

The ASEAN Framework was approved by the ASWGAC on 26 February 2021 through ad-referendum

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ASEAN Framework

**Support Food, Agriculture and Forestry Small Producers, Cooperatives and
Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) to Improve Product
Quality to Meet Regional/International Standards and
Ensure Competitiveness**

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ASEAN, October 2021

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967. The Member States of the Association are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. The ASEAN Secretariat is based in Jakarta, Indonesia.

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General information on ASEAN appears online at the ASEAN Website: www.asean.org

Catalogue-in-Publication Data

ASEAN Framework on Support Food, Agriculture and Forestry Small Producers, Cooperatives and Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) to Improve Product Quality to Meet Regional/International Standards and Ensure Competitiveness

Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, October 2021

1. Support Food, Agriculture and Forestry Small Producers, Cooperatives and MSMEs to Improve Product Quality to Meet Regional/International Standards and Ensure Competitiveness
2. ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF)-ASEAN

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Preface

The ASEAN Framework on Support Food, Agriculture and Forestry Small Producers, Cooperatives and Micro, Small, and Medium Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) to Improve Product Quality to Meet Regional/International Standards and Ensure Competitiveness (**ASEAN Framework**) was developed by the ASEAN Working Group on Agricultural Cooperatives (AWGAC) and adopted by the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF).

Established in 2000, the ASWGAC served as a forum to (i) conduct periodic reviews of the agricultural Cooperatives situation in the ASEAN region, (ii) to develop effective methods of exchange of information among the ASEAN Member Countries (AMS) on agricultural cooperatives with the view to facilitating cooperative undertakings in this sub-sector of agriculture, as well as the eventual coordination and harmonisation of ASEAN policies in the sub-sector, and (iii) to identify areas of cooperation among the AMS as well as with third countries, groups of countries or international agencies, to promote the sound development of the sector in the ASEAN region. The collaborative development of the ASEAN Framework is one of the key priorities in 2021 to implement the Vision and Strategic Plan for ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry, 2016-2025. The ASEAN Framework is a Priority Economic Deliverable of Brunei Darussalam's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2021.

For the purposes of the ASEAN Framework, the strategic priorities, principles and action programmes are defined as those government measures that directly affect the behavior of different stakeholders such as small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs. The Framework basically covers key elements to put in place a set of recommendations that enhance the quality of food, agriculture and forestry products to meet regional/international standards and ensure the competitiveness of small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs in ASEAN.

The ASEAN Framework is based on countries/regional experience and international best practices. They set out different options that serve as reference guides for AMS in their efforts to enhance the quality of food, agriculture and forestry products to meet regional/international standards and to ensure the competitiveness of small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs. The ASEAN Framework is not intended to be a full or binding statement. The ASEAN Framework will help increase AMS' awareness of the importance of small producers, agricultural cooperatives, and MSMEs to stimulate the development of best practices and enhance cooperation among AMS.

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The ASEAN Framework, which is a public document, will be a living reference as the ASWGAC will update them frequently to reflect any changes and development in ASEAN and regional /international best practices.

Background and Overview

The food, agriculture, and forestry (FAF) sector remains a strategic sector in most ASEAN countries and a major source of employment and income for a large proportion of the population. With over a hundred million hectares of agricultural land, ASEAN is a major producer and supplier of grains, particularly rice, and the world's largest producer of palm oil and natural rubber, which have grown rapidly in recent years.

The Vision and Strategic Plan for ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry (2016-2025), which were adopted by the thirty-seventh meeting of the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (37th AMAF) in 2015 have emphasised seven priority areas of cooperation to achieve the Vision of *“A competitive, inclusive, resilient and sustainable Food, Agriculture, and Forestry sector integrated with the global economy, based on a single market and production base contributing to food and nutrition security and prosperity in the ASEAN Community”*.

One of the seven priority areas of cooperation is to “Assist resource-constrained small producers and SMEs to improve productivity, technology, and product quality, to meet global market standards and increase competitiveness”. The priority area will be implemented by AMS in supporting small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs to improve product quality, to meet regional and international standards, and to ensure competitiveness through appropriate policies and mechanisms. The main focus of ASEAN towards 2025 will be placed on, among others, promoting cooperatives and farmers' organisations, providing credit, insurance, technology, and implementing competition policies to protect against unfair competition in the sector.

The 42nd AMAF, which was organised on 21 October 2020 agreed to develop the ASEAN Framework to Support FAF Small Producers, Cooperative and Micro, Small, and Medium Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) to Improve Product Quality to Meet Regional/International Standards and Ensure Competitiveness. Recognising that the small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs represent the backbone of the ASEAN economy and serve as a flexible tool for governments to support their economies, the ASEAN Framework will serve as a guiding document to support AMS in strengthening small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs engagement in an increasingly competitive economic environment and to support their growth and development in the FAF sector.

The ASEAN Framework was approved by the ASWGAC on 26 February 2021 through ad-referendum

The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

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We, the ASEAN Ministers of Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF) of Brunei Darussalam, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Republic of Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Singapore, the Kingdom of Thailand, and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam:

REAFFIRMING our collective commitments to an inclusive and integrated ASEAN through cooperation in the field of food, agriculture and forestry and propel ASEAN towards a competitive, inclusive, resilient and sustainable Food, Agriculture, and Forestry (FAF) sector integrated with the global economy, based on a single market and production base contributing to food and nutrition security and prosperity in the ASEAN Community;

RECOGNISING the importance of assisting resource-constrained small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs to improve productivity, technology and product quality, to meet global market standards and increase competitiveness in line with the ASEAN Policy Blueprint on MSMEs Development;

RECALLING the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint 2025 adopted by the ASEAN Leaders at the 27th ASEAN Summit on 22 November 2015 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which called for deeper integration of the FAF sector in the region and the world through, among others: (i) enhancing trade facilitation and economic integration; (ii) strengthening cooperation and capacity for sustainable production; (iii) enhancing agricultural productivity; (iv) increasing investment in agricultural science and technology; and (v) ensuring the involvement of agricultural producers in globalisation process;

FURTHER RECALLING the Vision and Strategic Plan for ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry (2016-2025), which was adopted by the 37th AMAF on 10 September 2015;

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The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

through ad-referendum

DESIRING to foster closer understanding, information sharing, exchange of good practices, joint activities in ASEAN to promote cooperation in small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs;

HAVE REACHED the following understanding on this ASEAN Framework on Support Food, Agriculture and Forestry Small Producers, Cooperatives and MSMEs to Improve Product Quality to Meet Regional/International Standards and Ensure Competitiveness (hereinafter referred to as “ASEAN Framework”).

1. Objectives

In AMS, there are a lot of initiatives, programmes and policies, including laws and directives to support small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs. However, ASEAN lacks a dedicated framework or policy that bring together and coordinates the various support efforts to FAF small producer, cooperatives and MSMEs.

As such, this ASEAN Framework will support the AMS in terms of:

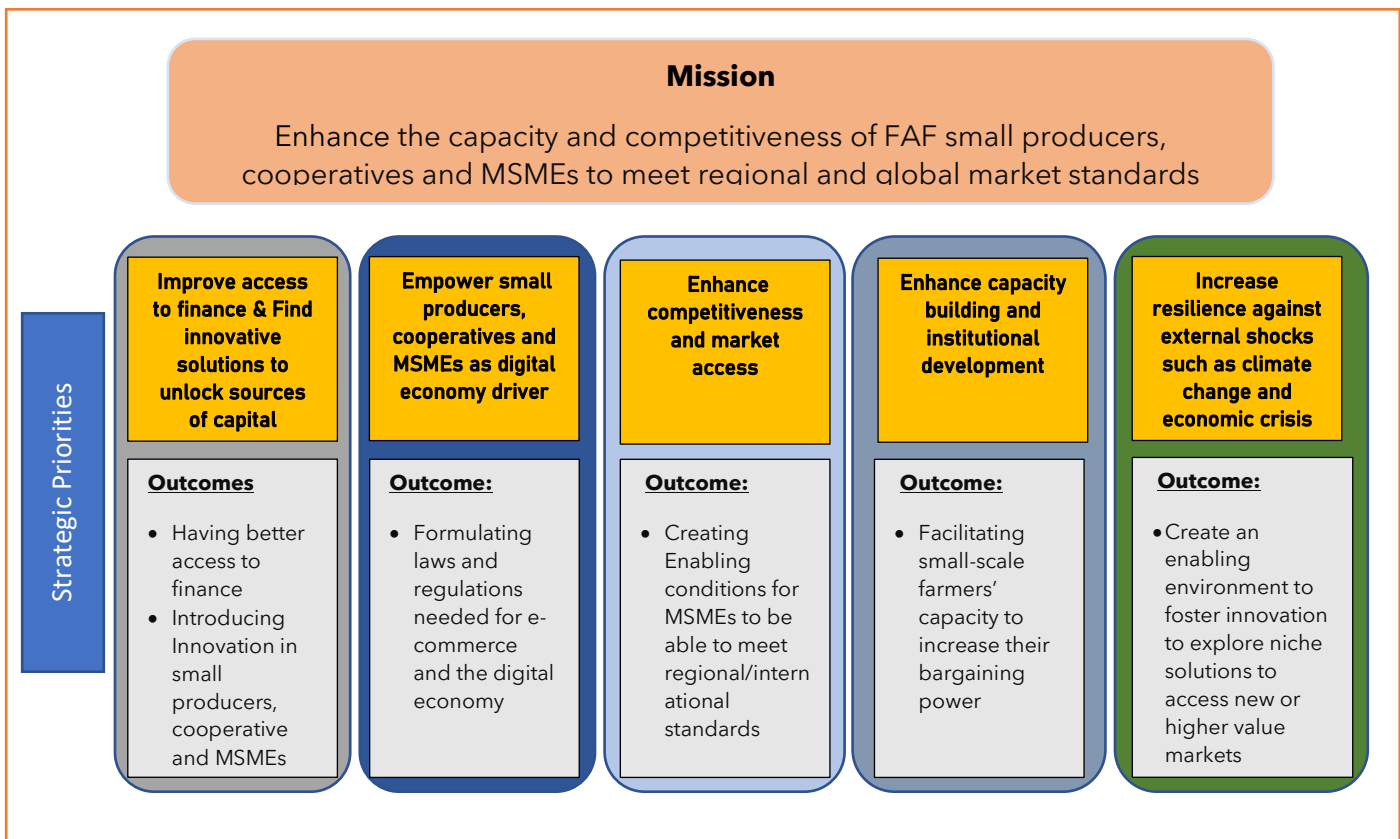
- providing recommendations on strategic priorities, principles and action programmes to formulate policies and regulations to manage and promote FAF small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs.
- enhancing the capacity/competitiveness of FAF small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs to meet regional and global market standards.

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The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

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Figure 1: Summary of the ASEAN Framework



2. Scope of the Framework

The Framework identifies **five strategic priorities** of supporting small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs, namely:

- Improve FAF small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs' access to finance and find innovative solutions to unlock sources of capital**
- Empower small producers, Cooperatives, MSMEs as digital economy drivers to promote technology investment**
- Enhance the competitiveness and market access of food, agriculture and forestry products**
- Enhance capacity building and institutional development**

The ASEAN Framework was approved by the ASWGAC on 26 February 2021 through ad-referendum

The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

through ad-referendum

e. Increase resilience against external shocks such as climate change, economic crisis, political instability and natural catastrophes.

The Framework also identifies principles and action programmes that can be undertaken in support of the five strategic priorities.

3. Non-binding Nature of this Framework

This ASEAN Framework is non-binding and does not create rights or obligations under domestic or international law for the AMS. This ASEAN Framework will also not apply to matters relating to national sovereignty, national security, public safety, and all government activities deemed suitable by an AMS to be exempted. Activities conducted under the ASEAN Framework will be carried out on a voluntary and self-funding basis. Implementation of any activity among interested AMS under this Framework will take into consideration the national circumstances of each AMS.

4. Five Strategic Priorities:

Strategic Priority 1: Improve FAF small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs' access to finance and investment sources, and find innovative solutions to unlock sources of capital.

Small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs are less likely to be able to obtain bank loans than large firms. Instead, they rely on internal funds, or cash from friends and family, to launch and initially run their businesses. In some ASEAN countries, although financial services may be available, they may not be suitable for all types of agricultural activities, which will have diverse needs with respect to the timing of disbursements, amounts and risks.

The gap between the finance available to small producers, cooperatives, and MSMEs and the finance that they could productively use remains a major barrier to the transition from the start-up phase to the scale-up phase. As this challenge cannot be met by governments alone, new instruments and cooperation structures for raising matched funding from support actors from the public and private sector should be leveraged to increase investment capacities.

Principles:

- Governments are important sources of finance aside from private sources of finance. Public financing can focus on particular farmer association or cooperatives; on particular issues, such as environmental protection and organic agriculture;
- The regulatory framework governing the financial sector is twofold: (i) the government should provide enough openness and flexibility for the financial sector

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The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

through ad-referendum

to offer the financial instruments needed for the rural sector and (ii) regulation should control abuses by financial institutions, such as offering unduly high rates or taking excessive risks with people's savings or investors' fund;

- Priorities should be given to small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs, who need financing to allow them to expand their production and diversify their food and agricultural products;
- In ASEAN, regulation and awareness programs can play a key role in the response to the financial needs of small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs;

Action Programmes under Strategic Priority 1:

- Develop an enabling environment, design and set up of credit guarantee scheme in AMS.
- Improve credit infrastructure (credit reporting systems, secured transactions and collateral registries, and insolvency regimes), which can lead to greater access to finance.
- Introduce innovation in MSMEs finance such as e-lending platforms, e-invoicing, e-factoring and supply chain financing.
- Promote internal finance (this take place between participants along the value chain such as when a fertilizer company provides fertilizers and the farmer only pays the company after they have sold their harvest) and external finance (this comes from outside the value chain such as a microcredit bank will cover the costs of purchasing the fertilizer for the farmer).
- Developing and monitoring innovative rural financing mechanisms, including public-private partnerships, to improve access of FAF small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs to finance and investment sources.

In AMS, access to finance is a vital part to support FAF small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs to maintain, expand and diversify food, agriculture and forestry production. This requires a coherent strategy with consistent regulation and policies that match the sectors' needs and in line with the realistic capacities of producers, cooperatives and MSMEs. All efforts must be made to take a holistic approach to consider, among others, food security, poverty reduction and mainstreaming marginalized groups.

Strategic Priority 2: Empower small producers, Cooperatives, MSMEs as digital economy drivers to promote technology investment

As ASEAN advances to become the world's fourth-largest economy by 2030, it is undergoing a transition marked by a demographic shift to a younger population, a rising middle class, and rapid adoption of technology. With many 'mobile-first' markets in the

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The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

through ad-referendum

region, ASEAN is expected to see a rapid increase in the use of technology which would contribute to the growth of its digital economy by 6.4 times, from \$31 billion in 2015 to \$197 billion by 2025. The digital economy, therefore, is a key factor driving the growth of the region's economy. Digitalisation in ASEAN is facilitated by improvements in the digital infrastructure, especially a rapid rise in mobile broadband coverage. The mobile broadband penetration rates (per 100 people) in Singapore and Brunei Darussalam were at over 100% in 2016 and 2018 respectively, and those of Malaysia and Thailand were close to 100%. Meanwhile, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Viet Nam, Myanmar, and Lao PDR are fast approaching 50%¹.

Principles:

- ASEAN should encourage small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs' digitalization by providing initial support in terms of digital infrastructure, technical assistance, and financial support.
- ASEAN should focus on developing a collaborative framework with digital platformers as they are becoming primary digital service providers for small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs. They have the expertise and are keen to improve the digital capability of MSMEs, which would in turn be instrumental in expanding their business base. Governments and digital platformers can complement each other to promote small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs' digitalisation effectively.

Action Programmes under Strategic Priority 2:

- Perform a regulatory gap analysis, which would provide the basis for a holistic approach to formulating laws and regulations needed for e-commerce and the digital economy, and then adopt baseline e-commerce legislation or updating relevant laws and regulations in line with international best practices.
- Increase access to fast, affordable and reliable Internet services. In this context, support where necessary should be given to public-private partnerships (PPPs) to strengthen national backbone infrastructure and improve access to international bandwidth.
- Encouraging commercial banks to develop tailored lending practices and products better adapted to the needs of FAF small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs. Special efforts may be needed to train FAF small producers, cooperatives and

¹ Study on MSMEs Participation in the Digital Economy in ASEAN, Nurturing ASEAN MSMEs to embrace digital adoption, conducted by Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA).

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The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

through ad-referendum

MSMEs in developing bankable business plans that meet the requirements of commercial banks.

- Funding the initial procurement of new technologies for small producers, cooperatives and SMEs, to reduce their initial cost and catalyze technological progress in the region. Focusing on appropriate technologies to assist FAF small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs improve productivity and product quality, comply with international market standards, and increase competitiveness.
- Setting up a dialogue with major digital platformers in the region.

Strategic Priority 3: Enhance the competitiveness and market access of food, agriculture and forestry products

Small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs have a high potential to be a solution in improving and contributing to the economic growth in the region. It was evident that during an economic crisis, the MSMEs were regarded as the saviors of the economy because they were able to survive in the crisis and become the pillars of the economy. In addition, MSMEs are also able to absorb a lot of labour which can provide jobs for peoples. Besides generating employment and promoting equitable growth, small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs also contribute to the judicious use of local resources and export earning of the country.

Despite its potential contributions to economic growth, small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs are facing various challenges such as weak competitiveness of its products, limited infrastructure and government access related to licensing, free-market/trade liberalisation, access to market and market information. Small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs are not well aware of the issues related to regional and international requirements or standards that would facilitate market access.

The capability of small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs and their human resources to deal with the global flow of competition is indeed indispensable to further develop to enhance competitiveness and open regional/international market access.

Noting the above challenges and in supporting the ASEAN's efforts towards competitive, innovative and dynamic of the region, ASEAN has developed some principles and action programs to support increasing small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs' competitiveness and productivity as well as to open the international market access.

Principles:

The ASEAN Framework was approved by the ASWGAC on 26 February 2021 through ad-referendum

The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

through ad-referendum

- The government should provide and create enabling conditions for small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs to be able to meet regional/international standards as a prerequisite in the global value chain. Enhancing capacities and capabilities of Small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs and easy access to the infrastructure of standardization (e.g. certification, labeling).
- Small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs should be facilitated to have easy access to market information. Legislations and regulations can shall support enhancing capacity in information technology and innovation. Small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs have been contributing to the innovation system by introducing new products and easily adapt to the needs of customers.
- Creating a noble environment for research and development (R&D) activity in particular for enhancing product quality, product diversification and market intelligence.

Action Programmes:

- Promote awareness and adoption of regional and international standards e.g ASEAN Good Agricultural Practices to small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs, relevant to ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangements (ASEAN MRAs) and ASEAN FTAs Agreements to facilitate market access.
- Exchange best experience, technology transfer, inputs, better finance access and extension services.
- Facilitate access to higher-value markets by facilitating integration into modern value chains such as enhancing the use of e-commerce.
- Promote partnerships between small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs and multi-national companies/large enterprises to increase market access and opportunities, foster adoption of innovations and participation in high-value markets and to ensure there is no unfair exploitation by large firms along the supply chain.
- Provide, market information, quality control and certification facilities to enable small-scale producers, cooperatives and SMEs to comply with food safety and quality standards in both domestic and foreign markets.
- Conduct regular joint promotion/exhibitions at the regional and international levels for small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs products. Support and attend Business Fora and match-making events between businesses, MSMEs and agricultural cooperatives;

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The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

through ad-referendum

- Set-up a market information system (MIS) regarding consumer patterns, new business opportunities and competitiveness for Small producers, cooperatives and MSMEs and agricultural cooperatives.

Strategic Priority 4: Enhance capacity building and institutional development

Small-scale farmers and cooperatives may face challenges in securing market access and eliciting benefits to support healthy livelihoods. They are often confronted with problems of meeting required standards and other requirements on food safety and quality. As individual farmers, they have little bargaining power and can be vulnerable to disadvantageous contracts or unfair conditions and practices in the markets.

This underscores the importance of reinforcing the capacity of small-scale farmers and cooperatives to generate, allocate and use human and financial resources effectively to attain higher product value and access to markets. Governments play an essential role in facilitating farmers' learning and decision making regarding changes to farming systems, trialing new technologies, and overcoming problems such as food security, environmental management, and marketing of products.

Market information can have an impact on small-scale farmers' food security and livelihood, which could be better understood through data collection and analysis. It is particularly important to understand the need for access to appropriate information by small-scale farmers and cooperatives to help them cope with existing problems and empower them to improve their livelihoods.

Principles:

- The government could facilitate small-scale farmers' capacity to increase their bargaining power and participation in the food value chain through forming cooperatives, associations and networks, and provide an enabling environment for women, youth, and marginalized groups to participate in the decision making process.
- Small-scale farmers and cooperatives should have access where possible to research findings, technologies, best practices, and market information to make an informed decision and implement effective production and marketing strategies.

Action Programmes under Strategic Priority 4:

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The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

through ad-referendum

- Support for the setting up and the development of cooperatives and organisations of the small-scale agriculture sector, as well as marketing mechanisms as appropriate, e.g. auctions and market-matching events.
- Conduct targeted education and training programmes to support the development of production, financial, managerial, and entrepreneurial capacities of small-scale farmers and cooperatives, taking into account the participation of women and youth.
- Develop tools for small-scale farmers and cooperatives to access useful, timely, and transparent scientific and market information to enable informed decisions on new technologies, business opportunities and markets.

Strategic Priority 5: Increase resilience against external shocks such as climate change, economic crisis, political instability and natural catastrophe.

The economic, social, environmental and political landscapes in which most small-scale farmers and cooperatives are operating is changing faster than ever before. Climate change, economic and political instability, volatility of food and energy prices, natural catastrophe and other external shocks may present both challenges and opportunities for small-scale farmers and cooperatives. Climate change for instance may lead to decreasing crop yields, thereby affecting farmers' income and access to food. However, it may also create an enabling environment to foster innovation, experimentation, and the ability to explore niche solutions to access new or higher value markets. Facing these challenges and opportunities, the government needs to provide practical solutions and approaches that help small-scale farmers adapt to external shocks and enhance the resilience of their production system.

Principles:

- Small-scale farmers and cooperatives need to be better equipped to understand risks to their crops and market outlets, and what potential tools and responses they could employ to mitigate the risks and promote resilience.
- Reducing small-scale farmers' vulnerability to external shocks is closely linked to poverty reduction and economic development agenda. The government could consider providing transparent access to adaptation funds, facilities, agricultural innovation and technologies, as appropriate, to boost the resilience of small-scale farmers and cooperatives.

The ASEAN Framework was approved by the ASWGAC on 26 February 2021 through ad-referendum

The ASEAN Framework was adopted by the SOM AMAF Leaders on 20 March 2021

through ad-referendum

- The government could consider integrating and mainstreaming climate-smart agriculture practices and priorities into their broader agricultural plans and strategies, policy and investment conditions, and extension curricula to boost their adoption by small-scale farmers and cooperatives.

Action Programmes under Strategic Priority 5:

- Assess or map out current agricultural production, its vulnerability and future opportunities and develop a range of tailored commodity and location-specific interventions.
- Increase the risk management capacity of small-scale farmers and cooperatives through the development and conduct of training courses on agricultural risk management tools.
- Facilitate production diversification to increase to reduce seasonal food and income fluctuations and enable more diverse food consumption.
- Accelerate uptake of climate-resilient innovation and technology for small-scale farmers and cooperatives through mobilizing private sector partnerships, providing technical assistance packages, and improving access to co-financing sources.

5. Implementation of the ASEAN Framework

To facilitate the implementation of this ASEAN Framework, including the proposed action programmes, AMS interested in applying the ASEAN Framework should endeavour to provide updates on their progress of implementing the ASEAN Framework at the annual meeting of the ASWGAC.

6. Amendments

This ASEAN Framework may be reviewed periodically, and amended at any time to incorporate new developments or changes, by mutual agreement amongst all AMS.

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