

## Executive Summary

In a world of diverse learners from diverse economic backgrounds, education systems hold a unique position. They not only provide students with the skills and training to enter the workforce but also offer students from various socioeconomic backgrounds an opportunity to come together and learn from one another. Education policies should, therefore, focus on best practices in the classroom in inclusive learning systems and create a learning environment where all students, including those with physical and intellectual disabilities, have the tools to flourish.

Before the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, students with disabilities faced barriers in accessing quality education, and many were excluded from education programmes altogether. During the pandemic, enrolment of students with disabilities fell. Of the nearly 240 million students with disabilities worldwide, 40% are more likely to have never attended school, 47% were more likely to be out of primary school, 33% out of lower-secondary school, and 27% out of upper-secondary school (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2022). The numbers are staggering and must be tackled if countries are to make an equitable and inclusive post–COVID-19 recovery.

‘Disability’ may be physical and/or intellectual, but children with intellectual disabilities are the most excluded. Early intervention and education programmes have shown positive learning outcomes for students with disabilities and developmental delays and yield higher returns on funding than later years of education and training. However, in much of Asia and the Pacific, children with disabilities continue to have limited or no access to early services (UNICEF, 1995).

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members and East Asian countries face a dual challenge: (i) many countries in the region are developing and their economic growth might be unable to support increased funding for education, and (ii) many countries continue to struggle to provide equitable opportunities to all students returning from school closures. However, the region must ensure that students with disabilities, who already face several barriers to accessing quality education, are not left behind.

Taking its foundations from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), ASEAN Community Vision 2025, and the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), this report presents current practices of inclusive education in Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam from ASEAN, and in China and Mongolia.

The seven domains of inclusive education as described in UNICEF’s (2020) *Education for Every Ability* anchor the country profiles. The domains are (i) a whole-system approach; (ii) curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment; (iii) supported teachers; (iv) a learning-friendly environment; (v) effective transitions; (vi) partnerships; and (vii) data and monitoring

(UNICEF, 2020). The country profiles cover information across several domains, but information on all domains and all countries remains limited.

Nevertheless, all 10 ASEAN countries and the 2 East Asian countries aspire to create inclusive education systems for students with disabilities. The countries have committed to international and regional documents and national and sub-national frameworks, laws, and policies that promote inclusion and the moral duty to uphold all rights of persons with disabilities. Progress on meeting the commitments can be slow, but it is being made across the region.

The report shares current practices in inclusive national and local education in schools. Whilst many countries are making a great effort to include students with disabilities, they also have many gaps and lack understanding of inclusion. The report provides cross-cutting recommendations that can be implemented before and after school reopening, and a framework for action specifically for schools, ministries, and ASEAN Member States (AMSs) to implement the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Last, whilst inclusion in education is vital in providing students with disabilities with the skills needed to fully integrate into society, inclusion is a cross-cutting theme, which implies the need for collaboration and coordination between education, health, and transport, amongst others. Students with disabilities not only can help the economy grow across ASEAN but also contribute to the diversity of work locations in the public and private sectors, and foster morale, creativity, and greater social cohesion.