

Culture, Development and Society in ASEAN: Balancing Economic Development with the Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage

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Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the balance between preserving cultural heritage and fostering economic development through cultural initiatives in ASEAN.

Key Findings

- ASEAN's rich cultural heritage presents both opportunities and challenges for regional integration and economic growth.
- Although the inscription of cultural sites on UNESCO World Heritage Lists has led to increased recognition and tourism, it has increased the risk over-commercialisation and loss of authenticity.
- While digital technologies offer new avenues for cultural preservation and dissemination, maximising their benefit requires a strategic approach to ensure the continued vitality of traditional knowledge and practices.

State of Cultural Policies

- The cultural policies of ASEAN Member States (AMS) are diverse, reflecting varied historical contexts, political systems,

and development priorities.

- Common themes include heritage preservation, the promotion of traditional arts, and recognition of culture's economic potential.
- There is growing emphasis on cultural diplomacy and the use of culture for social cohesion and peace-building.

Challenges

- Balancing economic benefits with the preservation of cultural integrity and creative expression.
- Addressing disparities in cultural infrastructure and funding across the region.
- Navigating local and national identity while promoting regional cultural connectivity.

- Balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with economic development and modernisation.
- Addressing the tension between preserving cultural richness and the homogenising pressures arising from globalisation and regional integration.
- Mitigating the inequitable distribution of cultural resources and infrastructure in the region.
- Protecting intellectual property rights, particularly for traditional cultural expressions.
- Adapting to climate change impacts on cultural heritage sites.
- Navigating digital transformation especially artificial intelligence (AI) for culture.

Policy Recommendations

- Enhance regional coordination mechanisms and networks for cultural initiatives.

- Implement capacity-building programs for cultural professionals in ASEAN.
- Develop ASEAN-wide digital preservation standards for cultural heritage.
- Create a comprehensive regional cultural policy framework.
- Integrate culture into sustainable development plans and urban planning.
- Develop balanced cultural tourism strategies.
- Establish regional cultural innovation hubs to foster creativity and innovation.

These recommendations address key challenges while leveraging emerging opportunities, particularly in digital technology and sustainable development. Successful implementation will require sustained political commitment, adequate funding, and active participation from diverse stakeholders across ASEAN.

1 Introduction

AMS cultures are rich and diverse, comprising many traditions, languages, and forms of artistic expressions. This diversity offers strengths and challenges for ASEAN policymakers seeking to preserve cultural heritage while simultaneously leveraging it for social cohesion and economic development. This brief addresses several questions facing ASEAN in developing cultural policies:

1. What are the impacts and implications for AMS from inscribing their tangible and intangible cultural heritage on UNESCO World Heritage Lists? How does commercialisation, overcrowding, physical degradation, and loss of original significance affect local community culture?
2. What lessons can ASEAN learn from nations with sites previously included on the World Heritage List as it considers developing its own cultural heritage list?
3. How can culture promote tolerance, greater understanding, and harmony in ASEAN?
4. How might ASEAN and its stakeholders enhance the role of culture to promote peace, tolerance, understanding, and harmony in the region and globally?

2 Impact and Implications of UNESCO World Heritage List Inscriptions

The inscription of cultural sites on UNESCO's World Heritage List brings significant attention and resources to a nation's culture. However, recognition can also introduce challenges. While commercialisation often increases tourism revenues, it also leads to the commodification of culture. For instance, traditional alms-giving ceremonies at spiritual sites can become a tourist spectacle, potentially diminishing their spiritual significance. Popular sites have experienced an increased volume of visitors, which has led to physical impacts on structures and their surroundings and highlighted the need for additional conservation. As sites and practices gain global attention, it is important to ensure that their original cultural and spiritual significance to local communities is preserved.

Approaches must be developed that balance economic benefits with preservation, such as visitor caps or rotational access systems. It is essential to ensure that local communities are central to decision-making processes and benefit directly from heritage site management. Priority should be given to developing educational initiatives that convey the deep cultural significance of sites to visitors, going beyond surface-level tourism. Finally, in considering development of its own cultural heritage list, ASEAN must ensure that cultural recognition represents the full spectrum of AMS' cultural heritage, including intangible heritage and living cultures.

Culture as an Enabler of Tolerance and Harmony

Culture can foster tolerance and harmony in ASEAN's diverse communities. By highlighting shared values and promoting intercultural dialogue, cultural initiatives can bridge divides and foster a shared ASEAN identity. However, this approach is not without challenges. Promoting an ASEAN cultural identity must be balanced by preserving the cultural identities of individual AMS. Historical narratives and cultural practices may require sensitive handling in cultural exchange programs. ASEAN and AMS must ensure that forms of cultural expressions within AMS are adequately represented and protected in regional cultural initiatives.

Enhancing the Role of Culture in Promoting Peace and Understanding

Despite rising global tensions and nativism, ASEAN can leverage its cultural heritage. Potential strategies include expanding cultural diplomacy through exchange programs in ASEAN and with external partners to foster dialogues and mutual understanding. Further, it is essential to develop region-wide educational curricula to celebrate ASEAN's cultural heritage and promote critical thinking about cultural issue. Media and digital technologies should be deployed to showcase ASEAN's cultural richness. Incorporating cultural awareness into diplomatic and creative peace-building process in the region can also be beneficial.

However, tension exists between preserving cultural authenticity and developments on the ground. The challenge lies in crafting policies that protect and celebrate ASEAN's diverse cultural heritage while enabling creativity, innovation, and economic development. This policy brief considers these issues, providing suggestions on how to develop cultural policies that respect traditions and respond to contemporary needs.

Defining Culture in the ASEAN Context

Across Southeast Asia, definitions of culture are complex, reflecting the region's history and dynamism. Tangible heritage encompasses physical artifacts, historical sites, and monuments, with ancient temples and colonial architecture that offer visible links to the past. Intangible heritage covers traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and knowledge systems passed down over generations.

Contemporary creative expressions include modern interpretations of traditional arts and new forms of cultural expression in literature, film, music, and digital media, reflecting globalisation and technological advancements. Belief systems and values shape societal norms and individual behaviours across AMS, influencing everything from daily interactions to policies. Culinary traditions reflect local ingredients, historical influences, and social customs, and serve as a tangible expression of each country's unique heritage. Languages and linguistic diversity are integral to cultural identity and knowledge transmission, serving as repositories of unique worldviews and traditional knowledge.

ASEAN's cultures manifest in multiple fields and domains. Cultural institutions, including museums, theatres, and educational institutions, play a crucial role in preserving and promoting culture. Creative outputs, such as film, dance, music, fashion, and design, contribute to cultural expression and economic growth, often connecting traditional forms with global markets. Cultural tourism presents opportunities for economic development alongside challenges of preservation and authenticity.

Digital culture, including online platforms and digital archives, facilitates cultural sharing and preservation, offering new ways to engage with cultural knowledge. Cultural diplomacy uses culture to foster international understanding and cooperation, crucial for ASEAN's regional integration and external relations. Local, community-based cultural practices serve as the foundation for broader cultural expressions and industries. Cultural education, both formal and informal, ensures the continuity and evolution of the diverse cultural tradition of AMS, preserving heritage while allowing their adaptation to contemporary contexts.

The breadth and depth of cultures in AMS present both opportunities and challenges for regional policymakers, necessitating a regional approach that addresses the needs of different sectors and stakeholders while balancing preservation with creativity and innovation.

3 Cultural Policies

Individual AMS cultural policies are diverse, reflecting the cultures they seek to govern, protect, and promote. This diversity reflects the historical contexts, political systems, and development priorities and the capacity of each AMS to interact with international regimes. Despite this diversity, some common themes have emerged.

Overall Trends

Heritage preservation is the foundation of cultural policy in ASEAN. Most AMS have robust laws to protect their tangible cultural heritage. Cambodia's 1996 Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, for instance, provides a comprehensive framework for safeguarding ancient and historical sites of cultural significance.

The promotion of traditional arts forms another key aspect of AMS cultural policies. Thailand and Indonesia, for example, have policies supporting traditional performing arts through subsidies and educational programs. These initiatives aim to ensure the continuity of cultural practices that are integral to their national identity.

Recognising the economic potential of culture, several AMS have implemented policies to enhance their creative industries. Malaysia and Singapore, in particular, have been at the forefront of this approach, approaching cultural production as a driver of economic growth.

Cultural diplomacy is also a key area of focus. The Philippines and Viet Nam, for example, have active cultural diplomacy policies, promoting cultural exchanges as a means of strengthening international relations and enhancing their soft power on the global stage.

Several AMS have implemented policies aimed at using culture to promote social cohesion and peace. For instance, Malaysia's National Culture Policy emphasises the role of culture in fostering national unity among the nation's diverse ethnic groups. The Philippines' National Commission for Culture and the Arts has programs dedicated to using arts for conflict transformation in areas affected by insurgencies.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 further outlined regional strategies for enhancing awareness of ASEAN culture to promote regional identity and social cohesion. However, the degree of success achieved by these policies has varied. There is the potential for more comprehensive regional approaches to cultural dialogues, exchange, and peace-building through culture.

Recently, the rise of digital technology has prompted some AMS to develop policies on culture's digital aspects. Malaysia, for instance, has launched initiatives on digital archiving and cultural content that reflect an understanding of the changes in cultural production and consumption in the digital age.

Differences in Policy Responses across ASEAN

Significant differences also exist in the cultural policies of each AMS. The degree of centralisation in cultural policymaking varies considerably across the region. Indonesia, for example, has a decentralised approach, giving significant autonomy to regions in cultural affairs. A different approach is evident in Viet Nam, which maintains a more centralised structure.

AMS also adopt different approaches when addressing the economic potential of culture and heritage preservation. Singapore's policies often emphasise the economic potential of culture for investment and growth. Conversely, Lao PDR, emphasises preserving traditional cultures, reflecting a heritage-centric approach.

The cultural policies also adopt different approaches when exerting state control and involving the private sector. Myanmar's cultural sector is largely managed by government bodies, which undertake the bulk of cultural production and preservation. The Philippines, conversely, adopts a structure that encourages private sector participation, fostering a more diverse and market-driven cultural landscape.

The inclusivity of cultural policies also varies across ASEAN. Some AMS prioritise a focused scope of cultural expressions in their national initiatives. In contrast, other such as Singapore, aim for a broad-based approach, seeking to balance their multi-cultural heritage across cultural representations and support.

The effectiveness of these varied policies varies considerably across the region. Viet Nam's cultural diplomacy efforts, for instance, have raised its international profile, showcasing the potential of soft power approaches. Singapore's investment in creative industries has yielded economic benefits.

However, challenges remain. Further policy development is required to keep pace with evolving challenges, particularly in addressing the impact of digital technology. Establishing complete and robust policy frameworks remains a priority for many nations to fully leverage the opportunities and address the potential tensions of digitalisation in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

Further, optimising policy implementation remains an area for continued focus. Even well-crafted policies require aligned resources and or consistent to realise their intended impact on the ground. For example, while Cambodia demonstrates strong policies for tangible heritage preservation, enhancing support for living cultural practitioners is necessary. This disparity highlights the need for approaches that address both material heritage and living cultural practices.

4 Policy Recommendations: Policy Coordination and Integration

The diverse cultures of AMS require robust policy coordination to manage and promote the region's cultural heritage, foster economic growth, and promote social cohesion. This section explores key areas that may benefit from coordinated policies.

Regional Collaboration Opportunities

AMS recognise the importance of cultural cooperation. ASEAN established the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts (AMCA) in 2003 to facilitate regional collaborative initiatives. The AMCA's accomplishments include the introduction in 2008 of the rotating ASEAN City of Culture, to promote cultural exchange and tourism. While the programme has been successful in raising the profile of several cities, it could benefit from long-term cultural development strategies.

Similarly, the AMCA's ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive (ACHDA) aimed to digitise to improve the accessibility of the diverse cultural heritage products of AMS, and has made an important contribution to cultural preservation. However, optimising the initiative's long-term sustainability remains necessary, and the representation of the AMS in the archive is to be addressed.

The biennial ASEAN Traditional Textiles Symposium has promoted the exchange of knowledge and the preservation of traditional textile arts. The symposium exemplifies how sector-specific collaborations can support cultural preservation and creative industries.

These collaborations, while promising, experience a number of problems. Firstly,

funding has not been sustainable. There are also disparities in institutional capacity among AMS, while local and national interests need to complement regional objectives.

International Cooperation

The growth of international cooperation for cultural heritage preservation projects across Southeast Asia presents both opportunities and challenges. World Heritage inscription has brought international recognition, resources, and funding. It has also prioritise tangible sites and monuments representing prevailing national or regional narratives (Winter, 2014). This can marginalise local, minority, or contested forms of heritage, potentially deepening existing cultural disparities.

Emerging non-governmental networks can accommodate inclusive heritage practices, balance top-down approaches to heritage management, and provide platforms for underrepresented voices. However, even well-intentioned community engagement initiatives may unintentionally perpetuate existing power imbalances if not thoughtfully implemented (Waterton & Smith, 2010).

Proposed ASEAN Heritage List

Regional initiatives, such as a proposed ASEAN Cultural Heritage List, reflect growing recognition of shared cultural identities and the potential of regional cooperation. However, these efforts require careful consideration and harmonisation regarding the relationship between national sovereignty, regional integration, and the World Heritage frameworks.

The proposed ASEAN list could offer a more regionally specific approach. It could highlight transnational cultural landscapes, intangible heritage practices across multiple countries, and historical trade routes that transcend political boundaries. For instance, an ASEAN list could recognise shared maritime heritage or the shared cultures of transnational ethnic groups.

However, the proposed ASEAN list introduces several strategic requirements. It would require that AMS adopt a regional perspective, which requires careful management to ensure it complements national identities, interests, and boundaries that have historically framed political and heritage narratives. The success of the ASEAN list would depend on ASEAN's ability to develop criteria and management approaches that reflect intricate cultural interrelationships.

ASEAN could consider exploring other ways to recognise cultural elements that connect the region, such as shared cultural landscapes, practices, and historical connections, with approaches that acknowledge the complex relationships between cultures while respecting individual national contexts. It should also review this proposed List, to ensure it is not a duplication or a counter to the Global UNESCO inscription process. This is to manage limited resources and manpower accordingly.

ASEAN increasingly relies on external funding for cultural initiatives. International funding has influenced project priorities and methodologies, potentially prioritising funders' interests over local needs. This dependence may create sustainability issues when external funding ceases (Henderson, 2019). To address this, AMS could explore various funding approaches that draw on local expertise and resources, which might include different funding models suited to local contexts. They can also include the private sector.

The relationship between the ASEAN Heritage and World Heritage Lists reflects distinct but interconnected levels of recognition. The proposed ASEAN list may assert a Southeast Asian identity within global frameworks, while acknowledging the established scale of the UNESCO World Heritage List. The older, UNESCO regime currently attracts a significant proportion of international attention, funding and resources, creating an opportunity for the ASEAN list to carve out a complementary and regionally focused resource strategy.

Despite these challenges, the recognition of heritage in Southeast Asia could offer a holistic and interconnected perspective, address transboundary issues, and promote lesser-known sites and practices that have been regionally significant. Such approaches must balance regional cohesion, and respect for cultural heritage, while also addressing the challenges of representation, funding, national and overlapping interests.

Coordinating Cultural Exchange and Peace-Building Efforts

ASEAN has attempted to coordinate cultural exchanges and peace-building initiatives across the AMS. The ASEAN-China Cultural Exchange Year and

similar programs with other ASEAN Dialogue Partners attempts to enhance regional cultural diplomacy. The ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) has promoted a culture of peace, although its cultural initiatives could be further developed. While these efforts have been promising, it is challenging to coordinate diverse national approaches across AMS. More robust coordination mechanisms can enhance the role of culture in fostering regional understanding and prevent conflict.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) in Cultural Initiatives

Recognising the limits of government resources, some AMS have turned to public-private partnerships (PPPs) to support cultural initiatives. The revival of historic buildings into luxury and tourist spaces in Malaysia and Singapore show how the involvement of the private sector can contribute to the preservation of heritage sites. Similar models could be adapted across ASEAN, although care must be taken to ensure that the sites are not over-commercialised.

Malaysia's MyCreative Ventures, a government investment arm for creative industries, partners with private entities to provide funding and support for cultural entrepreneurs, combining public oversight with private sector dynamism. The Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA) collaborates with both government agencies and private sponsors to deliver cultural education programs, enhancing the reach and sustainability of cultural education initiatives.

While PPPs offer significant potential, they also present challenges. The member states may need to ensure that private sector involvement does not compromise cultural authenticity or exclude less commercially viable cultural forms. Clear regulatory frameworks may be necessary to guide such partnerships.

Integrating Cultural Policies with Other Sectors

AMS recognise the need for cross-sectoral integration to maximise the impact of cultural policies. The inclusion of local cultural content in its national educational curriculum in Indonesia exemplifies how cultural policy can be integrated into education to preserve local languages and traditions while fostering cultural literacy among youth. Thailand's 'Creative Tourism' initiative links cultural heritage with tourism development, encouraging visitors to engage in authentic cultural experience. Careful management is necessary, to prevent cultural commodification and overdevelopment.

Singapore's 'Renaissance City Plan' integrates cultural development with urban planning, creating arts spaces and cultural districts, enhancing liveability, and supporting cultural industries. Viet Nam's digitisation of cultural heritage sites, such as the virtual tour of the Thang Long Imperial Citadel, demonstrates how preservation can leverage technological advancements. The Philippines' National Eco-Savers Program integrates traditional cultural practices with environmental education. The programme showcases how cultural wisdom can contribute to sustainable development goals.

Other AMS recognise the role of culture in national security and social stability. Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth works with cultural institutions to promote inter-religious harmony and social resilience. Indonesia's Office of the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs includes cultural considerations in its strategies for maintaining national unity.

These innovative efforts present opportunities for stronger collaboration. They require significant cross-departmental coordination, which can be difficult in government bureaucracies. Moreover, economic or political priorities may dominate over cultural objectives. ASEAN will need to coordinate its policies to harness the full potential of its cultural resources by strengthening its local, national, and regional mechanisms and engage in cross-sectoral policymaking. It can also encourage innovation through adopt public-private collaboration. They will need to create synergies between policymakers and various stakeholders while safeguarding the integrity and diversity of ASEAN's cultural heritage.

5 Challenges and Opportunities

Across the region, AMS have been challenged to balance preservation with progress. This dynamic is visible in places where tourism-driven urban development has posed potential risks to ancient monuments, traditional knowledge, and practices. This nexus between maintaining cultural authenticity

and embracing economic growth occurs throughout Southeast Asia.

Regional Challenges

Despite their benefits, globalisation and regional integration place new pressures on cultural traditions and practices that manifest at the local and global levels. Traditional art forms such as puppetry, dance, and opera are declining in popularity as younger generations gravitate toward global entertainment options, particularly those from Western and East Asian sources. Rapid urbanisation threatens traditional knowledge and cultural practices as communities disperse and adapt to urban lifestyles.

The rapid emergence of AI and digital transformation also poses challenges to cultural authenticity and the integrity of cultural content. While technology offers new ways to document and share cultural heritage, it also risks altering or diluting traditional cultural meaning through automated reproduction and interpretation. The ability of AI to generate and manipulate content has raised concerns about the preservation of authentic cultural narratives their symbolic meanings, potentially affecting how traditional knowledge and cultural practices can be understood and transmitted across generations. This technological shift adds another layer of complexity to the already challenging task of preserving cultural authenticity in a digital world.

AMS also show varying levels of development in resilient cultural infrastructure. While Singapore maintains world-class museums and cultural institutions, strategic investment is necessary for countries like Cambodia and Myanmar to establish adequate facilities for preserving and promoting their cultural heritage. Additionally, strengthening the protection of traditional cultural expressions and knowledge remains a priority. Many countries require further policy development to develop and strengthen their legal frameworks to prevent exploitation. For instance, it is important to ensure the use of traditional items is accompanied by proper attribution or compensation to the local communities.

Environmental challenges pose another threat. Climate change and environmental degradation increasingly endanger cultural heritage sites across ASEAN. In Thailand, the ancient city of Ayutthaya faces elevated flooding risks due to climate change, threatening its historical structures and cultural significance.

Country-Specific Challenges

The political context in Myanmar presents unique challenges to cultural preservation efforts and the development of cultural industries. International cooperation and funding for cultural projects has declined.

Indonesia faces challenges in implementing consistent cultural policies across its diverse regions. Balancing national identity with local cultural autonomy remains a significant challenge.

Similarly, despite its well-funded cultural sector, Singapore face challenges in cultivating authentic cultural expressions in a highly urbanised, multicultural environment. An ongoing debate persists, on the balance between supporting 'high art' and preserving vernacular cultural practices.

Rapid economic development has led to the loss of traditional architecture in many ASEAN cities. The country faces the challenge of modernising while preserving its architectural heritage. Moreover, countries like the Philippines face constant threats to cultural heritage from natural disasters. The 2013 Bohol earthquake, for instance, damaged numerous historical churches, highlighting the need for disaster preparedness in cultural preservation strategies.

Emerging Opportunities

Digitalisation opens avenues to preserve and share cultural heritage. One example is the ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive project. While this initiative has the potential to make cultural artifacts accessible to a global audience, its successful long-term management requires careful consideration of questions about digital rights management and the equitable representation of diverse cultural elements.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual cultural experiences, with institutions like the National Museum of Singapore pioneering immersive online exhibitions. Sustainable cultural tourism initiatives, such as Cambodia's Community-Based Ecotourism Network, demonstrate how cultural preservation can align with the Sustainable Development Goals while providing economic benefits to local communities.

Digital platforms and sustainable development frameworks create new opportunities for cultural exchange and peace-building. Virtual cultural

exchanges, online peace education programs, and collaborative digital projects that share cultural heritage can foster understanding and cooperation across ASEAN. Such initiatives can mitigate regional tensions while promoting a shared ASEAN identity.

The digital creative industries present particularly promising opportunities. For instance, animation studios in the Philippines are producing content for global streaming platforms. This example shows the potential for including local cultural elements in globally distributed content. Emerging technologies like blockchain offer potential solutions for authenticating and tracking cultural artifacts, while AI shows promise in preserving endangered languages and cultural practices.

The emphasis on sustainability opens new avenues for heritage management innovation. Indonesia's efforts to incorporate traditional knowledge in forest conservation in Kalimantan exemplifies how cultural practices can contribute to environmental sustainability.

However, ASEAN must also devise policies that address the gaps in digital access within and between AMS, ensure digital data privacy and cultural rights, and balance economic and technological development with cultural authenticity.

6 Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to address the key issues identified in this brief while leveraging emerging opportunities.

Short-Term Strategies

Enhance Regional Coordination Mechanisms and Networks. ASEAN can strengthen the AMCA and relevant regional organs, centres, and networks. These mechanisms should meet more frequently and be given the authority and funding to implement region-wide cultural initiatives. ASEAN should also develop a comprehensive database of cultural policies across AMS to facilitate knowledge sharing and policy coordination.

Implement Capacity-Building Programs. ASEAN can launch workshops and training programs for cultural professionals, focussing on areas such as digital skills, cultural entrepreneurship, and sustainable cultural management. The use of online platforms can ensure wide accessibility. However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of these programmes depends not only on their implementation but also on the presence of appropriate infrastructure in each country, including non-physical infrastructure such as organisations and institutions, to support execution and ensure that the lessons learned are effectively put into practice.

Develop Digital Preservation Standards. ASEAN can explore common approaches for digital preservation of cultural heritage, including considerations for metadata, file formats, long-term storage, and ethical issues, while supporting knowledge-sharing across AMS.

Long-Term Strategies

Facilitate Sharing of Best Practices for the Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage. ASEAN can facilitate sharing of experiences and approaches in preserving and promoting cultural heritage, while considering ways to balance commercialisation with sustainable management of the sites and practices.

Develop a Comprehensive Regional Cultural Policy Framework. ASEAN can draft an ASEAN Cultural Policy Framework to provide guidelines for AMS that respects diverse approaches. This framework should address cultural traditions and practices, cultural rights, freedom of expression, support for cultural industries, and integrate culture in sustainable development plans.

Establish ASEAN Cultural Innovation Hubs. ASEAN can create physical and virtual spaces to foster creativity and innovation in the cultural and creative sectors. These hubs should facilitate collaboration between artists, technologists, and entrepreneurs across ASEAN, and focus on developing new cultural expression and sustainable business models for the creative industries.

Implement a Regional Cultural Education Program. ASEAN can develop an ASEAN cultural curriculum to be integrated into national school systems. This curriculum should promote increased understanding of ASEAN's diverse cultures, shared heritage, and contemporary cultural expressions. Include both traditional and digital learning resources to engage younger generations.

Cross-Sectoral Policy Integration

Integrate Culture with Sustainable Development Plans.

- Consider cultural factors when planning major development projects across ASEAN.
- Develop guidelines for integrating traditional knowledge and cultural practices into environmental conservation efforts.
- Encourage AMS to include culture as a part of their national sustainable development strategies.

Incorporate Cultural Considerations in Urban Planning.

- Explore approaches for culture-led urban development that consider both heritage preservation and modernisation needs.
- Promote the creation of cultural districts and creative hubs in urban development plans.

Develop Balanced Cultural Tourism Strategies.

- Create an ASEAN Sustainable Cultural Tourism Charter to provide guidelines for developing tourism products that balance economic benefits with cultural preservation and community well-being.
- Encourage the development of community-based cultural tourism initiatives to ensure benefits flow directly to local communities.

Monitoring and Evaluation Framework.

- Explore efficient approaches to collect data, monitor policy implementation, and evaluate outcomes across the region.

By strengthening regional coordination, embracing digital innovations, and integrating culture across policy areas, ASEAN can harness its cultural heritage to drive sustainable development and regional identity. Successful implementation will require sustained political commitment, adequate funding, and active participation from diverse stakeholders in the public and private sectors and civil society.

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7 Conclusion

This policy brief emphasised the need to balance preservation of the vibrant cultural heritage of AMS with economic growth to ensure the region's sustainable development.

From ancient temples to the high-tech creative hubs, ASEAN's cultural assets are symbols of identity as well as potential drivers of socio-economic progress. However, thoughtful and coordinated policy responses are necessary to mitigate the challenges of uneven development, the threat of cultural homogenisation, and the impact of climate change.

The digital revolution and sustainable development offer new avenues for cultural innovation, preservation, and promotion. Virtual museums, digital cataloguing of cultural artifacts, and eco-cultural tourism are a few examples of how technology and sustainability principles might enhance cultural sectors.

Regional cooperation can address these challenges and opportunities. Shared cultural policies and initiatives can foster a stronger ASEAN identity while promoting respect for national and local cultural contexts. The recommendations proposed in this brief provide strategies for such cooperation.

ASEAN policymakers can ensure that its cultural policies better support regional growth and identity-building. It can harness its cultural heritage as a source of creativity, resilience, and shared prosperity. Bold, innovative approaches to cultural policy can shape a vibrant, inclusive, and culturally rich ASEAN Community for future generations.

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Appendix: Adaptable Policies and Initiatives from AMS

This list presents current AMS policies and government initiatives that align with the above recommendations. They may be adapted or expanded for implementation across the region.

Policies and Plans

Malaysia: National Cultural Policy. Aims to strengthen national identity while

respecting cultural diversity. It includes programs for cultural education in schools, support for traditional arts, and initiatives to promote inter-cultural dialogue.

Singapore: Renaissance City Plan. A comprehensive strategy integrating culture with urban planning and economic development. It includes funding for arts infrastructure, support for cultural industries, and developing programs to increase cultural participation.

Thailand: Creative Economy Policy. Focuses on leveraging cultural and creative industries for economic growth. It includes offering tax incentives for creative businesses, establishing creative districts, and promoting Thai cultural products internationally.

Viet Nam: Cultural Heritage Law. Provides a legal framework to protect tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It includes provisions for community involvement in heritage management and sustainable tourism development.

Initiatives

Indonesia: ‘Indonesiana’ Platform. A digital initiative by the Indonesian Culture and Education Ministry to showcase and preserve the nation’s cultural heritage. It includes virtual exhibitions, online courses on traditional arts, and a database of cultural practices.

Philippines: School of Living Traditions: A program that facilitates the transfer of indigenous knowledge and skills to younger generations. Potential model for programs to preserve intangible cultural heritage in other AMS.

Brunei: Islamic Heritage Centre. Demonstrates how cultural institutions can be designed to preserve specific cultural traditions while promoting broader understanding and education.

Cambodia: Angkor Heritage Management Framework. A model balancing heritage preservation with tourism development and local community needs.

Lao PDR: Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre. An example of a community-based museum that preserves and promotes ethnic minority cultures.

Myanmar: Cultural Heritage Digital Library. Implemented despite national challenges, this initiative shows potential for using technology to preserve and provide access to cultural heritage resources.

These initiatives demonstrate diverse approaches to cultural policy across ASEAN. They address diverse issues, including heritage preservation and the development of the creative economy. They offer valuable lessons and potential models for adaptation different national and local contexts.

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