1 Introduction to *Society at a Glance: Asia/Pacific*

Society at a Glance: Asia/Pacific provides an OECD overview of social indicators in the region. It provides quantitative evidence on social indicators, and presents internationally comparable data on a range of issues. The presented evidence include data on, economic growth, labour market participation, international migration, social expenditure, poverty and income inequality, demographic trends, pensions, marriage and divorce, early childhood education and care, educational attainment, health status, COVID-19 and health expenditure, social cohesion and life satisfaction.

The *Society at a Glance: Asia/Pacific* series provides an example of how OECD frameworks may be used to highlight and illustrate societal progress and social policy issues in the Asia/Pacific region (OECD, 2019[1]). The purpose of *Society at a Glance: Asia/Pacific* and the *Society at a Glance* series more generally[1] is to provide information on two questions:

- Compared with their own past and with other countries, what progress have countries made in their social development?
- How effective have been societies' efforts to further their own development?

Addressing the first question about societal progress requires indicators that cover a broad range of social outcomes across countries and over time. As social development requires improvements in health, education and economic resources, as well as a stable basis for social interactions, indicators have to be found for all these dimensions.

The second question about societal effectiveness is even more challenging to answer. Societies try to influence social outcomes, often through government policy. Whether policies are effective in achieving their aims is a critical issue. Indicators help to make that assessment. A first step is to compare the resources intended to change outcomes across countries and contrast those resources with social outcomes. While this comparison is far from being a comprehensive evaluation of policy effectiveness, indicators can contribute to highlighting areas where more evaluative work may be needed.

The framework of OECD social indicators

The structure applied here is not a full-scale framework of social indicators. But it is more than a simple list of indicators. This framework has been informed by experiences in other parts of the OECD on policy and outcome assessment in a variety of fields. It draws, in particular, on the OECD experience with environmental indicators. The indicators are based on a variant of the "Pressure-State-Response" (PSR) framework that has also been used in other policy areas (United Nations, 1996[2]). In this framework human activities exert **pressures** on the environment, which affect the **state** of natural resources and environmental conditions, and which prompt a **societal response** to these changes through various policies. The PSR framework highlights these sequential links, which in turn helps decision-makers and the public to interconnections that are often overlooked.

A similar approach for social indicators is followed in this report. Indicators are grouped along two dimensions their nature and the policy fields that they cover. The first dimension is broken down into three areas:

- *Social context* refers to variables that, while not usually direct policy targets, are crucial for understanding the social policy context. For example, the proportion of elderly people in the total population is not a policy target. However, it is relevant information about the social landscape in which, for example, health, taxation or pension policy responses are made. Unlike other indicators, trends in social context indicators cannot be unambiguously interpreted as "good" or "bad".
- *Social status* indicators describe the social outcomes that policies try to influence. These indicators describe the general conditions of the population. Ideally, the indicators chosen are ones that can be easily and unambiguously interpreted – all countries would rather have low poverty rates than high ones, for example.
- *Societal response* indicators provide information about what society is doing to affect social status indicators. Societal responses include indicators of government policy settings. Additionally, the activities of non-governmental organisations, families and the broader civil society also involve societal responses. Comparing societal response indicators with social status indicators provides an initial indication of policy effectiveness.

An important limitation of the social context, social status and societal response indicators used here is that these are presented at a national level. For countries with a significant degree of federalism and/or regional variation, Australia, China or India such indicators may not be reflective of the different regions within the federation, which may have different contexts, outcomes and social responses. This limitation should be borne in mind in considering the indicators presented below.

In addition, the framework used in *Society at a Glance: Asia/Pacific* groups "social status" and "social response" indicators according to the broad policy fields that they cover:

1. *Self-sufficiency* is an underlying objective of social policy. Self-sufficiency is promoted by ensuring people's active social and economic participation, and their autonomy in activities of daily life.
2. *Equity* is another longstanding objective of social policy. Equitable outcomes are measured mainly in terms of access by people and families to resources.
3. *Health* status is a fundamental objective of health care systems, but improving health status also requires a wider focus on its social determinants, making health a central objective of social policy.
4. *Social cohesion* is often identified as an over-arching objective of countries' social policies. While little agreement exists on what it means, a range of symptoms are informative about a lack of social cohesion. Social cohesion is more positively evident in the extent to which people participate in their communities.

The selection and description of indicators

Asia/Pacific countries differ substantially in the ways that they collect and publish social indicators. In selecting indicators for this report, the following questions were considered.

- What is the minimum degree of indicator comparability across countries? This report strives to present the best comparative information for each of the areas covered. However, the indicators presented are not confined to those for which there is "absolute" comparability. Readers are, however, alerted as to the nature of the data used and the limits to comparability.
- What is the minimum number of countries for which the data must be available? This report generally includes only indicators that are available for a majority of countries.
- What decompositions should be used at a country level? Social indicators can often be disaggregated at a national level into outcomes by social sub-categories, as for example people's age. Pragmatism prevails: the decompositions presented here vary according to the indicator considered. Individual indicators can be relevant for multiple areas of social policy. That is to say, they could plausibly be included under more than one category. For example, the ability to undertake activities of daily living without assistance is potentially an indicator of social cohesion, self-sufficiency and health. Indicators are presented here under the category for which they are considered to be most relevant.

General social context indicators

When comparing social status and societal response indicators, it is easy to suggest that one country is doing badly relative to others, or that another is spending a lot of money in a particular area compared with others. It is important to put such statements into a broader context. For example, national income levels vary across OECD countries. If there is any link between income and health, richer countries may have better health conditions than poor ones, irrespective of societal responses. If the demand for health care services increases with income (as appears to be the case), rich countries may spend more on health care (as a percentage of national income) than poorer countries. These observations do not mean that the

indicators of health status and health spending are misleading. They do mean, however, that the general context behind the data should be borne in mind when considering policy implications.

General social context indicators, including fertility, marriage and divorce, migration and the old age support ratio, provide the general background for the other indicators in this report. GDP per capita is a social outcome in its own right, giving an indication of the average material well-being of that society.

Table 1.1. List of general context indicators

GDP per capita
Fertility
Marriage and divorce
International migration
Old-age support ratio

Self-sufficiency indicators

For many people, paid active labour force participation and employment provide income, identity and social interactions. Hence promoting higher labour force participation and paid employment is a priority for most countries. A better education enables longer term self-sufficiency now and in the future, including in paid employment. Early childhood education provides a foundation for future learning, as well as freeing up mothers to choose to work. Educational attainment and students performance provides information on human capital accumulation. Education spending provides information on the primary social response made by governments to help ensure self-sufficiency. The reader should keep that these self-sufficiency indicators are also related to equity indicators, such as employment, pensions and social spending.

Table 1.2 List of self-sufficiency indicators

Social status	Societal responses
Labour force participation	Education spending
Employment	
Early childhood education and care	
Educational attainment and student performance	

Equity

Equity has many dimensions. It concerns the ability to access social services and economic opportunities, as well as equity in outcomes. Opinions vary widely as to what exactly entails a fair or a just distribution of opportunities. Additionally, as it is hard to obtain information on all dimensions of equity, the social status equity indicators are focussed on inequality in financial resources.

Table 1.3. List of equity indicators

Social status	Societal responses
Poverty	Pensions: coverage and replacement rates
Income inequality	Public social expenditure
	Solidarity

Poverty is a natural starting point for considering equity at the bottom of society. Absolute measures of poverty are used here, since many of the region's countries are very poor. In addition to an absolute poverty measure, an indicator of relative inequality across the distribution is also considered. Pension coverage and the old-age replacement rate are important indicators of the extent to which society treats its older people in an equitable fashion. Many Asia/Pacific countries have social protection systems that redistribute resources and insure people against various contingencies. These interventions are summarised by public social spending, while the solidarity indicator reflects on the extent to which people make donations and/or participate in voluntary work.

Health

The links between social and health conditions are strong. Indeed, educational gains, accompanied by public health measures, better access to health care and continuing progress in medical technology, have contributed to significant improvements in health status, as measured by life expectancy. To a significant extent, improvements in life expectancy reflect lower infant mortality. As it is essential for economic development and well-being to access sufficient, safe, nutritious food and balanced diet, child malnutrition is a salient indicator to predict a country's economic and social development potential.

Health expenditure is a general and key part of the policy response of health care systems to concerns about health conditions. The indicator on hospital activities provides information on the number of hospital beds, discharge rates and duration of stays in hospitals. Nevertheless, health problems are frequently rooted in interrelated social conditions – such as unemployment, poverty and inadequate housing – that are beyond the reach of health policies.

Table 1.4. List of health indicators

Social status	Societal responses
Life expectancy	Health expenditure
Neonatal, infant and child mortality	Hospital activities
Child malnutrition	
COVID-19	

Social cohesion

Promoting social cohesion is an important social policy goal in many countries. However, because there is no commonly-accepted definition, identifying suitable indicators is particularly difficult. The approach taken here in *Society at a Glance: Asia/Pacific* is to assess social cohesion through indicators that describe the extent to which citizens participate in societal life trust their fellow citizens and institutions, and derive satisfaction from their daily activities.

Table 1.5. List of social cohesion indicators

Social status	Societal responses
Life satisfaction	
Confidence in institutions	
Trust and safety	
Tolerance	
Voting	

Life satisfaction is strongly associated with confidence in the broader society and its institutions. A general measure of trust in other people and safety may indicate the degree to which economic and social exchange is facilitated, enhancing well-being and facilitating socially productive collective action. The degree of community acceptance of minority groups (migrants, ethnic minorities and gay and lesbian people) is a measurable dimension of social cohesion. Finally, high voter turnout indicates that a country's political system enjoys a high level of participation, increasing its effectiveness and reflecting a broad public consensus about its legitimacy.

What can be found in this publication?

Chapters 2 to 6 cover each of the five domains of social indicators as discussed above. For each indicator, there is a page of text and a page of figures. Both figures and text are, to a degree, standardised. Both the text and figures address the most recent headline indicator data, with country performances often ranked from best to worst. Changes in the indicator over time and the length of the time-period at hand can be considered when data are available. Having addressed the indicator and changes over time, the text and figures then typically consider an alternative disaggregation of the indicator, or relationships with other social outcomes or policies. For each indicator, a boxed section on "Definition and measurement" provides the definitions of the data used and a discussion of potential measurement issues. Finally, suggestions for further reading can be given.

References

OECD (2020), *How's Life? 2020: Measuring Well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/9870c393-en. [3]

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United Nations (1996), "Glossary of Environment Statistics", *F*, No. 67, Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis, Studies in Methods, https://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/SeriesF/SeriesF_67E.pdf (accessed on 29 November 2018). [2]

Note

[1] A related OECD publication, *How's life? 2020: Measuring Well-being*, (OECD, 2020[3]) presents the latest evidence from over 80 indicators, covering both current well-being outcomes and resources for future well-being, and including changes since 2010. Compared with *Society at a Glance*, it uses a broader set of outcome measures but does not include indicators of policy responses.
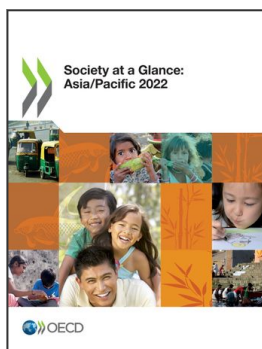
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