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No One Left Behind Building an Inclusive ASEAN Workforce

Edward Vrkic

Resident Representative

UNDP Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam



Empowering ASEAN's Future: Investing in Skills
for Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development

What does it mean to leave no one behind?

Ensuring that all people — regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, disability, location, or economic status — have equal opportunities to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from, economic growth, human security and social mobility.”

It is about creating the pathways to ensure the greatest well being for the greatest number of people.

SDG 4 and SDG 8 targets relevant to the issue of inclusion in skills development and lifelong learning



... ensure that **all** girls and boys complete free, **equitable** and quality primary and secondary education ... (4.1);

... ensure **equal** access for **all** women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education ... (4.3);

... eliminate **gender disparities** in education and ensure **equal** access to all levels of education and vocational training for the **vulnerable**, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations (4.5);

... ensure that **all** learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote ... gender **equality** ... (4.7);

... provide safe, non-violent, **inclusive** and effective learning environments for **all** (4.a);

... achieve full and productive employment and decent work for **all** women and men, including young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value (8.5);

... substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training (8.6).

Source: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Inequality in ASEAN

A Picture of ASEAN

Inequality has widened in several ASEAN countries over recent years, although the extent and nature of this trend varies across the region.

For Example:

- **Thailand:** Consistently ranks among the most unequal countries in Southeast Asia. As of 2023, the richest 10% of the population earn just over half of the total national income, while the bottom 50% earn about 10% .
- **Indonesia:** The Gini coefficient decreased from 0.388 in 2023 to 0.379 in 2024, indicating a slight improvement in income distribution.
- **Philippines:** The Gini coefficient is approximately 0.4439, reflecting persistent income disparities .
- **Vietnam:** The Gini coefficient stands at 37.6, with the top 10% accounting for 30.2% of the nation's income and the bottom 10% receiving 3.2% .

Key Drivers of Inequality

- **Urban-Rural Divide:** Urban areas often have better access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, leading to income disparities between urban and rural populations.
- **Informal Employment:** A significant portion of the workforce in ASEAN countries is engaged in informal employment, which typically offers lower wages and less job security.
- **Education Access:** Disparities in access to quality education contribute to skill gaps and limit economic mobility for lower-income groups.
- **Social Protection:** Limited social protections exacerbate vulnerability among low-income populations.

Economic Implications

Widening inequality can hinder sustainable economic growth and social cohesion. Addressing these disparities requires comprehensive policies focused on:

- **Enhancing Social Protection:** Expanding coverage and benefits to reduce vulnerability.
- **Improving Education Access:** Investing in quality education to bridge skill gaps.
- **Reducing Barriers to Employment:** Delivering legislation and regulation that reduce barriers to entering the labour market.
- **Infrastructure Development:** Investing in rural infrastructure to reduce the urban-rural divide.

By implementing targeted strategies, ASEAN countries can work towards reducing inequality and promoting more inclusive economic growth.

Inclusive Financing Mechanisms for Skills Development

Why current financing mechanism fall short?

- Design bias toward the formal sector and urban populations. ¹
- Low awareness and accessibility of programmes. ²
- Lack of targeted incentives. ³
- High opportunity costs not covered or considered. ⁴
- Discriminatory practices and institutional bias. ⁵

UNDP's Approach to Inclusive Financing



Equity-Focused Resource Allocation



Integration of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI)



Support for Vulnerable Populations



Promotion of Inclusive Digital Economies

Barriers to Accessing Skills Development for Marginalised Community

Marginalised communities face **multifaceted challenges in socioeconomic, educational, and systemic inequities**. All represent barriers to accessing skills development, opportunities and improved wellbeing.



Socioeconomic

Poverty and financial constraints

Lack of infrastructure



Education

Equal access to quality education

Language and literacy challenges



Institutional

Poor Programme Design

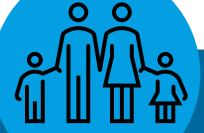
Inadequate outreach and support



Technological

Digital divide

Low digital literacy



Cultural and Social Norms

Gender Norms

Cultural Bias

Addressing Barriers: Innovative Skills Development Funds with an Equity Lens

Example:

Malaysia - UN SDG Trust Fund for Population at Risk of Being Left Behind

- Launched in 2022, the Malaysia-UN SDG Trust Fund is a partnership between the UN Malaysia, MySDG Foundation, and the Ministry of Finance.
- Aims to deliver catalytic interventions that **target those at risk of being left behind e.g. indigenous communities, displaced peoples, PWDs.**
- Under this fund, UNDP works with partners (e.g. ILO, MEF) to empower PWDs with skills for the future through micro-credentials and on-the-job learning / training.
- Improve the capacity of participating companies to provide inclusive opportunities for PWDs. Draws on lessons learned for scalability and sustainability of inclusive employment strategies for the private sector.



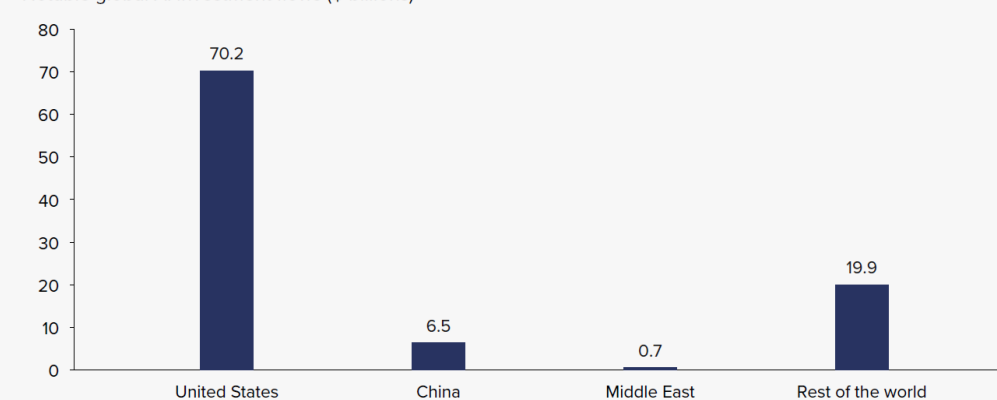
Can Technology Assist Inclusion?

AI-powered for Developing Human Capital

- The [UNDP 2025 Human Development Report](https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2025), 'A matter of choice: people and possibilities in the age of AI', showed that people are realistic yet hopeful about the change AI can bring.
- Half of the respondents (21 countries representing 63% of world population) think that their jobs could be automated. Six in ten expect AI to impact their employment positively, creating opportunities in jobs that may not even exist today.
- Only 13% fear AI could lead to job losses. 70% respondents across low, medium and developed countries, expect AI to increase their productivity, and two-thirds anticipate using AI in education, health, or work within the next year.
- Potential contributions of AI to human development are substantial. With the right policies and focus on people, AI can be a crucial bridge to new knowledge, skills, and ideas that can empower everyone.

Source: <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2025>

Notable global AI investment flows (\$ billions)



AI Investment Disparities

- United States, Canada and Western Europe dominate global AI but face challenges around labour impacts, trust, and inclusion.
- East Asia is a global AI powerhouse, but underinvestment in AI safety, structural divides, skills, and regulatory preparedness across the region exist.
- These disparities are not just technical—they reflect and risk amplifying existing global inequalities in ways that could undermine SDG progress.

Sustainability and Scalability of Inclusive Financing Models

Public-Private-
Partnership

Policy
Coherence

Donor
participation
and alignment

Monitoring and
Evaluation

Recommendations to Actions

Determine the **root causes of vulnerability, including discrimination** that leads to the exclusion of disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals and social groups from access and opportunity.

“Nothing about us without us.”

Inclusive and participatory processes give voice to marginalized people, which better informs more inclusive and integrated programme design.

Integrated solutions to better address complexity and to increase scalability and sustainability of impact.



THANK YOU

For enquiries, please contact:

Herlianna Naning

Head of Inclusive Growth and Prosperity

herlianna.naning@undp.org

