

Press Statement
Working Group on Social ASEAN
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Adopt a Social ASEAN for a Life of Dignity for All!

Today marks the eve of the historic 30th ASEAN Summit at the Philippine International Convention Center in Manila, Philippines, hosted by the Government of the Philippines as Chair of ASEAN this year. ASEAN Heads of State and key government officials will tackle six priority issues. One of these is on a people-centered and people-oriented ASEAN - a critical theme that has a potential of creating significant impact on ordinary people's lives within the region.

Unfortunately, the ongoing process towards this goal has failed to fully involve grassroots organizations and other stakeholders through consultations and sharing of inputs on the substance of these priority issues.

Hence, also today, we –from thirty national and regional civil society organizations, trade unions, parliamentarians, migrants and various groups from vulnerable sectors in Southeast Asia, gather and unite to demand from our leaders to ensure a social dimension in the ASEAN integration.

Regional integration, the very essence of the ASEAN, will be meaningless without the perspectives of ordinary women, men, and vulnerable communities aspiring for a better quality of life, improved standard of living, and a life of dignity.

Specifically, we call on government leaders to adopt a "Social ASEAN", a concept that ensures sustainable jobs, workers' rights, adequate food, universal healthcare, education, water, energy, social security and affordable housing as fundamental components to regional integration.

The social dimension of regional integration, which focuses on decent work, social services, food and social protection measures, must no longer take a backseat to economic integration.

For decades, markets and profits have been prioritized over people's rights and demands. Neoliberal policies of market liberalization, deregulation and privatization have only led to people's loss of traditional livelihoods and means of survival, and further exploitation of workers. These have also resulted in people's diminished public access to essential services and social security.

As inequalities continue to widen, majority of the peoples in Southeast Asia suffer from economic and social deprivation, insecurity, social exclusion and oppression. More than 65% of the workforce in the region are in precarious conditions – without permanent and decent jobs, lack of access to social services and social security, and highly inadequate income.

Because government expenditure for social protection remains measly, less than 30% of the population have social protection. An average of only 3% of GDP per country in Southeast Asia goes to social protection expenditures. In three ASEAN countries, less than 2% of GDP is earmarked for social protection.

As integration efforts are taking place at a time when ASEAN member states are signing a slew of new free trade agreements especially under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, it is all the more important to guarantee that people's rights are respected, promoted and fulfilled.

Everyone in Southeast Asia must be able to benefit from regional integration, which must create opportunities for all. Adopting a Social ASEAN is a step towards the realization of this vision. To achieve a sustainable *Social ASEAN*, the following structural issues be addressed and considered in the decision-making processes of ASEAN governments and non-state actors:

1. Democratic, participatory and people-centered processes

ASEAN government should create conditions for successful public participation in matters that affect their political, economic, and social well-being. Trade unions, civil society organisations, and academia should be able to engage in established ASEAN processes, including the ASEAN Labour Ministers Meeting (ALMM), the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), the ASEAN Commission on Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), and other ASEAN-level committees created to formulate and implement the various social declarations.

2. Gender Equality

In line with international commitments, including the Beijing Platform of Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and a series of International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, concrete measures should be implemented in order to enable the social and economic empowerment of women. These include providing opportunities for skills development and vocational training as well as support for women entrepreneurs and women in leadership roles.

3. Protection of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups

Children and young people should be assured the care, assistance, education, and training that they need. They should be protected against negligence, violence, and exploitation. States should provide free public education to children and young people, including the disabled.

Governments should take necessary measures to provide **persons with disabilities** with education, vocational training, and guidance to enable them to access employment and livelihood opportunities.

Migrant workers and their families have the right to protection and assistance. This demands the full ratification and implementation – in terms of appropriate national and regional policies, institutions, and enforcement mechanisms – of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Furthermore, this also requires ASEAN member states to finalise a legally-binding ASEAN Framework Instrument on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers.

4. State duty to provide essential social services

Universal, affordable, and accessible quality healthcare, water, education, housing, and energy should be regarded as public goods that the State must provide. Privatization of these public goods must be reversed. Public-public partnership—state partnerships with non-profit groups like peoples' cooperatives or social enterprises – must be forged. As a matter of regional policy, public spending on healthcare and education should be raised to a minimum of 10 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).

5. Social protection for all

ASEAN governments should create and legislate comprehensive social protection systems that include, but not limited to living pensions for the elderly and the disabled, child allowances, maternity protections, and income guarantees during unemployment, sickness, and natural disasters.

6. Safe and affordable food and access to productive resources

People have the right to safe, affordable food produced through ecological and sustainable agricultural practices by small-scale farmers and food workers. Small-scale farmers, food workers, and their organisations should have a meaningful voice in the conversation and decision-making about how food is produced, how fisheries are maintained, and how land and natural resources are controlled and managed.

7. Ratification and implementation of ILO core labor standards

National level ratification and implementation of the ILO core labour standards must be done. Workers should have the right to organize and bargain collectively. Trade unions should be able to fulfill their role and responsibility to organize and unionise all workers, including migrant workers and workers in the informal economy.

ASEAN governments should promote stable and sustainable forms of employment. This would require present employment strategies through labour brokers, outsourcing, and subcontracting to be outlawed in the region.

These are the critical areas that the 30th ASEAN Summit must address. To guarantee these, existing ASEAN Declarations with a social dimension must be made binding on governments and the notion of non-interference set aside in the interests of the people.

Overall, we call on the Heads of State and delegates to the 30th ASEAN Summit to enact a Social ASEAN. We urge our leaders to work for more inclusive and accountable governments in partnership with all citizens towards social justice, sustainable development, and a life of dignity for all.

SaowalakThongkuay, ASEAN Disability Forum

TesBorgonos, ASEAN Services Employees Trade Union Council

Emily Beridico, Coalition of Services of the Elderly

DioscorroBenalla, Confederation of Older Person Association of the Philippines

Ana Maria R. Nemenzo, Network for Transformative Social Protection / Dignidad Alliance

SinapanSamydorai, Task Force on ASEAN Migrant Workers - MFA

Maris dela Cruz, Working Group on Social ASEAN