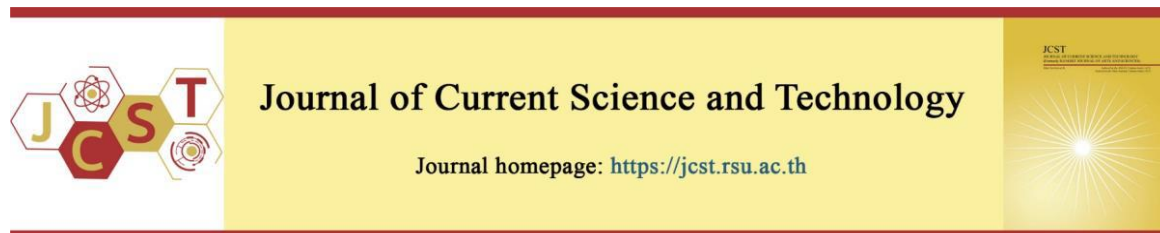


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ASEAN Population and Work Forces Views from Engaging with Princess Maha Chakri Award Teachers

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Special Lectures From Conferences (Keynote Address)

Invited article

Abstract

This speech explores Thailand's efforts to align its education system with regional and international standards. It highlights the role of the Princess Maha Chakri Award (PMCA) Foundation, which spearheads initiatives to leverage education for economic and social development by emphasizing innovative teaching methods, inclusive education policies, and the use of technology to expand access to quality learning. The speech also underscores the interconnectedness of education, population dynamics, and workforce development across the ASEAN region, emphasizing the importance of collaboration to address shared challenges and opportunities.

1. Introduction

The speaker has been an ASEAN traveler for over 40 years. It started in the 1970's after the US pulled out from Vietnam in 1975, necessitating consolidation in international political arena and international trades of the original 5 ASEAN countries – ASEAN 5 (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand). It had also led to jointed development cooperations, e.g. education, science and technology (S&T), social development. Negotiation on trades with Dialog Partners under GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades) and before establishment of WTO (World Trade Organization) were more cohesive. Development supports were received from major ASEAN Dialog Partners then, i.e. Australia, the European Community (EC), Canada, Japan, US and New Zealand. One of the significant cooperative areas was S&T cooperations.

The speaker was a chairman of an ASEAN committee on energy research from 1980's to 2000's, becoming deeply engaged with ASEAN and actively involved in S&T circles until 2010's.

Over this 40-year period, Brunei became the 6th ASEAN member in 1984, followed by the 4 CLMV countries, Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997) and Cambodia (1999) (Figure 1). Over the years, ASEAN has engaged with more Dialog Partners, Sectorial Dialog Partners and Development Dialog Partners. Examples are Korea, China, Russia and India. Novel economic and political instruments are established such as ASEAN plus One, and East Asia Summit. Inclusion of CLMV countries into ASEAN has reduced confrontation resulting from the colonial legacy, the Cold War and the Indochina war three decades before that. The ASEAN ethos has gradually evolved from acrimony

to cooperative and engaging tones. Foes become neighbors and trading partners. Prosperity, social infrastructures such as education, quality of workforce significantly improved. A major lesson learned from ASEAN flourishing in the past 2-3

decades is **peaceful coexistence with neighbors**. ASEAN should not be dragged into being proxies anymore, as in 1950's to 1990's, proxies of and proxy for serving powerful nations.

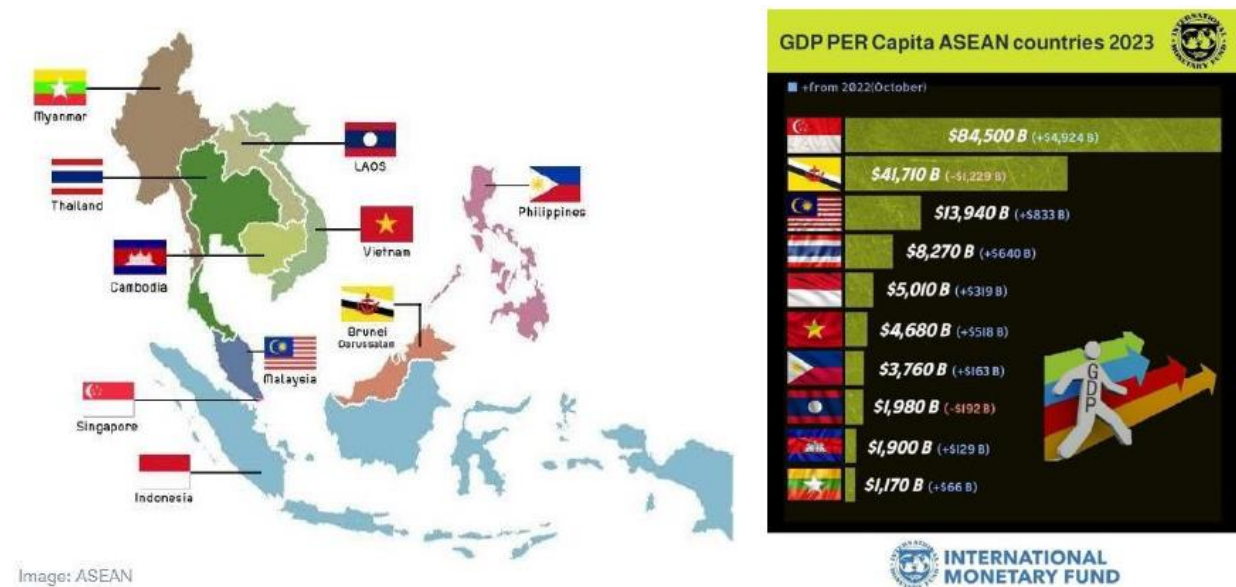


Figure 1 ASEAN members



Figure 2 The Princess Maha Chakri Award

The speaker's second deep engagement with ASEAN from the 2010's until present is on education and equity, not S&T, through the Princess Maha Chakri Award – PMCA Foundation (Figure 2). The Foundation was established in 2014 and the Award in 2015 to celebrate the 60th Birthday Anniversary of Princess Maha Chakri. This is in recognition of HRH commitments, devotion and work **for education, children development, especially marginalized groups, and equity**. The main criterion for teachers receiving the Award is “Teachers who have change lives of students” from ASEAN and Timor Leste, totaling 11 countries. Also of importance, recognition is given to “teachers whose commitments and devotion inspire their fellow teachers” to thread a similar path. The Award is given every 2 years to Education. Each Ministry of Education then sets up their own committees to spell out the detailed criteria and process of selection.

The selection process reflects **national priority** that each country wants to **show case** and **aligns with regional and international standards**.

Besides the knowledge, experience, innovation, competency, and leadership attributes of the teachers that are considered, each country also brings about the special traits that these outstanding teachers contribute to grooming the new generation in their respective country. For example, Singapore shows their teachers whose area of expertise is in **special education**. The government supports special education needs and commits to their policy of **leaving no one behind**, particularly those with disabilities. While Indonesia and Malaysia show case teachers with **skills in IT, STEM, and digital technology** for innovation in teaching and learning, The Philippines shows case **their indigenous culture and community engagement** through the teachers whom they selected to receive the Princess Maha Chakri Award.

These are ways in which ASEAN countries develop their workforce through the lens of the speaker on PMCA recipients.



Figure 3 PMCA family 2015-2023



Figure 4 PMCA family PMCA family 2015-2023

2. Ways in which ASEAN Countries Develop their Workforce

Most national candidates are outstanding teachers, qualified for presidential or prime minister awards in their countries (Figures 3-4). For Thailand, selection is carried out by 77 provincial selection committees, with multi stakeholders, namely, education, academic, private and media sectors. Each provincial selection committee is chaired by a provincial governor. There are 150-160 final nominees from Thailand. One is chosen as the Thai PMCA recipient to receive the PMCA Award. The remaining teachers received Ku Na Korn (คุณนก), Kru Ying Khun (ครูยิ่งคุณ) and Kru Kwan Sidh (ครูขวัญศิษฐ์) awards from the Foundation, they are PMCAF teachers. All PMCA teachers and Thai PMCAF teachers are expected to be drivers or change agents on Thai education-learning system and “new value creation”. They are encouraged to begin a journey on disseminating knowledge and experience to their students and fellow teachers, nationally and globally. If possible, they should advocate new education measures and policy in their countries. This is what I call “after sales services”. The Foundation provides technical supports and networking for the new value creation, in Thailand, ASEAN, and Timor Leste. Of increasingly importance, the Thai private sector contributes through their CSR programs and special

projects programs, e.g. learning infrastructures, scholarships.

The Foundation seeks to understand the evolving national socio-economic context, national and local education system dynamism in order to help drive knowledge-learning sharing and new value creation. This being so, from 2015 until present delegations from the Foundation visited nearly all of the schools of 55 PMCA teachers in 11 countries, and many tens of the Thai PMCAF schools. Delegations observe teachers in action as well as real time student-teacher interactions. School visits enable PMCA to be front row spectators where live education is taking place, how it happens, who are live actors. Delegations are met and carry out dialogs with PMCA teachers, their principals and colleagues, school boards, teachers’ unions and representatives of local government. These are highly unique and once-in-a-life-time opportunities.

Strategically with micro-observation at school classroom, delegations meet high official of the Ministry of Education on country policy and education initiatives. The delegations pay courtesy call to the Thai ambassadors, receive in depth briefing from Thai ambassadors and high-ranking Thai officials from other ministries abroad. Discussions are held with Thai private sectors representatives, normally 5-10 global, regional and national players at each dialog, are carried out. The dialogs have become remarkably

useful. It turns to be a joint analysis session on Thai investments, opportunities, political situations, quality of education and workforce etc. Thai investments in ASEAN cover a wide spectrum from global players to small S E's. Investments span agricultures, foods and beverages, manufacturing, energy exploration and services, telecommunications and IT, chains of hotels, hospitals and high-end department stores, right down to SME's importing Thai components of vehicles and motorcycles and fruits. Of recent interest, discussions are focused on strengthening of **Thai soft power** through diplomacy with Thai business activities and CSR. Opportunities are identified on Thai soft power empowerment through education and human resources development in synchronization with the PMCA Foundation.

The contents of this special lecture are extracted and derived from the speaker's long involvement with ASEAN and working context of PMCA as front row spectators, dialogs with Ministry of Education, the Thai Ambassadors and the Thai private sector.

2.1 Reflections on Country Development and Challenges through Lens on PMCA Teachers

- **Physical infrastructures investments** rapidly increase in all countries, except Myanmar having economic contractions. This has been greatly achieved through (i) foreign direct investment from non-ASEAN countries, for example, China and Japan as key investors, and (ii) intra ASEAN investment, for example, by Vietnam and Thailand in Laos and Cambodia. Investments from US and EU countries are still significant.

- **COVID 19 pandemics** have greatly impacted economy, finances as well as population health and education. Socio-economic infrastructures, including health system and social safety nets, have been severely tested. Currencies of Laos PDR, Indonesia and Myanmar were significantly weakened at some point. Singapore dollar remains strong.

- **Countries with markedly growth trends and to watch** are Vietnam and Philippines, registering large 2023 economic growth. Growth drivers are large **inflow of dynamic, entrepreneurial young labor forces**. Revival of tourism will stimulate growth, development of public lands for tourism, reskilling, upskilling and new skilling (RUN) of labor forces for employment. Disputes of the South China Sea and Southeast Asia continental shelf pose real risks to both countries. Both countries need upgrading physical

infrastructures, economic and technology investments.

Both countries suffer from perennial problems of urban and rural disparities, but are determined to leap-frog in education. Vietnam emphasizes **world class education standards** whereas Philippines supplies the world with **quality teachers, labor, and domestic helpers**.

- **High quality of life standard** is characteristic of Singapore and Brunei, having highest DP per capita. Both have small population and low birth rate. Quality and productivity of small workforce and limited natural resources pose future challenge for both. Risks are real on being net import country on foods, energy, and professionals.

2.2 Education Investment and Development

Education investment and development are priority and of importance in all ASEAN countries and Timor Leste. overnment and foreign investors play roles in education investment and development. Nearly all countries have cooperation programs in education. ASEAN middle income countries have sizable government budgets on education, right from kindergarten, basic education, vocational education to higher education. Cambodia, Laos PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam and Timor Leste receive considerable assistance on education development.

- **Demographic trends** in ASEAN countries of large population (Figure 5) show that within one generation, Year 2050, except Thailand and Myanmar, all countries have population increase. Large population implies large workforces, domestic markets, and economy. Thailand is an exception that the population slightly declines.

Of great concerns to Thailand are decreasing and aging labor forces, and more worrisome, large aging population. Dependency ratio gets worse. Thai domestic market becomes smaller, aging and with decreasing work forces, imply **declining productivity**. To compensate for and overcome these declining productivity in foreseeable future Thailand would have to train unskilled workers and working migrants from neighbor countries, allow **special employment status and preferential settlements of selected workers**, and if possible, **assimilate them** and eventually add new members to **neighbor country diaspora in Thai society**, similar to Chinese Diaspora in Thailand over few centuries ago. At professional level, mobility pf university students, researchers and S&T professionals should be accorded priority. Selected professionals are assimilated.

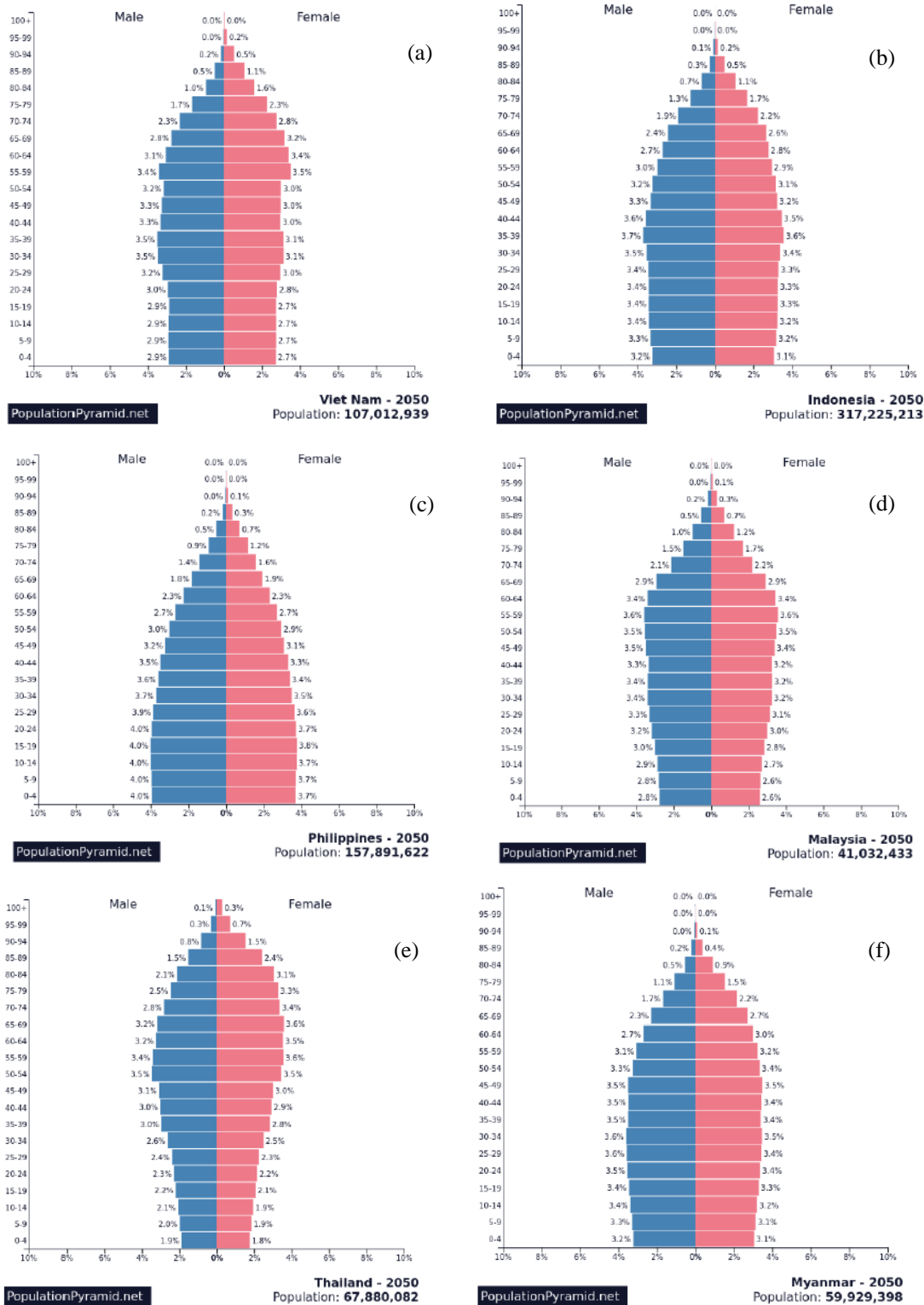


Figure 5 Population pyramid:
(a) Vietnam, (b) Indonesia, (c) Philippine, (d) Malaysia, (e) Thailand, (f) Myanmar

Too Few Babies, Too Few Workers, Too Many Old People.

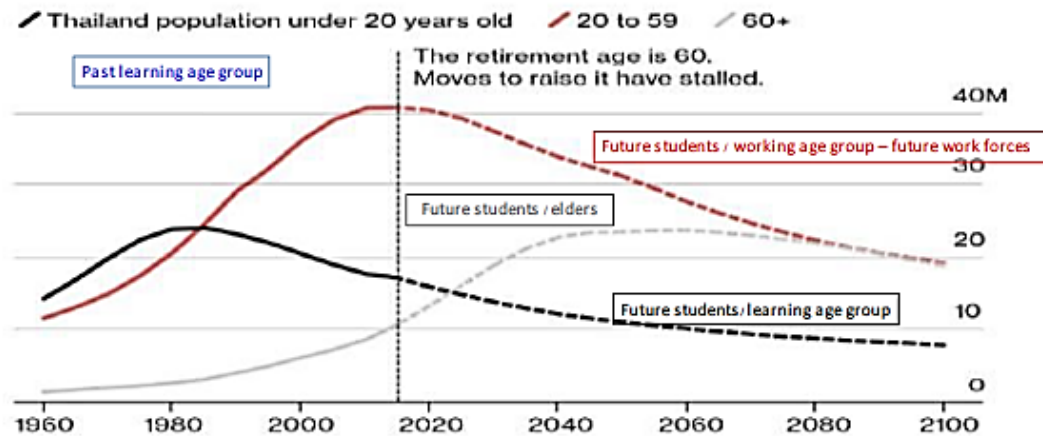


Figure 6 Thailand population under twenty years old: 20-59 years old (red line), 60+ (black line)

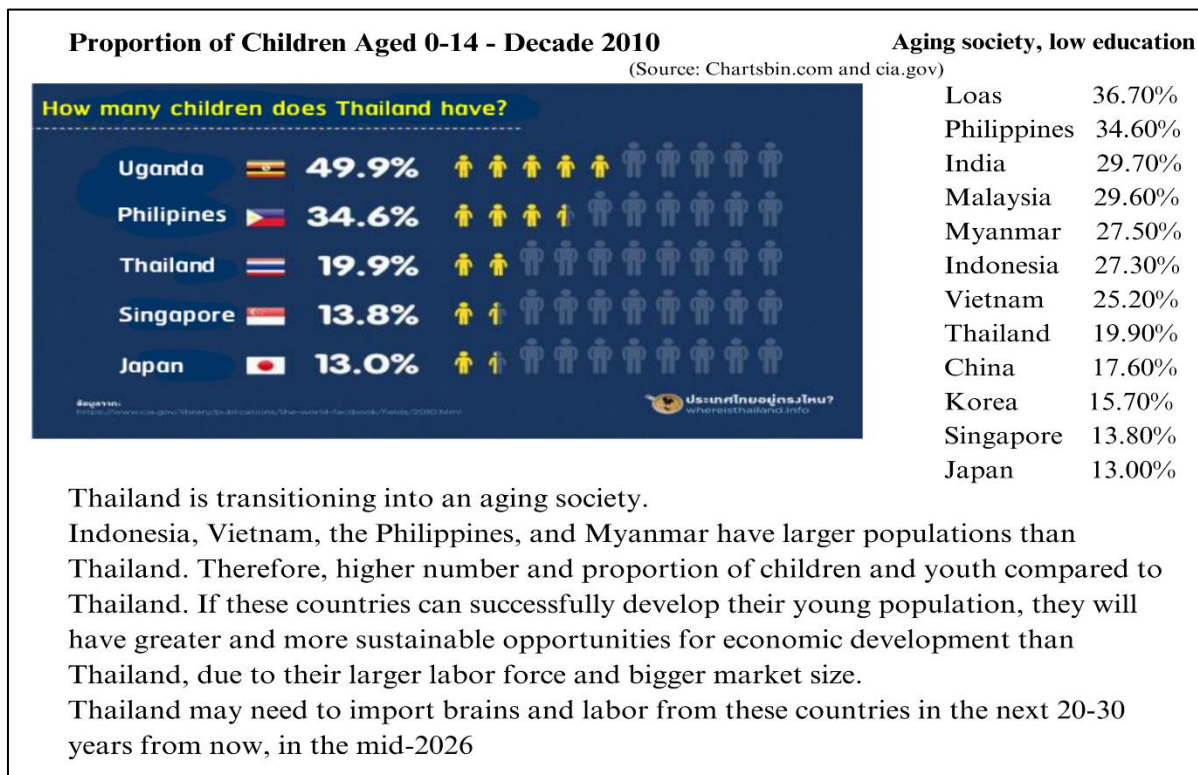


Figure 7 Proportion of Children aged 0-14 – Decade 2020

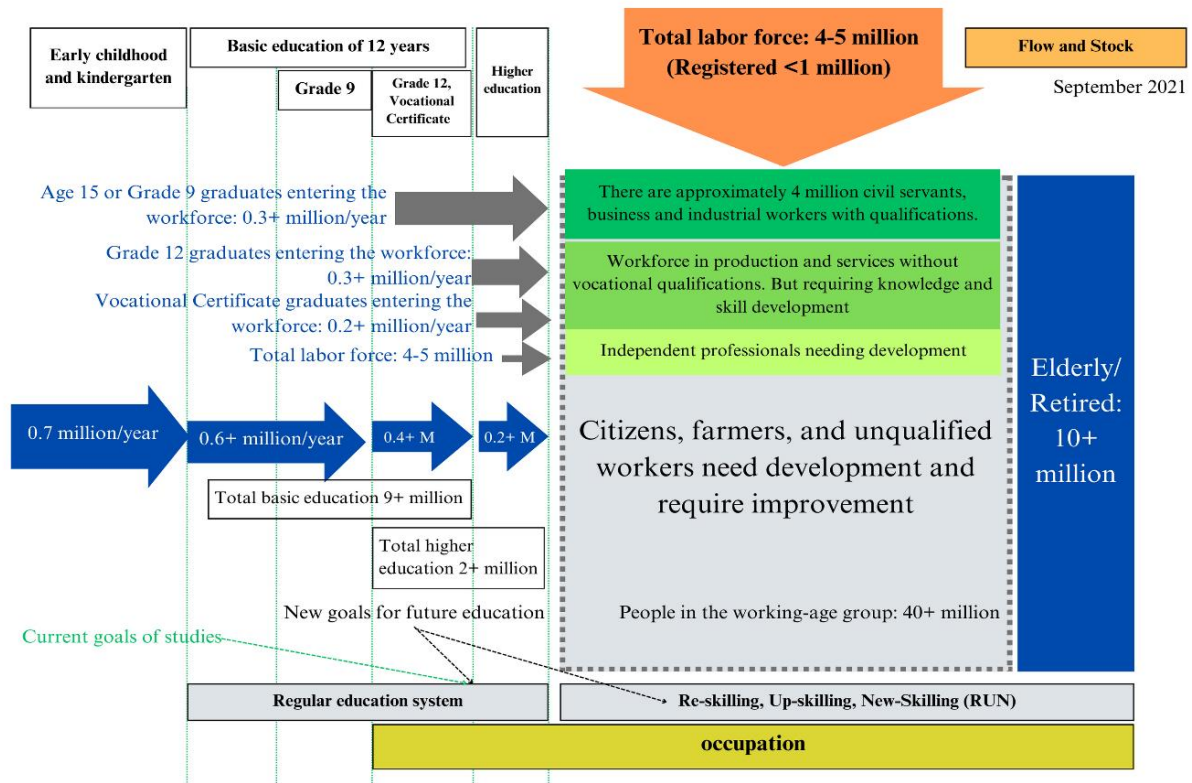


Figure 8 Education toward Quality Workforce

• **Early childhood education** is recognized in all countries as an important first step in quality of population. Investment in early childhood education is noted in all countries. Substantial childhood education investments are observed in

: Thailand and Singapore, both having declining population growth,

: countries of large population and high birth rate such as Philippines, Vietnam, and

: countries of small population and high birth rate such as Cambodia, Laos PDR and Timor Leste.

Apart from early childhood education, improvement of quality of life are major keys in all countries. SD s on these two are closely monitored.

• **Influence of China** is evident in economic and social activities in all countries. Highly noticeable are physical infrastructures (transportation, rail systems and logistics), economic investment, services sector, foods and restaurants. Tutorial schools and Chinese language schools are getting prominent and should be basis of Chinese speaking workforces in all countries.

After China, one sees emerging bilateral and multilateral cooperation of increasing importance among neighboring countries. Examples are Vietnam - Laos PDR - Thailand, China - Vietnam - Thailand - Korea, Malaysia - Indonesia - Brunei, Myanmar - Thailand, Cambodia - Thailand - Vietnam, Philippines - Australia - Thailand, and Timor Leste - Australia.

• **Thai business and investment in ASEAN** cover a wide range of enterprises from global and regional players and SME's in manufacturing industries, energy, agricultures and food processing, beverages and energy drinks, restaurants, high end department stores, hospitals, real estates, and importers-exporters. Some of these enterprises have operated in the region for more than a decade, and have developed a well planned CSR programs of various nature, including education supports. For example

: Indonesia - PTT, SC have area based and issue-based CRS projects in various islands,

: Laos PDR, Myanmar - scholarships and school activities supports from itr Phol,

: Philippines, Cambodia – S C, PTTOR mobilize public funding for education.

The speaker is of the view that these enterprises should be strategic partners and serve to empower soft power of Thailand in the region.

Education Policy

• **Inclusive Education** is a policy catch phrase of all countries. Every country has policy and spend on students that need special education, ethnic and minority groups, and the marginalized. The key concept is “**No child is left behind**”.

Singapore and Brunei have policy on inclusive education for few decades. Various policies have been effectively translated into actions with good results. Overhauling learning infrastructure, physical and learning processes, conducive to personal and diverse needs.

For Laos inclusive education manifests to universal access to education with limited physical and learning resources.

Multiplicity of ethnic groups, indigenous people, tribes, and minorities are characteristic of Vietnam, Indonesia, Laos PDR and Philippines. Revival and revitalization of these groups are evident. This will produce new generation, from population normally marginalized, with access to quality education and potential fully developed. Increase in women roles in Vietnam and Indonesia are promoted.

• **Policy on quality of education system** on par with international standard are target of Singapore, Vietnam, Brunei and Malaysia. Education access opportunity, equity and raising education standards are focused in Laos PDR, Cambodia, Myanmar and Timor Leste. Thailand adopts both pathways.

Stand-alone schools are of necessity in remote areas. In this case access comes before quality. The philosophy is “bringing schools / learning to students”, leaving no one behind, common in Laos PDR, Timor Leste, and in mountainous and border areas of Thailand.

• **Investments in and IT uses in education** in education management and classroom learning. Hybrid learning methods have been readily adopted for school student learning, blending technology and on-line courses through mobile phones, tablets, iPad. This has been observed across countries from Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore. The speaker has not observed any hybrid

learning in basic education class in Myanmar and Timor Leste.

• **English is a must in all countries.** English serves as working language in Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore. English is the second language in Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand and Laos PDR. In Laos PDR, English has replaced French, with Chinese language emerging strong. Bahasa, working language in Brunei, Malaysia Indonesia, is the third language in remaining countries.

• **Active learning and experiential based learning** are become norm in all countries. It manifests, in many forms, from teachers with ingenuity, simple tools, simple IT gadgets and internet based. The speaker has observed numbers of active learning and experiential based learning, for example,

- **Based on contents** such as mathematics, English, Bahasa Indonesia and Laos language in Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Laos PDR and Myanmar,

- **Based on socio-cultural context** such as Brunei-learning in rice fields, Brunei - English for oon Cakes Festival, Singapore- English with project based learning on edible insects, and

- **Integration and bundling of subjects** to weave learning for new important knowledge and skills such as STE education, observed in Cambodia and Malaysia,

- **Classroom expansion**, physically and logically, to achieve larger, more diverse, more mentally challenging, and richer learning space. In countries with good internet facilities, we see on-line classrooms, cyber communities through smart phones and tablets, and classical libraries. In those schools in remote areas, without internet or inadequate internet services, libraries and real life learning spaces are adopted, such as in Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos PDR.

3. What ASEAN Government are Doing

3.1 Point # 1 Government Policy on Education toward Quality Workforce

Every nation's government has the common goal of preparing its people to be competitive and capable human capital for their country's social and economic development and growth. Each country has its own ways of crafting, molding, and creating its existing human resources and future generations. The uniqueness of each country reflects the vision and readiness of the country as well as how they want to position themselves in the global arena.

During my trip to ASEAN in the past ten years with PMCA, I was very fortunate to learn how ASEAN countries show case the uniqueness of their systems and policies in grooming their workforce through education.

Starting with my recent visit to Singapore, I learned that Singapore aims to bring out every child's full potential. The Ministry of Education recently shifted the education system to be more flexible, providing more diverse pathways and opportunities toward skills future and lifelong learning. The vision of Singapore education is to "learn for life". Moreover, Singapore has adjusted some structural changes and strengthened support for special education. For example, the teachers that they selected to receive the award are special education teachers. This very well reflects the policy of leaving no one behind, particularly those with disabilities. Singapore also gives importance to teachers, as they are the core of the education system. Singapore puts a lot of emphasis on systematic teacher professional development through the Academy of Singapore Teachers.

Similar to Singapore, Brunei Darussalam restructures their education system toward 21st century skills for Vision 2035 and globalization. The Brunei Ministry of Education firmly implements an inclusive education policy. Students with special education needs attend mainstream schools, and special education need assistant (SENA) teachers are fully supported by the Ministry of Education. This is reflected in the teachers whom the Ministry of Education nominated to receive the Princess Maha Chakri Award. They are teachers and school principal who take care of students with special needs. Brunei also focuses its policy on leaving no one behind and making every child matter. In preparing for the future, Brunei emphasizes their curriculum with "entrepreneurial skills and lifelong learning" to make their workforce competitive in the global arena. They also invest in "early childhood education" as one of their key strategies toward their vision 2035 for their highly skilled workforce.

The Malaysian Ministry of Education emphasizes on "STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and digital innovation." The education system encourages students' innovation in STE and "building the roots of science and technology" for the advancement of human resources and their country. This also reflects on the teacher's nomination to receive the Princess Maha Chakri Award. The teachers are all STEM education and IT teachers with strong innovative practices, which are key elements

in building the skills for their workforce.

Vietnam education system also has some similarities with Malaysia in promoting "STEM education." The Ministry of Education invests in their workforce and human capital by equipping their students with STEM skills, which are necessary for them to be competitive and bring about economic development for their country. Vietnam also places emphasis on improving their students' English skills. "English language proficiency" is considered essential and viewed as a key skill for academic and career advancement. Vietnam intends to develop its workforce competencies to be as competitive as other countries in Southeast Asia.

For Indonesia, the challenge is with the vast number of populations. Having the largest population in Southeast Asia, Indonesia initiates the concept of SMART education, using "digital technology to enhance teaching and learning." The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (MOECRT) in Indonesia upskills its teachers, using web portals as professional development method. As well as aiming for their citizens to be SMART Citizen with technology skills. This concept was demonstrated in the recent selection of the 2023 Princess Maha Chakri Award recipient, whose expertise is to use digital technology with their students to teach English.

Philippines adjusts their education system to 12 years to align with other countries of 12 years of basic education. The new system aims to better prepare their students for higher education and the job market. Exiting from COVID-19, the Department of Education- Dept Ed, Philippines, has strengthened their Alternative Learning System (ALS) which provides "non-formal education to out of-school youth and adults, reaching out to the unreached." At the same time, Dept Ed leads in their strong policy of mother tongue-based multilingual education, which promotes students' mother tongue as the language of instruction in the early years in school to help children improve their literacy skills and increase their capacity to learn.

Countries like Cambodia and Laos put emphasis on strengthening the foundational learning of students in basic education. Cambodia focuses on developing a highly skilled teaching workforce and is currently preparing their students with practical skills and vocational knowledge – TVET for skilled workforce development. While Lao Ministry of Education aims to provide access to ethnic minority children, especially in rural and remote areas, as well as promote their proud cultural heritage.

With examples of these developments, I strongly believe that **education affects the work force and the productivity of each country.**

3.2 Point #2 Preparing Workforce for Employment and Global Citizenship

The problem with the current situation is the mismatch between the labor market and the graduates. Many educational policies do not link their policies to employment, thus creating a mismatch between education and the workforce. Some education systems are too rigid and not flexible enough to adjust to the fast-paced, changing world that children are quickly growing up in.

From what the speaker observes, some ASEAN countries have started to “link employment to life”, matching education to bridge the gap in the workforce. At the same time, they groom their people to become “global citizens.” The concept has become more relevant and important to the new generation. Having a global mindset is essential for the new workforce of capable, creative, innovative, and highly skilled citizens.

4. Conclusion

The challenges remain in how Thailand are visioning our human capital in our own country for the benefit of not only our country-Thailand but regional and global. How do we work together to adjust the system, strengthen our workforce, and empower our human capital to be the driving force behind our social and economic development? The speaker believes that Thailand should start with few steps below.

1. Help the schools and equip them with IT.

However, we must ensure that students are provided with sufficient basic contents, not IT-based peripheral knowledge. Schools should not just receive IT tools. Learning should be well equipped, whether on-site, on air or online, with appropriate technologies, enhancing the quality of education through technology. Technology should facilitate bringing education to students, whereas in our mainstream education system students are brought to education.

2. Introducing education volunteers to solve problem of teachers’ shortages, particularly in remote areas and in some major subjects, by who are locals. Basic health cares at Thai village level are successful due to village-based local health workers, shared among villages of close proximity. The speaker surmises that basic education could be uplifted with shared village-based education volunteers. Volunteers help and augment professional teachers, not replacing them.

Basic study on school cluster management has

been done. The study indicates that this is feasible, without lowering education standard, with few thousand clusters. Sharing of education resources, in particular, teachers should be quickly implemented in education areas that are decentralized.

3. Less streaming of secondary education into subjects, allowing students to explore their own potential and identity. Students are allowed to find balance between, for example, subjects of academic in nature, hands-on experience, exploratory mode, athletics and sports, music and aesthetics.

5. Acknowledgements

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