

LEADING  
EDGE

INTERNATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT  
IN ASIA

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Working for a Just World



# THE LEADING EDGE: INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA, 2020

*This research briefing reviews the findings of *The Leading Edge: International Development in Asia, 2020*,<sup>1</sup> a 'horizons' scanning report investigating how International NGOs (INGOs) are adapting to a rapidly changing region where the traditional 'rules of engagement' between global North and South have perhaps altered quicker than anywhere else.*

*Interviews were conducted with eighteen experts on development in Asia, from civil society, government, the private sector and intergovernmental bodies. It provides a qualitative investigation of how four areas which emerged strongly in earlier Trócaire research - *Shifting Geopolitics, Demographic Shifts, Climate Change and Pressure on Natural Resources* – will play out in Asia over the coming decade.*

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<sup>1</sup> In 2011, Trócaire published *Leading Edge 2020*, a 'horizons scanning' report on the future of international development, the major trends which would shape development in the coming decade, and the implications for INGOs. The findings of this report formed the basis of the *Asia 2020* research report. Both reports are available through Trócaire's website at [www.trocaire.ie](http://www.trocaire.ie)



## INTRODUCTION: THE ASIAN CENTURY?

***“The coming decade – and indeed century – belongs to Asia.”***

*International Organisation, Europe*

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There is little doubt that current commentary on Asia focuses on growth, growth and growth. Estimates from the Asia Development Bank (ADB) show that by 2050 per capita income in Asia could reach parity with Europe.<sup>2</sup> The region will double its share of global GDP to 52%.<sup>3</sup> Its urban population will have doubled, with all the cultural change, agricultural shifts and demand for employment that brings.<sup>4</sup>

That standard narrative includes, of course, significant omissions. The percentage of people living on less than \$1.25/day in South Asia rose from approximately one third to 45% between 1990 and 2005, and continues to rise.<sup>5</sup> South Asia accounts for 44% of those living in conditions of multi-dimensional poverty globally, compared with 29% in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>6</sup> Equally, it's uncertain whether newfound wealth will translate into greater political freedoms.

Neither is there evidence of a 'trickle down effect' *between* countries of unequal growth levels. The ADB predicts that, under a 'best case' scenario for sustained prosperity in Asia, in 2050 91% of all GDP growth in Asia will be accounted for by just seven countries.<sup>7</sup> The standard vision of prosperity in Asia continues to assume the dominance of a small number of nations. And in Asia, where regional structures remain underdeveloped and politically problematic, the knock-on effect of growth from one economy to another is doubly uncertain.

Nonetheless, the point remains that the simple fact of Asia's newfound wealth is a game-changer for how international development can be effective in that region – if only in bringing an end to assumptions from donors that with aid dollars comes influence.

And indeed it is interesting that in this context, the interviewees in *Leading Edge Asia* challenge INGOs to begin to more carefully distinguish between two separate problems: political will and poverty. It is clear that in Asia, political will at both national and international level has become the issue of the day.

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<sup>2</sup> Asia Development Bank (2010) *Asia 2050: Realizing the Asian Century* <http://www.adb.org/publications/asia-2050-realizing-asian-century> p.3

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p.3

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p.6

<sup>5</sup> Sumner, Andy (2010) *Where do the poor live?* p.5 <http://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/GlobalPovertyDataPaper1.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Sumner *Where do the poor live?* p.6

<sup>7</sup> *Asia 2050* p. 8

## KEY TREND #1: SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS

### Does economic growth equal political power?

***“This is a zero sum game, and those that have power currently are going to be reluctant to pass it over”*** – *Economist, South Asia*

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In Asia perhaps more than any other region, our interviewees emphasised that any changes in geopolitical power would come as a consequence of economic shifts and growth. And while there was broad agreement amongst interviewees as to the speed of economic growth – India’s and China’s economies will be second only to the US in terms of size within a decade – there was far less consensus as to whether economic growth would translate into increased *political* influence at a global level. In forums such as the World Bank and IMF, the same old players continue to dominate.

### Leadership in Asia

The dominating ‘unknown’ mentioned by interviewees was what ‘balance of power’ will emerge within Asia. Though China is often touted as the obvious ‘emerging power’, our interviewees’ attention focused on the potential of regional blocs to serve as a credible counterbalance to China. Whether or not regional integration solidifies in South and Southeast Asia was identified as a critical factor in determining the extent to which China will pursue its interests in the region unilaterally.

Southeast Asian regionalisation emerged in interviews as the most realistic counterbalance to China’s influence. Increased intra-regional trade and investment was regarded as inevitable. Less certain was the likelihood of increased labour mobility. Interviewees pointed to the organisation’s recent expansion beyond economic affairs. ASEAN’s recent engagement with human rights issues in Myanmar was one such example cited.

Cooperation in the area of Disaster Risk Reduction was identified as a non-politicised area demanding cross-border coordination, which might serve as a forerunner to increased political regionalisation.

***“The South Asian community will just learn to find some common ground because they have to, they don’t have any choice”*** – *Donor, Southeast Asia*

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In South Asia, regional integration was considered limited by tension between India and Pakistan. That relationship was consistently mentioned as the biggest potential conflict trigger in South or Southeast Asia, complicated further by Afghanistan. Our interviewees’ analysis, however, was that were Indian-Pakistan relations to improve, a strengthened South Asian bloc would provide the most formidable regional counter-balance to China.

There was little agreement amongst interviewees in predicting what sort of relationship will emerge between China and India. Some predicted that competition between the two would exacerbate conflicts involving Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran.

Others argued that India would not pose a challenge to China as a regional leader. Economically, interviewees pointed to India’s fragility, its deficit, and its boom-driven economy. Politically, growing civil society mobilisation was cited as evidence that India, a democracy, could not depend on domestic opinion to implement dramatic policy shifts. In a context where good governance, rather than reach on the global stage, will determine the fortunes of the marginalised in emerging ‘superpowers’, India’s continued internal flux might indeed be read as a positive sign for attempts to ensure growth translates into reductions in poverty.



## WHAT WILL THE ROLE OF CHINA IN THE REGION BE OVER THE NEXT DECADE?

***“China is just the latest ‘evil empire’ like Japan 40 years ago or Russia more recently. I think we’ll see the Chinese, eventually, are not so irrational or brutal or evil, as they become real global players” – INGO, South Asia***

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While the world waits to see what China’s next move will be, our interviewees were less convinced that China has any grand plan to increase its space at the global table. One commentator argued that China itself has been taken aback by how quick its economic growth has been and are unsure how to use their newfound influence. Major challenges of internal stability remain before, interviewees argued, China steps up to the global stage.

A number of interviewees emphasised the potential for a win-win situation in the region *vis-a-vis* China: investment and support for economic activity, including demand for resources, is not necessarily a bad thing. The Chinese private sector could increase inter-dependence and as such regional stability.

***“China depends on securing a future for a country that cannot survive by itself” – Regional NGO, Southeast Asia***

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The alliances which China develops globally were identified as being critical to how it exerts influence. A number of interviewees pointed out that careful alliances and a multilateral attitude were a necessity, because the Chinese economy is structured in such a way that it can’t survive by itself. China needs food and resources and the global economic system to grow and survive. This will limit its willingness to challenge the global economic status quo in ways which might undermine traditionally strong economies. Conversely, interviewees speculated, alliances within Asia might allow China to pursue a strategy of enabling growth within the region, to develop markets in such a way that China becomes less reliant on the EU and the US. The route China takes in this regard will determine a huge amount of the role it plays in the region.

## Will geopolitical shifts help the poorest?

**“The North has not been good for development - that is certain. So the changes can only be good.”** – *Economist, India*

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Our interviewees formed two bodies of opinion on whether the increased global significance of many Asian economies would be positive for the poor. Some worried that any shift in power away from the global North would risk lowering the human rights *status quo*.

Others though questioned whether we are really moving away from a positive model at all. One interviewee pointed to the fact that the dominant development model of the past century has been so destructive that emerging powers physically cannot pursue the same resource-demanding growth strategies that Northern counterparts have. China, for example, was seen as too easily placed as the ‘evil’ cousin; rather, its expansionist, resource-hungry policies are simply replicating the standard development model, but with potential for dividends regionally.

## Shifting Geopolitics: Reflections from the Humanitarian Sector

Interviewees listed deteriorating relations between Israel and Iran or India and Pakistan, and any destabilisation of North Korea, as the potential ‘sparks’ for conflict in the region.

Beyond conflict, the geopolitical trend cited as most significant for humanitarian relief in Asia was the likely emergence of increasingly confident ‘new humanitarian actors’, in the form of increasingly assertive governments in Asia. Increasingly, governments see providing emergency response within their own borders as a core element of asserting their own sovereignty. Interviewees welcomed such independence, while noting challenges – the most obvious being a threat to the humanitarian principle of impartiality.

Interviewees argued that the increased political and economic power of emerging economies would likely lead to changes in the logistics of emergency response. It was anticipated that any relief mechanism within ASEAN would employ a far stricter definition of ‘sovereignty,’ and require far more explicit consent from recipient governments, than is the case with the UN.

Finally, increased regional cooperation was welcomed by interviewees, seen as critical to ensuring effective response to natural disasters which are inherently cross-border.



## SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS IN ASIA: WHAT ROLE FOR INTERNATIONAL NGOS?

***“The influence of donors from the West is dropping fast. Their budgets relative to national economies are dropping, and Asian governments have good reason not to listen to donors anymore.” – International NGO, South Asia***

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The consensus amongst interviewees was that INGOs have largely ignored the drastic shifts in power across Asia. Amongst recommendations for how INGOs can adapt to the shifting context were;

1. INGOs must consider how best to influence governments, as their leverage as donors decreases
2. INGOs must build the capacity of local civil society to advocate that new power on the global stage be translated into new welfare for the poor
3. INGOs should build understanding of the meaning of humanitarianism amongst emerging powers who are initiating humanitarian programmes, both overseas and within their own borders
4. INGOs must consider the political implications of how they fund their work, as global power shifts

## KEY TREND #2: DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

***“Demographic shifts are the single most significant trend in Asia: almost everything else follows from there” – Economist, International Organisation***

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### Urbanisation

***“Rural sectors are very static. In urban settings, tomorrow doesn’t look anything like today: you can work in a slum today, and when you return tomorrow, it’s gone”***

*– Academic, South Asia*

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A large majority of interviewees identified urbanisation as the key demographic shift impacting on development across Asia. Interviewees were divided as to whether the most important response to unplanned urbanisation was simply better planning, or active prevention of migration to urban areas.

A number of policy options were identified which would actively keep people in rural areas. One commentator advocated shifting rural policy towards the provision of non-farm employment, arguing that agriculture cannot provide the level of employment and income required to keep people in rural areas. Others emphasised that government policy regulating land concessions and land grab is often actively pushing people out of their land when they *do* want to stay.



A second group of commentators pointed to the significance of how governments handle urbanisation when it does take place. The qualitative difference in the skills and knowledge required to effectively respond to urban needs was seen as a major challenge to doing this.

Migration to urban areas was recognised as presenting distinct challenges for women in particular. Interviewees noted that women migrants tend to be overrepresented in informal sectors, such as domestic work and the sex industry, and as such are often excluded from progressive regulation of the formal employment sector.

***“Urbanisation could easily lead to the extermination of an entire class of people – foragers, pastoralists and so on – simply by virtue of their occupation”***

*– Regional NGO, South Asia*

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Urbanisation’s cultural impact was also highlighted. Some interviewees pointed to the threat, for example, to the identity of the ‘peasant’ in many countries. Others noted that the increased independence of women urban migrants would alter family structures, and lead to falling fertility rates and a shrinking labour pool over time.

### **Asia’s shifting age profile**

Countries in South and Southeast Asia are split between those experiencing rapid aging, and those with rapidly increasing working-age populations. Again, the importance of government policy responses to these new challenges was emphasised by interviewees; aging demands a social net, and youth demands employment generation, neither of which are currently in place.

In Southeast Asia, our interviewees argued that the implications of increasing numbers of older citizens have been largely ignored. The ‘dependency ratio’ will change, putting pressure on younger people financially and in terms of how they use their time. Meanwhile governments can’t necessarily rely anymore on traditional family structures to support elderly relatives.

Sex-selective feticide was recognised as being particularly worrying in Asia. Beyond the clear ethical issues it raises, it will exacerbate gender imbalance over time. Interviewees linked this trend to inadequate security for older populations and the resulting preference for a son capable of providing for parents.

***“South Asia has already created 800,000 jobs per month over the last decade, but a 50% increase on this would be required to satisfy demand.”*** – *International Organisation, Europe*

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Meanwhile, a younger population in South Asia will place major pressure on the jobs market. Over 1 million entrants to the jobs market are predicted every month for the next 20 years globally. 30-40% of the increase in the global labour force will come from South Asia. Interviewees questioned whether governments have adequately considered the implications of the demand for jobs. Investment will be key, interviewees argued, to encouraging young people to pursue their potential at home.

## Demographic Changes: Reflections from the Humanitarian Sector

***“With a disaster in an urban area, you drive into a city and you can’t really tell who is affiliated to whom. They might not even know each other. But they might spend an awful lot of time with someone a few streets or districts away. It’s not intuitive, as it is in rural areas.”***

– INGO, Southeast Asia, humanitarian

Rapid urbanisation coupled with low building codes means that increasingly large, increasingly condensed populations are exposed to devastating natural disasters. The megacities of Kathmandu and Manila, for example, are overdue an earthquake, and they are the most devastating places such events could happen.

Interviewees from the humanitarian sector emphasised the weakness of humanitarian response in urban settings. Two issues in particular were identified. Most significantly, traditional humanitarian responses rely on established social networks in rural areas, to gain access and negotiate with communities. This doesn’t exist so easily in urban areas; networks are much more fluid and complex. A second difficulty particular to urban areas is land rights. Land rights are more complex in urban areas, which makes building shelters, schools etc. doubly complex.



## DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN ASIA: WHAT ROLE FOR INTERNATIONAL NGOS?

***“In a rural area you can turn up in a village and you can probably assume that people know each other, and that there’s some kind of hierarchy. In a city, it’s much more complicated than that. This has huge implications for how INGOs carry out their work.”***

– INGO, Southeast Asia

1. INGOs need to increase their capacity to respond to need in urban areas  
*There was consensus across interviewees that the absence of INGOs operating in urban areas was due less to strategic decisions than to lack of capacity. In relation to humanitarian response in particular, two specific gaps were identified: capacity to advise on disaster-proofing urban planning, and ability to rapidly engage communities in relief efforts in highly complex urban environments.*
2. INGOs must consider how to work with the growing numbers of educated, unemployed young people: there is a real potential for conflict emerging from this group
3. INGOs should engage the new supporter base which is emerging in the shape of growing middle classes in Middle Income Countries, for both fundraising and awareness raising/campaigning
4. INGOs must disaggregate information regarding demographic changes to ensure that inequalities relating to, for example, employment distribution are not masked by overall statistics

## KEY TREND #3: CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATURAL DISASTERS

### A vulnerable region

In discussing the specific impacts of climate change in Asia, natural disasters were named as a particularly Asian threat. The region's tropical and sub-tropical location, combined with growing urban mega-cities, form a deadly combination.

Specific also to Asia, several interviewees pointed to the as yet unknown impact which the melting of glaciers in the Himalayas will have over the coming decade on water and food security and resource production. Massive areas of South Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan, are reliant for their current way of living on the Himalayan glaciers, and these are now changing in highly unpredictable ways.

### The “absence of justice” in the climate discourse

***“Climate Change is not a natural phenomenon ... but a relation between people, between powers, and in terms of resource management”*** – Regional NGO, Southeast Asia

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A number of interviewees mentioned that the pertinent problem to be addressed over the next decade is not climate change as such, but an absence of broader justice. The rights of women in society, for example, will determine how powerfully they feel the effects of climate change. In Indonesia women have strong entitlements to land ownership, ensuring far greater legal recourse following displacement. Interviewees pointed out that ‘adaptation to climate change’ policies were equally open to disparate impacts on rich and poor.

***“The only reason countries in the region are paying attention to climate change and the environment is because its being pushed down their throat by international organisations”*** – Private Sector, Southeast Asia

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A similar problem was identified in donor policies. One interviewee argued that governments in the region are frustrated with the labelling by donors of a range of vulnerabilities – food insecurity, for example - as ‘climate change.’ The ‘climate change’ label, often necessary to attract funding, was seen as obscuring more fundamental global inequalities, such as how to use resources or produce energy in a more equitable manner, for example.

There was some divergence of opinions, however, on whether it would be helpful to politicise the debate on the impacts of climate change. China remains engaged with the issue at a global level precisely *because* it remains seen as relatively politically neutral.

## Tensions between climate change and growth

***“Climate change demands a whole new way of thinking and living: not just doing what we’re doing now but naming it green”*** – Regional NGO, Southeast Asia

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Of greatest significance for our interviewees, and subject to much disagreement, was the incompatibility between policies to mitigate the effects of climate change, and the continued pursuit of economic growth in Asian economies. Our commentators were divided between those who called for the need to ‘decouple’ growth from development, and those who argued that now is not the time to question a model which, for all its faults, continues to increase the standard of living of many in the region.

The former group argued that current attempts by Asian governments to address climate change amounted to little more than window dressing. Solutions continue to be based on an ‘old paradigm’ of resource-driven growth which, ultimately, will prove unsustainable. This group advocated the work of activists attempting to shift the debate in a direction which questions the growth/development nexus more broadly.

***“We cannot lose sight, in climate change debates, of the fact that we have very large populations that are denied even the basics of what would be seen as a minimally decent life.”*** – Academic, South Asia

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The larger group amongst our interviewees, however, emphasised the continued importance of a growth-based model in the Asian context, where the needs of 40% of the region’s population still have not been met. Citizens and government are generally in agreement that pollution is a necessary component of the growth which their economy requires at this point.

Interviewees emphasised that the northern discourse on climate change is not sufficiently cognisant of this fact, and that talk of ‘decoupling’ growth from development remains a broadly Western agenda.

Reduced emissions are a necessity: but it is not reasonable or likely to expect poorer countries to choose a low-carbon path for the sake of the planet.

***“I don’t think there’s much prospect for, at the moment, many developing countries single-handedly deciding to follow a low-carbon development path, because no one has really demonstrated what that looks like.”*** – INGO, Europe

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Perhaps what this dilemma most strongly demonstrates is the need for leadership from those countries not faced with the massive development needs of Asian economies. A definite, tested model from international organisations, Northern countries and INGOs must be developed to show poorer countries how a lower carbon development model can get them *the same* results.

As long as investment by Northern governments in environmentally destructive infrastructural projects continues, it is absurd for donors to fund ‘climate change’ projects under the guise of environmental sustainability, interviewees argued. Civil society in the South won’t tolerate this.

## **“The most commonly felt impact of climate change:” Responding to Natural Disasters in Asia**

**“We are seeing a very Asian story of climate change: too much water in the wrong place at the wrong time in a way that we’re not able to cope with.”** – International NGO, Southeast Asia

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There was a clear trend across interviews of discussing the impacts of natural disasters in Asia as a core part of discussions on climate change.

Interviewees pointed out the real potential, on a continent lauded for its dramatic development gains, for natural disasters to reverse such moves forward overnight. They emphasised again and again the inconsistency between government concern with economic growth, and failure to acknowledge the massive economic losses which a disaster can bring. Urbanisation compounds the likely economic impact of a natural disaster.

Investment in long-term disaster risk reduction strategies is far less costly than financing the impact of a future disaster. Political will was once again identified as preventing progress in the area: all the more so in the case of an investment on which the ‘return’ may never be seen.

Interviewees highlighted the increasing unwillingness of countries to ask for external disaster relief. This was viewed as a justified response to the chaotic, invasive international responses to a number of prominent crises in recent years. Meanwhile, there was recognition of the growing internal capacity for response. Bangladesh was cited for its high quality early warning system. Interviewees emphasised the imperative for INGOs to utilise such local ‘comparative technical advantage’ wherever possible.

Mega-disasters in overpopulated areas are predicted to increase. They will likely be accompanied by the sort of massive technological failure which has never previously been faced. As mentioned earlier, Kathmandu and Manila are long ‘overdue’ such a disaster. Water scarcity, identified by one interviewee as the most likely source of conflict in the region over the next twenty years, further increases the complexity of the crisis.

Interviewees emphasised the importance of cross-border cooperation in determining how well Asia can respond to natural disasters. Increased vulnerability to disaster will also demand new social protection provisions. How will governments insure people living on increasingly marginal lands? What security net will be available for those displaced due to the effects of climate change? Interviewees agreed that the major determinant of how climate change plays out will be ‘ability to cope’ with these new shocks, more than the science of climate change itself.

## **Climate Change: Reflections from the Humanitarian Sector**

**“Do humanitarian organisations have a mandate to work on emerging, likely long-term, mega-disasters? Are they to be dealt with as humanitarian problems, or is it a question for development?”** – International Organisation, Europe

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The most significant analysis coming from our interviews with the humanitarian sector was that, while of huge importance, the real impact of climate change was that its effects would be felt in conjunction with a large number of other vulnerabilities: increasing water scarcity, increased populations and marginalised urban populations. Given the likely scale of such vulnerabilities, interviewees also pointed to the high potential for conflict predicted to emerge as the effects of climate change worsen.

***“Disasters are the most commonly felt impact of climate change: communities might not understand emissions, but they feel it when there’s drought, when there are floods.”***

– Regional NGO, Asia

One of the few certainties noted was that the impacts of climate change, and in particular the high vulnerability in Asia to natural disasters, would inevitably demand massively increased humanitarian response levels. The nature of these disasters, however, would shift significantly. Interviewees noted that humanitarian assistance has always been provided on a short-term basis, with an exit strategy. If, however, a rapidly changing natural environment means that disasters are simply the ‘new normal,’ this has serious implications for how we view humanitarian work in the context of broader development.



## **CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATURAL DISASTERS: WHAT ROLE FOR INTERNATIONAL NGOS?**

***“My question to donors is, while we in India are fighting our government for a responsible climate change policy, you guys are giving aid to countries because you want your countries to be able to go and mine coal. So why should we side with you?”***

– Regional NGO, South Asia

1. INGOs need to put pressure on their own governments, and populations, to change their own behaviours. INGOs must also raise awareness about the principle of historical responsibility for climate change
2. There is a need for greater coherence between donor/INGO policies to prevent the provision of discrete funding for climate-related activities, while continuing to pursue resource-dependent economic growth strategies directly contradictory to this work.
3. INGOs need to resist co-optation into the policy solutions of the North – in particular the ‘commoditisation of the atmosphere’ through carbon trading
4. INGOs must articulate a model of development which mitigates climate change *and* delivers on the basic needs of the worlds’ poorest. They must engage with the basic dilemma that the current growth model, for its flaws, is the only one proven to be capable of bringing large populations out of poverty.
5. Aid directed towards natural disasters must become more locally sensitive, and more carefully routed to remain within local economies. The most advanced, relevant expertise is often available regionally, rather than in the global North.
6. The rapidly increasing frequency of natural disasters, the likelihood of ‘megadisasters’ particularly in urban areas, and the impacts of climate change necessitate that INGOs build disaster risk reduction into all long-term development work.
7. INGOs must begin to reconsider the distinction between humanitarian crises and what often are in fact longer-term vulnerabilities which result directly from our development model.

## KEY TREND #4: PRESSURE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

### Resources and economic growth in Asia: public good versus individual right?

***“What do you do when countries are growing and populations are growing? We (the INGO community) are supporting development, and development requires resources.”***

*– International NGO, Europe*

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That the resources fuelling development and growth in Asia are coming under increased pressure was the strong consensus from our interviewees. Water was the resource cited most frequently by interviewees, and highlights well the extent to which the region’s economic fortunes are tied to resource availability. One interviewee pointed to the extent to which Bhutan’s economy is intertwined with the Himalayan floodwaters, increasingly unpredictable as glaciers melt.

In different ways, our interviewees emphasised the ‘high stakes game’ that is the scramble for resources in the region. There is a very real link between resource demand and improvements in people’s wellbeing. The question becomes what to do with people and countries that are simply growing. We have not yet articulated a model of how to accommodate growth without high resource usage, and such practical considerations should not be dismissed lightly by those with a ‘conservation’ agenda.

But interviewees differed as to how governments ought to manage the inevitable clash between collective needs for increasingly scarce resources, and individual rights. Who should prevail, for example, when claims to traditional ownership of forests come into tension with the public good of using such fertile land for food production? Some argued that, if well managed, development would require that governments have leeway to appropriate certain resources in the interest of the broader population. Others argued that state appropriation of resource rich land has led, in effect, to military occupation of large swathes of India, China and Indonesia.

### A problem of scarcity or a question of distribution?

Interviewees questioned whether *scarcity* of resources was in fact the problem at all. Many pointed to distribution of resources as being at the core of the issue. Interviewees emphasised the importance of a state role in resource distribution in particular for women, who don’t traditionally have a strong role in local decision-making processes in many places. Some pointed to a simple lack of capacity by government to distribute and manage resources effectively. One example given was that India has in fact enough water for its economy and agriculture if managed properly. Adequate management of water will also require cross-border cooperation of rivers and water beds, which to date has been absent.

***“Before, when you talked about development work, you thought of things like building potable water for communities: now you can’t even do that, because water is owned by companies. It’s hard to know what is left to do.”*** – Regional NGO, Southeast Asia

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Other interviewees highlighted that proper management of resources is absent because the very principle behind government management of resources is under threat. Under such an analysis, it is the model of development being pursued which is at the core of the resource problem in Asia. The problem of scarcity, under such an analysis, cannot be easily solved by discrete policy innovations, without challenging the economic model itself. Whether or not resources actually are scarce is irrelevant if people can’t access them.



***“The state has to be the allocator between rich and poor, urban and rural, between ethnic groups, class groups and gender groups. Tensions are unavoidable, and the state has to be the one to deal with them.”*** – Academic, South Asia

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A number of interviewees argued that the increased concentration of food, water and land in smaller numbers of hands has centralised production, distribution and trade of goods in the hands of small numbers of corporations, with full discretion as to their future use. In this manner as resources concentrate, scarcity increases, and that scarcity leads to reactionary policies promoting further concentration. Chief amongst the detrimental impacts of such concentration of power over resources is the threat to the very concept of common access to resources.

### **What should a government response look like?**

***“Changes in policy will fix this problem. What is needed is an understanding of the politics of why clearly beneficial reforms haven’t taken place.”*** – International Organisation, United States

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Whether following the logic that resource pressure is a question of mismanagement or of economic ideology, interviewees agreed that pressure on resources is a political rather than natural problem, and as such there are political solutions. In Thailand, repeated drought was addressed through diversified crop selection, which has proofed agriculture against the effects of drought, showing that pro-active government policy can manage resources effectively and equitably.

How then, should governments respond? In Asia, where the public good often trumps the individual good, a number of interviewees pointed to the likelihood that government responses would involve the resettlement of communities in the interests of better planning and resource distribution. This may well be in the public interest, but regardless of how well planned will inevitably disrupt individuals’ livelihoods. This could result in huge cultural shifts for people used to, for instance, subsistence living.

***“We must remember human beings’ capacity to adapt”*** – International Organisation, Europe

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Finally, a number of interviewees pointed to the potential of technological innovation to mitigate the crisis of resources. There was a sense that the negativity around resource depletion often obscures the very likely technological advances which will be made. Interviewees cited evidence of East Asian countries compensating for resource deficits by investing heavily in human resources, demonstrating the capacity to innovate in terms of how we respond to the problem, to simply do less with more.

### **Pressure on Natural Resources: Reflections from the Humanitarian Sector**

***“There is a danger that continuing to respond to resource crises in the traditional manner will create a condition where relief encourages people to stay in a place which simply isn’t viable anymore ... humanitarian actors will be accused of simply keeping people alive with no bigger plan.”*** – International NGO, Southeast Asia

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In some places, scarcity is rendering places entirely unlivable, to the point where humanitarian responses to hunger and thirst might appear to have no ‘end point’. Somalia and Kenya are the most prominent situations of such a protracted crisis, and interviewees predicted similar scenarios in areas affected by the Himalaya river basin. Interviewees questioned whether it was either sustainable or manageable to continue to provide relief for people in areas where it is increasingly unlikely populations will ever sustain themselves. A real response requires that we consider these scenarios as the new, long-term norm, rather than a particular, short-term crisis.





## PRESSURE ON NATURAL RESOURCES: WHAT ROLE FOR INTERNATIONAL NGOS?

1. INGOs should act as a ‘watchdog,’ monitoring the activities of private companies in acquiring natural resources, resisting the corporatization of natural resources
2. INGOs should work more closely with governments to plan sustainable, rights-oriented policies for resource acquisition, in particular around resettlement
3. INGOs should ensure that scarcity and resource rights are mainstreamed across all programming, in terms of the approaches and models which they advocate
4. INGOs should increase local community ability to influence the political processes which decide resource distribution
5. INGOs must examine and articulate a response to the tension between resource conservation and the growth which development demands

## CONCLUSIONS: WHAT NEXT FOR DEVELOPMENT IN A GROWING ASIA?

***“Money is no longer a big deal. You can’t just come bearing money and expect to achieve something, anymore. You need to make a smarter contribution than that.”***

– *Economist, South Asia*

***“In many middle income countries, governments aren’t spending money on the poor, because there isn’t the politics that forces them to spend. The development sector has played some role in inadvertently allowing that to continue.”*** – *Economist, South Asia*

It is worth noting the significant ambiguity from interviewees, when asked, as to whether INGOs could add value in middle income countries *at all*. Interviewees flagged the very real danger that competition might emerge between local and international NGOs for funding, but also for political space to negotiate with governments and to campaign. Similarly, some interviewees questioned whether INGOs would be willing to begin taking ‘the lead’ from local civil society in terms of policy direction.

One interviewee flagged the growing number of billionaires in India, something which INGOs, whilst mindful that such wealth has little immediate impact on the poor, cannot turn a blind eye to. In this context, the most significant role identified by interviewees for INGOs was strengthening critical social movements which could ensure pressure to bring such redistribution about. By funding service provision while leaving more critical elements of civil society unfunded, INGOs have at times altered the shape of civil society in a way which limits its ability to hold government to account.

Even where INGOs are not needed financially, interviewees pointed to the usefulness of the transnational face of INGOs, and their potential to mobilise citizens and opinions across borders. They are uniquely situated to address the inherently transnational challenges facing the region. This might take the shape of facilitating south-south exchange amongst civil society actors, strengthening social movements across borders, or building platforms for exchange of knowledge on specific themes.

A number of interviewees brought the 'international mediator' role of INGOs to a further level again, advocating the furthering of a type of 'globalised South' inclusive of the poor in the UK, in Asia, and globally, building solidarity between, for example, those who see their welfare eroded in the UK, and those being prevented from protesting on the streets of Cambodia. These interviewees pointed to the responsibility of international NGOs to get directly involved in the causes of the oppressed in the global North: the more conservative the policies of governments in the North, the more challenging life in the global South.

A number of specific areas for intervention in middle income countries were noted. The first is the issue of sustainability: while countries are inevitably growing, whether this happens in an environmentally sustainable manner is not inevitable, and as such this was noted as an area where there is *increasing* need for intervention. The second is gender equality. Here, our interviewees argued that even equitable economic growth is insufficient to deliver the rights of women. More broadly, they emphasised the need for INGOs to consider what progress *won't* automatically come through economic growth, such as respect for human rights, and focus their work entirely in these areas. Finally, one interviewee emphasised the tendency for new 'exclusions' to occur within middle income countries, even when growth is well-distributed; for example the increase in groups such as domestic workers and migrants within wealthy economies.

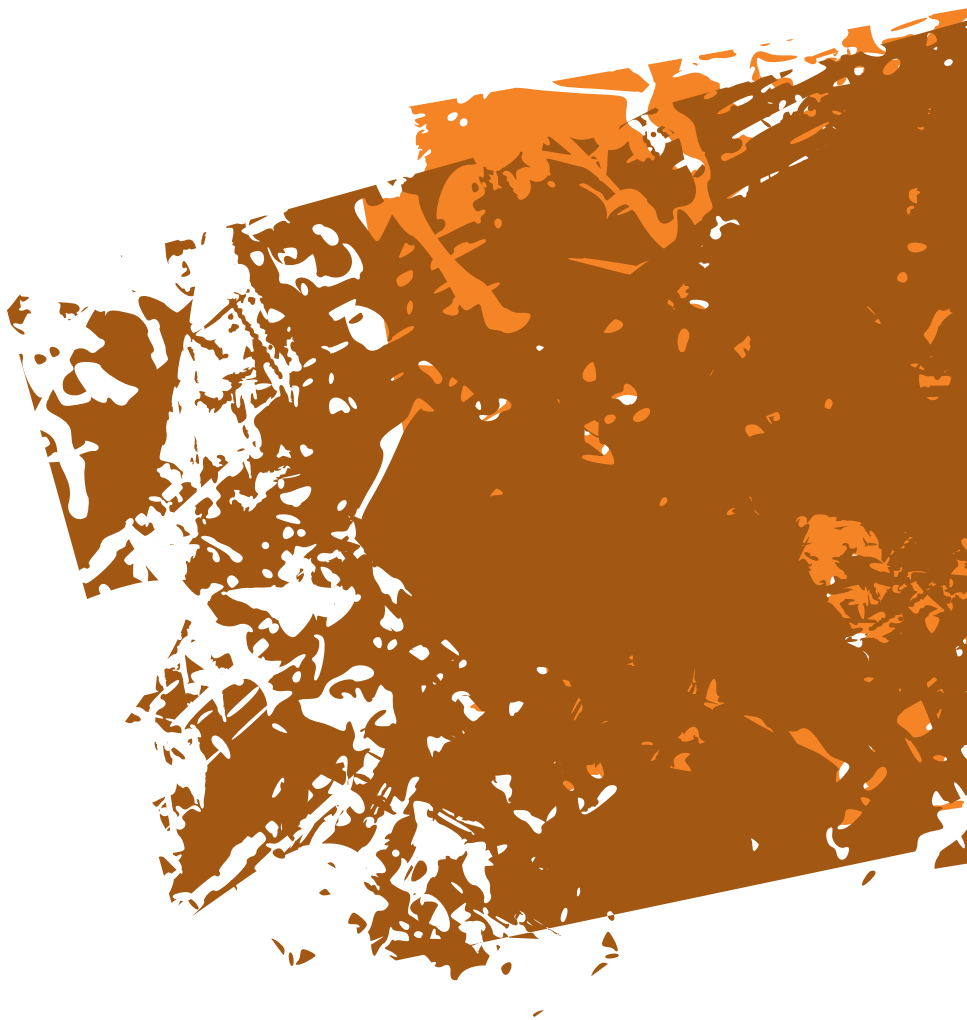
If current rates of growth continue, 3 billion additional people on the Asian continent will be classed as 'affluent' by 2050. The new wealth at the disposal of governments across Asia challenges INGOs to 'do' development in contexts where political will, not poverty, is the problem. Placing *Asia 2020* beside the findings of Trócaire's global Leading Edge, this emphasis on political will and decision-making is the clearest distinctive feature coming from Asia. The challenges which emerged in our interviews were met by potential policy solutions every time, if political will were present.

It is notable, though, that interviewees reflected on the very real danger that the presence INGOs in countries where there *is* wealth may in fact serve to weaken the political will needed for Asia's growth to benefit the poorest. Given the significance of political will in addressing Asia's challenges over the coming decade, the greatest challenge for International NGOs in Asia, now, is surely to plan their work as 'Asia's century' begins with this to the forefront of their minds.

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<sup>8</sup> *Asia 2050: Realizing the Asian Century* 2011: Asia Development Bank, p.3  
[http://asianbondsonline.adb.org/publications/adb/2011/Asia\\_2050-Realizing\\_the\\_Asian\\_Century-Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://asianbondsonline.adb.org/publications/adb/2011/Asia_2050-Realizing_the_Asian_Century-Executive_Summary.pdf)





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