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Economic Security and Development in ASEAN — An SDG Goal Review

Tamara Nair

At almost 60 years since its founding, ASEAN's 'success story' as a regional multilateral organisation is often cited as one of tremendous economic development. It has transformed from a modest combined economy of US\$24 billion in 1967 to the world's fourth-largest economic bloc in 2024, with an estimated GDP of US\$4.13 trillion. By demonstrating a consistent upward trajectory of GDP and GDP per capita from 2020 to 2023, it has also reflected economic resilience post-COVID-19.

Yet, even beyond the indicators of GDP and GDP per capita, variables like job stability and income disparity give a more comprehensive picture of economic security and development in the region. It is beneficial to contextualise ASEAN's economic feats within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth. As the 2030 deadline for achieving the SDGs approaches, is ASEAN's economic performance on the path to inclusive and sustainable development?

Goal 8 and a Regional Progress Report

ASEAN's economic growth has been largely consistent with the objectives of Goal 8, which focuses on promoting entrepreneurship, creating quality jobs, and 'decent work' opportunities for everyone. Such work entails fair income, workplace security, social protection for families, and better prospects for personal development. According to the IMF, Southeast Asia's

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real GDP growth rate is at 4.3 per cent in 2025, well above the average global growth rate of 3.2 per cent. However, despite strong macroeconomic performance, the region sees an uneven progress towards inclusive and ‘decent’ work opportunities.

According to ASEAN’s 2025 SDG Progress Report, the region recorded only a minor reduction in unemployment rates between 2016 and 2023, making it unlikely to achieve full employment by 2030. IMF data also reveals significant disparities among member states. For instance, while the Philippines saw a sharp decline in unemployment between 2020 and 2025 (10.4 to 3.9 per cent), its unemployment rates are still much higher than those in Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand. Moreover, informal employment is more widespread in ASEAN than expected from the level of GDP-per capita. Again, intra-regional divergences persist in employment quality and productivity; Cambodia and Lao PDR’s economies are substantially more informal sector-driven than Singapore and Malaysia’s high-value, diversified economies.

Old and New (economic) Insecurities

The SDG Progress Report also identified, between the period of 2016 and 2023, an increased proportion of both women and men in the informal sector. While informal employment can provide an entry point into entrepreneurship, it is often characterised by women bearing disproportionate burden for unpaid or underpaid labour, job insecurity, and lack of social protection. This is a persistent concern even before the global pandemic. At the level of individual economic security, women still do not fare as well in the region, not only because of their preponderance in the informal sector but also due to the other factors as mentioned above. But there is both intra-regional and intra-national exceptions to this as well.

In addition, high regional GDP figures do not of course mean equitable income distribution. Across ASEAN, the richest 1 per cent hold about 25 to 33 per cent of total wealth, whereas the poorest 50 per cent own merely 14 to 19 per cent wealth, according to a 2025 Oxfam report. This is especially so in light of climate change. Studies have also found correlations between income inequality and human capital, environmental degrada-

tion, and the technological divide. Unless these issues are addressed, objectives of Goal 8, especially that of ‘decent work’, will be difficult to meet.

Moving Forward

The persistence of economic insecurities highlights that economic growth alone does not translate into inclusive and equitable development. Uneven progress under SDG 8 also constrains advances toward SDG 10, which aims to reduce socio-economic inequality within and among countries. This is important when we look towards ASEAN’s community vision for the future. There should be concerted efforts, region-wide, to not only move towards achieving Goal 8, but also to employ greater and sustained interest in reducing, as much as possible, intra-regional economic disparities very simply because inequalities of income, opportunity, class, sex, disability, and so on, threaten the long-term regional goals of poverty reduction and of economic security and growth. Moving forward, ASEAN’s focus should not only be on sustaining economic growth and development, but also on ensuring that it is equitable and inclusive. This would go a long way in helping the region achieve its goal of creating a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centered ASEAN by 2045.

SUGGESTED READINGS

ASEAN Secretariat. *ASEAN SDG Indicators Progress Report 2025*. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2025.

Avinash Kumar et al., ‘An Unequal Future: Asia’s Struggle for Justice in a Warming, Wired World’, Oxfam, 29 October 2025, 12–13.

International Monetary Fund. *IMF DataMapper*. 2025.

Kasman Karimi et al., ‘The Nexus of Income Inequality, Growth, and Environmental Degradation in ASEAN Economies’, *International Journal of Sustainable Development & Planning* 19, no. 6 (2024).

Lili Yan Ing et al., ‘ASEAN in the Global Economy: A Half-Century Journey’, Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), 2 December 2024.

Thu Kim Hoang and Quoc Hoi Le, ‘The Impact of Technical Change on Income Inequality in Vietnam’, *Journal of Economics and Development* 26, no. 4 (2024): 329–45.

CLIMATE CHANGE



Photo Credit: Freepik.com

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

After the American retreat: How Southeast Asia can seize its climate future

The Trump administration's aggressive rollback of US climate policy has left a global void. Yet, for Southeast Asia, this is not just a crisis but a catalyst. By leveraging critical minerals to sustain US engagement and through strengthening ties with new partners, the region can forge a resilient, independent green path.

Adam X. Hansen and Pey Peili

RSIS Commentary | 28 October 2025

Climate change made Hurricane Melissa four times more likely: Study

Hurricane Melissa, which struck Jamaica as one of the most powerful storms ever recorded, was made four times more likely because of human-caused climate change, scientists at Imperial College London have found. Warming, mainly from burning fossil fuels, increased both the likelihood and intensity of the hurricane.

AFP

Straits Times | 30 October 2025

Only 3% of international climate aid going to transitioning communities: 'This is absurd'

Less than 3% of international aid to slash carbon emissions is supporting a "just transition" for workers and communities away from polluting industries, according to a new report conducted by the climate and development non-profit ActionAid.

Dharna Noor

The Guardian | 3 November 2025

The water insecurity-climate change nexus: A looming threat to peace and security in Southeast Asia

Climate change is intensifying water insecurity across Southeast Asia, heightening both interstate frictions and local societal tensions. Recent disputes over transboundary dam projects and public unrest over failed flood control efforts underscore how water governance challenges are increasingly becoming peace and security concerns in the region.

Julius Cesar Imperial Trajano and Adam X. Hansen

RSIS Commentary | 3 November 2025

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Emissions gap report 2025

Ten years of the Paris Agreement has spurred climate action, but ambition and implementation still fall short of what is needed. The new Nationally Determined Contributions have limited effect on narrowing the emissions gap by 2030 and 2035, leaving global warming projections well above the Paris Agreement's temperature goal.

United Nations Environment Programme
2025

10 new insights in climate science 2025/2026

The first four insights of this year's report revolve around Earth system processes and highlight the concerning possibility that global warming is accelerating. The next three insights focus on impacts of climate change on water security, human health, and livelihoods and productivity. The third and final cluster of insights focuses on key aspects for enhancing mitigation.

Future Earth, The Earth League, and the World Climate Research Programme
2025

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

XIX World Water Congress

The congress will bring together a diverse global audience of experts, researchers, policymakers, practitioners, civil society leaders, and private sector representatives. Participants will contribute to advancing global efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 and strengthen cross-sector partnerships essential for a water-secure future.

Marrakech, Morocco
1-5 December 2025

ENERGY SECURITY



Photo Credit: Adobe Firefly Generated Images

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

PH a ‘front-runner’ in Asean nuclear push

A report noted that the country was a “leader” in the region, given the government’s target to fire up an initial 1,200 megawatts (MW) of nuclear power by 2032.

Lisbet K. Esmael

Inquirer.net | 18 October 2025

China's power paradox: Record renewables, continued coal

China installed more renewables last year than all existing US capacity; and President Xi Jinping has made the country's first emissions reduction pledges. Yet in the first half of this year, coal power capacity also grew, with new or revived proposals hitting a decade high.

AFP

Channel News Asia | 19 October 2025

Renewables, sustainable growth and competition in the East Asian market

Global renewable energy production is expected to double by 2030, creating extremely lucrative business opportunities for the companies that manage to carve out a share of the market. Energy production and energy storage are both crucial components of the energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables.

Cameron Stone

The Diplomat | 6 November 2025

Nuclear education needed in Singapore as Asean neighbours explore deployment: Tan See Leng

There is a need to build up Singaporeans’ knowledge and understanding on nuclear energy, even if the government eventually decides not to deploy this form of clean energy. This is because the city-state’s neighbouring countries may choose to do so.

Janice Lim

The Business Times | 6 November 2025

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Breakthrough Agenda Report 2025

Geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainty are testing the resilience of international co-operation, but also underscore its importance to avoid fragmentation of global markets and delaying action on emissions reductions. This report therefore identifies many practical opportunities for countries to work together in ways that advance economic development objectives as well as transitions.

International Energy Agency
2025

Oil price uncertainty and China’s rare earth exports: Driver or constraint?

The trade war has underscored the strategic importance of rare earth elements in geopolitical dynamics. The study’s research findings offer valuable insights for formulating China’s rare earth export policies amid global oil price fluctuations.

Zhengzheng Li, et al.

Energy Policy, Vol 208 | 2025

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

10th International Conference on Green Energy and Applications (ICGEA) Call for Papers

The most interesting and disruptive technology often happened at edges and boundaries of different disciplines, and so the aim of the conference is to bring these brains together to synthesise the ideas and knowledge from different sources to achieve energy innovation.

Hanoi, Vietnam

6-8 March 2026; Abstract Submission by 15 November 2025

FOOD SECURITY



Photo Credit: Adobe Firefly Generated Images

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

Americans facing hunger as shutdown enters second month

The ongoing U.S. government shutdown has entered its second month, and federal food-aid programmes like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which serves 42 million Americans, are running out of funds. Many federal workers are unpaid or furloughed, public services are crippled, and hunger is rising for those reliant on government aid.

AFP

Channel News Asia | 1 November 2025

Singapore drops '30 by 30' farming goal, sets revised targets for fibre and protein by 2035

Singapore has replaced its original 2030 farming goal with new targets for protein and fibre production by 20235, amid challenges confronting the local agricultural sector. The revised target is for Singapore to produce 20 percent of the country's fibre consumption and 30 percent of proteins by 2035.

Shabana Begum

The Straits Times | 4 November 2025

Local food production up but Malaysia still import-dependent, says minister

Malaysia's food production is increasing, but the country still relies heavily on imports for key staples. In 2023, self-sufficiency was 56.2% for rice and 90.2% for chicken, while beef, fresh milk and some vegetables remain import dependent. The government aims to raise local output, especially in dairy, cattle and aquaculture, targeting 50% beef self-sufficiency by 2030.

The Star

The Straits Times | 10 November 2025

Indonesia to be self-reliant on food with increased agriculture

Indonesia aims to become self-reliant on food by boosting agricultural production, efficiency and sustainability. The agriculture minister reaffirmed the ministry's commitment to attain full food sovereignty for Indonesia by 2028 and has plans to leverage machinery distribution and improved seeds for commodities like rice, corn, sugar, soybeans and potatoes.

Kenzu Harianto and Arie Novarina

Antara | 11 November 2025

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

A systematic review on the impact of artificial intelligence in the agri-food supply chain

This review explores how AI can support the agri-food sector by strengthening decision-making, increasing transparency across supply chains, and enabling tailored nutrition approaches. It also notes key obstacles, including limited technological access, knowledge gaps among farmers and industry actors, consumer mistrust, and weaknesses in current research methods. It offers a clearer picture of AI's potential future impact and serves as a basis for policymakers, academics, and industry leaders to design strategies that enhance AI's social and economic value.

Matilde Reitano, et al.

Food Policy | 2025

Informal food systems in food security planning: A case study of Nanjing, China

Economic crises, climate change, and pandemics, have raised concerns about food issues in China and worldwide. The current food planning in China, which prioritises food security, ignores the role of the informal sector in the resilience of food systems. This study examines the role of informal food systems in enhancing food security and explored the dilemmas of informal food systems in food planning through field and literature research. It also highlights the importance of considering the contributions of informal food systems to improve the current situation by appreciating small-scale agriculture, supporting local food supply chains, and providing a formalisation procedure for food bottom-up food activities.

Luoman Zhao, et al.

Food Security | 2025

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

The 5th International Conference on Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture in The Tropics

This webinar hosted by the Faculty of Agriculture at Hasanuddin University, Indonesia served as a platform for researchers from academia, industries, and research institutes to share their research findings and to engage in fruitful discussions to further the development of new knowledge and technologies in the field of agriculture, which included topics like biodiversity and regenerative farming.

Recorded Webinar

30 October 2025

HEALTH SECURITY



Photo Credit: Adobe Firefly Generated Images

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

Thousands of NHS staff in England to lose jobs after deal approved

Thousands of NHS England 'staff redundancies' will proceed after a Treasury deal allows temporary overspending, aiming to cut bureaucracy and redirect 1 billion pounds yearly savings to front-line care. The cuts are expected to cause immense uncertainty to the future of staff who had offered commitment and service to NHS.

Nick Trigg

BBC News | 12 November 2025

New infectious diseases agency to chart Singapore's new pandemic plans: PM Wong

Singapore's new Communicable Diseases Agency, led by Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, will update pandemic plans, balance preparedness with resource sustainability, and strengthen surveillance, immunisation, and cross-sector collaboration for future health crises.

Judith Tan

The Straits Times | 12 November 2025

AI for mental health is violating proper therapy standards and here's what can be done about it

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) giving mental health advice to users often violates therapist ethical standards, with research identifying 15 key lapses, and thus urging AI to adhere to human therapeutic codes of conduct.

Lance Eliot

Forbes | 12 November 2025

Fossil fuel projects around the world threaten the health of 2bn people

Fossil fuel projects endanger 2 billion people globally, disproportionately harming marginalised communities and ecosystems, with Amnesty International urging an immediate, just phase-out to protect health and human rights.

Nina Lakhani

The Guardian | 12 November 2025

SELECTED PUBLICATION

The importance of informed consent to overcome force, fraud, or coercion in the trafficking of persons for organ harvesting

Organ trafficking for purposes such as organ transplant exploits vulnerable people; the author provides legal recommendations for strengthening clinical protocols, informed consent, and ethical reviews as vital measures to combat illicit commercial transplants and protecting victims' rights.

Luz E. Nagle

Journal of Mental Health Disorders, Vol. 5, Issue 1 | 2025

Physical activity as a modifiable risk factor in pre-clinical Alzheimer's disease

Higher physical activity in cognitively unimpaired older adults with elevated amyloid slows tau accumulation and cognitive decline, independent of amyloid levels. Benefits plateau at 5,001-7,500 daily steps, suggesting moderate activity is sufficient to modify pre-clinical Alzheimer's disease progression.

Wai-Ying Wendy Yau, et al.

Nature Medicine | 2025

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

COP30 Health Pavilion Livestream

The World Health Organisation (WHO), Wellcome, and partners host a Health Pavilion at COP30 in Belém from 10th to 21st November 2025, with a full programme of discussions centring health and equity in climate talks through evidence, initiatives, and cross-sector solutions. The sessions will be livestreamed on the WHO's webpage.

Online

10-21 November 2025

BIOSECURITY



Photo Credit: Adobe Firefly Generated Images

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

After CDC cuts, former officials say “we’re not prepared” for daily public health or emergencies

Days after hundreds of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) employees were laid off, former CDC officials are warning it has left the agency more unprepared to keep Americans healthy and safe. The cuts include the Institutional Review Board, the ethics office, and the technology transfer office. Some communication and policy offices were also cut, making it more difficult to communicate health threats to the public.

Sara Moniuszko

CBS News | 15 October 2025

Indonesia, Brazil sign deal to boost farm trade, biosecurity

Indonesia and Brazil signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Cooperation. The signing of this deal underscores Indonesia’s commitment to strengthening national biosecurity, improving the competitiveness of its quarantine commodities, and bolstering its position in international discussions on SPS policies and standards.

Dan Charles

Antara News Agency | 24 October 2025

PEF heightens biosecurity alert after Bird Flu case near Cotabato

The Philippine Eagle Foundation (PEF) has implemented a heightened biosecurity alert following a confirmed case of avian influenza, which poses a significant risk to the Philippine eagles house at the Philippine Eagle Center (PEC).

Rojean Grace G. Patumbon

Sunstar | 5 November 2025

European Union and Vietnam: A joint path to poultry farming based on immunity and prevention

To mark the World Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) Awareness Week, the EU co-financed the ‘European Poultry—From Our Farms to Your Tables’ information and promotional campaign to highlight Vietnam’s progress in the rational use of antibiotics in poultry production and the compatibility of European standards with local market expectations.

Thailand Business News

18 November 2025

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

A critical infrastructure approach to mitigating future pandemics in Southeast Asia

This policy report proposes a preventive critical infrastructure (CI) protection approach to governance, in mitigating the emergence/re-emergence of infectious diseases. A CI approach presents a holistic approach to biosecurity, complementing existing whole-of-government approaches by prioritising the tackling of potential blind spots as bases for regional cooperation.

Jose Ma. Luis P. Montesclaros, et al.

RSIS Policy Report | 2025

Biosecurity really: A strategy for victory

Drawing on decades of experience and the knowledge of dozens of subject matter experts, this report offers a forward-looking analysis of how global trends and technologies are reshaping the biosecurity landscape, and actionable steps we can take to respond. Resilience requires new systems of biological intelligence, audits, and governance alongside restriction on high-risk research.

Drew Endy, et al.

The Hoover Institution | 2025

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

Global Health Security Conference 2026

Global Health Security Conference provides a forum where leaders, researchers, policy-makers, and representatives from government, international organisations, civil society, and private industry from around the world can engage with each other, review the latest research and policy innovations, and agree on solutions for making the world safer and healthier.

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

9-12 June 2026

MIGRATION



Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

Over 81,000 civilians displaced by insecurity in Sudan's El-Fasher, UN migration agency says

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), more than 81,000 people have fled the city of El-Fasher and nearby villages in Sudan's North Darfur state since 26 October due to ongoing fighting and insecurity.

Adel Abdelrheem and Mohammad Sio

Anadolu Agency | 5 November 2025

Inside Mauritania's mass deportation campaign targeting African migrants

The Mauritanian authorities have not released deportation figures, but according to a statement by its government spokesman, 130,000 migrants entered the country of 5 million in 2022, while only 7,000 people renewed their residence permits that year. Rights groups, opposition politicians and migrants have spoken out that the deportations are made under cruel and degrading conditions.

Josef Skrdlik and Oliver Dunn

Al Jazeera | 7 November 2025

Boat with Rohingya migrants sinks off Malaysia, hundreds missing

A boat carrying members of the Rohingya community from Myanmar has sunk near the Thai-Malaysian border, with hundreds missing, seven dead and 13 rescued, the Malaysian maritime agency said on 9 November.

Channel News Asia

9 November 2025

What is choice without knowledge? Climate literacy for displaced communities

Climate literacy enables greater agency, decision-making, and meaningful refugee participation. One refugee-led organisation in Egypt is piloting workshops and supporting community-led initiatives to help translate knowledge into power.

Philippa Weichs, Emmanuel Zangako Peter and Isaiah Du Pree

Forced Migration Review | November 2025

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Climate change and its health impacts: A case Study of internal migrant workers in Hanoi, Viet Nam

This publication examines the health impacts of climate change on internal migrant workers in Hanoi's industrial zones. The study found that most workers perceive climate change through immediate weather changes and air pollution, with limited understanding of broader systemic causes.

International Organization for Migration
2025

Care at home: Projecting Thailand's need for national and migrant labour for home-based care for older persons

Thailand is ageing. By 2037, one third of the population will be over 60 years of age. This study projects that the need for paid home-based care workers will increase by at least 70 per cent.

International Labour Organization
2025

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

New Dynamics in Asia's Migration Regimes: Global Labour Shortages and Rising Demand for Migrant Workers

Asian migration regimes are undergoing notable changes. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have relaxed previously rigid migration policies to admit more workers, with Japan and Taiwan now allowing select low-skilled migrants to change their status and stay long-term. The PRC, traditionally closed to low-skilled migrant labour, experimented with a limited "guest worker" programme.

Hybrid
15-16 January 2026