

**Report of the NEAT Working Group on
"The Sustainable Development Goals and East Asian Cooperation"**

21 July 2022

Rationale

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have increasingly become a universal agenda since its adoption by the United Nations in 2015. It has also been described as the ‘transformative agenda’ (UN 2015). The SDGs aim to eradicate poverty, establish socioeconomic inclusion and protect the environment. Disparaging analysis suggests a potential inconsistency in the SDGs, particularly between the socio-economic development and environmental sustainability goals. While being a transformative agenda that is universal, human rights-based and comprehensive, SDGs are also constrained by the lack of political will, limited capacity, and financial resources.

The ASEAN Plus Three member states have pursued the SDGs with various levels of commitment and capacity. ASEAN's goal of being people-centred and people-oriented has emphasised the significance and urgency of the SDGs. ASEAN adopted the report on the SDG indicators to establish the baseline information of the SDGs being tracked and measured in the region, which will support the monitoring of progress in achieving the global agenda and supporting relevant policymaking at the national and regional levels. A situation is made more acute by a lack of appropriate data and implementation mechanisms.

The SDGs increasingly appear to complement the establishment of the ASEAN Community and are essential in building a regional community in East Asia. The SDGs' significant elements align with those of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), which include poverty, gender, environment, biodiversity, education, labour, rural and urban development, marine issues, and so on. ASCC embraces a wide range of subjects and topics under the SDGs. However, the relatively slow progress of ASCC is evident. In addition, the pandemic will likely negatively affect ASEAN's progress toward the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In early 2020, a UN report illustrated that the region's SDG progress had already slowed and that the area was far from achieving most goals by 2030.

Considering the urgency of the SDGs, regional cooperation is an essential part of realising the SDGs as many goals are transboundary in nature. There are different priorities among the APT member states. A regional cooperative mechanism has a chance to bridge multilateralism and unilateralism toward the SDGs.

The working group, held on 21 July 2022 online, discussed how the SDGs can be incorporated into the East Asian community-building process.

On Discussion

Participants in the working group shared their views, observation, assessment and insightful policy recommendations to improve the implementation of the SDGs in APT member states through enhanced regional cooperation.

The working group participants revisited the SDGs' concepts and essential principles. They addressed critical issues arising from the SDG implementation at the national and regional levels based on the review of the development of the SDGs in ASEAN and the APT. The working group suggested an institutional mechanism and measures for achieving the SDGs.

Participants agreed that there was a significant disparity among the countries in practising the SDGs. The priority of SDGs agendas varies from country to country. There has been a considerable capacity gap in technology and financial resources among the APT member states.

There is a lack of regional cooperation for the SDGs in the region. At the same time, a state-led SDGs model has been a dominant feature with limited collaboration with the United Nations. The state-led approach at the national level has exposed its limitation in tackling various issues since the nature of SDGs is inherently transnational. At the domestic level, it is essential to embrace multi-stakeholders, including government, local authority, enterprise, civil society, etc.

The participants reaffirmed essential principles of the SDGs, including a human rights-based approach, gender equality, and the principle of 'leaving no one behind, which are of particular importance to cope with various challenges derived from the Covid 19 pandemic. Since nearly ninety per cent of the goals correspond to human rights, implementing the SDGs is crucial to secure human rights. The SDGs need to be pursued more inclusively since vulnerable groups, including women, children, refugees, and foreign workers, face social and economic problems worsened by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Without committing to the principles of the SDGs and lack of involvement of multi-stakeholders, the practice of the SDGs would be constrained as 'SDGs Wash' decoupling with internal development.

The SDGs are also transformative at a time of the fast-emerging digital economy, which will bring various socio-economic impacts as well as business transformation, which includes changes in the labour market. The SDGs implementation should contribute to reducing inequality and caring for marginalised groups by providing the proper programs to develop digital literacy for improving human capital and capacity building. In this sense, SDGs can be a great reset to adapt to our new challenges.

The record of the SDGs progress of the APT member states has been off track even before the outbreak of Covid-19. The re-emergence of Covid-19 would bring more significant impacts on the SDGs achievement without severe and immediate responses through international cooperation. Despite the modest progress in reducing poverty and related agendas, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor increased considerably during the onset of the pandemic-triggered social-economic crisis. To protect their human security, the vulnerable groups should be subject to exceptional attention.

Recommendations

Localisation of the SDGs is crucial for the meaningful implementation of the SDGs. There are cases of domestic mechanisms to implement the SDGs such as engagement of the parliamentarians in some member states. There should be more effort to raise public awareness and participation to promote the “bottom-up” implementation of the SDGs.

Sharing good practices and models of SDGs and related capacity and technology, including digitalisation and statistics, should be extended at the regional level. The APT-wide implementation mechanism of the SDGs by the APT and member states should be considered to meet financial and institutional needs.

To achieve the SDGs, WG suggests that APT:

- Call the leaders to pay more attention to APT cooperation to meet the SDGs and acknowledge the growing challenges amid the covid 19 and significant disparity in progress among the member states.
- To incorporate SDGs implementation into APT cooperation to share good practices of SDGs. i.e. climate change, capacity building, and Human capital/resources development should be considered to ensure no one is **left** behind.
- To establish the APT SDGs multi-stakeholders committee, including national and local governments, business sectors and CSOs, to share development model and related technology, and to provide finance and investment based on the bottom-up approach.
- For further collaboration among the APT member states, conduct joint voluntary national reviews and organise a special session at the UN High-Level Political Forum.