Guiding Notes for Panel Discussion One:

Economic Trends in the Asia-Pacific Region and Implications for Education

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Asia-Pacific region has undergone rapid economic growth, with numerous countries in the region such as China, India and the ‘East Asian Tiger’ economies having recorded remarkable increases in GDP. Notwithstanding the damaging effects of the global financial crisis, the region has continued to grow and the pace and scope of globalization and regional economic integration is accelerating. ASEAN’s integration agenda and an expansion of bilateral economic and trade links continue to shape the region’s development. Recent figures show trade dependence across the region has almost doubled since 1990 (UNESCAP 2011) and while international conditions remain uncertain, the region is still expected to lead global growth (ADB 2012).

Technological advancement has also played a crucial role in both introducing profound changes in agricultural and industrial production as such and in driving and facilitating globalization and economic integration. Technology has changed economic activities profoundly, from reducing the costs of cross-border transactions to enabling international, real-time information flow which improved efficiency of international businesses. Technological penetration to households is also expanding at a rapid rate: the number of internet users in the region quintupled between 2000 and 2009 (UNESCAP 2011).

It is worth noting, however, that these macro trends belie vast disparities between and within countries and that economic growth has not necessarily resulted in equivalent increases in living standards in all countries. While the Asia-Pacific region has made historic achievements in terms of reducing the absolute number of people living in extreme poverty over the past twenty years, relative poverty has been on the rise (UNESCAP 2011, ADB 2012). Disparities in income, wealth and economic opportunities mean individuals’ experiences of economic development continue to differ markedly, and trends favour a widening, rather than a narrowing, of these gaps (OECD 2010, ADB 2012). Despite their capacity to improve living standards if harnessed effectively, technology, globalization, and market reforms, have been blamed for exacerbating such disparities, through their
tendency to place favour capital over labour; high-skilled over low-skilled labour, and urban over rural regions. These tendencies have materialised in rising inequality in terms of income and wealth but also opportunity (ADB 2012).

Simultaneously, governments in the region, together with their international counterparts, are also increasingly attentive to the need to strike a balance between economic growth and social well-being, environmental protection and political stability. The integration of economic and environmental interests is a principal example. As the potential impacts of global climate change become clearer, attention has turned to how countries can and should adapt their economies to overcome these changed circumstances. Such adjustments have now begun to be understood in realms beyond natural resource use and energy, to encompass the ways in which other sectors can help to position countries to make the most out of these changes.

Implications for education

That education and economic objectives are linked is not new. However, the nature of this relationship is changing and so too is the policy discourse. Where education may once have been seen as a means to achieving economic development driven by industrialization and foreign trade, it is increasingly being seen as a way of addressing a wider range of challenges. In the face of concern over social equity and equal participation in development, population pressures and environmental degradation, and a foreseeable scarcity in natural resources, education for sustainable development is gathering momentum around the world, with many nations in the region leaders in this field. Skills development to support a sustainable, ‘green’ economy has become a common catch-cry; and the role that education can play not only in providing young people with the requisite knowledge of environmental challenges, but the skills and aptitudes to innovate, adapt and be resilient have also come to the fore.

In the light of the transformation of economies and labour markets, training for pre-established job profiles is no longer possible or desirable. Enhanced international economic integration has also facilitated the freer flow of people as well as ideas. Countries in the region are now turning to harmonization of areas that directly affect education, including skills recognition and educational strategies. This growing skills mobility has intensified competition among countries, concentrating attention on ensuring that education equips young people with the skills and aptitudes to compete in a global labour market where needs are constantly changing. Under such circumstances, education systems must train learners to be innovative, able to adapt to and assimilate changes. For some countries, however, such mobility has led to fears of a ‘brain drain’ in which trained young people seek out better economic opportunities elsewhere, to the overall detriment of the nation's development. For these countries, the benefits of educational investments
are no longer contained to the country, with impacts on the balance of the education system as a whole. In this circumstance, education systems must also address the disparities in economic development and be aware of the training needs for the informal market, which in many countries represents a large segment of the economy.

This Panel will discuss which economic trends, challenges and opportunities observed in the region have the most significant implications for education. Attention will be paid to economic inequalities and in which way education can play a role to address them. At the same time, education is not simply regarded as being reactive to economic and labour market needs, and as such, the panel will discuss the proactive role education can play in spurring new economic sectors and approaches to economic priorities. More in particular, the panel will look more in detail into two themes: green economies as an emerging sector as a response to ecological challenges as well as globalization, technological changes and the role of ICTs and consequent changes in educational requirements.

**Key questions for discussions:**

1. What are the key current and future economic challenges and opportunities impacting on education and what are the implications for education policy making?
2. In particular, how should education policies best respond to prepare citizens for the rapidly evolving requirements of economies?
3. How can the education sector take a key role in alleviating socio-economic inequalities?
4. What particular education policies should be developed to influence economies as regards ecological requirements in view of a sustainable development?
5. In what way can learners be better prepared for the rapid changes in technologies including IT and what policies should be developed in this view?

**References**


