

# Chapter 3

## Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic on the Sustainable Development Goals

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## Chapter 3

# Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic on the Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, all ASEAN governments adopted the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, including 17 goals and 169 targets, which were designed to shape action over the next 15 years to realise the socioeconomic and cultural rights of all and to balance economic, social, and environmental development (UN DESA, 2016b). This agenda marks a milestone by mainstreaming migration, migrant workers, and the issues of inequality and decent work as integral components of development policy into SDGs 8 and 10 (Foresti and Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Long et al., 2017). In paragraph 29 of the declaration accompanying the adoption of the SDGs, ASEAN governments also committed to recognise the positive contribution of migrants to ‘inclusive growth and sustainable development’.

The ASEAN governments also committed to ‘cooperate internationally to ensure safe, orderly and regular migration involving full respect for human rights and the humane treatment of migrants regardless of migration status’ (UN General Assembly, 2015). Given the wide range of factors driving the phenomenon of migration, from poverty to climate change, it is seen by international agencies (IOM, 2018) and by ASEAN as a crosscutting issue relevant to all 17 of the SDGs and most of the 169 targets in the agenda. The paragraphs below review the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on select SDGs and their targets with respect to migrant workers, based on currently available information.

### 1. Baseline and Progress

A snapshot analysis of where the ASEAN region stood in 2015 (the baseline year for measuring progress towards the SDGs to be achieved by 2030) revealed that the region as a whole made significant progress in four goal areas from 2000 to 2015: poverty eradication (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), and life below water (SDG 14) (UNESCAP, 2017b). For example, extreme income poverty (earning less than \$1.90 a day in 2011 purchasing power parity) more than halved from 26% in 2000 to 9% in 2015.

However, progress was slow or stagnant in six goal areas: good health and well-being (SDG 3); gender equality (SDG 5); clean water and sanitation (SDG 6); industry, innovation, and infrastructure (SDG 9); responsible consumption and production (SDG 12); and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).

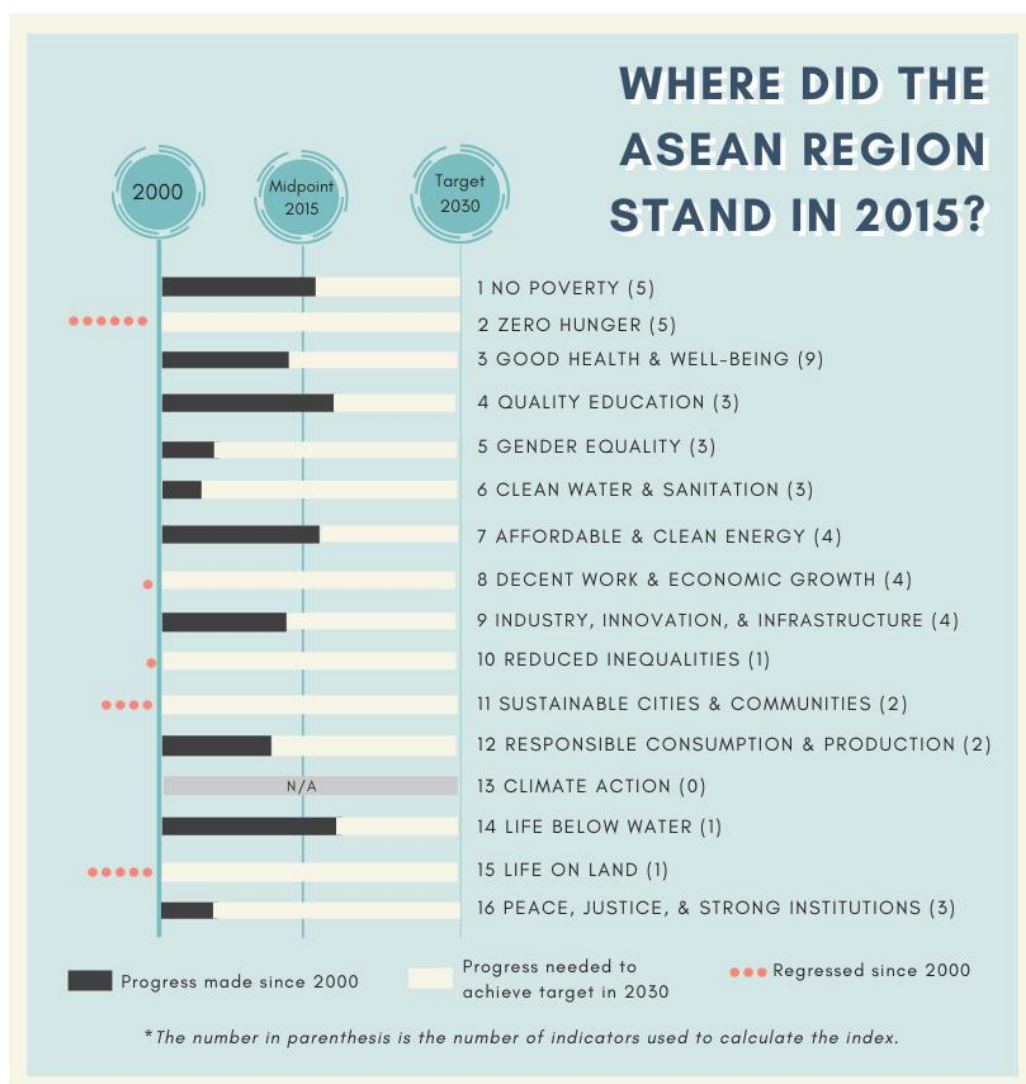
**Figure 3.1: Links between the Sustainable Development Goals and Migration**



Source: International Organization for Migration (2018), *Migration and the 2030 Agenda: A Guide for Practitioners*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.

Since 2015, ASEAN has been making progress in several target areas under SDG 3 (good health and well-being); SDG 5 (gender equality); SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy); SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth); and SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure). The UNESCAP analysis (2017a) cautioned that, to achieve the SDGs by 2030, ASEAN as a whole must to maintain its current rate of progress in reducing under-5 and maternal mortality, ensuring equal opportunities for leadership for women, increasing access to renewable energy, enhancing employment, increasing access to mobile networks, and reducing carbon dioxide emissions.

**Figure 3.2: The Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Performance on the Sustainable Development Goals, 2015**



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2017), *Southeast Asia Subregion Challenges and Priorities for SDG Implementation*. 17 May. Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.unescap.org/resources/southeast-asia-subregion-challenges-and-priorities-sdg-implementation> (accessed 12 February 2021).

ASEAN would also have to reverse the trend in several other target areas, including increasing investment in agriculture, reducing overweight and wasting amongst children under 5, reducing adolescent fertility, increasing the supply of qualified primary school teachers, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, achieving the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources, conserving natural forests, and reducing all forms of violence and related death rates.

It has been predicted that the COVID-19 pandemic will have both short- and long-term impacts on many of the SDGs (Evetts, n.d.). In the ASEAN region the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to significantly impact the ability of least developed countries like Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Myanmar in the Lower Mekong Region (currently the main labour-

supplying nations to the ASEAN region) to meet the SDGs by 2030, as well as reversing gains made in recent years (UN, 2020a).

The section below presents an overview of the possible channels of impact of COVID-19 on different SDGs and specific targets related to migration and the welfare of migrant workers. Although the paucity of reliable and up-to-date region-wide data limits this analysis, the discussion below indicates the overall trends and provides useful insights on appropriate mid-course corrective action for governments and policy makers, and future research.

## **2. Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic on Migration-Related Sustainable Development Goals**

### **2.1. Sustainable Development Goal 1: End Poverty in All its Forms Everywhere**

Historically, an important driver of migration has been the quest of people to improve their lives and those of their families materially (Murrugarra, Larrison, and Sasin, n.d.). Large differences in income within and between countries motivate individuals to escape poverty through migration. Migrants typically not only improve the economic status of their own families, but through remittances can make an impact on sending countries at the national level. They also acquire new skills and education that can make a lasting impact on poverty alleviation.

In implementing the SDG targets related to poverty, governments can help integrate the rights and interests of migrant groups, including asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced persons, in local and national poverty reduction policies and programming.

Migration relevant targets to be achieved by 2030 under SDG 1 include (i) eradicating extreme poverty (currently measured as earning less than \$1.25 a day) for all people everywhere (Target 1.1); and (ii) implementing nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable (Target 1.3).

#### **Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic**

According to a UN assessment of the global impact of COVID-19, the crisis risks ‘reversing decades of progress in the fight against poverty and exacerbating already high levels of inequality within and between countries’ (UN, 2020a). The UN report warned that, unless adequate measures are promptly put in place, the disruptions imposed by the pandemic and the measures adopted to suppress the virus will dramatically worsen the situation.

Another analysis asserted that ‘the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are predicted to hit vulnerable populations in the region – which include urban and rural poor, migrants, informal workers, refugees, indigenous and ethnic groups, religious minorities, and women – harder. This is due to a complex intersection of a lack of social protections, limited infrastructure for hygiene and sanitation, difficulties in implementing social distancing, and overall low resilience to shocks like these due to underinvestment in the necessary supports’ (Open Development Mekong, 2020).

Based on a survey, the University of Chicago has estimated that globally two out of every five jobs lost during the pandemic may not come back, and that close to 40% of people are likely to face pandemic-induced layoffs from work (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis, 2020).

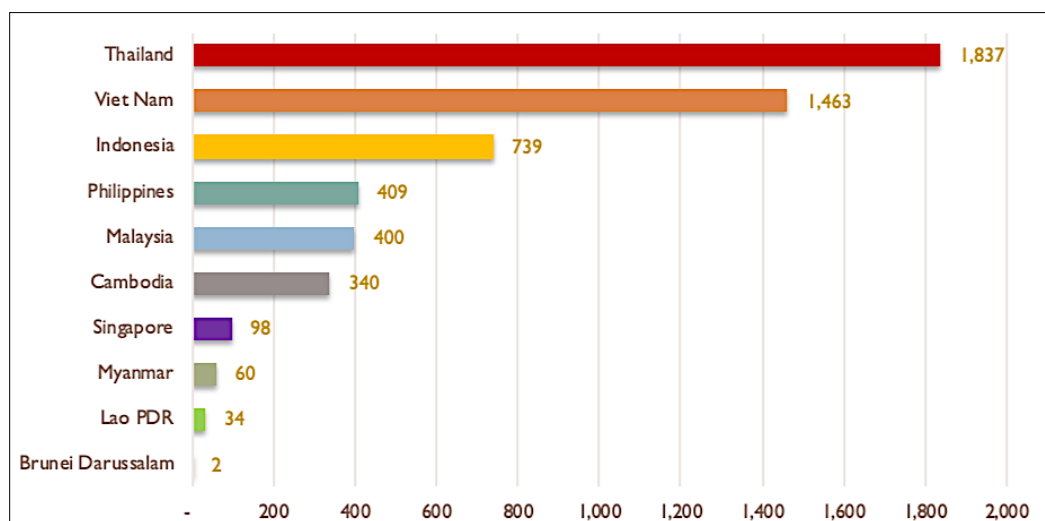
What is said about the global trend is equally relevant for ASEAN, and probably more relevant because a higher proportion of the population is dependent on the informal sector (Nortajuddin, 2020b).

A major negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the ASEAN region will likely be reduced employment, in both the formal and informal sector, which in turn will considerably drive up the number of people living in poverty in the region ('ADB Says Cambodia to Lose', 2020; ILO, 2020b; 2020c). While official figures are not yet available, ADB's Asian Development Outlook 2020 concluded that, overall, ASEAN countries stand to lose around 16 million jobs in 2020, and will take 2–3 years to recover.

In the context of Southeast Asia, according to a UN policy brief, the COVID-19 crisis also threatens to destroy the livelihoods of the region's 218 million informal workers, who represent 51–90% of the national non-agricultural workforce in the subregion. Without alternative incomes, formal social protection systems, or savings to buffer these shocks, workers and their families will be pushed into poverty, reversing decades of poverty reduction (UNESCAP, 2020c).

In the ASEAN region, economic shocks wrought by COVID-19 are already impacting poverty and welfare indicators, especially amongst the vulnerable and workers in the informal economy. Virgil and Lie argue that 'COVID-19 impacted all sectors in ASEAN, from health to the economy. It is predicted that 60 million people in East Asia and the Pacific may be pushed into poverty as a result of a 20% loss in income' (2020). While the region has accomplished considerable progress in poverty alleviation in the last few decades, approximately one in seven residents across the region were still living on less than \$2 per day as of 2015 ('The Fourth Industrial Revolution', 2020).

**Figure 3.3: Post-Coronavirus Disease Pandemic Job Loss amongst Intra-Association of Southeast Asian Nations Migrant Workers**

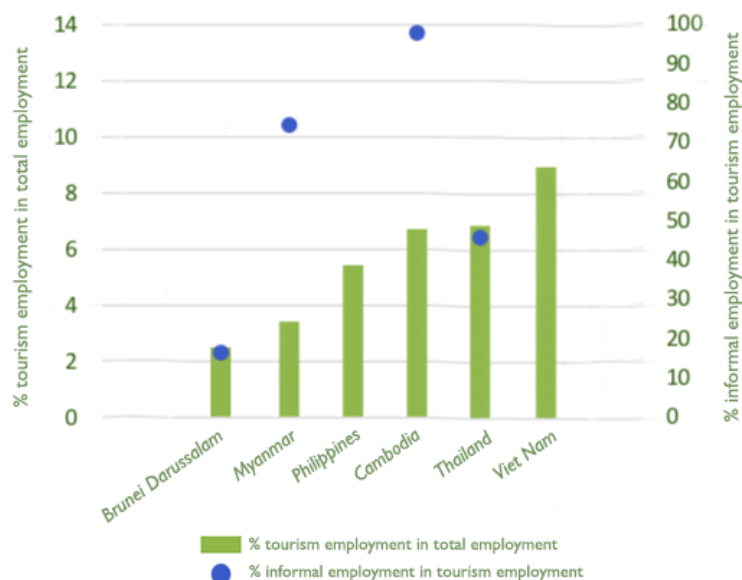


Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Source: Myat Thura (2020), *Myanmar: Over 60,000 Workers Lost Jobs Due to Factory Shutdowns. Caused by COVID-19*. 28 April. London: Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (republished from Myanmar Times). <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/myanmar-over-60000-workers-lost-jobs-due-to-factory-shutdowns-caused-by-covid-19> (accessed 25 September 2020).

At the country level, between 2015 and 2019 the Philippines made progress in combating poverty; the poverty rate decreased from 21.6% in 2015 to 16.6% in 2018, and was projected to decline further during 2020–2025. A report in 2019 showed that about one in five of the country's 106 million people lived in extreme poverty and, of these, around 50% were reportedly undernourished. The ongoing public health crisis is expected to come as an additional burden for impoverished families and those living in urban slums, many of whom are informal workers. Similarly, Nortajuddin observes that things have never looked bleaker in Indonesia, where 24.79 million people are considered impoverished (2020b).

**Figure 3.4: Employment in the Tourism Sector as a Share of Total Employment and Share of Informality in Tourism Employment, Latest Available Year (%)**



Note: The informal employment share is not available for Fiji, the Philippines, or Thailand.

Source: Calculations based on national labour force surveys in the International Labour Organization (ILO) repository of micro datasets ([www.ilo.org/ilostat](http://www.ilo.org/ilostat)). ILO (2020e), *Thematic Brief: COVID-19 and Employment in the Tourism Sector: Impact and Response in Asia and the Pacific*. 24 April. Bangkok: ILO.

[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_742664.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_742664.pdf) (accessed 20 July 2020).

#### Box 5: Collapse of the Travel and Tourism Industry

The travel and tourism sector is fundamental to the economic health of several Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, accounting for about 12.0% of the region's gross domestic product in 2019 and 13.3% of employment (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020). Online travel booking services, the bedrock of thousands of startups in the region, are now a \$34 billion industry and saw annual growth of 15% in the region from 2015 to 2019.

The collapse of the tourism sector (a major source of revenue and jobs in the ASEAN region) induced by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is an important factor behind the International Monetary Fund projections of stalled economic growth for 2020 (International

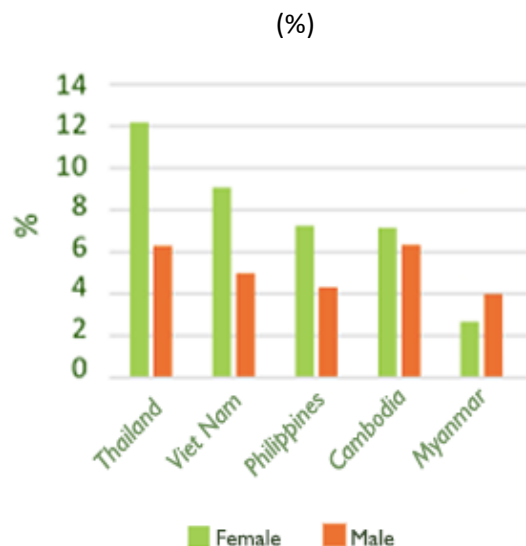
Monetary Fund, 2020). The impact on the region's tourism sector was felt at an early stage when the number of tourists from China declined abruptly. Now, with the virus spread across the globe, as many as 96% of the world's destinations are imposing some form of travel restrictions according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization.

According to an International Labour Organization report in April 2020, Asia and the Pacific stands to lose approximately 63 million jobs and \$1 trillion in gross domestic product, as international tourism plunged by about 80% in 2020 compared to 2019. This is by far the worst result for tourism since 1950 and puts an abrupt end to a 10-year period of sustained growth since the 2009 financial crisis (International Labour Organization, 2020e). Amongst countries with available data, those with the highest share of employment in tourism are Cambodia (with 6.7%), Thailand (with 9.0%), and Viet Nam (with 6.9%). During peak travel months, the percentage of workers employed in tourism can reach as high as 12%–15% in some countries. Tourism-dependent economies like Thailand – where nearly one in four jobs are in the hotel and restaurant sector, and migrant workers (both domestic and regional) account for two-thirds of those engaged in tourism sector – stand to lose 1.8 million jobs (ADB, 2020a).

In many ASEAN countries, more than three in four workers in the tourism sector are in informal jobs, leaving them especially vulnerable to the negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>27</sup> Workers who continue to work for hotels, airlines, or other hospitality industries typically do not have the option to work remotely, and therefore have a heightened risk of COVID-19 infection. Those who do fall ill may be disadvantaged in accessing healthcare services as informal workers and have no way of replacing their incomes if they stop working because of sickness or lockdowns.

Source: Authors.

**Figure 3.5: Employment in the Tourism Sector as a Share of Total Employment by Sex, Latest Available Year**



Source: Calculations based on national labour force surveys in the International Labour Organization (ILO) repository of micro datasets ([www.ilo.org/ilostat](http://www.ilo.org/ilostat)). ILO (2020e), *Thematic Brief: COVID-19 and Employment in the Tourism Sector: Impact and Response in Asia and the Pacific*. 24 April. Bangkok: ILO. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_742664.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_742664.pdf) (accessed 20 July 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Informal sector jobs are characterised by a lack of basic protections, including social protection coverage.

Beginning in April 2020, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam reported a spike in unemployment rates that continued into June 2020 (Hutt, 2020). For the last decade, Thailand's jobless rate has hovered around 0.6%, while Cambodia's unemployment rates before the COVID-19 crisis had barely risen above 2% since the early 1990s. Viet Nam's unemployment rate had also been consistently at less than 2%, while the formal unemployment rate in the Lao PDR was less than 1% through the end of 2019. Unemployment rates have risen to a 10-year high in Viet Nam, where the pandemic has cost nearly five million Vietnamese workers their jobs in just the first quarter (Q1) of 2020, according to the country's General Statistics Office. Experts predict that this rate will increase when figures for the more economically debilitating second quarter results are released (OECD, 2020b; 'ASEAN's Virus Dilemma', 2020; Hutt, 2020).

In the case of the Lao PDR, the World Bank observed that a sharp drop in the performance of the travel, tourism, and hospitality sectors – which account for 11% of total employment and 22% of employment in urban areas – has caused widespread job losses (2020c). Sengpaseuth (2020) reported that joblessness in the Lao PDR spiked to around 25% in May alone due to the pandemic. Between 96,000 and 214,000 additional people are projected to fall into working poverty as a result of the pandemic. In all cases, job losses in Thailand are projected to occur in construction, services (hotels and tourism in particular), and seasonal agriculture amongst both domestic workers and migrants.

By June 2020, the situation in Indonesia was equally serious, with around 6 million reported job losses in the construction, textile and garment, and service sectors (Jefriando and Suroyo, 2020). This in turn is expected to impact jobs for returning migrant workers and/or cause competition for jobs, resulting in wage cuts (Soeriaatmadja, 2020). Indonesia's National Planning Board (Bappenas) reasoned that the pandemic will worsen the labour market for Indonesia's young candidates as a result of higher barriers of entry into the job market, long-lasting lower income levels, and worsening labour conditions. These poor employment conditions might, amongst other factors, force desperate young graduates to accept jobs for which they are overqualified with low pay and minimum growth opportunities. Others might even be forced to accept informal jobs, typically characterised by vulnerable contract terms and substandard working conditions (Pradesha et al., 2020).

The situation is no different in Cambodia where layoffs were reported amongst garment workers, while at the same time migrants returned from Thailand in April–May 2020 ('ADB Says Cambodia to Lose', 2020). Given the economic decline, companies have been unable to finance expenses, including their employees' wages; and by the end of June 2020 there were reports of employers seeking 'deferred payment of wages', particularly in the travel and hospitality sector (Bagus Enrico and Partners, 2020). The return of migrant workers and increased competition for local jobs were expected to drive significant wage cuts in the garment sector, which was already bracing itself for the cancellation of export orders and lack of new business proposals. Given this situation, many in Cambodia and Myanmar wanted to return to Thailand (despite travel restrictions and a possible lack of jobs in Thailand too), hoping for a turnaround ('Migrant Workers Poised', 2020).

The COVID-19 shock has been most devastating for discretionary services, including restaurants, hotels, travel, and entertainment, which face a slow recovery but account for a high proportion of employment. One assessment predicted that many of these service businesses would soon have to choose between cutting workers, closing down, or facing bankruptcy (Subbaraman and Varma, 2020). The costs of unemployment for individual migrant workers and their households are not hard to imagine. When a person loses their job, there is often an immediate impact on that person's standard of living, particularly amongst informal sector workers whose savings tend to drift down to zero when a crisis occurs at home. Job losses are also likely to trigger social strife and increased household violence (ILO, 2020i; 2020k).

Despite playing an important role in national economies, providing a link with global structures of agricultural production and trade, and feeding the world, many agricultural workers and their families have long suffered from poverty and periodic and seasonal food insecurity (ILO, 2020c). Post-COVID 19, experts have also predicted that working poverty rates around the world and in ASEAN are expected to increase significantly. A report published by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) for Indonesia and Myanmar observed that agricultural workers experienced the highest incidence of working poverty during the early days of COVID-19 as there was prolonged non-activity followed by stiff competition for local jobs that led to arbitrary wage cuts. By June 2020, one-quarter of workers engaged in the sector were estimated to be in extreme poverty (Pradesha et al., 2020; ILO, 2020a). In addition to this, as governments order nonessential business to close, millions of people employed in the gig economy – who are mostly on precarious contracts, with little or limited access to health facilities or health insurance – are put in vulnerable situations and may turn to risky or exploitative employment.

Based on multiple field reports, the ILO expressed concern that casual and migrant wage workers (particularly in agriculture), landless farmers, small-scale traders, and commodity producers whose ability to purchase food grains were most affected. The ILO estimates that, to maintain their standard of living and not fall into poverty, low-paid rural migrant workers in the worst affected countries (like Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines) would have had to find an additional week of employment every month (ILO, 2020c). Given widespread curfew and the closure of economic activities, replacement work has not been possible for many who have lost their jobs.

The social costs of job losses are difficult to calculate but are more real. Past crises have shown that increased unemployment (both domestic and migration-related) leads to domestic violence; social strife within communities; and, politically, nationalistic rhetoric, protectionism, and severe restrictions on migration of poorer groups. Moreover, prolonged periods of unemployment amongst migrant workers without a replacement job at home could lead to resentment within the local community, and/or drive unemployed people to crime to meet their immediate economic needs (ILO, 2020i; UNESCAP, 2020c).

## Social Protections

SDG 1.3 calls for the implementation of appropriate social protection systems nationally, including support for different floors,<sup>28</sup> and achieving substantial coverage of the poor and vulnerable by 2030. A UN report observed that social protection or assistance has a positive impact on migrant workers and should be systematically enforced to secure SDG 1.3 (2018). The report adds that ‘social protection can cushion the adverse social effects of rapid structural change, including those associated with migration, unemployment, rising inequalities and pandemics’. It asserted that better access to social protections and services have been proven to ‘enable families to care for and sustain their members and reduce both the costs and time involved in work and other daily activities. They increase the chances that individuals and their families can lift themselves out of poverty and live dignified and productive lives’. This underlines the importance of taking marginalised and vulnerable communities into account in developing the pillars of ASEAN’s economy in all circumstances (ATUC, 2016b). Although migrant workers play a key role in ASEAN’s economic development, a large proportion of them lack adequate social protection coverage in both their home and host countries, such as proper contracts, unemployment support, retirement funds, accident coverage, sufficient paid leave, and family care. Many labour-sending nations also lack adequate resources for such programmes (Olivier, 2018; ASEAN, 2016a).

The ASEAN community has yet to achieve fair treatment of migrant workers and effective protection for them from abuse, exploitation, and violence (ATUC, 2020). AMS have been reluctant to extend the coverage of the Employment Act and Workmen’s Compensation Act to foreign migrant workers, leaving the parties to negotiate benefits individually (ATUC, 2020). Instead, many receiving countries in the region treat the migrant labour market arrangements (including wages and benefits) between employees and employers as a private matter, and refuse to intervene on matters of working hours and rest days for live-in domestic workers.<sup>29</sup>

Even prior to the pandemic, AMS acknowledged that the absence of coordinated social protection programmes rendered workers vulnerable to discrimination in the laws and practices of both origin and destination countries. They also recognised that undocumented and women migrant workers in particular are left with little or no protection from very low wages and poor working conditions (Orbeta et al., 2013).

In addition, existing social protection programmes have always lacked a comprehensive list of migrant workers employed at any given time, thus weakening the targeting of assistance delivery. The targeting effectiveness of these programmes and registries has also been poor, often excluding over half of the poorest migrants such as undocumented workers or women (who often serve as domestic workers or family care givers).

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<sup>28</sup> According to the ILO, national social protection floors should comprise at least the following four social security guarantees: (i) access to essential health care, including maternity care; (ii) basic income security for children, providing access to nutrition, education, care, and any other necessary goods and services; (iii) basic income security for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in particular in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity, and disability; and (iv) basic income security for older persons.

<sup>29</sup> While Singapore has put in place strict oversight arrangements on the provision of and access to welfare systems for migrant workers, such oversight arrangements are treated flexibly in Malaysia and Thailand.

Some countries in the region have responded to the crisis by increasing social welfare measures for vulnerable populations. For example, the Philippines is currently providing a cash transfer to 75% of the poorest households across the country using its social registry to identify beneficiary households (Rutkowski, 2020). However, this approach likely excludes a considerable portion of intended recipients, particularly migrant workers who may not have registered or renewed their registration. Although Thailand's response was seen as efficient, reaching almost two-thirds of households, few schemes targeted the social protection of documented regional migrant workers, and a large number of undocumented, irregular workers were excluded (ILO, 2020i; 2020l; 2020o).

The COVID-19 crisis is also gradually reducing access to safe and reliable employment opportunities for migrant workers and informal sector in general.<sup>30</sup> Informal sector workers carry obvious risks, like substandard safety provisions and working with dangerous goods and machinery, on construction sites for example. During the COVID-19 crisis, migrant workers have reportedly been prepared to engage in unsafe tasks to avoid job losses (Saturdaysang, 2020). For domestic workers and those engaged in service sector, there is no process in place for resolving workplace-related safety issues, and helplines provided by civil society organisations only extend support at times. Moreover, women (particularly those in domestic work and elderly care) are sometimes unable to access these services because of their work location and conditions imposed by their employers.

#### **Box 6: Importance of Equal Treatment**

Many migrant workers in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region are vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion in their destination countries (Olivier, 2018; ATUC, 2019b). Two overlapping reasons for this are their migration status (irregular or undocumented) and the nature of their employment (e.g. informal work or the informal economy). Even regularised migrant workers in the formal economy are not subject to equal treatment across all four social protection guarantees. Since early 2000s, the main receiving ASEAN countries – Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand – have also reduced hospital subsidies for non-nationals or obliged them to take up private insurance.

Six of the 10 ASEAN Member States – Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore – have ratified the Equality of Treatment (Accident Compensation) Convention, 1925 (No. 19) to ensure some occupational injury protection for non-national workers. Under the Work Injury Compensation Act 2009, private insurance for work injury and illnesses is compulsory in Singapore for both migrant and non-migrant workers engaging in manual work or earning less than S\$1,600 per month for non-manual work. In contrast, although Thailand recognises equality of treatment for accident compensation under its 1994 Workmen's Compensation Act B.E. 2537, in reality, most migrant workers are uninsured for occupational injury and diseases. This is because of their undocumented status, non-compliance of employers, migrants' lack of awareness of their rights, language barriers, onerous administrative procedures, and other factors. In Malaysia, non-permanent resident migrant workers do not qualify for work injury and invalidity protection under its Social Security Organization, and are instead obliged to be insured under the lesser Foreign Workers Compensation Scheme. Although not a signatory of Convention No. 19, the Government of Viet Nam recently amended its Law on Social Insurance to permit the coverage of migrant workers with valid work permits as of January 2018.

Source: Authors.

<sup>30</sup> Workplace shelter-related issues are discussed under different SDGs.

## **2.2. Sustainable Development Goal 2: End Hunger, Achieve Food Security and Improved Nutrition, and Promote Sustainable Agriculture**

Low-paying employment in rural areas and low productivity of small-scale food producers drive migration to urban centres and overseas, as workers search for better income opportunities. At the same time, agricultural communities are often affected by climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding, and other disasters, necessitating adaptation strategies to boost livelihoods and help prevent forced environmental migration.

### **Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic**

A large migrant labour force that depends on the food supply chain sector for their livelihoods remains significantly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. ASEAN's food and beverage sector not only accounts for 116 million jobs (about 35% of the labour force) but also ensures a continued food supply. By the end of July 2020 this labour force was confronting numerous challenges (Chan, 2020). Apart from the threat to lives and livelihoods of millions of those employed in the sector, the pandemic initially raised additional concerns about the durability of the subregion's food supply systems, a complex matrix involving farmers, fishers, labourers, drivers, cold storage, food processors, retailers, and consumers (UN Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2020a). In a briefing note on ASEAN dated 2 June 2020, the OECD observed that '...the COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented stresses on food supply chains, with bottlenecks in farm labour, processing, transport and logistics, as well as momentous shifts in demand. Most of these disruptions are a result of policies adopted to contain the spread of the virus'.

At the onset of COVID-19, initial lockdown measures resulted in panic buying that left many migrant workers and their households in distress as they either could not access supplies or lacked cash on hand to purchase them. Safety nets are essential to avoid hunger and food insecurity for migrant workers and help them overcome temporary shocks. Border closures and export restrictions have limited the availability and affordability of certain food items for countries that rely on imports. Domestically, disruptions in upstream food supply chains have arisen from both mobility restrictions and worker illness during planting and harvesting, in addition to hindered operations in processing, trucking, logistics, and trading ('ADB Says Cambodia to Lose', 2020). The sudden closure of economic activities and international borders quickly halted the transport of essential commodities for some time, leading to public anxiety. Disruptions to domestic and regional food supply chains (including the delayed start of the farming season in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam) caused by major transport and travel restrictions undermined food availability and accessibility (Ellis, 2020; Food Industry Asia, 2020).<sup>31</sup> At the same time, a host of new problems brought on by the pandemic has stunted both in-country and cross-border supply chains, leaving essentials

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<sup>31</sup> Southeast Asia's food supply chain was already at risk of serious disruption before the COVID-19 pandemic, which has underscored existing frailties and brought them to the fore.

accessible only to a few (Ellis, 2020).

Rapid regional surveys and anecdotal reports indicate that sudden job and income losses are triggering reduced food consumption amongst migrant workers as they try to save money and survive during the lockdown period, leaving them at risk of hunger and malnutrition (ADB, 2020b). Given the lack of income and concerns about the impossibility of returning to work in the near future, households have started 'saving', impacting food consumption and nutrition amongst informal sector workers. Basic food handouts provided by state agencies or charities to compensate for the losses incurred are often limited, and may not meet the nutritional needs of children and pregnant women (Tantau, 2020).

An ADB briefing note found that household food consumption and nutrition have been significantly affected by the loss of jobs and income and by limited access to food. Informal sector workers in particular, most of whom are migrants (either domestic or regional), have been at a higher risk of food insecurity since April 2020. Shortages of labour and input supplies resulting from prolonged lockdowns can reduce the scale of crop production while disrupted logistics limit the options of smallholder farmers to access better priced markets. A parallel report noted distress sales of vegetables during May–June in several parts of ASEAN (ADB, 2020b).

### **Potential Long-Term Impact**

Although food supplies currently appear plentiful and the initial panic buying has subsided, worries persist about the availability of sufficient food at affordable prices in the future, particularly in the context of job and income losses amongst migrant workers. Approximately 61 million people in Southeast Asia are currently undernourished; this number may increase following the pandemic and is likely to moderate only when the economic situation stabilises (FAO, 2019).

Rice is the staple food of Southeast Asia, which produces, trades, and consumes a large portion of the global rice supply. In 2018, Southeast Asia produced more than 220 million tonnes of rice. While both FAO and the IFPRI have projected sufficient rice stocks for the rest of 2020 in ASEAN and Asia and the Pacific more widely, the measures needed to curb further COVID-19 outbreaks could disrupt supply chains critical for food security (ADB, 2020b; Diao and Wang, 2020; Pradesha et al., 2020).

A participant in a webinar on the future of food systems in Southeast Asia post COVID-19 convened by the International Rice Research Institute along with other development institutions asserted that, 'the impacts of the pandemic pose immense threats to the health of communities already struggling with hunger and on the livelihood of vulnerable groups including farmers'. The webinar participants considered various ways that AMS could help smallholders, landless people, and other poor groups who migrate for work across borders and have lost their jobs since March 2020. In the short term, the continued lack of economic access to food is a major challenge that must be dealt with. This could mean cash disbursements in some cases and free distribution of food for a period of time in others.

Studies and anecdotal reports have identified multiple impacts of the pandemic felt by different groups in society, including primary food producers such as smallholder farmers, landless people, and those who have now been without an income for a significant period of time (ADB, 2020b). Field studies and reports from Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand observe that curfew forced the closure of operations, removed travel and transport facilities, and prevented workers (both locals and migrants) from working in farms and processing and packaging facilities. In many rural areas, access to farm inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, and crop protection products became challenging. Farming activities virtually came to a halt during April–May and gradually opened only in late June (Pradesha et al., 2020; UNESCAP, 2020b; FAO, 2020b). In the medium term (through early 2021), this non-activity is likely to have significant impacts on labour-intensive food crops, including fruit, vegetables, dairy products, and meat processing (Dzulfikar, 2020).

Acknowledging this situation, the June 2020 ASEAN Summit stated, ‘We note that the COVID-19 outbreak has drawn our attention on the immediate danger of food shortage and its adverse effect on nutrition, given a sudden spike in demand and disruption in supply chains, ASEAN needs to also continue its efforts to ensure stable and sustainable food sources’ (ASEAN, 2020e). In parallel, the ASEAN Ministers’ Summit on Agriculture and Forestry recognised the threat to food security, food safety, and nutrition; and called for pertinent actions (ASEAN, 2020e).

In response, in addition to credit support for the agriculture sector, some ASEAN governments have implemented measures to ensure that supply chains from farms to markets remain open. For example, Malaysia allotted RM1 billion (\$231.6 million) to its Food Security Fund, and provided additional support to farmers and fishers for agricultural production (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020). A budget was allocated for food storage facilities and distribution to safeguard supply, and for agro-food projects. Myanmar also provided substantial support for its agriculture sector in the form of cash or loans to smallholder farmers to support production (French-Myanmar Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020).

Several AMS have complemented these measures by supporting access to markets and productivity enhancement, and facilitating export processes including for rice. Rural cash-for-work programmes for the economic recovery period were also included in overall measures to ensure food supply chain connectivity during the pandemic (ASEAN, 2020c).

### **2.3. Sustainable Development Goal 3: Ensure Healthy Lives and Promote Well-Being for All Ages**

It is well recognised that to achieve the vision of the SDGs – to leave no one behind –the health needs of refugees and migrants must be adequately addressed (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018). Unfortunately, productive migrant populations have been perceived as a burden on countries’ health services rather than an asset. Achieving the health-related targets of SDG 3 in the ASEAN region will require a special focus on migrants and refugees, to help both the cause of these vulnerable groups as well as larger national health goals.

Migrants face a variety of obstacles in accessing quality healthcare, which is often denied to them due to their legal and administrative status. There is a lack of comprehensive national health policies and strategies for migrants in many Southeast Asian countries. With the exception of a few countries in ASEAN, undocumented migrants have been prevented from accessing local health services, resulting in great hardship for them and also contributing to a failure to eliminate vaccine-preventable and other communicable diseases.

Migration relevant targets to be achieved by 2030 under SDG 3 include the following:

- (i) Reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births (Target 3.1).
- (ii) End preventable deaths of neonates and children under 5 years of age (Target 3.2).
- (iii) End the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases; and combat hepatitis, waterborne diseases, and other communicable diseases (Target 3.3).
- (iv) Reduce by one-third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment, and promote mental health and well-being (Target 3.4).
- (v) Substantially increase health financing and the recruitment, development, training, and retention of the health workforce in developing countries, especially in least developed countries and small island developing states (Target 3.8).

### **Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic**

People in vulnerable situations are particularly at risk from the COVID-19 outbreak because of their health and overall social and economic circumstances. Intra-ASEAN migrant workers face greater risks because of their often solitary status and living conditions in workplace shelters or dormitories, which are ideal settings for rapid transmission. They may also find it difficult to social distance. In the case of female domestic workers or caregivers, there is a possibility of further risk from their work, in addition to sociocultural and financial barriers. Working mothers have little recourse to social protection when public health measures such as school closures are imposed (UN Women, 2020b; ILO, 2020n).

Countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, and Myanmar where COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate multiple existing vulnerabilities are of particular concern. Myanmar, for example, has relatively poor public health infrastructure and domestic opportunities for livelihoods. Of the four million Myanmar citizens currently working abroad, it is estimated that 700,000–900,000 may have returned home after losing their jobs, and another 500,000 may have lost their jobs but have yet to return home (Diao and Michael Wang, 2020).<sup>32</sup> Almost all have likely lost their incomes and are unable to remit money home, leaving their families to cope with complex livelihood issues, especially health concerns, during a pandemic with less cash on hand. Even before the pandemic, many households in southeast Myanmar were highly vulnerable as a result of the effects of protracted conflict, a lack of sufficient investments in local development, and stagnating

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<sup>32</sup> This report estimated that remittances declined by 14% during the first 2 weeks of May 2020.

employment opportunities. The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated the vulnerability of these households (United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2020). As migrants lose income and remittances correspondingly decrease, families back home dealing with their own pandemic-related challenges will suffer. Over the years, various studies have shown that health care crises can drive people to make risky labour market decisions that can make them more vulnerable, either because they cannot afford to pay for medical care or because they have lost their job as a result of the crisis. This can heighten the risk of forced labour or enslavement, further impacting their health (Human Rights Watch, 2018).<sup>33</sup> Moreover, large numbers of migrant workers fall into employment ‘grey areas’ such as the entertainment and related service areas, which are associated with higher levels of poverty (Buller et al., 2020).

In Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore – despite statements to the contrary – there is also serious concern about the risks of infection amongst migrant workers accommodated in densely packed, often poorly sanitised dormitories.<sup>34</sup> As analysts have pointed out, with no vaccine and continued high demands placed on the public health system and services, the level of care available to regional migrant workers is likely to deteriorate in the coming months, and the situation could obviously be worse in the case of undocumented workers (US State Department, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2018).<sup>35</sup> In all of these countries, undocumented migrant workers often lack ready access to local health care systems, and that access may be further hampered as spiralling demands on those systems force governments to limit who receives health care.<sup>36</sup> The post-COVID-19 surge of nativist and nationalist political rhetoric (e.g. Malaysia, as discussed below) have also made migrant workers easy targets for exclusion from further access to services or, worse, stigmatisation as an infection risk (‘Locked up in Malaysia’s Lockdown’, 2020). As a result, migrant workers have had to use their savings, if any, to pay medical bills.

### **Long-Term Health Impact**

Even before the pandemic, healthcare in the ASEAN region was of variable quality. Maternal mortality in some countries (e.g. the Lao PDR and Myanmar) was 10 times higher than in others (e.g. Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, and Singapore). While Southeast Asia had made considerable progress in its fight against malaria, it lagged in eliminating tuberculosis, with new and relapse cases of tuberculosis still affecting 300 in 100,000 people, double the average rate in Asia and the Pacific. Neglected tropical diseases constituted a burden on the region’s development, with 31.3% of the population (more than 200 million people) requiring interventions in the form of large-scale preventive drug treatment or individual treatment. Child malnutrition in the region is also a complicated issue, with more than one-third of children in some countries malnourished, while the

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<sup>33</sup> Most migrant workers engaged in the illegal fishing sector in Thailand moved out of their homes largely out of concern about heightened risks of poor health, either to themselves or someone in the household.

<sup>34</sup> Thailand allows migrants to access health care like all citizens; however, this situation is challenging in the case of undocumented migrant workers. Similarly, in Malaysia the high number of undocumented migrant workers and refugees (who may also work illegally) makes the provision of health care difficult.

<sup>35</sup> Thailand is known to be a source, transit, and destination country for forced labour, particularly in the fishing, service, and sex sectors.

<sup>36</sup> Migrants include irregular migrants and those trafficked into other countries.

proportion of overweight children has tripled since 2000. In this context, COVID-19 has the potential to disrupt health services in several different ways; through the health system becoming overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, through interventions used to slow the transmission of COVID-19 inhibiting access to preventative interventions and services, and through the interruption of medical supplies (Hogan et al., 2020).

According to a 2020 study by the Imperial College London COVID-19 response team, such service disruptions in high-burden settings worldwide could increase deaths related to HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria over 5 years by up to 10% (for HIV), 20% (for tuberculosis), and 36% (for malaria) (Hogan et al., 2020). The greatest impact on HIV deaths will likely be from interruptions to antiretroviral therapy, which may occur at times of high or extremely high demand on health systems; and for tuberculosis, the greatest impact is likely to be from reductions in the timely diagnosis and treatment of new cases, which may result from a long period of COVID-19-suppression interventions. New modelling on HIV by the WHO and Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS also highlights the importance of taking immediate steps to minimise interruptions in health services and supplies of antiretroviral drugs during the pandemic (WHO, 2020a).<sup>37</sup>

While there is limited data on COVID-19 infection in tuberculosis patients, those ill with both will likely have poorer treatment outcomes, especially if tuberculosis treatment is interrupted. Tuberculosis patients should take precautions against COVID-19 as advised by health authorities, and continue their treatment as prescribed (WHO, 2020b).

Maintaining critical prevention activities and health care services for HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria could significantly reduce the overall impact of the pandemic and contribute towards the progress of this SDG and its targets.

#### **Box 7: Noncommunicable Diseases**

According to a 2019 World Health Organization (WHO) report on noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) (September), COVID-19 poses a high risk to both older people and people with pre-existing NCDs, include cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory disease (e.g. chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), diabetes, and cancer. According to global data, death rates in COVID-19 patients with pre-existing conditions such as cardiovascular disease (13.2%), diabetes (9.2%), chronic respiratory disease (8%), hypertension (8.4%), and cancer (7.6%) exceed that of patients without coexisting conditions (0.9%) (Guan et al., 2020).

Noncommunicable diseases – mainly cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes, and cancer – are top killers in the WHO South-East Asia Region,<sup>38</sup> claiming an estimated 8.5 million lives each year (WHO, n.d.a.). One-third of these deaths are premature and occur before the age of 70, thus affecting economically productive individuals. The four most common NCDs are largely caused by four modifiable behavioural risk factors: tobacco use, unhealthy diet, insufficient physical activity, and harmful use of alcohol. NCDs disproportionately affect the poor, impoverish families, and place a growing burden on healthcare systems.

According to Thakur et al. (2020), many people with NCDs are expected to experience restricted

<sup>37</sup> Service disruptions related to COVID-19 could cause hundreds of thousands of extra deaths from HIV.

<sup>38</sup> The WHO South-East Asia Region includes only Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand.

mobility due to lockdowns or a lack of transportation, which will affect their ability to access health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, restrictive measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, and travel restrictions to reduce the spread of infection in many countries may also impact people living with NCDs by limiting their activity, hampering their ability to secure healthy foods and access preventive or health promotion services. Without proper management, chronic medical conditions can worsen due to stressful situations resulting from restrictions, insecure economic situations, and changes in normal health behaviours. Disruptions in routine health services and medical supplies can also increase morbidity, disability, and avoidable mortality amongst NCD patients (Thakur et al., 2020).

Source: Authors.

## **2.4. Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Opportunities for All**

Migrants often have difficulty providing their children with quality education because of a variety of barriers, including cost, access, and discrimination. Deprived of a good education, these children grow up with several disadvantages that in turn keep them in the same conditions of poverty as their parents. Ensuring the education of these children is essential to meet the targets of SDG 4 in the ASEAN region.

Migration-relevant targets to be achieved by 2030 include the following:

- (i) By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education, leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes (Target 4.1).
- (ii) By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university (Target 4.3).
- (iii) By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults (both men and women) achieve literacy and numeracy (Target 4.6).
- (iv) By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries (especially least developed countries, small island developing states, and African countries) for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training; information and communication technology; and technical, engineering, and scientific programmes in developed countries and other developing countries (Target 4.b).

### **Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic**

A study of AMS showed that, while the impact of worker migration on children is not always negative, it often results in them being deprived of a normal schooling and childhood (Mortensen, 2016). Migrating parents often leave school-aged children with elderly grandparents or other extended family members, and children therefore may lack the necessary supervision to attend school. These children often must work to meet shortfalls in household income (resulting in increased child labour), and girls especially are required to take on caring roles previously done by the migrant mother. Children not in school are often easy targets for trafficking.

Children left behind in a sending country also have high rates of non-attendance at school between the ages of 10 and 17 years, and those in school often show no substantial improvement in educational performance. Children who accompany their parents to their destination countries may find it difficult to access educational infrastructure as they are often not included in school enrolment campaigns by local authorities, for example, because of a lack of proficiency in the local language or non-recognition of grades completed in their home towns. Children who do enrol in a state school may be unable to learn in their native language, and households may find it difficult to bear the costs of uniforms and/or books. (Altbach and de Wit, 2018).

The COVID-19 crisis is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities in access to quality education (e.g. through the lack of adequate information technology infrastructure and facilities to engage in online learning) in the ASEAN region, and children of vulnerable groups such as migrant workers are likely to be impacted most by the COVID-19 crisis (Jalli, 2020). This reality will affect populations from low-income, labour-exporting countries like Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam (and to an extent Indonesia), where access to good-quality learning institutions has been a problem for some time (Altbach and de Wit, 2018). In ASEAN's developing countries, primary school-age children from households in the poorest quintile are almost three times more likely to be out of school than those in the richest quintile, and the childhood mortality rate for the poorest quintile is two to three times higher than for the richest quintile.

During the COVID-19 crisis many of these countries observed significant increases in school drop-out rates and the incidence of child labour because of unaffordable school costs and a lack of adequate food (Nortajuddin, 2020c).<sup>39</sup> In addition to the impact on their growth and development, children not in school are easy targets for trafficking (both domestic and across borders) (US State Department, 2020; US Department of Justice, n.d.).<sup>40</sup>

### **School Closures**

The Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 (virtual) held on 14 April 2020 reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to take collective action and coordinate policies in the fight against the pandemic. In doing so, ASEAN leaders acknowledged that hard-won gains in expanded access to education in the region since the 1990s could stagnate or reverse as school closures are extended, and access to alternative options like online or distance learning remain out of reach for those without means to connect. This may cause further losses in human capital and diminish economic opportunities. The statement included special action plans for school-going children and education ('The Fourth Industrial Revolution', 2020). Nonetheless, schools were closed for a period of time, sparking concern about the education sector in general and rural schools in particular.

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<sup>39</sup> The World Bank has stated that Cambodia's economy is likely to shrink by 1.0%–2.9% this year, the worst performance for the country in a quarter of a century. The COVID-19 crisis will put 1.76 million jobs at risk as a result of losses in tourism, manufacturing, and construction, which together account for more than 70% of growth and 40% of employment (World Bank, 2020a).

<sup>40</sup> See [www.ecpat.org](https://www.ecpat.org). The US Department's Trafficking in Persons Report 2020, which cites different issues that occurred during 2020, shows that child trafficking flourished despite the pandemic.

While school closures seem to be a logical solution to enforce social distancing within communities during the pandemic, educationists and activists assert that prolonged closures tend to have a disproportionately negative impact on the most vulnerable students, particularly those living in rural areas and those with disabilities. They have fewer opportunities for learning at home, and their time out of school may present economic burdens for parents who may face challenges finding prolonged childcare, or even adequate food in the absence of school meals.

After some initial hesitation, countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand (and to a lesser extent the Philippines and Indonesia) continued with internet (online) and distance learning, regardless of school closures ('Schools May Reopen', 2020; 'Thailand Schools Reopen', 2020; Su and Daga, 2020). Institutions of higher learning in these countries were also generally quite prepared to adapt to this new reality because of the rapid progress of technology since the mid-2000s and distance learning methods. However, rural areas faced technical problems along with difficulties providing the necessary household infrastructure for children to engage in online classes. This gap further increased as a result of the job and income losses experienced by households that depend on remittances. In Myanmar and the Philippines, there were reports of distress sales of items like mobile phones and laptops by households in both urban and rural areas.<sup>41</sup>

Most other countries and school systems (e.g. Indonesia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and the Philippines) were much less prepared to introduce e-learning methods, particularly for secondary education and below. Governments acknowledged that access to technology in most households varied, with shortfalls seen amongst poorer groups and especially amongst migrants. Programmes to target those most in need were lacking, and children from these households were likely to drop silently out of school (Jalli, 2020).

By August, schools in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand reopened with varying degrees of caution, but those in other countries remained closed. In countries like Myanmar, where health facilities are scarce, schools were turned into makeshift holding centres during the initial period of the crisis. The extent to which this temporary closure of schools impacted education is unknown. These issues must all be factored into planning, particularly during the coping and recovery phases when schools reopen post-COVID-19, and in addressing the education needs of children of migrant workers.

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<sup>41</sup> Discussions with U Maung Soe in Yangon (21 July 2020) and Ramon Bultron in Manila (21 August 2020).

### Box 8: Risks of Increasing Child Labour

The crisis induced by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has already caused enormous geographical and social dislocation, loss of income, and disruption in the lives of migrants; and is expected to have a very negative impact on the education of their children, only compounding existing problems. In recognition of this, at the onset of the pandemic, the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children and the Joining Forces and Child Rights Coalition issued the following collective statement: 'The COVID-19 pandemic is a child rights crisis in Asia. Due to school closures across the region, tens of millions of children have been forced into potentially unsafe home environments for weeks or months on end. We have received extremely worrying reports from several countries that domestic violence is on the rise. Governments of ASEAN and SAARC must put children's well-being at the centre of the pandemic response. Child protection services must be designated as essential and be given adequate resources to respond to reports of abuse'.<sup>42</sup>

A particular concern was that prolonged closure of rural schools could result in large numbers of children dropping out of the system and becoming child labourers (Nortadujin, 2020a). In early May 2020, the International Labour Organization and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) warned that the COVID-19 outbreak could create the first increase in child labour in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations region in more than 20 years unless urgent action were taken. This concern was particularly widespread amongst educationists and civil society groups engaged in protecting child rights (UNICEF, 2020).

Integrating child labour concerns across broader policies for education, social protection, justice, labour markets, and international human and labour rights makes a critical difference. According to a UNICEF brief, COVID-19 could lead to a rise in poverty and in child labour as a result, as households use every available means to survive (UNICEF, 2020). Some studies show that a one percentage point rise in poverty leads to at least a 0.7% increase in child labour in certain countries (Idris, 2020). This again underscores the importance of providing social protection to the most vulnerable in times of crisis (The Human Capital and Education for Asian Development Foundation, 2020).

Source: Authors.

## 2.5. Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls

Female migrant workers not only face the same problems that male workers face, but are also subjected to gender-based discrimination. Migrant women and girls are also often subject to violence and exploitation at all stages of the migration cycle. This includes physical, sexual, or psychological violence both during transit (e.g. while travelling or in refugee camps) and at the final destination (e.g. by an employer).

Achieving SDG 5, which calls for gender equality and empowering all women and girls, should involve protecting the rights of migrant women, including domestic workers and combating all forms of trafficking of women and girls (Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, 2018).

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<sup>42</sup> Statements by Amihan V. Abueva, Regional Executive Director, Child Rights Coalition Asia.

Migration-relevant targets include Target 5.5: ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.

### **Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic**

Women account for nearly half of the intra-ASEAN migrant working-age population (UN Women, 2017), and form a substantial proportion of the workforce in sectors such as agriculture, personal care and healthcare, garbage collection, and cleaning services where employment conditions are poor.<sup>43</sup> Prior to the pandemic, undocumented women workers accounted for almost one-third of intraregional migrants. At least 30% of women migrant workers in Malaysia and Thailand are girls aged 15–24 (UN Women, 2017; Piper, 2011).

Although migration brings many socioeconomic benefits and some freedom from social norms that women normally experience in their home countries, women migrant workers confront restrictive social norms and laws, gender and racial discrimination, and gender-specific vulnerabilities in their host countries as well, limiting their opportunities for personal growth and access to benefits. Many migrant women are also employed in highly feminised sectors such as healthcare, domestic work, entertainment, manufacturing, and textiles in destination countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand (Piper, 2011). Thus, women migrant workers are vulnerable not just because of their youth, which prevents them from being vocal about their rights because of constraints imposed by regressive cultural norms, but also because of the type of work in which they are engaged (e.g. domestic work, home-based health care, entertainment, and services) and a lack of adequate protection when they face challenges.<sup>44</sup>

The nature of their employment, inability to work remotely, limited access to private transportation, physical proximity with co-workers and customers, and lack of adequate protective equipment and hygiene options make some of these 'women migrant-centric' occupations particularly risky. Many women workers who lacked decent working conditions before the COVID-19 crisis are now at high risk of getting sick because of a lack of access to health care, job loss, or substantial decreases in income (as employers tend to cut wages citing the pandemic). They also often lack safety and privacy, and face specific privacy concerns such as accommodation arrangements for live-in domestic workers.<sup>45</sup> At the same time they have limited access to social protection, as employment arrangements rarely follow prescribed standards (Guadagno, 2020). Several reports highlighted acts of overt and covert deception, coercion, and exploitation experienced by

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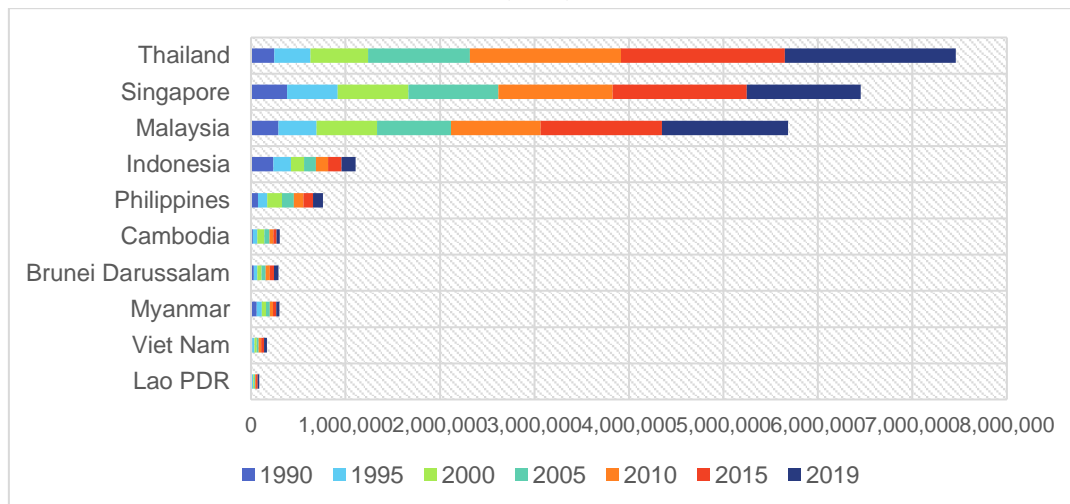
<sup>43</sup>ASEAN countries with ageing populations or high women's labour force participation (e.g. Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand) have higher demand for domestic work and care for children and the elderly. Although more women are participating in the labour force, social gender norms still dictate that women care for the household, both in domestic work and caregiving. This presumption leads to a higher demand for migrant women, creating a 'global care chain' consisting of women migrant workers.

<sup>44</sup> Despite skilled female migrants being the fastest growing category of migrants, little attention has been paid to their experiences, particularly those working in the personal care and health care sectors.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Article 2: legal guarantees and penalties for violation. GR. No. 26, para. 17: lack of privacy and hygiene in working and living conditions, especially related to health.

women migrant workers (e.g. forced sex, noncompliance with contract provisions, extended work hours, and lack of social distancing) (ILO, 2020n).

**Figure 3.6: Association of Southeast Asian Nations Women Migrants at Mid-Year**  
(‘000)



Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2017), *Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2017 Revision* [Data Set]. New York, NY: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates17.asp> (accessed 12 February 2021).

COVID-19 has exposed the influence of social norms on women's migration and decisions to take up certain kinds of work (Fleury, 2016).<sup>46</sup> Several studies have shown that many migrant women, often accompanying their spouses, start off as temporary workers before moving to seasonal or circular (during off-farm months) employment, quasi-permanent jobs, then 'better' or more socially valued types of employment (Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau, 2017; ASEAN, 2012). For example, women migrants are often employed in domestic work either because they accompany their spouses to a host country and then seek local employment that is largely undocumented (and hence lack benefits and protection), or because they have moved from other jobs such as entertainment seeking 'better', or more socially valued types of work; this is reflected in lower pay and fewer labour regulations compared with other sectors (Fleury, 2016). For example, several ASEAN countries do not offer adequate protection for domestic workers within national labour laws. Some countries (e.g. Malaysia and Singapore) may include protections in national labour laws but invest little or no resources in enforcement. Enforcing the rights of domestic workers is particularly difficult since many live in their employer's home, away from public view (UN Women, 2017; 2020a; O'Neil et al., 2016). Gender-based discrimination of women migrant workers and structural inequalities were

<sup>46</sup>Women are more likely to make migration decisions based on their family rather than individually. On the other hand, single mothers, widows, or divorcees who experience discrimination at home may use migration to escape social stigma. Domestic workers in the latter category reportedly confronted more workplace abuses during the pandemic and curfew period as they had little incentive or option to return home, leaving them at the mercy of their employers (Statement by Indonesian Migrant Workers Union, 24 May 2020).

widely seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has been especially challenging for female migrant workers, who have had to face gender barriers (e.g. access to health, privacy, and childcare facilities) on top of other general impacts and discrimination in terms of language, race, and cultural barriers (Fleury, 2016). With economic activity at a halt during the pandemic, employers across ASEAN initially laid off women workers in the informal sector in large numbers (around 33% of women workers between April and June 2020), resulting in a dramatic decline in their capacity to earn a living (ILO, 2020n; UN, 2020a; Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau, 2017).<sup>47</sup> Secondly, rural women are more likely to migrate across borders if social networks are in place or if recruitment agencies can facilitate the process. With social networks virtually broken during the early days of the pandemic and lockdown, gender-based risks reportedly increased in the case of undocumented women workers (UN Women, 2020c; Peterman et al., 2020).

Between March and June 2020, there was no shortage of news reporting on migrant workers on the road, with the media describing them as the mass intraregional migrant worker exodus. Many migrant workers traveled on foot or different road transport facilities to reach the border. However, women migrant workers were invisible in these discussions, either because many stayed with their employers and did not return, or because their trauma is even less obvious than that of other categories of workers (Lavietes, 2020; United Nations Development Programme, 2020).

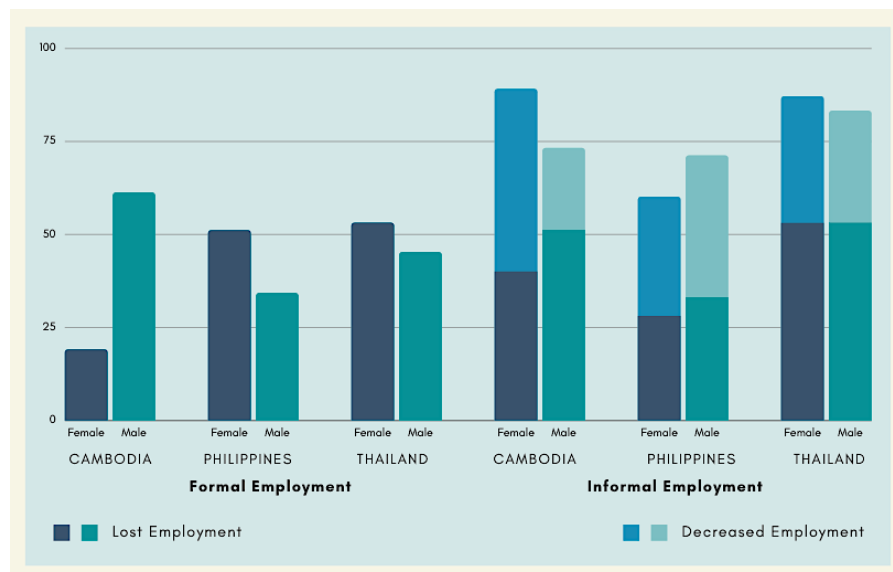
Surveys also show that fewer women than men are receiving information to prepare for COVID-19 (IOM, 2020b). For instance, in the Philippines, 79% of female respondents indicated they did not receive any information on the virus, compared to 57% of men. Assessments indicate that women experience increased barriers in accessing health care (especially amongst undocumented and sex workers who fear seeking help will lead to deportation) (UN Women, 2020c). As health care systems have been overwhelmed, the crisis has hit pregnant women and women with infants and young children particularly hard, disrupting access to health care services, medical supplies, and hygiene products.

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<sup>47</sup> This estimate was presented during the early days of the pandemic, and was later affirmed by data from the ILO (3 July 2020).

**Figure 3.7: Proportion of People Who Experienced Job Losses or Decreased Paid Work Hours since the Spread of Coronavirus Disease, by Sex (January–June 2020)**

(%)



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2020), *Policy Brief: Impact of COVID-19 on Southeast Asia*. 30 July. Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/2020-07/SG-Policy-brief-COVID-19-and-South-East-Asia-30-July-2020.pdf> (accessed 30 August 2020).

### Box 9: Impact on Trafficking

Prior to the onset of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, several regional studies concluded that migrant women domestic workers in the region are often victims of trafficking and forced labour. Most are poor, especially those who are single or widowed, and therefore particularly vulnerable to distress migration. Some factors underpinning this vulnerability are their lack of skills, awareness, income-generating opportunities, land, and assets, in addition to illiteracy and social inequalities due to nationality or ethnicity. National labour laws still do not protect many domestic workers, who are instead exposed to overly restrictive immigration laws and policies. Their isolation in private homes and a lack of information and support can lead to exploitation.<sup>48</sup> Human rights groups have largely blamed the heightened abuse and exploitation of migrant workers on outsourcing firms, who are also involved in the trafficking of persons for labour in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand (ECPAT International, 2016; Giammarinaro, 2020). Based on available reports from the International Labour Organization, other multilateral institutions, and civil society, it is evident that COVID-19 has impacted those forcefully trafficked into ASEAN in at least three ways: (i) heightened risks for those already working under exploitative conditions, (ii) increased risk of exploitation, including through child labour and sex work, and (iii) disruption of some of the affirmative actions and response efforts in progress prior to the onset of the pandemic.

<sup>48</sup> The SDGs' central reference to migration is made in Target 10.7: to facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. This appears under SDG 10: to reduce inequality within and amongst countries. Other targets that directly reference migration mention trafficking, remittances, and mobility, amongst other things.

In Thailand and the Philippines, for example, civil society voices have expressed concern for sex workers as nightclubs shut and sex work is pushed underground, making workers increasingly vulnerable to lower pay, poorer working conditions, and exploitation. In the construction and tourism sectors, with economic activities contracting, an increased supply of workers could result in lower wages and exploitation. Past experiences indicate that the growing informalisation of women migrants heightens the risk of modern slavery, further reversing previous socioeconomic progress.

Finally, the social and economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 will fragment anti-trafficking response efforts in numerous ways. Many government and civil society response organisations have been impeded, and are finding it difficult to obtain the resources needed to sustain anti-trafficking efforts (including funding and attention). On the other hand, civil society organisations that provide critical protection, advocacy, and advisory support to those trafficked (such as shelters and reintegration programmes) are likely to be adversely affected as donors turn their attention elsewhere. This could further expose migrant women to abuse and exploitation.

Source: Authors.

## **2.6. Promote Sustained, Inclusive, and Sustainable Economic Growth; Full and Productive Employment, and Decent Work for All**

The concept of ‘decent work’ in the 2030 Agenda is an important and positive move forward, steering policy debates beyond their focus on the quantitative aspects of job creation towards considering how the quality of new and existing work opportunities might also be enhanced (Võ Hải Minh, 2012; Umanath, 2020).<sup>49</sup> It features most centrally in SDG 8, which sets targets for job creation, social protection, social dialogue, and workers’ rights, including those of migrant workers, in a manner that is consistent with environmental, social, and even economic imperatives. Migrants in particular, especially irregular migrants, should be given access to social protections, and efforts should be made to ensure the transferability and portability of these benefits.

Targets relevant to migration under SDG 8 include the following:

- (i) Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation; and encourage the formalisation and growth of MSMEs, including through access to financial services (Target 8.3).
- (ii) By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value (Target 8.5).
- (iii) By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training (Target 8.6).
- (iv) Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking, prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child

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<sup>49</sup> It is important to note that, within the policy context, the relationship between migration and employment tends to be discussed in terms of how job availability influences migration movements (and vice versa). Recent mass displacements have given further weight to this focus on the numbers. In countries such as Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam, new jobs are being created to counter domestic political pressures.

labour (including the recruitment and use of child soldiers), and end all forms of child labour by 2025 (Target 8.7).

- (v) Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers and women migrants in particular, as well as those in precarious employment (Target 8.8).
- (vi) Strengthen the capacity of domestic financial institutions to encourage and expand access to banking, insurance, and financial services for all (Target 8.5).

## **Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic**

### ***Worsening Work Conditions***

Current unemployment rates and a prevailing pessimistic outlook on job creation in the short- to medium-term in ASEAN is a cause for concern.<sup>50</sup> The current phase of growing unemployment is not cyclical, and different estimates have asserted that unemployment will continue to increase over the next 5 years while many jobs lost during the pandemic may not return. The sectors that are expected to be affected most are tourism, services (including health care tourism), garments, and, to an extent, supply chains (logistics) ('ADB Says Cambodia to Lose', 2020). These are all sectors that employ a large proportion of migrant workers, who are likely to lose their jobs with no new investments or job opportunities in sight. This sudden loss of jobs for migrant workers not only has resulted in lost income, but also is likely to make competition for jobs more deeply entrenched, with significant wage cuts and social costs (Virgil and Lie, 2020; Diao and Wang, 2020).

Better recruitment and labour market practices built over the years, along with sustained advocacy and investments, have gradually eroded since the pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic, because of the high costs, long duration, and considerable complexity of navigating the existing bilateral channels for migration, many intra-ASEAN migrants were precariously employed in an irregular or quasi-regular status (Wickramarasekara, 2002). The pandemic has provided an additional opportunity for employers and agents to erode and undermine labour market practices deliberately (Satrusayang, 2020). Migrant workers who returned to work in June 2020 reported not only wage cuts (at times more cuts than those imposed on domestic workers), but also being asked to work more hours (against employment norms) to compensate for the losses incurred in April–May, without additional payment (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). Migrant workers in Thailand and Malaysia have reported that this situation had already resulted in wage cuts in June–July 2020 (ILO, 2020d). This situation was reportedly prevalent in export-dependent industries (e.g. textiles) where merchants could not execute pending orders (because of cancellations or delayed processing of documentation) and insisted on suspending minimum wages and certain work-related benefits, such as free meals (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2020c; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). According to

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In ASEAN, more young people than older people are unemployed, with five young people per one adult out of work, on average. Young people, moreover, are vulnerable to losing their jobs in volatile, short-cycle industries. The high proportion of young, unemployed workers creates disturbing problems for society, such as increased crime, increased numbers of drug addicts, and the cost to the state of dealing with these problems.

workers, such measures were subtly imposed on them, such as through the threat of massive layoffs, to avoid legal action (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2020b). The ILO and UN Women have reported more such suffering amongst domestic workers and health care providers. In a related blog post, based on information received from different network members, the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre argued that migrant workers in supply chains faced further risks from inadequate and crowded living conditions, harsh virus containment measures, and discrimination. The situation was reportedly more dire in the garment, food, and beverage sectors, which employ proportionally more women (2020b).

#### **Box 10: Irregular Workers**

Irregular labour migration has emerged as a major issue affecting the management of intra-Association of Southeast Asian Nations migration, and more so during times of economic or political crises. Many workers become irregular in their host countries because they have overstayed their visas. Typical examples of irregular migrant workers are those who overstay their tourist visas and engage in work, students engaged in employment, trainees overstaying their visas, regular migrants continuing beyond the contract period, regular migrants running away from their designated employers before the expiry of their contracts, and persons trafficked into the sex industry. The seriousness of this problem led the Governments of Malaysia and Thailand to revise their visa policies several times since the 1990s. At present, no verifiable data are available on the regular versus irregular migration of workers. However, anecdotal data and estimates indicate that close to one-third of migrant workers could be treated as 'irregular' (Kassim and Zin, 2011). The irregular situation of such migrants, who comprise 30%–40% of all migrants in the region, puts them at the mercy of unscrupulous agents, employers, and officials and weakens their ability to seek redress (Orbeta and Gonzales, 2013).

Source: Authors.

Immigration status worsens the sufferings of migrant workers. Given the rise of outsourcing and off-shoring approaches, migrant workers across ASEAN often work as part of a complicated system of subcontracting and intermediaries, which hurts their rights as workers as well as the progress of the 'decent work' agenda. Recruitment agencies, who are more active in construction and domestic work, did not turn up to offer advice, information, or travel support to workers when the pandemic unfolded in March–April 2020 (ILO, 2018b). Despite several governments issuing statements on the automatic extension of work visas or arranging transport to return to border towns, the information networks on which workers rely failed to function, aggravating anxieties and concerns (Kuentak, 2020; Lindsey and Mann, 2020; Rajah and Yihan, 2020). On the other hand, considering the high level of bureaucracy and 'service fees' often demanded when making use of 'official' channels for labourers to work in another country, seeking employment via social networks might seem like a rational choice from a migrant's perspective. However, during the pandemic such arrangements seem to have partly made workers more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Orbeta and Gonzales, 2013).

The pandemic provided an additional opportunity for employers and outsource agencies to modify existing employment arrangements with irregular workers with less pay and fewer benefits, if any, using the threat of deportation in the case of resistance (Reich, 2020; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015). There were unverified reports of unscrupulous manpower agencies engaging in coercive practices, including forced isolation, surveillance, withholding of payments, and threats of violence and of denunciation to authorities. In many cases, especially in the domestic and entertainment sectors, recruiters or employers reportedly withheld workers' identification documents and passports for fear of losing them (The Interpreter, 2020). The retention or confiscation of workers' identity documents typically affects international migrants, but can also involve those that do not cross international borders. This can restrict workers' freedom of movement, and be used as a means to bind them to a particular job or employer, forcing them to do work that they may not have originally consented to for fear of losing their documents or jobs permanently, and consequently being deported to their country of origin (TF-AMW, 2020; 2018).

Labour agents thrived even during the pandemic, but have neglected to prioritise migrant workers' survival needs. In Indonesia in May–June, labour brokers reportedly deceived workers about the characteristics and terms of their potential employment, charging them fees of \$600–\$1,200 to secure them employment (US State Department, 2014). The Indonesian Migrant Workers Union asserted that recruitment agencies usually work through individual brokers who often operate in rural areas and lure people by offering well-paid jobs. In such cases, recruitment agencies' abusive practices are generally hidden under the surface, and the agencies may claim that they are not accountable for local brokers' noncompliance with agreements made with the workers. Such abuses were rampant as news of workers returning and the revival of economic activities surfaced in May 2020, highlighting the demand for labour. Fearing demands from workers, by early April most brokers' phones were either 'switched off' or busy.<sup>51</sup>

The work of labour institutions during the early phase of the crisis exposed serious limitations in labour governance (ILO, 2020m). As curfew measures were relaxed in mid-June, stranded migrant workers prepared to return to their home countries, whose economies were already fragile and could not absorb additional labour. The Indonesian Migrant Workers Union reported that labour institutions were completely unprepared and seriously under-resourced to help returning workers reintegrate, and those who remained in their host countries to seek work received little information on available opportunities. There was no recognition that helping returning migrants reintegrate could reduce socioeconomic tensions in their home countries, where some communities fear the transport of virus by returning workers. In addition, analysts have also noted that 'there was no scheme to reintegrate migrants so that returnees are not forced into accepting wage-cuts or efforts to re-migrate through illegal means' (Walden and Wijaya,

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<sup>51</sup> In an interview in early September, Dr Dominggus Li in Indonesia confirmed that labour agents were still 'hiding', fearing demands for lost wages by workers sent to work overseas. Dr Dominggus Elcid Li is the Executive Director of the Institute of Resource Governance and Social Change (2013 to present), an Indonesian think tank based in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia.

2020; Chew, 2020; 'Region's Migrants Struggle', 2020). Poor or dysfunctional labour institutions in both sending and receiving countries impacted the capacity of labourers to express their grievances and undermined the strength and voices of labourers in every possible arena (ATUC, 2016b). According to the International Trade Union Conference's statement, immigrant workers entering through brokers faced extremely harsh conditions during April–June and later received lower wages than promised (Ang, 2020; Medina, 2020).

Even migrants who follow regular programmes may not find the protection of their guaranteed, since certain destinations such as Singapore group them into different categories: high-skilled labour is actively catered for and such workers may gain the right to abode, while migrants in low-skilled jobs can only get temporary contracts, and domestic workers are completely excluded from labour laws, since their occupation is not recognised as actual work (Kaur-Gill, 2020).

The private sector has a significant responsibility in progressing SDG 8. If the targets under this goal are to be achieved, the private sector must fundamentally change the way it operates. A move away from a model built upon maximising profit through the exploitation of labour to one built upon rights-based principles and approaches, as well as adherence to the ILO conventions will be key.<sup>52</sup>

Private sector involvement in humanitarian and health crises is not a new phenomenon. For example, in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, several corporate groups provided financial aid to relief organisations and affected populations. Indeed, the private sector has almost always been willing to provide in-kind and cash donations in times of crisis. However, the impact of COVID-19 is on a much larger scale than previous outbreaks as it has seriously impacted every aspect of life and livelihoods. It is not geographically isolated, instead spreading across all of the AMS and beyond. The scale and reach of the disease have created a global supply chain crisis, with many AMS facing shortages of medical equipment such as surgical masks and ventilators. In this context, the private sector was expected to make efforts to manage the pandemic. While most medical companies are repurposing their factories and leveraging their comparative advantages and resources to help fill gaps in medical supply chains, others were forced to 'rethink' their plans and strategies. Regrettably, the private sector response during the crisis was not viewed favourably overall. Initially, several large corporations announced cash donations and medical supplies to governments as relief funds (CSIS, 2020; Kirschner, 2020; ILO, 2020k; TF-AMW, 2020). However, most factories and private sector operations announced the closure of activities and laid off workers without much warning, while cutting the wages of those

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<sup>52</sup> A discussion of the role played by the private health sector is outside the scope of this report. However, we note that ASEAN's private health sector is largely unregulated and was visibly absent in the initial weeks of the pandemic, leaving the provision of health services to state hospitals. By the end of April, the regional WHO office reported that the private sector was handling only one-tenth of the COVID-19 patient load, although it had two-thirds of the region's hospital beds and ventilators. This was a result of several factors, from restrictions implemented through government policy, to these hospitals 'playing it safe'. According to local media reports, private hospitals only began to provide emergency and patient care for those affected by COVID-19 in May 2020.

who continued to work (ILO, 2020k; TF-AMW, 2020).

There were also reports that the private sector in Thailand and Malaysia was not properly and timely distributing relief funds provided by the government or local charities meant for migrant workers, for example, by disallowing entry or timely distribution at construction sites or worker dormitories. There were also reports of pilferage and non-distribution (Uy, 2020). It is clear that, given their fragile immigration status, workers receive neither fair compensation for their efforts and productivity, nor relief in times of crisis to which they are entitled. Consequently, self-reporting and self-assessment of social responsibility by the private sector must end and be replaced by mandatory and transparent agency-by-agency reporting. The current model of global and regional labour supply chains is based on low wages and insecure – often unsafe – work. The challenge facing governments and civil society is how to push the private sector to do more to promote social and fiscal accountability and transparency in times of crisis.

Regular dialogue amongst stakeholders while undertaking relief efforts is essential to improve quality of outcomes (ILO, 2020d).<sup>53</sup> Between April and October 2020, AMS made several statements indicating the need for national- and regional-level dialogue and action (ASEAN, 2020e; 2020h; 2020i; 2020m). However, no multi-stakeholder social dialogue was held between the ASEAN governments and civil society groups; instead, governments issued ‘orders and instructions’ to be complied with. The absence of a multi-stakeholder platform during the early stages of the pandemic deprived the public of a better understanding of the evolving situation, restricted the exchange of information, and prevented the building of responsive networks to support migrant workers in the region.<sup>54</sup> Some countries with reasonably good public health systems (e.g. Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand) should have responded to the crisis more effectively, but poorly designed crisis-redressal mechanisms and a lack of monitoring resulted in weak targeting and the circulation of misinformation, leading to panic buying and workers hurriedly traveling out of their work areas, amongst other things (Migrant Forum in Asia [MFA], 2020c).<sup>55</sup> Regional and local CSOs asserted that the absence of a clear crisis monitoring and stakeholder dialogue platform left governments ignorant as to what was happening on the ground, and governments continuing to treat the pandemic as a mere ‘law and order’ issue also did not help provide any good solutions (Migrante International, 2020). Better communication with civil society and local communities would have mitigated the forcible displacement of workers within a short timespan and non-collection of wages for work performed, while reducing deaths and the suffering of workers (MFA, 2020b; 2020c; World Council of Churches, 2020). On a positive note, prior to the pandemic, the ILO’s work through the Triangle Program for ASEAN established a platform known as the ASEAN

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<sup>53</sup> It is important to note that, of the four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda, social dialogue is the only one not explicitly recognised amongst the targets and indicators of SDG 8. Since the four pillars are equally important and mutually reinforcing, this omission is a notable oversight. with regard not only to SDG 8 but also to other goals, including ending poverty (SDG 1), advancing gender equality (SDG 5), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), and building more just and inclusive societies (SDG 16).

<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, ASEAN countries convened a couple of virtual gatherings to review the situation and issued solidarity statements.

<sup>55</sup> See Migrant Forum in Asia (2020c) for instances of ‘wage theft’ during the pandemic, based on anecdotal evidence.

Migrant Labour Forum, which meets annually to review progress on the implementation of compliance with international labour standards and treaties.<sup>56</sup> During the pandemic, such a forum can play valuable role in encouraging stakeholder engagement. One can only hope that going forward such platforms and efforts will offer a space to develop and strengthen dialogue amongst governments, the private sector, and civil society for a better future for migrant workers.

In sum, to achieve the targets under SDG 8, comprehensive national employment policy frameworks along with functioning labour institutions are needed to ensure that standards of employment of regional migrants in ASEAN match global requirements. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the poor progress made in policymaking and strengthening labour institutions in the region to support the provision of ‘decent work’ for migrant workers. Despite numerous efforts to engage in tripartite consultations including governments and civil society partners (e.g. employers and workers’ representatives), strong and functioning labour market policies and institutions have not yet emerged in any meaningful way. Arbitrary wage cuts, extended work hours, poor benefits, and a lack of social protection programmes for migrant workers remain the norm.

This calls attention to the fact that workers in general and migrant workers more specifically have not emerged in the region as a powerful enough lobby to have their voices heard and demands fulfilled by those in government. Most AMS, with some exceptions, follow economic and social policies heavily skewed in favour of businesses and investors, often to the detriment of employees. For just and humane policies on migrant workers to be implemented with sincerity, international conventions alone may not be enough and in the long term, change will have to come from within ASEAN by assigning workers their rightful place as important contributors to economies and nation building.

## **2.7. Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduce Inequality within and amongst Countries**

SDG 10 intends to tackle inequality both within and amongst countries with respect to income inequality; social, political, and economic exclusion; discrimination; inequalities of opportunity and outcome; and reform of global governance.

With regard to migrant workers, SDG 10 wants governments to facilitate the orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. Specifically, SDG 10.c aims to reduce the transaction costs of migrant remittances to less than 3% and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5% by 2030.

The targets set by SDG 10 also emphasise human rights, and operate as a lever to combat ‘horizontal’ inequality and the exclusion of particular groups, including women and racial

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<sup>56</sup> The annual ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour hosted by the ILO regional office is an open platform for the review, discussion, and exchange of good practices and ideas amongst governments, workers’ and employers’ organizations, and civil society stakeholders on key issues facing women and men migrant workers in Southeast Asia; and to develop recommendations to advance the implementation of the principles of the 2007 ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers.

or ethnic minorities, as well as overall levels of economic inequality (i.e. disparities of income and wealth). For example, Target 10.1 calls for progressively achieving and sustaining income growth for the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average by 2030. SDG 10.2 aims to empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status.

In early 2020, when COVID-19 hit ASEAN, many AMS were not on track to achieve the 17 SDGs by 2030, but were lagging behind in most of them (UNESCAP, 2020a). The 2020 UNESCAP Report on this subject observed that, although the region has done well in terms of economic growth over the last few decades (especially since 2010), it has neglected human development issues such as persistent high levels of inequality in select regions and amongst social groups, continued lack of access to social safety nets and welfare systems amongst poorer groups, low levels of social protection, and the continued growth of a large informal sector, as well as weak institutions of justice and ecological sustainability.

The preparation of medium- and long-term responses to the COVID-19 crisis provides AMS with an opportunity to rethink their priorities and to centre the welfare of poorer sections of the society and ordinary people, both domestic workers and migrants, in developmental policies. This will not only enable a speedy recovery by mobilising the contributions of all citizens, but will also ensure the sustainability of social safety nets and investments in the long term.

Migration-relevant targets under SDG 10 include the following:

- (i) By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status (Target 10.2).
- (ii) Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices; and promoting appropriate legislation, policies, and action in this regard (Target 10.3).
- (iii) Facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies (Target 10.7).
- (iv) By 2030, reduce the transaction costs of migrant remittances to less than 3%, and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5% (Target 10.c).

### **Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic**

In the AMS, as in other regions, wide wage and income disparities and wealth inequality, in addition to poor living conditions, amongst sections of the population are the single major reason why many poorer and less educated sections migrate for employment, both within and outside the country.<sup>57</sup> Typically, many leave their homes because of a lack of sufficient fertile pastures, arable land, food, or water, as well as a surplus household labour force and lack of local employment opportunities and other fundamental

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<sup>57</sup> In 1960, the income of the richest fifth of the world's population was, on average, 30 times higher than that of the poorest fifth. In 2015, it was 90 times higher.

requirements (Singapore Ministry of Manpower, 2020). The poorest often lack the means to escape war and poverty or obtain support from community networks. Once in a new country, migrants prefer to engage in a job right away and undergo a difficult and often conflict-driven process in the host community (Hein et al., 2015).

The slow economic progress across the AMS has also given rise to distorted social progress. Serious development problems, including poverty, inequality, and unemployment, lingered even in economically advanced Singapore (Võ Hải Minh, 2012). The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated these problems, which were prominently exposed in the sufferings of migrant workers.

ASEAN's 2001 Hanoi Declaration on Narrowing Development Gap for Closer Economic Integration acknowledged the uneven distribution of income and wealth both within the AMS and across the region, and resolved to promote effective measures to address these growing challenges (ASEAN, 2012). As of 2019, despite economic progress made by ASEAN since the 1990s, inequalities in income and wealth were severe and had been widening in both worker-sending and -receiving countries (see Table 3.1). Economic prosperity within the region is significantly uneven, and poverty remains an enduring challenge both within and amongst ASEAN countries.

However, regional economic gains have fallen short of erasing significant differences amongst the AMS. The AMS span a wide spectrum of income levels, from Singapore's GDP per capita of \$57,714 (as of 2018) to Cambodia's \$1,298. In recent years, lower-income states have made important gains. With respect to financial inclusion, the 2017 edition of the World Bank's Global Findex showed that, while 98% of adults in Singapore and 85% in Malaysia had a bank account, just 22% of Cambodian adults and 26% of Myanmar adults did (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018).

Today, roughly two-thirds of the people in the region live in economically poor countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. Women, indigenous peoples, ethnic groups, and rural communities in particular have not benefitted to the same extent from the region's macroeconomic gains or progress of their respective countries (ASEANStats, 2018). Large wage differentials also exist between AMS, with workers in Myanmar earning an average of \$91 per month and those in Singapore earning \$2,859 (Harkins and Lindgren, 2018). Given the wage cuts imposed after the pandemic, these gaps are set to increase rather than decline, which will negatively impact progress towards the targets under this SDG.

Available data indicate that, between 1990 and 2019, intra-ASEAN migration of workers, of whom 85% are either unskilled or low-skilled, increased many times over. Those migrating from one part of ASEAN to another obviously seek better terms of employment and wages.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> In general, the labour-receiving nations are Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand; and the labour-sending nations are Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. Thailand is also a labour-sending nation, with people traveling to work in the Middle East, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan.

**Table 3.1: Minimum Wages in Association of Southeast Asian Nations  
Member Countries**

Country	Last	Previous	Reference	Unit
<i>Cambodia</i>	190	182	January 2020	\$/month
<i>Indonesia</i>	3.94	3.6	January 2019	Rp million/month
<i>Malaysia</i>	1200	1100	February 2020	RM/month
<i>Myanmar</i>	4800	3600	December 2018	MK/day
<i>Philippines</i>	537	537	December 2019	₱/day
<i>Thailand</i>	331	325	December 2019	B/day

Source: Trading Economics (2020), Minimum Wages – Asia [Data Set].

<https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/minimum-wages?continent=asia> (accessed 1 September 2020).

The Asian Development Bank Institute’s August 2020 briefing note on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic observed that ‘the overall economic conditions of the host countries and their sectoral affiliations determine the impact, with severe losses of migrant jobs reported in the retail trade, manufacturing, hospitality and recreation, and accommodation and food service sectors. Workers have been laid off and, in many cases, stranded in host economies as strict quarantines have been imposed, borders closed, and air travel halted. Worse still, departures of new migrant workers from Asia have been put off until further notice’ (Takenaka et al., 2020a).

In the long term, income gaps between countries are the most important driver of migration pressures, and the present crisis is not expected to lower the income gap sufficiently to reduce this. Instead, the crisis is likely to increase income inequality between low- and high-skilled workers (Ratha et al., 2020). Similarly, in the case of migrant workers within a country, the COVID-19 outbreak is likely to result in dire conditions, with many losing their (mostly informal) jobs and unable to return home because of disruptions to public transport services and movement restrictions. Lockdowns, travel bans, and social distancing measures in response to the crisis have disproportionately affected internal migrant workers, who have found themselves stranded, unable to return to either their places of work or their communities of origin. Without adequate access to housing, basic water and sanitation, health facilities, or social safety nets to help them survive such restrictions, these migrants have become even more vulnerable to both ill health and severe poverty.

Unless governments include internal migrants in programmes to provide health services, cash transfers, and other social programmes, the net result may be increased inequality between the rich and poor within AMS.

### Box 11: Migration Policies

While Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states have responded to the problems faced by migrant workers as part of their policy initiatives aimed at the larger economic and social crisis wrought by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, there is a need to maintain a holistic and longer-term perspective on migration governance. The current crisis can be an opportunity for governments to reassess their long-term migration governance and be better prepared for future crises (Giammarinaro and Palumbo, 2020).

In this context it is relevant to note that the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 10.7.2 – which calls on countries to facilitate the orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies – is the target most explicitly and directly related to international migration amongst all the targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The indicator aims to describe the state of national migration policies and how such policies change over time.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs have developed a methodology to measure this indicator based on an assessment of six policy domains: migrants' rights, institutional capacity, regional and international cooperation, migrants' socioeconomic well-being, mobility dimensions of crises, and safe and orderly migration (Migration Data Portal, 2020).

The Migration Governance Framework developed is being applied in a growing number of volunteering countries to help them develop baseline assessments and conduct future reviews of their work in the context of the SDGs. This is a gap analysis tool, not meant for ranking countries on their migration policies, but rather aiming to offer insights on policy levers that countries can action to strengthen their migration governance, and identify best practices for future programming.

Based on the available data, an analysis of SDG Indicator 10.7.2 indicates that more than half of all ASEAN governments (54%) report having a wide range of policies to facilitate the orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people (Migration Data Portal, 2020). Additionally, 91% of governments indicate that they have an inter-ministerial coordination mechanism on migration in place, and 90% have bilateral agreements on migration with other countries.

Of the ASEAN Member States, only Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand are participating in the monitoring process, and all of them meet or fully meet the different criteria for achieving the target set by SDG Indicator 10.7.2 (United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs and IOM, 2019).

As is the case with most other countries, the analysis shows that these ASEAN members have room for improvement as policies are often not fully aligned with other important relevant policy domains such as sustainable development, disaster management, and climate change mitigation and adaptation (IOM, 2019).

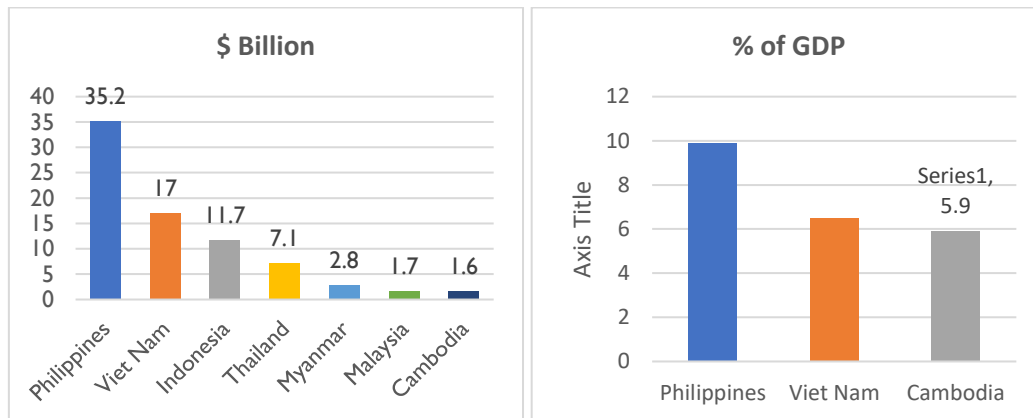
Source: Authors.

### Impact of the Coronavirus Disease on Remittances

Remittances form a substantial proportion of many nations' GDP in the region, and have historically been an important tool to help people in developing countries overcome poverty. For example, in 2018 the Philippines, as one of the world's largest recipients of remittances, received roughly 12%–16% of its GDP through this channel (ASEAN, 2020c; Bismonte, 2020); and remittances formed about 12% of Myanmar's GDP. These flows

have become the single most important source of foreign exchange to the economy (Figure 3.8) and a significant source of income for recipient families. Migrant remittances transferred to families in home countries directly become part of household budgets that can be spent on basic needs, serve as extra funds for increased consumption of durable and nondurable goods, or be used for savings. Remittances may also serve as capital for starting businesses. Thus, such cash flows from overseas raise the standard of living of recipient families (Takenaka et al., 2020b).

**Figure 3.8: Top Remittance Recipients in the East Asia and Pacific Region (2019)**



GDP = gross domestic product.

Source: Ratha, D.K., S. De, E.J. Kim, S. Plaza, G.K. Seshan and N.D. Yameogo (2020), 'COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens', *Migration and Development Brief*, No. 32. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/989721587512418006/COVID-19-Crisis-Through-a-Migration-Lens> (accessed 20 August 2020).

Although exact figures might be unknown for some time, it is clear that COVID-19 has already caused many migrant workers to lose their jobs and income while abroad and forced them to use any savings they may have had to survive for a period of time. This situation has, in turn, led to an inevitable decrease in remittances, which will negatively affect families and communities in sending countries acutely (Dang, 2020; Yayboke, 2020; ILO, 2020i).

The World Bank projects that remittance flows will decline across all regions as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, as follows: Europe and Central Asia (-27.5%); Sub-Saharan Africa (-23.1%), South Asia (-22.1%), the Middle East and North Africa (-19.6%), Latin America and the Caribbean (-19.3%), and East Asia and the Pacific (-13%) (Ratha et al., 2020). This decline comes after remittances to low-to-middle-income countries reached a record \$554 billion in 2019, overtaking foreign direct investments. In 2019, in current US dollars, the top five remittance-recipient countries were India (\$83.1 billion), China (\$68.4 billion), Mexico (\$38.5 billion), the Philippines (\$35.2 billion), and the Arab Republic of Egypt (\$26.8 billion) (Ratha et al., 2020). This drop in remittances could have a very significant impact on ASEAN's labour-sending nations. For example, in the case of the Philippines a conservative estimate forecasts that the COVID-19 pandemic will result in a drop of around \$10 billion (around 35 % below 2019 levels) in 2020, an enormous blow to the country's remittance-dependent economy (Moritsugu, 2020).

**Table 3.2: Impact on Global Remittance Inflows (Worst-Case Scenario)**

<i>Remittance Recipients</i>	<i>Amount (\$ million)</i>	<i>% of Baseline</i>
<i>Global</i>	–108,617	–18.3
<i>Asia</i>	–54,255	–19.8
<i>Australia and New Zealand</i>	–299	–10.8
<i>Central Asia</i>	–3,366	–23.8
<i>East Asia (excluding China and Japan)</i>	–1,660	–16.2
<i>Japan</i>	–497	–13.3
<i>China</i>	–7,886	–12.6
<i>Southeast Asia</i>	–11,660	–18.6
<i>South Asia</i>	–28,621	–24.7
<i>Pacific</i>	–267	–13.2
<i>United States</i>	–482	–7.4
<i>European Union + United Kingdom</i>	–17,889	–14.4

Note: Data presented for East Asia do not include those for China and Japan.

Source: Asian Development Bank estimates.

Another ADB analysis assuming a worst-case scenario projected that ASEAN (including Asia and the Pacific) economies will likely take about a year to get their domestic outbreaks under control and bring economic activities back to normal; and, in parallel, estimated that remittances in Southeast Asia would fall by around \$11.7 billion, an 18.6% decline from 2018 (Takenaka et al., 2020b).

An analysis by the IFPRI's Myanmar Agriculture Policy Support Activity showed a major short-term contraction of remittances of 22%–27% into the country during April–May 2020, compared to the same period in 2019 (Diao and Wang, 2020). The report highlighted that the lockdown and subsequent restrictive measures have had direct and indirect negative impacts on the flow of goods and services, resulting in a decline of 41% in Myanmar's GDP during the 2-week lockdown in April 2020; this decline reportedly continued into May–June. The situation is no different in other countries in the region. For example, in the case of Indonesia, remittances from overseas workers declined by 20% by June 2020, and an IFPRI report suggested that national poverty would increase by 13 percentage points by the end of 2020 (Pradesha et al., 2020; Villafuerte and Takenaka, 2020). A panel discussion on migrant workers, organised by the IFPRI in collaboration with the FAO and others, asserted that this decline in remittances is partly linked to travel bans, lockdowns, and social-distancing rules, which reduce migrants' incomes or lead to unemployment (Paitoonpong and Chalamwong, 2012).

In addition, since the start of the lockdown, as commercial banks and money-transfer offices were not functioning at full scale, marooned migrants were unable either to send money overseas to their families or to receive cash from home to survive. This had a very negative impact on households, many of whom are reeling from job losses and economic hardship and need the money more than ever (Chalamwong, 2011).

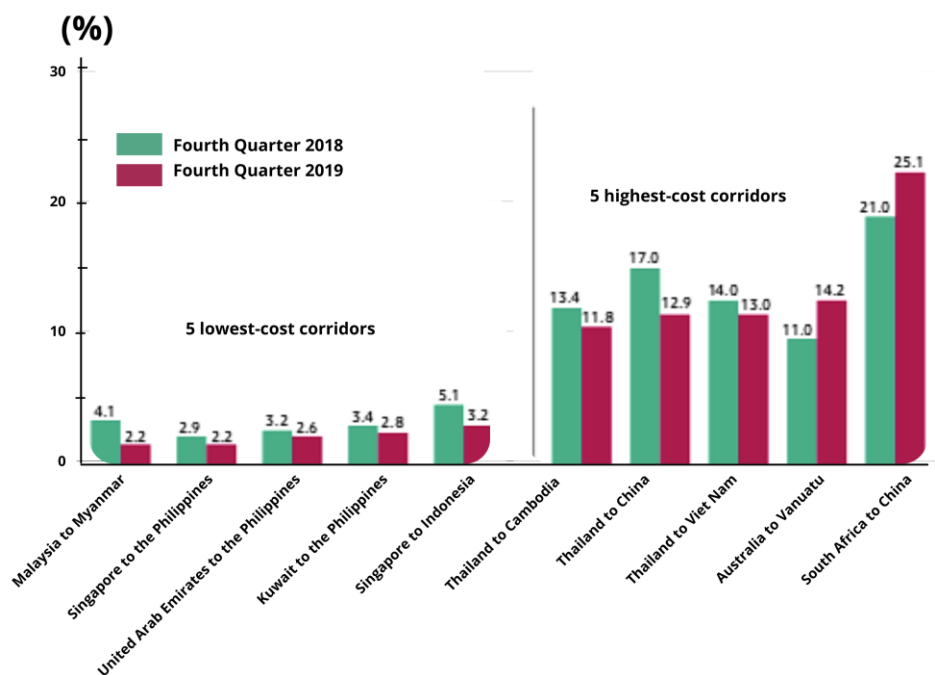
### ***Transaction Cost of Remittances***

Reducing the cost of remitting funds by migrant workers is an important target under SDG 10. The objective of SDG 10.c is to help bring remittances into the formal economy, enhance financial inclusion, and increase the net income of receiving households. Globally, sending remittances costs 6.75% of the amount sent, on average (World Bank, 2020d). SDG 10 aims to reduce this global average to 3% by 2030 and the transaction costs of between any two corridors to less than 5%. Cutting prices by 5 percentage points is expected to result in savings of up to \$16 billion.

The cost of remittance services can vary substantially by region and transfer method. According to a World Bank study, the average cost of transferring \$200 to a developing country remained at 7% in Q1 2019, about the same as in previous quarters (Ratha et al., 2020). This is more than double the SDG target of 3% to be achieved by the year 2030. Banks are the most expensive route for sending remittances, with an average cost of 10.9%, while post offices are cheaper at 7.6%, although many poorer migrant workers use informal banking systems where costs are lower (Ahmed, Mughal, and Martinez-Zarzoso, 2020). Overall, based on data from formal remittance methods it is estimated that the transaction cost is the lowest in South Asia, at 4.98%, and the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa, at 8.47% on average (Ratha et al., 2020). According to a database maintained by the World Bank, the average cost of sending \$200 in remittances to East Asia and the Pacific dropped to 7.13% in Q1 2020, compared with 7.21% in Q1 2019 (2020d). The five lowest-cost corridors in the region averaged 2.6% while the five highest-cost corridors averaged 15.4% as of Q4 2019. Money transfer costs from Thailand to neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia were amongst the highest, averaging 12.1% in Q4 2019.

Because of the closure of many brick-and-mortar services, the use of digital channels for sending money is increasing (World Bank, 2020d). However, many migrant workers and their families back home who lack access to proper banking services face challenges in meeting the due diligence requirements of digital channels. In the short term, services that remain available are generally less expensive than those preceding the COVID-19 measures. Some remittance service providers have removed their fees and have been using social media to raise awareness of digital payment instruments. According to the World Bank study, it is important for remittance service providers and authorities to work together to mitigate the effects of the crisis and encourage the adoption of digital payments, greater use of regulated channels, and wider availability of cost-efficient services (World Bank, 2020d).

Figure 3.9: Remittance Fees to the Philippines versus East Asia and the Pacific



Source: Ratha, D.K., S. De, E.J. Kim, S. Plaza, G.K. Seshan and N.D. Yameogo (2020), 'COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens', *Migration and Development Brief*, No. 32. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.  
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/989721587512418006/COVID-19-Crisis-Through-a-Migration-Lens> (accessed 20 August 2020).