Background and Genesis

East Asia has made tremendous strides in reducing poverty. However these successes mask important remaining challenges, both in low and middle-income countries. One of the most important is continued and widespread vulnerability to unanticipated shocks, which contributes to transitory episodes of poverty as well as deeply entrenched chronic poverty. Moreover, the dramatic growth and structural transformation that the region has experienced have given rise to new challenges -- potentially increasing the vulnerability of households, poor and non-poor, to a variety of uninsured risks. Countries in the region face therefore a growing need for better social protection systems, and there is an increasing recognition of this need by the governments in the region, in response to growing demands from their citizens.

In this context, the World Bank is hosting a workshop on Managing Vulnerability in East Asia, on June 25-26th 2008, in Bangkok, Thailand. The objective of the workshop is to bring together East Asian policy makers, researchers, Bank staff, and interested individuals from the international community to assess the key shocks experienced by countries in the region, their impacts on well-being, and to discuss existing and future policies to mitigate these impacts.

Agenda

The two-day workshop will begin with a framing and diagnostic session that highlights the key challenges and issues to discuss, and presents what is known about risks faced by the poor in the region, coping mechanisms, and policy challenges in meeting social protection needs.

This will be followed by six thematic sessions, each focused on specific sources of risk and recent shocks. The thematic sessions provide an opportunity for participants to learn about how different countries have responded to recent shocks, what types of social protection and other systems are in place to help households anticipate and manage risk, and what are some of the current debates on spending and policy priorities to better manage vulnerability.

The first day will focus on macro risks, including sessions on (i) macroeconomic shocks, (ii) rising food prices, and (iii) natural hazards and agrarian risk. The discussion will turn to household and individual level shocks on the second day, including (iv) access to jobs and the informalization of employment, (v) health risks, and (vi) gender vulnerabilities, ethnicity and excluded groups.

In addition to addressing specific themes, the sessions will also explore some of the major systemic issues that drive national policy debates, such as the evolving role of the state, balancing security concerns with long-run fiscal sustainability, and promoting
sustainable growth. Speakers will present different views within these debates, and will reflect approaches followed by different countries in the region.

A closing session will take stock of what has been covered over the course of the workshop – what is known and where gaps in knowledge remain, where there is broad agreement, and where further discussion is needed, and it will identify possible next steps. Three or four volunteers will be identified at the start of the workshop to listen to and reflect on presentations and discussions, and then to give short presentations at the end to highlight key unresolved and emerging concerns. This will be followed by a panel discussion, with the panel consisting primarily of senior experts from the region.

All sessions will be in plenary. Short policy notes will be prepared for each thematic session. These and other background papers will be distributed to participants at the start of the workshop. Participants are encouraged to send the team any papers they would like the workshop organizers to make available to participants.