

Chapter 1

Overview: Disability in the ASEAN Region

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Chapter 1

Overview: Disability in the ASEAN region

1.1 Disability throughout ASEAN: Trends and challenges

People living with a disability comprise an estimated 15% of the global population and represent one of the largest minority groups in the world (UNESCAP, 2019a). The rights and inclusion of people living with a disability are a critical and far-reaching issue for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Member States (AMS). It is estimated that 1 in every 6 people in Asia and the Pacific – about 690 million people – live with a disability. This figure is expected to rise due to population aging, chronic health conditions, climate-related disasters, and other factors (UNESCAP, 2018). 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.

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Studies show that the GDP of Asia-Pacific countries could rise by 1 to 7% with disability-inclusive employment. Persons with disabilities are not adequately or fairly represented throughout the workforce in Asia and the Pacific, with evidence showing that persons with disabilities are systematically excluded from equal access to work across the region. According to UNESCAP, ‘When persons with disabilities work less or earn less because of the barriers they face, they accordingly contribute less to overall consumption and economic growth.’ 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%’ (UNESCAP, 2016).

While the prevalence of certain disabilities varies amongst the 10 AMS, their citizens living with disability experience many of the same barriers to equality. Many studies show that these individuals face similar obstacles throughout ASEAN in accessing education, decent work, social protection services, and legal support. They are also subject to disproportionately high rates of poverty, and women and girls who live with a disability face additional obstacles (UNESCAP, 2018). While there are notable differences across the ASEAN region, we observe many similar weaknesses such as inadequate legislation, unequal employment, and inadequate physical access or adapted services.

In recent decades, the disability rights movement has achieved a notable shift toward equal rights, inclusion, and empowerment of people living with disability. This is in stark contrast to the earlier, disempowering view that focused on charity and sympathy-driven support. Historically, social stigma and pity dominated societal responses to people who live with disability, rather than sound policies and programmes to support equal rights and well-being. While many regulatory frameworks have

emerged to reflect this new focus on equal rights, inclusion, and empowerment of people living with a disability, in many cases recent legislation has yet to be implemented and enforced in full.

Box 1.1: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Persons with Disabilities

Evidence shows that persons with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Overall, persons with disabilities have experienced poorer health outcomes, lower access to education, reduced services and support, and increased violence and abuse throughout the pandemic. Evidence shows that persons with disabilities have disproportionately experienced:

- Higher rates of infection and death from COVID-19,
- Less access to healthcare and information,
- Worsened mental health,
- Lack of involvement in response planning,
- Loss of income and little or no financial assistance,
- Reduced access to disability support and services,
- Increased gender-based violence, and
- Inaccessible remote learning (Australian Aid et al., 2021).

It is crucial that COVID-19 response and recovery programmes appropriately prioritise persons with disabilities in their efforts. To this end, it is highly recommended that more public and private funding be mobilised for SEs and other organisations that directly support persons with disabilities. Such funding can support the full inclusion of persons with disabilities throughout the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, in addition to addressing additional hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2 Stakeholders: Public and private actors in the disability rights and inclusion landscape

A wide range of key stakeholders work at the international, regional, national, and local levels to protect the equal rights of persons with disabilities throughout ASEAN. The following table presents some of these key actors according to their organisation type, notable for their significant work for the advancement of persons with disabilities throughout ASEAN. The purpose of the table is not to provide an exhaustive list, but to offer an overview of some of the key actors and how they can be categorised.

Table 1: Overview of Key Stakeholders by Sector or Organisation Type*

Type of organisation	Name and brief description
International organisations	<p>UN Programme on Disability – Designated UN agency promoting the rights and advancement of persons with disabilities worldwide, also serving as the secretariat for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.</p> <p>UNESCAP – Leader of initiatives such as the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2013–2022) and the Incheon Strategy to ‘Make the Right Real’ for persons with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific.</p>
ASEAN and regional Organisations	<p>ASEAN Disability Forum (ASEAN-DF) – A network composed of the disabled persons’ organisations (DPOs) of AMS. The ASEAN-DF serves as a platform for DPOs to coordinate advocacy for disability inclusive policy formulation and implementation.</p> <p>Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability – A regional platform for major disability-related networks based in Thailand.</p>

**National ministries
(or equivalent national
entities)****

Brunei Darussalam

- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Education

Cambodia

- Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports
- Ministry of Rural Development

Indonesia

- Ministry of Social Affairs
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Education and Culture

Lao PDR

- Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare
- Ministry of Public Health
- Ministry of Education

Malaysia

- Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Education

Myanmar

- Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Education

Philippines

- National Council on Disability Affairs
- Department of Health
- Department of Education

Singapore

- Ministry of Social and Family Development
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Education

Thailand

- Ministry of Social Development and Human Security
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Education

Viet Nam

- Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Education and Training

<p>Universities and research institutes</p>	<p>Asian Institute of Disability & Development – Institute conducting research, capacity building, and advocacy to promote inclusion,, based at the University of South Asia, Dhaka, Bangladesh.</p> <p>Australia–Indonesia Disability Research and Advocacy Network (AIDRAN) – Network of Australian and Indonesian disability advocates, researchers, and practitioners who promote broader social inclusion through interdisciplinary research on disability and social inclusion, and evidence-informed, disability-inclusive policy.</p> <p>Disability Research and Capacity Development – Research and training institute based in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam.</p> <p>Brawijaya University Center for Disability Studies and Services – Major university research center based in Malang, Indonesia.</p> <p>Social Service Institute of Singapore – A key research division under the National Council of Social Service of Singapore.</p>
<p>Non-profits</p>	<p>Humanity & Inclusion (H&I) – Formerly known as Handicap International, H&I is one of the world’s largest international non-profits dedicated to supporting people with disabilities.</p> <p>Action on Disability and Development (ADD) – International non-profit based in the United Kingdom, supporting programmes in Cambodia and other ASEAN nations.</p> <p>Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (MINDS) – Leading non-profit supporting persons with disabilities in Singapore.</p> <p>The Fred Hollows Foundation – An Australian non-profit focused on ending avoidable blindness in more than 25 countries worldwide.</p> <p>Christian Blind Mission (CBM) – An international non-profit with an Asia Regional Hub Office located in Bangkok, Thailand. CBM’s mission is to promote inclusion and prevent blindness.</p>
<p>Private sector stakeholders</p>	<p>Singtel – A founding member of the Singapore Business Network on DisAbility, Singtel provides adapted technology through its Enabling Innovation Centre to promote inclusive employment.</p> <p>SAP – German multinational software corporation that promotes neurodiversity in the workplace through its worldwide Autism Inclusion Network and Pledge.</p> <p>Microsoft Asia – Through the Microsoft Enabler Program, Microsoft works with SEs and non-profits to improve inclusive employment in Asia–Pacific.</p>

Foundations and impact investors	<p>Disability Rights Fund (DRF) & Disability Rights Advocacy Fund (DRAF) – Grantmaker and grantmaking collaborative between donors and non-profits that promote disability rights worldwide.</p> <p>Open Society Foundations – Foundation supporting non-profits that promote full equality and inclusion of persons with disabilities in their communities.</p> <p>Disability Impact Fund – Invests in new technologies and innovations to scale market-based solutions to reach millions of persons with disabilities throughout Asia.</p>
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AMS = ASEAN Member States, ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN-DF = ASEAN Disability Forum, CBM = Christian Blind Mission, DPO = disabled persons' organisations, H&I = Humanity & Inclusion, SEs = social enterprises, UN = United Nations, UNESCAP = United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

Notes: *This table provides an overview of key stakeholders, not a comprehensive list of all or most stakeholders supporting persons with disabilities throughout ASEAN. These key stakeholders are notable for their visibility and/or achievements in supporting the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities throughout ASEAN. ** This section includes the Ministries that have a mandate or focus on supporting persons with disabilities in their respective countries but it does not include every national Ministry supporting persons with disabilities or the specific Departments they oversee.

Source: Various sources compiled by authors.

1.3 Legal frameworks: Laws and regulations impacting disability in the ASEAN region

A wide range of international, regional, and national regulatory frameworks is in place to protect the rights of persons with disabilities in ASEAN today. The highest level and most comprehensive international and regional frameworks include:

- **The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** is the foremost UN Convention to ensure the rights of persons with disabilities worldwide. The CRPD entered into force in 2008 and has 114 signatories today, including all 10 AMS (UNCRPD, 2008). The CRPD is frequently referenced as the fundamental regulatory framework for the protection of persons with disabilities.
- **The UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD) Strategic Operational Framework 2020–2025** was put forth by the UNPRPD in order to support the implementation of the CRPD and address key developments in today's disability inclusion landscape (UNPRPD, 2020).
- **The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** specifically includes persons with disabilities (as well as 'persons in vulnerable situations') in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while the **UN Disability and Development Report** provides specific, evidence-based recommendations to promote the realisation of the SDGs for persons with disabilities (UN DESA, 2018a).

- **The Incheon Strategy** is a framework for the Asia–Pacific region that provided the first set of 10 regionally agreed disability-specific development goals, 27 targets, and 62 indicators to enhance the implementation of the CRPD towards achieving the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- **The ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025** was put forth by the ASEAN Secretariat to reaffirm all 10 AMS’ commitments to disability inclusion, especially regarding specific CRPD commitments (ASEAN, 2019).

While all 10 AMS have officially ratified the CRPD and other regulatory frameworks at the international or regional levels, legislation at the national level varies widely amongst the Member States and comprehensive legislation is still needed to protect the rights of persons with disabilities and achieve full inclusion. In particular, national legislation on the right to equal employment for persons with disabilities varies significantly amongst ASEAN and reveals certain gaps in legal protection of the right to equal employment. In countries where comprehensive legislation already protects the right to equal employment, employment discrimination still occurs and robust accountability mechanisms need to be developed.

Box 1.2: National Legislation for Disability Rights in the ASEAN Region

National legislation for disability rights varies widely amongst the 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Member States (AMS). Although all 10 of the AMS have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), certain Member States have adopted more comprehensive national legislation than others. Even in nations that have ratified more comprehensive national legislation, there may be a lack of legal enforcement that hinders the effective protection of disability rights. In particular, employment discrimination continues to be a serious issue throughout ASEAN, but this can be improved through legislation.

Singapore provides a useful case study of an ASEAN Member State that has already achieved significant advancements for disability inclusion, and for which certain advancements can still be made. The Singapore Government has ratified and adopted a series of legislative acts, including the first Enabling Masterplan to ensure an inclusive society in 2007. Singapore then ratified the CRPD in 2013, and it has since adopted the second and third Enabling Masterplans to ensure the full achievement of its goals for a fully inclusive society. And yet, according to the ASEAN Disability Forum in 2020, ‘To ensure and promote the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities, the Singapore Government would have to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices that discriminate against persons with disabilities’ (ASEAN–DF, 2020). The Disabled People’s Association of Singapore has highlighted the low employment rate of persons with disabilities in Singapore today and offered solutions that the Singapore Government can adopt.

Overall, Singapore has achieved significant advancements through legislation to protect persons with disabilities since 2007, and its Enabling Masterplans have put forth clear targets and indicators that may serve as a useful reference for other AMS. Singapore can continue to make further advancements to achieve a fully inclusive society, notably for the equal employment of persons with disabilities. Social enterprises have emerged to help address this need for equal employment across ASEAN, ultimately contributing innovative solutions that could provide useful support to further legislative advancements.