



H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN

Pre-recorded Opening Remarks for

the 2025 ASEAN Plus Three (ASEAN+3) HRD Forum

Republic of Korea, 20 November 2025

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Mr. Cheol Soo Lee, President, Korea Polytechnic

Honourable Senior Officials from ASEAN Member States and the Plus Three Countries,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

I'm delighted to share these congratulatory remarks at the 2025 ASEAN+3 Human Resource Development Forum. I want to thank the Ministry of Employment and Labour of the Republic of Korea, together with its partners—the World Bank, HRD Korea, and Korea Polytechnics—for sustaining this valuable platform of knowledge sharing among the ASEAN+3 Countries since 2013.

This year's theme, "Re-imagining HR Systems: Innovating HRD for a Sustainable Future," speaks directly to where we are today. Across our region, we are experiencing a fundamental transformation in the world of work, driven by a convergence of megatrends—digitalisation, climate change, demographic shifts, and global uncertainties. According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025, 39% of workers' core skills are expected to be disrupted by 2030. This Forum provides an important platform for all of us—policymakers, partners, thought leaders and practitioners—to collectively chart a future that is inclusive, forward-looking, and people-centred.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Human resource development lies at the core of ASEAN's commitment to building a cohesive, resilient, and inclusive community. It is a critical enabler of sustainable growth and social progress. As reaffirmed in the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, we envision a future where all ASEAN people enjoy equitable access to quality education and lifelong learning, decent work opportunities, and social protection in a rapidly changing world of work.

The challenge before us is the need to translate this vision into concrete outcomes—ensuring that the benefits of technological advancement and green transition reach not just urban centres and high-skilled workers, but also rural communities, women, youth, and informal sector workers who comprise a significant portion of our regional workforce.

In this regard, ASEAN has advanced considerably in strengthening our human capital systems through various regional frameworks. The 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur last month acknowledged the adoption by the ASEAN Labour Ministers' the two important Joint Statements on Skills Development for the Future Workforce in ASEAN and on Actionable Plan for Green Jobs Towards a Sustainable and Inclusive ASEAN Workforce. These actions affirmed the shared commitment of Member States to the promotion of lifelong learning, especially in upgrading ASEAN workforce's green, digital and AI competencies, while advancing skills recognition and public-private partnerships. Together, these frameworks set out a shared vision of a region that is digitally empowered, environmentally sustainable, and socially inclusive.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The ASEAN+3 Human Resource Development Forum has become a vital platform for policy exchange and collaboration. The Republic of Korea, in particular, has been instrumental through this Forum and other projects with ASEAN on TVET capacity building. Korea's own experience in transforming its workforce through strategic investments in technical education, industry-led training, and lifelong learning infrastructure offers valuable lessons for our region. The challenge is how to adapt these insights to ASEAN's diverse economic landscapes and institutional contexts. We look forward to expanding our cooperation through the next ASEAN–ROK Plan of Action (2026–2030).

Our collective focus on human resource development was further reinforced at the 13th ASEAN Plus Three Labour Ministers' Meeting, which I attended last year, in Singapore. There, the ministers highlighted three key imperatives—upskilling workers, strengthening resilience, and promoting innovation. These factors remain central to the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Strategic Plan and to our vision of a dynamic, inclusive, and future-ready region.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

These imperatives take on particular urgency as we confront the technological transformation in reshaping our economies. The integration of artificial intelligence and green technologies presents both transformative policy challenges and opportunities for the region. The promise of automation, big data, and digital platforms is reshaping how we work, learn, adapt, and deliver services. Yet, we must also

recognise the inherent risks of widening inequality, labour market displacement, and digital exclusion.

Recent studies in fact suggest that while technology may create new jobs, workers displaced by automation often lack the means or opportunity to transition into these emerging roles. The mismatch is multidimensional, not only technical but also geographical, generational, and gendered. Our task, therefore, is not simply to harness these technologies, but to humanise them—to ensure that innovation serves people, rather than the other way around. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated regional strategies that combine technological advancement with inclusive workforce development.

One such strategy is the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA). According to projections, DEFA could contribute up to an additional US\$2 trillion to the region's digital economy by 2030¹, while establishing a strong foundation for inclusive and interoperable digital markets across member states. Yet, its success will hinge not only on infrastructure and regulation, but on skilled, adaptable, and empowered human resources—underscoring the critical link between technological growth and human capital development.

This is why our labour and education sectors are accelerating efforts to build digital and green skill sets, foster ethical AI literacy, and strengthen the adaptability of our training institutions and workforce development strategies.

Another important focus area is modernising technical and vocational education and training (TVET) to meet the demands of emerging green and digital economies. In line with the adoption of the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Higher Education and our ongoing efforts to support the ASEAN TVET Council (ATC) Work Plan 2021-2030, we are working to enhance quality assurance, regional qualification frameworks, and industry partnerships.

At the same time, the region recognises that green technologies are integral to sustainable growth. The adoption of the Joint Statement on Actionable Plan for Green Jobs Towards a Sustainable and Inclusive ASEAN Workforce by the ASEAN Labour Ministers this year and the ongoing finalisation of the ASEAN Framework and Action Plan for a Just and Inclusive Transition to Green Jobs (2025–2030), seek to guide Member States in developing green skills ecosystems, promoting sustainable enterprises, and ensuring a just transition for workers and communities.

Our goal is to build a future-ready TVET ecosystem—one that supports lifelong learning, integrates digital competencies, and reaches vulnerable and marginalised groups. To this end, public–private partnerships will be instrumental. The ASEAN Secretariat is supporting Member States to design sectoral skills strategies that respond to real-time labour market signals.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In this era of transition and uncertainty, we must remember that investing in people is not only an economic imperative, but a social responsibility. It is pivotal in reducing inequality, promoting well-being, and strengthening resilience of our societies and communities. The return on investment in human capital may not appear immediately

¹ https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ASEAN-Digital-Economy-Framework-Agreement-Public-Summary_Final-published-version-1.pdf

on balance sheets, but it manifests in stronger social cohesion, reduced poverty, enhanced innovation capacity, and the ability of our societies to navigate future shocks—whether economic, environmental, or health-related.

Let me close by reaffirming ASEAN's steadfast commitment to regional and multilateral cooperation. We stand ready to work closely with the Plus Three countries and all our partners in advancing human capital development as a cornerstone of regional progress. The challenges we face are too complex, too interconnected, and too urgent for any nation to address them alone. This Forum exemplifies the spirit of collaboration that must define our path forward—sharing knowledge, pooling resources, and learning from both our successes and setbacks.

I wish this Forum every success and look forward to the new ideas and partnerships that will emerge from our discussions.

Thank you very much.
