

## Wellness in Worrying Times – The Asian Development Outlook 2020 Update



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<https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/economic-forecasts/september-2020/theme-chapter>

“*Wellness in worrying times*”, a report released by the Asian Development Bank in September 2020 is part of the Asian Development Outlook 2020 Update. One of the key focus areas of the Outlook is the GDP contraction rate of 0.7 per cent in the region for 2020, owing to the pandemic, which the report claims is first of its kind for the region since the 1960s. In this context, the theme chapter explores the concept of wellness during the pandemic and possible pathways to wellness in the post-pandemic recovery period in Asia. The report discusses wellness both as a driver of economic growth, recovery and sustainability as well as a desired outcome.

What is of relevance to the Forum on India Traditional Medicines (FITM) as well as the AYUSH community is that the report highlights traditional medicine and allied knowledge practices as key resources for rebuilding the economy and society in the region. In 2016, RIS came out with a publication, “Health, Nature and Quality of Life - Towards BRICS Wellness Index” which defined contours of wellness as “a unified paradigm that looks at quality of life, covering aspects of access to material resources, opportunities, conditions of healthy living, and environmental sustainability...” (RIS, 2016). This publication had a series of well-articulated perspectives

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and experiences from countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. It also proposed a framework for a wellness index for these countries. In July 2019, FITM also brought out a policy brief titled “Special Wellness Zones for Wellness Tourism - Exploring prospects of creating dedicated ISM hubs” which highlighted the increase in lifestyle diseases and the potential of traditional medicine in wellness tourism in developing countries as a major driver of growth (FITM, 2019). It extensively discussed the strategic potential of wellness and various related pathways for the country from the perspective of AYUSH and other rich cultural health traditions. The ADB report should be read in the context of these parallel efforts that were taken in India in the recent years. It also assumes importance when the Ministry of AYUSH has taken up key initiatives to convey the message of wellness in COVID-19 times through national advisories and protocols.

In Asian countries, wellness economy forms 11 per cent of the economic output with an annual growth of 10 per cent in the recent years (ADB, 2020). The ADB report starts by highlighting the public health impacts, both physical and mental, during the pandemic. It showcases how the pandemic has accentuated the importance of engaging with wellness, or “the deliberate pursuit of activities that bring holistic health, happiness and wellbeing.” This report analyses how wellness had assumed a critical position in the Asian economy even before the pandemic due to the growing relative affluence and disparities in the region, attendant lifestyle changes, and health issues. It more specifically dwells on the new vulnerabilities, physical, mental as

well as the socio-economic, in the wake of COVID-19. Interestingly, the report calls attention to the rich traditional health practices and productive cultural assets of the region which form a key resource for wellness and the need to revitalize these practices in a strategic, science-policy-practice approach. The report offers four policy domains to be addressed such as: healthy environment and liveable places; enabling improved physical activity; healthy diets and enhancing workplace wellness. It also touches upon the poor and the marginalized populations who have limited opportunities for wellness engagements and how governments should take affirmative actions for the benefit of such communities.

The first chapter starts with an extensive discussion on the conceptualization and definition of wellness, its links to social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainability, and how it has been toppled due to the unprecedented impacts of the pandemic. In the following section it quantifies multiple sectors (ten of them) related to wellness and extensive cross-country comparison of the wellness economy in the region. The third section on ‘holistic pathways to physical wellness’ highlights the emerging regional public health challenges in terms of physical inactivity, unplanned workplaces, infrastructure and planning, and malnutrition (both undernutrition and obesity). The next section on mental wellness describes the strength of Asian wellness traditions and the need to capitalize on them. The subsequent two chapters focus on wellness as a development indicator and inclusive growth and key policy directions towards advancing it.

The report compares various indexes such as the HDI, OECD Better Life Index, Indigo Wellness Index, Social Progress Index, Happy Planet Index, and Inclusive Green Growth Index. The report says that Asia's wellness indicators are close to the world average yet fall below OECD countries as well as Latin America and the Caribbean states. In South Asian Wellness Index coverage and scores, India (38.96) appears weak just above Afghanistan and Pakistan in comparison to more progressive countries like Sri Lanka (69.29) and Bhutan (67.03).

The ten sectors reflected upon extensively with systematic data include Personal care, beauty, and anti-aging; Physical activity; Healthy eating, nutrition, and weight loss; Wellness tourism; Preventive and personalized medicine and public health; Traditional and complementary medicine; Wellness real estate; Spa economy; Thermal and mineral springs; Workplace wellness. These are mostly very relevant to the AYUSH sector as well as the Indian economy in general. It estimates that more than 50 per cent of the Asian population utilizes traditional medicine (TM) habitually and the usage is higher in rural than urban areas. Interestingly, in relation to TM usage it talks of a bimodal curve high at both extremities but lower in the middle, examined by income and educational factors. More affluent and educated have better appeal for promoting health, prevention and wellness. By highlighting the exclusive nature of knowledge systems and challenges in the model of care, it calls for a better integrative model of traditional and modern medicine in Asian countries to maximize synergies and potential of the two. By quoting GWI (2018), it says "Wellness tourism expenditure in the

region, for example, grew by 11% annually in 2015–2017 to \$136.7 billion. The industry directly employed 3.74 million in India, 1.78 million in the PRC, and 530,000 in Thailand."

Excitingly the report has a significant focus on "the ancient spiritual traditions, healing modalities, and life philosophies – including yoga, ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine, tai chi, reiki (energy healing), meditation, herbal medicines, and ikigai (Japanese "reason for being") – which are deeply ingrained in culture and daily life" of the region. By contrasting the medical (which is reactive) and wellness (proactive) paradigms, it says that what is desired is not just a disease-free neutral state but an advanced stage of prospective optimal health. It also highlights the issue of the relatively low subjective (self-reported) happiness in the Asian region. It comprehensively touches on the gender dimension of wellness sector and inclusive growth and says women have better stake in the sector as consumers, service providers, knowledge holders, and drivers of growth.

On the flipside, the report harps much on the documents of the Global Wellness Institute while giving limited focus on the national and subnational efforts of the States in the region. It has a dearth of focus on the broader areas such as structural determinants of health and wellness, other socio-political dimensions such as freedom, capabilities, plurality, equity, access, rights, social security, all of which are factors that empower individuals towards wellbeing as articulated sustainability discussions. It is rather reticent over the direct negative drivers such as unclean water, sanitation, air, tobacco, alcohol, unsafe roads which are critical for optimal health. The report is also silent on the broader emerging

intersectoral perspectives of global public health which are squarely relevant to wellness such as the one health, eco-social health, planetary health, biodiversity and health, and so on. While there are critical discussions on localizing SDGs it would have assumed additional value if it had a slightly more detailed analysis from the framework of SDGs. While discussing the policy environment the report is also silent on the WHO 2023 strategic goals such as the triple billion goals where “1 billion more people enjoying better health and well-being” and Healthy Life Expectancy are key aspects. Most importantly though the report in passing refers to the growing socio-economic disparity in the region, it is largely silent on specific pathways to address them even hinting at an affluence bias of the wellness sector

As per the FITM policy brief, “India’s wellness market, estimated at INR 85,000 crore, is expected to grow at a CAGR of 12 per cent between 2015 and 2020. With this growth rate the wellness industry in India will reach at INR 1,50,000 crore by 2020” (FITM, 2019; FICCI, 2016). In light of this newly emerging interest in wellness, it is noteworthy that many Indian national policies have wellness as a key focus - the National Health Policy 2017 (*Health and Wellness Centres – AYUSH Wellness clinics as part of Ayushman Bharat*), National Education Policy (*Health and wellness in education and educational facilities; medical education and wellness*), National Mental Health Policy 2014, National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship 2015, National policy for Women 2017, to

name a few. It is also important to note that the Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India has created a “National Wellness and Medical Tourism Board to act as an umbrella organisation to promote wellness tourism in India in an organised manner (FITM 2019)”.

In conclusion, by bringing out this report at a critical time of the pandemic, ADB should be able to create better cross cutting imagination and traction of an ‘adaptive lifetime framework for wellness policy’ as well as more broadly towards building health and wellbeing for all at all ages!

## References

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