



[A woman farmer waters her pineapple crop in a rural Cambodian village. Photo by Oxfam Cambodia]

ENABLING A JUST AND RESILIENT FUTURE:

Strengthening Social Protection Framework in ASEAN

This policy paper serves as a reference for ASEAN Member States in the review the ASEAN Declaration of Strengthening Social Protection and its Regional Framework and Action Plan. It is intended as a practical tool for identifying strategic priorities for a renewed commitment to universal social protection. The paper offers insights and recommendations to ensure revised frameworks address to current realities and align with the ASEAN's long-term vision of cohesive, prosperous and people-centered community.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last 50 years, the ASEAN region has seen exponential economic growth, becoming the world's fifth-largest economy in 2022, reaching a gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$3.6 trillion.¹ Yet, this remarkable growth has not translated into shared prosperity and equal opportunities for all. Inequality and poverty are rising, while low wages, precarious and insecure work, weak labor rights enforcement, unequal access to resources and public services, and limited social protection continue to affect millions.

Social protection systems remain fragmented, underfunded, and inadequate, leaving large segments of populations vulnerable to shocks.

- Only **33.2% of the population** in Southeast Asia had access to at least one social protection benefit – well below the global average of 46.9%.² Singapore leads with universal coverage, followed by Thailand (70.1%) and Indonesia (54.3%), while Myanmar (6.3%) and Laos PDR (15.5%)³ present the lowest coverage rates.
- Only **28% of people with disabilities** are covered, while old pension schemes present the highest coverage (37,8%).⁴
- Less than a **quarter of children** (22.2%) and only a **quarter of mothers** (28%) have access to maternity benefits.⁵
- While **one in four workers** are covered by employment injury schemes, unemployment benefits cover only 12.3% of the population.⁶
- Over **234 million informal workers or 69.8% of the workforce** remain in informal employment with no access to social protection, low wages and poor working conditions.⁷
- Only **21% of economically vulnerable people** receive any form of social assistance.⁸
- Women are **disproportionately affected**, often trapped in precarious employment, shouldering most of the unpaid care work, and sidelined from formal protections, leading to a gender pay gap of 21%.⁹

ASEAN is at a critical juncture as it undertakes a review of the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection and its Regional Framework and Action Plan. This process offers a strategic moment for the Member States to shape the direction of social protection for the next decade and beyond. Without timely and decisive reforms, the vital

opportunity to build inclusive, adaptive, comprehensive and transformative systems might be lost. Strengthening social protection is a strategic response to today's pressing challenges, including, but not limited to:

- **Climate crisis** - ASEAN is one of the most climate-vulnerable regions globally, with countries like, Myanmar, Thailand, Philippines, and Vietnam among the top 10 most affected by climate-related disasters.¹⁰ Inaction could cost up to 37.4% of its current GDP by 2047.¹¹
- **Green and digital transitions** - the changing world of work is creating new opportunities, but without adaptations and comprehensive social protection systems, ASEAN risks widening the gap between those who can adapt and those left behind.
- **Demographic shifts and care needs** - aging population and shifting care needs demand responsive care policies.
- **Economic uncertainty in a changing global landscape** - ongoing global economic volatility underscores the need for robust social protection systems that can people during times of crisis and transition.

The paper was prepared to seize the opportunity presented by the review of the Declaration. With Member States currently shaping the direction of the regional social protection framework for the next decade, this is a pivotal moment to ensure that the voices of civil society and the needs of the citizens are meaningfully reflected. The paper is intended to support engagement with ASEAN Member States and national social protection institutions, highlighting urgent priorities and proposing actionable policy considerations.

The paper begins by examining ASEAN Member States' commitments to social protection recognizing both the importance and limitations of the current ASEAN Declaration of Strengthening Social Protection. It then outlines key systems gaps and priority areas that require urgent attention. The paper concludes with recommendations for Member States and considerations for the revision of the Declaration to enhance its relevance and impact. While not exhaustive, the paper aims to highlight some of the most pressing issues and opportunities, recognizing that additional gaps and policy concerns may fall outside its current scope.

2. ASEAN AGENDA FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION

Social Protection is a fundamental human right¹², and a cornerstone of inclusive, resilient and sustainable development. Beyond serving as a safety net for the most vulnerable, it is a powerful instrument for reducing inequality, addressing risks and vulnerabilities across the life cycle and promoting human rights and dignity.¹³ Anchored in principles of universality, solidarity, and gender equity, social protection is not only a moral imperative, but also a social and economic necessity. It contributes to stronger, more productive societies by supporting individuals and families to cope with shocks, invest in their futures, and participate fully in economic and social life. Ensuring that all people can enjoy this right is a core responsibility of governments and a critical element of equitable national development.

Recognizing this, ASEAN Member States adopted the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection on 9 October 2013 during the 23rd ASEAN Summit in Brunei Darussalam. The Declaration recognized the importance of a lifecycle approach to social protection emphasizing its role in safeguarding people against economic shocks and fostering inclusive regional integration. ASEAN's commitment to SDG 1.3. – on implementing nationally appropriate social protection systems for all - further emphasizes the importance of expanding coverage by 2023.

Since 2013, ASEAN has made important strides in strengthening social protection systems.¹⁴ However, there is growing recognition that the current framing of the Declaration may benefit from updates to reflect evolving challenges and priorities. While the Declaration rightly identifies key vulnerable groups—including poor, at risk, persons with disabilities, older people, children, undernourished, women, migrants, and disaster-affected populations¹⁵—it largely emphasizes targeted approaches, without sufficiently embedding the principle of universality, which is essential for inclusive social protection. Achieving universality can be done progressively, ensuring no one is left behind while building political and social cohesion.

However, while the Declaration acknowledges women and children as priority groups, it lacks an explicit gender lens or a comprehensive gender-transformative approach. Given the disproportionate responsibility of unpaid care and domestic work on women, their overrepresentation in informal and precarious employment, and barriers to access social protection, mainstreaming gender throughout social protection policies is vital to achieving equitable outcomes.

Finally, the Declaration does not yet integrate crucial considerations related to climate resilience and just transition. As ASEAN faces increasing risks from climate change and undergoes major economic transformations social protection systems must evolve to help populations adapt, safeguard livelihoods, and promote environmental and economic sustainability.

The review of the declaration presents a timely and critical opportunity to address these gaps and ensure ASEAN's social protection framework remains relevant, inclusive and forward-looking.

3. BRIDGING THE GAPS: STRENGTHENING SOCIAL PROTECTION IN ASEAN

Fragmented systems, limited coverage and informality

Social Protection systems across ASEAN remain highly fragmented, often structured across multiple ministries, schemes, and delivery mechanisms, and prioritizing narrowly defined vulnerable groups. This leads to administrative burdens, exclusion errors, inefficiencies, and major coverage gaps, particularly for populations outside formal employment. While progress has been made, large segments of population remain excluded from the comprehensive and inclusive protection.

As of 2023, approximately 234 million workers in Southeast Asia¹⁶ were in informal employment, representing 69.8% of the workforce, significantly higher than the global average of 58%.¹⁷ Across the region those in informal, precarious, low-wage employment remain largely excluded from social protection frameworks. While formal employees benefit from schemes like maternity protection, employment injury protection, and unemployment benefits, the so called “missing middle” - who are neither formally employed nor classified as poor - remain unprotected.

Informality is particularly high among own-account workers, contributing family workers, seasonal, casual, migrant workers and employees in sectors such as agriculture, domestic work, and home-based production—often with no legal or practical access to protections like maternity leave, health insurance, or pensions. Estimates on informal employment ranges widely across the ASEAN bloc, from 31% in Brunei Darussalam to 90.5% in Lao PDR.¹⁸ Own-account workers and contributing family workers make up half (52.3%) of informal employment, while a significant share of informal workers (20%) is employed in formal enterprises but lack job security and benefits.¹⁹

Women face greater vulnerabilities, often concentrated in sectors with weakest protection such as domestic work, home-based work, unpaid contributing family work, as well as agricultural work being exposed to unsafe working conditions and hazardous agrochemicals. Youth and older workers are also overrepresented in informal or insecure jobs, reflecting systemic barriers to labor market entry and insufficient pension systems, respectively. Furthermore, those working on digital platforms

face exclusion due to lack of clear legal definitions which exacerbates informality.

Further compounding the problem are system weaknesses in policy design and delivery. Key challenges to expanding equitable coverage include: (i) legal barriers; (ii) weak enforcement of laws and regulations; (iii) lack of policy coherence and integration among social protection policies and between social protection and other policy areas; (iv) burdensome and lengthy administrative procedures and processes; (v) limited contributory capacity; (vi) weak governance structures; (vii) limited institutional capacities and supply-side constraints; (viii) lack of incentives or a weak perception of value for money; (ix) limited public awareness and information; (x) lack of organization and representation.²⁰

Although ASEAN has demonstrated commitment to expanding coverage—as articulated in the *Vientiane Declaration on Transition from Informal to Formal Employment Towards Decent Work Promotion in ASEAN (2016)*—implementation has fallen short. The prevailing reliance on poverty-targeted and means-tested approaches reinforces fragmentation and often excludes those in vulnerable but non-poor categories. At the same time, labor market-linked schemes are not sufficiently adapted to labor markets that remain characterized by informal and non-standard employment. Furthermore, often the systems are not designed to respond to large-scale shocks.

To close these gaps, the ASEAN Member States need to adopt a universal, multi-dimensional life-cycle approach by expanding and integrating both contributory and non-contributory schemes, and services; analyzing the risks and vulnerabilities through an intersectional lens between work (sectors, status of employment, place of work), stage of the life cycle and gender.

Public services gaps

One of the most critical barriers to achieving universal and inclusive social protection is gaps in public services (such as education, health, housing, water, sanitation, care services).²¹ When assessed through the lens of availability, accessibility, affordability, adaptability and quality, public services, are an essential component of social protection system. Social protection needs to be included in a broader framework of quality public services that guarantee continuity and access to essential goods and services tied to human rights.²² Despite the advancements in many Member States, underinvestment, austerity measures and increasing privatization of public services are undermining this potential.

While several ASEAN countries have made strides in expanding health coverage, significant disparities remain in both access and quality. Thailand, for example, has made strong progress toward universal health coverage through public financing models. In contrast, large segments of the ASEAN population, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, face barriers to accessing quality public health and education services due to

cost, geographic inaccessibility, and infrastructural deficits. It is well documented that privatization of these services – often incentivized by financial institutions – is increasing inequality and household vulnerability to shocks and out-of-pocket expenses, disproportionately affecting low income-households, women and informal workers.

Health coverage is also closely linked to broader care services, which vary across countries. ILO notes that insufficient public care infrastructure – such as childcare, elder care, disability services - contributes to the feminization of unpaid care work, exacerbating gender inequality and limiting women's labor force participation.²³ Additionally, UNESCAP highlights that public spending on care services in several ASEAN countries remains below global averages, limiting the state's capacity to ensure universal coverage. Given the demographics shifts towards ageing, it is important that Member States adopt plans to manage old-age and long-term care issues.²⁴

Without a strong foundation of public services, efforts to expand social protection and respond effectively to today's intersection shocks and vulnerabilities will remain insufficient. ASEAN Member States must therefore reframe from the privatization of essential services, and instead commit to publicly financed, universal systems that uphold rights and reduce inequality.

Gender gaps and unequal access to social protection

Women in ASEAN face significant gender gaps in social protection, largely due to structural inequalities in the labor market and social protection systems. Many women work in informal, low-paid, and precarious jobs, often without contracts and labor protection, which limits their access to contributory schemes linked to formal employment, such as pensions, health insurance, unemployment benefits, and maternity protection. In the absence of social protection floors, they are often left without any form of support, job security and access to essential services, making them vulnerable to poverty.

A major structural barrier, originated in the prevailing gender norms, is the unpaid care and domestic work which continues to be disproportionately carried out by women. In Asia Pacific, women and girls spend 4.1 times more time in unpaid care and domestic work than men.²⁵ This contributes to the “motherhood employment penalty” - where women face reduced access to job opportunities and income, while men experience the “fatherhood bonus” – where fathers are perceived more competent and tend to be paid more because they're seen as the main breadwinner. This unequal distribution of care leads to reduced access to paid employment, education and economic opportunities for women, which results in a lower lifetime earnings and fragmented social security entitlements.

Additionally, care needs are becoming more critical in the context of ASEAN's rapid demographic transition. The proportion of people aged 60 and above is expected rise from 77.4 million in 2020 to 173.3 million by 2050, significantly increasing the demand for long-term care.²⁶ Women are at the center of this transition as they live longer than men, are more likely to be single in old age, less likely to have an income, own property and more likely to live in poverty, and are overwhelmingly responsible for unpaid eldercare.²⁷ Yet, they are also the ones least protected by contributory pension schemes, long-term care benefits, access to health care compounding their vulnerability to poverty in old age.

Women are also facing increasing health risks, particularly those working in the agri-food sector, being exposed to long hours, difficult labor and harmful chemicals without having access to adequate access to occupational health protection or insurance. Their sexual and reproductive needs, and exposure to agrochemicals are rarely recognized in social protection and labor policies.

Despite the growing recognition of these issues, ASEAN's current social protection frameworks fail to fully address these gender-specific risks. Many social protection programs target households rather than individuals, reinforcing existing power imbalances and failing to account for intra-household inequalities. While almost all Member States provide maternity benefit schemes, these often reinforce gender traditional norms by placing the care responsibility solely on women - offering little or no parental leave for men and limited adequate and affordable childcare services. As a result, they fall short of advancing broader gender equality objectives. Many are also excluded due to eligibility conditions like minimum periods of employment or formal contracts.

The absence of care-sensitive policies - such as universal childcare and child benefits, comprehensive paid maternity, paternity and parental leaves, care leave for the sick, disabled and elderly family members, universal disability benefits, and non-contributory pension schemes - further deepens the gender gap. Most ASEAN Member States, except for Cambodia, have also introduced paternity leave, however, the duration remains limited and contingent on social security contributions. Moreover, the lack of gender-responsive budgeting mechanisms means that social protection schemes rarely receive dedicated financing to address gender inequalities in a holistic and sustainable manner.

The consequences are far-reaching. Women's economic dependence on family members increases, leaving them financially insecure, particularly in old age. The absence of adequate maternity protection and childcare support discourages women from entering or remaining in the workforce, contributing to lower labor force participation rates. Moreover, the gender wage gap translates into a gender pension gap, leaving women with significant lower benefits during retirement.

To address these challenges, ASEAN must adopt gender-transformative social protection systems that address the structural gender barriers and

power imbalances. Gender analysis must inform the design, implementation and evaluation of social protection schemes assessing how gender roles and social norms influence exposure to risk, ability to respond to crisis and barriers to access.²⁸

Limited adaptive and shock-responsive social protection in the context of climate change

Climate change is expected to potentially push an additional 132 million people into extreme poverty by 2030²⁹, making it critical for ASEAN to integrate climate resilience into its social protection frameworks and ensure a shock-responsive and adaptive capacity to climate change.

Despite the clear link between social protection and climate resilience, current social protection policies remain largely reactive and inadequately integrated into climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. While ASEAN has acknowledged disaster-responsive social protection through initiatives like the *Guidelines on Disaster-Responsive Social Protection to Increase Resilience*, these efforts focus mainly on post-disaster recovery rather than long-term climate adaptation and mitigation. Moreover, ASEAN's strategies often prioritize economic growth and private-sector solutions, sidelining the inclusion of vulnerable populations, particularly informal workers and women.

Moreover, existing social protection programs struggle with limited targeting mechanisms, largely designed to reach the chronically poor, outdated delivery systems, and insufficient financing. Many programs are designed to assist the poorest, rather than responding flexibly to sudden climate shocks. The lack of risk-informed beneficiary registries means that social protection systems are unable to quickly scale up support when disasters strike. There are only a handful of documented experiences in the use of social protection to respond to shocks in the ASEAN region.³⁰ Additionally, ASEAN's broader climate strategies—such as ASEAN Climate Vision 2050—primarily emphasize technical solutions (e.g., renewable energy, disaster risk management) while overlooking the socioeconomic dimensions of climate vulnerability.

Climate-induced disruptions are already leading to an increase in inequalities, loss of livelihoods, food shortages, and economic instability. Without shock-responsive social protection, many vulnerable groups are pushed further into poverty after climate-related disasters. This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the need for rapid financial support systems, scalable assistance, and robust beneficiary registries.³¹ Lessons from the pandemic underscore the urgent need to apply similar adaptive mechanisms to climate-related shocks.

Well-designed Social Protection systems, such as income security for vulnerable groups, public employment programs, and universal and free public healthcare and education, could help vulnerable populations and

workers in climate-sensitive sectors cope with the growing frequency and intensity of climate-related shocks. Social protection can also enable vulnerable populations to adapt to the changing environment by incentivizing sustainable practices. Adaptive measures, such as subsidies for climate-resilient agriculture, training in sustainable farming techniques, and re-skilling programs for workers, equip individuals and communities to adjust to new climate realities.

By integrating climate resilient considerations into social protection frameworks and social protection into climate strategies and financing structure, ASEAN can address the socio-economic impacts of climate change, protect vulnerable populations while foster a just transition that prioritizes equity, inclusivity, and resilience.

Social Protection Gaps in Just and Energy Green Transition Frameworks

As ASEAN economies accelerate efforts to tackle the climate crisis, transitioning away from carbon-intensive industries is both urgent and inevitable. The region's energy sector remains heavily reliant on fossil fuels,³² and while decarbonization is necessary to meet climate goals, without deliberate planning, the transition poses significant socioeconomic risks—especially for workers, communities, and groups that depend on carbon-intensive industries for their livelihoods. If not managed with equity at the core, these risks could deepen inequality, displace millions, and undermine public support for climate action.

While ASEAN Member States have made commitments in articulating energy transition ambitions—such as through the ASEAN Climate Vision 2050 and during the 40th ASEAN Ministers on Energy Meeting (AMEM)³³—there are substantial gaps in integrating social protection into these frameworks. ASEAN lacks a dedicated, region-wide strategy to address the social consequences of phasing out fossil fuels and transitioning to green energy. As explained above, existing social protection systems are uneven and fragmented and are not systematically designed to support people displaced from high-carbon sectors or to facilitate the creation of green jobs.

Adding to this scenario, there is limited use of social dialogue between government, employers, workers and civil society to shape the transition agenda, and there are few mechanisms to promote the inclusion of women and marginalized voices to the table. Reforms, like fossil fuel subsidy removals are rarely accompanied by compensatory social protection measures, exposing poor households to energy insecurity.

Without a sound, rights-based and comprehensive social protection system and floors the transition to greener sectors risks deepening inequalities and affect millions of people. Many workers could face unemployment and income insecurity due to job losses in fossil fuel-based industries, and lack of skills needed for the “green jobs”. Low-

income households might struggle with rising energy and food costs, leading to increase lifecycle risks, such as sickness, old-age insecurity.

A just and inclusive transition offers an opportunity to rebalance power, redistribute benefits, and invest in the resilience and wellbeing of all. Therefore, ASEAN should work toward a coordinated regional framework for just transition that integrates social protection into national energy and climate strategies. This includes expanding adaptive and inclusive social protection systems that respond to climate-related risks, particularly for vulnerable groups. Strengthening labor market policies, promoting lifelong education and reskilling programs for green jobs, fostering gender equality, and ensuring universal access to affordable energy are essential to building resilience. Regional cooperation, social dialogue, and alignment with climate finance mechanisms will be key to ensuring that the transition is not only green—but also fair and equitable for all.

Limited fiscal space for Social Protection

Financing social protection in ASEAN remains a key challenge as the region faces mounting pressures from climate change, demographic shifts, and economic transformation. Public expenditure on social protection as a share of GDP is below the Asia Pacific average of 8%.³⁴ While some countries have made notable progress in extending coverage and modernizing delivery systems, overall funding remains uneven, with limited fiscal space to ensure universal, adaptive, and shock-responsive protection. Expenditure levels vary widely across the region - from 7.0% in Viet Nam and 8.5% in Thailand to just 2-4% in Cambodia, Brunei, Laos and Myanmar, Indonesia.³⁵ (Table 2).

To build resilient systems, ASEAN governments must prioritize increased and more efficient public investment in social protection. Allocating the necessary public budgets to universal social protection is a smart investment, not a cost.³⁶ The financing gap for achieving universal social protection coverage per year in Asian and Pacific countries, amounts to 2% of their GDP.³⁷ This could have a multiplier effect. Most households would have a guaranteed level of income regardless of unemployment or sickness, with poverty reduction, income redistribution and more social cohesion as a result.³⁸ Investing in social protection becomes even more affordable over time, once countries begin the virtuous cycle of investing in universal social protection and providing good quality public services.³⁹

Investments in universal social protection systems that benefit everyone increase trust in government and strengthen the social contract so more residents are willing to pay taxes with more government revenues for universal programs and public services such as healthcare, childcare and education in return. Therefore, increasing spending on social protection has impressive returns that make it a cost-effective investment. Providing universal social protection only requires courage and political will.⁴⁰

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A POST-2025 SOCIAL PROTECTION FRAMEWORK

Reflecting on the current social protection landscape and the commitments of ASEAN Member States in fostering an inclusive social protection framework, the following policy considerations are proposed for the ASEAN Member States, and specific considerations for the Declaration.

Recommendations for the ASEAN Member States

Progressive expansion towards a universal social protection framework

- ASEAN must shift from poverty-targeted approaches toward rights-based, **universal social protection systems** that ensure no one is left behind financed through progressive revenue raising measures, making rapid progress in implementing a universal social protection floor and gradually expend more comprehensive protection through integration of contributory and non-contributory schemes.
- Governments should avoid relying on targeted or means-tested models, instead beginning with a universal framework and progressively expanding coverage both in terms of benefits and adequacy.
- A system of regular five-year strategic reviews should be institutionalized to monitor equity, adequacy, and resilience, ensuring steady progress toward the ASEAN 2045 Vision.⁴¹
- Ensure the quality and accessibility of essential services, such as health care, childcare, long-term elder care within social protection frameworks is strengthened and promoted.

Extend coverage to workers in informal economy

- While working towards universal social protection, ASEAN Member States should adopt a comprehensive, rights-based approach to extend social protection to workers in informal economy recognizing the diversity of employment arrangement

and income patterns, through a combination of measures and strategies to ensure effective and equitable coverage.

- Extend social protection schemes (including the right to maternity, paternity, and parental leaves, access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health care) to reach workers in informal employment, migrants, domestic and community care workers. These should include, where possible, universal schemes, such as unconditional cash transfers or social pensions covering the “missing middle” and those with no contributory capacity, as well as implementation of portability of social security for migrant workers.
- At the same time, contributory social insurance schemes should be adapted to progressively cover those workers with some contributory capacity. This requires introducing flexible contribution schedules, simplifying registration and payment systems, including through digital platforms, and offering partial or full subsidies for low-income earners and the self-employed. Providing incentives for voluntary participation is also essential, especially in sectors where workers are self-employed, or own account.
- Governments should establish and strengthen tripartite mechanisms that include, on equal footing, governments, workers’ organizations (including informal worker organizations) and employers in the design, implementation, management and monitoring of social protection policies.

Advance and deliver gender-transformative social protection

- Incorporating the 5R Framework for Decent Care Work (Recognizing, Reducing, Redistributing, Representing and Rewarding unpaid care work) in the legislative and policy measures. Schemes like universal child benefits and childcare services, paid maternity, paternity and parental leaves, disability and long-term elder care benefits, non-contributory pension schemes, and more investment in public care infrastructure and services ensure that care responsibilities are more evenly distributed within households, the community and the state.
- Ensure social protection systems are designed around individual-based entitlements rather than household-targeted schemes, ensuring that women and girls have direct and independent access to benefits.
- Establish universal, non-contributory social protection floors, including public health care services, childcare and pre-school education, public pensions and basic income security, to safeguard individuals with interrupted labor force participation,

such as mothers with newborns, caregivers and people with disabilities.

- Prohibit discrimination based on maternity, family, and care responsibilities while promoting work life balance policies; and the right to equal pay for equal work that also covers part-time, atypical, and informal economy workers.⁴²
- Establish systematic and robust gender differentiated databases such as existing databases on labor participation, informal work, the wage and pension gap and expand them with databases on unpaid care and domestic work, workplace harassment and representation in management boards and politics to inform the design of gender transformative social protection policies.

Integrate Climate Risk and Just Transition into Social Protection Systems

- Include direct and indirect climate risk assessments into the design of social protection programs to identify and support populations most vulnerable to climate-related shocks, including establishing shock-responsive and adaptive mechanisms to provide timely assistance following climate disasters.
- Addressing climate risks and vulnerabilities can't be achieved without health care coverage models that are truly universal, ensuring healthcare is affordable, accessible and of good quality. Occupational health and safety should also be included as a core component of comprehensive social protection.
- Implement a Just Transition Framework aligned with the Social Protection Frameworks to protect workers through unemployment benefits, income guarantees, early retirement schemes, access to reskilling opportunities and job placement services for workers transitioning to green jobs.

Increase financing for universal social protection and public services

- Ensure adequate and sustainable financing for the extension of universal social protection coverage and quality public services. This includes exploring equitable financing mechanisms, such as progressive taxation and innovative fiscal strategies that create new fiscal space. Globally, progressive tax policies, such as 0.5% wealth tax on the richest 1% over the next 10 years would equal the investment needed to create 117 million jobs in education, health and elderly care.⁴³ Expand the tax base through fair and efficient 'domestic resource mobilization', including taxes on wealth, capital gains and large corporations to support social protection programs.⁴⁴

- ASEAN Member States should ensure that international financial institutions (IFIs), particularly the IMF and World Bank, support rather than hinder the expansion of universal, rights-based social protection systems. They should call on IFIs to roll back austerity policies and promote social spending, adopt measures that expand fiscal space, including cancelling or restructuring sovereign debt, replace loans with grants for social spending, regulate private sector actors delivering social services, ensuring they do not extract profit at the expense of public welfare.
- Governments must halt the privatization of public services and prioritize public investment, ownership, and management of essential services. Strengthening publicly funded and managed systems is critical to ensure accessibility, affordability, and quality services for all. Expand investment in care economy and ensure gender-responsive budgeting.
- ASEAN Member States should continue its commitments to free, available, quality healthcare services for all, especially mothers, newborns and children, to reduce out-of-pocket spending and improve health across the life cycle. This should be accompanied by greater investment in healthcare infrastructure to ensure that services are resilient to future health challenges.
- In parallel, ASEAN Member States should ensure access to free, quality education for all, including early childhood care and pre-school education.

Considerations for the Declaration

- **Reaffirm Commitment to Universal, Rights-Based Social Protection:** Ensure the Declaration explicitly endorses a universal and rights-based approach over targeted models, referencing international standards, such as the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202), as guiding benchmarks.
- **A Transformative focus on gender justice:** Gender justice must be a foundational pillar of the Declaration, cutting across all commitments, informed by intersectional analysis, and shaped by the voices of those most affected. Integrating a clear commitment to gender-transformative social protection, putting care at the heart of it, as well as addressing intersecting vulnerabilities (e.g., gender, disability, age, migration status, climate exposure) will ensure that the Declaration supports an inclusive, multidimensional approach.
- **Explicit inclusion of the “missing middle”:** Ensure the Declaration explicitly recognizes the importance of extending coverage to those that are currently excluded from the systems, including informal workers such as domestic, agri-food sector

workers, gig, and platform workers, migrants, self-employed, care workers, seasonal workers.

- **Climate Resilience and Just Transition:** Include climate-sensitive social protection as a core principle and emphasize the importance of shock-responsive systems, occupational health, and a just transition framework for workers affected by environmental and labor market changes.
- **Equitable and Sustainable Financing:** Strengthen language around public financing and progressive taxation specify public investment and taxation as key drivers and a commitment to halt privatization of core public services.
- **Inclusivity of Stakeholders:** Recognize the role of civil society organizations, labor unions, membership-based organizations of workers in the informal economy, and underrepresented, including women's groups in the design and monitoring of social protection systems.

ANNEX

Table 1: Regional Case Examples of Social Protection Programs

Country	Scheme
Thailand	Thailand provides universal healthcare through three schemes including the civil service welfare system for civil servants and their families, contributory social security for private employees including overseas workers, and the Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS Profile 2017) , introduced in 2002, which opened up universal health coverage to all citizens. Social security is financed by payroll contributions while the universal coverage and civil servant benefit programs are financed by general taxation.
Philippines	The maternity leave law in the Philippines, officially referred to as the “105-day Expanded Maternity Leave Law” (RA 11210 or EML) provides the updated policy on maternity leave that covers females who are workers in the private and public sectors, workers in the informal economy, voluntary contributors to the Social Security System (SSS), and national athletes. It likewise grants a woman the option to allocate up to seven days of paid maternity leave to her child’s father or an alternate caregiver.

**Table 2 - Social Protection Expenditure in ASEAN countries,
2023 or latest available year (% of GDP)**

Country	Total expenditure on social protection (including health)	Domestic General Government health expenditure, WHO (2021)	Total expenditure on social protection (excluding health)
Brunei Darussalam	2.7	2.1	0.6
Cambodia	3.1	2.0	1.1
Indonesia	3.7	2.2	1.5
Laos PDR	1.4	0.7	0.7
Malaysia	6.2	2.5	4.2
Myanmar	2.0	1.1	0.9
Philippines	5.0	2.3	2.7
Singapore	4.5	3.5	1.0
Thailand	8.5	3.6	4.9
Viet Nam	7.0	2.0	5.1

Source: World Social Protection Data Dashboard, ILO: <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/WSPDB.action?id=19> (accessed March 2025)

Table 3 - Other ASEAN frameworks related to social protection

Frameworks	Observation
ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Fostering Resilience Towards the Post-2025 ASEAN Community (2024)	Highlights the need for care-related social protection, supporting both unpaid and paid care workers in all sectors. It calls for social assistance, social welfare schemes, social insurance programs, and measures to enhance resilience and reduce vulnerability during crises, including from climate change, disasters and pandemics. ⁴⁵
ASEAN Declaration on Portability of Social Security Benefits for Migrant Workers in ASEAN (2022)	Includes migrant workers in medical and healthcare of receiving countries and returned migrant workers in sending countries in social protection policies. ⁴⁶
ASEAN Guideline on Gender Mainstreaming (2021)	Shows a strong commitment of ASEAN on Universal Maternity Protection. ⁴⁷
The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint 2025	Calls for the need for enhancing the effectiveness of programs related to social protection, universal health coverage, poverty eradication, employment, and decent work. ⁴⁸
The ASEAN Labor Ministers (ALM) Work Program (2016–2020)	Aims to provide “a better quality of life for people by ensuring that its workforce has enhanced competitiveness and is engaged in safe and decent work derived from productive employment, harmonious and progressive workplaces, and adequate social protection”. ⁴⁹
The Hà Nội Declaration on the Enhancement of Welfare and Development of ASEAN Women and Children (2010)	Aims to promote and protect the rights of women, deliver essential social services relating to women and children, foster collaboration with dialogue partners for the welfare and development of women and children, promote gender equality and women’s participation in the labor market, address gender-based occupational segregation, and improve maternity protection in workplace. ⁵⁰
The ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2012)	Includes provisions on access to assistance for the unemployed, adequate standard of living, medical care and social services, affordable health care and access to medical facilities, social security, special protection to mothers and children, including paid leave or leave with adequate benefits, special care and assistance to all children regardless of birth status. ⁵¹
The Vientiane Declaration on the Transition from Informal Employment to Formal Employment toward Decent Work Promotion in ASEAN (2016)	Links social protection to the working-age population through the formalization of informal employment. ⁵²
ASEAN Guidelines on Disaster Responsive Social Protection to Increase Resilience (2021)	Means to leverage adaptive social protection systems, while promoting cooperation with all concerned instances (public health, DRM, social welfare, ...). ⁵³

NOTES

¹ ASEAN Statistical Brief, Volume IV, January 2024

² Coverage data for at least one social protection benefit, as well as for specific benefits, are sourced from the ILOSTAT database, accessed in June 2024. The data pertains to 2020 or the most recent available year. The coverage rate is defined as the proportion of the total population receiving at least one contributory or non-contributory cash benefit, or actively contributing to at least one social security scheme, excluding healthcare and sickness benefits. The data represents effective coverage rather than legal coverage. (ILO 2024).

³ "Statistics on social protection", ILOSTAT database. Available at <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/social-protection/> (accessed in June 2024).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ILO. 2024. *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2024: Promoting Decent Work And Social Justice to Manage Ageing Societies*, Geneva: ILO.

⁸ *Statistics on social protection*, ILOSTAT database. Available at <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/social-protection/> (accessed in June 2025).

⁹ ILO. 2016. *Gender equality in the labor market in Asia and the Pacific and the Arab States*, Geneva: ILO. Available at <https://www.ilo.org/media/430031/download>

¹⁰ Global Climate Risk Index 2020 | Germanwatch e.V. <https://www.germanwatch.org/en/17307>

¹¹ The Economics of Climate Change: Impacts for Asia | <https://www.swissre.com/risk-knowledge/mitigating-climate-risk/economics-of-climate-change-impacts-for-asia.html>

¹² The right to social protection is recognized in numerous human rights instruments including: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 22), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (arts. 9 and 10), Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (art.11), Convention on the Rights of the Child (art.26), the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (art.27), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (art.28).

¹³ ILO.2024. *World Social Protection Report 2024-2026: Universal Social Protection for Climate Action and a Just Transition*, Geneva: ILO.

¹⁴ ASEAN's commitment to social protection is reflected in several key frameworks and declarations listed in table 3.

¹⁵ ASEAN. 2013. *ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection and Regional Framework and Action Plan to Implement the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection*.

¹⁶ Southeast Asia includes the following countries: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Viet-Nam.

¹⁷ ILO. 2024. *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2024: Promoting Decent Work And Social Justice to Manage Ageing Societies*, Geneva: ILO.

¹⁸ ILOSTAT (accessed June 2024)

¹⁹ ILO.2023. *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Update*, Geneva: ILO.

²⁰ ILO.2019. *Extension of social security to workers in informal employment in the ASEAN region*. Geneva: ILO

²¹ While public services encompass a wide range of essential services—including education, housing, water and sanitation, transport, and more—this paper focuses specifically on health and care services due to their central role in social protection and their critical relevance to current regional challenges, including demographic change, gender inequality.

²² Development Pathways. Human Rights Watch. 2023. *Questions and Answers on the Right to Social Security*.

²³ ILO. 2022. *Care at Work: Investing in Care Leave and Services for a More Gender Equal World*. Geneva: ILO.

²⁴ UNESCAP. 2021. *Addressing Unpaid Care Work in ASEAN*. Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

²⁵ ILO. 2018. *Care Work and Care Jobs. The Future of Work*. Geneva: ILO

²⁶ ASEAN Secretariat. 2023. *Old Age Poverty and Active Ageing in ASEAN: Trends and Opportunities*. Jakarta.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Newton, Julie. 2016. *Making Social Protection Gender Sensitive for Inclusive Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Gender Advisory and Knowledge Services supported by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

²⁹ Jafino, Bramka Arga; Walsh, Brian James; Rozenberg, Julie; Hallegatte, Stephane. *Revised Estimates of the Impact of Climate Change on Extreme Poverty by 2030 (English)*. COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Policy Research working paper no. WPS 9417 Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

³⁰ Two examples include: In the Philippines, the protocols of the Pantawid CCT include a provision that suspends conditionalities for a limited period of time when a 'state of calamity' is declared. In Thailand, the Social Security Act B.E. 2558 establishes a protocol to reduce employee and employer contributions and to extend the duration of unemployment benefits during emergencies

³¹ During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Member States such as Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam carried out tweaks and changes to the existing social protection programs expanding to reach to poor women and workers in the informal economy enabling them to adjust and respond to the crisis. They also introduced child protection schemes and the temporary waiving of conditionality clauses in cash transfer programs for workers in the informal sector and low-skilled workers in the formal economy.

³² Oxfam Briefing Note. 2023. *Advancing Just Energy Transition in the ASEAN*

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ ILO estimates, World Social Protection Database, based on the Social Security Inquiry; ADB, GSW, IMF; OECD; UNECLAC; WHO, national sources

³⁵ World Social Protection Data Dashboard, ILO: <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/WSPDB.action?id=19> (accessed March 2025).

³⁶ Marcos Barba, L. Van Regenmortel, H. Ehmke, E. 2020. *Shelter from the Storm: The global need for universal social protection in times of COVID-19*. Oxfam.

³⁷ Cattaneo, U. 2024. *Financing gap for universal social protection*. ILO.

³⁸ Marcos Barba, L. Van Regenmortel, H. Ehmke, E. 2020. *Shelter from the Storm: The global need for universal social protection in times of COVID-19*. Oxfam.

³⁹ Gazzman, F. 2018. *Inclusive virtuous cycles: Why governments need to invest in social protection (and why it's in their best interest)*. Maastricht University.

⁴⁰ Kidd, et al. 2020. *The social contract and the role of universal social security in building trust in government*. Development Pathways.

⁴¹ ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/ASEAN-2045-Our-Shared-Future.pdf>

⁴² Oxfam Briefing Paper. 2021. *Recommendations for a social protection framework that empowers women in the ASEAN*.

⁴³ Oxfam International. 2020. *Time to Care: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work and the Global Inequality Crisis*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxfam GB on behalf of Oxfam International

⁴⁴ Asian Development Bank. 2021. *Strengthening Domestic Resource Mobilization in South-East Asia*, ADB Briefs, March 2021: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/684916/adb-brief-172-domestic-resource-mobilization-southeast-asia.pdf>

⁴⁵ ASEAN. 2024. *ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Fostering Resilience Towards the Post-2025 ASEAN Community*. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/1-ASEAN-Declaration-on-Strengthening-the-Care-Economy-and-Fostering-Resilience-towards-ASEAN-Community-Post-2025_.pdf

⁴⁶ ASEAN, 2022. *Declaration on Portability of Social Security Benefits for Migrant Workers in ASEAN*. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/30-ASEAN-Declaration-on-Portability-of-Social-Security-Benefits-for-Migrant-Workers-in-ASEAN.pdf>

⁴⁷ ASEAN, 2021. *ASEAN Guideline on Gender Mainstreaming*. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/GM_Pub%20ASEAN%20Guideline%20on%20gender%20mainstreaming%20into%20labour%20and%20employment%20policies%20towards%20decent%20work%20for%20all.pdf

⁴⁸ ASEAN. 2016a. *ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2015*.
<https://asean.org/storage/2016/01/ASCC-Blueprint-2025.pdf>

⁴⁹ ASEAN. 2016b. *ASEAN Labour Minister's Work Programme 2016-20*.
https://asean.org/storage/2012/05/FINAL-PRINTING_27Content-ALM-WP.pdf

⁵⁰ ASEAN. 2010. *Ha Noi Declaration on the Enhancement of Welfare and Development of ASEAN Women and Children*. https://asean.org/?static_post=ha-noi-declaration-on-the-enhancement-of-welfare-and-development-of-asean-women-and-children

⁵¹ ASEAN. 2012. *ASEAN Human Rights Declaration*. <https://asean.org/asean-human-rights-declaration/>

⁵² ASEAN. 2016c. *The Vientiane Declaration on the Transition from Informal Employment to Formal Employment towards Decent Work Promotion in ASEAN*.
<https://asean.org/storage/2016/09/Vientiane-Declaration-on-Employment.pdf>

⁵³ ASEAN. 2021. *ASEAN Guidelines on Disaster Responsive Social Protection to Increase Resilience* - <https://asean.org/book/asean-guidelines-on-disaster-responsive-social-protection-to-increase-resilience/>