



REDUCING INEQUALITY IN THE DECADE OF ACTION TO ACHIEVE THE SDGs AND RECOVERY FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Disclaimer: This paper does not represent the views and opinions of the organizers of the symposium or of the participants.

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- ET11. Poverty levels and reversal in trends (if any)
- ET12. Digital access/penetration among individuals, rural vs. urban (by gender)

Acronyms and abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GDP	Gross domestic product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LMIC	Lower-middle-income country
MSME	Micro, small and medium-sized enterprise
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UMIC	Upper-middle-income country
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Executive summary

Reducing inequality is at the heart of leaving no one behind and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet inequality remains the greatest challenge to achieving sustainable development. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) SDGs 2021 report: *“The Asia-Pacific region has fallen short of the 2020 milestone for the 2030 Agenda. The region must accelerate progress and urgently reverse its regressing trends on some goals and targets to achieve its 2030 ambition.”* The report indicated that concerted efforts are needed to improve the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region’s performance to achieve the targets under Goal 10 (reducing inequality).

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered multiple forms of inequality and hit certain groups hardest, such as lower-income households, workers with lower education, minorities, immigrants, and women.¹

Income inequalities in the ASEAN region were increasing before the onset of the pandemic. There is little prospect of their being mitigated in the absence of renewed growth. Recovery is expected: according to the most recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) World Economic Outlook Update, the growth estimate for ASEAN is 3.1 percent in 2021 and the projection is 5.6 percent in 2022.²

A rise in inequality triggers an increase in the incidence of poverty. It is estimated that a 1 percent increase in the Gini Index in each country in 2020 would increase the number of additional poor people by around 15 percent—or around 152 million people. Going beyond income poverty, around 7.7 percent of the population of Southeast Asia are at risk of falling into multidimensional poverty as a result of the pandemic.³ In ASEAN, the rate of rural poverty is higher, with around 18 percent of rural people living below the poverty line.⁴

At regional level, ASEAN is currently implementing the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, which contains a comprehensive response, including measures to protect vulnerable groups. It is expected to contribute to avoiding widening gaps in society.

This Policy Brief has been prepared based on discussions at the 6th ASEAN–China–UNDP Symposium on the SDGs, guided by the theme ‘Reducing Inequality in the Decade of Action to Achieve the SDGs and Recovery from COVID-19 Pandemic’, jointly organized by the Senior Officials Meeting on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication (SOMRDPE), through the leadership of the Philippines, the Mission of the People’s Republic of China to ASEAN, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the ASEAN Secretariat. It outlines and elaborates on approaches to reducing inequality in the ASEAN region to achieve the SDGs.

Moreover, this paper discusses specific dimensions of the differential impacts on the population which cover five key issues: jobs, social protection, education, health and food security. The Policy Brief concludes by discussing an exit strategy and suggests a series of exit indicators that ASEAN countries may consider monitoring.

¹ International Monetary Fund, ‘World Economic Outlook: Managing Divergent Recoveries’, Washington, DC, April 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/03/23/world-economic-outlook-april-2021>.

² International Monetary Fund, ‘World Economic Outlook Update. Rising Caseloads, a Disrupted Recovery, and Higher Inflation. January 2022. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/01/25/world-economic-outlook-update-january-2022>

³ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, ‘Asia and Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021’, Bangkok, 2021.

⁴ ASEAN Secretariat, ‘ASEAN Sustainable Development Goals Indicators Baseline Report 2020’, Jakarta, 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/10/ASEAN-SDG-Indicator-Baseline-Report-2020.pdf>.

The impact of COVID-19 on economic and human well being

A survey by the Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI) suggests that intra-country inequalities in the ASEAN is of concern.⁵ The impacts of COVID-19 on various dimensions of economic and social wellbeing are striking:

Job losses. The pandemic led to lockdowns and supply disruptions, which contributed to 6.7 million job losses, in both the formal and informal sectors, between 2020 and 2021.⁶ Also, a significant number of workers exited the workforce, and women, young people and low-skilled workers in particular suffered from a decrease in working hours. The size of the impact has varied across countries, driven by several factors, including the ability to control the pandemic, as well as the stringency and duration of lockdown measures to reduce the spread of the virus. Often, the crisis disproportionately affected low-paid workers, thereby increasing wage and income inequalities.

Informality. The pandemic opened up an unprecedented jobs gap, but the high levels of informal workers (over 60 percent) without social security faced greater uncertainty than formal workers. In a survey of migrant workers in the ASEAN region, 97 percent of the unemployed migrant workers interviewed did not have access to any social security. Many workers who were originally in formal employment moved into informal employment, experiencing a deterioration in working conditions, which is not reflected in the job loss estimates.⁷

Moreover, the majority of the rural population are engaged in agriculture, and the vast majority have no or little social security. Pre-pandemic social protection coverage was fragmented in many countries and continues to be so in the post-COVID recovery, as it is still perceived as a cost rather than an investment and an engine for recovery and growth. Unemployment has increased, but practically no part of the workforce, including in the formal sector, receives unemployment benefits. Gaps also exist in the number of children/households receiving child/family cash benefits, and in the number of vulnerable people covered by social assistance.

Education and health impacts. Given the considerable inequality at school level, the effects of a year or more of lost face-to-face schooling can be serious, even though every government has tried to ensure access to online schooling. An ADBI survey in the ASEAN region (Morgan and Trinh, 2021) found that about 27 percent of children who stopped attending school could not fully participate in online learning programmes due to a weak/insufficient Internet connection and a lack of digital devices. Pre-existing gender inequalities further exacerbated this digital divide. In terms of health, the behaviour and choices of poorer and disadvantaged individuals put them on the front lines of infection during the pandemic, causing them to bear a disproportionate burden of health costs.

Food security. COVID-19 has threatened food security and undermined households' nutrition via overall stagnation in the economy and associated income shortfalls and job losses, particularly for migrant workers and poor households. Such job losses and declines in income typically result in consumers shifting towards 'caloric sufficiency' starch-based diets, at the expense of nutritious food. Such dietary shifts exacerbate already high rates of stunting in children under 5 years old and anaemia among women. In poorer ASEAN Member States—and poorer households in particular—such dietary shifts could have longer-term adverse impacts on maternal and child health, with knock-on complications for the incidence of stunting, mental health issues and educational attainment prospects in the long term (see table 14).

⁵ Morgan, Peter J.; Long Quang Trinh (2021) : Impacts of COVID-19 on households in ASEAN countries and their implications for human capital development, ADBI Working Paper Series, No. 1226, Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI), Tokyo

⁶ Viegela, C., and Phu Huynh, 'COVID-19 and the ASEAN labour market: Impact and policy response', ILO Policy Brief, International Labour Organization, Bangkok, August 2021.

⁷ International Labour Organization, 'COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy: Immediate responses and policy challenges', Geneva, 2020.

Suggested response measures

The following thematic approach can help in dealing with inequalities in the ASEAN region, both in general as well as related to COVID-19, to assist in achieving SDG 10. While SDG 10 is focused on reducing inequalities, the approaches discussed here will also assist progress on the other SDGs.

Theme 1: Ensuring equity through more jobs

The ASEAN region collectively had allocated nearly 16 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) to the fiscal stimulus response as of the end of May 2021 (Viegelahn and Phu, 2021). The range of support partially reflects public budgetary constraints. However, at country level, the fiscal action may need to increase, on the strength of domestic borrowing, given that fiscal deficits as a share of GDP are low by historical standards and international levels.

Second, the symposium highlighted differential impacts by gender, and the need to invest in building systems of the care economy to reduce the burden on women. If governments were to invest more in ensuring childcare for pre-school children, in addition to expanding access to pre-schools (which remains low), it would go a long way to ensuring that women, who were the worst affected in the labour market due to the pandemic, may more easily return to work.

Third, the symposium further highlighted the need for specific actions to support micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, which generate most non-farm jobs.

Theme 2: Bridging the recovery divide: Addressing informality and weak social protection systems in the labour market

First, ASEAN governments' expenditure on social protection (excluding health care) as a share of GDP suggests room for re-thinking. Second, governments need to consider building comprehensive social insurance systems to provide old-age, death and disability insurance and maternity benefits to all currently informal workers.

Theme 3: Inequality in education and health

Education. There needs to be a new focus, post-COVID, on bridging inequality through quality education, for which government spending is key. First, ASEAN may need to examine the potential for diverting some education funding to increase Internet access locally, and community access to computers with mobile broadband. It is critical that investments are also made to enhance the digital literacy of local communities to enable them to operate these platforms.

Second, the pandemic has resulted in massive income and health shocks for many households, with increases in unemployment and underemployment. Reductions in income and the need for greater health spending will make it difficult for some families to cover education costs over and above the already significant out-of-pocket spending prior to COVID-19. Therefore, education budgets may require some restructuring towards school education.

Third, funding will also be needed so that the impact of the pandemic does not fall disproportionately on girls and on children in poor and vulnerable households. This has the potential to widen already stark disparities in learning outcomes among children.

Fourth, it is important to take into account the needs of children with disabilities given pre-existing inequalities and the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic.

Fifth, as the pandemic begins to subside, and schools reopen, it will be critical to ensure that public schools are adequately funded and that they are prevented from seeking additional fees or contributions from parents. Education institutions will also require additional funding to implement new health and safety requirements, undertake the outreach activities needed to persuade students to return, and facilitate remedial teaching to minimize learning losses. School stipends, cash transfer programmes,

school meals and fee waivers can all help to encourage children to enrol and increase their attainment and learning.

Sixth, investment in digitalizing the education sector could prevent any setbacks in the event of further school closures, and also serve as an investment in equipping the young generation with appropriate skills for the 21st century as the labour market potentially shifts towards the gig and green economies.

Health-related measures. First, until effective vaccines and therapeutics are widely available and provided to all who need them, improving information on the pandemic's spread and containment with widespread testing will enhance the ability to identify and isolate new cases, thus reducing infection risks.

Second, health inequality in ASEAN is generally the result of limited government expenditure on public health infrastructure, and burdensome private health expenditure (mostly out of pocket, due to limited coverage by health insurance). Without increasing public spending on health, private expenses cannot decrease; such expenses can exacerbate inequality and poverty at the time of a once-in-a-century pandemic. Finally, primary and preventive health measures will need to be expanded.

Theme 4: Food security and minimizing the rural–urban divide in the time of COVID-19

One way to reduce extreme poverty and structural inequalities is through accelerated food systems transformation that is both pro-poor and inclusive. In rural areas in particular, the transformation of agri-food systems represents an opportunity for some of the poorest smallholders, who are not well integrated into food value chains. This integration of poor smallholders into food value chains could be better facilitated through public–private–producer partnerships and digitization of rural and agricultural value chains, which will provide opportunities to overcome poverty and structural inequalities.

Actions to improve agricultural productivity and relieve rural distress. First, governments could accelerate movements to digital transactions in wholesale and retail operations and at the border for both products and people. Second, governments could consider replacing input subsidies and output subsidies with direct income support for farming households. Third, safety nets could include migrants and food system workers. Fourth, there may be a need to explicitly include women in pandemic stimulus and adjustment policies. Fifth, governments could improve the coverage, granularity and timeliness of data on agriculture, food and nutrition to assist public and private decision-making on production, distribution and trade. Sixth, nationwide digitalization strategies need to be coupled with the identification of specific needs of rural communities to ensure impactful interventions.

Finally, at regional level, ASEAN might consider establishing a fund to support empowerment of rural people's organizations. Moreover, as ASEAN is currently in the process of developing a masterplan on rural development, it is suggested that the masterplan promote a comprehensive and cross-sectoral approach to transforming rural areas, especially addressing the nexus between agriculture, food security and rural development.

Theme 5: The lack of adequate data and the need for regular monitoring of an 'exit' strategy and indicators

Data gaps persist, at least at the international level (though the same data may be available at national level, we have no way of confirming this data availability). We show the latest available values for each indicator.

An exit strategy from COVID-19 requires a set of exit indicators from pandemic conditions—i.e. a set of socio-economic indicators that need to be monitored by each country. They must be quickly generated if they are not already being generated. In most cases, the fast-moving indicators should cut across a variety of economic and human development indicators. Of prime significance is transparent data generation on these indicators in each country with the required periodicity.

There is a need to enhance statistical systems and the availability of data to monitor progress, design targeted interventions and enhance accountability. Policymakers, for instance, should know in which areas progress has been made, which groups are furthest behind, and which types of programme should be designed. ASEAN Member States should also use opportunities arising from technology such as big data in collecting, managing, and presenting data.

Background

Reducing inequality is at the heart of leaving no one behind and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet inequality remains the greatest challenge to achieving sustainable development. The 2019 ‘Human Development Report’ comprehensively discusses how inequality is an obstacle to human development and how individuals are placed in disadvantageous situations largely due to their circumstances such as sex, religion, race and place of birth, among others.⁸

The ‘Asia and Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021’ indicated that concerted efforts are needed to improve the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region’s performance to achieve the targets under Goal 10 (reducing inequality). Special attention is required to reverse the trend under Target 10.7 (safe migration and mobility).⁹

An increase in the Gini Index, indicating a rise in income inequality, was recorded for two ASEAN countries (Indonesia and Lao PDR).¹⁰ A deeper look into the state of inequality in the region shows a more diverse picture. This is the case, for instance, for gender-based inequality. On average, ASEAN nearly reached gender parity between males and females in gross enrolment in primary education (see table 11ii), with minimal or no inequality in access to primary education in all ASEAN Member States.¹¹ However, overall gender-based inequality remains a major issue for many countries in the region. According to the Global Gender Gap Report, which measures the gender gap from 0 (imparity) to 1 (parity), the overall score in five ASEAN Member States remains below 0.7.¹²

Studies indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate and deepen inequalities unless policymakers take adequate and immediate action. A study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) suggests that the impacts of COVID-19 on inequality will be stronger than those of previous pandemics faced by the global community.¹³ The negative impacts might even persist for a longer time and lead to intergenerational inequality. This is especially true in the case of inequality in vaccine roll-out among nations.

A rise in inequality triggers an increase in the incidence of poverty. It is estimated that a 1 percent increase in the Gini Index in each country in 2020 would increase the number of additional poor people by around 15 percent—or around 152 million people.¹⁴ Going beyond income poverty, around 7.7 percent of the population of Southeast Asia are at risk of falling into multidimensional poverty as a result of the pandemic.¹⁵ It is important to note that the rate

⁸ United Nations Development Programme, ‘Human Development Report 2019, Beyond Income, beyond Averages, beyond Today: Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century’, New York, 2019, <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>.

⁹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, ‘Asia and Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021’, Bangkok, 2021.

¹⁰ ASEAN Secretariat, ‘ASEAN Key Figures 2020’, Jakarta, 2020, https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ASEAN_Key_Figures_2020.pdf.

¹¹ ASEAN Secretariat, ‘ASEAN Sustainable Development Goals Indicators Baseline Report 2020’, Jakarta, 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/10/ASEAN-SDG-Indicator-Baseline-Report-2020.pdf>.

¹² World Economic Forum, ‘Global Gender Gap Report 2021’, Geneva, March 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>.

¹³ International Monetary Fund, ‘Will COVID-19 Have Long-Lasting Effects on Inequality? Evidence from Past Pandemics’, IMF Working Paper, Washington, DC, May 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2021/05/01/Will-COVID-19-Affect-Inequality-Evidence-from-Past-Pandemics-50286>.

¹⁴ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, ‘Asia and Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021’, Bangkok, 2021.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

of rural poverty in the ASEAN region is high, with around 18 percent of rural people living below the poverty line.¹⁶

Yet without robust policies, reducing inequality is not impossible. For instance, ASEAN Member States have shown promising progress in achieving SDG 10, especially Target 10.2 (social, economic, and political inclusion) and 10.4 (fiscal and social protection policies)¹⁷. It is also important to share, exchange and consolidate good practices in reducing inequality across ASEAN Member States.

At regional level, ASEAN has also undertaken collective efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19. Member States are currently implementing the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, which contains a comprehensive response, including measures to protect vulnerable groups. It is expected to contribute to addressing widening inequalities in the region.

This Policy Brief was prepared based on discussions at the 6th ASEAN–China–UNDP Symposium on the SDGs, guided by the theme ‘Reducing Inequality in the Decade of Action to Achieve the SDGs and Recovery from COVID-19 Pandemic’, jointly organized by the Senior Officials Meeting on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication (SOMRDPE) through the leadership of the Philippines, the Mission of the People’s Republic of China to ASEAN, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the ASEAN Secretariat. It outlines and elaborates on approaches to reducing inequality in the ASEAN region to achieve the SDGs and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Evidence suggests that inequalities in ASEAN were increasing before the onset of COVID-19¹⁸, and there is little prospect of their being mitigated in the absence of renewed growth. Growth has slowed to varying extents in the ASEAN region, but the decrease is much worse on the whole than after the Asian economic crisis of 1998 and the global economic crisis of 2009. The economies of the ASEAN region were growing at an even pace after recovering from the global economic crisis, until the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020 (IMF, 2021).¹⁹

Unexpectedly, ASEAN economies found that gross domestic product (GDP) contracted in 2020 for the first time in a long time (see Table 1), and GDP growth slowed significantly. According to the most recent IMF World Economic Outlook Update²⁰, the growth estimate for ASEAN in 2021 is 3.1 percent and the projection for 2022 is 5.6 percent. This will, of course, depend on various factors, including the uncertain dynamics of the pandemic. But the

¹⁶ ASEAN Secretariat, ‘ASEAN Sustainable Development Goals Indicators Baseline Report 2020’, Jakarta, 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/10/ASEAN-SDG-Indicator-Baseline-Report-2020.pdf>.

¹⁷ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, ‘Asia and Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021’, Bangkok, 2021.

¹⁸ Asian Development Bank Institute, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and International Labour Organization, ‘Labor Migration in Asia: Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis and the Post-Pandemic Future’, 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_784823.pdf; International Monetary Fund, ‘Navigating waves of new variants: Pandemic Resurgence slows the recovery. Regional Economic Outlook for Asia and the Pacific’, Washington, DC, October 2021.

¹⁹ International Monetary Fund, ‘Navigating waves of new variants: Pandemic Resurgence slows the recovery. Regional Economic Outlook for Asia and the Pacific’, Washington, DC, October 2021.

²⁰ International Monetary Fund, ‘World Economic Outlook Update. Rising Caseloads, a Disrupted Recovery, and Higher Inflation. January 2022.

contraction implies that the fiscal space available to most countries will still be constrained, even though the pandemic response will demand more spending.

All ASEAN Member States have a Human Development Index (HDI) in the medium, high or very high category (see Table 2). However, when we adjust for inequality in the dimensions that constitute the HDI (income, health and education status), there is a significant loss in the relatively impressive HDI levels. This clearly suggests that inequalities are considerable in almost all the countries.

To better understand these impacts, the Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI) carried out computer-assisted telephone interviews of households in eight Asian Development Bank developing member countries: Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam. The empirical results suggest that intra-country inequality in ASEAN is of concern: various household characteristics, including household income class (before COVID-19), household demographic factors and COVID-19-induced factors such as having at least one person who lost their job or being located in lockdown areas, all affected the likelihood of a decline in income.²¹

This Policy Brief, which takes into account discussions at the symposium, focuses on which inequalities in the region need priority attention. Inequality is conceptualized as prevailing in five domains: income inequality as a result of impacts of the pandemic on income and the labour market; social protection; education; health; and food security.

This paper has six sections. Section 2 examines the first theme: ensuring equity, by reversing the job losses caused by the pandemic. It addresses the question of how jobs lost can be revived. Section 3 addresses a structural source of inequality in ASEAN, in respect of the quality of employment: roughly two thirds of the workforce are in informal employment, while the remaining third have formal employment.²² COVID-related joblessness can entrench already high informality (60–65 percent) in the ASEAN workforce. There is considerable scope for extending social insurance to the informal workforce.

Section 4 examines the unequal impacts of COVID-19 on different groups of people in the education and health sectors, and makes suggestions about how these inequalities can be redressed. Section 5 addresses a final theme: how the pandemic has affected the food security of some segments of the population, but not of others. What is the nature of food security? And how was it affected in ASEAN countries? It also examines the rural–urban divide. Finally, Section 6 discusses an exit strategy from the pandemic's impact, with a focus on data requirements—a set of socio-economic indicators that need to be monitored by each country.

Tables 1–15 feed into the analysis of the five themes of the paper.

Theme 1: Ensuring equity through more decent jobs

The pandemic led to lockdowns and supply disruptions, which contributed to job losses. The International Labour Organization (ILO) found that, in 2020, the ASEAN region recorded working-hour losses of 8.4 percent relative to the fourth quarter of 2019, which is only marginally lower than the global losses of 8.8 percent and slightly higher than the losses in the

²¹ P.J. Morgan and L.Q. Trinh, 'Impacts of COVID-19 on Households in ASEAN Countries and Their Implications for Human Capital Development', ADBI Working Paper 1226, Asian Development Bank Institute, Tokyo, 2021, <https://www.adb.org/publications/impacts-covid-19-households-asean-countries>.

²² Viegelahn, C., and Phu Huynh, 'COVID-19 and the ASEAN labour market: Impact and policy response', ILO Policy Brief, International Labour Organization, Bangkok, August 2021.

whole Asia-Pacific region of 7.9 percent.²³ The working hours lost in the region due to the pandemic are equivalent to the working time of about 24 million full-time workers, assuming a 48-hour working week. In the first two quarters of 2021, the ASEAN region is estimated to have seen working-hour losses of 6.1 percent and 6.2 percent, respectively, relative to the fourth quarter of 2019.²⁴

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) has presented the labour share of income prior to the pandemic for most ASEAN countries, and finds it was falling between 2005 and 2017—i.e. inequality in the labour market was already high.²⁵ With massive job losses, the pandemic is likely to have worsened this dimension of inequality.

The size of the impact has varied across countries.²⁶ These differences are driven by several factors, including the ability to control the pandemic, as well as the stringency and duration of lockdown measures to reduce the spread of the virus. Also, countries' capacities to provide fiscal stimulus to their economies (see Table 3) and to keep workers in employment have differed vastly.

Moreover, economic structure is a factor, as the agriculture sector has been less vulnerable to the pandemic than tourism-related industries.²⁷ Some countries have been affected more than others due to their participation in global supply chains. As consumer demand has decreased, jobs in global supply chains for manufacturing, located in the ASEAN region, have suffered adverse impacts.²⁸

Overall, there are an estimated 83 million jobs in global supply chains for manufacturing in the eight ASEAN countries for which estimates are available—representing approximately 28 percent of total employment.²⁹ In April 2021, an estimated 18 million of these jobs endured a significant adverse impact, and a further 35 million witnessed a medium adverse impact, due to a drop in consumer demand for manufacturing products.

While employment in the ASEAN region had been on a steady upwards trajectory, largely driven by demographic trends, the COVID-19 pandemic has reversed it. In 2020, there were 10.6 million (or 3.2 percent) fewer workers in employment than expected in a no-pandemic scenario.³⁰ In 2021 and 2022, the employment gap in the region relative to the no-pandemic scenario is projected to remain at 9.3 million and 4.1 million jobs, respectively. This

²³ Viegelahn, C., and Phu Huynh, 'COVID-19 and the ASEAN labour market: Impact and policy response', ILO Policy Brief, International Labour Organization, Bangkok, August 2021.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ In Viet Nam, it fell between 2004 and 2017 from 47 percent to 40 percent; in Myanmar from 47 percent to 44 percent; in the Philippines from 35 percent to 25 percent; in Lao PDR from 50 percent to 45 percent; in Indonesia from 42 percent to 38 percent; and in Brunei it remained at 45 percent (UNESCAP presentation at the 6th ASEAN–China–UNDP Symposium, 7 December 2021).

²⁶ In 2020, the Philippines saw the largest working-hour losses, of 13.6 percent. In contrast, working hours in countries such as Viet Nam, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam and the Lao People's Democratic Republic decreased by only 4.3–4.5 percent. The decreases in other countries in the region were between these extremes.

²⁷ International Labour Organization, 'ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work', Geneva, 2021.

²⁸ For example, Viet Nam has grown in recent years to become the second-largest supplier of apparel and footwear to the United States after China, but supplies were disrupted by lockdowns. Viet Nam made it through the first part of the pandemic relatively unscathed, but with the Delta variant on the rampage, it highlighted the uneven distribution of vaccines globally and the threat that new outbreaks pose to the world's economy (Paddock and Doan, 2021).

²⁹ Viegelahn, C., and Phu Huynh, 'COVID-19 and the ASEAN labour market: Impact and policy response', ILO Policy Brief, International Labour Organization, Bangkok, August 2021.

³⁰ Ibid.

is unprecedented. Even during previous economic crises such as the Asian financial crisis of 1998 or the global economic crisis of 2008–2009, employment had always been on the rise in the ASEAN region.

Most of the 6.7 million workers who left employment in 2020 went into economic inactivity (i.e. left the labour force), which increased by 4.8 million people compared to 2019.³¹ Some of those workers might have been discouraged from searching for a new job, and others—in many cases, women—might have been forced to give up employment because of unpaid care responsibilities as schools closed.

There are many inequalities embedded in the nature of these job losses. Women and young workers were affected most severely, losing more employment than their male counterparts, globally as well as in the ASEAN region.³² More specifically, female employment in the ASEAN region in 2020 was 3.9 percent lower than the expected level in the absence of the crisis, but for men it was 2.7 percent lower.³³

Likewise, young workers have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic. Youth employment losses were 6.2 percent, compared with 2.8 percent for adults, with many young workers moving into either unemployment or inactivity. The share of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) increased between 2019 and 2020 in large parts of the ASEAN region, including in Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam, in line with global trends.³⁴

There were also inequalities in respect of which regions were affected, and who within countries was more affected. In the ASEAN region, 7.8 percent of labour income was lost in 2020, which corresponds to US\$100 billion (using 2019 market exchange rates) or 3.3 percent of the region's GDP in 2019.³⁵ This drop was slightly smaller than global income losses, but higher than regional Asia-Pacific income losses. Often, the crisis disproportionately affected low-paid workers, thereby increasing wage and income inequalities.³⁶ Working-hour losses and job losses led to their risk of falling into poverty.

Suggested actions

The ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, adopted at the 37th ASEAN Summit on 12 November 2020, lays out a clear implementation plan that “serves as the consolidated exit strategy from the COVID-19 crisis”.³⁷ Its areas of focus are: agricultural productivity; informal and gig employment; labour migration; support for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs); occupational safety and health; skills development; social dialogue; and social protection.

To counter the disequalizing economic effects of the pandemic, the ASEAN region collectively had allocated nearly 16 percent of GDP to the fiscal stimulus response as of the end of May 2021.³⁸ The range in the magnitude of the fiscal policy response in each country

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ The inference is drawn based on data for south-east Asia as a group. It is not synonymous with ASEAN as the former includes Timor-Leste. However, with a total population of 1.3 million and GDP of \$4.5 billion (World Bank, 2021), its inclusion will have minor analytical implications to the ASEAN outcome.

³⁴ International Labour Organization, ‘ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work’, Geneva, 2021.

³⁵ Viegelaan, C., and Phu Huynh, ‘COVID-19 and the ASEAN labour market: Impact and policy response’, ILO Policy Brief, International Labour Organization, Bangkok, August 2021.

³⁶ International Labour Organization, ‘COVID-19, Vaccinations and Consumer Demand: How Jobs are Affected Through Global Supply Chains’, Geneva, 2021.

³⁷ ASEAN Secretariat, ‘ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework’, Jakarta, November 2020.

³⁸ Viegelaan, C., and Phu Huynh, ‘COVID-19 and the ASEAN labour market: Impact and policy response’, ILO Policy Brief, International Labour Organization, Bangkok, August 2021.

has been wide, however, partially reflecting public budgetary constraints.³⁹ This situation calls for increased intra-ASEAN cooperation and solidarity to foster a robust recovery across the entire region. Fiscal deficits are manageable in the region, and debt-to-GDP ratios are not forbidding (see Exit Table 1); governments can borrow more domestically. This is an almost war-like situation, which requires creative thinking. In any case, there is not a single country in the world that has not increased borrowing. In fact, fiscal stimuli in the emerging market economies have averaged 4.7 percent of GDP⁴⁰, and ASEAN countries need to explore the possibility of greater domestic borrowing. Providing that the borrowed funds are used for capital investment, the return over time will mean that the investment pays for itself.⁴¹

ASEAN Member States had announced 133 social protection measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as of mid-May 2021.⁴² Of the various types of social protection measures, special allowances and grants (for example, cash transfers to low-income households) accounted for the largest proportion (20.3 percent), followed by income and employment protection (15.8 percent).⁴³

Income and employment protection schemes included temporary wage subsidy programmes introduced during the crisis to effectively retain jobs, sustain the essential employer–employee relationship and boost consumption. Sizeable investments were made in such policies in some countries.⁴⁴

However, given that the labour market impact of the pandemic has differed by sector, governments will now need to focus on sectors where the jobs losses have been the worst, including contact-based services, transportation and tourism. Tourism has been severely affected; this is serious because most countries in the ASEAN region are heavily dependent on international tourism. Exit Table 2 shows the scale of the loss in foreign exchange earnings from tourism as a share of GDP between 2019 and 2020. The contribution of tourism as a proportion of GDP fell by half or more between the two years. The number of tourism- and travel-related jobs fell by 10–25 percent in all the lower-middle-income countries (LMICs) and upper-middle-income countries (UMICs) in the region (see Exit Table 2).

However, some countries have taken specific action in tourism that others can emulate. In July 2021, Thailand began a campaign to start reviving its crucial tourism industry by letting visitors who follow strict COVID-19 protocols roam freely on the resort island of Phuket. The

³⁹ For example, at the upper end of the scale, Malaysia and Singapore had invested around 30 percent of GDP to counter the COVID-19 crisis. In contrast, both Myanmar and the Lao People's Democratic Republic had announced fiscal stimulus packages of less than 1 percent of GDP.

⁴⁰ This data is based on the IMF Fiscal Monitor, various issues, and cited in Mehrotra (2021).

⁴¹ Governments across North America and Europe have borrowed, as they have in emerging market economies. See data analysed in Mehrotra (2021) based on the IMF Fiscal Monitor and other sources.

⁴² Viegelahn and Phu, *ibid.*

⁴³ International Labour Organization, 'Experiences of ASEAN Migrant Workers during COVID-19', ILO Brief, Geneva, 3 June 2020, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_746881.pdf.

⁴⁴ In Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, for example, the temporary schemes amounted to 1.1 percent, 2.3 percent and 4.6 percent of GDP, respectively (International Labour Organization, 'COVID-19 and Employment Protection Policies: A Quantitative Analysis of the Asia-Pacific Region', Geneva, 2021). The employment support schemes in many ASEAN countries were used to assist the most vulnerable and hardest-hit segments of the labour market. They included support for MSMEs in Brunei Darussalam and the Philippines, and garment manufacturing and tourism in Cambodia, which predominantly employ women, and low-paid workers in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand (Viegelahn, C., and Phu Huynh, 'COVID-19 and the ASEAN labour market: Impact and policy response', ILO Policy Brief, International Labour Organization, Bangkok, August 2021).

so-called ‘Phuket Sandbox’ programme⁴⁵ effectively turned Thailand’s largest island into a quarantine zone for overseas tourists who were fully vaccinated and had negative test results.⁴⁶ Hotel operators and owners of small businesses say the programme has helped the ravaged local economy, and other Southeast Asian countries with resort islands are considering emulating it.

Second, if necessary, governments may need to consider initiating public works with the government as an employer of last resort, for a limited period, at least until the economy fully revives. Such actions can be taken by local governments in both rural and urban areas, supported by the central government, until the economy recovers.

Third, a new focus on the low-carbon and gig economies provides opportunities for more employment (and employment growth), including for women and young people. Governments will need to explore such possibilities.⁴⁷ One solution is to sustainably manage natural forests, which has multiple benefits from water and air filtration to flood prevention. Well-designed payment for ecosystem services, as in Viet Nam, can help to conserve forests and the services they provide, while also benefiting local livelihoods and communities.⁴⁸

Fourth, digitalization is now one of the key factors shaping the picture of inequality. ASEAN has supported various initiatives with a view to narrowing digital divides. The ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 includes ‘digitally inclusive society’ as one of its desired outcomes. It is important to foster inclusive digital literacy as part of human resources development while at the same time building more digital infrastructure and enabling accessibility.

Fifth, an important action is to boost digital-ready MSMEs. The pandemic has promoted digital practices, including in business. It is important to enhance the digital capacity of MSMEs and ensure no MSME is left behind in using digital economic opportunities. The number of MSMEs is quite high in the region, and they have the potential to foster economic recovery. Other opportunities include the high number of Internet users, the growth of online spending, and the large young population.

Beyond readiness for digitalization, governments need to strengthen other interventions to support MSMEs, such as fostering financial inclusion and considering the provision of interest-free loans, especially for those MSMEs hit hardest by the pandemic.

Theme 2: Bridging the inequality in quality of work: Addressing informality through improved social protection

⁴⁵ See Hannah Beech and Muktita Suhartono, ‘Thailand opens a holiday island to vaccinated tourists’, *New York Times*, 22 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/world/thailand-phuket-sandbox-quarantine.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁴⁶ If they continued to test negative for seven days, they could visit certain other islands; after 14 days, they could go anywhere in Thailand.

⁴⁷ Deforestation and the destruction of topsoil have led to costly, catastrophic flooding—witness the 2011 floods in Thailand.

⁴⁸ Fossil fuel subsidies, which promote polluting technologies and inefficient energy use, cost the region about US\$51 billion in 2012, equivalent to roughly 11 percent of all general government spending. Indonesia has the region’s largest fossil fuel subsidy programme, amounting in 2012 to about 15 percent of general government expenditures and 60 percent of its public expenditures on education and health. Reforming these subsidies could improve the environment, set countries on a more sustainable path and free up spending for education, health and other poverty reduction measures (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, ‘Towards Green Growth in Southeast Asia Solutions for Policy Makers’, Paris, 2014, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/environment-development/Final%20SE%20Asia%20Brochure%20low%20res.pdf>).

Employment losses have affected both formal and informal workers, but the impact on informal workers has been disproportionately higher. Table 4 shows that informality remains high across the entire workforce. From the perspective of workers, informality is defined as those without social insurance.⁴⁹ The share of informal workers in the total workforce, including agriculture, is as follows: Cambodia 93.1 percent (89.8 percent excluding agriculture); Myanmar 85.7 percent (82.3 percent); Indonesia 85.6 percent (80.2 percent); Viet Nam 76.2 percent (57.9 percent); and Brunei 35.7 percent. There is practically no difference between men's and women's level of participation in the informal economy in all countries, except in Lao PDR (90.4 percent for women vs. 83.1 percent for men).

As shown in Table 4, the majority of these informal workers in ASEAN economies work in the informal sector and lack social insurance, as is the case in the rest of the world. However, there are also many informal workers in the formal sector.⁵⁰

Tables 5i and 5ii examine social protection in the ASEAN region, which is an obvious source of inequality between and within ASEAN countries.⁵¹

The pandemic has led to unprecedented job losses in the midst of such high levels of informality. Inevitably, informal workers are unequally prepared to face the labour market; lacking social security, they face greater uncertainty. Many workers who were originally in formal employment have moved into informal employment, experiencing a deterioration in working conditions, which is not reflected in the estimates of job losses.⁵² This trend in the region is consistent with the global trend of workers losing formal jobs (ILO, 2021).⁵³

Suggested actions to mitigate the effects of labour market informality

The ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, adopted at the 37th ASEAN Summit on 12 November 2020, lays out a clear implementation plan that “serves as the consolidated exit strategy from the COVID-19 crisis”.⁵⁴ Among its priorities for labour are: improving agricultural productivity; informal and gig employment; labour migration; MSME support; occupational safety and health; skills development; social dialogue; and social protection.

National policy responses in ASEAN are unprecedented. Sizeable investments have been made in employment and income protection policies in some countries. In Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, for example, the temporary schemes amounted to 1.1 percent, 2.3 percent and 4.6 percent of GDP, respectively.⁵⁵ Employment support schemes in many ASEAN countries have been used to assist the most vulnerable and hardest-hit segments of the labour market. They include support for MSMEs in Brunei Darussalam and the Philippines, garment

⁴⁹ Informal workers could also be those who lack entitlement to paid annual or sick leave, lack a written employment contract or who are engaged in casual/temporary work. However, the sharp dividing line is social insurance coverage. These definitions derive from the International Conference of Labour Statistics 1993 and 2003, conducted every five years by the International Labour Organization.

⁵⁰ As many as 22 percent of all informal workers in Brunei (31.9 percent of the total workforce) are in the formal sector, without social insurance. Brunei is an exception, since 80–90 percent of informal workers in the remaining ASEAN countries are in the informal sector.

⁵¹ While high-income Singapore has 100 percent of its population covered by at least one social protection benefit (column 1), that proportion is much lower in even the UMICs: Thailand 68 percent; Indonesia 27.8 percent; Malaysia 27.3 percent; and the other high-income country, Brunei, 34.1 percent. The proportion is even lower in the LMICs: the Philippines 36.7 percent; Lao PDR 12.1 percent; Myanmar 6.3 percent; and Cambodia 6.2 percent.

⁵² International Labour Organization, ‘COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy: Immediate responses and policy challenges’, Geneva, 2020.

⁵³ International Labour Organization, ‘ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work’, Geneva, 2021.

⁵⁴ ASEAN Secretariat, ‘ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework’, Jakarta, November 2020.

⁵⁵ International Labour Organization, ‘COVID-19 and Employment Protection Policies: A Quantitative Analysis of the Asia-Pacific Region’, Geneva, 2021.

manufacturing and tourism in Cambodia, which predominantly employ women, and low-paid workers in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.⁵⁶ The fiscal stimulus has been significant (i.e. above-the-line measures for the health and non-health sectors post-COVID as a share of GDP are presented in Table 3).

ASEAN countries have undertaken a range of social protection measures in response to COVID-19 (as noted above). However, the picture that emerges from the columns of Table 5 shows a highly fragmented pre-pandemic social protection system in many countries. It is possible that social protection could still be perceived as a cost rather than an investment and engine for recovery and growth. Unemployment has increased, but practically no part of the workforce, including in the formal sector, receives unemployment benefits.⁵⁷

The proportion of people above retirement age receiving a pension is low in all countries except Singapore and Brunei.⁵⁸ There is a case now to expand access to pensions, to recover more resiliently and equitably, since those who are near retirement age are unlikely to find new employment when the economy revives.

What would have been most beneficial during a shock such as the pandemic are children/households receiving child/family cash benefits or vulnerable people covered by social assistance (the last two columns in Table 5), but here too the gaps existing prior to COVID-19 were significant. These gaps could be filled, to reduce inequality. The proportion of vulnerable people covered by social assistance is extremely low across the region, with a few exceptions.

Expenditure on social protection, excluding health, in ASEAN countries is still low compared to a world average of 10.8 percent.⁵⁹ ASEAN governments' expenditure on social protection (excluding health care) as a share of GDP is shown in Table 5ii. Viet Nam is a high achiever among the LMICs (4.3 percent of GDP) and is doing even better than UMICs and the two high-income countries in respect of expenditure on social protection as a share of GDP. Thailand and Malaysia are also high performers among the UMICs, at 3 percent and 4.2 percent of GDP, respectively (Table 5ii).

Millions of international migrants, particularly low-skilled migrant workers, usually lack any social protection. As a result of migrant repatriations, job losses and job suspensions, remittance shortfalls for ASEAN members are estimated to be US\$6–12 billion (ADB, 2020).⁶⁰ In many instances, employers held migrants' passports and other documents, limiting migrants' ability to remove themselves from an abusive or exploitative situation. Increased incidences of deferred, reduced, withheld or non-payment of wages by employers were also experienced by migrant workers.⁶¹ Governments will need to monitor such activities by employers; this may possibly require cooperation at ASEAN regional level.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ According to ILOSTAT (2020), 66 percent of unemployed people in Viet Nam are receiving unemployment benefits. However, coverage is as low as 7.6 percent in Lao PDR and 3 percent in Malaysia, and benefits are not available in the remaining countries (Table 5i).

⁵⁸ In Thailand (an UMIC) it is 40.9 percent, and in Lao PDR (an LMIC) 6.3 percent. Coverage is between these extremes in the other countries in the region.

⁵⁹ ILO, World Social Protection Report 2021, International Labour Organization, Geneva.

⁶⁰ Asian Development Bank Institute, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and International Labour Organization, 'Labor Migration in Asia: Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis and the Post-Pandemic Future', 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_784823.pdf

⁶¹ Asian Development Bank Institute, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and International Labour Organization, 'Labor Migration in Asia: Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis and the Post-

For a better recovery, fair wages and decent working and living conditions for migrant workers are key considerations. The pandemic has highlighted how vulnerabilities of migrant workers can have repercussions for economic growth and recovery of the whole economy. Governments need to increase expenditure on social protection while ensuring synergies with other policies such as fair wages and decent working and living conditions to address large coverage gaps, particularly targeting vulnerable populations, including women, informal sectors workers, migrants, and children, who are only partially covered by the current social protection system.

Theme 3: Inequality in education and health

Education

All ASEAN countries provide at least some level of free and compulsory basic education. Education system structures vary, and net enrolment rates are high in all of them, even at upper secondary school level (ISCED 3). However, the problems appear when we dig deeper and assess achievement of minimum learning proficiency. At the end of lower secondary education, the learning levels leave much to be desired: in Cambodia, 38 percent of children achieve minimum proficiency in reading, and 17 percent in mathematics; in Indonesia, the proportion is 45 percent for reading and 31 percent for maths; in Malaysia, 73 percent and 42 percent, respectively; and in Thailand, 50 percent and 46 percent, respectively. For the six countries for which data are available, learning levels are highest in Viet Nam (86 percent and 81 percent, respectively) and Singapore (89 percent and 99 percent, respectively).⁶²

Given this inequality in schooling, the effects of a year or more of lost face-to-face schooling due to the pandemic can be serious, even though every government in the region has tried to ensure access to online schooling. Despite these efforts, the findings of an Asian Development Bank Institute survey across the 10 ASEAN countries in 2021 to assess the impacts of the pandemic are dismal.

About 27 percent of children who stopped attending school could not fully participate in online learning programmes due to weak/insufficient Internet connections or a lack of digital devices.⁶³ Two COVID-related factors—having at least one person who lost their job or had working hours reduced and experiencing financial difficulties—significantly affected the intensity of online classes taken by children in an average household. In all countries, having at least one person who lost their job or had reduced working time increased the likelihood of experiencing financial difficulties by 17 percentage points.⁶⁴

There is evidence of considerable differences between ASEAN countries in how many children could access online classes.⁶⁵ Even when schools offered online classes, not all

Pandemic Future', 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_784823.pdf

⁶² UNESCO, 'Education Systems in ASEAN+6 Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Selected Educational Issues', Education Policy Research Series Discussion Document No. 5, Education Policy and Reform Unit, Bangkok, 2014.

⁶³ P.J. Morgan and L.Q. Trinh, 'Impacts of COVID-19 on Households in ASEAN Countries and Their Implications for Human Capital Development', ADBI Working Paper 1226, Asian Development Bank Institute, Tokyo, 2021, <https://www.adb.org/publications/impacts-covid-19-households-asean-countries>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ The vast majority (94 percent) of Indonesian children studied in schools that offered online classes. In Thailand, Viet Nam, Malaysia and Cambodia, around 70–77 percent of children studied in schools with online classes. The figure is slightly lower in the Philippines, at only 57 percent of children. Most children in the Lao PDR and Myanmar still went to school rather than taking online classes. Only 48 percent of pupils in Myanmar continued

children attended them in the region. About 8 percent did not attend any online classes, 19 percent attended only a few, and 16 percent attended some but not all.⁶⁶

The ADBI survey examined the reasons why some students did not fully attend the online classes, given that the school offered them. There were four major reasons: doing household chores; lack of computer/tablet; lack of Internet connection; and weak/unstable Internet connection. Table 6 presents data on these parameters of access to technology (Internet users as a percentage of the population, Internet subscriptions as a percentage of the population, and broadband subscribers as a percentage of the population), revealing a digital divide. On average, about a third of households with children who did not attend online classes fully did not have facilities for online learning (i.e. devices or Internet connections).⁶⁷

It is quite widely recognized that there is a digital divide in most LMICs and UMICs. The proportion of broadband subscriptions as a percentage of the population is much lower than the proportion of Internet subscriptions; even the latter shows huge gaps in the population: 53.4 percent in Indonesia, 46.7 percent in the Philippines, 75.1 percent in Thailand and 71.3 percent in Viet Nam (Table 6).

Given the much lower proportion of broadband connections in each country, Internet use is dependent on access to smartphones (on which we did not find any information). The number of smartphones is expected to be limited in a lower-income household, and certainly not adequate to provide access to all children when online classes are being run by schools at the same time. Thus, exclusion is inevitable, even among those children who do not belong to poor households.

Even before COVID-19, education in the East Asia and Pacific region was facing a learning crisis.⁶⁸ On top of the 15 million girls out of school, a sizeable proportion of girls in school were not on course to meet minimum proficiency in basic reading and mathematics: one in every five girls in the region was unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10. UNICEF also finds that even more girls are missing out on learning, competencies and skills (including information and technology literacy) required for thriving in the economy and society of the 21st century.⁶⁹

A recent World Bank study predicts falling test scores and a 19 percent increase in the proportion of lower secondary school-aged girls and boys in the region who are below the minimum level of proficiency due to the prolonged school closures and delayed implementation of distance learning programmes. These estimates assume that schools were

their education during the pandemic, and only 6 percent studied online classes. This may be because only a small number of schools in Myanmar can offer online courses (Morgan and Trinh, 2021).

⁶⁶ A high proportion of children in Indonesia and Viet Nam attended all online classes (79–80 percent), while the figure was very low in the Philippines (only 21 percent) and only moderate in Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia. One third (35 percent) of Filipino children did not attend any online classes. In Myanmar, nearly 70 percent did not fully attend online classes (Morgan and Trinh, 2021).

⁶⁷ This situation was most common in the Philippines, where more than 70 percent of households reported that their children did not attend online classes because they did not have a computer or tablet for their children to use, and nearly 80 percent said that they did not have an Internet connection.

⁶⁸ UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, ‘COVID-19 Response Issue Brief (2020): COVID-19 and Girls’ Education in East Asia and Pacific’, Bangkok, October 2020.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

closed for five months. The longer school closures last, the greater the negative impact COVID-19 will have on learning.⁷⁰

The gender disparity within the overarching digital divide is stark. In the East Asia and Pacific region, 20 percent of girls—40 million in total—were not reached by distance learning delivered online or through TV or radio, due to the lack of devices and/or policies geared towards their needs. Girls in rural and poor households in particular are facing barriers to accessing distance learning during school closures.⁷¹

In the East Asia and Pacific region, 55 percent of men had access to the Internet, compared to 41 percent of women before COVID-19.⁷² Girls are still often disadvantaged with regards to access to devices and the Internet in multi-child households in which the number of children exceeds the number of devices.

Even before COVID-19, girls from poor households were more disadvantaged than boys in terms of their access to education.⁷³ In the case of limited resources, poor households may decide to send only boys to school, rather than girls, due to higher perceived returns of education for boys exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and inequalities facing girls.⁷⁴

In addition, the prolonged lockdown, economic stress on the family and the loss of the school support system and routines can all result in psychosocial stress and mental health issues, affecting their ability to learn.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ The World Bank also found that students in the Asia and the Pacific region lost 0.8 Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling between January 2020 and December 2021 (World Bank, 'East Asia and Pacific Economic Update: Uneven Recovery', Washington, DC, 2021).

⁷¹ As the data quoted earlier are based on potential access to distance learning, actual access is expected to be significantly lower. These estimates are supported by assessments conducted in countries. A survey conducted by UNICEF (2021) in Indonesia found that 36 percent of girls learning online faced challenges with Internet access at home. In a similar survey conducted by UNICEF in Malaysia, 30 percent of participating girls reported that they were not or only sometimes able to attend online classes. A recent UNICEF survey in Indonesia found that 68 percent of school-age girls were studying only two hours or less a day when they were learning from home, and 30 percent of them did not receive any support from their school such as learning materials.

⁷² UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 'COVID-19 Response Issue Brief (2020): COVID-19 and Girls' Education in East Asia and Pacific', Bangkok, October 2020.

⁷³ In the Philippines, for example, before the pandemic, 63 percent of out-of-school primary school-aged children were girls (United Nations Children's Fund East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 'COVID-19 and Girls' Education in East Asia and Pacific', COVID-19 Response Issue Brief, Bangkok, October 2020). While girls and boys from the richest households in Lao PDR and the Philippines were almost equally likely to complete primary to upper secondary education before COVID-19, girls from the poorest households were much less likely to complete their education than boys.

⁷⁴ In Viet Nam, the Peace House, a shelter for women and girl victims of domestic violence and abuse, has received double the usual number of clients since COVID-related measures were introduced. Malaysia reported that calls related to violence against children to the Talian Kasih Helpline increased by 12 percent during the last two weeks of the Movement Control Order/Conditional Movement Control Order compared to the preceding two weeks, while reports of domestic violence nearly tripled. The number of calls and chats to the UNICEF-supported Childline in Thailand increased from just over 500 in January at the onset of COVID-19 to over 4,500 in June.

⁷⁵ Findings are consistent across countries in the East Asia and Pacific region. A recent survey of 800 girls and adolescents conducted by UNICEF Philippines found that 30 percent of girls felt worried, and 28 percent felt sad. Only 14 percent of girls claimed to have remained calm. A recent survey of more than 600 girls conducted in Viet Nam found that 60 percent of participants felt worried and pressured during the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey conducted by UNICEF Thailand with almost 7,000 participants found that three out of every four female respondents reported mental health issues such as stress, boredom, lack of motivation and frustration caused by the lockdown. All three studies found that girls are generally more susceptible to mental health concerns than boys.

Suggested actions to address the education divide

First, there needs to be a new focus on bridging inequality through quality education. In the least developed ASEAN countries, there was a clear problem of under-provision at upper secondary level (though not at lower secondary level in any country, as noted above).

Government spending is key. The pandemic will affect households' ability to fund education, since government fiscal pressures have grown due to the lower GDP and higher health expenditure requirements. This is quite apart from the fact that teachers themselves are likely to have become infected, affecting their ability to deliver teaching. Governments, households and development partners—in that order—are the main funders of education. Their contributions differ significantly across country income groups.⁷⁶

However, LMICs could consider additional investments to enable children's access to computers and the Internet (through local community centres). Public spending on education is already very low in most LMICs; given these already low budgets, diverting funds could have detrimental impacts. Since some LMICs did not close schools, their focus could be on ensuring that all teachers and school administrative staff are vaccinated as a priority group, to protect themselves as well as the children, so that schools can function safely. China introduced additional resources for online education in early 2020—weeks after the pandemic began—especially in the form of 22 online platforms providing 24,000 online higher education courses free of charge.⁷⁷

In previous crises, globally, most countries experienced a fall in education budgets.⁷⁸ But the pandemic-induced crisis is deeper. Also, the pandemic has resulted, as we showed earlier, in a massive income and health shock for many households, with increases in unemployment and underemployment. Reductions in income and the need for greater health spending will make it difficult for some families to cover education costs. Therefore, education budgets may require some restructuring towards school education from higher education, if fiscal constraints are very tight.

Moreover, school feeding programmes and other student support programmes (such as stipends) are likely to become even more necessary. Resources to ensure that these programmes continue and, where possible, increase their coverage will be critical for enabling students to continue to learn.

As the pandemic begins to subside and vaccination coverage rises, schools will reopen in a staggered manner. To ensure that children return to school, it will be important to ensure that schools are adequately funded and that they are prevented from seeking additional fees or contributions from parents. Education institutions will also require additional funding to implement new health and safety requirements, undertake the outreach activities needed to persuade students to return, and facilitate remedial teaching to minimize learning losses.

⁷⁶ Among the ASEAN 10, current education expenditure as a share of GDP is the highest in Viet Nam at 5.7 percent, which is a LMIC; in the UMICs of Malaysia (4.8 percent), Thailand (4.1 percent) and Indonesia (3.6 percent) it is lower (Table ET 3). In the LMICs it is even lower: Cambodia 1.6 percent; Lao PDR 2.9 percent; Myanmar 2.2 percent; and the Philippines (2.5 percent). Singapore, which is a high-income country, spends 2.9 percent of GDP on education, and Brunei much more (4.4 percent). Only UMICs in the ASEAN region may need to examine the potential for diverting some education funding to increase access to the Internet locally, and community access to computers with mobile broadband, where the children could receive community supervision from educated older people.

⁷⁷ Wang Xiaoxiao, 'Online Education Development in China to Bridge the Digital Divide', presentation at the 6th ASEAN–China–UNDP Symposium, 7 December 2021.

⁷⁸ S. Al-Sammarai, 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Education Financing', World Bank Brief, Washington, DC, May 2020.

Funding will also be needed so that the impact of the pandemic does not fall disproportionately on girls and on children in poor and vulnerable households. This has the potential to widen already stark disparities in learning outcomes among children.⁷⁹ Providing additional support to disadvantaged children will be critical to ensuring that they return to school and have opportunities to make up any learning lost during the school closures. Evidence has shown that school stipends, cash transfer programmes and fee waivers can all help encourage children to enrol and increase their attainment and learning (Al-Sammarai, 2020).⁸⁰

Protecting girls' education. The pandemic has had a negative economic impact on many households, but the specific needs of girls should be considered. A gender perspective is needed in all analysis and assessments of solutions and decisions concerning education provision. There is a need for different modes of distance learning, including online, TV, radio and take-home learning kits.⁸¹

Health

The health impacts of COVID-19 in the ASEAN 10 were more significant in 2021 than in 2020. This paper began by stating that economic revival and the stemming or reversal of inequality in the region are dependent on controlling the pandemic through rapid vaccination with two doses; however, additional actions are needed now, as we have outlined. Countries may need to speed up procurement and administration of vaccines faster than has happened so far.

There are specific dimensions of health-related inequality that stem from income inequality. Thus, the behaviour and choices that put poorer individuals on the front lines of infection during a pandemic are often the product of necessity.⁸²

Many low-wage workers are employed in services deemed essential during the pandemic (such as grocery stores and delivery services) or jobs with limited options for remote working. Second, poorer neighbourhoods are likely to have denser populations and poor housing conditions (lack of adequate water and sanitation infrastructure), which is more conducive to contagion. Third, people in poorer communities also tend to have very little in emergency savings, limiting their ability to reduce work hours to reduce their infection risks (for example, self-employed informal workers, to whom we will turn in a later section).

The effect of these choices is dramatic. The model simulations by Dizioli, Andrie and Bluedorn indicate that while a little more than 10 percent of rich households ever get infected by the virus, over half of poor households would become infected over a two-year period.⁸³ These numbers suggest that poor households bear the brunt of the pandemic's health costs.

The main reason for high out-of-pocket health expenditures (which impoverish people) is limited government health spending. This leads to limited health infrastructure.⁸⁴ Limited

⁷⁹ World Bank, 'East Asia and Pacific Economic Update: Uneven Recovery', Washington, DC, 2021.

⁸⁰ Al-Sammarai, S., 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Education Financing', World Bank Brief, Washington, DC, May 2020.

⁸¹ UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 'COVID-19 Response Issue Brief (2020): COVID-19 and Girls' Education in East Asia and Pacific', Bangkok, October 2020.

⁸² A. Dizioli, M. Andrie and J. Bluedorn, 'COVID-19 Hits the Poor Harder, but Scaled-Up Testing Can Help', IMF Working Paper No. 20/188, International Monetary Fund, Washington, DC, 3 December 2020.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ The World Health Organization recommends five hospital beds per 1,000 population. Table 7 shows that none of the ASEAN countries reach even half of that level, though Brunei is the highest at 2.7 (China 4.34). In

infrastructure is the result of relatively limited health expenditures as a share of GDP (as noted above). But the source of inequality is really the private health expenditure, most of which is out of pocket by households.⁸⁵ Given that a very small proportion of the population have private health insurance, most of this expenditure is households' own out-of-pocket spending. Inefficiency and inequality in health systems and health outcomes are the result, in the first instance, of low public expenditure.⁸⁶

Suggested actions to address health inequalities

During a pandemic such as this, when incomes have fallen, such a high share of private spending on health is likely to impoverish people further. Two important policy measures can help alleviate the epidemic's considerable impact on poor households until effective vaccines and therapeutics are widely available and provided to all who need them.

First, improving information on the pandemic's spread and containment with widespread testing enhances the ability to identify and isolate new cases, reducing infection risks. The latest rapid tests are affordable; the World Health Organization recently negotiated a price of US\$5 per test,⁸⁷ and with scaled-up demand and production, prices could drop to US\$1 or less.⁸⁸ Mass testing could reduce the pandemic's spread and bring it under control, especially when combined with mask-wearing, hand-washing and physical distancing.

IMF research shows that if half of asymptomatic infectious people were identified, deaths would be reduced by almost three quarters within a year.⁸⁹ Poor people benefit the most, with their COVID-19 fatality rate dropping by about three quarters with improved mass testing, compared to a fall of about a half for those who are better off. The simulation also shows that when no asymptomatic infectious people are tested and the virus spreads undetected, the drop in GDP is a staggering 15 percent in the first year for the representative economy. The loss shrinks to just 3.3 percent of GDP if 50 percent of asymptomatic infectious people are identified through testing and isolate to reduce the spread.⁹⁰

With the potential to avoid large GDP losses and the comparatively low and declining costs of rapid tests, the returns from widespread testing combined with mask-wearing, hand-washing and physical distancing are enormous. This approach could also reduce some of the inequities made worse by the pandemic, helping poor and more vulnerable households better weather the crisis.

Second, governments may wish to carry out large-scale representative sample surveys among the adult population to find out the share of the population that has been infected; in other words, conduct seropositivity surveys. A high proportion of the population with virus antibodies would suggest that the population is moving towards herd immunity, even though

Singapore it was 2.4, and in Viet Nam 2.6. In the UMICs, in Thailand it was 2.1, in Malaysia it was 1.9, and in Indonesia 1.04. In the LMICs, Cambodia 0.84, Lao PDR 1.04, Myanmar 0.9 and the Philippines 1.0.

⁸⁵ Total private and public spending on health was in the range of 5.92 percent in Viet Nam at the highest end, and 2.25 percent in Lao PDR (see Table ET4). In no ASEAN country is the private share lower than 49 percent (Lao PDR), with the exception of Brunei, a high-income country, where it was only 5 percent of total current health expenditure in 2018. Thailand is an exception, where the private share is 23.4 percent. But in the rest of ASEAN at least half of all health expenditure is private, which is a great source of inequality.

⁸⁶ Santosh Mehrotra and E. Delamonica, *Eliminating Human Poverty. Macro-economic and social policies for equitable growth*, Zed Press, London, 2007.

⁸⁷ *Financial Times*, WHO to offer 120m cheap coronavirus tests to developing world, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/cd10aef3-f10d-427f-af40-aecb8c625535>.

⁸⁸ See <http://www.rapidtests.org/>.

⁸⁹ A. Dizioli, M. Andrieu and J. Bluedorn, 'COVID-19 Hits the Poor Harder, but Scaled-Up Testing Can Help', IMF Working Paper No. 20/188, International Monetary Fund, Washington, DC, 3 December 2020.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

vaccination rates are still low. However, high seropositivity in the population should not mean that there is scope for any laxity in the speed of vaccination.

Third, health inequality in ASEAN is generally the result of limited public health infrastructure and burdensome private health expenditure (mostly out of pocket, due to limited coverage by health insurance). Without increasing public spending on health, private expenses cannot fall; such expenses can exacerbate inequality and poverty at the time of a once-in-a-century pandemic. Further, until effective vaccines and therapeutics are widely available and provided to all who need them, improving information on the pandemic's spread and containment with widespread testing enhances the ability to identify and isolate new cases, reducing infection risks.

Fourth, public investment in strengthening health care systems (particularly primary health care) will need to be a greater priority when public health infrastructure is strengthened based on increased government spending on health. A stronger primary health care system would significantly contribute to early detection, testing and curbing transmission. In other words, this greater focus on the primary, preventive health care system as well as on basic curative care services could prepare the ASEAN region for other health crises in the future, which may arise due to climate change or other causes. An additional dimension of public health spending is that an overwhelming share of it may be allocated to curative care (e.g. around two thirds in Indonesia, with the rest being split equally between preventive and other spending).⁹¹

Fifth, the need for health system digitization has become urgent. It can have several dimensions: digitizing logistics to ensure availability of essential drugs and vaccines; digitizing health records of all individuals across the country; and encouraging telemedicine. This can improve the distribution of essential medical supplies in remote locations.

Sixth, migrants all over the world, including in ASEAN, have been disproportionately more vulnerable to the risk of COVID infection and have had much less access to vaccination and treatment than country nationals. Rates of infection are higher among migrant workers in ASEAN countries. For example, in Singapore, migrant workers represent 38 percent of the total workforce but comprised more than 90 percent of the country's total COVID-19 cases. The numbers for Malaysia were 15 percent and 30 percent, respectively (ILOSTAT, 2020). A joint study by the ADBI, the OECD and the ILO postulates that possible reasons for this—apart from the nature of their work and working conditions—may very well be the nature of their housing and accommodation, which civil society organizations and media reports consider crowded and unhygienic. They may need more focused attention in the future as countries prepare for future waves of the pandemic or future pandemics.⁹²

Finally, in the medium to long term, a health care system transformation may be needed (as, for example, envisaged in Indonesia's 2021–2024 plan). This could have six pillars: primary care transformation (population education, primary and secondary prevention, increasing capacity of capability of primary care); increasing access and improving quality of secondary and tertiary care; health system resilience transformation (increasing resilience of the pharmaceuticals and medical devices sector, strengthening the emergency response system); health care financing transformation (effectiveness of funding and equitable access

⁹¹ Ministry of Health presentation at the 6th ASEAN–China–UNDP Symposium, 7 December 2021.

⁹² Asian Development Bank Institute, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and International Labour Organization, 'Labor Migration in Asia: Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis and the Post-Pandemic Future', 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_784823.pdf.

for every segment); accelerating the availability, quality and distribution of human resources in health care; and accelerating the adoption of digital health technology and solutions and data-driven decision-making.

Theme 4: Poverty, the rural–urban divide and food security

Despite the considerable GDP growth over several decades, poverty is still prevalent in the ASEAN region. The East Asia and Pacific region is marred by an average multidimensional poverty rate of 42.5 percent, with a narrow range across countries.⁹³

In 2020–2021, overall stagnation in the economy and associated income shortfalls and job losses, particularly for migrant workers and poor households, undermined households' ability to buy food and other essentials. Such job losses and declines in income typically result in consumers shifting towards 'caloric sufficiency' starch-based diets, at the expense of diets with greater amounts of nutrition-rich vegetables, fruits, meat, and fish.

Poverty rates are higher in rural than urban areas. One element of this inequality is the gap between rural and urban incomes, which contributes to relatively higher income inequality. Moreover, the majority of people living in rural areas are engaged in agriculture, where incomes tend to be low and unstable; and the vast majority have no or little social security (see Table 9). The proportion of the rural population in the ASEAN 10 varies enormously, from as low as 22 percent in Brunei and 23 percent in Malaysia to 64 percent in Lao PDR and over 75 percent in Cambodia (Table 4). While poverty rates are higher in rural areas, urban poverty is going to be a major issue in the near future, given the rapid urbanization. Data from UN Habitat's Urban Indicator database indicates that Eastern and South-Eastern Asia has seen an increase in its urban population living in slums--284 million in 1990 to 370 million in 2018.⁹⁴

A joint report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and others found that in 2019, before the pandemic, 49.5 percent of the population of Southeast Asia (a region coterminous with the ASEAN) were unable to afford a healthy diet, which is the second highest figure for any subregion in the world; 316.1 million people were affected by this situation.⁹⁵ Reduced calorie intake and compromised nutrition threaten gains in poverty reduction and health and could have lasting impacts on the cognitive development of young children.⁹⁶ Using a different indicator that tracks year-round access to adequate food, nearly 2.37 billion people (or 30 percent of the global population) lacked access to adequate food in 2020, of which around 113 million were in the ASEAN region⁹⁷.

COVID-19 is estimated to have dramatically increased the number of people facing acute food insecurity in 2020–2021.⁹⁸ FAO et al estimates that 272 million people are already or are at risk of becoming acutely food-insecure in the countries where it operates, of which

⁹³ The level of deprivation is highest in Lao PDR (47 percent), followed by Myanmar (45.9 percent), Cambodia (45.8 percent), Philippines (41.8 percent), Viet Nam (39.5 percent), Indonesia (38.7 percent) and Thailand (36.7 percent). In Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia, a little over a fifth of the total population are vulnerable to multidimensional poverty—i.e. at risk of suffering multiple deprivations (UNDP, 'Human Development Report', Oxford University Press, New York, 2021).

⁹⁴ UN Habitat. Urban Indicators Database. <https://data.unhabitat.org/pages/housing-slums-and-informal-settlements>

⁹⁵ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 'The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets', Rome, 2020.

⁹⁶ World Bank, 'Food security and Covid 19', Washington, DC, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-and-covid-19>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ FAO, WFP and UNICEF, 'The State Food Security and Nutrition in the World', Rome, 2021.

nearly 20 million were in the ASEAN region. There was an upward trend in hunger even before the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing effects from extreme climate events, conflict and other shocks to economic opportunities.⁹⁹

Inflation, especially food inflation, at a time of falling jobs and incomes as in 2020, is a serious matter. It is worrying that the Agricultural Commodity Price Index globally remained near its highest level since 2013, and as of 16 July 2021 was approximately 30 percent higher than in January 2020.¹⁰⁰ Surging prices reflect strong demand, along with weather uncertainties, macroeconomic conditions and COVID-related supply disruptions, even though the global production outlook for major grains remains good. The primary risks to food security are at the country level: higher retail prices, combined with reduced incomes, mean more and more households are having to cut down on the quantity and quality of their food consumption. Rising food prices have a greater impact on people in low- and middle-income countries, since they spend a larger share of their income on food than people in high-income countries.

Suggestions for policy

Dealing with the impact on women and children in agriculture. The impact of COVID-19 on the agriculture sector has had differential impacts on different population groups. Due to the predominance of women as market food vendors, many of them were also forced to significantly reduce the price of their goods and operating capacity so that they could cover the cost of their household necessities. As a result, negative impacts on household nutrition and food security outcomes have been observed.¹⁰¹

Moreover, although women officially make up over a third of workers in the agriculture sector in ASEAN, they hold only 13 percent of agricultural land.¹⁰² Operationally, men and women may share roles in resource management responsibilities. However, this legal bias of not owning land is problematic when female migrant workers return home and intend to start farm production activities but cannot exercise control over their resources due to the absence of their male counterparts. Policies to empower women through greater access to resources, such as land, need to coincide with COVID-19 relief efforts to present women with the independence of household decision-making. Also, investments should be made to create an enabling environment to reduce the care burden on women.

Dietary shifts towards starch-based diets, highlighted by FAO and others,¹⁰³ if sustained, are likely to further exacerbate already high rates of stunting in children under 5 years old and anaemia among women. In poorer ASEAN Member States and poorer households in particular, such dietary shifts could have longer-term adverse impacts on maternal and child health, with knock-on complications for the incidence of stunting, mental health issues and educational attainment prospects. Achieving a 'nutrition adequate' diet will be a challenge for ASEAN.

Actions to improve agricultural productivity and relieve rural distress. First, governments could accelerate movements to digital transactions in wholesale and retail operations and at the

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada, 'COVID-19 Pandemic Implications on Agriculture and Food Consumption, Production and Trade in ASEAN Member States', Vancouver, February 2021, <https://www.asiapacific.ca/sites/default/files/publication-pdf/COVID-19%20Pandemic%20Implications%20on%20Agriculture%20and%20Food%20Consumption%2C%20Prod....pdf>.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ FAO, WFP and UNICEF, 'The State Food Security and Nutrition in the World', Rome, 2021.

border for both products and people. Second, governments could consider replacing input subsidies and output subsidies with direct income support for farming households. Third, safety nets could include migrants and food system workers. Fourth, there is need to explicitly include women in pandemic stimulus and adjustment policies. Finally, governments could improve coverage, granularity and timeliness of data on agriculture, food and nutrition to assist public and private decision-making on production, distribution and trade.

However, there may also be a case for longer-term action. Many of these actions would involve learning from each other within the ASEAN region. On climate change, there are good practices from within the region. For instance, in Lao PDR, diversified and climate-resilient agricultural practices introduced in 2016 through farmer field schools and farmer nutrition schools resulted in positive impacts on soil conservation, biodiversity, and income and nutritional outcomes.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, community-based approaches with a strong focus on women's empowerment resulted in increased purchasing power and higher dietary diversity among women and children, in addition to positive impacts on children's health.

While access of poor households living in rural areas to health services, social protection, education and infrastructure is limited, those in urban settings mostly live in congested informal settlements with precarious socio-economic conditions and limited protection.¹⁰⁵ The urban share of the population in the region is expected to range from 23 percent in Lao PDR to 80 percent in Malaysia and 100 percent (Singapore) by 2025.¹⁰⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated this situation, exacerbated inequalities and negatively impacted the lives and well-being of poor people in rural areas in particular. In rural areas, the transformation of agri-food systems presents an opportunity for some of the poorest smallholders, who are not well integrated into food value chains.¹⁰⁷ In Southeast Asia, rural poverty among smallholders is exacerbated by the lack of access to productive resources and poor market integration, further compounded by climate-related and economic shocks, as well as periodic plant and animal disease outbreaks. In this region, the integration of poor smallholders into food value chains has been facilitated through public-private-producer partnerships that provide opportunities to overcome poverty and structural inequalities, especially where reinforced by improved governance mechanisms and multi-stakeholder platforms.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ ASEAN, 'ASEAN ministerial meeting on rural development and poverty eradication', Singapore, 19 August 2020, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AMRDPE-Joint-Statement-on-COVID-19-adopted_9Nov2020.pdf.

¹⁰⁶ Statista, 'ASEAN countries: Urbanization from 2010 to 2020', 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/804503/urbanization-in-the-asean-countries/>.

¹⁰⁷ However, changes are possible. For instance, in Indonesia in 2017, the total production and value of cocoa had fallen by 70 percent from its peak in 2009, hitting smallholders' incomes and livelihoods particularly hard. In 2014, in an effort to reduce the number of cocoa farmers living below the poverty line and empower them to engage in a more efficient and resilient cocoa supply chain, a multi-stakeholder 'whole of value chain' approach was introduced. The public-private-producer partnership approach engaging 150,000 smallholders included, among others, increased access to financing and productivity-enhancing technologies, product certification to capture premium prices, improved primary processing, and the establishment of farmer organizations. Over a five-year period, cocoa yields increased by 73 percent, while empowered smallholders saw their incomes increase by more than 200 percent (FAO, WFP and UNICEF, 'The State Food Security and Nutrition in the World', Rome, 2021).

¹⁰⁸ In Viet Nam, about half a million mostly poor smallholder farmers earn their livelihoods from coffee production. In mid-2020, coffee prices had plummeted by 48 percent from a peak in late 2016, before recovering but remaining volatile (FAO, WFP and UNICEF, 'The State Food Security and Nutrition in the World', Rome, 2021). To help reduce smallholder vulnerability to both economic and climate-related shocks, provincial and

More accessible services for better rural–urban connectivity—which is digitally enabled—are being promoted by the FAO across Asia. In 2021, the 1,000 Digital Village Initiative started—a global initiative currently being rolled out in over 12 countries, the majority of which are in ASEAN). The FAO is supporting digital village readiness assessments and piloting best practices with the aim of enabling, supporting and accelerating the digitization of villages in Asia.¹⁰⁹

Finally, Ramirez suggests, as does a partnership network of 11 rural development organizations working mainly in Southeast Asia, that there should be increased development financing and investment for responsive small-scale infrastructure and the harmonization of border facilities supportive of smallholders’ participation in agricultural value chains (i.e. minimum storage, packaging, trading equipment, market information).¹¹⁰ This would require renewed support to the ASEAN Guidelines to Develop Agri-cooperatives.

This also implies rural revitalization as a policy priority and infrastructure investment to improve the economic livelihoods in the region. This would involve a series of guidelines for agricultural and rural development, with a shift in priority from poverty alleviation to rural revitalization, including liveable eco-environments, effective governance and the contribution of agricultural science to the primary sector’s GDP growth. This would imply a recognition of ‘rurbanomics’—a solution to the urban–rural dichotomy of urban-biased development. Rurbanomics requires an integrated urban–rural development strategy to offset the prime trade-offs between eco-environment and economic performance, and at the same time between growth and equality. The primary difference between traditional urban–rural integration and rurbanomics is the emphasis on the complementary strategies of rural revitalization and urbanization within national development strategies.¹¹¹

Digitalization is a key instrument to help resolve the urban–rural divide. This would involve scaling up financial inclusion through investments in MSMEs and digital capacity-building skills. It also demands the assessment of the need for digital solutions and opportunities, to strike the right balance between nationwide digital infrastructure deployment and digital literacy/awareness within the rural development context.

However, none of this is possible without strengthening the role of local and governmental institutions through capacity-building measures and maintaining the competency of institutional actors. This should include measures to:

- empower rural farmers and ensure inclusion of small-scale producers in the value chain;
- enhance capacity in territorial rural development planning;
- foster rural–urban connectivity and design an integrated rural–urban development strategy; and
- promote a sense of ownership and identify local champions to ensure successful implementation of programmes.

district-level coffee boards were established to assist smallholders with improved technologies and good environmental practices in coffee production. Now coffee is certified for a premium on producer prices, while also strengthening the resilience of coffee growers to climate shocks and future economic shocks.

¹⁰⁹ A. Albehri (FAO), presentation at the 6th ASEAN–China–UNDP Symposium, 7 December 2021.

¹¹⁰ M. Ramirez, ‘Strategic Master Plan 2021–2025 for Asia’, presentation at the 6th ASEAN–China–UNDP Symposium, 7 December 2021.

¹¹¹ Taken from Group 1 discussions at the 6th ASEAN–China–UNDP Symposium, 7 December 2021.

Digitalization also plays a crucial role in resolving the urban–rural divide. To ensure that rural communities are not left behind, it is vital to raise awareness and enhance the digital capacities of rural communities. Nationwide strategies on digitalization need to be coupled with identification of specific needs of rural communities to ensure impactful interventions.

At **regional level**, ASEAN might consider establishing a fund to support empowerment of rural people’s organizations. Moreover, as ASEAN is currently in the process of developing a masterplan on rural development, it is suggested that the masterplan should promote comprehensive and cross-sectoral approach in transforming rural areas, especially addressing the nexus between agriculture, food security and rural development.

Theme 5: The data requirements to monitor indicators to manage the crisis

The discussion in previous sections has highlighted the prevalence of inequality, both high and rising, across the ASEAN region. It has also underlined that inequalities existed even prior to the pandemic, and were exacerbated by it. This not only creates obstacles for recovery out of the pandemic but also poses a risk of inequalities worsening further.

First, we have made policy suggestions for the socio-economic revival of ASEAN countries. This needs to be carried out in two phases: an exit strategy for recovery out of the pandemic to attain the pre-COVID status, and then to improve the situation thereafter.

Second, prioritization across the policy suggestions is the key to attain the requisites for a successful and timely exit strategy. We divide the policy suggestions into short-term strategies and medium-to-long-term structural adjustments. This will help ASEAN Member States safeguard against immediate and urgent COVID-related vulnerabilities and also strengthen the socio-economic base to recover better.

Third, the exit strategy needs to be tested in the interim through performance feedback. Such analysis requires that there be a set of exit indicators—i.e. a set of socio-economic indicators that need to be generated and monitored by each country. We present these indicators in Exit Tables 1–12. An important discussion in this regard relates to the availability of data on selected indicators, the absence of which hinders the entire exercise and is thus a serious impediment to effective policy analysis and implementation.

Let us begin by discussing the exit strategies, which are intimately linked to the exit indicators (identified in the Exit Indicators Tables). As posited earlier, the strategy to recover from the pandemic should reflect its effectiveness through a series of indicators. They are discussed below.

Exit strategies

The first exit strategy is health-related: to contain the COVID-19 caseload. The requisite indicators are the number of new cases per 1,000 population and the proportion of the population who have received the first and second vaccinations against COVID-19. In 2021, the Delta variant contributed to a rapid rise in COVID-19 cases in parts of Asia, causing a severe strain on the health care infrastructure in some countries. Vaccination rates are relatively low in many Asian countries, compared to China or India, leading to fears that the virus will continue to spread. Since the summer of 2021, the case numbers have risen particularly in some countries. The Delta variant identified worldwide was the source of the spread of COVID-19 globally in 2021. However, 2021 ended with the appearance of another variant, Omicron, which spreads more rapidly than Delta, although it is thought to be causing less severity of disease among those who are vaccinated; this has created a new uncertainty.

The second exit strategy revolves around macroeconomic stability. The indicators are quarter-on-quarter GDP growth rates, government debt as a percentage of GDP, fiscal deficit to GDP, and revival of the tourism and service sectors. These outcome indicators will supplement the child mortality above, to assess whether the health effects of pandemic mitigation measures are leading to sufficient confidence in society for economic activity to resume on a sustained basis. The reason for this is that with GDP growth down, the fiscal situation is adversely impacted in all countries. Yet at the same time, the pressures on governments to increase expenditures on health, education and cash transfers, among other demands, has only heightened, not reduced. In other words, just when the capacity of government to generate revenues is reduced, the demands on it to spend more have grown. As noted earlier, governments in the region have taken exemplary action with the size of the fiscal stimulus (or above-the-line) measures in 2020. However, the pressure to borrow more will increase, from international sources for the LMICs and domestic sources for the UMICs. Hence the need to monitor these indicators.

The third exit strategy is employment generation, with quarter-on-quarter job growth being the most significant indicator. This indicator depends on whether quarterly labour force surveys are currently conducted regularly. If not, they may need to be started. Another important indicator under this strategy is **real wages at least in the major employing sectors of the economy, which will vary by country.** The availability of these data is again dependent on regular labour force surveys being conducted across the economy. This is especially important because while companies might report data regularly to the Ministry of Finance or central bank, the informal economy is very large (as mentioned earlier). Labour force surveys among households (as opposed to informal enterprises) may reveal the real situation on the ground in respect of consumption demand, in the present and in the near future. Once employment revives, investment in human development is the key to sustainability.

The fourth exit strategy is thus human development, indicated through government expenditure on education and health, with a special focus on child nutrition. Data on quarterly government education expenditure and its distribution by level of education are needed because as the economy recovers, schools will reopen, but children who fell behind in learning or those who were so impoverished that they never returned to school can be helped. Hence, education expenditure cannot fall at any level of education. Further, we have seen that if public health spending becomes squeezed or receives less priority as the pandemic recedes, citizens may not be in a position to reduce their out-of-pocket costs, which have become a burden on households without health coverage or health insurance, especially those who are informally employed. Earlier sections showed how private health expenditure is very high in most countries in the region. Public health expenditure will need to increase and be monitored in real time to offset out-of-pocket expenses and mitigate poverty and inequality.

The previous section noted that food security has been especially impacted as a result of COVID-19. The effect of reduced food availability and falling incomes is felt by young children and shows up in child wasting—a sign of acute distress (as opposed to chronic undernutrition among children). It is a fast-changing indicator. However, it is unclear how frequently these data are collected in each country (the data we found were relatively dated). The bilateral and multilateral agencies could support sentinel site surveillance of child wasting in regions where there is a risk. Thus, in the remote islands of archipelagos of the region it is possible that vulnerable subregions are facing undetected child wasting.

The fifth exit strategy relates to digitalization of the ASEAN region. Digital access/penetration among individuals is an important exit strategy indicator. Data gaps persist, at least at the international level (though the same data may be available at national

level, we have no way of confirming this data availability). We show the latest available values for each indicator. However, information disaggregated by rural vs. urban area or by gender was often not available to the author, although significant efforts were made to collect it. Hence our analysis is limited by the lack of data disaggregated by location and gender.

Implementing an exit strategy is a time-consuming exercise and has lagged effects, especially with respect to human development investments. A short-term strategy is thus called for, to tackle the urgency due to the pandemic. This may take the form of further fiscal stimulus packages and social security nets to cater to vulnerable sections of the population. It is, therefore, necessary to monitor public expenditure on social protection, given that expanding social protection is fundamental to a robust recovery.

Huge gaps exist with respect to data availability for major indicators like wages, job growth and even GDP per capita, quarter-on-quarter. It is strongly recommended that efforts be made to make data available on a more regular and timely fashion. It must be quickly generated if they are not already being generated. In most cases, the fast-moving indicators should cut across a variety of economic and human development indicators. Data should also be made available across gender and location.

Two data sources can be used to help in understanding inequality in access to services and opportunities: Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and Demographic and Health Survey (DHS). UNESCAP has used these surveys, implemented in eight ASEAN countries, to build the Dissimilarity Index, an index to measure inequality of opportunity among groups.¹¹² Countries could use this analysis or conduct it at local level to understand the scale of inequality.¹¹³

In summary, there is a need to enhance **statistical systems** and the availability of **data** to monitor progress, design targeted interventions and enhance accountability. Policymakers, for instance, should know in which areas progress has been made, which groups are furthest behind and which types of programmes should be designed. ASEAN Member States should also use opportunities arising from technology such as big data in collecting, managing and presenting data.

The following list of tables can serve as indicators for an effective exit strategy:

ET1. Debt and fiscal deficit (percentage of GDP)

ET2. Tourism revival

¹¹² Ermina Sokou (UNESCAP), presentation at the 6th ASEAN–China–UNDP Symposium, 7 December 2021.

¹¹³ Similarly, Wang Xu (Guizhou University), in a presentation at the Symposium, discussed public data analysis and collection based on the Guizhou model. Big data are a new means to understand complex systems, contribute to economic growth, ensure national security and improve governance capacity. Guizhou was established as the national big data comprehensive experimental zone in 2016 and is considered a leader in the digital economy in China. Guizhou Province has built a precision poverty alleviation big data support platform, collected over 25 million poverty alleviation data to realize interoperability, sharing, automatic comparison, real-time update and automatic early warning. Big data have helped in water conservancy, poverty alleviation and advancing commerce. Big data have also been applied in the context of COVID-19.

- ET3. Education expenditure (percentage of GDP)
- ET4. Health expenditure (percentage of GDP)
- ET5. Government Expenditure on health in ASEAN
- ET6. COVID-19 cases (per million population)
- ET7. Child wasting
- ET8. Growth rates (quarterly)
- ET9. Trends in wage rates
- ET10. Trends in job growth
- ET11. Poverty levels and reversal in trends (if any)
- ET12. Digital access/penetration among individuals, rural vs. urban (by gender)

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