Development since 2005: Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Latin America and East Asia

South Asia made the most progress on income, life expectancy and secondary enrollment between 2005 and 2024, ahead of East Asia & Pacific, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America & Caribbean. Income per person is the largest remaining gap in every region.

Overview

Headline

South Asia made the most progress since 2005, followed by East Asia & Pacific, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America & Caribbean. The ranking averages each region's rank on three gains: GDP per capita growth, years of life expectancy gained and percentage points of secondary enrollment gained. South Asia ranks first on income and enrollment and second on life expectancy [1][2][3].

- **Sub-Saharan Africa** gained the most life expectancy (+8.9 years, to 62.8) but income per person rose only 16% and is still below its 2015 peak [1][2].
- **South Asia** more than doubled income per person (+148%), added 7.4 years of life expectancy and gained 22 points of secondary enrollment [1][2][3].
- **Latin America & Caribbean** was near the top on enrollment (98% gross) and life expectancy (75.8 years) in 2024. But it gained the least in life expectancy and enrollment, and income per person grew only 24% [1][2][3].
- **East Asia & Pacific** more than doubled income per person (+115%) and still has the highest income of the four, at $13,295. Even so, that is only about 32% of the high-income-country level [1][4].

Income is the largest gap in every region once each is compared with high-income countries. The size of that gap varies enormously, from 4% of the high-income level in Sub-Saharan Africa to 32% in East Asia & Pacific [1][4].

> **Note:** Scope: "last 20 years" is measured 2005 to 2024, the latest year in the data, which is 19 years of change. Regions are World Bank aggregates. Population, fertility and age come from the UN, whose regions differ slightly from the World Bank's (see Caveats).

Regional trajectories

Regional trajectories

Each chart below shows one region's three indicators indexed to 2005 = 100, on the same vertical scale for all four regions, so heights compare directly. Levels are in the text.

Sub-Saharan Africa

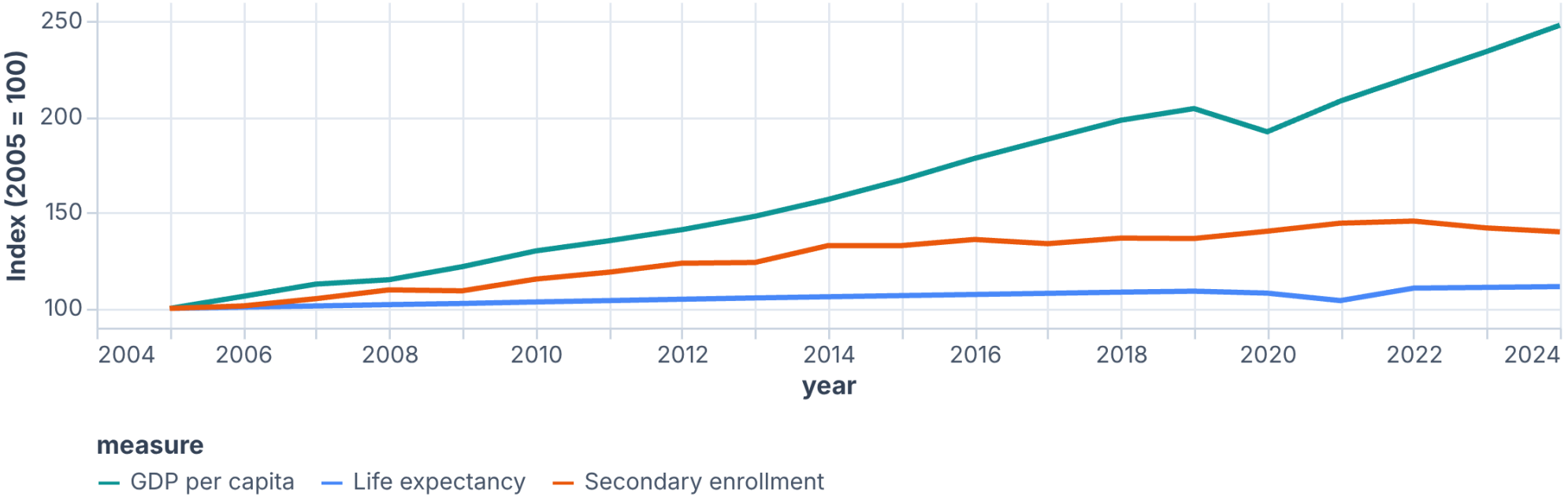
Biggest gain: life expectancy. It rose from 53.9 to 62.8 years (+8.9, the largest gain of any region) [2]. Secondary enrollment rose from 31% to 46% [3]. Income per person grew only 0.8% a year, from $1,367 to $1,589, and peaked at $1,647 in 2015 [1]. **Biggest gap: income.** It stands at 3.8% of the high-income level, down from 4.1% in 2005, so the gap widened [1][4]. The biggest non-income gap is secondary enrollment: 46% against 103% in high-income countries [3][5]. Population grew 66% to 1.24 billion, so total output grew much faster than income per person (see the population section) [6].



Sub-Saharan Africa, indexed to 2005 = 100 [1][2][3]

South Asia

Biggest gain: income. GDP per capita rose from $940 to $2,329 (+148%, 4.9% a year), the fastest of the four [1]. Life expectancy rose from 65.1 to 72.6 years. It fell to 67.8 in 2021, the COVID-19 year, before recovering [2]. Secondary enrollment rose from 55% to 77%, though the series has slipped from a 2022 high of 80% [3]. **Biggest gap: income.** It reached 5.5% of the high-income level, from 2.8% in 2005, so the gap narrowed relatively but remains very large [1][4]. Secondary enrollment, 26 points behind high-income countries, is the largest non-income gap [3][5].



South Asia, indexed to 2005 = 100 [1][2][3]

Latin America & Caribbean

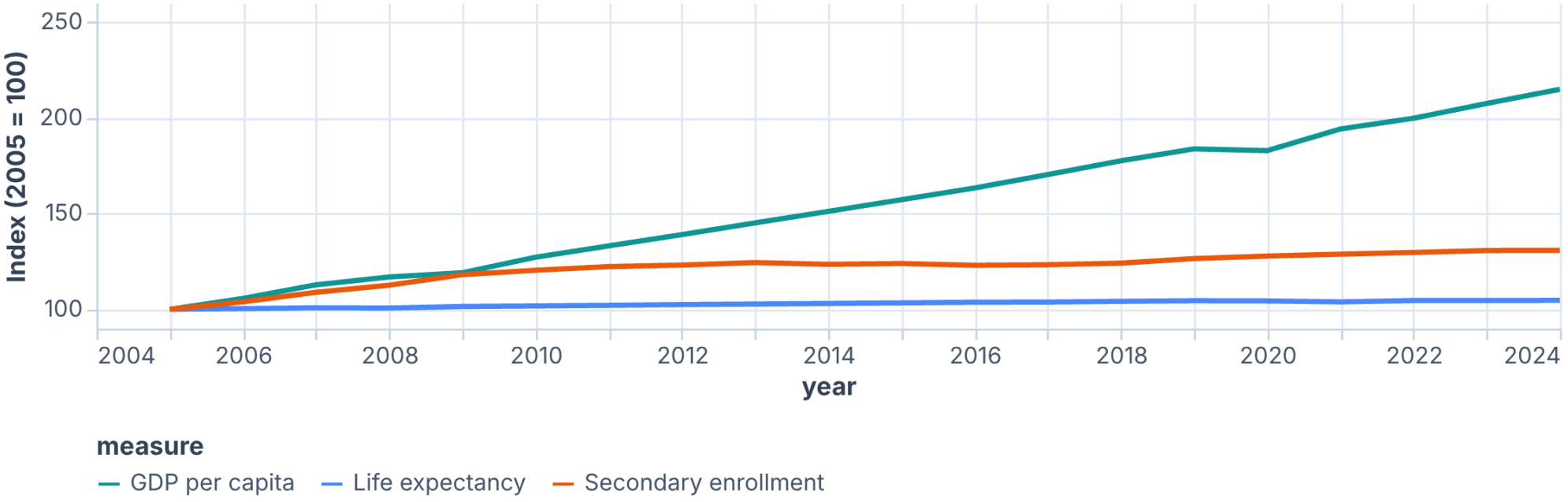
Biggest gain (relative to peers): secondary enrollment. It rose from 87% to 98% gross, close to the high-income level [3]. This is a modest result: the region's gains in income (+24%) and life expectancy (+3.3 years) were the smallest or second smallest of the four [1][2]. Income per person grew only 1.1% a year, from $7,161 to $8,872. It fell in 2020 and has recovered only gradually [1]. **Biggest gap: income.** It stayed at about 21% of the high-income level (21.6% in 2005, 21.1% in 2024), so there was no convergence in two decades [1][4]. Life expectancy (4.6 years behind) and enrollment are close to the high-income levels [2][3][7][5].



Latin America & Caribbean, indexed to 2005 = 100 [1][2][3]

East Asia & Pacific

Biggest gain: income. GDP per capita more than doubled, from $6,191 to $13,295 (+115%, 4.1% a year) [1]. Secondary enrollment rose from 70% to 92% [3]. Life expectancy rose from 73.3 to 76.7 years, a smaller gain because it started high [2]. **Biggest gap: income.** At 31.6% of the high-income level, up from 18.7%, this is the closest to convergence of the four but still far from it [1][4]. Secondary enrollment, 11 points behind high-income countries, is the largest non-income gap [3][5]. The World Bank's East Asia & Pacific aggregate is dominated by its largest economies, so it hides large differences between countries.



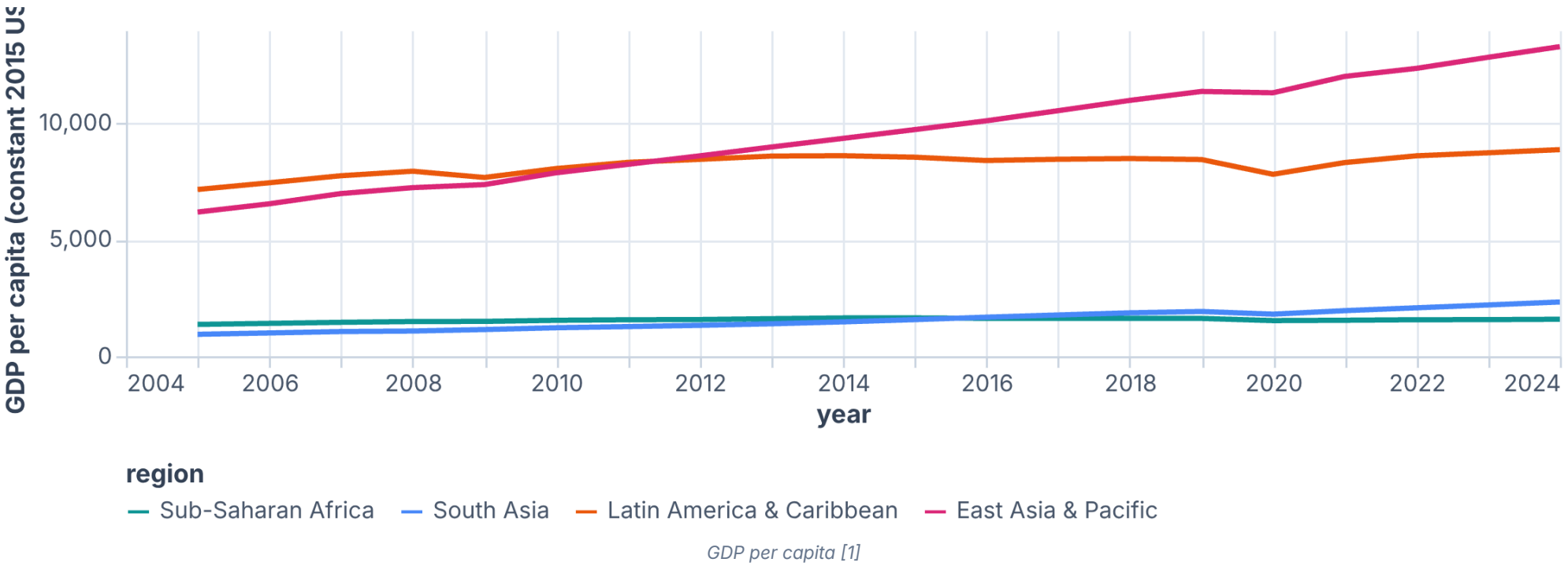
East Asia & Pacific, indexed to 2005 = 100 [1][2][3]

Side-by-side comparison

Levels on a common scale

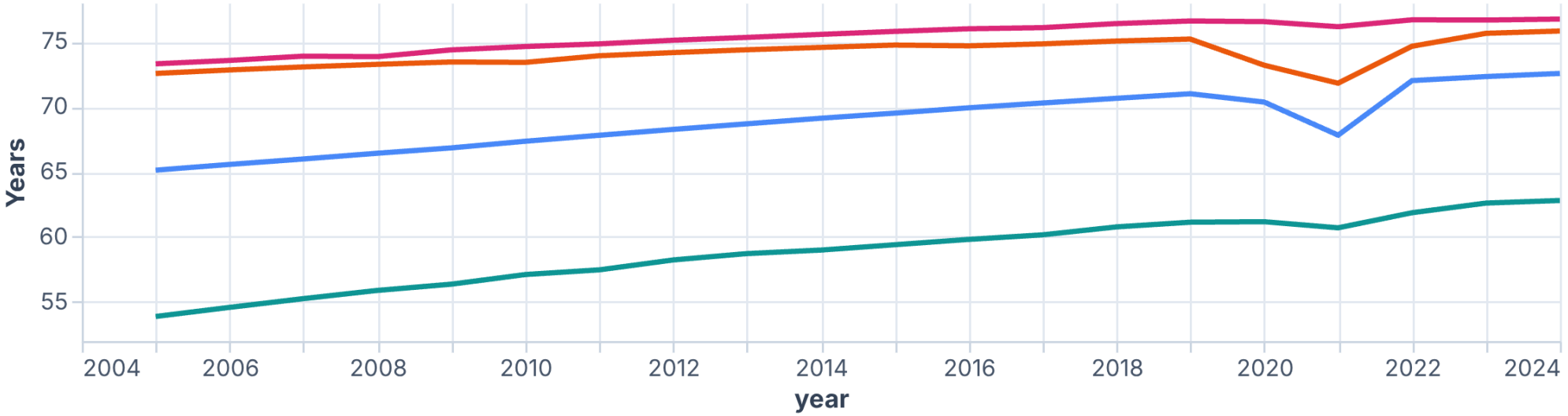
The three charts below plot the four regions' levels on common axes for each indicator.

GDP per capita



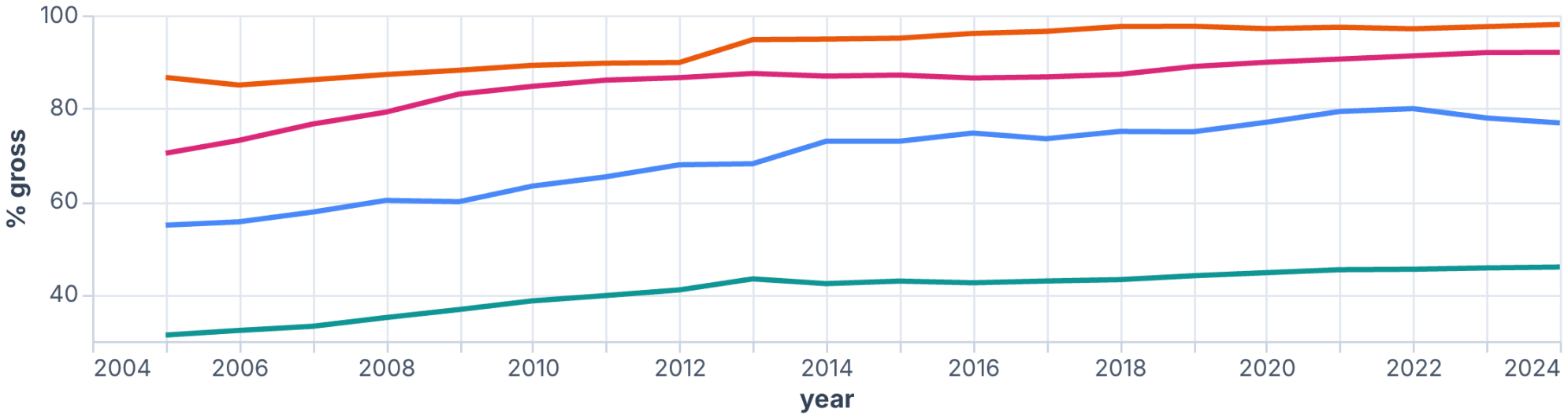
GDP per capita [1]

Life expectancy



Life expectancy at birth [2]

Secondary enrollment



Secondary school enrollment, gross [3]

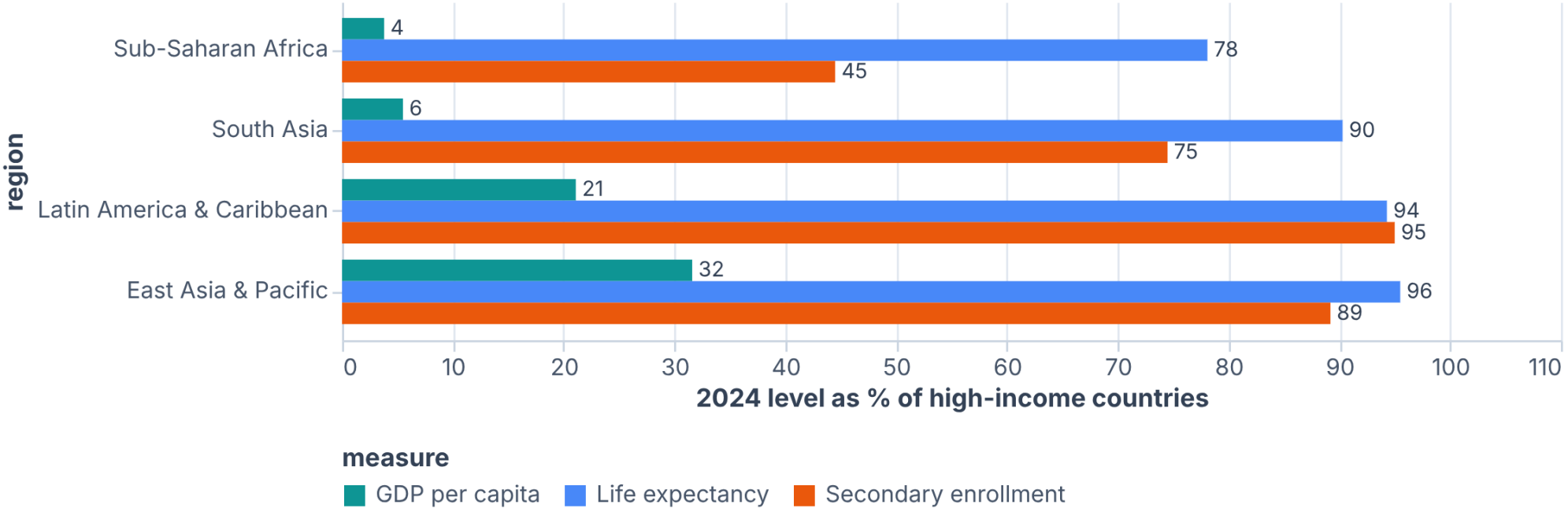
Gains, 2005 to 2024

Region	GDP per capita (2015 US$)	Income change	Life expectancy (yrs)	Change	Secondary enrollment	Change
Sub-Saharan Africa	$1,367 → $1,589	+16% (0.8%/yr)	53.9 → 62.8	+8.9 yrs	31% → 46%	+14.6 pts
South Asia	$940 → $2,329	+148% (4.9%/yr)	65.1 → 72.6	+7.4 yrs	55% → 77%	+22.0 pts
Latin America & Caribbean	$7,161 → $8,872	+24% (1.1%/yr)	72.6 → 75.8	+3.3 yrs	87% → 98%	+11.4 pts
East Asia & Pacific	$6,191 → $13,295	+115% (4.1%/yr)	73.3 → 76.7	+3.4 yrs	70% → 92%	+21.7 pts

World Bank regional aggregates [1][2][3]. Gross enrollment can exceed 100% because it counts over-age and under-age pupils.

Gaps to the high-income benchmark

Gap is each region's 2024 level as a share of the World Bank high-income aggregate. The high-income level is a benchmark, not a target. It shows how far each region is from where today's richest countries stand.



2024 level as % of high-income countries [1][2][3][4][7][5]

Region	Income as % of high-income, 2005 → 2024	Life expectancy as % of high-income, 2024	Secondary enrollment as % of high-income, 2024
Sub-Saharan Africa	4.1% → 3.8%	78% (17.6 yrs behind)	44% (57 pts behind)
South Asia	2.8% → 5.5%	90% (7.8 yrs behind)	75% (26 pts behind)
Latin America & Caribbean	21.6% → 21.1%	94% (4.6 yrs behind)	95% (5 pts behind)
East Asia & Pacific	18.7% → 31.6%	95% (3.7 yrs behind)	89% (11 pts behind)

High-income benchmark in 2024: $42,027 GDP per capita, 80.4 years, 103% gross secondary enrollment [4][7][5].

Income per person is the largest gap in every region and the only one that is wide in all four. For Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, secondary enrollment is the second-largest gap, 57 and 26 points behind the high-income level. For Latin America & Caribbean and East Asia & Pacific, life expectancy is within 4 to 5 years of the high-income level and secondary enrollment within 5 to 11 points [2][3][7][5].

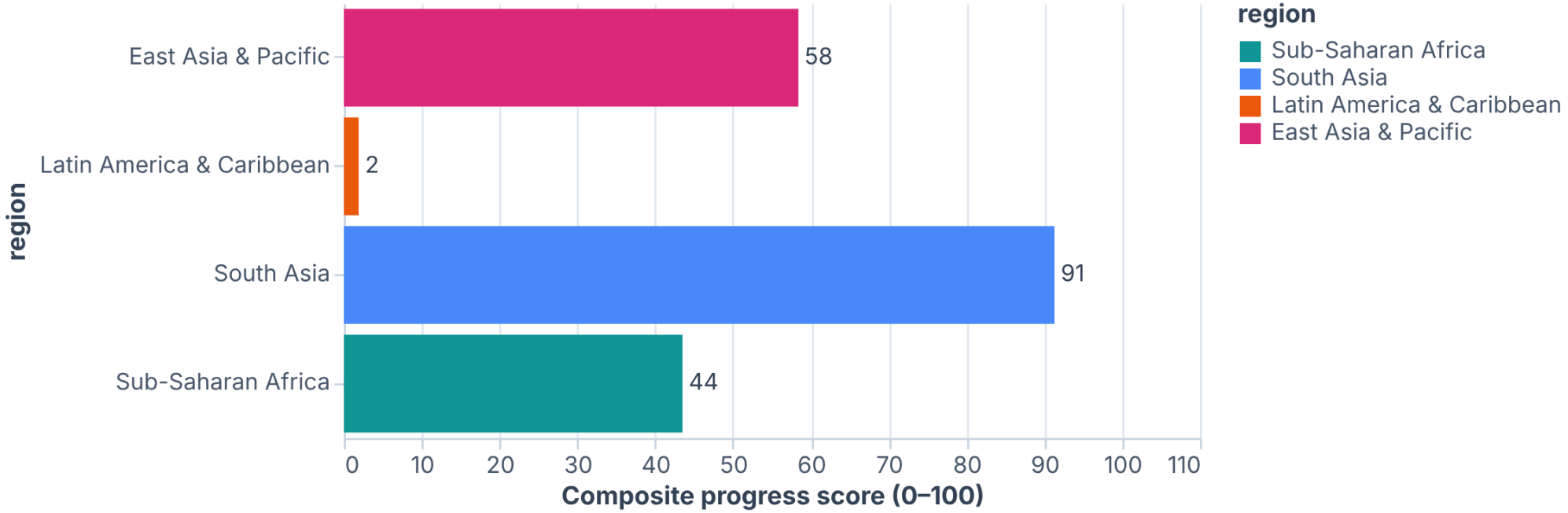
Ranking since 2005

How the ranking works

Regions are ranked by the average of their ranks on three gains: GDP per capita growth (%), life expectancy gain (years) and secondary enrollment gain (percentage points). A second, normalized score rescales each gain to 0–100 across the four regions (0 = smallest gain, 100 = largest) and averages the three.

Overall rank	Region	Income growth rank	Life expectancy gain rank	Enrollment gain rank	Average rank	Composite score (0–100)
1	South Asia	1	2	1	1.33	91
2	East Asia & Pacific	2	3	2	2.33	58
3	Sub-Saharan Africa	4	1	3	2.67	44
4	Latin America & Caribbean	3	4	4	3.67	2

Ranking of 2005–2024 progress [1][2][3]



Composite progress score, 0–100 [1][2][3]

Ranking

1. South Asia. It ranks first on income and enrollment and second on life expectancy. Both ranking methods place it first.

2. East Asia & Pacific. It ranks second on income and enrollment, but third on life expectancy because it started high.

3. Sub-Saharan Africa. It gained the most life expectancy but the least in income per person. Its gains are large relative to its starting point.

4. Latin America & Caribbean. It ranks last on life expectancy and enrollment gains and third on income, and it is last under both methods. Its low ranking partly reflects its high starting point.

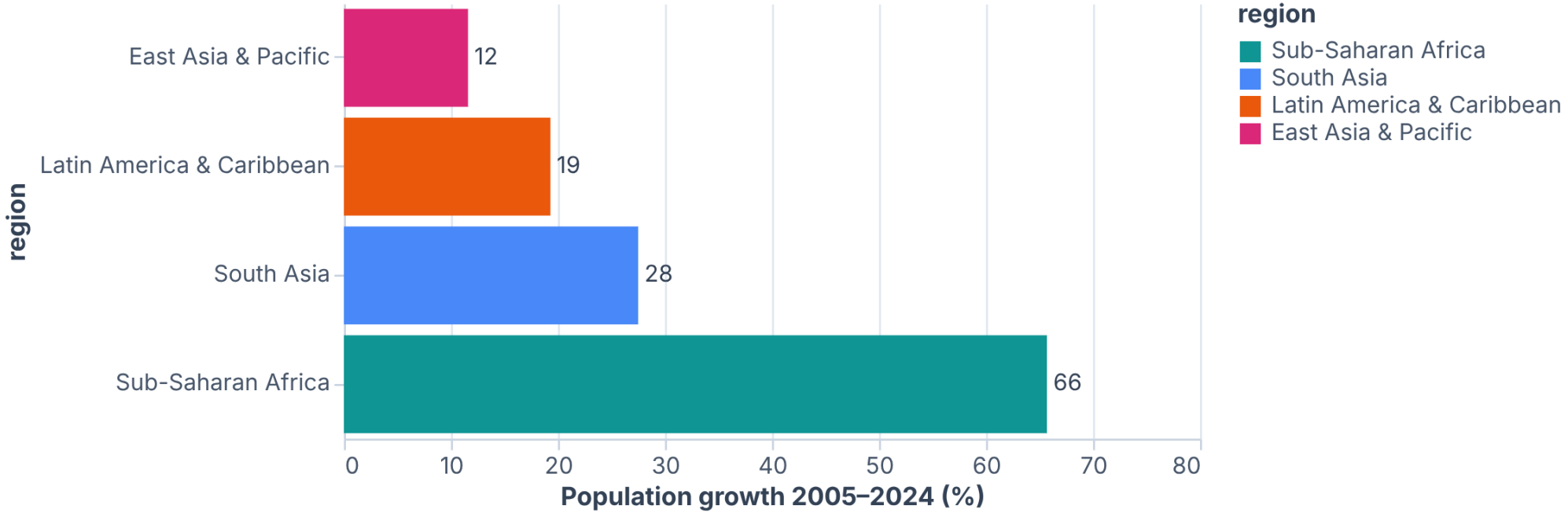
> **Warning:** Robustness: South Asia first and Latin America & Caribbean last hold under every variant tested. Second and third place are close. Ranking by the pre-COVID 2005–2019 gains puts East Asia & Pacific and Sub-Saharan Africa tied on average rank. Ranking by percentage rather

than absolute change in life expectancy and enrollment moves Sub-Saharan Africa to second and East Asia & Pacific to third. Treat East Asia & Pacific and Sub-Saharan Africa as roughly level for second place, depending on whether absolute or proportional change is weighted more.

Population context

Population context

UN population data show demographic forces that sit beside the World Bank figures. Population growth dilutes per-person gains in Sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia has the oldest population of the four regions [6].



Population growth 2005–2024, UN regions [6]

Region (UN definition)	Population 2005 (millions)	Population 2024 (millions)	Growth	Fertility rate (births per woman)	Median age (years)	Implied total GDP growth*
Sub-Saharan Africa	750	1,243	+66%	5.56 → 4.26	16.6 → 18.2	+93%
South Asia	1,619	2,064	+28%	3.07 → 2.20	21.5 → 27.1	+216%
Latin America & Caribbean	556	663	+19%	2.34 → 1.80	24.7 → 31.3	+48%
East Asia & Pacific	2,107	2,351	+12%	1.80 → 1.34	30.5 → 37.4	+140%

*UN WPP 2024 [6]. *Approximate: (1 + GDP per capita growth) × (1 + UN population growth) − 1, mixing World Bank and UN region definitions [1][6]. UN regions: Sub-Saharan Africa; Southern Asia; Latin America and the Caribbean; Eastern and South-Eastern Asia.*

- **Sub-Saharan Africa:** population grew 66% to 1.24 billion, while fertility fell from 5.6 to 4.3 births per woman. Median age is only 18. Output grew roughly 93% in total, yet income per person grew only 16% [1][6].
- **South Asia:** population grew 28% and fertility fell to 2.2, about replacement level. Faster output growth than any other region is the main reason for its top rank [1][6].
- **East Asia:** population grew only 12%, fertility is 1.3, and median age rose from 30.5 to 37.4. It has the oldest population of the four regions [6].
- **Latin America & Caribbean:** population grew 19% and fertility fell to 1.8, below replacement. Its income per person grew 24% over the period [1][6].

Caveats

> **Warning:** Regional aggregates hide large differences between countries. East Asia & Pacific is dominated by its largest economies, and Sub-Saharan Africa spans very different national experiences. The findings describe regions, not countries.

Caveats

- **Regional definitions differ between sources.** The World Bank's South Asia, East Asia & Pacific, Latin America & Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa are matched to the UN's Southern Asia, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa. UN Southern Asia includes Iran, and the UN East Asia grouping excludes Pacific island states. Use the population figures as context rather than as an exact match.

- **School enrollment is secondary gross enrollment.** Net primary enrollment would be the cleaner measure, but the World Bank has no regional values for it after 2015 [8]. Gross enrollment can exceed 100%, and it measures access, not learning quality.
- **The most recent years may be provisional.** The 2024 values are the latest published and may be revised. South Asia's secondary enrollment fell from 80% in 2022 to 77% in 2024 in the current series [3].
- **COVID-19 distorts the middle of the period.** Life expectancy dropped in 2020–21 in South Asia and Latin America & Caribbean, and income fell in most regions in 2020. The ranking is not sensitive to this, as 2005–2019 gives the same first and last places [1][2].
- **Income is measured in constant 2015 US dollars at market exchange rates.** It is not adjusted for purchasing power, and it is not a measure of well-being.
- **The ranking weights three indicators equally.** Adding health outcomes other than life expectancy, poverty or inequality could change second and third places.

Sources and Citations

[1] World Bank. GDP per capita (constant 2015 US$), NY.GDP.PCAP.KD — regional aggregates SSF, SAS, LCN, EAS, WLD, 2000–2024. World Development Indicators.

https://api.worldbank.org/v2/country/SSF;SAS;LCN;EAS;WLD/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD (accessed November 4, 2026)

[2] World Bank. Life expectancy at birth, total (years), SP.DYN.LE00.IN — regional aggregates, 2000–2024. World Development Indicators.

https://api.worldbank.org/v2/country/SSF;SAS;LCN;EAS;WLD/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN (accessed November 4, 2026)

[3] World Bank. School enrollment, secondary (% gross), SE.SEC.ENRR — regional aggregates, 2000–2024. World Development Indicators.

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[4] World Bank. GDP per capita (constant 2015 US$), NY.GDP.PCAP.KD — High income aggregate, 2000–2024. World Development Indicators.

https://api.worldbank.org/v2/country/HIC/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD (accessed November 4, 2026)

[5] World Bank. School enrollment, secondary (% gross), SE.SEC.ENRR — High income aggregate, 2000–2024. World Development Indicators.

https://api.worldbank.org/v2/country/HIC/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR (accessed November 4, 2026)

[6] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. World Population Prospects 2024 — total population, median age, total fertility rate; Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, 2005–2024 (Median variant, both sexes). CC BY 3.0 IGO.

https://population.un.org/dataportalapi/api/v1/data/indicators/49,67,19/locations/947,5501,904,1832/start/2005/end/2024 (accessed November 4, 2026)

[7] World Bank. Life expectancy at birth, total (years), SP.DYN.LE00.IN — High income aggregate, 2000–2024. World Development Indicators.

https://api.worldbank.org/v2/country/HIC/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN (accessed November 4, 2026)

[8] World Bank. School enrollment, primary (% net), SE.PRM.NENR — regional aggregates, 2000–2024 (no values after 2015). World Development Indicators.

https://api.worldbank.org/v2/country/SSF;SAS;LCN;EAS;WLD/indicator/SE.PRM.NENR (accessed November 4, 2026)

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Each entry records the request behind a numbered reference: when it was fetched, whether the response was live or cached, and a fingerprint (hash prefix) of the response body, so every cited figure can be re-fetched and verified.

[1] World Bank WDI, GDP per capita — fetched 2026-11-04 06:55:43 UTC · live response · fingerprint 233100bc40717758

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[2] World Bank WDI, life expectancy — fetched 2026-11-04 06:55:45 UTC · live response · fingerprint e44d66e53217b17f

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[3] World Bank WDI, secondary enrollment — fetched 2026-11-04 06:55:46 UTC · live response · fingerprint 17a2d6f69f259b28

GET https://api.worldbank.org/v2/country/SSF;SAS;LCN;EAS;WLD/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR

[4] World Bank WDI, high-income GDP per capita — fetched 2026-11-04 06:56:36 UTC · live response · fingerprint 1188ea50cedb1368

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[5] World Bank WDI, high-income secondary enrollment — fetched 2026-11-04 06:56:39 UTC · live response · fingerprint 830dccc213b4d362

GET https://api.worldbank.org/v2/country/HIC/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR

[6] UN DESA, WPP 2024 — fetched 2026-11-04 06:56:13 UTC · live response · fingerprint ff8f5e79b4711d81

GET https://population.un.org/dataportalapi/api/v1/data/indicators/49,67,19/locations/947,5501,904,1832/start/2005/end/2024

[7] World Bank WDI, high-income life expectancy — fetched 2026-11-04 06:56:37 UTC · live response · fingerprint ca2df529b6c05da7

GET https://api.worldbank.org/v2/country/HIC/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN

[8] World Bank WDI, primary enrollment — fetched 2026-11-04 06:55:47 UTC · live response · fingerprint 50c0b76169e934ed

GET https://api.worldbank.org/v2/country/SSF;SAS;LCN;EAS;WLD/indicator/SE.PRM.NENR