



## ***Promoting Universal Health Coverage and Decent Work: Mainstreaming SDGs at the 42<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN Summit in 2023***

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### ***Abstract***

*The issue of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and decent work remains vital to ensure social and economic growth. As a region with diverse backgrounds like ASEAN, this is quite challenging. In fact, UHC and decent work are strategic issues to achieve ASEAN Charter and the 2030 SDGs target. However, challenges remain still after 17 years of ASEAN Charter's enforcement and 10 years of SDGs' adoption. This research applies a qualitative approach with the focus on ASEAN integration and strategic preference. As for the scope of analysis, it will limit only on the 42<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN Summit 2023. Result confirms that ASEAN's leaders commit to strengthen UHC. However, there was no declaration on decent work, since the focus is on protecting migrant workers and their relative. As for the SDGs, they are mainstream in ASEAN's agendas. To sum up, UHC and SDGs become key issues during the summit, but not for decent work.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the context of international cooperation, regional integration functions as a platform through which countries with diverse backgrounds converge around shared interests to achieve common objectives. One of the most enduring and adaptive forms of regional integration is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). At its inception, ASEAN primarily aimed to promote economic integration among its member states (Azis, 2018). Over time, however, its role has expanded significantly to encompass broader objectives, including regional stability and security (Pongsudhirak, 2018). This evolution reflects the convergence of political interests, shared purposes, and a collective vision among its members, which underpin the expansion of ASEAN cooperation (De Castro, 2000).

At the regional level, ASEAN member states are bound by cooperation across economic, socio-cultural, and political-security domains. This multidimensional collaboration is institutionalized through the concept of ASEAN Community building, as elaborated in the ASEAN Charter (Wirajuda, 2015). Complementing this framework is the “ASEAN Way,” which emphasizes consensus-building and non-intervention in the domestic affairs of member states (Ramcharan, 2000). This principle allows each country to independently manage its internal and external political affairs, while fostering mutual respect and regional cohesion.

The principle of non-interference was reaffirmed with the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007 (Woon, 2017). Article 2(a) explicitly emphasizes respect for sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity among member states (ASEAN’s Future and Asian Integration on JSTOR, n.d.). As an intergovernmental organization, ASEAN has also been characterized as a “neighborhood watch group,” reflecting its collective approach to conflict prevention, solidarity-building, and the maintenance of regional stability (San, 2000). This institutional consolidation was further strengthened with the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 (AC 2025) on 22 November 2015, which outlines the region’s long-term strategic direction.

Coinciding with the formulation of AC 2025, global leaders adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the United Nations Headquarters in New York in 2015. This global agenda commits countries to implementing sustainable development strategies at the regional, national, and sub-national levels through 2030 (Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). At the regional level, progress is monitored through periodic reviews, while at the national and sub-national levels, governments are encouraged to align development planning and institutional arrangements with SDG targets (Clark, 2017).

Substantively, the ASEAN Charter and the SDGs share a common normative foundation centered on inclusive and sustainable development. Both frameworks

emphasize that economic growth should not come at the expense of social welfare, environmental sustainability, or community well-being. Although AC 2025 and the SDGs operate on different timelines, ASEAN had already embedded sustainability principles within its regional integration agenda prior to the formal adoption of the SDGs. Consequently, the launch of the SDGs in 2015 reinforced ASEAN's identity as "One Vision, One Identity, and One Caring and Sharing Community," further strengthening its commitment to sustainable development.

Within this context, the implementation of the SDGs in ASEAN can be understood as a process of localization, whereby global norms are adapted to regional and national circumstances. ASEAN encourages its member states to share experiences, address common challenges, and foster cooperation in achieving sustainable development objectives. This localization process also extends to the sub-national level, where local governments play a critical role in translating national commitments into concrete policies and programs. As such, SDG implementation in ASEAN serves not only as a normative commitment but also as a practical strategy to address multidimensional challenges, including poverty, inequality, health disparities, and economic development.

This article focuses on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and decent work within the SDG framework, particularly in the context of the 42nd ASEAN Summit under Indonesia's presidency. Both issues are considered integral to achieving the objectives of AC 2025. UHC functions as a key enabler of economic resilience, improved public health, and social stability (Bloom et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the promotion of decent work, characterized by safe and equitable working conditions, supports the effectiveness of social protection systems and contributes to long-term socio-economic development (Ramji-Nogales, 2017). Together, these two dimensions play a critical role in advancing ASEAN's vision of a stable, inclusive, and prosperous regional community.

While existing studies have extensively examined UHC, decent work, SDGs, and ASEAN, this article distinguishes itself by focusing specifically on their prioritization within the 42nd ASEAN Summit. In addition, it introduces the concept of strategic preference as an analytical lens to understand why certain issues gain prominence within ASEAN's policy agenda. This perspective enables a more nuanced analysis of how UHC, decent work, and SDGs are positioned within ASEAN's regional cooperation framework, and why their relative importance varies across policy discussions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a desk study approach grounded in qualitative and descriptive analysis. The data are derived from both primary and secondary sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, reports from international governmental organizations (IGOs), and relevant online

resources. The primary variables examined in this study are Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and decent work, specifically within the context of the 42nd ASEAN Summit in 2023. In addition, the analysis incorporates ASEAN regional integration and strategic preference as key analytical lenses. To enhance the validity of the findings, this study applies data triangulation, whereby the variables are examined through multiple sources of evidence to ensure consistency and reliability in the interpretation.

The qualitative analysis is structured around a case study approach, complemented by descriptive and comparative methods (Cannella & Lincoln, 2016). The analytical process begins with data condensation, which involves the selection, categorization, and simplification of relevant information. The data analysed may include official documents, policy reports, and other empirical materials. Subsequently, the findings are presented in a narrative form, supported where necessary by tables, graphs, or visual representations to enhance clarity. The final stage involves drawing conclusions based on the research questions, ensuring that the analysis remains systematic and evidence-based (Abror, 2024). Overall, this methodological approach is designed to produce a rigorous and empirically grounded analysis of the issues under investigation.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. AC 2025's Value and Outlook SDGs' Achievement in ASEAN**

The ASEAN Community (AC) 2025 is structured around three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) (Magno, 2021). The overarching objective of AC 2025 is to mainstream the ASEAN Community agenda into the domestic policies of member states, promote multi-stakeholder cooperation, and strengthen the institutional role of the ASEAN Secretariat. Collectively, these pillars are intended to enhance regional integration and deepen cooperation across political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions (ASEAN-2025-Forging-Ahead-Together-Final.pdf, n.d.).

Table 1: Explanation of APSC, AEC, and ASCC's Vision

APSC	AEC	ASCC
Rule-based, individual-oriented, and community oriented	Integrated economic system	Make a positive contribution to the individual
Peace, security and stability of the region	A dynamic, competitive and innovative ASEAN	Inclusive

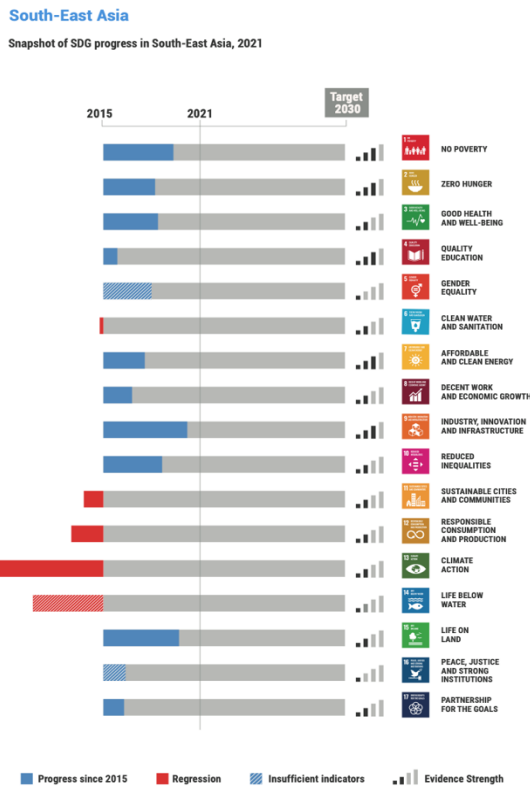
ASEAN as a dynamic region	Improving regional connectivity and cooperation	Sustainable
Strengthening ASEAN's institutional capacity and contribution	A resilient, inclusive, and individual-oriented and community-centered ASEAN society	Resilient, ASEAN Global, Vibrant

Source: Yuyun Wahyuningrum, 2012:4

Referring to Table 1, among the three pillars of AC 2025, the ASCC demonstrates the strongest normative alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment is reflected in shared principles such as inclusiveness and sustainability, both of which are central to the implementation of the SDGs. In practice, ASEAN’s commitment to sustainable development predates the formal adoption of the SDGs in 2015. The principle of sustainability had already been embedded in the ASEAN Charter in 2008 (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2010). Furthermore, during the 27th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN leaders reaffirmed their commitment to supporting the SDGs as part of the regional development agenda (ASEAN-2025-Forging-Ahead-Together-Final.pdf, n.d.).

Despite this formal commitment, progress toward the SDGs in ASEAN has remained relatively limited. Nearly a decade after the 27th ASEAN Summit, achievements across the goals remain uneven and, in several areas, insufficient. In 2021, measurable progress was observed only in Goals 1, 9, and 15. By contrast, Goals 4, 8, and 17 were categorized as significantly off track. In addition, Goals 6, 11, 12, 13, and 14 showed signs of stagnation or slowdown (Widening Disparities amid COVID-19, 17). These findings are particularly relevant to this article, as the region continues to face difficulties in expanding universal health coverage (UHC), generating adequate employment opportunities, and ensuring safe and productive working conditions

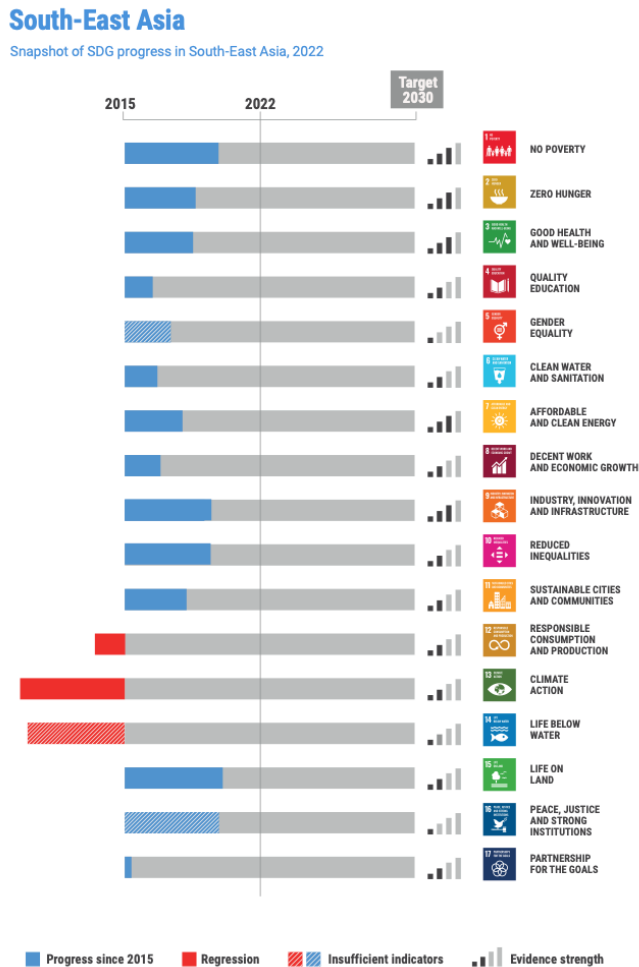
Figure 1: The SDGs achievement of 2021 in ASEAN compared to 2030 target



(UNESCO AP, 2022)

In 2022, some improvement was recorded. The number of goals categorized in the red zone declined from five to three. Goals 1, 9, 10, and 15 demonstrated progress, while Goals 1 and 9 sustained their positive performance from 2021. Nevertheless, Goals 4, 6, and 8 remained below target and showed no substantial improvement compared with the previous year. Moreover, Goals 12 and 13 experienced regression, continuing the setbacks already identified in 2021 (Championing Sustainability despite Adversities, 2023). Although these developments suggest partial recovery, progress in UHC and decent work remained inadequate. This raises an important question regarding whether ASEAN can realistically meet either the AC 2025 targets or the broader SDG targets by 2030.

Figure 2: The SDGs achievement of 2022 in ASEAN compared to 2030 target (UNESCAP, 2023)

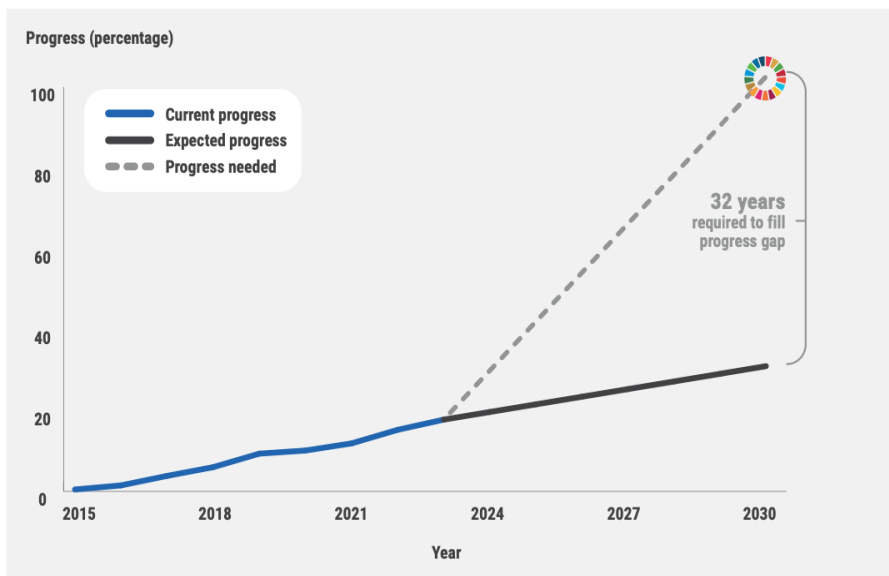


Overall, the trajectory of SDG implementation in ASEAN illustrates a persistent gap between normative commitment and practical achievement. While AC 2025 provides an important institutional framework for regional cooperation, the uneven pace of implementation across member states suggests that stronger policy coordination, greater resource commitment, and more inclusive governance mechanisms are still required. Without substantial acceleration, ASEAN risks falling short of both its regional integration aspirations and its global sustainable development commitments.

## 2. The Overview of UHC and Decent Work in ASEAN

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) released the SDG Progress Report 2024. Notably, none of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Asia-Pacific region were classified as on track to be achieved by 2030. Since the adoption of the SDGs, progress has remained slow, increasing from only 4.4 percent in 2017 to 17 percent in 2023. UNESCAP estimates that, if current strategies remain unchanged, the region will require an additional 32 years to achieve the SDG targets. Accordingly, transformative action by all countries is urgently needed (Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2024, n.d.-a).

Figure 3: Progress of SDGs Achievement Towards 2030 Target (UNESCAP, 2024)



Graph 1. Progress of SDGs Achievement Towards 2030 Target (UNESCAP, 2024)

Within the Asia-Pacific region, progress on universal health coverage (UHC) ranks fifteenth and remains slow, with achievement still far from the 2030 target. Key barriers include unequal access to health services, insufficient health infrastructure, and limited capacity of health personnel (Rizvi et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the unemployment rate ranks eleventh and has been categorized as regressing. In response, UNESCAP has urged countries to promote quality

employment opportunities and strengthen the protection of workers' rights (Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2024, n.d.-b).

In ASEAN specifically, the performance of UHC has been fluctuating. Between 2021 and 2023, progress remained stagnant, indicating some advancement but still falling short of the target. Similarly, the unemployment rate increased in 2021 without reaching the expected benchmark, regressed in 2022, and improved again in 2023 (Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2024, n.d.-b). These inconsistent trends suggest that ASEAN continues to face structural challenges in advancing both health protection and labour market resilience.

Such fluctuations are a growing concern for ASEAN member states, particularly given the limited time remaining to achieve the 2030 Agenda. In response, ASEAN adopted the *ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Fostering Resilience Towards the Post-2025 ASEAN Community* in 2024, which identified UHC and employment as key regional priorities (1-ASEAN-Declaration-on-Strengthening-the-Care-Economy-and-Fostering-Resilience-towards-ASEAN-Community-Post-2025\_.pdf, n.d.). This initiative reflects ASEAN's recognition that achieving these goals requires the participation of multiple stakeholders. In line with this approach, the pillars of AC 2025 emphasize partnerships involving civil society organizations (CSOs), academics, business actors, and development partners (Fornalé, 2018).

Within the declaration, ASEAN member states agreed that care-related social protection programmes should be implemented in an inclusive and comprehensive manner. The proposed strategy seeks to balance the provision of direct assistance with broader improvements in governance capacity. In addition, ASEAN committed to developing employment-related care policies aimed at enhancing workers' welfare through stronger policy support and institutional measures. These commitments indicate that ASEAN's post-2025 regional strategy is not only intended to strengthen community resilience, but also to accelerate progress toward the achievement of the SDGs.

### **3. Why UHC Matters for ASEAN?**

Universal health coverage (UHC) refers to a condition in which all individuals are able to access essential health services without experiencing financial hardship, regardless of their socio-economic background (Forman et al., 2016). It has increasingly emerged as a prominent public policy priority because of its function as a social safety net, particularly for vulnerable populations (Lougarre, 2016). Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), UHC encompasses financial risk protection, access to quality essential healthcare services, and access to safe, effective, quality, and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all (Tichenor & Sridhar, 2017). Accordingly, the implementation of UHC seeks

not only to improve public health outcomes, but also to reduce social and economic inequalities.

UHC can generally be advanced through two complementary strategies: strengthening health service delivery and improving broader quality-of-life conditions. The first strategy emphasizes the equitable distribution of healthcare services, disease prevention and treatment, and the provision of adequate medical facilities. The second focuses on preventive approaches, including health education, advocacy, and public awareness initiatives that improve overall well-being and reduce long-term health risks.

Within the SDGs, UHC is explicitly reflected in Goal 3, particularly Target 3.8.1, which measures coverage of essential health services (Brolan & Hill, 2016). This indicator captures four major dimensions: (i) reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health; (ii) infectious diseases; (iii) non-communicable diseases; and (iv) service capacity and access. These dimensions underline the comprehensive nature of UHC as both a health and development objective.

Overall, UHC performance in ASEAN has improved over time. This is reflected in the Universal Health Coverage Service Coverage Index (UHC SCI), which increased from 47 in 2010 to 62 in 2021. Despite this progress, performance remains uneven across member states, and most countries continue to fall below the desired benchmark. In 2021, the target UHC SCI score was 82, a threshold exceeded only by Singapore and Thailand (Monitoring Progress on Universal Health Coverage and the Health-Related Sustainable Development Goals in the South-East Asia Region, n.d.). The following table presents the UHC SCI performance of ASEAN member states.

Table 2: Score of SCI UHC in ASEAN

<b>Country</b>	<b>Score of UHC</b>	<b>Progress</b>
Indonesia	55	improved 26 points from 2020
Malaysia	76	improved 24 points from 2020
Thailand	82	improved 39 points from 2020
Viet Nam	68	improved 31 points from 2020
Philippines	58	improved 22 points from 2020
Cambodia	58	improved 34 points from 2020
Singapore	89	improved 25 points from 2020
Myanmar	52	improved 27 points from 2020
Laos	52	improved 27 points from 2020
Brunei Darussalam	78	improved 26 points from 2020

Source: World Health Organization, 2003

One of the principal challenges in expanding UHC across ASEAN is the uneven financial capacity of member states, combined with differing levels of health sector development (Collins, 2019). This disparity is evident in the proportion of households spending more than 10 percent of total household expenditure or income on health services. This indicator reflects both the affordability of healthcare and the extent to which households are financially protected from health-related shocks.

Among ASEAN countries, Cambodia recorded the highest proportion of households spending more than 10 percent of household resources on healthcare, at 18 percent. Myanmar followed at 13 percent, Viet Nam at 12 percent, Singapore at 9 percent, Laos at 7 percent, while Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand each recorded 2 percent. Data were unavailable for Brunei Darussalam and the Philippines (ASEAN-Statistical-Brief-March-2024-FINAL.pdf,n.d.). These figures demonstrate significant variation in households’ capacity to finance healthcare across the region.

Given these disparities, ASEAN has identified UHC as a strategic priority in the *Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Fostering Resilience Towards the Post-2025 ASEAN Community*. This is particularly significant as the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 approaches its conclusion while several member states remain below target. The inclusion of UHC in the declaration reflects ASEAN’s broader integration agenda, whereby expanding health coverage requires sustained cooperation, policy coordination, and shared commitment among all member states.

Several structural factors continue to hinder the achievement of UHC in ASEAN, including limited funding, unequal distribution of health infrastructure, and differences in national disease-management priorities (Te et al., 2018). Among these constraints, the role of government is especially important in ensuring adequate and sustained budget allocation for the health sector. The table below compares domestic general government health expenditure (GGHE-D) as a proportion of general government expenditure (GGE) in 2021 (B9C6C79, n.d.).

Table 3: Comparative Achievement Score of GGHE-D and GGE

Country	GGHE-D Comparison to GGE	Progress
Indonesia	12 percent	improved 8.6 percent from 2020
Malaysia	10 percent	improved 5.5 percent from 2020
Thailand	13 percent	improved 4.2 percent from 2020
Viet Nam	9 percent	regressed 0.51 percent from 2020

Philippines	8.5 percent	improved 1.9 percent from 2020
Cambodia	7 percent	regressed 1.61 percent from 2020
Singapore	21 percent	improved 13 percent from 2020
Myanmar	4.4 percent	regressed 1.61 percent from 2020
Laos	4.4 percent	regressed 1.8 percent from 2020
Brunei Darussalam	7.1 percent	regressed 1.3 percent from 2020

Source: World Health Organization, 2024

As shown in Table 3, ASEAN member states demonstrate varying levels of commitment to expanding UHC through public expenditure. Singapore allocated the highest share of government expenditure to health, at approximately 21 percent, whereas Myanmar and Laos allocated less than 5 percent. When considered alongside differences in UHC SCI performance, these budgetary patterns suggest that public investment remains a critical determinant of progress toward UHC.

Ultimately, UHC is a vital issue for ASEAN because it reflects a shared regional interest in strengthening human capital, reducing inequality, and improving long-term socio-economic resilience. Advancing UHC is therefore not solely a health-sector objective, but also a strategic investment in inclusive development that is consistent with the principles and aspirations of the ASEAN Charter.

#### **4. Why Decent Work Matters for ASEAN?**

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines decent work as a condition in which all individuals have equal opportunities to obtain productive employment, receive fair wages, work under safe conditions, pursue self-development, and enjoy equal treatment regardless of gender or other social characteristics (Macnaughton & Frey, 2018). The concept of decent work is closely linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8, which promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. During the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, the ILO’s four strategic priorities—job creation, social protection, workers’ rights, and social dialogue were substantially reflected in the formulation of Goal 8 (Rombouts & Zekić, 2020). This demonstrates the normative convergence between international labour standards and the global development agenda (Barbier & Burgess, 2021).

This article focuses specifically on social protection as a key dimension of decent work. Social protection plays a crucial role in safeguarding livelihoods against unexpected economic shocks and reducing poverty (Lee, 2023). Although initially more common in developed economies, social protection has become increasingly prominent in developing countries over the last decade (Janzen et al.,

2021). This trend reflects growing recognition that labour markets alone are insufficient to guarantee welfare security, particularly for vulnerable groups.

Social protection is particularly relevant in developing countries, where a substantial proportion of the population belongs to middle- and low-income households. In such contexts, social protection can improve living standards and provide economic stability during periods of crisis or disruption (McCarthy & Sumarto, 2018). Its positive effects on household welfare have contributed to the wider adoption of social protection systems across developing regions, including Southeast Asia (Yi et al., 2018).

Recent developments also indicate a shift in the governance of social protection. States are increasingly expected to take a more active role in regulating labour conditions and ensuring welfare provision for workers. This requires constructive engagement between governments and the private sector so that labour-related policies can be effectively implemented in practice (Chris, 2017). Existing studies further show that well-targeted social protection systems can reduce poverty, mitigate inequality, and contribute to long-term economic growth (Ouma, 2020).

Within ASEAN, differences in economic structures and levels of development have produced diverse models of social protection. In Indonesia, for example, the system combines cash assistance programmes with employment-based insurance schemes (Manning & Pratomo, 2018). By contrast, Singapore supported by a high-income economy adopts a Confucian welfare model that emphasizes a hierarchical relationship among individuals, families, communities, and the state, whereby individuals are expected to maximize self-reliance before relying on higher levels of support (Yeoh et al., 2020). These examples illustrate that ASEAN member states pursue different pathways toward the common objective of worker welfare.

The implementation of social protection in ASEAN can be assessed through the indicator measuring the proportion of the population covered by social security programmes, which is recognized by both the ILO and the SDGs. The following table presents the level of social protection coverage in ASEAN in 2019 (FES, 2020).

Table 4: Social Protection Floor Achievement Score in ASEAN

Country	Social Protection Floor Score
Indonesia	2.5 percent
Malaysia	1 percent
Thailand	1.1 percent
Viet Nam	1.5 percent
Philippines	2.3 percent
Cambodia	Data unavailable

Singapore	Data unavailable
Myanmar	3.2 percent
Laos	3 percent
Brunei Darussalam	Data unavailable

Source: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2024

Another important indicator relevant to decent work is the unemployment rate. Under SDG 8, unemployment refers to the proportion of the labour force that is not employed but actively seeking work (Zakaria et al., 2015). High unemployment rates may indicate that an economy is operating below its productive potential (Yean & Yi, 2017). However, in developing countries, unemployment should not be interpreted solely through formal joblessness, but also through the prevalence of informal employment, where workers often lack legal protection, stable income, and social security coverage (Pratomo & Manning, 2022).

Even where unemployment rates are relatively low, it remains necessary to assess whether informal employment exceeds formal employment. This distinction is important because formal workers are more likely to receive occupational safety protections, employment benefits, and opportunities for career advancement, whereas informal workers frequently remain excluded from such protections (Rustagi, 2015). Therefore, maintaining a low unemployment rate alone is insufficient as a policy objective (Gutierrez et al., 2019). What is equally important is the creation of employment that is both quantitatively sufficient and qualitatively decent.

Table 5: Unemployment Rate in ASEAN

<b>Country</b>	<b>Social Protection Floor Score</b>
Indonesia	2.5 percent
Malaysia	1 percent
Thailand	1.1 percent
Viet Nam	1.5 percent
Philippines	2.3 percent
Cambodia	Data unavailable
Singapore	Data unavailable
Myanmar	3.2 percent
Laos	3 percent
Brunei Darussalam	Data unavailable

Source: International Labour Organization, 2023

As shown in Table 5, unemployment conditions vary significantly across ASEAN among populations aged 25 years and above. Malaysia records the lowest unemployment rate, while Myanmar records the highest. Indonesia occupies a middle position relative to other member states. These differences indicate that labour market outcomes remain uneven across the region.

The continued relevance of social protection and unemployment as regional priorities is also reflected in the *ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Fostering Resilience Towards the Post-2025 ASEAN Community*, which emphasizes four strategic areas: infrastructure, social protection, health, and employment (ASEAN Endorses New Declaration on Care Economy and Resilience, n.d.). This demonstrates that decent work is not merely a national labour issue, but a broader regional development concern linked to resilience, inclusion, and sustainable growth.

Ultimately, decent work matters for ASEAN because it supports social stability, reduces inequality, strengthens human capital, and enhances the region's long-term economic competitiveness. As ASEAN moves toward its post-2025 agenda, improving the quality of employment and expanding social protection will be essential to ensuring that economic growth translates into inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

As a regional organization, ASEAN views the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and universal health coverage (UHC) as strategic priorities shaped by both internal and external considerations. Internally, member states face the shared need to improve health standards, reduce financing gaps, and harmonize policy priorities in key strategic sectors. Externally, UHC gained renewed global prominence through its inclusion as a key theme in the *Summit of the Future*, which further encouraged ASEAN member states to strengthen regional commitments toward the expansion of UHC.

With regard to the SDGs, their principles are closely aligned with ASEAN's long-term vision. Even before the formal adoption of the SDGs by the United Nations in 2015, ASEAN leaders had already incorporated the values of sustainability and inclusiveness into the ASEAN Charter. In this sense, the subsequent adoption of the SDGs—occurring within a similar timeframe to the formulation of the ASEAN Community (AC) 2025 agenda—provided an additional framework through which ASEAN could operationalize and advance many of its existing regional programmes. The 2030 Agenda therefore became not merely an external global commitment, but also

a complementary mechanism for implementing ASEAN's own developmental aspirations.

However, while the SDGs and UHC received considerable attention during the 42nd ASEAN Summit, decent work, particularly in relation to social protection, did not emerge as a central priority at that time. This suggests that ASEAN leaders initially viewed health security and sustainable development as more immediate areas of regional convergence than labour welfare and employment governance.

In conclusion, the 42nd ASEAN Summit demonstrated that ASEAN leaders were able to reach consensus on UHC as a fundamental regional issue, largely because member states shared common interests in strengthening health systems and social resilience. By contrast, decent work did not receive equivalent attention, as summit discussions were more narrowly focused on the protection of migrant workers. Nevertheless, ASEAN's policy orientation evolved in the following year. Recognizing that economic growth must be accompanied by improved employment conditions, ASEAN leaders adopted the *ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Fostering Resilience Towards the Post-2025 ASEAN Community* on 9 October 2024. This development indicates a broader understanding that labour welfare, care systems, and economic resilience are mutually reinforcing objectives.

Ultimately, the SDGs have become mainstreamed within ASEAN's normative and institutional framework. This is not only because the two agendas share similar objectives, but also because ASEAN had already embedded the principles of inclusiveness and sustainability within its Charter prior to the global adoption of the SDGs. Consequently, ASEAN's engagement with the SDGs reflects both normative continuity and strategic adaptation in pursuit of regional development goals.

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