

Progressive Development of the ASEAN Community under the UN 2030 Agenda

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This paper aims to examine the progressive development process of the ASEAN under the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. As of 2022, the ASEAN Member States have a total population of 622 million people and a combined GDP of USD 3.2 trillion. The ASEAN's main focus is integration by connectivity which has been facilitated by "the ASEAN Way." The ASEAN connectivity was upgraded into a single community through the ASEAN Vision 2020 comprehensively formalized by the Bali Concord II in 2003. The ASEAN has been geographically expanding towards Northeast Asia (ASEAN+3) and then Oceania with India (ASEAN+6). It was also connected to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which is the biggest mega FTA in the contemporary world. With the Vision 2025, furthermore, the ASEAN Community reset its direction to sustainable development goals which are the main objective to attain for the Association under the Master Plan 2025.

Keywords: ASEAN, ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Plus Six, Sustainable Development, ASEAN Community Vision 2025, UN Agenda 2030

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I. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established as a regional bloc among the five founding member States such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand in 1967.¹ The ASEAN was originally motivated by the security issues of the region at that time including Vietnam War, the Cold War, the newly created state of Malaysia, the Indo-China refugee crisis, and Vietnam-Cambodia border conflicts, etc.² However, the Association has been progressively developing to address economic, political, security and socio-cultural issues as one of the largest regional integration.³

As of 2022, the ASEAN Member States have a total population of 622 million people⁴ and a combined GDP of USD 3.2 trillion.⁵ The ASEAN's main focus is integration by connectivity⁶ which has been facilitated by "the ASEAN Way."⁷ The ASEAN connectivity was upgraded into a single community through the ASEAN Vision 2020⁸ comprehensively formalized by the Bali Concord II in 2003.⁹ At the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007, the ASEAN leaders affirmed to establishing one of the world's largest free trade blocs by 2015 through the ASEAN Community.¹⁰ Based on Bali Concord II, the ASEAN Community is divided into three main pillars, being the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).¹¹

The ASEAN has been geographically expanding toward Northeast Asia (ASEAN+3), Oceania and finally India (ASEAN+6). It was also connected to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which is the biggest mega FTA in the contemporary world. With the Vision 2025, furthermore, the ASEAN Community reset its direction to sustainable development which is the main objective for the Association to attain under the Master Plan 2025.

This paper aims to examine the progressive development process of the ASEAN under the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. The paper is composed of six parts including a short Introduction and Conclusion. Part two will examine constitutionalization of regional measures. Part three will shortly deal with three ASEAN Communities. Part four will scrutinize the expansion process of the ASEAN into ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+6. Part five will finally analyze the post-2025 vision of the ASEAN with special references to the Master Plan 2025 and UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

II. Constitutionalization of Regional Measures

A. The ASEAN Declaration

The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) signed on August 8, 1967 in Bangkok is the founding document of the Association.¹² The ASEAN aims to promote the economic growth, social progress and cultural development; regional peace and stability; active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields, etc.¹³

B. The Declaration of ASEAN Concord

On February 24, 1976, the five original members of the ASEAN adopted the Declaration of ASEAN Concord (Bali Concord I) which addresses the objectives and principles in pursuit of political stability in this region.¹⁴ The Bali Concord I addressed political, economic, social, cultural and information issue and improved the ASEAN machinery program of action as a framework for the ASEAN cooperation.¹⁵

C. Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) was signed in February 1976 in order “to promote perpetual peace, everlasting amity and cooperation among their peoples which would contribute to their strength, solidarity and closer relationship.” (Article 1) TAC was amended on December 15, 1987 by a protocol¹⁶ and on July 25, 1998 to condition such accession on the consent of all Member States.¹⁷ On October 7, 2003, the Member States adopted the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II) which addresses the ASEAN Community’s three pillars, namely political and security cooperation, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation.¹⁸

D. The ASEAN Charter

The ASEAN Charter is a constitutional document addressing comprehensive legal status and institutional framework for the ASEAN Community.¹⁹ As a legally binding instrument, the ASEAN Charter is a turning point of the ASEAN history

for integration. Following the Charter, the Association finally transformed from a policy-based forum to rule-based institution.²⁰

E. Bali Declaration on ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations 2011

The Bali Declaration on ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations (Bali Concord III)²¹ addresses the politics and security, economy and socio-culture pillars. The Bali Concord III further reaffirms the ASEAN's commitment to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and respect for international laws.²²

F. The ASEAN Vision 2020 (Kuala Lumpur 2017)

On December 15, 1997, the ASEAN leaders signed the ASEAN Vision 2020 to achieve continuous prosperity, peace, partnership in their region.²³

G. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) 2019

In 2019, the ASEAN Leaders finally agreed to further discuss an initiative that reinforces the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).²⁴ One of the main objectives of AOIP is to implement existing and exploring other ASEAN priority areas of cooperation, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).²⁵

H. The Ha Noi Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision

At the 37th ASEAN Summit in 2020, the Hanoi Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision was adopted in order to build a solid foundation for the road ahead for the ASEAN Community.²⁶

III. Communities

A. ASEAN Economic Community

1. ASEAN Free Trade Area Agreement

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was established in 2015 to build a single market within the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA).²⁷ The Agreement on the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) Scheme for the ASEAN Free

Trade Area (hereinafter CEPT Agreement or AFTA Agreement)²⁸ was signed on January 28, 1992 as the first substantial measure for integrating the ASEAN market between six members, namely, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.²⁹ The CEPT Scheme was implemented in January 2004 when Malaysia announced its tariff reduction for completely built up (CBUs) and completely knocked down (CKDs) automotive units.³⁰ Now, more than 90 percent of goods are traded without tariffs.³¹

2. ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint

In the 13th Summit in Singapore, the ASEAN leaders adopted the AEC Blueprint to transform the Association into a single market and production base.³² The AEC Blueprint addresses that the AEC can be realized by economic integration as illustrated in the ASEAN Vision 2020 which was adopted in 1997.³³ The AEC Blueprint was upgraded by the AEC Blueprint 2025 which was adopted at the 27th ASEAN Summit on November 22, 2015 in Kuala Lumpur.³⁴ Along with the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, the APSC Blueprint 2025 and the ASCC Blueprint 2025, the AEC Blueprint 2025 form a part of ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together.³⁵

3. AEC Framework Agreements

The ASEAN concluded, at the summit of December 1998, framework agreements on mutual recognition arrangements and goods-in-transit.³⁶ The framework agreement on goods-in-transit came into force through nine legally binding protocols, four of which have already been concluded.³⁷

B. ASEAN Political and Security Community

1. Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone

The Treaty on the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANWFZ) was adopted for a nuclear weapons moratorium between ASEAN Member States. Entering into force on March 28, 1997, SEANWFZ obliges its members not to develop, manufacture or otherwise acquire, possess, or have control over nuclear weapons.³⁸

2. ASEAN Regional Forum

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established in 1994 as a multilateral platform for security dialogue in the Indo-Pacific region.³⁹ ARF is characterized by consensus-based decision-making and frank dialogue, which promotes political and security dialogue and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region through confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution. It comprises of 27 members (hereinafter ARF Partners).⁴⁰ ARF aims to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴¹ In the 27th ARF held in September 2020 in Hanoi, the Member States discussed the critical situation in the South China Sea, the importance of ICT in mitigating the impact caused by Covid-19, and upholding peace in the Korean Peninsula.⁴²

3. The APSC Blueprint

The APSC Blueprint was adopted by the ASEAN Leaders at the 14th ASEAN Summit on March 1, 2009 in Thailand.⁴³ The APSC Blueprint envisions the ASEAN to be: a rules-based Community; a cohesive, peaceful, stable and resilient region with shared responsibility; and a dynamic and outward-looking region for an integrated and interdependent world.⁴⁴

C. ASEAN Socio-Culture Community

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is committed to lift the quality of life of its peoples through cooperative activities towards the promotion of sustainable development.⁴⁵ The ASCC is obliged to open a world of opportunities to collectively deliver and fully realize human development, resiliency, and sustainable development.⁴⁶

The ASCC Blueprint was adopted at the 13th ASEAN Summit in 2007 addressing human and social development.⁴⁷ At the 27th ASEAN Summit (2015), the ASEAN leaders adopted the APSC Blueprint 2025 to meet the challenges and opportunities that the Association would be facing regionally and globally.⁴⁸ The ASCC Blueprint 2025 is striving for a community that engages and benefits the people, and is inclusive, sustainable, resilient and dynamic.⁴⁹ In terms of the ASCC, the ASEAN has so far adopted eight agreements on ageing, humanitarian assistance, biodiversity, disaster management, transboundary haze pollution, education, cultural

fund, and cultural activities.⁵⁰

IV. Expansion

A. FTAs

The ASEAN is fast expanding. It is a party to six free trade agreements with Australia (Agreement Establishing the ASEAN-Australia 2009); New Zealand (Agreement Establishing the ASEAN-New Zealand Free Trade Area 2009); China (ASEAN-China Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Co-Operation 2002); India (ASEAN-India Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation 2003); Japan (ASEAN-Japan Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Partnership 2008); and Korea (ASEAN-Republic of Korea Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation 2005).⁵¹ Meanwhile, the ASEAN-Hong Kong, China Free Trade Agreement (AHKFTA) entered into force on June 11, 2019. Under the AHKFTA, Hong Kong and five ASEAN Member States-Lao PDR, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam-grant free access or eliminate customs duties.⁵² In November 2020, the ASEAN Member States joined the RCEP which had been negotiated since 2012.⁵³

B. The ASEAN Plus Three

The ASEAN Plus Three (APT) consists of the ten ASEAN Member States with three East Asian economies including China, Japan and South Korea. A vision for the APT was discussed between the leaders of the ASEAN and those three countries in the second Informal Summit in Malaysia of 1997. In 1999, the APT leaders finally released a Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation as a result of the third APT Summit in Malaysia. In the Joint Statement, the APT leaders agreed to strengthen the cooperation in various areas including economic and social, political, and other fields.⁵⁴

The APT framework has become an important element for fostering East Asian regionalism towards an East Asian Community (EAC). For this long-term goal, “Building on the Foundations of ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation” was adopted at the Singapore APT Summit in 2007 which reaffirmed the APT process as a main vehicle to build the EAC. The APT Cooperation Work Plan (2007-17) and

its succeeding Work Plan (2018-22) were endorsed to serve as the master plan to enhance APT cooperation in 2007 and 2017, respectively. In 2017, in Manila, the APT leaders issued the Manila Declaration on the 20th Anniversary of APT Cooperation.⁵⁵

The APT cooperation covers a wide range of areas such as political and security, transnational crime, trade and investment, finance, tourism, agriculture and forestry, energy, minerals, small and medium-sized enterprises, science and technology, innovation, environment, rural development and poverty alleviation, social welfare, ageing, youth, women, civil service, labor, culture and arts, information and media, education, disaster management, health, and connectivity.⁵⁶ These areas are divided into three sections for sustainable development such as Political-Security Cooperation, Economic and Finance Cooperation, and Socio-Cultural Cooperation.

1. Political-Security Cooperation

As regard the political-security cooperation (SDG 16), the first action launched by the ATP Summit was to organize the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) in 1998. The EAVG released a report in 2001 titled, “Towards an East Asia Community: Region of Peace, Prosperity and Progress” which addressed the future direction of regional cooperation.⁵⁷ The EAVG delivered its second report in 2012.⁵⁸

The APT continued to address political security matters through dialogue and cooperation. The 24th APT Summit of 2021 reaffirmed the commitment to combatting transnational crimes and addressing non-traditional security issues such as trafficking, cybercrime, counter-terrorism and illicit drug trafficking.⁵⁹ Non-traditional security matters are undertaken by the APT Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC+3) and the APT Senior Officials’ Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC+3), while illicit drug trafficking is handled by the SOMTC+3 Working Groups on Narcotics, under the ambit of ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD).⁶⁰

2. Economic and Financial Cooperation

As of today, the most critical challenge before the APT’s economic and financial cooperation is the Covid-19. In order to mitigate the adverse impact of the pandemic on its socio-economic development, the APT agreed to cooperate for regional recovery through the ASEAN Plus Three Plan of Action (APT POA) on Mitigating

the Economic Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic 2020⁶¹ and the following APT Leaders' Statement on Strengthening APT Cooperation for Economic and Financial Resilience in the face of Emerging Challenges.⁶² In September 2021, the AEM+3 Consultations endorsed the APT Economic Cooperation Work Program 2021-2022 including the "Development of Digital Economy" as a new work area.⁶³ During the 23rd AEM+3 Consultations, the EABC recommended the APT members to strengthen in food and agriculture reserve.⁶⁴

In finance and monetary field (SDG 8), the APT cooperation is led by ASEAN+3 Finance Ministers' and Central Bank Governors' Meeting (AFMGM+3), with the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM), the ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office (AMRO), and the Asian Bond Market Initiative (ABMI).⁶⁵ At the 25th meeting of AFMGM+3 in May 2022, the APT Finance Ministers and the Central Bank Governors, in their Joint Statement, agreed to enhance regional financial cooperation through CMIM, AMRO, ABMI and Asian Future Initiatives.⁶⁶

For agriculture and forestry (SDGs 2 & 15), the APT Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF+3) are focusing on strengthening food security, biomass energy development, sustainable forest management, climate change mitigation and adaptation, animal and plant health disease control, information and knowledge network and exchange, research and development, etc.⁶⁷ The APT Cooperation Strategy on Food, Agriculture and Forestry (2016–25) is aimed at implementing the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and advancing APT collaboration in the priority areas of agriculture, fisheries, livestock and forestry sectors.⁶⁸

As regard food security (SDG 2), the Ministers of the Agriculture and Forestry of the APT established the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve in October 2011 in order to strengthen food security, poverty alleviation, and malnourishment eradication among its members without distorting normal trade.⁶⁹

In tourism (SDG 3), the Memorandum of Cooperation on APT Tourism Cooperation was signed in January 2016 which is the key instrument for more action-oriented cooperation.⁷⁰ The APT Tourism Ministers (M-ATM+3) held annually reviews the progress and development of the APT cooperation in tourism of the region.⁷¹

In energy section (SDG 7), the APT has conducted various cooperation projects including the APT forum on oil market and natural gas; the APT forum on energy security; the APT forum on new and renewable energy, energy efficiency and conservation. At the annual Senior Officials Meeting on Energy Plus Three

(SOME+3) and the ASEAN Ministers on Energy Plus Three (AMEM+3), the APT countries exchanged views on energy security, oil market and natural gas, and energy efficiency and renewable energy promotion and deployment.⁷²

In minerals cooperation (SDGs 9 & 17), the APT Senior Officials Meeting on Minerals (ASOMM+3) covers such areas as cross-border geological correlations, geological mapping, mineral resources database and information system, and mineral conservation.⁷³

On science and technology (SDGs 9, 14 & 15), the ASEAN Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation Plus Three (COSTI+3) discussed recent developments on cooperation in science, technology, and innovation. In recent, COSTI+3 conducted the APT Junior Science Odyssey, ASEAN+3 Centre for the Gifted in Science Board of Directors Meeting and ASEAN+3 Teachers' Workshop and Students' Camp for the Gifted in Science.⁷⁴

3. Socio-Cultural Cooperation

Socio-cultural cooperation is closely connected to sustainable development which is an ultimate goal of the ASEAN community building. The 19th APT Summit in September 2016 adopted the "ASEAN Plus Three Leaders' Statement on Promoting Sustainable Development Cooperation," which aimed to advance the complementarity between the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the ASEAN Community Vision 2025.⁷⁵

On environment (SDG 13), a number of key projects have been implemented such as the APT Youth Environment Forum (AYEF)⁷⁶ under the leadership of the APT Senior Officials Meeting on Environment and the APT Environment Ministers Meeting.⁷⁷

In order to reduce marine debris (SDG 14), the APT adopted the APT Marine Plastic Debris Cooperative Action Initiative⁷⁸ and made collective effort for Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP).⁷⁹

On poverty alleviation (SDG 1), the ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication Plus Three (SOMRDPE+3) exchanges and shares good practices and program innovations. The 13th SOMRDPE+3 held on March 26, 2021 noted the finalization of the Framework Action Plan on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication (2021-25).⁸⁰

In social welfare and development (SDG 3), SOMSWD+3 and the ASEAN

Ministerial Meeting for Social Welfare and Development Plus Three (AMMSWD+3) are committed to promoting and enhancing the social protection measures in order to meet the needs of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups.⁸¹

On gender issue (SDG 5), since November 2009, the APT Committee on Women (ACW+3) has been holding annual meetings to exchange views on best practices on right-based programs on poverty reduction among women and other approaches in reducing the feminization of poverty.⁸²

As for the youth (SDG 3), the APT Senior Officials Meeting on Youth (SOMY+3) has endorsed the ASEAN Plus Three Work Plan on Youth (2021-25)⁸³ which will be a part of the overall youth work plan addressing issues relevant to the Post-2020 strategic direction of youth development in ASEAN and the APT Cooperation Work Plan (2018-22).

In civil service (SDG 11), the APT Conference on Civil Service Matters (ACCSM+3) adopted the Luang Prabang Joint Declaration on APT Civil Service Cooperation.⁸⁴

As regard labor cooperation (SDG 8), the APT Labour Ministers Meeting (ALMM+3) adopted the 5-Year Priorities of the ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation on Labour (2021-25) on October 28, 2020 to promote human resources development, inclusive growth, sustainable development.⁸⁵

In culture (SDG 17), the APT Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts (AMCA+3) adopted the APT Work Plan on Cooperation in Culture and the Arts (2018-21) on October 24, 2018 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.⁸⁶

In information and media cooperation (SDGs 10 & 17), the APT Ministers Responsible for Information (AMRI+3) adopted the Work Plan on Enhancing APT Cooperation through Information and Media (2018-23) on May 10, 2018 in Singapore.⁸⁷

Regarding education cooperation (SDG 4), the APT promotes student mobility in higher education with quality assurance led by the Working Group on Student Mobility and Quality Assurance of Higher Education among the ASEAN Plus Three Countries (APTWG). The ASEAN University Network (AUN) and the Campus Asia Program in association with China, Japan and South Korea are the notable examples for this initiative.⁸⁸

On disaster management and emergency response cooperation (SDGs 9 & 11), the APT is implementing the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and

Emergency Response (AADMER) Work Programme for 2021-2025⁸⁹ through various cooperation projects.⁹⁰

In health cooperation (SDG 3), the APT Health Ministers Meeting (AHMM+3) and APT Senior Officials Meeting (SOMHD+3) conducted cooperation in universal health coverage, utilizing ICT for healthcare, non-communicable diseases, traditional and complementary medicine, active ageing, human resources for health. The 9th ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Meeting held in Bali in May in 2022 reaffirmed the APT commitment to optimizing the mobilization of essential health resource in responding to public health crisis.⁹¹ Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly, the APT Health Ministers had a Special Video Conference in Enhancing Cooperation on Covid-19 Response on April 7, 2020 and released their Joint Statement, which committed them to coordinate real-time information and data sharing, and technical exchanges on Covid-19, enhancing bilateral and multi-lateral collaboration on prevention, detection and response measures, etc.⁹²

C. The ASEAN Plus Six

In November 2004, the ASEAN leaders agreed to convene an East Asian Summit (EAS) which had been suggested by the EAVG. At the second EAS held on January 15, 2007 in Cebu, the Leaders of the ASEAN and six other nations (China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand) agreed to launch a study on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA) among EAS participants.⁹³

The scope of CEPEA covers economic cooperation, facilitation of trade and investment, and liberalization of trade and investment. In this regard, there are three basic principles of CEPEA. First, the ASEAN should be regarded as the driving force of economic integration. Second, CEPEA should be business-oriented as the business sector would be both the beneficiary and the implementation body of measures under CEPEA. Third, open regionalism should be taken into account, as development of the region under CEPEA should contribute to global liberalization, be beneficial to the region outside East Asia, and not hinder the development of the world economy.⁹⁴

Following these principles, the EAS aimed to establish an ASEAN Plus Six whose common interest is to build an FTA with wider group of participants.⁹⁵ The APS initiative would accelerate economic growth in East Asian countries and promote

cooperation in energy, foods, and other fields vital to economic activities of this region. Together with the three member States of the APT like China, Japan and South Korea, additionally, Australia, New Zealand and India could produce significant merits with a larger market and more resources. In the new APS, India may be a key actor to economic partnership with a large population and tremendous economic potential. Within the APS framework, India (both government and the private-sector) can make cooperation with other five members in human resource development, infrastructure, and other areas.⁹⁶ As the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) just launched with a dozen initial partners such as Australia, Brunei, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and the US,⁹⁷ India has both economic and strategic significance.

D. RCEP

The 15th EAS adopted the Ha Noi Declaration⁹⁸ and the APT Leaders' Statement on Strengthening Economic and Financial Resilience in the Face of Emerging Challenges.⁹⁹ Through these declarations, they agreed to strengthen the role of APT as a framework for preventing and addressing risks of economic and financial crisis in the region.¹⁰⁰

The RCEP was also signed by the APT with Australia and New Zealand. As the RCEP Agreement entered into force on January 1, 2022, this Partnership is now the world's biggest trade pact, covering a market of 2.2 billion people (almost 30% of the world's population), with a combined GDP of USD26.2 trillion (about 30% of global GDP).¹⁰¹ The markets covered by the RCEP account for nearly 28% of global trade. This mega trade pact is expected to improve market access by eliminating tariffs and quotas for over 65% of goods.¹⁰² The ASEAN Secretary-General Dato Lim Jock Hoi said:

The signing of the RCEP Agreement is a historic event as it underpins ASEAN's role in leading a multilateral trade agreement of this magnitude, despite global and regional challenges and eight years of negotiations ... RCEP will give a much-needed boost for a swift and robust recovery for businesses and peoples in our region particularly during the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis.¹⁰³

The RCEP Agreement contains 20 Chapters, 17 Annexes and 54 schedules of commitments covering intellectual property, electronic commerce, competition,

small and medium enterprises, economic and technical cooperation, and government procurement.¹⁰⁴

V. The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 for Sustainable Development

A. The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the UN 2030 Agenda

The ASEAN Member States agreed to develop the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 in a comprehensive, pragmatic, balanced, inclusive and coordinated manner. Following the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, the leaders delegated the ASEAN Coordinating Council to:

1. oversee the overall process of developing the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision and attendant documents;
2. develop a roadmap and core elements for the development of the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision and attendant documents, for subsequent consideration and endorsement by the ASEAN Leaders; and
3. look into the establishment of a High-Level Task Force (HLTF) to plan and develop the Post-2025 Vision and attendant documents for further consideration by the ASEAN Coordinating Council.¹⁰⁵

The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 aims to achieve a comprehensively connected and integrated ASEAN that will promote competitiveness, inclusiveness, and a greater sense of Community. Greater connectivity is the foundational supportive and facilitative means to achieving the political-security, economic, and socio-cultural pillars of an integrated ASEAN Community.¹⁰⁶ The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 is based on the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 which was adopted at Vientiane Declaration 2016.

The Master Plan 2025 reconfirmed the principles of its original strategic document 2010 and proposed new initiatives for connecting the ASEAN Communities as a whole towards 2025. The Agenda for the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 include: a doubling of the number of the ASEAN households over the next 15 years; the challenge of improving productivity to sustain economic progress; the movement of 90 million more people to cities within the ASEAN by 2030; the

need for infrastructure spending to more than double from the historical levels; the challenge of equipping the world's third-largest labour force; the emergence of disruptive technologies; the opportunity to transform natural resource efficiency in the region; and the imperative to understanding the implications for ASEAN towards a multipolar global power structure.¹⁰⁷

The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 is progressing with three directions: Physical connectivity; Institutional connectivity; and People-to-People connectivity.¹⁰⁸ It showcases 15 initiatives to achieve strategic objectives of the Master Plan 2025. (Table 1)

Table 1: 15 Initiatives for the Master Plan 2025¹⁰⁹

No.	Initiatives
1	Establish a Rolling Priority Pipeline List of Potential ASEAN Infrastructure Projects and Sources of Funds
2	Establish an ASEAN Platform to Measure and Improve Infrastructure Productivity
3	Develop Sustainable Urbanisation Strategies in ASEAN Cities
4	Enhance the MSME Technology Platform.
5	Develop the ASEAN Digital Financial Inclusion Framework
6	Establish an ASEAN Open Data Network
7	Establish an ASEAN Digital Data Governance Framework
8	Strengthen ASEAN Competitiveness through Enhanced Trade Routes and Logistics
9	Enhance Supply Chain Efficiency through Addressing Key Chokepoints
10	Complete Harmonisation of Standards, Mutual Recognition, and Technical Regulations in Three Prioritised Product Groupings
11	Increase Transparency and Strengthen Evaluation to Reduce Trade-Distorting Non-Tariff Measures
12	Enhance ASEAN Travel by Making Finding Information Easier
13	Ease ASEAN Travel by Facilitating Visa Processes
14	Establish New Vocational Training Programmes and Common Qualifications across ASEAN Member States, in accordance with National Circumstances of each ASEAN Member State
15	Support Higher Education Exchange across ASEAN Member States

B. Localization of SDGs

Following the successful enforcement of the Millennium Development Goals, in 2016, the global leaders agreed to sign the SDGs. The SDGs are in line with those of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 as well as the wider EAS vision. This common objective of realizing SDGs under the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific will be a major contribution of the region to the global community.

The ASEAN Community may achieve SDGs through utilizing digital economy; enhancing complementarities; aligning regional development agenda like the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; and promoting cooperation with the ASEAN Center for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue and other relevant institutions in the region.¹¹⁰ SDGs were also major targets of the ASEAN Community in terms of the post-2025 vision. In this regard, three-stage approach with systematic thinking are necessary for the ASEAN countries.¹¹¹ First, they should address “what will work at the regional level and in what context” sectoral policy should be formulated.¹¹² Second, the ASEAN should ensure the “combined activities across the region.” The member States should “identify what the SDGs are actually for, where the interlinkages are, and who holds the power, resources, and innovations that can affect the desired change.”¹¹³ Third, it is necessary for the ASEAN to “adopt a joined-up approach” to set “a network of targets” in connection with SDGs.¹¹⁴

Among the 17 SDGs, there were major progresses in five areas such as Goals 3 (good health and well-being), 5 (gender equality), 7 (affordable and clean energy); 8 (decent work and economic growth); and 9 (industry innovation and infrastructure). In order to obtain all 2030 SDGs, however, the ASEAN should make more efforts to maintain current speed of progress.¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, the ASEAN faces a few challenges to obtain the SDGs. The first is the absolute poverty. About three percent of population in the median ASEAN countries are living below absolute poverty. In case of median lower-middle-income ASEAN countries, this ratio is higher than 10 percent. Absolute poverty is declining and expected to be eradicated in most ASEAN countries by 2030 if the Master Plan 2025 is well implemented by every member State.¹¹⁶ The second is education. Now, the enrollment rate in lower secondary school in median ASEAN countries is 78 percent. Currently, enrollment is generally rising, but that of the lower-middle-income ASEAN countries should be improved to the level of the overall ASEAN

median by 2030.¹¹⁷ The third is health. For the median ASEAN country, mortality for children under the age of five is 24.5 per 1,000 live births, which is already below the SDG 3.2.1 (25 per 1,000 live births). However, it is not yet reached at the ultimate goal (12 per 1000 live births).¹¹⁸ Health situations are more serious in lower-middle income ASEAN countries. For example, maternal mortality remains at 143.5 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (compared to 70 per 100,000 live births under the UN 2030 Agenda). As a result, the life expectancy gap between the median ASEAN country and advanced Asia remains substantial and is expected to remain by 2030. This suggests that significant gaps remain in other dimensions of health that are not captured by the indicators analyzed here.¹¹⁹

Today, all the ASEAN members are signatories of the UN SDGs. Following the 2015 ASEAN Charter, the Association is committed to sustainable development “for the benefit of the present and future generations and to place the well-being, livelihood and welfare of the peoples at the centre of the ASEAN Community building progress.”¹²⁰ Accordingly, the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 also puts forward to environmental protection for now and future, adapting and responding to climate change with green technology and development.¹²¹

Despite the vision and agenda for sustainable development, the ASEAN members are not implementing the 17 SDGs efficiently.¹²² The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 is connected to the UN 2030 Agenda commonly which is progressively developing the global community for sustainable development. The ASEAN should thus recognize that the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the UN 2030 Agenda can be realized when these goals are translated into policies at the local level.¹²³

VI. Conclusion

The ASEAN is one of the biggest and the most active regional blocs in the world. It has been expanding for the past few decades towards the APT and the APS with more members including China, Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India.¹²⁴ The ultimate destination of this expansion process is to build the largest FTA in the world towards the AEC. The APT covers a wide range of areas such as security, finance, investment, social and cultural development. Its broaden connectivity, however, is more significant only when this geographical expansion is served for

the sustainable development of the peoples and the communities in the region.

In addition to geographical expansion, the ASEAN has been developing in a progressive way for sustainable development in terms of the ASEAN 2025 Vision and the UN 2030 Agenda. The 17 SDGs cover a wider set of interlinked objectives in environmental, economic and social manner, which are important for all ASEAN members. In order to attain SDGs the ASEAN countries should continue their considerable past achievements.¹²⁵

The ASEAN countries have made significant progress in reducing poverty since 2000. Given the dynamic economic situation of this region, income growth, structural transformation, and improvement of social and economic infrastructure including gender equality continue to support sustainable development in the ASEAN. If policy measures for income growth are successfully implemented, most ASEAN countries could eradicate absolute poverty by 2030. All of these are milestones for the ASEAN community as a whole.¹²⁶

Despite some progress, income inequality remains relatively high in several countries. To close these gaps, sustainable development will be a significant steppingstone. For the lower-middle-income ASEAN countries, in particular, more determined policy efforts are needed to improve infrastructure, as well as health and education outcomes. These challenges call for comprehensive and tailored strategies to attain the SDGs formulated in the context of national development plans through the voluntary review process.¹²⁷

The ASEAN was established for peace and stability via economic growth, social progress and cultural alliance. Over the past five decades, the ASEAN members have been taking quite different tracks in order to arrive at the same destination -“One Vision, One Identity, One Community”¹²⁸ following the principles of non-interference, consensus and peaceful dispute settlement.¹²⁹ SDGs will be an ambitious turning point for the ASEAN to be integrated more progressively for its peoples living in a diverse regional, political and cultural bloc under unity within diversity.

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