Poverty Reduction and Social Development in ASEAN: Towards an ASEAN Roadmap for the Implementation of the Millennium Development Goals Plus

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY PROJECT

Poverty alleviation lies at the very core of a strong and resilient ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). ASEAN Member Countries therefore strive, individually and collectively, to address the fundamental issue of poverty in the region. Embedded in the VAP 2004-2010, the ASCC Plan of Action sets the goal of building an ASEAN community of caring societies through among others accelerating the goal of poverty reduction within the framework of the MDGs.

At the 12th ASEAN Summit on 13 January 2007, the ASEAN Leaders agreed to strengthen efforts to achieve common goals of eradicating poverty and hunger in ASEAN, as determined by the World Food Summit, the MDGs and the Vientiane Action Programme (VAP) 2004-2010.

At the 40th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) on 29-30 July 2007, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers underlined the commitment to carry out the ASCC Plan of Action, particularly towards building a community of caring societies, and agreed on the need to draw up an ASEAN roadmap for the implementation of the MDG Plus by the concerned ASEAN sectoral bodies, particularly those involved in poverty reduction and social development.

The Regional Workshop on ASEAN Cooperation on Poverty Reduction and the MDGs in August 2005 came up with a classification of ASEAN Member Countries based on their human development status. Singapore and Brunei Darussalam are in the high human development group; Malaysia and Thailand are in the upper medium group; Indonesia, Philippines and Viet Nam are in the medium group; and Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar are in the lower medium group.

The Southeast Asian region has made significant progress towards many of the MDGs. According to the ESCAP, UNDP and ADB Joint Progress Report on the MDG in the Asia Pacific 2006, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Viet Nam are considered as early achievers and Philippines as on-track. One of the countries having most difficulty in eradicating extreme poverty and hunger is Lao PDR.
Overall, Southeast Asia region is assessed to be on-track to meet the poverty reduction target by 2015. With respect to other MDG targets, Southeast Asia has a better prospect of achieving them compared to all other developing regions. Thailand and Malaysia exemplify how the MDGs can be put to good use in middle-income countries that have already achieved most of the MDGs well in advance of the 2015 deadline. The two countries have set more ambitious targets in terms of scale and/or timing process to transform the MDGs into a floor instead of a ceiling for human development and ultimate commitment to these adapted goals known locally as the MDG-Plus.

In supporting the establishment of the ASEAN Community by 2015, ASEAN shall ensure that its societies will be prepared for, and benefit from, economic integration by, among others, alleviating poverty and socio-economic disparities and ensuring economic growth with equity. As emphasized by the 40th AMM, ASEAN strives to meet the targets set in a roadmap for the implementation of the MDG Plus. This roadmap would be an important milestone for ASEAN as a region in joining hands to support its Member Countries in improving their livelihood and well-being.

This project initiates a study commissioned by the Regional Economic Policy Support Facility II (REPSF II) on the progress that the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Member Countries (AMCs) have made towards achievement of their national Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); lessons learned; and common challenges faced; and how ASEAN might assist AMCs in the achievement of the MDGs. Poverty reduction, both narrowly and broadly conceived, is the core of the analysis.

The MDGs (United Nations, 2000) are a set of 8 globally agreed, time-bound and measurable goals and targets for combating barriers to development that includes poverty, hunger, AIDS and other diseases, education, maternal and child mortality, environmental degradation and discrimination against women. The MDGs respond to the world’s main development challenges. Nationally-set MDG targets, which bridge the gap between global commitments and national progress, will form the topic of this study. Each AMC has adopted the MDGs that pertain to their individual development situation. Each country has set relevant targets for achievement by 2015. Some countries have set additional goals and targets that are critical to their further development of the country.

A recently released joint report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) outlines the progress that has been made by AMCs towards the achievement of the MDGs. This report states that the greatest remaining development challenges lie in the areas of child mortality, malnutrition, improving maternal health and providing safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, although the severity of these problems varies widely across AMCs. The study will review the progress made by AMCs in achieving their nationally-set MDGs; lessons learned; remaining challenges; and factors influencing inter and intra-country disparities in order to provide recommendations on possible collective action that could be mobilized to address existing challenges.

ASEAN has as its vision 2020: to promote equitable economic development and to reduce poverty and economic disparities across the ASEAN region (ASEAN, 2005). The MDGs provide a common vehicle that can assist AMCs to achieve relevant development objectives. However, it is important, both for this study and for development in AMCs, that the MDGs are not seen as an end in themselves, but rather a tool and a platform for AMCs to make development choices that move beyond achievement of these fundamental but
essential development achievements, just as in the case of Thailand’s MDG-Plus Initiative (UNDP, 2005).

The challenge of achieving the MDGs can be viewed at two levels. First, there is the acknowledged social importance of attaining these goals, seen simply as ends in themselves. Second, there is the possible connection between attainment of these goals and progress towards other ASEAN goals, which include deepened integration among the ASEAN countries. This broad goal encompasses three ‘communities’: economic integration, through the ASEAN Economic Community; security integration, through the ASEAN Security Community; and socio-cultural integration, through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, as outlined in the Bali Concord and the Vientiane Action Plan (ASEAN, 2003a and 2003b; ASEAN, 2004c). The successful integration of AMCs will encounter many challenges, not least social and economic development of member countries (Yong, Ong Keng HE, 2007). The MDGs provide a comparable set of key development indicators upon which to gauge progress towards development. Hence, the importance of this study.

The focus of this study is on progress towards achievement of the MDGs in each AMC. It is clearly important that there be a clear understanding of the common challenges to achieving the MDGs; what are the vulnerabilities and weaknesses that exist within and between the AMCs; how much progress has already occurred in achieving the MDGs in each AMC; what factors exacerbate disparities; what lessons can be learned from the past experience of the ASEAN and other Asian countries; and what measures can be taken by AMCs and ASEAN to maximise development, particularly in achieving national MDGs. For example, what can the more developed AMCs offer to the less-developed ones, what can ASEAN do collectively and how can other Asian countries assist directly or indirectly? This study will address these questions and will facilitate the development of a roadmap that may assist ASEAN to optimise progress towards achievement of the MDGs within the AMCs, which in turn may assist in maximizing the benefits of integration, across the board.