



HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE — CONCEPT NOTE

An Asia for Everyone: Public Services, Social Protection and the Promise of Shared Prosperity

Friday, 9 October 2026 | Auditorium at Chamchuri 10, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

Background and Rationale

Asia's growth has been extraordinary and so has its economic inequality. The richest 10% now capture between 60% and 77% of national income in major Asian economies, while the poorest 50% earn just 12–15%, a share that has been shrinking since 2022. Asia's wealth Gini has climbed to 0.72, among the highest in the world. Asian billionaire wealth has surged by over 120% in a decade, from US\$1.5–2 trillion in 2015 to US\$3.4–4 trillion in 2025, while nearly 250 million more Asians could have escaped poverty had inequality not risen. As of 2024, 18.9% of developing Asia still lives on under US\$3.65 a day, and over half a billion people are poor or at risk of poverty.¹

Unequal access and weak public services are the mechanism through which economic inequality is passed to the next generation. Over 2.1 billion people live in Asia-Pacific countries where interest payments on public debt exceed education or health spending; external debt service by Asian low- and middle-income countries reached US\$443.5 billion in 2022, and 25 of 28 Asian nations face spending cuts averaging 3% of GDP by 2027.² Between 2022 and 2024, education budgets were cut in 56% of the region's countries, health budgets in 43% and social protection budgets in 46%,³ and nearly half of Asia-Pacific's population—46.4%, or some 2.1 billion people—is not covered by even one social protection benefit.⁴ An estimated three-quarters of ten-year-olds in South Asia cannot read a simple text,⁵ and out-of-pocket healthcare payments push an estimated 32–39 million Indians below the poverty line every year.⁶ In 2023, the average tax-to-GDP ratio in the 37 Asian and Pacific economies covered in the report was 19.6%, below the averages for OECD countries and for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), of 33.9% and 21.3%, respectively this is a policy choice, not an income constraint.⁷

Public services like health and education are key, apart from boosting life chances and human capability, they also directly tackle income inequality. Evidence from the OECD, Latin America and more than 70 developing and transition countries finds that public services allocate 'virtual income' equally across income groups, meaning they

disproportionately benefit the poorest when compared to income. In this way, they mitigate the impact of a skewed income distribution.⁸ Asia's own record proves the point: Thailand's Universal Coverage Scheme reaches 99% of the population and has sharply reduced catastrophic health costs; Kerala delivers near-developed-country health outcomes on a middle-ranking state income; Mongolia's universal Child Money Programme has lifted social protection spending above 10% of GDP; Vietnam's education investment of 4.2% of GDP has produced world-class learning outcomes; and Indonesia's Family Hope Program (PKH), India's employment guarantee (MNREGA) and Korea's Basic Old-Age Pension show comparable gains.⁹ A one percentage-point rise in social protection spending cuts inequality by 0.6%,¹⁰ and a 2–5% wealth tax on the region's ultra-rich could raise US\$792 billion a year, enough to lift regional health spending by over 60%.¹¹ With the IMF–World Bank Annual Meetings

¹ Oxfam (2025). *An Unequal Future: Asia's Struggle for Justice in a Warming, Wired World*. Oxfam Briefing Paper, October 2025. DOI: 10.21201/2025.000101.

² Oxfam (2025), *An Unequal Future*, op. cit.

³ Oxfam and Development Finance International (2024). *The Commitment to Reducing Inequality (CRI) Index 2024*.

⁴ International Labour Office (2024). *World Social Protection Report 2024–26: Regional Companion Report for Asia and the Pacific*. Geneva: ILO. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/publications/world-social-protection-report-2024-26-regional-companion-report-asia-and>

⁵ World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, FCDO, USAID, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/state-of-global-learning-poverty>.

⁶ Mehak Nanda, Rajesh Sharma, A comprehensive examination of the economic impact of out-of-pocket health expenditures in India, *Health Policy and Planning*, Volume 38, Issue 8, October 2023, Pages 926–938, <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czad050>

⁷ OECD (2025). *Revenue Statistics in Asia and the Pacific 2025: Personal Income Taxation in Asia and the Pacific*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/6c04402f-en>

⁸ M. Talpur (ed.) (2019). *Getting Even: Public Policies to Tackle Inequality in Asia*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury India.

⁹ Talpur (ed.) (2019), *Getting Even*, op. cit.; Oxfam (2025), *An Unequal Future*, op. cit.

¹⁰ UN ESCAP estimate, cited in Oxfam (2025), *An Unequal Future*, op. cit.

¹¹ Oxfam (2025), *An Unequal Future*, op. cit.

convening in Bangkok on 12–18 October 2026, drawing some 15,000 delegates from 190 countries, this conference is scheduled so that Asia’s evidence and voice reach the world’s financial decision and policy makers.

Three recent developments make public services more critical than ever. First, climate associated disasters and conflicts are draining the budgets that fund essential services: Asia suffered US\$65 billion in losses in 2023 alone, 1.2 billion people were affected over the past decade, and in 2022 the region’s lowest-income countries paid nearly twice as much in debt service as they received in climate finance, responding to every flood and heatwave on the cost of health or education budget widens inequality.¹² Second, digital access now decides access to work: by 2030, up to 80% of jobs in South-East Asia will require basic digital skills, yet only 49% of the region’s rural population is online and 330 million South Asian women lack mobile internet, without public digital services, it will be difficult to access future job market for those who are not prepared.¹³ Third, care services are the constraints of women’s economic participation: women in Asia perform two to four times more unpaid care work than men; public investment in childcare, eldercare and health frees that time, creates millions of decent jobs, and is central to the US\$4.5 trillion a year that closing gender gaps could add to Asia-Pacific GDP.¹⁴ Universal public services: education, health, care, social protection and digital access are the powerful instruments on disposal of governments to address inequality.

Objectives

- Present the global and Asian evidence on how public services and social protection measurably reduce economic and social inequality.
- Generate political debate and commitments from governments and international financial institutions to invest in and reform public services and social protection as a core inequality-reduction strategy.
- Launch the flagship policy brief *Rigged from Birth: How Inequality Steals Futures in Asia and the Five Public Services That Can Reverse It* as an evidence base for governments, multilateral organisations and civil society across Asia.

Format and Participation

A one-day, in-person conference of 100–150 invited delegates: ministers and senior officials from across Asia, global economists, WB/IMF and UN representatives, academics, civil society and media [approximately 60% from Thailand and 40% regional and international]. Ministerial participation is woven through the day: the host government delivers the inaugural address, visiting ministers join the keynote plenary and lead discussion on the education/health, social protection and financing sessions. Proceedings run in plenary with simultaneous Thai English interpretation and full-day live-streaming.

Detailed Conference programme

Morning Plenary

TIME	SESSION / FORMAT	SPEAKERS / CHAIRS	Responsibility
08:00 – 09:00	Registration, Welcome Coffee and Exhibition	Registration desk open	Chula student volunteers
09:00 – 09:45	FORMAL OPENING AND MINISTERIAL ADDRESS Welcome by President, Chulalongkorn University	President, Chulalongkorn University	Chulalongkorn
	Remarks from Co-host: Oxfam International	Mr. Amitabh Behar Executive Director, Oxfam International	Oxfam
	Launch of policy brief on public services	H.E Prof. Dr.Yodchanan Wongsawat, Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand, Minister of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation and Amitabh Behar ED Oxfam international	Oxfam
	Ministerial Address	H.E Prof. Dr.Yodchanan Wongsawat, Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand, Minister of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation	Chulalongkorn & Oxfam

¹² Oxfam (2025), *An Unequal Future*, op. cit.

¹³ World Economic Forum (2025). *Future of Jobs Report 2025*, and GSMA (2025), *The Mobile Gender Gap Report*, cited in Oxfam (2025), *An Unequal Future*, op. cit.

¹⁴ Oxfam (2025), *An Unequal Future*, op. cit.; McKinsey Global Institute (2018). *The Power of Parity: Advancing Women’s Equality in Asia Pacific*.

09:45 – 11:00	KEYNOTE SESSION : THE INEQUALITY CRISIS: GLOBAL EVIDENCE, ASIAN REALITIES AND WHAT GOVERNMENTS MUST DO Q&A with audience (20 min)	Speakers Kate Pickett- confirmed Moderator: Mustafa Talpur, Asia regional head of Advocacy and Campaigns	
11:00 – 11:20	NETWORKING BREAK Coffee, exhibition and Policy Brief distribution		

Afternoon Plenary

TIME	SESSION / FORMAT	SPEAKERS / CHAIRS	
11:20 – 12:30	SESSION I — EDUCATION AND HEALTH: THE FOUNDATIONS OF EQUAL SOCIETIES Why education and health are the most powerful inequality-reduction instruments. Closing the gap: from enrolment to equity in education; from coverage to universality in health. Regional evidence: what has worked and why it was possible. Financing the foundations: what political will looks like in practice	Dr. Somsak Chunharas , President of the National Health Foundation and Chairperson of the Foundation of Thai Gerontology Research and Development institute (TGRI) Mr. Syed Sardar Ali Shah , Minister for Education Mines & Mineral Development Sindh Pakistan [TBC] Christoph Lakner - Program Manager for Global Poverty and Inequality Data - World Bank.	Moderated by: Prof. Dr. Chantal Herberholz
12:30 – 13:30	LUNCH BREAK — Hosted lunch for all participants.		
13:30 – 15:00	SESSION II: BUILDING THE EQUALITY INFRASTRUCTURE: SOCIAL PROTECTION, CARE AND DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICES Asia's social protection gap: setting the scene 45% of the population without adequate coverage and what it costs in inequality. Cash transfers, pensions and employment guarantees: which instruments reduce inequality most, and what the evidence tells us about design and scale. why women are disproportionately excluded from existing systems and how to fix it. The unpaid care economy: the hidden gender tax that social protection alone cannot solve. Publicly funded care services as an equality tool. The digital opportunity: extending social and care services at scale without proportional cost. The digital frontier: from the promise of platforms, gig economy and financial inclusion to the fault lines of access (83% urban vs 49% rural; South Asia's gender gap widening to 41%) and the risks of data privacy, surveillance and	Drs. H. Saifullah Yusuf , Minister social affairs Indonesia H.E Aly Vongnobountham , President of Lao Women's Union H.E. Mr. Gobind Singh Deo, Minister digital Malaysia Ms. Worawan Plikhamin , Deputy Secretary General, Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, Thailand	Moderated by: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kanittha Tambunlertchai Oxfam Oxfam/Chula

	security — what governance and design principles put equality at the centre?		
15:30 – 15:50	AFTERNOON REFRESHMENT BREAK		
15:50 – 16:50	SESSION III — FINANCING EQUALITY: RESOURCE MOBILISATION FOR PUBLIC SERVICES ❖ Asia-Pacific's tax gap: 19.6% tax-to-GDP vs OECD average of 33.9% - a political choice, not an income constraint ❖ The debt trap: 2.24 billion people in Asia-Pacific live in countries where interest payments exceed health spending ❖ The case for progressive taxation: wealth taxes, capital gains and the end of VAT-reliance ❖ What a 2–5% annual wealth tax on Asia's ultra-rich could generate — and what it could fund ❖ Controlling privatisation and strengthening regulatory frameworks ❖ Gender-responsive budgeting as a structural accountability mechanism	Dr. Upali Pannilage Minister of Rural Development, Social Security and Community Empowerment Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka [TBC] Prof. Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir Adviser to the Prime Minister on the Ministries of Finance and Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh [TBC] Ms. Yong Hye-in Leader of the Basic Income Party, Republic of Korea	Moderated by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Yong Yoon
16:50 – 17:20	CLOSING PLENARY: THE BANGKOK COMMITMENT • Closing keynote speaker • Closing remarks by Chulalongkorn University • Closing remarks by Oxfam Asia	H.E. Thai Minister or any other ASEAN govt minister Or Jomo Kwame Sundaram Malaysian economist, advisor at the Khazanah Research Institute, a visiting fellow at the Initiative for Policy Dialogue at Columbia University, and an adjunct professor at the International Islamic University Malaysia John Samuel, regional director Oxfam Asia	