Newly recruited coaches celebrate the launch of the government's Graduation program in West Nusa Tenggara province on December 16, 2025.

POLICY BRIEF

Reducing Extreme Poverty and Advancing Inclusive Social Protection in ASEAN

I. Overview

ASEAN's economic transformation over the past four decades has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s alone, poverty incidence fell by more than 80 percent in Indonesia and by over 90 percent in Thailand and Malaysia. More recently, Vietnam's multidimensional poverty rate has fallen to below 1 percent, and Indonesia's national poverty rate has declined to under 9 percent. In the Philippines, the national poverty rate fell from 23.5 percent in 2015 to 15.5 percent in 2023, despite a temporary pandemic-era reversal. These achievements are remarkable by any global standard and provide a strong foundation for ASEAN's next phase of action under the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, which places inclusive development, resilience, and social protection at the center of the region's long-term agenda.

Yet extreme poverty[1] in the region remains persistent and unevenly distributed. Lower middle-income member states, including Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Cambodia continue to face elevated poverty rates. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and intensifying climate shocks have stalled or reversed hard-won gains in some contexts. Cambodia's poverty rate nearly doubled between 2015 and 2021. The Philippines, which was reclassified by the World Bank as an upper middle-income economy in July 2026, illustrates both the region's progress and its unfinished agenda: After rising during the pandemic, poverty incidence fell from 18.1 percent in 2021 to 15.5 percent in 2023. This has still left an estimated 17.54 million Filipinos below the national poverty line, with many more vulnerable to falling back into poverty. Inequality, as measured by Gini coefficients, remains stubbornly high in several economies. Across the region, women, rural households, informally-employed workers, and communities with limited access to social protection remain disproportionately exposed.

ASEAN member states have built a diverse and expanding landscape of social protection and livelihood programmes. However, structural challenges remain — particularly fragmentation across ministries and levels of government, imprecise targeting that often misses the most marginalised households, weak sequencing and coordination between programmes, and the absence of clear pathways by which beneficiaries transition from assistance to sustainable livelihoods. These are not failures of effort; they are systemic design and capacity gaps that limit the reach and durability of public investment.

One tool that can support regional efforts to address these gaps is the Graduation approach — a sequenced, multi-component intervention that addresses the barriers faced by people living in extreme poverty and enables them break out of poverty traps into sustainable livelihoods through a coordinated "big push". **Critically, Graduation does not replace cash transfers, social assistance, or livelihood programmes.** Rather, it is one tool in the broader poverty eradication and social protection toolbox with a specific focus on households in the deepest forms of poverty. Governments can deliver Graduation through different institutional models: as a stand-alone programme, by layering Graduation components onto an existing cash transfer or livelihood programme, or through a fuller convergence model that links and sequences multiple existing interventions into a coordinated package. Across these models, Graduation can help connect participants to complementary services and create a clearer pathway from assistance to sustainable livelihoods.

Pioneered by BRAC in Bangladesh in 2002, the Graduation approach is a sequenced, time-bound programme combining consumption support, productive asset transfers, and intensive, ongoing coaching. The model aims to provide short-term stability that allows households to build the capabilities and confidence needed to develop productive assets into sustainable livelihoods over time.

After more than two decades of rigorous testing spanning 40 countries, there are now more than 100 studies available on Graduation. Among them include randomised controlled trials from diverse country contexts that demonstrate consistent, transformative gains in income, consumption, assets, and resilience, durable gains lasting a decade or more. The wealth of evidence on the Graduation approach has influenced widespread adoption, including among governments in 38 countries, several of which are ASEAN member states.

About the Policy Brief

This brief reviews the state of poverty and inequality across the ASEAN region, identifies structural gaps in existing programmes, presents the evidence base for the Graduation approach, and outlines opportunities for regional coordination and learning. It is intended to support ASEAN and national policymakers in identifying concrete, actionable pathways toward more coherent and effective strategies for eradicating extreme poverty.

The brief calls for ASEAN member states and their development partners to:

- Strengthen national pathways from social protection to resilient livelihoods
- Build a regional learning agenda on integrated poverty eradication, and;
- Support country-led adaptation and evidence-building.

Member states already piloting Graduation programmes, as well as higher-income members with resources to support regional learning, have a distinct and valuable role to play. It is timely because the region is still recovering from pandemic-era reversals in poverty eradication progress, contending with intensifying climate shocks, and working to deliver on shared commitments under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community to realise the full potential of ASEAN citizens.

II. Poverty Reduction in ASEAN: Progress, Persistent Vulnerabilities, and Emerging Risks

People in extreme poverty are disproportionately rural, women, and excluded from formal systems. Households in extreme poverty tend to be physically and socially isolated and face disadvantages across multiple dimensions, making them the hardest to reach through conventional programmes. Unstable and seasonal livelihoods, weak documentation, geographic remoteness, and overlapping deprivations in health, assets, and income mean single-sector interventions rarely reach or sustain impact for this group. Women bear a disproportionate share of this burden: Across Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, women account for between 55 and 73 percent of people in rural poverty.[2] Women's labour force participation remains far lower than men's, and they are concentrated in unpaid and low-wage work. Women earn around 54 percent of the male agricultural wage in Asia. In Indonesia and Malaysia, women make up 68 and 64 percent of unpaid family workers respectively.[3] These interlocking disadvantages make people in extreme poverty among the last to benefit from broad-based growth and the most likely to be missed by social protection systems not designed with them in mind.[2]

Remarkable but uneven long-run progress. ASEAN's poverty reduction story has been substantial, but uneven across countries, population groups, and time periods. As previously discussed, early gains in Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia were among the most significant trends in the region around alleviating poverty, but more recent progress in Vietnam and the Philippines shows poverty reduction has continued across different national contexts and measurement systems. These gains reflect a combination of broad-based growth, rural development, social assistance expansion, and sustained public investment. They also underscore an important regional pattern: Progress has been real, but uneven across countries, populations, and time periods.

Persistent poverty and vulnerability in parts of the region. Despite regional progress, ASEAN's remaining poverty challenge is concentrated in specific countries, regions, and population groups, and is often difficult to assess consistently because poverty data are uneven across member states.[4] Lao PDR's national poverty rate stood at 18.3 percent in 2018, the most recent year for which data are available. As mentioned, the Philippines, while making significant strides — reducing poverty from 18.1 percent in 2021 to 15.5 percent in 2023 — still has over 17 million Filipinos living below the national poverty line.[5] Myanmar's poverty data are fragmented, but available estimates indicated a spike to over 32 percent in 2016.[3] Cambodia's most recent national poverty line figure is 17.8 percent (2019), though pandemic-era estimates suggest poverty rose sharply during 2020–2021.

National and international poverty lines are useful, but they often measure different things. For example, national poverty lines reflect country-specific definitions of basic needs; whereas international poverty lines provide a common benchmark for comparison across countries. In some cases, national poverty lines may be set at relatively low thresholds, which can understate the extent of economic hardship. Similarly, international poverty lines — such as the $3.00/day extreme poverty threshold (updated from the previous $2.15 benchmark) — may understate poverty in higher-cost ASEAN economies. These measurement differences underscore the importance of reading national statistics with care and of interpreting regional trends as indicative rather than directly comparable.

COVID-19 exposed, and in some cases reversed, hard-won gains. The pandemic exposed the fragility of livelihoods across the region, particularly for informal workers and rural households. Cambodia's poverty rate rose from 13.5 percent in 2015 to 21.5 percent in 2021.

Climate shocks continue to compound these vulnerabilities. The ASEAN region is highly vulnerable to climate-related risks. Rising sea levels and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns threaten agriculture and food security for millions of people across the region with the potential to deepen poverty and inequality. According to the Asian Development Bank, climate-related impacts could reduce GDP in Asia and the Pacific by 17% by 2070 without urgent intervention.

Inequality remains elevated despite growth. Gini coefficients highlight the persistence of income inequality across the region: the Philippines at 0.441 (2021), Singapore at 0.437 (2022), Thailand at 0.430 (2021), Malaysia at 0.404 (2022), and Indonesia at 0.379 (2024).[6,3] While Indonesia's Gini has declined in recent years, most member states for which data are available remain at or above global averages, and progress on reducing inequality has been slow or stagnant.

Corazon Gaylon, program participant in the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment Graduation pilot from 2018 to 2020, was able to diversify her income and see her children through school in Murcia, Negros Occidental, Philippines (2020).

III. Existing programmes: Progress, Fragmentation, and Gaps

A. What ASEAN Member States Are Already Doing

ASEAN member states have significantly expanded social protection coverage over the past two decades, developing a diverse and growing set of programmes. These include conditional cash transfer programmes — such as the Philippines' Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino programme (4Ps) and Indonesia's programme Keluarga Harapan (PKH) — as well as food subsidy schemes, health insurance expansions (Thailand's Universal Coverage Scheme, Indonesia's Jaminan Kesehatan Nasional), and targeted livelihood and skills programmes.

Several programmes have achieved notable scale and impact. The Philippines' 4Ps, launched in 2007, now reaches over 4 million households, linking cash transfers to education and health conditionalities. Indonesia's PKH reaches approximately 10 million beneficiary families, combining financial support with compliance requirements in health and education. Vietnam's sustained poverty reduction, from roughly 60 percent in the 1990s to below 1 percent on multidimensional measures by 2024, reflects a multi-decade commitment to rural development and social assistance. Thailand's welfare card programme has channeled targeted subsidies to lower-income households.

These national efforts are anchored in a substantial and still-active regional architecture. Member states have committed to over a dozen ASEAN-level frameworks directly relevant to social protection, livelihoods, and poverty eradication (see Annex). The foundational instrument remains the 2013 ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection, which established shared principles of rights-based, lifecycle, and adaptive social protection across the region. Its operational counterpart — the Regional Framework and Action Plan on Social Protection — set out coordinated approaches to policy development, capacity building, and monitoring, and is now transitioning into a successor plan under the newly adopted ASEAN Community Vision 2045.

On rural development and poverty specifically, the ASEAN Framework and Action Plan on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication (2021–2025) served as the region's primary coordinating instrument across this planning cycle, with the ASEAN Master Plan on Rural Development (2022–2026) operationalising its territorial and cross-sectoral dimensions and remaining fully active through the end of 2026. More recently, ASEAN has deepened commitments in adjacent areas critical to sustainable livelihoods. The ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy (2021) and the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy (2024) formally recognise care systems as foundational to both social protection and labor market participation, while the Hanoi Declaration on Strengthening Social Work (2020) elevated the social service workforce as an essential delivery mechanism. Overarching all of these is the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2045, adopted in May 2025, which elevates social protection, inclusive development, and poverty eradication as central to the region's long-term agenda, and is accompanied by an ASCC Strategic Plan 2026–2030 that will govern the next cycle of implementation.

The ambition embedded in this framework landscape is real and has grown more sophisticated over time. The challenge across these commitments is less one of intent than of implementation: translating shared goals into coordinated, well-sequenced delivery that reliably reaches households facing extreme poverty and multiple deprivations.

B. Key Gaps and Structural Fragmentation

These initiatives have achieved a great deal of political commitment and alignment across the region and have also helped contribute to notable reductions in poverty levels. However, structural gaps remain that limit the reach of people living in extreme poverty. Addressing these gaps is not a matter of starting over but of building on and leveraging what exists — strengthening coordination, sharpening targeting, and introducing clearer pathways for people living in extreme poverty to progress toward sustainable livelihoods. The moment is timely. With the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2045 signed in

May 2025 and the ACV 2045 cycle now underway, ASEAN leaders have explicitly identified poverty, widening development gaps, and gaps in social protection as defining challenges for the region. This provides an important opportunity and window to embed integrated, evidence-based approaches to eradicating extreme poverty in the region's emerging strategic plans and sectoral blueprints.

Programmes often do not reach, or are not designed around the realities of, people in extreme poverty. Livelihood development and cash transfer programmes across Asia and globally have been found to produce lower benefit-cost ratios when targeting the broader population of people in poverty than when specifically designed for people in extreme poverty. Many programmes use targeting methodologies that inadvertently exclude the most marginalised — those without land, formal employment history, or identity documents. But the challenge is not only one of targeting. Even when households in extreme poverty are correctly identified, they may be unable to participate in or benefit from standard livelihood programmes because they face multiple, binding constraints at once: food insecurity, lack of savings, unstable work, poor health, unpaid care responsibilities, limited mobility, and weak access to information, markets, or social networks.

For households struggling to meet immediate consumption needs, taking time away from low-paid daily work to attend training, build a new livelihood, or make investments whose returns arrive only later may simply not be feasible. While targeting systems have improved in recent years, inclusion and exclusion errors remain a significant challenge across the region and world.[7] The 2013 ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection affirms commitments to reaching people in the deepest forms of poverty and the most marginalised, but does not establish binding quantitative targets or verification mechanisms, leaving questions of reach to the discretion of individual member state implementation.

Fragmentation prevents households from receiving support as a coordinated package. Households living in extreme poverty rarely face a single constraint. They may need temporary consumption support to stabilise food security, productive assets or capital to start or expand a livelihood, skills and coaching to manage that livelihood, savings or financial services to build resilience, and referrals to health, education, care, or social services. These interventions are most effective when they are delivered in a deliberate sequence: stabilising basic needs first, then supporting investment in livelihoods, and continuing coaching and follow-up as households build confidence and adapt.

Many ASEAN member states already have several of these ingredients in place through cash transfer programmes, livelihood schemes, skills programmes, social services, and local development initiatives. The challenge is that they are often not delivered to the same households as a coordinated and well-sequenced package. For example, social protection (transfers, insurance, safety nets) and poverty eradication programming (livelihoods, skills, asset transfers) typically operate under separate ministries with separate budgets, beneficiary registries, and implementation timelines. This creates gaps and duplication. Households may receive one form of support but not the complementary interventions that would enable a sustained exit from extreme poverty.

Sequencing and transition plans are often absent. Cash transfer programmes can play a vital role in stabilising households and supporting child welfare. However, their impact can be amplified and more durable when using complementary interventions that help households build sustainable economic capacity over time. Examples from the global literature [8,9,10] have compared cash-only to cash plus complementary interventions and found larger and more long-lasting impacts from the latter, though evidence is fairly limited. In ASEAN, many programmes do not yet incorporate a clear theory of change for how participants move from receiving support to sustaining livelihoods independently. Deliberate sequencing – stabilising consumption first, then introducing asset transfers and coaching — and establishing clear milestones for transitioning out of intensive support can help ensure public investment endures well beyond the programme cycle. The incoming sectoral plans under ACV 2045 offer a concrete opportunity to build this sequencing logic into regional guidance for the first time.

Critically, fragmentation also occurs within each stream — both vertically, across national and subnational levels of government, and horizontally, across agencies at the same level. In Indonesia, for example, observers have noted that multi-dimensional fragmentation contributes to overlapping mandates, duplicated efforts, and inefficiencies in service delivery. This fragmentation is mirrored in the regional architecture. Social protection is coordinated through ASEAN bodies such as the Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (SOMSWD) and ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (AMMSWD); rural development and poverty eradication through ASEAN Ministers Meeting on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication (AMRDPE); the care economy through ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women (AMMW); and labor and livelihoods through the ASEAN Labour Ministers' process. Each of these bodies has its own action plans, reporting cycles, and sectoral logic, and limited formal linkages between them. The ASCC Strategic Plan 2026–2030, offers an important opportunity to strengthen coherence across these tracks while respecting their distinct mandates.

Inadequate data systems and monitoring. Gini data and national poverty statistics across ASEAN are irregular, with multiple years of missing data for Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and the Philippines.[3] Without robust targeting data and real-time monitoring, ministries cannot verify whether support is reaching the extreme poor, track beneficiary progress, or make evidence-based adjustments to programme design. The 2022 ASEAN SDG Snapshot Report underscores this challenge at the regional level. While all member states have implemented national statistical plans, poverty measurement coverage and comparability remain inconsistent across the region. The monitoring framework for the Regional Framework and Action Plan on Social Protection developed unevenly over its implementation period — a gap that the ACV 2045 cycle has the potential to address through shared data standards and more regular cross-country reporting.

Participant in Islamic Relief Graduation programme in East Lombok within West Nusa Tenggara Province in front of his home.

IV. The Graduation Approach: A Tool to Support Coherence

A. What Is the Graduation Approach?

The Graduation approach is a sequenced, time-bound, multi-component programme specifically designed to help households in extreme poverty build sustainable livelihoods. It is distinguished by three essential elements, or ABCs: (A) Asset: a "big push" asset transfer — a productive asset or seed capital; (B) Basic Needs: temporary consumption or food support to stabilise basic needs during the transition; and (C) Coaching: intensive coaching and skills training to build agency, livelihoods knowledge, and confidence. Many programmes also include access to savings and financial services, and linkages to existing social protection systems. The approach is adapted to local contexts while maintaining these core design essentials.[11]

Graduation sits at the intersection of social protection and economic inclusion. It can be layered onto different types of programmes, including cash transfer programmes or other types of economic empowerment and livelihood programmes. Graduation programmes add elements that give households durable economic capacity. These programmes also differ from standard livelihood programmes by providing the consumption safety net that allows the extreme poor to take risks and invest. By supporting households to move out of extreme poverty, it complements, rather than replaces, existing social protection infrastructure.

B. What the Evidence Shows

One of the most well-researched approaches in development. Rigorous research across 16 countries — spanning Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and now Southeast Asia finds income gains range from 7 to 65 percent, and consumption increases from 11 to 30 percent, with benefit-cost ratios consistently exceeding 100 percent.[12]

Long-run impacts persist and in some contexts, grow. Perhaps the most compelling feature of the approach is its durability. Ten-year follow-up data from India show that consumption and income gains not only persisted but accelerated over time as households diversified into better-paid work. Eleven-year evidence from Bangladesh similarly demonstrates permanent gains — consistent with the approach generating a lasting shift above a poverty trap threshold.[13]

Graduation increases resilience to climate shocks. Evidence from Bangladesh shows that households lifted out of poverty through the Graduation programme were significantly more resilient to drought and flood shocks: food consumption was 13 percent higher during shock periods relative to control households, driven by asset diversification and stronger labor market participation. Given the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters across ASEAN, this resilience dimension is particularly relevant for the region.[14]

Government-led programmes now reach millions of people globally. According to data from the Partnership for Economic Inclusion (PEI), some 6.7 million households have participated in a Graduation programme cumulatively.[15] The approach has survived changes of government in multiple countries and is now embedded in national social protection architectures in Ethiopia, Kenya, and several Sahel nations. This signals that the model is not only evidence-based but institutionally viable at scale as demonstrated in this case study synthesis paper.[16]

C. Emerging Regional Practice

Several ASEAN member states have begun piloting or adopting Graduation-style programmes within broader social protection and livelihoods systems. While these efforts vary in scale and maturity, they represent important signals that integrated, sequenced approaches can be adapted to diverse institutional, geographic, and economic contexts across the region.

The Philippines Graduation Pilot: DOLE / ADB / BRAC

Implemented from 2018 to 2021 in Negros Occidental, this pilot drew beneficiaries from the government's 4Ps conditional cash transfer programme. DOLE's existing Kabuhayan (Livelihood) asset transfer was supplemented with BRAC-designed coaching, skills training, and savings facilitation — integrating Graduation directly into an existing government livelihood programme. Three programme variations were tested, comparing group and individual coaching models.

Key results from the rigorous RCT endline: monthly per capita consumption was 7.8–8.6 percent higher than control households; food security improved by 0.20–0.28 standard deviations; productive assets increased 18–43 percent in value; savings rates rose 6–15 percentage points. The group coaching model reduced programme costs by 27–32 percent with no significant loss of impact, suggesting a more cost-effective scaling pathway. BRAC's Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative continues to provide technical support to the Philippine government.

Cambodia. Cambodia has launched a government-led Graduation-based Social Protection programme in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme, integrating a sequenced package of cash assistance, productive assets, skills training, financial literacy, and coaching. Building on a successful pilot phase (2020–2024), the national rollout began in 2025, initially targeting 5,000 households in Kampong Chhnang and Preah Vihear provinces, with a longer-term goal of reaching 200,000 households by 2035.[17]

Lao PDR. The Building Resilience and Reducing Rural Poverty Project introduces a government-led, gender-responsive, and climate-resilient Graduation programme targeting rural women. It delivers a sequenced, multi-component package combining cash transfers, livelihood grants, skills training, financial inclusion, and intensive coaching. The programme is integrated with an expanded nutrition-sensitive conditional cash transfer system and supported by investments in digital delivery, grievance mechanisms, and climate-informed monitoring.[18]

Indonesia Graduation Programming and Implementation

Indonesia is advancing a government-led Graduation model co-designed by the central and local government with technical support from BRAC. The programme embeds core elements within existing social protection and poverty reduction systems rather than creating a parallel programme. Integrated into national and subnational development plans and other strategic policy frameworks, the model emphasises sustainability and scale with a target of reaching at least one million households by 2029.

At the subnational level, implementation is underway across a few provinces with West Nusa Tenggara leading the way. In West Nusa Tenggara, people living in poverty account for 11.38% of the province's total population. In late 2025, the Government of West Nusa Tenggara launched a standalone Graduation-style programme targeting households living in extreme poverty. The province hired nearly 150 coaches to support the selection of the first cohort and deliver coaching, with a livelihood asset transfer planned for mid-2026. The first cohort would cover 7,250 households to test the programme's effectiveness, with plans to expand to up to approximately 28,000 households by 2028. This prototype reflects an effort by the government to build a new tool from the ground up. Other provinces may take a different approach, bringing together, or "converging," existing well-funded programmes to deliver a Graduation package.

India (regional comparator). While not an ASEAN member, India offers the strongest long-run evidence for the approach in an Asian context. The Bandhan-Konnagar programme in West Bengal, evaluated through a ten-year RCT, showed consumption and income gains that not only persisted but accelerated over time. India also provides South Asia's most rigorous test of government-led Graduation at scale: Bihar's Sashakt Jeevika Yojana (SJY), backed by a state commitment that grew from $120M to $130M, has reached over 300,000 households (~1.5 million people) at roughly $500 per household. Estimated early results from a three-way RCT led by Nobel laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo across three Bihar districts (2,267 households) found large effects — monthly household earnings up roughly 220%, per capita consumption up 30%, and savings up 35%, alongside significant gains in women's decision-making — with a marginal-value-of-public-funds return of approximately 4.3. These results are not yet final and are expected to be formally released at a later date, further informing the refinement and scaling of Graduation with governments once finalised. With its diverse geography, large population in rural poverty, and mixed state capacity, India has direct lessons for lower-income ASEAN economies.[9]

Other governments around the world have also successfully implemented Graduation with impressive outcomes. Some cases have also generated important lessons.

Elvie Gallo, program participant in the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment Graduation pilot from 2018 to 2020, initially relied on unpredictable odd jobs, but through the pilot successfully launched her own thriving chicken-rearing business.

V. Toward Greater Coherence: Convergence, Coordination, and Cost-Effectiveness

The evidence and emerging regional experience outlined above suggest a clear opportunity. By converging and coordinating sequenced, targeted, and time-bound programmes applying the Graduation approach, ASEAN member states can amplify programme impact and improve cost-effectiveness of public investments in poverty eradication and social protection. This section presents that opportunity as a practical pathway for building on what has already been achieved.

The Case for Convergence

The most vulnerable households face multiple, intersecting constraints: food insecurity, lack of productive assets, limited skills, social exclusion, and lack of access to health and financial services. No single programme addresses all of these. Where programmes are siloed, households may receive a cash transfer but lack the coaching to turn it into a livelihood, or receive livelihood training but lack the consumption safety net that would allow them to participate. Coordinating these critical components and sequencing them in a way that reflects how households stabilise, invest, and adapt over time, is a core design principle of the Graduation approach that helps produce lasting results for people in extreme poverty.

Key Design Principles

Programmes can achieve greater impact and be more cost-effective by applying three principles:

- First, rigorously targeting people in extreme poverty using transparent, verified (typically, participatory) methods;

- Second, getting the "right" sequencing of interventions, i.e., consumption support begins before asset transfers so households are stable enough to invest productively, while coaching is offered throughout the project to support planning, goal-setting, and a positive mindset; and

- Third, programmes are time-bound — establishing a clear transition point when many households can become less reliant on intensive programming. These principles reduce waste, improve impact, and allow resources to be redirected to the next cohort of beneficiaries.

Opportunities for Regional Learning

ASEAN's existing mechanisms for social protection coordination, including the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint and regional working groups on social welfare, provide a platform for member states to share evidence, compare targeting methodologies, and explore joint frameworks for economic inclusion. The experiences from the Philippines, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Indonesia, India, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh offer a foundation for this dialogue.

At the same time, the significant variation across national systems, institutional capacities, and definitions of poverty among ASEAN member states points to the importance of applying lessons and adapting to each individual member's context, rather than seeking uniform or rigid models.

VI. Recommended Next Steps

Drawing on the evidence and regional experience presented above, the following actions merit consideration by ASEAN member states and their development partners. Given that member states vary considerably in their poverty profiles, social protection systems, and experience with Graduation, these recommendations are not one-size-fits-all. They are intended to speak to different groups of countries, each with a distinct role to play.

Recommendation 1:

Strengthen national pathways from social protection to resilient livelihoods for households in extreme poverty. ASEAN member states can review and strengthen how existing social protection, livelihood, rural development, gender, and local government programmes work together for households in extreme poverty. This recommendation is most directly applicable to countries already implementing or piloting Graduation-style approaches, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Lao PDR. It is also relevant to middle-income member states with more developed social protection or livelihood systems, where the opportunity lies in achieving greater convergence across existing programme streams.

Sub-actions could include:

- Establish coordination mechanisms across relevant ministries where gaps are identified, such as an inter-ministerial working group on integrated poverty eradication;
- Conduct convergence reviews of existing social protection and livelihood programmes;
- Identify whether the poorest households are being reached, including through gender-disaggregated data and community validation where appropriate;
- Assess whether cash, assets, coaching, skills, savings, and referral services are linked and sequenced; and
- Strengthen targeting systems to support more coordinated programme delivery.

It is important to note that a major structural challenge across many member states is the absence of large-scale livelihood programmes that can serve as an anchor for sequenced interventions. Recommendations in this area should therefore be calibrated to each country's existing programme architecture rather than applied uniformly.

Primary responsibility: National governments, particularly planning and social welfare ministries

Recommendation 2:

Use ASEAN platforms to support regional learning on integrated poverty eradication approaches. ASEAN can use existing regional platforms to help governments learn from one another about what works in linking social protection and livelihoods. A shared learning agenda — focused on how member states can support households on pathways toward greater resilience and economic inclusion — would promote greater documentation, evidence generation, and knowledge exchange around what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

This agenda would benefit from the active participation of member states at different stages. Countries already piloting Graduation approaches, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Lao PDR, are best placed to contribute implementation evidence and operational lessons. Countries with more developed systems can contribute lessons on convergence and scale. Higher-income ASEAN members, including Singapore and Brunei, may not be primary implementation contexts for Graduation, but are well-positioned to support regional learning through financing, hosting convenings, facilitating South-South partnerships, and contributing to shared knowledge infrastructure.

Sub-actions could include:

- Convene peer learning exchanges among countries already testing Graduation or related approaches, building on models such as BRAC's International Learning Exchange (ILE) programme;
- Document implementation lessons from countries piloting Graduation, including the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Lao PDR;
- Support study visits, practitioner workshops, and technical exchanges; and
- Create a light-touch repository of tools, case studies, programme designs, and cost data accessible to all member states.

Primary responsibility: ASEAN Secretariat (Social Welfare and Development Division), with support from partners such as BRAC, ADB, UNDP, and the World Bank

Recommendation 3:

Support country-led adaptation and evidence-building. For member states that have not yet piloted the Graduation approach — or that are in early stages of design — ASEAN and its development partners can support country-led feasibility studies, pilots, and learning agendas to test how Graduation-style elements can strengthen existing government programmes. Higher-income ASEAN members and regional development partners have a natural role here, contributing technical assistance, co-financing, or facilitating South-South partnerships that connect countries at earlier stages of Graduation adoption with those that have accumulated operational experience.

Sub-actions could include:

- Conduct feasibility or institutional readiness assessments;
- Assess whether Graduation elements can be integrated into existing cash transfer, livelihood, rural development, or women's economic empowerment programmes;
- Build MIS systems around core outcomes such as income, food security, assets, women's agency, and resilience;
- Use rigorous evaluations where feasible, while avoiding making RCTs a universal requirement; and
- Ensure that evidence feeds back into national planning and regional learning.

Member states retain full sovereignty over national programme definitions and measurement approaches, but reporting against common indicators would strengthen regional dialogue and the collective evidence base.

Primary responsibility: Interested member state governments and development partners, coordinated through the ASEAN Secretariat

VII. ANNEX: ASEAN Regional Frameworks – Social Protection, Livelihoods & Poverty Eradication

Status key:

Active	*fully in force*
Transitioning	*expires 2025–26, successor in development*
Superseded	*replaced by ACV 2045 / ASCC Strategic Plan 2026–2030*
Ongoing	*standing cooperation mechanism*

Framework / Commitment	Year	Status in 2026	Summary of Commitments	Opportunities for Further Progress
CORE SOCIAL PROTECTION				
ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection	2013	Active	Establishes the normative foundation for rights-based, lifecycle, and adaptive social protection across the region. Affirms member states' commitment to comprehensive social protection covering people in poverty and vulnerable groups, women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and migrant workers.	Measurable regional targets and a shared accountability framework would strengthen the ability to track collective progress. Reporting consistency across member states remains an area where further harmonisation could yield significant dividends.
Regional Framework and Action Plan on Social Protection	2015	Transitioning	Provides the operational roadmap for the 2013 Declaration through coordinated policy development, capacity building, and monitoring. Covers five strategic areas: policy coherence, institutional capacity, financing, monitoring, and regional knowledge exchange.	Monitoring and reporting mechanisms have developed unevenly across the region. The successor plan under the ACV 2045 cycle presents an opportunity to establish more consistent data infrastructure and cross-country learning platforms.
ASCC Blueprint 2025	2015	Superseded	The overarching socio-cultural pillar of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. Integrated social protection, inclusion, and human development objectives into ASEAN community-building through 2025.	Now succeeded by the ASCC Strategic Plan 2026–2030 under the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 (May 2025). The transition presents an opportunity to sharpen implementation architecture and align national programmes more closely with regional priorities.
Hanoi Declaration on Strengthening Social Work	2020	Active	Formally recognises the social service workforce as an essential pillar of social protection delivery. Commits member states to professionalising social work, developing competency standards, and strengthening workforce capacity to serve vulnerable populations.	Workforce numbers and professional standards vary considerably across member states. Regional benchmarks and peer-learning mechanisms could help consolidate progress and share effective models of social worker development.
POVERTY ERADICATION & RURAL DEVELOPMENT				
Framework & Action Plan on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication (RDPE) 2021–2025	2021–2025	Transitioning	The region's primary coordinating instrument for poverty reduction, social inclusion, and rural development. Sets strategic priorities across governance, livelihood diversification, market access, and resilience for rural and marginalised communities.	Implementation has varied across member states, in part reflecting differences in fiscal capacity and technical resources. The forthcoming 2026–2030 successor plan presents a timely opportunity to address this through enhanced regional financing mechanisms and peer-support arrangements.

Framework / Commitment	Year	Status in 2026	Summary of Commitments	Opportunities for Further Progress
ASEAN Master Plan on Rural Development 2022–2026	2022–2026	Active	Operationalises territorial rural development through cross-pillar cooperation, value chain development, and improved access to services for rural and remote communities. Emphasises multi-stakeholder partnerships and digital connectivity as enablers of rural transformation.	Delivery in remote and cross-border areas continues to present logistical and governance challenges. Strengthening sub-regional coordination mechanisms and investing in last-mile infrastructure would support more equitable outcomes as the plan enters its final year.
CARE ECONOMY				
ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy	2021	Active	The first regional framework to formally recognise care systems as a foundational element of social protection and economic resilience. Links care infrastructure investment to gender equality, labour market participation, and long-term fiscal sustainability.	Coordination between multiple sectoral bodies responsible for care policy, and adequate public financing for care services, remain areas where regional dialogue and shared frameworks could add significant value.
ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy	2024	Active	Advances commitments on care infrastructure, care-related social protection, quality care services, and employment policies for care workers. Builds on the 2021 Framework and aligns care economy development with the post-2025 ASEAN Community agenda.	The transition from political commitment to national-level investment plans and service delivery systems is the key next step. Technical assistance and South-South learning platforms could accelerate uptake across member states with varying starting points.
SPECIFIC POPULATIONS				
Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Ageing	2015	Active	Promotes active and healthy ageing, age-inclusive social protection, and regional cooperation on elder care. Supported by a Regional Plan of Action on Ageing. The 2025 KL Declaration on ASEAN 2045 further elevates ageing as a cross-cutting regional priority.	Pension adequacy and long-term care coverage remain structural challenges as the region's demographic transition accelerates. Regional dialogue on sustainable financing models for ageing populations would support member states in building forward-looking systems.
ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 (Disability Inclusion)	2018	Transitioning	Mainstreams disability rights and inclusion across ASEAN policies, programmes, and institutions. Provides a rights-based framework for ensuring persons with disabilities can participate fully in economic, social, and cultural life.	Service coverage and accessibility infrastructure remain uneven across the region. The successor framework anticipated under the ASCC Strategic Plan 2026–2030 offers a timely opportunity to build on progress and extend inclusion more consistently.
OVERALL VISION				
Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2045 (ASEAN Community Vision 2045)	2025	Active	The overarching strategic vision for ASEAN through 2045, adopted at the 46th ASEAN Summit in May 2025. Elevates social protection, care, ageing, disability inclusion, and shared prosperity as central to the region's long-term agenda. Accompanied by the ASCC Strategic Plan 2026–2030.	Translating the vision into time-bound sectoral plans with clear responsibilities and financing commitments is the defining implementation task for the 2026–2030 cycle. Early alignment of national development plans with ACV 2045 priorities will be important for coherent regional progress.

Framework / Commitment	Year	Status in 2026	Summary of Commitments	Opportunities for Further Progress
EXTERNAL COOPERATION				
ASEAN Plus Three & External Partner Cooperation	Ongoing	Ongoing	Encompasses project-based technical and financial cooperation with ASEAN Plus Three partners (China, Japan, Republic of Korea) and multilateral organisations including ILO, ADB, World Bank, UNICEF, UNDP, and GIZ, spanning social protection, poverty reduction, and resilience.	Greater strategic coherence between individual partner programmes and ASEAN frameworks would strengthen collective impact. A unified compact or alignment mechanism could reduce fragmentation and ensure external support reinforces regional ownership.

Sources: *ASEAN Secretariat; SOMSWD; AMMSWD; AMRDPE; AMMW; ACW; ILO; ADB. Compiled June 2026. ACV 2045 = ASEAN Community Vision 2045; ASCC Strategic Plan = ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Strategic Plan 2026–2030.*

Cindy Logronio - Labor and Employment Officer 3 of Region 5 conducting Targetting Verification System (TVS) for Graduation approach in DOLE's Integrated Livelihood Program.

References

- ASEAN Secretariat (2023). ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2023 (Vol. 19). Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat.
- ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (2025). Trend Report No. 18: How Do ASEAN Member Countries Measure Poverty? Understanding Different Definitions, Standards, and Measurement of Poverty in Southeast Asia. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat.
- ASEAN Master Plan on Rural Development 2022–2026. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat.
- Asian Development Bank (2025). Designing a Gender-Responsive and Climate-Resilient Poverty Graduation programme for Rural Women. Community Resilience Partnership programme, Project Brief No. 5. Manila: ADB.
- Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) (2025). In March 2025, the Percentage of the Poor Population Decreased into 8.47 Percent. Press Release, July 25, 2025.
- BPS (2025). Understanding the Differences in Poverty Rates Reported by the World Bank and Statistics Indonesia. May 2, 2025.
- Balboni, C., Bandiera, O., Burgess, R., Ghatak, M., & Heil, A. (2022). Why do people stay poor? Quarterly Journal of Economics, 137(2), 785–844.
- Balboni, C., Bandiera, O., Burgess, R., Ghatak, M., & Heil, A. (2025). Weathering Poverty: Evidence on the Long-Run Effects of Climate Shocks on Ultra-Poor Households.
- Banerjee, A., Duflo, E., Goldberg, N. et al. (2015). A multifaceted programme causes lasting progress for the very poor: Evidence from six countries. Science, 348(6236).
- Banerjee, A., Duflo, E., & Sharma, G. (2021). Long-term effects of the targeting the ultra poor programme. American Economic Review: Insights, 3(4), 471–486.
- BRAC Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative (2024). Graduation Essentials: Minimums for Long-Term Trajectory Out of Extreme Poverty.
- Corner, L. (1997). Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation in ASEAN: A Gender Perspective. UNIFEM East & Southeast Asia.
- Innovations for Poverty Action Philippines (2022). Impact Evaluation of the Graduation of the Ultra-Poor Pilot in the Philippines: Endline Survey Report. Prepared for the Asian Development Bank.
- J-PAL / IPA Policy Insight (2023). Building Stable Livelihoods for Low-Income Households (updated). Cambridge, MA.
- Levy, S. (2017). Graduation-Based Social Protection for Cambodia's Extreme Poor: A General Equilibrium Analysis. Phnom Penh: UNDP Cambodia.
- Pasanen, T., Burke, L., & Morinigo, L. (2026). Case Study Synthesis: Lessons from Government-led Graduation Programmes. BRAC Ultra Poor Graduation Initiative.
- Partnership for Economic Inclusion (PEI) / World Bank (2024). The State of Economic Inclusion Report 2024: Pathways to Scale. Washington, D.C.
- Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) (2024). 2023 Full Year Official Poverty Statistics. Press Conference, August 15, 2024.
- Sulaiman, M., Goldberg, N., Karlan, D., & de Montesquiou, A. (2016). Eliminating Extreme Poverty: Comparing the Cost-Effectiveness of Livelihood, Cash Transfer, and Graduation Approaches. CGAP Forum No. 11.
- UNDP Cambodia (2025). Press Release: Cambodia Launches the Graduation-Based Social Protection Programme. Phnom Penh. December 8.
- Vietnam Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MoLISA) (2024). Year-End Review: Multidimensional Poverty Rate Drops to Below 1% in 2024. December 27, 2024.
- World Bank (2025). The World Bank's Updated Global Poverty Lines: Indonesia. Factsheet, June 13, 2025.

Endnotes

1 The World Bank's extreme poverty line is set at $3.00 per person per day, yet extreme poverty is often multidimensional, with overlapping economic, social, and human deprivations. The Multidimensional Poverty Measure (MPM) seeks to understand poverty beyond monetary deprivations

2 Corner, L. (1997). Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation in ASEAN: A Gender Perspective. UNIFEM East & Southeast Asia.

3 ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2023, Volume 19. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat. Tables 12.1 and 12.2. Note: Gini data and poverty statistics across ASEAN are irregular, with multiple years of missing data for Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and the Philippines.

4 Cross-country comparisons are challenging due to differences in how poverty is measured. A 2025 ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Trend Report notes that each ASEAN member state determines its own poverty thresholds and measurement methods, and that these variations make it difficult to compare poverty levels directly across the region.

5 Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) (2024). 2023 Full Year Official Poverty Statistics. August 15, 2024. Poverty incidence among population: 15.5% (revised to 15.3% in some government statements); equivalent to 17.54 million Filipinos.

6 Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) (2025). In March 2025, the Percentage of the Poor Population Decreased into 8.47 Percent. Press Release, July 25, 2025. Gini ratio from BPS: 0.379 in 2024, down from 0.388 in 2023.

7 Sulaiman, M., Goldberg, N., Karlan, D., & de Montesquiou, A. (2016). Eliminating Extreme Poverty: Comparing the Cost-Effectiveness of Livelihood, Cash Transfer, and Graduation Approaches. CGAP Forum No. 11.

8 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385584483_A_Firm_of_One's_Own_Experimental_Evidence_on_Credit_Constraints_and_Occupational_Choice

9 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304387818305522

10 https://economics.ucr.edu/pacdev/pacdev-papers/valuing_assets_provided.pdf

11 BRAC Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative (2024). Graduation Essentials: Minimums for Long-Term Trajectory Out of Extreme Poverty.

12 Banerjee, A., Duflo, E., Goldberg, N. et al. (2015). A multifaceted programme causes lasting progress for the very poor. Science, 348(6236). Also: J-PAL/IPA Policy Insight (2023).

13 Banerjee, A., Duflo, E., & Sharma, G. (2021). Long-term effects of the targeting the ultra poor programme. American Economic Review: Insights, 3(4), 471–486. Balboni, C. et al. (2022). Why do people stay poor? Quarterly Journal of Economics, 137(2), 785–844.

14 Balboni, C., Bandiera, O., Burgess, R., Ghatak, M., & Heil, A. (2025). Weathering Poverty: Evidence on the Long-Run Effects of Climate Shocks on Ultra-Poor Households.

15 Partnership for Economic Inclusion (PEI) / World Bank (2025). Landscape of Graduation programmes: Approach and Summary of Key Findings.

16 Partnership for Economic Inclusion (PEI) / World Bank (2024). The State of Economic Inclusion Report 2024. Washington, D.C.

17 UNDP Cambodia (2025). Press Release: Cambodia Launches the Graduation-Based Social Protection Programme. December 8.

18 ADB (2025). Designing a Gender-Responsive and Climate-Resilient Poverty Graduation programme for Rural Women. Community Resilience Partnership programme, Project Brief No. 5.