# FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING DIGITAL READINESS AMONG ASEAN CITIZENS

1.      The 15th Conference of the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Information (AMRI) held virtually in March 2021 adopted the Framework for Developing Digital Readiness Among ASEAN Citizens ("Framework"). The Framework, which is broad-based, non-binding and aspirational, places on-going work in AMRI on digital literacy, access to information and digital communication, within a broader context of developing "digital readiness" among ASEAN citizens.

## BACKGROUND

2.      The theme for the 14th AMRI held in Singapore in May 2018, was an "Inclusive and Informed Digital ASEAN". The 14th AMRI adopted a set of Core Values on Digital Literacy for ASEAN, which promotes digital literacy and cyber wellness in the region. The Core Values would serve as a guide for online etiquette while promoting socially responsible online behaviour. A Framework and Joint Declaration on the Harmful Effects of Fake News, which outlines broad strategies for ASEAN Member States (AMS) to tackle the growing problem of fake news, was also adopted. Guided by the framework, an ASEAN Workshop on Strategies to Combat Fake News and an ASEAN Fact-Checking Capacity Building Workshop were held in Singapore in June 2018 and February 2019 respectively. These more recent outcomes were built on foundations laid earlier at the AMRI Roundtable Discussion on Fake News and Communicating the Right Information, and the ASEAN-Japan Forum on Media and Information Literacy: Cyber Wellness for the Youth, held in the Philippines in September 2017 and March 2018 respectively.

3.      The 14th AMRI also noted that ASEAN is undergoing a digital transformation and citizens of AMS need to be prepared for the new age of digital information and technology. ASEAN needs the right strategies to position itself as a vibrant and successful region in the globalised digital economy and new media sectors. AMRI would therefore continue to play a pivotal role in leading ASEAN into this new digital age, having laid the foundations for managing and harnessing the benefits of digital information flow. As ASEAN embraces digitalisation, it must continue to ensure collective progress and inclusiveness for all.

4.      A survey by Google and Temasek indicated that ASEAN is the world's fastest growing Internet region. The user base is projected to grow from 260 million in 2016 to 480 million by 2020.[1] In tandem, digitalisation has had an impact on societies across ASEAN and brought a growing range of benefits and conveniences. These include the flourishing of the digital economy, to new channels of education and employment, as well as deeper connections with family and friends.

5.      As online services and sources of news and information become richer and dominant, access to these sources become critical to the development of an informed and connected citizenry. Yet, there remains ASEAN citizens, especially those in vulnerable groups, whom are not able to reap the benefits as they are digitally excluded. This could be due to common barriers such as a lack of access to technology, or knowledge and confidence on how to use technology.

6.      AMS need to be digitally ready – both in terms of availability of connectivity infrastructure and adoption of technology across governments, businesses and citizenry. If progress is uneven, this would risk widening the digital divide.

7.      There are currently no fixed definitions of digital readiness.[2] In a broad sense, this paper has defined it in the context of ASEAN citizens (a) having access to digital technology; (b) having the literacy and know-how to use technology; and (c) being able to participate in and create with technology. These concepts will be elaborated in the paper.

8.      Taking into account that AMS have different approaches and priorities for digital development, this Framework has a broad aspirational target of developing digital readiness among ASEAN citizens. This Framework aims to provide a frame of reference for AMS to take stock, exchange best practices and continually enhance their respective approaches towards digital readiness. Hence, this Framework is intended to serve as a "living document", to be further reviewed and developed when applicable. This approach would allow for AMS to continually review and enhance the promotion of digital readiness as the dynamic digital landscape continues to evolve. This would help further ASEAN's goal for regional integration and a common identity as we move into the digital age.

9.      This Framework is not meant to provide a one-size-fits-all strategy. Instead, the value of the Framework is in providing a guide to help AMS think through the issues needed to further digital readiness. Each AMS would need to customise its own solution to meet its needs, and suit its structure and circumstances. No timelines nor tracking mechanisms are set in the Framework, to allow flexibility and customisation. Given the cross-cutting nature of the work, in particular the digital access component, the Framework was shared at the Senior Telecommunications Officials Meeting (TELSOM)[3] platform to engender cross-fertilisation of ideas and potential collaborations.

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10.     To achieve digital readiness, this Framework has identified three inter-related elements, namely (i) digital access; (ii) digital literacy; and (iii) digital participation. The Framework takes into account the significant work done by AMRI & SOMRI in digital literacy and to bring in digital access and digital participation under the umbrella of digital readiness.

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[1] e-economy SEA: Unlocking the $200 billion digital opportunity in Southeast Asia, Temasek Holdings and Google, 2016.

[2] According to the United Kingdom Government, digital inclusion, or digital readiness, is about having the right access, skills, motivation, and trust to confidently go online. According to the US Institute of Museum and Library Services, digital inclusion is the ability of individuals and groups to access and use information and communication technologies. Digital inclusion encompasses not only access to the internet but also the availability of hardware and software, relevant content and services, and training for the digital literacy skills required for effective use of information and communication techniques.

[3] Now known as ASEAN Digital Senior Officials Meeting (ADGSOM).

*Digital Access*

11.     A basic part of being digitally-ready is having access to online information, networks and communities. Hence, the ready availability of internet connectivity and devices used to access the internet (such as computers, laptops and smart devices) are the basic requirement towards digital readiness. In this regard, even where internet penetration is high, there is still room for AMS to improve information infrastructure and deliver connectivity to rural communities and to vulnerable groups. While the work of the building and scaling of digital infrastructure would come under the TELMIN/TELSOM platform, there is value in cross-sectoral collaborations with AMRI/SOMRI playing a supporting role, where appropriate.

12.     For AMS which already have the necessary digital information infrastructure in place, the next step is to ensure that digital access is inclusive for all. The target audience may thus comprise vulnerable segments of the population, such as the low-income, seniors, and persons with disabilities, who may face more challenges in accessing or using technology. To that end, pervasive shared computer or high-speed broadband services could bring such technology within easier reach of vulnerable segments of the population. Assistance schemes, for example subsidies or affordable internet packages, could also be considered for those with specific needs to close the digital divide.

*Digital Literacy*

13.      While hardware and connectivity are important enablers towards digital readiness, what is arguably more important are the skills and knowhow to be able to use these well. In this regard, it is important to build digital literacy among our citizens, defined here as having the skills, confidence and motivation to use technology. AMS could identify a set of basic digital skills, for example searching for information, communicating or accessing basic digital services, that we need to equip our citizens with through basic training.

14.     Besides these digital skills, it is equally important to make citizens aware of the need to stay safe online, and to guard against online scams or cyberattacks. In ASEAN, digital media has increasingly become the primary source of information, especially youths. However, the reliance on online sources of information also put us at risk of being victims of fake news. Hence, ASEAN citizens need the necessary skills to enter the digital age to ensure that they are not just tech-savvy, but information-savvy too. As a region, ASEAN has strengthened focus on information and media literacy through the adoption of a set of Core Values on Digital Literacy for ASEAN and Framework and Joint Declaration on the Harmful Effects of Fake News. ASEAN should continue to maintain the momentum, such as continuing to conduct capacity-building workshops to enhance digital literacy.

*Digital Participation*

15.     Digital readiness goes beyond digital access and digital literacy. Participation in the digital age involves enabling all citizens to take advantage of technology and digital services to improve their quality of life. This could be available to those from all walks of life, and not limited to the tech-savvy segment of society. However, for technology and applications to be easily adopted by all consumers, it is essential to

promote good user experience/user interface (UX/UI) design. Fundamentally, this means for companies to design such technology and digital products with inclusion in mind from the onset for intuitive use. Adopting this mind-set could lead to greater take up by the widest range of people.

16.     Another essential component towards digital participation is the role of Government in pushing digital adoption by community organisations, businesses and government agencies. That said, building digital readiness cannot just be a government effort alone; a whole-of-society approach, across the public-private sectors is required. Government could take the lead in fostering more opportunities for community participation, encouraging businesses to play their part in ensuring digital inclusion, informing citizens of the availability of online public services, as well as providing assistance for the digitally vulnerable who may face challenges in embracing new technology.

## BENEFITS TO ASEAN MEMBER STATES

17.     Digital Readiness in the region is important to fulfil the aspiration of an inclusive and informed digital ASEAN. A digital-ready population will:

> a.  Enable ASEAN citizens to access and navigate the digital world;
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> b.  Help AMS respond to new digital challenges such as fake news; and
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> c.  Support businesses to make full use of digital technology to innovate new products and services.

18.     For information, this framework is aligned with the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint 2025, which aims to work "towards an open and adaptive ASEAN", (Key Result Area E.1) particularly on the corresponding strategic measures of: (a) encouraging freedom of universal access to information and communications technology in accordance with national legislation; and (d) promoting measures to ensure a caring society, social harmony and values of humanity, and spirit of community.