

## **Recovery of the ASEAN Economy through a Sustainable Tourism Sector in the Post-COVID-19**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the post-COVID-19 economic recovery in the ASEAN region, particularly focusing on the sustainable tourism sector. To provide a comprehensive understanding, it is crucial to consider the pre-COVID-19 economic situation in ASEAN. Sustainable development, which encompasses both short-term and long-term ASEAN tourism development, has been a significant contributor to the economic growth of ASEAN countries. The research narrows down its focus to three countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, as they are the top tourist destinations in the ASEAN Region. The theoretical framework used in this research is sustainable development, which examines economic development through the tourism sector in four aspects: grassroots/people-centered development, environmental management, engagement with globalization, and the development impasse. The research methodology involves a qualitative approach through a literature study, examining previous research on economic recovery in ASEAN after COVID-19 and data from various references. The ultimate goal of this research is to provide insights for international relations (IR) studies, particularly focusing on ASEAN economic issues after COVID-19.

### **Keywords**

Recovery ASEAN, Economy, Tourism Sector, Post COVID-19, Sustainable Development

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant economic damage in various parts of the world, including Southeast Asia. Member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) face significant challenges in maintaining the stability of their economies amidst this global crisis. Data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) shows significant variations in ASEAN countries' Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2021-2022. Some countries managed to maintain positive economic growth, such as Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines, while other countries, such as Myanmar and Brunei Darussalam, experienced economic contraction.

The economic recovery process in the ASEAN region after the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be slow and full of challenges, such as uncertainty about the duration and impact of the pandemic, dependence on specific economic sectors that have been badly affected, vulnerability to external shocks, limited fiscal capacity, and the potential for increased economic and social inequality (Asia Regional Integration Center, 2023; Beh & Lin, 2022). The tourism sector, which previously contributed significantly to GDP and employment in many ASEAN countries, has become one of the sectors most affected by travel restrictions and a drastic decline in visitors (Kumar & Ekka, 2024; United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2019).

To face these challenges, ASEAN has created the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), which focuses on five main strategies, including increasing the capacity of the public health system, strengthening economic resilience, promoting sustainable development, strengthening food and natural resource security, and building a better ASEAN. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). Apart from that, ASEAN also has a regional comprehensive economic partnership agreement (RCEP) initiative, which is expected to play an essential role in helping the Southeast Asian economy to revive (Jong et al., 2021). With abundant natural and cultural tourism potential, the tourism sector is essential for ASEAN countries' economic growth and social development. However, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis also provides an opportunity for ASEAN countries to build a more sustainable and resilient tourism sector.

Efforts that can be made include promoting the concept of sustainable tourism, increasing investment in environmentally friendly tourism infrastructure, encouraging diversification of tourism products, increasing human resource capacity, and strengthening partnerships between government, the private sector and local communities (Dewanti, 2022; United Nations World Tourism Organization, n.d.). ASEAN can act as a facilitator and coordinator in developing cooperation frameworks, sharing best practices, and ensuring harmonization of regional tourism policies and standards. Tourism is one of the main pillars supporting ASEAN's economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The authors of this article have limited the ASEAN-member countries used as case studies of ASEAN countries rebuilding their tourism sectors, to Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, because these three countries have the highest-valued tourism sectors in the ASEAN region. Based on the theoretical framework and background used in this research, the authors posed a research question as to how the ASEAN economy might recover from the pandemic disruption of 2019-2022, through a sustainable tourism sector strategy in the post COVID-19 period.

The research hypothesis is that developing the ASEAN economy through a sustainable tourism sector necessitates regional and international cooperation. Based on the theory used, the hypothesis of this study is:

1. The recovery of ASEAN in the post-COVID-19 era through a sustainable tourism sector strategy can be achieved through government regulations to conserve or even restore the environment, especially in ASEAN tourist destination areas.

2. The recovery of ASEAN is not just a government's task, but a collective effort involving the people, namely communities in ASEAN society, that help promote ASEAN tourist destinations. Their active involvement is crucial in the recovery process.

3. The recovery of ASEAN is a global concern that necessitates international and regional cooperation. Only through unity and collaboration can we effectively combat the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Among the three hypotheses, the study foregrounds the recovery of the natural environmental aspect of tourist destinations in ASEAN as the most effective means of restoring tourist numbers and income from tourism to pre-pandemic levels because past over-development has come at a significant environmental cost that has made tourist destinations unattractive. Environmental recuperation will reproduce a clean, beautiful environment with appropriate but adequate facilities that are compatible with the environment and neatly arranged which will attract tourists in large numbers and will restore the ASEAN economy quickly.

## **Research Objectives**

The study's objectives are twofold, with a focus on both theoretical and practical aspects. These objectives are not only significant in enriching the field of International Relations (IR) but also in providing actionable strategies for policymakers and stakeholders.

On a theoretical level, this study aims to enrich the field of International Relations (IR) by offering a new perspective on economic development issues in ASEAN, particularly those arising from the pandemic. However, the practical implications of this theoretical contribution are equally significant. By providing insights on how ASEAN can expedite its

economic recovery in the face of an outbreak or pandemic, this study offers actionable strategies for policymakers and stakeholders, reinforcing its value.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

In this research, we use the existing literature on the topic to explore the efforts and challenges of economic recovery and sustainable tourism in the ASEAN region. The review is structured around several key themes: the role of ASEAN in promoting economic recovery and sustainable tourism, the potential of natural tourism and community-based tourism in supporting economic recovery, the impact of global supply chain improvements on ASEAN economies, and the role of technology in developing sustainable tourism. For example, the Aini article (2022) explores the efforts made by ASEAN as an international organization in promoting regional diplomacy and cooperation, primarily through forums such as ASEAN ministers responsible for information (AMRI) and the ASEAN comprehensive recovery framework (ACRF).

Zhang et al. (2023) explore the concept of natural tourism as a program that can build post-pandemic economic growth by exploiting the abundant natural tourism potential in ASEAN countries. Policies supporting the sustainable development of natural tourism, including environmental conservation, responsible management of natural resources, and empowerment of local communities, are crucial factors in realizing a green economy through this sector. Zhang's research aligns with ours, focusing on environmental factors, government policies, and a green economy as part of the effort to improve the economy post-COVID-19. However, the distinct aspect of our research is the emphasis on regional and international cooperation, which Zhang did not mention. Therefore, the novelty of our research lies in highlighting the importance of regional and international cooperation, which other researchers have yet to discuss extensively. Additionally, our research emphasizes the significance of the environmental sector, a focal point for governments in ASEAN.

Mangku (2021) writes about the policies used by ASEAN in essential sectors, even in the face of challenges. This underscores the resilience of the ASEAN region, which has identified vital sectors that need to be prioritized in economic recovery efforts, such as tourism, agriculture, and manufacturing industry. For the tourism sector, ASEAN has promoted sustainable tourism, which minimizes negative environmental impacts and provides economic benefits for local communities.

Aside from economic improvement, other relevant studies that examine the tourism sector include the research of Naha & Nandy (2022). Their work, based on a comprehensive review of industry reports and academic studies, highlights the enhancements in the global supply chain across key sectors like agriculture, textiles, and tourism. Importantly, Naha & Nandy (2022) identify the potential of the electronics and electronic commerce sectors as future economic growth drivers, underscoring the long-term positive impact of supply chain

improvements on ASEAN economies. This study's findings, based on a rigorous and systematic review of the literature, underscore the potential of supply chain improvements in promoting economic growth in the ASEAN region, but also highlight the need for further research on the specific strategies and policies that can maximize this potential.

Nguyen et al. (2021) highlighted the transformative potential of technology in the digital era, stating that it is the key to developing sustainable tourism in the ASEAN region. According to research by Nguyen et al. (2021), digital technology such as the Internet of Things (IoT), big data, and artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to help manage and plan tourism more efficiently and sustainably, inspiring a vision of a technologically advanced and sustainable ASEAN tourism sector.

In contrast to previous research, which discussed tourism recovery efforts using a framework, Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2014) highlighted the potential of community-based tourism (CBT) in supporting sustainable economic development in the ASEAN region. CBT involves active participation from local communities in planning, developing and managing tourism activities. This innovative approach not only encourages environmental conservation and preservation of local culture but also provides economic opportunities for local communities, making it a comprehensive solution to realizing sustainable economic recovery. This study's findings underscore the potential of CBT in promoting sustainable economic development, but also highlight the need for further research on the specific strategies and policies that can maximize its potential.

A study undertaken by Nair et al. (2022) underscores the pivotal role of tourism in achieving sustainable development goals in the ASEAN region. It highlights that well-managed tourism cannot only create jobs, increase income, and encourage investment in infrastructure and public facilities, but also foster inclusive economic growth. According to Khuong et al. (2022), this can be achieved through multi-stakeholder collaboration, which is instrumental in overcoming challenges and obstacles in developing sustainable tourism in the ASEAN region. The government, in particular, has a crucial role in creating supportive policies and regulations, providing infrastructure, and fostering a conducive environment for tourism. International organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and ASEAN can contribute by providing guidance, resources, and training programs to support sustainable tourism development.

Other research that is also relevant to sustainable tourism includes the work of Saunder et al. (2019) which illuminates the transformative potential of digital technology. For instance, the application of mobile applications, online booking platforms, and Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technology can revolutionize the process of travel planning, accommodation reservations, and exploring tourism destinations. Han et al. (2019) further argue that by using AR and VR technology, tourists can embark on virtual

explorations of destinations before their physical visits, or delve into local history and culture through more interactive and engaging experiences.

Tan et al. (2021) explain that digital technology can provide tourists with relevant and timely information, such as recommended tourist attractions, traffic conditions and weather updates. Through user-friendly applications and websites, information about access facilities and special services can be provided efficiently, allowing travelers to plan their trips better and more conveniently.

Digital technology can also be used to create exciting tourist experiences to improve the tourist experience (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). Gretzel et al. (2015) highlighted that technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analysis could be used to personalize travel recommendations and experiences according to individual preferences and behavior. However, the application of digital technology in tourism also faces challenges such as privacy and data security issues and potential negative impacts on the environment and local culture. Therefore, tourism stakeholders must develop and implement digital technology responsibly by considering sustainability and respecting local values (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015). Through the wise and integrated use of digital technology, the tourism sector can improve accessibility and tourist experience while maintaining environmental and cultural sustainability in the ASEAN region.

Pawitra & Tan's study (2003) presents a different perspective, advocating for economic recovery through a sustainable tourism sector. It underscores the pivotal role of collaboration between the government and the private sector. Public-private partnerships can facilitate more effective and integrated tourism development, by leveraging the resources, expertise, and perspectives of both parties. This highlights the importance of each stakeholder's role in the collective effort towards sustainable tourism in the ASEAN region. By harnessing the potential of sustainable tourism, the region can look forward to a brighter economic future post-COVID-19 pandemic.

On one hand, the government plays a crucial role in providing policies, regulations, and infrastructure that underpin sustainable tourism development (Dodds & Butler, 2010). The government also acts as a supervisor and quality guarantor to ensure that tourism activities are conducted with due regard to environmental, social, and cultural aspects. By combining the capacities of both parties through public-private partnerships, tourism development can be executed more efficiently and in line with sustainability principles (Pawitra & Tan, 2003). Therefore, a clear framework, guidelines, and good governance are essential to ensure that public-private partnerships in tourism can operate effectively and yield optimal benefits for all parties (Zapata & Hall, 2012).

However, the government has an important role in providing policies, regulations and infrastructure that support sustainable tourism development (Dodds & Butler, 2010). The

government can also act as a supervisor and quality guarantor to ensure that tourism activities are carried out by paying attention to environmental, social and cultural aspects. By combining the capacities of both parties through public-private partnerships, tourism development can be carried out more efficiently and in line with sustainability principles (Pawitra & Tan, 2003). Therefore, a clear framework, guidelines and good governance are needed to ensure that public-private partnerships in tourism can run effectively and produce optimal benefits for all parties (Zapata & Hall, 2012). With a strong partnership between the government and the private sector, sustainable tourism development in the ASEAN region can be encouraged, positively contributing to economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic.

From the many previous studies published, this research takes a more comprehensive approach to developing the ASEAN economy through a sustainable tourism sector. This study not only focuses on one or several specific aspects, but also covers the role of government, local communities, international partnerships, environmental management, and the application of digital technology in developing sustainable tourism in this region. This research also compares sustainable tourism development efforts in several ASEAN countries, especially Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, providing a broader perspective on best practices and lessons that can be learned from each country. Three crucial factors, namely the role of ASEAN society, international cooperation, and environmental development in ASEAN tourism areas, are novel in this research.

Other studies, such as that of Wijayani & Puspitarini (2022), focus on the economic recovery in ASEAN post-COVID-19. This research concentrates not on sustainable tourism but on improving the SMEs sector. Their argument is based on the rise of SMEs in e-commerce in ASEAN countries after COVID-19. This data provides another perspective on ASEAN's economic recovery after COVID-19. They emphasize the crucial role of micro, small, and medium enterprises (SMEs) in this effort. The authors also highlight ASEAN's initiatives to support this sector, mainly through trade agreements such as the Asian Trade in Goods Agreement. They argue that these factors are essential in facilitating the strong development of SMEs, ultimately enhancing their contribution to regional economic recovery.

This study uses sustainable development theory developed by David Harrison as the main theoretical basis. Harrison emphasized the importance of community-centered development (grassroots/people-centered development), wise environmental management (environment management), involvement with globalization (engagement with globalization), as well as efforts to overcome development deadlocks that cause challenges in development (the development impasse) (Butler, 1999; Goodwin, 2006; Harrison, 1996).

This grassroots/people-centered development definition refers to empowering local communities to take control of their economic, social and cultural development through the

tourism industry (Tolkach & King, 2015). This approach emphasizes the importance of involving local communities in planning, developing, and managing tourist destinations and ensuring that local communities can moderately enjoy the benefits of tourism (Saufi et al., 2014). By involving local communities in the tourism development process, a sense of ownership and responsibility for tourism development in their region can be created (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018). According to Kotze & Nel (2009), environmental management is not environmental management but rather a management or governance strategy whose authority comes from a predetermined legal mandate.

Environmental management in tourism refers to systematic efforts to minimize the negative impacts of tourism activities on the natural and cultural environment while ensuring the conservation and preservation of natural resources and ecosystems (McKercher et al., 2021). Apart from that, the importance of regional and international cooperation in facing globalization in the ASEAN tourism sector cannot be underestimated. Through this cooperation, ASEAN countries can strengthen their tourism competitiveness collectively, promote sustainable tourism, and protect the local environment and culture from the negative impacts of globalization (McKercher et al., 2021). The development deadlock refers to challenges in development where no progress is possible. This predicament is characterized by a need for more consensus regarding the meaning of development and failures in development policies that are not in line with expected results (Dittmar, 2009; Schuurman, 2002). Lack of equitable policies causes many risks, such as environmental damage, exploitation of natural resources, and erosion of culture and traditional values. This condition means that policies in the environmental development sector must be changed.

According to Harrison, sustainable development in the context of tourism is a complex concept with many dimensions. This concept aims to achieve tourism development that is environmentally, socially and culturally sound, as well as reducing dependence on foreign capital and increasing local ownership in the tourism industry (Beckerman, 1992; Sharpley, 2009; Tisdell, 1993). However, sustainable tourism development is challenging and can be seen as an oxymoron involving continuity and change (Adams, 1990; Hayle, 2005; Mitchell, 1989).

Harrison criticizes the dominant sustainable development paradigm and highlights the emergence of post-development schools and neoliberalism or alternative development approaches (Gmelch, 2012; Pattullo, 1996; Spencer, 2010; Strachan, 2002). He argues that sustainable tourism development is often seen as a morally desirable but essentially idealistic and impractical alternative, and its benefits are often valued more in rhetoric than in actual practice.

One of the main challenges in implementing sustainable tourism development is the balance of environmental, economic and socio-cultural benchmarks and the difficulty in



measuring social and cultural sustainability. Harrison also highlighted the importance of understanding the global and regional context in international tourism and the challenges faced in achieving sustainable tourism development related to the dominance of mass tourism.

In simple terms, Sustainable Development theory emphasizes the importance of local community participation, cultural sensitivity, and a critical understanding of the complex relationship between tourism, development, and poverty. Using Sustainable Development Theory as a theoretical basis, this research will explore ASEAN's economic recovery efforts after the COVID-19 pandemic through the tourism sector with sustainable development principles, such as community participation, environmental management, engagement with globalization, and poverty alleviation. This research will also criticize the challenges and limitations in implementing sustainable tourism development in the ASEAN region in the context of economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. The research results will show which factor the most dominant in contributing to ASEAN's economic recovery, hether the role of the ASEAN community, environmental improvement or international cooperation.

## **Research Method**

This study surveys and analyses the secondary data on economic recovery after COVID-19, of which there is now a large volume. Because of the huge volume, a deeper exploration of this literature is now needed to obtain a novel and comprehensive perspective on ASEAN's economic recovery after COVID-19. Quantitative methods are not used in this study. This research does not test several theories. Theory is needed only as an analytical tool to test the hypothesis. This study also limits the number of ASEAN countries to three that will be the subject of research. The reason is that these three countries have the most significant incomes in the tourism sector of all ASEAN countries. According to data, until December 2023, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia are the countries with the most tourist arrivals in the ASEAN region (MacroMicro, 2023). This means that if the conditions of these three countries improve, ASEAN's recovery through sustainable tourism will also improve.

Data was collected through a systematic survey of the existing literature, by looking at previous research on economic recovery in ASEAN after COVID-19. Data was also obtained through the official government websites of three countries (Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia) and international news, e-books, and journal articles relevant to this research. It is hoped that the proposed descriptive method can contribute to research design development by uniting various existing research fields and encouraging collaboration with other scientific disciplines.

## **Discussion**

### **The Role of Community in Post-COVID-19 ASEAN Economic Recovery in the Tourism Sector**

In the context of ASEAN tourism, grassroots/people-centered development is becoming increasingly crucial in line with efforts to promote sustainable and inclusive tourism in the region. Various initiatives and programs, such as the ASEAN Community-Based Tourism Standards, have been launched to encourage local community participation in tourism development (Novelli et al., 2017). This standard aims to guide ASEAN member countries in developing community-based tourism that involves local communities, ensures fair distribution of benefits, and preserves culture and the natural environment (Novelli et al., 2017).

Even though there are several good practices, implementing grassroots/people-centered development in ASEAN tourism also faces several challenges. One of the main challenges is the need for more capacity and resources that local communities possess to participate effectively in the tourism development process (Chok et al., 2007). This situation includes limited access to information, knowledge, skills and financial resources. Additionally, there is also a risk of cultural commodification and exploitation of local communities if grassroots/people-centered development is not implemented correctly (Tolkach & King, 2015). Several case studies regarding grassroots/people-centered development were studied by the author within the scope of ASEAN.

#### **1. Indonesia**

After the COVID-19 pandemic, Lombok, Bali, and Yogyakarta, leading tourism destinations in Indonesia, faced significant challenges in restoring the tourism sector. The grassroots/people-centered development (GCD) approach is a relevant strategy in this recovery effort. GCD emphasizes active participation and empowerment of local communities in tourism development so that local communities can directly benefit from economic benefits. The local government has launched the "Lombok Tourism Revitalization" program in Lombok, which integrates GCD elements. This program focuses on developing environmentally friendly tourism infrastructure, improving service quality, and strengthening the involvement of local communities in the tourism value chain (Wiranti et al., 2021).

Some critical steps include local community development, which is carried out by empowering local community groups to provide tourism services, such as tour guides, handicrafts and traditional culinary delights. This provides an alternative source of income for the community while preserving local culture and increasing community capacity by using training and mentoring programs to improve community skills in tourism management, service, and entrepreneurship. This aims to ensure good service quality, the sustainability of

tourism development (Wiranti et al., 2021), and the development of community-based ecotourism that involves local communities in managing natural conservation areas. This provides economic opportunities while preserving the environment (Biro Humas Kementerian Perdagangan, 2023).

Meanwhile, the regional government launched the Bali Tourism Development program in Bali, which also adopted GCD principles. This program aims to strengthen Bali's attractiveness as a cultural tourism destination while improving the welfare of local communities (Anggraini et al., 2023). Some of the main initiatives undertaken include revitalizing tourist villages involving local communities in developing and managing tourist villages that offer authentic cultural experiences. This project provides economic opportunities for the community while preserving Bali's cultural heritage, empowering micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with mentoring programs and access to capital provided to local SME actors engaged in the tourism sector, such as handicrafts, culinary and other services. This strategy directly supports local communities' economic growth (Anggraini et al., 2023). It increases environmental awareness by conducting campaigns and education to increase awareness of local communities and tourists about the importance of preserving the environment in Bali.

One example of GCD practice in ASEAN tourism can be found in the Banyaksari Tourism Village, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This village has succeeded in developing community-based tourism, which involves the active participation of local communities in planning, managing and distributing benefits from tourism activities (Aini & Wulandari, 2021). Local communities are involved in decision-making, managing tourism facilities, providing accommodation and culinary delights, and cultural activities. This approach has succeeded in improving the community's economic welfare while preserving the village's culture and natural environment (Aini & Wulandari, 2021). Lombok, Bali and Yogyakarta Tourism have committed to implementing the GCD approach to stimulate recovery in the tourism sector. However, the main challenge faced is ensuring fair and sustainable community participation and overcoming the potential for excessive commodification of culture (Tolkach & King, 2015).

Overall, case studies in Yogyakarta, Lombok, and Bali show that the GCD (Grassroots/People-Centered Development) approach has great potential to support the economic recovery of local communities after the COVID-19 pandemic while ensuring the sustainability of tourism in the future. This approach can create a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for sustainable tourism development by actively involving local communities and providing direct economic benefits.

## 2. Malaysia

As one of the leading tourism destinations in the ASEAN region, Malaysia has experienced a significant impact from the COVID-19 pandemic on its tourism sector. To recover the post-pandemic economy, Malaysia has adopted a Grassroots/people-centered Development (GCD) approach to tourism development. This approach not only aims to empower local communities but also emphasizes their active participation in the recovery process. One of the main initiatives launched is the "Malaysia Tourism Development" program which integrates GCD principles. This program focuses on developing sustainable tourism infrastructure, improving service quality, and strengthening the involvement of local communities in the tourism value chain (Mabrruroh, 2020; Wisroni et al., 2021). Some of the key steps taken in this program include local community development which is carried out through the formation of local community groups involved in providing tourism services, such as tour guides, handicrafts and traditional culinary delights. This strategy provides new economic opportunities for the community while preserving local culture and wisdom (Wisroni et al., 2021), as well as increasing community capacity with training and mentoring programs implemented to improve local community skills in the fields of tourism management, services and entrepreneurship.

This effort aims to ensure good service quality and guarantee the sustainability of community-based tourism development (Mabrruroh, 2020). It also aims to develop ecotourism that involves local communities in managing natural conservation areas. This condition provides economic opportunities while preserving the environment and supporting biodiversity conservation efforts (Sarana & Sari, 2022).

Apart from the Malaysia Tourism Development program, other initiatives adopt GCD principles in Malaysian tourism. For example, the Kampung Homestay program offers the experience of living with local people in traditional villages. This program provides opportunities for tourists to learn about the culture and lifestyle of local communities directly while providing economic benefits for these communities (Hamzah & Mohamad, 2012).

The main challenge in implementing GCD in the Malaysian tourism sector is ensuring fair and sustainable participation of local communities (Tolkach & King, 2015). However, the GCD case study in tourism in Malaysia shows that the empowerment and active participation of local communities is key in supporting economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic while ensuring the sustainability of tourism in the future. By involving local communities directly in tourism development, it not only provides economic benefits, but also creates a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for efforts to preserve the environment and local culture. This highlights the potential of the GCD approach, offering a promising path for the future of Malaysian tourism.

### 3. Thailand

A prominent tourism destination in ASEAN, Thailand has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the country has adopted a unique grassroots/people-centered development (GCD) approach to tourism recovery. This approach, unlike traditional top-down strategies, aims to empower local communities and ensure their active participation in the tourism development process. A key initiative of the Thai government, the 'Thailand Tourism Revitalization' program, is a testament to this approach. It integrates GCD principles, empowering local communities and fostering community-based tourism (Putri & Kresnawati, 2023).

Several necessary steps in this program include the development of tourist villages, which is carried out through establishing tourist villages managed by local communities. In these tourist villages, local communities directly provide tourism services, such as accommodation, culinary delights, handicrafts and cultural attractions. This provides new economic opportunities for the community while preserving local culture and wisdom, increasing community capacity with training and mentoring programs implemented to improve local community skills in tourism management, services, entrepreneurship and environmental management. This decision aims to ensure good service quality and guarantee the sustainability of community-based tourism and the development of community-based ecotourism that involves local communities in managing natural conservation areas (Putri & Kresnawati, 2023). These local communities provide economic opportunities while preserving the environment and supporting biodiversity conservation efforts (Vajirakachorn & Nepal, 2014).

Another notable GCD initiative in Thai tourism is the homestay program. This unique offering allows tourists to experience the culture and lifestyle of local communities firsthand, providing economic benefits for these communities. The program not only promotes cultural exchange but also contributes to the sustainability of local tourism (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015).

The success of GCD in Thai tourism is not just a result of government initiatives. The private sector has also played a crucial role by developing inclusive business models and involving local communities in the tourism supply chain. Non-governmental organizations and academics have contributed by building local communities' capacity and conducting research and advocacy to support GCD. This collaborative effort across sectors is a testament to the shared commitment towards sustainable and inclusive tourism development (Scheyvens, 2002).

GCD in ASEAN tourism is a critical approach to ensure sustainability and equitable distribution of benefits from the tourism industry in this region. By actively involving local communities in the tourism development process, a greater sense of ownership and

responsibility can be created and ensure long-term sustainability. Even though there are various challenges in its implementation, GCD must be a top priority in ASEAN tourism recovery efforts after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as becoming a foundation for sustainable and inclusive tourism development in the future.

### **Environmental Management in Sustainable Tourism in ASEAN**

Environmental management is a crucial aspect in ensuring the sustainability of the tourism sector, especially in the ASEAN region, which is rich in natural resources and biodiversity. The definition and concept of environmental management in tourism refers to systematic efforts to minimize the negative impact of tourism activities on the natural and cultural environment while ensuring the conservation and preservation of natural resources and ecosystems (Insani, 2023). This approach aims to balance tourism development and environmental protection so that future generations can also enjoy the benefits of sustainable tourism.

The importance of environmental management for tourism sustainability in ASEAN must be considered. The tourism sector in this region relies heavily on natural beauty and cultural richness, which are the main attractions for tourists (Mihalič, 2000). With effective environmental management, environmental damage and degradation can threaten tourism attractiveness, which in turn will positively impact the economies of ASEAN countries. Unsustainable tourism can also exploit natural resources such as water, energy, and land, causing pollution and climate change (Kasim et al., 2021). To ensure the sustainability of the tourism sector in ASEAN, member countries have implemented various best environmental management practices. Some examples of these practices include implementing environmental management systems in hotels, resorts and other tourist facilities; use of renewable energy such as solar and wind power in tourism operations; recycling and waste reduction programs in tourist destinations; and conservation and protection of natural areas such as forests, coral reefs and wildlife habitats (European Commission, 2013). These practices minimize the negative impacts of tourism, improve operational efficiency, and reduce costs in the long term.

One of the main approaches to environmental management in the tourism sector is implementing an environmental management system (EMS). EMS is a systematic and integrated framework for managing the environmental impact of business operations. In tourism, EMS can be applied to hotels, resorts, restaurants and other tourist facilities. Implementing EMS involves identifying and controlling significant environmental impacts, complying with environmental regulations, and continuously improving environmental performance (Bohdanowicz, 2006). A concrete example of EMS implementation in the hotel industry is using international standards such as ISO 14001. Hotels implementing ISO 14001 must identify significant environmental impacts from their operations and develop action

plans to manage them. This rule includes managing energy, water, waste and chemicals used in daily operations. As a result, hotels can reduce their ecological footprint, increase operational efficiency, and attract guests who care about the environment (Chan & Wong, 2006).

Some of the main initiatives that ASEAN has carried out include establishing guidelines for sustainable tourism development, including environmental aspects, collaboration and sharing of best practices among member countries, and regional programs and projects to support green and environmentally friendly tourism development (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). ASEAN is also committed to increasing awareness and human resource capacity in managing the tourism environment in the region. Environmental training and education programs for tourism industry players and local communities are essential to this effort. For example, the ASEAN tourism standards reward destinations, hotels, and tour operators who implement sustainable and environmentally friendly tourism practices (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Although many efforts have been made to manage the environment in the tourism sector, various challenges still need to be overcome. One of the main challenges is the need for more awareness and understanding of the importance of environmental management among tourism industry players and tourists. Many industry players focus more on short-term profits than long-term sustainability, while tourists often care less about the environmental impacts of their activities (Gossling, 2002). Another challenge is limited resources and capacity to implement effective environmental management practices. Many tourist destinations, especially in developing countries in ASEAN, face financial and technical obstacles in implementing environmental management systems, renewable energy and recycling programs.

Support from the government and the international community is needed to help overcome these obstacles. Apart from the various challenges, many opportunities can be exploited to improve environmental management in the ASEAN tourism sector. One key opportunity is increasing global awareness of the importance of sustainability and environmental responsibility. Modern travelers are increasingly attracted to destinations that offer environmentally friendly and sustainable tourism experiences. Destinations that can promote themselves as sustainable tourism destinations can attract this growing market segment (Weaver, 2006)—an excellent opportunity to improve environmental management. Innovations in green technology, such as smart energy management systems, mobile applications for destination management, and waste processing technologies, can help reduce the environmental impact of tourism activities and increase operational efficiency. This technology can benefit significantly, economically, and environmentally (Gretzel, 2011).

## **1. Tourism Environmental Management in Thailand**

Thailand, as one of the leading tourist destinations in ASEAN, has taken various steps to manage the environmental impact of its tourism sector. The Thai government works with the private sector and local communities to develop and implement various environmental management initiatives. One successful example is the "Green Leaf" program, which encourages hotels and resorts to adopt environmentally friendly practices. The program includes environmental audits, training and certification for hotels that meet specific environmental standards. As a result, many hotels in Thailand have succeeded in reducing energy and water consumption and managing waste more effectively (Wejwithan et al., 2018). Apart from that, Thailand has also developed various conservation and ecotourism areas that focus on environmental preservation and empowering local communities. For example, Khao Yai National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site, offers ecotourism experiences that educate tourists about biodiversity and the importance of conservation. Tourists can enjoy trekking, wildlife watching, and other environmentally friendly activities that benefit local communities economically (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d.).

## **2. Tourism Environmental Management in Indonesia**

With its abundant natural wealth, Indonesia has also adopted various environmental management practices in the tourism sector. One important initiative is the development of ecotourism in Komodo National Park, which is famous for its population of Komodo dragons and the beauty of its underwater world. The Indonesian government collaborates with various non-governmental organizations and local communities to manage this national park, focusing on conservation and sustainable tourism. Steps taken include limiting the number of visitors, training tour guides on conservation, and environmental awareness campaigns for tourists (The Jakarta Post, 2018).

In Bali, one of Indonesia's leading tourist destinations, environmental management is also a priority. Many hotels and resorts in Bali have adopted environmentally friendly practices, such as using renewable energy, waste management and water conservation. These initiatives are supported by local government programs that encourage sustainable tourism through regulations and incentives. Apart from that, Bali also has various ecotourism projects involving local communities, such as tourist villages, that offer authentic cultural and natural experiences while preserving the environment (Ginaya et al., 2020).

The future of environmental management in ASEAN tourism relies heavily on the commitment and collaboration of all stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, local communities and tourists. To achieve long-term sustainability, continuous efforts must be made to increase all parties' awareness, capacity, and involvement in environmental



management practices. One important step is strengthening regulations and policies that support sustainable tourism. Governments in ASEAN countries need to set clear standards and guidelines for environmental management in the tourism sector and provide incentives for industry players who adopt environmentally friendly practices. In addition, it is essential to increase supervision and law enforcement to ensure compliance with environmental regulations (Permatasari, 2022).

#### **ASEAN International Cooperation in Post-COVID-19 on Economic Development**

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a significant blow to the tourism sector in the ASEAN region, causing a drastic decline in international tourist arrivals and significant economic losses (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2020). In facing these global challenges, international and regional cooperation is essential for ASEAN in order to restore the tourism sector and encourage sustainable economic growth. One of the international cooperation efforts carried out by ASEAN is through a partnership with the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). ASEAN and UNWTO have collaborated in developing a "post-COVID-19 ASEAN tourism recovery plan," which aims to facilitate the recovery of the tourism sector in the region in a coordinated and sustainable manner (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). This plan includes strategies and concrete steps to support tourist destinations, revitalize tourism businesses, and promote sustainable and environmentally friendly tourism (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

Regional cooperation is also an important factor in the development of sustainable tourism in ASEAN. ASEAN member countries have worked together through various initiatives to promote sustainable tourism. One example is the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan (ATSP) 2016-2025, which aims to promote ASEAN as a quality and sustainable tourism destination. ATSP includes various programs and activities supporting sustainable tourism development, such as capacity building, development of sustainable tourism standards, and promoting environmentally friendly tourist destinations. In addition, ASEAN member countries collaborate on various cross-border projects that support sustainable tourism. As a regional cooperation forum, the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand growth triangle (IMT-GT) also created a "visit year IMT-GT 2023-2025" program involving ten provinces in Indonesia, Malaysia and Southern Thailand. It is hoped that this program can encourage the acceleration of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, especially in the tourism sector (Kementerian Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif, 2023).

ASEAN has also collaborated with other international bodies, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The partnership with the OECD is focused on developing sustainable tourism policies and standards and increasing human resource capacity in the ASEAN tourism sector (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020).

Meanwhile, collaboration with ADB aims to facilitate investment and financing in developing environmentally friendly tourism infrastructure and supporting inclusive economic growth in this region (Asian Development Bank, 2022). Through this collaboration, ASEAN can leverage the expertise and experience of international partners to develop effective strategies to promote sustainable and inclusive tourism recovery.

Apart from cooperation with international organizations, ASEAN has strengthened bilateral relations with key partner countries in the tourism sector. For example, ASEAN and the European Union have launched the ASEAN-EU Blue Book for sustainable and inclusive tourism, which provides practical guidance for developing sustainable and inclusive tourism in the ASEAN region (ASEAN-EU Blue Book, 2022). This guide covers recommendations and best practices in human resource development, digital marketing and environmental management in the tourism industry. To stimulate economic recovery after COVID-19, international cooperation is also focused on developing human resource capacity in the ASEAN tourism sector. ASEAN has collaborated with organizations such as the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) to provide training and skills development programs for workers in the tourism industry (International Labour Organization, 2022; Pacific Asia Travel Association, 2021). This goal is to prepare a competent and adaptive workforce to face post-pandemic challenges and support sustainable and quality tourism growth.

International cooperation also includes efforts to promote and market ASEAN tourist destinations globally. ASEAN has collaborated with leading digital platforms such as Booking.com, Expedia, and Airbnb to increase the online visibility and marketing of regional tourist destinations (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). This partnership allows ASEAN to reach a broader global tourist market and promote eco-friendly, authentic, and sustainable tourism experiences. Despite challenges in coordinating recovery efforts among ASEAN countries with diverse social, economic and cultural contexts, international cooperation has helped strengthen the region's capacity to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector (Tolkach & King, 2015). By leveraging global partners' resources, expertise and best practices, ASEAN can accelerate tourism recovery while ensuring the sustainability and inclusiveness of future economic growth.

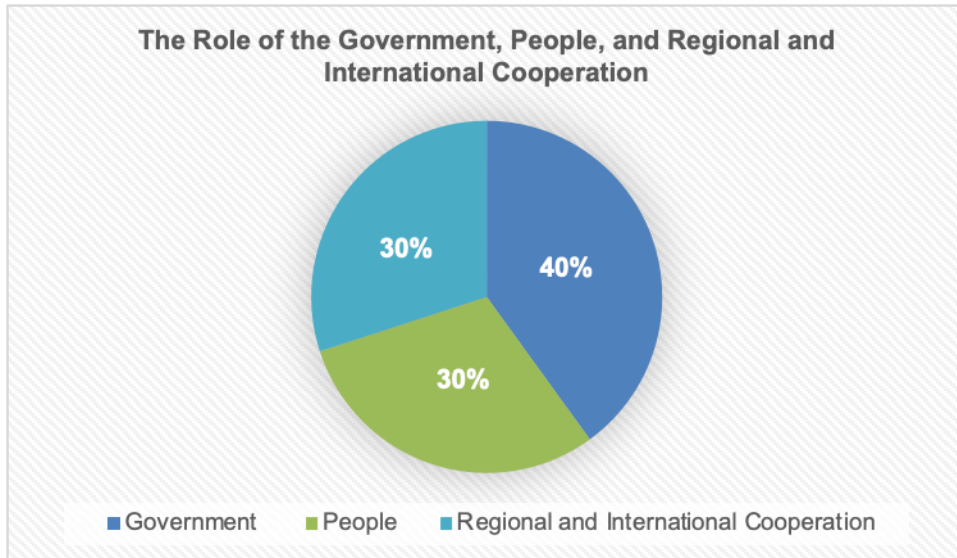
In building sustainable tourism, a change in mindset and awareness is needed from all parties involved. Several pillars needed to strengthen sustainable tourism development are sustainable tourism destination management, economic utilization for local communities, cultural preservation for the community and visitors, and environmental conservation.

Based on the data obtained in this paper, the authors use a table to illustrate the role of the government, society, and international cooperation in improving the ASEAN

economy through the sustainable tourism sector, which focuses on three countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

**Table 1** Identification of the Role of Government, Community, and Regional and International Cooperation in Improving the ASEAN Economy through the Sustainable Tourism Sector

Country	The Role of Government in Environmental Management, People and Regional and International Cooperation		
	Government in Environmental Management	People	Regional and International Cooperation
Indonesia	Regulations and incentives for green tourism  Initiative for tourism on the Islands of Komodo and Bali	Development of tourist villages  Active participation of local communities	Capacity increase  Cooperation with non-governmental organizations
Malaysia	Regulations and incentives for green tourism  Ecotourism development  Malaysia tourism development program	Increasing community capacity  Empowerment of local communities	Human resource capacity development  Collaboration with ADB and ILO
Thailand	Regulations and incentives for green tourism  Development of conservation areas  Green leaf program	Increasing community capacity  Empowerment of local communities	Promotion of tourist destinations  Partnership with UNWTO and OECD



**Figure 1** The most dominant role in developing the ASEAN economy after COVID-19 is based on sustainable tourism.

**Source:** Authors' data processing results, 2024.

Based on this processed data, the government's role is the most influential in developing the ASEAN economy post-COVID-19, among the three factor's roles in rebuilding a sustainable tourism sector. The chart above shows that the government's role in developing the ASEAN economy reaches 40 percent, slightly more significant than the role of society and international cooperation.

These three ASEAN countries are seriously paying attention to the environmental sector in tourist destinations, not only to improve the ASEAN economy post-COVID-19 but also to create significant employment opportunities. This can be seen from the large amount of budget they have spent. The Indonesian government's fiscal stimulus of IDR 695.2 trillion is used to fund various labour-intensive programs, including green programs such as the 15,000-hectare mangrove forest restoration project. This project, which has created jobs for around 25,000 people along the Indonesian coastline, is a testament to their commitment to both the environment and the workforce (Ministry of Finance Indonesia, 2021). Malaysia, through Sustainable Sukuk, has issued funds of up to RM10 billion, the proceeds of which are channeled to eligible social or environmentally friendly projects (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2021). Thailand will carry out environmental management post-COVID-19 to address various ecological challenges. The total allocation for environmental management reached 16.143 billion Thai baht, a substantial increase from previous years, and a significant contributor to job creation in the region (Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning Thailand, 2022; Thailand's Budget Bureau, 2022).

**ASEAN Economic Recovery Data: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (2019-2024)****Table 2** GDP per year (%)

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Malaysia	4.4	-5.6	3.1	8.7	4.5	4.8
Indonesia	5.0	-2.1	3.7	5.3	5.0	5.1
Thailand	2.2	-6.2	1.5	2.6	3.7	3.6

**Source:** International Monetary Fund (2024).

**Table 3** GDP (in million US\$)

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Indonesia	1119.1	1058.4	1186.1	1319.1	1391.8	1485.4
Malaysia	364.7	337.3	372.7	406.3	431.5	458.6
Thailand	544.3	501.8	505.9	495.3	512.2	536.8

**Source:** International Monetary Fund (2024).

From the table above, it is evident that ASEAN's economic recovery from COVID-19 has been on an upward trajectory from 2019 to the end of 2021. In 2020, the economic growth conditions of the three ASEAN countries were a cause for concern, reaching a negative figure. However, in 2021, there was a noticeable improvement to 3 percent, and by 2023, the average economic improvement had reached 5 percent. The GDP of the three countries also shows a significant improvement, as per IMF data, further indicating the region's economic recovery.

**Table 4** Number of International Tourist Arrivals (in million)

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Indonesia	16,11	4,05	1,56	5,89	11,68
Malaysia	26,10	4,33	0,14	10,07	20,14
Thailand	39,92	6,73	0,51	11,07	28,15

**Source:** Badan Pusat Statistik Indonesia (2024), United Nations World Tourism Organization (2023).

**Table 5** Income from International Tourism (in million US\$)

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Indonesia	16,9	3,4	0,5	6,8	14,0
Malaysia	19,8	3,0	0,1	6,5	14,9
Thailand	59,8	13,4	5,1	14,9	29,7

**Source:** United Nations World Tourism Organization (2023).

Tourism data after COVID-19 in 2021, when conditions began to return to normal without WFH (Work from Home), showed that the number of tourists had continued to increase. Malaysia and Thailand received 10 to 11 million foreign tourists in 2022, a significant recovery from the pre-COVID-19 levels. Thailand obtained the highest income from the tourism sector from 2021 to 2024 after COVID-19. Thailand became the country with the highest income from the tourism sector, rising from 14 to 29 million US dollars from 2022 to 2023. This data means that the tourism sector is significant in the ASEAN economic recovery process based on statistical data from three countries: Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

## Conclusion and Suggestion

The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted severe damage on the tourism sector in the ASEAN region, leading to a sharp decline in tourist arrivals and substantial economic setbacks. However, this crisis has also presented an opportunity for ASEAN to foster a more sustainable and inclusive tourism industry. This research underscores the urgency of adopting a grassroots development approach (grassroots/people-centered development) in tourism, implementing effective environmental management, and navigating the challenges of globalization as crucial elements of ASEAN's post-COVID-19 economic recovery strategy.

Grassroots development, a development model centered on local communities, is heralded as the cornerstone of fostering a prosperous economy and an inclusive society. This approach places community participation and networking at its core, making the organization more representative of the communities it serves. In the context of tourism, grassroots development is not just a strategy, but a testament to the invaluable role of local communities in ensuring sustainability and fair distribution of benefits.

Effective environmental management in sustainable tourism is a critical factor. These endeavors encompass processes that mitigate tourism's environmental footprint while promoting the conservation and preservation of natural resources. ASEAN has underscored the significance of eco-friendly tourism practices and ecotourism in its post-COVID-19 green economy recovery plan. The region's engagement with globalization is also a pivotal aspect,

with globalization exerting significant influence on the tourism sector. While globalization brings economic and technological prospects, it also poses challenges in terms of environmental sustainability and cultural preservation, necessitating a delicate balance.

ASEAN needs to develop the right strategy to face globalization in the tourism sector. In facing the challenges of tourism development in the post-COVID-19 era, ASEAN has taken strategic steps, such as a tourism recovery plan, sustainable economic growth, social inclusiveness, environmental sustainability, and cultural diversity in recovery efforts. Sustainable tourism encourages green and equitable economic recovery in the ASEAN region.

The suggestions from this study for further research in developing the ASEAN economy, especially after COVID-19, are that it is essential to continue sustainable tourism strategies, especially in the environmental sector. The environment is a vital factor for the long-term progress of the ASEAN tourism sector. ASEAN often promotes and holds meetings with international parties without realizing the environmental factors involved in building ASEAN's tourism economy.

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