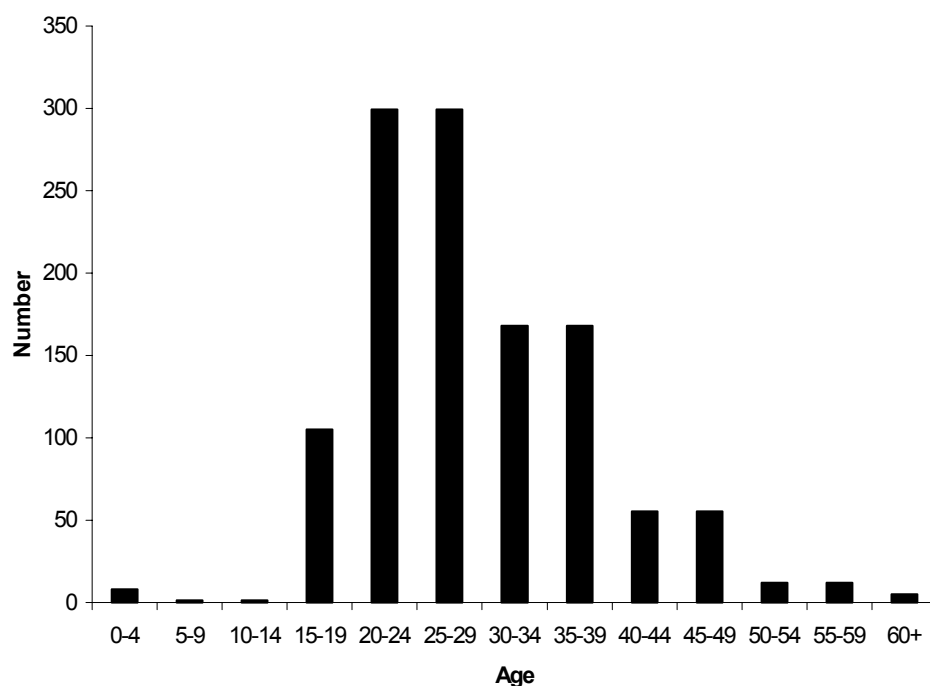
Figure 1.7
Proportion of female sex workers who are teenagers or under the age of 25, selected sites in Asia



Source: National and regional behavioural surveillance survey data; see Cai Cai, “Globalization and its impact on youth health in Asia”, a paper presented at the Regional Expert Group Meeting on Development Challenges for Young People in Asia, Bangkok, 28-30 March 2006.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) reports that multiple forms of risky behaviour are driving serious AIDS epidemics in Asia, and the interplay between injecting drug use and unprotected sex, much of it commercial, is at the heart of the problem. Evidence of increased levels of sexual risk-taking among young Asians has raised concerns about the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (East-West Center, 2002). An estimated 2.2 million young people live with HIV/AIDS in Asia, and half of all new infections occur among youth (Cai, 2006). Statistics for the latter part of 2000 indicate that in Indonesia, HIV prevalence was highest for the age group 20-30, though the number of cases among 15- to 19-year-olds was also significant (see figure 1.8). Although data are limited, there is also evidence of an increase in sexually transmitted diseases among young people in Viet Nam, and youth are becoming an increasingly important group in the rapidly growing HIV-infected population (Haub and Huong, 2003).

Figure 1.8
HIV-infected population in Indonesia by age, November 2000



Source: Indonesia, Directorate-General of Communicable Disease Control and EH Ministry of Health (2001).

Other negative lifestyle factors, including tobacco use, excessive alcohol consumption, substance abuse, and poor dietary practices, also undermine the ability of youth to move towards independent and responsible adulthood and full participation in society. Table 1.8 shows the prevalence of drinking, smoking and drug use among youth in selected Asian countries. Young men are far more likely than young women to engage in these practices and to start at a younger age (East-West Center, 2002).

Table 1.8
Percentage of males and females aged 15-19 years who drink, smoke or use drugs, selected countries in Asia

Country (year)	Drink		Smoke		Use drugs	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
China (2000)	37	9	36	1	..	..
India (1998/99)	2	1	14 ^a	2 ^a	..	..
Indonesia (1988)	2	—	38	1	1	—
Japan (2000) ^b	39	31	26	12	..	..
Nepal (2000)	21	11	12	4	..	..
Philippines (1994)	47	12	28	3	2	—
Republic of Korea (2000)	46	51	21	11	3	3
Thailand (1994)	43	16	33	2	6	1

Source: East-West Center Research Program, Population and Health Studies, *The Future of Population in Asia* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2002).

Note: Two dots (..) indicate that the information is not available. An em dash (—) indicates that the amount is nil or negligible.

^a Includes chewing tobacco.

^b For youth between the ages of 15 and 18 only.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published data in 2006 showing that while the prevalence of cigarette use among young people in Asia is among the lowest in the world, the region ranks highest in terms of other tobacco use (this category includes but is not limited to chewing tobacco, snuff, dip and cigars). It is estimated that more than one third of the tobacco consumed in Asia is smokeless; some of the more traditional options include betel quid, tobacco with lime, and tobacco tooth powder. Tobacco use is prevalent not only among men and women, but also among children and teenagers (Gupta and Ray, 2003). In China and Indonesia more than 30 per cent of young men smoke, but only 1 per cent of young women do. In the Philippines, 14 per cent of children begin smoking before reaching age 10, and in some parts of China the corresponding proportion is over 20 per cent (Cai, 2006). Young women in Japan and the Republic of Korea are more likely to smoke than their female counterparts in other Asian countries.

The prevalence of precocious alcohol use varies considerably depending on the cultural and religious environment. Although alcohol consumption is very limited among young people aged 15-19 years in countries such as India and Indonesia, almost half of the young men in this age group drink alcohol in the Philippines, the Republic of Korea and Thailand. Among the countries surveyed in table 1.8, rates of alcohol consumption are generally lower among women, except in the Republic of Korea.

Asian countries report very low rates of drug use, but recent statistics point to a growing problem, especially in urban areas. One estimate indicates that in Indonesia drugs are used by around 2 per cent of the population, or around 4 million residents, 1.3 million of whom live in Jakarta (Utomo and others, 2000). Hospitals in the country's capital are reporting a surge in drug overdoses among young people. Survey data on 400 intravenous drug users in Jakarta indicated that 90 per cent were male and that 95 per cent were younger than 30 years of age. In China's Yunnan province, more than half of the registered drug users are under the age of 25, and more than half of the injecting drug users in India, Myanmar and Thailand are between 15 and 24 years old (Cai, 2006).

There is a clear link between globalization and the increased prevalence of obesity. Multinational fast-food companies in OECD countries are rapidly expanding into Asia, and the internationalization of the food industry is changing the diets of many young Asians, especially in the larger cities. Obesity exists alongside malnutrition in Asia and affects all age groups. One third of South Asians are dangerously overweight. In Chinese cities 12 per cent of adults and 8 per cent of children are obese, and in Thailand the prevalence of obesity among children aged 5-12 years increased from 12 per cent to between 15 and 16 per cent in two years (Cai, 2006). Obesity is often conceptualized as a problem of the affluent, but it actually occurs across the socio-economic spectrum. Overeating is certainly a factor, but obesity is also function of imbalanced nutrition and insufficient exercise. Unless action is taken to address the growing prevalence of obesity among young people in Asia, the youth of today will be more vulnerable

than any previous generation to the early onset of degenerative and non-communicable diseases and to reduced longevity.

The challenges deriving from unhealthy behaviour are compounded by difficulties surrounding access to health education and health care. Though reproductive health information has been more widely disseminated in Asia in recent years, many young people have limited access to materials detailing contraceptive options and the risks of unprotected sexual activity, and youth-friendly health services are often unavailable. Substantial numbers of Asian youth simply cannot afford health care (Gubhaju, 2002). Demographic and health surveys indicate that young people in Cambodia frequently lack the knowledge, authority and financial resources to address their health needs.

The failure of the health-care establishment to address the needs of youth is particularly apparent in rural areas. Reproductive health is an urgent concern; though family planning programmes have been in place for some time, young people have limited knowledge of contraception. Throughout Asia, family planning information and programmes are almost exclusively targeted at married people, especially married women.

Youth migration: opportunities and challenges

One of the most dramatic trends in Asia in recent decades has been the exponential increase in migration (Hugo, 2006). The region's population has become highly mobile, with growing numbers of residents resettling either permanently or temporarily in other Asian countries or abroad. Migration flows within, into, and out of the region are significant. In recent years there has been a substantial increase in migration from the less developed to the more developed countries in Asia and, to a much greater extent, to OECD countries. Statistics from the OECD Database on Immigrants and Expatriates indicate that relatively large numbers of Asians are relocating not only to traditional destinations such as Australia, Canada and the United States, but also to various European countries. In 2005, 28 per cent of all migrants worldwide lived in Asia, and Asians are increasingly moving abroad. Between 2000 and 2003 more than 2 million workers left Asian countries, compared with 1.4 million during the period 1990-1994 (United Nations, 2006a).

International migration takes many forms and directions; sizeable numbers of Asians relocate within the region or seek their fortunes in OECD countries or the Middle East, and there are "circular" as well as permanent flows, legal as well as undocumented migration, and both forced and voluntary movement. Although age-disaggregated data on migration are scarce, available evidence suggests that young adults make up a significant proportion of those leaving their countries for extended periods. As shown in table 1.9, for example, almost one third of Asian-born migrants arriving in Australia in the five years preceding the 2001 census were between the ages of 15 and 24. Other data suggest that levels of mobility are quite high among young adults; most Asian youth no longer have to limit themselves to the opportunities available in their local communities.

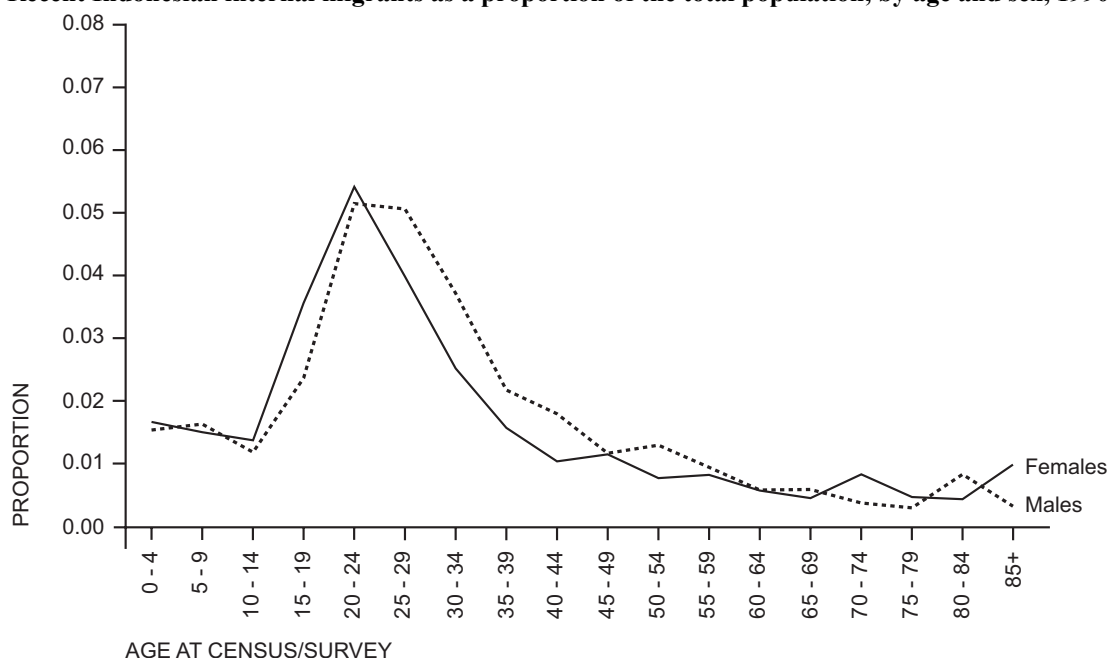
Table 1.9
Migrants from Asia arriving in Australia between 1996 and 2001

Birthplace	Number aged 15-24 years	Migrants aged 15-24 years as percentage of total	Total number of migrants (subregion and region)
South-East Asia	36 434	37.2	97 914
North-East Asia	28 452	29.2	97 526
South and Central Asia	12 069	21.9	55 163
Total Asia	76 955	30.7	250 603

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing (2001)* (data accessed at <http://www.abs.gov.au> on 10 May 2007).

Data on the age and sex composition of internal migrants are limited, but there are indications that youth constitute a major share of such migrants in various countries. In Indonesia, for example, internal migration rates for both sexes appear to rise progressively starting with the age group 10-14 years, peaking at various points between the ages of 20 and 35 for males and females (see figure 1.9). A distinctive feature of internal mobility in recent decades has been the increasing involvement of women. In Indonesia, where women comprise a relatively large proportion of the labour force, the migration rate is higher among females than among males (Chotib, 2003). Women migrate from rural to urban areas to work in factories but also seek employment in the informal economy; a great many are able to secure domestic service jobs. The rate of internal migration is highest for the age group 20-25, though the average ages of male and female migrant labourers are 21 and 17 years respectively (Chotib, 2003).

Figure 1.9
Recent Indonesian internal migrants as a proportion of the total population, by age and sex, 1990-1995



Source: Salahudin Muhidin, *The Population of Indonesia: Regional Demographic Scenarios Using a Multiregional Method and Multiple Data Sources* (Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers, 2002).

Opportunities for migration to OECD countries have increased for Asian youth with the requisite skills and qualifications but have decreased for those who are unskilled. As asserted previously, globalization has greatly expanded options for some while seriously limiting possibilities for others.

Women are underrepresented among international migrants living in Asia (United Nations, 2006a). However, in several of the region's labour-sending countries, females account for a sizeable proportion of the emigrant population (see table 1.10). Large numbers of young women from countries such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka are employed as domestic helpers in oil-rich Gulf States and some of the wealthier Asian countries. In many cases, this improves their status within their families back home. Because their remittances typically represent a significant proportion of the family income and may even be necessary for survival, these migrants often earn the right to participate in and influence family decision-making and assume responsibility for the welfare of other family members. However, their social status in their host countries is generally very low. They often work extremely long hours for little pay.

Table 1.10
Women as a proportion of international labour migrants, selected labour-sending Asian countries

Country of origin	Year	Number of workers sent	Women as a proportion of the workers sent
Philippines	2005	704 586	74.3*
Sri Lanka	2004	213 453	65.5
Thailand	2005	128 612	17.7
Indonesia	2004	382 514	78.0
Bangladesh	1999	268 182	0.1
Viet Nam	2000	30 000	15.0

Source: Graeme Hugo, "Globalization and Asian youth: a demographic perspective", a paper presented at the United Nations Regional Expert Group Meeting on Development for Young People in Asia, Bangkok, 28-30 March 2006.

* New hires in 2004.

Globalization has been characterized by major changes in the loci of production and dramatic shifts in the number and spatial distribution of job opportunities. It has also made people more aware of possibilities outside of their immediate communities. The high mobility of Asian youth is a response to limited local opportunities coupled with the awareness, or at least the expectation, of better prospects elsewhere. This trend is fuelled by social and economic change that can provide new opportunities—but only for some.

Migration both within and outside of Asia is driven primarily by improved employment prospects, educational opportunities, marriage and/or family reunification, and escape from conflict situations or social unrest. All types of migration have been facilitated by the ICT revolution and reduced transportation costs. Social networks established by the growing Asian diaspora have allowed many new migrants to adjust more quickly and easily to their new surroundings (Massey and others, 1993). For young people, migration is often associated with

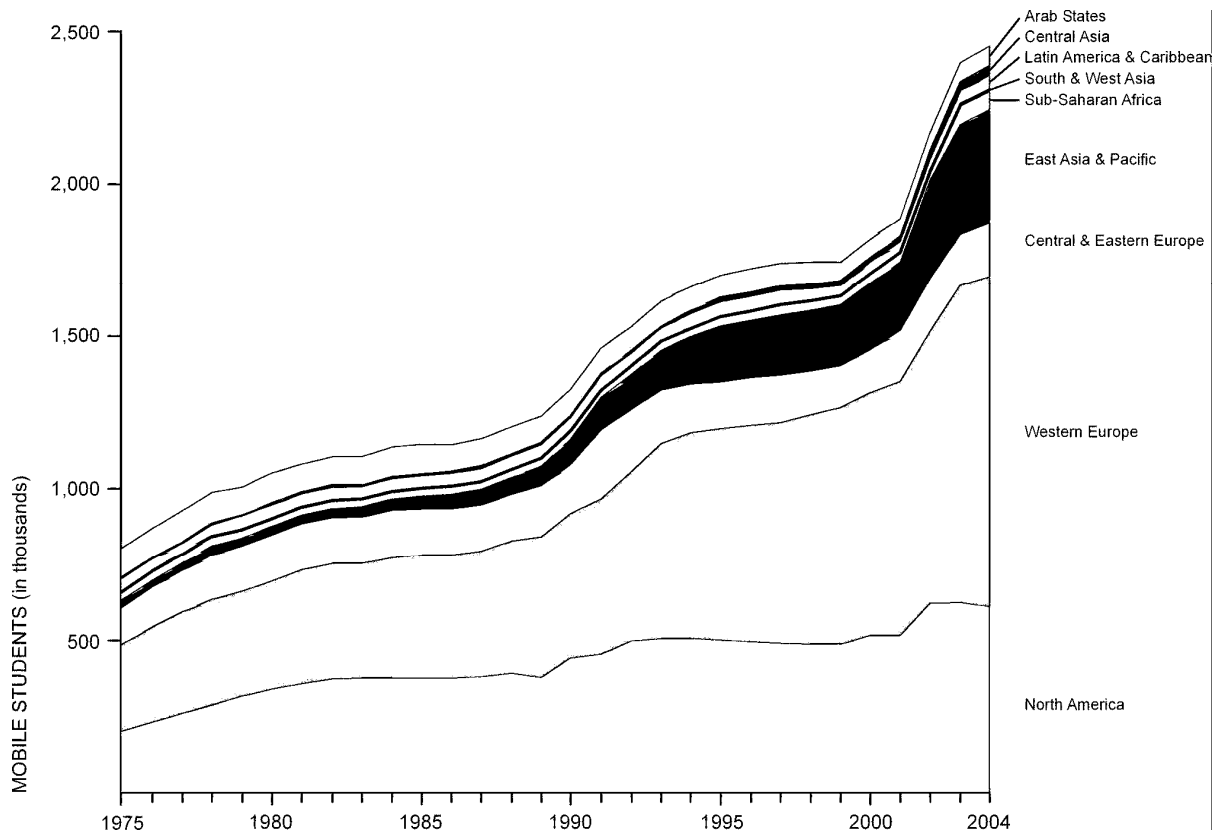
increased social and economic independence, separation from traditional authority structures, exposure to new and different ideas and practices, and interaction with a wide range of people.

As the global demand for professionally and technically qualified youth increases, larger numbers of educated young people from poorer Asian countries are leaving home for well-paid jobs in wealthier countries. The resulting brain drain leaves developing countries unable to move from low-skill production to technologically advanced industrial production and service provision. Persistently low productivity levels in some developing Asian countries keep average incomes low, compelling even those with relatively limited skills to migrate to higher-income countries.

International student migration

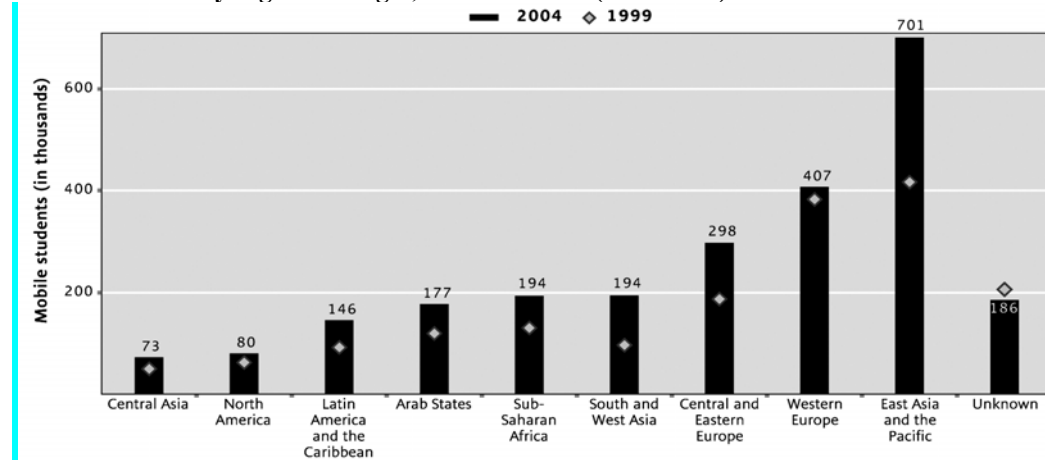
Student migration is particularly significant among Asian youth. Global student mobility has increased exponentially in the past 30 years. In Afghanistan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Malaysia and Nepal, mobile students account for at least 5 per cent of domestic tertiary enrolment (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006b). Figure 1.10 indicates that East Asia and the Pacific has become an increasingly popular destination for international students, and figure 1.11 reveals that this subregion is the point of origin for the largest number of individuals migrating for educational purposes, accounting for around 700,000 students, or 29 per cent of the global total. Approximately 40 per cent of these students remain in the Asia-Pacific area (Australia and Japan each account for 15 per cent), 34 per cent travel to North America, and 25 per cent study in Western Europe. In absolute terms, China is the country with the largest share of student migrants, accounting for 14 per cent of the world total. India, Japan and the Republic of Korea each have more than 60,000 students in educational institutions abroad.

Figure 1.10
International students by region of study, 1975-2004



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Global Education Digest 2006: Comparing Education Statistics Across the World* (Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006) (UIS/SD/06-01).

Figure 1.11
Mobile students by region of origin, 1999 and 2004 (thousands)



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Global Education Digest 2006: Comparing Education Statistics Across the World* (Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006) (UIS/SD/06-01).

Many international students decide to stay and seek employment in their host countries, contributing to the massive brain drain from the poorer Asian nations. In 2004/05, 16,485 people

on student visas in Australia successfully applied for permanent residence, and the majority of these were young Asians (Australia, Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2006).

Consequences of migration

As international migration from and within Asia has increased, so have transnational marriages. Various factors are associated with this trend. Increased global travel and the emergence of commercial enterprises that facilitate marriage raise the likelihood of partnering with a foreign person. As a result of long-standing reproductive trends favouring males, eligible young women are in short supply in some countries, especially in rural areas. According to a report by the Chinese State Population and Family Planning Commission, around 118 boys are born for every 100 girls in China (Wang, 2007). In India in 2001, there were 93 girls aged 0-6 years for every 100 boys (Dasvarma, 2006). It has been estimated that by 2020 the male “surplus” could number more than 20 million in India and 30 million in China (Dasvarma, 2006; Wang, 2007). Even now, there are unprecedented numbers of young adult males who are unlikely to find marriage partners in the future. The report by the Chinese State Population and Family Planning Commission warns that the growing difficulties men face in finding wives may lead to social instability (Wang, 2007). Hudson and den Boer (2004) observe that those males who cannot find spouses generally have low socio-economic status, tend to be unemployed or underemployed, have relatively few ties to the community, and are otherwise marginalized in Chinese society. A marriage migration industry has emerged in which brides are recruited for males in other countries. In Taiwan Province of China, the practice has spread to such an extent that currently 32.2 per cent of marriages are to foreigners, and 13.4 per cent of births are to foreign women (Tsay, 2004).

International migration has opened up a vast range of new possibilities for Asian youth, particularly in terms of job and learning opportunities. Spending time abroad, away from the family, gives young people a chance to gain independence and develop their own opinions and ideas. Evidence shows that in many cases international migration has a positive impact on young Asians, allowing them to obtain work and personal experience, build self-confidence, and acquire skills and attitudes beneficial to themselves and their countries. Migration can lift barriers to participation in employment, particularly for the well-educated, and allow young people to earn decent wages and send remittances back home. This can facilitate young people’s engagement with their families and communities in their countries of origin. Migrants who return bring back experience, expertise, and access to strategic contacts in their host countries. The “diaspora effect” has stimulated the growth of high-technology and other industries in several East Asian countries and India (International Labour Office, 2004).

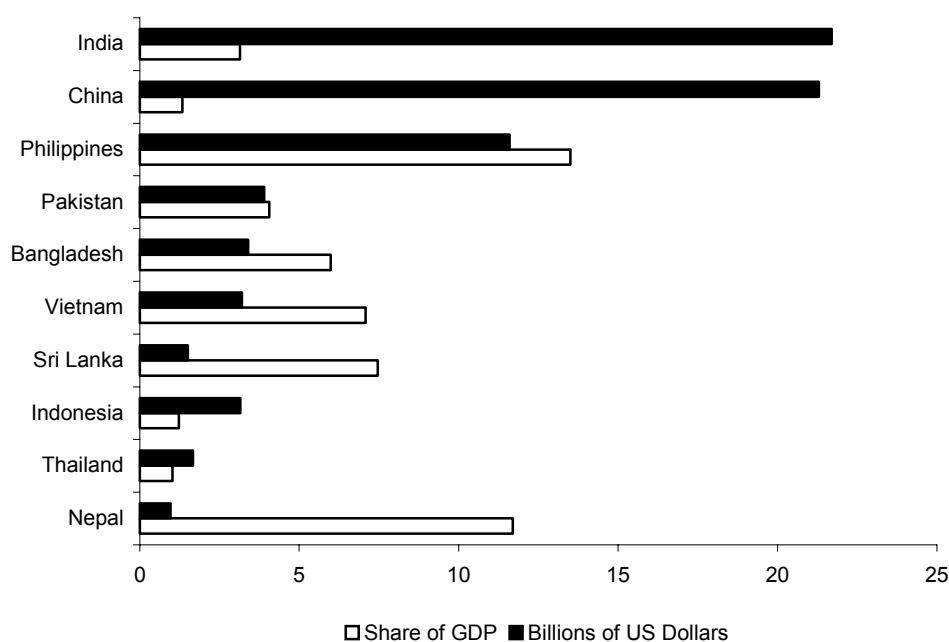
International migration has created not only opportunities but also serious challenges for Asian youth and their home countries. There is ample evidence of expatriate contract workers being exploited. Levels of protection are often inadequate, especially for the large numbers of undocumented labour migrants (Battistella and Asis, 2003). The Philippines has put a number of protections in place for its contract workers living abroad, but few other countries in Asia have done the same.

Although women are still underrepresented in international migrant flows, their share is increasing. Growing numbers of females are entering the job market, many as breadwinners, and those who travel abroad for work are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and degradation. Among these are several million who provide domestic and care-giving services and work in the sex and entertainment industries (Yeoh and Huang, 1999; Lim, 1998; Jones, 1996; 2000). Criminal groups are becoming increasingly involved in human trafficking and other forms of undocumented migration and mainly target young people—in particular girls and young women, who are often forced into the sex and entertainment trades (Skrobanek, Boonpakdi and Janthakeero, 1997; Jones, 1996; 2000). The victims of the thriving Asian sex industry are predominantly poor youth. The exploitation and deprivation of human rights in this area is extreme.

Some Asian countries are experiencing substantial outflows of their brightest and most qualified young people. Aside from the implications of this exodus for national development, there are social costs associated with the separation of family members. Psychological stress is experienced by everyone involved, in part because young migrants and those they leave behind are often unable to fulfil the implicit terms of the “intergenerational contract”. Ageing members of labour-sending families suffer because they are not able to rely on their children for day-to-day support and assistance, and the young migrants lose opportunities to benefit from the experience and guidance of their family elders.

Young people who migrate may be less able to benefit from their family’s physical and emotional support and to provide such support to their families. However, remittances can have a significant impact on the well-being of household members back home; along with covering basic needs, these funds can provide young people in the family who have not migrated with the opportunity to obtain an education. Figure 1.12 shows that remittances account for a substantial proportion of both foreign exchange earnings and gross domestic product (GDP) in many Asian countries. India and China, with their large cohorts of young people, are the top two recipients of remittances in the world in absolute value (United Nations, 2006a). If channelled effectively, these resources can be used to enhance the educational and professional prospects of young people who are less able to take advantage of cross-border opportunities.

Figure 1.12
Remittances to selected Asian countries, 2004



Source: Graeme Hugo, “Globalization and Asian youth: a demographic perspective”, a paper presented at the United Nations Regional Expert Group Meeting on Development for Young People in Asia, Bangkok, 28-30 March 2006.

Summary and conclusions

Globalization and major improvements in access to education have allowed many Asian youth to both benefit from and contribute to the development of their countries. Asian culture, values and ways of life have changed considerably as a result of increased economic openness and exposure to foreign goods, services and information. The new perspectives and modes of behaviour adopted by the region’s young people sometimes place them at risk but have also allowed them to become a strong, positive force in the development of their societies. Younger workers constitute a ready pool of human capital and are industrious, competitive, adaptable and technologically savvy, but they are often underutilized or exploited in the labour market.

Factors such as the changing nature of work, diminishing demand for unskilled labour, and the emergence of new and less secure forms of employment effectively prevent young people from participating fully in the global economy. Although large numbers of Asian youth are better prepared now than ever before to enter the workforce, many are unable to secure decent employment. The relatively high rate of joblessness among educated youth is believed to derive at least partly from the misalignment or lack of correspondence between their training and the skill requirements for the types of jobs created by globalization. Young people unable to find work may become frustrated and discouraged and eventually give up and drop out of the labour force altogether. Others stay in the education system much longer than they intended.

Females may face additional obstacles. Although more women have found jobs in the era of globalization, the gender gap in employment remains significant; young women in many countries are often less qualified than their male counterparts and are not given an equal opportunity to acquire skills and participate in the labour market.

The population of Asia has become highly mobile in recent decades; temporary and permanent migration within and from the region have increased dramatically as millions of young Asians have left their homes to pursue educational and employment opportunities abroad. Many are taking advantage of the vast range of learning options now available in other countries. International demand for youth with professional and technical skills is growing, and highly qualified young people in poorer countries are drawn to well-paid jobs in wealthier parts of the world. Some Asian countries are experiencing substantial outflows of their brightest and most competent young people. Spending time abroad, away from the family, can provide youth with an important opportunity to gain independence. However, young migrants often experience poverty, deprivation and marginalization as they struggle to become part of their new communities.

Large numbers of Asian youth are highly educated, but strong academic qualifications do not appear to be sufficient to ensure their effective participation in society and the global economy. In the context of rapid globalization, it does not take long for the knowledge and skills of educated youth to be rendered redundant, and securing employment is often just as difficult for this group as for those with little education and training. It is imperative that Governments invest the time and resources necessary to ensure that the education young people receive, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels, prepares them for meaningful participation in the labour market. Private sector educational provision is growing rapidly but is often available only in urban areas. Governments must work to improve the content, quality and accessibility of education in rural areas in order to prevent the education gap from widening in the coming years. Making sure schools in remote locations have the facilities and resources to teach science, mathematics and technical subjects can expand career options for rural youth. Education policies and programmes must also address the special needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups such as girls and young women, youth with disabilities, those living in poverty, ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, and other young people in areas affected by conflict. Given the economic and cultural diversity of Asia, it is important for Governments to ensure that the educational establishment does not contribute to the further marginalization of these groups. Multilingual and multicultural education should be encouraged to increase inter-ethnic and intercultural understanding and communication. Ideally, education should be used not only to enhance prospects for gainful employment and a sustainable livelihood, but also to combat crime and violence and to promote pluralistic, democratic values and peace.

Investment in education must be scaled up, particularly at the higher levels, as Asia has a large youth cohort that in many areas constitutes a significant share of the total population. Traditional secondary and tertiary education should be expanded, but there is also an urgent need to provide non-formal education, literacy programmes, accelerated and distance learning options, vocational training, and other “catch-up” opportunities to the millions of young Asians (especially women) who have never completed primary school.

To ensure that today’s children and underserved youth ultimately have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to community and national development, sustained interventions are

needed to achieve universal primary education and higher rates of secondary enrolment. Incentives such as compensating poorer households for keeping their younger members in school, providing free education and materials, and giving a subsistence allowance to children and youth from poor backgrounds who attend school should be introduced or expanded in order to reach those who are not receiving an education.

Schools have a vital role to play in preparing young people for employment. Keeping up with an ever-changing job market is challenging even for the most advanced educational systems, and the majority of developing countries struggle to maintain complementarity between school curricula and workplace requirements. Even in the best situations, however, producing qualified professional and technical personnel does not necessarily translate into guaranteed employment, and graduates are not automatically equipped with the social, moral and attitudinal skills needed to find and keep a decent job. As education in Asia becomes increasingly commercialized and profit oriented, regulation is needed to ensure the availability of a broad range of disciplines and fields of study for young people in both urban and rural areas. Policy makers must ensure that educational curricula prepare young people for the job market, providing them with professional, entrepreneurial and job-search skills.

Today, education is incomplete without ICT integration, which entails both ICT training and the use of ICT as an educational tool. Within Asia, ICT exposure and access and overall e-readiness vary considerably. The Internet and other ICT applications are widely used in most of the higher-income East Asian countries, while in the region's less developed countries ICT penetration is extremely limited. Young people without foreign language skills and those in rural areas are at a particular disadvantage. Without access to ICT, young people are effectively isolated from the global market and unable to take advantage of an immense network of informational and educational resources. The digital divide is expected to narrow over time as the public and private sectors work to ensure universal ICT access, but the existing gap is having an enormous impact on the present cohort of Asian youth.

Governments, international organizations, the commercial private sector, and civil society all have roles to play in enhancing ICT-led education. Both individually and collaboratively, these actors must work to develop the telecommunications infrastructure, provide ICT facilities in schools, and strengthen e-literacy. They can also help to provide wider access to schooling through investments in non-formal education and distance learning with a view to reaching youth in rural and remote areas.

It is essential that young people be given the opportunity to develop in a balanced manner and to make a positive contribution to society. The pursuit of excellence in education (or the lack of opportunity to pursue an education), combined with the evolving challenges associated with rapid globalization, can place young people under extreme stress and interfere with their healthy transition to adulthood. A concerted effort must be made to provide youth with social, economic, personal and other forms of support both within and outside the education system as well as structured opportunities for healthy leisure activity. Active citizenship, intercultural understanding and social solidarity among young people are necessary to ensure equitable development, social justice, peace and social cohesion.

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