



Photo Credit: Freepik.com

ASEAN's Socio-Cultural Agenda and Responding to Population Ageing

Pey Peili

As ASEAN pivots toward its new Community Vision 2045, the region faces a crucial demographic transition: sustained population ageing. While the demographic dividend has historically driven economic growth in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Strategic Plan, adopted at the 46th ASEAN Summit in May 2025, identifies ageing societies as a major long-term trend. With the conclusion of the ASCC Blueprint 2025, the new Strategic Plan aims to build a resilient, inclusive, and people-centred ASEAN by 2045. Within this framework, the ASCC is tasked with a pivotal role in addressing the economic and social implications of ageing, and identifying areas for improved resilience, innovation, and social cohesion.

Priorities of the ASCC Strategic Plan: From Welfare to Empowerment

The ASCC Strategic Plan outlines a comprehensive approach to population ageing, positioning the "care economy" not merely as a social support mechanism, but also as an area of economic activity and employment. Strategic Goal 3 emphasises leveraging the demographic dividend while building "age-friendly societies". This involves integrating ageing considerations into national development plans, promoting "healthy, active, and successful ageing," and supporting flexible employment and retirement policies for older persons who wish to remain economically active.

The plan also links demographic resilience with economic opportunity. It calls for the development of products, technologies, services, and solutions that respond to the needs of the ageing population, positioning the care economy as a source of growth and innovation. This shift from "welfare" to "empowerment" aims to enable functional independence and continued social participation. In parallel, the plan adopts a

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rights-based approach, mandating the prevention of abuse and age-based discrimination, and equitable access to public services, income generation, and legal protection.

Health Security and the Promise of Active Ageing

Health security is a central component of the ASCC agenda on ageing. The Strategic Plan prioritises action to reduce risk factors for non-communicable diseases (NCDs), which disproportionately affect older populations. It also advocates for the strengthening of health systems to be resilient against future health emergencies, integrating the principles of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) to include the management of NCDs and mental health.

Beyond treatment, the plan promotes healthy lifestyles and universal access to healthcare. A "healthy ASEAN populace" with higher life expectancy and well-being for all ages thus requires accessible mental health services, healthy active ageing, and addressing the interaction between health outcomes and broader social factors such as poverty and social exclusion.

Digital Inclusion for the Silver Generation

The ASCC Strategic Plan also addresses the implications of digitalisation for social inclusion. Strategic Goal 1 promote an inclusive and sustainable digital society particularly for older persons who risk exclusion from digital workplaces and services. The plan supports lifelong learning and skills development as a means of maintaining employability and participation in a digital economy.

Furthermore, the plan seeks to bridge the digital divide to empower all ASEAN peoples, which includes ensuring that digital infrastructure and skills are accessible to vulnerable groups. Digital tools are positioned as a way to improve the delivery of social services and healthcare, making them more efficient and accessible for the elderly.

Social Protection and Resilience

At the heart of the "caring Community" goal is the commitment to leave no one behind, strengthening social protection systems across the life cycle. Strategic Goal 2 focuses on equitable and shared prosperity, particularly for vulnerable groups. The plan calls for adaptive social protection that strengthen family resilience and well-being including sustainable financing mechanisms for social protection and social pensions.

The plan also addresses the intersection of ageing and climate change. It aims to minimise the vulnerability of people including elderly living in at-risk areas to climate-related extreme events, by integrating gender-responsive and age-sensitive disaster risk management. These measures are intended to empower community resilience.

Looking Ahead in 2026

With Philippines assuming the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026, the region turns its attention to the theme "Navigating Our Future, Together". The "People Empowerment" pillar places the rights of vulnerable groups, including the elderly, at the core of its socio-cultural agenda. Key challenges will include translating the ASCC Strategic Plan into practical initiatives, narrowing the development gaps among member states, and ensuring that social protection systems can accommodate ageing populations across different income levels. Strengthening the care economy as a regional priority is also likely to feature prominently, consistent with the Philippines' focus on social protection and family support.

Amid broader geopolitical uncertainty and domestic pressures, the 2026 Chairmanship will test ASEAN's ability to align its socio-cultural commitments with economic and technological change. The extent to which regional integration delivers tangible improvements in quality of life, particularly for older populations, will be a key measure of progress toward the Community Vision 2045.

SUGGESTED READINGS

ASEAN. "ASEAN's Proactive Strategy for Ageing Populations." *The ASEAN Magazine*, July 8, 2025.

GBD 2021 ASEAN Mental Disorders Collaborators. 2025. "The Epidemiology and Burden of Ten Mental Disorders in Countries of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN), 1990-2021: Findings from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021." *The Lancet Public Health* 10(6): e480-91.

OECD. "Promoting Active Ageing in Southeast Asia." 2025. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Si, Yafei, Lei Guo, Shu Chen, Xinyu Zhang, Xiaochen Dai, Daniel Wang, Yunguo Liu, Back Xuan Tran, Paul Michael Pronyk, and Shenglan Tang. 2025. "Progressing towards the 2030 Health-Related SDGs in ASEAN: A Systematic Analysis." *PLoS Medicine* 22 (4): e1004551-51.

WHO. 2025. "Promoting Health and Well-Being of Older Persons: WHO's Support to ASEAN Member States." World Health Organisation. February 25, 2025.

CLIMATE CHANGE



Photo Credit: Freepik.com

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

New York Sunrise Wind project can resume as Trump effort to block offshore wind rejected again in court

A federal judge's ruling has ruled that all five offshore wind projects halted in December can resume construction, rejecting national security concerns about radar interference raised by the Trump administration. The ruling marks another contentious development following disruptions against wind power under President Trump.

CBS News | 2 February 2026

Greenland shatters temperature record, redrawing economy from fishing to minerals

Amidst growing geopolitical tension, Greenland faced its warmest January on record in 2026. With waters around the island warming up and ice patterns changing, climate change is actively undermining Greenland's fishing sector while increasing the attractiveness of critical minerals extraction.

Reuters

The Straits Times | 4 February 2026

Water bankruptcy: How fossil fuels are destroying the world's water supply

The recent UN report proclaiming a "global water bankruptcy" shows what the climate crisis looks like when it hits the systems that sustain life. Exacerbated by fossil fuels, local communities are the ones forced to pay the price of the water bankruptcy, requiring an urgent rethink and an end to fossil fuel expansion.

Mallika Singhal

350.org | 4 February 2026

EU rethinks climate diplomacy after bruising COP30 summit, document shows

An internal EU document shows the regional organisation reassessing its climate diplomacy approach following its failure to rally support for faster, more ambitious climate action to cut planet-heating emissions at COP30. The document indicates that the EU is considering leveraging its trade and development tools to push for enhanced climate action at future climate summits.

Reuters

The Straits Times | 5 February 2026

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Recalibrating climate risk: Aligning damage functions with scientific understanding

Economic damages from climate change have long been underestimated and inconsistently represented in policy and financial decision-making. Drawing on expert judgment from more than 60 climate scientists, this report examines how risks evolve as warming increases and where conventional economic models begin to fail.

Jesse F. Abrams, Sam Hu, and Ben Dickenson Bampton
University of Exeter and Carbon Tracker | 2026

Unpacking contestation in Southeast Asia's renewable energy development

Understanding the dynamics between the state and local contestation is essential for designing renewable energy development strategies and regional energy cooperation frameworks that facilitate the region's transition to renewable energy sources in an environmentally, socially and politically credible way.

Margareth Sembiring and Danielle Lynn Goh

RSIS Policy Report, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies | 2026

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

World Water Day

The 2026 World Water Day campaign calls for a transformative, rights-based approach where women have equal voice, leadership, and opportunities in water decision-making – making water a force for a healthier, more prosperous, gender-equal future that will benefit us all.

Worldwide

22 March 2026

ENERGY SECURITY



Photo Credit: Adobe Firefly Generated Images

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

How Singapore's 'radiation detectives' ensure safety as South-east Asia explores nuclear energy

Singapore is part of the ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy, which established a regional early warning network in the event of nuclear or radiological incidents. More than 80 monitoring stations are installed across Southeast Asia, with data shared on a platform for the countries to access. Singapore's monitoring network is connected to the system.

Shabana Begum

The Straits Times | 1 February 2026

Asia's power mix to be shaken up by Indonesia's coal export stoppage

Indonesia supplied half of all global thermal coal exports in 2025, and is by far the top coal supplier to many of the world's largest coal importers including China, India, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Morning Gavin Maguire

Reuters | 4 February 2026

As energy demand surges, Southeast Asia faces an uncomfortable nuclear question

Nuclear energy demands confidence in regulators, operators and governments, gradually developed over decades. Without that confidence, no amount of strategic justification will secure public acceptance.

Husni Nassir-Deen

Eco-Business | 9 February 2026

Japan restarts world's biggest nuclear plant again

Public opinion in the area around the plant is deeply divided - around 60% of residents oppose the restart, while 37 per cent support it, according to a survey conducted by Niigata prefecture in September.

AFP

Channel News Asia | 9 February 2026

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

World energy outlook 2025

Another common element across scenarios is the revival of fortunes for nuclear energy, with investment rising in both traditional large-scale plants and new designs, including small modular reactors (SMRs). More than 40 countries now include nuclear energy in their strategies and are taking steps to develop new projects.

International Energy Agency

Paris: International Energy Agency | 2025

Nuclear energy - The solution to climate change?

The most important result of this work is that the contribution of nuclear power to mitigate climate change is, and will be, very limited. At present nuclear power avoids annually 2–3% of total global GHG emissions.

Nikolas Muellner, et al.

Energy Policy Vol. 155 | 2025

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

The 5th ASEAN International Conference on Energy and Environment (AICEE)

The conference features recent research and critical discussions on Energy, Environment, and Climate Policy.

Recorded Conference

20 January 2026

FOOD SECURITY



Photo Credit: Adobe Firefly Generated Images

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

Afghanistan: FAO and Asian Development Bank advance \$100 million initiative to boost food security and resilience

The FAO and Asian Development Bank are launching a \$100 million, two-year initiative in Afghanistan to bolster food and nutrition security and restore agricultural livelihoods for over one million vulnerable people. It will support rural households in rebuilding production, protecting livestock, and strengthening climate-smart and resilient systems.

Hashim Azizi

FAO | 29 January 2026

SATS unveils AI-enabled control tower to anticipate and manage risks to food supply

SATS has launched an AI-enabled Control Tower to monitor and manage global food-supply risks in near-real time, enhancing resilience from farm to distribution. The system tracks shipments, detects disruptions like weather or port delays, and supports quicker operational decisions to safeguard Singapore's food supply chain.

Douglas Toh

Yahoo Finance | 2 February 2026

China pledges to bolster Asia-Pacific food security via cooperation

China said it will work with Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) members to strengthen regional food security by building a resilient, open, efficient and sustainable food system. Chinese officials proposed cooperation across the whole food chain, sharing expertise in reserves management and technology, and promoting information sharing and policy partnerships to boost innovation and mutual support.

Xinhua

The Star | 7 February 2026

Prabowo cites fertilizer access, rice abundance as food security gains

Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto highlighted progress toward food self-sufficiency, citing improved fertilizer access for farmers and record-high national rice reserves. He said the government aims to expand independence to other commodities, lower food prices, while scaling up nationwide nutrition programs to support millions of vulnerable citizens.

Azis Kurmala

Antara | 8 February 2026

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

A systematic review on the impact of Artificial Intelligence in the agri-food supply chain

The authors explore the transformative potential of artificial intelligence in the whole agri-food supply chain, focusing on its implications for agricultural productivity and consumer behaviour, while highlighting barriers such as technological accessibility, knowledge gaps among agricultural stakeholders, consumer scepticism, and notable methodological limitations in the existing research.

Matilde Reitano, Michelle S. Segovia and Rodolfo M. Nayga Jr.

Food Policy | November 2025

Decoding conservation agriculture discourses in Zambia: Advocacy politics, contestations, and emerging narratives

This study found three narrative patterns shaping discourses around whether farmers should adopt environmentally attuned conservation agriculture practices: i) advocacy narratives led by donors and extension agents framing conservation agriculture as climate-smart and yield-stabilising; ii) counternarratives from smallholder farmers emphasising labour demands, input costs, and cultural barriers; and iii) overlooked "nonstories", including partial adoption and Indigenous knowledge revival.

Godfrey Omulo, et al.

December 2025 | Development in Practice

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

Asia and the Pacific Food Systems Forum 2026

The four-day event will feature high-level plenaries, regional dialogues, technical sessions, and innovation showcases that highlight integrated approaches linking climate action, nature-positive solutions, food and water security, and rural revitalization. The event's outcomes will guide forward programs, deepen partnerships, and support regional discussions leading into the ADB Annual Meeting in May 2026.

Hybrid, ADB Headquarters, Manila, The Philippines
16 - 19 March 2026

HEALTH SECURITY



Photo Credit: Adobe Firefly Generated Images

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

More young adults, teens in Singapore being diagnosed with cancer

Singapore saw a 34% rise in under-40 cancer diagnoses (2019-2023), with colorectal and breast cancers increasing. Lifestyle factors like ultra-processed foods and obesity contribute; physical activity and healthy diet offer protection against early-onset cancers.

Zhaki Abdullah

The Straits Times | 26 January 2026

Researchers move closer to home-based screening test that could catch cancer much earlier

Carnegie Mellon researchers are developing an affordable at-home cancer test: a sensor-packed pill detects Stage I tumours, with results analysed via urine. Funded by the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H), it aims to identify 30+ solid cancers early for under US\$100.

Raul Dancel

The Straits Times | 04 February 2026

FDA to reassess the safety of BHA, a preservative used in popular snack foods

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reassess BHA, a carcinogen-linked preservative pervasive in the food supply such as popular snacks. The includes assessing exposure of vulnerable populations, including children, to potential health security and safety concerns from BHA consumption.

Associated Press

CNN Health | 10 February 2026

Reading and writing can lower dementia risk by almost 40%, study finds

Lifelong intellectual engagement, i.e. reading, writing, and language learning, lowers Alzheimer's risk by 38% and delays onset by over five years, suggesting cognitive enrichment could prevent or delay dementia for millions globally.

Andrew Gregory

The Guardian | 11 February 2026

SELECTED PUBLICATION

Global health burdens of plastics: a lifecycle assessment model from 2016 to 2040

A global study estimates 83 million disability-adjusted life years lost (2016-2040) from plastics lifecycle emissions, primarily greenhouse gases, air pollution, and toxic chemicals. Reducing primary plastics production was the most effective intervention, even though optimal scenarios still projected rising health burdens without deep systemic change.

Megan Deeney et al.

The Lancet Planetary Health, Vol. 10, Issue 1, 101406 | 2026

A survey on health spending and comprehensive eGuide for healthcare: Challenges, implementation and future directions

Oman is developing a centralised AI-powered eGuide system to enhance healthcare access, navigation, and efficiency across its facilities. The initiative, aligned with Vision 2040, faces challenges including digital literacy gaps, infrastructure limitations, and data security concerns requiring substantial investment and policy alignment.

Yasir Abdelgadir Mohamed et al.

Sustainable Futures Vol. 11, 101584 | 2026

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

One Health Summit 2026

France hosts the One Health Summit in Lyon on 7 April 2026, uniting global leaders to advance concrete solutions on zoonotic diseases, antimicrobial resistance, and ecosystem health through science-driven collaboration and multilateral action.

Lyon, France

7 April 2026

BIOSECURITY



Photo Credit: Adobe Firefly Generated Images

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

Governing the unseen: AI, dual-use biology, and the illusion of control

Hailed as a medical and global health breakthrough, the intersection of artificial intelligence and the life sciences has also unveiled one of the core failures in international governance: the world is managing biological threats, but intelligence remains slow, scarce, and tied to the state.

Rimsha Malik

Modern Diplomacy | 20 January 2026

It is 85 seconds to midnight

The Doomsday Clock was set at 85 seconds to midnight, the closest the Clock has ever been to midnight in its history. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' Science and Security Board called for urgent action to limit nuclear arsenals, create international guidelines on the use of AI, and form multilateral agreements to address global biological threats.

Sarah Starkey

Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists | 27 January 2026

Nipah virus outbreak in India triggers Asia airport screenings

An outbreak of the deadly Nipah virus in India's West Bengal state has sparked concern in parts of Asia, with some tightening screening measures at the airports. No cases have yet been reported outside India, but several countries, including Thailand, Nepal and Taiwan, are stepping up precautions.

Kelly Ng

BBC | 28 January 2026

Biosecurity Modernization and Innovation Act of 2026 is a major step for U.S. biosecurity

US Senators recently introduced the Biosecurity Modernization and Innovation Act of 2026, giving the White House 90 days to assess the state of biosecurity oversight by clarifying roles, measuring effectiveness, listening to practitioners and identifying gaps in resources and capability.

Sam Weiss Evans, Yong-Bee Lim and Nazish Jeffery

Federation of American Scientists | 6 February 2026

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

AI risks from non-state actors

This collection of essays explores whether it would be feasible for the United States and China to coordinate to address risks of artificial intelligence (AI) misuse by non-state actors, what conditions might be needed to enable such coordination, and whether bilateral coordination would be sufficient to address the threat or if broader capacity-building and cooperation would be necessary.

Kyle Chan, et al.

Brookings | 2026

The Biological Weapons Convention at 50: Perspectives from Asia and the Pacific

This publication brings together a wealth of perspectives from across the Asia-Pacific region—one of the most dynamic and scientifically innovative regions in the world. The authors' contributions underscore both the diversity and the shared purpose of the region's engagement with the Biological Weapons Convention.

United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs

UNODA Occasional Papers No. 46 | 2025

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

Indonesian Biorisk Association Conference 2026

This conference will bring together different stakeholders who are actively involved in formulating regulation related to risk, safety and security; performing research using any biological materials; working on biological materials in industrial, academic, hospital, and clinical laboratories; and involved in transporting, waste management, storage, and logistical activities of biological material.

Jakarta, Indonesia

18-19 June 2026

MIGRATION



Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons

NEWS & COMMENTARIES

Overseas Filipina workers dominate migration, bear higher risks abroad

Women now make up the majority of overseas Filipino workers, yet they are disproportionately deployed to countries with restrictive labour and migration systems, where they are funnelled into high-risk, low-visibility jobs and left with limited legal protection when abuse occurs.

Philippine Daily Inquirer/ANN

The Star | 20 January 2026

Bucking a global trend, Spain offers undocumented migrants a legal way to stay

This measure would allow undocumented people already living in Spain to apply for temporary residency permits. The Socialist-led government of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez described it as crucial for Spain, where migrant labour plays a key role in agriculture, tourism and more.

José Bautista

The New York Times | 27 January 2026

How Germany's skilled worker gap exposes migration hurdles

Economists at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) in Nuremberg, Germany, have estimated that Germany must attract 300,000 skilled workers annually just to maintain the status quo. However, despite Germany's renewed need for skilled workers, migrants face many hurdles to work.

Andreas Becker and Nicolas Martin

DW News | 28 January 2026

Female labour migration and reintegration: Challenges, opportunities, and policy imperatives

While female labour migration has contributed significantly to both the micro- and macro-economies of Bangladesh, the process of return and reintegration remains a neglected aspect. Without effective reintegration mechanisms, the social and economic gains of female labour migration risk being short-lived or even reversed.

Ayesha Ahmed Ridi

The Business Standard | 29 January 2026

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Climate, trafficking and gender

This publication finds that climate events and trafficking are linked through a complex series of intertwined steps. Climate events reduce livelihood options and increase vulnerability; this increases pressure to migrate and reduces the resources that can be used to plan migration journeys.

International Organization for Migration
2025

Labour migration in ASEAN: Analysis from the International Labour Migration Statistics Database in ASEAN

Migration trends in and out of the ASEAN region are shifting and evolving over time. In recent years, there are growing concerns about trafficking in persons into cyber-scam centres in several countries in the region.

International Labour Organization
2025

EVENT & ANNOUNCEMENT

Migration amid Climate Change: Adaptation, Displacement, and People Trapped in Place

Climate change is driving and altering migration in a variety of ways. Patterns of human movement often differ in the face of fast-moving environmental disasters. Other factors, including the resilience of a community's infrastructure and their dependence on agricultural livelihoods, can help determine whether, when, and how people migrate.

Recorded Webinar
27 January 2026