

DECENT WORK SOLUTIONS AT THE INTERSECTION OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND POVERTY IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

May 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

The impacts of climate change in the Asia-Pacific region threaten to undo hard-won gains in sustainable development that countries have made in recent decades. Poor and vulnerable people, who contribute little to global carbon emissions, are affected the most by climate change and are the least equipped to cope and adapt. The **2024 ESCAP-ADB-UNDP SDG Partnership Report** provides an analysis of interlinked challenges of climate change, poverty and hunger as well as solutions from the region related to food systems, jobs and social protection.

Climate change poses major challenges to the environment, economic growth and human development in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Floods, droughts and cyclones are common in the region and impact poor communities especially. While awareness of these climate impacts is increasing, a sound understanding of their destructive impact on food security and

poverty alleviation is still lacking. Climate change is certainly not the sole cause of poverty and hunger, but it is adversely impacting these critical areas and associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

People's ability to find productive and decent work can be key for alleviating poverty and hunger. Climate mitigation and adaptation actions are creating new jobs and economic activities. However, raising the quality of these jobs is necessary for them to be a catalyst to achieve SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). This policy brief focusses on the impacts of climate change on poor and vulnerable populations particularly in terms of jobs and livelihoods. It further delves into solutions for decent work and just transition with examples from the Asia-Pacific region.

2. CLIMATE CHANGE AND DECENT WORK DEFICITS

Climate change affects both existing and future jobs in multiple ways that include reduced labour productivity, outputs and incomes across diverse sectors such as agriculture, construction, tourism, energy and infrastructure. The poor are the most vulnerable, often living in inadequate housing, working outside and facing climate-related income losses with limited means to adapt (figure 1). Poor households feel the impacts of climate change through numerous channels, including in the areas of labour supply and productivity, asset accumulation and price and consumption. Population groups not covered by social protection systems, workers in the informal economy and migrant workers are particularly at risk.

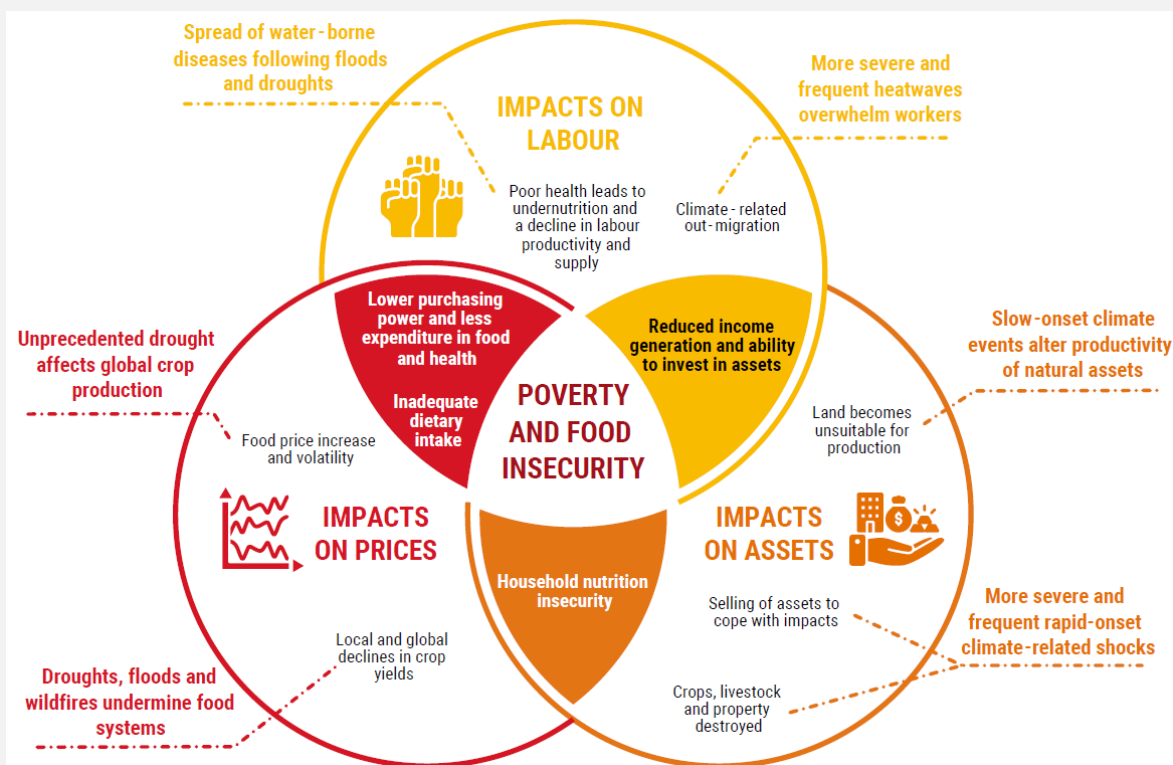
Working poverty

Between 1990 and 2019, the prevalence of extreme poverty in developing Asia fell from 58 per cent to 5 per cent (ADB, 2023a). The region has also been witnessing declining working poverty rates. However, such progress stalled or even reversed

because of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent global shocks. Moreover, stalled or reversed progress towards achieving SDG 1 heightens vulnerability to climate change as when poor people are unable to escape poverty, their ability to adapt to climate change is much reduced. The region is expected to experience twice the global average increase in the incidence of extreme poverty under the worst-case climate trajectory – at 18.1 per cent compared with a global average of 9.1 per cent (UN Women, 2023).

In most of the region, poverty is not associated with unemployment. Rather, extreme poverty affects employed persons, as highlighted in table 1, suggesting that the quality of employment is one of the principle challenges to address. Given insufficient earnings to meet basic needs and lack of social protection coverage, a large share of the region's workforce is left extremely vulnerable to life contingencies and to shocks ranging from pandemics, economic crises and climate change.

Figure 1: Nexus connecting climate change to poverty and food insecurity through labour, assets and price channels at the household level



Source: Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership Report 2024

Table 1: Employment by economic class (thousands) and working poverty rate (%), 2023

Region	Extremely poor < USD 2.15 PPP	Moderately poor >= USD 2.15 and < USD 3.65 PPP	Working poverty rate
Asia and the Pacific	72,544	275,631	3.6
East Asia	3,141	17,311	0.4
South-East Asia	7,437	35,710	2.2
Pacific Islands	1,052	975	4.9
South Asia	60,915	221,636	8.0
Central Asia	2,570	5,543	8.7
Western Asia	74	255	0.2

Note: Subregional classification is based on ILO country groupings.

Source: ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates, November 2023.

Gendered effects on labour markets

The impact of climate change has negative gender dimensions due to underlying inequalities, to the extent that women and girls are more vulnerable to climate-related disasters, in terms of both the immediate impacts as well as their capacity to recover in the aftermath. Laws, policies and social

norms that discriminate on the basis of gender mean that women typically have less access to income and finance, employment and productive resources, including agricultural land. Women predominate among the poorest in the region and are disproportionately concentrated in sectors such as agriculture and tourism, where decent work

deficits are high. While women constitute the majority of small-scale farmers, they are less likely than men to own agricultural land in 40 out of 46 countries in the region (Turquet and others, 2023).

Women are also more vulnerable to climate change, with female extreme poverty set to rise to 17.1 per cent under the worst climate path scenario compared to 9.3 per cent for women globally (UN Women, 2023).

For the majority of women working in the informal economy and in small enterprises, it is particularly difficult to recover from the effects of climate-

related disasters. While South Asia has the lowest female labour force participation in the region, women who are working experience high informal employment rates (table 2). Given the unequal distribution of household and care responsibilities, and social restrictions on women’s mobility in South Asia, their access to job opportunities is limited. While men have opportunities to find off-farm employment, women tend to be confined to informal and lower-paid jobs, often in agriculture. This lack of diversification to non-farm income due to social norms and restricted mobility makes women more vulnerable to climate-related shocks (Afridi and others, 2022).

Table 2: Proportion of informal employment in total employment and labour force participation rate by sex (%), 2023

Region	Male informal employment rate	Female informal employment rate	Male labour force participation rate	Female labour force participation rate
<i>Asia and the Pacific</i>	68.1	62.5	74.9	46.6
<i>East Asia</i>	47.8	45.6	72.1	59.9
<i>South-East Asia</i>	70.0	69.5	77.8	54.8
<i>Pacific Islands</i>	34.7	34.8	67.5	59.0
<i>South Asia</i>	85.9	90.7	76.7	30.8
<i>Central Asia</i>	48.5	40.0	68.9	47.0
<i>Western Asia</i>	26.5	36.3	71.4	41.9

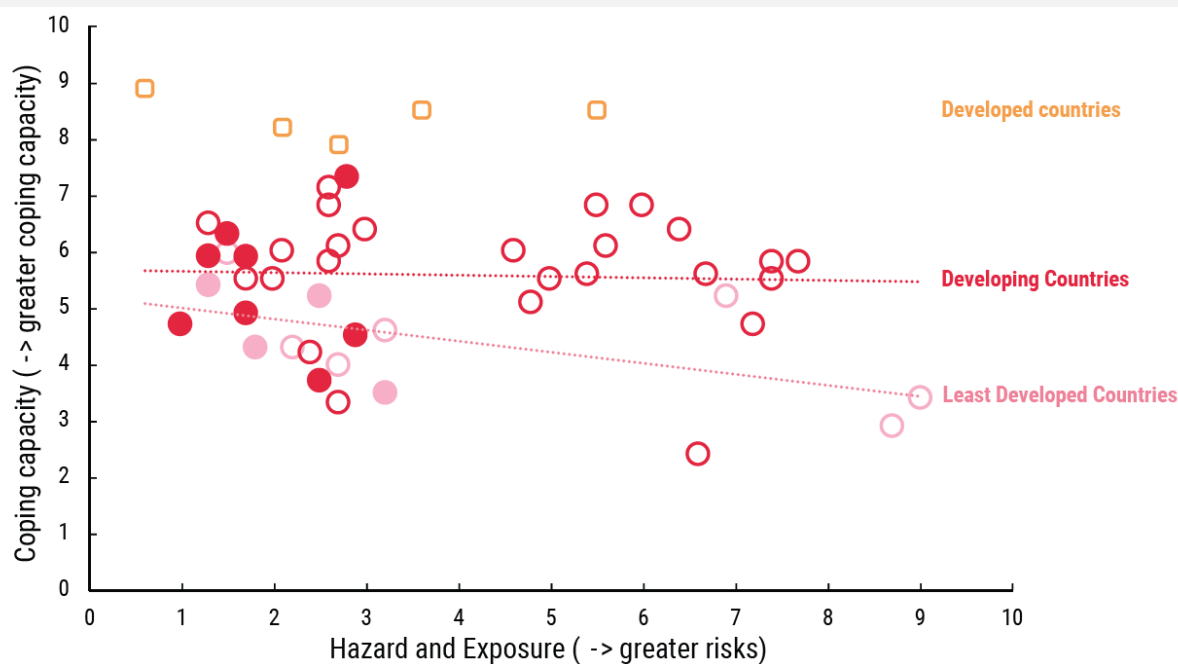
*Note: Subregional classification is based on ILO country groupings.
Source: ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates, November 2023.*

Uneven coping capacities of countries

A comparison of coping capacity and exposure to climate-related shocks and non-climate shocks in the region shows that developed countries are less exposed and more resilient to shocks than least developed and developing countries (figure 2). While countries with a higher exposure, and thus a greater need to adapt, typically have a lower coping capacity due to a lack of financing, infrastructure, and institutional capacity, poorer countries, particularly least developed countries, are at higher risk due to their lower capacity to mitigate the damage and mobilize resources for reconstruction. Moreover, the financial resources spent on post-disaster reconstruction are a drain to public budgets, detracting from vital investments that foster growth.

Small island developing States (SIDS) are particularly vulnerable to climate-related shocks as their economies’ small size and remoteness limits government capacity to mitigate the impact of external shocks emanating from climate change and natural disasters. Many of the environmental risks that threaten SIDS originate outside their borders and directly affect key sectors such as agriculture, fisheries and tourism, and thereby the substantial number of jobs and livelihoods that depend on these sectors. Impacts of climate change on these key sectors will not only displace workers but can threaten food supplies (ADB and ILO, 2017). These challenges could intensify labour migration pressures and lead to long-term implications of a green ‘brain drain’ resulting in emigration of

Figure 2: Coping capacity and exposure to climate-related and other shocks in Asia-Pacific, 2023



Note: Coping capacity refers to country-system capacity (INFORM hazard and exposure, and coping capacity indexes, points out of 10). Dotted line shows estimated linear relationship for developing economies and least developed countries. Coping capacity is the inverse of the 'lack of coping capacity' in INFORM. Countries are classified following the United Nations classification from the World Economic Situation and Prospects 2023. Filled markers indicate Small island developing States. Source: Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership Report 2024

workers with key skills needed for transitions to environmentally sustainable economies (ADB, 2023b). Quality of available jobs domestically combined with rising costs of living and increased climate vulnerability are some of the drivers of labour migration among Pacific islanders. While the number of international migrants from and within the Pacific Islands are small in absolute numbers, the impact of labour mobility on their societies and economies is significant. As of mid-2020, there were an estimated 566,000 migrants from Pacific Island countries and semi-autonomous territories, around 56 per cent of which migrated to Australia and New Zealand. Another 12 per cent migrated to other Pacific Island countries. In addition to permanent migration, a combined total of almost 48,000 visas were issued to workers participating in temporary labour migration schemes in the region (ILO, 2024a).

Heat stress and air pollution

Many parts of Asia-Pacific experienced extreme heat events in 2023 and the warming trend has nearly doubled since the 1961-1990 period (WMO, 2024). High temperatures weigh on labour supply

and productivity, particularly in a region where a significant number of workers are employed in sectors with high risk of heat exposure such as agriculture and construction. Heat waves also impact tourism, leading to large decreases of often informal jobs. Moreover, those countries that are most affected by heat-related risks have higher rates of working poverty and informal employment (ILO, 2024b). Poor and vulnerable population groups who are dependent on agricultural or coastal livelihoods also tend to be at higher risk. In countries where agriculture depends on irrigation, rising heat and water scarcity can severely constrain crop production and affect farmer livelihoods. Research shows that labour productivity in the region is projected to fall by 6.7 percentage points at 1.5°C warming (and 10.4 and 18.6 percentage points at 2.0°C and 3.0°C warming, respectively) (Dasgupta and others, 2021). Countries near the equator are projected to see the largest climate-related drops in labour productivity.

Furthermore, air pollution has a big impact on workers and labour productivity, with the severity depending on, among others, gender, age, and the type of work. Research in Cambodia, Lao People's

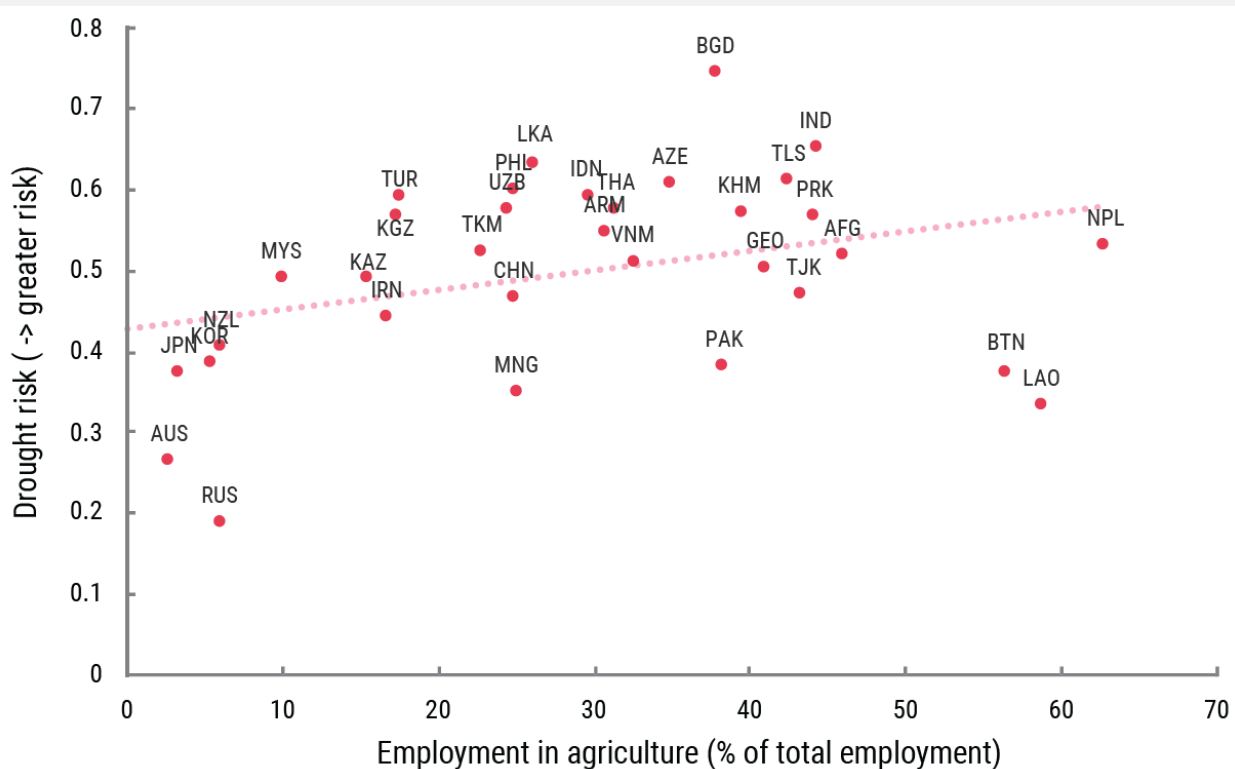
Democratic Republic, Thailand, and Viet Nam has found that informal workers, such as street vendors, delivery drivers and people doing home-based work, were the least protected and most affected by air pollution (Stockholm Environment Institute, 2023).

Informality and vulnerability of jobs

With nearly two thirds of total employment in Asia-Pacific in 2023 in informal employment (ILO, 2024c), the ability of workers and enterprises to adapt and cope with climate-related shocks is limited. In countries with high drought risk and a high share of jobs in agriculture, this climate-agricultural labour nexus is particularly concerning (figure 3). The sector’s vulnerability is a major challenge, especially for the poorest farmers, who cannot adapt easily, for example, through use of groundwater pumps, or finding less risky, better-paying non-farm jobs.

Young workers in the region are also vulnerable with more than eight out of ten in informal employment and one in four living in households below the moderate poverty threshold of US\$3.65 per day (ILO, 2024c). As numerous informal businesses and their workers operate within informal settlements, dual exposure to environmental hazards, such as landslides and floods, poses a further risk (ILO, 2022). With the informal economy exposed to potential negative impacts of energy and climate policies as the phasing out of fossil fuels will result in loss of employment and income, coverage from social protection schemes, unemployment benefits and retraining and labour market programmes is required to ensure just transitions.

Figure 3: Comparison of drought risk and share of employment in agriculture in 2022



Note: Agricultural labour markets in countries with high drought risk and high share of employment in agriculture are particularly vulnerable to climate change. AFG: Afghanistan; ARM: Armenia; AUS: Australia; AZE: Azerbaijan; BGD: Bangladesh; BTN: Bhutan; CHN: China; GEO: Georgia; IDN: Indonesia; IND: India; IRN: Islamic Republic of Iran; JPN: Japan; KAZ: Kazakhstan; KGZ: Kyrgyzstan; KHM: Cambodia; KOR: Republic of Korea; LAO: Lao People’s Democratic Republic; LKA: Sri Lanka; MNG: Mongolia; MYS: Malaysia; NPL: Nepal; NZL: New Zealand; PAK: Pakistan; PHL: Philippines; PRK: Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; RUS: the Russian Federation; THA: Thailand; TJK: Tajikistan; TKM: Turkmenistan; TLS: Timor-Leste; TUR: Türkiye; UZB: Uzbekistan; VNM: Viet Nam.

Source: Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership Report 2024

3. CLIMATE ACTION AND DECENT WORK SOLUTIONS

As demonstrated, climate change aggravates poverty through an employment lens in Asia and the Pacific. This section focuses on selected areas of how decent work and just transition can step up climate action and ensure to leave no one behind.

Skills for a just transition

Transitioning to a greener economy will require reskilling and upskilling of workers to reduce the risk of unemployment, poverty and inequality. Skills development is a cornerstone of a ‘just transition’, namely a transition to an ecologically sustainable economy that is as fair and inclusive as possible, creates decent work opportunities and leaves no one behind (ILO, 2015).

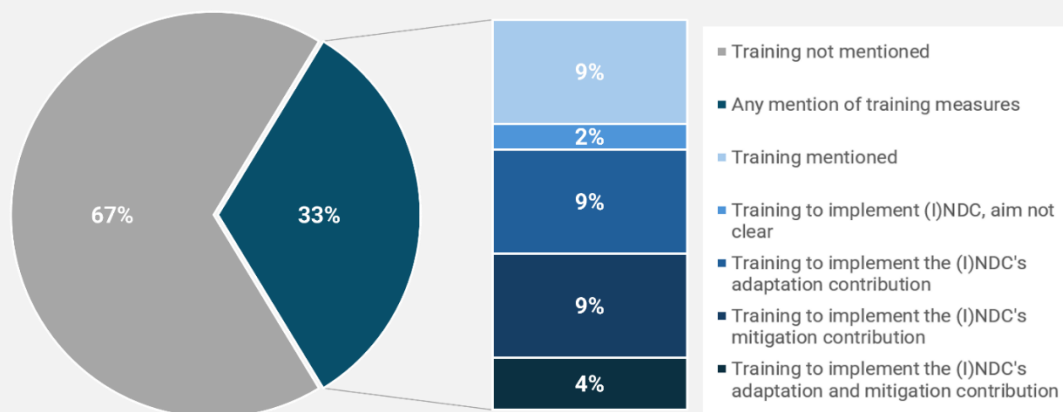
The 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement provide an institutional and policy framework to address these challenges. While countries submit Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) pledges under the Paris Agreement every five years, the national commitments and sectoral priorities tend to underestimate the role of skills development and capacity building measures (figure 4). Indeed, only 15 countries in the region mention the need for skills training to support the implementation of their NDCs, while 24 countries mention the need for climate education (Pieter and others, 2022). Effectively designed NDCs need to integrate climate change literacy, skills training

and capacity building at national and sectoral levels.

The changing environment, shifting policies and regulations, as well as advancements in green technology and innovation, collectively drive the need for skills for green jobs. The ILO estimates that some 24 million net green jobs can be created in the Asia-Pacific region by 2030 (ILO, 2018). Building the skills required for these new “green jobs” will be critical to ensuring that people currently working in the informal sector can access them. As the decarbonisation of economies will lead to job losses as employment in carbon-intensive sectors is phased down, planning and investments in retraining, coupled with labour market support measures, would mitigate the impacts on workers and communities. Improved coordination and coherence between skills and environmental policies, as well as involvement of private sector stakeholders would enable a more effective design of skills development measures. Moreover, public acceptance of climate action can be increased by involving workers in transition decisions and encouraging citizen engagement.

The Energy Transition Mechanism (ETM) launched by Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2021 in Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, the Philippines and Viet Nam is a scalable model for a just transition in the region. It ensures an inclusive transition by

Figure 4: Share of NDCs in Asia-Pacific that mentioned skills training and level of measures specified



Note: Sample consisted of 46 Intended NDCs (INDCs) and NDCs in Asia and the Pacific
Source: Data computed from NDC Explorer, 2022.

placing social safeguards for impacted workers and communities at its center. It focuses on the delivery of climate objectives through concessional and commercial capital to accelerate the retirement or repurposing of fossil fuel power plants while simultaneously ensuring socio-economic outcomes including access to new opportunities, jobs and markets (ESCAP, ADB and UNDP, 2024).

Entrepreneurship and innovation

Workers and communities can play an active role in propelling green structural transformation through entrepreneurship and innovation. By generating employment opportunities and advocating for sustainable approaches, green entrepreneurship significantly impacts poverty reduction. Innovation lies at the core of this transformational process, serving as a catalyst for expediting the adoption of more efficient and sustainable solutions, thereby empowering communities, fostering economic progress, mitigating the impacts of climate change, and addressing issues of poverty and hunger.

Entrepreneurs can contribute to fostering and sustaining a green economy through the provision of green products and services, implementation of greener production techniques, boosting demand for green products and services, and creating green jobs. Through pollution reduction, adoption of clean production processes, and resource optimization, green entrepreneurship can transcend mere technological aspects of business operations and foster a culture of lifecycle-oriented thinking. Green entrepreneurs can thereby shift public mindset towards sustainability, contributing to both employment and environmental gains.

Supporting young people to become entrepreneurs and promoting youth-led business solutions are vital for creating green jobs for youth. In the Philippines, for instance, a young female entrepreneur founded AGREA Agricultural Communities International (AGREA) Foundation, a social enterprise that supplies households with fruit and vegetables and provides education and

skills training to contribute to labour market opportunities in the food production sector (ESCAP, ADB and UNDP, 2024).

Job creation in nature-dependent sectors

Climate adaptation activities will be an important source of new employment particularly in ecosystems-based sectors and where livelihoods are dependent on natural ecosystems. New jobs in adaptation-related activities are emerging in a variety of economic sectors, with nature-based projects being a vital source of local employment.¹ In areas where people are poor and food insecure and their livelihoods depend on natural ecosystems, such projects can be especially effective in tackling the challenges at the heart of the climate-poverty-hunger nexus. Figure 5 provides an overview of employment in nature-based activities.

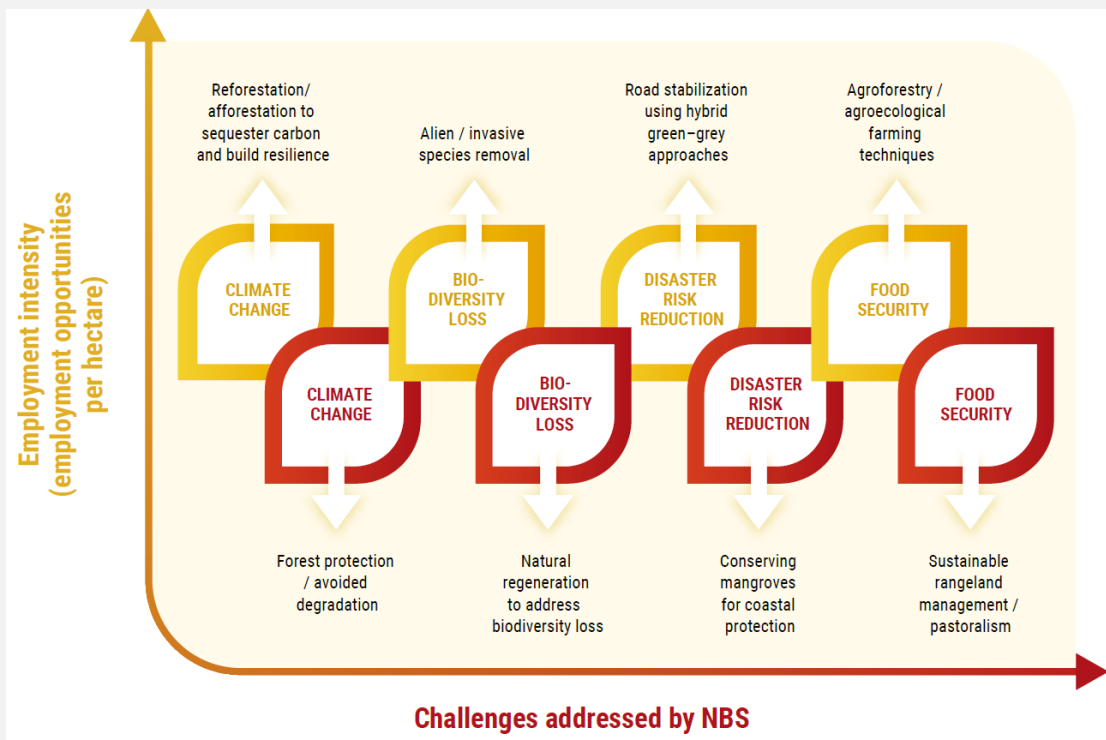
It is, however, critical to ensure that these jobs are decent by taking concrete measures to address pre-existing inequalities faced by vulnerable and marginalized groups. Initiatives focused on nature-based solutions would need to develop governance models, impart skills to local communities and put in place financing, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. For instance, Indonesia's village of Demak uses a nature-based solution to restore a protective belt of mangroves to fight against erosion and sea level rise. The project provides jobs for local people during planting, and some in maintenance and monitoring, and helps make fishing and aquaculture livelihoods more viable (UNEP, 2023).

Labour mobility programmes

In the absence of proactive policies linking climate change, human mobility and employment, the risk of decent work deficits and negative impacts on labour markets is high. However, with appropriate governance, labour migration and mobility in the context of climate change also present opportunities and can serve as an important adaptive mechanism. Countries of destination can benefit from new skills, which can also contribute to their own climate mitigation and adaptation plans. Over the longer term, as migrants return, they bring skills and experience with them that benefit their home

¹ Such projects protect, sustainably manage and restore natural or modified ecosystems that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits.

Figure 5: Employment intensity of different nature-based solutions



Source: ILO, UNEP and IUCN, 2022

countries. For labour mobility and migration to be safe, established pathways and decent work protections must be in place. Such protections include access to formal jobs, as well as health, housing and social services in destination countries. Reliable information in destination and origin areas is also vital so that workers and employers can make informed decisions. Small island developing States are using labour mobility as a means of climate adaptation. For instance, Pacific governments endorsed a Regional Framework on Climate Mobility at the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting in 2023. It aims to guide governments in addressing specific legal, policy and practical issues that will arise from increased climate mobility in the following areas: staying in place, displacement, migration, planned relocations and stranded migrants. The key objective of the framework is to ensure provisions for safe labour migration as an adaptation strategy for impacted Pacific islanders. These provisions include training and skills development to support more skilled labour migration, pre-departure orientation for migrants, as well as capacity building (IOM and ILO, 2022).

Climate-resilient and inclusive social protection systems

Social protection systems that provide a safety net for poor and vulnerable groups play a critical role in addressing employment and livelihoods impacts of climate change. Instruments ranging from unemployment protection, social health protection, pensions, cash benefits and public employment programmes can provide income security, access to healthcare and generate new opportunities. Well-designed social protection systems with adequate funding are an essential component for climate action and just transition to succeed. Social protection can support climate action by: (i) reducing poverty and vulnerability, including ensuring wellbeing and ability to cope with climate shocks ex-ante; (ii) providing immediate support through shock-responsive measures; (iii) contributing to climate change adaptation by reducing disaster risk and enhancing adaptive capacity; (iv) and using measures to compensate for losses or incentivize a just transition to a green economy (Costella and others, 2021).

When strengthening existing social protection systems or building new systems in support of climate change adaptation or mitigation, it is critical to ensure that all those in need can be reached.

Adopting a gender lens in these processes is vital to address the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls when disasters strike. Long-term sustainability and success of social protection systems will also rely on integration in relevant policy and financing mechanisms. International and national climate financing strategies as well as NDCs and National Adaptation Plans are instrumental to ensure adequate allocations for social protection to finance a just transition.

4. CONCLUSION

The Asia-Pacific region stands at a critical juncture with the urgent need for climate action intersecting with poverty reduction and hunger alleviation. Integrated approaches that unlock synergies and mitigate trade-offs provide the best opportunities for transformative change. These approaches can leapfrog barriers that limit progress, namely siloed actions that result in uncoordinated policy, investment gaps and an imbalance of short and long-term benefits and costs that can impede climate action.

Climate change threatens livelihoods, particularly of the poor and vulnerable groups who are least prepared to cope and adapt. Moreover, a transition to green industries and sectors and moving away from fossil fuels will intensify the need for inclusive solutions. Mitigating the adverse impacts of this transition while harnessing its potential requires a multifaceted approach. Solutions that particularly address labour market challenges exacerbated by the climate crisis are instrumental for transformative change. These efforts, among others which encompass skills development, entrepreneurship promotion, nature-based projects, labour mobility programmes and social protection systems, play a pivotal role in facilitating decent work and just transitions.

India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is the largest labour guarantee scheme in the world, offering 100 days of paid labour to every rural household. Public Works Programs (PWP) are state-sponsored employment programs targeting poverty where labour is exchanged for wages and/or food. PWP offers decent work, provides a safety net, restores and conserves the natural resources and secures water and food supply. Evaluations have highlighted the environmental benefits of the program, including reforestation and afforestation, improved water security and carbon abatement (Angom and Viswanathan, 2022).

However, ensuring the inclusion of vulnerable groups will remain a challenge. Factors such as poverty, marginalization and gender-based roles hinder the participation of women, young people, informal workers, low-skilled workers and persons with disabilities. A just transition requires addressing these barriers through targeted and tailored interventions to promote social justice and inclusion.

In essence, the intertwined challenges of decent work and climate action call for a holistic approach that integrates social, environmental and economic considerations. By prioritizing sustainability alongside social equity and economic prosperity, the Asia-Pacific region can navigate the complexities of climate action while fostering inclusive growth and resilience towards just transitions for all.

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