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Subregional perspectives on current and emerging policy issues for inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific

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1. Countries in the ASEAN region enjoy the fruits of peace, stability, and socio-economic progress, contributed significantly by more than five decades of ASEAN cooperation. However, the region faces significant challenges including rapid urbanisation[i], deforestation[ii], climate change impacts on livelihoods[iii], healthcare access gaps, food insecurity, and prevalent informal employment among others. Effective action for sustainable development requires a nuanced understanding of the interconnected economic, socio-cultural, and geopolitical landscape.

Distinguished Guests, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. Today, I wish to highlight the instrumental role of regional organisations, particularly ASEAN, in driving collective action towards equitable and sustainable development for all within this broader context.

3. I will focus on three key strengths that enable ASEAN to address emerging policy issues in this collective effort: first, our strategic commitment to integrating equitable and sustainable development within Southeast Asia, providing a strong foundation aligned with the SDGs; second, our consensus-driven processes and deeply held values that foster robust regional collaboration and ensure shared ownership of sustainable solutions; and third, our unwavering commitment to people-centred and inclusive approaches, offering a significant contribution to achieving lasting and equitable sustainability across the wider Asia-Pacific.

4. First, ASEAN's commitment to fostering a prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable region is deeply embedded in its guiding frameworks, notably the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and looking ahead to the ASEAN Community Vision 2045. These documents articulate ASEAN's long-term economic, socio-cultural, and political aspirations.

Recognising the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a crucial global compact, ASEAN has strategically sought to align its regional priorities with the SDGs through the **Complementarities Initiative**, viewing them as integral to achieving broader equitable and sustainable progress across Southeast Asia and contributing to the stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific.

5. The Complementarities Initiative, led by Thailand and supported by ESCAP, and welcomed at the 9th ASEAN-UN Summit in 2017, produced a key report mapping the synergies between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the UN 2030 Agenda. A **Complementarities Initiative 2.0** is currently being developed to align with the new Vision and to better reflect current global and regional sustainability trends.

6. Further, high-level dialogues, such as the **ASEAN Ministerial Dialogue on Accelerating Actions to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals**, and specialised forums like the **ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies**, facilitate policy coordination, sharing of best practices, and joint initiatives aimed for the SDGs and broader equitable and sustainable development goals.

7. Second, a cornerstone of ASEAN's approach to fostering equitable and sustainable development lies in its unique processes and deeply held values. The ASEAN Way, characterised by dialogue, consultation, and consensus building, underpins our regional cooperation, ensuring that the diverse perspectives and needs of all Member States are considered. This emphasis on regional harmony and cooperation allows us to collectively address complex challenges, from economic disparities to environmental degradation, prioritising inclusivity and building shared ownership for adaptable and equitable sustainable outcomes.

8. To illustrate these values and processes in action, ASEAN has established key regional mechanisms across various sectors. In the critical area of public health, the **ASEAN Public Health Emergency Coordination System (APHECS) Framework** provides a whole-of-ASEAN-Community approach for effective coordination public health emergency coordination, aiming to significantly reduce loss of life and socio-economic impact. Complementing this, the envisioned **ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED)** will serve as a regional hub of excellence, strengthening ASEAN's capabilities in preparedness, prevention, detection, and response to novel and re-emerging infectious diseases.

9. Similarly, ASEAN's commitment to addressing disasters and providing humanitarian assistance is evident through the **ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre)**, which plays a vital role in coordinating regional responses and mobilising resources in the context of increasingly complex and climate-related disasters. In the area of environmental sustainability, ASEAN is strengthening regional cooperation through the establishment of the **ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution** and the **ASEAN Centre for Climate Change**. Furthermore, the envisaged **ASEAN Cultural Heritage List** aims to garner support for the protection and conservation of ASEAN's diverse tangible

and intangible cultural heritage, recognising its intrinsic value and contribution to sustainable development.

10. Finally, a significant contribution of ASEAN to the broader Asia-Pacific's pursuit of equitable and sustainable development lies in its unwavering focus on people-centred and inclusive approaches. Our experiences offer tangible examples of this commitment. The **ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**, the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework and the ASEAN Guidelines on Portability of Social Security Benefits for Migrant Workers in ASEAN demonstrate our dedication to inclusivity. ASEAN fosters a future-ready through initiatives like the **ASEAN Declaration on HRD for the Changing World of Work**, and the **Roadmap on the Digital Transformation of Education Systems in ASEAN,** to name a few.

11. Furthermore, the **ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement**, of which negotiations are ongoing, emphasises bridging the digital divide and ensuring inclusive participation in the digital transformation. The **ASEAN Blue Economy Framework** highlights our integrated approach to the sustainable use of marine and freshwater resources, focusing on the well-being and livelihoods of coastal communities, and the **ASEAN Strategy for Carbon Neutrality**, identifies decarbonisation solutions tailored to the region in view of a just transition.

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12. In closing, the pursuit of equitable and sustainable development across the Asia-Pacific, requires robust regional leadership and collaboration where ASEAN is uniquely positioned as a driving force. Through established frameworks and mechanisms including the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, diverse cooperation platforms and deep understanding of the specific needs and priorities of our Member States, ASEAN can foster tailored solutions and catalyse significant progress.

13. Looking ahead, ASEAN, like the wider Asia-Pacific, will face evolving and increasingly complex issues. These include intensifying climate change impacts demanding agile policy responses, the imperative for a just energy transition requiring innovative regional cooperation, managing rapid technological disruptions necessitating inclusive digital policies, addressing widening inequalities calling for adaptive social frameworks, and navigating geopolitical uncertainties requiring regional solidarity – all of which have profound implications for sustainable development.

14. However, it is precisely ASEAN's inherent strengths – our commitment to strategic integration, our ability to build consensus and foster regional ownership, and our focus on inclusive and people-centred solutions – that will be crucial in effectively tackling these future challenges with agility and foresight.

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[i] ASEAN and UN Women. (2024). ASEAN Gender Outlook 2024. https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/2024/ASEAN-gender-outlook_2024.pdf

[ii] ASEAN Secretariat. (2024). ASEANstats Database as of 16 December 2024. https://www.aseanstats.org/ Data is on forest area for 2022.

[iii] ASEAN and UN Women. (2024). ASEAN Gender Outlook 2024. https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/2024/ASEAN-gender-outlook_2024.pdf