Foreword

From being mired in poverty 60 years ago, developing Asia is now the world’s fastest growing and arguably most dynamic region. Many of its economies have transitioned from low income to middle income status and are trying to climb higher on the income ladder. The region has also made remarkable progress in poverty reduction. Neither the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 nor the global financial crisis a decade later dented the region’s progress. But rapidly growing economies bring new challenges to governments, with households and businesses expecting more and better public services, greater transparency in government, and a say in public decision-making. Developing Asia’s governance performance has not been in line with its economic performance. Indeed, surveys of ADB’s stakeholders consistently show poor governance and corruption among the top five development concerns.

Despite the region’s economic achievements, two-thirds of its population still lives on less than $2 a day. Inequality is on the rise, which affects social cohesion. Public investment in human and physical capital is low, holding back countries and their citizens from realizing their full potential. In 2011, only 4.3 percent of the region’s gross domestic product was spent on education and 3.7 percent on health, compared with 5.2 percent and 7.5 percent, respectively, in advanced economies. The quality of transport, electricity supply, and water services is inadequate. This is a major concern because the region faces a massive infrastructure deficit of $750 billion a year for the 2010–20 period. Even the meager public expenditure on essential services does not fully reach target beneficiaries due to corruption, red tape, and lack of accountability of service providers.

Ensuring the sustainability of inclusive economic growth requires new catalysts of change. This book examines two critical ones: good governance and the empowerment of citizens and communities to monitor the delivery and quality of government services and provide feedback to government. The studies in this book show how poor governance and lack of citizens’ voice are very significant factors behind the generally poor quality of public services in developing Asia and inadequate access to these services by the poor. The authors recommend policies and reforms for improving governance, particularly in enabling citizens to participate
in public service delivery and making greater use of local governments in this area, tapping the private sector and nongovernment organizations to expand the scope and scale of services, and increasing the use of information and communication technology to facilitate these interventions. A key argument is that such interventions are not mutually exclusive but synergistically complement each other—and the authors make the compelling case that a single intervention alone is unlikely to be effective and that a cross-cutting approach is needed.

This work is a timely contribution to the current policy discussion on sustaining Asia’s growth momentum by sharing the benefits more equally across society, addressing the vulnerabilities of the poor and involving citizens and communities in improving governance. This book will be of great use to policymakers, frontline public service providers, and academics and students for understanding the links between good governance and service quality to enhance their impact on the poor.

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