

Chapter 2

The Role of Social Enterprises (SEs) in Supporting Persons with Disability in the ASEAN region

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Chapter 2

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2.1 The rise of SEs throughout ASEAN

In a context that is often characterised by inadequate policy protection and private sector inaction, social enterprises have emerged as key actors for their capacity to identify new solutions and foster inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities. According to the UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs (DESA), a social enterprise is ‘a form of entrepreneurship which predominantly focuses on social benefits rather than solely financial ones, and which seeks to address societal, cultural or environmental issues, often in an innovative b’ (UN DESA, 2018b). In essence, a social enterprise is comprised of both a social mission and a for-profit business model, though many definitions of social enterprises vary in terms of how the social mission and for-profit business model are combined and structured.

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Social entrepreneurship is a growing phenomenon both worldwide and within ASEAN. In many ASEAN countries, social entrepreneurship has built upon the evolving history of cooperatives and shown tremendous growth in recent years. In Singapore, for example, over 90% of existing social enterprises have been established since 2010, with an estimated 67% of all social enterprises having been operational for less than 5 years (British Council and the Singapore Centre for Social Enterprise, raiSE Ltd., 2020). In Indonesia, over 70% of social enterprises were established in the past 5 years (British Council et al., 2020a). In Thailand, the government introduced a social enterprise promotion policy in 2010 (British Council et al., 2020b).

The rise of social enterprises in the region reflects both a need for social innovation and the growing demand for purpose-driven enterprises, especially amongst millennial consumers. According to the World Economic Forum, 40% of millennials believe that the goal of business should be ‘to improve society’, and millennials make up 40% of all consumers today, influencing about US\$40 billion in sales (World Economic Forum, 2019). A significant number of social enterprises focus on the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities, showing tremendous potential for advancing equal rights.

Box 2: Defining Social Enterprises in the ASEAN Region

Social enterprises (SEs) take different forms in various ASEAN countries, in terms of both legal status and practice. SEs have grown significantly throughout Southeast Asia in recent years. Yet, there is still a lack of legal incorporation status for organisations that simultaneously pursue a social mission while carrying out profit-generating business activities, with the notable exception of Viet Nam which officially recognised SEs under its Enterprise Law in 2014 (British Council et al., 2018). Thailand also has a legal definition for SEs, but qualifying as a SE in Thailand has been described as a prohibitively difficult process.

SEs in most ASEAN countries must therefore resort to weighing the various options available to them for legal incorporation, which each carry different legal and financial implications (e.g., related to taxes, fundraising, property ownership, and others). These SEs generally fall under one of the following de facto models:

- **Non-profit, charity, or foundation registration status**, wherein the organisation’s social services evolve to include revenue generation (often in addition to traditional fundraising).
- **Enterprise, company, or business incorporation**, wherein the organisation provides social services in addition to its for-profit business activities.

The uncertain legal definition of SEs is one of the main challenges hampering their development. Although SEs achieve both income-generation and the delivery of essential social services, they face extensive challenges related to the administration of their organisational structures. The lack of clear SE incorporation places limits on either the income-generating activities pursued by organisations registered as non-profits, or it restricts the social services offered by organisations incorporated as companies.

2.2 Overview of SEs supporting persons with disabilities in the ASEAN region

A growing number of SEs are supporting persons with disabilities throughout ASEAN today. According to the *State of Social Enterprise in South East Asia* published by UNESCAP and the British Council in 2021, up to 1 million SEs are tackling social and environmental problems across Southeast Asia today (British Council et al., 2021). These social problems include the right to equal employment for persons with disabilities, which is a common focus for the skills training and employment programmes provided by SEs throughout Southeast Asia today. There are also many non-profits supporting persons with disabilities throughout ASEAN, many of which are increasingly pursuing the income-generating models practiced by SEs.

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These SEs support persons with diverse types of disabilities, and they work across all sectors of the economy. SEs throughout ASEAN address all forms of disability, including physical, intellectual, and mental disabilities. While certain SEs focus on a specific type of disability for specialised support, other SEs provide support to persons with all disabilities in the aim of fostering a larger community for inclusion. These SEs also work across diverse sectors, ranging from the technology sector to the health sector and the hospitality industry. In the technology sector, notable SEs train persons with disabilities in technological skills that increase the individual's employability and potential for higher-earning income while in the hospitality industry, a significant number of SEs train persons with disabilities in the skills needed to work in high-performing restaurants, coffeeshops, and bakeries. Many SEs also provide consulting services to help companies become inclusive employers. These services are highly useful for advancing equal employment in practice, and SEs are often able to refer graduates from their own training programmes for recruitment.





Various trends can be identified for the SEs throughout ASEAN, including the need for more advanced government support for equal employment of persons with disabilities. While the national regulations protecting disability rights vary greatly amongst the 10 AMS, the overall level of government support is not yet sufficiently advanced, particularly with regard to equal employment opportunities and practices for persons with disabilities. The right to employment remains a critical issue throughout the region which could be addressed significantly through improvements in legislation. Corporations also play a crucial role in achieving equal employment and becoming inclusive employers that enforce inclusive business practices. In this context of unequal employment, SEs have emerged as key players providing useful solutions by (a) developing high-quality skills training, job placement, and coaching programmes for persons with disabilities, and (b) offering consulting services to assist government and corporations to become inclusive employers. Many of these impactful SEs are led and operated by persons with disabilities – these social entrepreneurs champion disability rights while making significant contributions toward inclusive employment and, ultimately, inclusive societies.





Case studies were carried out to illustrate innovation by and impact of notable SEs supporting persons with disabilities across the ASEAN region. These case studies included in-depth reviews of specific SE models, identification of common strengths and challenges amongst SEs, and recommendations for stakeholders who wish to support the nascent SE movement.

2.3 Case Studies

The 8 SEs presented here provide clear examples of how the power of social entrepreneurship can positively impact persons with disabilities throughout ASEAN. These SEs have been selected based on a comprehensive mapping exercise which identified the key stakeholders supporting persons with disabilities throughout all 10 AMS, with a focus on active SEs and non-profits whose express mission is to support persons with disabilities. These case studies offer examples of the distinct role that SEs can play in terms of fostering inclusion for persons with disabilities through solutions and business models that are sustainable, scalable, and often highly innovative. These case studies also provide insights into the significant challenges or obstacles that may keep SEs from realising their full potential.

Table 2: Social Enterprises (SEs) Interviewed for the Study

Name of SE	Description
<p>Alina Vision Viet Nam</p> 	<p>Alina Vision aims to prevent and treat avoidable blindness and vision impairment in emerging markets by delivering affordable eye care, including targeting those excluded from mainstream healthcare systems, particularly low-income individuals and women. Alina sets up surgery and vision centers and applies principles of the Affordable Eye Care Model, a social enterprise model that makes this high-quality eye care accessible and affordable.</p> <p>www.alinavision.com</p>
<p>Epic Arts Cambodia</p> 	<p>Epic Arts is an arts organisation that provides inclusive education, community, and social enterprise programmes. Epic Arts is led by Onn Sokny, a woman with a disability. Over 50% of their full-time staff also have a disability. Their social enterprise programmes include the Epic Arts Café, which serves an average of 20,000 customers each year.</p> <p>http://epicarts.org.uk</p>
<p>Fingertalk Indonesia</p> 	<p>Fingertalk provides equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities, especially deaf people. According to Fingertalk, 74% of deaf people in Indonesia are unemployed due to stigma and communication barriers. Fingertalk has created six fully inclusive social enterprise entities: two cafes, a bakery, two sewing workshops, and a carwash. In addition to providing training and employment for these social enterprise entities, Fingertalk has also delivered vocational training to more than 1,000 underserved women and youth since 2015.</p> <p>https://finger-talk.com</p>
<p>Kerjabilitas Indonesia</p> 	<p>Kerjabilitas is the largest job search platform in Indonesia that facilitates employment for persons with disabilities. Since 2015, the Kerjabilitas platform has served over 12,000 job seekers and assisted recruitment for more than 2,000 companies looking to hire. Kerjabilitas also provides consulting services for companies to become fully inclusive employers.</p> <p>https://kerjabilitas.com</p>

<p>Project Dignity Singapore</p>  <p>Project Dignity</p>	<p>Project Dignity provides vocational training and employment opportunities to people with disabilities. According to Project Dignity, only 5 out of every 100 people with a disability in Singapore are employed. Amongst its various activities and services, Project Dignity has created a large food hall to train and employ people with disabilities. The social enterprise has trained more than 1,000 people with disabilities since it was founded in 2015, and it also operates in Hong Kong.</p> <p>https://projectdignity.sg</p>
<p>REACH Viet Nam Viet Nam</p> 	<p>REACH Viet Nam provides vocational training, career counseling, and job placement services for Viet Nam's most underserved youth, including people with disability. Since 2004, REACH has trained more than 18,000 underserved youth and partnered with over 1,000 employers. More than 80% of their graduates have found a job after their training. REACH has also created an inclusive business entity called Viewzz, a real-estate visual firm that employs REACH graduates.</p> <p>https://reach.org.vn, www.viewzz-studio.com</p>
<p>Steps with Theera Thailand</p> 	<p>Steps with Theera aims to achieve equality and inclusion for people with intellectual differences by operating vocational training centers and coffee shops. Their team of specialists and therapists provide in-depth training and support to their trainees, and they offer inclusive employment opportunities at their coffee shops. Steps with Theera partners with over 20 businesses as employers for its graduates, and they provide consulting services on inclusion.</p> <p>https://stepswiththeera.com</p>
<p>Virtualahan The Philippines</p> 	<p>Virtualahan equips persons with disabilities with practical and essential skills to become competitive and economically independent in the technology sector. Virtualahan was founded by Ryan Gervasa in 2015, an Ashoka Fellow living with a disability himself. Over 500 people have graduated from Virtualahan's 5-week skills training programme since 2015, and more than 66% of these graduates have secured gainful employment.</p> <p>https://virtualahan.com</p>

SE = social enterprise.

Source: Various websites mentioned above, accessed 5 July 2021.

Most of these SEs are led by young social entrepreneurs, many of whom are persons with disabilities themselves. Trends in social entrepreneurship worldwide have shown the growing emergence of young leaders. Numerous studies show that young people today are highly motivated to generate positive social change and interested in developing innovative solutions through social entrepreneurship (UN DESA, 2020). In addition to the strong presence of young leaders in this ecosystem, another pattern that can be identified relates to the importance of supporting persons with disabilities in championing their own cause. Persons with disabilities have considerable assets to leverage in advocating for disability rights, including first-hand knowledge of their needs and the ability to develop effective solutions to social problems. These highly driven social entrepreneurs are well-positioned to address the need for stronger disability rights across ASEAN:

‘We are beyond the “Good for Business Case” that it’s good for companies to hire people with disabilities. True inclusion is when you build mechanisms for persons with disabilities – and anyone – to thrive, including in the workplace.’

– Ryan Gersava, Founder and President of Virtualahan¹

‘We need to understand that disabilities are a “human rights issue”.’

– Dissa Ahdanisa, Founder and CEO of Fingertalk²

Due to the need to address employment inequality throughout ASEAN, many SEs across the region focus their mission on supporting equal employment pathways. The majority of SEs supporting persons with disabilities in ASEAN have one or more of the following objectives: (i) to provide education, skills or training to persons with disabilities, (ii) to create jobs and provide direct employment for persons with disabilities, and (iii) to support the employment or job placement of persons with disabilities with external companies and organisations. The case studies revealed several different strategies for achieving this mission as well as a wide range of employment sectors. Steps with Theera provides work-readiness training with a focus on restaurant and coffee shop skills, whereas REACH Viet Nam has created the Viewzz social enterprise which provides training and employment related to visual design for real estate businesses. Kerjabilitas focuses its work on facilitating job placement and recruitment through its major online platform devoted to employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. SEs provide training, experience, and employment opportunities that are essential for achieving inclusive employment across ASEAN.

¹ This is a direct quotation from our interview with Ryan Gersava on 17 May 2021. The interview was conducted by Senior Impact Advisor Allison Sanders on behalf of ERIA/Impact46.

² This is a direct quotation from our interview with Ryan Gersava on 17 May 2021. The interview was conducted by Senior Impact Advisor Allison Sanders on behalf of ERIA/Impact46.

In addition to direct support to persons with disabilities, many SEs throughout ASEAN also assist companies in becoming inclusive employers with accessible workplaces. Several of the SEs interviewed have developed consulting services for helping companies become inclusive employers and assisting them in adapting their systems and workplaces accordingly. Although ASEAN currently exhibits a tremendous gap in the equal employment of persons with disabilities, Virtualahan founder Ryan Gersava observes, ‘more companies are more ready than they initially thought to employ people with disabilities.’³ Kerjabilitas, Project Dignity, Steps with Theera, and Virtualahan have developed consulting services for corporate employers – services which they believe have significant potential for expansion in the future. These SEs also provide valuable assistance by recommending their own trainees and graduates for recruitment, which significantly facilitates the recruitment process for companies.

*‘More companies are more ready than they initially thought
to employ people with disabilities.’*

– Ryan Gersava, Founder and President of Virtualahan⁴

Many SEs throughout ASEAN provide high-performing, competitive services. SEs face the two-fold challenge of achieving both social impact and profitability. Most of these SEs interviewed for this study did in fact generate year-on-year profit and growth, but also demonstrated remarkable achievements in their respective industries. In 2020, Virtualahan was selected by Microsoft to provide expertise on inclusive employment to technology companies in the Asia–Pacific. Due to the quality of its services in the restaurant and food delivery market in Singapore, Project Dignity received funding to replicate its work in Hong Kong. As Project Dignity Founder Koh Seng Choon explains, ‘We’re successful because we make great food – not because we’re part-charity.’⁵

The key findings from these case studies illustrate the great potential that SEs have for improving disability rights across ASEAN. They improve the representation of young people and persons with disabilities in their leadership and staff positions, and they address priority issues, such as unequal employment throughout ASEAN. These SEs demonstrate great innovation through their consulting services that assist corporations to become inclusive employers, and they also demonstrate strong business performance. Overall, these SEs illustrate the tremendous potential for social innovation that could be greatly enhanced by support from other stakeholders in the region.

³ This is a direct quotation from our interview with Ryan Gersava on 17 May 2021. The interview was conducted by Senior Impact Advisor Allison Sanders on behalf of ERIA/Impact46.

⁴ Idem.

⁵ This is a direct quotation from our interview with Koh Seng Choon on 20 April 2021, conducted by Allison Sanders on behalf of ERIA/Impact46.