



## **Address by the Vice-Chancellor, Universiti Malaya**

### **Forum on Redefining Poverty Eradication in ASEAN: Multidimensional Perspectives, Evidence, and Pathways for Inclusive Development**

#### **FESTIVAL OF IDEA**

**6 November 2025 | Putrajaya International Convention Centre**

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Distinguished guests, esteemed speakers, colleagues, and friends from across ASEAN,

1. We gather today not merely to discuss poverty, but to confront one of the most defining moral and strategic questions of our time: *why, after decades of growth and progress, does poverty still persist—and in some cases deepen—amid prosperity?*
2. Welcome to the Forum on Redefining Poverty Eradication in ASEAN, under the banner of the Festival of Ideas, and this beautiful Putrajaya serves as the backdrop for our important discourse for today.

3. To eradicate poverty today requires a multidimensional approach that transcends income thresholds and penetrates the deeper roots of inequality—governance failures, lack of access, fragile education systems, and the unequal distribution of opportunity.
  
4. For too long, economic growth has been seen as the singular remedy for poverty. Yet, growth without equity has become an illusion of progress. The World Bank’s latest data show that while ASEAN’s GDP surpassed **US\$4.2 trillion in 2024**, nearly **100 million people** in our region remain either poor or at risk of falling back into poverty with a single shock. This exposes a troubling truth: prosperity in ASEAN has not been evenly shared. Intra-country and intra-ASEAN inequalities are widening.
  
5. Between nations, the disparity is even more striking—Singapore’s per-capita GDP now exceeds **US\$80,000**, while Cambodia’s remains below **US\$2,000**. Without deliberate correction, we risk cementing a two-speed ASEAN: one part racing ahead in innovation, the other left behind in survival.
  
6. Inequality, left unchecked, is a silent destabilizer—it breeds resentment, corrodes trust, and undermines social cohesion. The poorest 40% of ASEAN’s population still hold less than **15% of national income**, while the richest 10% control nearly half. This is not merely an economic imbalance; it is a structural fragility that threatens the long-term stability of our nations.

7. The poverty we face today is not defined solely by lack of income; it is about access, agency, and resilience. We must confront
- the geography gaps that isolate rural and remote communities from education, health, and digital infrastructure;
  - the governance gaps where good intentions falter amid bureaucratic fragmentation;
  - the societal gaps that leave women, indigenous peoples, migrants, and the elderly excluded from the development cycle;
  - and the literacy and digital divides that threaten to make the promise of the digital economy a privilege of the few.

Even within our cities, a new form of urban poverty is emerging—among gig workers, informal settlers, and displaced workers—whose struggles are hidden behind the metrics of modernity.

8. The ASEAN region cannot break free from the grip of inequality unless it escapes the middle-income trap that has held back most of its economies for over two decades. Too much of our growth still depends on resource extraction, low-value assembly lines, and export-oriented models built on cheap labour and foreign capital. This path has reached its ceiling. Productivity gains are slowing, wages remain stagnant, and the promise of social mobility has flattened.

9. To move forward, ASEAN must reinvent its economic foundations—shifting from exporting raw materials to exporting intelligence; from depending on natural endowments to creating technological ones. Only through high-value manufacturing, advanced services, and regional technology transfer can we raise incomes and build resilience against future shocks.
  
10. The ASEAN region still spends less than **1% of GDP** on research and development, compared to **3% in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) economies**. This gap reflects a lack of innovation intensity—and closing it is no longer optional, it is existential.
  
11. The future demands a new synergy—between high-tech industries, education, and human capital transformation. Our economies must grow not just by producing more, but by producing smarter. Yet this transformation must also address another looming reality: an ageing population and a shrinking youth workforce. By 2035, nearly **one in five Malaysians**, and **a quarter of the people in Thailand**, will be over 60 years old, while fertility rates across ASEAN continue to decline.
  
12. Global military expenditure has surpassed **US\$2.4 trillion in 2024**, the highest in history, while global aid for poverty eradication and social development combined stands at less than **US\$200 billion**. That means for every dollar spent on fighting poverty, **twelve dollars are spent on weapons**.

13. Even within ASEAN, defence spending grew by **52% over the past decade**, while investments in social protection and rural education barely reached 1% of GDP in most member states. The imbalance is not of resources, but of priorities. We are perfecting the art of deterrence but neglecting the architecture of human dignity. We have built stronger armies, but not stronger communities.
  
14. To truly redefine poverty eradication, we must move beyond the reactive cycle of aid and response, and instead adopt anticipatory foresight. Poverty is no longer static—it evolves with technology, climate change, and demography. The *Asian Development Bank* warns that climate change alone could push another **11 million ASEAN citizens** into poverty by 2030. Automation and artificial intelligence could displace half of low-skilled jobs within the next decade.
  
15. We must also leverage automation, AI, digital industries, and lifelong learning ecosystems that allow older citizens to remain economically active while younger generations move up the value chain. Without foresight, we risk replacing one form of poverty with another—digital exclusion, climate displacement, and loss of dignity through unemployment.

16. In the end, poverty eradication is not merely an economic agenda—it is a moral covenant. It is about justice, dignity, and the shared humanity that binds us as an ASEAN family. No policy succeeds without courage, and no reform endures without political will. ASEAN's future depends on leaders who dare to recalibrate our development priorities—from the infrastructure of concrete to the infrastructure of minds, from growth for numbers to growth for people.

17. Together, let us ensure that in the decades ahead, ASEAN is not known for managing poverty, but for ending it—through knowledge, compassion, and foresight.

Thank you.

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Vice-Chancellor

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