



KEYNOTE REMARKS BY
H.E. DR. KAO KIM HOURN, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF ASEAN
OPENING CEREMONY OF M360 ASEAN 2026
10 SEPTEMBER 2026, KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

Your Excellency Dato' Seri Fahmi Fadzil, Minister of Communications of Malaysia,

***Mr. Vivek Badrinath, Director General of Global System for Mobile
Communications Association (GSMA),***

***Distinguished Ministers, Business Leaders, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and
Gentlemen,***

1. Thank you very much for the opportunity to join the Opening Ceremony of M360 ASEAN 2026. My sincere appreciation goes to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and co-hosting partner GSMA for organising today's conference. It is a demonstration of how public-private partnerships can effectively advance the region's shared interests and deliver tangible benefits for ASEAN.
2. Across our region, digital technologies are reshaping economies and industries, and transforming societies and lives, and creating new opportunities for businesses and communities. Consider something as small as a QR code. A traveler from Kuala Lumpur can now walk into a shop in Bangkok, open their

banking app, and pay in Thai baht without ever touching a currency counter — because DuitNow and PromptPay were built to speak to each other. Multiply that single transaction across millions of travelers, and across the small merchants on the other side of that scan, and you begin to see what national strategies look like once they are made to work together.

3. This is the same logic driving ASEAN's digital economy as a whole, which continues to expand at a remarkable pace: in 2025, it surpassed USD 300 billion in Gross Merchandise Value, driven by sustained growth of approximately 15 per cent year-on-year¹.
4. The ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), to be signed at the 49th ASEAN Summit this November, marks a new milestone in ASEAN's digital transformation journey. Once implemented, after signing in November the period now has been shortened to only 6 months for ratification, DEFA is projected to lift the region's digital economy from an expected USD 1 trillion to USD 2 trillion by 2030². This offers hundreds of thousands of businesses and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) substantial opportunities to transform themselves and capture the full benefits of digital technology. The informal economy will be transforming into the formal economy. So everyone will be part of the digital economy.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. GSMA M360 ASEAN acts as a crucial bridge between public policymakers and the private sector ecosystem, working together on the technical execution, industry investment, and operational standards needed to turn policy goals into reality. Against this backdrop, I would like to highlight four priorities where M360 ASEAN 2026 can make a meaningful contribution to ASEAN's digital future.

¹ e-Conmy SEA Report 2025

² DEFA Study

6. **First, we must prioritise harmonising resilient and interoperable digital network infrastructure across the region.** ASEAN's digital economy relies on robust, scalable, cross-border connectivity infrastructure. The Asia-Pacific (APAC) region is projected to account for 34 per cent of global data centre operational capacity by 2028, with ASEAN contributing 51 per cent of the pipeline across key APAC markets³.
7. ASEAN is now witnessing a structural reconfiguration in which data centres, semiconductor manufacturing, and connectivity networks are converging to form a regional digital backbone. Platforms like GSMA M360 ASEAN play a pivotal role here, bridging governments and leading telecom operators to align on critical spectrum policies, accelerate 5G deployment, mobilise AI-enabled infrastructure investment, and complement broader regional efforts under the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2030.
8. **Second, we must strengthen digital trust and cybersecurity as a cornerstone of digital transformation.** Trust and security are fundamental to a thriving digital economy, particularly as we integrate emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence. AI significantly boosts productivity, innovation, and public service delivery, but it also introduces serious security concerns as well.
9. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Cybersecurity Outlook, 94 per cent of cyber experts identify AI as the most significant driver of cyber threat complexity. Platforms like M360 ASEAN can help address this by building cross-border anti-scam coalitions between regional mobile network operators and telecom regulators, sharing real-time threat intelligence and deploying AI-driven anti-phishing networks.
10. **Third, sustainability must be deeply integrated into our digital transformation.** Driven by the rapid expansion of AI and cloud computing, global electricity demand from data centres is projected to double between 2022 and

³ [Aseanexchanges.org](https://aseanexchanges.org)

2026. As our digital and energy transitions become inextricably linked, ASEAN must manage this "twin transition" by accelerating towards cleaner, more efficient energy systems, ensuring that the expansion of clean energy supports, rather than constrains, continued technological innovation and digital growth.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

11. I encourage M360 ASEAN and the wider private sector to support this vision and contribute actively to ASEAN's sustainability agenda.

12. **Fourth, we need to cultivate next-generation talent to close the digital inclusion gap.** The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 projects a net increase of 78 million jobs by 2030, driven by AI, green energy, and demographic shifts; even as 92 million jobs are displaced⁴. This shift is not only reshaping our labour markets but also redefining the wider digital transformation landscape. Inclusive digital transformation must ensure that MSMEs, marginalised communities, and startups have the knowledge, skills, and support to participate in the digital economy.

13. To this end, we are developing an ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on AI-Powered MSME Growth, together with its Action Plan, targeted for adoption at the 49th ASEAN Summit in November of this year. The Declaration will shape ASEAN's shared digital future by building AI talent and readiness for MSMEs across the region, supported by public-private partnerships.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

14. As we work towards a single digital market and an interoperable digital economy serving nearly 700 million people, the third largest trading block of in the world, greater effort at both the national and regional level is needed to unlock the region's

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/digest/>

full potential. Achieving this will require close collaboration between governments and the private sector.

15. I hope that this conference would be able to contribute its expertise, insights, experience, and best practices in support of ASEAN's digital transformation agenda. Such contributions will help shape policies that are not only practical, but responsive to business needs. By working together with trust, purpose, conviction, and a shared commitment to ASEAN's future, we can build a digital economy that is competitive, resilient, sustainable, and inclusive for all ASEAN citizens.

16. It is, in essence, the ambition of this conference in miniature: national strategies becoming, together, an integrated digital economy. I look forward to what this conference builds; for ASEAN, with ASEAN, and with the people of this region.

With that thank you very much and good morning to all of you.

