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ISSUE 03 | JULY 2020

Social Protection for All in ASEAN

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SNAPSHOTS

The 36th
ASEAN Summit

THE INSIDE VIEW

Social Protection and How ASEAN
Seeks to Leave No One Behind

SHIFTING CURRENTS

The State of Informal
Employment

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ISSUE 04 | AUGUST 2020

YOUR ARTWORK. OUR COVER.



We invite youth from the ASEAN region to submit an original illustration for the cover of the fourth issue of The ASEAN.

Theme:
Youth and Skills

Deadline:
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Magazine Cover and
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- Only individuals may enter the contest. Design entries submitted by a group or organization will not be entertained.
- An individual artist may submit a maximum of two entries.
- ASEAN Secretariat staff or officers or their immediate family members are not eligible to join. By submitting an entry, the individual artist agrees for his/her design to be used by the ASEAN Secretariat for publication in The ASEAN magazine, social media, other ASEAN publications and projects without any remuneration.

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In this issue



The Inside View: Social Protection

Interview with Lao PDR Minister Khampheng Saysompheng	6
Social Protection in Asean: A Tool Towards Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Community	8
Universal Health Coverage in ASEAN	10
The Role of Social Protection in Mitigating Crises	14
Leaving No One Behind: The ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management and its Role in Fostering Social Protection in ASEAN	18
Strengthening Social Protection of Older Persons	21



Impact

Reflection On Autism: From Disabilities to Different Abilities	24
ASEAN Opens Its Doors: An Inclusive Internship Programme	26

Shifting Currents

ASEAN-Japan Cooperation in the Age of Pandemics	31
Plastics in a Pandemic: A Look at Long-term Solutions	32
Studies on Informal Employment Reveal Progress, Gaps, and Future Directions	35

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Bridges

In Numbers: Social Protection for Children, Women, Workers, and Older Persons	28
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Conversations

Addressing Ageism in ASEAN	40
On Living Well: New Narratives on Older Life	41



Snapshots

The 36th ASEAN Summit	46
ASCC Council Convenes to Further ASEAN's Socio- Cultural Cooperation	49
ASEAN at 53	50
Konnnect ASEAN	51
For the Love of Noodles	52



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A Note from the Editorial Team

ASEAN defines Social Protection as policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty, inequalities, and vulnerability of the poor and other populations at risk. These include women, children, older persons, workers, and persons with disabilities.

With the unprecedented socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no better time to ensure these interventions are in place. In this issue, we look at existing ASEAN national and regional initiatives that help protect at-risk populations from the shocks of unforeseen events, disasters, pandemics, and other crises.

Lao PDR Minister for Labour and Social Welfare, Dr. Khampheng Saysompheng, Chair of ASEAN's Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development talks about the need for ASEAN Member States to strengthen protection mechanisms during this pandemic, and for other crises to come.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) contributes an article on the role of social protection in addressing the social, economic and health impact of the crisis. ASEAN's Poverty Eradication and Gender Division Head, Dr. Sita Sumrit, reflects on the need for inclusion and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities, particularly those with autism.

This month, we have a special focus on the protection of older persons. On our cover is a beautifully rendered ballpoint illustration, "Portrait of an Old Farmer in Bali," by Indonesian artist Deborah Tomasowa.

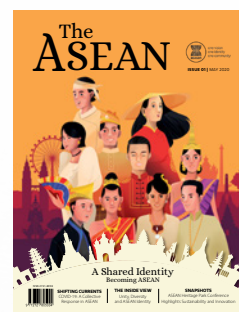
It is often said that the lines on a person's face chronicle the passage of life. It maps out where we have been and where we still have to go. In this issue, we feature the journeys of four outstanding men and women, who share with us their thoughts on longevity, purpose and living well.

This first set of profiles introduces a new section, "Conversations," that will highlight stories and interviews with peoples of ASEAN, from all generations.

In our Shifting Currents section, you will find articles on the region's plastic waste problem and the state of informal employment. Find out more about the recently held 36th ASEAN Summit and the upcoming 53rd Anniversary of the founding of ASEAN.

We again call on talented young artists to join The ASEAN magazine's illustration contest. The theme "Youth and Skills" is for our fourth issue and it will be all about education, youth, sports and 21st century skills.

We hope you enjoy reading *The ASEAN* magazine, as much as we loved putting it together.



Issue 1
https://bit.ly/TheASEAN_V1



Issue 2
https://bit.ly/TheASEAN_V2



"Portrait of an Old Farmer in Bali"
Artist: Deborah Tomasowa
<https://dtomasowa.wixsite.com/debs-artbox>
IG: deb.art_box/
Facebook: dtomasowa/

INSIDE VIEW

*The night market in front
of National Museum of
Luang Prabang, Lao PDR*





Viewpoint:

H.E. Khampheng Saysompheng

Minister, Labour and Social Welfare, Lao PDR
Chair, ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on
Social Welfare and Development

What are the strengths and opportunities for the promotion of rights and welfare of vulnerable groups in Lao PDR's perspective?

Minister Saysompheng: Lao PDR has accorded high importance to social protection especially for the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. This national commitment also resonates with our adherence to international and regional normative frameworks related to social protection, from the lens of human rights, labour, economic empowerment, and the 2030 Development Agenda, among others.

For Lao PDR, we have made tremendous efforts to translate the high-level policy commitments into much needed actions for the people. The issues of social protection and social welfare are one of the key priorities in our national economic and social development plan (2016-2020) and in other reforms such as in the areas of poverty eradication and labour skills development to lift the quality of life of the poor and vulnerable groups in order to ensure that they are part of the national development process.

Aside from social protection, welfare and assistance policies, the rights and dignity of vulnerable groups are key to our planning and implementation as we believe in participatory development where all stakeholders shall be empowered. We continue to work hard and strengthen engagement with ASEAN and development partners to exchange good practices, technical expertise and resources, with the aim of achieving good health and well-being for all.

Can Your Excellency expound on the policy recommendations from the 10th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social



Welfare and Development (AMMSWD) in Vientiane that focused on social protection for vulnerable children?

Minister Saysompheng: The theme of the 10th AMMSWD held in Vientiane, Lao PDR last year was on social protection for vulnerable children. Lao PDR believes that children are a critical force for both economic and social development of the country. However, challenges remain for vulnerable children especially the ones living in rural areas and those suffering from poverty and deprivation. Hence, we have been working to promote and protect their rights and to support their welfare.

On behalf of AMMSWD, I would like to reiterate that the needs of all children shall be acknowledged and taken into

account in the design, planning, and implementation of any social protection measures concerning them. This is in line with the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the SDGs as children's issues cut across all goals and action points.

Children in Lao PDR, especially those under three years of age, receive assistance and support from the government in collaboration with development partners and UN agencies with focus on the areas of nutrition, education and access to essential services. The ultimate objectives, aside from ensuring the rights and welfare of children, are also to reduce inequalities and forge ahead with human and sustainable development for the country and for our ASEAN region in which no child should be left behind.

“

On behalf of AMMSWD, I would like to reiterate that the needs of vulnerable children and all children shall be acknowledged and taken into account in the design, planning, and implementation on any social protection measures concerning them.

How do you envisage the Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (SOMSWD) and ASEAN sectoral bodies, in their continuing efforts to promote the social protection regional agenda?

Minister Saysompheng: I trust that AMMSWD with support from SOMSWD will work closely and tirelessly together towards social protection for all. Our aim is to make social protection inclusive as a transformative tool linking human capital development, justice and sustainability together. This is particularly evident in times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While promoting and advancing the tenets of the ASEAN Social Protection Declaration and Framework, we at the same time need to: i) strengthen local and community economic and social development; ii) continue to foster environmental sustainability; iii) remain inclusive and do no leave anyone behind; and iv) solidify our collaborative efforts in expanding social protection in times of uncertainties and in the face of emerging risks.

In this regard, I would like to highlight the central role of labour development for the economic growth and well-being of local and rural communities. This is very pertinent in the context of Lao PDR and our stage of development. We need revitalisation of community-led economies to build resilience and establish our strength from the ground-level up. This will be pivotal to the success of all protection measures and for the outcomes of social protection policies at all levels. ■



SOCIAL PROTECTION IN ASEAN:

A TOOL TOWARDS INCLUSIVE, SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT COMMUNITY



BY THIPHASONE SOUKATHAMAVONG

DEPUTY DIRECTOR GENERAL, DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION
MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL WELFARE, LAO PDR
CHAIR, SENIOR OFFICIALS MEETING ON SOCIAL WELFARE AND DEVELOPMENT

Social Protection as Basic Rights for All

Social protection is unequivocally a basic human right. It is key to poverty eradication, equality, social inclusion and to political stability and peace. At the macro level, social protection policies contribute to economic growth and human development.

In recent years, the pivotal role of social protection in sustainable development has been further emphasised in the 2030 development agenda through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Under Goal 1, to end poverty in all its forms, one of the targets is to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including social protection floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable. Goal 3, on healthy lives and well-being, articulates the need for universal health coverage or UHC. The lifelong approach is embraced in the advancement of the SDGs and recognises social protection systems for all, including children, women, workers, persons with disabilities, and older persons.

We have witnessed the utmost importance of social protection in mitigating the detrimental impact caused by the global financial crisis that hit the ASEAN region in 1990s. People provided with social protection coverage were more resilient to the shocks and risks and able to rebuild their lives, as well as those of their communities.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has once again put to test the readiness, sustainability, and efficiency of social protection systems, especially in emerging countries, where the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. Many nations were unprepared for the unprecedented nature of the shock generated by the pandemic. Indeed, it is also an opportunity for us to revisit existing schemes, available resources, and assess the level of agility of our social protection systems in order to safeguard the well-being of our people.

Social Protection: Mechanism and Progress in ASEAN

Ensuring social protection for all has been a long-standing commitment of ASEAN, with the region adopting the **ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection** in 2013 and the Regional Framework and Action Plan in 2015.



The tenets of both instruments are to advocate for an integrated and cross-sectoral approach, and to address emerging issues and challenges in the delivery of social protection.

Social protection is also embedded in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint's strategic measures with an emphasis on extending coverage, accessibility, availability, comprehensiveness, quality, equality, affordability and sustainability of social services and social protection. Strong foundations have been built for us to strengthening social protection in the ASEAN region.

The ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (SOMSWD) plays a central role in advancing social protection. Its overall objective is to enhance the well-being and improve the quality of life of older persons, children, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups in ASEAN. Focusing on the promotion of social protection policies for increased access and sustainability,

SOMSWD envisions social protection as a cross-cutting issue that requires a coordinated and holistic approach, involving various stakeholders such as governments, the private sector, development partners, civil society organisations, and service providers.

The inter-pillar approach has been adopted; with at least 10 ASEAN sectoral bodies working hand-in-hand to promote social protection, including social welfare, health, labour, women and children, agriculture, statistics, disaster management, rural development, and poverty eradication. Social protection is viewed as an investment in people that requires sufficient and sustainable resources. This is to enable the people, particularly the poor and the vulnerable, to meet their basic needs; to be adaptive to health, social, and other emerging risks faced by ASEAN.

SOMSWD recognises that vulnerabilities are multifaceted and solutions need to cut across multiple sectors to ensure that no one is left behind. In a time of uncertainties, unique demographic shifts, and increasing occurrences of natural and human-induced disasters, social welfare and development will need to remain agile and responsive to emerging trends and measures, to help build people's capacity to cope with and recover from shortcomings.

Towards Inclusive and Transformative Social Protection in ASEAN

The state of social protection in ASEAN Member States is diverse, with different stages of maturity in each nation's schemes and coverage. Even though significant progress in extending and reforming social protection systems has been made, more efforts are needed to support those who remain unprotected. Public expenditure on social protection is deemed inadequate in most ASEAN countries due to competing priorities, contributory capacity, and development challenges.

Yet, social welfare systems that can reduce poverty and address persistent inequality require adequate financing as well as strategic planning. Sufficient funding and resource mobilisation will help end the undesirable cycle of underinvestment and underperformance in the systems.

Certainly, we are encouraged by the progress in the implementation of key milestones in the area of social welfare and development that expand the scope and deepen the quality of social protection systems, particularly the adoption of the **ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** and the upcoming **Regional Action Plan to Implement the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Ageing: Empowering Older Persons in ASEAN** and the **ASEAN Social Protection Results Framework** and the establishment of



the ASEAN Training Centre for Social Work and Social Welfare. In the area of child protection, the adoption of the **ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration** and the **Declaration on Protection of Children from all Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse in ASEAN** have marked a step forward in the protection, services, and assistance provided to vulnerable children.

ASEAN will forge ahead with the operationalisation of the key components of regional social protection framework which are i) policy and programme development; ii) capacity building; iii) monitoring and evaluation; and iv) institutionalisation.

We recognise that policy coherence among social protection policies and other policy areas is imperative, along with the improvement of knowledge gaps, financing and fiscal

mechanisms, governance structures and institutional capacities.

As echoed in the **Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19** and the **Joint Statement of the Special ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development on Mitigating Impacts of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Groups in ASEAN**, accelerated efforts are underway to ensure a social safety net as well as implement risk-informed, evidence-based, and shock-responsive social protection systems to reduce the vulnerabilities of at-risk populations and improve their overall resilience in view of the pandemic.

Harnessing the lessons learned from this unprecedented crisis and transitioning towards recovery and normalcy, ASEAN and its stakeholders must reassess the state of social protection in terms of its accessibility, allocation of public funds for social spending, and the capacity to provide essential services and safeguard the well-being and livelihoods of the poor, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, women and girls, migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups in both normal and new normal times. ■

Universal Health Coverage in ASEAN



BY OSCAR PRIMADI, MPH

SECRETARY GENERAL, MINISTRY OF HEALTH, INDONESIA
CHAIR, SENIOR OFFICIALS MEETING ON HEALTH DEVELOPMENT

In pursuing Universal Health Coverage (UHC), the World Health Organization (WHO) advocates that all people should receive the full spectrum of essential, quality health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care, without suffering financial hardship.

WHO further describes UHC as an intervention to increase peoples' access to quality health services that are needs-based in order to improve the health of those who are able to receive them.

All UN Member States have agreed to undertake and achieve UHC by 2030 as part of their commitment to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This goal presents challenges given that at least half of the world's population is still without full coverage for essential health services and about 100 million people are still living on 1.90 US Dollars or less per day based on WHO estimates. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that a household spends at least 10 per cent of its income for health care—a common situation facing more than 930 million people around the globe according to WHO.

Currently, more emphasis has been placed on addressing and achieving UHC because of the health and socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries around the world that are challenged by the pandemic are also confronted by, among

others, labour and poverty issues. The global discourse in addressing and financing UHC has gone beyond the identification of traditional sources of funds or approaches to deliver essential health services to populations. Literature has introduced encompassing perspectives to tackle UHC, including upstream investments in public health; health system enhancement; investments on human capital especially human resources for health; increase in labour market skills and jobs; poverty reduction and social protection; promotion of financial protection and reduction in inequities by decreasing out-of-pocket payments; increase in efficiency of resource mobilisation; and, health security strengthening. These are being tackled as the current COVID-19 pandemic including past outbreaks have shown their overarching effects, such as causing productivity and development setbacks, at the national, regional, and global levels.

Indonesia's Progress Towards Achieving UHC

As mandated by the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, all citizens, including the poor and vulnerable, are entitled to proper healthcare services. Consequently, the governments are responsible for providing a healthcare system that improves access to health services for the poor and vulnerable and protects them against the impacts of illness. The Indonesian government has initiated a social security reform process by promulgating Law No. 40 on National Social Security System in 2004 (SJSN Law) and Law No. 24 establishing the National Social Security Agency (BPJS) in 2011, to fulfil its commitment to have a health care system for all Indonesians and migrant workers who have been working in Indonesia for at least six months.

On the National Health Insurance or *Jaminan Kesehatan Nasional* (JKN), its implementation in Indonesia began in January 2014 and was widely seen as a significant step towards achieving UHC.

JKN aims to provide a comprehensive healthcare for the entire population through government support and by funding low-income groups' premium. JKN intends not only to expand coverage, but also to improve access to quality and comprehensive healthcare services.

During the first six years of JKN implementation, the Indonesian government carried out several strategies to strengthen JKN sustainability, primarily by improving the National Health Insurance



Administration Agency or *Badan Penyelenggara Jaminan Sosial Kesehatan* (BPJS Health) management. The strategies entailed improving the standards of quality, strengthening promotive and preventive measures, increasing the use of generic drugs and domestic medical devices, rationalising health financing by optimising cost-sharing, and promoting other financial sources such as philanthropy.

In August 2019, more than 223.4 million people, representing 83 per cent of the total population, have been covered by the JKN. In the same period, there were 23,084 primary healthcare providers and 2,251 secondary and tertiary healthcare providers registered as JKN providers. JKN utilisation reached 233 million visits in 2018, and it reached more than 159 million visits in May 2019. Since JKN's implementation, there has been a dynamic change in health spending in Indonesia. In 2019, Indonesia's National Health Account reported that a share of public financing through the government budget increased and became the largest financing source at 32 per cent of total health expenditure. The share of social health insurance financing also increased to 21 per cent of total health expenditure and the out-of-pocket spending in the macro term decreased from 54 per cent in 2010 to 31.6 per cent in 2017. However, the proportion of total health expenditure is 3.2 per cent of GDP in 2017.

Indonesia's Approach to the COVID-19 Pandemic and UHC

Amidst growing concerns related to the increasing demands to the health system and needs of the people affected by COVID-19, maintaining the quality as well as the cost-effectiveness of services without compromising other national health priorities, remains of prime importance to the Ministry of Health. In the fight against COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia is faced with having to care for numerous patients while preventing the health system from being overwhelmed,

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Amidst growing concerns related to the increasing demands to the health system and needs of the people affected by COVID-19, maintaining the quality as well as the cost-effectiveness of services without compromising other national health priorities, remains of prime importance to the Ministry of Health

and allocating health care resources while minimising price rationing.

To cope with the situation, the central and local governments reallocated their budget to prioritise government response to COVID-19, such as contact tracing, surveillance, and in-patient care, and provision of medical supplies and health care as additional support to the JKN. With the increasing demand for health care, JKN plays a vital role in providing essential healthcare services to COVID-19 patients as well as controlling the price of pharmaceuticals and healthcare services.

UHC Achievements in ASEAN

Based on the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint, the **ASEAN Post 2015 Health Development Agenda** (APHDA) was developed to address the regional health concerns of 10 ASEAN Member States. One of the 20 Health Priorities in this APHDA is UHC.

Aligned with the SDGs, the work programme of ASEAN Health Cluster 3 on Strengthening Health Systems and Access to Care for 2016-2020 identified regional activities to complement and enhance the achievements of UHC at the national level. Under this work programme, ASEAN targets that all ASEAN populations, regardless of household income,

expenditure or wealth, place of residence or gender, have at least 80 per cent essential health services coverage by 2030; and by 2020, at least 80 per cent of documented migrants in ASEAN have access to healthcare in receiving countries.

In 2019, the ASEAN Health Sector published a dedicated issue in the *ASEAN e-Health Bulletin* on UHC entitled "Progressive Realisation of Universal Health Coverage: ASEAN Member States." In this publication, we reported that ASEAN's population had reached 642.1 million, accounting for 8.5 per cent of the world population as of 2017. Though ASEAN's population is considered to be gradually getting older, the share of youth population below 20 years and productive working-age population of 20-54 years has remained large at 34.5 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively.

The article highlighted regional achievements in UHC and noted that all ASEAN Member States have committed to UHC even though they are at different stages of moving towards the goal through different health financing approaches and programmes. As of July 2019, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand have covered nearly 100 per cent of their population under their UHC programmes. Brunei Darussalam achieved UHC by implementing its national welfare programme. Malaysia achieved UHC using public providers and general government budget since the 1980s. Singapore has covered 93 per cent of its population by implementing national programmes such as MediSave, MediShield, and MediFund since the 1980s. Thailand has achieved UHC since 2002.

Indonesia, Philippines, and Viet Nam are also moving closer to achieving UHC. As for Indonesia, it has achieved 84 per cent coverage through its national health insurance which started in 2014. The Philippines has achieved 78 per cent national health insurance coverage through the efforts of national and local

Member States	Million (Pop)	GNI per capita, (current US\$)	UHC Service coverage index (out of 100)	Insurance coverage* (% of total pop)	Catastrophic health spending (%) ***threshold 10%, 25%	UHC policy or movement towards UHC
	2018	2018	2015	(2019)	(year)	
Brunei Darussalam	0.4	31,020	NA	100%	NA	National Welfare
Cambodia	16.2	1,380	55	24%	10.7, 3.6 (2009)	Commitment to move towards UHC
Indonesia	267.7	3,840	49	84%	3.6, 0.4 (2015)	UHC started since 2014
Lao PDR	7.1	2,460	48	94%	3.0, 0.3 (2007)	Commitment by 2020
Malaysia	31.5	10,460	70	100%	0.7, 0.0 (2004)	UHC using public providers and general government budget since 1980s
Myanmar	53.7	1,310	NA	2%	NA	Commitment to strengthen health system to support UHC
Philippines	106.7	3,830	58	78%	6.3, 1.4 (2015)	Expansion of the national health insurance, both in terms of population coverage by the national and local governments and benefits packages by the PhilHealth Insurance Corporation
Singapore	5.6	58,770	≥80%	93%	9.0, 1.5 (2015)	UHC through National Programmes of MediSave, MediShield and MediFund since 1980s
Thailand	69.4	6,610	75	100%	3.4, 0.7 (2010)	UHC since 2002
Viet Nam	94.7	2,590	73	89.9%	9.8, 2.1 (2014)	Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Viet Nam has commitment to move towards UHC. Social health insurance coverage is targeted at 95% by 2025

UHC SITUATION IN ASEAN MEMBER STATES

Source: *Progressive Realisation of Universal Health Coverage: ASEAN Member States, ASEAN e-Health Bulletin, Issue 14, December 2019*

governments and the benefits package offered by the PhilHealth Insurance Corporation. Viet Nam has achieved 89.9 per cent coverage through its social health insurance scheme based on the Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Viet Nam. Cambodia, Myanmar, and Lao PDR are also committed to progressing in UHC and have exerted efforts on

strengthening their health systems which form the foundation of UHC.

Moving Towards UHC through the ASEAN Post 2015 Development Agenda and Beyond

The decision of ASEAN Member States to prioritise UHC specifically took the perspective of enhancing health systems

under the five-year work programme of ASEAN Health Cluster 3 on Strengthening Health Systems and Access to Care. To complement national interventions on UHC, this cluster identified regional priority strategies to include as follows: (i) promoting improved access to safe, affordable and appropriate services; technology, essential drugs and vaccines; and traditional and complementary medicine by developing national policies and regulations for ASEAN population including vulnerable groups; (ii) advocating appropriate levels of health resources including human resources for health and health financing; and (iii) enhancing communication, knowledge sharing including research and development, and innovations.

In this work programme, there are 18 project activities that are collectively implemented by Member States which are categorised according to themes. Theme 1 on Entitlement/ Access to Affordable Package of Goods and Services (end-user perspective) focuses on achieving the best value for money through Health Technology Assessment (HTA) by determining HTA capacity needs and building capacities in Member States; promoting efficient use of resources through information sharing such as on the affordability of pharmaceuticals; and encouraging the adoption of standard measurements of health system performance through the system of health accounts and UHC metrics.

Theme 2 on the Availability and Quality of Care (provider perspective) entails ensuring ASEAN drug and vaccine security and self-reliance by establishing baselines of Member States and regional policy and programme development; strengthening quality health care by establishing baselines of Member States to develop regional recommendations; sharing of best practices; and promoting traditional and complementary medicine. Theme 3 on Services for Special Populations involves policy development on the



A patient consults a health worker at a local health centre in Indonesia

health coverage of special populations as well as research development on special populations to contribute to evidence-based UHC.

The other work programmes under the ASEAN Post 2015 Health Development Agenda for 2016-2020 include those for: ASEAN Health Cluster 1 on Promoting Healthy Lifestyles, ASEAN Health Cluster 2 on Responding to All Hazards and Emerging Threats, and ASEAN Health Cluster 4 on Ensuring Food Safety all contribute to the attainment of UHC.

The sector-wide promotion of UHC at the regional level is continuously supported by the ASEAN health ministers and their counterparts in China, Japan and Republic of Korea (also known as the "Plus Three" countries). In the 14th ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting (AHMM) in August 2019, the health ministers committed to "strengthen primary health care in order to achieve Universal Health Coverage among ASEAN Member States, and ensure the availability and timely provision of essential medicines and cost-effective health interventions at healthcare facilities and building up the capacity of health workers" (14th AHMM Joint Statement). The 8th ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Meeting (APTHMM),

on the other hand, reaffirmed their commitment to the United Nations SDGs to achieve Universal Health Coverage by 2030 which includes financial risk protection, access to quality essential healthcare services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all. The 8th APTHMM also tasks "the ASEAN Plus Three Senior Health Officials to accelerate the progress towards UHC in all countries by building up the national and regional capacity to assess and manage the equitable and efficient health systems to support UHC, including activities under the ASEAN Plus Three UHC Network" (8th APTHMM Joint Statement).

Looking beyond the current work programme of the ASEAN Health Sector, the Universal Health Coverage will still form part of the ASEAN Health Sector's health priorities to build upon the outputs of ASEAN Post 2015 Health Development Agenda. To support national UHC goals and to push the regional health agenda forward, the commitments of ASEAN health ministers and other external partners on UHC will be further realised through the development of relevant strategies and activities in the 2021-2025 ASEAN Health Development Agenda. ■

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL PROTECTION IN MITIGATING CRISES



BY TOMOKO NISHIMOTO
REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION

The COVID-19 crisis has fundamentally shaken the social and economic foundations of countries across the world, including ASEAN Member States.

The ILO has observed with admiration how ASEAN governments have taken unprecedented measures to respond to the health, economic, and social impacts of the crisis, and is especially pleased to note the prominence given to social protection within the different emergency response packages.

The lockdown measures adopted across the region have been relatively successful at suppressing the spread of the virus, at least for the moment. Nonetheless, the IMF estimates that the region is facing its slowest growth since the 1960s. Economies in ASEAN face the combined economic impact of local lockdown measures and, given the high levels of economic integration within the region and beyond, the lockdowns elsewhere. The global collapse of demand for manufacturing goods and the blockage of the international flow of goods and services, including tourism, hit the ASEAN economies especially hard. The ILO estimates that the crisis will result in a decline in working hours of around 9.2 per cent relative to the last quarter of 2019 for the ASEAN region, equivalent to the loss of 26 million full-time jobs, assuming a 48-hour working week.

Within ASEAN, many countries are starting to pass the first phase of what is likely to be a long-term crisis and the emphasis in the policy debate is moving towards how to organise economic recovery. The story of the crisis so far has been that of most of the countries in the region imposing stringent lockdown and social distancing measures. Even if a single country was able to revert to “business as usual,” the international context would mean that economic sectors will continue to be heavily affected. In this context, a protracted crisis looks increasingly likely, as does the scenario in which parts of the economy are permanently reconfigured. One key feature of the ongoing crisis is that countries will likely be obliged to depend more, at least temporarily, on domestic investment and internal demand than in pre COVID-19 times. How to incentivise local investment in the context of fiscal strain and reduced

disposable income is one of the biggest challenges facing policymakers at the moment.

While the crisis has affected whole societies, it is now evident that some people have been far more affected than others. The majority of job losses and reduced working hours is occurring in certain hardest-hit sectors. In total among the 10 ASEAN countries, there are 133 million workers in economically hardest-hit sectors. This corresponds to 41 per cent of the region’s workforce who are likely to feel the devastating effects of reduced working hours, reduced wages, or full job loss.

Many of the workers in the region were already engaged in the informal economy, receiving low wages that trapped them in poverty. COVID-19 has laid bare the vulnerability of such workers as lockdown





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measures left them with no means of generating income. Informal workers are particularly vulnerable given their limited employment protections and access to social protection, while many have low-to-modest and irregular incomes even in normal times. In ASEAN, the COVID-19 crisis threatens to destroy the livelihoods of 218 million informal workers, 67 per cent of the total employment in the region. Without alternative income sources, many of these workers and their families have been pushed into poverty, thus reversing the decades of poverty reduction shown across the region in pre-COVID time.

Social protection has a central role to play in addressing the social, economic, and health dimensions of the crisis and is part of the broader stimulus package. The actions taken by ASEAN Member States in this area have been an example for other regions. As expected, the varying responses reflect the diversity of the labour market context, social protection configuration among ASEAN Member States, and each country's specific institutional backgrounds.

Various countries injected significant additional financial resources into the health sector, in parallel with measures to increase access to affordable health care for those not covered, including migrant workers in some countries. Sickness benefits constituted another focus of attention from the very early stages of the crisis, including the expansion to groups that were previously not covered. In many countries where they exist unemployment insurance schemes were central in providing a significant and rapid response. Some countries made modifications to their existing schemes, including the introduction of "job retention" schemes through wage subsidies.

“Evidence from past economic crises shows us that social protection is one of the most effective fiscal tools governments have at their disposal to provide economic stimulus.

Of particular note has been the way countries recognised and sought to fill significant coverage gaps in their social protection systems. Extremely important to reach some of the most vulnerable groups was the mobilisation of non-contributory schemes to reach large groups of national populations, with several countries extending measures to the "missing middle," i.e. those who are not covered through social insurance nor social assistance schemes. Various countries provided short-term top ups to existing categorical transfers, such as child, disability, and old age benefits. Other countries established new benefits targeted to workers in informal



employment. The COVID-19 crisis period has been extremely rich in innovations in the area of social protection, both regarding methods to register workers and in the delivery of benefits.

Have the actions taken by ASEAN Member States been impressive in their speed and scope? Yes. Has it and will it be enough to deal effectively with the expected impact of the crisis? Probably not. Even relatively ambitious packages of support have left important gaps. In most countries, the support provided has been one-off or designed to cover only the few months when the most severe lockdown measures were in place. At best, the support provided

extends for up to six or nine months, for example, in the case of some employment retention programmes. This leaves a question about the role of social protection in contributing to countries' resilience and sustainable solutions as countries enter the recovery phase.

If anything, ILO believes that social protection is likely to become even more relevant as countries commence their social and economic recovery. Evidence from past economic crises shows us that social protection is one of the most effective fiscal tools governments have at their disposal to provide economic stimulus. The cushion provided by initial

measures will no doubt have an indirect stimulus effect, for example, as fewer households will need to go into debt to survive in the short term, and can be in a stronger position to spend when the economy re-starts. The moment when economies are opening up is also a crucial moment to provide a substantial boost to household income. Such a stimulus can increase households' ability to consume goods and services, and thus support businesses that may be struggling to re-establish themselves.

The immediate social protection response to COVID-19 was rightly focused on providing emergency short-term support,



“Following years of progress, including the issuance of the **ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection**, this crisis might provide Member States the opportunity to build back better and to move towards the objective of universal social protection, as agreed under the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs.

COVID-19 are a wake-up call with the potential to lead to a similar reassessment.

Following years of progress, including the issuance of the **ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection**, this crisis might provide Member States the opportunity to build back better and to move towards the objective of universal social protection, as agreed under the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs. Workers and employers, through their representatives, should play a central role in this debate.

often under immense pressure and with limited scope for detailed design of approaches. As countries transition to the next phase, there is more time and space to adapt the ongoing response so that it contributes to addressing the major limitations of existing social protection systems revealed by COVID-19.

Let me end by reminding the readers of an important lesson. Historically, economic crises from the Second World War to the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and the Great Recession of 2008-09 have resulted in rethinking and adjustment of existing economic and social models. Social

protection has often been a key part of this process, with the post-War period in both Europe and Japan being the crucial moment when truly comprehensive systems were established. Similarly, the Asian financial crisis and the 2008-09 global crisis triggered many countries in Asia to expand and transform their social protection systems. The way the Republic of Korea extended its pension and social insurance coverage to all workers following the 1997 crisis, how China extended health protection and pensions to all, and Thailand made its Old Age Allowance universal as a response to the impact of the 2008-09 crisis are cases in point. The significant gaps in social protection systems laid bare by

In a situation where countries will be less able to rely on foreign direct investment and foreign demand (including tourism), social protection, together with employment-centred macroeconomic policies, has the potential to promote domestic demand and build national economies that are more inclusive and more resilient to future crises. We strongly believe that the human-centred approach to the future of work proposed by the ILO Centenary Declaration—which puts workers' rights and the needs, aspirations, and rights of all people at the heart of economic, social, and environmental policies—offers an important framework to build a new normal that can be a better normal. ■

Leaving No One Behind:

The ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management and its Role in Fostering Social Protection in ASEAN



BY UNDERSECRETARY RICARDO B. JALAD

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The ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response established a clear objective to “provide effective mechanisms to achieve substantial reduction of disaster losses in lives and in the social, economic and environmental assets of the Parties, and to jointly respond to disaster emergencies through concerted national efforts and intensified regional and international cooperation.

The ASEAN region is located in one of the most disaster-prone areas of the world. It is vulnerable to typhoons, floods, droughts, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions.

In the past 15 years alone, ASEAN has experienced major catastrophes like the Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004), Cyclone Nargis (2008), and Typhoon Haiyan (2013), to name a few.

To sustain economic growth and social development in ASEAN amidst the threat of more severe and frequent disasters, a well-designed social protection system is essential. This will build resilience at the grassroots level which, in turn, will bolster the resilience of ASEAN as a community.

ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response and the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection
The **ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER)** established a clear objective to “provide effective mechanisms to achieve substantial reduction of disaster losses in lives and in the social, economic and environmental assets of the Parties, and to jointly respond to disaster emergencies through concerted national efforts and intensified regional and international cooperation” (Article 2 of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, 26 July 2005).

In the AADMER Work Programme 2016–2020, Priority Programme 4 (PROTECT) is dedicated towards “ensuring social protection and establishing social safety nets in the context of disasters.” One of the initiatives under this programme is the development of an **ASEAN Guidelines on Disaster-Responsive Social Protection**, which is supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and other relevant partners.

The formulation of these regional guidelines enables different sectoral

bodies within ASEAN—including the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM), Senior Officials’ Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (SOMSWD), and Senior Officials’ Meeting on Health and Development (SOMHD)—to be part of a thorough consultation process to strengthen the link between social protection and emergency response. The eventual implementation of the social protection guidelines in ASEAN will certainly boost the long-term social protection system that supports humanitarian assistance in times of disasters.

In addition to initiatives strengthening social protection under the AADMER Work Programme, the social welfare sector also adopted the **ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection** in November 2013.

This declaration emphasises ASEAN’s goal of enhancing the well-being and livelihood of ASEAN people by providing

equitable access to opportunities for human development, social welfare, and justice.

The declaration on social protection is instrumental in supporting national policies, strategies, and mechanisms that strengthen the implementation of social protection programmes in the region. It also promotes results-based and evidence-based national assessments and the benchmarking of social protection delivery services in ASEAN Member States. It likewise encourages the responsiveness of social protection systems through multisectoral consultations and continuous sharing of information.

Following the declaration’s adoption, ASEAN approved the Regional Framework and Action Plan, which breaks down the provisions of the declaration into goals, objectives, and specific actions to be implemented by various sectors of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

The implementation of both the AADMER and the Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection led to the development of key policies that guided ASEAN social protection activities towards a participative, integrated, coordinated, and effective manner of development and implementation. This effort also underscores ASEAN’s commitment



ASEAN-Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ASEAN-ERAT) facilitates the incoming relief for the Central Sulawesi earthquake in Indonesia

to draw on social protection systems to complement efforts to strengthen existing disaster risk management systems and protocols in the region.

Thus, Member States remain fully committed to mainstreaming social protection systems and measures not only in disaster response, but also in the entire disaster risk reduction and management continuum, from prevention and mitigation, to rehabilitation and recovery.

Promotion of Social Protection Measures in Disaster Risk Reduction and Management in ASEAN

ASEAN has continuously promoted social protection measures as a way to reduce vulnerabilities of at-risk populations and to strengthen their capacity to cope with and recover from the economic and social impacts of disasters.

This can be seen in the implementation of the project, Scaling up Forecast-based Financing/Early Warning Action (FbF/EWEA) and Disaster Responsive Social Protection (DRSP), which showcases the innovative use of climate risk information for disaster resilience in the ASEAN. Promoted in Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines, this project is focused on accelerating the use of climate risk data and strengthening early warning systems to trigger early action and shock-responsive social protection (SRSP) measures using impact-based forecasts.

We encourage ASEAN Member States to adopt the FbF/EWEA approach and implement roadmaps to establish SRSP systems by equipping them with skills and providing financial options to implement such measures, strengthening regional cooperation, and implementing coherent technical approaches.

The two key challenges that were cited during the project evaluation are as follows: (i) limited number of disaster-affected population covered by existing social protection programmes which renders these programmes insufficient for quickly delivering extensive disaster assistance; and (ii) the limited capacity of national governments to implement a scaled up social protection programme for disaster response.

To address this situation, we, at the **ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management** (ACDM), shall continue to promote regional cooperation, use coherent technical approaches and tools, and undertake a joint advocacy to support the actions of the Member States requiring enhancement. This shall be done through the following: (i) multisectoral cooperation among the ASEAN sectoral bodies (SOMSWD, ACDM, SOMHD) in developing concrete action plan(s) to implement and monitor the ASEAN guidelines; (ii) strengthening the understanding and visibility of FbF/EWEA and DRSP through the development and dissemination of policy briefs, regular knowledge-sharing, and discussions among the ASEAN sectoral bodies and stakeholders; and (iii) inclusion of the FbF/EWEA approach and reinforcement of DRSP as among the priorities in the development of the new AADMER Work Programme for 2021-2025.

ACDM's Role in ASEAN's COVID-19 Response

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has brought and will continue to bring social and economic consequences to ASEAN. It has exposed weaknesses in the social protection systems meant to support the urban poor and vulnerable communities, and may further contribute to the incidence of inequality within the region. It has also posed challenges to the ASEAN Member States' respective preparedness and response mechanisms, economies, and health systems.

In the **Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19** issued on 14 April 2020, the heads of state made people's well-being their top priority in the collective effort to manage the pandemic. The declaration also called for the continued sharing and provision of appropriate assistance among the Member States. This includes the enhancement of cooperation in ensuring social safety nets for ASEAN communities, the prevention of social disruption and instability as a consequence of the



pandemic, the continuation of efforts to design and implement risk-informed and shock-responsive social protection systems to reduce the vulnerabilities, and the improvement of the overall resilience of the ASEAN community.

In a time of profound uncertainty for ASEAN and its peoples, the ACDM is strengthening regional cooperation in facing the pandemic.

The ACDM has ongoing discussions to address "new normal" scenarios towards strategic contextualisation of the AADMER Work Programme 2021-2025. The work programme will support the harmonisation of disaster risk reduction and management strategies for combating the current COVID-19 pandemic, along with the further examination of various cross-cutting issues such as public health. The current ASEAN response to the pandemic will also be tackled in the conduct of the 36th ACDM and other related meetings.

The ongoing COVID-19 response in the ASEAN region has certainly highlighted the multisectoral and cross-cutting nature of risks, while emphasising the importance of cooperation and solidarity among the ASEAN Member States in adopting evidence-based interventions.

The fight against the pandemic has yet to be concluded but, eventually, the tide will turn. It is now up to us to decide how to turn this disaster into an opportunity for ASEAN and to strengthen its cooperation and collaboration with partners to create a stronger and more resilient region. ■

STRENGTHENING *Social Protection* of Older Persons



BY SUSANA CONCORDO
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Southeast Asia is Ageing Rapidly

Population ageing, a demographic transition resulting from declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy, reflects the significant achievements of many countries in the areas of quality of healthcare and human development.

While the median age of our world's population has been increasing, the speed of this increase is remarkably rapid in Southeast Asia. The region is home to nearly 74.5 million older persons aged 60 years old and above in 2020. According to the publication, *Ageing, Older Persons and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the population of older persons in Southeast Asia is projected to increase 2.4 times by 2050, reaching 176 million. Between 2020 and 2050, the total population of the oldest-old (above 80 years old) is also expected to increase almost fourfold from 8.2 million to 32.4 million, with major representation from older women and countries like Singapore and Thailand. By the end of the century, according to a forthcoming International Labour Organization (ILO) publication, even Southeast Asian countries with a large youth population, like Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, will have an ageing population.

With rapid population ageing, strengthening social protection of older people alongside economic development presents an urgent challenge in Southeast Asia. In this article, we highlight the imperative to do so, outlining sources of financial and social vulnerability among older people alongside relevant action that has been taken in the region.



Older Persons are Financially Vulnerable, Particularly Older Women

A key vulnerability is the financial insecurity of older persons in many Southeast Asia countries. Without adequate social protection, financially insecure older persons are at risk of falling into poverty. In Indonesia, for example, more than 30 per cent of older persons are poor; this increases with age due to reduced opportunities and capacities for income generation, according to a 2017 UNESCAP report.

Based on ILO figures from 2017, only 31.5 per cent of the population receives an old age pension in Southeast Asia. Among the ASEAN Member States, the share of older persons receiving a pension varies significantly, ranging from 81.7 per cent in Brunei Darussalam and 83 per cent in Thailand, to roughly 40 per cent in the Philippines and Viet Nam, and substantially less in Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, based on the same ILO report.

Women, however, bear the brunt of old-age poverty, due to their longer life expectancies and relatively lower formal labour participation rate. For instance, in the Philippines, 53.2 per cent of older men and only 29 per cent of older women are covered, highlighting gender inequalities within countries in the receipt of old-age pensions.

As a result, many older persons, particularly older women, are financially dependent on their family. A 2017 study by HelpAge revealed that 67 to 79 per cent of older persons in Thailand and Viet Nam receive income from their children. In the Philippines,



“Beyond providing pension schemes, strengthening long-term care systems is an important element of social protection for older people. While older persons are living longer, they spend significant years in disability, highlighting the need for quality long-term care.”

meanwhile, a local study showed that more mothers than fathers (70 per cent vs. 55 per cent) receive monetary support from their children. This kind of family support, however, is under threat as family size declines. Income transfers from family as the main source of income dropped from 84.3 per cent in 2000 to 72.9 per cent in 2010 in Singapore.

Social Pension as a Lever: Progress and Policy Gaps

Over the years, there has been significant progress in strengthening the pension system for older persons in Southeast Asia. In particular, a number of ASEAN Member States introduced non-contributory social pension programmes. These are Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Viet Nam and very recently, Myanmar. HelpAge, a global network that promotes the rights of older people, notes that social pensions now make up more than half of the total pension coverage of older persons in Thailand and Viet Nam. From a gender perspective, social pensions are particularly important for women as they are more likely to receive social pension than earnings-related pensions.

A forthcoming ILO publication on old-age income security in ASEAN Member States, aptly notes “pensions still have a limited role in guaranteeing income security in old age for many ASEAN countries,” and stresses the importance and urgency of reducing the old-age coverage gap (mainly through social pension), increasing benefit adequacy, and ensuring the financial sustainability of pension systems.

Even in countries with extensive population coverage, the pension provided to older persons often does not meet the minimum amount for subsistence. As a result, a sizable proportion of older persons cannot afford to retire and continue to work in vulnerable, low-paid, and insecure jobs. This imposes extra challenge to older

women who are mostly informal workers, with lower pension entitlement and benefits.

In countries such as Singapore with no basic non-contributory pension, public social assistance schemes for lower-income older persons are often tied to proof of household income and inability to obtain income support from family members. Cases of voluntary exemption of subsidies are therefore not uncommon, particularly in the face of dysfunctional family relationships that impose strain on proving household income, as well as wider issues of pride in an Asian context where filial piety from one's children imbues high social status.

Long-Term Care: Quality Regulation and Addressing BioPsychoSocial Needs

Beyond providing pension schemes, strengthening long-term care systems is an important element of social protection for older people. While older persons are living longer, they spend significant years in disability, highlighting the need for quality long-term care. In Myanmar, nearly 40 per cent of persons in their early 60s and 90 per cent of those in their 80s and older reported at least one physical difficulty. In the Philippines, a local study noted that 22 per cent of older persons have difficulty performing activities of daily living. Functional disability is also higher among older females. In Indonesia, one out of three older persons relies on others for activities of daily living.

Despite the rapidly rising demand for long-term care, challenges remain in providing quality care that addresses the biopsychosocial needs of older persons. These include the virtual non-existence of national legislation of long-term care in the region, healthcare financing systems that favour acute care, and a shortage of trained manpower. For example, while Singapore's and Thailand's current long-term care policies are focused on supporting informal home care and informal community-based care, both countries have yet to enact a national legislation on long-term care for older persons. In terms of healthcare financing, in the Philippines, while all older persons are mandatorily covered by its national health insurance programme and universal health care programme, specific long-term care services are still underdeveloped.



As a result of underdeveloped long-term care systems in the region, family members—and in the case of Singapore, foreign domestic helpers—are often the main providers of this service. This is despite the rising trends of international migration and smaller family sizes. Caregiver burden and isolation as a result of providing around-the-clock care can affect quality of care, particularly in maintaining the mental health of the older person being cared for.

Tsao Foundation's Regional Initiative and Success in Strengthening Social Protection of Older People

Based in Singapore but regionally oriented, Tsao Foundation seeks mindset and systemic change to positively transform experiences of ageing and opportunities associated with longevity. This is through a focus on implementing innovative models of community-based care, training and education, policy-relevant research, and collaboration and advocacy. In the areas of social protection, the foundation has been working collaboratively with Singapore and regional partners to enhance financial security and long-term care for older persons in Southeast Asia, particularly older women.

Our regional initiatives on financial security started when the International Longevity Centre Singapore (ILC-S) within Tsao Foundation organised the first regional meeting on the financial security of older women in East and Southeast Asia. The meeting culminated in the formation of a regional learning network, which brought together non-government organisations, policy think tanks, international organisations, and leading academics from ASEAN Plus Three (10 ASEAN Member States plus China, Japan, and Republic of Korea), to pledge action on promoting financial security among older women.

In 2018, ILC-S launched the first comparative study to assess the state of financial security of older women in Indonesia, Malaysia,

Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The Singapore Alliance of Women in Ageing was formed by ILC-S in Singapore, composed of Tsao Foundation, Association of Women for Action and Research, Singapore Muslim Women's Association, and Singapore Council of Women's Organisation. This year, ILC-S is piloting a gender and ageing mainstream project to promote financial security of older women (Pro-older Women Project) in Thailand and the Philippines, with plans to extend this to other ASEAN countries.

Within Singapore, ILC-S was commissioned in 2017 to conduct a study on the effectiveness of government matched savings as a scheme to increase the savings of low income older women in Singapore. The recommendation of the study was adopted into a new Matched Retirement Savings Scheme, which is now part of Singapore's 2020 budget.

Through a 2019 minimum income study done by local academics to assess the sum required for basic living in Singapore, it was found out that the minimum sum required (1,379 Singapore dollars per month if single; 2,351 Singapore dollars per month if a couple) fell vastly short of that provided by public assistance schemes, and contributory retirement pay-outs through the Central Provident Fund for low-wage workers.

Tsao Foundation has also been working since 2016 with the Asian Development Bank, as its centre of excellence and knowledge partner, in building the capacity and capability of six middle-income countries in the Asia Pacific including Indonesia, Thailand, and Viet Nam to set up a long-term care system. We continue to be an active partner of the ASEAN in committing to promote a gender-responsive and life-course approach towards a dignified old-age in the region. ■



Reflection On Autism: From Disabilities To Different Abilities



BY SITA SUMRIT, PhD

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Autism is widely known, often seen, but not sufficiently understood.

Through media and varying communication channels, we have seen children with autism performing arts and being engaged in learning activities. This inspiring imagery invites us to delve deeper into the intricate layers of the world of autism.

Shifting from Ambiguity to Understanding

Despite diverse definitions, autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), in general, refers to a broad range of conditions characterised by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviour, speech, and nonverbal communication. With autism being on a spectrum, its manifestation varies widely. Some individuals with autism have intellectual disabilities while others may have an average, above average, or genius level of intelligence.

Promisingly, understanding of autism and its prevalence has significantly improved in recent years with modern clinical diagnosis and research. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one per cent of the world's population is affected by autism and one in 160 children has an autism spectrum disorder. In the ASEAN region, latest estimates reveal that 6 million persons are living with autism.

However, a number is a mere indication of how autism is comprehended and experienced. Oftentimes, autism is perceived to be a form of disability in children, as in the majority of cases, apparent conditions are observed during the first 5 years of one's life. In fact, autism starts in childhood and persists into adolescence and adulthood. Unfortunately, little is known about autism in old age, as recognition of the disability and development of accurate diagnostic criteria have only emerged in recent times.

Aside from the lifespan perspective, one of the most salient features of autism is that more men are diagnosed with autism than women, with the approximate ratio of 5:1. Even though it remains debatable whether this gender disparity is attributed to biology or discrepancies and biases in assessment, it serves as a reminder

to all of us that autism is gendered and that a life cycle lens is fundamental to demystify what we thought we knew about autism.

Moving from Protection to Solutions

While being explicitly acknowledged as a form of disability in both international and national instruments, symptoms of autism, due to its broad spectrum, are implicit. Detection is not always easy or straightforward and it is believed that a substantial number of individuals are undiagnosed or inaccurately diagnosed. As such, the design and implementation of comprehensive policies and programmes to protect and provide assistance to persons living with autism is an intractable challenge because their condition is left unknown and/or unattended to.

Individuals with autism are also faced with discrimination and biases in daily lives. This is caused by the flawed and often unconscious expectation of "normalcy" and "acceptability" vis-à-vis social interaction and interpersonal communication. The cost of this longstanding prejudice is not minimal. Less than 10 per cent of people with ASD are employed in most regions, resulting in further social exclusion.

The silver lining though is that perceptions are changing. An increasing number of studies have affirmed that as individuals with autism are not constrained by conformity and rigid social norms, they often excel at developing innovative and original ideas. Moreover, their approaches to problem solving and coping with setbacks are different, which can contribute to new solutions in different settings. Companies are thus more open to offer employment for adults with autism, not only to be inclusive but also to tap into their strengths as individuals with unique thinking skills and diverse abilities.

Without a doubt, gaining access to employment opportunities and being acknowledged for their employability helps enhance the autonomy, dignity, and self-determination of persons with autism. Expanding their choices, nourishing their sense of capability, and promoting impendence will lead to a more durable outcomes of human development.



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By acknowledging and accepting the individuality and uniqueness of persons with autism, we come to realise that autism is only one aspect of an individual's character.

Fostering ASEAN's Efforts and Initiatives

In ASEAN, autism has been given marked importance as part of regional integration and community building process. The region is committed to creating a more inclusive ecosystem for people with autism through advancing their rights and eliminating barriers so that they can live their fullest lives.

In most ASEAN countries, persons with autism are recognised as disabled persons by law. Some ASEAN Member States have established specific mechanisms to uphold the rights and provision of services to persons with autism through national autism plans and strategies, while ad-hoc measures are strategies adopted by other Member States.

Under the principles of diversity and inclusion, the integrated-system-based approach is being embraced by the region to effectively address autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders. Continued undertakings have been witnessed in the area of social welfare and development, education and health as well as economic empowerment.

One of the key milestones that has propelled the region towards a more robust foundation for the promotion and protection of the

rights of people with autism is the **ASEAN Enabling Master Plan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017)**. Adhering

to the ultimate goal of inclusive community in which independence, freedom of choice, and full and effective participation of persons with disabilities are realised and sustained, the enabling masterplan has clearly articulated the importance of empowering not only persons with

disabilities, but also their family members, assistants, caregivers, and communities.

This regional milestone and the values it upholds resonate with other laudable endeavours. In the same year, the **Autism Mapping Project in the ASEAN Region** was initiated by the Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability (APCD) and the ASEAN Secretariat in consultation with the ASEAN Senior Officials on Social Welfare and Development (SOMSWD) to contribute towards data collection, policy recommendation, and awareness raising, which are pivotal to building evidence-based interventions to prevent and remove barriers faced by persons with autism. In 2018, through the awarding of the ASEAN Prize to Ms Erlinda Uy Koe, the region is made aware of family-centric autism advocacy and family-centred care (FCC) for children, youth and adults living with autism.

Taking its commitment and actions to make the region inclusive for persons with autism to new heights, ASEAN Member States, in July 2020, have accredited the ASEAN Autism Network (AAN) as an entity associated with ASEAN and listed under Annex II of the ASEAN Charter. The accreditation of AAN is emblematic of our unyielding belief that potential for persons with autism is limitless, that the region is looking forward to working with all stakeholders, and that we are, in spite of our different abilities, a community.

Understanding Autism: Awareness, Acceptance and Empowerment

As we annually commemorate the World Autism Awareness Day on 2 April and as the ASEAN will soon celebrate the launch of Autism Mapping which will serve as the first evidence-informed benchmark to boost our understanding and charter policy direction on autism in the region, we can ponder further on what more can we do.

Awareness is a necessity but may not be a definite end of our autism journey. Promoting a message of acceptance and acts of empowerment will take us a step further to realise liberty,

independence, and self-determination for and of persons with autism as well as of those who love, care for, and support them.

In the autism community, there is a saying that goes, "If you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism." This sentence accentuates the fact that each person with autism is unique and their experiences of living with ASD are not homogenous. This also applies to their families, friends, colleagues, teachers, caregivers, and people who believe in them.

By acknowledging and accepting the individuality and uniqueness of persons with autism, we come to realise that autism is only one aspect of an individual's character. We all live with our own strengths, limitations, and differences in abilities. As such, while autism is recognised as a disability, reinforcing it as disabling quality may not be the best narrative going forward.

Of all ages and genders and in all its spectrum, persons with autism need inclusive environments whereby they, along with their families, are not just accepted but empowered to learn, grow, succeed, live a meaningful lives, and reach their highest potentials through the optimisation of their different abilities. ■

ASEAN Opens Its Doors: An Inclusive Internship Programme



BY MARY KATHLEEN QUIANO-CASTRO



NOVIA D. RULISTIA

It was an opportunity of a lifetime for the four graduates of the London School Beyond Academy (LSBA), a school in Jakarta that provides education to students with special needs and abilities.

Jonathan Kenneth Nangoi, M. Abijdzar Alghivari, Reychando Rintar Siregar, and M. Rifqi Adiono – all in their 20s – just finished a three-month internship at the ASEAN Secretariat. The graphic design studies graduates first trained at the ASEAN Foundation in 2019. In March, they began another on-the-job training programme at the ASEAN Secretariat's Community Affairs Directorate.

Director of Community Affairs Lee Yoong Yoong said "the primary purpose of providing such internship opportunities to Persons with

Disabilities (PWDs) and Special Needs is to demonstrate that ASEAN walks the talk. The ASEAN Secretariat is happy to take the experimental lead in delivering an inclusive, people-oriented, people-centred ASEAN Community through rendering corporate working experience to these PWDs, many of whom are not able to secure jobs upon their graduations."

Siregar, who loves editing photos, was assigned to the information and resource centre of ASEAN Secretariat. "Here, I could learn more about ASEAN, and I could also see records of presidential meetings (summit) through the old summit photos. I think I will grade myself 10 out of 10 for my internship with the ASEAN Secretariat," he said.

LSBA Founder Prita Kemal Gani told *The ASEAN*, "this is a good model. If this internship is a success, maybe other businesses and companies will follow."

A week into the programme, the ASEAN Secretariat enforced the Jakarta government's social distancing regulations with a work-



“

With more chances for people with autism to do internship, I hope that people can be more considerate toward us and treat people with autism equally.

from-home scheme. It did not curb their enthusiasm.

"I only worked in the office for one week and the remaining months at home due to the pandemic, but I am satisfied enough with this chance. I enjoyed the work, and I could complete the tasks given to me," said Nangoi.

All the interns raved about how well they were treated by their mentors. Adiono assisted the ASEAN Secretariat's photographer Kusuma Pandu Wijaya. "If I make a mistake, he did not get mad at me, and he said that it's okay to make mistakes," Adiono explained.

Alghivari worked with the social media team and was equally appreciative of the friendly atmosphere at work. He mused on the stigma that people with disabilities like him still face in the real world. "I used to be treated as a second-grade citizen. People despised me because of my autism," he said. "With more chances for people with autism to do internship, I hope that people can be more considerate toward us and treat people with autism equally. We can understand normal people, but they also need to understand us. They need to try to learn to understand what we have been through, what conditions we were born with."

The internship programme has opened another door for Alghivari. The ASEAN caught up with the four on video call recently, and he said he was offered a job as an administrative officer at the ASEAN



Top

From left to right: M. Abijdzar Alghivari, Reychando Rintar Siregar, Jonathan Kenneth Nangoi, and M. Rifqi Adiono. They participated in a three-month internship programme at the ASEAN Secretariat

Bottom

M. Abijdzar Alghivari speaks at the launch of the internship programme on 9 March 2020

Autism Network. "It's quite embarrassing," he said. "I am the only one chosen. I wish their regulations were a bit loose so we could work together again. I miss working together; working alone is not terrible, but it would be better to work together."

His three other friends were obviously supportive and ecstatic for him but Nangoi had already set his sights on a new goal. He said, "I wish I could work permanently at the ASEAN Secretariat because I love working here." ■



SOCIAL PROTECTION

Seven Member States increased social protection spending between 2009-2015.

Nine of 10 Member States spent the following on social protection (as a percentage of aggregate GDP):

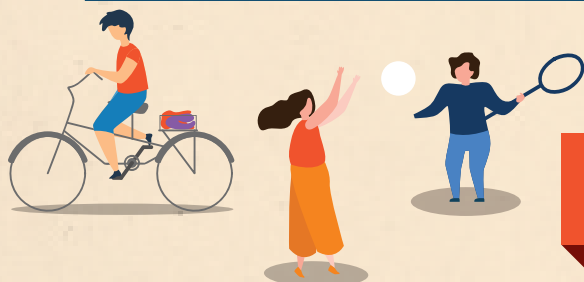
- Total social protection expenditure ranged from **0.8% to 6.3%** in 2017
- Expenditure on the poor ranged between **0.1%** and **0.8%**, while expenditure on the non-poor ranged between **0.3%** and **4.1%**
- Expenditure on women ranged between **0.3%** and **2.1%**, while expenditure for men ranged between **0.3%** and **4.1%**

- Men have greater access to social protection across all three major types of programs (social insurance, social assistance, and labour market programs)

Note: Data not available for Brunei Darussalam
Source: *Asian Development Bank, Social Protection Indicators for Asia, 2019*

Member States score ranged between **51** and **86** on the World Health Organization's Universal Health Care service coverage index, which includes 16 tracer indicators of service coverage

Source: *World Health Organization, Primary Health Care on the Road to Universal Health Coverage, 2019 Global Monitoring Report*



SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN IN ASEAN

Access to mainly free basic education, with enrolment rates over **90%**

Access to nutrition programmes, mainly through schools

Increasing access to early childhood care and education

SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR WORKERS

Legal coverage rates of work injury schemes vary across ASEAN, but have a regional average of **46.2%**

Maternity benefits range between **8** and **26** weeks in Member States. Philippines, Thailand and Singapore provide maternity benefits to the self-employed

Paid sickness leave is provided to employees in varying extents in Member States. Philippines and Thailand have schemes that provide sickness coverage to the self-employed

Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam have established unemployment insurance schemes

Note: Data not available for Myanmar



SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR OLDER PERSONS

The regional average coverage rate of pensionable persons receiving monthly pension is **29.9%**

Note: Data not available for Myanmar

Singapore and Thailand have introduced tax incentives to encourage familial arrangements for elderly care

Sources:

International Labour Office Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, The State of Social Protection in ASEAN at the Dawn of Integration, 2015

International Labour Office, World Social Protection Report 2017-2019: Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017



ASEAN COMMITMENTS TO SOCIAL PROTECTION

2019

ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on ASEAN Vaccine Security and Self-Reliance

Bangkok Declaration on Advancing Partnership in Education for 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in ASEAN

ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration

2018

Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Promoting Green Jobs for Equity and Inclusive Growth of ASEAN Community

Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

2017

ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers

2016

ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth

Vientiane Declaration on Transition from Informal Employment to Formal Employment towards Decent Work Promotion in ASEAN

2015

Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Ageing: Empowering Older Persons in ASEAN

2010

ASEAN Leaders' Statement on Human Resources

Brunei Darussalam Declaration on Strengthening Family Institution: Caring for the Elderly

Ha Noi Declaration on the Enhancement of Welfare and Development of ASEAN Women and Children

2011

Proclamation of the ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2011-2020): Towards an Inclusive Society

Bali Declaration on the Enhancement of the Role and Participation of the Persons with Disabilities in ASEAN Community

Bali Declaration on ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations "Bali Concord III"

2012

ASEAN Human Rights Declaration

2013

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Elimination of Violence Against Children in ASEAN

ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection



2007

ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers

Cebu Declaration Towards One Caring and Sharing Community

2001

Declaration on the Commitments for Children in ASEAN

1993

Resolution on the ASEAN Plan of Action for Children

Shifting Currents

Plastics in a pandemic:
How can we save lives and
save the planet too?

A look at the state of informal
employment in ASEAN

Photo Credit: © Jaromir Chalabala

ASEAN-JAPAN COOPERATION

in the Age of Pandemics



BY KIRAN SAGOO, PhD,
AND THE ASEAN EDITORIAL TEAM

The ASEAN region has faced many health challenges over the past few years due to emerging diseases.

These include the H5N1/H7N9 avian influenza, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Nipah virus disease, H1N1 pandemic Influenza, the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), Severe Febrile Thrombocytopenia Syndrome (SFTS), and Zika virus disease. Emerging antimicrobial resistance in existing infectious diseases is also a serious public health challenge. The region is currently dealing with the public health threat of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), and its impact on the economic and social well-being of its people, countries and region.

Countries in the region face common experiences, concerns, and challenges when threatened with communicable diseases or emerging infectious disease outbreaks. While the ASEAN Health Sector has regional mechanisms in place to respond to all hazards and emerging health threats, such as the ASEAN Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) Network for public health emergencies, the ASEAN Plus Three Field Epidemiology Training Network for disease surveillance, the ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre for big data analytics and visualization in risk assessments; and, the regional public health laboratory network, the region needs a single regional entity to fully coordinate measures on preparedness, prevention, detection and response to health threats, including pandemics.

Enhancing these capacities has been ongoing within the ASEAN Health Sector



together with support from external partners and ASEAN Secretariat.

A feasibility study, supported by the Government of Japan, is currently underway to assess the suitability of establishing an institution to promote public health and safety through control and prevention of disease, injury, and disability at the regional level. The study will assess the financial, organisational and technical feasibility of setting up an institution, tentatively named as the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases. In addition, the study will identify regional gaps and specific needs for fully implementing the World Health Organization's International Health Regulations 2005. Findings and recommendations of the study will be released in late October 2020 and shared at the 37th ASEAN Summit.

In addition to the above study, ASEAN-Japan cooperation in the area of COVID-19 has included technical support and sharing of information through various Plus Three platforms. These include the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), the ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Meeting and the Senior

Officials Meeting on Health Development, and the ASEAN Plus Three Field Epidemiology Training Network Discussions included focus on the capacity needs and gaps in national responses which could possibly be supported through cooperation at national or regional levels with external partners. Recommendations included the necessity of controlling the spread of the disease while minimising socio-economic impact on people and their livelihoods.

At the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit held on 14 April 2020, ASEAN Leaders together with leaders from People's Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea affirmed their shared commitment to strengthen solidarity, enhance cooperation and mutual support among the ASEAN Plus Three countries to control and contain the spread of the pandemic.

Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe highlighted that expansion of regional cooperation, with there being free, timely and transparent sharing of information, is crucial in managing the virus. Solid regional cooperation such as establishing the ASEAN Centre on Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases, is needed. Prime Minister Abe also reaffirmed Japan's commitment towards expanding clinical research to develop medicines needed in dealing with COVID-19. ■



WHAT IS ASEAN PLUS THREE?

The ASEAN Plus Three includes all ten ASEAN countries, and People's Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. The ASEAN Plus Three cooperation process began in December 1997 with the convening of an Informal Summit among the Leaders of ASEAN and People's Republic of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea at the sidelines of the 2nd ASEAN Informal Summit.

ASEAN Secretariat's Health Division contributed to this article

PLASTICS IN A PANDEMIC:

A Look at Long-term Solutions



BY MARY KATHLEEN QUIANO-CASTRO



NOVIA D. RULISTIA

Saving Lives, Polluting the Earth

Plastic—in all shapes, size, and forms—has provided the world conveniences of a modern lifestyle for over 50 years. That reliance on plastic has caused a daunting waste problem, particularly in Southeast Asia.

According to a 2019 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report, plastics make up 60-80 per cent of total marine litter, and over half of land-based plastic pollution in the ocean originates from just five countries, four of which are in Southeast Asia.

A significant amount of this recyclable plastic and waste is imported from developed nations. China, once the largest plastic waste importer, banned shipments

Photo Credit: © frank60/Shutterstock



in 2018. While some of the countries have pushed back on these imports, others continue to receive them for processing in recycling facilities, many of them are small and medium scale operations.

Improper disposal and unsustainable waste management systems exacerbate the problem. Much of the local and imported waste end up in overflowing landfills and leak into waterways and oceans. Incinerated trash also causes air pollution and pose various health risks.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, threats from plastics waste to environment are now compounded by massive residue produced from the implementation of safety and protective measures. Governments now have to prioritise saving lives over measures to curb plastic pollution.

Health workers and other front-liners don protective equipment that are essential to fighting the spread of COVID-19. Masks, gloves, protective suits, face shields, sanitizer bottles, and other medical and chemical waste now add to the mounds of trash.

A recent Asian Development Bank report estimates that over a period of 60 days during the pandemic, five cities in Southeast Asia could collectively produce about 60,000 tons of medical waste.

As people stay in the safety of their homes, their reliance on online deliveries and packaged goods has also surged. A survey conducted by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences shows a 62 per cent increase in online shopping, and 47 per cent rise in food deliveries during the large-scale social restriction scheme in Greater Jakarta.

In Singapore, an additional 1,334 tons of plastic waste was generated from food delivery and takeaways during the two-month circuit breaker period, according to a study conducted by a group of Environmental Management alumni of the National University of Singapore.

The same trends have been detected in other cities and countries across the region. The problem of poor waste disposal and leakages is exacerbated in areas where services may not be operating at optimal levels. Harmful medical and chemical waste



A scavenger rummages through garbage at Piyungan integrated waste treatment site in Yogyakarta, Indonesia

also put scavengers, workers in sanitary and recycling facilities at even greater risk.

ASEAN Initiatives

ASEAN has always recognised that the region has a plastic waste problem; and it has committed to more sustainable regional and national approaches to address it.

ASEAN cooperation on plastic waste management and circular economy is collaboratively coordinated by relevant ASEAN working groups responsible for coastal and marine environment, chemicals and waste, and environmentally sustainable cities.

Under the leadership of Thailand, ASEAN initiated the Phuket Conference on Reducing Marine Debris in ASEAN Region in 2017 and led the development of the **Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris in the ASEAN Region** and the **ASEAN Framework of Action on Marine Debris**. The documents were then adopted and noted, respectively, by the ASEAN Leaders in June 2019.

Varying efforts on the national level had already been in place. Indonesia, for instance, launched the National Action Plan on Marine Debris (2017-2025), which calls for efforts to reduce 70 per cent of its plastic debris by the end of 2025. In 2018, Malaysia adopted the Roadmap Towards Zero Single-Use Plastics 2018-2030. The use of conventional plastic bags and

food containers have also been banned in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya since 2017. Viet Nam has formulated policies on plastic use and imposed temporary restrictions on the import of plastic scraps. Thailand issued a national Roadmap on Plastic Waste Management 2018–2030 with a goal to reduce 50 per cent of plastic marine debris by 2027.

The transboundary nature of issues associated with plastics and the interlinked economies of ASEAN Member States require some initiatives to be implemented through region-wide collaboration. In addition, actions addressing problems common to most or all ASEAN Member States can be made more effective when operationalised at a wide scale.

In October 2019, ASEAN conducted a joint study on **“Circular Economy and Plastics: A Gap Analysis in ASEAN Member States,”** under the ASEAN-EU Partnership E-READI programme.

The report of the study states that some Member States, including Thailand, Indonesia, and Viet Nam, have initiated national strategies geared towards action to tackle plastics issues more holistically, largely in line with circular economy principles.

The study says the current economic systems drive a linear economy, also referred to as “take-make-waste.” On the other hand, it describes circular economy as sustainable resource management by keeping plastics in the economy for as long as possible, to reduce the need for new materials and to derive as much use and value from plastics as possible.



Street vendor packs food with a single-use plastic bag

and necessary warranties ensured; avoiding single-use plastics unless where necessary and there are no viable alternatives; adopting business models and social solutions that enable reuse, repair and product sharing; setting up effective and efficient waste collection systems; and to recycle such materials to high quality grades.” the study said.

A Call to Action

Plastic pollution is a complex and multifaceted problem. Compounding it is a pandemic where nations need to prioritise public health and address its serious impact on livelihoods and economies.

ASEAN plans to organise a Regional Webinar on Reducing Marine Plastic Pollution during COVID-19 Pandemic in ASEAN Countries on 18 August 2020, to exchange experiences, and discuss solutions in the longer run in light of COVID-19.

The use of plastic and other non-biodegradable materials is helping save lives today; but as the world adapts to new lifestyles in a pandemic, this may be an opportune time to put sustainable strategies at the local, national and regional levels into action, create new business models, and change behaviors. A drastic change will only be achieved if the issue is tackled in a coordinated and systematic manner.

Reducing plastic waste protects the environment, decreases health risks, and protects our land and oceans. In the long run, this action will save lives too. ■

ASEAN Secretariat’s Environment Division contributed to this article

“Implications for plastics range from designing products with long lifetimes, and necessary warranties ensured; avoiding single-use plastics unless where necessary and there are no viable alternatives; adopting business models and social solutions that enable reuse, repair and product sharing; setting up effective and efficient waste collection systems; and to recycle such materials to high quality grades.”

Challenges faced by ASEAN Member States in realising circular economy include, among others, the lack of data on patterns and trends of waste management, comprehensive and instrument policies to turn national strategies into action on the ground, and technological and human resource constraints.

Engaging upstream business to develop solutions is, therefore, as important as waste management. Key to the long-term solution is the involvement of the private sector to

produce and design products that are sustainable and less hazardous to people and the environment.

“Implications for plastics range from designing products with long lifetimes,



The report of The Circular Economy and Plastics: A Gap-Analysis in ASEAN Member States study can be downloaded from the following link: <https://environment.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Circular-Economy-gap-analysis-final.pdf>

STUDIES ON INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT

Reveal Progress, Gaps, and Future Directions



BY JOANNE B. AGBISIT
AND THE ASEAN EDITORIAL TEAM

A secure and satisfying job. Good income. Health care and social insurance.

These are the bare bones expectation of every worker in ASEAN. Yet, they remain elusive for many—and more so for the informal workers in the region. In general terms, informal workers refer to people holding jobs in both formal and informal sectors who have insufficient job security, workers' benefits, or labour and social protection.

Two new studies reveal the characteristics, vulnerabilities, and challenges faced by workers in informal employment as well as measures taken by ASEAN Member States to extend social protection to this category of workers.

Size and Characteristics of Informal Workers

Using its operational definition of informal employment, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates ASEAN to have 244 million informal workers, representing about 80 per cent of the region's workforce.

ASEAN Member States' varying definitions of what constitutes "informal employment," however, make it difficult to establish an official region-wide estimate. Cambodia and Viet Nam, for example, exclude agricultural workers, whereas Brunei Darussalam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand include them.

Nonetheless, on a country-by-country level, informal workers comprise a substantial portion of each Member States' working population. In Cambodia, Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam, informal workers account for more than half these countries' respective workforce, with Cambodia leading the way at a high 90.3 per cent.

In the rest of Southeast Asia, the share of informal employment ranges from 10.6 per cent (Malaysia) to 46.6 percent (Brunei Darussalam). Malaysia's low informal employment rate may be partly explained by its exclusion of workers doing informal jobs within the formal sector and those beyond 64 years old.

As expected, most informal economy workers are employed in the informal sector. But informal employment in the formal sector is also prevalent. This is the case in Cambodia and Myanmar where informal workers account for the majority of workers in the formal sector.

These figures and trends come from the *Regional Study on Informal Employment Statistics to Support Decent Work Promotion in ASEAN* published by the ASEAN Secretariat in 2019. The study examined existing informal employment

statistics in the region and looked at how those can be translated to evidence-based policies to address informal employment. The study is part of a larger effort to fulfil ASEAN's goals under the *Vientiane Declaration on Transition from Informal Employment to Formal Employment Towards Decent Work Promotion*.

The regional study further breaks down the key characteristics of informal employment in eight of the 10 ASEAN Member States: men hold more than half of the informal jobs; a majority of informal workers are in the combined 25-39 and 40-59 age groups; most informal workers are less likely to have reached tertiary education, indicating a correlation between low educational attainment and informal employment; and most earn their living in services and sales, craft and related trades, and elementary occupations (or jobs involving simple tasks).



Who are the Informal Workers?

Own-account workers and employers employed in their own informal sector enterprises

Contributing family workers, whether they work in formal or informal sector of enterprises

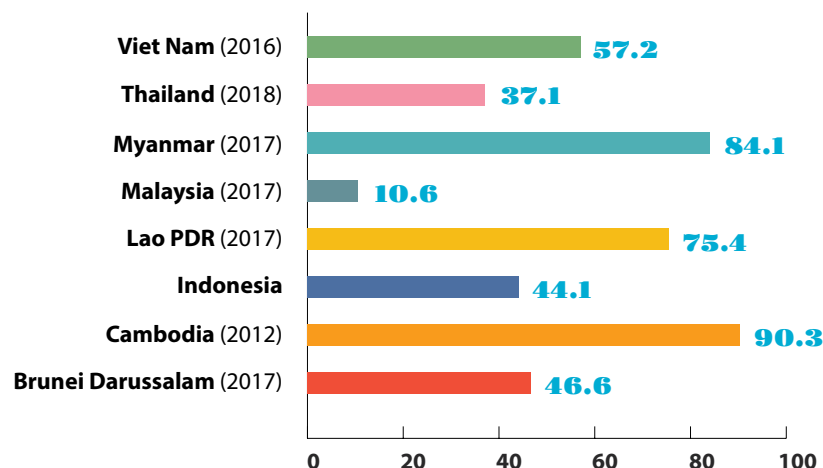
Members of informal producers' cooperatives

Own-account workers engaged in the production of goods exclusively for own final use by their household

Employees holding informal jobs in formal or informal sector enterprises, or as paid domestic workers by household

Source: *Statistical definition of informal employment: Guidelines endorsed by the Seventeenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians, 2003* (<https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/download/papers/def.pdf>)

Informal Employment Rate



Note: Data are based on the submission of ASEAN Member States' focal points.

Source: *Regional Study on Informal Employment Statistics to Support Decent Work Promotion in ASEAN, 2019.*

The regional study also looked at how Member States fare against two indicators of decent work—earnings and work hours. It notes that average earnings are higher in formal employment than informal employment. For example, Thai workers in formal employment have an average take-home pay of 23,259 Thai baht per month (or about 730 US dollars in today's exchange rate), while those in informal employment make only about a third of that amount. There are no clear patterns when it comes to working hours. In Brunei and Cambodia, informal workers work longer, averaging about 50 hours per week, but in Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam, they work a little less or about the same number of hours per week as regular workers.

Social Protection Needs of Informal Workers

Social protection or social security, according to the ILO, encompasses all interventions that aim to prevent and reduce poverty and social exclusion of people throughout the life cycle. These include healthcare; maternity benefits; support for children and families; assistance in cases of unemployment, work-related injury, disability, or sickness; and old age and survivors' pension.

ASEAN Member States, under the 2013 [ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection](#), view social protection as a basic human right that everyone is entitled to, but must especially be extended to the country's poor, persons with disabilities, older people, out-of-school youth, children, migrant workers, at-risk, and other vulnerable groups. Informal workers are considered to be among the most vulnerable group and in need of social protection.

The 2019 ILO study, [Extension of Social Security to Workers in Informal Employment in the ASEAN Region](#), lays bare the specific needs and vulnerabilities of different types of workers in informal job arrangements, three of which are highlighted below.

Domestic workers are identified as among those most exposed to poor conditions and susceptible to exploitation and discrimination. Their employment terms are usually not covered by a written contract. They work for multiple employers who sometimes pay them irregularly or even make in-kind payments. They work in isolation, are not organised, and have limited or no bargaining power. In countries like Brunei Darussalam and Cambodia, the employment relationship is not recognised by law. In other countries

like Malaysia and Thailand, domestic workers have limited labour protection and are not eligible to receive certain benefits, such as maternity leave and overtime pay.

Home workers—or persons who produce goods in their homes and supply them to enterprises or intermediate contractors—also have the least job security and often work in substandard conditions. Examples of these are home-based garment sewers and handicraft workers. Their work is usually labour-intensive and requires long hours, and they get compensated on a piece-rate basis. In countries where home workers may be eligible for voluntary social protection schemes such as Viet Nam, the types of benefits they can avail are confined to long-term benefits and they have to complete a qualifying period to receive pension.

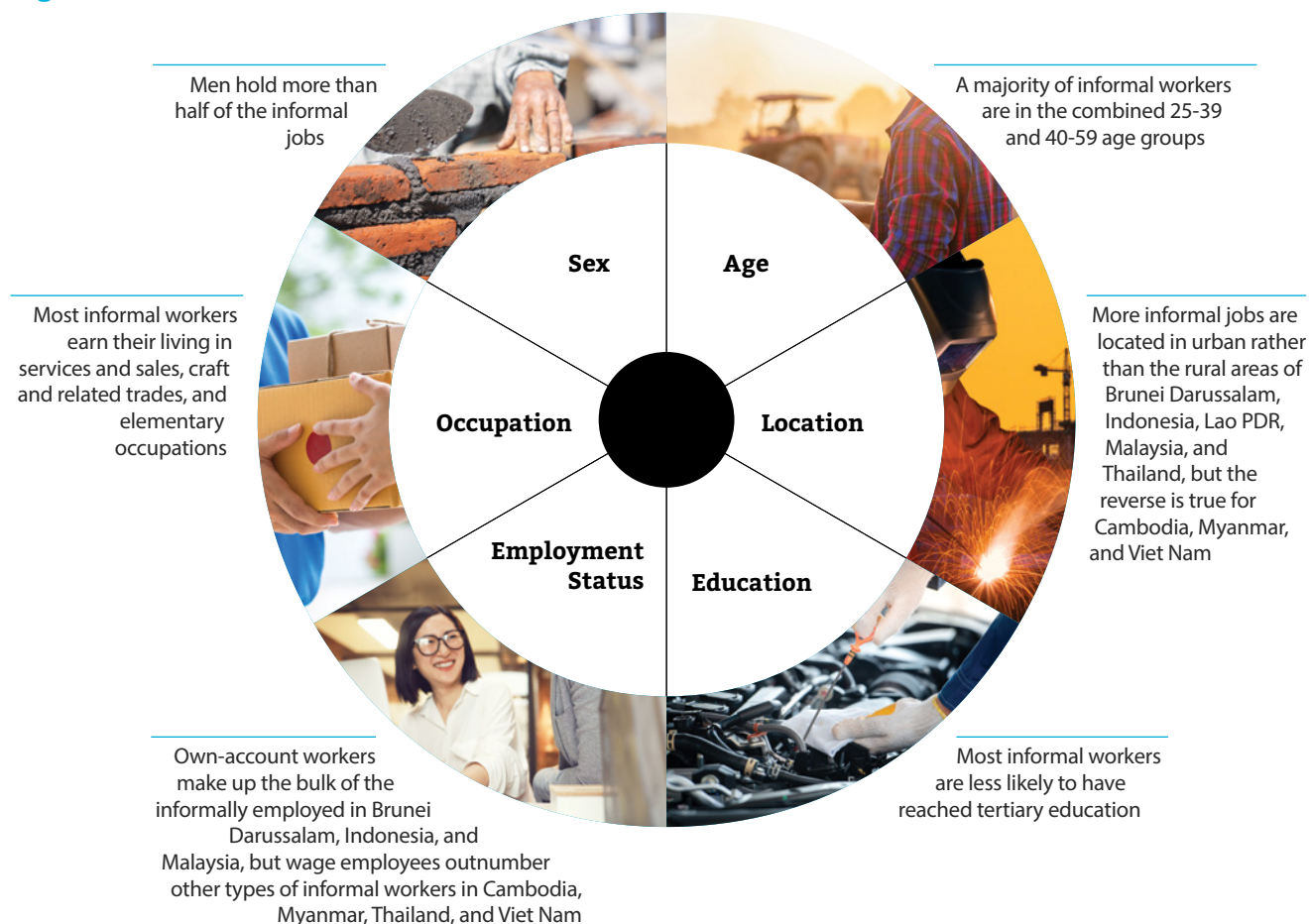
Digital platform workers are an emerging class of informal workers and have yet to be covered by regulation in many countries. They include crowdworkers who accept jobs posted on global matchmaking platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk; and individuals who render on-demand services, such as transportation and food delivery, through the use of digital applications (e.g. Grab). Employment is unstable, temporary, and part-time. Platform workers are commonly treated as independent contractors rather than employees, thus releasing the intermediary platforms from the responsibility of providing workers' benefits, such as paid leave and health insurance.

Country Strategies to Extend Social Protection

The ILO study discusses the broad spectrum of strategies and solutions that ASEAN Member States have put in place to extend social protection coverage to informal workers.

One such strategy is the expansion of existing social security programmes to accommodate the unique circumstances of informal workers. Several countries have dismantled legal barriers that previously prevented inclusion or limited the benefits of informal workers in national social security systems. In the Philippines, for example, the Domestic Workers Act of 2013 directs the inclusion of domestic workers

Characteristics of Informal Employment in Eight ASEAN Member States



Note: Based on data provided by Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Viet Nam, and Thailand.

Source: *Regional Study on Informal Employment Statistics to Support Decent Work Promotion in ASEAN, 2019*

with at least one-month employment in the country's social security system and national health insurance, with employers paying 100 per cent of the premium contribution if the monthly salary is less than 5,000 Philippine pesos (equivalent to 101 US dollars in today's exchange rate).

Countries are also now offering financial solutions to make it affordable for informal workers to enter into existing programmes. The Thai government, for instance, provides a counterpart amount for every contribution of workers registered under its voluntary programme (e.g. 30 baht/month for workers contributing 70 baht/month, which entitles workers to disability, sickness cash, and funeral benefits).

Streamlining the requirements and procedures for enrolling in existing social security schemes and paying contributions is another step taken by a number of Member States. The government of Indonesia, for example, recruits community-based agents under the Kader JKN partnership programme whose tasks are to enrol new members (e.g. self-employed workers), collect contributions, disseminate information, and handle complaints. Indonesia's national health insurance agency also developed a mobile phone app "one-stop shop" where individuals can register, update and access their data, receive information, and submit complaints.

Some Member States tried a different strategy altogether—establishing totally separate social protection programmes for uncovered groups and sectors. An example is Thailand's National Savings Fund, an old-age insurance programme which caters to farmers, vendors, taxi drivers, daily wage earners, and self-employed workers who are not members of mandatory programmes. The Thai government matches the contribution of workers, ranging from 50 to 100 per cent, depending on the worker's age. Another example of this strategy is Brunei Darussalam's tax-funded universal pension programme for persons above the age of 60.

Countries are aware that social security programmes, whether existing or new, will only be successful if there are corresponding improvements in the system of governance. Thus, part and parcel of the Member States' strategies is to make administrative processes efficient, transparent, and accessible to the public. Another is to involve workers' and employers' groups in designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating social protection programmes.

Member States are also pursuing broader, non-social security strategies that indirectly affect informal workers' access to social insurance. One of these is the business registration or formalisation of informal enterprises which will make it compulsory for employers to enrol their workers in social protection programmes. Another is the provision of tax incentives such as the tax deductions offered by Singapore to self-employed workers who are enrolled in its Medisave and Central Provident Fund programmes. Measures that promote workers' organisation and representation, create opportunities for training and skills development of workers, and end discrimination are also being carried out.

Agenda for Action

The two informal employment studies cited areas for action at both country and regional levels.

ASEAN's regional study on informal employment statistics urges countries to strengthen their national database on informal employment by, among others, regularly conducting labour force surveys; create an inter-agency committee on informal employment statistics to set clear directions on data collection and analysis; improve country analysis and reporting of informal employment statistics; and institutionalise use of informal employment data by including these in the computation of national income accounts. It also proposes that countries establish an official operational definition of informal employment and determine the classification of platform workers.

At the regional level, the ASEAN study recommends the establishment of a regional database, using the study's varying

Summary of Country Strategies to Extend Social Protection



Expand existing social security programmes through:

- reduction of legal barriers
- financial incentives
- simplified requirements and procedures for enrolment, contribution, and access of benefits

Create separate schemes and programmes such as:

- contributory schemes
- sector- and occupation-specific schemes
- non-contributory schemes

Ensure good governance through:

- greater institutional accountability and transparency, and participation of stakeholders such as workers' groups
- dissemination of information on social protection programmes and benefits as well as workers' rights

Pursue broader measures or interventions such as:

- formalisation of enterprises
- labour policies
- tax incentives
- stronger workers' representation
- policies on skills development, training, and anti-discrimination

Note: Derived from the *Extension of Social Security to Workers in Informal Employment in the ASEAN Region, 2019*

statistical tables on informal employment as a starting point, and to build on this database by including additional indicators like occupational safety, health, and decent work indicators, to name a few. Following this recommendation, the ASEAN Secretariat has incorporated informal employment statistics tables in the ASEAN Statistics Web Portal.

The ILO study, meanwhile, gave a number of recommendations that some ASEAN Member States have already put in place, including strengthening the coordination among relevant agencies and at different levels of government; subsidising the participation of low-income workers in social protection programmes; identifying and eliminating legal impediments to informal workers'

coverage; and simplifying administrative procedures and delivery mechanisms.

Additionally, it advises governments to be responsive to the expressed need of uncovered groups in developing social insurance programmes (e.g. preference for short-term rather than long-term benefits), and address as well the problematic areas of ongoing programmes, such as adverse selection and low participation in voluntary contribution schemes.

Finally, the ILO study encourages Member States to increase their investment in social protection, develop evaluation and monitoring tools for assessing country and regional progress, and strengthen ASEAN-level collaboration in the areas of knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, technical assistance, and pilot projects. ■

The two studies are available for download in the following links:



LINK 1



LINK 2

<https://asean.org/storage/2012/05/13-Regional-Study-on-Informal-Employment-Statistics-to-Support-Decent-Wo....pdf>

<https://asean.org/storage/2020/01/Regional-Study-on-Extension-of-Social-Security-to-Informal-Workers-in-ASEAN.pdf>

Conversations

Addressing ageism in ASEAN

Living with purpose:
Stories from a generation

Addressing Ageism in ASEAN



BY KIRAN SAGOO, PhD,
AND THE ASEAN EDITORIAL TEAM

Southeast Asia has an ageing population. Social and economic development in the region has helped lower mortality and fertility rates, and increased life expectancy.

Southeast Asia's population of persons 60 years of age and over is currently at 8.8 per cent of total population (2018) and is anticipated to reach 24.1 per cent by 2050. The region can benefit from this demographic shift.

Older persons are an asset to society as they contribute towards their family, local community, and society at large. Older persons, especially older women provide child care to grandchildren, and both older men and women contribute to their local community through voluntary activities. Older persons also contribute to the economy through taxes. An increase in the number of older persons has also resulted in the growth of the silver economy, which covers all goods and services used by older persons.

Unfortunately, despite their valuable contributions, older persons experience ageism. Ageism, which is the stereotyping and discrimination against individuals and groups on the basis on their age, takes various forms. It includes prejudicial

attitudes, which lead to discriminatory institutional policies and practices. Ageism, together with sexism and racism, causes and maintains inequality between people.

Ageism has led to older persons facing difficulties in maintaining or finding a job as they are assumed to be slow, incompetent, and lacking digital skills. They also face difficulties in getting loans approved as banks may be concerned on their capability to repay any loan granted. Health conditions suffered by older persons are sometimes dismissed as being due to "old age" causing them to receive no or substandard treatment in the workplace.

The media further perpetuates ageism. In movies, older persons are portrayed in stereotypical roles of being old, frail, and forgetful. Often, ageism is disguised through jokes on ageing. The advertising industry also perpetuates ageism by equating beauty with youth. This has led to a proliferation of anti-ageing products in the form of cosmetics, hair dyes, and nutritional products, among others. Perhaps the most

pressing concern is an older person's internalisation of ageism. Older persons who hold prejudicial attitudes towards ageing experience damaged self-worth and poorer health outcomes, which may even shorten lives.

It is necessary for attitudes on ageism to be challenged. A shift in mindset that poor health is inevitable in older age to one that embraces healthy ageing, is needed. It needs to be recognised that older persons are a diverse group with differing needs and capacities, and continue to have the ability to contribute to society. Government expenditure on education, health care, and social protection should be viewed as investments in human capital, rather than a financial burden. Measures need to be taken to mainstream ageing into relevant policies. As women tend to live longer than men and make up a larger proportion of older persons, social policies must include the gender dimension.

Older women face the double burden of ageism and sexism. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the vulnerabilities of older women. Due to their work in the informal sector and unpaid domestic work, older women have limited access to social protection, are experiencing increased burden of providing care and the loss of livelihood, due to the pandemic.

ASEAN has adopted various commitments to improve the lives of older persons. These commitments provide an opportunity to address and remove all forms of ageism. ■

ASEAN Commitments that can be applied to address ageism:

2010:

Brunei Darussalam Declaration on Strengthening Family Institution: Caring for the Elderly aims to nurture a life course approach to growing older and responding to issues relating to ageing

2015:

Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Ageing: Empowering Older Persons in ASEAN includes a provision to raise public awareness on the issue of ageing

2016:

ASEAN Plus Three Statement on Active Ageing recognises the wisdom of older persons and encourages intergenerational solidarity

2017:

Joint Statement of ASEAN-Japan Health Ministers Meeting: Universal Health Coverage and Population Ageing addresses concerns on population ageing, governance, health financing, and service delivery

2019:

ASEAN Centre for Active Ageing and Innovation, ASEAN's flagship initiative, aims to prepare the region for an ageing society and promote the well-being of older persons in the region

2020:

Joint Statement on Mitigating Impacts of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Groups in ASEAN calls for protection of the rights and dignity of vulnerable groups, including older women



On Living Well

New Narratives on Older Life

BY THE ASEAN EDITORIAL TEAM

In Southeast Asian societies, growing old is not something to be dreaded, but is accepted as a natural part of the life cycle. Reaching old age accords one a certain status—as someone to be respected, even deferred to, for their life experiences and great wisdom.

Nonetheless, traditional constructs of older adults as less able, unproductive, and extremely dependent persist. Their pursuits and contributions, once they are past their prime, are no longer deemed as interesting or worth highlighting.

We caught up with four older adults from different backgrounds whose lives resist our stereotypes of ageing and inspire us to embrace growing older.

Photo Credit: © Jub-Job/Shutterstock



Krisana Kraisintu, PhD

Pharmaceutical Chemist

Krisana Kraisintu dedicates her life to ensuring that everyone has access to affordable healthcare. She studied at Chiang Mai University, Thailand, and continued her study at University of Strathclyde, and University of Bath in the United Kingdom.

Over the past 40 years, she has worked in the pharmaceutical industry in various roles of quality assurance, manufacturing, research and development, and business development, to name a few.

She developed the first generic HIV drug combination, zidovudine (AZT), and helped reverse the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Thailand. She also developed an inexpensive drug "cocktail" which was chosen by the World Health Organization as the first treatment for patients in poor countries. While working for Thailand's Government Pharmaceutical Organization, Kraisintu developed 64 herbal-based medicines to treat various diseases, including diabetes and hypertension.

This Ramon Magsaysay Award recipient spent seven years in Africa to assist and provide technical know-how in manufacturing HIV/AIDS and antimalarial drugs in 17 countries, including Kenya, Congo, Senegal, and Ethiopia.

Kraisintu is known as Thailand's 'gypsy pharmacist,' as she is always on the move. Through the Krisana Kraisintu Foundation, she still travels around the country to help communities build their own mobile laboratories and manufacture affordable medicines.

In her own words:

"I always believe that everybody should get access to treatment, whether you are rich, poor, white, black, or whatever. This is basic human rights. The condition is better now in Thailand. But how about the rest of world, especially in African countries. There are still a lot of problems there. Another problem I found during my field works is about the empowerment of women, especially housewife. That's why I am involving women in every of my project now.



Known as the 'gypsy pharmacist,' Dr. Krisana Kraisintu travels around the world to help manufacture affordable medicines

"My works now focus on the community works; I try to teach communities to produce drugs by themselves, especially herbal medicines. It is important to produce drug locally. People cannot rely on importing drug donation all the time. Once the donation is done, what are they going to do if they cannot produce drugs by themselves? I have this mobile herbal plant processing truck that goes to communities in southern Thailand, so they do not

Helping poor people and seeing them happy bring a lot of happiness for me, and in turn brings me lots of power and that makes me don't want to stop.

have to go to Bangkok to cultivate the materials they gather. I'm now developing a mobile quality control medicinal plants to complement the mobile processing truck which will be finished by next year.

"When I go to the communities, I work with young people and older persons, many of whom are women in their 60s and 70s who are still highly active. I set up a work model

and the young can follow the model and when I leave the communities, they can take over the work. When a project ends in one place, I move to another one; I don't want to get too attached.

"Helping poor people and seeing them happy bring a lot of happiness for me, and in turn brings me lots of power and that makes me don't want to stop. There are still many sufferings in this world. I know I cannot help them all, but I can help as much as I can. I can be born 10 times, but I still cannot finish my work. I am 68 years old now, although I may look like 80, my time is limited. I cannot move as fast as before, and because of this COVID-19, I must stop. I do not involve in any development of COVID-19 vaccines; I'm too old to do that. I will just focus my activities on social problems that do not need me to stay in laboratory." ■

Interviewed by Mary Kathleen Quiano-Castro and Novia D. Rulistia

Francisco A. Datar, PhD

Physical Anthropologist

Photo Credit: © Francisco A. Datar

Francisco A. Datar was determined to become a medical doctor at an early age, but tight finances, a mentor's guidance, and serendipity set him on a different path—physical anthropology.

Armed with a PhD degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo, Datar became the first Filipino to receive an advanced training in this specialised branch of anthropology. He went on to teach at the University of the Philippines, serving as chair and field school director of the anthropology department at one point.

In between doing field research and teaching students the finer points of human evolution, food and nutrition, human osteology, and forensic anthropology, he lent his expertise to aid various forensic investigations. Among his most notable assignments was helping the Philippine Commission on Human Rights and a human rights NGO identify the skeletal remains of human rights victims. Datar officially retired from the University of the Philippines in 2019 after 42 years of service.

In his own words:

"Retirement is simply transcending the daily routine of your bread-and-butter job. I don't have to wake up early for an early morning class and I don't have to review my lectures the night before. It does not mean you suddenly have nothing to do. Now I am faced with all the things I have been wanting to do. Books I have been wanting to read. Mountains I have been wanting to hike. More islands to visit. More cultures to experience and more food to savor. More time to write.

"I have an enormous amount of data from my three major field sites waiting to be written. I have also been given an opportunity to teach in a different culture where students' behavior is different from what I have been used to. It has also allowed me to visit some of the country's indigenous peoples and compare them with ours.



Dr. Francisco Datar participates in bogwa, the bone cleaning ritual of the Ifugao indigenous group in northern Philippines

Ageing is a state of mind. I can still out-hike students twice or thrice younger than me. No maintenance medicine for me. I don't get bored and I don't have idle moments.

"Eating is still my passion and cooking is my relaxation. Margaret Mead advised that if the locals eat it, 'eat it.' That's exactly what I do and what I taught my students.

"I have picked up my classical guitar again and started relearning my old easy pieces. Retirement made me reconnect with friends from graduate school through Facebook.

"Ageing is a state of mind. I can still out-hike students twice or thrice younger than me. No maintenance medicine for me. I don't get bored and I don't have idle moments. I always find something to keep me busy and I'm always excited to learn new things. My interaction with students has kept me young. I am updated with the latest fad and the youth's lingo.

"Longevity is the byproduct of proper nutrition, better health care, and genetics. More people now are in their 80s and 90s. But are we really ready for an ageing generation?

"Southeast Asian families are still better off in terms of dealing with ageing parents. We take care of our elders in our homes. Moving them to nursing homes is unthinkable. But times are changing. When children have to go out and make a living, it puts a strain on everybody, especially when there is not enough money for a caregiver. This is how ASEAN could help. It should encourage and fund more studies on ageing from biological and cultural perspectives to inform policy." ■

Interviewed by Joanne B. Agbisit

Dato' Dr. Faridah Merican

Director/Producer/Actress

Dato' Dr. Faridah Merican is fondly known as the first lady of Malaysian theatre. She has been involved in the Malaysian theatre scene since the 1960s, acting in plays that defined the Malaysian theatre scene.

In 1989, she co-founded the Actors Studio in Malaysia with her husband, Joe Hasham. Unhindered by a devastating flood which destroyed the entire complex of The Actors Studio, Merican's "nothing is impossible" attitude led to the creation of The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre. Merican is currently the Executive Producer and Co-Founder of The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre and the Performing Arts Centre of Penang.

Merican has worked towards developing and raising the standard of performing arts in Malaysia. Her efforts are greatly appreciated. Among her many recognition awards is the Outstanding Achievement award under the Arts, Culture and Entertainment category from the Inaugural Malaysian Women of Excellence Awards and the BOH Cameronian Lifetime Achievement Award.

Through her octogenarian year, she continues with her inspiring work of nurturing the arts in Malaysia.

In her own words:

"The arts have a way of engulfing you into its world, if you allow yourself that pleasure. I have been in this industry since the late fifties and even though the challenges get more and more, I find excitement in them.

"In the early days, I was an untrained actress and did what I did because of my love for the arts. I was fortunate to be surrounded by friends and teachers who inspired me with their knowledge as they had 'been there and done that' a decade before me. I was and still am not afraid of hard work, not afraid of being confronted with the newness of the arts.

"I am inquisitive and that I learnt from young is a good trait to have. The arts in Malaysia is still something new and fresh for me even though I have been treading the boards since the 60s. This



Dato' Dr. Faridah Merican continues to support the performing arts in Malaysia

My wish for the younger generation is to never give up, never say die, and believe in yourselves and your country

keeps me going and knowing there are others out there who want to learn and perhaps do what I do.

"I am also a teacher and I know how important it is that you pass on what you know to the younger generation. Unfortunately, this can only be achieved if you have a solid educational foundation in schools where the arts have been given the importance it deserves. We lost this several decades ago when arts, culture,

and literature were taken over by science and technology, to answer to the needs of a young country.

"Fortunately, now I can tell you a slightly different story as the arts has not been allowed to die out, even though we have lost quite a lot. The drive amongst arts practitioners is strong, fortunately. My wish for the younger generation is to never give up, never say die, and believe in yourselves and your country.

"When I was growing up, I wished I had the opportunities that are available now. Although we were given a good education with very good teachers, arts education as you experience it today was not there for me. Sometimes though, it is good to have to rough it out, when you have to pick yourself up every time you fall.

"Older persons are normally wiser and this wisdom must be put to good use. But there is much to be learnt from today's youth, if you want to, as long as you want to keep on learning.

"ASEAN as a region is very rich and has much to offer. We should open up our borders more freely so there is a smooth flow of good leaders and intellectuals that will benefit our population. We've waited too long for this freedom of movement to happen." ■

Interviewed by Kiran Sagoo, PhD

William Wongso

Chef/Food Connoisseur

Photo Credit: © William Wongso

William Wongso has been in the food industry for more than four decades. But slowing down never once crossed his mind.

His culinary journey began when he became a baker in 1977. He traveled the world to learn about international cuisines, and after 20 years, he decided to dedicate his time and energy to Indonesian culinary pursuits. He visits villages across the Indonesian archipelago to learn more about traditional cooking methods. Wongso also loves going to traditional markets. For him, the traditional market is a living food encyclopedia where he can ask vendors anything about spices and ingredients, and listen to the stories.

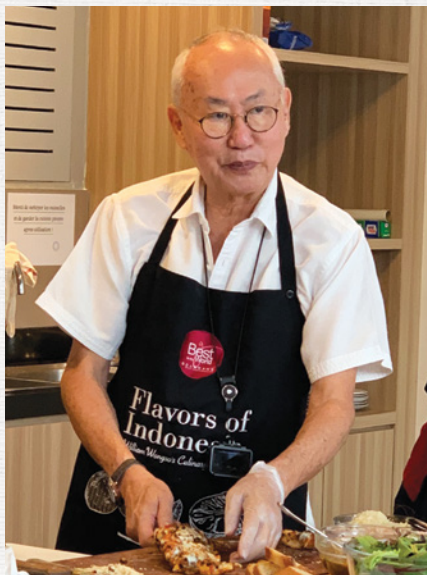
Wongso participates in international culinary fairs and teaches in well-known cooking schools in many countries as his contribution to put Indonesian dishes in the global food map. He cofounded *Aku Cinta Masakan Indonesia* (I Love Indonesian Cooking) community to nurture the love of Indonesian cooking in the national and international stages. He released *Flavors of Indonesia: William Wongso's Culinary Wonders* cooking book, which won the Best Book of the Year at the 2017 Gourmand World Cookbook Awards.

His expertise earned him the Medaille d'Honneur by the Academie du Pain Award in 2018, and with this, he becomes a member of the prestigious culinary club Elite de La Boulangerie International. The 73-year-old never feels too old and too tired to continue promoting Indonesian food.

In his own words:

"As long as I still can contribute to Indonesian culinary, I will never stop even during this time. Before COVID-19, I spent 60 per cent of my time to travel, but now I travel through the cyber world. With Instagram and Zoom, I can share with young people and the world about Indonesia's cooking treasure. I make photo essays on social media to interact. Through photos, I can convey better to people about things I love. It was difficult for me at first to use social media, but I got used to it eventually.

Many say that I'm too old for social media, but why can't I do that? I like keeping myself active and busy.



William Wongso dedicates his life to put Indonesian culinary in the global food map

As long as I still can contribute to Indonesian culinary, I will never stop even during this time.

"I always control my food; I restrain from eating too much. I think that's the secret why I'm still active. Food intake is vital for elderly to stay healthy. The government should pay great attention to this matter. Moreover, the government should also provide adequate elderly care facilities for those who do not have families that can take care of them. It's better if the facilities have proper kitchens and healthy menus. I think ASEAN as an organisation can play its part by monitoring the facilities.

"I am so lucky that I am quite independent at this age. I can go here and there by myself. Recently, I was featured in the National Geographic's *Uncharted* with the British chef Gordon Ramsay. I picked *rendang*, which is beef slow-cooked in coconut milk and spices, because everyone in Indonesia knows it and it can become like a national bond. People can also see the vibrant culture of West Sumatra province. Nowadays, street food and indigenous cooking are taking over fine dining. I remember Anthony Bourdain once told me that 'wherever you travel, you always get culinary surprises from street food.'

"My next project is to build an interactive platform for culinary education. Students in many culinary vocational high schools here do not have opportunity to learn about the richness of Indonesian culinary. I hope this project can improve this situation. It is important for the youth or those who are interested in culinary to have solid knowledge about Indonesian culinary. They can master all types of international cooking, but they must know about the essence of Indonesian culinary as this will make them creative.

"I don't have plans to retire. It is always my dream for Indonesian culinary to be known around the world and preserved by everyone, so I will keep working." ■

Interviewed by Novia D. Rulistia

THE 36TH ASEAN SUMMIT



BY JOANNE B. AGBISIT
AND THE ASEAN EDITORIAL TEAM

Against a backdrop of a raging pandemic and global economic downturn, ASEAN Leaders reaffirmed their solidarity and cooperation at the 36th ASEAN Summit on 26 June 2020. The Summit was held via a live-streamed video conference—a first in the 44-year history of the biannual summit.

Photo Credit: © AsiaTravel/Shutterstock



Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc delivers his remarks at the 36th ASEAN Summit opening ceremony

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, who serves as the 2020 ASEAN Chair, opened and presided over the top-level meeting, appropriately themed “Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN.”

In his opening remarks, Prime Minister Nguyen acknowledged the unprecedented social and economic damage wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, and commiserated with families who lost loved ones and livelihoods over the past months.

At the same time, he recognised ASEAN’s early, rapid, and collective action which helped the regional bloc manage the pandemic relatively well compared to other parts of the world. “ASEAN’s Health Emergencies Response Network and cooperation with partners were activated from the very first days,” he said. “ASEAN countries have engaged in active information and experience sharing, and coordination in disease control.”

Prime Minister Nguyen called on ASEAN Leaders to work together to rejuvenate economies and help their nationals regain their footing. “In the latter half of

2020, the heavy burden rests upon the governments of ASEAN members and upon us as leaders to lead ASEAN out of this period of adversity,” he said.

During the Summit’s plenary session, the other ASEAN Leaders delivered their own speeches and interventions: His Majesty Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei Darussalam, Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia, President Joko Widodo of Indonesia, Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith of Lao PDR, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin of Malaysia, State Chancellor Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore, and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha of Thailand.

The ASEAN Leaders adopted the **ASEAN Leaders’ Vision Statement on a Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN**, which provides the broad strokes of the region’s socio-economic recovery plan as well as reiterates Member States’ continuing commitment to the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. The creation of the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund was highlighted as an important element of the recovery plan.

The ASEAN Leaders also adopted the **ASEAN Declaration on Human Resources Development for the Changing World of Work**, which “commits ASEAN Member States to promote lifelong learning with a view to preparing the region’s human resources to adapt to the changing world of work due to technological advances, demographic transition, and greening economies.”

The progress made by ASEAN in building a politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible community—the core aspiration of ASEAN Community Vision 2025—was likewise discussed. Undeterred by the pandemic, the regional bloc continues to implement the Political-Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural Blueprints; the Initiative for ASEAN Integration Work Plan III; and the

Artists perform at the opening ceremony of the 36th ASEAN Summit in Hanoi, Viet Nam





“In the latter half of 2020, the heavy burden rests upon the governments of ASEAN members and upon us as leaders to lead ASEAN out of this period of adversity.”

Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 to bring the ASEAN Vision to fruition. A mid-term review of the blueprints is being undertaken to look beyond ASEAN’s collective progress and achievements. It will assess as well the changes affecting the region and emerging issues that need to be addressed to reach ASEAN Vision 2025.

At the Summit, the ASEAN Leaders welcomed the launch of the Year of ASEAN Identity. They believe that the development of the Narrative of ASEAN Identity “will further inculcate a sense of belonging and popularise ASEAN as a people-centred, people-oriented community.”

The forthcoming conclusion of negotiations for the Regional

Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with major trading partners is also a much anticipated event. The ASEAN Leaders look forward to the signing of the agreement by end of 2020 as a demonstration of “the firm commitment of ASEAN and its partners to upholding an open, inclusive and rules-based multi-lateral trading system.”

The ASEAN Leaders acknowledged the important role of dialogue partners, sectoral dialogue partners, development partners, and international organisations in ASEAN’s community-building efforts as well as in the fight against COVID-19 and its multifaceted and long-term effects. They agreed “to further enhance and strengthen partnerships and cooperation with our external partners, including

through adoption of the successor Plans of Action for the next five years (2021-2025).”

A special session on Women Empowerment in the Digital Age was held to highlight ASEAN’s ongoing work to promote gender equality and empowerment. The ASEAN Leaders were joined by Prime Minister Jacinda Arden of New Zealand, Dr. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Secretary-General of ASEAN Dato Lim Jock Hoi, and Ms. Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan of the National Assembly of Viet Nam.

At the conclusion of the Summit, the ASEAN Leaders unanimously approved the **Chairman’s Statement** which contains a summary of the proceedings and outputs of the 36th Summit. ■

A copy of the Chairman’s Statement and other 36th Summit documents may be downloaded from the following link:
<https://asean.org/asean/asean-structure/asean-summit/>

ASCC Council

Convenes to Further ASEAN's Socio-cultural Cooperation



BY NOVIA D. RULISTIA
AND THE ASEAN EDITORIAL TEAM

The ministers of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) gathered virtually for the 23rd ASCC Council meeting on 23 June 2020 to discuss developments in the socio-cultural sectors in the region, including ASEAN's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Viet Nam's Minister of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs Dao Ngoc Dung, Chair of ASCC Council 2020, emphasised the necessity for ASEAN Member States to prepare plans to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and ensure the welfare of all people.

The ministers will continue working together through regional cooperation to address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and identify opportunities to revitalise affected sectors in the region. With 15 specialised agencies covering

various fields, joint intersectoral efforts will enable the potential development of a post-pandemic recovery plan to restore the employment and livelihoods of workers, as well as foster the social and economic recovery of vulnerable groups.

"These commendable joint efforts ensure that ASEAN maintains its course in realising an inclusive, resilient and sustainable ASEAN Community," the ministers said in their Joint Statement.

Minister Dung said that the virtual senior officials' meetings and summits were unprecedented in ASEAN's history. The shift to a technology-mediated approach indicates how COVID-19 has

transformed people's lives, showcasing the value of digital technology in these challenging times. Several digital innovations, like online learning, virtual meetings and exhibitions, and e-commerce have gained popularity during the pandemic.

The ministers noted Indonesia's proposal to establish an ASEAN Plus Three Task Force on Pandemics. They also welcomed the proposal of Viet Nam and the ASEAN Secretariat to organise a series of webinars on ASCC-led efforts to address COVID-19.

The Council also discussed the progress of works in other ASCC sectors.

From the labour sector, the Council endorsed the [Declaration on Human Resources Development for the Changing World of Work](#) to be adopted by the Leaders at the 36th Summit. The Declaration reaffirms ASEAN's commitment to strengthen ASEAN cooperation on labour, education, and business sectors, towards promoting new skills for the future, as well as advancing inclusive education and employment.

On ASEAN Identity, the ministers looked forward to the finalisation of "The Narrative of ASEAN Identity" that aimed to instill ASEAN Identity as an inseparable part of daily lives. They acknowledged all activities under the 2020 Year of ASEAN Identity that foster a sense of belonging in building a sharing and caring ASEAN Community.

The progress of the mid-term review of the ASCC Blueprint 2025 was also discussed. Most ASCC sectoral bodies have reviewed their work plans and are currently working on their next five-year plans of action. The mid-term review is expected to provide recommendations for more effective implementation of the blueprint. The final report of the mid-term review will be submitted to the 37th ASEAN Summit in November.

The meeting also noted the establishment of the ASEAN TVET Council, marine environment cooperation, and the empowerment of women.

The ministers will hold the 24th ASCC meeting in October 2020. ■

The ASCC ministers meet virtually to discuss progress in the ASCC pillar





ASEAN AT 53

On 8 August 2020, ASEAN turns 53 with a virtual celebration, a first in its history.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to stay apart, but ASEAN's spirit of unity and togetherness lives on.

This year, a special online programme has been prepared to honor ASEAN's founders, and pay tribute to the frontliners and citizens who take risks every day to save the lives of others.

Watch for announcements on ASEAN's social media platforms, or write in to public@asean.org, for links to the live event. More details will be released after 4 August.

Listen to inspiring messages from the President of the Republic of Indonesia Joko Widodo, Viet Nam Deputy Prime Minister Phạm Bình Minh, and ASEAN's top diplomats around the world. Guests include Air Asia CEO Tony Fernandes and the ASEAN Prize winners.

Last year's ASEAN Day celebration was also special as ASEAN marked its 52nd anniversary in the new ASEAN Secretariat building. President Joko Widodo officiated the inauguration



of the new building that was constructed right next to the original structure, now called the Heritage building.

The new ASEAN Secretariat is now housed in two 16-floor towers and features a green concept, with only natural ventilation in the lobby. It is equipped with more than 20 meeting rooms of various sizes, and each ASEAN Member State has its own country room.

Secretary-General of ASEAN Dato Lim Jock Hoi said the new building, in the long-term, will provide a sound foundation to deepen ASEAN's community building efforts by creating more opportunities for meetings and interaction.

Until the time comes for physical gatherings, join the ASEAN Day online celebration this year.

Be one with the community.
Be one with ASEAN. ■



From the top

Lobby of the ASEAN Secretariat's new building

Painting of ASEAN founding fathers

Indonesian President Joko Widodo symbolically hands over the new building's key to the Secretary-General of ASEAN

The Heritage building lobby

KONNECT ASEAN

Connecting through the Arts



BY BEN HAMPE
PROJECT DIRECTOR, KONNECT ASEAN
ASEAN FOUNDATION

ASEAN has, since its inception, facilitated people-to-people exchange in the arts sector across Southeast Asia to encourage dialogue and debate.

This unique space for artistic discourse, which fosters pluralistic notions of what constitutes a regional artistic identity and aesthetic, is one of ASEAN's great legacies and is widely acknowledged, researched, and discussed by a new generation of art historians and curators.

Key projects in recent history include the ASEAN Sculpture Symposiums (1981-1990), ASEAN Workshops, Exhibitions, and Symposiums on Aesthetics (1989-1995), and Phillip Morris ASEAN Art Awards (1994-2006). In the last 15 years, ASEAN has relinquished this role—an important aspect of its community building aspirations in the arts sector—encouraging the proliferation of nation specific biennales and art fairs, and allowing maturing cultural institutions to serve this function in its stead.

In 2019, the Republic of Korea (ROK) celebrated 30 years of diplomatic relations with ASEAN. In the same year the ASEAN-ROK Cooperation Fund was doubled to 14 million US dollars and a new arts and cultural programme was established, KONNECT ASEAN. A key driver of ROK's New Southern Policy to strengthen ties of friendship and cooperation with ASEAN through the three pillars of people, prosperity and peace, KONNECT ASEAN will serve as the ASEAN Foundation's core arts and cultural programme over the next three years. In the words of Lim Sungham, Ambassador of Republic of Korea to ASEAN, "...diplomatic relations are like personal relationships. ASEAN-ROK relations could make rapid progress not only on the basis of common interests but also mutual trust and shared values. Indeed, ASEAN and Korea are natural partners in every sense.



Geographically, both of us are in East Asia. Historically, we share similar experiences. Culturally, our values are almost identical" (*The Jakarta Post*, November 2019).

As the post-Cold War reality of a new world has taken shape and formed new directions and conversations, KONNECT ASEAN heralds a new era for cultural diplomacy and regional integration between ASEAN Member States and ROK, signalling both an eagerness by ASEAN to revitalise its once integral role in the contemporary arts and South Korea's sincerity in establishing closer ties with ASEAN. The programme will celebrate the arts with partner organisations across the region, and in the process explore and discuss social, political, economic, and environmental issues. The artists' works and activities will engage and strengthen the public's understanding of ASEAN and connect the three major stakeholder groups of government, business, and civil society to achieve the vision of an ASEAN Community.

A June 2020 article in Singapore's *The Straits Times* caused quite a stir amongst international arts circles for publishing the results of a survey denouncing artists as "non-essential workers." As many of us have endured the global pandemic with books, music, film, and other art forms, we are now more than ever acutely aware of how important it is for us to share in and understand our collective destinies. Investment in arts and cultural programmes is an essential element to realise regional integration and goes hand in hand with security concerns. Many nations throughout recent history have understood the societal need to facilitate arts and cultural activities especially following times of adversity.

The ROK established Asia's oldest biennale in the mid 90s to commemorate the 1980 Gwangju Democratisation Movement, a tragic chapter in the nation's history. The Gwangju Biennale embodies the general value of human civilisation and disseminates a message of democracy, human rights, and peace throughout the world and its local community. The Gwangju Biennale is now recognised as amongst the world's most important biennales, influential Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor being appointed as Artistic Director of the 7th edition in 2008. Reflecting on his participation he remarked that, "...judging from the shape and turn of events, the clockwork convergence of Asia's polyglot cultures, the large and still-growing consumer society and middle class, and the rapidly changing technology that knits them together, it may not be premature to think that we are facing an Asian moment. This emergence of global Asia, in fact, does not benefit Asia alone; it creates a model for other societies in transition. (*Invisible Culture*, September 2010)."

The work of artists connects us in tangible and dynamic ways to the world, advancing diplomatic efforts and building deep connections, mutual understanding, and goodwill, which builds resilient communities and underpins our future prosperity. Cultural diplomacy initiatives like KONNECT ASEAN are key to avoiding negative consequences of COVID-19. Now is the time for us to come together and encourage dialogue amongst our myriad ethnicities, religions, and cultures to build a better world for the future. ■

For the love of noodles!



BY NOVIA D. RULISTIA
AND THE ASEAN EDITORIAL TEAM

Are you a foodie about to trek across Southeast Asia? Or simply an adventurer wanting to soak up Southeast Asian culture through its cuisine? Then read on to learn more about the sumptuous noodle dishes from around the region!

But first, here's a fun fact about noodles. The world's oldest known noodles date back to around 4,000 years ago! Chinese archaeologists, in 2005, unearthed a bowl of well-preserved thin yellow noodles at an archaeological site in northwestern China. The noodles were said to be made from millet grains.

Through the millennia, noodle-making obviously found its way into Southeast Asia and countries have created a variety of noodle dishes to suit their own palates. Here are some that are must-try:



Soto (Brunei Darussalam)

Soto is a common soup name in Southeast Asian countries with Malay influence, including Brunei Darussalam. In Brunei, the beef-based soto is usually consumed with either rice or egg noodles. If you can't decide which noodle to take, mixing both noodles is also one of the best ways to enjoy the dish. Locally, it's called *soto kawin* (married). Soto Brunei does make a perfect marriage of its ingredients. With shredded chicken, sliced fish cakes, and hard boiled eggs thrown into the broth, soto Brunei is ready to be served.



Num Banh Chok Khmer (Cambodia)

This Khmer noodle dish is usually served for breakfast and afternoon snacks. It is very popular among Cambodian people and they usually have this dish during a family gathering and party. In 2019, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen campaigned for it to be the country's national dish. The rice noodle is made from fermented rice, ground with stone or wooden mills. It is usually topped with Samlor Proher, river fish-based soup that incorporates Prahok, lemongrass, turmeric, fingerroot, garlics, peanuts and coconut milk. A fistful of banana blossom, cucumber, water lily, bean sprout, green beans, mint leaf and chilli, and voilà, Num Banh Chok Khmer is ready to be enjoyed.



Mie Titi (Indonesia)

Originating from Makassar, South Sulawesi province, this noodle dish is named after the owner of a famous noodle stall in the city back in the 1970s. The noodle is fried until it is dry and soaked with thick chicken broth. With some vegetables, prawns, lime juice, and other toppings of your preference, the crunchiness of *mie titi* will definitely satisfy every hungry tummy.



Khao Poon (Lao PDR)

Also known as Lao laksa, *khao poon* is rich in herbs, fragrant spices, and vegetables. It is served on all occasions, but especially during the last day of *That Luang* festival in Vientiane.

The rice is first fermented for three days before cooking and pressing into noodles. Coconut curry broth, which consists of shredded chicken, fish, or pork seasoned with coconut milk, galangal, lemongrass, lime leaves, and chili, is poured over the noodles. Shredded cabbage, bean sprouts, banana blossom, mint leaves, and shallots complete the topping.



Char Kuey Teow (Malaysia)

Culinary researchers theorise that the dish originally came from China's province of Guangdong. The name itself is Hokkien for flat rice noodle.

The secret to a perfectly cooked *char kuey teow* is a slightly charred noodle

where the noodle is stir-fried at the highest heat with light or dark soy sauce, chili, prawns, deshelled cockles, bean sprouts, chinese chives, and eggs. The Penang variant of the dish uses thinner noodles, omits the dark sauce, and at times, uses duck eggs instead of chicken eggs.



Mohinga (Myanmar)

Mohinga is fish-based soup with rice noodle that can be found in every corner of the country. It is a national dish that locals enjoy anytime of the day.

Mohinga broth is made by using local catfish meat with an assortment of local spices such as lime, coriander, and lemongrass, or other ingredients that suit your liking. Garnishes range from hard-boiled egg slices, to crispy fritters and fried crullers. One rule: always use a soup spoon or a fork and spoon. No chopsticks, please.



Pancit Palabok (Philippines)

Palabok is one of the many types of pancit or noodle dishes available in the Philippines. Pancit—which comes from the Hokkien term *pian i sit* (food that is convenient or cooked fast)—is usually served during birthday celebrations as it is believed to symbolise long life.

Palabok consists of thin rice noodles; sauce made up of shrimp or pork stock, annatto powder, all-purpose flour, fish sauce, and ground black pepper; and toppings that include shrimps, pork cracklings, fish flakes, hard-boiled eggs, scallions, and calamansi. Palabok's other variant is *pancit luglug* which uses thicker noodles and has less toppings.



Laksa (Singapore)

The soul of Singapore *laksa* lies in its Peranakan style that mixes local spices and Chinese noodles. The spicy curry noodle soup is made from coconut milk fused with thick vermicelli, bean sprouts, tofu, prawns, and fishcake.

Laksa can be found in some other parts of Southeast Asia too, but the mouthwatering Singapore laksa's broth offers the perfect balance of spices and coconut milk that will make you crave for more.



Pad Thai (Thailand)

Perhaps the most well-recognised noodle dish in the region, *pad Thai* is a mainstay in Thai restaurants around the world. Contrary to common misconception, pad Thai did not become a national dish until it was decreed and promoted by the government in the mid-20th century. The then Thai government wanted to create a unique dish that would invoke a sense of national identity and at the same time, would preserve the rice stock of the country at a time of shortage.

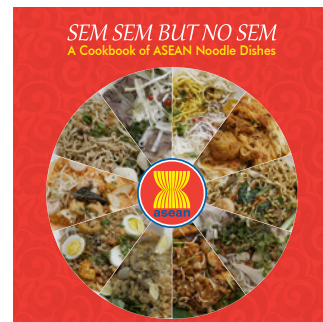
Pad Thai is made from rice noodles, eggs, peanuts, shrimp, tofu, and bean sprouts. The flavour profile is enhanced with fish sauce, palm sugar, tamarind pulp, and coriander. Fresh from the smoking wok, the food is ready to treat everyone's palates.



Phở (Viet Nam)

In the beginning, this most well-known Vietnamese dish was only sold in big cities like Ha Noi before spreading across the country. The flavours from one region to another may differ, but the secret to cooking *phở* is always in its broth, usually made from simmering

beef bones. To really bring out the flavour, various herbs and spices, like ginger, coriander, cardamom, and onion leaves, are added. Save some space in your tummy as one bowl of this rice noodle is never enough. ■



SEM SEM BUT NO SEM NOODLE FESTIVAL

Ten noodle dishes from ASEAN Member States were showcased at the *Sem Sem But No Sem* noodle dish mini festival on 18 March 2019, organised by the Philippines Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta. The Ambassadors of ASEAN Member States, collectively known as the Committee of Permanent Representatives to ASEAN, and their spouses showed how to cook the noodle dishes from their countries. Secretary-General of ASEAN Dato Lim Jock Hoi and his spouse Datin Chan Chin Ming, Ambassadors of ASEAN Dialogue Partners, and other members of diplomatic corps in Jakarta also attended the event.

The dishes presented at the festival are compiled in a cookbook, titled *Sem Sem But Not Sem: A Cookbook of ASEAN Noodle Dishes*. The cookbook features not only the recipes and cooking instructions, but also some trivia about the dishes. The recipes featured in this book reveal the rich history and cultural heritage of ASEAN countries. The cookbook is available for download on the ASEAN Secretariat website.

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The ASEAN

*Shwesandau Pagoda, Bagan,
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