

Research Article

Building Inclusive Development for People with Disability in Post-Pandemic Era to Pursue ASEAN Community 2025: Learning from Asia-Pacific Development Center (APDC)

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Abstract

This qualitative research conducted with the study case method tries to point out the impact of COVID-19 on the employment condition of disabled-person and what ASEAN might consider adopting from the Asia-Pacific Development Center (APCD) when it faces disability policy development. ASEAN itself has many legal commitment papers to establish an inclusive community, particularly for people with disabilities. COVID-19 has hit multi-sector of development in ASEAN and facing bigger challenges to establish an inclusive environment to achieve ASEAN Community 2025 due to the economic slump and mass unemployment. The study found that the pandemic's negative effect doubled when it hit people with disabilities and required rapid response. ASEAN established the Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), a set of principle guidelines, to respond to the challenge. However, it lacks procedures on how to implement the principles and guidelines at regional level. ASEAN may learn from Asia-Pacific Development Center for Disability (APCD) program, 60+Plus Project, as policy implementation guidelines for ASEAN Member States.

Keywords: Disability, Inclusive Development, ASEAN, APDC, 60+Plus Project, COVID-19, post-Pandemic World.

I. Introduction

Persons with disabilities are one of the groups most likely to be left behind, encountering a range of barriers including limited opportunities for health, education, and employment. Approximately 1 billion people, or 15% of the world's population, live with some form of disability, and 80% of them live in developing countries. It is estimated that 1 in every 6 people in Asia and the Pacific about 690 million people live with a disability. These 690 million people include individuals with physical disabilities; those who are blind or experience low vision, deaf, or hard-of-hearing; those with learning disabilities, cognitive/developmental disabilities, psychosocial disabilities, or are deaf-blind; and those with multiple disabilities (Crosta & Sanders, 2021).

The qualitative case study is used to help explore the impact of COVID-19 on the employment condition of the disabled group. Various data sources from ASEAN legal policy documents related to the current guidelines on the post-pandemic period, statistics, and official websites from various world actors who have concerns about disability inclusion have been used to provide multiple perspectives. In the end, as the outcome of the policy and practice analysis between ASEAN and APCD, learning points can be recognized.

The commitment of Asia and Pacific countries to the disability agenda after the adoption of the CRPD (Convention of The Rights of Persons with Disabilities) became more tangible with the Incheon Strategy to "Make the Rights Real" for persons with disabilities in ASEAN (M. Lusli, 2010). All 10 ASEAN countries have signed and ratified the UNCRPD and are now responsible for its

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implementation in their countries (Cogburn & Reuter, 2017).

In 2013, The ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection mentioned that people with disabilities should have equitable access to social protection. The Declaration calls upon ASEAN members state (AMS) to support the principle by adopting it into their national policies, strategies, and mechanisms to ensure the implementation of social protection programs as well as the tangible targeting system to assure that social protection services may go to those who need most. Furthermore, In 2015, The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on a People-Oriented, People-Centered ASEAN, promotes the protection rights of people with disabilities and facilitates their interest and welfare in ASEAN's future agenda (ASEAN Summit 33rd, 2018). Both declarations are the follow-up of the previous work and to show continued commitment to the issues, Bali Declaration on Enhancement of The Role and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in ASEAN Community in 2011. ASEAN's commitment to an inclusive community is enshrined in the ASEAN Community Vision 2025.

There are 4 main aims to realizing disability inclusion; adjusting national development plans of education, diversifications of social services, development of social security schemes, and accessible education and work opportunities, among others (ASEAN Summit 33rd, 2018). Thus, ASEAN embodied the Bali Declaration on the Enhancement of The Role and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in The ASEAN Community into 3 principles set forth in the Mobilization Framework of The ASEAN Decade of Person with Disabilities (2011-2020):

1. Relevance. The vision and work plan of inclusion on people with disabilities rights is pertain to the ASEAN Community Pillars.
2. Complementarity. The inclusion rights for people with disabilities complements the

existing commitments and aspirations of ASEAN to establish ASEAN Community 2025.

3. Interrelatedness. People with disabilities rights are the whole part of human rights, which means the principles are interconnected and interdependent. Coordination among sectoral bodies and participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations will be key success factors in the holistic implementation of this Enabling Masterplan. (ASEAN Summit 33rd, 2018)

ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities developed to address the needs of persons with disabilities across the three pillars of ASEAN Community Vision 2025. The master plan's purpose is to mainstream the rights of people with disability across the three pillars by providing a framework for the integration of persons with disabilities across sectors (Singh, 2022). The commitment to include people with disability in ASEAN Community Agenda are emerge as the response of ASEAN as the key regional actor in Southeast Asia and contribute to the global development, of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

II. Conditions of People with Disabilities in ASEAN

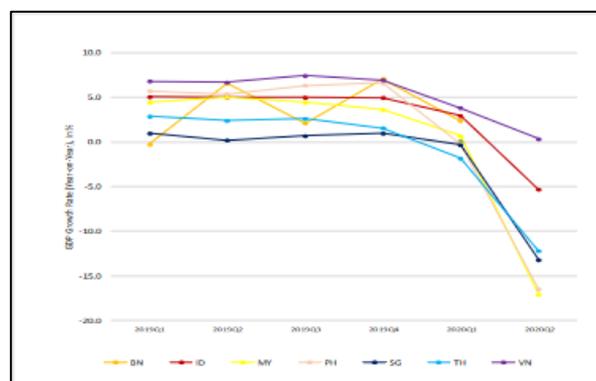


Fig. 1. Massive GDP Contraction ASEAN Member States in Q2 2020

Source: (ASEAN, 2020)

COVID-19 declared as pandemic in March 2020, and since then the world condition disrupted and filled with uncertainty crisis. Neither developed countries nor developing countries were secured from the rapid changing because of COVID-19 which generated global multi-dimension crisis; health, economy, and social disaster.

Southeast Asia region has encountered similar experiences with the rest of the world. Figure 1 shows after expanding by an average of 5.3% over the last decade, the ASEAN region is now projected to contract by 3.8%¹ in 2020, the first decline in economic growth in 22 years. Economically, in 2020, trade and investment in ASEAN were impacted by the pandemic. ASEAN's trade fell by 12.4% and FDI inflows by 32.9% compared to the previous year (ASEAN, 2020).



Fig. 2. Unemployment Rate in ASEAN 2019-2022 (%)

Source: (ASEAN, 2021)

Furthermore, an economic catastrophe is unavoidable as the response of the world economy fell off due to the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis led to mass layoffs and contributed to rising poverty and inequality around the globe. International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated global working hours were lost by around 5.4% in the first quarter of 2020 compared to the last quarter of 2019 and the number worsened to 14% in the second quarter.

The situation in ASEAN is even more delicate given the high levels of informality, uneven social security nets, and structural

dependence on highly labor-intensive sectors in some AMS. Yet overall, job losses appear to rise in unemployment rates across ASEAN in the second quarter of 2020 (ASEAN, 2020). In detail, figure 2, unemployment in ASEAN from 2.5% in 2019 to 3.1% in 2021, stalling the 20-year achievement of the region in terms of labor force participation (ASEAN, 2021). Unfortunately, there are less data on disability unemployment rate before and during COVID-19 period can be found to exactly point out the analysis impact.

Assumed that the number shown in figure 2 includes unemployment status for people with disability. Even so, the percentage of people with disability unemployment rate may be higher than the data showed. Because, people with disabilities often do not register as either employed or unemployed, which means they are often invisible in labor market statistics and likely to be overlooked in policy initiatives (UN ESCAP, 2020).

Moreover, the employment prospects for individuals with disabilities tend to be poor; they are likely to be in low-paying jobs in the informal economy without social protection; they are likely to be involved in corporate social responsibility programs; or they are likely to be self-employed. It is estimated that three quarters of employed persons with disabilities work in the informal economy, with informal workers accounting for 28 to 92 percent of the labor force across developing countries. It positioned people with disabilities at more critical point and broadened the inequality at the worst moment.

It is estimated that in 1 in every 6 people in Asia and the Pacific, about 690 million people live with a disability. The emergence of the Pandemic COVID-19 in 2020 has significantly affected multi-dimensions of social life for the majority group of society and made the vulnerable group more suffer due to existing gaps in the status quo. People with disabilities in general, have experienced

poorer health outcomes, lower access to education, reduced services, and support, and increased violence and abuse throughout the pandemic.

Furthermore, persons with disabilities are not fairly represented in the workforce in Asia and the Pacific. As an outcome, people with disabilities have less overall consumption and less contribution toward economic growth. Persons with disabilities are systematically excluded from equal access to work across the region. According to UNESCAP, persons with disabilities work less or earn less because of the barriers they face. The domino effect of being excluded from the system has triggered a long record of social injustice. People with disabilities most likely experienced discrimination in their daily lives in many sectors even in normal conditions and aggravated due to the pandemic. Evidence shows that people with disabilities faced more threats due to the pandemic, such as; higher rates of infection and death from COVID-19, less access to healthcare information, worsened mental health, lack of involvement in response planning, loss of income, and poor assistance, reduced access to disability support and services, increased gender-based violence, and inaccessible remote learning (Crosta & Sanders, 2021).

The prevalence of specific disabilities varies among the AMS, yet the obstacles people with disabilities face is similar. Despite the different variables among the AMS, they have similar weaknesses such as inadequate legislation, unequal employment, and inadequate physical access which correlated to education accessibility. Meanwhile, studies show that if persons with disabilities were paid on an equal basis as their colleagues without disabilities, the GDP of many Asian and Pacific countries could increase by 1 to 7% (Crosta & Sanders, 2021). Based on the founding, the contribution of people with disabilities might be one of the keys to supporting the region's

economic pace to recovery from the pandemic if they were, to have more chances and access, included in the mainstream.

III. ASEAN Resolution in Post-Covid Development Framework

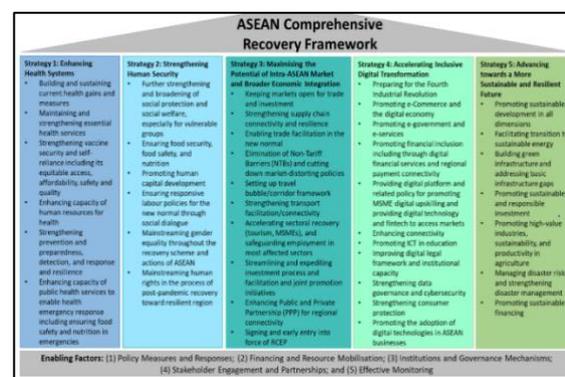


Fig.3. ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework: Broad Strategies, and Enabling Factors

Source: (ASEAN, 2021)

ASEAN has designed the “ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF)” to provide a consolidated exit strategy for ASEAN to emerge resilient and strong from the COVID-19 crisis. ACRF observes 6 key principles; focused, balanced, impactful, pragmatic, inclusive, and measurable (ASEAN, 2020). ASEAN applied the principles into 3 phases: re-opening, recovery, and resilience. First, in brief, re-opening designed the smooth transition from lock-down/social rigid restriction into “new normal” conditions without undertaking the health procedure to prevent further COVID-19 waves. Secondly, concerns to support the sectors back to pre-COVID-19 potential and focused on assisting sectors and groups that have been affected by the pandemic, such as tourism, micro, small and medium enterprises, and vulnerable groups (ASEAN, 2020). The third phase, building resilience in society towards unprecedented crisis on fundamental vulnerabilities within economies and societies.

Indirectly, inclusive development for the vulnerable group has been involved in the 5 strategies of ACRF shown in figure 3. In the short term of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework embedded in further strengthening and broadening of social protection and social welfare for a vulnerable group, social assistance programs need to be continued and scaled up. The proposal is necessary not limited only to mitigate the risk of the pandemic in socioeconomic impact at an individual level, but also to ensure domestic consumption going.

One key challenge is to ensure that social assistance is accessible to those without social security or unemployment benefits. Accessibility to social care services should also be ensured especially for those facing higher risks during lockdown and containment measures, owing to their age, gender, disability, economic status, and other factors (ASEAN, 2020). ASEAN recovery efforts must follow inclusive principles and cover the intersection of age, disability, and gender in designing measures. Prioritizing human rights and the protection of vulnerable groups and sectors is uncompromised. Recovery efforts must be inclusive and consider the intersection of age, disability, and gender in designing measures. Human rights and the protection of vulnerable sectors must be prioritized.

To sum up, COVID-19 has positioned ASEAN in an uncomfortable situation from multi-dimensions, such as economic instability to mass unemployed wave, and it affects the path of the region to establish equal environment for vulnerable groups. But the insufficient disaggregated data hampers a deeper analysis of socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on people with disabilities. ASEAN, directly and indirectly, stated inclusive development for vulnerable groups on many legal papers, yet full and integrated programs still turn out as the main issues. Thus, the

framework offers very general overview of the inclusive development principle yet lacks implementation policy development. Considering the hidden economic potency towards domestic finance growth, building accessibility and integration program for people with disabilities is a vital foundation. Not only to tackle inequality but also to achieve rapid recovery, it will need double effort due to the pandemic development setbacks and stagnancies.

IV. Asia-Pacific Development Center: The 60+ Plus Project

APCD was established in Bangkok, Thailand on 31 July 2001 as a legacy of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 1993-2002. APCD was endorsed by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) as a regional collaboration between Thailand and JICA. ESCAP also identified APCD as the regional center on disability and development for the Incheon Strategy to Make the Right Real, 2013-2022 (APCD Foundation, 2021).

The main mission of APCD is to nurture the capacities of person with disability and establish Community-Based Inclusive Development Disabled Organizations and Disability-Inclusive Business as agents of change. While the vision is to promote an inclusive, barrier-free, and right-based society for person and organizations of disability throughout empowerment program. After operating for 21 years, APCD has trained more than 7,000 persons with disabilities and stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region. APCD provide capacity building and training for not only people with disabilities but also for parent who has disabled family members and staff who interact with disabled person. Moreover, APCD cooperates with more than 30 countries to establish disability and development

programs and activities (APCD Foundation, 2021).

To achieve an inclusive community, people with disabilities must be independent, and capable of empowering themselves and leading community-based development to support the entire agenda of inclusive development. Networking and collaboration among disability organizations and stakeholders are one of the main missions. Armed with sophisticated network and various collaborations will provide people with disability more access to be actively involved and contribute to the community. Considering how the issues have been left behind among any other inequality concerns, even without the pandemic, it is essential to build networking, initiate collaboration and share experiences to mainstream the issues of inequality among people with disabilities.

Working closely and considering people with disability as resourceful individuals is the principle of APCD's capacity development (CD) project. Since it is important to build strong self-esteem in people with disabilities, considering the common societal prejudice against them. Once the PWDs got involved in their communities and began to work towards a barrier-free society, they came in closer contact with non-disabled persons, including their families and community members, local government officials, and even policymakers at the central government level. In this way, the APCD Project also created a comprehensive and multilayered CD impact (JICA & IFIC, 2008). Through effective training and capacity building, people with disabilities and stakeholders will be empowered with skills, knowledge, and a positive attitude toward disability and community development (APCD Foundation, 2021).

The 60+ Plus Bakery & Chocolate Café Project is APCD's main activity. One of the settled projects is disability-inclusive business in the food industry which aims to develop the

inclusive business skills of persons with disabilities in society, as well as provide sustainable on-the-job training and an inclusive environment for them. The project supports them to be professional bakers and chocolatiers, shopkeepers, and entrepreneurs based on Disability Inclusive Business and Inclusive Entrepreneurship.

This initiative is implemented by APCD, with support from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) and other partners, as part of the Incheon Strategy to 'Make the Right Real' for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific. Collaboration between the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security of Thailand, the Embassy of Japan, Thai-Yamazaki Co.ltd., and APCD, 60+Plus Bakery has been established. The project aimed youths with disabilities produce and sell baked goods at the shop. Thus, another project with food-based workshop is 60 + Plus Chocolatier by MarkRin, initiated by APCD and MarkRin Co., Ltd (*Home / Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability*, n.d.). Almost 100 trainees with various disabilities (visual, hearing, physical, psychosocial, intellectual, learning, and autism) participated in both Thai Yamazaki and Chocolate training since 2015. The trainee employed by Thai Yamazaki in various branches in Bangkok while others were hired by cafes (i.e., Cafe Amazon, Black Canyon), hotels (i.e., Chaophaya Hotel), hospitals (i.e., Siriraj Hospital), and schools (i.e., Anglo Singapore International School). Trainees are also hired by 60+Plus Bakery & Chocolate Café or start their entrepreneurship career in food businesses.

As the follow-up workshop program of 60 + Plus Chocolatier and 60 + Plus Bakery, APCD established 60+Plus Bakery & Chocolate Café. The original 60+Plus Bakery & Chocolate Café in the compound of Rajvithi home for the girls where APCD is located has been established at the end of December 2018. The

café run by the disabled person has become the star and down-to-earth role model on how to include people with disability into the community in Thailand and internationally. As a result of this success, APCD has been invited to open another branch of 60+ Café in the Government House. The opening new branch in the Government House will increase the number of employment opportunities and real-life training facilities for a person with disabilities (*Home | Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability, n.d.*).

V. Learning from APCD to Achieve ASEAN Community 2025 for People with Disabilities

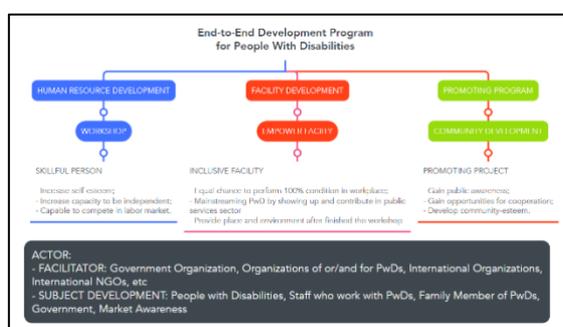


Fig. 4. End-to-End Inclusive Program Mapping

The end-to-end development principle run by APCD on 60+Project has become the key to building inclusive development for people with disabilities. Overall, the end-to-end program required many actors to work together on the same track, from start to finish line, to empowering people with disabilities from human development, providing inclusive access and/or facility, and promoting.

The cooperation between APCD, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security as the representative of Thai government, Embassy of Japan and UNESCAP as the international actors, and the business sector represented by Thai-Yamzaki Co.ltd and MarkRin Co., Ltd has succeeded to established end-to-end program for inclusive development of people with disability.

The program started with a workshop not only for people with disabilities but also for the disability staff who work within the community and was supported by government commitment and collaboration with the business sector. 60+Project equip people with disabilities-specific skill sets in the F&B sector. People with disabilities obtained intensive training on F&B services, from making to marketing. F&B, as one of the closest sectors to human services, is considered a strategic sector, to begin with, to make people with disability gain more exposure and public awareness towards the equal capability to provide services. Furthermore, due to unequal access to many sectors since they were born, as the result, people with disability cannot properly develop their potencies and most likely has low self-esteem as well. Training them with useful skills will increase people with disability specialty and self-esteem as the first step to competing in the labor market (figure 4).

The effort to actively include people with disability in the business sector is acknowledged as an effort of economic redistribution. The core problem with fully including people with disability in the economic sector, which later become one of the main reasons to increase independence level and self-esteem, is because employers are less likely to hire people with disabilities and prefer persons without disabilities. Therefore, it is essential to provide a place or facility where people with disabilities can show what they are capable of after finishing the workshop (figure 4). If there is no follow-up program after the workshop is finished, the resolution to achieve equality between the person with and without disabilities will end up in vain. Bear in mind that unequal access and the absence of fruitful networks are the main obstacles for the disabled person to explore their potencies.

Positive discrimination against people with disabilities access to the workforce is needed due to the current condition of inaccessibility. The prejudice that peoples with a disability unable to work as efficiently as people without disability due to disabling conditions have to eradicate. It is vital for non-disabled persons in general to recognize the status of "disabled" is no barrier for person with disability to give equal service. If the majority of employers find it difficult to hire people with disabilities, then create a place and/or facility where disability may perform 100% with their conditions and at the same time promote cooperation with companies who may employ people with disabilities. Humans are more reluctant to believe in invisible changes, therefore it is important to show them that humans with disabilities have equal abilities. While having people with disabilities in a workplace full of people without disabilities will promote an inclusive environment as part of mainstreaming the issue.

Through the efforts above, the next step is promoting the program as the community development endeavor. A successful project, such as 60+Project, will most likely become favorable case study. In this state, media exposure plays an important role to gain mass public awareness and build community esteem among people with disabilities. The process of spreading good news will contribute to reconstructing the definition of self-sufficiency widely.

Due to the fact that the current notion of self-sufficiency pays amount of responsibility against discrimination against people with disability in the matter of workforce selection procedure. Employers will prefer to hire a non-disabled person based on the argument that efficiency in the workplace can be achieved if the workers have proper self-sufficiency (the absence of physical and intellectual disability). The argument failed to

capture the root problem. Even people without disabilities will need a set of the facility to support their potency to become fully efficient laborers. Therefore, instead of a set requirement to meet a certain level of self-sufficiency during recruitment, the problem is how employers provide facilities to support their worker's efficiency points. The APCD actively working on promoting 60+Project, as one of the role models to establish inclusive model development, through seminars, TV shows, and joining a meeting with various actors either domestically or internationally.

To sum up, the persons with disabilities in ASEAN are still facing difficulties to access fair employment and assistance either in their respective fields or entrepreneurship skill. Strengthening by ESCAP report that the gap in inclusive development in ASEAN, almost always leads to the lack of financial investment in accessibility, as well as a dearth of innovative investment forms outside of monetary values, ranging from high-level commitment and institutional buy-in, or the creation of strong legal accessibility frameworks to the development of human resources, as well as to the development of strong partnerships among governments and policymakers, organizations and other stakeholders. (Sano, 2021).

ASEAN may adopt end-to-end development model to improve the regional capability to achieve ASEAN Inclusive Community Masterplan in 2025. Due to the fact, APCD has a tangible project which answers the challenge to build and provide equal access, as well as a network for people with disabilities. Indeed, the last policy product and implementation, in the end, will be AMS's responsibility. An end-to-end program such as the 60+Plus Project by APCD will automatically answer the world agenda against inclusive development for vulnerable groups. As a prior explanation, the hidden economic potency of people with disability is still less explored and

even shrink due to the economic crisis because of the pandemic. Therefore, offering a clear path to develop an inclusive environment, which positively impacts economic inclusivity, for people with disabilities is considered a necessary option. The development framework with sharp and clear methods will be easier to be adopted and further adjusted by AMS. Especially in the current condition where recovery from the pandemic becomes a priority for vulnerable groups.

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