

Regional Dialogue E-Paper Series

Creative Vision or Concrete Action?

Reflections on Social Justice in Southeast Asia

Yulius Purwadi Hermawan, Nazwa, and Syanne Averina Teja



Authors: Yulius Purwadi Hermawan, Nazwa, and Syanne Averina Teja
Title: Creative Vision or Concrete Action? Reflections on Social Justice in Southeast Asia
Published by: Heinrich Böll Stiftung Southeast Asia Regional Office, Bangkok, December 2025

***Disclaimer:** This published work was prepared with the support of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung. The views and analysis contained in the work are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the foundation. The author is responsible for any liability claims against copyright breaches of graphics, photograph, images, audio, and text used.*



This publication is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0
International License.

Regional Dialogue E-Paper Series

Creative Vision or Concrete Action?

Reflections on Social Justice in Southeast Asia

Content

Key Findings.....	4
Introduction.....	7
Definitions and Implementation of Social Justice in Southeast Asia.....	9
ASEAN Leaders' Rhetorical Commitment to Promote Social Justice and Environmental Justice.....	15
ASEAN's Collaboration in Meeting the Requirements of Social Justice in Southeast Asia.....	23
Why ASEAN Needs to Take More Concrete Actions?.....	28
Challenges for Building Social Justice in Southeast Asia.....	33
The Urgency to Integrate Environmental Justice and Social Justice.....	39
Conclusion: ASEAN is Always Creative in Crafting Its Vision.....	42
Recommendation: How to Translate ASEAN Vision into Concrete Actions.....	44

Key Findings

1. Social justice has become a common term widely known among people in Southeast Asia, since the national leaders declared the establishment of their independent countries and adopted national constitutions in the 1940s, 1950s or 1960s. The nations' constitutions reflect the founders' vision, highlighting the state's prime responsibility for establishing social justice for all people.
2. ASEAN has been very creative and productive in formulating its vision on the establishment of social justice in the region. ASEAN leaders have delivered dozens of declarations and initiatives that highlight social justice as one of their principal values and place social justice as the main agenda of cooperation between them.
3. The concern on environmental justice gained the ASEAN leaders' attention, particularly since 1985 when ASEAN leaders elevated the issue of environmental justice as one core value to be addressed along with stronger respect towards social justice. Commitment to environmental protection has increased steadily. The relevant ASEAN-level declarations and strategic documents include the 1985 ASEAN Agreement on Nature Conservation and Natural Resources, the Vientiane Action Programme (VAP) 2004-2010 (adopted in 2004), the ASEAN Biodiversity Center (established in 2005), the ASEAN Declaration on Environmental Sustainability (adopted in 2007), the ASEAN Initiative for Environmentally Sustainable Cities (ESC) (initiated in 2005), and the drafting of the ASEAN Declaration on Environmental Rights (since March 2024). These consolidated documents highlight ASEAN's normative commitments to environmental justice in the region.
4. Despite dozens of already adopted normative documents, the issues of social justice and environmental justice remain to fall far short behind targets. The rich-poor gap within and between ASEAN member states remains a difficult issue. Poverty, inequality and illiteracy need greater attention to be addressed in most ASEAN member states, particularly Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar.
5. Southeast Asian nations also face increasing environmental challenges, such as deforestation that threatens environmental justice such as equitable access to clean, safe and healthy environment, and clean water and air. Various natural disasters such as floods, landslides, storms, cyclones, earthquakes, and volcanic activities become serious threats to the lives of a large number of the population, including women and marginalized groups.

6. The complexity of social and environmental problems demonstrates that having documents of commitments is not sufficient to achieve ASEAN's vision to become a true people-centered community that values both social and environmental justice.

Key Recommendations

This is now the time for ASEAN and its member states to invent new bold initiatives and approaches to achieve social justice and environmental justice. Development partners and INGOs can provide support for ASEAN as an institution, its member states, and the society across the region in advancing collaborative efforts to address the complexity of problems related to social justice and environmental justice.

1. Special Commission on Social Justice

ASEAN needs to have more effective institutions that have the authority to translate the vision of social justice into concrete actions by directly executing the action plan. The existing approach of leaving the state members to follow up on the commitment individually is not effective in addressing the gap between the rich and poor, the inequality, the illiteracy rate, the environmental destruction, and other issues related to the establishment of social and environmental justice.

Institutional capacity is highly necessary if ASEAN wants to function as more than simply a forum of knowledge sharing, but a visionary institution that can truly deliver the measurable goals. Recognizing the environmental problem as a highly urgent matter for ASEAN citizens, ASEAN may develop a more permanent commission that carries out very special tasks in executing plans of action related to the environmental and social rights of the ASEAN citizens. ASEAN can also scale up the capacity of the existing institutions with a special mandate to execute some actions. Examples of the potential institutions include the AHA Center and AICHR. The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) has been active in facilitating cooperation and coordination to deal with disaster management and emergency response in the ASEAN region. ASEAN has also developed the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), which has been active in promoting environmental rights. Gradual steps to scale up the institutional capacity of the existing bodies shall be accelerated.

2. Forging the synergy of sustainable collaboration among development partners

The complexity of the problems in Southeast Asia partly reflects the reluctance (if not the failure) of the dialogue partners to build a coordinated approach to improving the effectiveness of their development programs in Southeast Asia. The collaboration between ASEAN's external partners to improve aid effectiveness in delivering social justice and environmental justice is thus imperative.

3. Creating a Regional Hub of Vibrant Societies that consistently advocates social justice and environmental justice with high determination

The role of civil society is highly important in the context where the democratic system in most ASEAN countries remains very fragile. International NGOs can provide support to the development of a network of CSOs across the region that are advocating the true interests of the people to secure equal access to social justice and environmental justice with strong passion and high determination.

4. Encouraging the immediate implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on Environmental Rights: equal rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment

ASEAN has officially adopted the Declaration on the Right to a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment in October 2025. The Declaration marks a significant step forward in advancing environmental rights and addressing the triple planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. It emphasizes the implementation of environmental law, access to information, public participation, access to justice, and accountability of non-state actors and businesses. To ensure effective implementation, ASEAN is developing a Regional Implementation Plan to guide Member States and the ASEAN Secretariat. Once the implementation plan is finalized, the ASEAN members and Secretariat shall immediately implement consistently the Declaration.

Introduction

Southeast Asia, a region of over 680 million people, is characterized by its rich socio-cultural diversity in terms of class, race, ethnic groups, and religions. The region also demonstrates a complex political system where an authoritarian regime and a semi-democratic country coexist with some fragile and less-consolidated democratic countries.

Since its establishment in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has pursued collaboration among ten nations in the region for promoting regional stability and security, economic integration, and socio-cultural cooperation. The organization has been playing an important role in shaping policies that significantly impact economic growth. Since adopting the Bali Concord II in 2003, ASEAN leaders have shared a commitment to address the economic gap between old and new members through various initiatives for regional integration, connectivity, and infrastructure development that allow less developed countries to catch up with faster economic growth. With support from ASEAN's dialogue partners such as Japan, China, South Korea, Australia, the United States, and the European Union (EU), ASEAN nations have enjoyed remarkable economic growth rates, particularly in the last two decades.

However, amidst the promising economic growth in each Southeast Asian nation, the widening gap between the rich and poor people is evident as indicated by the large number of people living under the poverty line. Gender equality remains a serious concern, even though there is a commitment among regional leaders to foster collaboration for forging respect for human rights. The Southeast Asian nations also face growing environmental challenges, such as water and air pollution, extreme weather, increased temperature, biodiversity loss, flooding, and displacement due to climate change, while socio-economic inequality needs more serious concern. The region is vulnerable to various natural disasters such as typhoons, floods, and earthquakes that endanger the livelihood of a large number of people.

These real conditions and challenges highlight the urgency for ASEAN leaders to forge stronger collaboration for establishing a social justice that integrates environmental justice as an indispensable part of sustainable development initiatives. Any initiative for promoting social justice shall be embedded with concrete actions to promote environmental justice.

This paper aims to examine the extent to which ASEAN has paid serious attention in establishing social and environmental justice in Southeast Asia. To achieve this objective, this paper is divided into seven sections. The first section of this paper provides an executive summary consisting of key findings and recommendations

to ease readers in discerning the key messages and substance of the paper. In the second section, this paper provides an introduction that informs readers with the background knowledge about ASEAN.

The third section explores definitions of social justice in ASEAN member states. This section is divided into three subsections: (1) how prominent national leaders define the conceptions of social justice and put the conception into their national Constitutions; (2) the missing correlation of environmental justice and social justice; (3) critical issues regarding capital punishment and contradictory reality.

In the fourth section, this paper highlights ASEAN Leaders' rhetorical commitments to promote social justice and environmental justice. First it highlights oratorical promise on social justice; secondly it describes the eloquent pledges on environmental justice.

The fifth section describes the initiatives made by ASEAN leaders to meet the requirement of social justice. The initiatives include the initiative for ASEAN integration, Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) and ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: ASEAN Initiatives in Promoting Gender Equality; Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; ASEAN Biodiversity Plan; Strategic Plan of Action for ASEAN Cooperation on Forestry (2016-2025); ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation 2016-2025 (APAEC).

The sixth section examines reasons why ASEAN needs to take more concrete actions to promote social justice in the region. This section is divided into three subsections: (1) the real conditions of social justice in Southeast Asia; (2) challenges for building social justice in Southeast Asia including the historical, political, and demographic factors; (3) the urgency to integrate environmental justice and social justice in Southeast Asia.

The seventh section concludes with the identification of key findings and proposes recommendations to support ASEAN in delivering its eloquent pledges to promote social and environmental justice in the region.

Definitions and Implementation of Social Justice in Southeast Asia

This section explores how nations in Southeast Asia define the concept of social justice and overlooks the extent to which the definition of social justice takes environmental justice as one of the key components.

Social Justice in Southeast Asian Countries

The nations in Southeast Asia have been familiar with the term “social justice” since their independence. Having experienced living under colonialism, the founders of the nations frequently used the term in their speeches to build nationalism on various occasions. In general, the founders focused on the well-being of their people as the core of social justice. Soekarno, the first president of Indonesia, envisioned social justice in the fifth principle of Pancasila, focusing on shared prosperity and economic equity for all Indonesians with the support of the state (Prastyo, 2013). Ho Chi Minh from Vietnam upheld the idea of social justice that includes access to education, healthcare, and other basic services (Ngo Thi Phuong & Khoa Ngoc Vo Nguyen, 2024). President Manuel L. Quezon, popularly known as the Father of Social Justice in the Philippines, advocated justice for all, not just a select few. Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of Singapore, using the symbolism of Yin and Yang, promoted equal opportunities through a balance of competitiveness and equity. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, highlighted the state's role in ensuring liberty, justice, and public well-being. Norodom Sihanouk, the former king and prime minister of Cambodia, emphasized the importance of addressing the needs of the common people, advocating for policies that would alleviate poverty and promote social welfare (Chatterji, 1962).

These founders' view on social justice is reflected in the constitutions that became the legal basis for the government to create a responsible leadership in establishing social justice for the whole nation. The national constitutions of the countries explicitly recognize social justice as one of the core visions. The following are the definitions of “social justice,” as written in the constitutions of ASEAN member-states.

1. Brunei Darussalam

Social justice is viewed through the lens of Islamic principles, emphasizing the equitable distribution of wealth and resources to ensure the well-being of all citizens (Sainah and Saim, 2010). In Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), the ideology of Brunei Darussalam, Islam is elevated as the national religion, the rights of the ethnic Malay community are guaranteed, and the Sultan's lineage is justified as a legitimate system of government.

2. Cambodia

Social justice is reflected in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, which emphasizes equality, non-discrimination, and human rights protection. Article 31 guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms for all citizens, regardless of race, color, sex, language, religious belief, political tendency, national origin, social status, wealth, or other status. Additionally, Article 46 promotes gender equality and protects women's rights (Socheat, 2008).

3. Indonesia

Indonesia views social justice as part of its ideology, Pancasila, particularly in the fifth principle: Keadilan Sosial bagi Seluruh Rakyat Indonesia (Social Justice for All the People of Indonesia). The definition of social justice in Indonesia emphasizes the equitable distribution of resources, equal opportunities, and state intervention to ensure the welfare of all citizens, particularly marginalized groups. This concept is enshrined in Articles 33 and 34 of the 1945 Constitution, which emphasize economic democracy, state control over vital resources, and social welfare (Aditiya, Agung, and Dyah, 2019).

4. Lao People's Democratic Republic

The National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) 2025 of the Lao PDR defines social justice as sustainable access to social protection for all citizens (MOLSW, 2020). The Lao People's Democratic Republic 1991 Constitution (rev. 2015), specifically in Article 35, states that Lao citizens are all equal before the law, irrespective of their gender, social status, education, beliefs, and ethnic group.

5. Malaysia

Social justice is a crucial pillar of MADANI, a political framework that refers to a fair distribution of resources and opportunities in society and the protection of the rights of marginalized and vulnerable groups (Malaysia MADANI 2024). The Constitution of Malaysia 1957, specifically in Article 8, guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination against citizens based on religion, race, descent, or place of birth in matters related to property ownership, trade, business, profession, and employment.

6. Myanmar

Myanmar has designated the concept of social justice in Chapter 8 of its 2008 Constitution. It refers to a system of rights and duties that ensure equality (Article 347), non-discrimination (Article 348), and fair opportunities for all citizens (Article 366-372). It is also stated that the people of Myanmar are responsible for promoting legal protection and enacting mutual respect among diverse groups, in ensuring social welfare at the community level (Article 390-391).

7. The Philippines

The definition of social justice in the Philippines is enshrined in Article 13 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution, which is the commitment of the State to create equitable opportunities, reduce socio-economic & political inequalities, and remove cultural inequities. Social justice is adopted in the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2017-2022 and Ambisyon Natin 2040. Post-COVID, the Philippines has identified key policy areas to advance social justice, one of which is a renewed commitment to climate and environmental justice. As an integral part of social justice, environmental justice is meant to ensure equitable access to a clean and sustainable environment (Gilbert et al. 2022).

8. Singapore

In Singapore, the Constitution (1963), particularly Article 12, guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law, prohibiting discrimination based on religion, race, descent, or place of birth. This legal framework reflects the nation's commitment to social justice by ensuring that all individuals are treated fairly and equitably (MSF, 2020). Singapore's commitment to ensuring equal access to justice is shown through the adoption of a whole-of-society approach, in which efforts are made to raise public awareness about legal rights and the types of legal assistance available (UNODC, 2024).

9. Thailand

Social justice issues go beyond individual concerns, encompassing broader principles of equality and fairness within society and establishing norms to safeguard the rights of the underprivileged (Sindecharak, 2020). The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (2017), Article 8 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection for all individuals. It prohibits unjust discrimination based on origin, race, language, sex, age, disability, health condition, economic or social status, religion, education, or political views.

10. Vietnam

In the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2013), the state's role in guaranteeing and promoting the people's mastery, acknowledging, respecting, protecting, and ensuring human rights and citizens' rights is emphasized in Article 3. Throughout Articles 14 to 16, social justice is described as equality for all citizens before the law and prohibits discrimination in political, civil, economic, cultural, or social life. These provisions ensure that no individual faces discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or social status. Similar to Myanmar, the citizens' rights are inseparable from their duties, emphasizing the responsibility to respect others' rights and fulfill obligations toward the state and society (Article 15).

In some respects, the definitions of social justice by the nations of Southeast Asia are in line with key points of the UN's definition of social justice¹, which underlines "the principles of equality and solidarity, understand and value human rights, and recognize the dignity of every human being." Some examples can be highlighted as follows. Brunei Darussalam uses the phrase of the equitable distribution of wealth and resources to ensure the well-being of all citizens. Indonesia uses the phrase of equitable distribution of resources, equal opportunities, and the welfare of all citizens, particularly marginalized groups. Malaysia uses the phrase of the fair distribution of resources and opportunities in society and the protection of the rights of marginalized and vulnerable groups. The Philippines uses the phrase equitable opportunities, reduce socioeconomic and political inequalities, and remove cultural inequities.

Table 1. The Common Terms Being Used in the Definition of Social Justice in Southeast Asia

Equitable distribution of wealth and resources	Equality before the law	Equitable protection for all individuals
Well-being of all citizens	Equitable opportunities	Prohibiting any form of discrimination
Equal access to economic resources	Fundamental rights and freedoms	Fair and equal treatment for all individuals

It is common in Southeast Asian Nations to emphasize economic aspects when defining social justice. Social justice is first about the well-being of all citizens. The state must guarantee that all citizens must have equal access to economic resources. The second understanding refers to the legal vantage point, which highlights that the citizens deserve to have equality before the law and equitable opportunities to have legal protection as well as fundamental rights and freedom. Another common phrase to define social justice is the right to have fair and equal treatment and the prohibition of any form of discrimination.

1 The UN interprets social justice as a world in which societies are based on the principles of equality and solidarity, understand and value human rights, and recognize the dignity of every human being. Five key principles of social justice are equity, access, participation, rights, and diversity. Equity refers to the recognition towards different needs and circumstances of different people; the equal access refers to the insurance that everyone has access to the resources and opportunities they need to success; the principle of participation enables all individuals to play in role in the political, economic and social life of the communities; the principle of human rights means the protection of all individuals; diversity values and respects differences between people such as race, gender and sexual orientation. See: UN (2025). "What is social justice and how is the UN helping make it reality." <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1160301#:~:text=The%20UN%20definition%20of%20social,in%20the%20next%20five%20years>.

The Missing Correlation of Social Justice and Environmental Justice

What has been missing in the definition is the correlation of social justice with environmental justice and sustainability. The definitions of social justice in most Southeast Asian countries do not explicitly recognize the intersection of social justice and environmental justice, by incorporating environmental justice as an indispensable part of efforts to promote social justice. Despite the growing environmental challenges, the current discourse focuses on issues such as economic inequality, human rights, and poverty alleviation without clearly articulating the significance of environmental sustainability for promoting social justice. This gap in recognition has significant implications on marginalized communities, including indigenous peoples and rural populations, who often become the most affected by environmental degradation, including deforestation, water and air pollution, and climate-induced displacement.

However, some countries have taken steps to bridge this gap by recognizing the intersection of environmental and social justice, at least in the form of legal framework. The Philippines, for example, has made significant progress towards enacting the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, which recognizes the ancestral territories of indigenous tribes and asserts their right to manage and protect their lands. This legal milestone highlights the importance of integrating environmental protection within a broader social justice framework. Similarly, Cambodia has established a legal framework that recognizes indigenous land rights and allows for the collective management of territories. Despite these advances, challenges remain, such as delays in granting formal land titles and increasing global demand for natural resources, threatening customary lands. These examples demonstrate that the promotion of social justice principles needs to inherently integrate environmental management with fairness and equity, ensuring that marginalized communities are included in decision-making processes and resource distribution (Levy, 2024).

The Critical Issues: Capital Punishment and Contradictory Reality

There is a critical issue related to the enactment of capital punishment in several ASEAN countries, which contradicts the principles of social justice and violates human rights². Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore retain the death penalty in their national law, arguing that the penalty is a necessary legal tool to deter crime, particularly drug-related offenses. Cambodia and the Philippines have abolished the death penalty, while Laos and Brunei are categorized as de facto abolitionist countries because they have not executed the penalty for decades. Critics suggest that the death penalty is not effective in tackling drug trafficking and related crimes, as the cases continue to grow in the region. Despite strong criticism by human rights activists, there is no sign of amendment of the law in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

It is also highly important to note that even though the term of social justice is embedded in the national constitution, the reality of social justice for the people of Southeast Asian nations is still far from the ideals. Wealth is distributed unequally, opportunity is a privilege for a select group of people, and resources are exploited by those in power. In recent years, even the state has misused its power and sovereignty, endangering or even harming the rights of its citizens, and causing the loss of social justice. Examples are as follows. There has been discrimination against the Rohingya ethnic in Myanmar and violence against other ethnic groups in Myanmar. Malaysia imposes the Bumiputera Policy which obviously provides privilege for indigenous Malaysian ethnic groups, particularly Malays and indigenous groups from Sabah and Sarawak. Cambodia introduces stricter control over the media. Inequality remains a big issue in the Philippines and Indonesia due to uneven economic development in different parts of the countries. The pieces of evidence that show the real conditions of social justice are provided in the sixth section of this paper.

These small numbers of examples show that social injustice, which promotes fair and equal access for all, remains a serious issue in many ASEAN member states, despite the existing formal recognition in the national constitutions.

2 Thanh Phuong Hoang and Quynh Anh Nguyen. "Capital Punishment for Drug-Offenses in ASEAN," https://law.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/3606464/Thanh-Phuong-Hoang_Quynh-Anh-Nguyen.pdf

ASEAN Leaders' Rhetorical Commitment to Promote Social Justice and Environmental Justice

This section looks into definitions of social justice developed by ASEAN leaders and examines whether definitions reflect the recognition of environmental justice as an embedded key component.

Oratorical Promise on Social Justice

ASEAN leaders have voiced vocal concern on social justice since ASEAN was founded in 1967. The Bangkok Declaration that constitutes the foundation of the regional organization explicitly recognizes social justice as an important value in ASEAN. ASEAN leaders have also adopted dozens of documents and strategic blueprints that envision the establishment of a people-centered, inclusive, and harmonious regional community. ASEAN leaders have also agreed to adopt operational legal frameworks and policy initiatives, and established regional mechanisms dedicated to upholding human rights and social protection.

The Documents that reflect the leader's eloquent commitments to promote social justice are as follows.

1. The Bangkok Declaration: Recognition of Social Justice as Ideal

The ASEAN (Bangkok) Declaration, signed on August 8, 1967, established ASEAN's commitment to regional economic and social stability, peaceful development, and security from external interference. The Declaration explicitly acknowledges that meaningful cooperation among the countries in the region constitutes the best way to attain the ideals of peace, freedom, social justice and economic well-being³. This document shows the ASEAN leaders' recognition of social justice as one of the ideals of the establishment of ASEAN.

2. The Declaration of ASEAN Concord: The Elimination of Poverty

The Declaration of ASEAN Concord on 24 February 1976 in Bali, Indonesia, stated that the primary concern of ASEAN member states is to eliminate poverty, hunger, and disease. These concerns are to be handled through the promotion of social justice and the improvement of the living standards of their people⁴. This Declaration reflects the ASEAN commitment to build one of the requirements of social justice in the region, which is the elimination of poverty.

3 <https://agreement.asean.org/media/download/20140117154159.pdf>

4 <https://asean.org/the-declaration-of-asean-concord-bali-indonesia-24-february-1976/>

5 <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/declaration-of-asean-concord-ii-bali-concord-ii/>

3. The Declaration of ASEAN Concord II: Equal Rights for All Individuals

The Declaration of ASEAN Concord II on 7 October 2003, in Bali, Indonesia affirms ASEAN's commitment to promote the principle of equality as the required foundation of the community that values social justice⁵. The Document shows the ASEAN vision to build a community based on equal rights for all individuals. The Declaration highlights commitment to foster cooperation in social development to raise living standards of disadvantaged groups and the rural population and seek the active engagement of all sectors of society, in particular women, youth and local communities. The ASEAN Concord II also encourages intensive cooperation in addressing problems such as unemployment, environmental degradation and transboundary pollution and disaster management in the region so that all individual members can fully realize their development potentials.

4. The ASEAN Charter: The vision of citizenship built on Equitable Access for all Sectors of Society

The ASEAN Charter was adopted at the 13th ASEAN Summit in Singapore in 2007⁶. The Charter declares 15 purposes of ASEAN, including the establishment of ASEAN is to alleviate poverty and narrow the development gap through mutual assistance and regional cooperation; to enhance the well-being and livelihood of the peoples of ASEAN by providing them with equitable access to opportunities for human development, social welfare and justice, and to promote a people-oriented ASEAN in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, the process of ASEAN integration and community-building;

5. ASEAN Human Rights Declaration: equal in dignity and rights for all persons, eradication of poverty and elimination of illiteracy

The ASEAN Human Rights Declaration was adopted at 21st ASEAN Summit in Cambodia, in 2012⁷. The document is very important as it shows ASEAN's affirmation to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant international human rights instruments that all ASEAN members have already ratified. ASEAN recognizes firmly that all persons are born free and equal in dignity and rights and that every person is entitled to the rights and freedoms set forth herein, without distinction of any kind, such as race, gender, age, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic status, birth, disability or other status.

5 <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/declaration-of-asean-concord-ii-bali-concord-ii/>

6 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>

7 <https://asean.org/asean-human-rights-declaration/>

6. The ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection: Equal access to social protection for all people

The ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection (2013) is a joint declaration by ASEAN member states to improve the quality, coverage, and sustainability of social protection in ASEAN Member States, which shall conform to ASEAN member states national policies and priorities and be adapted to the different contexts of ASEAN Member States⁸.

7. ASEAN Community Vision 2025: Equitable access to education, healthcare, social protection and basic services

The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint 2025 constitute significant documents that suggest ASEAN's awareness to correlate some key components of environmental justice and social justice. The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 emphasizes a commitment to promote inclusivity and equity by ensuring equal opportunities, reducing disparities, and improving access to education, healthcare, and social protection, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable groups⁹.

The ASCC Blueprint 2025 is the strategy and planning mechanism to develop and strengthen coherent policy frameworks and institutions to advance human and sustainable development, social justice and rights, social protection and welfare, environmental sustainability and ASEAN awareness, and to narrow the development gap.

The ASCC Blueprint 2025 highlights five characteristics of the Community¹⁰:

- a. Engages and Benefits the People: Focuses on ensuring committed, participatory, and socially responsible communities through accountable and inclusive mechanisms for the benefit of all ASEAN
- b. Inclusive: Promotes a high quality of life and equitable access to opportunities for all, and promotes and protects human rights
- c. Sustainable: Ensures the attainment of a community that promotes social development and environmental protection
- d. Resilient: Enhanced capacity and capability to adapt and respond to social and economic vulnerabilities, disasters, and climate change
- e. Dynamic: Create a harmonious ASCC that is aware and proud of its identity, culture, and heritage.

8 https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/23rdASEANSummit/5.%20asean%20declaration%20on%20social%20protection_final.pdf

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

10 <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/8.-March-2016-ASCC-Blueprint-2025.pdf>

The blueprint explicitly identifies 18 key result areas, which include biodiversity conservation, social protection, institutional strengthening and empowerment of people and communities, reducing barriers and providing equitable access to basic services, disaster management, climate resiliency, and strengthening health systems.

8. ASEAN Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Development and on Gender Equality and Family Development: Equal opportunity for all women

The ASEAN Declaration on Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and Sustainable Development Goals, adopted at 31st ASEAN Summit on 13 November 2017, emphasizes the commitment to realize a people-oriented and people-centered ASEAN where women and girls are able to reach the fullest of their potentials. It highlights the promotion of women's leadership, the elimination of gender stereotyping and violence against women, economic empowerment, and the protection of women in vulnerable situations¹¹. In 2023, ASEAN leaders strengthened their support for promoting gender equality at the 43rd ASEAN Summit, through the ASEAN Declaration on Gender Equality and Family Development¹².

9. Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2025 was adopted at the 46th ASEAN Summit on 26 May 2025¹³. It is an important document that highlights the inclusivity and sustainability as principal themes of cooperation among ASEAN member states, the recognition of the environmental challenges, equitable access to economic opportunity and the achievement of sustainability, and the importance of the strengthening of institutional capacity and effectiveness to advance ASEAN community building. The Declaration underscores the promotion of inclusive, participatory and equitable access to economic opportunities, while achieving sustainability in all dimensions.

The leaders envision the establishment of a resilient, innovative, dynamic and people-centered community through the implementation of the specific strategic plans relevant with ASEAN pillars: ASEAN Political-Security Community Strategic Plan, the ASEAN Economic Community Strategic Plan, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Strategic Plan, and the ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan. The leaders also agreed to continue the ASEAN initiative to narrow the development gaps through the adoption of the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan V (2026-2030).

11 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Declaration-on-the-Gender-Responsive-Implementation-of-the-ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025-and-Sustainable-Development-Goals.pdf>

12 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ASEAN-Declaration-on-Gender-Equality-and-Family-Development.pdf>

13 https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/04.-Kuala-Lumpur-Declaration-on-ASEAN-2045-Our-Shared-Future_adapted.pdf

The description in this section overall shows that ASEAN has declared formal commitments to promote social justice in the region. On paper, ASEAN's commitments cover diverse key components of social justice, including the elimination of poverty, hunger, and disease; the improvement of living standards of disadvantaged groups and the rural population; equal opportunity for all sectors of society, in particular women, youth and local communities; equitable access to opportunities for human development, social welfare and justice; equal in dignity and rights; the rights and freedoms for all people without distinction of any kind, such as race, gender, age, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic status, birth, disability or other status; the improvement of the quality, coverage, and sustainability of social protection; the promotion of inclusivity and equity by ensuring equal opportunities, reducing disparities, and improving access to education, healthcare, and social protection, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable groups; equitable access to basic services, disaster management, climate resiliency, and strengthening health systems.

Eloquent Pledge on Environmental Justice

While ASEAN leaders have acknowledged social justice as one of the ASEAN ideal values since the inception of ASEAN in 1967, the concern about environmental justice has gained the leaders' attention quite recently. ASEAN leaders have adopted several specific agreements and initiatives that demonstrate their awareness of the environmental issues at least on paper.

1. ASEAN Agreement on the Conservation of Nature & Natural Resources: creating equal access to healthy and clean environment for all people

The 1985 ASEAN Agreement on Conservation focuses on promoting sustainable development through ecosystem conservation, species protection, and resource sustainability while balancing economic growth. This agreement was signed but has not yet come into force due to the lack of ratifications (ASEAN, 1985).¹⁴

This Agreement highlights the significance of equal access to a healthy and clean environment for all people, as a key component of environmental justice.

2. Vientiane Action Programme (VAP): equal access to natural resources management

From 2004 to 2010, the plan promoted environmental sustainability and sustainable natural resource management that prioritizes social protection, cultural identity, the conservation of natural resources, and the protection of the environment to fuel economic growth and sustain life. The plan emphasizes public awareness, the balance of environmental sustainability and socio-economic needs, and integrated environmental policies to sustain life (ASEAN, 2004).¹⁵

14 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/69.-Agreement-Consrv-of-Nature-Nat-Resr.pdf>

15 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/VAP-10th%20ASEAN%20Summit.pdf>

3. ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity: sustainable resource management

Signed on 27 September 2005, the agreement enhances regional cooperation in biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management. It establishes the ACB as a hub for research, policy coordination, and capacity-building (ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity, 2024)¹⁶.

4. ASEAN Declaration on Environmental Sustainability: equal access to environmental protection

Signed on 18-21 November 2007, this first joint declaration reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to sustainable development and environmental protection, emphasizing climate change mitigation and calling for efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance resilience. It also calls for the sustainable management of natural resources, the promotion of eco-friendly technologies, and stronger collaboration among ASEAN member states to achieve long-term environmental sustainability. (ASEAN, 2007).¹⁷

5. ASEAN Declaration on ASEAN Post-2015 Environmental Sustainability and Climate Change Agenda: Creation of resilient community

ASEAN leaders affirm their commitment to strengthen international cooperation to achieve the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals and to support global cooperation in addressing climate change and biodiversity conservation, including the achievement of Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020.¹⁸ The Declaration was adopted on 21 November 2015 in Kuala Lumpur.

6. The Adoption of the ASEAN Declaration on Environmental Rights: equal rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

ASEAN has officially adopted the Declaration on the Right to a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment in October 2025. The Declaration marks a significant step forward in advancing environmental rights and addressing the triple planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. It emphasizes the implementation of environmental law, access to information, public participation, access to justice, and accountability of non-State actors and businesses. To ensure effective implementation, ASEAN will develop a Regional Implementation Plan to guide Member States and the ASEAN Secretariat.¹⁹

¹⁶ <https://agreement.asean.org/media/download/20220330063351.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://asean.org/asean-declaration-on-environmental-sustainability/>

¹⁸ https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/27th-summit/ASCC_documents/Declaration%20on%20Post%202015%20Environmental%20Sustainability%20and%20Climate%20Change%20AgendaAdopted.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/10/un-experts-welcome-landmark-asean-declaration-right-safe-clean-healthy-and>

Table 2. Key indicators of Environmental Justice in ASEAN

Indicators	Description	Current Challenges in ASEAN
Equal rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment for all individuals	The right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment includes clean air, a safe and stable climate, healthy ecosystems and biodiversity, safe and sufficient water and adequate sanitation, healthy and sustainably produced food, and non-toxic environments.	Economic interests shall not overshadow environmental and human rights; Other challenges include air and water pollution, transboundary haze pollution, deforestation and land degradation, the safety of legal defenders, lack of strong legal framework, weak enforcement and inadequate resources for environmental protection.
Protection, conservation, and restoration of the environment for present and future generations.	Every person has the right to protect the environment, contribute to its protection and improvement, prevent pollution, combat climate change, promote biodiversity and prevent damage to the environment.	Deforestation and biodiversity loss continues in the region, driven by agricultural expansion, logging infrastructure development, and industrialization as well as unsustainable resource extraction.
Access to Environmental Information	Right to affordable, timely, and effective access to environmental data, including laws, regulations, emission reports, and resource concessions.	Restricted access due to limitations in the draft ASEAN Declaration 2024, reflecting unresolved debates and a lack of transparency in some member states.
Public Participation	The ability of citizens, especially marginalized groups, to engage in environmental decision-making, including policy development, environmental impact assessments (EIAs), and resource management.	ASEAN's draft Declaration on Environmental Rights has faced criticism for insufficient public consultation, with civil society calling for extended engagement periods.
Access to Justice	The availability of independent, impartial mechanisms for individuals and communities to challenge environmental decisions or violations. This includes legal remedies and recognition of environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs).	Weak enforcement mechanisms and persecution of activists (e.g., 10 Cambodian activists jailed in 2024) hinder effective redress.

Indicators	Description	Current Challenges in ASEAN
Recognition and Protection of Vulnerable Groups	Explicit inclusion of Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and LGBTQIA+ communities in environmental governance, ensuring their rights are protected.	Bracketing of Indigenous rights (e.g., Free, Prior, and Informed Consent) in the 2024 draft Declaration on Environmental Rights and lack of recognition for other marginalized groups.
Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Implementation	Use of transparent, participatory, and holistic EIAs to inform decisions on projects affecting the environment.	ASEAN's draft Declaration lacks robust provisions for transboundary EIAs, limiting accountability for cross-border impacts like haze.
Protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs)	Safeguards for activists and communities defending environmental rights, including protection from violence and legal persecution.	The high number of EHRD killings (e.g., 281 in the Philippines since 2012) underscores the need for stronger protections.

Source: Identified by Authors based on the Draft of the ASEAN Environmental Rights

Table 2 shows eight indicators of environmental justice that are highlighted in the draft of the ASEAN Declaration on Environmental Rights. The indicators are access to environmental information, public participation, access to justice, the recognized protection of vulnerable groups, implementation of the environmental impact assessment, and protection of EHRDs. The Table also identifies concerns that need to be addressed to ensure the Declaration can fully respect environmental justice.

The description in this fifth section overall demonstrates that there is progress, at least on paper, in the understanding of the correlation between social justice and environmental justice. ASEAN has adopted dozens of formal documents that show leaders' awareness of social justice and environmental justice. The Declarations and Initiatives encompass requirements of social justice, including the closing of the gap between the rich and the poor, eradication of poverty, the promotion of equality, and the vision of citizenship based on the equal rights for all people. ASEAN leaders have also paid attention to the women and children as well as the marginalized group including people with disabilities and indigenous people. This overall shows that ASEAN wants to ensure that no one is left behind.

The remaining question is how ASEAN leaders translate their vision into concrete actions to establish social justice and environmental justice in the region. The following section elaborates on how ASEAN pursues cooperation to translate its formal commitments into initiatives and concrete actions.

ASEAN's Collaboration in Meeting the Requirements of Social Justice in Southeast Asia

ASEAN leaders recognize there is a gap between the old and new ASEAN member states in terms of economic development. ASEAN leaders also acknowledge poverty, illiteracy, and inequality as serious issues for all nations in the region. To address the gap, poverty, and illiteracy, ASEAN has taken several initiatives. The following are examples of initiatives already agreed by ASEAN leaders.

Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI): Narrowing the development gap

The Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) was launched in 2000 at the ASEAN Summit in Singapore, following the recruitment of new member states, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. The IAI is a special program that aims to narrow the development gap between the new and old members by providing necessary support and technical assistance to new members: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam²⁰. At the core of the approach is a regional cooperation framework through which the more developed members help the members in need of support. Since the launching of the IAI, ASEAN has developed four work plans: the IAI Work Plan I (2002-2008), IAI Work Plan II (2009-2015), IAI Work Plan III (2016-2020) and IAI Work Plan IV (2021-2025). Each Work Plan focuses on particular priorities.

There were 232 projects of the IAI Work Plan I which focused on infrastructure, human resources development, information and communication technology (ICT) and regional economic integration. The total value of the project was approximately USD 52.9 million. The IAI Work Plan II implemented 383 projects with a value of USD 49.8 million. The Work Plan assisted the new members to meet ASEAN targets related to three pillars of the ASEAN community: Political Security, Economic and Social Cultural Communities. The IAI Work Plan III developed 133 projects with a value of USD 42.87 million. The Work Plan III focused on five strategic areas: food and agriculture, trade facilitation, micro, small and medium enterprises, education and health and well-being. The IAI Work Plan IV prioritizes on food and agriculture, trade facilitation, MSMEs, education, and health, while also addressing Industry 4.0, gender inclusion, and environmental sustainability for CLMV development.

ASEAN claims that the IAI programs have delivered remarkable achievements in the four countries that received assistance from old members. The projects prove helpful to narrow the gap between the new and old member states. The

20 <https://asean.org/our-communities/initiative-for-asean-integration-narrowing-development-gap-iai-ndg/>

Human Development Index in the countries has increased by 30.4% from 2000 to 2017. More people get access to electricity and drinking water resources, while penetration of mobile communication is well improved.

Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC): Narrowing the Development Gap

Another project that ASEAN develops to narrow the development gap between ASEAN member states is the MPAC. The MPAC was adopted at the ASEAN Summit in Hanoi, Vietnam in 2010. The objective is to achieve a seamlessly integrated region that promotes competitiveness, inclusiveness, and a greater sense of community. It encompasses physical, institutional, and people-to-people linkages, supporting ASEAN's economic, political-security, and socio-cultural pillars. Recognizing the importance of connectivity, ASEAN leaders adopted the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 as the successor document to the MPAC at the ASEAN Summit in 2016 in Vientiane, Laos.²¹ At the 46th Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2025, ASEAN leaders renewed their commitment to foster inclusive economic growth and narrow the development gap, by adopting the ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan.²² Since the adoption of the MPAC in 2010, ASEAN has completed 15 initiatives that consist of 84 key action projects.²³

ASEAN Initiatives in Promoting Gender Equality

ASEAN has taken several initiatives to promote the rights of women in the region. The first is the establishment of the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) which is responsible for promoting and protecting women and children's fundamental rights and freedom, building partnerships and platforms to advance women and children's rights, deepening awareness and institutionalizing women and children's rights, and strengthening institutional and stakeholders' capacity.²⁴ The ACWC which was founded in 2010 develops policies, programmes and innovative strategies to promote and protect the fundamental rights of women and children. To carry out these roles, ACWC works closely with the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) as the ASEAN's special body that addresses women's rights.

The second initiative to promote gender equality is the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women (ASEAN RPA on EVAW).²⁵

21 https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/8_compressed.pdf

22 https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/09.-ASEAN-Connectivity-Strategic-Plan_adopted.pdf

23 <https://kemlu.go.id/ptri-asean/tentang-perwakilan/asean-connectivity>

24 <https://acwc.asean.org/about>

25 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Regional-Plan-of-Action-on-Elimination-of-Violence-Against-WomenAdopted.pdf>

The Plan is aimed to implement the ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Elimination of Violence against Children in ASEAN and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD). The Plan adopts eight key strategies and actions, including prevention, legal framework and capacity building.

ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 reflects the ASEAN leaders' commitment to promote social justice particularly for the people with disabilities. ASEAN recognizes that they adopt specialized approaches to promote the inclusion and mainstreaming of the rights of the persons with disabilities across the ASEAN community and encourage all members to foster their commitments towards an inclusive community.²⁶ The Master plan was adopted at the 33th ASEAN Summit in Singapore in 2018. The Masterplan identifies 27 key action points to realize the full rights of the people with disabilities.

ASEAN has paid special attention to the interest of people with disabilities at the 19th Summit in 2011 when ASEAN Leaders agreed on the Bali Declaration on the Enhancement of the Role and Participation of the Persons with Disabilities in ASEAN Community and Mobilization Framework of the ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2011-2020). ASEAN leaders renewed their commitment to provide equal opportunities for people with disabilities at the 43rd ASEAN Summit in 2023 with the launching of the ASEAN Declaration on Disability-Inclusive Development and Partnership for a Resilient ASEAN Community.

ASEAN Biodiversity Plan

The ASEAN Biodiversity Plan aims to contribute to the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Diversity Framework (KM GBF) through regional interventions, and complement the efforts of the AMS in carrying out their respective National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), through capacity development, sharing knowledge and best practices on addressing common challenges and emerging issues affecting the region's natural wealth.²⁷ The Plan identifies 51 strategies and key actions to achieve 23 targets.

26 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Publication-ASEAN-Enabling-Masterplan-2025-1.pdf>

27 https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/48-Final_ASEAN-Biodiversity-Plan.pdf

Strategic Plan of Action for ASEAN Cooperation on Forestry (2016-2025)

The Strategic Plan for ASEAN Cooperation in Forestry (2016-2025) was agreed by the 12th Meeting of the ASEAN Ad-hoc Experts Working Group on International Forest Policy Process (AEG-IFPP) in Siem Reap, Cambodia from 9-10 June 2016. The vision of ASEAN Cooperation on Forestry is to manage forest resources sustainably at the landscape level to meet societal needs of the present and future generations and to contribute positively to sustainable development.²⁸ The Plan is aimed at enhancing “sustainable forest management for the continuous production of forest goods and services in a balanced way and ensuring forest protection and biological diversity conservation, as well as optimize their utilization, compatible with social and ecological sustainability.” The Plan consists of 5 Strategic Thrusts, 16 Action Programmes and 74 activities, including facilitating reforestation and afforestation programs and reviewing and adapting national strategies, plans and programs for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation 2016-2025 (APAEC)

APAEC demonstrates ASEAN’s efforts to meet the fifth requirement of social justice: Just transition that ensures no one is left behind economically and socially in the shift of sustainable future. APAEC is the blueprint for ASEAN energy transition cooperation which was endorsed at the 32nd ASEAN Ministers on Energy Meeting (AMEM) in September 2014 in Vientiane, Laos. The plan focuses on specific priority areas including energy efficiency, renewable energy, regional energy connectivity and cooperation with dialogue partners.²⁹ There are seven program areas of the APAEC to be implemented in two phases (2016-2020 and 2021-2025). The areas include the ASEAN power grid, energy efficiency and conservation, and renewable energy.

In ASEAN, there are also some new initiatives that support the just transition such as the ASEAN Energy Transformation Initiative (AETI) and the ASEAN Just Energy Partnership (ASEAN-JETP). Both proposals of initiatives highlight the need for a regional framework to support ASEAN member states in their energy transition to a cleaner and more sustainable energy system.

28 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Strategic-Plan-of-Action-for-ASEAN-Cooperation-on-Forestry-2016-2025.pdf>

29 <https://aseanenergy.org/publications/2016-2025-asean-plan-of-action-for-energy-cooperation-apaec/>

The initiatives to promote just energy embrace distributive justice, procedural justice and restorative justice. Distributive justice emphasizes that both benefits and challenges shall be fairly shared across society; procedural justice values the involvement of the people in the decision-making process that will bring impacts on them; restorative justice addresses the harm in the past through restoration.³⁰

30 <https://www.wri.org/insights/what-is-just-transition-tracking-progress#:~:text=What%20Does%20a%20'Just%20Transition,coal%20mine%20in%20Gelsenkirchen%2C%20Germany>

Why ASEAN Needs to Take More Concrete Actions?

The previous Section Four and Five have described ASEAN commitments, initiatives and plans of actions, at least on paper, to establish social justice in the region. This Sixth Section identifies the real condition of social justice in the region that reflects the extent to which ASEAN has made progress towards social justice. This section then shows complex challenges that affect the achievement of the efforts to develop social justice in the region. The last subsection highlights urgency for ASEAN to take more bolder actions to advance social justice and environmental justice in the region.

The Real Conditions of Social Justice in Southeast Asia: High Poverty and Illiteracy Rate and Inequality

Despite many initiatives made by ASEAN leaders to build the requirements of social justice, ASEAN has not been able to develop the ideal conditions of social justice. The gap between the rich and the poor people in many ASEAN countries remains wide, while the economic development gap between old ASEAN member states and new members such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar needs greater attention. Poverty and illiteracy rates, and inequitable access to resources remain high, while many people, particularly women and disadvantaged groups in Southeast Asia, must struggle to secure access to basic needs such as affordable, nutritious food, quality education, decent health services, and proper housing. The condition of social justice and environmental justice in ASEAN member states reflects the complexities of the problems that are not easy to address.

Southeast Asia's economy has grown significantly, and it is one of the fastest-growing regions in the world³¹. However, this growth alone does not fully reflect the region's overall prosperity. There are concerns on the equal income distribution, social welfare, and access to essential services.

31 "ASEAN Economic Outlook 2023." [https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/asean-economic-outlook-2023/#:~:text=The%20ASEAN%20\(the%20Association%20of,host%20of%20evolving%20economic%20pressures](https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/asean-economic-outlook-2023/#:~:text=The%20ASEAN%20(the%20Association%20of,host%20of%20evolving%20economic%20pressures)

Table 3. GDP per Capita in ASEAN, 2015-2022

Country	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Singapore	55,646.6	56,897.4	61,174.4	66,823.5	66,068.1	61,298.1	77,679.7	82,794.0
Brunei Darussalam	31,013.4	27,345.8	28,806.1	30,642.1	29,403.7	26,462.1	32,383.0	37,445.9
Malaysia	9,663.1	9,523.3	9,965.2	11,079.7	11,228.3	10,400.1	11,475.6	12,448.0
Thailand	5,968.1	6,127.4	6,745.5	7,470.8	8,297.1	7,648.2	7,751.9	7,494.4
Indonesia	3,345.0	3,599.8	3,880.1	3,937.2	4,200.4	3,922.1	4,357.0	4,777.5
Vietnam	2,596.0	2,757.3	2,983.5	3,250.5	3,464.9	3,552.0	3,716.8	4,109.1
Philippines	3,017.5	3,086.3	3,134.1	3,261.2	3,512.0	3,329.3	3,576.2	3,623.5
Lao PDR	2,166.2	2,342.9	2,472.3	2,585.0	2,627.8	2,630.1	2,586.8	2,022.0
Cambodia	1,190.7	1,257.1	1,402.4	1,539.8	1,685.7	1,588.9	1,637.2	1,758.0
Myanmar	1,023.2	1,136.5	1,152.0	1,246.6	1,223.8	1,280.1	1,317.7	1,093.2
ASEAN	3,997.2	4,166.5	4,446.3	4,720.1	4,971.9	4,677.3	5,095.0	5,391.8

Notes:

1) GDP per Capita is GDP at current prices divided by mid-year population

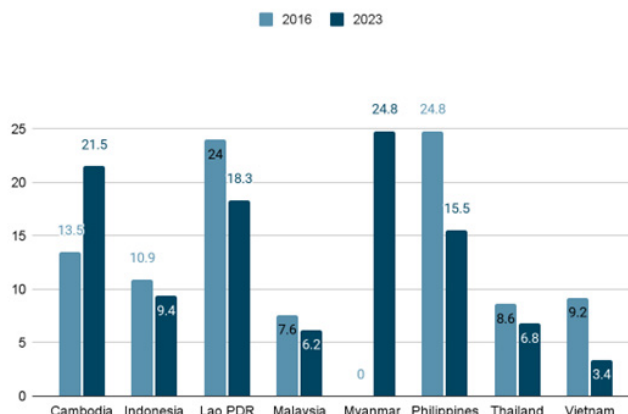
2) Very preliminary figure in fiscal year

Source: ASEAN Statistical Yearbook, 2023³²

Table 3 shows the gap between ASEAN member states in terms of GDP per capita from 2015 to 2022. In Singapore, the GDP per capita has increased significantly since 2015, when ASEAN adopted the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. In 2022, the GDP per capita in Singapore reached US\$ 82,974.0. Malaysia, Brunei, and Thailand also enjoy significant increases in the GDP Per Capita. Meanwhile, the GDP Per Capita in Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos remain far below the regional average. This gap reflects the widening gap between ASEAN member states and further suggests that collaboration among ASEAN leaders has not fully helped Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos to address the gap between the rich and the poor.

32 <https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ASYB-2023-v1.pdf>

Graph 1. Population Living Below the National Poverty Lines (%) by ASEAN Member States (2016 and 2023)

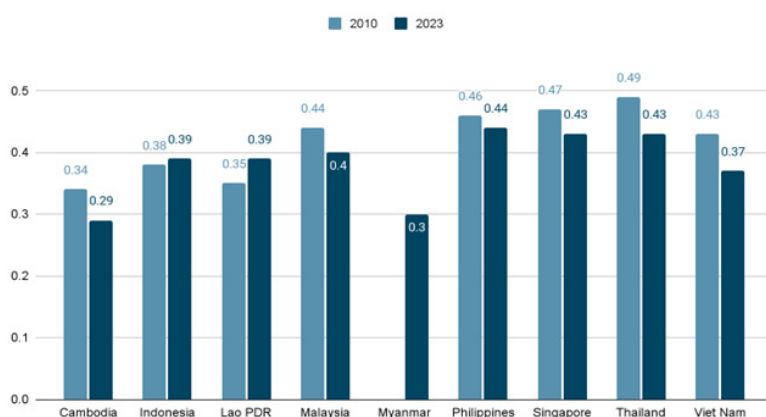


Notes:

- 1) The indicator is not applicable to Brunei Darussalam and Singapore
- 2) The latest available data for Myanmar is 2017, Lao PDR is 2018, Thailand is 2020, Cambodia is 2021, and Malaysia is 2022.
- 3) The data for Malaysia refer to the proportion of households living below the national poverty line, while for Vietnam, the data refer to the proportion of households living below the national multidimensional poverty rate.

Source: ASEAN Secretariat, (2024). ASEAN Key Figures 2024, December 2024³³

The collaboration between ASEAN countries has not been successful in eliminating poverty in the region. As shown in Graph 1, the number of people living under the poverty line is still high in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Indonesia. There was a significant increase in poverty levels in Cambodia from 13.5% in 2016 to 21.5% in 2021; this increase reflects an increase in economic vulnerability. In Myanmar, the report of 2017 suggests a relatively high poverty rate of 24.8%.



Notes:

- 1) The latest available data for Cambodia and Myanmar is 2017, Lao PDR is 2018, Philippines and Thailand is 2021, Malaysia is 2022
- 2) The data for Myanmar prior to 2015 is not available
- 3) The data for Brunei Darussalam is not available

Source: ASEAN Secretariat, (2024). ASEAN Key Figures 2024, December 2024³⁴

³³ <https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/AKF2024.v1.pdf>

³⁴ <https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/AKF2024.v1.pdf>

The initiative of ASEAN to address inequality resulted in mixed progress. Graph 2 shows that the Lao PDR seems to have serious issues in promoting equality, as the income inequality in the country increased from 0.36 in 2015 to 0.39 in 2018. Significant progress in reducing inequality has been achieved by Vietnam, as indicated by the increase of the Gini Ratio from 0.43 in 2015 to 0.37 in 2023, while Cambodia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand reported modest progress in reducing income inequality. A report also suggests a decline in income inequality in Myanmar. ASEAN member states need to introduce more inclusive economic policies and social programs to address the increasing disparity.

Table 4. Literacy Rate in Southeast Asia (2025)
Adult literacy rate (% of population aged 15 and above)

No.	Countries	%Total Population	Literacy Rate-Male	Literacy Rate-Female
1	Brunei Darussalam	97.6	98.3	96.9
2	Singapore	97.5	98.9	96.1
3	Philippines	96.3	95.7	96.9
4	Indonesia	96	97.4	94.6
5	Vietnam	95.8	97	94.6
6	Malaysia	95	96.2	93.6
7	Thailand	94.1	95.5	92.8
8	Myanmar	89.1	92.4	86.3
9	Laos	88	91.4	81.4
10	Cambodia	84	88.4	79.8

Source: World Population Review, Literacy Rate by Country 2025³⁵

Table 4 shows that illiteracy remains a big issue in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Yet other ASEAN member states have not completely solved illiteracy among their adult population. In Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia, the adult illiteracy rates range from 3 to 6%. The literacy rate among women is lower than men in almost all ASEAN member states, except in the Philippines.

35 <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/literacy-rate-by-country>

Table 5. Rankings of Gender Gap Index in Southeast Asia (2024)

Ranked	Countries	Score	Score change from	Rank change from
25	Philippines	0.779	-0.012	-9
48	Singapore	0.744	+0.004	+1
65	Thailand	0.720	+0.009	+9
72	Vietnam	0.715	+0.003	-
86	Timor Leste	0.704	+0.011	+9
89	Laos	0.700	-0.033	-35
100	Indonesia	0.686	-0.011	-13
102	Cambodia	0.685	-0.010	-10
105	Brunei Darussalam	0.684	-0.009	-9
114	Malaysia	0.668	-0.015	-12
-	Myanmar	not covered	not covered	not covered

Source: World Economic Forum (2024). Global Gender Gap 2024, p. 12.³⁶

Table 5 shows that the progress in promoting gender equality presents mixed results. Some countries, such as Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, achieve positive results as indicated by the increase in their score in the gender gap index. Laos, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Brunei Darussalam need to pay more serious attention as their gender gap indexes and ranks experience a significant decline. The decline highlights that these countries fail to develop equality for all their citizens as one of the key requirements of social justice.

Table 6. Women Participation in ASEAN (various years, 2017-2021)

Women Participation	Percentage
Women in National Parliaments	21.2%
Women in Local Government	22.8%
Women in Managerial Positions	32.8%

Source: ASEANstats (2023). Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Infographic³⁷

Table 6 shows the numbers of women who have opportunities to participate at the national parliaments and local governmental offices across ASEAN countries are still very limited. The number at the national parliaments reaches only 21.2%, while at local governmental offices only 22.8%. Women also have limited opportunities to occupy managerial positions across ASEAN countries, even though the number is much better than those at national parliaments and local government offices. This indicates that equal opportunity for women remains a big concern in the region.

36 https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf

37 <https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SDG-Woman-20230502.pdf>

The description of the real conditions of social justice in Southeast Asia overall shows that despite dozens of eloquent Declarations on social justice, ASEAN leaders have not fully developed the necessary requirements of social justice in the region. This further demonstrates a gap between the rhetoric and reality. ASEAN needs to take a bolder initiative to build the required conditions of social justice in the region. The following two sections explore the need to introduce innovative approaches to address the real existing conditions of social justice in the region.

Challenges for Building Social Justice in Southeast Asia

ASEAN member states face many challenging factors that seriously affect their competence in closing the gap between the rich and the poor, eradicating poverty, and eliminating illiteracy as requirements of social and environmental justice. The challenges that impede little progress in the development of social justice in ASEAN member-states include historical, political, and demographic factors.

The Historical Factor

As most Southeast Asian countries are historically rooted in kingdoms and gained their freedom from colonialism, the development of social development is also related to how the policies and understanding of social justice are inherited. In the early years of Indonesia's independence, for example, the inefficiency of social policy in the country occurred because of the absence of inherited social development in Dutch colonialism. Though some may argue that education was less focused by the Dutch in Indonesia than the French in Indochina, the British in Malaysia and the United States in the Philippines (Putra and Aminuddin, 2020), there is still a similar pattern that shows how this historical background embedded social injustice in some Southeast Asian countries.

As an example, when the French attempted to regain control in Indochina after World War II, they imposed exploitative economic systems, enforced racial and social hierarchies, and excluded most locals from meaningful political participation. The French prioritize resource extraction and the enrichment of French settlers, relegating the majority of the indigenous population to poverty and harsh labor conditions, while a small elite was assimilated into French culture but denied real power or equality (Grenier Burlette, 2007). Racial policies marginalized mixed-race (Eurasian) children and reinforced discriminatory structures, further entrenching inequality and social division (Firpo, 2010). Attempts at reform were limited and often self-serving, and resistance to colonial rule was met with violent repression, preventing the growth of local institutions and civil society

necessary for social justice and equitable development. Although French rule ended in 1954, the region faced prolonged conflict, including the Vietnam War, which also affected Laos and Cambodia. Cambodia and Laos, having endured long periods of war, remain the least developed, while Myanmar's military rulers have stifled growth through civil wars and economic mismanagement (Perkins, 2021).

The Political Factor

Southeast Asian countries have gone through similar transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy, often facing political uncertainty and instability. Ideally, as democracy expands, people gain more political freedom, allowing them to express their aspirations and opposition. But despite aspirations for democratic expansion, Southeast Asia has recently experienced a marked regression in democratic freedoms and a resurgence of authoritarian practices.

In the past, the regime used social policies mainly to maintain control and gain public support. During colonial times, these policies served the interests of colonial rulers, similar to how authoritarian governments later used them. For example, Indonesia's Dutch-era Ethical Policy aimed to secure public backing for colonial rule. Likewise, Soeharto's social safety net policy (Jaring Pengaman Sosial) was designed to regain support as his regime lost legitimacy. In the Philippines, Marcos introduced populist policies to maintain public approval after imposing Martial Law in 1973. Malaysia's National Education Philosophy (NEP), introduced in 1971, was a response to ethnic tensions following the May 13, 1969, riots. Meanwhile, King Mongkut of Thailand strengthened education in the 1870s to counter anti-colonial sentiments (Putra and Aminuddin, 2020).

Nowadays, efforts to expand and protect democracy in Southeast Asian countries are facing significant challenges. This phenomenon is not limited to Southeast Asia, but it has happened globally. Over the past twenty years, the world has witnessed a notable decline in democratic governance, with several key reports highlighting a troubling shift toward authoritarianism as of 2024. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, only 6.6% of the global population lives in countries classified as full democracies. In contrast, the V-Dem Institute reports that nearly 72% of the world's population now resides in autocracies. Voter participation has also declined, with the International IDEA noting a nearly 10% drop in global voter turnout over the past 15 years. For the first time in more than two decades, there are now fewer democracies than autocracies worldwide, as confirmed by the V-Dem Institute. Additionally, Freedom House reports that political and civil rights have deteriorated in 60 countries, while improvements were seen in only 34. These findings collectively underscore the deepening crisis of democracy across the globe.

Table 7. Democracy Index in Southeast Asia (2023)

Rank	Country	Index	Regime Type
40	Malaysia	7.29	Flawed Democracies
53	Philippines	6.66	Flawed Democracies
56	Indonesia	6.53	Flawed Democracies
63	Thailand	6.35	Flawed Democracies
69	Singapore	6.18	Flawed Democracies
121	Cambodia	3.05	Authoritarian Regime
136	Vietnam	2.63	Authoritarian Regime
159	Laos	1.71	Authoritarian Regime
166	Myanmar	0.85	Authoritarian Regime

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023

Table 7 shows that the democracy index varies among countries in Southeast Asia, with Malaysia ranking in 40 democracies, and Myanmar at the rank of 166. In general, the decline of democracy in Southeast Asia has directly contributed to social injustice by suppressing dissent, weakening institutions that protect rights, and entrenching inequality and elite interests. In the rising trend of authoritarian regimes in many countries of Southeast Asia, military or ruling elites have suppressed opposition voices through draconian laws, imprisonment of activists, and even lethal violence against protesters (Razita et al, 2024). Violence has become increasingly common, especially for those coming from ethnic minorities and marginalized communities. Many elites from authoritarian regimes, even within the countries that are categorized as flawed democracies, have fostered crony capitalism, where political and economic power is concentrated among elites closely linked to the ruling regime. As they consolidate power, they often weaken the rule of law and undermine judicial independence, making it difficult for citizens to challenge abuses or seek protection. This environment enables corruption, abuse of power, and the neglect of vulnerable populations (Gaens and Ruohomäki, 2022).

The Demographic Factor

Population growth, age distribution, and urbanization shape social justice in Southeast Asian nations. A young population drives social change, while urbanization creates both opportunities and challenges for ensuring equality and fair resource distribution in each country.

Table 8. Population Growth in ASEAN (%) (2015-2022)

Country	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Cambodia	1.7	1.7	1.7	1.7	0.6	1.6	1.6	1.5
Philippines	1.7	1.7	1.6	0.8	1.4	1.3	1.4	1.2
Malaysia	1.6	1.4	1.2	1.1	0.4	-0.2	0.4	0.4
Indonesia	1.4	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.2	0.8	1.3
Singapore	1.3	1.3	0.1	0.5	1.2	-0.3	-4.1	3.4
Viet Nam	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.1	0.9	1.0
Myanmar	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9
Thailand	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	-3.4	-0.2	-0.3	1.3
Brunei Darussalam	0.1	1.2	1.0	5.0	3.9	-1.3	-5.2	3.6
Lao PDR	-2.0	1.7	1.7	1.6	1.6	1.9	1.1	1.4
ASEAN	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.6	1.0	0.8	1.2

Source: ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2023³⁸

Table 8 shows the annual population growth rates in ASEAN member states from 2015 to 2022. The data shows significant fluctuations, particularly in Brunei Darussalam and Singapore, that are experiencing negative growth rates in 2021. On the other hand, countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines show more stable and positive trends. The regional average shows a decline in growth from 1.2% in 2015 to 0.8% in 2021 before it recovered to 1.2% in 2022. These population trends are closely linked to issues of social justice, as unequal population growth can deepen inequalities in resource distribution, access to healthcare services, and the labor market. For example, rapidly growing populations in low-income countries may raise pressure on better public services and education systems. In contrast, the decline in richer countries could lead to labor shortages and reliance on migrant workers, raising complex issues related to social justice and rights across ASEAN.

38 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ASEAN-Statistical-Yearbook-2023.pdf>.

Table 9. ASEAN Urban Population (%)

Country	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Singapore	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Brunei Darussalam	76.7	77.0	77.3	77.6	77.9	78.3	78.6	78.9
Malaysia	74.3	74.8	75.2	75.6	76.2	75.1	77.7	78.2
Indonesia	53.3	54.0	54.7	55.3	56.0	56.6	57.3	57.9
Thailand	47.7	48.4	49.2	49.9	50.7	51.4	52.2	52.9
Philippines	46.3	46.5	46.7	46.9	47.1	47.4	47.7	48.0
Viet Nam	33.5	33.7	33.9	34.2	35.0	36.8	37.1	37.6
Lao PDR	33.1	33.7	34.4	35.0	35.6	36.3	36.9	37.6
Myanmar	29.3	29.4	29.5	30.0	30.00	29.9	30.1	30.2
Cambodia	23.0	23.5	24.0	24.5	39.4	39.1	39.3	39.2
ASEAN	47.2	47.6	48.1	48.6	49.5	50.1	50.6	51.1

Source: ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2023³⁹

Table 9 shows that there is an increasing trend of population living in urban areas across all ASEAN countries. In 2020 onwards, more than fifty percent of people in Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand already lived in urban areas. The similar trend also occurred in the Philippines, Vietnam, Lao, Myanmar and Cambodia even though the population predominantly lives in rural areas. This disparity reflects unequal development of infrastructure, economic activity, and public service provision in urban and rural areas. Urban areas generally offer better access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, while rural populations often face systemic exclusion and a lack of investment. This urban-rural divide has deepened social inequality, with rural and marginalized communities lacking opportunities and a voice in policy-making. The increase of population living in urban areas potentially brings serious challenges of social justice unless there are responsive policies to anticipate the challenges.

The challenge of demographic factor is even more complex if the population structure is being observed.

Table 10. ASEAN Population Structure (%)

Age Group	Percentage
0-4	8.1%
5-19	24.4%
20-54	50.6%
55-64	9.3%
65+	7.5%

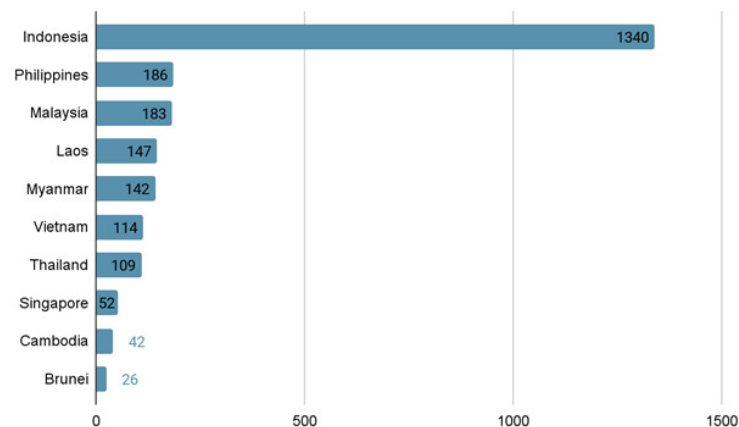
Source: ASEANStats (2023).⁴⁰

39 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ASEAN-Statistical-Yearbook-2023.pdf>

40 <https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/AKF2024.v1.pdf>

Table 10 indicates that more than half (50.6%) of the ASEAN population falls within the category of the productive age group. This demographic trend highlights the opportunity for the region to gain a demographic dividend, but also emphasizes the urgency to ensure equal access to education, employment, and social protection in order to prevent the widening social inequality. The governments in the region must be responsible for creating more job opportunities for the young generation in order to anticipate the rise of unemployment which may potentially bring other social issues.

Graph 3. Ethnic Groups in Southeast Asia



Source: Diny Yasyi (2022)⁴¹.

The presence of diverse ethnic groups in ASEAN countries constitutes another challenge for building social justice in the region. Graph 3 shows that there are more than a thousand ethnic groups living in the countries across the region, and this reflects the urgent need for fair and just respect towards their rights. In some countries like Myanmar, some ethnic groups are subject to systemic discrimination because of their position, which is critical of the government's policies, in some conflict zones. Marginalized groups, particularly the indigenous peoples, face disproportionate environmental burdens and limited civic space to participate in the decision-making process in some states.

The ongoing negotiations on the drafting of ASEAN Declaration on the Environmental Rights demonstrate the real challenges for finding an agreeable solution to address the rights of indigenous people who are facing the brunt of ecological degradation, necessitating stronger protections for vulnerable populations and EHRDs. The 2025 Interface Consultation, which focused on aligning the Declaration with existing frameworks such as the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration and the Phnom Penh Statement (2012), reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to balancing diversity with concerted action. However, achieving environmental justice requires moving beyond non-binding commitments to enforceable mechanisms that respect the region's diverse identities while ensuring equitable access to a sustainable environment.

⁴¹ <https://seasia.co/2022/09/25/number-of-ethnic-groups-in-southeast-asian-countries>

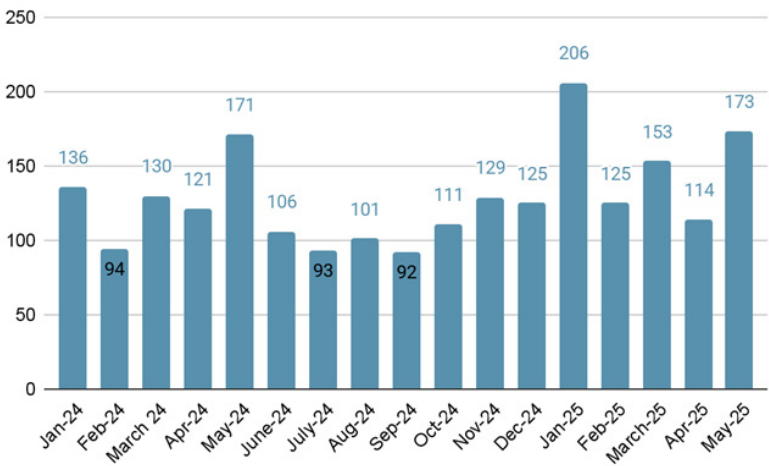
The Urgency to Integrate Environmental Justice and Social Justice

There is an urgency for ASEAN and its member states to put a priority on addressing the impacts of climate change on the lives of the population. There are at least two urgent reasons for the importance of the promotion of environmental justice in this region. The first is the natural disasters and the second is the deforestation.

1. Natural Disaster in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a region that is very vulnerable to different types of natural disasters, including floods, landslides, storms, wind-related disasters, cyclones, earthquakes, and volcanic activity. These natural disasters become serious threats to the people living in the region.

Graph 5. Number of Recorded Natural Disasters in Southeast Asia (January 2024- May 2025)



Source: Calculation by authors based on data published by AHA Center, <https://ahacentre.org/>

Graph 5 shows that Southeast Asia is very vulnerable to natural disasters. In the period from January 2024 to May 2025, 2,180 natural disasters have occurred in the Southeast Asia region. The data suggests that an average of 128 disasters have occurred every month, or an average of 3-4 natural disasters every day.

Table 11. Impacts of the Natural Disasters (January 2024-May 2025)

Impacts	Numbers
Affected People	68,955,641
Displaced People	10,700,010
Damaged Houses	4,685,425
Dead people	9,532
Missing people	4,563
Injured People	15,206

Source: Calculation by authors based on data published by AHA Center, <https://ahacentre.org/>

The impact of the disasters is very serious and pervasive. Table 11 shows that during the period from January 2024-May 2025, 68,955,641 people were affected by the natural disasters. 10,700,010 people had to leave their homes because of the disaster, while 4,685,425 houses were damaged due to the disasters during the period from January 2024 to May 2025. The casualties are remarkably very high. 9,532 people were dead, 4,563 were missing and 15,206 were injured. These numbers highlight the urgent need for ASEAN to strengthen disaster preparedness, emergency response systems, and climate resilience strategies, particularly to protect vulnerable and marginalized communities who are living in the most affected areas. 10,700,010 people had to leave their homes because of the disaster, while 4,685,425 houses were damaged due to the disasters during the period from January 2024 to May 2025.

One of the hardest disasters occurred on 28 March 2025 when a powerful magnitude 7.7 earthquake struck Myanmar and brought a humanitarian crisis in the country. This natural disaster provides a more urgent reason for ASEAN to work closely in building a resilient society and providing fair protection and treatment for the population who are affected by the natural disaster. The disaster caused 3,757 deaths, 116 people missing and 5,107 injured and 206,977 displaced in Myanmar. The earthquake affected 41.7 million people, consisting of 9.06 million households. The disaster also caused 58 deaths and 38 injured in Thailand. The AHA Center (23 April 2025) also reports that 55,587 houses were damaged in Myanmar, while 1,389 were damaged in Thailand. It is unfortunate for the people who are living in the conflict zones. Because the war continued in the areas, those people could not get equal access to the provision of humanitarian assistance provided by the international community (Michael, 2025).

People deserve their rights to have protection from the impacts of natural disasters that have been frequently occurring in the region. The right to have environmental justice is embedded in the right to secure access to social justice. Social justice shall not only include the rights to meet basic needs, have access to education and health, and decent well-being without any discrimination related to their backgrounds, but also the equal rights to have environmental protections, including the protection from the impacts of natural disasters.

2. Deforestation

Southeast Asia is a region that experiences a high rate of deforestation.⁴² The region that holds almost 15% of the world's tropical forests, loses 1.2% of its forest annually. From 2001 and 2019, the region lost 610,000 square kilometers of forests. The projection suggests that Kalimantan, the region's largest land share by Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, alone loses about 220,000 km square between 2010 and 2030, or 30% of its total land area. Palm oil plantation, logging and mining are the main drivers that lead to deforestation.

The deforestation causes negative impacts on the livelihood of the population in general and the forest dependent communities in particular. Deforestation disrupts the way of life of indigenous people and can potentially lead to displacement of the people. Deforestation also affects the water quality as it increases soil erosion that leads to sedimentation of rivers. As forests function crucially in absorbing carbon dioxide, deforestation affects the quality of a clean and healthy environment. Overall, deforestation is a serious threat to environmental justice and thus there is an urgent need to tackle the threat.

It is now time for the ASEAN leaders to pay more serious attention to both environmental justice and social justice. ASEAN is now on the right track to elevate environmental rights as a basis of the socio-cultural community. However, the next necessary agenda is how ASEAN as an institution can fully guarantee the environmental rights of the ASEAN citizens, regardless of their nationality, and translate its environmental justice into concrete actions in every single ASEAN member state.

42 <https://earth.org/deforestation-in-southeast-asia/#:~:text=Southeast%20Asia%2C%20including%20Indonesia%2C%20Malaysia,of%20its%20total%20land%20area>

Conclusion: ASEAN is Always Creative in Crafting Its Vision

This paper suggests that most national leaders in Southeast Asia have envisioned the establishment of states that highly value “social justice” for all and prohibit any form of discrimination. The national constitutions have given the leaders a mandate to realize social justice.

At the regional level, ASEAN leaders have paid attention to social justice as one of the core agendas of cooperation between ASEAN member states since the inception of ASEAN in 1967. They have adopted various documents to show their commitments to promote social justice. ASEAN has also initiated programs of action to close the gap between the Rich and the Poor, address inequality, provide access and opportunity for all people to meet their basic needs, promote education to increase literacy, and deliver wealth for all.

The concern with environmental justice as an important value of the ASEAN community gained the ASEAN leaders’ attention quite recently, particularly since 2015 when the leaders adopted the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 that affirms their commitment to environmental protection along with the commitment to realize social justice. ASEAN is now finalizing a draft of the Leaders’ Declaration on Environmental Rights that reflects a greater concern for environmental justice, while at the same time, ASEAN is also busy drafting a new long-term vision to build a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centered community by 2045. There also develops a discourse on just transition to low-carbon economy in ASEAN countries and this shows initial initiative to meet the requirement of social justice, which is closely related with environmental justice.

Yet the agenda of the establishment of social justice and environmental justice leaves the nations in the region with a complexity of issues. The rich-poor gap within and between ASEAN member states remains one of the most difficult issues. Inequality and illiteracy need greater attention to be addressed. The gender gap index in many ASEAN countries shows a regression rather than progress in promoting gender equality.

Southeast Asian nations must also address the increasing environmental challenges, such as deforestation and land degradation, to promote economic growth and reduce the displacement of people and natural disasters due to climate change. Droughts, floods, landslides, storms, cyclones, earthquakes, and volcanic activities become a serious threat to the lives of a large number of the population. Deforestation continues to expand in many ASEAN countries due to industrialization, agricultural expansion and the like, and this threatens the environmental rights of the people to have clean, safe, healthy water and air.

The complexity of social and environmental problems demonstrates that having dozens of declarations of commitments is not sufficient to achieve ASEAN's vision to become a true people-centered community that can deliver many progressive, concrete results.

What has been lagging in ASEAN is the absence of an institution that has the capacity to deliver concrete actions. ASEAN used to have ad hoc committees or permanent intergovernmental commissions that carried out particular mandates in formulating visions and goals in specific fields (economic, political security, and social and cultural) and plans of action set to achieve the goals. The committees ended their responsibility once their draft declaration and other related agreements had been adopted unanimously by the ASEAN leaders. Meanwhile, the permanent intergovernmental commissions lack competence to implement the agreements on action plans.

It is thus understandable that even though social justice has been in the ASEAN leaders' vision since the inception of ASEAN, ASEAN has never actually had the responsibility to bring the indicative goals into reality. It is the responsibility of ASEAN member states to introduce inclusive policies and implement development programs to establish social justice in their country. In its nearly six decades of existence, ASEAN upholds a strong belief that its member states are fully responsible for building the required foundations of social justice. It is thus understandable that the gap between the rich and the poor between and within ASEAN countries, remains huge, while poverty and illiteracy need greater attention. A new vision of citizenship is already written on paper, but the nations lack a sense of being an ever-closer community that was built on equal rights for all individuals in the region. This paper further suggests that the nations in Southeast Asia are facing unresolved issues in providing fair treatments regarding gender, race, age, religion, class, ethnicity, or national origin.

Recommendation: How to Translate ASEAN Vision into Concrete Actions

This is now the time for ASEAN leaders to invent new, bold initiatives and approaches that can help translate vision into concrete actions. Development partners and INGOs can provide support for ASEAN as an institution, its member states, and the society across the region in advancing collaborative efforts to address the complexity of problems related to social justice and environmental justice.

1. A Special Commission on Social Justice and Environmental Justice

ASEAN needs to have the institutional capacity to initiate concrete actions in translating its vision into reality. The existing approach of letting the state members follow up on the leaders' declaration and implement plans of action individually is not effective in addressing the complexity of problems related to social justice and environmental justice. Institutional capacity is highly necessary if ASEAN wants to function as more than simply a forum of knowledge sharing, but an institution that can truly deliver the measurable goals. Recognizing the environmental problem as a highly urgent matter for ASEAN citizens, ASEAN may exercise to develop a more permanent commission that carries out very special tasks in executing plans of action related to the environmental and social rights of the ASEAN citizens.

ASEAN can also scale up the capacity of the existing institutions with a special mandate to execute some actions. Examples of the potential institutions include the AHA Center and AICHR. The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) has been active in facilitating cooperation and coordination to deal with disaster management and emergency response in the ASEAN region. ASEAN has also developed the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), which has been active in promoting environmental rights. Gradual steps to scale up the institutional capacity of the existing bodies shall be accelerated.

2. Forging the synergy of sustainable collaboration among development partners

ASEAN member states have enjoyed technical and financial support from ASEAN dialogue partners and international organizations in achieving social justice and environmental justice's indicative goals through various development cooperation programs. Yet there is a tendency that the foreign partners work in silo in assisting the ASEAN member states in achieving their development goal.

The complexity of today's problems in Southeast Asia partly reflects the reluctance (if not failure) of the dialogue partners to build a coordinated approach to improving the effectiveness of their development programs in Southeast Asia. Collaboration between ASEAN's external partners to improve aid effectiveness in delivering social and environmental justice is thus imperative.

3. Creating a Regional Hub of Vibrant Societies that advocates social justice and environmental justice with high perseverance and determination

The role of civil society is highly important in the context where the democratic system in most ASEAN countries remains very fragile. It is hard to expect that national leaders will always have a strong commitment to building social justice and environmental justice. An effective grassroots movement that works closely with society, including women and marginalized groups, needs to have room for expanding its affirmative actions. International NGOs can provide support for the regional CSOs by facilitating the development of a network that can solidify their confidence and move in advocating the true interests of the people with strong passion and high determination.

4. Supporting the implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Right to a Safe, Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment

The adoption of the Declaration marks a significant step in advancing environmental governance and human rights in Southeast Asia. Initiated by the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), the Declaration represents a collective commitment to uphold the right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment for all.

To ensure effective implementation, ASEAN shall immediately finalize the Regional Implementation Plan to guide Member States and the ASEAN Secretariat. UN human rights experts have welcomed this progress but also urged ASEAN to adopt the internationally recognized term "Indigenous Peoples" and to ensure that their rights, along with those of local communities, environmental human rights defenders, women, and children, are fully respected and protected in practice. Once the implementation plan is accomplished, all ASEAN members and ASEAN Secretariat shall implement the Declaration and its regional implementation plan consistently to advance better environmental governance that guarantees the social and environmental justice in the region.

List of Abbreviations

ACB	: ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity
ACW	: ASEAN Committee on Women
AEC	: ASEAN Economic Community
AEG-IFPP	: ASEAN Ad-hoc Experts Working Group on International Forest Policy Process
AETI	: ASEAN Energy Transformation Initiative
AHRD	: ASEAN Human Rights Declaration
AICHR	: ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights
APAEC	: ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation
ASCC	: ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community
ASEAN	: Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEAN-JETP	: ASEAN Just Energy Transition Partnership
EHRDs	: Environmental Human Rights Defenders
EIA	: Environmental Impact Assessment
EJF	: Environmental Justice Foundation
ESC	: Environmentally Sustainable Cities
EU	: European Union
FPIC	: Free, Prior, and Informed Consent
GDP	: Gross Domestic Product
IAI	: Initiative for ASEAN Integration
IPRA	: Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act
KFCP	: Kalimantan Forests and Climate Partnership
KM GBF	: Kunming-Montreal Global Diversity Framework
LICADHO	: Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights
MPAC	: Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity
MSIA	: Malaysian Semiconductor Industry Association
MSMRs	: Minimum Standards on Migration-Related Services
NBSAPs	: National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans
NETR	: National Energy Transition Roadmap
NGO	: Non-Governmental Organization
UN	: United Nations
VAP	: Vientiane Action Programme
VWU	: Vietnam Women's Union

About the authors:



Yulius P. Hermawan is the chair of the Parahyangan Center for International Studies (PACIS), an academic and policy research center at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia. His research interests include the G20, ASEAN, global governance, and international development cooperation.



Ms. Nazwa has been actively engaged with the Parahyangan Center for International Studies (PACIS) as an intern and junior researcher on several strategic projects. She has contributed to the research on Indonesia's Strategy to strengthen development partnership with the countries and territories in the Pacific, as well as the assesment of the implementation of the Korean Official Development Assistance program in the West Jawa Province. She has also supported research on the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) and participated in a policy project with the Ministry of State Secretariat to develop the Grand Design and Competency Development Curriculum for Cooperation Analysts. Nazwa is a final year student at the Study Program of Internasional Relations, Parahyangan Catholic University.



Ms. Syanne Averina Teja is a junior researcher in PACIS for the Social Justice in Southeast Asia project. She is an International Relations student at Parahyangan Catholic University and enjoys learning about how communities, policies, and regional cooperation shape people's everyday lives. Other field of research interests includes non-traditional security issues, power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, China's global politics, and international organizations.

References

- Aditiya, Nana, Leo Agung, and Cecilia Dyah. 2019. "Hatta's Thoughts of Democracy, Social Justice, Human Rights and Democratic Economy," *International Journal of Education and Social Science Research* 2 (03). https://ijessr.com/uploads/2019/ijessr_02_152.pdf.
- Ampater, Althea Marie, Steven Lance Dompur, Jenny Lyn Duhac, and Bhea Paje. 2024. "Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) Law in the Philippines: A Scoping Review on Effectiveness." *Journal of Public Administration and Government* 6 (3): 106–22. <https://doi.org/10.22487/jpag.v6i3.1657>.
- Beban, Alice, and Pou Sovachana. 2014. "Human Security & Land Rights in Cambodia." <https://cicp.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HSLR-report-Final-3-29-2015.pdf>.
- Bünthe, Marco, and Meredith Weiss. 2023. "Civil Society and Democratic Decline in Southeast Asia." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 42 (3): 297–307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034231212488>.
- Gilbert, Valerie, Ma Christina, F Epetia, and Sonny N. Domingo. 2022. "Close the Gap: Accelerating Post-Pandemic Recovery through Social Justice." <https://pidswebs.pids.gov.ph/CDN/document/pidsdps2236.pdf>.
- Lall, Marie. 2021. *Myanmar's Education Reforms: A Pathway to Social Justice?* JSTOR. UCL Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv13xprwx>.
- Levy, Antonio. 2024. "Laudate Deum: A Framework for Environmental Stewardship and Social Justice in the Philippines and Southeast Asia." *CSID Journal of Infrastructure Development* 7 (3): 496–521. <https://doi.org/10.7454/jid.v7.i3.1173>.
- Malaysia MADANI. 2024. "Setahun Ekonomi Madani," https://malaysiamadani.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Booklet-Program-Madani-Rakyat_vFinalv4.pdf.
- Mashuri, Ali, Idhamsyah Eka Putra, and Cristina Montiel. 2022. "Political Psychology of Southeast Asia." *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 10 (2): 491–500. <https://doi.org/10.5964/jssp.10133>.
- Michaels, Morgan (2025). Assessing Post-Earthquake Pattern of Violence in Myanmar. <https://myanmar.iiss.org/updates/2025-05>
- Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MOLSW). 2020. "National Social Protection Strategy of Lao PDR, 2025." International Labour Organization. October 13, 2020. https://www.ilo.org/publications/national-social-protection-strategy-lao-pdr-2025?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
- Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF). 2020. "Singapore's Social Compact." Msf.gov.sg. December 2020. <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963?ProvIds=P14->.
- Perkins, Dwight. 2021. "Understanding Political Influences on Southeast Asia's Development Experience." *Fulbright Review of Economics and Policy* 1 (1): 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1108/frep-03-2021-0021>.
- Phuong, Ngo Thi, and Khoa Ngoc Vo Nguyen. 2024. "Democracy and Social Justice in Ho Chi Minh's Thought for Economic Development in Vietnam." *Social Science and Humanities Journal (SSHJ)* 8 (05): 3704–8. <https://doi.org/10.18535/sshj.v8i05.1105>.
- Plubins, Rodrigo. 2013. "Khmer Empire." World History Encyclopedia. March 12, 2013. https://www.worldhistory.org/Khmer_Empire/.
- Prastyo, Brian Amy. 2013. "The Principle of Social Justice as the Law." *Jurnal IUS Kajian Hukum Dan Keadilan* 1 (3). <https://doi.org/10.12345/ius.v1i3.247>.
- Putra, Fadillah, and Muhammad Faishal Aminuddin. 2020. "Democracy and Social Policy in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Process Tracing Analysis." *Jurnal Politik* 5 (2): 221. <https://doi.org/10.7454/jp.v5i2.266>.
- R, Chatterji B. 1962. "The Welfare State Concept in Indonesia and Cambodia." *India Quarterly* 18 (2): 154–66. <https://doi.org/10.2307/45068241>.
- Sainah, Hajah, and Haji Saim. 2010. "Chapter 5 Social Protection in Brunei Darussalam - Current and Challenges." https://www.eria.org/uploads/media/Research-Project-Report/RPR_FY2009_9_Chapter_5.pdf.

Sindecharak, Teera. 2020. "Social Justice" Measuring Fairness for Understanding the Balance of Fairness in Thai Society." *Journal of Multidisciplinary in Social Sciences* 16 (1): 39–47. <https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/sduhs/article/view/268105>.

Socheat, Samreth. 2008. "Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia| អង្គភាពព័ត៌មាន និងប្រតិភូរដ្ឋបាល." Pressocm.gov.kh. 2008. <https://pressocm.gov.kh/en/archives/9539>.

United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2024. "ASEAN Gender Outlook 2024 Highlights Climate Change Threats to Women and Girls in Southeast Asia, a Warning Sign for Other Regions." September 27, 2024. <https://www.preventionweb.net/news/asean-gender-outlook-2024-highlights-climate-change-threats-women-and-girls-southeast-asia> .

