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ASEAN–India Cooperation for Sustainable Development: SDG Progress, Institutional Mechanisms and Emerging Areas of Cooperation

Sabyasachi Saha and Tushti Tanwar

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Contents

1. Introduction.....1

2. Sustainable Development: Perspectives from ASEAN and India.....4
   - 2.1 The SDGs: Background.....4
   - 2.2 SDG Progress in ASEAN.....6
   - 2.3 SDG Progress in India.....12

3. Emerging Areas of Cooperation and Partnership.....15
   - 3.1 Institutional and Financing Framework.....16
   - 3.2 Digital Public Infrastructure and Financial Inclusion.....16
   - 3.3 Climate and Disaster Resilience.....17
   - 3.4 Towards 2030: Priorities for Deepening Cooperation.....18

4. Conclusion.....18

Endnotes.....19

References.....20

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Abstract: ASEAN and India have demonstrated strong resilience in the face of recent shocks, underscoring the need for deeper collaboration on resilience building and sustainable development within the broader framework of ASEAN-India cooperation. This partnership has progressed significantly over the decades and can deliver tangible gains for both partners, at a time when multilateral cooperation remains weak. This paper examines progress and monitoring of SDG indicators in ASEAN and India. We suggest that, ASEAN-India partnership on sustainable development must be adequately supported by already existing cooperation mechanisms like the AIF, AIGF, AISTDF, and AIFDF that represent valuable examples of regional public goods with few direct parallels. The ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Digital Transformation and can be leveraged into an operational agenda through the Digital Future Fund launched in 2024. Based on the rich experience on both sides, sustained engagement in digital transformation, climate action and disaster resilience would be critical from a regional and global perspective. We conclude that, as the 2030 deadline approaches, the ASEAN-India partnership is well positioned to introduce its next phase of cooperation, building on the foundation of three decades of deep engagement and a decade of experience with SDG monitoring and localisation.

1. Introduction

Economic development and sustainable development are inseparable and mutually reinforcing pathways for humanity. Unprecedented changes in the social and material conditions of life and habitation—driven primarily by technological progress, industrialisation, and historic shifts in demography and longevity—have generated negative spillovers, including breaches of planetary boundaries, natural disasters, and

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embedded inequalities, which now pose existential threats. ASEAN and India have been globally recognised for rapid economic growth, emergence, poverty reduction, and distinctive sustainable development initiatives among developing regions. Adopted in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provided a global compact to accelerate sustainable development on all fronts, offering a common framework to guard against fragmented approaches and guide global cooperation beyond narrow domestic economic interests. However, since then, the world has experienced repeated shocks and growing uncertainties that continue to undermine this compact. ASEAN and India have demonstrated strong resilience in the face of recent shocks, underscoring the need for deeper collaboration on resilience building and sustainable development within the broader framework of ASEAN-India cooperation. This partnership has progressed significantly over the decades and can deliver tangible gains for both partners, even as multilateral cooperation remains weak. This paper examines progress on sustainable development in ASEAN and India and identifies potential areas of cooperation.

Given that sustainable development remains a top priority for both India and ASEAN, and that a wide range of best practices has already produced positive transformations despite multiple cross-cutting challenges, a meaningful partnership would be consequential not only for the region but also for the wider global community. Such cooperation can help shape the roadmap for the coming decades and influence the architecture of sustainable development partnerships and development cooperation beyond 2030.

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provided a robust global compact for sustainable and inclusive development in 2015, built on the expectation that global cooperation would be effective and that national governments would pursue implementation in line with their development aspirations. The agenda set out a plan of action for partnerships centred on people and the planet, while promoting peace and prosperity. Nearly a decade later, however, prospects for achieving the SDGs have diminished, with only 17 per

cent of targets currently on track globally. It is important to note that the SDGs are not legally binding; their support mechanisms operate primarily through intergovernmental institutional arrangements and national localisation approaches (Biermann et al., 2017). Today, multilateralism has weakened amid inadequate institutions, governance challenges, and financial constraints. Sustaining collective action on sustainable development priorities has therefore become increasingly difficult in the current global context. Further, the broader constituency of the Global South continues to face structural bottlenecks, including economic and fiscal constraints, weak innovation ecosystems, dependence on imported technologies, concentration of global capital stock in the Global North, resource misallocation, and market failures that generate negative spillovers and hinder progress on the SDGs.

This period has witnessed several shocks, including the pandemic, which deepened economic instability across many countries in the Global South and contributed to debt distress. Although global cooperation on sustainable development remains urgent, it has become increasingly fragile. This calls for new leadership from countries that have demonstrated strong potential for economic resilience and have undertaken major initiatives to implement large-scale sustainable development programmes for the well-being of their citizens. Their experience is highly valuable for envisioning and implementing sustainable development projects globally at scale, particularly in relation to resource mobilisation, governance innovation, access to technology, capacity building, and partnerships. As the world struggles to accelerate progress on the SDGs, cooperation among aligned and willing countries can provide an important step forward and inspire broader collective action.

India is a significant partner in this context, having substantially reduced multidimensional poverty during the post-SDG period after achieving reductions in absolute poverty within the MDG timeframe. Over the past decade, India has witnessed development transformation at scale through the localisation of development, the delivery of large-scale welfare programmes addressing basic human needs, unprecedented

financial inclusion and livelihood promotion, major steps towards renewable energy transitions at all levels, and the mainstreaming of environmental protection and disaster preparedness across the country. Similarly, ASEAN has been a frontrunner in economic development and sustainability practices. According to the Sustainable Development Report 2025, East and South Asia have, on average, shown the fastest progress on the SDGs since 2015, driven primarily by advances in socioeconomic targets (Sachs et al., 2025). This makes Southeast Asia an important region for examining the relationship between sustainable development and regional cooperation in the India-ASEAN partnership context. India has developed institutional and technological approaches in areas such as SDG localisation, digital public infrastructure, financial inclusion, renewable energy, and large-scale public-service delivery. These experiences offer valuable lessons for regional cooperation and make ASEAN-India cooperation especially relevant for addressing implementation challenges in the region.

The ASEAN-India partnership emerged from India's "Look East Policy" in the 1990s. India became a Sectoral Partner of ASEAN in 1992, a Dialogue Partner in 1996, and a Summit Partner in 2002. The partnership gained renewed momentum with the announcement of the "Act East Policy" at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit in 2014. Engagement subsequently shifted more robustly towards connectivity, commerce, and culture (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017). ASEAN has since emerged as a major trade partner for India, while India has advanced the Act East Policy through high-level government engagement and sectoral cooperation mechanisms.

2. Sustainable Development: Perspectives from ASEAN and India

2.1 The SDGs: Background

At the turn of the century, the world came together to launch the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This marked the first major

political acknowledgement that the development divide between high-income countries and the rest of the world was a persistent challenge requiring urgent collective action. However, the MDGs produced uneven results across developing countries. Following the Rio+20 process in 2012, the post-2015 development agenda took shape, leading to the 2030 Agenda and the adoption of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals.

The SDGs set out 17 goals and 169 associated targets, which are integrated and indivisible, to transform systems and address the root causes of human development challenges beyond economic growth. The vision was to build a world in which human habitats are safe, resilient, and sustainable, with improved access to healthcare, education, and social protection, and freedom from poverty, hunger, disease, and want (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, para. 7). Agenda 2030, adopted by 193 United Nations member states in September 2015, provided a framework for holding countries accountable across the 17 SDGs.

This paper draws on the Sustainable Development Report indices, ASEAN Secretariat progress reports, and national VNR submissions as its primary data sources, triangulated with sector-specific schemes and related documentation for India. With less than four years remaining until 2030, there is a pressing need to identify areas where gaps persist. Current figures present an alarming picture. Globally, SDG progress has stagnated, with wide variation across countries: SDG scores exceed 80 in top-performing countries but fall below 50 in the least developed countries. Major goals that remain off track include SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) (Sachs et al., 2024). Based on the 1999-2019 trend, the global Human Development Index was expected to reach its 2030 target. However, as the world falls off track, every region's projected 2023 values have dropped below the pre-2019 trend (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Emerging Asian economies have shown resilience in sustaining growth momentum (OECD, 2023). In this context, developing

nations in Asia, and regional groupings such as ASEAN, are especially significant in contemporary development discussions.

2.2 SDG Progress in ASEAN

2.2.1 Overall Regional Trajectory

ASEAN's sustainable development trajectory reflects both measurable progress and persistent disparities. ASEAN has been working towards becoming a fully integrated and globally competitive region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). The trajectory of sustainable development across the region is reflected in the ASEAN SDG Indicators Progress Report 2025, which shows that only 15 targets are on track to be achieved by 2030. Although the region has made significant progress, the pace remains uneven across goals. In addition, 32 targets across 15 goals, excluding Goal 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), have recorded moderate progress. The remaining 21 targets under 14 goals, excluding Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 14 (Life Below Water), and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), have shown minimal progress, stagnation, or regression (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025). This points to a varied pattern of development across socioeconomic indicators.

2.2.2 Country-Level Variation

Table 1 presents the SDG index scores of ASEAN member states for the period 2000-2025. A comparison of these scores from 2015 to 2025, following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, helps categorise development outcomes. High-performing economies, namely Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, started from relatively strong positions and recorded moderate but steady progress over the period. In 2025, Thailand remains the highest scorer in the region, with a score of 75.43. The slower pace of SDG improvement in high-performing economies suggests that countries closer to the development frontier face a different set of challenges, with future gains depending heavily on innovation-led growth and sustainability-focused policy development.

Mid-performing economies, such as Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, recorded SDG scores above 60 in 2015. The Philippines and Indonesia have remained relatively stable in their growth trajectories. Brunei Darussalam, meanwhile, has maintained comparatively strong performance since the early years and has recorded notable progress in its scorecard. To accelerate the current rate of development, implementation capacities must be strengthened while sector-specific challenges are addressed.

Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Cambodia began from comparatively lower development baselines. In terms of absolute change during 2015-2025, Cambodia recorded the strongest progress over the decade. These countries still have considerable scope to accelerate sustainable development.

Timor-Leste became the 11th member of ASEAN in 2025, and its SDG performance is reported in Table 1. Despite global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the region has maintained consistency and recorded marginal improvements since 2015. Most countries have converged towards broadly similar SDG index scores and demonstrated steady progress. Some countries that started from lower baselines, such as Cambodia and Myanmar, have registered greater absolute improvements than several other economies. Taken together, these trends suggest that ASEAN countries require differentiated response mechanisms to address their specific challenges. They also indicate areas where ASEAN-India cooperation can create impact through targeted interventions.

2.2.3 The Implementation and Data Gaps

The ASEAN SDG Indicators Progress Report also provides a detailed assessment of progress for 2016-2023. The report comprehensively covers all 17 goals and 68 corresponding targets. Each target is represented by one or more indicators, forming a total of 80 unique indicators (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025).[1] However, one of the region's major challenges in

Table 1: SDG Index Score of ASEAN Member States

Country	2000	2010	2015	2020	2025	2015-2025 (Absolute Change) (%)
Brunei Darussalam	61.48	63.51	65.82	66.71	68.95	3.13
Cambodia	46.65	53.35	57.77	62.58	65.31	7.54
Indonesia	59.95	63.19	65.1	69.31	70.81	5.71
Lao PDR	50.31	55.83	59.78	61.64	62.53	2.75
Malaysia	64.16	66.08	68.38	69.21	70.38	2
Myanmar	49.37	54.86	57.36	61.82	62.42	5.06
The Philippines	58.21	61.12	63.66	67.38	69.87	6.21
Singapore	67.78	70.19	71.22	72.33	73.82	2.6
Thailand	66.83	69.98	72.75	74.07	75.43	2.68
Timor-Leste	52.95	59.3	62.23	65.26	66.15	3.92
Vietnam	60.57	66.45	70.31	71.19	73.84	3.53

Source: Sachs et al. (2026)

Box 1: The CLMV Gap

ASEAN began with five founding members—Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore—bringing together Southeast Asian countries under a common association. Brunei Darussalam joined later, followed by Viet Nam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Cambodia. This expansion created a development gap between the wealthier established members and the newer members, which has often been described as a "two-tier ASEAN" (Menon, 2013). These countries share a common colonial history, with Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam under French colonial rule and Myanmar under British rule. After decolonisation, they undertook economic reforms and opened their economies during the 1980s and 1990s. Following these reforms, the CLMV countries experienced economic growth and rising foreign investment. Jin and Kang (2025) examined sustainable development trajectories in CLMV countries for 1990-2023 and found that reforms significantly improved SDG performance, particularly in poverty reduction, health, infrastructure, education, and partnerships (Jin and Kang, 2025). These countries also adopted a common regional approach through CLMV summits, which began in 2004 and focused on strengthening cooperation within the region and with external partners. Sustained efforts over the decade helped reduce disparities, particularly in infrastructure connectivity, agriculture, tourism, and human resources. Tourism remains one of the core economic activities in CLMV countries. Moska et al. (2024) examine its growing role in shaping Southeast Asia's tourism economy amid regional integration and expanding intra-ASEAN connectivity. Integration into regional tourism networks has increased tourist mobility, infrastructure development, and cross-border economic cooperation (Moska et al., 2024).

monitoring the SDGs remains limited data availability, as a result of which 101 global SDG indicators have not been covered. Myanmar has not submitted any VNR since the implementation of the SDGs in 2015. The challenge therefore lies not only in implementation capacity but also in monitoring and assessment.

2.2.4 Thematic SDG Priorities

At an aggregate level, ASEAN has demonstrated progress in poverty reduction, with the proportion of the population living below national poverty lines declining from 13.3 per cent to 10.8 per cent between 2016 and 2023. The region has shown mixed outcomes in industrialisation, with stagnant manufacturing performance but improvements in unemployment rates, which declined from 11.2 per cent to 8.5 per cent for both sexes aged 15-24 years. In terms of universal access to energy services, measured through access to electricity under indicator 7.1.1, ASEAN has made significant progress, rising from 88.5 per cent in 2016 to 95.7 per cent in 2023.[2]

Climate-related disasters pose a major threat to ASEAN's development gains. The region's concentration along coastlines intensifies its exposure to cyclones, floods, and rising sea levels. This has contributed to regression on SDG 13, with an increase in deaths and people affected by disasters, as reflected in indicator 13.1.1 on deaths and missing persons per 100,000 people (Sachs et al., 2025). The region is projected to remain among the most vulnerable to climate change globally, primarily because of its geographic location (Overland et al., 2021). The Climate Risk Index Report 2026 identifies Myanmar as the second most affected country during 1995-2024, with one of the highest numbers of absolute fatalities from weather events such as cyclones, including Cyclone Nargis in 2008, floods, and other hazards. The Philippines and India are also listed among the top 10 most affected countries, owing to heatwaves, droughts, floods, cyclones, and related events (Adil et al., 2025).

In terms of human development, ASEAN has made progress in reducing mortality ratios, particularly maternal mortality and neonatal and under-five mortality rates. Health financing and the health workforce increased substantially between 2016 and 2023. In education, ASEAN is approaching universal access, although challenges persist in quality and infrastructure, including a decline in access to computers in primary schools from 69 per cent to 65.3 per cent. One positive development is

Box 2: Localisation Practices Adopted in the ASEAN Region

The Philippines: With its decentralised structure of governance (via the Department of Interior and Local Governance), the national developmental plans were localised. It started during the MDGs and supported innovations in the local processes. One of the prime examples is MDG FACES (Family Based Actions for Children and their Environs in the Slums), which expanded to 127 cities by 2015. The program focused on addressing the deprivations faced by select children in urban poor households. Moreover, the select children and their households shall be tracked until 2030 to analyse the implementation. This provides an imperative that sub-national SDG Frameworks could be adapted to local development priorities.

Cambodia and Lao PDR: As the ASEAN region remains prone to climate vulnerabilities, increased damage has been occurring every year. Moreover, there remain challenges with limited data availability. A disaster loss database has been initiated by UNDP, and all countries (except Malaysia and Singapore) have set up this database. In partnership with ADB, it integrated climate and disaster risk information into the public investment cycle in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar, particularly in the road sector. This represents a relevant dimension of localisation by integrating locally relevant risk information into public infrastructure investment decisions.

Viet Nam: As Vietnam ranks 78th in the "ease of doing business" index, start-up ecosystem builder and government agencies recognise the massive potential of the entrepreneurial spirit that exists in Vietnam. However, the country requires to build the spirit of innovation to scale-up the social impact start-ups and attract international investments. The setup of Saigon Innovation Hub (or SIHUB) promotes the youth to find innovative SDG solutions through skill development on social innovation and entrepreneurship; mentorship to early-stage impact startups. The SIHUB UNDP Youth Co: Lab focused on capacity building among relevant stakeholders to foster impact startups towards achieving the SDGs. This demonstrates how local innovation systems scale and mobilise the youth bringing in ground-level implementation.

Source: United Nations Development Programme, 2019

the decline in early marriage from 12.4 per cent to 9.7 per cent by 2023.[3] Overall, ASEAN has recorded gradual but slow improvements, with varied levels of progress among member states.

2.3 SDG Progress in India

In India, the Sustainable Development Goals have been interpreted as closely aligned with national development aspirations. According to the SDG India Index 2023-24, India has registered progress in five of the seventeen SDGs and stagnation in eight. The index measures progress across four categories: Achiever [100], Front Runner [65-99], Performer [50-64], and Aspirant [0-49]. India's approach to poverty measurement has moved beyond the SDG indicator on the proportion of the population living below the national poverty line (Global SDG Indicator 1.2.1 under Target 1.2) towards a multidimensional framework. NITI Aayog, in collaboration with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), developed the National Multidimensional Poverty Index (NMPI), which provides data on multidimensional poverty across more than 700 districts in India. The MPI estimates show that India's multidimensional poverty value nearly halved, with the proportion of the population in multidimensional poverty declining from 24.85 per cent to 14.96 per cent between 2015-16 and 2019-21 (NITI Aayog, 2023). Between 2020-21 and 2023-24, India also recorded progress in SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), with the score increasing from 61 to 68, and SDG 13 (Climate Action), with the score increasing from 54 to 67, bringing both into the Front Runner category. Under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), India has achieved 100 per cent infrastructure connectivity through all-weather roads in 10 states. However, SDG 5 (Gender Equality) remains in the Aspirant category, with an overall score of 42. For one of its indicators, the female-to-male labour force participation ratio (15-59 years), where the target is 1, India recorded a score of 0.48 in 2023-24 (National Statistics Office, 2024).

One of the most institutionally significant features of India's SDG architecture is its localisation model, which rests on four pillars: institutionalisation, collaborative competition, capacity building, and a "whole-of-society" approach (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). India's decentralised governance structure, operating across central, state, and local levels, has enabled the country to address development needs across a vast and diverse population. This has been strengthened through the Aspirational Districts and Blocks Programme, which aims to support underdeveloped districts and localise the SDGs. Around 112 districts and 500 blocks were identified across the country as being at risk of falling behind. Although India continues to lag in some indicators, existing schemes and programmes are designed to address development challenges at the grassroots level.

India's welfare architecture illustrates how national schemes can be directly mapped onto SDG indicators, demonstrating measurable convergence between domestic development priorities and the 2030 Agenda. The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), India's landmark sanitation initiative, aligns closely with access to safely managed sanitation services and handwashing facilities, reflecting its contribution to public health. Similarly, the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY 2.0) has supported the shift towards clean cooking fuel and technology, thereby easing the transition away from traditional energy sources. The Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) has improved access to safely managed drinking water services. Urban transformation has been supported through the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana (PMAY), which addresses informal settlements and inadequate housing. Finally, financial inclusion is captured through the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), which has been instrumental in bringing previously unbanked populations into the formal financial system.

India has been recognised for its Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), including Aadhaar and UPI (Unified Payments Interface), which has enabled cashless transactions and Direct Benefit Transfers while helping overcome geographical distance and other physical barriers to reaching the country's population. This architecture was strengthened through the

Jan-Aadhaar-Mobile trinity, which integrated financial accounts with identity and mobile connectivity, enabling direct subsidy delivery and timely assistance during the pandemic. DBT provides a strong example of a good-governance model that enhances financial autonomy among vulnerable communities.

India has played a leading role in advancing renewable energy cooperation through the International Solar Alliance (ISA). Its G20 presidency also advanced SDG implementation priorities through an ambitious seven-year action plan to accelerate progress on the SDGs. This effort sought to strengthen the collective voice of the Global South and make better use of global governance platforms (NITI Aayog, 2024). India's policy choices, which deliver SDGs through institutional architecture, have made sustainable development an integral element of systems thinking for development. Well-established monitoring frameworks, including the SDG India Index and the Northeastern Region District SDG Index prepared by NITI Aayog, provide assessments of the performance of Indian states and Union Territories. During its second Voluntary National Review, India emphasised a "whole-of-society"

Box 2: VNR Accountability and Commitment

A Voluntary National Review, or VNR, is a voluntary reporting mechanism that helps assess a country's progress in SDG implementation. It enables countries to present progress, challenges, and best practices developed during implementation and is presented annually at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). Since VNRs are the only official country-level reporting source for the 2030 Agenda, tracking their submission is essential. VNR submissions across ASEAN show an uneven pattern, with Indonesia and the Philippines reporting the highest number, at four each. Myanmar is the only member state that has not submitted a VNR during the period, creating a gap that limits visibility of the country's development situation. India has submitted three VNRs, most recently in 2025, demonstrating both capacity and willingness to institutionalise the SDGs.

Table 2: VNR Reporting in ASEAN

Country	Number of VNRs submitted	Year
Brunei Darussalam	2	2020, 2023
Cambodia	2	2019, 2023
Indonesia	4	2017, 2019, 2021, 2025
Laos PDR	3	2018, 2021, 2024
Malaysia	3	2017, 2021, 2025
Myanmar	--	--
Philippines	4	2016, 2019, 2022, 2025
Singapore	2	2018, 2023
Thailand	3	2017, 2021, 2025
Timor-Leste	2	2019, 2023
Vietnam	2	2018, 2023
India	3	2017, 2020, 2025

Source: United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (2026)

approach, bringing private stakeholders and civil society organisations into a broader collective effort.

3. Emerging Areas of Cooperation and Partnership

Uneven regional trajectories make external development partnerships increasingly relevant, particularly in areas where institutional and technological cooperation can accelerate SDG implementation. Mapping existing areas of cooperation helps identify current alignments and gaps. It is therefore important to move forward by building stronger partnerships, especially as ASEAN-India cooperation represents an emerging Global South framework for SDG implementation. Cooperation on sustainable development between ASEAN and India was formalised well before the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in

2015. Over time, this cooperation has evolved in line with priorities such as innovation, capacity building, biodiversity conservation, and climate action.

3.1 Institutional and Financing Framework

The ASEAN-India partnership has therefore moved from an economic and political relationship towards one increasingly anchored in sustainability and innovation. A key feature of this evolution has been the establishment of dedicated financial mechanisms. The Plan of Action (POA) for the ASEAN-India Partnership created pathways to connect ASEAN-India funds and financial cooperation activities with green growth, clean energy, and sustainable development. The four major funds are the ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund (AIF, 1996), the ASEAN-India Green Fund (AIGF, 2007), the ASEAN-India S&T Development Fund (AISTDF, 2008), and the ASEAN-India Fund for Digital Future (AIFDF, 2024). These dedicated mechanisms provide institutional support for operational activities. The AIF, the original flagship initiative of the partnership, seeks to address development gaps through three pillars: political-security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation. The ASEAN-India Green Fund was launched in 2007 to support areas such as climate change, renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, clean technologies, and energy efficiency (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018). As the need for deeper cooperation in science and technology emerged, the ASEAN-India Science Technology and Development Fund (AISTDF) was established to facilitate collaborative pilot projects in key areas, including agricultural technologies, renewable and alternative energy, biodiversity, food-processing technologies, advanced materials, and space science and technology.

3.2 Digital Public Infrastructure and Financial Inclusion

With the rise in global uncertainties and vulnerabilities, including the COVID-19 pandemic, dependence on technology has increased, with digital platforms becoming indispensable for essential services such as education, healthcare, e-commerce, and digital payments. India

began addressing the need for digital infrastructure through the launch of the Digital India initiative in 2015. Today, India's Digital Public Infrastructure model remains one of the most prominent examples of large-scale digitisation. Through UPI, the transaction process has helped narrow rural-urban divides and gender-based disparities in access to digital payment systems. The cost-effective design of such systems has enabled benefits to reach small-scale businesses, education systems, and women in rural areas. These systems could offer useful lessons and be operationalised through the AIFDF for select ASEAN countries, where cost-effectiveness is a critical factor in development programmes. The ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Digital Transformation acknowledges the success of this model and emphasises the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and best practices in the development, implementation, and governance of DPI. Moreover, innovative financing mechanisms can be explored to develop a cross-border unified UPI system that simplifies business, trade, and investment across the region. India's domestic institutional experience can be adapted for regional development in ASEAN and extended to climate and disaster resilience.

3.3 Climate and Disaster Resilience

Because the ASEAN region remains highly vulnerable to disasters, economic losses have become increasingly frequent. Disaster resilience therefore represents a significant area for development cooperation. Against this backdrop, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) provides a framework for strengthening disaster preparedness and response. In addition, strategic interventions under the ASEAN Vision on Disaster Management 2025 are guided by three principles: institutionalisation and communications, finance and resource mobilisation, and partnerships and innovations.[4]

Similar efforts have been advanced through initiatives such as the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), an India-led global initiative that has developed the world's first Global Infrastructure Risk Model and Resilience Index to assess infrastructure-related economic

losses. Climate and disaster resilience, under SDG 13, remains a natural anchor for the ASEAN-India Green Fund. At present, the Fund's portfolio includes biodiversity projects related to the implementation of the Nagoya Protocol.

3.4 Towards 2030: Priorities for Deepening Cooperation

To translate foundational plans into measurable outcomes aligned with the 2030 Agenda, the areas discussed above point towards a meaningful partnership agenda. The four financial mechanisms—AIF, AIGF, AISTDF, and AIFDF—have been developed incrementally and remain a distinctive binding feature of ASEAN-India cooperation. They also represent a valuable example of regional cooperation and South-South partnership with few direct parallels. Standardising monitoring and accountability will be essential to ensure effective implementation of these funds. India's Digital Public Infrastructure model has already demonstrated regional relevance through the UPI-PayNow linkage with Singapore. The next priority should be to extend such cooperation to the CLMV economies, where the marginal impact of financial inclusion is likely to be highest. Importantly, these priorities do not require a new institutional architecture; they can be built on existing cooperation platforms and financial mechanisms. As the 2030 deadline approaches, the success of the ASEAN-India partnership will depend on its ability to convert existing architecture into implementation.

4. Conclusion

The ASEAN-India relationship has matured over three decades from a trade- and connectivity-led partnership into one increasingly oriented towards sustainable development cooperation. ASEAN's SDG Indicators Progress Report shows real and measurable gains, including poverty reduction, declining early marriage rates, and near-universal electricity access. India's own trajectory demonstrates development transformation at scale over the past decade, with multidimensional poverty nearly halved, and climate action and decent work registering considerable

progress according to the SDG India Index. Seen together, these trends suggest that institutional commitments have been converted into measurable outcomes across ASEAN and, prominently, in India.

The development experience of the CLMV countries shows that targeted, capacity-oriented cooperation can generate substantial returns. India's Digital Public Infrastructure model, validated through UPI's reach into rural and underserved populations and its role in reducing gender gaps, offers important lessons for some CLMV countries. This has also been formalised in the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Digital Transformation and can be converted into an operational agenda through the Digital Future Fund launched in 2024. Lastly, the region's climate exposure and vulnerability require the highest level of attention within regional cooperation frameworks. India's experience, from the International Solar Alliance to CDRI's Global Infrastructure Risk Model, offers direct value to the region, suggesting that disaster-resilience financing gaps can be realistically addressed through partnership-building efforts that are already taking shape.

As the 2030 deadline approaches, the ASEAN-India partnership is well positioned to introduce its next phase of cooperation, building on the foundation of three decades of deep engagement and a decade of experience with SDG monitoring and localisation. This offers a model for the wider Global South suggesting what sustained, mutually reinforcing partnership can achieve on the path to 2030 and beyond.

Endnotes

1 Interpretations of ASEAN progress made from report Annex of the ASEAN SDG Indicators Progress Report, 2025

2 ibid

3 SDG 5: Indicator 5.3.1 Proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in a union before age 18.

4 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (2024, October 10). ASEAN–India joint statement on advancing digital transformation. ASEAN.

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