

The ASEAN



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DOUBLE ISSUE 51-52
March 2026

A Decade of Progress **THE MAKING OF THE ASEAN COMMUNITY**

ISSN 2721-8058



9 772721 805233

THE INSIDE VIEW
A Review: The ASEAN
Community Vision 2025

**FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
OF ASEAN, DR. KAO KIM HOUN**
Ten Years that Reshaped a Region

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In Human Terms: Stories
from Across the Region

THE ASEAN COMMUNITY

The ASEAN Community is envisioned as a community with enhanced capacity and capabilities to both respond effectively to challenges and to seize opportunities. Established in 2015, it encapsulates ASEAN's resilience and dynamism in a journey spanning more than half a century, and how far and well the ASEAN Member States have come together as one Community.

With the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007, ASEAN has built and strengthened its institutional frameworks to be more effective, efficient, and have better synergy and coordination, paving the way for a rules-based and comprehensive institutional infrastructure in line with the needs of regional integration and Community building. The ASEAN Community is anchored on three mutually supporting pillars: Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural.

POLITICAL- SECURITY COMMUNITY

The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) is envisioned "to ensure a rules-based and inclusive community in which [the ASEAN] peoples enjoy human rights, fundamental freedoms and social justice, live in a safe and secure environment with enhanced capacity to respond effectively to emerging challenges and in a dynamic region where ASEAN enhances its Centrality in the evolving regional architecture and plays a constructive role globally."

ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) 2025 is an aspiration held by the 10 Member States of ASEAN to be, by year 2025, a) a highly integrated and cohesive economy, b) a competitive, innovative and dynamic ASEAN with c) enhanced connectivity and sectoral cooperation, by remaining d) resilient, inclusive, people-oriented and people-centred and becoming a e) global ASEAN.

SOCIO- CULTURAL COMMUNITY

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is dedicated to realising the full potential of ASEAN citizens. At the heart of the ASCC is the commitment to lift the quality of life of ASEAN peoples through cooperative initiatives that are people-oriented and people-centred.

CROSS-SECTORAL INITIATIVES

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration 2015 decided that the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan III and the ASEAN Connectivity 2025, adopted in 2016, shall be an integral part of ASEAN Community Vision 2025: Forging Ahead Together. In addition, to implement the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, other cross-sectoral/pillar issues and their coordination should also continuously be enhanced and strengthened.

Sources:

ASEAN Secretariat. (2023). ASEAN Community fact sheet 2023. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ASEAN-Community-Fact-Sheet-2023-FINAL.pdf>
ASEAN Secretariat. (n.d.). Our communities. ASEAN. <https://asean.org/our-communities/>

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ISSN 2721-8058

Cover by Phonepaserth PHIMSAVANN
Layout by Foxidia Digital Media

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Note from the Editorial Team

Taking Stock: The Promise of ASEAN's Vision 2025

A decade ago, the ASEAN Leaders made a collective commitment to the more than 620 million people across this richly diverse region. They set out a vision of an ASEAN Community grounded in rules rather than rivalries, one that placed people at its centre and measured progress not merely in summits and declarations, but in the tangible improvements to the lives of its citizens. That commitment was the ASEAN Community Vision 2025.

As that horizon now arrives, it is worth pausing to reflect on how far the region has travelled.

In this issue, ASEAN takes a careful and considered look at that journey—the achievements worth recognising, the gaps that persist, and the questions that still demand clear answers. As the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 is

already taking form, it is carrying the spirit of 2025 into an era of greater complexity and opportunity. We invite our readers to learn more about the foundation the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 has built, and its legacy as ASEAN enters that next chapter.

<https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/aec-page/ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025.pdf>

https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/05.-ASEAN-Community-Vision-2045_adopted.pdf



Cover Story

Phonepasert PHIMSAVANN, known as Bee, was born in Vientiane, Lao PDR. She graduated from the National Institute of Fine Arts in Vientiane, Lao PDR, in 2023 with a major in painting. Since childhood, she has enjoyed creating art and often tells stories drawn from her own experiences. Her work is shaped by nature, everyday life, the environment, awareness of its impacts, and childhood memories. Since 2023, she has been a member of Lost Jigsaw, a contemporary art collective based in Vientiane that seeks to expand modern art in Lao PDR through themes of environment, culture, and identity.





TEN YEARS THAT RESHAPED A REGION

**Dr. Kao
Kim Hourn**

Secretary-General of
ASEAN

When the Leaders of ten ASEAN Member States convened in Kuala Lumpur, in 2015, for the 27th ASEAN Summit, they arrived carrying the weight of nearly five decades of regional cooperation—and the knowledge that much remained unfinished.

The numbers told a story of genuine progress: a combined economy of 2.55 trillion US dollars by 2014, poverty rates that had tumbled from 47 per cent to 14 per cent since 1990, and life expectancy that had risen by 15 years since ASEAN's founding in 1967. Yet the Leaders knew the gains were uneven. Non-tariff barriers were hampering intra-regional trade. Inequality—between nations and within them—remained stubbornly wide. Ecological degradation was accelerating. And Member States were being pulled, with growing intensity, into the gravitational field of great-power rivalry.

It was a genuine inflection point. And ASEAN responded to it decisively.

Ten years of cooperation

At the Kuala Lumpur Summit, Leaders formally **established the ASEAN Community and launched the ASEAN Community Vision 2025**—an compact built around three pillars: a region that is stable and secure, economically integrated, and genuinely focused on the well-being of its people. Three complementary blueprints covering the political-security, economic, and socio-cultural domains, alongside a connectivity master plan and the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Workplan V (2026-2030), were forged to give the vision concrete shape.

Ten years on, ASEAN is a thriving Community. The achievements of this decade—hard-won and wide-ranging—are a source of genuine pride and confidence among ASEAN Leaders, policymakers, and the public alike. More than a scorecard, they are a testament to what sustained collective efforts, channelled through shared institutions and a common vision, can actually deliver.

The decade that followed was not kind to regional architectures. Escalating great-power competition, a devastating global pandemic, territorial frictions, and a succession of economic shocks would have fractured less cohesive groupings. ASEAN not only endured these pressures and challenges; it emerged from them with its solidarity intact and its institutions meaningfully strengthened.



Nowhere was this resilience more vividly demonstrated than during COVID-19. Drawing on frameworks built in calmer times, the region activated a coordinated public health response from the outset—accelerating knowledge-sharing and emergency coordination—including with partners. The pandemic, paradoxically, also galvanised Member States into action on digital transformation and economic resilience, turning crisis into catalyst.

Where stability has taken root

Sustaining regional peace has been among ASEAN's most consequential, if often underappreciated, achievements. The region's most volatile disputes were contained through a sustained commitment to dialogue, diplomacy, and a web of confidence-building mechanisms that held under considerable geopolitical pressures.

The Myanmar situation and the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand have been the most severe tests to ASEAN's cohesion and unity in recent memory. ASEAN has navigated both crises through mechanisms such as the Five Point Consensus and mediation by the ASEAN Chair, maintaining crucial channels of dialogue that might otherwise have deteriorated into complete breakdown. In the South China

Sea, ASEAN has pursued a constructive approach in managing territorial and maritime disputes through the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) and the ongoing work toward an effective and substantive Code of Conduct (COC). This diplomatic persistence has proven instrumental in mitigating the risk of maritime confrontations that could have devastating consequences for the region's extensive trade networks.

The adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019 represented a pivotal assertion of regional agency in an increasingly strategic environment. Rather than succumbing to external pressures to choose side, ASEAN articulated its own regional vision that prioritises inclusive engagement with all major powers while emphasising practical cooperation across maritime, connectivity, economic and sustainable development sectors. By doing so, ASEAN has reinforced its **Centrality** and transcended the zero-sum logic of geopolitical competition. External powers are engaged through ASEAN Plus One and ASEAN-led mechanisms rather than carving the region into competing spheres of influence. In doing so, the AOIP serves as both a shield against external pressures and a bridge for constructive cooperation, preserving ASEAN's strategic autonomy while fostering an inclusive regional order.



This standing is increasingly recognised globally. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), signed by just five countries in 1976, now counts 58 signatories to date—a quiet but significant testament to ASEAN's diplomacy, legitimacy, and reach. The region's 11 Dialogue Partners, nine Sectoral Dialogue Partners, and six Development Partners reflect a network of relationships that translate into deeper cooperation and tangible impact.

And then there is Timor-Leste. After 14 years of its application, the last remaining Southeast Asian neighbour has finally joined the family as ASEAN's 11th Member State—a moment that speaks not only to ASEAN's commitment to inclusive regionalism, but also to its confidence in welcoming a new voice into the community-building project.

An increasingly integrated and interconnected region

Economic integration—the painstaking, often unglamorous work of dismantling barriers—has quietly transformed the region's commercial landscape. Through years of gruelling negotiations, tariffs have been eliminated on 98.6 per cent of traded goods. Mechanisms such as the ASEAN Single Window and the ASEAN Customs Transit System have slashed clearance times and costs. Other barriers to the movement of

goods, services, and investment across Southeast Asian borders are being methodically addressed.

But ASEAN did not stop at removing barriers. It actively built new connections. The landmark Lao PDR–Thailand–Malaysia–Singapore Power Integration Project has made cross-border electricity sharing a reality, advancing both sustainable energy transition and energy security. This milestone achievement signals that the broader ASEAN Power Grid vision, long aspirational, is now delivering tangible results: cleaner energy reaching more homes and industries, and a region better insulated against supply disruptions. Multilateral agreements on freight in transit, inter-state transport, multimodal logistics, and cross-border passenger movement have entered into force. The progressive liberalisation of regional air transport has opened the region's skies to new carriers and routes, benefiting millions of travellers.

In the digital realm, integration is most tangible in everyday life. National digital payment systems, built independently by most Member States, are now being systematically linked across borders. More consequentially, the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA)—the first of its kind—is nearing conclusion. Covering cross-border data flows, digital transactions, cybersecurity, and talent mobility, DEFA is designed

to transform a fragmented collection of digital markets into a coherent, interconnected digital economy, positioning the region as a genuine digital powerhouse.

Alongside this, ASEAN has worked to ensure that deeper integration lifts all boats. The Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) built the institutional capacity of Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam to participate fully in—and benefit from—a more connected and integrated region. For the millions of people whose livelihoods depend on micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs)—which account for 85 per cent of domestic employment across the region—dedicated programmes including ASEAN Access, the ASEAN SME Academy, and Go Digital ASEAN have opened doors to regional and international markets, financing, technology, and advisory services that were previously out of reach.

The aggregate economic impact is striking: an estimated 1.1 trillion US dollars in economic value added, representing a 5 per cent uplift to the region's collective GDP. Trade rose by 11 per cent. Foreign direct investment grew at 10 per cent annually. Around four million jobs were created, and average monthly wages climbed by 5 per cent. Numbers tell a compelling story. Behind each of these figures are real people—working more, earning more, and living better.

People's well-being at the centre

Economic integration is always intended as a means to an end. The end is people's well-being—and here too, the decade has produced meaningful advancements.

ASEAN delivered on its commitment to expand opportunity and extend social protection to those most often left behind. Under the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan, persons with disabilities gained expanded access to social assistance and vocational training. Millions of migrant workers—among the region's most vulnerable—gained access to pensions, health insurance, and work-related risk coverage through national initiatives aligned with ASEAN-led labour frameworks. Women gained better access to economic opportunities



“

Escalating great-power competition, a devastating global pandemic, territorial frictions, and a succession of economic shocks would have fractured less cohesive groupings. ASEAN not only endured these pressures and challenges; it emerged from them with its solidarity intact and its institutions meaningfully strengthened.

through targeted training and financing programmes, while institutional frameworks for protecting women and children from violence were put in place.

The pandemic underscored the value of ASEAN's prior investment in regional health mechanisms. Those frameworks accelerated knowledge-sharing and emergency responses, including vaccine distribution at precisely the moment they were needed most. Since then, the region has gone further—expanding access to healthcare, scaling digital health services, establishing a dedicated regional centre for public health emergencies, and adopting a One Health approach that integrates human, animal, and environmental health into a single framework.

On climate and the environment, ASEAN has responded to the mounting costs of ecological degradation with transboundary initiatives targeting pollution, coastal protection, fishery resources, biodiversity preservation, and sustainable practices. With climate change compounding the vulnerabilities of an already disaster-prone region, early warning systems and disaster response coordination have been strengthened through the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management.

The region has also invested in its next generation. Declarations on early childhood education, the digital transformation of education systems, higher education, and human resource development have laid the groundwork

for preparing young Southeast Asians for a rapidly changing world of work. Youth exchanges, volunteer programmes, and fellowship schemes have given students and young professionals both skills and a stake in the ASEAN project. Cultural and heritage collaborations, meanwhile, have deepened mutual understanding and cultivated a shared regional identity—one that holds the community together precisely because it is enriched, rather than threatened, by diversity.

The cumulative effect is visible in the data. Poverty rates have declined further. Life expectancy and key health outcomes have continued to improve. More children—particularly girls—are in school. Communities are better protected and better connected to opportunity than they were ten years ago.

The next horizon

ASEAN's record over the past decade is one of steady, adaptive progress—achieved, it must be said, under genuinely difficult conditions and within a consensus-based structure that must reconcile the diverse interests of sovereign nations. That is no small feat. It speaks to a deeper cohesion and to an institutional maturity capable of translating collective will into meaningful actions.

The challenges of the next chapter are, if anything, more demanding. Great-power competition is intensifying. Climate risk is no longer a future concern but a present threat. Artificial

intelligence is reshaping economies and societies faster than policy can comfortably follow. And the structural shifts reordering global trade will require responses that are faster, better-resourced, and more coordinated than anything the region has previously attempted.

The roadmap for this next chapter is the **ASEAN Community Vision 2045: Our Shared Future**—a forward-looking, strategic document that places the region's citizens at the centre of ASEAN's ambitions. It acknowledges the shifts in geopolitics, digitalisation, demographic change, and climate risk, and charts a course toward a more resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred Community. It also calls, explicitly, for ASEAN institutions—its organs, bodies, and mechanisms—to become more decisive, responsive, and future-ready, with stronger cross-sectoral and cross-pillar coordination and sufficient funding to match the Vision's ambitions.

Equally important is the human dimension of that vision: communicating it, engaging people in community building, and forging a stronger sense of ASEAN identity that makes the project meaningful not just to leaders and policymakers, but to the nearly 700 million people it is ultimately for.

The work of the next twenty years begins now and it will be understandably more interesting to see the growth and transformation of ASEAN in this new era.

ASEAN POLITICAL-SECURITY COMMUNITY

A DECADE OF ASEAN POLITICAL-SECURITY COMMUNITY-BUILDING

An End-Term Review of the APSC Blueprint 2025

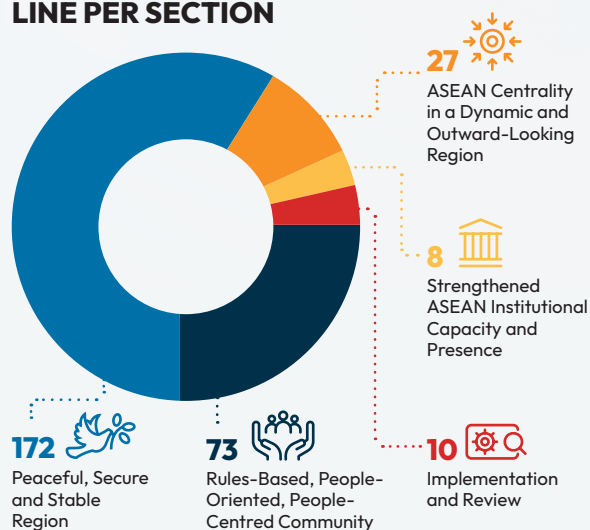
Introduction

In 2015, the ASEAN Community, composed of three Pillars—ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)—was established with the adoption of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Establishment of the ASEAN Community by the ASEAN Leaders during the 27th ASEAN Summit.

To guide ASEAN's Community-building from 2015 until 2025, the ASEAN Leaders adopted the ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, which contains the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the Blueprints of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community.

The APSC Blueprint 2025 is composed of five sections: (1) rules-based, people-oriented, people-centred community; (2) peaceful, secure and stable region; (3) ASEAN Centrality in a dynamic and outward-looking region; (4) strengthened ASEAN institutional capacity and presence; and (5) implementation and review. The 290 action lines of the Blueprint are distributed across these sections, as shown in the Figure 1. By year-end 2025, the implementation rate of the APSC Blueprint 2025 reached 99.6 per cent, with 289 of the action lines acted upon.

FIGURE 1
**NUMBER OF ACTION
LINE PER SECTION**



Achieving the goals of the APSC Blueprint 2025

The APSC Blueprint 2025 was meant to contribute to achieving the following goals: (i) a rules-based, people-oriented, people-centred community, (ii) a peaceful, secure and stable region, (iii) ASEAN Centrality, and (iv) a strengthened institutional capacity.

During the 17th ASEAN Coordinating Conference for Political Security Community (ASCCO), there was the view that the most achieved goal is “fostering a peaceful, secure, and stable region,” with this goal having seen “significant progress.” ASEAN has advanced politically sensitive agenda, including the South China Sea. It has played a crucial role in maintaining overall regional stability, preventing disputes from escalating into wider armed conflict, and advancing confidence-building measures through dialogues under ASEAN-led mechanisms.

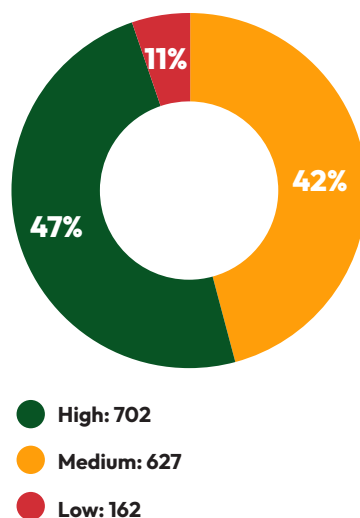
There is another set of views that the goal of a strengthened ASEAN’s institutional capacity has been the most achieved: “[o]ver the years, ASEAN has not only advanced cooperation in diverse priority areas but has been flexible in approaches and modalities to address urgent and emerging issues.” Amidst challenges encountered in enhancing ASEAN’s institutional capacity and effectiveness, there is consensus that since 2015, when the Blueprint’s implementation commenced, ASEAN’s institutional capacity has improved, although in the words of one ASEAN Member State, “modestly improved.” Nonetheless, “while there has been some progress, the demands of an increasingly complex regional environment require more agile, better resourced, and better coordinated mechanisms.”

Assessing the implementation of the APSC Blueprint 2025

In assessing the implementation of the APSC Blueprint 2025, specifically the 1,492 activities which have been recorded as implementing the various action lines, the following parameters were used: (i) extent – whether an activity has contributed in attaining the APSC pillar goal, the overall ASEAN Community-building goal or both; (ii)

impact – the magnitude of an activity’s contribution in attaining the goals the APSC pillar or the ASEAN Community; (iii) sustainability – the possibility of the activity being continued; (iv) duration – the period of time when the effect of the activity could be felt; (v) irreversibility – possibility that the activity’s effects could be undone; and (vi) probability – the chance of the intended effect happening.

FIGURE 2
IMPACT



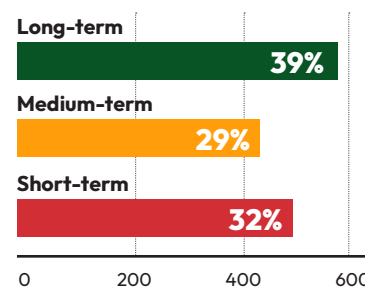
On extent, almost half (47%) of the activities were viewed as having contributed to the goal of the APSC pillar. Thirty-eight per cent (38%) were evaluated to have contributed to the overall goal of ASEAN Community-building, and 16 per cent contributed to both.

In terms of impact, almost half (47%) were seen to have high impact, followed by 42 per cent being considered to have medium impact. Eleven per cent were considered to have low impact. One activity was evaluated to have no impact at all (Figure 2).

In terms of the possibility of the activities being continued, 9 in every 10 activities were considered as having the likelihood of being continued. This is a positive outcome and shows that the activities undertaken are not one-off activities. It also indicates that sustainability has been a key consideration when activities were being planned.

As to when the effects of an activity would be felt, the results are spread across the periods: short-term, medium-term, and long-term, 32 per cent, 29 per cent and 39 per cent, respectively, with long-term having the greatest proportion and medium-term having the least (Figure 3). Should one look closely at the activities for each of the sections of the APSC Blueprint 2025, more than half of the activities under the *Rules-*

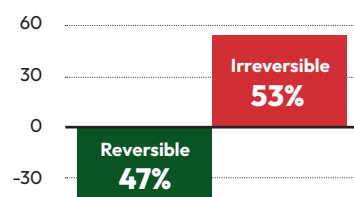
FIGURE 3
DURATION



Based, People-Oriented, People-Centred Community (52%) have been assessed to have their effects felt over the short-term. In contrast, 50 per cent of the activities under the sections *Peaceful, Secure and Stable Region* and 52 per cent of those in *ASEAN Centrality in a Dynamic and Outward-Looking Region* have been assessed to have their effects felt over the long-term. ASEAN’s goal of having a rules-based, people-oriented, people-centred community is immediate. The goal of having a peaceful, secure and stable region, as well as ensuring ASEAN Centrality, are long-term undertakings.

While 53 per cent of the activities were viewed as having irreversible effects, 47 per cent were seen to have their effects as reversible (Figure 4). The proportion of activities whose effects are seen as reversible is nearly the same as the proportion of activities whose effects are seen as irreversible.

FIGURE 4
IRREVERSIBILITY



In terms of the probability of the intended effects happening, it is worth noting that the combined proportion of those having their effects definitively and probably happening is 71 per cent (34 and 37 percent, respectively). Twenty-six per cent (26%) were viewed as having their effects possibly happening. A mere 3 per cent were seen to have their effects unlikely to happen.

The implementation of the APSC Blueprint 2025 has brought forth two separate but interrelated issues. One is the alignment of Sectoral Action Plans and/or Workplans with the APSC Blueprint 2025 itself. The other one is the nexus of efforts of APSC Sectoral Bodies and actions at the national level by the ASEAN Member States.

Ideally, Sectoral Action Plans and/or Work Plans should be aligned with the APSC Blueprint 2025. The Blueprint's action lines provide the framework and serve as the guidepost, while the Sectoral Action Plans and/or Work Plans identify how the contents contained in the Blueprint's action lines are operationalised.

Given that the APSC Blueprint 2025 "outlines broad goals for the political and security community, while sectoral bodies [are] focused on translating these into specific actions within their respective areas..., plans of action and work plans should be aligned with the APSC Blueprint." Another ASEAN Member State reinforced this view by saying that "alignment of sectoral plans with the APSC Blueprint 2025 [is] essential for regional cohesion and effectiveness."

On the nexus between sectoral efforts and national actions, Sectoral Bodies' approaches have complemented national-level undertakings by "translating broad policy goals into concrete, actionable initiatives within specific areas of cooperation." As one ASEAN Member State put it, "common frameworks and standard regional guidelines," including action plans developed by Sectoral Bodies, provided ASEAN Member States with "a shared reference point."

The case of sectoral strategies being implemented nationally but reviewed regionally implies that efforts of implementation are predominantly at the national level. It is said that "national leadership will remain essential but sectoral bodies...can play an increasingly important role in providing expertise and regional coherence." For technical and cross-border issues, there is "merit in a more sectoral-based approach, with sectoral bodies

taking the lead in coordination and implementation, but within a hybrid model that maintains close alignment with ASEAN Member State-led inputs to ensure national ownership."

On ASEAN Centrality

Amidst the current geo-political and geo-economic challenges, ASEAN Centrality remains as the linchpin of ASEAN Community-building as well as ASEAN's external relations, providing ASEAN with a "strong foundation" of its "external relations and strategic positioning in the evolving regional landscape." It enables ASEAN to "safeguard regional interests while benefitting from international cooperation." However, ensuring and promoting ASEAN Centrality could likewise be a challenge.

ASEAN's external relations has expanded significantly over the past ten years, both in terms of accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) and formal partnerships.

In addition to the number of ASEAN's dialogue partners having increased to 11 with the UK becoming one in 2021, it is also within this period that several of ASEAN's Dialogue Partners, which were already Strategic Partners, became Comprehensive Strategic Partners, a manifestation of their robust cooperation with ASEAN. These are Australia and China in 2021, the United States and India in 2022, Japan in 2023, the Republic of Korea in 2024, and New Zealand in 2025.

Equally important to highlight is the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019. Amidst the then already increasing competition among the major powers, ASEAN adopted the AOIP to reinforce the inclusive approach to cooperation that ASEAN has promoted through the years. The AOIP, with its principle of inclusivity at its core, has since become a key reference framework for cooperation between ASEAN and its external partners and has consistently gained support from ASEAN's external partners.

Conclusion and moving forward

The good progress made in ASEAN Political-Security Community-building

is attested to by the fact that the region has remained peaceful, secure and stable. The centrifugal forces of political, security, economic, and socio-cultural challenges, both traditional and non-traditional, from the intensifying geopolitical and geoeconomic competition among major powers to the effects of climate to public health emergencies to problems in the digital world, could have pulled the ASEAN Community apart. However, ASEAN, being the centripetal force, has kept the region together. ASEAN has remained the locus of identity for its members and continues as the fulcrum of cooperation with external partners.

The goals set forth in the APSC Blueprint 2025 have therefore been achieved, even if sectoral action plans and/or work plans do not perfectly align with the APSC Blueprint. Achieving the goals is a result of the complementarity between sectoral action plans and/or work plans on the one hand and national efforts on the other hand. The Implementation of the APSC Blueprint 2025 was underpinned by enhanced institutional capacity and effectiveness, which was also one of the goals set forth in the Blueprint. Meanwhile, efforts have been made to keep the APSC Blueprint 2025 adaptive and responsive to the changing strategic environment. ASEAN has taken strides to ensure that ASEAN Centrality is ensured, promoted and supported by its external partners as it pursued its Political-Security Community-building for the past 10 years.

Notwithstanding the successful implementation of the APSC Blueprint 2025, challenges were encountered along the way in terms of resources, capacity-building and even monitoring progress, promoting cross-pillar and cross-sectoral coordination, and cascading the APSC Blueprint 2025 and its activities beyond the policy level to the ground. These challenges, while serving as constraints, nonetheless allowed or paved the way for lessons to be learned—lessons that will be useful references as ASEAN moves towards the next stage of implementing the new APSC Strategic Plan to realise what is envisioned in the ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future.

The article is adapted from the APSC Blueprint 2025 End-Term Review Report, which was approved by the 30th APSC Council Meeting on 25 October 2025.

ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

A DECADE OF ASEAN ECONOMIC SUCCESS

ASEAN'S Economic Blueprint for Regional Integration and Growth

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint is a 10-year roadmap guiding economic integration among ASEAN countries. It sets strategies to strengthen trade, investment, and economic cooperation across the region.



Highly Integrated
and Cohesive
Economy



Competitive,
Innovative, and
Dynamic ASEAN



Enhanced
Connectivity and
Sectoral Cooperation



Resilient, Inclusive,
People-Oriented
ASEAN



Globally
Connected
ASEAN

ASEAN's efforts over the last 10 years have contributed to:



5%
uplift in regional
GDP, equivalent to
USD 1.1T



4 million
additional
jobs



5%
increase in
average monthly
wage



3%
increase in
overall worker
productivity



8%
uplift in foreign
direct investments,
worth USD 105B



11%
uplift in total regional
trade, equivalent to
USD 3.3T



Regional Market Integration

ASEAN Trade in Goods
Agreement Elimination of
tariffs over 98% of goods
traded in the region



Strengthening Transport and Tourism

Close to 700B tourists visited
ASEAN over the past decade,
supported by regional tourism
marketing and cross-border
travel experiences



MSME Development

Go Digital ASEAN provided
digital skills training to
more than 200,000 people
and MSMEs



Digital Transformation

Number of people with internet
access has doubled over the past
decade, supported by initiatives
in the ASEAN Digital Masterplan



Global Trade Facilitation

Partners of the Regional
Comprehensive Economic
Partnership now account for
35% of ASEAN's total trade



Trade Facilitation and Regulatory Reform

The ASEAN Single Window,
Customs Transit System, and
Harmonised Tariff Nomenclature
streamline trade, cut costs, and
speed up market access



Enhancing Energy Security

Strengthened energy security
across 6 member states, with over
3,600 km of gas pipeline developed
under the Trans-ASEAN Gas
Pipeline Initiative

Source: ASEAN Economic Strategic Plan
Review on Impact Realisation (ASPIRE)

Driving Integration and Growth into the Future



Strengthen
ASEAN's role in the
global value chain
enabled by a single
ASEAN market



Drive growth
of trade in
services within
ASEAN and
globally



Harness green
growth opportunities
while maintaining
sustainability and
driving adaptation



Drive inclusive
growth by
supporting all
labour groups



Integrate MSMEs
and the informal
sector into the
ASEAN growth
economy



ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

HOW THE AEC BLUEPRINT 2025 TRANSFORMED SOUTHEAST ASIA'S ECONOMY

When ASEAN Leaders launched the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint 2025 in November 2015, they set out an ambitious vision: to transform Southeast Asia into a highly integrated and cohesive; innovative and dynamic, with enhanced connectivity and sectoral cooperation; and a more resilient, people-oriented, people-centred community, integrated with the global economy. A decade on, a comprehensive End-Term Review of the Blueprint, together with an assessment of its outcomes and impacts, shows how far this vision has been realised in practice—driving faster growth and productivity gains, deepening ASEAN's trade and investment links regionally and with the world, and energising the region's shift towards a more digital, sustainable, and inclusive economy as it moves into the post-2025 phase.

The impact in numbers

By the end of 2025, 87 per cent of all AEC Blueprint activities (3,379 out of 3,867) had been completed, with a further 11 per cent still in progress. But the significance of the past decade lies not only in implementation rates. The End-Term Review shows that these efforts have translated into measurable economic outcomes felt by businesses, workers, and communities across the region.

This is reflected in a clear shift in ASEAN's economic trajectory over the Blueprint period. AEC initiatives are estimated to generate 1.1 trillion US dollars in added value, equivalent to a 5 per cent uplift in ASEAN's cumulative GDP. Trade expanded by 11 per cent, or 3.3 trillion US dollars, fuelled by deeper external partnerships and a more cohesive single market. Foreign direct investment also strengthened, rising 10 per cent annually even as global flows

declined, with AEC measures contributing an 8 per cent uplift amounting to 104 billion US dollars. Meanwhile, labour productivity climbed 3 per cent, translating into an average gain of 340 US dollars per worker.

The human dimension of this growth is equally significant. AEC's efforts contributed to the creation of an estimated 4 million jobs across the region, while average monthly wages rose by around 5 per cent, adding approximately 16 US dollars per month to household incomes. In a region as diverse as ASEAN, these gains represent a tangible improvement in living standards for millions of people.

Building a single market and delivering results

At the heart of the Blueprint was the goal of creating a seamless regional market. ASEAN should function as one market and production base. For businesses, this means scale and predictability; for consumers, more choices at better prices.

Tariffs on 98.6 per cent of tariff lines have now been eliminated, positioning ASEAN as one of the most open trading regions in the developing world. With tariffs largely addressed, attention shifted to the practical barriers that still slowed trade, including different procedures, documentation, and regulatory requirements at the border. In this context, the conclusion of the upgrade to the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement marks an important milestone, modernising ASEAN's core trade framework by strengthening provisions on transparency, streamlining customs procedures, and addressing non-tariff measures more systematically. Complementing this, regional initiatives such as the ASEAN Single Window and the ASEAN Customs Transit System have helped simplify and harmonise processes, shortening clearance times from weeks to days and making cross-border movements more seamless.

Progress has also extended to services, an increasingly central driver of ASEAN's growth. The ASEAN Trade in Services Agreement (ATISA) brought earlier commitments into a more ambitious, consolidated framework, while work in sectors such as transport, financial services, and professional services sought to make regulations clearer and market entry more predictable. Together, these initiatives brought ASEAN closer to operating as a single, connected market rather than a set of separate national economies.

The AEC has also worked to make ASEAN a more attractive and predictable destination for investment. The ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement and the AEC's investment work programme have focused on opening more sectors, protecting investors, simplifying procedures, and improving promotion, supported by peer reviews and new facilitation tools that help governments identify and reduce obstacles to doing business.

ASEAN's integration agenda has never been just inward-looking. It has built a full suite of ASEAN+1 FTAs with its key partners: the ASEAN–China FTA (ACFTA), ASEAN–Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP), ASEAN–Korea FTA (AKFTA), ASEAN–India FTA (AIFTA), the ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand FTA (AANZFTA), and the ASEAN–Hong Kong, China FTA, while also participating in the Regional

Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Together, these agreements—many now undergoing upgrades—anchor ASEAN at the centre of Asia-Pacific production networks and global value chains, linking its single market to the world's major production and consumer hubs.

A region built for the digital age

Over the past decade, the most visible shift has been in ASEAN's digital economy. ASEAN has put in place a robust regional cybersecurity architecture, adopted harmonised data governance frameworks, and developed practical AI ethics guidance, creating the regulatory foundations for a digital single market.

Nothing feels more personal and tangible in ASEAN's digital integration than in the everyday act of paying. Eight out of ten member states have deployed national QR payment systems. Under the ASEAN Regional Payment Connectivity initiative, these are being progressively linked, enabling consumers to pay in real time, in their own currency, at merchants across the region. Digital payments across the six largest ASEAN economies reached 1.14 trillion US dollars in 2024, projected to more than double by 2030.

Underpinning this agenda is the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), ASEAN's most ambitious digital integration initiative. DEFA is designed to go beyond traditional trade facilitation: establishing a harmonised and interoperable digital ecosystem that connects businesses, protects data, enables secure transactions, and facilitates the mobility of digital talent across borders, in a region where the digital economy is projected to reach around 2 trillion US dollars by 2030. Negotiations were substantially concluded in late 2025, and ASEAN is now working towards full conclusion, after which DEFA is expected to serve as the cornerstone of ASEAN's post-2025 digital economy agenda.

Putting sustainability at the core

Alongside its digital agenda, ASEAN has embedded sustainability more firmly into its economic integration.

ASEAN's sustainable finance work has been central to this shift, particularly the ASEAN Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance, which provides a common reference point for classifying green and transition activities and helps steer capital towards low-carbon and climate-resilient investments across energy, transport, industry, agriculture, and fisheries. In parallel, region-wide initiatives such as the ASEAN Strategy for Carbon Neutrality, the Framework for Circular Economy for AEC, and the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework have begun to orient development towards lower-carbon, more resource-efficient, and ocean-friendly growth models, including along critical mineral and agri-food value chains.

In the energy sector, ASEAN advanced both integration and decarbonisation of its power systems. The Lao PDR–Thailand–Malaysia–Singapore Power Integration Project, the region's first multilateral power-trade arrangement, showed how shared hydropower can support both energy security and decarbonisation and offered a model for further links under the broader ASEAN Power Grid. Building on this, ASEAN, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank launched the ASEAN Power Grid Financing Initiative in 2025, with around 12.5 billion US dollars in committed support over the next decade to help governments, utilities, and private investors turn priority interconnection projects into bankable investments and scale up regional trade in cleaner electricity.

Connecting the region physically and institutionally

Integration is not only a matter of policy. It requires physical and institutional infrastructure that allows people and goods to move seamlessly. In transport, the entry into force of key multilateral frameworks on goods in transit, inter-state transport, and multimodal transport has made cross-border movements easier and more predictable, with clearer and more consistent rules across several Member States. Liberalisation of air services also advanced, with ASEAN deepening its own Single Aviation Market and expanding cooperation with key partners. The EU–ASEAN Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement, for example,



Photo Credit: ©primeimages / iStock Photos

is the first region-to-region air transport agreement and expands passenger and cargo rights between the two regions, reinforcing ASEAN's role as an aviation hub in the wider Asia-Pacific.

Institutional connectivity has advanced in parallel through stronger regional disciplines and better governance practices. ASEAN has put in place region-wide competition and consumer-protection frameworks, with operational competition laws in all ASEAN Member States, a network of competition agencies, and common consumer-protection principles that make markets fairer and more predictable for businesses and households. Cooperation on intellectual property has also deepened, with joint work on patent examination, trademarks, and enforcement helping firms protect and commercialise their innovations across the region. In addition, ASEAN has promoted good regulatory practices to make rules clearer, more predictable, and more aligned across markets, reducing compliance costs for companies operating in multiple ASEAN Member States.

Leaving no one behind

Integration must be inclusive to be sustainable. Micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) constitute more than 95 per cent of all businesses in ASEAN and provide nearly 85 per cent of domestic employment. Yet, they still account for a much smaller share

of exports and value added, reflecting persistent gaps in finance, technology, and access to regional markets. In response, the AEC Blueprint 2025 has placed MSMEs at the heart of its resilience and inclusivity agenda. Its regional programmes under the Strategic Action Plan for SME Development and digital-inclusion efforts such as Go Digital ASEAN—which has trained more than 225,000 people, around 60 per cent of them women—have helped smaller firms upgrade skills, adopt digital tools, meet standards, and plug into regional and global value chains so they can move from the periphery of integration to a more central role as drivers of jobs, innovation, and broad-based growth.

At the same time, the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) and related programmes have played a significant role in narrowing development gaps, especially for CLMV members, recognising that deeper integration cannot succeed if these disparities persist. These efforts have improved hard and soft infrastructure—from transport links and trade-related facilities to targeted training for officials and regulators—while building capacities and facilitating regulatory upgrades that help less-developed economies implement their AEC commitments, raise their competitiveness, and connect more effectively to regional production networks.

When the crisis became the catalyst

No account of this decade would be complete without acknowledging COVID-19, the most disruptive event in ASEAN's recent economic history. Borders closed, supply chains fractured, and years of development gains were suddenly at risk.

But rather than breaking the region, the crisis served as a catalyst for deeper integration. ASEAN's collective response, anchored by the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, demonstrated remarkable institutional agility. The pandemic forced a rapid acceleration of digitalisation: governments migrated services online, businesses pivoted to e-commerce, and digital payments expanded at speed. The ASEAN Single Window, once a technical aspiration, became a critical lifeline for contactless trade. The pandemic did not slow ASEAN's digital agenda. It accelerated it.

A solid foundation for what comes next

The End-Term Review does not shy away from the harder truths. Progress was uneven in places. Cross-cutting areas such as digitalisation and sustainability require stronger coordination to realise their full potential. ASEAN's carbon intensity increased over the Blueprint period even as the global average declined, underlining that growth and environmental sustainability must now be pursued far more deliberately together, while the development gap between more and less advanced members, though narrowing, still demands focused and sustained effort.

Looking ahead, three strategic imperatives stand out. First, deepening intra-ASEAN trade by addressing persistent non-tariff barriers and unlocking high-growth services sectors. Second, accelerating the green transition: ASEAN sits atop an estimated 1 trillion US dollars in annual green-economy opportunities by 2030, and harnessing them will require stronger carbon-neutrality strategies, innovative financing mechanisms, and harmonised standards for cross-border trade in green goods. Third, making inclusion a core pillar rather than a parallel track because enhancing social mobility and closing the gender wage gap could boost ASEAN's economic growth by nearly 5 per cent over the next decade.

The AEC Blueprint 2025 has shown that regional cooperation, when sustained and pragmatic, can produce real economic dividends. It has quietly reshaped Southeast Asia into a more competitive, resilient, and interconnected economy, one that is better positioned to navigate an increasingly uncertain global landscape. In an era when multilateralism is often questioned, ASEAN offers a different lesson: integration need not be dramatic to be effective. Sometimes, it is the steady, incremental work of cooperation that delivers the most enduring transformation.

The article was prepared by Ahmad Zafarullah Abdul Jalil, Director, ASEAN Integration Monitoring Directorate; Glenda Reyes, Head, and Rose Anne P. Enerio, Senior Officer, Monitoring and Surveillance Coordination Division.

The latest cohort of Attachment Officers from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Viet Nam, and Timor-Leste upon completion of the programme

GRADUATION CEREMONY



HUMAN CAPITAL AT THE HEART OF INTEGRATION

THE ATTACHMENT OFFICER PROGRAMME AND ASEAN-JAPAN COOPERATION



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Intani Nur Kusuma

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Regional integration is only as strong as the people who carry it forward. Hence, ASEAN has made institutional strengthening a priority for achieving a cohesive ASEAN Community.

The Attachment Officer (AO) Programme was designed to specifically address the varying levels of institutional readiness between ASEAN's newer and longer-established members. The programme is being implemented under the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) with support from the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF).

For 12 months, officials from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Viet Nam, and, more recently, Timor-Leste (CLMV-TL) are assigned at the ASEAN Secretariat to gain immersive, firsthand exposure to ASEAN's regional processes. In addition

to acquiring technical skills, participants leave with institutional confidence, a genuine sense of shared purpose, and a stake in building an inclusive, resilient, and dynamic ASEAN Community. While individual careers advance, the region also gains.

Tracing the evolution of the Attachment Officer Programme

The AO Programme traces its origins to ASEAN's early efforts to narrow development gaps and foster a cohesive ASEAN Community through targeted

institutional capacity-building. Launched in 2001, just one year after the IAI was established, and initially funded by the Government of Japan through the Japan-ASEAN General Exchange Fund (JAGEF), the programme seconded four junior diplomats from CLMV to the ASEAN Secretariat, offering them a front-row seat to the region's unfolding integration agenda. Over time, the initiative scaled up with support from the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) since its establishment in 2006.

While early batches were assigned to the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Department, the programme expanded in 2013 to include placements



An Attachment Officer actively participating in a training activity under the programme.

From learning to action: Impacts on individuals and institutions

The impact of the AO Programme extends well beyond the one-year attachment period. For many participants, the experience becomes a pivotal stage in their professional development. The alumni of the programme frequently report improvements in English proficiency, negotiation skills, and technical understanding of ASEAN instruments, including the ASEAN Charter and sectoral cooperation frameworks.

Upon returning to their home ministries, AOs often serve as valuable “ASEAN focal points,” supporting colleagues in navigating ASEAN processes more effectively and streamlining communication with the ASEAN Secretariat. This enhances institutional coordination and ensures smoother engagement in ASEAN meetings and initiatives.

One notable example is former Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for ASCC, Ekkaphab Phanthavong. After participating in the AO Programme in 2007, he served as Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Lao PDR to ASEAN from 2018 to 2021 and was subsequently appointed Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for ASCC from 2021 to 2024. His career progression demonstrates how the AO Programme contributes not only to individual professional growth but also to strengthening ASEAN-oriented leadership within the ASEAN Secretariat itself.

Ambassador Phanthavong is now the Director General of the Department of European and American Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Lao PDR. Reflecting on the programme, he noted: “For CLMV, especially for Lao PDR, we feel that the Programme meets what we need and remains highly relevant for the new generation of officials.” This observation underscores the programme’s continued relevance in equipping officials from CLMV-TL with the confidence, institutional understanding, and leadership orientation needed to contribute meaningfully to ASEAN integration in the long term.

of AOs across the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) pillars, reflecting ASEAN’s increasingly comprehensive approach to integration. As of February 2026, 135 officials from CLMV-TL have completed the programme, many of whom now hold senior positions in their home ministries or serve within the ASEAN Secretariat. The inclusion of Timor-Leste officials in the most recent batch marks a historic milestone, underscoring ASEAN and Japan’s shared commitment to inclusive and forward-looking capacity development.

Since its inception phase, the AO Programme has been guided by a clear objective: strengthen the institutional capacity of government officials from CLMV by immersing them in the day-to-day work of the ASEAN Secretariat. Rather than relying solely on classroom-based learning, the programme subscribes to a “learning by doing” approach where participants experience and gain insights into the breadth and depth of ASEAN’s work by performing diverse Secretariat tasks

The Attachment Officers actively contribute to substantive work, attend internal meetings, and observe how ASEAN coordination and decision-making processes operate. This practical exposure is complemented by structured briefings, participation in ASEAN meetings and activities within the region and beyond, a two-week diplomatic training course, and a one-week study visit to Japan, where participants learn about development practices and regional cooperation perspectives.

By combining on-the-job experience with structured learning, the programme deepens participants’ understanding of ASEAN mechanisms and institutional dynamics, while enhancing core professional competencies, including technical and policy analysis, coordination skills, and cross-cultural communication. This integrated design ensures that AOs return to their home institutions equipped not only with knowledge of ASEAN processes but also with practical, transferable skills that can be applied immediately in their respective institutions.

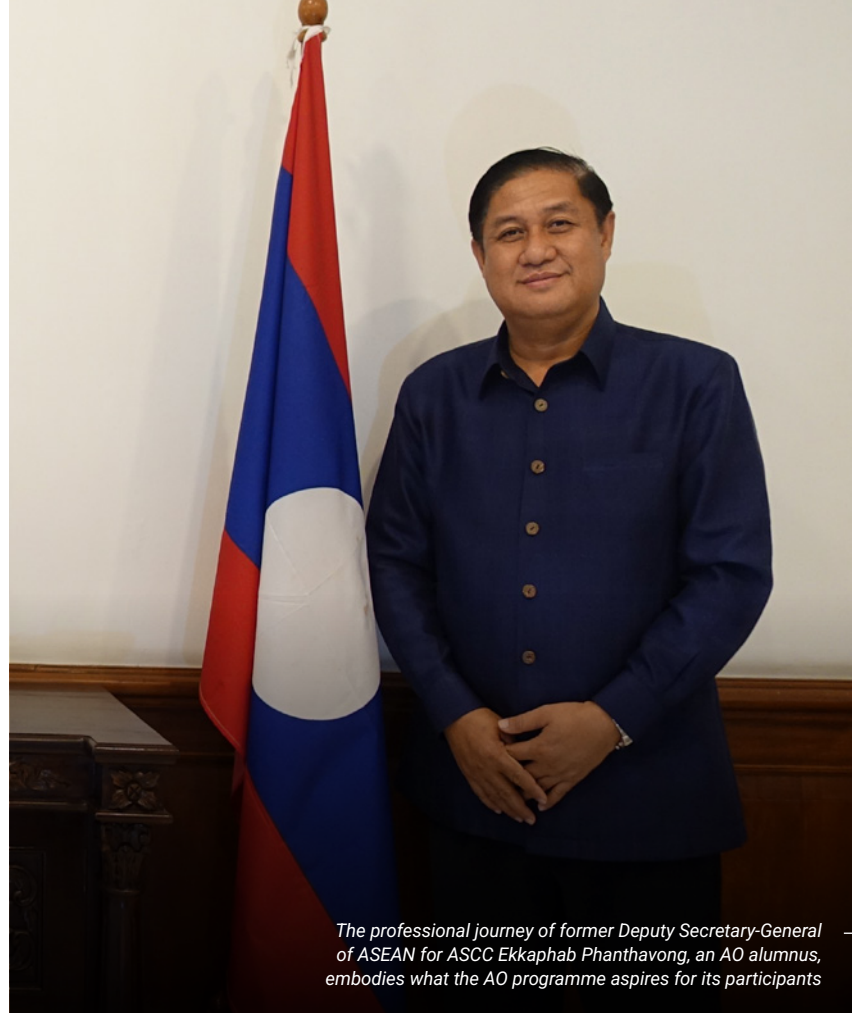
Beyond technical skills, the programme fosters strong people-to-people connections. Living and working together in Jakarta for a year allows participants to form lasting professional networks and reinforces a shared sense of ASEAN identity. This intangible yet powerful outcome enables participants to put a face to ASEAN's work through direct engagement with technical officers across sectors, building trust, practical understanding, and meaningful professional relationships through day-to-day collaboration in their respective fields.

Beyond attachment: Building long-term institutional capacity and strength

The AO Programme is one component of a long-term ASEAN-Japan partnership aimed at strengthening institutional capacity and human resource development across the region. Through JAIF, this commitment extends beyond short-term attachments to sustained investments that reinforce the ASEAN Secretariat's effectiveness and resilience.

One such initiative is the Master's Degree Programme for IAI Attachment Programme graduates at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) of Japan, launched in 2024. Designed as a follow-up pathway for AO alumni, the programme equips participants with advanced public policy knowledge, practical problem-solving skills, and a deeper understanding of Japan's political and economic landscape, enabling them to contribute more effectively to regional priorities such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), democracy, and the rule of law.

Complementing this, JAIF also supports the ASEAN Human Educational Development Scholarship Partners Programme (AHEAD50), a scholarship programme commemorating the 50th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation, which strengthens institutional linkages through human capital development. In addition, JAIF's support for enhancing the ASEAN Secretariat's e-learning platform expands access to continuous learning, ensuring that capacity development remains inclusive, scalable, and sustainable over the long term.



The professional journey of former Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for ASCC Ekkaphab Phanthavong, an AO alumnus, embodies what the AO programme aspires for its participants

Sustaining ASEAN integration through human capital development

As ASEAN advances towards deeper integration amid evolving regional and global challenges, the continued relevance of the AO Programme lies in its ability to adapt to the changing landscape, while remaining firmly anchored in human capacity development. The inclusion of Timor-Leste officials in recent batches—even prior to Timor-Leste's official accession as an ASEAN Member State—reflects Japan's foresight and proactive support in facilitating their integration process at an early stage. This demonstrates ASEAN and Japan's enduring commitment to inclusive, forward-looking institution-building, ensuring that no Member State is left behind in the integration process.

Looking ahead, the programme is expected to play an increasingly important role in cultivating a new generation of officials equipped with the skills, networks, and regional

perspectives needed to navigate complex policy environments. More than an administrative attachment, the AO Programme serves as a catalyst for regional unity, solidarity, and co-creation by narrowing development and capacity gaps, strengthening institutional linkages, and fostering people-to-people connectivity across ASEAN. Supported by Japan's long-standing commitment to ASEAN integration, as enshrined in the Joint Vision Statement on ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation Trusted Partners and its Implementation Plan, the programme demonstrates how sustained investment in human capital development can translate shared aspirations into enduring regional cooperation.

The information contained in this article represents the views and opinions of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the Government of Japan.



Learning ASEAN from Within

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I gained first-hand exposure to the Secretariat's operational work and a deeper understanding of ASEAN's political-security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation with Dialogue Partners and Development Partners. I participated in and served major ASEAN meetings, such as the 46th and 47th ASEAN Summits and Related Summits, the ASEAN Foreign Minister Meeting, and the Post-Ministerial Conference as part of the ASEAN Secretariat delegation, both in overseas missions and in Jakarta, which offered practical insights into engagement processes under ERD3's purview.

The hands-on involvement and direct observation of policy coordination strengthened my understanding of ASEAN's external relations architecture and partnership dynamics. Overall, the experience significantly contributed to my professional growth and enhanced my ability to support Timor-Leste's ASEAN integration efforts, surpassing my expectations.

The most valuable things I learned about ASEAN's regional cooperation and processes centre on how collaboration, structure, and external partnerships drive effective outcomes. First, I gained a deeper understanding of ASEAN's collaborative model, where consensus-building is paired with practical coordination across a diverse set of Member States and partners, emphasising inclusivity, consultative processes, and incremental decision-making to balance competing interests while advancing regional priorities.

I also appreciated the importance of structured policy processes, observing how policy development follows clear stages: conceptualisation, drafting, stakeholder consultation, revision, and final endorsement, supported by robust documentation, transparent inputs, and well-defined roles to ensure legitimacy and timeliness. Engagement with Dialogue Partners and development partners highlighted how external relationships amplify impact and how joint statements are negotiated and aligned with regional development plans. Finally, mentorship and hands-on exposure proved invaluable for translating experiences into practical skills in policy coordination and stakeholder management, with ongoing reflections and objective-setting guiding professional growth.

The knowledge and experience I gained over the year directly strengthened my performance as the ASEAN focal point in my line ministry. I plan to apply a more structured approach to policy coordination by leveraging the clear stages I observed in the ASEAN Secretariat. The emphasis on inclusive, consultative decision-making will guide me in coordinating with internal departments, line ministries, and external partners to build consensus and align national priorities with ASEAN strategies.

Overall, the knowledge and networks gained made it easier to navigate cross-institutional collaborations, anticipate potential issues, and deliver tangible contributions to ASEAN integration efforts at home.



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What I've enjoyed most is how much I've grown—both professionally and personally. Working in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance division gave me a clear view of how regional initiatives move from ideas to real support for ASEAN Member States, which became especially meaningful during Cambodia's ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management (AMMDM) and ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) Chairmanship. I was proud to contribute by preparing updates, supporting ASEAN Committee for Disaster Management working group meetings, assisting with high level materials, and servicing the senior-level and ministerial-level meetings.,

The programme far exceeded my expectations. Instead of just administrative tasks, I was able to support regional processes, join technical study visits, and learn from dedicated colleagues committed to strengthening ASEAN's disaster resilience. It made my year at the ASEAN Secretariat both impactful and deeply rewarding.

Each challenge became a valuable learning experience that strengthened my skills, confidence, and understanding of ASEAN's collaborative way of working.

One memory that would stay with me happened during a preparation meeting for senior and ministerial level meetings. Before joining ASEC, I used to wonder how it was done and why the process was time-consuming. But sitting inside the ASEAN Secretariat and watching the coordination unfold, I finally understood. That moment changed the way I view regional coordination.

I genuinely hope many more officers will have this opportunity in the future. This programme doesn't just build capacity—it builds friendships, understanding, and the true spirit of "One ASEAN, One Community."



ASEAN COMMUNITY VISION 2045

THE PHILIPPINES' 2026 ASEAN CHAIRSHIP

Priority Economic Deliverables

**SAIL-ASEAN: Five Strategic Thrusts
Powering ASEAN's Prosperity Corridors**

THRUST 1 **S**
**STRENGTHENING
TRADE & INVESTMENT
LINKAGES**

7 Priority
Deliverables

THRUST 2 **A**
**ACCELERATING
DIGITAL
TRANSFORMATION**

3 Priority
Deliverables

THRUST 3 **I**
**INTEGRATING ASEAN'S
MSME DEVELOPMENT
AGENDA**

1 Priority
Deliverable

THRUST 4 **L**
**LEVERAGING THE
CREATIVE ECONOMY
& INNOVATION**

4 Priority
Deliverables

THRUST 5 **A**
**ADVANCING
SUSTAINABLE &
INCLUSIVE ECONOMIES**

4 Priority
Deliverables

What Each Initiative Delivers for the Region

S STRENGTHENING TRADE AND INVESTMENT LINKAGES



ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Strategic Trade Management for Secure Regional Trade



Advancing ASEAN Energy Interconnectivity through the Operationalisation of the Enhanced Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on ASEAN Power Grid (APG)



Leader's Declaration on the Cross-Border Movement of Digital Workers



Sustainable and Resilient ASEAN Capital Markets



Substantial Conclusion of the ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Agreement Negotiations



ASEAN Semiconductor Roadmap: Enabling Pathways for Strategic Investment



ASEAN Critical Minerals Strategy for Regional Resilience and Sustainable Growth

A ACCELERATING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION



Advancing ASEAN Regional Payments Connectivity



ASEAN Declaration on Responsible AI Implementation and Regional Coordination



Signing of the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA)

I INTEGRATING ASEAN'S MSME DEVELOPMENT AGENDA



Establishment of the ASEAN Center of Excellence for MSMEs (ACE-MSMEs)

L LEVERAGING THE CREATIVE ECONOMY & INNOVATION



Establishment of the ASEAN Center of Excellence for Creative Industries (ACE - CI)



Intellectual Property Valuation Handy Manual for the ASEAN



ASEAN Declaration on the Advancement of Space Science Technology Innovation Cooperation (ASEAN Declaration on Space Cooperation)



Regional Program for Science, Technology, and Innovation on AI (Phase 1 - Health S&T) - 2026

A ADVANCING SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE ECONOMIES



ASEAN Implementation Plan for Regenerative and Resilient Agriculture Systems



Driving Financial Health Forward: Unlocking the Next Frontier of Financial Inclusion



Greener Future-Implementation of the Regional Investment Promotion Action Plan 2025-2030



ASEAN Sustainable and Resilient Tourism Investment Outlook



From Vision to Action: What 2026 Sets in Motion

A Chairship Built for the Next Chapter

Under the Philippines SAIL-ASEAN economic agenda, ASEAN's 2026 programme is designed to deliver concrete, measurable outcomes that advance the region toward the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 vision of a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred community. Every initiative carries defined deliverables that integrate economic competitiveness, innovation, digitalisation, sustainability, and MSME development support.

STRATEGIC IMPACT BY THRUSTS



TRADE & INVESTMENT

- Secure, rules-based supply chains
- USD 6 billion + GDP gain via the ASEAN-Canada FTA
- Green finance mobilisation
- ASEAN as semiconductor hub



DIGITAL ECONOMY

- DEFA: unified digital market
- Seamless payments across AMS
- Development of digital talents



MSMES & INNOVATION

- Permanent ACE-MSMEs hub
- 15-25% MSME productivity gains
- AI adoption for 97% of enterprises
- IP valuation across ASEAN



CREATIVE ECONOMY

- ACE-CI established in Philippines
- Regional space cooperation launch
- AI-powered health diagnostics
- Stronger creative IP ecosystem



SUSTAINABILITY

- Climate-resilient agriculture
- Green FDI acceleration
- Responsible tourism roadmap
- Financial health for vulnerable groups

ASCC BLUEPRINT 2025 Implementation Results



100%

**STRATEGIC
MEASURES
ADDRESSED**

All 109 measures



88%

**SECTORAL WORK
PLAN AVERAGE
IMPLEMENTATION RATE**

All ASCC sectors



96%

**DECLARATIONS AND
STATEMENTS WITH
FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS**

Adopted declarations



3,752

**NATIONAL AND
REGIONAL FOLLOW-UP
ACTIONS GENERATED**

Policies, programmes,
activities

Note: Strategic Measures addressed include both completed and ongoing initiatives. Follow-up actions are generated from 96% of adopted declarations and statements and reflect implementation at national and regional levels across ASEAN Member States.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

BUILDING AN ASEAN COMMUNITY FOR THE PEOPLE, WITH THE PEOPLE



STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Institutionalised through hundreds of sectoral activities, with youth and community participation expanded across cultural, environmental, and social welfare initiatives.

REDUCING BARRIERS, EMPOWERING THE PEOPLE



EQUITABLE ACCESS

Advances made in health services, social protection, and labour rights with gender equality embedded as a cross-cutting theme.

DRIVING DYNAMISM, RESILIENCE, AND SUSTAINABILITY



PANDEMIC RESILIENCE

COVID-19 reinforced regional cooperation and accelerated digital transformation in health, labour, and education, demonstrating ASEAN's capacity to leverage existing frameworks in times of crisis.



INCLUSIVE VISIBILITY

Women, persons with disabilities, older persons, and youth organisations gained greater visibility and opportunity through regional programmes in climate action, disaster management, and cultural exchange.



NATIONAL TRANSLATION

Regional frameworks on disability inclusion, women's empowerment, and child protection concretely translated into national policies and programmes, with hundreds of follow-up actions recorded.



DISASTER AND CLIMATE ACTION

Strengthened disaster preparedness and response through the AHA Centre and regional emergency mechanisms, while advancing climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation, and transboundary haze management.

LABOUR

ASEAN labour markets have shown steady improvement across the blueprint period, with the unemployment rate declining and labour force participation edging upward.



Unemployment rate (%)

2016

4.1%

2024

3.4%

↓ 0.7 pp



Labour force participation rate (%)

68.2%

68.4%

↑ 0.2 pp

HEALTH

Significant progress has been observed in health outcomes across ASEAN, with infant mortality falling sharply and life expectancy rising over the period.

Note: Life expectancy baseline is 2020, the earliest comparable year available.



Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)

Baseline

31

Latest

16.4

↓ 47% reduction



Life expectancy (years)

72.1

73.2

↑ 1.1 years

SOCIAL PROTECTION

The ASEAN Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Progress Report 2025 records a meaningful reduction in the proportion of the population living below the national poverty line.

Note: Poverty data refers to 2023, the latest year available in the ASEAN SDG Indicators Progress Report 2025.



Population below national poverty line (%)

2016

13.3%

Latest

10.8%

↓ 2.5 pp

Sources:

Altamont Group (n.d.). ASCC Blueprint 2025 Interim Report. ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Department.

ASEAN Secretariat. (2025). ASEAN Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Progress Report 2025. <https://www.aseanstats.org/publication/sdg2025/>.



ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

A review of the ASCC Blueprint 2025

ASEAN Community-building—spanning political security, economic progress, connectivity, and socio-cultural development—has always placed people at its core. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint 2025 has advanced this commitment and turned it into reality by attaining real progress on improving the well-being and quality of life of the ASEAN people.

After a decade of its implementation, an End-Term Review of the ASCC Blueprint 2025 has shown significant strides made by the ASCC in lifting the quality of life of the people through cooperative activities that are people-centred, environmentally friendly, and geared towards sustainable development. These include strengthening regional cooperation and partnerships, expanding cross-sectoral and cross-pillar linkages, and aligning ASCC initiatives to national policies and priorities.

The End-Term Review combines quantitative analysis of the ASCC Blueprint 2025 monitoring reports, key performance indicators, and sectoral work plan implementation with qualitative insights gathered through interviews and focus group discussions involving sectoral bodies, national focal points, and institutions across ASEAN Member States. The Review was conducted independently by the Altamont Group and applied internationally recognised evaluation criteria, with a cross-cutting focus on gender equality, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion.

A decade in numbers

At the conclusion of the ASCC Blueprint 2025, all 109 of its Strategic Measures have been completely addressed with completed and ongoing initiatives. Its sectoral work plans have an average implementation rate of 88 per cent. In comparison, 96 per cent of ASCC's adopted declarations and statements have 3,752 national and regional follow-up actions (i.e., policies, programmes, and activities).

The unemployment rate in ASEAN dropped from 4.1 per cent in 2016 to 3.4 per cent in 2024, while labour force participation increased slightly from 68.2 to 68.4 over the same period. In the health sector, similar progress was observed with a decrease in infant mortality from 31 to 16.4 per 1,000 live births between 2016 and 2024. ASEAN statistics show that life expectancy also rose to 73.2 in 2024 from 72.1 in 2020. The ASEAN Sustainable Development

Goal Indicators Progress Report 2025 has shown a significant reduction in the proportion of the population living below the national poverty line from 13.3 per cent in 2016 to 10.8 per cent in 2023. The End-Term Review complements these numbers with progress in key areas such as health development, education, environmental sustainability, labour, and social protection.

Building an ASEAN Community for the people, with the people

The ASCC Blueprint 2025 set forth actions that ensured the active participation of ASEAN people, not just beneficiaries, in regional and national initiatives. Stakeholder engagement was institutionalised as part of the Blueprint's strategic measure, with 314 sectoral activities supporting the institutionalisation of stakeholder consultations and a further 304 activities strengthening partnership and cooperation frameworks.

Member States developed programmes

to broaden youth involvement, ensuring the active participation of ASEAN youth in ASEAN's Community-building efforts. Initiatives such as the ASEAN Youth Cultural Forum and the ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive (ACHDA) increased the younger generation's awareness of ASEAN's shared identity and the value of heritage preservation. At the same time, they supported capacity building in heritage preservation through digital documentation and regional artist residencies, further fostering cultural awareness, empathy, and institutional cooperation across national ministries of culture.

Bringing together communities across the region has also been a key factor in preserving and promoting culture. Cultural performances, media broadcasts, and historical storytelling were used to promote ASEAN's rich and diverse cultures under the "Vivid ASEAN" initiative, while the "Sarong Diplomacy" project employed heritage-based collaborations to promote cross-cultural exchanges. Member States have also used radio programmes and regional events to showcase their



Photo Credit: ©CandyRetriever / iStock Photos

cultural heritage and share local stories and traditional practices with a larger audience. Data gathered from Member States have demonstrated that cultural initiatives under the ASCC Blueprint have provided artists and other talented individuals with ways and platforms to engage and connect with a broader audience. The End-Term Review results also showed that young people and women's organisations gained visibility and more opportunities by participating in regional activities.

In social welfare, climate action, and disaster management, participation is more inclusive and community-driven. Persons with disabilities were actively engaged in the implementation of the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025, while women and community leaders are engaged in resilience planning and development of localised post-disaster recovery frameworks. Across the region, climate action initiatives have engaged women, youth, and communities in environmental governance. Community forestry and biodiversity conservation programmes in a number of Member States have embedded consultation mechanisms for women and local communities to inform local environment planning and benefit sharing. Climate dialogues have also engaged youth and women's organisations, particularly in the context of climate education and awareness campaigns aligned with the ASEAN Strategic Plan on Environment.

Reducing barriers, empowering the people

Across sectoral workplans, 554 activities focused on providing equitable access to services and opportunities, while 397 focused on promotion and protection of human rights, indicating that inclusivity and addressing barriers to access and opportunities are not only peripheral concerns but core principles of the ASCC Blueprint's implementation.

In health development, different levels of success were noted in achieving universal health coverage (UHC), while improvements were seen in health finance and access to health services. To lower the risk factors associated with non-communicable diseases, stricter regulations in promoting tobacco and alternative nicotine products were implemented across the region.

Climate and health strategies have also integrated efforts to combat vector-borne diseases and illnesses caused by pollution. The End-Term Review findings also showed the effectiveness of technical subgroups and health cluster mechanisms in managing coordination, allowing countries to act and respond quickly in areas such as surveillance and emergency response. Relatedly, information sharing and disease surveillance among Member States were also strengthened by the operationalisation of the ASEAN UHC Network.

Under the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025, Member States expanded social assistance for persons with disabilities, further promoting equal access and opportunities. Vocational training programmes for persons with disabilities, which contributed to improved employment opportunities, have contributed to disability-inclusive development in the region. Notable progress was also recorded in the area of social protection, with the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection listing 122 follow-up actions. The Bali Declaration on the Enhancement of the Role and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in the ASEAN Community generated 90 follow-up actions. Both ensured that regional frameworks are concretely translated into national policies, programmes and activities.

On labour, the End-Term Review findings showed that more than seven million migrant workers benefited from ASEAN-led social security and labour frameworks through access to pensions, health insurance, and work-related risk coverage. In several Member States, returning migrant workers also received skills development and participated in reintegration programmes. Regional instruments outlining labour resilience strategies, such as skill development programs, employment reintegration efforts, and financial literacy campaigns, have also been instrumental in supporting communities affected by economic disruptions.

Similarly, public service training programmes and human resource development have also seen improvements under the ASCC Blueprint 2025, particularly in governance, leadership development, and service delivery. Results from the End-Term



Review showed that initiatives under the ASEAN Cooperation on Civil Service Matters (ACCSM) facilitated knowledge exchange programmes across Member States, fostered stronger networks for public service delivery and training, and enabled governments to adopt and adapt best practices, leading to a more strengthened and enhanced public service delivery and administration across the region.

Gender equality and the protection of women and children remain among the significant dimensions of the ASCC Blueprint's people-centred approach. Treated as a cross-cutting theme, gender has been integrated into multiple sectoral workplans, such as in health, social welfare, labour and education. Data from Member States showed their prioritisation of women's and children's access to essential health services. In the area of women's economic empowerment, the establishment of the ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs Network is considered a notable milestone that has improved women's access to economic opportunities, including access to financing and training support for women-led businesses. To ensure the protection of women migrant workers, several Member States have instituted policies that address gender-specific vulnerabilities, which also ensure that women migrant workers receive better legal protections and access to social services. Member States have also ensured the translation of key regional frameworks, such as the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Children with 109 follow-up actions, and the ASEAN Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and SDGs with 94 actions, reflecting the strength and depth of regional engagement in advancing gender equality and women's rights.

Driving dynamism, resilience and sustainability

Recognising that ASEAN is a region prone to natural disasters, the ASCC has worked tirelessly to ensure that the region is better prepared, communities are safeguarded, and the quality of life of the people is preserved.

ASEAN has improved its disaster response and efficiency, mainly

through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre). Efficient and effective coordination of humanitarian aid, deployment of early warning systems, and streamlining of post-disaster recovery efforts have also benefited from multisectoral engagement in disaster preparedness. Regional emergency response mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Emergency Response and Assessment Teams, public communication campaigns, and close collaboration across Member States have contributed to a coordinated and collective response to disasters and to equipping communities with knowledge of safety protocols, digital tools on emergency updates, and early warning systems.

With the growing impacts of climate change, the ASCC has advanced climate adaptation and environmental sustainability through various initiatives that incorporate biodiversity preservation and coastal protection initiatives into regional frameworks. Instrumental in driving biodiversity conservation and enhancing ecosystem management is the ASEAN Heritage Parks (AHPs) programme, which also strengthened ranger training programmes and facilitated dialogues on wildlife trafficking and forest protection. ASEAN has also continuously addressed the issues of transboundary haze pollution with mechanisms such as the Myanmar-Thai Transboundary Haze Pollution Prevention Committee and regional fire protection initiatives, which improved real-time data sharing, resource mobilisation, and cross-border policy alignment.

In 2020, the region's resilience was tested by the COVID-19 pandemic. ASEAN's response to the pandemic demonstrated its strength in leveraging and maximising its existing mechanisms and partnerships, while also exposing gaps in the region's preparedness for public health emergencies. Cross-border pandemic response measures, coordinating vaccine distribution and facilitating knowledge sharing between health ministries have been guided by regional frameworks, including the ASEAN Public Health Emergency Coordination System. Member States have also accelerated the digitalisation of health services, including telemedicine, online consultations, and





digital health monitoring platforms, which have been integrated into their national healthcare systems well beyond the pandemic. The pandemic has also hastened digital transformation in the areas of labour and education, where virtual platforms became essential in sustaining learning and workforce development.

Central to ensuring that the gains of the ASCC Blueprint's decade-long implementation are sustained, the ASCC has undertaken efforts to translate ASEAN commitments into national laws and long-term strategies, as evidenced by its more than 3,000 follow-up actions, at both the national and regional levels, to adopt declarations and statements. Member States have successfully translated ASCC priorities, such as social protection measures, into national programmes; disaster resilience frameworks into national disaster response laws; and gender sensitivity into policies and programmes. Several Member States have also developed national-level frameworks that ensure ASEAN's regional commitments align with national laws and policies—reflecting the impact of national integration on the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of regional initiatives.

Regional partnerships and cross-pillar and sectoral collaborations have also played a critical role in sustaining the gains of the ASCC Blueprint 2025. Examples from joint environmental programmes, such as in the Mekong River Basin, and multi-sectoral cooperation initiatives have

also demonstrated the importance of regional partnerships in promoting shared responsibility and ensuring sustainability, including through knowledge transfer and regional learning exchanges.

Building on a decade of lessons, gains, and good practices

The ASCC Blueprint 2025 has been instrumental in building a people-centred, people-oriented ASEAN Community that is more resilient, dynamic, inclusive, and sustainable. Its implementation has advanced climate action and disaster resilience, enhanced social welfare and protection, and ensured that ASEAN people are better prepared, protected, and supported, especially in times of crises, emergencies, and disasters.

While the End-Term Review outlined ASCC's milestones and accomplishments, it is equally candid about what still needs to be done.

The uneven gains in the Blueprint's implementation resulted from gaps in participation, resource constraints, and the need for deeper institutional and stakeholder ownership, stronger and more sustainable financing, and greater alignment between regional commitments and national action. The breadth and comprehensiveness of initiatives under the ASCC Blueprint 2025 also pose further challenges to the ASCC's capacity and resources, underscoring the value of prioritisation

and strategic focus. Communication and outreach efforts have largely focused on institutional stakeholders rather than grassroots communities, particularly in rural and remote areas. The End-Term Review points to the need to focus on high-impact, sustainable initiatives; strengthen cross-sectoral and cross-pillar coordination; and invest in more robust monitoring, evaluation, learning, and communication systems.

As ASEAN looks beyond 2025, the ASCC Blueprint leaves behind both a foundation and a roadmap. The ASCC Strategic Plan inherits this decade's lessons—on what works, where the gaps and challenges lie, and what it truly takes to translate ASEAN's shared vision into a people-centred, inclusive, sustainable, and resilient community. The years ahead present an opportunity to carry forward the ASCC Blueprint's core objective of putting people at the centre and further improving their quality of life—leaving no one behind in ASEAN's regional cooperation and community-building.

The article is drawn from the Interim Report of the ASCC Blueprint 2025, covering the period of 2016-2023, submitted by the Altamont Group, an independent consultant for the End Term Review of the ASCC Blueprint 2025. The Final Report of the ASCC Blueprint 2025, which covers the period until 31 December 2025, is currently being developed.

The article was prepared by Jennifer L. Santos, Senior Officer, and Astri Fajawarti, Officer, ASCC Monitoring Division.

VIEWPOINT

THE PHILIPPINES' ASEAN CHAIRSHIP 2026

Advancing Gender Responsiveness in the ASEAN Community Vision 2045

Ermelita V. Valdeavilla

*Chairperson of the
Philippine Commission on
Women (PCW)*

*Philippine Representative
to the ASEAN Ministerial
Meeting on Women
(AMMW)*



Back in 2017, the Philippines, as ASEAN Chair, championed the ASEAN Declaration on Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. As the current ASEAN Chair, the Philippines is advancing another ASEAN Declaration focused on the gender-transformative implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045.

How does a gender-transformative approach build on ASEAN's existing gender-responsive approach, and how will this shift help advance ASEAN's goal of an inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Community by 2045?

Ermelita V. Valdeavilla:

A gender-transformative approach builds on ASEAN's earlier gender-responsive efforts by moving beyond integrating gender considerations into policies to address the deeper, structural drivers of inequality. While gender-responsive approaches have been instrumental in making programmes more inclusive and responsive to the different needs of women and men, persistent gaps highlight that underlying and compounding issues—such as unequal power relations, entrenched social norms, and systemic barriers—must be confronted more directly.

As ASEAN advances towards the Community Vision 2045, there is increasing recognition that meaningful and lasting progress requires transforming the root causes of gender inequality across ASEAN. A gender-transformative approach enables this shift by promoting changes not only in policies but also in institutions, systems, and societal mindsets. This ensures that women are not just beneficiaries of development, but equal and active architects of our regional future. By building on past achievements while addressing structural inequalities, the Philippines aims to ensure that ASEAN's gender agenda is both transformative and enduring.

This is particularly critical in areas where disparities remain pronounced, including women's access to economic opportunities, the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, and the persistence of gender-based violence. By embedding a gender-transformative lens across all three ASEAN pillars and its strategic frameworks, ASEAN is better positioned to strengthen inclusion, enhance resilience, and ensure that development gains are both equitable and sustainable. Ultimately, this contributes to the realisation of a truly people-centred and people-oriented ASEAN Community by 2045, establishing equality not just as a policy we implement, but as the very foundation of our shared future.



As ACW Chair, what are your views on leveraging cross-sectoral cooperation among ASCC, APSC and AEC to further mainstream and institutionalise gender perspectives, particularly in light of the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework's implementation?

Ermelita V. Valdeavilla:

From the ACW's perspective, cross-sectoral cooperation is paramount. Gender equality is inherently cross-cutting, intersecting deeply with the economic development mandates of the AEC, the political-security concerns of the APSC, and the socio-cultural dimensions of the ASCC.

Many of the challenges faced by women—whether in employment, access to services, climate change impacts, peace and security, emerging technologies, or participation in decision-making—are inherently intersectional. However, the capacity for intersectional planning and programming across ASEAN remains uneven. These issues are shaped by interconnected structural factors that cannot be effectively addressed within sectoral silos. Strengthening coordination among the ASCC, APSC, and AEC is therefore not only important but necessary to enable more coherent, responsive, and sustained progress toward the ASEAN Community Vision 2045. Without such cross-sectoral integration, efforts to advance gender equality risk remaining fragmented and limited in impact.

The ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework (AGMSF) provides a strong foundation. Moving forward, its effective implementation will depend on how well sectoral bodies collaborate in practice. This includes strengthening cross-pillar coordination mechanisms, enhancing the collection and use of sex-disaggregated data, and building institutional capacities to apply gender analysis in sectoral policies and programmes.

Equally important is fostering joint initiatives that integrate gender and inclusion from the outset, rather than treating them as a complementary afterthought. As ACW Chair, the Philippines continues to actively advocate for a whole-of-ASEAN approach—one that firmly recognises gender equality as a shared responsibility across all pillars. This will be key to deepening and sustaining the institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming in the years ahead.

The Philippines is also championing the establishment of an ASEAN Centre of Excellence on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment this year. What does the Centre aim to achieve, and what benefits can ASEAN and its citizens—particularly women and girls—expect from its work in the coming years?

Ermelita V. Valdeavilla:

The proposed ASEAN Centre of Excellence on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (ACE-GEWE) is envisioned



“By embedding a gender-transformative lens across all three ASEAN pillars and its strategic frameworks, ASEAN is better positioned to strengthen inclusion, enhance resilience, and ensure that development gains are both equitable and sustainable.

as a regional hub for gender research, knowledge management, expertise, capacity-building efforts, and policy innovation to support ASEAN Member States in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.

At its core, the Centre is a strategic regional initiative aimed at strengthening ASEAN's institutional capacity to systematically translate political commitments into coordinated, evidence-based, and measurable action. By providing research, policy guidance, capacity building, and regional coordination, the Centre will strengthen institutional coherence and support Member States in operationalising these commitments sustainably. It will support and empower governments and institutions while also facilitating the exchange of good practices and lessons learned across ASEAN.

The Centre is also expected to play a strategic role in addressing emerging and priority areas, including the care economy, women's economic empowerment, and gender-responsive approaches to climate action and digital transformation. In doing so, it will help ensure that ASEAN remains adaptive and forward-looking, while keeping gender equality at the centre of its development agenda.

For ASEAN citizens—particularly women and girls—the impact of the Centre will be seen in a sustained, coordinated institutional mechanism

that includes more inclusive policies, improved access to opportunities and services, and stronger systems to protect and promote their rights. Over time, it is expected to contribute to a more coherent, coordinated, and results-oriented approach to gender mainstreaming across the region.

During the Philippines' ASEAN Chair year, how does the Philippines view the role and leadership of women and girls in advancing ASEAN's gender equality agenda, and how will it champion these efforts across the ASEAN Community?

Ermelita V. Valdeavilla:

The Philippines firmly views women and girls as central to advancing ASEAN's gender equality agenda—not only as beneficiaries of development, but as leaders and active partners in shaping it. Across the region, women play vital roles in governance, economic development, community-building, and peace and security. However, their contributions are not always fully recognised or supported.

As ACW Chair, the Philippines is committed to creating more opportunities to elevate and strengthen women's leadership. This includes convening the 4th ASEAN Women Leaders' Summit, anchored on the theme “The Year of Women's Leadership for Inclusive Prosperity in the ASEAN Region,” and advancing regional cooperation on women's economic empowerment and the care economy through the ASEAN High-Level Conference on the Care Economy.

At the same time, promoting women's leadership requires addressing the structural barriers that limit their participation. This includes advocating for policies that expand women's access to decision-making spaces, enhance economic opportunities, and support a more equitable distribution of unpaid care and domestic work.

Through these efforts, the Philippines aims to ensure that women and girls are not only included in ASEAN's development processes, but are actively shaping its future and contributing to a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable ASEAN Community.



A PEOPLE-CENTRED ASEAN THE DAWN OF A NEW VISION



Miguel Musngi
Assistant Director/Head



Jacel Javier-Paguio
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Ajeng Purnama Pratiwi
Senior Officer



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The year 2026 marks the first year of implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and its Strategic Plans. The ASEAN Leaders gave a clear mandate that ASEAN's 20-year development roadmap would realise a resilient and inclusive people-centred ASEAN Community. At the heart of this vision is the recognition that people must remain at the centre of ASEAN's community-building processes.

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future signals an important evolution in ASEAN's community-building journey. Building on the earlier phases that focused on institutional integration, the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 places stronger

emphasis on regional solidarity, human rights, and social inclusion. This shift reflects ASEAN's growing recognition that sustainable regional progress cannot be measured solely by economic growth. Rather, it depends equally on the empowerment, protection, and meaningful participation of the region's people.

Within this context, the concept of "people-centred ASEAN" gains renewed significance. It is anchored on meaningful participation, good governance and accountability, and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. These principles form the bedrock of the new Strategic Plans that will guide ASEAN's development over

the next two decades. Together, they reaffirm that the success of ASEAN integration lies in improving the lives of its people.

Actors and agency of change

A people-centred ASEAN Community makes clear that women, children, persons with disabilities, older persons, and communities in vulnerable situations are more than beneficiaries of regional cooperation; they are rights-holders, partners, and drivers of social transformation. Turning this vision into coordinated action will shape ASEAN's next phase of community-building.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Strategic Plan articulates a shared vision of what a people-centred ASEAN Community looks like, as it charts the results ASEAN hopes to achieve after a decade and outlines the pathways to reach those goals. The Strategic Plan includes 112 strategic measures that cover a broad spectrum of social welfare, equity, and human development concerns across the region.

At this critical juncture, the ASCC Strategic Plan sets the direction for ASEAN's coordinated efforts. It serves as the bridge between high-level aspirations under the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the 2026–2030 Work Plans of the 15 ASEAN Sectoral Bodies (ASBs) and ASEAN Entities within the ASCC. Out of the 15 ASBs within the ASCC, four embarked on an innovative undertaking to synchronise the development of their five-year work plans. These sectoral bodies are the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW), the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), the Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (SOMSWD), and the Senior Officials Meeting on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication (SOMRDPE). Collectively, they have been mandated to advancing a substantial share of the Strategic Plan's priority measures over the next ten years.

The synergy of these four bodies is crucial as they lead and contribute to a significant majority of the strategic measures, with SOMSWD being the sectoral body leading or co-leading the most number of measures across the ASCC. While each of these bodies plays a distinct role, their complementary and combined contributions underscore the growing importance of cross-sectoral collaboration within ASEAN's socio-cultural pillar.

This innovative model sharpens functional complementation at both the regional and country levels. It recognises SOMSWD's role as the implementation lead given its strong operational presence on the ground. Meanwhile, ACWC acts as a rights advocate, ensuring that policies and programmes remain aligned with international and regional human rights standards; ACW serves as the gender architect and vision leader on gender equality and

women's empowerment; and SOMRDPE contributes as a catalyst for grassroots participation, strengthening engagement with communities and civil society.

Therefore, the agreement to develop synchronised work plans goes beyond streamlining programme management. These bodies increasingly share common agendas, and the activities and outputs in previous work plan cycles were often pursued jointly. Also, national-level implementation requires stronger inter-agency coordination among ministry focal points. This approach moves ASEAN cooperation away from siloed initiatives toward integrated national and regional outcomes.

Looking back: Milestones from the past five years

As ASEAN moves forward with the implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, it is equally important to recognise the foundations laid during the implementation of the ASCC Blueprint 2025. Reviewing the progress made between 2015 and 2025 provides important context for understanding ASEAN's next phase of development.

Looking back at this period reveals significant milestones achieved by ACW, ACWC, SOMSWD, and SOMRDPE through their respective work plans. These efforts have helped advance gender equality and women's empowerment, social protection and social welfare and development, rural development and poverty alleviation, and inclusive participation across the region.

On gender equality and women's empowerment

One of the most notable developments during the ASCC Blueprint 2025 period has been the advancement of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in ASEAN. At the midpoint of the Blueprint's implementation, only a small number of ASEAN Member States had adopted National Action Plans on WPS. Since then, WPS has gathered considerable momentum.

The adoption of the Joint Statement on WPS and the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS provided important regional frameworks for advancing

this agenda. Several ASEAN Member States have since developed and begun implementing their national plans, while others are developing nationally tailored policy frameworks aligned with the WPS agenda.

Regional platforms have also played a critical role in sustaining this momentum. The ASEAN WPS Summits held in 2021, 2023 and 2025, under the leadership of Cambodia, Indonesia and Malaysia, have provided important spaces for dialogue and the exchange of experiences and awareness-raising on the WPS agenda, including highlighting the contributions of women's organisations at the community level.

An important institutional development has been the establishment of the Advisory Group on WPS in ASEAN, which serves as a mechanism for cross-sectoral coordination. The Advisory Group brings together ASEAN Sectoral Bodies and entities such as ACW, ACWC, the ASEAN Defence Senior Officials' Meeting (ADSOM), the Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime Working Group on Counter-Terrorism (SOMTC WG on CT), the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (ASEAN-IPR), and the ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs Network (AWEN).

On addressing unpaid care work and strengthening the care economy

Another key milestone during this period has been the growing recognition of the care economy. ASEAN has long acknowledged the link between unpaid care work and women's economic empowerment, recognising that unequal care responsibilities remain closely tied to persistent gender inequalities and social norms that disadvantage women and girls. In 2024, ASEAN Leaders adopted the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Fostering Resilience Towards the Post-2025 ASEAN Community, building on the ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy. Moving forward, stronger partnerships between women and men, and between girls and boys, will be essential for shifting mindsets and promoting the recognition, redistribution, and remuneration of unpaid care and domestic work.



On institutionalising gender mainstreaming

ASEAN has also strengthened efforts to institutionalise gender mainstreaming across its cooperation frameworks. The adoption of the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework, together with the establishment of the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Steering Committee, represents an important institutional milestone. Comprising representatives from ACW, the ACWC, the ASEAN Cooperation on Civil Service Matters (ACCSM), the ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE), ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (ACCMSME), and the Senior Labour Officials Meeting (SLOM), the Steering Committee provides a platform for regional dialogue and coordination while strengthening the capacity of ASEAN Sectoral Bodies to integrate gender perspectives into policies and programmes.

On social welfare, rights and inclusion

During the implementation of the ASCC Blueprint 2025, the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted and operationalised across ASEAN Member States. The masterplan institutionalised the participation of organisations of persons with disabilities in ASEAN platforms and processes and embedded disability inclusion in the regional development agenda across all sectors.

The promotion and protection of women's rights and children's rights figured prominently as ASEAN ensured synergy between the implementation of the regional plans of action on the elimination of violence against women and violence against children with national policies and programmes. Significantly, ASEAN leveraged regional cooperation to strengthen child online protection with the ASEAN Leaders' adoption of the Regional Plan of Action for the Protection of Children from All Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse in ASEAN and the regular convening of the ASEAN ICT Forum on Child Online Protection. The latter brings together governments, industry stakeholders, NGOs, and children and youth organisations to deliberate on strategies and actions to combat online child sexual exploitation and abuse and empower children and youth.

The ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection continued to be implemented. SOMSWD championed the development of regional guidelines that enabled practitioners and frontline service providers, particularly in addressing the intersectionality of social protection, disaster risk reduction, and climate change, and in protecting women and children.

On community-driven development

Multi-stakeholder approaches, such as the Public-Private-People Partnership (4P) model and the ASEAN

Villages Network, have strengthened collaboration among governments, rural communities, and the private sector. Building on this, the ASEAN Master Plan on Rural Development places greater emphasis on empowering rural communities by promoting sustainable livelihoods, improving digital connectivity and reinforcing local institutions, ensuring rural areas remain integral to the region's inclusive development journey toward 2045.

Sustaining the momentum

As ASEAN embarks on implementing the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, sustaining momentum will require promoting inclusion in systems and structures through proactive, forward-looking, and anticipatory approaches that strengthen resilience, particularly for vulnerable groups across the region. Women, children and persons with disabilities will increasingly be recognised not merely as vulnerable recipients but as active agents of peacebuilding, innovation and economic participation. The partnership approach moves beyond gender-specific silos, engaging men and boys in the redistribution of care responsibilities and the dismantling of harmful stereotypes.

Greater cross-sectoral synergy and streamlined coordination will be necessary to overcome barriers to collaboration, strengthen policy coherence and optimise resources at both regional and national levels. Critical to this endeavour is ensuring that engagement with external partners remains aligned with ASEAN's own priorities and guided by the principle of ASEAN Centrality. Regional cooperation should continue to reflect the needs and aspirations of the people of ASEAN. This will be complemented by effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress in implementing the 112 strategic measures outlined in the ASCC Strategic Plan.

Ultimately, the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 is more than a long-term roadmap. It represents a collective commitment to building a resilient, inclusive, and people-centred ASEAN Community. Its success will be measured by how effectively ASEAN's institutions work together to empower people as co-creators of ASEAN's shared future.

In Human Terms Stories from Across ASEAN

The ASEAN Editorial Team

Over the years, *The ASEAN* has shared stories from across ASEAN Member States that show how regional cooperation cascades into national and community actions and takes shape in everyday life. Some feature beneficiaries of national and regional initiatives, while others highlight advocates, creators, and community voices whose experiences bring those actions into human focus. Collected here, these stories offer a glimpse of the impact as it is lived on the ground.

Poverty Eradication and Social Inclusion

For many beneficiaries, impact begins with something immediate: help in a moment of hardship, a chance to continue school, or access to spaces that once felt out of reach.



Gemma Ambuyoc, Philippines

Gemma Ambuyoc's story shows how support can change the course of a family's life. For her, the *Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program*, or 4Ps, was a lifeline. Introduced by the Philippine government in 2008, 4Ps is a conditional cash transfer programme that supports low-income households through health and nutrition grants, rice subsidies, and educational assistance for children under 18, while requiring parents to keep their children in school and ensure regular health check-ups.

Once burdened by severe hardship, Gemma later looked back on the programme as a turning point that "made a huge difference in our lives." In 2017, she returned to school while selling clothes and beauty products to earn additional income. She also credited the 4Ps family development sessions with broadening her perspective and helping her see new possibilities for herself and her family.

"I became empowered and learned about my rights and responsibilities. Before, my whole world revolved around taking care of my family. But through the sessions, I learned that even though you're a mother, your life isn't over." - Gemma Ambuyoc in "Breaking the Cycle of Poverty" in *The ASEAN* Issue 36, "Reducing Poverty, Uplifting Lives"

<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/breaking-the-cycle-of-poverty/>



Touch Phalla, Cambodia

Touch Phalla's life changed early. At 12, just after finishing primary school, she had to leave school and help support her family after her father abandoned them in the 1980s. In Phnom Penh, she baked traditional Khmer cakes and sold them on foot around her neighbourhood, setting aside her dream of becoming a doctor. "All I do is work to provide for my family, to provide the essentials," she told *The ASEAN*.

Since 2019, she has received support through Cambodia's Cash Transfer Programme for Poor Households. She said the assistance has helped ease her family's burden, particularly by covering electricity costs and medicine for her mother, who has diabetes and high blood pressure. Though her earnings from the shop remain modest, the regular cash transfer has provided an important source of stability.

"My dream is to have an adequate livelihood. As women, we need to work hard, be patient, and persevere. Although I can't pursue my dream of becoming a doctor, I hope that my niece can be one in the future." - Touch Phalla in "Cash for Hope: A Story from Cambodia" in *The ASEAN* Issue 36, "Reducing Poverty, Uplifting Lives"

<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/cash-for-hope-a-story-from-cambodia/>



Dr. Nantanoot Suwannawut, Thailand

Dr. Nantanoot Suwannawut, known as Apple, is a member of the ASEAN Community Blind Forum. She shared with *The ASEAN* her journey as a person with visual impairment handling school, work, and public life. In mainstream education, she recalled, "Everything required additional effort." Her experience moves the conversation from individual hardship to structural inclusion, showing why accessibility, representation, and participation must remain central to ASEAN's social agenda.

"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.”- Dr. Nantanoot Suwannawut from The ASEAN Community Blind Forum in “Self-Advocacy and Shaping Policy,” *The ASEAN Issue 42*, “Breaking Barriers: Disability Rights and Inclusion in ASEAN.”

<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/self-advocacy-and-shaping-policy-dr-nantanoot-suwannawut-the-asean-community-blind-forum/>

Youth Shaping the Future

Across ASEAN, young people are not simply being prepared for the future. They are already shaping it. Through summits, dialogues, and youth-led platforms, they are building friendships, sharing ideas, and turning regional identity into a lived, meaningful reality.



ASEAN Youth Organization

ASEAN Youth Organization (AYO) is the 2024 ASEAN Prize winner. The organisation grew from a loosely connected Facebook page into one of the region’s most dynamic youth platforms, bringing together young people across ASEAN Member States and beyond through programmes in education, research, environmental advocacy, journalism, and leadership development. Founded on friendship and collaboration, AYO has created opportunities for youth from both urban

and rural communities to build skills, lead projects, and make an impact in their own societies. Its recognition with the ASEAN Prize reflects years of work to empower young people and strengthen regional connections across Southeast Asia.

“What makes AYO unique is friendship. It’s not just about completing a one-time project but creating meaningful relationships within the team, which we call AYO Family, partners, and beneficiaries. We need to understand that young people are not just tomorrow’s leaders— they are today’s changemakers. Each member brings a unique set of skills, and we harness this diversity to enrich our projects. From there, we learn how to conduct advocacy, organise grassroots campaigns, and collaborate with as many partners as possible. Hopefully, there will be more opportunities for collaboration to create even greater impact,” Sarah Rauzana, Chairperson of the ASEAN Youth Organization (AYO) in “ASEAN Prize Winner 2024: Youth, Let’s Go with AYO!” in *The ASEAN Issue 41*, “Towards a Mobile and Connected ASEAN.”

<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/asean-prize-winner-2024-youth-lets-go-with-ayo/>



ASEAN Youth for Biodiversity

The ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) has been steadily creating space for young people to take part in biodiversity work across the region, not as symbolic participants, but as organisers, storytellers, educators, and advocates. Through initiatives such as the ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Leaders programme and the Young ASEAN Storyteller platform, ACB has supported youth from different backgrounds and countries, giving them visibility, regional networks, and opportunities to connect their local work with wider ASEAN conversations.

“They are trying to do their best in each role, not only in biodiversity conservation but also in waste management and risk reduction. In each field, there are a lot of young people engaging and trying to fill the space. Conservation has taught me that passion, people, and creativity are just as important as science. Even though you do not have a science background, you can pursue your passion and do what you like to do.” - Thae Eindra Hsu, 2023 Youth Biodiversity Leader from Myanmar in “On Dolphins and Coastal Life in the Gulf of Mottama,” in *The ASEAN Issue 49-50*, “ASEAN’s Roots and Reefs: Nature’s Strongholds.”

<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/on-dolphins-and-coastal-life-in-the-gulf-of-mottama-thae-eindra-hsu-2023-youth-biodiversity-leader/>

Art, Culture, and Shared Spaces

The arts offer another way of tracing impact across the region. The ASEAN Artists Residency Programme, launched to nurture young and emerging artists and deepen mutual understanding across cultures, has become one of the clearest examples of this. Through residencies, exhibitions, and exchanges, artists have found space to interrogate memory, environment, identity, and belonging.



“I heard about the programme through social media. This is an opportunity for me to work with ASEAN alongside other artists from Southeast Asian countries. I believe this programme will benefit the artists in this region by introducing our arts and crafts to the bigger platform.” Saiful Razman, ASEAN Art Residency Programme (2022) in “Finding Home Away from Home,” in *The ASEAN Issue 23*, “ASEAN Revs Up Digital Transformation.”

“In ASEAN, we have many artists who are very good. ASEAN can be a platform for us to share opportunities and news

about art. We have a rich culture, and our art is charming. When you visit a place and move a little, you can already see a different culture, even in Lao. But we still do not really know how to preserve our art" - Souphalak Phongsavath, ASEAN Art Residency Programme (2025) in "The Little Beetle's Journey," *The ASEAN Issue* 49-50, "ASEAN's Roots and Reefs: Nature's Strongholds."

2025 ASEAN Art Residency Programme: "The Little Beetle's Journey" <https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/2025-asean-art-residency-programme-the-little-beetles-journey/>
<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/the-asean-artists-residency-programme/>
<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/asean-artists-residency-programme-2022-finding-home-away-from-home/>



ASEAN-India Artists' Camp

Twenty visual artists from ASEAN Member States and India gathered in Udaipur, Rajasthan, in 2022 to participate in the second ASEAN-India Artists' Camp, centring on the theme "Oceans of Connectivity." The camp was supported by the ASEAN-India Fund and implemented with the assistance of the SEHER Foundation, a nonprofit organisation dedicated to promoting music, dance, visual arts, theatre, and cinema.

From ASEAN, the following artists joined the camp: Nabil Fikri bin Haronli (Brunei Darussalam), Samrit Keo (Cambodia), Eddy Sulisty (Indonesia), Sone Khounpaseuth (the Lao PDR), Edroger Rosili (Malaysia), Aye Myat Soe (Myanmar), Melissa Abuga-a (the Philippines), Phattaraporn Leanpanit (Thailand), and Nguyen Phuong Linh (Viet Nam).

<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/bridging-cultures-through-art-and-music/>

<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/asean-india-artists-camp-2022/>

Digital Transformation, STEM, and Women Empowerment

Digital transformation matters most when it reaches people in practical ways, whether through small businesses, scientific research, or new technology designed to solve everyday problems. The stories gathered by *The ASEAN* show that innovation becomes meaningful when it widens access, supports livelihoods, and creates new paths for collaboration across borders.



Hensona Anak Munah, Brunei Darussalam

Across Southeast Asia, the benefits of digitalisation remain unevenly shared. Although governments and private companies have embraced digital tools to boost growth and support post-pandemic recovery, many MSMEs still lack the skills needed to take part in the digital economy.

Supported by Google.org, The Asia Foundation's ASEAN-endorsed Go Digital ASEAN initiative was created to help close that gap. In 2022, the initiative has trained more than 225,000 underemployed youth and small-business owners, including persons with disabilities and indigenous entrepreneurs, with a special focus on women.

"Even though I have never been a victim of digital fraud or internet scam, I am still cautious when it comes to the internet. I know that digitalisation can make our lives easier. We can order anything at the tip of our fingers! However, I deeply understand that this technology comes with its own risks. All of this frightened me. Thus, this training helped boost my confidence [...] There are many benefits in using social media to promote our business. We do not need to go to other countries to promote our crafts. My customers from all over

the world can just click and send me a message through direct message." - Hensona Anak Munah in "Go Digital ASEAN Initiative: Narrowing the Digital Divide, One Entrepreneur at a Time," in *The ASEAN Issue* 23, "ASEAN Revs Up Digital Transformation."

<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/go-digital-asean/>



Nguyen Thi Hiep, Viet Nam

Prof. Nguyen Thi Hiep, who has spent much of her career developing biomaterials and smart hydrogels for tissue regeneration, particularly for cancer patients, participated in the first ASEAN-India Women Scientists Conclave held in Singapore from 24 to 26 April 2024. Organised under the ASEAN-India Framework, the event marked an important step in strengthening regional collaboration and gender equity in STEM.

"It (ASEAN-India Women Scientists Conclave) creates a valuable space for women scientists from across the ASEAN region and India to connect, share knowledge, and explore potential collaborations... By highlighting the work of women scientists, these initiatives also increase our visibility, which can attract the attention of potential investors, industry partners, and policymakers." - Prof. Nguyen Thi Hiep, Dean of the School of Biomedical Engineering at International University, Viet Nam National University in "ASEAN-India Women Scientists Conclave: Creating Spaces for Growth and Visibility in Science," in *The ASEAN Issue* 44, "Caring Communities: ASEAN's Response to Ageing Challenges."

<https://theaseanmagazine.asean.org/article/asean-india-women-scientists-conclave-creating-spaces-for-growth-and-visibility-in-science/>

CONNECTIVITY

FROM VISION TO REALITY A DECADE OF MPAC 2025, ITS LESSONS, AND THE ROAD AHEAD



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When ASEAN leaders adopted the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC 2025) in Vientiane in September 2016, they set out a clear ambition: to achieve a seamlessly and comprehensively connected ASEAN that promotes competitiveness, inclusiveness, and a stronger sense of community. A decade on, that ambition has been tested against real-world outcomes.

With the Master Plan now concluded and its End-Term Review (ETR) finalised, ASEAN has a comprehensive and candid account of what the past decade of connectivity work delivered. This article draws on the ETR's key findings to take stock of MPAC 2025's achievements, reflect on the challenges encountered along the way, and look ahead to what the ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan (ACSP) holds for the region's connected future.

A decade-long blueprint for a better-connected region

MPAC 2025 was not ASEAN's first blueprint for connectivity. It was built on the earlier Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2010, which first gave the region a structured framework for

pursuing closer links across its Member States. MPAC 2025 sharpened the focus, anchoring the connectivity agenda around five strategic areas: Sustainable Infrastructure, Digital Innovation, Seamless Logistics, Regulatory Excellence, and People Mobility. Under these five areas, 15 initiatives and 143 Key Implementation Measures (KIMs) were identified, each with a designated lead body to drive progress.

Crucially, MPAC 2025 was designed with implementation in mind. Governance, ownership, and alignment were built into the plan from the outset as a response to the lessons learnt from its predecessor, setting up a framework through which ASEAN Member States and sectoral bodies could work together towards the connectivity vision.

The context in which the implementation of MPAC 2025 progressed was anything but straightforward. The COVID-19 pandemic affected progress across every area of cooperation. Accelerating digitalisation, supply chain shocks, geopolitical shifts, a growing imperative for inclusivity and sustainability, and widening development gaps within and across Member States shaped what was possible in delivering the region's achievements.

What was delivered

More than 83 per cent of KIMs under MPAC 2025 have been completed—a substantial result, made more significant by the challenging context in which MPAC 2025 was implemented. Across the five strategic areas, progress is concrete and tangible:

MPAC 2025 KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

STRATEGIC AREA 1 Sustainable Infrastructure



Establishment of a **new ASEAN body**, Lead Implementing Body for Sustainable Infrastructure (**LIB-SI**)*



Development of a **Pipeline of ASEAN Infrastructure projects: 21 projects** in the current pipeline



Development of **8 City Technical Proposals**, with 15 more to follow

**LIB-SI has been renamed as the ASEAN Committee on Sustainable Infrastructure (ACSI)*

STRATEGIC AREA 2 Digital Innovation



Development of a **self-diagnostic tool** to support MSME's digital adoption



Over 18,000 registered users after the enhancement of the ASEAN SME Academy and ASEAN Access



Development of **Guidance Notes on Digital Financial Services (DFS)** to encourage wider adoption



Development of the **ASEAN Open Data Development Framework**



Development of the **Framework on ASEAN Digital Data Governance**

STRATEGIC AREA 3 Seamless Logistics



Development of ASEAN Database on Trade Route compiled information and statistics on:

- **10 priority trade routes**
- **55 priority product groups**



Conduct of Supply Chain Analysis on **10 Specific Product Groups** for:

- COVID-19 response
- Food security and energy resiliency



Development of **Framework on ASEAN Supply Chain Efficiency and Resilience and its Implementation Plan**: First regional cross-sectoral plan on supply chain coordination and collaboration

STRATEGIC AREA 4 Regulatory Excellence



Establishment of **2 Working Groups under ASEAN Consultative Committee for Standards and Quality (ACCSQ) to share good practices** on standards and identify standards for harmonisation

- Building and Construction Materials (BCM)
- Digital Trade Standards



Development and signing of the **Mutual Recognition Agreement of Building and Construction Materials**



Development and delivery of the **Work Programme for ASEAN Digital Trade Standards and Conformance Working Group (DTSCWG)** (2021-2025), including **12 activity programmes to build capacity** in setting digital trade policies and standards

STRATEGIC AREA 5 People Mobility



Content from the Southeast Asia Tourism Chinese website widely shared on Chinese social media platforms, promoting ASEAN as a single tourist destination



Development of the Guide on ASEAN-wide good practices in the development of e-visa and online visa application facility



2 studies developed:

- Enhancing Intra-ASEAN University Student Mobility
- Report on Graduate Employability in ASEAN



Facilitation of intra-ASEAN TVET exchanges of **492 TVET students** and faculties along with capacity training for **89 TVET personnel** on five identified TVET priority sectors

Honest lessons

The ETR does more than just count achievements. It provides an honest accounting of where implementation fell short of MPAC 2025's ambitions and why. These findings are presented not as failures but as practical lessons that strengthen and ground the region's next connectivity plan.

Coordination across sectors proved consistently challenging. With 15 initiatives spanning multiple ministries, agencies, and bodies across the then ten Member States, keeping all parts of the machinery aligned was genuinely difficult. Ownership, which MPAC 2025 had explicitly prioritised from the start, was uneven in practice. Where a clear champion existed for an initiative, progress tended to be stronger; where responsibility was more diffuse, momentum was harder to sustain.

Awareness of the MPAC 2025 agenda was not always consistent among those responsible for implementing it, particularly at the national level. Engagement with the private sector, which plays a critical role in financing and delivering connectivity projects, has room to grow. Capacity also varied across Member States, affecting the pace and quality of implementation in some areas. And the financing available, while significant, was not always structured with the flexibility needed to respond to the rapid changes the region experienced over the decade.

Taken together, these are the realities of implementing an ambitious programme across diverse economies with different capacities and priorities. The ETR's contribution is to document these challenges clearly. Progress depends on knowing what worked, what did not, why, and how to address them in the next plan.

The ACSP: A more resilient roadmap

The ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan, developed as the successor to MPAC 2025, reflects these lessons directly. It expands on its predecessor in scope, encompassing six strategic areas, 14 objectives, and 47 strategic measures. Smart and Sustainable Urban Development has been added as a standalone strategic area, recognising the importance of sustainable

urbanisation and the ASEAN Smart Cities Network's contribution. Two additional strategic measures are dedicated to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), reflecting the importance of ASEAN's engagement with partners beyond the region.

The more significant changes lie in how the ACSP is designed to be implemented. Greater clarity on ownership, with specific lead bodies and supporting bodies identified for each strategic measure, directly addresses one of the ETR's most consistent findings. The ACSP's work plan is being developed with an explicitly agile and adaptive approach. Rather than a fixed set of activities for the decade ahead, it builds in the capacity to respond to changes in the region's needs and priorities over time. Cross-pillar coordination with the Strategic Plans of the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community is also a more deliberate feature of the ACSP than it was of MPAC 2025.

The ACSP also places a stronger emphasis on stakeholder engagement and participation, including with the private sector, civil society, academia, and ASEAN's dialogue partners, recognising that connectivity cannot be delivered by governments alone. All of these sit within the frame of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, which charts the region's course toward becoming a Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred community.

Looking ahead

Connectivity is ultimately not about plans and measures. It is about a student crossing a border to study, a small business owner accessing a digital marketplace, and a family travelling more easily between ASEAN countries. The ETR of MPAC 2025 confirms that real progress was made in these areas over the past decade, alongside an honest account of where the region can do better.

The ACSP takes on these lessons on board and forward. With a broader strategic framework, stronger institutional foundations, and a built-in commitment to agility and partnership, it offers the region a more resilient vehicle for the connectivity journey ahead. The road to 2045 is long, and the challenges are real, but ASEAN moves forward with both ambition and experience on its side.



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Shaping ASEAN's Urban Future TURNING A GLOBAL MEGATREND INTO A REGIONAL ADVANTAGE



Anacláudia Rossbach

United Nations Under-Secretary-
General
Executive Director, UN-Habitat

Urbanisation is one of the biggest forces shaping Southeast Asia's future. Across ASEAN, cities are growing in number, size, and complexity, driving economic opportunity, innovation, and cultural exchange. At the same time, they are also concentrating risk, inequality, and exposure to climate impacts. The question facing the region is not whether urbanisation will continue, but whether it can be steered in a way that delivers prosperity, resilience, and dignity for all.

Today, ASEAN is home to more than 350 million urban residents, just over half of the region's population. According to the *World Urbanization Prospects 2025*, this is projected to rise to around 70 per cent by 2050, adding nearly 150 million people to ASEAN's cities. This rapid shift is one of the fastest taking place anywhere in the world, and it's unfolding across a region with an incredibly varied mix of cities and urban environments.

Importantly, ASEAN's urban future won't be shaped by megacities alone. Middleweight cities with between 200,000 and 2 million residents are estimated to drive 40 per cent of the region's growth, highlighting the central role that these cities are likely to play in accommodating future urban expansion (ASEAN Smart Cities Framework, 2018).

These cities sit at the centre of national development systems, connecting rural economies to regional and global markets. When they are carefully planned, they can drive steady, balanced growth. But if they are overlooked, they can quickly turn into areas marked by informal settlements, unchecked urban sprawl, and environmental degradation.

Urban opportunity and urban risk

Urbanisation has been a major driver of ASEAN's economic transformation. Cities generate the majority of national GDP, attract investment, and provide jobs. Yet rapid expansion is putting increasing strain on urban systems. Across the region, cities are facing persistent challenges, with housing shortages, infrastructure gaps, congestion, air pollution, and unequal access to basic services. For example, in 2022, most ASEAN countries had more than 20 per cent of their urban population living in slums or informal settlements, highlighting the widespread scale of urban housing vulnerability across the region (The Habibie Centre, 2025). Housing is not merely shelter; it underpins health, education, dignity, safety and social inclusion, and is therefore a cornerstone of human security and well-being.

The climate crisis is making these challenges even harder to manage. As highlighted in the *World Cities Report 2024*, cities are on the front line of

climate impacts. This is especially true in Southeast Asia, one of the world's most vulnerable climate regions. Floods, extreme heat, droughts and sea-level rise are already disrupting livelihoods, infrastructure, and local economies. Over the past five decades, these events have affected more than 580 million people and caused approximately 235 billion US dollars in damage in the Southeast Asian region (UN ESCAP, 2024).

ASEAN's strategic response: Urbanisation as a regional priority

ASEAN has increasingly treated urbanisation not just as a standalone sector, but as a strategic regional priority. A key step in this direction is the decision to place smart and sustainable urban development as its own strategic area under the ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan. It reflects a clear understanding that urbanisation is a global megatrend with implications for connectivity, competitiveness, and social cohesion in Southeast Asia.

To ensure the plan remains flexible and forward-looking, ASEAN has identified seven key trends that will shape ASEAN Connectivity in the years ahead. These include digital transformation, the climate crisis, the net-zero transition, supply chain reconfiguration, urban expansion, the rise of middle-weight cities, innovation in financing, regionalism, and population ageing. They highlight the need for stronger regional integration and collaboration to seize emerging opportunities.

This strategic shift builds on a strong foundation. The ASEAN Sustainable Urbanisation Strategy (ASUS) provides a shared framework to guide cities toward inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable development, in line with the global vision provided by the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda.

Through the project "Accelerating the Implementation of the ASEAN Sustainable Urbanisation Strategy-Phases I and II" (ASUS Project), ASEAN and UN-Habitat, with the support of the Government of Australia, are working together with the ASEAN Member States to strengthen policy coherence, build local capacity, and promote peer

learning among cities. UN-Habitat greatly values this partnership, which shows how regional cooperation can translate global commitments into practical, city-level action while respecting the diversity of local contexts across ASEAN.

Cities leading the way: Lessons from the region

ASEAN cities are not waiting for solutions; they are actively shaping them. This was clearly demonstrated at the ASEAN Sustainable Urbanisation Forum (ASUF) 2025 held in August 2025, led by the Government of Malaysia, and specifically the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT), together with the host city of Kuala Lumpur, the ASEAN Secretariat, UN-Habitat, and the United Cities and Local Governments Asia Pacific (UCLG ASPAC). The forum brought together over 9,000 participants from 66 countries, including representatives from more than 300 cities and local governments, national institutions, civil society, and the private sector.

Cities exchanged hands-on experiences on how they are managing growth, improving mobility, expanding access to housing and services, and strengthening climate resilience. Something common across these experiences was the importance of inclusive and participatory governance. Cities participating in the ASUS Project-Phase II highlighted approaches that actively engage women, youth, older persons and communities in planning and decision-making processes. These experiences show that gender-responsive and inclusive planning, combined with meaningful representation, can lead to more responsive, equitable, and durable results. This includes improved access to housing, education, services, and public spaces.

These local innovations are reinforced by regional platforms such as the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN), which focuses on people-centred digital solutions to improve service delivery, strengthen resilience, and help close digital divides. UN-Habitat is working across the region to connect these initiatives to global action through the UN-Habitat's SDG Cities initiative, which links SDG Localisation and SDG Voluntary Local Reviews to



A workshop was held in Makassar under the framework of the ASUS Project–Phase II

Photo Credit: ©UN-Habitat

“UN-Habitat is ready to support ASEAN in advancing its Community Vision 2045 and key initiatives and frameworks, such as the Sustainable Urbanisation Strategy and the Smart Cities Network. Asia and the Pacific are home to some of the world’s most dynamic and diverse cities, yet millions of people still live in informal settlements and slums without adequate housing. By joining forces, sharing solutions and learning from one another, cities across the region can accelerate action and amplify impact where it matters most, on the ground and in communities.

concrete local action. This enables cities in ASEAN and beyond to share experiences, track progress and accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the local level.

A shared urban future

The challenge ahead is one of scale and speed. Over the next decades, ASEAN cities will need to accommodate millions of new residents, while upgrading existing infrastructure and adapting to intensifying climate risks. This will require integrated urban and territorial planning, stronger multilevel governance, and sustained investment, especially in secondary and intermediate cities, where early action can prevent costly future impacts.

UN-Habitat’s Strategic Plan 2026-2029 aims to respond to this crisis, as well as to the wider challenges of poverty,

inequality and climate change, by placing housing, land and basic services at the centre of its action. In Southeast Asia, UN-Habitat stands ready to continue supporting ASEAN and its Member States in implementing the ASEAN Sustainable Urbanisation Strategy, the work of the ASEAN Smart Cities Network and the ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan, building on the achievements of the past decade.

Urbanisation will define ASEAN’s trajectory to 2045 and beyond. By aligning global and regional agendas with local action and solutions, the region can turn urbanisation into a powerful driver of shared prosperity, regional integration, and human development. As an important step to assess together the progress, I take here the opportunity to encourage all ASEAN Member States to submit the New Urban Agenda Report this year. The upcoming 13th World Urban Forum, to be held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in May

2026, will provide a global platform to advance this agenda, share lessons from ASEAN cities, and strengthen international partnerships to accelerate implementation. We look forward to ASEAN Member States’ participation in the forthcoming High-Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly on the midterm review of the New Urban Agenda, which is scheduled for 16–17 July 2026, following the 2026 High-Level Political Forum.

In line with its mandate to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns, cities, and human settlements, aiming to provide adequate shelter for all, UN-Habitat is proud to be a trusted partner in this journey.

The views and opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent the policy or official position of ASEAN.

ASEAN SDG INDICATORS PROGRESS REPORT 2025

The ASEAN SDG Indicators Progress Report 2025, produced by the ASEAN Community Statistical System (ACSS), tracks regional progress across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals using 80 unique indicators drawn from ASEAN Member States (AMS). It compares 2016 baseline data against 2023 figures to assess ASEAN's trajectory towards the 2030 targets.

Below are selected target indicators and their status based on Annex 1 (pp. 162–177) of the Report.

**Reference period:
2016 – 2023**



1 NO POVERTY

Population below national poverty line	13.3% → 10.8%
Deaths/missing/affected by climate disasters (per 100,000 population)	2,921 → 6,386
AMS adopting national disaster risk reduction strategies (Sendai)	0.8 → 0.9 (avg)
Government spending on education (% of total government spending)	17.8% → 13.9%
Government spending on health (% of total government spending)	7.7% → 12.1%

2 ZERO HUNGER

Prevalence of undernourishment	7.3% → 6.5%
Moderate or severe food insecurity	16.5% → 15.7%
Stunting among children under 5	27.0% → 21.5%
Wasting among children under 5	8.6% → 7.2%
Overweight children under 5	4.4% → 5.0%
Indicator of Food Price Anomalies (IFPA)—abnormal = > 0.5 or < -0.5	0.1 → 1.4

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	234.5 → 164.3	Women with family planning needs met with modern methods	72.6% → 75.6%
Births attended by skilled health personnel	91.0% → 93.1%	Adolescent birth rate (per 1,000 women aged 15–19)	32.5 → 26.1
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births; target ≤25)	31.0 → 22.6	Coverage of essential health services (0–100 scale)	73.6 → 74.3
Neonatal mortality rate (per 1,000 live births; target ≤12)	14.6 → 11.0	Age-standardised tobacco use prevalence (15 years and older)	25.3% → 23.5%
New HIV infections (per 1,000 uninfected population)	1.2 → 0.1	DTP vaccine coverage (3rd dose)	88.7% → 90.7%
Tuberculosis incidence (per 100,000 population)	301.6 → 354.0	Measles vaccine coverage (2nd dose)	74.9% → 79.8%
Malaria incidence (per 1,000 population)	1.2 → 1.8	Medical doctors (per 10,000 population)	6.7 → 8.0
NCD mortality rate—cardiovascular	9.1% → 9.2%	Nursing and midwifery personnel (per 10,000 population)	27.3 → 30.5
Alcohol per capita consumption (litres of pure alcohol, 15+ years)	12.2 → 12.6	Dentists (per 10,000 population)	1.1 → 1.4
Death rate due to road traffic injuries (per 100,000 population)	15.2 → 14.2	Pharmacists (per 10,000 population)	2.2 → 2.9

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



Primary education completion rate	90.7% → 89.3%	Adult literacy rate	93.4% → 94.3%
Lower secondary completion rate	81.7% → 81.8%	Primary schools with access to electricity	78.9% → 85.3%
Upper secondary completion rate	68.6% → 71.4%	Primary schools with basic drinking water access	80.6% → 91.4%
Pre-primary participation rate (1 year before primary entry age)	73.2% → 76.8%	Primary schools with computers for pedagogical purposes	69.0% → 65.3%
GPI net enrolment ratio — primary education (target = 1.0)	1.002 → 1.004	Qualified teachers in pre-primary school	92.0% → 85.3%
GPI gross enrolment ratio — lower secondary	1.005 → 1.023	Qualified teachers in primary school	95.3% → 94.6%
GPI gross enrolment ratio — upper secondary	1.028 → 1.076	Qualified teachers in lower secondary school	95.7% → 96.4%
GPI gross enrolment ratio — tertiary	1.240 → 1.252	Qualified teachers in upper secondary school	97.0% → 97.2%

5 GENDER EQUALITY



Women aged 20–24 married or in union before age 18	12.4% → 9.7%
Women's seats in national parliaments	18.8% → 19.9%
Women's seats in local governments	19.2% → 20.3%
Women in managerial positions	31.4% → 33.8%
GPI of mobile phone ownership (women vs men; target = 1.0)	0.93 → 0.95

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



Population using safely managed drinking water services	41.5% → 44.0%
Population using safely managed sanitation services	54.5% → 56.5%
Population with access to basic handwashing facilities	77.5% → 84.4%

7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY



Population with access to electricity (target: universal)	88.5% → 95.7%
Renewable energy share in total final energy consumption	21.2% → 20.4%
Energy intensity (TOE per thousand 2010 USD of GDP; lower = better)	23.0 → 22.7
Installed renewable energy-generating capacity (watts per capita)	60.1 → 74.9

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



Annual growth rate of real GDP per capita	3.8% → 2.9%
Annual growth rate of real GDP per employed person	3.0% → 1.6%
Informal employment (% of total employment, both sexes)	63.7% → 61.5%
Informal employment in non-agricultural sector (both sexes)	56.7% → 58.5%
Unemployment rate (15 years and above, both sexes)	3.9% → 3.8%

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE



Road passengers (billion persons)	4.5B → 8.2B
Rail passengers (billion persons)	2.6B → 2.8B
Rail freight volumes (million tonnes)	66.7M → 98.8M
Manufacturing value added per capita (constant 2015 USD)	\$901 → \$1,072
Manufacturing employment (% of total employment)	13.6% → 14.4%
Proportion of small-scale industries in total industry value added	12.2% → 11.5%
R&D expenditure as proportion of GDP	1.007% → 1.005%
Researchers (FTE) per million inhabitants	1,010 → 990
Medium and high-tech industry share of total manufacturing value added	38.0% → 41.6%
Population covered by mobile network	91.6% → 97.6%
Population covered by 4G mobile network	81.1% → 96.1%

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



Growth of household expenditure/income per capita — bottom 40%	5.2% → 5.8%
Labour share of GDP	48.7% → 46.7%
AMS membership/voting rights in international organisations (avg)	0.9 → 0.9–1.0
Tariff lines with zero duty for LDCs and developing countries	59.3% → 63.9%

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



Deaths/missing/affected by climate disasters (per 100,000 population)	2,921 → 6,386
AMS adopting national disaster risk reduction strategies (Sendai)	0.8 → 0.9 (avg)
AMS adopting local disaster risk reduction strategies	0.7 → 0.7 (avg)

12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



AMS compliant with international multilateral environmental agreements	0.7 → 0.8
Installed renewable energy-generating capacity (watts per capita)	60.1 → 74.9

13 CLIMATE ACTION



Deaths/missing/affected by climate disasters (per 100,000 population)	2,921 → 6,386
AMS adopting national disaster risk reduction strategies (Sendai)	0.8 → 0.9 (avg)
AMS with NDCs, long-term strategies, national adaptation plans	0.7 → 0.7 (avg)

14 LIFE BELOW WATER



Marine protected areas as % of total marine area (target ≥10%)	3.2% → 4.4%
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15 LIFE ON LAND



Forest area as proportion of total land area	45.6% → 45.7%
Protected area coverage of key biodiversity areas	30.8% → 33.0%
Red List Index — species extinction risk (1 = least concern, 0 = all extinct)	0.76 → 0.75

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



Unsentenced detainees as proportion of total prison population	28.8% → 27.6%
Primary govt expenditure as proportion of original approved budget	95.3% → 97.5%
AMS membership/voting rights in international organisations	0.9–1.0 (stable)
Children under 5 with births registered with civil authority	81.9% → 85.9%

17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS



Total government revenue as proportion of nominal GDP	16.2% → 15.7%
Domestic budget funded by domestic taxes	67.5% → 59.6%
Fixed internet broadband subscriptions (per 100 inhabitants)	5.7 → 11.8
Proportion of individuals using the internet	50.6% → 82.0%
ASEAN share of global merchandise exports	7.4% → 8.0%
ASEAN share of global services exports	6.6% → 6.9%
Macroeconomic dashboard available to policy agencies in all AMS	All AMS: Yes
Data Infrastructure Performance Index (SPI Pillar 5)	41.5 → 58.5
Open Data Inventory (ODIN) Coverage Index	38.7 → 52.3
AMS with population census in the last 10 years	9 of 10 AMS
AMS with 100% birth registration	3 of 10 AMS
AMS with 80% death registration	5 of 10 AMS

17 Goals

80 Unique Indicators

68 Assessed Targets

To learn more, please download ASEAN SDG Indicators Progress Report 2025
<https://asean.org/book/asean-sdg-indicators-progress-report-2025/>

COMPLEMENTARITIES INITIATIVE 2.0

ADVANCING ASEAN'S SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



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When the world's leaders adopted the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, they set an ambitious goal of achieving prosperity that leaves no one behind. In that same year, ASEAN adopted the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, charting a regional pathway towards a peaceful, stable, and resilient community.

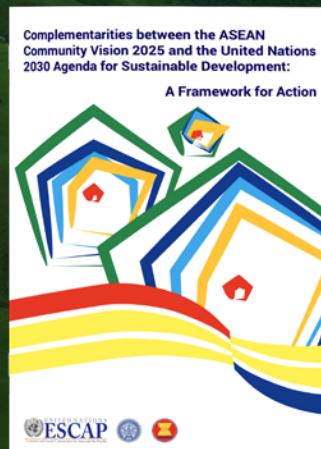
These two visions, one global and one regional, share the same heart—a belief that development must balance economic growth with environmental responsibility. Recognising this shared purpose, in 2017 Thailand, in its capacity as the ASEAN Coordinator for Sustainable Development Cooperation, in collaboration with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) and the ASEAN Secretariat, developed the Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, or the Complementarities

Initiative (CI). The Initiative aimed to provide synergy that connects ASEAN's regional priorities with the global development agenda, reaffirming that ASEAN's and the world's progress are interconnected.

A renewed vision for a changing world

Eight years later, the world has changed profoundly. The impacts of climate change, digital disruption, and widening inequality are reshaping societies and testing the resilience of nations. Against this backdrop, ASEAN also moves toward its new long-term vision, the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, which envisions a “green ASEAN” that is sustainable and resilient.

To support this vision, Thailand, in collaboration with UNESCAP and the ASEAN Secretariat, developed the Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the United



Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, or the Complementarities Initiative 2.0 (CI 2.0), building on the lessons of its first edition. The CI 2.0 reaffirms ASEAN's collective commitment to sustainable development, ensuring that regional priorities remain aligned with global goals, while demonstrating the region's resolve to address emerging challenges and to ensure that sustainability remains a cornerstone of ASEAN's community-building journey.

A GREEN agenda for ASEAN

At the heart of CI 2.0 lies a set of five cross-cutting priority areas, collectively known as the GREEN Agenda:

- Green Finance,
- Resilience against Climate Change,
- Energy Transition,
- Effective Digital Transformation, and
- Networking and Partnerships

All of these priorities are interconnected, forming a holistic framework for how ASEAN can pursue growth that is environmentally and socially just.

Under Green Finance, ASEAN seeks to mobilise resources for sustainable infrastructure and projects that enable a just transition to a low-carbon economy. Initiatives such as the ASEAN Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance and the ASEAN Catalytic Green Facility (ACGF) illustrate the region's shared effort to direct public and private capital toward green transformation. Yet, challenges remain. Ensuring equitable access to finance across all Member States, enhancing financial literacy, and attracting investment from partners are essential to making green growth inclusive for all.

Resilience against Climate Change is another key pillar. The region continues to experience climate-induced disasters, from typhoons and droughts to rising sea levels that threaten coastal communities. ASEAN's efforts to strengthen resilience include the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change in Brunei Darussalam, which serves as a hub for regional data sharing, research, and policy coordination. The CI 2.0 also encourages Member States to adopt nature-based solutions and integrate climate adaptation into national and regional planning.

Energy Transition stands as another pillar of this transformation. As energy demand in ASEAN grows, the shift to cleaner energy sources will be key to reducing greenhouse gas emissions while creating opportunities for innovation and green jobs. CI 2.0 encourages ASEAN to strengthen regional connectivity, support technology transfer, and deepen cooperation to ensure that the energy transition is both just and inclusive, supported by a clear roadmap that provides institutional and financial frameworks for renewable power integration.

Meanwhile, Effective Digital Transformation plays a crucial role as both an economic driver and an enabler of sustainability and regional integration. Digital technologies can optimise energy use, improve resource efficiency, and enhance the monitoring of environmental and social outcomes. The CI 2.0 calls for narrowing the digital divide, promoting digital literacy, and ensuring that digital transformation benefits everyone, especially vulnerable communities.

Finally, Networking and Partnerships remain at the heart of ASEAN's sustainable development journey. The CI 2.0 exemplifies the power of collaboration among ASEAN Member States, with external partners, and across governments, the private sector, and civil society. By fostering inclusive, and multi-stakeholder partnerships, the CI 2.0 seeks to effectively translate regional aspirations into concrete actions effectively, ensuring that the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are implemented inclusively across the region.

From vision to action

The endorsement of CI 2.0 at the 15th ASEAN-UN Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 27 October 2025 marks an important milestone that reaffirms the region's strong commitment to the ASEAN-UN partnership and the global development agenda. It is Thailand's hope that this endeavour will inspire further dialogue and concrete cooperation within ASEAN, between ASEAN and external partners, and across the wider international community.

Building on this momentum, the CI 2.0 proposes a set of actions to



accelerate progress on the SDGs. These include enhancing regional financing mechanisms for sustainable projects, operationalising the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change, strengthening SDG data systems and regional indicators, and promoting cross-sectoral synergy among ASEAN's sustainability-related bodies. Through these efforts, ASEAN aims to deliver tangible benefits to its people, creating jobs, enhancing resilience, and promoting environmental stewardship, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

A shared future for a sustainable ASEAN

For Thailand, the CI 2.0 embodies our enduring belief in partnership and cooperation. As the ASEAN Coordinator for Sustainable Development Cooperation, Thailand remains committed to working closely with all partners to deliver concrete outcomes that advance sustainable, inclusive socio-economic development.

Looking towards 2045, ASEAN aspires to be a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred community, with sustainability underpinning all three pillars of the ASEAN Community. The CI 2.0 serves as a tool to navigate this journey, aligning regional actions with global goals and guiding ASEAN towards a future where sustainable and inclusive development empowers its people and safeguards the planet we all share.

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THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL INVESTORS IN CATALYSING ASEAN'S CIRCULAR TRANSITION



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Circular economy has moved from niche sustainability circles to centre stage in global climate negotiations. At UNEA-7 in Nairobi in November 2025, member states deliberated on binding agreements to tackle plastic pollution and resource depletion. The year 2025 also marked the first time that circular economy was discussed at COP30, underscoring the role of circular economy in climate action and the economic potential of circularity spillover for the member states.

The numbers from Southeast Asia are staggering. The region generates over 150 million tonnes of municipal solid waste each year, and that figure is projected to double by 2050. Malaysia discards approximately 39,000 tonnes daily of Municipal Solid Waste (MSW), yet only 37.9 per cent gets recycled by the end of 2024; this number is targeted to increase to 56.2 per cent by 2030 under the 13th Malaysian Plan (13MP).

The Asian Development Bank warns that resource depletion and waste mismanagement could cost Southeast Asia up to 11 per cent of its GDP by century's end if climate change remains unaddressed. Although environmentalists projected that shifting to a circular economy could generate economic growth, more efforts need to be made in transitioning to circularity, which requires strong innovative capital, as well as the political will to make it

happen. This is proven by the *Circularity Gap Report 2025* that brings more sobering news citing that the worldwide circularity has dropped to just 6.9 per cent in 2024.

The Framework for Circular Economy for the ASEAN Economic Community, which was established in 2021, determines which standards should be harmonised first while also establishing priorities for circular goods trade openness and



innovation, and sustainable finance and resource efficiency. The Circular Economy Implementation Plan from 2023 runs until 2030 and addresses three sectors which include agriculture, transport, and energy.

But barriers remain even though some of the framework and policies relating to the circular economy were adopted by some of the ASEAN countries. The ASEAN region faces policy fragmentation, which disrupts the operation of circular value chains that span across national borders. The financing gap represents a major challenge because public funding does exist, but it does not provide enough support to expand circular business models from their current pilot stage to widespread implementation. The ASEAN Member States should establish policy harmonisation as their top priority because they currently focus on trade liberalisation at the same level of importance.

Capital meets circularity: Insights from ACEF 2025

Over 500 participants gathered at the ASEAN Circular Economy Forum (ACEF) in Kuala Lumpur on 16-17 October 2025, under the theme "Accelerate the Circular Economy Transition in ASEAN with Green Skills, Innovative Solutions, and Investments." The panel session, facilitated by Kumpulan Wang Persaraan (Diperbadankan) [KWAP] and moderated by Fara Alyaa Azmin, KWAP Vice President of Private Equity, highlighted how the gap between circular ambitions and market reality is actually being bridged through strategic capital deployment.

Chalothorn Vashirakovit, Managing Director at TPG Rise, explained how large-scale private equity drives circular innovation globally. TPG Rise manages over 30 billion US dollars in impact assets, pursuing non-concessionary returns while achieving measurable environmental outcomes. Both stressed that ASEAN offers tremendous potential for scaling these innovations, particularly in waste management and sustainable consumption. But investors need three things: clear policy signals, demonstration of commercial viability, and credible impact measurement frameworks.

Badrul Hisham Jaafar, who serves as Principal and Senior Vice President of COPE Private Equity, discusses how domestic funding supports environmental sustainability through initial development stages. The fund mandates ESG integration, which must start within 100 days of investment, to help Malaysian SMEs learn circular principles at an early stage. Badrul presented two business examples which the audience found most memorable because they involved a pet food company that used local agricultural waste for protein substitution and an Ultra High-Performance Concrete manufacturer who developed materials to lengthen infrastructure operational periods. The two examples demonstrate how organisations that focus on ESG performance will experience increased value because sustainability acts as a competitive advantage.

Venon Tian of ZUS Coffee discussed how their company has collected 15 metric tonnes of spent coffee grounds in 2025 and transforms them into biofuel and fertiliser. Chai Peng Teh of Complete Human Network shared how the Device-as-a-Service model reduces electronic waste through rental and repurposing. Mohamed Tarek of EARTH uses gig economy logistics to divert over 3,000 tonnes of e-waste to licensed recovery facilities. One theme kept coming up: access to patient capital remains the biggest constraint for early-stage circular ventures.

Institutional investors as catalysts: The KWAP model

As a Malaysian public pension fund, KWAP offers a compelling example of how institutional investors can catalyse circular transition. Managing over 185.6 billion-Malaysian ringgit assets, KWAP shows that long-term financial returns and sustainability objectives can reinforce each other through commitments that include achieving a Net Zero Portfolio by 2050 and increasing investments in transition assets to 20 billion Malaysian ringgit by 2030.

Three catalytic investment programmes have been launched by KWAP. Dana Perintis (RM500 million) invests in local start-ups through venture capital support for agritech and automated manufacturing businesses. Dana Pemacu (RM6 billion) investment fund operates through a co-General Partner model, which unites international investment experts with Malaysian-based professionals to support food security and energy transformation initiatives. The Dana Iklim* of RM 2 billion investment fund serves as Malaysia's initial climate-focused investment fund, which operates under an impact measurement system that monitors climate resilience and UN Sustainable Development Goals-related co-benefits.

KWAP Inspire Conference 2024 took place to advance circular transformation for a climate-smart Malaysia through the theme "Advancing Circular Transformation for a Climate Smart Malaysia." This established the Circular Economy Young Leaders for Change (CYCLE), a youth-driven initiative that promotes circular economy principles. Some notable initiatives include the "Fuel the Future" campaign, which gathered 742 kg of Used Cooking Oil, demonstrating KWAP's dedication to developing closed-loop systems that benefit both the company and its stakeholders.

Renewable energy as circular economy infrastructure

While circular economy seeks to improve material flow, the transition toward a circular economy will require a simultaneous transformation of energy systems. KWAP's investment in Vantage Solar UK Ltd. (VSUK) demonstrates how renewable energy is a part of circular economy infrastructure. VSUK has generated significant greenhouse gas emissions avoidance through its 365-MW solar generation capacity, which has kept 49,057 tonnes of CO₂e out of the atmosphere in FY23 and 46,141 tonnes of CO₂e in FY24. These amounts were derived using PCAF emission factors and Project Finance methodologies.

The kind of transparency that is demonstrated by KWAP's disclosure of the carbon impact of VSUK represents an important step forward in the development of institutional investor accountability for climate-related disclosures. Under PCAF reporting standards, financial institutions that commit to measuring and disclosing their financed emissions are required to account for the total GHG emissions associated with their portfolios. This transparency makes the carbon impact of the project quantifiable. Additionally, the avoided emissions data, designated as PCAF Data Score 2, provide high-quality proof of the contributions made to decarbonisation by VSUK while providing clean electricity to approximately 87,000 UK households per annum.

To understand what the circular economy actually entails, it is useful to think about the circular economy requirements of manufacturing recycled materials, operating reverse logistics, and powering remanufacturing facilities. All of these requirements necessitate energy. Where energy comes from renewable resources, the potential for climate impacts of the circular economy increases. KWAP's portfolio-based approach enables synergies to exist when both clean materials and clean energy are used together, while at the same time maintaining strict reporting and measurement standards to ensure that there is real accountability.

Bridging the investment-implementation gap

The ACEF 2025 conference discussed that circular economy funding does not face barriers from insufficient business prospects, as investors face challenges that current projects cannot address. The blended finance mechanisms operate as risk reduction tools for circular economy investments through their combination of public funding at reduced rates with commercial investment capital. Pension funds, financial institutions, and sovereign wealth funds may find value in exploring how circular economy assessment criteria could be gradually integrated into their investment frameworks, drawing on approaches such as that adopted by KWAP.

Policy harmonisation requires immediate attention. The ASEAN region requires standardised rules, which should include certification recognition systems and unified Extended Producer Responsibility programmes and established procedures for moving secondary materials between countries. The ASEAN Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform maintains existing infrastructure for knowledge sharing, yet we need to establish this knowledge base throughout public sector organisations, private companies, and banking institutions. All parties involved must use the same playbook during circular economy project planning and budgeting activities.

ACEF 2025 identified that the constraints to circular economy investments are not due to a lack of opportunities but instead the result of systemic mismatches between what investors seek and what ventures are able to provide. Blended finance mechanisms have the ability to de-risk circular economy investments, combining concessionary public financing with commercial capital.

The path forward

Institutional investors like KWAP and the entrepreneurs featured at ACEF 2025 prove that the circular economy can be financed, scaled, and mainstreamed from within the region itself. But questions linger. Why do circular business models still struggle to access patient capital despite proven viability? The journey has begun, and the direction is clear, but reaching the destination requires sustained conviction and effort.

Circular economy transition needs deliberate, coordinated action through triple helix collaboration. In this model, policymakers craft enabling frameworks, industry players such as investors and entrepreneurs need to deploy patient capital and build circular business models, and citizens to demand circular innovative solutions. Will we move fast enough to capture the economic opportunity while addressing the environmental imperative? That depends on the choices we make now.

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

INVESTING IN CARE A PATHWAY TO GENDER EQUALITY IN ASEAN



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The COVID-19 pandemic reminded everyone how important care work is to daily life. When schools closed, and hospitals filled up, it was often women and girls who stepped up at home. Their contributions made a big difference, yet these responsibilities often go unseen and unrewarded.

“For me, care work is the heart of humanity,” shares Leah Payud, a resilience portfolio manager at Oxfam Pilipinas. “It anchors societies, families... and keeps them running. Without someone investing time, effort, and resources in essential care tasks, like cooking, cleaning, childcare, nursing the elderly and sick at home, nothing else would be possible.”

Strong social norms persist in the region where care tasks are automatically handed over to women and girls. On average, women and girls across the Asia-Pacific region spend two to five

times more time doing unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW) than men. In Viet Nam, women spend close to 19 hours a week on unpaid care, while men spend about 8 hours. In Malaysia and the Philippines, the gap is clear as well. Women’s UCDW labour was valued at 1.6 times that of men. Despite working similar hours in paid jobs, women still take on most of the care responsibilities at home.

These care demands limit women and girls’ time, energy, and ability to receive a full education or join the workforce. In 2023, fewer than half of working-age

women in the Asia-Pacific region held employment, compared to nearly three-quarters of men. Many cited caregiving as the reason.

Meanwhile, paid care services remain underinvested in and undervalued. Those from marginalised or disadvantaged communities particularly bear the brunt due to low wages and relatively poor working conditions.

Experts further agree that supporting care work is good for families and the economy. A study by the International Labour Organisation found that investing in care services like childcare and elder



Photo Credit: ©Worawee Meepian / iStock Photos

care could create up to 280 million jobs around the world by 2030. Most of these jobs would go to women. In Asia and the Pacific, recognising unpaid care work could potentially add 3.8 trillion US dollars to the economy.

For women in formal jobs and women entrepreneurs, the lack of care services can contribute to women dropping out of the workforce and to their inability to grow and scale their businesses, respectively. They face additional challenges, including the “motherhood employment penalty,” “motherhood wage penalty,” and “motherhood leadership challenge.”

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the ASEAN Leaders have paid more attention to this issue. In 2021, ASEAN introduced the ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on the Care Economy. It encouraged countries to invest in better care services and recognise the value of both paid and unpaid care work. This Framework called for concrete steps to expand care services and support care workers, reflecting ASEAN’s broader goal of building inclusive communities.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and ASEAN have also been working together to strengthen care systems across the region. Through

joint research, policy dialogue, and technical support, the partnership helps turn data into action. Together, ESCAP and ASEAN bring expert analysis to highlight the value of care work and to support Member States in translating these insights into national policies. In 2023, ESCAP co-hosted a regional forum on care work with ASEAN. The event brought together policymakers, community leaders, and experts from across the region to share ideas on what support caregivers need most, while also delving into gender-responsive and care-sensitive policies and programmes.

The topic gained further momentum when the Lao PDR hosted the Third ASEAN Women Leaders Summit in 2024, with capacity-building and knowledge support from ESCAP and various development partners. The Summit led to a new Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy adopted by the ASEAN Leaders later that year, which recognises the disproportionate presence of women in both the formal and informal care sectors, and identifies a range of gender-responsive priority actions.

“To create lasting change, we must prioritise transformative policies that recognise and redistribute the care burden equitably, without reinforcing traditional gender roles and norms.

By promoting shared responsibility for caregiving among all members of society, we can pave the way for more meaningful opportunities for women to realise their full potential and empower women and girls to dream big and reach far,” shares Cai Cai, Chief of the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Section at ESCAP.

Many ASEAN countries are already taking action. Indonesia has launched a Care Economy Roadmap and National Action Plan (2025-2045). Cambodia is close to finalising its own national action plan. Malaysia is developing a strategy to grow its care industry. In the Philippines, care services are being strengthened through provincial and national care ordinances. The Lao PDR is integrating care into both the Laos Women’s Development Plan 2026-2030 and the 10th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan. Timor-Leste is drafting a new Domestic Workers Law and has established a national Working Group on Care.

Together, these efforts reflect a shared regional commitment to making care more visible, accessible, and valued.

Looking ahead, ASEAN’s next community vision presents an opportunity to make care and gender equality a stronger part of the region’s development story. Mainstreaming them across all three ASEAN Community pillars will ensure ASEAN can harness all of its vast resources to accelerate progress towards achieving the global Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, with Target 5.4 aiming to recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work.

Care touches every part of life. Supporting care is not just about new policies. It is about recognising the needs of real people from every background and building systems that respond to them. When we recognise and invest in care, we create more chances for women to work, for families to thrive, and for communities to grow stronger.

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

ESCAP's Support to ASEAN in Advancing VNRs and the 2030 Agenda



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As ASEAN Member States advance their efforts toward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process has become an essential instrument—not only for tracking national progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but also for fostering inclusive dialogue and shaping shared development visions and priorities.

VNRs are country-led assessments of SDG implementation at the national level. Progress is shared and discussed during the annual Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) in Bangkok, providing a regional platform for discussion and peer learning to support countries presenting their VNRs at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York. The VNR helps connect national priorities with ASEAN's progress and align regional goals with global SDG efforts. Local governments contribute through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), helping to bridge local

realities with national priorities. This multi-level alignment ensures that local and national voices are reflected in the regional and global discussions.

To support this, ASEAN is working to strengthen VNR cooperation at the subregional level through the ASEAN Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Sustainability, utilising the Southeast Asia platform of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Most recently, the Forum convened on 28–29 August 2025, bringing together governments, civil society, academia, and other stakeholders from across the subregion. The event included a dedicated session on VNRs, where ASEAN Member States shared their latest experiences and reflected on how subregional cooperation can help amplify national reviews and strengthen their collective voice in regional and global discussions. ESCAP will continue to serve as a key partner in this effort by providing technical guidance, facilitating peer

learning, and supporting capacity development throughout the preparation of VNRs, to delivering and presenting the final report.

National commitment and ESCAP support throughout the VNR preparation

Across ASEAN, governments have shown a strong commitment to the VNR process, using it not only as a reporting mechanism but also as a means of implementing the SDGs. Indonesia and the Philippines, with four VNRs each, demonstrate strong institutional ownership and integration of the SDGs into national strategies. As the Philippines emphasised in its 2025 VNR presented in New York this year, “Goal localisation and the establishment of the Stakeholders’ Chamber on the Goals ensured that all hands are on deck for the country to achieve the 2030 Agenda.”



Photo Credit: ©Boy Wirat / iStock Photos

To support countries throughout the preparation process, ESCAP provides a range of advisory and technical assistance. This includes tailored training sessions and resource materials to guide Member States in planning, analysis, drafting, and finalising their reviews. In Thailand, for example, ESCAP supported the VNR Inception Workshop in November 2024, helping to familiarise relevant partners from national institutions with Thailand's process for its 3rd VNR and present key milestones, approaches, and technical tools for data analysis as well as key elements of the report.

Peer learning is another key part of this support. The ESCAP VNR Twinning Programme, connects countries preparing VNRs, collaborating with UN Resident Coordinator offices, UN Country Teams, and national and local counterparts and stakeholders. The programme facilitates knowledge sharing among VNR focal points, across the government and among stakeholders, enabling them to share experiences, challenges, and solutions through activities that may include a study tour, online platforms, peer review of VNR drafts, and joint activities at the APFSD and HLPF.

ESCAP also supports the preparation of the VLRs, which allow local governments to assess SDG progress in their own contexts and contribute directly to national reporting. Localisation of SDGs is not only essential for achieving the 2030 Agenda but also enriches the VNR

process by connecting community-level outcomes to high-level reporting. Countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have shown leadership in this by integrating VLRs and subnational reviews into their VNRs, helping to ensure that local-level data and priorities are reflected in the national narrative. These countries have empowered local government to align local development plans with national SDG targets, ensuring vertical coherence and community relevance.

By highlighting these localisation efforts in their VNRs, ASEAN Member States are demonstrating how sustainable development is most impactful when it is rooted in local contexts and driven by the participation of local actors.

VNRs as catalysts for data-driven and inclusive development

Across the ASEAN region, Member States have increasingly embraced the VNR as a tool for inclusive dialogue, data-driven policymaking, and regional collaboration by strengthening national planning, coordination, and accountability to advance the SDGs. This commitment is also visible in the way ASEAN Member States are harnessing data to strengthen the VNR process. Indonesia, for instance, has utilised a data platform grounded in the principle of “Leave No One Behind” to identify and address the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups. This platform supports more targeted policymaking and has informed Indonesia's national SDG reporting. The Philippines and Brunei Darussalam have also made significant strides in enhancing transparency and accessibility through data dashboards and visualisation. Both countries, in collaboration with ESCAP, have used the National SDG Tracker and have launched interactive dashboards that present disaggregated SDG data in intuitive, user-friendly formats. These tools not only support evidence-based government decision-making but also empower civil society and the public to track progress and advocate for change.

ESCAP's peer learning platforms enabled the sharing of these innovations. The Philippines' Stakeholders' Chamber on the SDGs, a formal structure for engaging civil society and other non-state actors, has been showcased as a

regional good practice in various peer learning platforms. Malaysia's recent trilateral exchanges with Bhutan and Kazakhstan show how dialogue builds trust and spreads ASEAN practices. As Fahrul Nizam bin Rusly, Deputy Director of Malaysia's National SDG Centre, remarked: “Peer learning turns individual knowledge into shared wisdom. It adds value, broadens horizons, and helps uncover blind spots by learning from others. We strongly recommend this approach to other countries.”

These peer learning opportunities go beyond idea-sharing—they can also help build regional coherence and strengthen ASEAN's collective voice. Insights shared among ASEAN Member States feed into subregional forums, which in turn inform Asia-Pacific regional dialogues such as the annual APFSD and peer learning across the region. From there, the shared priorities and perspectives of Asia-Pacific countries are brought to the global stage at the UN High-Level Political Forum.

Through this multi-level process, the VNR serves as a critical link connecting local voices to global conversation and aligning national progress with regional and international commitments. With ESCAP's continued support, ASEAN Member States are not only strengthening their own reviews but also contributing to a more coherent and coordinated SDG journey for the Asia-Pacific region.

Strengthening ASEAN's collective voice

The VNR has proven to be more than a reporting tool—it is shaping how ASEAN Member States collaborate and innovate together. By amplifying ASEAN's collective voice at the global stage, it ensures that the priorities and perspectives of Southeast Asia are reflected in international policy dialogues. As the region moves forward, partnerships between ASEAN and ESCAP will be critical to ensuring that the momentum behind the VNR process translates into meaningful, measurable progress for all.

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2025 VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW: THE PHILIPPINES

DRIVING TRANSFORMATION FOR THE 2030 AGENDA THROUGH SDG LOCALISATION, COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS, AND INNOVATIVE STATISTICAL DEVELOPMENTS



Department of Economy, Planning, and Development, Philippines

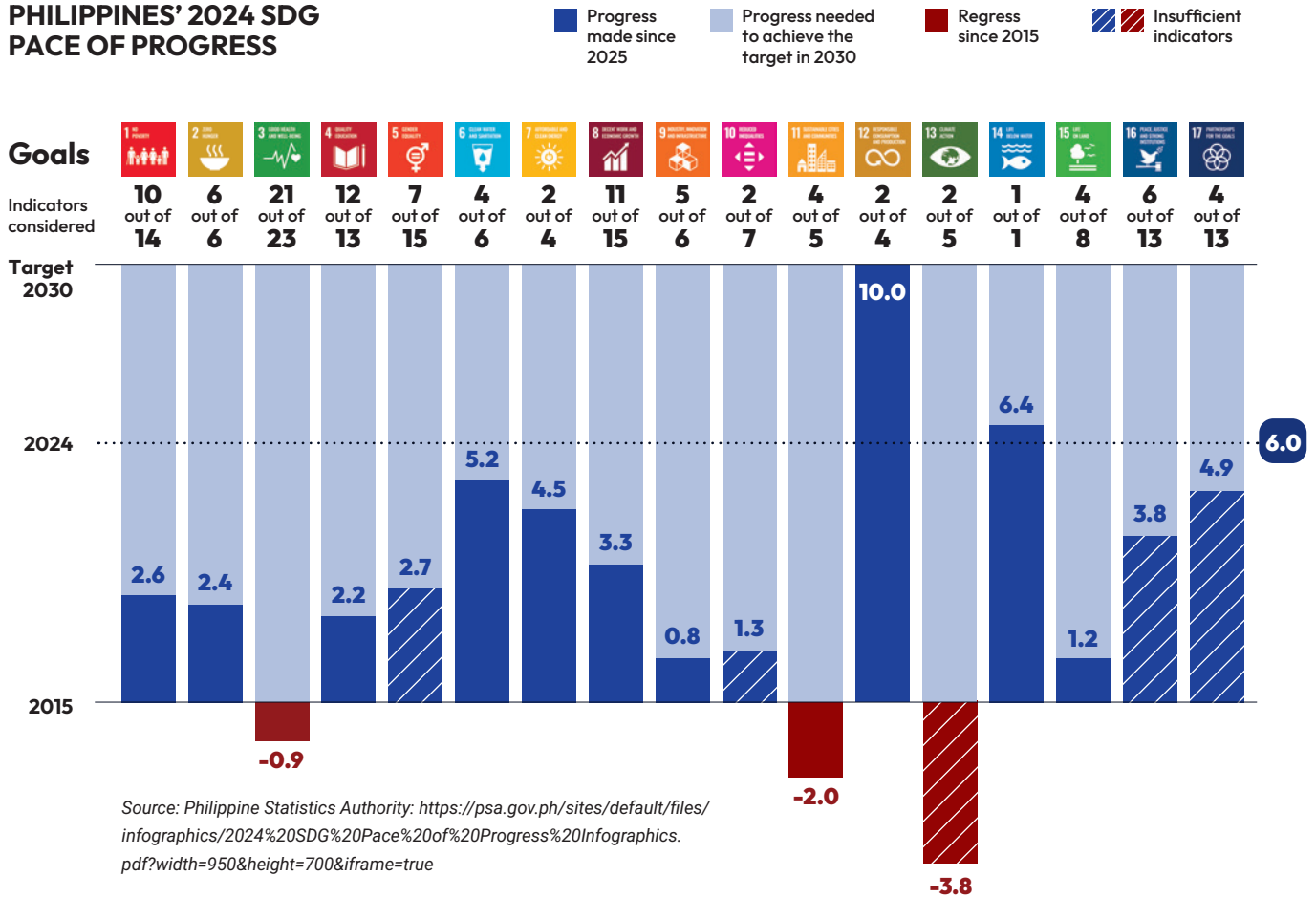
In 2015, as UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Philippines made an additional commitment to conduct a Voluntary National Review (VNR) on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) every three years. With the Department of Economy, Planning, and Development (DEPDev) serving as Chair and Secretariat to the Philippine Subcommittee on the SDGs (SC-SDG), we have produced four VNRs, published in 2016, 2019, 2022, and 2025.

Our fourth VNR provides a comprehensive assessment of the country's progress toward achieving the SDGs, based on 2024 data. It highlights actions taken in response to commitments made in the third VNR, with an emphasis on innovative statistical developments pursued to enable data-driven interventions.

Guided by AmBisyon Natin 2040, our long-term vision of a strongly rooted, comfortable, and secure life for all Filipinos, and with the Philippine Development Plan as our blueprint, the country has made notable progress across 10 SDGs.

The Philippines' 2024 SDG Pace of Progress reported gains in the following goals: Goals 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), 4 (Quality Education), 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), 14 (Life Below Water), and 15 (Life on Land). These represent a complete reversal of the setbacks noted in SDGs 2, 7, 8, and 9 under the 2022 Pace of Progress.

PHILIPPINES' 2024 SDG PACE OF PROGRESS



Key initiatives to accelerate SDG implementation

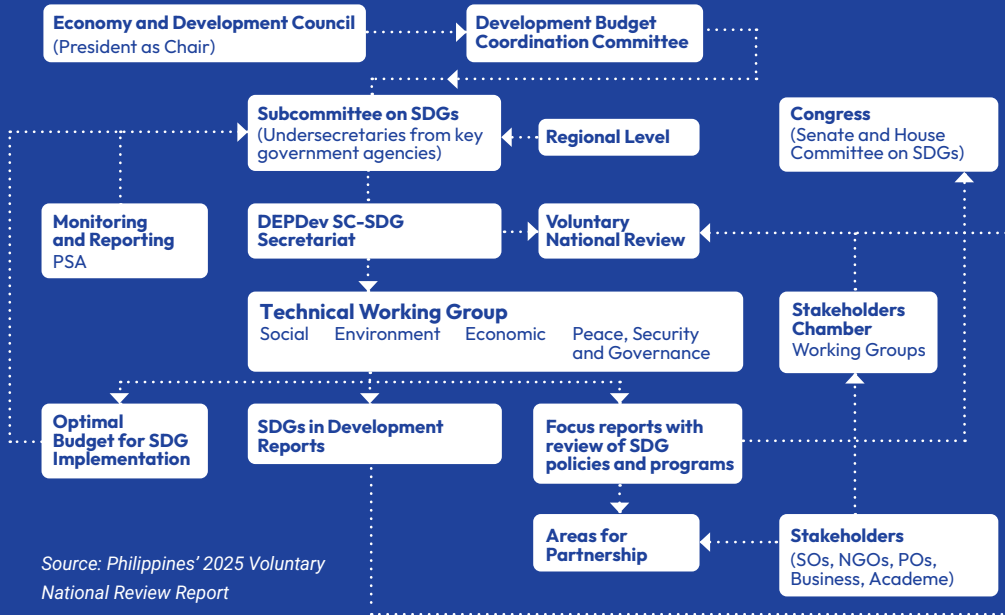
Building on the 2022 VNR, the Philippines leveraged the whole-of-nation plus approach to implement and report the country's progress toward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs. This approach fosters meaningful collaboration and partnerships across national and local governments ("whole-of-government") and non-government stakeholders ("whole-of-society"), aligning resources and initiatives in a unified effort to advance sustainable development. The "plus" component further strengthens this approach through innovation and futures thinking, as well as strengthened international cooperation for the SDGs. This added component will help build a more resilient and sustainable future in the post-pandemic era.

WHOLE-OF-NATION PLUS APPROACH TO SDG IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING, AND REPORTING



Source: Philippines' 2025 Voluntary National Review Report

SC-SDG COORDINATION STRUCTURE



We strengthened institutional mechanisms like the SC-SDG, its sectoral Technical Working Groups (TWGs), and the Stakeholders' Chamber for the SDGs (Chamber). Established in 2019, the SC-SDG and its TWGs serve as dedicated inter-agency bodies that steer and coordinate government efforts to implement the SDGs. As the non-government counterpart, the Chamber actively contributes to policymaking, implementation, advocacy, and SDG review. It demonstrates its commitment through a three-year roadmap that outlines strategic milestones and objectives for policy recommendations, monitoring and evaluation, coordinated action, and strategic communications.

SDG PACE OF PROGRESS – OVERVIEW OF CURRENT STATUS INDEX AND ANTICIPATED PROGRESS INDEX

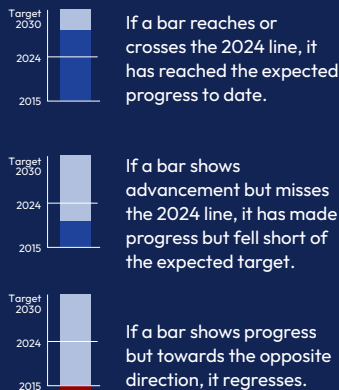
Current Status Index (Goal Level)

How much progress has been made since 2015?

- Assesses the current state of progress by creating a linkage between the progress made since 2015 in relation to the progress needed to achieve target by 2030.
- Data requirement: 2 or more datapoints and 2030 numerical targets.

Interpretation of Results

The length of each bar shows the progress of the country since 2015.



23.7%

23 indicators
ON TRACK

(Values range from 0 to 10). Maintained progress to achieve the target

51.5%

50 indicators
NEEDS ACCELERATION

(Values range from >10 to 100). Needs to accelerate progress to achieve the target

24.7%

24 indicators
REGRESS

(Values less than 0) Reverse trend for achievement



ON TRACK

If the Philippines is to sustain its current rate, the country is on track or will meet the target with the current rate or only minor effort is needed.

Anticipated Progress Index

How likely will the numerical targets be achieved by 2030?

- Provides a measure of how much extra effort is needed in order to meet the numerical target by end of target year (2030), assuming the pace of progress is sustained.
- Data requirement: 3 or more data points and 2030 numerical targets.

97 out of **158** Indicators **➔** **62** out of **98** Targets

Have measurable pace of progress

Aggregated to



Interpretation of Results

The length of the bar shows the magnitude of the gap in achieving the 2030 numerical target.



NEEDS ACCELERATION

The Philippines is still 52.4 percent away from achieving the 2030 numerical target assuming that the current rate is sustained. Thus, the country needs extra effort to accelerate the current rate of progress to achieve the target.

21.0%

13 targets
ON TRACK

(Values range from 0 to 10). Progress of aggregated indicator level estimate

51.6%

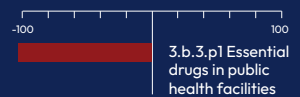
32 targets
NEEDS ACCELERATION

(Values range from >10 to 100). Progress of aggregated indicator level estimate

27.4%

17 indicators
REGRESS

(Values less than 0) Progress of aggregated indicator level estimate



REGRESS

The Philippines will not be able to achieve the 2030 numerical target and is 100 percent away from the baseline value, assuming that the current rate is sustained. Thus, the country needs to reverse the trend to achieve the 2030 numerical target.



Photo Credit: ©EyeEm Mobile GmbH / iStock Photos

Statistical innovations drive the country's initiatives and accomplishments in implementing data-driven interventions. These include the SDG Pace of Progress, SDG Watch, and SDG Data Platform, among others. The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) produces the SDG Pace of Progress, offering a snapshot of national performance on each goal since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015. The PSA also monitors the country's SDG Indicator Framework through the SDG Watch, updated annually with data submitted by national government agencies. To streamline this process and lessen the reporting burden, the PSA developed the SDG Data Platform—an automated, real-time system for compiling and managing SDG data online.

Localising SDG initiatives

DEPDev has led the strategic and coordinated effort to localise the 2030 Agenda by addressing specific development gaps and regional disparities in SDG progress through the Regional SDG Catch-up Plans. The initiative began with three pilot regions—Regions III, VIII, and SOCCSKSARGEN—representing each major island group in the country.

To support evidence-based policymaking, DEPDev developed the SDG Progress and Assessment Tool and partnered with the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in utilising the Every Policy Is Connected (EPIC) Tool. These tools helped identify priority areas and guide the formulation of the plans.

DEPDev and the Regional Development Councils (RDCs) jointly monitor and implement the plans through a multi-layered, data-driven process that ensures accountability and enables timely course corrections to accelerate SDG progress at the regional level.

Boosting SDG financing

The national budget of the Philippine government is embodied in the General Appropriations Act (GAA), which Congress enacts annually. The country aligns the entire national budget and its expenditure priorities with the Philippine Development Plan, in which the SDGs have been mainstreamed. To augment GAA allocations for SDG-related initiatives, Congress enacted Republic Act No. 11467, amending the National Internal Revenue Code of the Philippines. Section 9 of the law mandates that 20 per cent of the total revenues collected from excise taxes on alcohol, heated tobacco, and vapour products should be allocated to initiatives that support the achievement of the SDGs.

DEPDev led the adoption of the Program Convergence Budgeting approach for the SDGs (PCB-SDG). The PCB-SDG Framework outlines the guidelines, evaluation processes, prioritisation criteria, and administrative procedures for identifying key programmes, projects, and activities that contribute to achieving the SDGs.

The country's Innovation Fund also plays a pivotal role in accelerating SDG progress by supporting creative, scalable solutions to complex global challenges. Since 2022, innovation grants have enabled local government units and state universities and colleges to establish or enhance innovation infrastructure and to develop innovative tools for key sectors, such as education, transportation, food and agribusiness, medical sciences, security and defense, and the blue economy.

Accelerating the path to 2030: The Philippines' commitment to the SDGs

With 2030 on the horizon, the Philippines is implementing forward-looking strategies that promote inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development. The government is intensifying international cooperation by deepening engagement with multilateral and bilateral partners, mobilising resources, and advocating for fair access to global financing. It also seeks to strengthen regional economic ties to ensure long-term support for sustainable development initiatives.

To enhance SDG monitoring, the country is advancing integrated reporting by reinforcing linkages between national, subnational, and local reviews. The national government, led by the Department of the Interior and Local Government, in collaboration with local government leagues and UN agencies, has established mechanisms to track which local government units are conducting Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), along with facilitating dialogue to create synergies between national and local SDG efforts and encouraging more local governments to undertake VLRs.

The Philippine government also fortifies environmental resilience by implementing landmark legislation that focuses on ecosystem protection, rehabilitation, restoration, and sustainable management. These efforts strengthen the capacity of national and local institutions to prevent, reduce, and manage the impacts of climate change more effectively.

As the Philippines charts its path toward 2030, it remains steadfast in transforming ambition into action. By harnessing innovation, strengthening partnerships, and empowering local communities, the country is not only accelerating SDG progress but it is also shaping a future where no one is left behind. With bold leadership and a shared vision, the Philippines stands ready to deliver on the promise of sustainable development—resilient, inclusive, and enduring.

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100 youth volunteers of eYAA:
Cohort 5 in Bangkok before
deployment to their respective
project sites

Youth Volunteerism in Action

ADVANCING A PEOPLE-CENTRED ASEAN THROUGH EMPOWERING YOUTHS ACROSS ASEAN



Glorius Parulian Yuwono Setra

Communications Officer, eYAA Programme,
ASEAN Foundation

On his first night in La Union, the Philippines, Indonesian youth volunteer Andi Reza Zulkarnain arrived with a clear plan. Together with his team, he was scheduled to begin community sessions on marine conservation and environmental education as part of a local initiative to protect coastal ecosystems. Within hours, however, those plans were overtaken by events beyond anyone's control. A powerful typhoon struck the area, disrupting daily life, damaging infrastructure, and leaving parts of the community without electricity, water, or access to food.

Faced with these conditions, Andi and his fellow youth volunteers quickly shifted roles. Working alongside local partners and residents, they supported the emergency response, prepared relief items, and distributed assistance to affected families. What began as an environmental education deployment became an immediate exercise in solidarity, adaptability, and collective action under crisis conditions.

Reflecting on the experience, Andi recalled, “One of my most significant learning moments was shifting from an education-focused agenda to disaster relief overnight, preparing and distributing over 6,300 relief packs alongside local volunteers. It reminded me that meaningful impact often happens when we step beyond our comfort zones and respond to real community needs.”

Moments like these capture the deeper value of youth volunteerism in ASEAN. Beyond delivering planned activities, youth volunteers often find themselves navigating complex, real-world situations that develop their empathy and resilience, and engender a stronger commitment to community well-being.

At the same time, youth volunteers enrich communities with their involvement. These contributions reflect ASEAN’s people-centred approach to development, where progress is measured not only through plans and policies, but also through direct engagement with communities and citizens, especially in times of need.

Youth volunteerism is closely aligned with the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), one of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community. The ASCC Blueprint 2025, which serves as a roadmap for social and cultural development in the region, places strong emphasis on promoting a high quality of life, protecting human rights, and ensuring the inclusion of women, children, youths, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, and vulnerable and marginalised groups. It also underscores the importance of fostering a harmonious ASEAN community that values shared identity, culture, and heritage.

Momentum for volunteerism is growing globally. With the United Nations General Assembly proclaiming 2026 as the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development, volunteerism is receiving renewed attention as a vital force for inclusive and sustainable development. Across ASEAN, this presents a timely opportunity to recognise and strengthen youth volunteer ecosystems that empower young people to respond to local challenges while contributing to a more resilient region.

Youth volunteerism and regional identity

Across ASEAN Member States, youth volunteerism has demonstrated its relevance in addressing diverse development priorities. They support education in underserved areas, promote environmental responsibility, strengthen community participation, or revitalise cultural practices. They bring with them vitality, creativity, and an openness to engage with others across social and cultural boundaries. These experiences cultivate mutual understanding and help young people recognise shared aspirations that transcend nationality.

“Youth volunteerism allows youths to engage with ASEAN not as an abstract concept, but as a shared experience shaped through cooperation and mutual responsibility,” said Dr. Piti Srisangnam, Executive Director of the ASEAN Foundation. This perspective underscores the role of youth engagement in strengthening ASEAN identity through lived experience and collective action.

Youth volunteerism is further reinforced within the ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2021–2025, particularly under Priority 4 on Participation and Engagement. Aligned with Priority Areas 4.1 and 4.2, youth-led initiatives promote cross-cultural understanding, cultivate a sense of regional identity, and empower youths to contribute to ASEAN’s social, economic, and environmental development. Equally important, they support youth leadership as a central element of the youth development process, reinforcing the role of youths as partners in shaping a more inclusive and dynamic ASEAN.



From regional vision to community action

Against this broader regional landscape, platforms that connect youth volunteers with community-based organisations have proven particularly effective in enabling meaningful engagement. One such example is the eMpowering Youths Across ASEAN (eYAA) programme, which demonstrates how cross-border youth volunteerism can be organised in ways that remain locally grounded.

A collaboration between the ASEAN Foundation and Maybank Foundation, the eYAA programme places youth volunteers with civil society organisations and social enterprises that work closely with communities. This approach enables the youth to contribute to initiatives shaped by local priorities, while gaining insight into the social, cultural, and environmental contexts of different ASEAN Member States. Rather than operating as a standalone intervention, the eYAA programme serves to support ASEAN’s broader aspirations for inclusion, resilience, and people-to-people connectivity.

For the ASEAN Foundation, this model reflects a commitment to development rooted in participation



and local ownership. By engaging directly with community partners, youth volunteers contribute to initiatives that encourage cooperation, strengthen mutual understanding, and reinforce a shared sense of responsibility across borders. For the Maybank Foundation, involvement represents a long-term investment in communities and in the values and capabilities of future leaders, in line with its mission to humanise financial services and promote inclusive growth across the region.

Sustaining impact beyond service

Over five cohorts, initiatives supported through eYAA have reached more than 100,000 beneficiaries across ASEAN. Across successive cohorts, youth-led initiatives have consistently generated outcomes that extend beyond the duration of the volunteer placement, demonstrating how locally grounded action can translate into sustained community engagement.

In Cambodia, youth volunteers supported a Women's Economic Empowerment project delivered with Inclusive Organisation in Phnom Penh and Koh Dach. They acted as young ambassadors, translating financial

literacy and women's economic empowerment concepts into locally relevant messages through peer-led community presentations. Youth volunteers also amplified women's voices through digital storytelling, contributing to podcast-based advocacy that transformed complex issues of debt, gender, and poverty into accessible public narratives. By combining economic education with empathetic engagement and mental health awareness, the initiative introduced a more holistic and people-centred approach to community empowerment.

In the Philippines, Andi and fellow youth volunteers were deployed under the *Eco At Ako* project, implemented with Curma Group Inc., in La Union, to support environmental education and sea turtle conservation. When two major typhoons caused prolonged school closures and disrupted planned activities, youth volunteers demonstrated adaptability by rapidly adjusting programme delivery. Instead of pausing engagement, they supported local partners in redesigning sessions, aligning activities with existing school and parent-teacher association schedules, and integrating conservation education into alternative formats to sustain participation. This response ensured continuity of youth-led environmental action despite climate-related shocks, reflecting resilience under real-world conditions.

Together, these examples illustrate how youth volunteerism in ASEAN delivers planned outputs while responding thoughtfully to the realities communities face.

From youth service to civic leadership

Alongside community-level outcomes, youth volunteerism also contributes to the development of young leaders. Youth volunteers build practical competencies in areas such as project planning, financial management, basic monitoring and reporting, as well as communication and teamwork. Exposure to diverse community settings strengthens their ability to collaborate amid differences, adapt to new environments, and contribute constructively within and beyond their immediate environs.

"Volunteerism is a long-term investment. Its impact goes beyond today's communities and helps shape the

values of the leaders who will guide ASEAN towards 2045," said Izlyn Ramli, Chief Executive Officer of Maybank Foundation. This conviction underpins continued efforts to nurture socially conscious and purpose-driven youth leaders who carry forward the lessons of service into their future roles.

The longer-term influence of youth volunteerism is also evident in the ongoing journeys of programme alumni. In one such example, an eYAA alumnus, inspired by an earlier volunteer experience, went on to establish EcoLiving Community Indonesia, a grassroots organisation focused on sustainable waste management and environmental education. What began as a volunteer placement later developed into a community-led initiative engaging schools, households, youth groups, and local stakeholders in adopting more sustainable practices. Building on this foundation, the alumnus later returned to eYAA as a civil society organisation representative during Cohort 5, leading a project that combined education, community mobilisation, and policy dialogue, ultimately benefiting more than 4,300 beneficiaries. This trajectory illustrates how youth-led service can nurture not only project-based outcomes but also long-term civic leadership and locally rooted institutions that continue to contribute to community wellbeing.

Looking ahead to the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development 2026

As ASEAN implements ASEAN 2045 and the ASCC Strategic Plan, youth volunteerism assumes an increasingly important role in translating regional goals into community-level action. The forthcoming ASEAN Work Plan on Youth is expected to further strengthen youth volunteer ecosystems, which will support locally grounded solutions while reinforcing a shared sense of regional purpose.

ASEAN embraces the celebration of the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development in 2026, with initiatives such as eYAA demonstrating tangible proof that youth volunteerism can contribute to a more cohesive, resilient, and people-centred ASEAN.

BUILDING GREEN SKILLS FOR ASEAN'S SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



Margarita Pavlova, PhD

International Green Skills Expert and Research Fellow at the UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre, Hong Kong

ASEAN has set a bold vision for transitioning to a low-carbon, climate-resilient, and resource-efficient economy—one that is socially inclusive and sustainable. This commitment is reflected in key regional policies that encompass a range of issues, including energy and climate change, sustainable finance, pollution control, and marine debris management.

However, turning this vision into action depends on one crucial factor: people. The *ASEAN State of Climate Change Report* (ASCCR) 2021 highlights the vital role of skills development across various sectors, including energy, transport, and urban planning. As cities go green and industries shift toward sustainable practices, the demand for a skilled, adaptable workforce is growing fast.

With strong support from the ASEAN-German development project “Regional

Cooperation on Labour Market and TVET for a Twin Transition in ASEAN” (RECOTwin), I have been helping drive a critical conversation across the region: How can ASEAN develop the right skills for a greener, more inclusive future?

International agencies (e.g. UNESCO) have introduced the concept of “Green Human Capital,” holding significant opportunities for the region. This concept advocates for national governments to take the lead in identifying and developing green skills,

connecting jobs and occupations, skills, and training to shaping the framework of the green transition.

Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) plays a major role in this scenario. The ASEAN TVET Council (ATC) provides a platform for coordination, research and development of innovations, and monitors regional programmes that support the advancement of TVET. The ATC's Work Plan (2021-2030) clearly highlights TVET's key role in achieving ASEAN's

high aspirations of inclusive growth as well as responding to emerging trends, such as the green transition.

Therefore, greening TVET in all its facets, from green institutions to learning new skills, to trend scouting and driving innovation, is a vital cornerstone to the realisation of this plan. Curricula need to be adapted to reflect sustainability aspects throughout, by also incorporating skills such as “learning to learn” and transversal or generic green skills, which align closely with 21st-century skills. They are essential now and will equip young learners to become a future-ready workforce.

Moreover, the ATC Work Plan emphasises enhancing the capacity of TVET personnel through training programmes for trainers, educators, and leaders to stay ahead of new trends and innovations in teaching and learning. Finally, the rise of green industries such as renewable energy and electric vehicles is to be reflected in labour market information strategies.

Capacity building and innovation for greening TVET in ASEAN

In 2024/2025, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation's Regional Centre for Vocational and Technical Education and Training (SEAMEO VOTTECH), in collaboration with the Education University of Hong Kong, conducted four training workshops on “Greening TVET” with more than 100 TVET practitioners across Brunei, Timor-Leste, and Indonesia. Participants were tasked to create individual action plans aimed at greening their TVET institutions.

Some ideas included a campus-wide energy efficiency and renewable energy plan to reduce the carbon footprint and promote sustainability at their institute. Other approaches focused on awareness raising among staff and students and included activities like creating compost, planting trees and flowers. There are also suggestions to integrate waste management and efficient use of water as cross-cutting topics in the curriculum. Again, another group developed a detailed curriculum

with a 50-hour green module structured around key sustainability and green concepts, and it includes international and local case studies to illustrate how the challenges of the green transition can be resolved.

These efforts are part of broader regional strategies to embed sustainability within TVET in ASEAN. TVET institutions can help leverage ASEAN Quality Assurance Frameworks, such as the ASEAN TVET Network Quality Assurance (ATN-QA), share best practices, offer upskilling initiatives, conduct policy dialogues and advocacy campaigns, and generally help prepare the ASEAN workforce for the green transition.

Building knowledge and evidence

Another important aspect of the ATC Work Plan further emphasises generating evidence, conducting research, and developing knowledge as critical actions. My recent study analysed the landscape of green vocational education research within ASEAN, focusing on literature connecting environmental sustainability with vocational/technical education in the ASEAN region. The study distilled 283 papers into a final dataset, revealing significant interest from researchers and governments in the topic.

The meta-study identified several key themes across the region. The cornerstone of green TVET research in ASEAN lies in policy papers and strategic roadmaps. These official reports build the foundation and guidance for implementing green TVET initiatives. But researchers in ASEAN are not only focused on policy frameworks. They are also delving into practical aspects of curriculum design and human capital development. They explore how to create effective green architecture classes, green agriculture modules, and sustainable technical labs, and how these curricula can lead to measurable improvements in students' green competencies. Additionally, the research acknowledges ASEAN-specific realities, such as the role of temporary foreign workers, highlighting cross-border employment scenarios.

Recommendations for advancing the green transition in TVET

The importance of Green Human Capital in supporting the green transition in ASEAN is evident from the research. ASEAN and national governments must implement mechanisms that summarise and apply these findings. Different research methods and perspectives on greening TVET can help identify specific approaches. Sharing good examples of capacity building and curriculum development across the region can inform ASEAN-level policy formulation and recommendations. The findings suggest that a taxonomy of green skills for the region would be an important mechanism for collecting labour market information related to greening, ensuring that green skills are mutually addressed, and monitoring curricula and implementation are comparable across the member states. Incorporation of greening aspects into Quality Assurance Frameworks for TVET, with a focus on standards, assessment guidelines, and quality accreditation, will help move towards greening human capital in the region.

The ASEAN-German cooperation project, “Regional Cooperation on Labour Market Policy and TVET for a Twin Transition in ASEAN” (RECOTwin), facilitates peer exchanges among ASEAN member states represented in the ASEAN TVET Council (ATC), the Senior Labour Officials Meeting (SLOM), and the Senior Officials Meeting on Education (SOM-ED). The project aims to enhance knowledge exchange and share best practices among policymakers and practitioners to empower the ASEAN labour force with the skills and choices needed to shape a sustainable and inclusive future. Besides peer exchange, GIZ's RECOTwin project supports evidence-based policymaking, offering capacity development measures and developing regional standards to align TVET and labour market policies across the region with the green and digital transition, thereby contributing to achieving the set goals of the SLOM, SOM-ED, and ATC Work Plans.

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ASEAN-UK Women in STEM Scholars **DRIVING CHANGE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA'S SCIENCE AND TECH**

UK Mission to ASEAN

When we think of groundbreaking scientific achievements, names like Darwin and Alexander Graham Bell often come to mind. Rarely do we hear the names of the many women whose contributions have also been transformative. While women have always been involved in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), their contributions have often been overlooked or downplayed. Today, despite growing efforts toward gender equality, women are still significantly underrepresented in STEM fields across Southeast Asia. These disciplines are at the heart of solutions to today's most pressing challenges—innovation, climate resilience, and sustainable development—yet they remain largely male-dominated. Addressing STEM's “leaky pipeline” of lost female talent will not only bridge a critical skills gap but also accelerate progress on urgent global challenges. A more diverse STEM workforce brings broader perspectives, innovative thinking, and inclusive solutions.

The ASEAN-UK Women in STEM Scholarship established in 2023 under the Supporting the Advancement of Girls Education (SAGE) programme, is working to change that narrative. Established through a partnership between the UK government and the ASEAN Secretariat, this initiative offers postgraduate scholarships for outstanding women across ASEAN to study in the UK—creating new pathways for leadership, inclusion, and regional cooperation.

The scholarship is expanding the pool of ASEAN women who are establishing themselves in fields that have long excluded women: engineering, urban planning, climate finance, and data science. They are charting new territories, not just for themselves, but for the women who will follow.



**Maria Andrea
Kristina Anglao**
PHILIPPINES

Growing up in the Philippines, Andrea was drawn to the logic and design of industrial engineering. But her curiosity didn't stop there; she began exploring environmental science and, more recently, coding in Python. She was captivated by how data could be used not just to solve problems, but to drive decisions in climate action and public policy.

Before receiving the ASEAN-UK Women in STEM scholarship, Andrea had started her career at a local tech startup focused on sustainability. "It felt like I was building something real," she says. "But I also knew I needed more knowledge and a wider lens."

What she often found discouraging, though, was the subtle, and sometimes overt, messaging that women weren't meant for this kind of work. "In many households, girls are still raised to focus on domestic responsibilities. Even in the workplace, there's still this sense that women don't quite belong in technical spaces."

The UK changed that for her. "Being in such a diverse academic environment, surrounded by people from so many different cultures, opened my eyes to how much more we can do when everyone's voice is heard."

Andrea now envisions a future where she blends her skills in data science with policy development. She dreams of helping governments design smarter, more inclusive, and more sustainable solutions. "If we want women to thrive in STEM, we need to fund their research and open the space," she adds. "It's not just about representation, it's about what we all stand to gain."



**Sari Eloise
Yemima**
INDONESIA

Eloise's path has never followed a single trajectory. With a degree in computer science, she worked in banking and IT consultancy before finding her calling in environmental sustainability. But throughout those years, one thing remained constant: a desire to empower other women.

Her experience was shaped not only by the lack of female peers, but also by the absence of visible mentors. "There was no one to look up to. I had to imagine the version of myself I wanted to become."

Through the ASEAN-UK Women in STEM scholarship, Eloise found more than an education; she found a platform. She is using this opportunity to broaden her horizons by working across sectors and gaining insights she hopes to bring back to Indonesia. But more than that, she wants to teach.

"I want to mentor other young girls, share my story, and build networks of women in tech and sustainability. We need to break the stigma that women are less capable in STEM. The truth is, we bring something unique—our perspective, our empathy, our vision for the future."



**Punnapa
Yoswaris "Rose"**
THAILAND

For Rose, STEM wasn't a destination she planned; it was one she felt called to. With an extensive background in political science and social enterprise, she spent over a year working with a non-governmental organisation supporting small businesses in Thailand. But as she engaged with questions of inclusion and sustainability, one issue kept surfacing: climate change.

"I became fascinated with climate finance—how we can integrate sustainability into business and policy," she explains. "That's where STEM comes in. It's not just numbers and codes, it's about systems, compliance, and the future of our economies."

Rose has always seen the UK as a leader in climate commitment, and when she received the ASEAN-UK Women in STEM scholarship, she felt like she'd found her learning ground. "In the UK, I saw what's possible. I saw how diversity enriches innovation."

Back home, she faced the same challenges many women in Thailand do. In universities and industries alike, STEM remains male dominated, and the social stigma lingers. "People still think STEM is not for women. But without diversity, how can we expect better outcomes?"

Her vision goes beyond borders. Rose hopes to work across ASEAN, helping businesses understand climate regulation and financing climate adaptation. "ASEAN is fragile in the face of climate change. If we don't collaborate now, the cost will be too high later. Women must be part of that collaboration."



**Elsya
Patresia**
INDONESIA

Elsya's early career was rooted in hard industry—civil engineering in the mining fields of Kalimantan. But the longer she stayed, the more uneasy she became about the environmental impact of her work. "I realised I wanted to build, not extract," she recalls.

Her shift toward sustainable manufacturing came with many doubts, from others and, at times, even herself. "There's a belief that women can't do the 'tough' jobs. On the field, people often assume we're not strong enough."

But Elsy believes women's strengths lie elsewhere. "We're good at managing conflict, solving problems creatively, and looking at the long-term human impact."

Through the scholarship, she is now refining her expertise in sustainable systems and hopes to return to Indonesia to work in government. "Policy is where change begins. I want to help shape the kind of future I once thought I could only work around."



**Nava
Neilulfar Alvi**
INDONESIA

For Nava, ambition always burned quietly, especially in a system that offered so few opportunities. Based in a local government office in one of Indonesia's lesser-developed regions, she worked in urban planning for seven years, watching as male colleagues steadily rose through the ranks.

"There's meritocracy, but only for a few," she says. "It's hard to study abroad or move ahead when you're from a remote area. But I knew if I didn't try, nothing would change."

The ASEAN-UK Women in STEM scholarship gave her that leap. In the UK, she has been exposed to cutting-edge thinking and new global perspectives on urban development and social equity. But her mind is always on home.

"When I return, I want to apply what I've learned in practical, tangible ways, particularly for the outermost and least developed regions. We need to show young people there that ambition isn't just a dream, it's a starting point."

For Nava, STEM must reflect the dynamism of society. "It's not static. It evolves with us. And women, especially those from underrepresented areas, must be part of that evolution."

From access to action: A regional shift in motion

Each of these women carries a story of quiet resilience, of daring to dream beyond boundaries set by tradition or geography. Together, they reflect a growing movement—one where ASEAN women are not only stepping into STEM but reshaping its purpose and reach.

The ASEAN-UK Women in STEM Scholarship is not simply about academic mobility. It's about rewriting access, expanding possibilities, and nurturing leadership that reflects the full diversity of the region. By championing these scholars, the UK affirms its commitment to global equity, sustainable development, and the transformative power of education.

And as these scholars prepare to return to their home countries with degrees, new skills, and renewed purpose, they do not return alone. They carry with them new networks, new confidence, and a message that echoes across borders: women belong in STEM. And when they are given the tools and trust, they don't just contribute—they lead.

Read more about ASEAN-UK Women in STEM Scholarship: <https://www.britishcouncil.id/en/programmes/education/asean-uk-sage/women-in-stem-scholarships>

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An aerial photograph of a tropical river in Kerala, India. The river is dark and calm, reflecting the surrounding lush greenery. On either bank, there is a dense forest of tall palm trees with vibrant green fronds. In the center of the river, a small, narrow boat with a blue and yellow hull is moving towards the bottom of the frame. The boat has a small outboard motor and some equipment on board. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic, capturing the essence of a tropical environment.

The ASEAN is deeply grateful to the Government of India, through the Indian Mission to ASEAN, for its support to the magazine.

This collaboration reflects the shared commitment of ASEAN and India to disseminate knowledge and information on socio-cultural development in ASEAN.

The ASEAN

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This publication was made possible with the support of:

The Government of India

