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Reduction of Regional Economic Disparities Through the ASEAN Economic Community Framework

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Abstract: Regional economic integration through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) framework, established in 2015, aims to create a single market and production base while promoting equitable development and reducing poverty across Southeast Asia. However, economic disparities remain a persistent structural challenge within the region. This study examines the multi-dimensional facets of inequality among ASEAN member states encompassing severe gaps in income, infrastructure connectivity, and digital literacy and analyzes them through the lens of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's dependency theory. The data reveals profound disparities, highlighted by a stark 77:1 ratio in per capita GDP between Singapore and Myanmar, alongside a severe digital divide where internet penetration in CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) remains below 50%. Although mechanisms like the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) offer technical assistance and capacity building, their efficacy is limited by low institutional absorption and financial volatility. Under current conditions, the AEC risks inducing a state of "dependent development," where less developed economies are relegated to low-value raw material suppliers and cheap labor, while developed members capture high-value gains. This study concludes that resolving these disparities requires structural interventions, including robust funding commitments for infrastructure, long-term human capital cultivation, comprehensive digital inclusion frameworks, and upgraded social safety nets in lagging nations.

Keyword: ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), Regional Disparity, Dependency Theory, CLMV Countries, Digital Divide.

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is one of the regions experiencing rapid economic growth in the world. The member countries of ASEAN are working to strengthen economic cooperation in order to promote regional stability and prosperity. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is

the realization of the region's ultimate goal, namely economic integration (ASEAN, 2024). The AEC came into effect in 2015 with the aim of creating a single market and regional production base through the liberalization of trade, investment, services, and the mobility of skilled workers among ASEAN countries, in order to enhance the region's economic competitiveness, promote equitable development, and reduce poverty (Ishikawa, 2021).

Despite the continuous growth of ASEAN economic integration, regional economic disparity remains a major challenge. Differences in income, infrastructure quality, technological literacy, and human resource capacity are clear examples of the varying levels of development within ASEAN. This is evident when looking at countries like Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, which have much higher per capita income levels compared to developing nations such as Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. This inequality demonstrates that the benefits of economic integration have not been evenly distributed among all ASEAN member states (Apresian, 2014).

The impact of regional economic integration varies from one member country to another. Countries with advanced infrastructure and economic capacity tend to benefit more from free trade and investment flows, while developing countries face challenges in enhancing their economic competitiveness. Globalization and economic integration have contributed to rising regional disparities in ASEAN countries (Setyadi, 2017).

Through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) framework, ASEAN is addressing these challenges by fostering more inclusive economic development through enhanced economic cooperation, infrastructure development, strengthening of SMEs, and improved regional connectivity. The AEC serves not only as a mechanism for regional market integration but also as an instrument to reduce development disparities among ASEAN member states. Therefore, discussing the reduction of regional economic disparities through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) framework is crucial for understanding the effectiveness of ASEAN economic integration in fostering equitable development across Southeast Asia.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method using a literature study approach (library research). The research focuses on analyzing regional economic disparities within ASEAN and examining the role of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) framework in reducing those disparities. The data used in this study are secondary data obtained from various academic and institutional sources, including journal articles, books, official ASEAN reports, policy papers, and publications from international organizations such as the ASEAN Secretariat, Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Energy Agency (IEA), and United Nations agencies. These sources were selected based on their relevance to the topics of regional economic integration, inequality, digital divide, infrastructure development, and dependency theory in Southeast Asia.

The analysis is conducted descriptively and analytically by interpreting data and findings from previous studies. This research also applies Fernando Henrique Cardoso's dependency theory as the main analytical framework to understand how structural inequalities and dependency relations continue to shape development gaps among ASEAN member states, particularly between developed countries and CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam). Through this approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the ASEAN Economic Community in addressing regional economic disparities and promoting more equitable development across Southeast Asia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theory and Concept

Economic inequality is a condition when the results of development are not evenly distributed among regions or countries, which can create differences in levels of welfare (Situmorang et al., 2026). In the ASEAN region itself, this disparity is evident through the significant gap between member countries with high levels of industrialization, such as Singapore and Brunei, and countries that are still in the early stages of development, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. The disparity is influenced by several structural factors, such as the quality of human resources, with natural resources being a fundamental element in determining a country's capacity to develop. Countries with higher levels of education, strong labor productivity, and technological innovation capabilities tend to be more competitive in attracting investment and expanding their industrial sectors. Conversely, countries with limited labor quality often occupy positions in the primary economy sector or low-wage labor intensive industries, resulting in relatively limited growth. Infrastructure is also important in shaping connectivity, which determines how efficiently a country participates in regional trade flows. Countries that lag behind due to structural factors usually find it difficult to cope with economic development and competitiveness.

In explaining this condition, the economic development theory proposed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso can be used to explain that the disparity in development in regional areas is not only influenced by internal factors of a country, because it turns out that the position of the country also affects the international economic structure. Cardoso rejects the view that underdevelopment is caused by domestic failure. He stated that developing countries experience development in an unequal relationship with developed countries, so the growth achieved often occurs under conditions of dependency (Cardoso, 2014). Many multinational companies build factories or invest in developing countries. At first glance, this situation seems beneficial because it creates jobs and increases production. However, the main profits often remain in the hands of foreign companies because technology, patents, and market control are still dominated by developed countries. As a result, developing countries grow but remain in a dependent position (Cardoso, 2014).

To address the development disparities in the Southeast Asian region, ASEAN established the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) as an effort for regional economic integration aimed at strengthening economic cohesion while reducing the gaps between member countries. AEC was officially implemented at the end of 2015 as a continuation of the ASEAN economic liberalization process since the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) (Ishikawa, 2021). Within the framework of the AEC Blueprint, one of the main pillars emphasizing is equitable economic development. This pillar indicates that ASEAN recognizes that economic integration will not be effective if it only benefits member countries with more advanced industrial and infrastructure capacities. Therefore, the AEC also emphasizes the development of MSMEs, the enhancement of regional connectivity, infrastructure development, and the reduction of the development gap through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). This program is specifically aimed at helping CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam) to enhance their competitiveness and accelerate their economic development process with more advanced ASEAN members. If we look at the context of Cardoso's economic development theory, the AEC can be understood as a regional effort to reduce structural dependence in ASEAN within the international economic system. If previously developing countries tended to be subordinately integrated into global capitalism, then the AEC seeks to enhance the region's bargaining position through stronger internal integration.

Inequality Condition in ASEAN

Income inequality among ASEAN member states represents perhaps the most striking and well-documented dimension of regional disparity. Data from the ASEAN Statistical Highlights 2024 reveal a per capita GDP of US\$84,700 for Singapore, compared to US\$2,500 for Cambodia and approximately US\$1,100 for Myanmar, a ratio exceeding 77:1 between the region's most and least developed economies. Brunei Darussalam, buoyed by its hydrocarbon resource endowment, recorded a per capita GDP of approximately US\$33,500, placing it second in the region, though its economic structure differs markedly from that of industrializing peers (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). The country's pronounced dependence on oil and gas exports renders direct comparisons with economies undergoing active industrial transformation largely untenable.

Laos and Cambodia, meanwhile, have posted GDP growth rates exceeding 6% in recent years, yet their per capita incomes measured in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms remain well below US\$10,000. Rapid growth unaccompanied by equitable distribution may, in fact, deepen intra-national inequality rather than alleviate it. Singapore's Gini coefficient of 0.52 illustrates this tension clearly: despite its aggregate wealth, the city-state exhibits the highest degree of internal inequality in the region, challenging the assumption that economic growth automatically translates into distributional equity. Relatedly, a longitudinal study of seven ASEAN economies spanning 1992–2018 found that long-run human capital accumulation correlates negatively with low human development index scores, underscoring the structural interdependence between growth quality and social outcomes (Vo et al., 2024).

Infrastructure disparity constitutes a second critical dimension of regional inequality. The Southeast Asia Energy Outlook 2024, published by the International Energy Agency (IEA), reports that while over 95% of households across ASEAN now have access to electricity, approximately 20% of the population still lacks access to clean cooking technologies. This gap is concentrated primarily in Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. This finding illustrates that electrification alone is insufficient to catalyze broad-based economic advancement when complementary infrastructure remains underdeveloped (IEA, 2024).

Connectivity gaps compound these disparities at the cross-border level. Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand possess well-integrated transport and energy networks, whereas Myanmar and Cambodia remain in the early stages of regional connectivity development. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), 98 cross-border infrastructure projects valued at US\$16.2 billion were approved across Southeast Asia between 2010 and 2024 by seven international financial institutions (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022). However, the benefits of these investments have been disproportionately concentrated in countries with stronger institutional absorptive capacity, further entrenching the divide between more and less developed economies within ASEAN.

The digital divide constitutes a third, and increasingly consequential, axis of regional stratification. A bibliometric analysis of 5,058 articles published between 2018 and 2023 in *Quality and Quantity* (Springer Nature) documents a substantial digital gap across the region. Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar lag considerably behind Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand in terms of digital infrastructure and technological literacy. Internet penetration rates in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar remain below 50%, whereas Malaysia and Singapore have surpassed the 80% threshold (Ha & Chuah, 2023).

Studies examining the E-Government Development Index (EGDI) in Southeast Asia consistently rank Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei at the top, while Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar trail behind due to limited internet access, inadequate digital infrastructure, and low levels of digital literacy among the general population. In economic terms, the contribution of the ICT sector to GDP varies considerably across ASEAN, ranging from 0.7% to 5.4%. Myanmar records the lowest Digital Usage Index (DUI) in the subregion (Ha & Chuah, 2023).

The consequences of this digital divide are far-reaching. Countries with underdeveloped digital infrastructure are systematically excluded from the region's burgeoning digital economy, which is projected to exceed US\$1 trillion in gross merchandise value by 2030 (UN DESA, 2024). The scarcity of domestic research funding in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar further entrenches technological dependency, as these countries remain reliant on imported technologies that frequently fail to address local needs. This structural condition of technological dependency proves difficult to reverse.

The inequalities manifest across these three dimensions are inseparable from deeper historical and institutional factors. Cambodia and Myanmar bear the legacy of protracted armed conflict, which has severely eroded institutional capacity and degraded basic infrastructure. Laos, as a landlocked state, faces persistent geographic constraints that substantially raise the costs of regional integration. While Singapore and Malaysia have invested systematically in education and infrastructure since the 1970s, the CLM countries (Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar) did not begin undertaking serious developmental reforms until after the 1990s (Sadaka et al., 2018).

A policy report from the ASEAN Secretariat (2022) further highlights that social protection expenditure in the region's developing economies remains critically low. Myanmar allocates just 6.3% of GDP to social protection, Laos 12.1%, and Cambodia falls within a comparable range. These figures stand in stark contrast to Malaysia (27.3%) and Thailand (68%), both of which operate considerably more developed welfare systems. The inadequacy of these social safety nets perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty and constrains the long-run accumulation of human capital.

Taking together, these findings reveal that inequality in ASEAN is inherently multidimensional and self-reinforcing. The substantial income gap between Singapore and Brunei, on one hand, and the CLM economies, on the other, does not arise in isolation. It is compounded by infrastructure deficits and digital exclusion that collectively limit the capacity of lagging states to capitalize on the opportunities generated by regional integration (Vo et al., 2024). It is worth noting that while Cambodia and Laos have recorded comparatively strong GDP growth in recent years, these gains have done little to alter their relative position in terms of regional welfare distribution. This pattern aligns with the broader literature suggesting that economic growth absent adequate investment in human capital and infrastructure tends to produce narrow, exclusionary trajectories of development.

The particular challenge confronting CLM countries is that they are entering the digital era while still working to complete foundational infrastructure development. This dual burden forces them to close two developmental gaps simultaneously. As more advanced Southeast Asian economies such as Singapore and Malaysia accelerate their appropriation of digital economic gains, the relative distance between the two groups risks widening further, even as both experience positive absolute growth (Zaw Oo, 2025).

The Role of the ASEAN Economic Community

The ASEAN Economic Community plays a vital role in addressing regional economic disparity in Southeast Asia through the process of economic integration among ASEAN member states. The AEC enables each member country to establish more open and interconnected economic relations within a single regional area. Through the implementation of a free market system, trade barriers such as tariffs and import-export restrictions can be reduced, thereby facilitating a smoother flow of goods and services. Countries with lower economic levels can gain greater opportunities to market their products to other member states. Economic integration through the AEC helps foster more equitable economic growth across the ASEAN region (Chia, 2013). With more open economic cooperation, member states have the opportunity to develop together and reduce the regional economic gaps that have persisted over time (Chia, 2013).

The implementation of the AEC exerts a positive impact on foreign investment growth and investment cooperation among ASEAN member states. This increase in investment occurs due to the ease of economic cooperation and the reduction of trade barriers implemented within the AEC framework (Rasyidin, 2016). Incoming investment exerts a substantial impact on economic development in developing ASEAN nations. Investment funds are utilized to construct infrastructure such as roads, ports, and industrial zones that support the economic activities of the community. The rise in investment generates new employment opportunities, thereby helping to reduce unemployment rates. Consequently, with this growth in investment, developing countries in ASEAN gain the opportunity to accelerate economic development and enhance public welfare on a broader scale.

The ASEAN Economic Community also implements various economic policies aimed at strengthening cooperation among member states in facing global competition. One of the steps taken is the formulation of more coordinated economic rules and standards within the ASEAN region. Through these policies, member countries are encouraged to align their trade, investment, and economic service systems to become more integrated (Jasin, 2017). The AEC also dedicates significant attention to the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), as this sector plays a major role in the economic activities of the ASEAN community. Support for MSMEs is provided through collaborative training, enhanced market access, and the development of production capabilities. Furthermore, the AEC encourages the improvement of workforce quality through cooperation in education and professional skills training among member states. This step is taken to ensure that each country has better readiness to face regional economic competition. Through these various policies, the AEC strives to build a regional economic relationship that is more interconnected and organized within a unified ASEAN regional cooperation system.

Regional economic cooperation among ASEAN member states is carried out through various forms of economic policies and integration. This cooperation is undertaken with the objective of creating more equitable economic development throughout the Southeast Asian region (Jasin, 2017). One form of implementation is the strengthening of regional connectivity through the development of better transportation and trade routes. Increased connectivity can help accelerate the distribution of goods and facilitate smoother economic relations among ASEAN member states. The AEC also supports human resource development by improving the quality of education and workforce training. These efforts aim to ensure that developing nations possess better capabilities to face regional economic competition. Furthermore, ASEAN provides development assistance to member states that are still lagging behind in order to enhance their economic capacity (Jasin, 2017). This assistance is delivered through development cooperation and economic support among member states. Through this approach, the benefits of economic integration are expected to be felt not only by developed ASEAN nations but also by developing countries such as Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia.

Analysis

The AEC framework has made a tangible contribution to reducing regional economic disparities, although the results still vary among member countries. Since the implementation of the AEC in 2015, several macroeconomic indicators have shown significant improvement. The average GDP growth of the ASEAN region reached 5.0 to 5.5% per year before the COVID-19 pandemic, while total intra ASEAN trade continued to increase. Nevertheless, the pace of economic convergence among member countries remains slow, especially for the CLMV group of countries. ASEAN economic integration through the AEC has expanded market access for developing countries, but the benefits are still distributed asymmetrically because countries with stronger institutional capacities tend to absorb more benefits from trade liberalization (Ishikawa, 2021).

One of the main mechanisms of the AEC in reducing disparities is through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI). This program directly targets CLMV countries by providing technical assistance, capacity building, and knowledge transfer. However, the effectiveness of the IAI still faces several obstacles. Development cooperation in less developed countries in Southeast Asia is still hindered by limited institutional absorption capacity and inconsistent financing commitments (Zaw Oo, 2025). This analysis strengthens the argument that efforts to reduce inequality are not sufficient merely by opening market access; more structured interventions are needed to build institutional foundations and basic infrastructure in underdeveloped countries.

From the perspective of Cardoso's dependency theory, integration through the AEC has not yet fully transformed the structural position of ASEAN developing countries within the regional economic system. Although the AEC opens up space for CLMV countries to participate in the regional value chain, their position in that value chain is still dominated by the role of suppliers of raw materials and cheap labor, while stages with higher added value such as product design, research and development, and marketing are still controlled by developed countries in the region. The integration of the AEC, which operates under conditions of uneven development, has the potential to produce a pattern of "dependent development" where growth occurs, but without genuine structural transformation (Apresian, 2014). The biggest challenge of the AEC does not lie in policy design, but rather in the highly variable implementation capacity among member countries (Chia, 2013).

Overall, the analysis shows that the AEC is an important tool, but it is not sufficient to fully address regional economic disparities. To reduce inequality, there are three important requirements that must be met. The first is a consistent and measurable funding commitment for infrastructure development in CLMV countries, followed by long-term and coordinated human capacity building programs, as well as digital inclusion strategies that ensure lagging countries can participate in the regional digital economy. The existing gap is at risk of widening if the more advanced member countries accelerate digital integration and transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study examines regional economic disparities in the ASEAN region and efforts to reduce them through the ASEAN Economic Community framework. Structural factors such as history, geographical location, and the institutional capacity of each member country influence the existing disparities, which encompass various dimensions, such as the digital divide, income, and infrastructure. Additionally, these disparities include various dimensions, including the digital divide. According to the data, the difference between Singapore and Myanmar in GDP per capita is more than 77:1, while the gap between developed countries and CLMV countries in access to digital infrastructure and basic services is still very large (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024).

To enhance the function of the AEC as an instrument of equity, several steps forward are needed, such as increasing funding for the IAI program and implementing stricter accountability mechanisms to ensure that the benefits truly reach the countries that need them the most. So, a comprehensive ASEAN digital inclusion framework must be created because the region's economic growth will increasingly be determined by each country's ability to use technology. It cannot be ignored that sustainable investment in human capital, education, training, and health is a long-term necessity. To stop intergenerational poverty, improving the social protection systems in CLMV countries must be a top priority. AEC will remain an integration mechanism that generates growth if there are no reforms. However, it has not yet been able to achieve its goal of becoming a true tool for equitable development in Southeast Asia.

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