To what extent can the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) be achieved in Asia by 2030, and what specific reforms are necessary to accelerate the process?

Introduction

The 93 United Nations member states approved the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as a global initiative to eliminate poverty, protect the environment, and ensure peace and prosperity by 2030 (Bhatia, 2025). The SDG goals encourage inclusive, equitable, and sustainable approaches, seeking to address the interrelated global challenges of environmental, health, and economic risks.

Asia is home to more than half of the world's population and has notable economic diversity in terms of income levels, industrialization, and development progress. It currently faces a tough road ahead in its progress towards the SDGs. On one hand, Asia is home to some of the fastest growing economies like India, Cambodia, and Bangladesh, and has demonstrated significant progress in areas like poverty reduction, health, and infrastructure. However, it continues to struggle with deep rooted inequalities, high vulnerability to climate change, and uneven development across countries. This diversity makes Asia's progress crucial to the global success of the SDG agenda.

This essay will evaluate Asia's current progress towards the SDGs, assess the likelihood of achieving them by 2030, and highlight the critical reforms required to accelerate advancements.

Asia's Current SGD Progress

The Asia Pacific region has exhibited strong performance on several SDG goals and targets relative to other regions, leading in progress on Goal 1 (no poverty), Goal 2 (zero hunger), Goal 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production), Goal 15 (life on land), and Goal 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), although it largely falls behind on Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), Goal 13 (climate action), Goal 14 (life below water), and Goal 17 (partnerships for the goals) (ESCAP, 2025).

Overall, some goals are progressing considerably, while others are experiencing slow advances and even regressing. There is significant progress in Goal 1 due to successful reduction of income poverty, while Goal 2 progress is accelerated by remarkable improvements in tackling undernourishment. Additionally, notable success in improving maternal, infant, and child health has driven advancement in Goal 3 (good health and well-being). However, household health expenditures remain high, with 16.1% of South-East Asian households spending more than 10% of their income on health, up from 13.1% in 2010 (ESCAP, 2025). Goal 4 (quality education) is progressing slowly due to poor learning outcomes in reading and mathematics proficiency. Despite rising school completion rates, regression in literacy and numeracy proficiency highlights a major bottleneck.

Progress in Goal 5 (gender equality) and Goal 16 is difficult to understand due to insufficient data. Advancement towards Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation) remains slow due to low access to safe drinking water. At the current pace, only 76% of the region will have safely managed sanitation services by 2030, requiring a 2.5 fold increase in effort. Goal 7 (affordable and clean energy) exhibits mixed progress due to low capacity to produce renewable energy although the target of universal access to electricity is almost achieved. Rising unsustainable production patterns hinder progress to Goal 8, while broadened access to mobile networks contributed to achievements in Goal 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure). Goal 10 (reduced inequalities) is advancing slowly due to stagnant labour income share of GDP and doubling of refugees since 2015.

Improvement in Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities) is uneven due to massive economic and infrastructural losses caused by natural disasters. Progress on Goal 12 has been hindered due to rise in fossil fuel subsidies, while Goal 13 is alarmingly regressing due to significant damage from natural disasters and substantial pollution. Goal 14 and Goal 15 are experiencing slower improvement due to regressions in the share of sustainable fisheries in GDP and proportion of land degradation. Goal 17 shows mixed progress, with improvements in areas like digital connectivity and regressions in funding allocated to enhance statistical capacity.

In summary, Asia has made good progress in areas like poverty reduction, health, and infrastructure, although progress remains uneven with several SDGs progressing too slowly and some even regressing, especially in areas such as climate action, gender equality, and sustainable cities. Furthermore, insufficient data makes it difficult to monitor the progress of targets efficiently.

Where is Asia expected to be by 2030?

The 2025 SDG progress report outlines targets where Asia and the Pacific leads worldwide, including reducing income poverty (Goal 1), tackling undernourishment (Goal 2), supporting small-scale industries (Goal 9), lowering hazardous waste (Goal 12), reducing land degradation (Goal 15), and preventing human trafficking and homicide (Goal 16). In spite of these advancements, slow progress in crucial goals like Goal 4 (quality of education), Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), and Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production) jeopardize efforts to achieve the SDG goals by 2030. Furthermore, issues like rising fossil fuel subsidies, low competency in literacy and numeracy, and unsustainable production processes further add to these challenges. Environmental degradation, rising susceptibility to natural disasters, and continual greenhouse gas emissions are further regressing goals like climate action (Goal 13), life below water (Goal 14) and life on land (Goal 15). For instance, regression in sustainable fisheries (Goal 14) and continued land degradation (Goal 15) highlight worsening environmental challenges.

Additionally, official SDG data is available to evaluate progress on 117 of 169 targets across the 17 goals, with inadequate data to measure the remaining 52 targets. Amongst the 117 targets, 14% (16 targets) are expected to be met by 2030, 71% (83 targets) demand urgent acceleration, and 15% (18 targets) are regressing and demand immediate corrective action (see Figure 1). 50% of the regressing targets are linked to climate-related challenges and disaster preparedness, highlighting the need for resilient disaster-related reforms. According to the Economic and Social Commission for Asian and the Pacific (ESCAP), the region will miss 86% of the 117 measured targets by 2030.

Figure 1

Dashboard of expected achievements

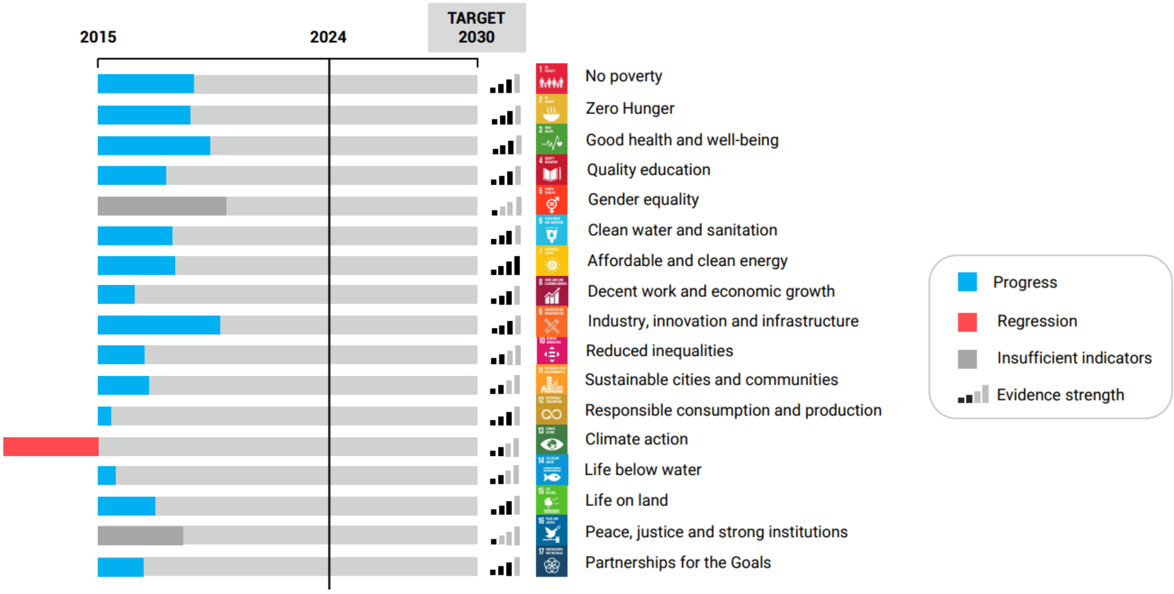
Note. Progress tracking of SDG targets. From "Asia and the Pacific SDG progress report 2025: Engaging communities to close the evidence gap" by Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2025, p. 6. (https://www.unescap.org/kp/2025/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report-2025). Copyright 2025 by United Nations.

The progress report also details barriers to progress such as development benefits bypassing vulnerable groups and factors like age, gender, education, location, and wealth worsening inequalities. Moreover, inequality of opportunity is exacerbated by poverty and education level, with deprived households in rural areas having low access to education and basic necessities like water, sanitation, and clean energy. Indicators under Goal 11 also reveal that the region recorded 12.76 million disaster-induced displacements in 2023, nearly half of the global total, highlighting the urgency of resilience building (ESCAP, 2025). Another significant barrier is the lack of reliable and timely data, with 52 targets being unable to be properly measured.

Based on current trends, it is highly unlikely that any of the SDG goals will be achieved by 2030. This is illustrated in Figure 2, where none of the goals have reached even halfway towards the 2030 target. Goal 3 and Goal 9 have made the most progress, but it is still unlikely that the 2030 target will be attained. Concerningly, Goal 13 (climate action) has been significantly regressing while there is insufficient data to measure progress towards Goals 5 and 16. As such, the areas which require immediate reform are climate action, disaster preparedness, sustainable consumption and production, land and water ecosystems, and governance structures that support inclusive and robust development.

Figure 2

Snapshot of regional SDG progress since 2015



Note. SDG progress since 2015. From "Asia and the Pacific SDG progress report 2025: Engaging communities to close the evidence gap" by Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2025, p. 3. (https://www.unescap.org/kp/2025/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report-2025). Copyright 2025 by United Nations.

Necessary Reforms to Accelerate SDG Progress

Instead of focusing on each goal independently and devising strategies to achieve each goal separately, it would be far more meticulous and effective to bring about structural changes that help accelerate several goals at the same time. Each country will have to devise strategies depending on their current position. As such, three categories of reforms are recommended: Policy Reforms, Government Reforms, and Financing Reforms.

Policy Reforms

Policy reforms are urgently needed in areas concerning climate action, renewable energy, and environmental protection laws. Rising fossil fuel subsidies should be phased out and replaced with incentives to use renewable energy, helping the region reverse regression in renewable energy capacity. Similarly, building sustainable and resilient food systems (Goal 2) is essential to address food insecurity and climate-related disruptions. Pollution permits can provide a market-based solution to control emissions, while disaster preparedness (Goal 11) must be strengthened due to Asia recording almost half of global disaster-induced displacements in 2023. Additionally, despite minimum wage regulations existing in several countries across Asia, wages are substantially below living costs slowing progress on poverty alleviation and decent work (World Fair Trade Organisation, n.d.). Therefore, it is necessary to revise wage laws to ensure affordability of basic necessities.

Government Reforms

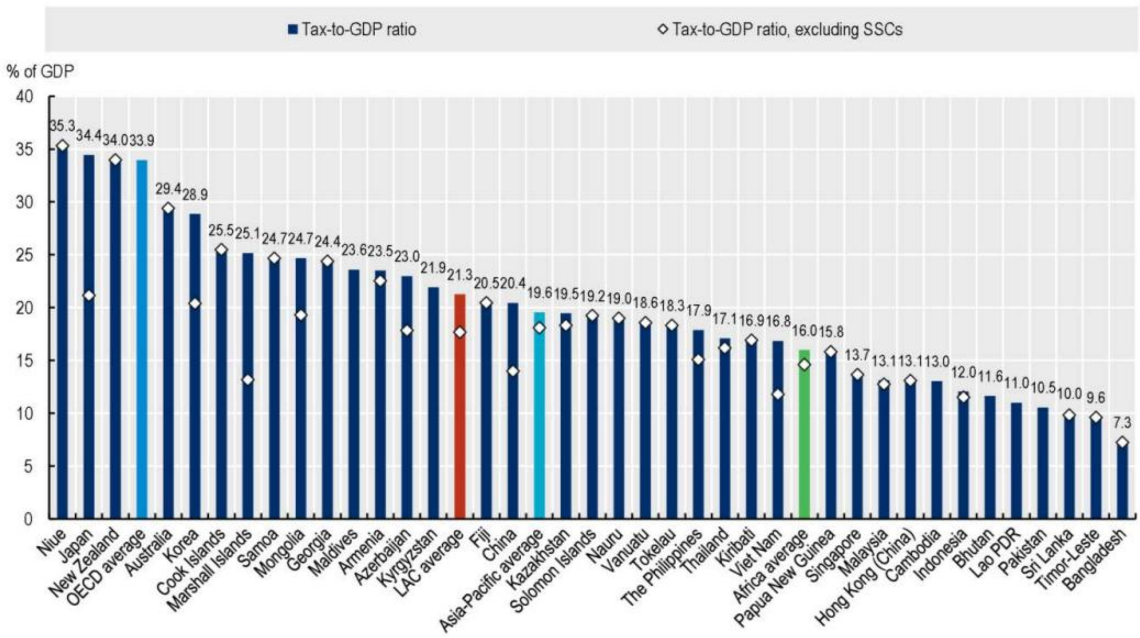
Government reforms are critical to ensure that policy initiatives are enforced effectively and reach vulnerable groups. Hameed et al. (2021) suggest governments should align their national development strategies with the SDGs and build stronger institutional capacity to coordinate SDG implementation effectively. This will help overcome barriers of inequality (Goal 10) and weak governance structures (Goal 16). Additionally, fiscal decentralisation should be enabled to ensure local government autonomy to implement disaster preparedness strategies (Goal 11) and climate resilience measures (Goal 13) (Guha & Chakrabarti, 2019). Finally, transparent monitoring and audits of SDG-related spending will address corruption and inefficiency while ensuring progress can be measured with reliable data, which is a major gap highlighted under Goal 17.

Financing Reforms

Financing reforms are needed to close critical funding gaps across the SDG agenda. Only 9 of the 23 Asian economies assessed had a tax-to-GDP ratio above the regional average (OECD, 2025). This limits domestic resource mobilisation in key areas such as education (Goal 4), healthcare (Goal 3), and clean water and sanitation (Goal 6). Expanding the tax base, improving compliance, and strengthening administration will provide governments with the fiscal ability to fund these investments. At the same time, Goal 17 highlights alarming regressions in financial resources allocated to strengthen statistical capacity. This highlights the need to direct funding into data collection and monitoring systems so that SDG implementation can be evidence based and transparent. Additionally, fiscal reforms must be designed to avoid placing additional burdens on low-income households, ensuring that financing strategies remain inclusive.

Figure 3

Tax-to-GDP ratios in Asian and Pacific economies and regional averages, including and excluding social security contributions, 2023



From "Revenue Statistics in Asia and the Pacific 2025: Personal Income Taxation in Asia and the Pacific" by OECD, 2025, p. 14. (https://doi.org/10.1787/6c04402f-en). Copyright 2025 by OECD.

Key Considerations and Limitations

Although these reforms work in theory, there are several challenges that occur in their implementation and enforcement. Firstly, phasing out fossil fuel subsidies will increase energy prices in the initial phases, affecting low-income households and firms. Therefore, careful planning is required to ensure the most vulnerable groups are not affected and subsidies should be redirected to renewable energy sources. Secondly, firms will pass on the costs of pollution permits to customers in markets with lower levels of competitive pressure, increasing the prices of goods and services. Again, this will mainly affect low-income communities.

Changing minimum wage regulations might increase unemployment if wage increases are too steep, calling for careful planning and implementation. Lastly, strengthening disaster preparedness will require substantial investments in infrastructure and technology. This will make it harder for low income economies to implement such changes as their budget would not be sufficient to invest in disaster resilience.

Conclusion

Although Asia has shown strong progress in areas such as poverty reduction, healthcare, and infrastructure, slow and regressing progress especially in environmental protection, sustainable production, climate action, and disaster preparedness is rendering it unlikely to achieve the SDGs fully by 2030. This calls for a systematic implementation and effective enforcement of reforms that addresses urgent areas that require immediate attention. Significant progress can be achieved through reforms in climate action, disaster resilience, and inclusive policies that accelerate progress across several goals simultaneously. These policies need to be implemented alongside governance reforms that promote efficient institutional capacity, decentralise financial decision making, and enable development benefits to reach vulnerable communities. Additionally, financing reforms such as expanding the tax base and improving tax compliance will be critical in funding these initiatives without worsening inequalities.

In conclusion, while the SDGs will not be fully met by 3020, targeted reforms will build a strong foundation that will promote sustainable, resilient, and inclusive development beyond 2030, positioning Asia as a leader in shaping a more sustainable global economy.

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