

POST PANDEMIC SOUTHEAST ASIA (SEA) URBANIZATION: THREE PILLARS FOR SUSTAINED PROSPERITY

A recent announcement by Vietnam allowing international flights to six major cities is a good indication that Southeast Asia's economic engines are beginning to turn-- a result of the exceptional measures taken to contain the COVID-19 crisis. Comparable low infection and low mortality rates have given governments confidence and assurance that the region is ready to resume its positive development trajectory. In this restart, it is essential to be reminded of where we were, gains made and what strategies will ensure continued success for citizens and the national interest.

With approximately 660 million inhabitants, Southeast Asia (SEA) accounts for 8.5% of the world's population, dispersed across eleven countries cumulating to 3% of the earth's total land area. Indonesia, the most populous with 273 million inhabitants, makes it the fourth most populous country in the world after China, India and the U.S. As a block, the region's economy is worth 9.7 trillion US dollars: third behind the United States and China, respectively, with Japan in a distant fourth with 4.8 trillion US dollars. Population and economy are projected to sustain steady growth in the next five to ten years; cities and urbanized centers will be the main benefactors of this growth.

Fifty percent of the SEA population lives in an urbanized environment-- projected to increase by 2.5% annually. Economically, even amidst the global pandemic (2020), the region is projected to grow by 5% annually and will increase robustly as the pandemic fades. These growth trends, along with demographic shifts, expanding middle class and increased spending power, will demand unique solutions to the challenges in existing and emerging urban centers. Broadly, there are three key disciplines stakeholders need to be acutely aware of as the region emerges out of the pandemic and catapults into the 21st century: development policies, economic strategies and a design mindset.

DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

Southeast Asia is known for having social and generational complexities that can sometimes hinder its universal success. Stakeholder engagement and awareness of policy intent can peel away some of these complexities and drive progress-- ensuring wide acceptance and rapid integration.

There is no one policy that will be the panacea for the region. Each country, province, city and rural district will need unique solutions for their unique challenges. For example, in the case of Indonesia, the country recently announced changes to foreign ownership laws-- this will unlock numerous opportunities once enacted in 2021. Whenever policies are crafted, whether, at the national or local level, policymakers must consider a holistic, long-term vision, benefits and service to the end-user and shared prosperity-- all sustainably maintained and resilient over long periods, adaptable and flexible to changing conditions.

The breadth and scope of policies needed to drive the region's sustainable prosperity are numerous. However, at a high level and from a development point of view, the following should be prioritized:

- Economic diversification and fair wage
- Capital flow, banking and financial security
- Mobility and connectivity
- Livable and inclusive built environment

- Protection and preservation of the natural environment
- Affordable housing
- Access to education and skill-based training
- Regional and international corporation (a few established inter-governmental agencies, such as ASEAN, are bridging this gap effectively)

ECONOMIC STRATEGIES

Southeast Asia's economy can be broadly categorized into two sectors: traditional and industrial. The conventional industry covers agriculture, timber, rubber, fishing and tourism, while the industrial sector includes petrol, chemical, automotive, garment, mining and electronics. As urbanization and modernization march on, other sectors will naturally emerge by design or by necessity to diversify or move towards a holistic and productive economic ecosystem. The service economy is one such sector poised for advanced maturity, already supporting banking, finance, healthcare, telecommunication, insurance, technology and education. Eventually, there will be sectors covering innovation, media, the internet of things (IoT) and artificial intelligence (AI). Within the bloc, Singapore has already developed several of these sectors-- but only at a national level. Transferring and developing these sectors in member blocs will ensure long-term economic success for all members.

The workforce and labor needed to scale is currently available and will grow to become sophisticated contributors to their economic and prosperity destiny. According to a 2019 survey by the World Bank, 49% or 323,400,000 of the region's population are at working age. Providing opportunities and long-term employment security for this number of people is a will significantly help solve many of the region's social challenges. including the region's economic strategies must focus on the following objectives:

- A high rate of employment
- Economic diversification (the region is heavily dependent on tourism, which is currently devastated due to the pandemic)
- Development and support of new industries, such as renewable energies
- Locally manufactured products
- Entrepreneurship and innovation centers
- Polycentric employment centers
- Natural resource management
- Development of the infrastructure for the Internet of Things (IoT)

DESIGN MINDSET

The region is home to some of the densest cities on the planet; it has been this way for decades. There is an innate understanding and appreciation for urbanism and urbanization. Though it may appear chaotic to the naked eye, there is an order, a rhythm, inherent vibrancy, constant change, growth and opportunity. With these qualities, cities and urban centers continue to be people magnets-- encouraging a continuous stream of new city dwellers. This compounded growth has now converged with negative impacts on urban systems supposed to provide an acceptable quality of life for inhabitants. Adopting a

design mindset has now become critical to reverse the decline of urban life quality. Solution-focused and action-oriented, the following should be prioritized.

- Living with water
- 3D urbanism
- Transport connectivity
- Open space networks
- Urban technologies
- Climate smart initiatives

A design mindset can be a transformative tool for the 21st century-- allowing multidimensional and multi-disciplinary thinking. Design not only shapes and articulates buildings and the built environment, but it also shapes processes, methodologies, strategies and frameworks. Using design to solve complex challenges, Southeast Asia should focus on the following and convert challenges into opportunities:

- Design transcending best practices
- Design integrated and multi-disciplinary collaborations
- Design focused and targeted solutions
- Design agile and flexible responses

Restarting ahead of many other global economies, Southeast Asia is creeping out of the COVID-19 crisis. Industries are starting up and markets are being connected. Continued clarity and empowerment of crucial development strategies must be maintained to ensure a clear path to full recovery, starting with smart and flexible government policies to support sustainable and prosperous urban growth, followed by creative, human-centric resilient economic solutions from private, public, and investor sectors. Finally, adopting a design mindset to ensure development is fundamental to drive the region into the 21st century.