



**THE 53<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN ECONOMIC MINISTERS' (AEM) MEETING  
8 - 9 September 2021, Virtual Meeting**

**JOINT MEDIA STATEMENT**

1. The Fifty-Third ASEAN Economic Ministers' (AEM) Meeting was held on 8 – 9 September 2021 via video conference. The Meeting, which was chaired by Brunei Darussalam under the theme “We Care, We Prepare, We Prosper” was preceded by a preparatory meeting of the ASEAN Senior Economic Officials (SEOM) and joint meetings with the 35<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) Council and the 23<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Investment Area (AIA) Council.

**Regional and Global Developments**

2. The Meeting noted that economic recovery across the region remains fragile, as gradual reopening in ASEAN Member States (AMS) are disrupted by surges in COVID-19 cases with the rise of new variants. Nonetheless, the Meeting welcomed that the economy is picking up, and gross domestic product (GDP) in Southeast Asia is expected to reach 4.0% this year and 5.2% in 2022. The Meeting recalled that ASEAN GDP contracted by 3.3% in 2020, with the transport and tourism sectors particularly hit due to the mobility and cross-border travel restrictions.

3. The Meeting also noted that while merchandise trade dropped by 5.5% in 2020, from USD 2.8 trillion to USD 2.7 trillion, some sectors, such as products which were vital to the pandemic response including rubber and bedding materials, as well as electrical machinery and equipment, performed well for most AMS. Moreover, the Meeting welcomed that e-commerce and digital services provided alternative channels for people to continue their activities such as working and learning, despite the pandemic.

4. As the region moves to sustain the momentum of recovery, the Meeting recognised that vaccination remains the top priority, and continued fiscal and monetary stimulus are necessary to reinforce the economy. The

Meeting also emphasised vigilance in monitoring the risks to the financial system, to ensure stability and safeguard the recovery process. The Meeting reaffirmed that support for the vulnerable groups, including informal workers, women, and youth, is important to minimise the development gap that has been amplified by the pandemic, and that the recovery period is a time to build back better, to develop and put into practice policies for inclusive and sustainable development, while taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the digital revolution.

### **Rising to the COVID-19 Challenge**

5. The Meeting noted the implementation of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) and its Implementation Plan, which serves as a consolidated exit strategy from the COVID-19 crisis. The Meeting further reiterated their resolve to work together to mitigate the impact of the pandemic through the five ACRF broad strategies around health, human security, economic integration, digital transformation, and sustainability. As part of this efforts, the Meeting tasked the concerned sectoral bodies to expedite the implementation of the ACRF. Noting the importance of cross-sectoral coordination and cross-pillar collaboration towards achieving post COVID-19 recovery and resilience in ASEAN, the Meeting welcomed and encouraged the support and contribution from all stakeholders for the effective implementation of the ACRF.

6. The Meeting endorsed the expanded list of essential goods that incorporates certain food and agricultural products into the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the Implementation of Non-Tariff Measures on Essential Goods under the Ha Noi Plan of Action on Strengthening ASEAN Economic Cooperation and Supply Chain Connectivity in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic that was signed by the AEM in November 2020. The Meeting agreed to look into the possibility of extending the life span of the MOU as well as expanding the list of essential goods given the continued uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. The Meeting also endorsed the Bandar Seri Begawan Roadmap: An ASEAN Digital Transformation Agenda to Accelerate ASEAN's Economic Recovery and Digital Economy Integration (BSBR) that highlights existing ASEAN initiatives that are crucial in supporting ASEAN's ongoing digital integration where the impacts are immediate and the long-term benefits to the region's competitiveness are significant, turning the ongoing pandemic

crisis into an opportunity through digital transformation. The BSBR will build a resilient foundation for an ASEAN Digital Economy, where the seamless and secure flow of goods, services and data is underpinned by enabling rules, regulations, infrastructure and talent. Under the BSBR, AMS have also agreed to conduct a study on the establishment of an ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) by 2023 and to commence negotiations on the DEFA by 2025.

8. The Meeting noted the progress of the endorsement of the post-COVID-19 Recovery Plan for ASEAN Tourism by the ASEAN Tourism Ministers. This Recovery Plan will provide coordinated measures to be undertaken by AMS in a phased approach to safely reopen the industry while working towards a more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive ASEAN tourism.

### **We Care, We Prepare, We Prosper: Brunei Darussalam's Priority Economic Deliverables**

9. The Meeting commended officials for their efforts to ensure that Brunei Darussalam's Priority Economic Deliverables (PEDs) are achieved according to the targets set. The Meeting noted that of the 13 PEDs identified by Brunei Darussalam at the start of its Chairmanship, five fall directly under the purview of the AEM: (a) NTM Cost-Effectiveness Toolkit (NTM Toolkit); (b) the ASEAN Investment Facilitation Framework (AIFF); (c) Work Plan on the Implementation of the ASEAN Agreement on Electronic Commerce 2021-2025; (d) Launch of Negotiations for the ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Area; and (e) the Framework for Circular Economy for the ASEAN Economic Community.

10. The Meeting welcomed the endorsement of the NTM Toolkit, which would encourage the adoption of good regulatory practices of simplifying import requirements and procedures, to ultimately boost export in the region. The Meeting underscored the importance of the Toolkit as a guideline to manage NTMs affecting the smooth flow of goods within the region and encouraged AMS to make full use of this Toolkit. The Meeting also noted the importance of regularly monitoring the usage of the Toolkit to better inform the public of ASEAN's continued efforts to address NTMs.

11. The Meeting adopted in principle, the AIFF, which contains principles and actions to facilitate the inflow of investment into ASEAN as the region gears up towards post-pandemic economic recovery and looked forward to its implementation. The AIFF is intended to improve accessibility and transparency of investment measures, streamline and speed up administrative procedures and requirements, and create favourable conditions for investment that would enhance regional economic integration and allow ASEAN to capture opportunities presented by shifts in global value chains. The Meeting acknowledged the importance of the AIFF delivering tangible benefits to stakeholders and looked forward to its implementation in this regard.

12. The Meeting endorsed the Work Plan on the Implementation of the ASEAN Agreement on Electronic Commerce 2021-2025, which seeks to establish a common and harmonised approach to operationalising the commitments and effectively delivering the value of the Agreement in spurring the growth of the region's online and digital sectors. The Meeting noted the updates on the ratification of the ASEAN Agreement on Electronic Commerce by all AMS and looked forward to its full ratification and entry into force by the Summit in October 2021.

13. The Meeting noted the progress made in finalising the Reference Paper for the Possible ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and looked forward to a positive consideration of the paper at the forthcoming AEM-Canada Consultations.

14. The Meeting welcomed the development of the Framework for Circular Economy for the ASEAN Economic Community and acknowledged the efforts of the ASEAN Secretariat and the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA). The Framework will provide a clear understanding and prioritisation of work on circular economy in the AEC, taking into account related ongoing initiatives and existing mechanisms for cross-pillar and cross-sectoral coordination. The Meeting agreed on the importance of implementing this Framework to ensure that concrete benefits are achieved. The Meeting noted that a Consultative Workshop on Circular Economy was held on 30 June 2021 to gather inputs from relevant ASEAN sectoral bodies, as well as the private sector. The Meeting recognised that

the support of the sectoral bodies and broader stakeholders would be crucial in the implementation of the Framework.

15. The Meeting also noted the progress to develop the Consolidated Strategy on the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) for ASEAN, which has been holistic and inclusive in its approach. Digital technologies have played an important role to keep ASEAN as a vibrant economic community during the pandemic and will continue to do so in the post-COVID-19 world. The Meeting, accordingly, recognised the importance of ASEAN's 4IR Consolidated Strategy as a means for the region to leverage the momentum and imperative of digital transformation and seize the opportunities digital technologies have to offer. Once adopted, the 4IR Consolidated Strategy will provide clear narrative on how the ASEAN Community intends to progress digital transformation and embrace new technologies in a comprehensive manner, for the benefit of ASEAN economy and the wider society.

### **Advancing the ASEAN Economic Community**

16. The Meeting noted the completion of the Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the AEC Blueprint 2025, and the circulation of its report to all AEC sectoral bodies. The Meeting welcomed the MTR's thorough and important assessment of the first half of the Blueprint's implementation, and recommendations going forward to help tackle issues and challenges that impinge on its performance, and ensure effective implementation of the Blueprint going forward, and delivery of target results and AEC goals by 2025. The Meeting called upon all bodies under AEC to consider, deliberate and act on the recommendations and translate adopted recommendations into concrete/specific actions. The Meeting also tasked the ASEAN Secretariat to track the follow through actions on the MTR recommendations. The Meeting noted with appreciation the support from the ARISE-PLUS to the MTR exercise.

#### **▪ Trade in Goods**

17. The Meeting welcomed the progress of the General Review of the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) and viewed that the outcomes of the General Review should be comprehensive in scope and cover not only traditional trade-in-goods elements but also emerging issues to ensure that the ATIGA will be a modern, forward-looking agreement, as well as more responsive and facilitative to regional and global developments including the

needs of the business community, to boost economic recovery. The Meeting further added that the General Review of the ATIGA should contribute meaningfully to deeper economic integration among the AMS, provide an environment conducive not only to the growth and development of supply chains but also to make them more resilient. The Meeting also welcomed the AFTA Council's endorsement of amending the ATIGA Operational Certification Procedures (OCP), Certificate of Origin (CO) Form D and its Overleaf Notes to incorporate agreed Rules of Origin (ROO) implementation issues without waiting for the General Review of the ATIGA to facilitate trade, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### ▪ **Trade Facilitation**

18. The Meeting commended the progress made in addressing the trade barrier effects of NTMs in the region; the establishment of the Independent NTM Panel/Rapporteurs as alternative mechanism to resolve NTM cases; strengthened notification procedures for draft NTMs; the progressive resolution of outstanding cases in the Matrix of Actual Cases (MAC) on NTMs/trade barriers; validating/ uploading NTMs onto the ASEAN Trade Repository/National Trade Repository (ATR/NTR), and enhancing the utilisation of ASEAN Solution for Investment, Services, and Trade (ASSIST), among others. The Meeting noted the completion of the Baseline Study of the ASEAN Seamless Trade Facilitation Indicators (ASTFI) and Trade Transaction Cost (TTC) and urged AMS to redouble efforts to submit the required data for the Follow-up Study on ASTFI and TTC (ASTFI-TTC II) within this year. The Meeting also noted that the public version of the ASTFI Baseline Study report reflecting the state of trade facilitation in all AMSs in 2018 has been finalised and published at the websites of the ASEAN Secretariat and ERIA. The public version is produced for the purpose of raising the public's awareness of ASEAN's trade facilitation initiatives.

#### ▪ **ASEAN Customs Integration**

19. The Meeting welcomed the progress and on-going work in Customs Integration namely: (i) the review of ASEAN Harmonised Tariff Nomenclature (AHTN 2017) and development of AHTN 2022 version which is targeted for implementation by the ten AMS in January 2022; (ii) the development/establishment of the national Authorised Economic Operator

(AEO) programmes of the remaining AMS<sup>1</sup> with Myanmar's report on the completion of her AEO pilot programme submitted for Ministers' approval. Noting the persistent COVID-19 pandemic, AMS agreed to proceed with the First Virtual Joint Validations (JVs) Pilot with the seven AMS<sup>2</sup> with operational AEO programmes by January 2022 to continue the work in the implementation of the ASEAN AEO Mutual Recognition Arrangement (AAMRA) on a pathfinder approach; and (iii) the live implementation of the ASEAN Customs Transit System (ACTS) among the six Participating Member States (PMS)<sup>3</sup> since 2 November 2020. Due to the COVID-19 situation, the change of truck at the border is allowed as a temporary measure. Initiatives such as the Survey on Multi-modal Transport (MMT) with Customs authorities and the Feasibility on Implementing ACTS along the Borneo corridor<sup>4</sup> are underway to enhance the use of ACTS and onboard all the AMS, respectively. The Meeting also welcomed the live exchange of the ASEAN Customs Declaration Document (ACDD) through the ASEAN Single Window among the five AMS, namely Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, and Thailand, and looked forward to the remaining AMS to join live operation by the end of 2021. The Meeting also noted the plan for some ready AMS to conduct the end-to-end test of the electronic Phytosanitary (e-Phyto) Certificate in December 2021 and on-going discussions with Dialogue Partners (DPs) for the possibility of exchange of trade-related documents.

## ▪ **Standards and Conformance**

20. The Meeting was pleased with the signing of the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) on Type Approval for Automotive Products and looked forward to its implementation in 2022. The Meeting noted the enhanced work programme of the Digital Trade Standards and Conformance Working Group 2021-2025 that focused on three pillars: Facilitating Digital Transactions, Facilitating Digital Trade Logistics and Delivery, and Facilitating Digital Trust. The Meeting also noted the completion of the ASEAN Guidelines for the Verification of Fuel Dispensers, and the good progress made in completing the key deliverables in 2021, in particular the imminent completion of the legally binding instrument on traditional medicines and health supplements, and the development of training module

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<sup>1</sup> Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar are in different stages in the development/establishment of their national AEO programmes.

<sup>2</sup> The with operational AEO programmes comprises Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

<sup>3</sup> The ACTS six Participating Member States consist of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

<sup>4</sup> The ACTS Borneo corridor involves Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

and trained experts for the implementation of MRA on Prepared Foodstuff. The updating of the ASEAN Guidelines on the Harmonisation of Standards, and the expansion of the MRA on good manufacturing practice in pharmaceuticals in 2021 are also on track. The Meeting looked forward to the signing of the ASEAN Framework Agreement on MRA, MRA on Building and Construction Materials, and the ASEAN Food Safety Regulatory Framework Agreement.

21. The Meeting noted the overall progress on the reduction of technical barriers to trade (TBT) in the region and welcomed the potential contribution of the harmonisation of standards and mutual recognition as a priority in the circular economy agenda as well as the future work to continue the momentum towards realising the roadmap and action plan on smart manufacturing development in ASEAN.

#### ▪ **Trade in Services**

22. The Meeting welcomed the completion of signing of the ASEAN Trade in Services Agreement (ATISA) by AMS on 7 October 2020 and its subsequent entry into force on 5 April 2021. The Meeting tasked officials to expedite the work to implement the ATISA, including commencing the preparation of Schedules of Non-Conforming Measures (NCMs) and broadening and deepening integration of trade in services taking into account the timeline stipulated under the ATISA. The Meeting noted the progress made in the review of the schedules of commitments under the ASEAN Agreement on Movement of Natural Persons (MNP) into an agreed common format and reflecting the previous outcomes of the meetings of the Coordinating Committee on Services, the 19<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Economic Community Council Report to the 37<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit, and the outcomes of the SEOM, and looked forward to the finalisation of the revised schedules within the year. The Meeting also noted the ongoing discussion on possible services disciplines or agreements to address new or emerging issues related to services in ASEAN and tasked officials to continue exploring guidelines or framework for services facilitation which will address specific challenges faced by ASEAN services suppliers in supplying their services within the region.

23. The Meeting also noted the various efforts and continuing works to implement the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement(s) notwithstanding the pandemic outbreak. In particular, the Meeting noted the establishment



of the ASEAN Competent Authority Committee on Surveying (ACACS) to further promote recognition and mobility of ASEAN surveyors and the establishment of the Technical Working Group on eHealthcare Services (TWG-eHS) to look into the issue of digitalisation of healthcare services. The Meeting welcomed the commencement of the ASEAN Qualifications Referencing Framework (AQRF) Phase V Project which aims to identify gaps in the implementation of National Qualification Framework (NQF) including quality assurance in all Member States and to build the capacity for the future sustainability, taking into account the need for unprecedented acceleration on digitalisation of education system in response to challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and also to assist CLMV in preparing their referencing reports. The Meeting look forward to the outcomes of the Project in April 2022.

#### ▪ Investment

24. The Meeting noted the progress of discussions in transitioning the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA) reservation list into a 2-annex negative list noting that this will provide greater certainty and transparency to investors.

25. The Meeting welcomed the launch of the ASEAN Investment Report (AIR) 2020-2021. Apart from highlighting the latest developments in the investment environment in ASEAN, this year's Report also contributes to ASEAN's current work in the area of 4IR. The Report highlighted the role of foreign direct investments (FDI) and Multi National Enterprises (MNEs) in the development of 4IR in the region. The Meeting thanked the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) for its work on this annual publication, with the support of the Government of Australia through the ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Program Phase II (AADCP II).

26. The Meeting also welcomed the other initiatives to cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic pursuant to the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, such as the brochure on "*Investment Opportunities in ASEAN 2021*" with the theme "*Invest in ASEAN: Towards Resilient Growth in the New Normal*" which was launched in November 2020, and the upcoming Forum and Report on Sustainable Investment in ASEAN scheduled in November 2021.

- **Competition Policy**

27. The Meeting commended the work of the ASEAN Experts Group on Competition (AEGC) on enhancing regional cooperation in light of increased cross border merger transactions by completing the Study on Recommended Procedures for Cooperation on Cross Border Competition Cases. The Meeting also welcomed the progress in the development of the Recommendations on Substantive and Procedural Standards in Competition Policy and Law (CPL); to hold the 9<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Competition Conference; and to launch the OECD Regional Reports on Competitive and Neutrality reviews of the logistic sectors in ASEAN. The Meeting also welcomed the addition of the following to the ASEAN Competition Action Plan (ACAP) following its Mid-Term Review: the development of a Regional Capacity Building Roadmap; development of guidelines for sharing merger cases in the AEGC Portal; establishment of an information portal on merger cases; development of an ASEAN Investigation Manual for Digital Economy; and holding of the Heads of Competition Agencies in ASEAN meeting. The Meeting emphasised the importance of capacity building for competition agencies so as to adapt quickly in an ever-changing competition landscape. The Meeting therefore commended the AEGC on the completion of the Study on Exemptions and Exception to Competition Laws and Policy, and the updated ASEAN Regional Guidelines on Competition Policy, with new chapters on emerging crisis, digital economy, sustainable consumption and climate change.

- **Consumer Protection**

28. The Meeting commended the work of the ASEAN Committee on Consumer Protection in enhancing consumer protection especially during the COVID-19 pandemic by carrying out regional and domestic information campaigns (with local translations) to warn consumers on the risk of online shopping and to enhance their awareness of misleading and deceptive advertisement and access to redress. The Meeting welcomed the completion of the Feasibility Study to develop the Criteria and Guidelines for the Operationalisation of the ASEAN Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) and the ASEAN Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Guidelines for Consumer Protection. Together with the on-going development of the ASEAN ODR

Guidelines and the Study on Needs and Gaps of AMS on redress mechanism, the Meeting underscored the importance of a holistic strategy to help some AMS develop their national ODR system and redress mechanism in ASEAN to resolve domestic and cross border complaints in E-Commerce. The Meeting also welcomed the progress of on-going online initiatives to enhance consumer education through online interactive and distance learning tools and to build the capacity of consumer protection agencies through the ASEAN Sustainable Consumption Toolkit. The Meeting commended the additional initiatives to the ASEAN Strategic Action Plan for Consumer Protection 2025 following its Mid Term Review, namely the ASEAN Guidelines on Consumer Protection in E-commerce, the ASEAN Guidelines on Consumer Impact Assessment, the ASEAN Guidelines on Unfair Contract Terms, the ASEAN Guidelines on Product Safety and Regulations, the Updated ASEAN Handbook on Consumer Protection Laws and Regions, and the ASEAN Consumer Protection Conference.

#### ▪ **Intellectual Property**

29. The Meeting commended the ASEAN Working Group on Intellectual Property Cooperation (AWGIPC) for its efforts towards enhancing regional IP cooperation and, in this regard, welcomed the completion of the Feasibility Study on the Establishment of an ASEAN Trademark Registration System; the Guidelines on Geographical Indications (GI) registration and protection of GIs in AMS; and the impact Study of ASEAN GI registration in the ASEAN Region. The Meeting also welcomed the progress of on-going study on the Quality Management System of AMS IP Offices in the patent examination process; the establishment of a virtual ASEAN IP Academy; the completion of the Comparative Study on Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Traditional Cultural Expression (GRTKTCE); and the drafting of the ASEAN Common Guidelines on Patent Examination. The Meeting noted the outcomes of the Mid Term Review of the ASEAN IPR Action Plan 2025 and endorsed seven (7) new deliverables, namely: (i) an ASEAN copyright information network; (ii) conduct a Feasibility Study for an ASEAN Patent System; (iii) develop an information exchange for online enforcement; (iv) develop the ASEAN Guidelines for IPR Enforcement against online infringement; (v) the strengthening of the financial management of IP Office;

(vi) to build the capacity of Copyright Offices to conduct audits for Collective Management Offices (CMOs); and (vii) study the royalty setting of CMOs.

#### ▪ **Electronic Commerce**

30. The Meeting commended the progress across sectoral bodies in the implementation of the ASEAN Digital Integration Framework Action Plan 2019 - 2025 as the regional blueprint for digital integration. The Meeting tasked officials to continue strengthening cross-sectoral coordination mechanism and prioritising resources to effectively deliver productive outcomes for the development of the ASEAN digital economy. The Meeting welcomed the launch of the 2021 ASEAN Digital Integration Index (ADII) Report, the first ASEAN digital economy-related index, to serve as a baseline for measuring the progress of the region's digital trade integration efforts. The Meeting also commended the successful organisation of the ASEAN Online Sale Day 2021 (AOSD), in conjunction with the ASEAN Day on 8 August 2021, where more than 359 ASEAN businesses joined, a 67% increase from last year's AOSD. The AOSD demonstrated ASEAN's unwavering commitment to promote cross-border e-commerce among AMS, as well as to work with the private sector, assist Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to recover after the COVID-19 pandemic, further adopt digital technologies to enable new business models and harness the potentials of the ASEAN digital economy.

#### ▪ **Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises**

31. The Meeting commended the launch of the ASEAN Access web portal, with the tagline "Your Business Information Gateway to ASEAN and Beyond", to facilitate businesses' access to international markets and take advantage of the ongoing process of ASEAN integration. The Meeting welcomed the finalisation of the mid-term review of the ASEAN Strategic Action Plan on SME Development (2016 – 2025) and looked forward to the second phase of implementation focusing on enhancing access to markets, finance, and skills among MSMEs, responding to the changing contexts and emerging megatrends as well as impacts faced by MSMEs from the COVID-19 pandemic. On this note, the Meeting commended the effort to develop a set of high-level guidelines for policymakers to promote MSMEs' resilience during and after a crisis. The Meeting emphasised the need to enhance the

capabilities AMS to collect and produce accurate, timely, accessible, and comparable MSME statistics towards evidence-based policymaking and thus, looked forward to the development of a cross-sectoral, multi-year collaboration on MSME data and statistics towards this end.

- **Public-Private Sector Engagement**

32. The Meeting expressed its appreciation to the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC) and Joint Business Councils (JBC) for their concerted efforts in assisting the region to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Meeting also commended the ASEAN-BAC for the progress made in the implementation of its legacy projects, which are pertinent for the realisation of the ASEAN Economic Community. In particular, the Meeting welcomed the implementation of this year's legacy project entitled "Harnessing Impact with Resilient Employability Digitally (HIRED)," which aims to identify best practices and define strategies to address skill gaps in ASEAN as well as re-aligning workforce's skill to stay relevant with the future of work.

- **ASEAN Community Statistical System (ACSS)**

33. The Meeting thanked the ACSS for its continued efforts in the harmonisation of key statistical areas relevant to the AEC integration monitoring. The Meeting noted the status of the following ACSS initiatives, including (i) the implementation of the ASEAN Help ASEAN Framework (AHAF); and the development of: (ii) a Concept Note for the Pilot Project on Utilising Big Data for Enhancing Official Statistics; (iii) the Metadata Template for Social and System of National Accounts (SNA) indicators; (iv) the Enhanced Methodological Handbook along with the Quality Report of International Merchandise Trade Statistics (IMTS); and (v) the revision of the Broad Framework for Sustainable Development of ASEAN Statistics (BFSDAS). The Meeting acknowledged the importance of improving the availability and quality of statistics in contributing to a more robust AEC monitoring and evaluation mechanism and encouraged the ACSS to continue working on building the statistical capacities of AMS to ensure readily available quality ASEAN statistics.

## ▪ **Global Value Chains**

34. The Meeting reiterated the need for more coordinated mechanism and approach to ASEAN's work on Global Value Chains (GVCs) given the cross-sectoral nature of the issue, and welcomed the paper prepared by the ASEAN Secretariat with inputs from SEOM on streamlining ASEAN's work on GVCs, which proposes the leveraging of the ongoing development of the Terms of Reference (ToR) of the Committee of the Whole of the AEC (CoW) for a CoW Focal Group on GVCs to be set up to coordinate ASEAN's work on GVCs moving forward, including the updating of list and approach to addressing priority integration sector.

## **Working towards a Global ASEAN**

35. The Meeting welcomed the progress made in the implementation of ASEAN's free trade area (FTA) and comprehensive economic partnership (CEP) agreements with our trading partners – China, India, Japan, Korea, Australia and New Zealand, and Hong Kong, China – as well as the current engagement with new potential FTA partners. The Meeting noted that, despite the continuing economic headwinds posed by the global pandemic, work on upgrading ASEAN's various FTAs is advancing progressively. Recognising the potential contribution of these FTAs not only to ASEAN economic integration but, more importantly, to post-pandemic economic recovery, the Meeting tasked officials to expedite efforts to upgrade FTAs, including incorporating elements that would help ensure the resilience of the regional supply chains, promote digitalisation and deliver new and commercially meaningful opportunities to businesses.

36. The Meeting was pleased to note the developments in ASEAN's engagement with other dialogue and trading partners, and underscored the need to deepen and broaden mutually-beneficial and robust partnerships in light of not only accelerating recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic but also making such partnerships stronger and more resilient especially when confronted with fast-evolving challenges that could potentially affect the global trade environment, including the need to undertake structural reforms in areas of digitalisation, green growth, and sustainable development.

37. The Meeting also welcomed the United Kingdom (UK) as an ASEAN Dialogue Partner and looked forward to enhancing economic ties and mutual prosperity between UK and ASEAN, including the proposed establishment

of the ASEAN-UK Digital Innovation Partnership for a long-term collaboration in the digital economy to increase digital trade and investment opportunities between the ASEAN and UK markets. The Meeting also welcomed and expressed appreciation to the Philippines who will be the country coordinator for ASEAN-UK relationship under the AEC Pillar.

38. The Meeting welcomed the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement and noted the progress made by the Interim RCEP Joint Committee in preparing the RCEP Agreement for its entry into force. The Meeting, reiterating the importance of ASEAN-centrality in driving RCEP, looked forward to the entry into force of the RCEP on 1 January 2022, as targeted. The Meeting underscored that the timely implementation of RCEP is a key building block to the post-pandemic recovery that will also keep markets open, reduce trade friction, and expand business opportunities in the region.

### **Narrowing the Development Gap**

39. The Meeting reaffirmed their commitment in narrowing the development gap within ASEAN in the pursuit of shared prosperity and fostering an equitable and inclusive economic community and commended the adoption of the new Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan IV (2021-2025) and noted its commencement on 1 January 2021. The Meeting noted with compliments the successful conduct of the national consultations with Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam (CLMV), the regional workshop, and the stakeholders' forum held from April to June 2021 which serve as inclusive and extensive processes in subsequent development of the ten project proposals to support the implementation of the new work plan. The Meeting expressed appreciation for the continued assistance provided by AMS, ASEAN Partners, and other stakeholders to the CLMV during the implementation of the IAI Work Plan III (2016-2020). The Meeting further called for stronger support to the implementation of the IAI Work Plan IV (2021-2025) as such assistance is critical to enhancing the capacity of CLMV countries to meet their regional commitments and promote inclusive development.

## **Collaborating with Development Partners**

### **▪ Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA)**

40. The Meeting thanked ERIA for its continued support and contribution to ASEAN economic integration and AEC-building efforts, the most notable of which is the support it has given in the development of Brunei Darussalam's two PEDs, i.e., the Framework on Circular Economy under the AEC and the Non-Tariff Measures (NTMs) Cost-Effectiveness Toolkit for ASEAN (NTM ToolKit), which was done in cooperation with UNCTAD. The Meeting noted that through its research activities, ERIA has also contributed studies on, among others, (i) an Assessment of the Impact of the ATIGA on Intra-ASEAN Trade, which is a component of the ATIGA General Review; (ii) Enhancing the Utilisation of ASEAN MRAs in Facilitating Mobility of Professionals in ASEAN, which includes identifying existing regulatory barriers to mobility of professionals in AMS; (iii) the Impact of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) on Evolving Services Trade Landscape and Mobility of Professionals, which would encourage improvement in movement of ASEAN professionals in ASEAN; (iv) the follow-up study on ASEAN Seamless Trade Facilitation Indicators and Trade Transaction Cost (ASTFITTC II) that would help determine the reduction by 10% in trade transactions cost in the region by 2020; and (v) "UK-ASEAN Trade: Strengthening the Supply Chain Linkages" - a study of UK-ASEAN supply chains that emanate from ASEAN's regional objectives and frameworks for strengthening and deepening ASEAN's economic resilience. ERIA, in cooperation with the Coordinating Committee on Services (CCS) and the ASEAN Business Sectors Working Group, is also undertaking further review of the domestic regulations and mapping the issues affecting the mobility of ASEAN professionals, to facilitate the movement of ASEAN Professional and enhancing the utilisation of ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangements. ERIA also continued to support capacity building to AMS officials related to services sectors to contribute towards developing their respective Schedules of Non-Conforming Measures under the ATISA.

### **▪ Technical Assistance and Capacity-Building**

41. The Meeting acknowledged that ASEAN economic integration would not be as successful if not for the technical assistance provided by ASEAN's dialogue and development partners. The Meeting therefore expressed its



appreciation to the ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Program (AADCP) II, AANZFTA Economic Cooperation Support Programme (AECSP), the ASEAN Regional Integration Support from the EU (EU-ARISE) Plus, the Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (E-READI), the ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund (ACCF), the AEM-METI Economic and Industrial Cooperation Committee (AMEICC), the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF), the ASEAN-Korea Economic Cooperation (AKEC) Fund, the Technical Advice and Solutions from Korea (TASK) Programme, the ASEAN-USAID Inclusive Growth in ASEAN through Innovation, Trade, and E-Commerce (IGNITE), and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development BZ projects as implemented by the GIZ GmbH and Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt (PTB) for their contribution to the ASEAN's Community-building efforts and looked forward to their continued support and cooperation as ASEAN deepens and broadens economic integration as part of efforts of accelerate economic recovery from the COVID-19 global pandemic.

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