

## The “Asian Miracle”

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*Asia has made excellent progress over the past 30 years and we must maintain the momentum into the new millennium*

As we celebrate the dawn of the twenty-first century and the start of the new millennium, a number of development-related issues come to mind: rising poverty levels, increased income inequality, the spread of HIV/AIDS, and social, cultural and gender deprivations. The issues are of global concern and must be kept to the fore even as we take stock of some impressive development gains made since the late 1960s. Among these are the increasing global nature of social, economic and political developments.

Population trends are an integral part of our common future. On 12 October 1999, many countries observed the Day of Six Billion. It was a day to reflect on what a world population of 6 billion would mean, now and in the future — while population growth rates continue to decline, numbers are still increasing owing mainly to the effects of population momentum. It was a day to recognize that individual lives and health come first, and that poverty, food and water shortages and other problems of underdevelopment can be helped by paying close attention to population issues.

There is general agreement that we should aim to stabilize global population size and only through the one acceptable way: by widening choices. That means paying close attention to individual needs for reproductive health, including family planning and sexual health; to education, especially of girls; and to achieving equality between women and men. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 reconfirmed the vital role of population in social development strategies and stressed the dynamic relationships among population, social and economic development, poverty alleviation, the environment and the empowerment of women.

The international community met again this year for the "ICPD + 5" review, as the special session of the United Nations General Assembly was popularly called. Delegations overwhelmingly endorsed the ICPD Programme of Action agreed in 1994. Five years of experience have shown that the Programme is practical, affordable and essential for the future. Countries are committed to making it work. Nearly half have reviewed their policies in the light of the new understanding of population and development; more than one third have updated their population policies to be consistent with ICPD goals or have integrated factors relating to quality of health care, gender equality and equity and the improvement of demographic information systems into long-term development plans; two thirds have introduced policy or legislative measures to promote gender equality and equity, and empowerment of women, including in the areas of inheritance, property rights and employment, and protection from gender-based violence.

For almost three decades, the Asian and Pacific region has stood out to the rest of the world as a model of development. The region had experienced stunning economic growth accompanied by massive investments in health and education that were widely credited with contributing to reduced infant, child and maternal mortality, smaller family size, higher living standards and significant improvement of women's status. But development is not a smooth process. The financial and economic crisis that began in South-East Asia in mid-1997, and whose direct and indirect effects spread throughout Asia, has provided a grim warning that global financial turmoil can wipe out developmental gains owing to decreased social sector investment.

The crisis threw millions into poverty and deep distress, which in some countries has been compounded by the lack of social cohesion and dependable political institutions. It has caused bewilderment among young generations who, before the onset of the crisis, had no real experience of anything except continued improvements in living conditions. Specifically, the crisis increased poverty and unemployment, lowered educational participation and reduced funding for social programmes, including population and reproductive health activities.

Evidence suggests that the region's remarkable development gains since the late 1960s have been set back, and that women and children are suffering the most. School dropout rates have increased throughout the region; unemployment has risen sharply and disproportionately in the sectors in which women work; urban job losses have reversed traditional rural-to-urban migration patterns and created a new class of urban poor.

Falling real incomes and rising prices of food and other basic commodities have combined to produce increased incidence of malnutrition in babies and young children. The harsh realities of women's lives have been exacerbated and gender equality and equity remain a distant goal. Rising poverty levels have increased pressure on women to enter the commercial sex industry; and because of a lack of accessible services, these new recruits are poorly equipped to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS.

Reproductive health programmes have suffered as budgetary priority has been given to addressing hunger, rising poverty, unemployment and social disruption. Evidence suggests that unsafe abortions have increased, while opportunities for post-abortion counselling in family planning are limited. There have been cutbacks in health promotion and medical service

activities, including STD and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programmes. The problem of inadequate access to reproductive health services for adolescents, especially girls, has intensified.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century the challenge for Asia and the Pacific will be to resume pre-crisis growth rates, to reduce income inequalities and to spread the benefits of development. Immediate priority must be given to eliminating extreme poverty and protecting the weakest and most vulnerable sections of society. Attacking poverty both promotes social cohesion and lays a firm foundation for sustainable economic growth. Eradicating poverty necessitates an effective social safety net to cover the basic needs of the very poor.

An associated challenge will be to invest in health and education, in reproductive health and rights, and in women's empowerment, all of which are crucial for human capital formation and social development. By 2015, all countries of the region should have attained the goals and objectives set out in the ICPD Programme of Action.

Among the key population challenges are containing the HIV/AIDS pandemic, operationalizing comprehensive integrated reproductive health services, meeting the reproductive needs of adolescents and increasing gender equity and equality.

Another policy challenge is to provide information and quality services for all, especially men. Programmes should be put in place to encourage men to undertake actions in support of women's rights and empowerment in family and public settings, in the socialization of male children, in improving women's health and in eradicating gender violence and sexual exploitation.

Close attention will need to be paid to the Asian and Pacific region's changing demographic structures. There is a marked increase in young people entering their childbearing years. Over the first decades of the next century, there will also be a gradual demographic shift towards an older population in all countries. The number of the elderly, as a proportion of the total population and overall, is rapidly increasing, with most of the world's elderly living in China, India and Japan. We need to develop policy frameworks and strengthen national capacities to address the needs of adolescents and the elderly.

The agreements reached at the international conferences of the 1990s on population, social development and women represent a global blueprint for the twenty-first century. Many of these policy options were revisited during the ICPD review and will be taken up during the reviews in 2000 of the 1995 social summit and the women's conference.

At the ICPD + 5 review, delegations recognized that, in spite of the progress made, more action is required in key areas, among them reproductive and sexual health, reduction of maternal mortality, the reproductive health needs of adolescents, reducing abortion and addressing the health consequences of unsafe abortion, prevention of HIV/AIDS, gender issues and education. They recommended setting new benchmarks and milestones in several of them, and urged strong action to meet ICPD goals in others.

To confront the challenges of the twenty-first century successfully, we must strive to promote, respect and protect all human rights: economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. Asia has made excellent progress over the past 30 years and we must maintain the momentum into the new millennium. Remarkable progress has been made by the Asian and Pacific countries towards achieving the goals and objectives of the ICPD Programme of Action. We must now increase our efforts and forge ahead to respond to the key actions that came out of its review. National governments, and especially the donor community, must commit the necessary resources to realize the vision behind the recommendations for further action.