Rethinking Asia for the 21st Century

The Report of the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) acknowledges and celebrates the considerable progress that has been made globally along different dimensions of social progress in the three quarters of a century since WWII. But it highlights the huge challenges the world now faces in continuing this progress into the next century, warns against complacency engendered by past successes, and questions whether the mechanisms and arrangements which delivered past successes are now fit for the new purpose. The Report calls for a rethinking of society for the 21st century.

It is remarkable how well the general messages of the Report resonate with Asian experience and accounts for its achievements. The Report is at pains to emphasize that the world is not homogeneous, but that nevertheless some broad themes can animate our discourse on social progress. Similarly, Asia is not homogeneous, and detail and context matter in diagnosis and design of specific policies. But some broad themes on social progress do emerge which mirror global themes.

The first and most obvious theme is the remarkable progress along different dimensions in Asia over the past several decades. Indeed, when exemplifying global progress, Asian countries are often ‘exhibit A’. It took a thousand years to multiply by 30 to 700 in Europe, but only 60 years for it to multiply by almost 7 between 1950 and 2008. The story of the big Asian economies of China and India is now as much the reality of trends in China as it is the reality of trends in India. Over the same period, the 2008. The story of the big Asian economies of China and India is now as much the reality of trends in China as it is the reality of trends in India.

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One cause for concern emphasized by the IPSP Report at the global level but which has Asian implications, is rising inequality. It is true that income inequality between countries has fallen as poorer countries (mostly in Asia) have grown faster than richer ones, but inequality within countries has risen for many countries in the world. These include the big countries in Asia such as China and India. An Asian Development Bank Report estimated that half of China and India’s population have increased by 4 times since 1990.2 It is remarkable how well the general messages of the Report resonate with Asian experience and accounts for its achievements.

Ravi Kanbur

Notes

The IPSP report ranges over a very wide set of topics in its three volumes, including socio-economic transformations; political regulation, governance, and societal transformations; and transformations in values, norms, cultures. But across this breadth of canvas emerge some core themes. If Asia is to avoid the complacency trap, even more so than the rest of the world because of the sheer impressiveness of Asia’s achievements in the last few decades, Asian policy makers and populations will have to address the looming issues of equity, government responsiveness, and environmental sustainability. Only then will social progress not be stalled or even go into reverse, but stand a chance of continuing on its remarkable path of the last three quarters of a century.

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