



Complementarities Initiative: An Instrument to Build Back Better

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Complementarities Initiative: The Progress of SDGs in ASEAN

In 2015, ASEAN launched the ASEAN Community with three pillars, which was a milestone and the culmination of the resilience and dynamics of ASEAN over the course of nearly half a century. In the same year, the United Nations also launched an optimistic vision, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a framework of cooperation that includes peace and prosperity for people and the planet, both now and for the future.

Several regional priorities that ASEAN highlighted in the ASEAN Community were also reflected in the SDGs. ASEAN identified complementarity between the ASEAN Community and the SDGs, so that those two agendas can be carried out in parallel. Even in declaring the ASEAN Community, ASEAN Leaders recognized the importance of creating synergy and complementarity between the two agendas, as explicitly stated in the ASEAN Vision 2025: *“we underline the complementarity of the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development with ASEAN Community building efforts to uplift the standards of living of our peoples”*.¹

ASEAN has been very dedicated to the implementation of the SDGs, and has since employed various processes to formalize the framework. Finally, at the High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue (HLBD) on Enhancing Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2017, ASEAN launched the Complementarities Initiative. Working together with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand as the ASEAN Coordinator for Sustainable Development Cooperation, the Complementarities Initiative seeks to bridge the similarities between



the ASEAN Community and the SDGs.² With the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including on the achievement of the SDGs, the Complementarities Initiative is more important than ever as an instrument to build back better.

HLBD and Other Progress

HLBD meetings play a significant role in fostering relationships and cooperation between ASEAN Member States and ASEAN's external partners. After successfully launching the Complementarities Initiative in the first year, HLBD meetings continued to be held annually to gather and discuss SDGs implementation in ASEAN.

One of the most significant progress of HLBD was the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue (ACSDSD) during the 3rd HLBD in 2019. ACSDSD was launched at the 35th ASEAN Summit 2019 in Thailand, and was envisioned to play an important role in promoting, facilitating, and coordinating efforts on sustainable development in the region.

The recent 4th HLBD was held via video conference in June 2020. Co-chaired by Thailand and UNESCAP, the meeting invited various external partners and highlighted that ASEAN needs to turn the challenges of COVID-19 into opportunities to achieve SDGs.³

Challenges

Even, with all the efforts made by ASEAN to achieve the SDGs, UNESCAP believes that the Asia Pacific region—Southeast Asia included—might not reach the 17 targets by the 2030 deadline based on current developments.⁴ A recent report by UNESCAP even stated that the region is expected to *"miss all measurable SDG targets related to other forms of poverty, hunger, gender equality and reduced inequalities within and between countries by 2030"*.⁵ According to the report,⁶ Southeast Asia is on track for several goals (Goal 2, 3, 4, 9), but the progress on the remaining goals seems to be stagnant, or even shows a negative trend. H.E. Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Under-Secretary-General of the UN and Executive Secretary of ESCAP, stated that if Asia and the Pacific continues working at the current trajectory, the SDGs will not be achieved by 2030. The region has to accelerate its progress to actually reach all SDGs' targets by 2030. She also highlighted the lack of data to measure the progress.⁷

Even before the pandemic, the region has gotten off track from achieving the SDGs' targets in time. With a development system that is not yet resilient and sustainable, the situation has been worsened by a global pandemic, which has significantly disrupted the implementation of several SDGs and even turned back years of progress.⁸ The crisis has disrupted almost all aspects of SDGs ranging from health





systems, education, poverty, economy, government institution, gender equality, food and nutrition, child labour, and other social economic impacts.

The COVID-19 pandemic is considered to be an “unprecedented wake-up call”⁹ to the world. This is a reminder of the importance of resilience, as one of the Complementarities Initiative’s targets, which the region has not yet achieved. This phenomenon has also shown how interconnected people are, which should force policymakers and stakeholders to revisit the region’s values and design a new area of development that balances economic, social, and environmental progress as envisioned by the SDGs.¹⁰

Recommendation to Build Back Better

The 4th HLBD also highlighted that the Complementarities Initiative can help with mitigating the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and strengthening regional resilience to future crises and disruptions.¹¹ As a regional institution, ASEAN has come a long way to finally launched the Complementarities Initiative and established ACSDSD together with its Work Plan. ASEAN could lead the region to achieve the SDGs target as a further effort to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic.

As the focus of ACSDSD will primarily be based on, yet not limited to, the six areas of cooperation under the Complementarities Roadmap—a continuation of Complementarities Initiative¹², ACSDSD could be a great instrument to accelerate the progress of SDGs and build back better towards a sustainable and resilient ASEAN. The work plan of ACSDSD, which has been adjusted in line with ASEAN’s priority during COVID-19, covers four areas of activities, which are (1) research and studies, (2) dialogue, (3) capacity-building, and (4) outreach and networking. This work plan could actually answer most of the problems that the SDGs face.

Firstly, ACSDSD could conduct research and studies not only to gather, monitor, and evaluate the data, but also to propose new findings and innovation needed. For example, 4th HLBD mentioned that a better monitoring and evaluation system is needed and that it would accelerate the implementation of SDGs. An official from UNESCAP also said that there is a lack of data to actually measure the progress.¹³

Secondly, tracing back to the value of SDGs and the ASEAN Community—leave no one behind, having a people-centered and people-oriented mechanism including, increasing the involvement of non-government parties in the dialogue process would make the issue of SDGs more mainstream in ASEAN. Exchange of best practices, knowledge, and experiences between government officials





and policymakers is important, but to actually gather additional thoughts from people of ASEAN, such as NGOs or think-tank experts, would also increase community engagement and include more perspectives in an inclusive sphere.

Lastly, in addition to capacity-building programs with more established institutions, outreach and networking is essential for new institutions to form and strengthen relations with external parties to better enhance the acceleration of the SDGs progress. It should also engage closely with the ASEAN Secretariat to integrate sustainable development in their strategy plans. ASEAN has emphasized the importance of promoting cooperation with ACSDSD in ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific document as ASEAN also supports the implementation of SDGs' targets that are aligned with ASEAN Community.¹⁴

Other than that, the regional levels is considered as the main bridge in connecting global and national level.¹⁵ ASEAN has been relatively successful in promoting the global development agenda into its regional agenda with its Complementarities Initiative. However, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), the COVID-19 pandemic has also emphasized the importance of integrating the SDGs at the national level.¹⁶ ASEAN needs to encourage Member States to incorporate the SDGs more into their development agenda to achieve a more resilient future.

Conclusion

The hit of COVID-19 should remind policymakers and government officials to adapt quickly and create a sustainable system for development. ASEAN has stepped forward in formally including and adjusting the SDGs to fit to ASEAN's agenda and institutional structure, which are the ASEAN Community and its 3 pillars. This is a great modality for ASEAN to move forward and use the existing framework and institutions during this difficult situation. Concretising Complementarities Initiative could create an enhanced regional resilience to future crises and disruptions both at the regional and national level.

ACSDSD could also be a great potential for speeding up the pandemic recovery. Based on the Complementarities Initiative's targets and values, ACSDSD could not only help the region to achieve SDGs and the ASEAN Community, but also to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 and build back better.



Endnotes

- 1 ASEAN (2015). *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together*.
- 2 UNESCAP (2017). *Complementarities Initiative*.
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- 4 The ASEAN Post (2019). *ASEAN not on track for SDG goals*.
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- 6 UNESCAP (2020). *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020*.
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- 8 UN/DESA (2020). *UN/DESA Policy Brief #81: Impact of COVID-19 on SDG progress: a statistical perspective*.
- 9 UN News (2020). *COVID-19 pandemic, an 'unprecedented wake-up call' for all inhabitants of Mother Earth*.
- 10 UNDP (2020). *COVID-19 and the SDGs*. <https://feature.undp.org/covid-19-and-the-sdgs/>
- 11 ASEAN (2020). *Co-Chairs' Summary of the 4th High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue on Enhancing Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.
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- 15 United Nations (2020). *2030 Agenda*.
- 16 WHO (2020). *COVID-19 and sustainable development goals*.





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