

Policy Harmonization for SDG Implementation in the ASEAN Region: Challenges and Opportunities

¹ Dr. Rajeshwari Dutta, Tribal Inclusion and Education Research Centre, Shillong Institute of Development Studies, India.

² Dr. Tanveer Alam, Tribal Inclusion and Education Research Centre, Shillong Institute of Development Studies, India.

Abstract: This paper examines the intricate challenges of policy harmonization across the ASEAN countries for the purposes of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through qualitative approaches which included case study analysis, review of policy documents, and stakeholder interviews, this research seeks to establish areas of regulatory convergence as well as divergence. The study findings demonstrate the influence of political will, institutional capacity, and cooperation at the regional level towards the achievement of the SDGs. The paper provides some policy pathways to close the gaps alongside recommendations to aid achieve the desired outcome which is useful for development practitioners and policymakers.

Keywords: ASEAN; Sustainable Development Goals; Policy Harmonization; Regional Integration; Governance; Implementation Gaps; Institutional Capacity; Policy Frameworks.

(Submitted: June 04, 2024; Revised: July 10, 2024; Accepted: August 13, 2024; Published: September 30, 2024)

I. Introduction

ASEAN is home to a vibrant region with the vision of achieving sustainable development by implementing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The differences in political systems, economic policies, and governance structures of the member states pose severe threats towards achieving policy harmonization for regional progress. While the SDGs have been adopted by individual countries and are being integrated into national frameworks, there are deep inconsistencies in policies coupled alongside insufficient institutional capacities which are detrimental to a unified strategy at the regional level.

As a regional bloc, ASEAN has acknowledged the importance of unified policy frameworks for ensuring equitable and inclusive achievement of Agenda 2030. Still, the alignment of national policies to regional policies is affected by issues such as sovereignty, absence of monitoring systems, and varying levels of development. These challenges are made worse by global shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change that have strained the resiliency of these policy frameworks.

This paper analyzes the most important barriers and opportunities in the alignment of national policies on SDGs at ASEAN level. The aim is to assess what ASEAN initiatives are already being done regionally and in what ways different models of collaborative governance can help strengthen alignment of policies. Through select case studies and policy initiatives, this research demonstrates both the structural constraints and the proactive approaches to policy harmonization. The findings are intended to assist policymakers in the ASEAN region in designing policies that are effective, inclusive, and adaptable to local contexts.

II. Literature Review

There are ongoing attempts to assess the regional cooperation frameworks for the SDGs. Carvajal et al. (2024) elaborate on the importance of intergovernmental platforms in advancing regional integration through education and policy alignment.

Regional disparities in public administration and policy implementation have been documented in institutional analyses. Elder and Ellis (2023) highlight uneven progress across ASEAN countries on health,

sustainability, education, and environmental dimensions. Complementing this, Kheng-Lian et al. (2016) stress that cross-border policy coherence requires enhanced data-sharing frameworks and stronger institutional integration.

Research by Ting and Yongkun (2023) underscores both the benefits and challenges of ASEAN's consensus-driven approach. While the model supports inclusivity and ownership, it slows down the enactment of stronger regional frameworks. Similarly, Pettman (2013) identifies standards harmonization as a persistent challenge, pointing to regulatory fragmentation as a barrier to cohesive regional action.

Collectively, these studies suggest that ASEAN must carefully balance national interests against regional aspirations. Within the constraints of institutional and technological barriers, there is significant scope for cohesive action through cooperation, adoption of digital innovations, and policy harmonization.

In this study, the method used is largely qualitative, encompassing document analysis, comparison of selected case studies, and interviews with key informants. Documents relevant to SDG implementation at the regional and country levels—such as policy frameworks, reports, and national voluntary reviews—were examined to assess coherence, identify gaps, and evaluate alignment with ASEAN strategies.

Moreover, a comparative case study approach was adopted, covering three ASEAN nations: Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Their active participation in regional mechanisms for reporting SDGs and cooperative initiatives was the main criterion for selection. These cases provided insights into the interaction between national strategies and regional approaches.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with policymakers and experts specializing in ASEAN regional policy and SDG focal points from member states. The interviews captured views on coordination, institutional mechanisms, and success stories in policy alignment.

The primary data was analyzed through thematic analysis, enabling the identification of common challenges and opportunities across the region. These findings informed contextual explanations and actionable recommendations to guide future regional cooperation on SDGs.

III. Results and Discussion

It was determined from the analysis that there is considerable variation in terms of institutional preparedness and prioritization in the ASEAN member countries regarding SDGs. Some Singapore and Vietnam, for instance, have started incorporating SDG allocations into their national budgets and planning documents, while others are constrained because of poor governance and low income. Perhaps the most prominent issue is still the alignment of data indicators and the frameworks used for their evaluation.

Table 1: Comparison of SDG implementation status across selected ASEAN countries

Country	Integrated SDG in National Policy	Monitoring Mechanism	Stakeholder Engagement
Indonesia	Yes	Moderate	High
Vietnam	Yes	Strong	Moderate
Philippines	Yes	Moderate	Moderate
Cambodia	Partial	Weak	Low

Table 2: Common barriers and potential enablers for policy harmonization in the region.

Barriers	Opportunities
Lack of standardized indicators	ASEAN SDG platforms
Limited data-sharing agreements	Regional digital infrastructure
Political sovereignty concerns	Bilateral cooperation frameworks

Weak institutional capacities	International technical assistance
-------------------------------	------------------------------------

IV. Conclusion

ASEAN confronts both steers and an opportunities with transformational potential regarding structure with regards to the SDGs. These findings highlight the gaps related to standardized procedures, the standardization of frameworks, acquisition of data, and cooperation at the regional level. Although heterogenous institutions present a challenge, political resolve and collective action within ASEAN provides a mechanism towards development. Further, these efforts should be directed towards fostering the capacity to govern and manage, encouraging participation in policy discourse, and implementing development in an exclusive manner which is free and flexible towards other forms of integration towards sustainable development in the region.

References

- [1] Carvajal, A. L. P., Pangilinan, A. M., & Sanchez, R. D. (2024). A roadmap on harmonizing education in the ASEAN region: Challenges and strategies. *International Journal of Open-Access, Interdisciplinary and New Educational Discoveries of ETCOR Educational Research Center (IJOINED ETCOR)*, 3(4), 215-228.
- [2] Elder, M., & Ellis, G. (2023). ASEAN countries' environmental policies for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) M. Elder, G. Ellis. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 25(10), 10975-10993.
- [3] Pettman, S. (2013). Standards harmonisation in ASEAN: progress, challenges and moving beyond 2015. *ERIA Discussion Paper Series*, 30.
- [4] Kheng-Lian, K., Robinson, N. A., & Lin-Heng, L. (2016). *ASEAN environmental legal integration: sustainable goals?* (Vol. 13). Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Ting, C., & Yongkun, L. (2023). Why can ASEAN promote sustainable development cooperation?. *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 66(2), e022.