

A Call to ASEAN Governments to Introduce a Social Dimension to ASEAN Economic Integration

Background

In 2015, the ten member countries of ASEAN launched the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), an ambitious plan designed to integrate the diverse economies of the region. The stated aim is for ASEAN to operate as a formidable regional economic bloc, successfully integrated in the global economy, and able to reap its benefits and share in its prosperity.

Although the idea of shared prosperity sounds nice on paper, the reality on the ground suggests that the AEC framework is tilted towards serving business interests. In such a scheme, markets and profits are prioritized over the needs and rights of the people.

The ASEAN integration process is influenced by regional neoliberal interests affirmed by free trade agreements. Big businesses and transnational corporations are its main drivers and beneficiaries.

Market liberalization, deregulation and privatization have led to the loss of traditional livelihoods and means of survival, and further exploitation of workers. They have also led to diminished public access to affordable essential services, such as electricity, water, healthcare, and education.

Thus, while most of Southeast Asia have enjoyed economic boom, many people continue to experience rising joblessness and social insecurity, increasing poverty and vulnerability, widening inequality, and life-threatening impacts of severe environmental degradation.

Social ASEAN: The Missing Link in ASEAN Integration

We urge ASEAN governments to embrace a broader conception of regional integration by including 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 for ASEAN governments to adopt a social dimension to regional integration. We propose the notion of a Social ASEAN – where sustainable jobs, workers' rights, universal healthcare, education, water, energy, social security and affordable housing are integral components to the integration effort.

While ASEAN has committed to forming a socio-cultural community in addition to an economic one, the specific outlines of the social dimension of integration are vague. Economic integration is consistently prioritized over any social protection measure or benefit.

The ASEAN integration process cannot be a zero sum game where those at the top reap all the rewards.

All people in the region must be able to benefit from the regional integration process. It must create opportunities for all. We believe that adopting a truly meaningful social dimension in ASEAN's economic integration process will better address the demands of various stakeholders and interests in the region.

The need to incorporate a social dimension in ASEAN's integration process is urgent. Integration efforts are taking place at a time when ASEAN member states are signing a slew of new free trade agreements. This includes mega-trade pacts led by the United States and China – namely, the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

A social dimension in the integration process guarantees that people's needs and rights will be promoted, protected, and incorporated in trade agreements and other economic decisions. These agreements that are designed to liberalise our economies and regulate governments could otherwise unleash negative consequences for the people of the region.

The notion of a Social ASEAN is therefore collectively formulated by the people of ASEAN and their organisations, and reflects their aspirations and demands in the context of regional integration.

Defining Social ASEAN

A *Social ASEAN* is one where people's rights and demands stand above markets and profits, and where the benefits of regional integration are distributed in a fair manner between varying stakeholders.

A Social ASEAN calls on all ASEAN governments, socially responsible employers, trade unions, NGOs, and grassroots organisations to respect, promote, and realise, the core demands of a *Social ASEAN*, namely:

- a) To institute democratic and participatory processes at national and regional levels;
- b) To ensure gender equality and protect vulnerable and disadvantaged groups;
- c) To realise access to essential social services, especially universal healthcare, and social protection for all;
- d) To fulfill the right to food and productive resources, and
- e) To adopt all ILO core labor standards.

Building a *Social ASEAN* obliges governments to become more inclusive and accountable and to work for all citizens. Governments actively working with civil society can create a win-win situation, where people's interests and rights, social justice, sustainable development, and a life of dignity can be collectively realized.

The Agenda for a Sustainable Social ASEAN

In order to achieve a sustainable *Social ASEAN*, the following structural issues must be addressed and factored into the decision-making processes of ASEAN governments and non-state actors: This would require existing ASEAN Declarations with a social dimension to be made binding on governments and the notion of non-interference set aside in the interests of the people.

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

Gender equality contributes significantly to advancing economies and sustainable development. Despite recent progress in the region, gender inequality still exist in the treatment of men and women in employment, the gender pay gap, inadequate maternity protections, and discrimination against female workers due to their family responsibilities.

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. The full implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Elimination of Violence against Children (2013) will require region-wide establishment and implementation of domestic laws, policies, institutions, and enforcement mechanisms.

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 – thus facilitating their full integration and participation in society.

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 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 are public goods. The provisioning of these essential resources must be guaranteed and financed by the state, as they are connected to the survival, dignity, and development of individuals as well as society as a whole.

This calls for a reversal of the privatization of these public goods. It also calls for the forging of public-public partnership—state partnerships with non-profit groups like peoples’ cooperatives or social enterprises – to achieve more people-centered, transparent and accountable modes of social service delivery. 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

Social protection is a human right as well as an economic necessity. It is an instrument to manage risks, ensure fair distribution of income, social cohesion, poverty eradication, political stability, and drive growth by boosting productivity and domestic demand.

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.

ASEAN governments should consider setting up a regional social protection fund to help poorer countries in the region meet the basic costs of putting effective social protection systems into place.

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.

Social protection systems, industrial policies, and development measures should aim to improve the incomes of rural populations, protect the legal rights of peasants, and recognize the role of women in food production. Land, forests, and water are common resources that should be made accessible to all. This demands an end to multiple forms of dispossession.

7. Ratification and implementation of ILO core labor standards

National level ratification and implementation of the ILO core labour standards are essential to creating the conditions to achieve decent work. 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, to prevent abuse and exploitation.

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.

Monitoring, Reporting, and Enforcement of Social ASEAN

An ASEAN Social Scorecard

An ASEAN 'social scorecard', jointly designed by ASEAN governments and ASEAN organisations, could be used to monitor and track implementation progress of the various ASEAN declarations and measures to fully realise the various rights of ASEAN citizens as outlined in a Social ASEAN.

The 'social scorecard' mechanism will require ASEAN member states to report their progress annually.

The ASEAN Secretariat or an independent enforcement agency should be empowered to call on governments to make the necessary adjustments consistent with Social ASEAN. National contact points should be set up to implement this reporting system.

The aspirations and demands of The Agenda for a Social ASEAN have been articulated in various regional meetings of trade unions, civil society organisations, people movements, academia, and think-tanks over the past several years. A working group made up of national and regional organisations as well as individuals have been established to promote Social ASEAN.

Specifically, the Working Group will lobby ASEAN governments to realise the promise and vision espoused in this document.

-Working Group on Social ASEAN:

ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR)

ASEAN Services Employees Trade Union Council (ASETUC)

Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF)

Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC)

Migrant Forum Asia (MFA)

Monitoring Sustainability of Globalisation (MSN)

Network for Transformative Social Protection (NTSP)

Trade Union Rights Centre (TURC)