

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 7

4-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Pong, Myra (2007) "Myra Pong on Spatial Disparities in Human Development: Perspectives from Asia edited by Kanbur, Ravi, Anthony J. Venables, and Guanghua Wan. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2006.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol7/iss1/7>



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Myra Pong on Spatial Disparities in Human Development: Perspectives from Asia
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Abstract

A review of:

Spatial Disparities in Human Development: Perspectives from Asia edited by Kanbur, Ravi, Anthony J. Venables, and Guanghua Wan. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2006.

Keywords

Human rights, Development, Inequality, Poverty, Asia

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Spatial Disparities in Human Development: Perspectives from Asia edited by Kanbur, Ravi, Anthony J. Venables, and Guanghua Wan. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2006.

This volume is a collection of theoretical and empirical contributions from 24 scholars focusing on the concept of “spatial disparities” in Asia—“the uneven distribution of income or other variables across different locations” (2). This collection is unique in that it covers a widely diverse group of countries (in terms of history and economic, military, and political systems) in seeking to provide answers to questions concerning the basic causes, effects, and policy implications of spatial inequality, especially in Asia. In doing so, it aims to provide a template for which Asian (and other) governments can fight poverty and curtail growing inequality. The significance of this book is amplified by the fact that Asia, the world’s most populous continent, is home to about two-thirds of the world’s impoverished. It deserves the attention of anyone interested in issues of poverty and inequality.

Chapter 1, written by the three editors, gives a brief overview of evidence for spatial disparities in human development in Asia. The rest of the collection is divided into three parts. In Part I, methodological issues are explored. In particular, Chapter 2, written by Nicholas Minot and Bob Baulch, is an analysis of poverty mapping with aggregate census data. The two authors argue that the use of aggregate census data in performing poverty mapping analysis leads either to an underestimation or overestimation of the incidence of poverty. In contrast, using household-level census data yields much more accurate estimates. The difficulty lies in the fact that household-level census data is often difficult to access in many developing countries (e.g., China and India). Chapter 3, by Stanislav Kolenikov and Anthony Shorrocks, argues that spatial variation is often neglected in analyses of inequality and poverty. They use the case of Russia to illustrate major regional differences. Chapter 4, by Henning Tarp Jensen and Finn Tarp, explores the relationship between trade liberalization and spatial inequality for the case of Vietnam. The two authors argue that the practical impact of changes to income distribution patterns is missing from so-called top-down approaches. As a solution, they propose including disaggregated micro households in analyzing poverty.

In Part II, the focus is specifically on inequality in Asia, including three chapters devoted to China, as well as several chapters devoted to other, less discussed areas (India, Nepal, the Philippines and Central Asia). Chapter 5, by Kanbur and Xiaobo Zhang, examines shifts in regional inequality since 1949. Most similar studies deal with shorter periods, while those that study longer periods have not brought the picture up to date. By constructing the factors contributing to inequality, they produce a long-run time series of regional inequality. Their major finding is that there is a correlation between different developmental policies and types of regional inequality. In the pre-reform period, the concentration on heavy industry led to greater urban-rural inequality, whereas in the post-reform era, openness and decentralization have led to a fast rate of inequality between inland and coastal regions. In Chapter 6, Wan and Zhangyue Zhou use mainly household income data and a regression-based decomposition technique to examine the last decade, noting the huge disparities in income even among rural households. They conclude that capital input, far more than land input, accounts for the phenomenon, and propose improvements in rural credit services as well as a return to grain-cropping as the main solutions to alleviating regional disparities. Chapter 7, by John Knight, Li Shi, and Zhao Renwei, explores income inequality in urban China. The chapter poses two key questions: “what happens to the spatial inequality of income inequality” and “what happens to the spatial inequality of

mean incomes”? Two patterns in spatial inequality in the context of income inequality in urban China are identified: inequality within provinces *and* across provinces (both in terms of income per worker and household income per capita). The authors admit, however, that they are unable to reach strong conclusions as to why these patterns unfold as they do.

Part III examines poverty in Asia. Chapter 12, by Shatakshee Dhongde, analyzes spatial differences in poverty in India. The author contends that the levels of poverty and income distribution differ greatly across India. Dhongde’s main conclusion is that the gap between the incidence of poverty given at the state and national levels can be understood, in large part, by the gap between state and national average income levels, with important implications for the relationship between poverty levels and income distribution. Chapter 13, by Tomoki Fujii, considers the applicability of the estimation of poverty at the commune level in Cambodia, a country in which over one-third of the population lives in poverty.

This volume, therefore, contributes to the discourses on spatial disparity in general and poverty and inequality in Asia. Perhaps the greatest advantage of this collection is the authors’ application of the concept of “spatial disparity” to such a diverse group of countries—from China and India (both rising economic powers with huge numbers of people living in poverty, though they also differ in many areas) to relatively less powerful countries like Cambodia, Vietnam, Nepal, and the Philippines. Given all of the historical, geographical, economic, political, and military differences between these countries, it is a remarkable accomplishment to explore poverty and income inequality among them in one book. Not only does this volume successfully prove that spatial inequality can be applied to a region as large and diverse as Asia, but it also employs some of the latest research methods in the field (including poverty decomposition and regression-based decomposition), thus providing an innovative framework upon which future studies on poverty – not only in Asia – can be performed.

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April 2007*