

Strengthening Regional Structures for SME Promotion in ASEAN (ASEAN SME II)

Promoting Market Access and Cross-Border Trade

Project name	Strengthening Regional Structures for Small and Medium Enterprise Promotion in the ASEAN Region
Commissioned by	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Project region	ASEAN Member States
Lead executing agency	Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)
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Context and Challenges

E-commerce and cross-border trade present new opportunities to expand globally. As the backbone of many ASEAN economies, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) can tap into emerging potentials by:

- Connecting with relevant partners;
- Understanding policy and compliance requirements;
- Adopting more sustainable and fair business practices.

With a vision for a more competitive and inclusive ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN Member States (AMS) prioritise empowering SMEs so that they can better integrate into regional and international value or supply chains. Among others, this is guided by the Strategic Action Plan on SME Development (SAPS-MED) 2016-2025.

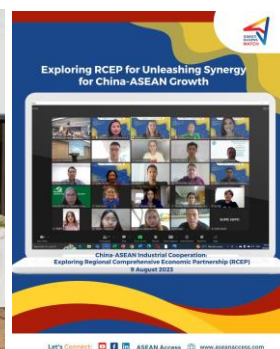
In cooperation with the ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (ACCMSME), the project supports the implementation of the SAPSMED, focusing on market access and internationalisation as well as enhancing the policy and regulatory environment for SMEs in ASEAN.

Objective

Building on the experiences and networks of the predecessor project, ASEAN SME II applies a two-tiered approach that combines regional cooperation with country-specific support. Project activities concentrate on three thematic fields:

- Sustaining the regional SME portal “ASEAN Access”;
- Strengthening the national SME portals and networks in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam, including cross-country business matchmaking; and
- Stimulating the public-private dialogue on key policy issues related to SME promotion and cross-border trade.

This is closely aligned with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) which seeks to bridge development and implementation gaps. Activities also contribute to the realisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 and 9 on Decent Work and Economic Growth as well as Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, respectively. Finally, particular attention is paid to strengthening women and young entrepreneurs.



Images:

Page 1 (left to right): Annual Meeting of ASEAN Access National Focal Points and Network Partners. Virtual business matchmaking event on the ASEAN Access platform.

Page 2 (left to right): Launch of the ASEAN SME Policy Index 2024 in Lao PDR in September 2024. Exchange visit of SMEs from Cambodia to Vietnam in December 2024.



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Approach

At the regional level, the **ASEAN Access** platform (www.aseanaccess.com) is central to project efforts. Launched in 2021, ASEAN Access is owned, steered and primarily operated by the AMS. The platform offers virtual market talks on prospective sectors, interactive matchmaking activities and self-paced training. Its unique governance structure by a public-private network ensures a high degree of ownership of partners and demand-oriented activities attuned to what SMEs need “on the ground”.

The network of ASEAN Access itself also reaches into the AMS where stakeholders actively engage through national SME portals or service centres aimed at improving the readiness of SMEs for entry into the domestic and foreign market. To support this, the project links up with other relevant projects and development partners to reach out to the local business community and raise awareness about new issues in the digital and circular economy.

Beyond the immediate engagement via ASEAN Access and the national SME portals, the project facilitates policy dialogues on future-oriented topics, such as digital trade and just transition. These policy dialogues not only serve to assess and address barriers faced by SMEs; they also foster “ASEAN helps ASEAN” approaches based on good practices suited to the specific context of the AMS.

Results

- ASEAN Access is continuously growing: 5,000+ SME members, 500 service providers, and 49 network partners from within and outside of ASEAN are currently registered on the platform. Apart from Thailand, as the main host, AMS have allocated funding from their respective state budget to run activities on the platform and with its network partners. In the upcoming SAPSMED 2030, ASEAN Access is featured as part of the region’s evolving “ecosystem” for SME promotion.
- The continued relevance of ASEAN Access is also reflected in the findings of the ASEAN SME Policy Index (ASPI) 2024, which was jointly supported by GIZ, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Economic Research Institute for East Asia and ASEAN (ERIA), with funded by the governments of Germany and Ireland. The ASPI outlines the status of national SME policies and offers recommendations on where to concentrate regional efforts in the future.
- A solid foundation has been created for the national SME portals in Cambodia and Viet Nam to sustain operations thanks to mobilising resources, including from international organisations. The initial impacts are noticeable, with SMEs from some AMS securing new suppliers and partnerships in niche segments resulting from successful exchange visits and matchmaking sessions on ASEAN Access.

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