

# The ASEAN



one vision  
one identity  
one community

**ISSUE 42**  
**FEBRUARY 2025**

A collage of six photographs with halftone patterns. Top left: A woman in a blue blazer speaking into a microphone against a red background. Top middle: A woman in a blue baseball cap and a green apron with 'CARAVAN' and 'OD' logos, smiling against a yellow background. Top right: A man in a blue shirt speaking into a microphone against a green background. Bottom left: Two women with glasses smiling against a red background. Bottom middle: Three people in white shirts looking upwards against a blue background. Bottom right: A man in a blue vest over a white shirt against a yellow background.

## BREAKING BARRIERS Disability Rights and Inclusion in ASEAN

ISSN 2721-8058



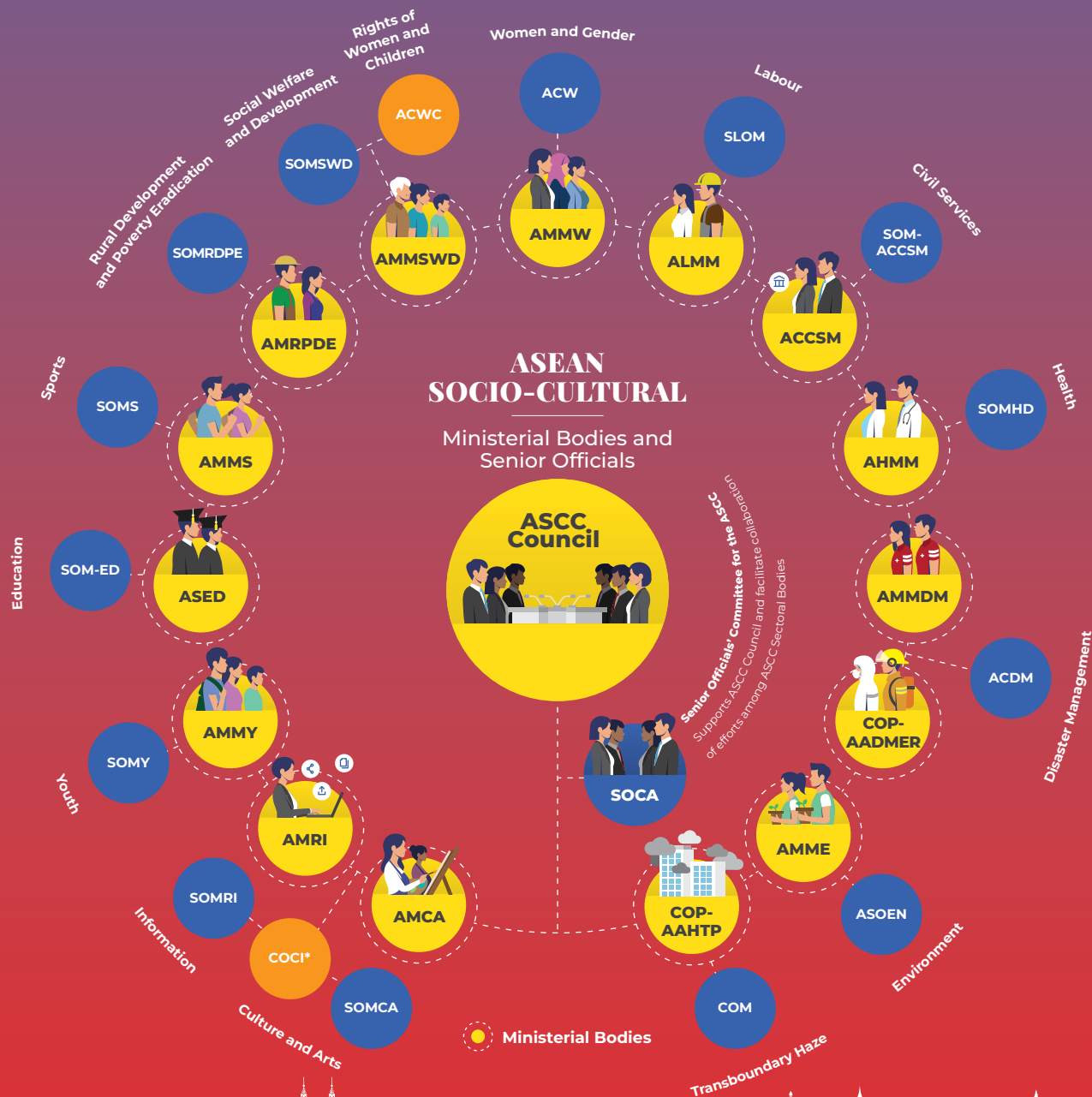
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**THE INSIDE VIEW**  
Mainstreaming Disability  
Rights in ASEAN

**SHIFTING CURRENTS**  
Revitalising Ecotourism

**CONVERSATIONS**  
Building Inclusive  
Communities





**AMRI:** ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Information

**AMCA:** ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts

**AMMY:** ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Youth

**ASED:** ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting

**AMMS:** ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Sports

**AMRDPE:** ASEAN Ministers on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication

**AMMSWD:** ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development

**AMMW:** ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women

**ALMM:** ASEAN Labour Ministers Meeting

**ACCSM:** ASEAN Cooperation on Civil Service Matters

**AHMM:** ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting

**AMMDM:** ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management

**COP to AADMER:** Conference of the Parties to the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response

**AMME:** ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Environment COP to AATHP-Conference of the Parties to the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution

**SOMCA:** Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts

**COCI:** The ASEAN Committee for Culture and Information

**SOMRI:** Senior Officials Meeting Responsible for Information

**SOMY:** Senior Officials Meeting on Youth

**SOMED:** Senior Officials Meeting on Education

**SOMS:** Senior Officials Meeting on Sports

**SOMRDPE:** Senior Officials Meeting on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication

**SOMSWD:** Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development

**ACWC:** ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children

**ACW:** ASEAN Committee on Women

**SLOM:** Senior Labour Officials Meeting

**SOM-ACCSM:** Senior Officials Meeting on ASEAN Cooperation on Civil Service Matters

**SOMHD:** Senior Officials Meeting on Health Development

**ASOEN:** ASEAN Senior Officials on the Environment

**COM to AATHP:** Committee under the Conference of Parties to the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution

*\* takes guidance from and reports to both AMCA and AMRI*

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# Note from Editorial Team

This year marks the completion of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and ushers in ASEAN Community Vision 2045. It is a critical phase for ASEAN as it assesses the progress achieved in the last five years and develops strategic plans for the next two decades.

As ASEAN reviews its achievements over the past five years and charts its course for the next two decades, Malaysia has assumed the ASEAN Chairmanship for 2025, embracing the theme “Inclusivity and Sustainability.” In this edition, Dato’ Sri Tiong King Sing, Malaysia’s Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture and Chair of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Council, outlines Malaysia’s priorities, particularly within the ASCC.

Building on the foundation laid by the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, ASEAN has made significant strides in advancing the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. This

edition showcases the key milestones in ASEAN’s ongoing commitment to mainstreaming disability rights and ensuring full participation for all.

The ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a critical framework guiding this work. This Enabling Masterplan provides a comprehensive roadmap for regional cooperation across ASEAN’s three pillars, with the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (AMMSWD) leading this cross-pillar initiative. Dato’ Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri, Malaysia’s Minister of Women, Family and Community Development and Chair of the AMMSWD, offers insights into ASEAN’s broader efforts to build an inclusive community.

The ASCC’s Poverty Eradication and Gender Division shares updates on the ongoing mid-term review of the implementation of the Enabling Masterplan, which includes a self-assessment by the ASEAN Member

States. Regional cooperation and knowledge sharing are essential to accelerating progress. By translating commitments into concrete actions, ASEAN can realise its vision of an inclusive community where persons with disabilities fully enjoy their rights and contribute to the region’s development. Critically, ASEAN prioritises the inclusion of organisations of persons with disabilities in the Enabling Masterplan’s development, implementation and review.

*The ASEAN* also features conversations with persons with disabilities and organisations that champion their right to live productive lives and contribute meaningfully to their communities and the region’s development. Central to ASEAN’s approach is the principle of leaving no one behind, which ensures that vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, are included, valued, and empowered.

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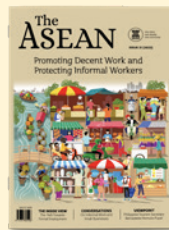
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# Dato' Sri Tiong King Sing

Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia

2025 Chair of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Council

## MALAYSIA ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP 2025

### INCLUSIVITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

On 1 January 2025, Malaysia assumed the Chairmanship of ASEAN for the fifth time, marking a decade since its last leadership role. Coincidentally, this year marks the end of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, launched at the 27th ASEAN Summit during Malaysia's 2015 Chairmanship. History repeats itself. In 2025, ASEAN will commemorate the tenth anniversary of the formal establishment of the ASEAN Community guided by the 2025 Vision and its Blueprints as well as the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025; ASEAN will adopt the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia during the 46th Summit.





*Thousands of Malaysian competing against each other during Malaysian United Run in Kuala Lumpur*

Photo Credit: ©Lens Hitam / Shutterstock

The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, received the ASEAN Chairmanship baton from Lao PDR Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone during the Closing Ceremony of the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits and Related Summits in Vientiane on 11 October 2024. During the handover, PM Anwar expressed Malaysia's aspiration for truly shared progress, ensuring no one is left behind. He also underscored Malaysia's commitment towards strengthening regional peace, stability, and prosperity. Malaysia will also aim to fortify ASEAN centrality and promote strategic trust amongst nations through dialogues, diplomacy, and goodwill towards regional community-building efforts.

In this regard, the theme for Malaysia's chairmanship is "Inclusivity and Sustainability"—two significant values drawn from Malaysia's MADANI concept based on sustainability, prosperity, innovation, respect, trust, and compassion. The value proposition is simple yet encapsulates the essence of ASEAN and what this region needs. Collectively, ASEAN's 680 million diverse population is the third largest globally. In 2023, ASEAN's economy reached a

nominal GDP of 3.8 trillion US dollars, positioning it as the fifth largest in the world and the third largest in Asia. In the same year, ASEAN nominal GDP per capita stood at 5,794 US dollars, a notable 37.6 per cent increase from 2015.

## ASCC 2025: What's in it for ASEAN?

Much has been achieved together, by the people, and for the people of ASEAN. Inclusivity and sustainability are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, and they will be ingrained across all three pillars of the ASEAN Community.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is one of the three and accorded the "people's pillar." ASCC commits to improving people's quality of life through people-oriented and people-centred cooperative initiatives. The ASCC continues to intensify regional cooperation towards realising human development fully, resilience, and sustainable development across the 15 sectors covering a wide range of areas, such as culture and information; education, youth and sports; social welfare and development; children,

women and gender; labour; civil service; rural development and poverty eradication; environment and transboundary haze; disaster management and humanitarian assistance; and health.

The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia (MOTAC), as Chair of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Council, now leads the pillar's initiatives that have always espoused inclusivity and sustainability.

Malaysia also spearheads the culture and arts sector, assuming the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts (AMCA) chairmanship in October 2024. The 11th AMCA's priorities align with ASEAN's 2025 theme of inclusivity and sustainability in one way or another. Themed "Bridging cultures, building futures: Unity in diversity," Malaysia's AMCA chairmanship underlines the pivotal role of culture and arts in promoting inclusive and sustainable development towards strengthening ASEAN's solidarity. Malaysia has initiated several initiatives that have advanced ASEAN's culture and arts sector, encouraging collaboration, innovation, and youth empowerment to shape the region's future. Melaka, one of the eight ASEAN Cities of Culture for 2024-2026, will host a series of cultural activities, including the International Culture and Arts Festival (ICAF), commemorating Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship. An ASEAN Youth and Heritage Forum was also organised.

## Priority areas and deliverables

The key events of Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship will be the two ASEAN Summits and the inaugural ASEAN conference with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Plus China. As for ASCC, the highlights will be the two ASCC Council Meetings. The first edition will be held in Kuching, Sarawak, and the second in Kuala Lumpur. To progress Malaysia's socio-cultural integration agenda, the plan has over 100 meetings and programmes at different levels (working groups, senior officials, and ministers) across various ministries. In ensuring that no state is left behind in reaping the socio-economic benefits of Malaysia's chairmanship, Malaysia aims to spread the meeting venues across all states in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak.



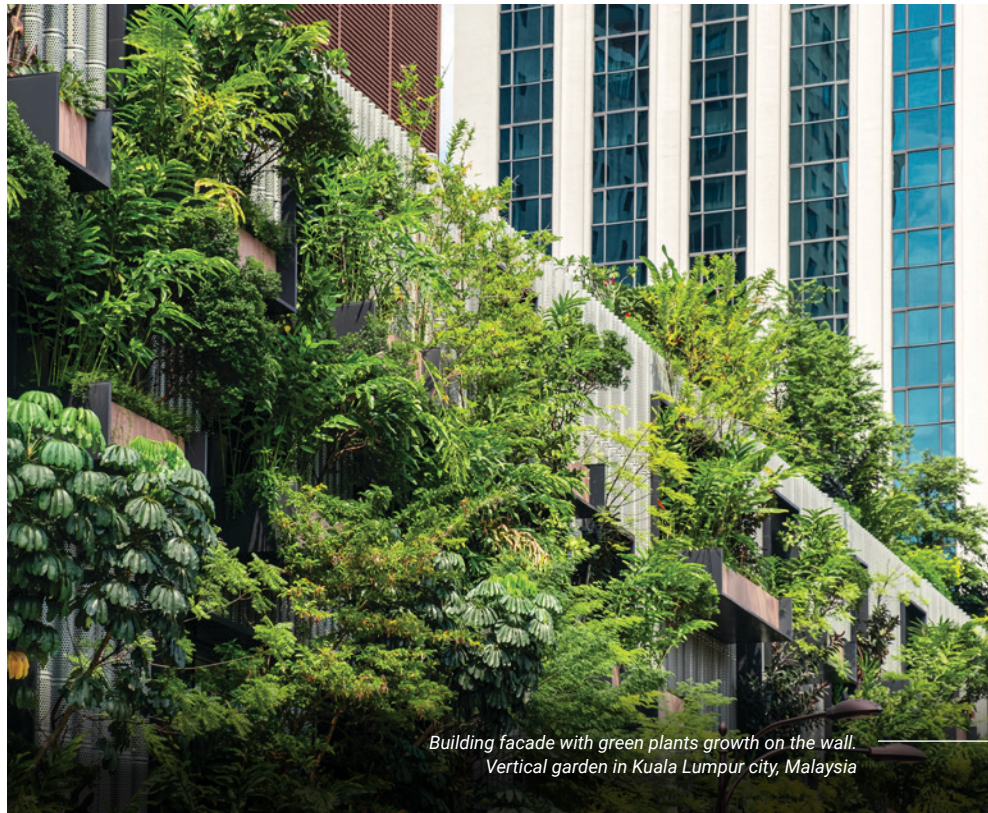
For the ASCC, which MOTAC, together with the other line ministries, is responsible for, we have clustered our ASCC priorities into five areas: culture and heritage; artificial intelligence, digitalisation, and green jobs; health; youth and sports potential; and climate action for stewardship, partnership, and ownership.

We will work on creating value for culture and heritage by enhancing ASEAN identity awareness, increasing its relevance and appreciation of cultural and creative industries, and safeguarding cultural heritage.

As for future-proofing skills and talents for ASEAN, Artificial Intelligence (AI), digitalisation, and green jobs will be prioritised to accelerate the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs towards growth and people's well-being. Under health, good nutrition and food safety will be promoted together with efforts to enhance regional preparedness and response to public health emergencies. As Malaysia advocates strongly for unity in diversity, emphasis will be placed on innovation and engagement in youth sports activities. The region will continue to call for climate action; hence, climate adaptation and mitigation efforts will be fostered while complementing the ASEAN Working Group on Climate Change Action Plan, particularly on disaster management, disaster reduction and resilience-building. Details will be unveiled as we go through the consultation and endorsement processes under the ASEAN mechanism accordingly.

At this juncture, we cannot ascertain the number of outcome documents and actual activities to be delivered under the ASCC 2025. However, I can shed some light on one of the expected deliverables under the Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA). All ASEAN Member States recognised the vitality and potential of the ASEAN Creative Economy's contribution to amplify appreciation of our rich cultural heritage and build a shared future of inclusive economic growth and socio-cultural development.

To this end, Malaysia is steering efforts to accelerate the realisation of the ASEAN Creative Economy through various initiatives. These include an ASEAN Creative Economy Symposium,



*Building facade with green plants growth on the wall.  
Vertical garden in Kuala Lumpur city, Malaysia*

which will be held in February 2025 in partnership with the UK and supported by the ASEAN Secretariat. Building on the Siem Reap Declaration on Promoting a Creative and Adaptive ASEAN Community to Support the Cultural and Creative Economy adopted in 2022, an ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework will be established.

## ASCC Post-2025 Strategic Plan

Supported by sectoral work plans such as the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts (2016-2025) and the ongoing end-term review of existing master plans and blueprints such as the ASCC Blueprint 2025, the Ad Hoc Working Group (AHWG) to Develop the ASCC Post-2025 Strategic Plan has had eight meetings and several interfaces with the High-Level Task Force thus far.

Since the beginning of the Strategic Plan drafting sessions, stakeholder consultations, deployment of the ASCC survey, and utilisation of research findings, the AHWG has made significant progress in developing the 20-year plan. The finalisation of the first draft of the ASCC Post-2025 Strategic Plan will form

the narrative version of the plan to be adopted at the 46th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur. The ASCC Post-2025 Results Framework will be developed in parallel with the Strategic Plan.

The ASEAN Member States look forward to the substantive discussion ahead to develop the new ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts (2026-2035) that will consider the opportunities and challenges for regional cooperation in the culture and arts sector. The Malaysian government and its people are determined to drive ASEAN's agenda and navigate ASEAN in the VUCA world during Malaysia's chairmanship. The continued support and cooperation from all ASEAN Member States and external partners will be crucial, and I trust that the positive impacts will leave a legacy even after 2025.

As the 2025 Chair of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Council, I wish to take this opportunity to welcome everyone to Malaysia Truly Asia in 2025 and Visit Malaysia in 2026.



# THE INSIDE VIEW

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ASEAN's key milestones in mainstreaming disability rights and building a more inclusive community.

Photo Credit: ©ibnjaafar / iStock Photo



# Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri

Minister of Women,  
Family and Community  
Development, Malaysia

Chair, ASEAN Ministerial  
Meeting on Social Welfare and  
Development (AMMSWD)



Photo Credit: ©Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia

## **What are the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan's primary objectives, and how does the master plan align with the broader strategic goals of ASEAN?**

**Minister Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri:**

The ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025, adopted by ASEAN Leaders at the 33rd ASEAN Summit in November 2018, marking a major milestone in ASEAN's journey towards creating a truly inclusive community. This master plan is the result of a collaborative, cross-pillar effort involving various ASEAN bodies and entities, all working together to realise ASEAN's commitment to building a region where persons with disabilities can fully exercise their independence and freedom of choice and participate actively in all aspects of life.

To truly understand the significance of the Enabling Masterplan, it is important to view it as more than just a policy document. It is a game-changer designed to promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities across the ASEAN region. The Enabling Masterplan is instrumental in addressing disability rights and serves as a framework for embedding these rights into the fabric of ASEAN's core pillars—the Political-Security Community, the Economic Community, and the Socio-Cultural Community.

The Enabling Masterplan aims to transform the region by promoting inclusion and accessibility for persons with disabilities in every sector—from education and healthcare to employment and social protection. It calls on ASEAN Member States to develop comprehensive policies that guarantee equitable opportunities and services, creating societies where persons with disabilities are included and empowered to participate fully in all aspects of life. It is about removing barriers and dismantling outdated perceptions, allowing persons with disabilities to thrive politically, economically, and culturally.

One of the most compelling aspects of the Enabling Masterplan is its capacity to elevate regional cooperation to new heights. It helps to accelerate the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), further showcasing ASEAN's strong commitment to building an inclusive

community by 2025. Moreover, by fostering partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society, the master plan paves the way for collaboration that can extend beyond national borders, transforming the entire region.

What is particularly noteworthy is that the Enabling Masterplan is not just about ASEAN's current vision—it is forward-looking and closely aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It lays a solid foundation for ASEAN's future, ensuring that inclusivity remains at the heart of the region's development. The idea of a “people-oriented” ASEAN Community is central, and this master plan brings that vision closer to reality. Inclusion is no longer a lofty goal; it is becoming a defining principle for the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the ASCC Strategic Plan Post-2025.

The master plan is not an isolated initiative. It seamlessly integrates into ASEAN's broader strategic goals, advocating for sustainable growth, social cohesion, and inclusive development. Its 76 key action points reflect ASEAN's commitment to mainstreaming disability inclusion across all sectors. In essence, the Enabling Masterplan represents a decisive step forward in building an ASEAN Community where no one is left behind, supporting a future that is as inclusive as it is prosperous.

In a nutshell, the Enabling Masterplan goes beyond just policy; it embodies a shared vision of an inclusive ASEAN where every individual, regardless of ability, is allowed to thrive. By integrating disability rights into the ASEAN agenda, this initiative lays the groundwork for sustained change, ensuring that persons with disabilities are represented and empowered to contribute meaningfully to society. It is about breaking down barriers and building a community that leaves no one behind, reflecting ASEAN's bold commitment to equality, dignity, and inclusion for all.

## **What specific strategies have been implemented to protect the rights of persons with disabilities and promote their social inclusion across ASEAN Member States?**

**Minister Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri:**

ASEAN has implemented several key strategies to protect the rights of persons with disabilities and promote their social inclusion. One significant step is the annual report on the progress of the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025, which is presented to the Joint Consultative Meeting (JCM) and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (AMMSWD). This report ensures cross-pillar coordination among ASEAN bodies.

From 2018-2019, efforts focused on raising awareness and building capacity for the effective implementation of the master plan. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these efforts, it also highlighted the heightened risks faced by persons with disabilities, accelerating awareness and the need for inclusive recovery measures.

The ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), adopted in 2020, places inclusivity at the heart of ASEAN's COVID-19 recovery strategy. Under Broad Strategy 2, the ACRF strengthened social protection, integrating the welfare of persons with disabilities into all recovery plans.

ASEAN also works closely with organisations like the ASEAN Disability Forum (ADF) and the ASEAN General Election Network for Disability Access (AGENDA) to advance disability inclusion. Additionally, ASEAN endorsed the ASEAN Autism Network (AAN) and collaborates with the Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability (APCD) on projects such as the Autism Mapping Project.

These partnerships reflect ASEAN's commitment to the principle of “nothing about us without us,” ensuring persons with disabilities are actively involved in shaping policies. Ongoing efforts focus on embedding disability rights into ASEAN's sectoral work plans, supporting digital inclusion, and addressing disability-related human rights in public health emergencies.

The mid-term review of the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 marks a pivotal moment in assessing progress



across the region in promoting the rights and social inclusion of persons with disabilities. While the review highlights significant achievements by ASEAN Member States, progress has been mixed, with some countries advancing more quickly than others. Several Member States have completed over 80 per cent of the key action points, particularly in developing enabling legal and policy frameworks aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Additionally, many countries have launched awareness campaigns and established coordination mechanisms to support implementation.

In Malaysia, we are committed to ensuring that persons with disabilities enjoy the same rights and opportunities as all citizens. The government established the Department for the Development of Persons with Disabilities, responsible for registration, protection, rehabilitation, and overall well-being. The Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 provides the legal framework for these efforts.

A significant milestone in Malaysia's disability rights movement is appointing persons with disabilities as Senators in the Upper House of Parliament. Currently, Senator Isaiah Jacob, who has physical disabilities, serves as the fourth Senator representing the community. Senator Jacob's appointment helps to ensure the voices of persons with disabilities are heard at the highest levels of decision-making.

Furthermore, two persons with disabilities have been appointed to the National Council for Persons with Disabilities. This council monitors the implementation of national policies and makes recommendations on matters such as support, care, protection, and development. These platforms ensure that persons disabilities are actively contributing to shaping the nation's future.

### **How are ASEAN Member States coordinating their cross-sectoral efforts to achieve the goals outlined in the master plan, and what mechanisms are in place to facilitate this coordination?**

**Minister Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri:** ASEAN Member States are working closely across sectors to achieve the goals of the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan

2025, guided by coordinated leadership and ongoing monitoring. The Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (SOMSWD) plays a crucial role in leading efforts to improve the quality of life for persons with disabilities and ensuring that their rights are integrated across all sectors.

Since 2018, the ASEAN Secretariat has supported SOMSWD by preparing annual progress reports, which track the implementation of the 76 Key Action Points across the three ASEAN Community pillars. These reports highlight initiatives by various ASEAN Sectoral Bodies, ensuring continuous cross-pillar collaboration. The Fifth Report will be presented to the ASEAN Coordination Council (ACC) and the AMMSWD, reinforcing the master plan's commitment to a disability-inclusive ASEAN.

The master plan's implementation is driven by the principle "nothing about us without us," ensuring meaningful engagement with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations. In 2021, SOMSWD and AMMSWD endorsed a Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, allowing ASEAN to measure progress effectively. This framework is essential in steering regional cooperation and embedding disability inclusion into sectoral work plans and regional frameworks.

SOMSWD's leadership has been key in advancing disability rights through targeted initiatives and mainstreaming efforts. These initiatives align with broader regional goals, addressing multiple vulnerabilities, including those faced by women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities.

There is also a growing space for collaboration with ASEAN Dialogue Partners, development organisations, and civil society, especially organisations of persons with disabilities, across the three pillars of ASEAN. The ongoing evaluation of the master plan creates opportunities for stronger partnerships at both regional and national levels, ensuring a disability-inclusive future for ASEAN.

### **What insights have been gained from the self-assessment review of national plans and policies by ASEAN Member States? Why was this self-assessment critical for reviewing the progress of the Enabling Masterplan?**

**Minister Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri:** The self-assessment review of national plans and policies by the ASEAN Member States has provided valuable insights into the progress and challenges of implementing the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025. One of the key insights gained is the significant variation in the level of progress across different Member States. While some countries have made substantial strides, particularly in areas such as legal frameworks and policy alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, others are still in the early stages of mainstreaming disability rights and inclusion. This diversity in progress highlights the need for tailored approaches that consider each country's unique context, resources, and capacities.

Another important takeaway is the critical role of multi-stakeholder collaboration. Countries that have successfully institutionalised coordination mechanisms involving government bodies, organisations of persons with disabilities, and private sector stakeholders have demonstrated more effective implementation of the master plan. This underscores the importance of having an inclusive, multi-sectoral platform for pooling resources, sharing best practices, and fostering accountability.

The self-assessment has also revealed gaps in awareness, particularly at the grassroots level and in remote areas, where infrastructure and services for persons with disabilities remain limited. This indicates that more efforts are needed to raise awareness and build local capacity, ensuring that inclusion principles are embedded throughout all sectors of society.

The self-assessment review was critical for several reasons. First, it provided an evidence-based evaluation of how well the Enabling Masterplan is being implemented, allowing Member States to identify areas of strength and areas requiring improvement. It also ensured that the review process was grounded in the realities of each country rather than

solely based on regional or top-down perspectives. This review helped capture the actual progress, challenges, and evolving needs, providing a clear picture of what has been achieved and what still needs to be done.

Furthermore, the self-assessment allowed for more honest and transparent reflections, mainly because it involved the organisations of persons with disabilities directly in the process. This inclusivity ensured that the feedback was more objective and reflective of the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. As the Enabling Masterplan approaches its 2025 target, the insights from the self-assessment are vital for shaping post-2025 strategies and ensuring that future initiatives are informed by real progress and challenges.

**Why is it important to include persons with disabilities and their organisations in the review process? What role does the private sector play in promoting disability inclusion?**

**Minister Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri:** Including persons with disabilities and their organisations in the review process is absolutely crucial. They are the best judges of how well their rights are being upheld and empowered, and their feedback directly reflects the effectiveness of government initiatives.

In Malaysia, for instance, the National Consultant appointed for the self-assessment of the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 is Wong Yoon Loong, a person with a disability from the National Council for the Blind who is also active at various regional platforms championing the agenda related to persons with disabilities. This involvement ensures that the recommendations are honest, transparent, and objective, offering a genuine reflection of the community's needs and experiences. Moreover, engaging organisations of persons with disabilities also promotes the principle of "nothing about us without us," as mentioned previously, ensuring that their perspectives are fully integrated into decision-making and implementation. This inclusion helps governments and policymakers create more effective, targeted solutions that address real gaps in the system.

Meanwhile, the private sector also plays a key role in promoting disability inclusion. Their involvement brings additional financial, technical, and human resources, which can bridge gaps in government funding and support. For example, Malaysia Airports Berhad's "Butterfly Effect" programme enhances the travel experience for passengers with disabilities, offering calm rooms, sensory walls, and special kits at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA).

Moreover, the government's "job coaching" programme helps integrate persons with disabilities into the workforce by matching them with suitable jobs and advising employers on necessary accommodations, such as transportation and a conducive work environment. Over 3,000 job coaches have been trained, and companies like Mydin, Aeon, KFC, Lotus, and Uniqlo have participated. To date, job coaches have helped facilitate the employment of over 1,600 persons with disabilities across 1,000 private companies.

Collaboration between the government, persons with disabilities, and the private sector is critical to creating an inclusive society. This collective effort ensures that disability inclusion becomes a reality in all aspects of life—from policy development to employment opportunities. Such collaboration can bridge gaps in budget allocation and resource mobilisation, ensuring that disability inclusion is not only a government-driven effort but a collective responsibility across all sectors of society.

**What lessons have been learned from implementing the Enabling Masterplan that could inform future ASEAN initiatives?**

**Minister Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri:** From our experience implementing the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025, several key lessons have emerged that can guide future ASEAN initiatives.

While we are making progress in promoting the rights and needs of persons with disabilities, the journey is far from over, especially when it comes to embedding this awareness at the grassroots level, particularly in remote areas. One of the standout lessons is the critical need to institutionalise a national-level coordination platform. Such a platform would pool resources,

harmonise priorities, and enforce shared responsibility across all sectors and ministries. This would ensure a more consistent, disability-inclusive approach to development.

Currently, the emphasis on disability inclusion varies across ministries and agencies. Some sectors are more deeply immersed in understanding the needs of persons with disabilities than others. This inconsistency shows us that a cross-sectoral, inter-ministerial approach is vital. Future ASEAN initiatives would benefit from this lesson by promoting a unified understanding and commitment across all levels of government and sectors.

A holistic, multi-stakeholder approach, as applied during the master plan implementation, could serve as a blueprint for future ASEAN projects. By fostering collaboration between governments, civil society, and the private sector, we ensure that solutions are inclusive and sustainable.

In addition, the iterative learning process—which includes continuous review and adaptation—should be at the core of ASEAN's future work. For example, leveraging the results of the self-assessment reviews conducted by Member States and using them to develop targeted action plans will provide a roadmap for post-2025 initiatives. This will help ensure that future interventions are informed by the actual progress and challenges faced in promoting disability inclusion.

Another crucial takeaway is the need for bold, perhaps even radical, measures to ensure that the resources, commitment, and political will are available to champion this agenda fully. Without adequate funding, human resources, and technical expertise, the progress we have achieved could stall. Future ASEAN initiatives must be built on strong, well-resourced foundations to ensure we create truly inclusive societies for persons with disabilities.

In summary, a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach, continuous learning, and resource mobilisation are key pillars that should inform future ASEAN efforts to promote inclusivity and protect the rights of persons with disabilities.



# Disability Defined

“...disability is an evolving concept and results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. (UN, 2006)

## What is disability?



### Persons with impairments

Individuals with limited functioning of the senses mobility, cognition, or psychosocial difficulties

+



### Barriers

Can be attitudinal—such as discrimination against job applicant with an impairment; or environmental—such as inaccessible building entrances

=



### Persons with Disabilities

The interaction of impairment and barriers to prevent the full participation of persons with disabilities in society

## Prevalence of disability



### Global

**16%** of the global population or about 1.3 billion people (as of 2023)



### Asia Pacific

**16%** or 700 million people (as of 2021)



### WHO South-East Asia Region

(including Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand)

**15.6%**



### WHO Western Pacific Region

(including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Viet Nam)

**15.3%**

## Status of persons with disabilities

### Education and Employment



East Asia and the Pacific are home to about 43.1 million children with disabilities. Many of them do not go to school.



At least one-third of children with disabilities in the Asia-Pacific region do not receive any early intervention services. The enrolment rate of children with disabilities drops by about 50% from elementary to secondary school.



In Asia-Pacific, there are an estimated 472 million persons with disabilities of working age. They are two to six times less likely to be employed than those without disabilities.



About 75% of employed persons with disabilities in the region are engaged in informal work and have no regular income or social insurance. Others work in corporate social responsibility projects or are self-employed.



Persons with self-care difficulty are least likely to be employed, followed by persons with difficulty in communication, mobility, cognition, hearing, and seeing.

### Health



In general, children with disabilities are 1.5–2.7 times more likely to be underweight for age, to be stunted, and to have a lower body mass index for age.



Persons with disabilities are more susceptible to communicable and noncommunicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, diabetes, and cardiovascular problems. They are also more at risk of developing mental health conditions.



In Asia-Pacific, persons with disabilities experienced higher rates of COVID-19 infection and death and a decline in their mental health condition. They also had limited access to healthcare and information.



Given that Asia is a disaster-prone region, persons with disabilities face heightened risks during disasters, being two to four times more likely to lose their lives compared to others.



References may be downloaded from the following link:  
[https://bit.ly/Issue42\\_Ref](https://bit.ly/Issue42_Ref)

# Progress in the Implementation of the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025



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## Fostering an enabling, disability-inclusive ASEAN Community

ASEAN has a long-standing commitment to promote and protect the rights and uplift the lives of persons with disabilities in the region. All ASEAN Member States have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). At the regional level, ASEAN has adopted and implemented regional frameworks, such as the Bali Declaration on the Enhancement of the Role and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in ASEAN Community (2011) and the Mobilisation Framework of the ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2011-2020), among others.

Building on the implementation of these regional frameworks, the ASEAN Leaders adopted the ASEAN Enabling

Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Enabling Masterplan) during the 33rd ASEAN Summit in November 2018.

The Enabling Masterplan aims to build an inclusive ASEAN Community where persons with disabilities have independence and freedom of choice and can fully and effectively participate in all areas of life. Moreover, the Enabling Masterplan intends to achieve equality and raise the quality of life for persons with disabilities, their family members, personal assistants, and caregivers.

Various ASEAN Sectoral Bodies across the ASEAN Community pillars contribute to implementing the Enabling Masterplan. Using a programmatic approach, disability inclusion principles are introduced and institutionalised in the sectoral work plans. The Enabling Masterplan's Key Action Points (KAPs) mainstream the rights of persons

with disabilities into specific regional priorities, strategies, projects, and programmes.

The Enabling Masterplan supports ASEAN Member States in realising their commitments to implement the CRPD. These commitments are centred on ensuring respect for and promoting, protecting, and fulfilling the rights of persons with disabilities. Specifically, implementing the Enabling Masterplan at the country level aims to foster an enabling environment and build the capacity of governments and duty-bearers to advance disability rights and disability inclusion.

Ultimately, implementing the Enabling Masterplan is based on the fundamental principle of considering the interests and needs of persons with disabilities. Such inclusion and mainstreaming initiatives give life to the principle of "nothing about us, without us."



## Reviewing progress and lessons learned

The Enabling Masterplan mandates conducting a mid-term and end-term review of its implementation. The former takes stock of the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned since its adoption in 2018. In particular, the mid-term review (MTR) examines the ASEAN Sectoral Bodies' contributions toward implementing the Enabling Masterplan's 76 Key Action Points across ASEAN's three pillars: 24 for the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint 2025; 25 under the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint 2025; and 27 under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint 2025.

The mid-term review was initiated through a stocktaking exercise conducted in 2022, which included an inventory of the disability-inclusive actions and initiatives undertaken by the various ASBs from 2018 to 2021. The relevant ASEAN Sectoral Bodies and all ASEAN Member States then undertook a self-assessment process utilising a standardised progress tracking tool developed under the Enabling Masterplan's results-based Monitoring and Evaluation framework.

Twenty-two ASEAN Sectoral Bodies submitted their respective Sectoral Self-Assessment Reports documenting various initiatives, projects, and activities. The reports enabled these sectoral bodies to categorise their initiatives according to the KAPs. In parallel, all 10 Member States conducted self-assessments indicating that policies and programmes were in line with the KAPs. All these reports were complemented by the information contained in the Annual Progress on the Implementation of the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan, which the ASEAN Secretariat has developed and submitted to the Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development and ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development each year since 2018.

Overall, ASEAN has made significant progress in implementing the Enabling Masterplan. The sectoral bodies that participated in the self-assessments and all the Member States reported substantial action taken across all the KAPs.

While each of the three ASEAN Community pillars has seen varying levels of progress, sectoral bodies often undertake actions that impact and advance Key Action Plans (KAPs) beyond their own pillar. It demonstrates an integrated and comprehensive approach, affirming the Enabling Masterplan's mandate of providing a comprehensive framework for mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities across the ASEAN Community.

Also, the self-assessment highlighted the interconnectedness of mainstreaming disability inclusion, demonstrating that the sectoral bodies did not work in silos. The sectoral bodies' contributions, which extend across the three ASEAN Community pillars, reflect a coordinated effort to address disability rights across sectors. A closer look reveals the following:

- The ASEAN Political Security Community sectoral bodies organised numerous awareness-raising training and workshops across the region on the fundamental rights of persons with disabilities. These initiatives highlight the critical importance of ensuring the right to participate in decision-making processes and engaging in the public sphere.

- The ASEAN Economic Community sectoral bodies pursued policies that encouraged inclusion of persons with disabilities in the economic sphere. A significant element of this strategy is the emphasis on stakeholder engagement and participation.

- The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community sectoral bodies demonstrated a comprehensive approach through a range of regional initiatives, from enhancing accessibility and promoting inclusion in various sectors and strengthening capacities to promoting overall inclusive development.

At the country level, ASEAN Member States excelled at developing enabling legal and policy frameworks aligned with the CRPD. These frameworks served as a solid foundation for developing and implementing disability-inclusive policies and programmes. Investments in awareness-raising campaigns and

coordination mechanisms complement these.

While much progress has been made, the most persistent challenge revolves around the insufficiency of disability-disaggregated data. Such data are crucial in designing and implementing responsive disability-inclusive policies, projects, and programmes. There is also a need to continue building capacities to foster a culture of disability inclusion. Lastly, efforts are required to bridge the gap and ensure the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their organisations throughout policymaking and implementation processes.

## Empowering persons with disabilities in ASEAN post-2025

The Enabling Masterplan's participatory and inclusive review is a testament to ASEAN's common resolve to learn from one another on what works and what needs to improve and realise the region's shared commitments for persons with disabilities. In this vein, ASEAN has been successful in measuring the progress of implementation of the Enabling Masterplan, which yielded valuable lessons and insights and surfaced gaps and key challenges that need to be addressed.

Reviewing the Enabling Masterplan's implementation highlighted key lessons, such as the importance of continuously raising awareness on disability rights and disability inclusion, enhancing cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration, and improving data collection and monitoring, among others.

ASEAN's post-2025 agenda will build on the lessons learned and elevate a comprehensive and integrated approach to disability inclusion, including mainstreaming and targeted approaches. Ultimately, this will ensure meaningful and substantive engagement of persons with disabilities and their organisations in policy and decision-making platforms and processes. ASEAN Member States can further advance efforts to provide the full participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of society.

# ASEAN's Pathway to Inclusion

## Empowering Persons with Disabilities



**ASEAN's commitment to promoting disability rights and inclusion is embodied in the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 across its three pillars. It is anchored on the 10 ASEAN Member States' commitment to these international and regional frameworks:**



The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) (2006) underpins ASEAN's efforts and sets the international standard for disability rights.



The Incheon Strategy (2012) provides a concrete set of goals and targets to implement the rights of persons with disabilities in the Asia-Pacific region, aiming to "Make the Right Real."



While focused on gender equality, the Beijing Declaration and Action Plan (2017) complement the Incheon Strategy by addressing the intersectional challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities and advocating for their empowerment and inclusion.



Bali Declaration (2011) reinforces commitment to the rights and participation of persons with disabilities.



Mobilisation Framework (2011-2020) provides a framework for regional cooperation on disability inclusion.



ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2012) enshrines disability rights within the broader human rights framework.



ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2018) is the first cross-pillar framework on disability rights in ASEAN.



### ASEAN Declaration on Disability-Inclusive Development and Partnership for a Resilient ASEAN Community

*It was adopted by the ASEAN Leaders during the 43rd ASEAN Summit on 5 September 2023, under the leadership of the Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (SOMSWD) Indonesia.*



Continue to respect, protect, fulfil, promote, and enforce the rights of persons with disability.



Further mainstream disability-inclusive as well as evidence and results-based approaches to protect and empower persons with disabilities.



Promote disability-inclusive infrastructure and comprehensive and universally designed goods, services, equipment, and facilities for persons with disabilities.



Advance public awareness to eliminate negative stigma and discrimination towards persons with disabilities.



Provide comprehensive and inclusive social protection for persons with disabilities.



Establish relevant multi-stakeholder partnership platforms potential collaboration.



Reduce disparities in disability data at national and regional levels; accelerate national reviews.



Explore possible development of a future regional strategy to strengthen and maintain disability-inclusive development and ensure its inclusion in ASEAN Community Vision 2045.





**The ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 aims to mainstream disability rights. It was launched in Bangkok in 2018 and includes 76 key actions for ASEAN Sectoral Bodies to implement. These actions are translated into specific programmes and projects, with progress monitored and challenges addressed by the Sectoral Bodies.**



### ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC)

"The APSC shall aim to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world in a just, democratic and harmonious environment." (asean.org)

**Key Actions include:**



Ensure the rights and participation of persons with disabilities in political processes.



Promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities through meaningful participation in elections, proportional representation in government institutions, and access to justice.



Increase accessibility to information and legal assistance for persons with disabilities.



Develop disability-inclusive disaster resilience plans.



### ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

"The AEC envisions ASEAN as a single market and product base, a highly competitive region with equitable economic development, and fully integrated into the global economy." (asean.org)

**Key Actions include:**



Develop policies that encourage inclusive employment and business opportunities.



Enhance accessibility to financial institutions and transactions.



Promote equal opportunity in economic activities.



Support entrepreneurship among persons with disabilities.



### ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)

"The ASCC is all about realising the full potential of ASEAN citizens." (asean.org)

**Key Actions include:**



Improve access to education, healthcare, and social services.



Strengthen the role of civil society organisations in supporting the rights of persons with disabilities.



Promote cultural understanding and respect for diversity, including disability.



# The Path Ahead



## Jakarta Declaration on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2023-2032)

*Asia and the Pacific is home to over 700 million people with disabilities, who experience significant barriers to full societal participation. Three consecutive Asian and Pacific Decades of Persons with Disabilities (1993-2022) aimed at disability-inclusive development, but progress fell short of goals outlined in the Incheon Strategy and Beijing Declaration. Consequently, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) members adopted the Jakarta Declaration (2023-2032), establishing six priority areas for accelerated action towards the 2030 Agenda. This new decade's focus remains guided by the Incheon Strategy and Beijing Declaration, and aligns with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.*

### Key Actions for Progress



**Harmonise Laws:** Align national legislation with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.



**Private Sector Engagement:** Galvanise the power and resources of the private sector in fostering inclusion.



**Meaningful Participation:** Promote the involvement of women and men with diverse disabilities of all ages.



**Gender-responsive approach:** Develop and implement disability-related policies and programmes that consider gender perspectives.



**Improve Accessibility:** Enhance access to physical environments, transportation, information and communications, including essential information and public services, disaster risks, and public health emergencies. Promote universally designed goods, services, equipment, and facilities.



**Data collection:** Close disability data gaps and strengthen capacities to track progress in disability-inclusive development at the national and sub-national levels.

To facilitate implementation, UN ESCAP developed an operational guide detailing concrete actions, initiatives, and multi-stakeholder collaboration mechanisms. An expert group meeting will contribute to this guide by generating practical suggestions for realising the Jakarta Declaration's six priority areas. While governments hold primary responsibility, organisations of persons with disabilities, the private sector, the UN, academia, and other stakeholders play crucial roles. The expert group will also explore strategic partnerships and technical collaboration between these diverse actors to ensure effective implementation and progress tracking.

## ASEAN Community Vision 2045



**A future regional strategy will strengthen disability-inclusive development within the ASEAN Community Vision 2045.**



# Advancing Disability Rights in Viet Nam

## BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED



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Viet Nam is firmly committed to advancing the rights of persons with disabilities, with over 6.2 million people, or 7.06 per cent of its population, living with disabilities. At the regional level, Viet Nam's leadership role in promoting disability rights and disability inclusion is notably demonstrated, alongside Thailand, based on the mid-term review of the implementation of the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

### Translating commitments into actions

In 2014, Viet Nam ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) without reservations. The country's commitment under the UNCRPD translated to the passing of the Law on People with Disabilities, which shifted Viet Nam's charity-based disability rights approach to a human rights-based framework in line with international standards. A dedicated body, the National Committee on People with Disabilities, was established in 2015 to enhance further

efforts in implementing and monitoring disability rights. It was followed by the National Action Plan to Implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2017, which includes indicators on accessibility and social integration of persons with disabilities. Laws and sub-laws further specify the rights and entitlements of persons with disabilities across education, employment, healthcare, and civil society.

The significant strides Viet Nam is making to promote disability rights are evident in the country's robust social assistance policies. Over the

years, the country prioritised improving community-based care, capacity-building for the social service workforce, subsidy provisions, socialisation of disability care services, and support for persons with mental illness. As a result, between 2011 and 2023, the number of persons with disabilities receiving monthly social benefits increased exponentially from 395,000 to almost 1.6 million. Currently, 425 social assistance establishments are located across the country, including 73 dedicated to disability care, and there is a growing workforce of over 15,000 civil servants and employees working in social protection.

In terms of access to education for persons with disabilities, Viet Nam is focused on addressing low enrolment and transition rates. In 2018, Viet Nam implemented a project aimed at increasing community-based protection, care, and education services for children with disabilities, with an emphasis on their integration into communities and the fulfilment of their rights. Consequently, the number of children with disabilities attending school increased tenfold between 2010 and 2019 compared to the period between 2000 and 2009. By 2018, the rate of children with disabilities attending school reached 65 per cent. In addition, four universities and three colleges were established across the country to train teachers on how to mentor children with disabilities, with nearly 600 teachers trained per year. From 2011 to 2020, the Ministry of Education and Training also provided training for approximately 2,500 educators from 63 provinces. These efforts have clearly borne fruit. In 2010 to 2019, over 45.8 per cent of children with disabilities ranked average or above in academic performance.

Aside from access to education for persons with disabilities, Viet Nam has also been putting efforts into increasing access to employment. The adoption of Directive No.39-CT/TW dated 1 November 2019 by the Secretariat, increasing of the leadership of the Communist Party in terms of work related to persons with disabilities, served as an accelerator for progress. The directive affirmed the government's commitment to promoting social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities and their significant participation in the workforce. This is markedly important, considering only 31.7 per cent of persons with disabilities above 15 years old are employed, compared to 83.4 per cent of non-disabled persons, according to the General Statistics Office in 2016. From 2021 to June 2023, the National Employment Fund and the Bank for Social Policies developed job creation, maintenance, and expansion for 136,928 persons with disabilities.

Due consideration for persons with disabilities has also been integrated into developing and using public infrastructure. The Law on Construction 2014 posits that convenient and safe access for persons with disabilities in public places and high-rise buildings

must be ensured, while the Law on Road Traffic 2008 stipulates that new, upgraded, and renovated roads must adhere to technical safety standards so that persons with disabilities can use them. To complement these laws, there are policies in place to prioritise persons with disabilities in the use of public transport; in particular, persons with disabilities are given priority tickets and seat arrangements. They are exempted from some ticket and service prices or given lower rates, and they are also provided accommodation in the form of support equipment and staff to ensure they can get on and off public transport with more ease.

Public information in Viet Nam has also increasingly taken disability inclusion into account. Viet Nam has adopted several national standards to ensure information and communication technology is readily available for persons with disabilities, including public internet and telecommunications products and services, including the production and broadcasting of news, entertainment shows, and TV programmes with Vietnamese subtitles and sign language. Furthermore, the Ministry of Information and Communications issued Circular No. 32/2017/TT-BTTTT in 2017, which ensures that websites and e-portals of state agencies must be disability-inclusive. The Ministry of Information and Communication has been leading by example on this, as its website has features to support disability inclusion, including narrated videos and web compatibility with reading software for the blind and visually impaired. Relatedly, 171 organisations working for the Department of Justice, have provided legal aid to over 32,477 persons with disabilities from 2011 to 2022, ensuring that they are aware of their legal rights and have access to justice. In terms of media accessibility, an increasing number of news, entertainment, radio, and television programmes have broadcasted and are developing content with subtitles and sign language. Library systems are also increasingly accessible, offering materials in Braille, having special information carriers, and integrating facilities designed for wheelchair users.

Persons with disabilities have voices in Viet Nam. From central to local levels, organisations of persons with disabilities are well established, such

as associations, clubs, and centres. These are helping them exercise rights and obligations according to the provisions of the law on persons with disabilities, which in turn create opportunities to integrate into society. These organisations include, among others, the Association for the Support of Vietnamese Handicapped and Orphans, Viet Nam Association of the Blind, Hanoi Disability Association, the Deaf Association, the Spine Club, the Association of Parents of Autistic Children, the Disabled Women's Club, the Disabled Youth Club, and the Disabled Sports Club.

## Facing the odds and challenges on disability rights

Guided by the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025, Viet Nam's initiatives on advancing disability inclusion in the country are addressing the gaps and challenges in the legal and policy systems, limited investments in disability data collection; overlap with service provision for persons with disabilities across sectors; limited provision of subsidy to persons with disabilities; barriers to inclusive education; lack of universal access, especially in public facilities and transportation; inadequate policy support for workers and entrepreneurs with disabilities; and lack of awareness of the community, families and persons with disabilities on disability rights.

Viet Nam's comprehensive and multi-sectoral strategy in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities demonstrates the country's resolute commitment to creating an inclusive and empowering community for all citizens. Even as the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 draws to a close, Viet Nam continues to enhance the quality of life of the 6.2 million persons with disabilities in the country and welcomes strengthened collaboration with all ASEAN Member States in creating a regional community that champions their rights and wellbeing. Together with the organisations of persons with disabilities, Viet Nam is committed to creating an enabling environment where people with disabilities have equal chances to thrive and live independently with respect and dignity.





# NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US ADVOCATING DISABILITY RIGHTS IN ASEAN



**Lim Puay Tiak**

*Chairman, ASEAN Disability Forum (ADF),  
Honorary Treasurer, International Disability  
Alliance (IDA)*

The ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 is a game changer for persons with disabilities in ASEAN. It is the first rights-based initiative to mainstream their rights in the ASEAN Community 2025.



All the ASEAN heads of government adopted the Enabling Masterplan during the ASEAN Summit in Singapore in November 2018. This initiative kicked off the inclusion of disability matters in all ASEAN processes and mechanisms. Each year, progress on this mainstreaming initiative is tabled for information and discussion at the highest levels of the ASEAN mechanism.

The ASEAN Disability Forum (ADF) was established in 2011 as a regional network of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) advocating for disability rights. Each of the 10 ASEAN countries has an ADF focal point, which allows the views and aspirations of persons with disabilities at the grassroots level in each country to be better heard and understood.

ADF has been an ASEAN-accredited civil service organisation on disability since 2017. With this recognition, ADF was plugged into the drafting and finalisation of the Enabling Masterplan. This effort took three years over many hours of debate, investigations, and tedious work to synthesise the essence of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Incheon Strategy and the Bali Declaration to ensure that the voices of persons with disabilities are heard and included in ASEAN. It embodied the spirit of "Leaving No One Behind" and "Nothing about Us without Us."

This journey was filled with many moments of passionate debate on what and how people with disabilities can be better heard and included. There has been a shift in thinking from viewing disability as a social service and social

welfare matter to establishing the fundamental human rights of people with disabilities.

The Enabling Masterplan, translated into the eight main languages of ASEAN, was ceremoniously launched on 3 December 2018, during the International Day of Persons with Disabilities celebrations in Bangkok, Thailand.

ADF partnered with AGENDA on these initiatives:

1. Conduct roadshows in seven ASEAN countries to create more public awareness and public education of the Enabling Masterplan.
2. Produce a publicity kit, including a social media video highlighting the Enabling Masterplan's message and a thumb drive containing the EMP in all 8 ASEAN languages and related resources.
3. Mobilise OPDs in the region to continually advocate to their respective governments to keep the Enabling Masterplan alive in their scope of work and offer their disability perspective.
4. Attend review meetings and dialogue sessions held by ASEAN sectoral bodies to continue the conversation on mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities in ASEAN.
5. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and restrictions, our activities moved virtually to conduct training to build the capability of OPDs and ASEAN sectoral bodies in implementing the 76 action points of the Enabling Masterplan. These

included training on disability-aggregated data capture to understand the profile of disability in ASEAN better and formulate intervention measures aimed at mainstreaming disability rights.

6. Provide the resources to formulate a monitoring and evaluation instrument for the Enabling Masterplan's mid-term review in all 10 ASEAN countries.
7. Provide the resources to appoint independent national consultants and a regional consultant to conduct the mid-term review.

Mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities in ASEAN is now being scrutinised. The ASEAN Community 2025 vision is being renewed to a 2040 version. Mainstreaming disability rights is always a work in progress. It is a journey and not a destination. There will always be new emerging needs and challenges faced by persons with disabilities, who are also rapidly ageing, to be part of an inclusive community. It goes beyond the hardware of providing accessibility in the built environment and transport infrastructure and introducing legislation to enforce an employment quota for persons with disabilities. No amount of legislation can level the playing field or regulate the software of how society views and treats persons with disabilities.

Although this journey may be paved with many good intentions, the real test of a developed and civilised community is how the less privileged and disadvantaged are treated and included. Together, we can overcome this.



## INVISIBLE EXPLOITATION

# The Intersection between Disability and Human Trafficking



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*Gender, Disability and Social  
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ASEAN-Australia Counter-Trafficking*

In the bustling streets of cities like Bangkok, amidst the vibrant markets and towering skyscrapers, lies a hidden crisis: human trafficking. Human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights that affects millions across the ASEAN region. Within this already vulnerable population exists an even more marginalised subset: persons with disabilities (PWDs) who are victims of human trafficking.

*Trafficking of persons with disabilities  
persists in some of the region's  
bustling cities (stock images)*



Photo Credit: ©2p2play / Shutterstock



## A silent struggle

Pros (a pseudonym) is visually impaired. At 15 years old, he relocated to Thailand from Cambodia, lured by promises of an education and a better life. He travelled by car and on foot with a large group, only to be taken to a rice farm and later forced to beg in another province. For two years, Pros was paid 50 Thai baht (approximately 1.45 US dollars) a day. He escaped with the help of a shop owner and now lives in Bangkok, busking at a bus stop to make money. Without an official identity card, he is not able to access social benefits or support services.

Pros' story is not unique. Across Asia and the Pacific, an estimated 15.1 million persons are trapped in trafficking situations. Among them, persons with disabilities are particularly vulnerable, facing additional barriers to accessing justice and the support they need to overcome their trafficking experience.

## The intersection of disability and trafficking

Recent research by the Australian Government funded ASEAN-Australia Counter-Trafficking programme (ASEAN-ACT) in partnership with La Trobe University, in Australia, focuses on the intersection of disability and trafficking in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.

Disability and trafficking intersect in two main ways—persons with disabilities may become victims of trafficking, or victims may acquire a disability as a result of being trafficked.

The findings reveal that the vulnerabilities of persons with disabilities are multifaceted. They often face higher levels of poverty and have fewer opportunities for decent work. Limited access to education further exacerbates their situation, leaving them ill-equipped to recognise and avoid exploitative situations. Additionally, societal stigma and lack of awareness about their rights make them easy targets for traffickers.

Much of this exploitation occurs within homes or communities and is perpetrated by those who should be protectors—family members or caregivers. This form of trafficking is less visible and often goes unreported, with only the most severe cases catching the attention of authorities.

## Barriers to justice and recovery

The challenges do not end when persons with disabilities escape a situation of exploitation. PWD victims of trafficking face significant barriers in accessing justice and recovery services. Law enforcement officers and other frontline responders often have a limited understanding of what constitutes a disability, typically only identifying those with disabilities that can easily be seen.

Even when victims are identified, recovery services frequently fall short. Few shelters are equipped to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. With limited or no access to services and support, temporary conditions—physical or psychological—can become permanent impairments.

## Bridging the gap

Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to enhance the visibility of persons with disabilities in counter-trafficking initiatives. This involves bridging the gap between organisations working to prevent trafficking and those serving the needs of persons with disabilities.

In December 2023, ASEAN sectoral bodies in Thailand, with support from ASEAN-ACT, convened an international conference to bring counter-trafficking practitioners and disability advocates together.

The conference highlighted international and regional legal frameworks to promote human-rights-based responses to trafficking, including the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan, developed in close partnership with organisations of persons with disabilities and civil





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**Across Asia and the Pacific, an estimated 15.1 million persons are trapped in trafficking situations. Among them, persons with disabilities are particularly vulnerable, facing additional barriers to accessing justice and the support they need to overcome their trafficking experience.**

society—a strong example of inclusive and evidence-based policymaking. Outcomes from the conference informed a set of policy recommendations that were released as part of the final research report.

Prof. Dr. Amara Pongsapich, the Representative of Thailand to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), said, “There are some very practical and impactful steps that several ASEAN Member States have taken to make justice more accessible to persons with disabilities, including those who have been trafficked. Inclusive strategies must be developed to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities. These include building the ‘disability literacy’ of the public and using technology to expand and extend access to services to all concerned.”

### **Inclusive counter-trafficking**

New collaborations are being formed, and new data are being gathered as part of the second phase of the research by ASEAN-ACT with La Trobe University in Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Viet Nam.

ASEAN Member States should consider collecting data using the Washington Group questions to build an evidence base to inform policy and programming. Without these types of data, we cannot tell the stories of trafficked persons with disabilities, and in turn, we cannot respond effectively.

By recognising and addressing the unique vulnerabilities of this group, ASEAN can take significant steps towards a more just and equitable society for all.

Pros’ story and those like his underscore the importance of continued research, advocacy, and reform on this urgent issue. As ASEAN continues to combat human trafficking, it must ensure that no one is left behind.

*Read the full study to learn more about the findings and recommendations. Visit: <https://www.aseanact.org/resources/tip-disability/>*

*The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of ASEAN.*

# Disability Inclusion, Technology, and the Digital Economy in ASEAN

## A PATH TO INCLUSIVE GROWTH



**Giulia Ajmone  
Marsan**



**Lina Maulidina  
Sabrina**



**Rubeena  
Singh**



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

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in 2023, persons with disabilities—including physical, intellectual, and mental disabilities—represent 16 per cent of the world's population. This is equivalent to 1.3 billion people, 80 per cent of whom acquired their disabilities between the ages of 18 and 64. Data from the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) in 2021 indicates that 472 million of these individuals are of working age, including women, youth, and rural residents, who often face disadvantages in socioeconomic activities, primarily in education and employment across the Asia-Pacific region.





Persistent challenges, such as attitudinal, environmental, institutional, and social barriers, are compounded by intersectional factors and were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. These barriers also hinder them from becoming equal and meaningful members of the people-centred ASEAN Community.

Advancing disability inclusion has emerged as a critical priority for the ASEAN Community, as reflected in its commitments under key international treaties and the development of regional instruments. All ASEAN Member States, for example, have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and have participated in the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in the Asia and Pacific 2013-2022.

In 2018, in line with the CRPD principles, ASEAN Leaders adopted the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 to guide the implementation and mainstreaming of the rights of persons with disabilities across the three ASEAN pillars. Despite these commitments, the evolution of disability inclusion remains slow. For example, people with disabilities remain an underutilised resource for driving the digital economy, let alone participating in it.

ASEAN's journey towards disability inclusion faces significant challenges, particularly with the rapid pace of digital transformation and technological advancements. According to a 2020 UNESCAP report, persons with disabilities are two to six times less likely to be employed and have labour force participation rates two to five times lower than those without disabilities. These disparities risk exacerbating the digital divide, further marginalising this group in the growing digital economy.

A recent ERIA study on building an inclusive digital economy underscores the importance of addressing the disproportionate impact of exclusion on marginalised groups, such as youth, women, and persons with disabilities. It highlights the need to adopt inclusive principles that ensure everyone, regardless of background, has the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from the digital economy. This approach aims to create a fairer and more equitable digital ecosystem that

leverages the diverse potential of all members of society.

The digital economy holds significant potential for advancing disability inclusion, particularly by creating new jobs in areas such as digital content creation, virtual assistance, programming, and data analytics. These emerging roles could provide employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, provided they gain the necessary digital skills and literacy. A recent UNESCAP report highlights that enabling persons with disabilities to work on equal terms with non-disabled individuals could increase GDP by 1 to 7 per cent in various Asia-Pacific countries, underscoring the economic benefits of inclusive employment practices.

As ASEAN continues negotiations on the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), which aims to harness the region's digital economy and potentially boost its value to 2 trillion US dollars by 2030, it is vital to ensure the active participation of persons with disabilities. Achieving this vision requires a systemic, innovative approach that spans education, healthcare, and employment sectors and involves collaboration among governments, businesses, and civil society stakeholders. Such coordinated efforts are crucial in fostering an inclusive digital economy that empowers persons with disabilities and maximises their contributions to regional growth.

First, inclusive education is a cornerstone for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), emphasising quality education for all. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO estimated that 9 per cent of 258 million children in Southeast Asia were out of school at primary and secondary levels. The pandemic exacerbated this issue, with school closures and lockdowns widening the learning gap and increasing the risk of children, particularly those with disabilities, dropping out permanently. This challenge calls for ASEAN to intensify efforts to recover from these setbacks while embracing the adoption of digital technologies.

A 2022 ERIA report on inclusive education highlighted that the pandemic's impact on education disproportionately affected persons with disabilities. While the shift to educational technology (EdTech)



created new learning opportunities, it also revealed the need for targeted assessments to tackle the unique requirements of students with disabilities, who often need additional support to thrive in digital learning environments.

Emerging innovations and start-ups are bridging these gaps by offering tailored education solutions. One notable example is Toybox Creations and Technology, the company behind Toy Eight, which provides tools for parents and preschool teachers to assess the developmental progress of preschool-aged children. This approach, informed by developmental psychology, supports customised learning experiences. By focusing on early childhood education, the company raises awareness among parents, educators, and industry stakeholders about the importance of identifying and addressing developmental barriers for children with disabilities. In recognition of regional initiatives, the company was named a winner of the 2024 One ASEAN Startup Award, hosted by the ERIA Digital Innovation Sustainable Economy Centre (E-DISC). Such initiatives illustrate the potential of innovative start-ups to create inclusive learning pathways and reduce barriers, ensuring that children with disabilities can access quality education and develop their full potential.

Second, to foster disability inclusion, workplaces and entrepreneurship must adopt strategies that integrate persons with disabilities into meaningful roles. Research by McKinsey has shown that diversity and inclusion practices

are ethical imperatives and drivers of business success, helping companies attract top talent and improve overall performance. In ASEAN, some governments have implemented quota schemes to promote the employment of persons with disabilities. However, challenges remain in ensuring access to quality jobs and addressing barriers to workplace inclusion.

Social enterprises are playing an increasingly vital role in advancing disability inclusion across the region, as highlighted by an ERIA report on Social Enterprises and Disability. In Thailand, for instance, the social enterprise STEPS has partnered with IKEA to create an inclusive office model tailored to the needs of persons with disabilities, demonstrating how corporate partnerships can lead to more equitable workplaces. Similarly, Virtualahan provides digital literacy and technology training in the Philippines, including skills in data analytics, coding, and digital marketing, equipping persons with disabilities with tools to succeed in industries driven by the digital economy.

The rise of impact investing in ASEAN also presents an opportunity to scale initiatives focused on disability inclusion. By directing investments toward ventures that prioritise social impact, the region can create sustainable pathways for empowering persons with disabilities, bridging employment gaps and fostering entrepreneurship. These efforts enhance inclusivity and also unlock the potential of a more diverse and innovative workforce.

Third, ASEAN must prioritise the deployment of digital technology

to enhance pathways for disability inclusion, particularly through Assistive Technology (AT). AI-powered tools such as voice recognition, speech-to-text transcription, and robotics have transformed how assistive devices support individuals with disabilities. These innovations promise significant improvements in accessibility and independence. However, there are growing concerns about potential biases in these technologies, as many lack inclusive design and fail to consider the unique needs of diverse populations. Without addressing these biases, such technologies risk exacerbating existing inequalities.

A noteworthy example of overcoming these challenges is The Vulcan Coalition. This Thailand-based start-up has partnered with the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security in an innovative programme to upskill persons with disabilities in digital skills. The initiative trains participants as data labellers to help improve AI systems, particularly by working with Thai language data. It provides participants with valuable job skills and addresses the technology bias by ensuring AI models are more inclusive and reflective of diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

The rise of such digital innovations demonstrates that digital transformation can indeed be a game-changer for advancing disability inclusion across ASEAN. However, realising these technologies' full potential requires strong international, regional, and national policy interventions. Governments cannot achieve this alone; a more collaborative approach is needed. Strengthening partnerships between governments, businesses (including corporations, startups, and social enterprises), and investors is essential to advancing disability inclusion in the region. This multi-stakeholder approach will help ensure that digital innovations are accessible and equitable and can empower all individuals, including those with disabilities, to participate fully in the digital economy.

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**POLICIES AND TRENDS**

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Policy Brief is a publication of the ASCC Department at the ASEAN Secretariat. It identifies trends and challenges that will impact ASEAN. The brief proposes policy relevant solutions and recommendations in ASCC sectors to improve people's quality of life.

ASEAN ONLINE FORUM ON THE FUTURE OF WORK

# EMPOWERING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN ASEAN'S WORKFORCE

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE POLICY BRIEF



**Idin Virgi Sabilah**

*Former Project Officer, Analysis Division  
ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community  
Department*

The empowerment of persons with disabilities (PWDs) holds immense potential for ASEAN's economic and social development. Yet, significant challenges often leave them confined to informal, low-wage employment with no job security or financial safety nets. Specifically, women with disabilities remain among the most marginalised groups, facing overlapping layers of discrimination, societal bias, and limited access to education and vocational training. Reports from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2022 stated that social protection schemes rarely include women with disabilities, leaving them with limited access to financial assistance, social security, or emergency relief funds.

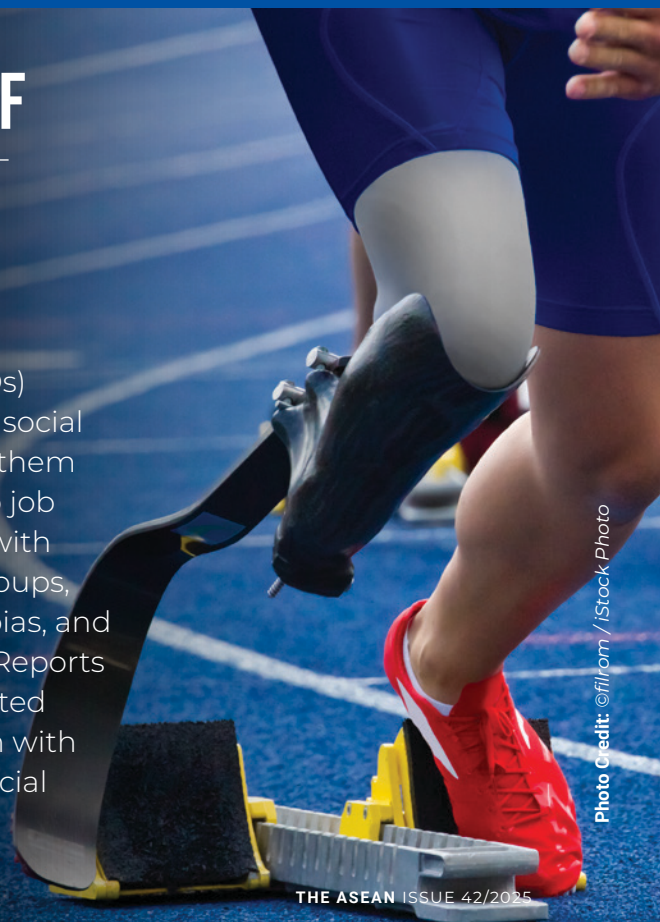


Photo Credit: ©filrom / iStock Photo

**A**SEAN has recognised these challenges and taken steps toward disability inclusion, most notably through the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025. The master plan contributes to implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at the regional level. It embeds sustainable development principles in ASEAN efforts, which are in line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, to achieve an inclusive and equitable ASEAN community, challenges remain in advancing disability inclusion. Significant gaps persist, including the lack of comprehensive support frameworks and a coordinated regional approach.

The recently concluded ASEAN Online Forum on the Future of Work held on 10–11 December 2024 aimed to address the challenges and opportunities in promoting workforce inclusion, particularly for PWDs. In particular, the speakers for Day 1 underscored the urgent need for inclusive policies, targeted interventions, and innovative solutions to overcome the capability, opportunity, and motivation barriers to workforce participation. Cai Cai from the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) shared examples of how companies are adopting remote work solutions, accessible virtual meetings, and assistive technologies to create opportunities for persons with disabilities. Technology, she emphasised, can provide the tools for a more inclusive workforce, where barriers to employment are reduced. Rudy Guiao from Accenture emphasised that partnerships between the government, private sector, and organisations of persons with disabilities are crucial to facilitate access to affordable assistive devices. Ultimately, digital transformation should put people at the heart and embed accessibility from the start.

The discussions also addressed the broader policies and strategies that can enhance employability and income opportunities for persons with disabilities. Prae Sunantaraks of Vulcan Coalition, who was born visually impaired, shared her belief that disability should not prevent anyone from living a full and meaningful life and that there is a

need to focus on abilities, and not on limitations. Creating accessible learning environments and providing psychosocial development support, she argued, is key to empowering individuals and breaking down barriers to labour market participation. Ryan Gersava, founder of Virtualahan, highlighted the importance of focusing on the abilities of PWDs, creating accessible learning environments, and providing psychosocial development support to change public perception and address stigma. Lim Puay Tiak from the ASEAN Disability Forum added another perspective, emphasising the need for intentional collaboration. He argued that for real transformation to happen, PWDs must be placed at the centre of the conversation and actively involved in shaping solutions.

Focusing on inclusion and empowerment is critical for ASEAN to advance workforce inclusion truly. It means creating pathways for PWDs, specifically women with disabilities, to access quality education, vocational training, and secure employment while ensuring workplaces are physically and digitally accessible.

Equally important is the need to incorporate the voices of PWDs into the design and implementation of policies and programmes. Too often, initiatives are designed with a “one-size-fits-all” approach, overlooking the diversity of needs within the disability community. By fostering partnerships with organisations of persons with disabilities—particularly those led by women—ASEAN can ensure its initiatives align with the aspirations and challenges faced by women with disabilities.

The forum concluded with a clear call to action: achieving workforce inclusion requires deliberate and sustained collaboration. Governments, private sector actors, and civil society must work together to create an environment where persons with disabilities can thrive. By embedding accessibility into policies, expanding educational and economic opportunities, and addressing societal stigmas, ASEAN can harness the talents and perspectives of persons with disabilities—unlocking a wealth of potential that benefits individuals and society.

For ASEAN to truly advance workforce inclusion, focusing on inclusion and empowerment is crucial. This means creating pathways for PWDs to access quality education, vocational training, and secure employment while ensuring workplaces are both physically and digitally accessible. It also means addressing intersectionality—the recognition that every woman’s experience is shaped by her culture, socioeconomic background, and the type of disability she lives with.

As the region looks to the future, ensuring women with disabilities are not left behind is more than a goal; it is a necessity for achieving sustainable development. Inclusion is not just about removing barriers—it is about creating opportunities, building trust, and enabling every individual to contribute to a brighter, more equitable future.

## About the Forum

The ASEAN Online Forum on the Future of Work, co-organised by the ASCC Analysis Division and the Labour and Civil Services Division (LCSD) of the ASEAN Secretariat with support from Verian as the consultant, is an activity under the ASCC Research and Development (R&D) Platform on the Future of Work. Supported by the ASEAN-Republic of Korea Cooperation Fund, it is part of the broader ASCC R&D Platforms Programme, which aims to support policymaking through research and analysis of megatrends and challenges impacting the ASEAN region.

*Ms. Idin Virgi Sabilah was a Project Officer in the ASCC Analysis Division at the time of this writing*



For more details on the forum, read the press release: <https://asean.org/asean-champions-inclusive-and-innovative-workforce-development-at-future-of-work-forum/>

Reference:



Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2022). *Strengthening Disability-Inclusive Development: 2021–2025 Road Map*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.22617/TCS220055-2>



# CONVERSATIONS

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Self-advocates and organisations talk about breaking barriers and building inclusive communities.

# A Teacher's Lantern

**Dadan Mochamad Rhamdan**  
Teacher



**Ixora Tri Devi**

Staff Writer, *The ASEAN*  
Analysis Division, ASEAN Socio-Cultural  
Community Department



Dadan Mochamad Rhamdan, or Damar (35), is an Indonesian Language and Literature teacher at SMP Negeri [Public Junior High School] 20 Bandung, Indonesia. He was born with cerebral palsy, which affected the development of his hands. The condition also impacts the left side of his body, limiting its mobility compared to his right.

He abbreviated his name to Damar because it means "lantern." True to its meaning, he hopes to bring warmth and light to those around him while creating a safe space for discussion—for his students and his community.

Although he never originally planned to become a teacher, Damar grew to love his career. He says that his students now ignite the fire within him.

**D**amar's eyes beam with pride whenever he talks about his students. As part of the Division of Student Potential Development, his responsibilities include coaching and accompanying students in various championships. These competitions include poetry, videography, debate, and even esports like Mobile Legends.

In 2022, Damar felt even prouder when he stood alongside his students, Fadil Nur Saleh and Adam Harisma Dolf, who had just received trophies for their

achievements in the Sundanese script and debate competitions, respectively.

"We made a pact because all three of us were competing in different events. We promised to hold our trophies together. And it was an incredible feeling to be able to do that," he tells *The ASEAN* tearily.

Damar started teaching in 2019 after failing six times to pass the civil servant selection test. From 2013 to 2018, he kept applying for a civil service position while working as an administrator at an

educational institution. Later, he moved to Purwakarta, West Java, to work as medical records staff at a healthcare facility.

"I only worked in Purwakarta for six months. During that time, I lost 12kg. Honestly, I realised I needed to be home—I still rely on my family for certain things," he says.

He explains that his acceptance was made possible by a national policy mandating that at least 2 per cent of civil servant positions be allocated to people with disabilities. Just three years after



beginning his career as a school teacher, Damar was recognised as one of Bandung's outstanding civil servants.

Damar initiated Ruang Edukasi Inklusi [Inclusive Education Space], an inclusive education platform at his school that fosters awareness and understanding of disabilities among students and staff. His efforts in advocating for inclusivity have earned him recognition as an outstanding civil servant.

"The award was like a gift to my parents. It symbolises my gratitude for their trust, support, and the opportunities that have shaped my path to where I am today."

Growing up, Damar attended regular schools near his home in Cicalengka, West Java. "I was always among the top 10 students. I had to write with my feet and use a special desk, but my teachers never treated me differently. They gave me the same opportunities to participate in competitions, just like my peers. And my friends? They were always there, always supportive."

After finishing high school in 2008, he faced a hurdle: there were no universities or higher education institutions nearby. After taking a gap year, he finally had the opportunity to continue his studies when a collaborative class programme, offered by Universitas Islam Nusantara Bandung, opened at a local primary school just 5 kilometres from his home.

"My parents were hesitant, but I insisted. I was adamant about continuing my studies. At that time, I wasn't picky—I was willing to accept any major. If it had been up to me, I would have chosen mathematics or psychology, but the only available option was Pendidikan Guru Bahasa Indonesia [Indonesian Language and Literature Education]. That opened the door to my career."

## Bringing inclusivity to the classroom

Like any teacher, Damar felt nervous on his first day in front of the class. He worried about how his students would react. "This feeling persists even now, especially at the start of a new academic year when I have to introduce myself to a new group of students."

"Why doesn't he just teach at a special needs school?" was one of the remarks that stung the most. But comments like that didn't stop him. "My students have

been incredibly supportive. One of them, Ardellio Satrio, even wrote a short story about disabilities and won a national competition."

The traditional teaching method presents another challenge for Damar. His condition makes it difficult for him to write on the whiteboard, which initially frustrated him. However, rather than dwell on what he couldn't do, he focused on what he could. He found creative ways to engage his students, using technology, gamification, and interactive methods that made learning more exciting.

Yet, he acknowledges that acceptance doesn't always come quickly. At first, some of his colleagues hesitated to assign him responsibilities, unsure of his capabilities. "There was reluctance. They weren't sure whether I could handle the tasks, but over time, as they saw my abilities, that trust naturally grew."

As time has proven his capabilities, Damar now juggles multiple roles. In addition to being a Bahasa Indonesia and a homeroom teacher, he is part of the Student Affairs Staff, serves as the student council advisor, and mentors the journalism club—and, at one point, even assisted the school's IT staff.

Damar's experiences made him realise he doesn't need to give endless speeches about inclusivity. Simply by being present—by existing in public spaces—his students learn through observation. "They see what inclusion truly means, how to support people with disabilities—not through words, but through action."

More than anything, Damar hopes that students and teachers with disabilities are not just accepted, but valued, trusted, and empowered to thrive. "We must not just welcome students with

disabilities—we must know how to support them," he says.

Indonesia's school enrolment system sets aside quotas for students with disabilities, yet many seats remain unfilled. "There's still a stigma," Damar observes. "Parents hesitate to acknowledge their child's learning challenges—dyslexia, slow learning—afraid of labels. But these children belong too."

"Public spaces for us are scarce—whether in education, infrastructure, or daily life. Schools claim to be open to students with disabilities, but many lack the proper support. Some accept children with dyslexia or physical limitations, yet their teachers aren't trained to accommodate them."

As our conversation ended, Damar hoped his story would inspire others to create more opportunities for persons with disabilities.

"Open the doors. That's all we ask. I know this because when I was given a chance, I took it as a responsibility. When public spaces welcome us, we don't take it for granted—we strive, and we work twice as hard. When access is granted—so many extraordinary abilities will emerge. There is so much we can contribute."

"The media plays a powerful role in this. We aim to amplify our stories, not as charity, but as proof that we are here, that we are capable. How many eyes will read, will see, will be inspired? That, in itself, is an opportunity. Regulations matter, but change begins in the smallest spaces."

*The views and opinions expressed in this conversation are solely of the interviewee and do not reflect the official policy or position of ASEAN*



# Self-Advocacy and Shaping Policy

**Dr. Nantanoot Suwannawut**  
The ASEAN Community Blind Forum



**Ixora Tri Devi**

Staff Writer, *The ASEAN*  
Analysis Division, ASEAN Socio-Cultural  
Community Department

Dr. Nantanoot Suwannawut, fondly known as Apple, began advocating for disability rights in middle school. Now, she is the Director of the International Cooperation Section in the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. She also serves as Vice President of the Thailand Association of the Blind and actively organises the ASEAN Community Blind Forum.

Speaking with *The ASEAN*, Apple shares her journey and the progress made towards inclusivity in Thailand and across the region.



Dr. Nantanoot Suwannawut presented at the 12th ASEAN Blind Community Forum, "Sustainable Smart City for, with and by the Blind," in Rayong, Thailand (24/4/2024)

It has been years since Apple sat in a classroom as a student. Born with cataracts, Apple gradually lost her eyesight and became legally blind at the age of 12 due to glaucoma. Overcoming these challenges, she remained committed to her education. She attended a school for the blind during middle school before transitioning to a regular high school, where she was the only student with a disability.

"Of course, there are differences," she explains. "In the blind school, all the educational materials and instructions catered to the blind. But in the mainstream school, we had to integrate ourselves into the regular curriculum. We had to do extra work—bringing in materials from the blind school or preparing for exams. Everything required additional effort."

Apple's perseverance culminated in earning her Ph.D. in Information Science from Indiana University, Bloomington, USA, in 2013. Following her doctoral degree, she spent eight years at the Ministry of Education before moving to the Ministry of Human Development and Human Security.





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Through her years in the education sector, she observes that laws and policies supporting education for persons with disabilities have progressed significantly since her school days. Back then, critical mechanisms were missing. Today, national and special education centres operate across the country with backing from the government and international organisations. However, challenges remain. Progress in applying inclusive policies has been slow, and instances of discrimination persist.

"Children with disabilities are sometimes denied access to education, even though the laws and regulations exist. Deaf students often don't have interpreters in the schools where they study. It's the same in other countries; there are still some problems in terms of implementation."

Even the advancement of technology is not a panacea. Apple asserts that despite the promise of inclusivity, many digital tools and platforms are still inaccessible. "Significant impediments and barriers persist, including the digital divide, issues of availability and affordability, and a lack of understanding among system developers," she says.

While technology such as artificial intelligence holds potential, accessibility is often overlooked during the design phase, making modifications costly and challenging in the later stage.

"It would be far better if these considerations were integrated from the start. This approach is essential for the ASEAN community. Raising awareness about accessibility and fostering an inclusive mindset from the beginning will ensure that we can live and work together without unnecessary challenges."

## ASEAN Community Blind Forum: An avenue for shared ideas

Among these ongoing setbacks, advocacy remains essential, particularly for government ministries and private sector partners. The ASEAN Community Blind Forum (ACBF), established in 2010, exemplifies this commitment.

Initially organised as a side event during the Thai Association of the Blind's national convention, the ACBF provides



*Dr. Nantanoot Suwannawut emphasises the importance of community involvement in decision-making and highlights that active participation is essential to ensuring an inclusive society*

a regional platform for collaboration and dialogue on shared challenges, particularly at the policy level. Apple officially joined the ACBF in 2014 as one of its organisers.

"The forum became a space where we could share ideas and discuss what was happening in each country. Instead of working in isolation, we realised the value of moving forward as a region because we face common issues like accessibility and discrimination."

Each year, the forum focuses on a specific theme, such as disaster management or smart city development. The ACBF collaborates with organisations from each ASEAN member state, namely the Vietnam Blind Association (VBA), the National Council for the Blind in Malaysia (NCBM), and Pertuni (Indonesia Blind Association). Many of these organisations are also affiliated with the World Blind Union, further strengthening their networks and advocacy efforts.

Apple emphasises that policy and legislation play a vital role in driving inclusivity.

"As members of the community, we should be involved in decision-making processes. We must voice our needs and perspectives so policymakers understand and consider them. After all, the policies ultimately affect us directly. We must ensure that society becomes inclusive, and this requires our active participation."

Collaboration and relationship-building are at the heart of ACBF. Viet Nam's recent hosting of an event for ASEAN

Blind Leaders, for example, brought representatives together to discuss education programmes and other initiatives. "It's a valuable platform where we practise and implement ideas collectively," Apple adds.

Furthermore, ASEAN is a region bound together by shared history and collective aspirations. Apple notes that persons with disabilities are an integral part of this community, not a separate or isolated group. Diversity is our strength, she adds, and our societies will thrive when we embrace and support all members.

"We must recognise the importance of living and working together. Supporting persons with disabilities opens opportunities for empowerment. In turn, they contribute back to society. The Sustainable Development Goals showed us the need to consider all groups. Progress requires us to move forward together, hand in hand. If one group advances while others are left behind, we must pause and reflect. Only by walking together can we achieve a truly inclusive and fully developed society."

"Let's walk together and work to collaborate. We don't need something special, special projects or special programmes—just to consider others in everything we do. By opening opportunities and fostering understanding, we can create a truly inclusive society. That is enough."

*The views and opinions expressed in this conversation are solely of the interviewee and do not reflect the official policy or position of ASEAN.*



# Inclusive Employment is Good for Business

**Francis Reyes**

CEO of Caravan Food Group, Inc. Philippines



**Joanne B. Agbisit**

Associate Editor, *The ASEAN*  
Analysis Division, ASEAN Socio-Cultural  
Community Department

Francis Reyes with CFGI staff  
doing an "I love you" hand sign

Disability is not a barrier to excelling in one's job. Caravan Food Group, Inc. (CFG I) founder Francis G. Reyes realised this as a young boy. When he once stepped into a clothing store, the only help he received came from a staff member wearing a nameplate that said "Deaf." The professionalism and quality of customer service left a lasting impression on him.

So, when Francis built his business in 2017, he was determined to hire persons with disabilities (PWDs). They now comprise more than 50 per cent of CFGI's personnel, serving as frontline service crew members and team leaders in CFGI's ten food outlets of Overdoughs and Elait.

Francis shares with *The ASEAN* his company's unwavering commitment to inclusivity and the mutual benefits it brings to his business and staff.





"Hiring PWDs has always been central to the company's mission since its inception. We want to create an inclusive environment where PWDs, especially the Deaf community, can thrive and showcase their abilities on equal footing with others."

"Our Deaf employees, whom we proudly refer to as Deaf partners, are mainstreamed in all our stores. Beyond their role as service crew, many Deaf partners are given the opportunity to advance in their careers, with some progressing to positions as team leaders and area supervisors. We also have Deaf partners working as production staff at our commissary and a graphic artist. Their dedication and talent are essential to our company's success, and we are committed to supporting their growth and professional development."

Francis says having Deaf partners has added value to the company and created meaningful work experiences. "Deaf employees often have high levels of attention to detail and a deep sense of commitment to their roles. These strengths contribute to an inclusive, attentive, and collaborative work environment."

However, Francis admits that there are challenges to hiring, training, and retraining Deaf employees. "Communication is the most significant adjustment in employing Deaf staff. We try to bridge the gap by bringing awareness to and organising basic Filipino Sign Language (FSL) workshop sessions for our hearing colleagues,

having access to FSL interpreters, and utilising technology, such as through the use of live captioning during meetings."

"For hearing co-workers, learning about our company's inclusive culture begins during the hiring or onboarding process through internal Deaf awareness and basic FSL seminars. Seeing how our hearing and Deaf staff collaborate seamlessly and understand one another reinforces that we're on the right path: building a sustainable workforce and setting an example to other businesses. This approach shows that inclusivity can thrive without compromising the core operations of a business as long as there is commitment and a solid understanding of the process."

In addition to creating a Deaf-friendly work environment, Francis ensures that his Deaf employees have an opportunity to move up. "We provide clear paths to leadership roles and additional training to empower them. We believe that giving regular feedback, mentorship, and performance recognition are keys to retaining our Deaf partners."

Francis says that first-time customers are usually taken aback when they visit the stores, but they quickly adapt to the unusual ordering system. "Oftentimes, we'd get an initial reaction of 'Oh!' when our Deaf partners would point to their nameplate and indicate that they are hard of hearing or Deaf. But our customers easily adjust because we have visual guides or pointers placed at our counters on how to communicate with our Deaf partners."

CFGF aims to educate the public about the Deaf community by offering sign language seminars. Francis explains, "We started the Good Sign in September 2022 with the sole purpose of bridging the gap between the Deaf and hearing communities. The regular seminar, held two Saturdays a month, aims to create more awareness and make a safer space for all members of the Deaf community. It is held in partnership with like-minded institutions such as Hand & Heart and the De La Salle College of St. Benilde's School of Deaf Education and Applied Studies."

Francis looks forward to expanding the business in the coming years and continuing to harness the potential of persons with disabilities. "We have store expansions already lined-up for 2025 and 2026, in which we will continue hiring more Deaf partners. We continue to develop our product lines and services, such as food carts, party trays, catering services, and the like. This gives our Deaf partners more opportunities to increase their skill set and allows them to showcase their capabilities to more customers and patrons, helping advance our advocacy and vision of Deaf inclusivity."

"As the company keeps on growing, we will continue to develop our people in the hopes of producing more leaders in the future, whether Hearing or Deaf."

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# ENABLING VILLAGE A Model for Universal Design and Inclusive Living

SG Enable



**Joanne B. Agbisit**

Associate Editor, *The ASEAN  
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Community Department*

*Enabling Village's accessible  
and inclusive amphitheatre*

Singapore is a trailblazer in many fields, including its commitment to the inclusion and well-being of persons with disabilities. In 2015, Singapore's Ministry of Social and Family Development together with SG Enable, Singapore's focal agency for disability, launched *Enabling Village*. This is a first-of-its-kind community space that caters to people with physical, sensory, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. Through this village, SG Enable aims to facilitate the integration of persons with disabilities into society so they can lead active and fulfilling lives.





Enabling Village Tour guide provides an overview of the inclusive community space

SG Enable applied universal design principles to repurpose a former technical school and its surrounding area into a state-of-the-art, inclusive village. It retrofitted the old buildings, replacing steps with ramps that have gentle gradients and installing lifts to accommodate wheelchair users. For the visually impaired, SG Enable placed tactile floor indicators to signal gradient change, installed handrails, provided braille lettering on key signages, and used colours to distinguish different blocks. For hard-of-hearing individuals, a hearing loop system was set up covering all event spaces to allow direct transmittal of audio to hearing aids so they could enjoy music and hear public announcements.

*Enabling Village* was also designed to create a park-like atmosphere, with lush greenery, well-lit and connected garden paths, visual landmarks, and an amphitheatre. Murals also adorn the buildings, featuring designs inspired by the artwork of artists with autism.

Facilities and services dedicated to persons with disabilities are now available at the *Enabling Village*. These include Kindle Garden, Singapore's first inclusive preschool; a community gym with specialised equipment for seniors and individuals with disabilities; and a disability-friendly medical and dental clinic. The village also now hosts Singapore's first stroke rehabilitation centre, and an innovation lab to showcase assistive technologies.

Emily Ong, Senior Director of Employment and Lifelong Learning at SG Enable, tells *The ASEAN* that these specialised facilities and services were developed with partners. "One of *Enabling Village's* core strengths is its role as an incubator and testbed for pioneering inclusive business prototypes and accessibility features, reflecting the collective commitment of its partners," she says.

SG Enable also organises activities within the village that cement its role as a hub for inclusive practices and solutions. One of these is the annual Enabling Lives Festival which brings together stakeholders, corporations, philanthropists, and the community to celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. Another is the Enabling Village Tour led by guides with disabilities who showcase the universal design features of the village and share inspiring stories on how it has helped and empowered them.

Other collaborative activities include Movies Under the Stars, which entails movie screening at the amphitheatre every last Saturday of the month since June 2024 using in-sync, immersive, high-quality audio; and Accessible Sights: The First Pilot Multi-Sensorial Programme, which allows the visually impaired community to have a more in-depth and engaging experience visiting *Enabling Village* through a Tactile-Audio Interaction System (TAIS).





Artisanal products created by/with persons with disabilities are showcased at the i'mable Gift Market, part of the Enabling Lives Festival



At the village's Stroke Support Station, an occupational therapist guides a client in a rehabilitation session using a robotic-assisted therapy device that improves hand and finger mobility through interactive, sensor-based exercises

*Enabling Village* also launched the Invitation for Programmes initiative in October 2024, inviting organisations and individuals who are passionate about bringing inclusive and innovative programmes to *Enabling Village*. These programmes span wellness, art, sports, educational talks, and human libraries.

According to Emily, the response to this unique space has been overwhelmingly positive. She notes, "Since *Enabling Village*'s completion, feedback from persons with disabilities, caregivers, employees, and industry experts has been positive. *Enabling Village* has been featured in the Champions of Inclusive Spaces report by the Zero Project, a global and research-driven initiative to support the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

"We have been organising regular events at *Enabling Village* to celebrate the diverse abilities and have further garnered positive feedback on raising awareness on inclusion in the community. *Enabling Village*'s tenants have also shared the benefit of an inclusive ecosystem that offers accessible and inclusive spaces, which provide a conducive and nurturing environment for all to come together and drive meaningful impact. Beyond being a community space, *Enabling Village* reflects Singapore's dedication to empowering persons with disabilities through training,

employment, and integration. Many have shared that *Enabling Village* is a safe working environment for persons with disabilities, which reassures their caregivers."

*Enabling Village* has been recognised for its exceptional design and social impact, receiving prestigious national and international awards, including the Design of the Year at the President's Design Award 2016, the Grand Award with Special Mention at the DFA Design for Asia Awards 2017, and more recently, the 2022 Urban Land Institute (ULI) Global and Asia-Pacific Award for Excellence. In 2018, *Enabling Village* was also showcased as part of the Singapore Pavilion at the 16th International Architecture Exhibition by La Biennale di Venezia (Venice Biennale).

Emily shares some of SG Enable's plans for the coming year. "As we celebrate 10 years of building dreams and enabling lives at *Enabling Village* in 2025, SG Enable will continue advancing our goals of an inclusive society with a four-storey extension of the space. Slated to be operational in 2025, the extension will be a model for inclusion and innovation, addressing post-18 challenges that persons with disabilities face after graduating from Special Education schools at the age of 18, such as finding services in the community that cater to their needs, opportunities for learning, working and integrating into society.

"The extension will focus on developing artistic talents, enhancing independent living skills, and supporting caregivers. Key features include independent living studios with smart home devices to help persons with disabilities build functional and social skills, supported by community resources. This approach provides a longer runway for skill development, fosters community acceptance, and offers alternatives to institutional care, easing caregivers' concerns for the future."

*SG Enable, the focal agency for disability and inclusion in Singapore, enables persons with disabilities to live, learn, work, and play in an inclusive society. It creates equitable opportunities for persons with disabilities through thought leadership, sustainable social innovation, and impactful partnership. Guided by its core values of professionalism, innovation and empathy, SG Enable envisions a more inclusive Singapore and enabled lives. Set up by the Ministry of Social and Family Development in 2013, SG Enable is a registered charity and an Institution of a Public Character.*

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# A Life Made Beautiful for All

**Nguyễn Văn Cử**  
Doi Rat Dep  
Social Enterprise



**Ixora Tri Devi**

Staff Writer, *The ASEAN*  
Analysis Division, ASEAN Socio-Cultural  
Community Department

Nguyễn Văn Cử is the Deputy Director of Disability Research and Capacity Development Center (DRD) and Director of Doi Rat Dep Social Enterprise. Doi Rat Dep, or "Life is Beautiful" in Vietnamese, is a non-profit social enterprise dedicated to promoting the inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities.

DRD has built a network of over 100 companies, including multinational corporations and Vietnamese enterprises, committed to hiring people with disabilities. Having been with the organisation since its inception, Văn Cử works to make his homeland a more beautiful and fairer place for all.

**B**orn and raised in An Giang province, Văn Cử is now a lecturer at Nguyen Tat Thanh University and a Ho Chi Minh City Peace and Development Foundation member. Before stepping into these roles, Văn Cử recalls his challenges after contracting polio at age two.

"(The polio) left me with a disability that caused me a great deal of insecurity and low self-esteem. After graduating from university, I worked as an accountant for a private company. During that time, I felt quite unhappy and isolated, as I was the only person with a disability in my workplace," he says to *The ASEAN*.

Văn Cử's seemingly monotonous life took a fresh direction when he learned about Doi Rat Dep. During a distribution programme for people with disabilities in Nhon Trach district, Dong Nai province, he met with Dr. Vo Thi Hoang Yen, the Director of DRD.



"It was the first time in my life that I had met so many people with disabilities facing even greater challenges than my own. Yet, despite their difficulties, they were joyful, resilient, and determined to live their lives to the fullest. From that moment on, I realised how fortunate I was and found a renewed sense of purpose."

In 2005, Văn Cử became part of DRD in its early days. What began as the Disability Resource and Development Program under the Open University of Ho Chi Minh City evolved over the years. By 2010, it transitioned into the Center for Disability Research and Capacity Development under the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA). In 2023, Doi Rat Dep took another step forward, becoming a social enterprise dedicated to inclusion and empowerment.

"At DRD, we work tirelessly to empower people with disabilities through various programmes and initiatives, focusing on education, employment, and social integration. We strive to create a society where people with disabilities are not only included but also valued for their contributions."

To *The ASEAN*, Văn Cử shares one story that stands out during his journey with DRD: the story of Pham Nhu Y. Y's dream of attending school was shattered at the age of 11 because of his physical disability. Unable to walk long distances,

he relied on friends to carry him every day, but eventually, the journey became too challenging. He was forced to leave school and his family behind, so he moved to Ho Chi Minh City to sell lottery tickets.

Life in the city was unforgiving. Y endured frequent exploitation and often dreamed of returning home but lacked the means to do so. For 10 years, he survived on the generosity of market vendors who shared their food with him. "Y said, 'I thought my name, Nhu Y (meaning "as you wish"), was beautiful, but why wasn't my life as I wished?'" Văn Cử recalls.

Y's fortunes changed when he stumbled upon an article about DRD's youth empowerment programme. Intrigued, he applied and shared his hopes during the interview. "I'm young and want to try something that can take me further," he said.

With DRD's support, Y received a scholarship to study Digital Marketing. His hard work paid off—within months, he was recognised as the best employee at his company, became a marketing manager and established his own business by early 2024.

Y's story is just among hundreds that have shaped DRD's journey. Yet, their work is far from over. Today, DRD focuses on expanding Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Consultancy Services while advancing initiatives that

promote education, vocational training, employment, and sustainable livelihoods for persons with disabilities.

"Through our D&I consultancy, we work with businesses and organisations to foster inclusive workplaces by offering training on reasonable accommodations, accessibility audits, and specialised recruitment services for persons with disabilities (PWDs). These services include providing vocational and employability skills training, conducting accessibility assessments, and offering post-placement support for employers and employees, such as mentoring and assistive devices. We aim to help organisations create supportive environments where PWDs can thrive and contribute effectively."

At the same time, DRD is driving initiatives that empower persons with disabilities through education and economic opportunities. These efforts include scholarships, assistive technologies, vocational orientation, vocational training, job placement services, and entrepreneurship support.

"By tackling systemic barriers while addressing personal needs, DRD moves closer to its vision of a more inclusive society where everyone can reach their full potential," says Văn Cử.

Refusing to walk this path alone, Văn Cử and DRD call on the ASEAN public and its leaders to support the creation of an inclusive society where people with disabilities can thrive. They stress that such efforts are not only a matter of fundamental rights but also a powerful catalyst for economic growth and social progress.

Văn Cử underlines the urgency of investing in accessible infrastructure, fostering inclusive education, and creating equitable employment opportunities. He calls for dismantling stigma and empowering people with disabilities to play active roles in shaping their futures.

"By working together, we can create an ASEAN region where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential and contribute to a vibrant and prosperous society," he concludes.



Disability Research and Capacity Development Center (DRD) has built a network of over 100 companies, including multinational corporations and Vietnamese enterprises, that are committed to hiring people with disabilities

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# Dancing Without Labels

**Maya Dance Theater**  
The Diverse Abilities  
Dance Collective



**Ixora Tri Devi**

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Since its inception in 2007, Maya Dance Theatre (MDT) has been faithful to its philosophy: bridging the space between audience and artist to provoke thought and dialogue about pressing social issues.

In 2018, MDT's artistic director and co-founder, Kavitha Krishnan, founded the Diverse Abilities Dance Collective (DADC). Kavitha, a trained occupational therapist, has provided arts education services to schools in Singapore for almost two decades. A question from one of her students with Down Syndrome—"Why can't we be professional dancers and also perform abroad like you?"—sparked the creation of DADC.

Kavitha and her co-founder, Imran Manaff, share DADC's story with *The ASEAN*.





DADC dancers June Lin and Weng Jiaying with Maya Dance Theatre's Shahrin Johry and associate artist Gigi Gianti (Gigi Art of Dance, Jakarta) filming for the 2024 National Arts Council stART Fund Patrons' Appreciation Ceremony



DADC dancers June Lin, Wanyi Chen, Lavelle Chee, and Zayna Vincent perform at the Wild Flowers production, part of SG Enable's Enabling Lives Festival 2024

Photo Credit: © Maya Dance Theater

Imran and Kavitha stood frozen in the Singapore Immigration office. They had just realised that one of their dancers had not obtained the correct visa for their trip to India. It was early 2020, just before COVID-19 onset, and they were en route to Chennai with six other dancers, including four with Down Syndrome. They planned to participate in the Saarang Festival 2020, organised by the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras. Their trip was supported by the National Arts Council Singapore and the Goh Chok Tong Enable Fund.

In the middle of the panic, Jaspreet Kaur, one of the founding members of DADC and dancers with Down Syndrome, offered a solution. "She said, 'OK, Kavitha, maybe you should stay back and settle the visa while we are going with Imran and take the seat in the plane first,'" Kavitha recalls.

"That was the moment I realised this group was ready. They demonstrated teamwork, coordination, and clarity of purpose. It was a real 'Wow' moment," she adds.

In its inaugural year, six dancers with Down Syndrome, including Jaspreet, joined the Diverse Abilities Dance Collective. Affectionately called "the pioneers," the group worked tirelessly for a year before presenting their first production, *Speaking with Hands*, in

collaboration with choreographer Liz Lea from Australia. The production attracted a full house audience in Singapore, and they subsequently presented the full-length version on an international stage.

"Upon arriving in Chennai, we barely had time to breathe. After clearing immigration, we quickly grabbed lunch and headed straight for stage blocking. Despite the hectic schedule, the team remained composed and focused. They started their day at 5 am, caught a 9 am flight, and worked non-stop until 11 pm Singapore time. Yet, there was no sign of distress—only determination. Without being told, they unpacked their costumes, aired them out, and prepared for the next day," says Kavitha.

"They showed a lot of confidence because they knew what they were doing. When they are tired, you can hear them saying, 'We are here to dance', 'You better drink your water', 'You better be ready on stage.' They were mentoring each other and even watching over the professionals while at the same time learning from them."

Despite the intensity, the group managed a 75-minute production involving up to seven costume changes without a hitch, all while displaying incredible professionalism.

"They handled it seamlessly, displaying no behavioural issues, and even

supported me as I juggled emceeing and assisting them," Kavitha claims proudly.

After numerous performances, including digital shows during the COVID-19 pandemic, Maya Dance Theatre recognised that the DADC dancers were ready for even greater challenges. However, what about the audience?

"All audiences are ready; the question lies in how we will deliver the message. If you are going to constantly highlight the fact that it is about disabled artists, then, of course, you are only highlighting their condition. We should remove this label and just talk about them as artists," Kavitha explains.

"You and I both may have limitations on many levels, so we are not any different from them. Why should we put them on a Disability pedestal? We need to work together to break stereotypes and also to stop or prevent tokenistic representation," she argues.

Imran echoes this sentiment. "I think the feedback from the audience is very good. They saw an individual dancing, not a person with a disability. And that is what we wanted to showcase.

"The main thing is that you need time, patience, and you need to work within their limitations. They have their way of doing something. The professionals will do it one way, but their way is their own

Photo Credit: © Leroy Coh



“

**All audiences are ready; the question lies in how we will deliver the message. If you are going to constantly highlight the fact that it is about disabled artists, then, of course, you are only highlighting their condition. We should remove this label and just talk about them as artists.**

*Kavitha Krishnan, Founder Diverse Ability Dance Collective.*

unique way of doing it. And we need to understand that this is their way of doing it, and we accept it,” Imran adds.

Kavitha also notes that co-creation is very limited in the region because people with disabilities usually don't get much opportunity to create their own works. “Trust me, in my experience, they are capable of creative energy and imagination as well,” she assesses.

For the company, the success of the DADC initiative is measured by more than just what happens on stage. While the performers in the spotlight offer the most immediate showcase of their talents, the members of DADC have so much more to offer.

“Not all of them are dancers,” Imran notes. “Some of them are co-facilitators of movement programmes in pre-schools, some do admin work for the company, some manage costumes and handle the online costume catalogue, and others take videos and photos for social media. The art part is just one foray into what they can do,” he adds.

Five years after their overseas debut in Chennai, DADC has built an impressive portfolio. These include performances at the 2023 Solo International Performing Arts Festival in Indonesia, with an audience of about 12,000 watching through physical and online channels,

and the World Down Syndrome Congress in Brisbane, Australia (2024). None of this would have been possible without the steadfast support of families and caregivers.

“I think what ASEAN leaders can advocate is also for the caregivers to believe in their space. Give them the tools and strength to come together. We couldn't have done what we did today if our parents and caregivers weren't in sync with us. As much as we develop the individual, we also build trust with the family unit. This is because, without effective communication, proper follow-ups, and adequate updates, all our efforts here could quickly be undone at home,” says Kavitha.

After receiving a warm welcome from audiences far and wide, Maya Dance Theatre is excited to announce its latest collaborations with choreographer Gianti Giadi, founder of Gigi Art of Dance in Indonesia and The Stellar Company, led by choreographer Liz Lea. Together, they plan to stage a collaborative, inclusive dance theatre production, *BHUMI*, in Singapore and Indonesia in June 2025.

Recently, at the end of November 2024, DADC also staged a new site-centric dance production, *Wild Flowers*, that became a beacon of hope for persons with disabilities to share their creative space with audiences in Singapore.



*DADC dancers June Lin, Weng Jiaying, and Wanyi Chen with Maya Dance Theatre's Shahrin Johry and Shaizman join the celebration of Singapore's National Day in 2024*

*Wild Flowers* featured a poet living with Down Syndrome, Catherine Joan Devadason, and her poems were interpreted through film and dance.

The DADC dancers performed two full-length performances per night to different groups of audiences. With a turn around time (from one performance to another) of only 30 minutes, they displayed tremendous resilience and tenacity. This shows that someone with diverse abilities is able to offer a lot more if given the right opportunities.

“We are happy to jump on board to do this on a regular basis. The more people who create a ripple of goodness by supporting the development of an individual, the more we will be helping the parents who are ageing. There are a lot of worries in older parents who feel that they do not know what to do because they are caring for the person and don't know what's next and, in the worst case scenario, how will they survive after they are no more? Arts is a very powerful catalyst to bring forward change,” Kavitha urges.

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# SHIFTING CURRENTS

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ASEAN strengthens partnerships to protect intellectual property rights

The Ecotourism Standard Initiative under the Lao PDR 2024 ASEAN Chairmanship

As ASEAN Chair in 2025, Malaysia held the ASEAN Tourism Forum in January to promote sustainable and inclusive tourism

Photo Credit: ©DasMaddin / iStock Photo

Sunset over tea plantation in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia



# ASEAN ECONOMIC DIGEST

## IN FOCUS

## Protecting Intellectual Property: ASEAN Partnered Up with WIPO to Boost Innovation



**Enterprise and Stakeholders Engagement Division,  
ASEAN Economic Community Department**

*Competition, Consumer Protection and IPR Division  
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### About the Digest

The articles in this section are from the ASEAN for Business Bulletin, a regular publication of the Enterprise and Stakeholders Engagement Division of the ASEAN Secretariat.

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Photo Credit: ©Lalaka/Shutterstock

**B**usinesses need certainty to thrive in today's fast-paced economy. To unlock innovation, drive digitalisation, and ensure sustainable growth, market players need a guarantee that intellectual property rights protect their hard work and breakthroughs. Well aware of this fact, ASEAN and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in August 2023. This MoU began a collaboration to empower small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), advance the digital economy, and grow the creative industries through the strategic use of intellectual property (IP) across Southeast Asia.

A year after its signing, the partnership has made impressive strides. This success has opened opportunities for greater impact, especially within ASEAN's SME ecosystem. SMEs make up 97 per cent of all businesses and are the backbone of ASEAN's economy. Recognising this importance, the MoU focuses on equipping these enterprises with the tools to leverage IP for growth. Programmes such as branding boot camps and IP management

clinics aim to empower SMEs by protecting and commercialising their innovations. These initiatives enhance competitiveness and fuel ASEAN's economic growth, enabling SMEs to thrive on regional and global stages.

With over 7.3 million IP registrations and 50,000 daily hits, this partnership signifies the importance of intellectual property for innovators and investors. The IP register provides businesses, innovators, and investors critical access to IP data across the region. This tool showcases the tangible benefits of the ASEAN-WIPO collaboration, making IP more accessible and fostering a culture of innovation that will drive SMEs' growth and sustainability for years to come.

Besides SMEs, the digital economy is another primary focus of the MoU. Projected to reach 1 trillion US dollars by 2030, ASEAN's digital landscape is poised for tremendous expansion, and IP is vital in keeping the region competitive. By integrating IP systems with cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, patent analytics, and mobile applications, the partnership is laying the groundwork for a thriving digital

ecosystem. Over 19,000 individuals across ASEAN have benefited from WIPO Academy training programmes, equipping businesses and professionals with the skills needed to capitalise on the region's digital transformation. Beyond that, the partnership also extends to the creative industries, such as artists, authors, and creators, where many IP problems often arise.

The 56th ASEAN Economic Ministerial Meeting (AEMM) marked a pivotal moment in this journey: a call to scale up the partnership to meet the region's growing needs. While the progress over the past year has been significant, both ASEAN and WIPO recognise that there is so much more to achieve together. By expanding IP education, investing in upskilling the workforce, enhancing digital infrastructure, and unlocking intangible assets, ASEAN is well-positioned to build on its own.

As ASEAN moves toward a post-2025 Economic Community, this effort is a commitment and a guarantee that ASEAN is a place where innovation is celebrated and creativity is protected. It is a community which provides endless opportunities for all.

# ASEAN ECONOMIC DIGEST

## IN FOCUS

## ASEAN Charts Course for IP-Driven Economic Growth through 2045



**Andrew Ong**

*Director, Division for Asia and the Pacific, Regional and National Development Sector, World Intellectual Property Organization*

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) cooperates with ASEAN on many grassroots projects and institutional capacity-building endeavours. Year in and year out, numerous activities and events are organised to reach an increasing base of stakeholders from various sectors of society, from parliamentarians to senior government officials to industry drivers, small enterprises, and individual artists and musicians.

When requested, WIPO also engages in strategic initiatives with ASEAN to support its future planning and scenario reflections on development and regional challenges. These initiatives include the development of the ASEAN Intellectual Property (IP) Rights Action Plans, which outline regional IP priorities and initiatives aimed at contributing to the objectives of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

The most recent strategic cooperation was the scoping study, conducted from October 2023 to September 2024. This study aimed to align IP development with ASEAN's broader vision of becoming "Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centered" by 2045. It provides comprehensive analyses of

the region's IP landscape, identifying critical challenges, opportunities, and priorities. The study offers a neutral, objective, and data-driven assessment for the benefit of ASEAN Member States, developed through close consultation and collaboration with them.

The scoping study is a foundational document for IP cooperation across ASEAN Member States. It captures key areas where enhanced IP collaboration can drive economic growth, encourage home-grown innovations, and protect the rich diverse cultural heritage across ASEAN. By aligning national and regional priorities, the study acts as a strategic and policy light post, helping the region collectively pursue sustainable IP development, harmonise IP policies, and enhance the global competitiveness of ASEAN's innovation and creative sectors.

Guided by WIPO's Medium-Term Strategic Plan (MTSP) 2022-2026, the study was able to outline initial strategic areas where IP and innovation can drive economic growth across key clusters to 2045. These are in the digital, green, blue, creative, and science-technology clusters (called "economies"). Identifying these economic drivers emerged from

an extensive review of ASEAN's strategic documents and a year of consultation with national IP offices. Each cluster was analysed in terms of intellectual property creation, protection and commercialisation potentials.

In the rapidly expanding digital economy, projected to reach 1 trillion US dollars by 2030, the IP system is crucial to incentivise and protect innovations in applying e-commerce, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence to benefit society. The study emphasises the need to align the IP legal framework and institutional services to support it, particularly in software, mobile apps, video gaming, and AI-generated content management.

For a green economy, IP can be utilised to generate new technologies and scout existing patented technologies for use in the region. The latter will require collaborative efforts to customise the technologies, even upgrades at times, for suitable application to the unique environs of the region. As such, IP-based transactions and deployment mechanisms will be critical. Clearly, IP will stimulate investment in products using sustainable technologies and facilitate cross-border licensing.



The blue economy is all about achieving sustainable marine resources and safeguarding them. It requires a robust IP protection framework. Innovations in marine biotechnology, fisheries, and ocean-based industries will flourish with proper IP management. The study highlights the importance of enabling structures for IP rights to balance with equitable access to marine genetic resources.

In the creative economy, IP plays a critical role in supporting artists and artisans in producing culture-rich heritage products. IP also enables the secure digital distribution of said products to a wider market. The study highlights the impact of IP on improving lives and providing livelihood even to marginalised communities, who are usually the custodians of unique traditional knowledge and cultural expressions.

For science, technology, and innovation to flourish, the study calls for closer collaboration among various actors of the ecosystem—government, industry, and the academe. It recommends establishing high-level inter-ministerial governance platforms to work across the usual silos to drive coherent policies and accumulative actions.

The study also proposes possible actions to streamline IP processes, reduce costs, strengthen IP mechanisms, and develop IP expertise in various disciplines. These measures will help position ASEAN as a global player in innovation while ensuring inclusive, equitable progress across the region. By aligning IP work with these priority “growth drivers,” IP will help to achieve an integrated, innovative, and competitive economic bloc by 2045 while maintaining a balance between rights holders' interests and public access to innovation.

The study concludes by suggesting a comprehensive framework of five interconnected strategic directions. Strengthening the national IP regimes is the foundation of a robust IP framework. The study outlines areas to modernise IP institutions, expand services to a growing population of IP generators, and align these efforts to international trends and standards. The study emphasises the need for rapid digital transformation and work-sharing among IP offices to support open innovation and intra-regional economic activities. This



includes the harmonisation of regulatory and operational frameworks across ASEAN. The study suggests further exploring establishing a regional IP filing and processing mechanism that builds on existing cooperation mechanisms to achieve an inter-connected cohesive regional nexus in IP management.

Another strategic focus is on monetising and valorising IP assets for commercialisation. It includes raising the capacity of ASEAN professionals to use and manage IP and ASEAN businesses in recognising and securing intangible assets. The study recommends creating effective marketplaces and interlocutor networks, alongside improved acceptable valuation and licensing approaches, to benefit more MSMEs and startups.

Of course, IP enforcement remains important in the future, and the study recommends deep diving into the challenge of infringement and experimenting with novel public sensitising programmes coupled with strengthened cooperation on enforcement actions. Particularly notable is the emphasis on addressing digital piracy and counterfeiting challenges through enhanced

stakeholder dialogue and coordinated enforcement actions.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of making IP policies and frameworks work for sustainable and inclusive growth. The study talks about protecting genetic resources and traditional knowledge and empowering women, youth, and disadvantaged groups, to make IP an integral part of the solution to address society's problems.

The study concludes that success in making IP central to ASEAN's priorities will require high-level ministerial commitment and cross-agency coordination—a whole government approach. Through a comprehensive ecosystem approach to developing IP, ASEAN can effectively harness IP as a catalyst for regional economic integration, transformation, and future-proofing.

In sum, the study provides ASEAN much to reflect on through the next five years (2030) and 20 years (2045), positioning the region as an important centre in the global knowledge economy while ensuring no Member State is left behind in the journey towards an ASEAN Community Vision 2045.



# Revitalising Ecotourism in Southeast Asia

# The ASEAN Ecotourism Standard Initiative



**Tourism Development Department,  
Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, Lao PDR**

*Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park  
is one of the largest protected  
areas in the Lao PDR*

In a significant move that underscores Southeast Asia's commitment to sustainable tourism, the ASEAN Ecotourism Standard (AECOS) has been officially endorsed at the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits under the leadership of Lao PDR, chaired by Sonexay Siphandone, Prime Minister of Lao PDR. The endorsement of AECOS reflects a broader regional effort to elevate sustainable tourism practices. This Standard aims to redefine how ecotourism is approached across Southeast Asia. The initiative was spearheaded by the Lao PDR in collaboration with ASEAN Member States, supported by the ASEAN Secretariat and experts from the Asia Ecotourism Network (AEN), and funded by the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA).



This milestone sets the stage for a transformative chapter in the region's tourism sector, focusing on balancing economic development, environmental stewardship, and community well-being. The AECOS is a comprehensive document that covers essential ecotourism principles, including sustainable management, conservation of natural and cultural assets, active stakeholder engagement, enhancement of local community well-being, and meaningful educational experiences for visitors.

## A spotlight on ecotourism operators

At the heart of AECOS is a vision to empower and uplift ecotourism operators. The initiatives range from individual entrepreneurs and small businesses to large organisations that curate and deliver ecotourism experiences. For operators looking to enhance their credibility and showcase their dedication to sustainability, AECOS provides a structured path to certification. AECOS assessment extends to three core areas:

1. **Ecotourism Activities:** These encompass the variety of experiences offered by operators, such as guided wildlife tours, educational and cultural programmes, adventure activities, and interactive eco-friendly initiatives.
2. **Ecotourism Facilities:** These include the physical spaces that accommodate visitors, such as hotels, homestays, restaurants, souvenir shops, visitor centres, nature trails, boardwalks, campsites, and even specialised infrastructure like canopy walks.
3. **Ecotourism Services:** They refer to services provided directly and indirectly by tour operators, local communities, and educational centres, such as eco-friendly accommodations, local culinary offerings, interpretation services, and low-impact educational activities.

AECOS establishes a robust framework comprising nine thematic pillars and 65 distinct criteria, guiding operators toward sustainable excellence. The most critical aspect of this framework is a set of 35 mandatory criteria that operators must meet to achieve full certification. However, even those who do not attain 100 per cent compliance can earn

recognition at varying levels—bronze, silver, and gold—acknowledging their ongoing commitment to sustainability.

The phased certification system is designed to measure compliance and incentivise operators to improve continuously. The rollout of the ASEAN Ecotourism Standard begins in 2025, inviting operators across the region to participate in this transformative process.

## Why this matters: Regional and global impact

For tourism stakeholders, from policymakers to operators and investors, AECOS represents more than just a standard—it is a roadmap for the future of tourism in the region. Adopting AECOS reinforces Southeast Asia's reputation as a premier ecotourism destination, a distinction that promises to attract conscious travellers from around the globe. These travellers are increasingly drawn to experiences that respect local cultures, prioritise sustainability, and contribute positively to local economies.

For international travellers, the AECOS implementation offers assurance that international travellers' experiences are rooted in genuine ecological and cultural preservation. It aligns with a growing global trend: tourists looking beyond conventional travel for experiences that connect them with nature, deepen their cultural understanding, and leave a positive footprint.

## Benefits for local communities and the environment

The impacts of AECOS extend far beyond tourism operators and travellers. Local communities stand to gain significantly from the implementation of these standards. By incorporating local stakeholders into the ecotourism value chain, AECOS promotes inclusive economic growth, creating job opportunities and fostering sustainable livelihoods. Additionally, the emphasis on conservation ensures that the region's rich biodiversity and cultural heritage are preserved for future generations.



With robust guidelines promoting low-impact tourism and educational initiatives, AECOS fosters a culture of environmental respect among operators and visitors. This cultural shift is pivotal for areas that depend on tourism but are vulnerable to overexploitation and degradation.

## A call to action: Embracing the future

As 2025 begins, the tourism industry in Southeast Asia is encouraged to gear up for participation. AECOS provides a clear path for players to enhance their practices and stand out in a competitive market. Beyond competition, the certification represents a shared responsibility and a collaborative effort to champion sustainability.

The AECOS is more than a set of guidelines; it is a call to action for a greener, more inclusive, and culturally rich tourism experience. By prioritising responsible practices and community-centred development, Southeast Asia positions itself as a leader in the global ecotourism movement—an example of how progress can be both profitable and sustainable.

Tourism operators, stakeholders, and travellers alike are urged to contribute to this collective vision, embracing the standards that will define a new era of travel, where the impact left behind is as valuable as the memories made.



ASEAN TOURISM FORUM 2025

# Unity in Motion, Shaping ASEAN Tourism Tomorrow



Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and  
Culture (MOTAC), Malaysia

Malaysia takes centre stage as it assumed the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025, marking a pivotal year for regional leadership and collaboration. The much-anticipated ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF) 2025 is one of the year's flagship events, scheduled from 15 to 20 January 2025 in Johor Bahru, Johor. With the theme "Unity in Motion, Shaping ASEAN Tourism Tomorrow," the ATF serves a critical platform for advancing sustainable and inclusive tourism throughout Southeast Asia.



## Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025: Leading with a purpose

Malaysia's role as the ASEAN Chair in 2025 comes at a time of renewed focus on the future of tourism and broader regional collaboration. The chairmanship theme, "Sustainability and Inclusivity," encapsulates our commitment to fostering a more resilient and equitable ASEAN Community. As the Chair, Malaysia will focus on ensuring that growth is environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive, integrating these values across economic and social initiatives.

The ASEAN region has emerged as one of the world's most dynamic tourism markets, but it also faces challenges ranging from climate change to the need for digital transformation. Under Malaysia's stewardship, ASEAN will work to balance economic development with environmental stewardship and social equity, ensuring that tourism remains a driving force for prosperity and cohesion across Member States.

## Unity in motion, shaping ASEAN tourism tomorrow

The ASEAN Tourism Forum 2025 theme, "Unity in Motion, Shaping ASEAN Tourism Tomorrow," beckons Member States and stakeholders to collaborate proactively in reshaping the region's tourism landscape. It emphasises the need for coordinated efforts to address evolving challenges and seize new opportunities for sustainable growth. The "unity in motion" concept signifies the physical and cultural connectivity between ASEAN nations and the dynamic forward momentum that will shape the future of the ASEAN tourism ecosystem.

This theme resonates deeply with Malaysia's vision of a resilient and future-proof tourism sector as it is aligned with the National Tourism Policy 2020-2030. It calls for strategic partnerships, innovative thinking, and the collective motivation to make ASEAN a leader in sustainable and inclusive tourism practices. From embracing digitalisation to enhancing disaster resilience and preserving cultural heritage, the ATF has adopted

a comprehensive agenda to lay the groundwork for a successful tourism future.

## A week of strategic engagement

The recently concluded ATF 2025 convened tourism ministers, heads of national tourism organisations (NTOs), industry players, stakeholders from across the ASEAN region, dialogue partners, and beyond.

The event was hosted in Johor Bahru, a state that blends cultural richness, modern attractions, and natural wonders. Hosting the ATF in Johor Bahru was a strategic decision that underscored Malaysia's dedication to developing emerging tourism hubs beyond its capital, Kuala Lumpur. Johor Bahru, known for its modern infrastructure, rich heritage, and vibrant culinary scene, exemplifies the country's multifaceted appeal. The state's attractions, from the pristine beaches of Desaru Coast to the bustling streets of Johor Bahru, reflect Malaysia's broader tourism ambitions as it gears up for Visit Malaysia Year 2026.

The ATF 2025 was an engaging and impactful week, featuring a blend of high-level policy discussions and business-oriented sessions. It included the following activities:

### ● Tourism Ministerial and NTO meetings

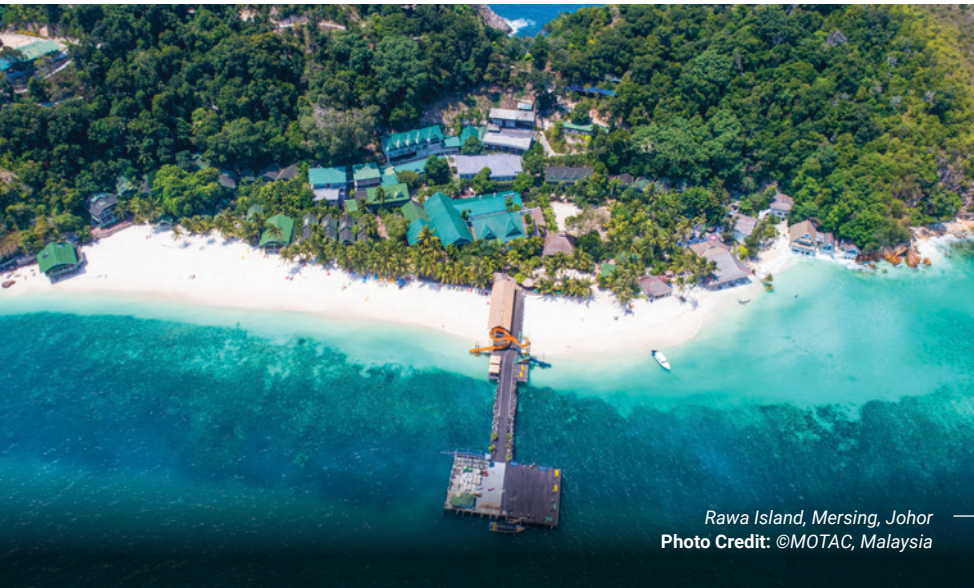
Tourism ministers and NTO heads from all ASEAN Member States; country dialogue partners such as China, Japan, Korea, India, and Russia; and international tourism bodies gathered to discuss policy frameworks, share insights on best practices, and explore new ways to strengthen regional tourism cooperation.

### ● TRAVEX at Persada Johor

The Travel Exchange (TRAVEX), held at Persada Johor International Convention Centre, attracted 323 buyers, 221 sellers, 221 exhibitors, and 100 media representatives from the region and globally.

Pinnacles in Mulu  
National Park in Malaysia





Rawa Island, Mersing, Johor  
Photo Credit: ©MOTAC, Malaysia

**“ Under Malaysia’s stewardship, ASEAN will work to balance economic development with environmental stewardship and social equity, ensuring that tourism remains a driving force for prosperity and cohesion across Member States.**



Laman Mahkota Istana Bukit Serene, Johor Bahru, Johor  
Photo Credit: ©MOTAC, Malaysia

#### ● **ASEAN Tourism Awards Ceremony**

At the ASEAN Tourism Standards Awards Ceremony held on 20 January 2025, 30 establishments in the region were honoured with the 5th ASEAN Homestay Award; 41 communities received the 4th ASEAN Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Award; 41 venues were recognised with the 3rd ASEAN Public Toilet Award; and 42 establishments were awarded the 3rd ASEAN Spa Services Award.

#### ● **ASEAN Tourism Conference (ATC)**

Running concurrently with TRAVEX, the ASEAN Tourism Conference featured thought leaders and industry experts who shared their perspectives on emerging trends focusing on sustainability and inclusivity in tourism practices. The discussions also included digital marketing and smart tourism solutions, as well as strategies for enhancing climate resilience, with ATC providing participants with actionable insights to shape their future endeavours.

### **Building ASEAN’s tourism future together**

The ASEAN Tourism Forum 2025 catalysed regional tourism cooperation, reinforcing the principles of sustainability and inclusivity that Malaysia champions in its chairmanship. As ASEAN looks toward the future, the forum urged Member States to work together, creating a tourism ecosystem that is robust, innovative, and united in motion. From leveraging technology to preserving cultural and natural heritage, ATF 2025 has undoubtedly shaped the strategies that would carry ASEAN tourism into a prosperous and sustainable tomorrow.

The ATF 2025 is a testament to the power of unity and shared vision in an era of rapid change. It reminds us that through collaboration, ASEAN can navigate challenges and emerge stronger, ensuring that tourism continues to be a force for positive economic and social transformation.





The Perak Tong Cave  
temple in Ipoh, Malaysia.

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The  
**ASEAN**



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