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The Role of Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund in Advancing Equality for Human Security and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

In Southeast Asia, inequality remains a persistent problem, as differences in access to education, healthcare, technology, and economic opportunities disrupt long-term growth and regional stability. One significant collaboration to address the issue is the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF), which was formed to strengthen ASEAN integration efforts and promote equitable development among its member countries. This research aims to analyze the role of JAIF in advancing equalities to achieve human security and Sustainable Development. Multiple data and information related to this research are described qualitatively and analyzed using the theoretical framework of human security and sustainable development. The research findings indicate the significance of JAIF in enhancing human security within ASEAN by employing the principles of freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live with dignity. JAIF-funded activities have supported initiatives in socioeconomic empowerment, security, and capacity building in ASEAN countries. The effectiveness of JAIF is influenced by the regional political structure, economic disparities, and institutional limitations. To enhance its effectiveness, stronger collaboration between ASEAN institutions and national governments is needed to make JAIF-funded programs more adaptive and inclusive.

Introduction

Human rights inequality remains a persistent problem in Southeast Asia, as differences in access to education, healthcare, technology, and economic opportunities disrupt long-term growth and regional stability (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Besides, socio-economic disparities remain a significant challenge in the Southeast Asian region, especially in the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam), which lag behind in terms of development compared to other ASEAN member states.

Recognizing the interconnectedness of these issues, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has moved to form constructive partnerships not only with the member states in Southeast Asia Region, but also with non member states across the region to address the inequities. ASEAN has adopted the Regional Development Cooperation (RDC) strategy as the basic framework. Among these partnerships, Japan has emerged as a key partner, contributing resources and expertise that benefit ASEAN member states while also serving Japan's strategic interests in the region. Through this framework, ASEAN and Japan work together to strengthen

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regional integration and reduce economic disparities among member states. The agreement with Japan serves as a major donor for development projects in the region (Rachmawati, 2018).

For Japan, collaboration with ASEAN reflects its broader national interests. Southeast Asia is a region central to Japan's economic and geopolitical strategy, serving as a critical aspect of Japan's trade and supply chains. In addition, regional stability is key to Japan's energy security and its broader Indo-Pacific vision, especially as Japan seeks to balance the growing influence of other powers. These dual benefits advancing ASEAN's socio-economic development while safeguarding Japan's national priorities have driven the evolution of the ASEAN-Japan partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023).

One of the important initiatives under this framework is the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF), which was established to support ASEAN integration efforts and reduce development gaps. Since its inception in 2006, JAIF has been a pillar of Japan's commitment to promoting prosperity and stability in ASEAN. Through targeted programs addressing capacity building, disaster management, technological innovation, and socio-economic development, JAIF exemplifies Japan's role as a major development partner. Beyond economic assistance, JAIF initiatives reflect a broader vision of inclusiveness and shared growth, underscoring the importance of equity in achieving regional resilience. JAIF focuses on projects aimed at enhancing institutional capacity, infrastructure development, and human resource development in CLMV countries. Through JAIF's financial and technical support, it is hoped that these countries can catch up and contribute to the stability and prosperity of the region as a whole (JAIF, 2020).

Building upon these efforts, it is crucial to analyze how JAIF specifically addresses inequalities by improving access to essential services such as economy, education, healthcare, and social protection. These aspects play a fundamental role in enhancing human security, as they directly impact individuals' well-being and opportunities for social mobility. This paper aims to analyze the role of JAIF in advancing equalities, particularly in terms of access to education, health, and social protection that directly affect people's daily lives to achieve human security and Sustainable Development.

Literature Review

A previous study relevant to this topic was conducted by Safitriyani examined the role of the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) in addressing socio-economic disparities in Southeast Asia, particularly in the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam). JAIF, through initiatives such as the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI), focuses on enhancing human resource capacity and infrastructure development in these less developed countries. The study shows that Japan's contributions to the IAI have had a tangible impact, such as improving the quality of education, training the workforce, and building better infrastructure. These projects have helped CLMV countries catch up in sectors such as transportation and energy, and improved the quality of life of their people. With Japan's support, these countries have been able to narrow their economic gaps more quickly, bringing them closer to other more economically developed ASEAN countries (Safitriyani, 2019).

ASEAN's diplomatic strategy towards Japan also helps reduce economic disparities in the region. A study by Rachmawati found that ASEAN made agreements with Japan using the Regional Development Cooperation (RDC) framework, which made Japan a major donor for various development projects. ASEAN successfully worked with Japan through initiative forums within the RDC framework to support initiatives aimed at reducing economic disparities among its member countries (Rachmawati, 2018).

Previous studies have extensively discussed the contribution of the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) in supporting economic development and reducing inequality in the ASEAN region, mostly focusing on macroeconomic and diplomatic aspects, without considering the broader social dimension. Many studies have emphasized how JAIF affects infrastructure and development capacity, but few have studied the impact of JAIF on long-term goals. In addition, previous studies often neglect to look at socio-economic inequality from a human security perspective in the most vulnerable ASEAN countries, such as the CLMV countries.

This study fills this gap by using a human security approach to analyze the role of JAIF in addressing inequalities, particularly in terms of access to education, health, and social protection that directly affect people's daily lives in these countries. The human security approach allows for a more holistic analysis of how JAIF plays a role in strengthening the socio-economic resilience of individuals and communities in more vulnerable ASEAN countries, especially in CLMV countries. The study also introduces a deeper analysis of the direct impact of Japanese aid on human well-being, rather than just macroeconomic indicators, thus providing a new contribution to the discourse on sustainable development in the region.

Theoretical Framework

Human Security

Human security is a concept that shifts the focus of security from state-centered approaches to a more people-centered framework. It emphasizes the protection of individuals from critical and pervasive threats while also promoting their empowerment to live dignified lives. The concept was first formally introduced in the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report, which outlined human security as encompassing freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live with dignity (UNDP, 1994).

The Human Security Theory is used in this study to examine how JAIF contributes to preserving and empowering individuals and communities in ASEAN. Human Security emphasizes security against various challenges to societal well-being, including economic, social, political, and environmental aspects. In this study, the Human Security approach provides an analysis of JAIF's commitment to addressing various issues, including economic inequality, conflict, climate change, and access to education. By using this perspective, this study can assess the effectiveness of JAIF initiatives in protecting vulnerable groups and strengthening the socio-economic resilience of ASEAN communities.

In addition, the Human Security theory provides a relevant framework in understanding how JAIF focuses not only on traditional security aspects but also on individual well-being and sustainable development. This approach is in line with JAIF's principle in supporting community-based projects to build community capacity and strengthen resilience to various threats. Thus, this study uses Human Security to analyze the extent to which JAIF has contributed to creating a safe and stable environment, and how this approach can be further optimized to achieve sustainable development goals in ASEAN.

Sustainable Development

Sutainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development has developed after the United Nations considered the Around the same time as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Around the same time as UNCLOS was being negotiated, there was a concurrent and growing awareness of the need to

better consider the environmental impacts of natural resource use and extraction (Wulandari, 2024).

The ratification of UNCLOS in 1982 has resulted in an increased awareness of the enormous opportunity offered through rights over vastly expanded zones of maritime jurisdiction and the valuable marine resources and activities within them. The sustainable development agenda, drawing attention to the oceans, has emphasized the need for development to be environmentally sustainable and socially equitable (Sustainable Development Commission, 2023).

The concept of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in this research is used as a framework to evaluate how JAIF's role contributes to inclusive and sustainable development in ASEAN. SDGs emphasize the balance between economic growth, environmental protection, and social welfare, which aligns with JAIF's focus in its various programs. For example, JAIF supports SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) through the strengthening of MSMEs and the development of the digital economy, which aims to create jobs and enhance the competitiveness of ASEAN countries. In addition, in an effort to reduce social and economic disparities in the region, JAIF also contributes to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by promoting more equitable development, especially for countries that still face infrastructure and resource limitations.

Method

This research was conducted using the qualitative method. Using the qualitative method allows researchers to examine, define, and analyze social phenomena (Mohajan, 2018). This method was chosen to fit the need for analyzing the role of JAIF in advancing equalities to achieve human security and Sustainable Development. The data presented in this research collected from journals, books, official websites, and articles. Literature review is used to establish the theoretical framework, identify research gaps, provide context, support methodology, and strengthen arguments by analyzing existing studies.

This type of research is known as descriptive research. To analyze the data from multiple sources, this research used the inductive process of qualitative research. The inductive process that is the hallmark of qualitative data analysis involves asking questions of the in-depth and extensive data that has been generated from multiple sources regarding the phenomenon (Ravindran, 2019). Multiple data and information related to the role of JAIF in advancing equalities in this research are described qualitatively and analyzed using the theoretical framework of human security and sustainable development. Following that, conclusions are drawn from the discussion as an inductive process is carried out in qualitative research.

Results

The Establishment and Objectives of the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF)

The Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) was established in 2006 as a manifestation of Japan’s commitment to strengthening its partnership with ASEAN and supporting the regional integration process. The establishment of JAIF began with the ASEAN-Japan Summit in 2005, where Japan announced an initial funding of USD 70 million to assist ASEAN in various development programs. Over time, the fund has continued to grow through additional contributions from the Japanese government, demonstrating Japan’s continued and serious commitment to supporting stability and development in the Southeast Asian region (JAIF, 2020).

The main objective of JAIF is to strengthen ASEAN integration by narrowing the development gap among member countries, particularly through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI). This program targets CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) which have lower levels of economic development compared to other ASEAN countries. By supporting human resource capacity development, infrastructure development, and strengthening institutional mechanisms, JAIF plays a role in ensuring that all ASEAN countries can fully participate in regional economic integration (JAIF, 2020).

In addition to promoting economic integration, JAIF aims to promote regional social resilience and human security. JAIF funds projects in ASEAN such as disaster assistance, food security, and health system strengthening. This is consistent with Japan's stance of putting human development at the center of regional cooperation. JAIF aspires to help ASEAN address socioeconomic difficulties, resulting in more resilient and economically and socially stable nations. Since its inception, JAIF has funded approximately 600 initiatives in a variety of sectors, including responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, raising more than $887 million in total investment (JAIF, 2020).

One of the key pillars of JAIF's support is to strengthen ASEAN's capacity and readiness to respond to disaster emergencies and reduce disaster risks in the region, as outlined in the Vision Statement on ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation adopted in December 2013, the Revised Implementation Plan in August 2017, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) adopted in June 2019. Japan's efforts are also influenced by the ASEAN-Japan Work Plan on Disaster Management 2021–2025. The progress of the Work Plan is regularly assessed and followed up on by the ASEAN-Japan Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management (AMMDM Plus Japan) and reviewed by the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) Plus Japan (Minamiguchi & Swe, 2024).

Furthermore, JAIF also plays a role in supporting various programs related to good governance and institutional strengthening in ASEAN. This support includes increasing bureaucratic capacity, transparency of public policies, and strengthening legal mechanisms that contribute to political and economic stability. Thus, JAIF does not only focus on economic development, but also on socio-political aspects that support the creation of a more inclusive and cohesive ASEAN in facing global challenges.

JAIF's Role in Enhancing Freedom from Fear through Security Cooperation and Disaster Management for Sustainable Development

Japan's support for ASEAN in disaster management has been ongoing for more than 50 years. This support is deeply rooted in its strategic partnership with ASEAN and related entities, especially the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance in Disaster Management (AHA Centre). With the support of JAIF, the AHA Centre was established and started operating in 2011. The Work Programme of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) 2021-2025 was also developed with the assistance of JAIF as a sign of Japan's unwavering commitment to disaster risk reduction and resilience building in ASEAN, and to realizing "One ASEAN, One Response" across the region (Minamiguchi & Swe, 2024).

Furthermore, The ASEAN-Japan collaboration over the years has ushered in significant advancements in disaster management coordination and cooperation. AADMER is at the center of the partnership: a comprehensive framework meant to respond collectively to catastrophes, mobilise and invest effectively, and eventually improve the region's disaster resilience. JAIF's assistance was critical in transforming AADMER into actual actions by developing the

AADMER Work Programme 2021-2025, which was approved at the 8th AMMDM in November 2020. This five-year strategic plan seeks to strengthen ASEAN's resilience and adaptive capacity to disasters through five strategic components: risk assessment and monitoring, prevention and mitigation, readiness and response, resilient recovery, and global leadership (Minamiguchi & Swe, 2024).

At the present time, ASEAN and Japan have coordinated and delivered over 40 disaster management projects totaling approximately 80 million US dollars. Notable accomplishments include the establishment and operation of the AHA Centre. The "Setting Up and Operationalisation of the AHA Centre" initiative, which was the region's first of its kind, considerably improved ASEAN's capacity to monitor, assess, and respond to disasters in a timely and effective manner. JAIF has since collaborated with the AHA Centre to improve its core emergency preparedness and response functions through initiatives such as the development of an integrated Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and system, The Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN (DELSA), the transformation of ASEAN-Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ASEAN-ERAT), and the AHA Centre Executive (ACE) Programme (Minamiguchi & Swe, 2024).

As we look ahead, the ASEAN-Japan alliance remains quite promising. The results gained thus far provide a solid platform for future disaster management efforts. Japan's consistent commitment will not stop with the goal of strengthening communities. It will also deepen bonds, boost solidarity, and ensure that the ASEAN area is better prepared to deal with whatever new challenges arise. JAIF, guided by the AADMER Work Programme 2021-2025 and other associated projects, is well-positioned to protect the lives and livelihoods of millions across the region. ASEAN and Japan will traverse the difficult path to a safer, more resilient, and sustainable future.

Aside from disaster management cooperation, JAIF is dedicated to prioritizing security cooperation in order to attain freedom from fear. ASEAN and Japan maintain dialogue partnerships through a number of mechanisms, including the ASEAN-Japan Summit, Ministerial Meetings, and Senior Officials and Experts Meetings. Japan has also taken part in ASEAN-led institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF).

The first ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers Informal Meeting took place on November 19, 2014, in Bagan, Myanmar, and the Ministers decided to continue discussing ASEAN-Japan defense cooperation in dealing with non-traditional security concerns. Japan has actively participated in the ADMM-Plus by promoting practical collaboration in the areas of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), maritime security, military medicine, counterterrorism, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian mine action, and, more recently, cyber security.

JAIF’s commitment to the principle of “freedom from fear” is also reflected in Japan’s initiatives in support of cybersecurity, peacekeeping operations, and counterterrorism cooperation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). Through the ASEAN-Japan Counter-Terrorism (AJCT) and ASEAN-Japan Cybercrime (AJCC) dialogues, Japan assists ASEAN in addressing increasingly complex cyber threats and preventing the proliferation of transnational criminal networks. In addition, Japan’s involvement in high-level meetings on drug control and maritime security further strengthens ASEAN’s capacity to maintain regional stability. With these initiatives, JAIF has proven itself to be a strategic partner for ASEAN in creating a safer, more resilient, and more fear-free region.

The various efforts made through the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) in creating freedom from fear are closely related to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. Strengthening ASEAN's capacity in disaster management, regional security, and combating transnational crime are concrete steps in creating a safer and more stable society. By reducing disaster risks and accelerating emergency response through the AHA Centre, JAIF helps create a more resilient environment against natural threats that can hinder sustainable development. In addition, JAIF's involvement in cooperation on counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, and law enforcement contributes to the creation of socio-political stability, which is a key prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Furthermore, JAIF-supported initiatives also support SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, by enhancing community preparedness for disasters and conflicts. Programs such as DELSA and ASEAN-ERAT play a role in ensuring that the ASEAN region has a robust emergency response infrastructure, thereby protecting vulnerable populations from the adverse impacts of disasters. In addition, strengthened regional security through cooperation mechanisms such as ADMM-Plus and ARF allows for greater stability, allowing ASEAN countries to focus on economic and social development without being overshadowed by security threats. Thus, the freedom from fear approach implemented through JAIF programs not only creates a safer environment but also paves the way for inclusive, sustainable and equitable development in the ASEAN region.

Advancing Freedom from Want: JAIF's Contribution to Socio-Economic Development through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration towards Sustainable Development Goals

Japan has been assisting ASEAN integration efforts since the implementation of the IAI Work Plan I in 2002. Japan has contributed to the IAI's objective of "to narrow the divide within ASEAN and enhance ASEAN's competitiveness as a region" by focusing the majority of its aid on capacity building in the CLMV countries. The IAI Work Plan IV (2021-2025) was adopted in November 2020 to promote effective cooperation and mutual assistance to narrow the development gap among ASEAN Member States as well as between ASEAN and the rest of the world by devoting special efforts and resources to assist CLMV countries in meeting ASEAN-wide targets and commitments towards achieving the ASEAN Community's goals. The revised work plan moves forward (Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, 2024a).

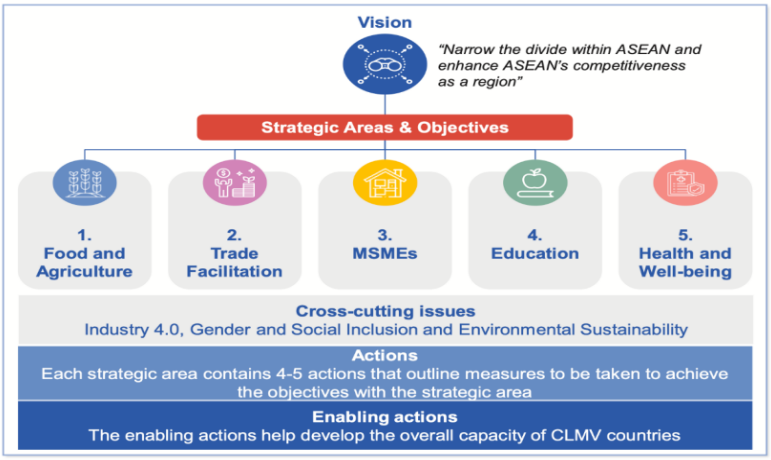

Figure 1. Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan IV (2021-2025)

The goal of the IAI is to improve ASEAN's competitiveness as a region and reduce divisions within the ASEAN. In order to realize the ASEAN Community, the IAI helps CLMV nations fulfill ASEAN-wide goals and pledges. As seen by the notable advancements made in the integration of CLMV nations into ASEAN, IAI's ambition is still difficult but attainable. In order to fulfill the new set of ASEAN-wide goals and pledges made in ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, CLMV countries will continue to need assistance (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). Since the IAI Work Plan I was adopted in 2002, Japan has been assisting with ASEAN integration efforts. Japan has contributed to the IAI's aim, which is "to narrow the divide within ASEAN and enhance ASEAN's competitiveness as a region," by concentrating the majority of its support on capacity building in the CLMV countries. Japan has since continued to support the IAI Work Plan IV (2021-2025) implementation, which began in January 2021.

The Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) plays a key role in supporting the IAI III Work Plan (2015-2020), particularly in the food and agriculture sector and the development of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, CO Myanmar and Vietnam). In the area of food and agriculture, JAIF contributes to the assessment and development of best practices to improve coordination and organization of water user groups in CLMV. The program aims to optimize water resource management for agriculture, ensure more efficient water distribution and enhance food security in the region. With better coordination among water user groups, the agricultural sector in CLMV can be more sustainable and productive, which ultimately supports food security in ASEAN as a whole. This initiative is one of the concrete steps in mitigating the impacts of climate change, improving farmers' welfare and strengthening the agricultural sector, which is the backbone of the economy in CLMV countries (Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, 2024b).

In supporting the development of MSMEs in CLMV, JAIF also plays an active role in various capacity building programs. One of its main initiatives is training in preparing business plans using the Credibility Index for SMEs (CIS) for 60 MSMEs from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. In addition, JAIF also supports the assessment of the legal and regulatory framework for e-commerce in CLMV which aims to identify challenges and opportunities in the development of the digital economy in the region. Another program is the Assessment Report on the Two-Stage Lending System, Credit Guarantee System, and Venture Capital in CLMV which was accompanied by a regional workshop attended by 34 participants. These initiatives help expand MSMEs' access to more flexible and innovative financing, thereby increasing their competitiveness in the global market. With JAIF's support in the IAI Work Plan III, CLMV countries can strengthen the MSME sector as a driver of economic growth and regional integration in line with ASEAN's efforts to create a more inclusive and competitive region (Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, 2024b).

In the term of socio-economy, The Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) has played a significant role in reducing socio-economic disparities in the ASEAN region through its human security approach. This approach emphasizes protecting individuals from various threats, including poverty and inequality, with the aim of ensuring that everyone can live in security and dignity. One of JAIF's prominent initiatives is its support for human rights, particularly through projects implemented by the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). Between 2015 and 2019, JAIF supported a series of regional dialogues focused on mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities in the ASEAN Community. These efforts contributed to the development of the ASEAN Empowerment Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was adopted at the 33rd ASEAN Summit in November 2018. The Masterplan aims to ensure the full and equal participation of persons with

disabilities in all pillars of the ASEAN Community, thereby reducing the socio-economic disparities they face (Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, 2024).

In addition, JAIF has funded various projects focused on economic empowerment and community capacity building in ASEAN countries, especially in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV), which still lags economically compared to other ASEAN countries. One important initiative is JAIF's support for the ASEAN Rural Development and Poverty Eradication program, which aims to improve workforce skills, support entrepreneurship, and strengthen the economic resilience of rural communities. For example, a skills training project for underprivileged communities in Myanmar funded by JAIF has helped improve the competitiveness of local workers in the manufacturing and services sectors. In addition, JAIF also supports projects to develop Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in ASEAN, by providing access to training and funding for small business actors, especially women and vulnerable groups. These efforts demonstrate that JAIF is not only playing a role in supporting ASEAN macroeconomic policies, but also providing real impacts for communities at the grassroots level, which is in line with the principle of human security in ensuring the well-being of individuals and communities (Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, 2024b).

The commitment of the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) in supporting the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) is a concrete proof of its efforts in realizing freedom from want, namely freedom from poverty and economic limitations that are still major challenges for CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam). By focusing on capacity building in the food, agriculture, and MSME sectors, JAIF helps reduce economic disparities in ASEAN. The program to improve coordination of water user groups in the agricultural sector, for example, ensures more efficient management of water resources, which contributes to food security and farmer welfare in CLMV. In addition, through business plan writing training, loan system evaluation, and venture capital development support, JAIF expands access to financing for MSMEs, improves the competitiveness of small businesses, and creates more jobs. Thus, JAIF not only helps CLMV overcome poverty and economic disparities but also encourages more inclusive economic growth in the ASEAN region.

JAIF's efforts in supporting the ASEAN Integration Initiative (IAI) directly contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a holistic and inclusive approach. In the context of SDG 1 (No Poverty), capacity building programs in the agriculture and MSME sectors help communities in CLMVs gain better access to economic resources and improve their standard of living. JAIF's support for SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) is also evident in various business skills training programs and financing for MSMEs, which enable them to compete in the global market and create more jobs. In addition, through lending and venture capital assessments, JAIF fosters innovation in the financial system in CLMVs, ultimately strengthening the business and investment ecosystem in these countries.

SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality) is also one of JAIF's main focuses, with efforts to address economic disparities among ASEAN countries by strengthening the capacity of CLMV countries to be on par with other ASEAN members. Furthermore, JAIF contributes to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by supporting women's economic empowerment through access to training and funding for MSMEs managed by women and vulnerable groups. Meanwhile, in a broader development aspect, JAIF's support for the rights of persons with disabilities in the ASEAN Empowerment Masterplan 2025 is in line with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), by ensuring that development in ASEAN is inclusive and does not leave marginalized groups behind. With this comprehensive approach, JAIF not only strengthens ASEAN's

competitiveness as an economic entity, but also builds the foundation for a more just, sustainable and prosperous society, in line with ASEAN Vision 2025: Moving Forward Together.

Empowering Communities and Advancing Human Rights: JAIF's Commitment to Achieving Freedom to Live in Dignity for Sustainable Development

The Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) makes significant contributions to "Freedom to Live with Dignity" in ASEAN through empowerment projects centered on human rights and social inclusion. JAIF recognizes that true dignity comes from an individual's ability to fully participate in society, access opportunities, and exercise their fundamental rights without discrimination. To achieve this, JAIF supports initiatives that focus on strengthening governance, promoting gender equality, and empowering marginalized communities in the ASEAN region.

One of the key areas that JAIF promotes under "Freedom to Live in Dignity" is through projects aimed at strengthening human capital and institutional capacity. For example, the "Attachment Programme" provides opportunities for young officials from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and VietNam (CLMV) to enhance their administrative capabilities in the ASEAN Secretariat. By equipping these officials with the necessary skills and knowledge, JAIF contributes to building stronger and more effective governance structures that are better able to protect and promote human rights. As noted by H.E. Mr. Ekkaphab Phanthavong, Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for the Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), this programme meets the needs of CLMV countries and remains highly relevant for the new generation of officials (Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, 2024a).

JAIF's commitment to "Freedom to Live with Dignity" also includes efforts to promote economic empowerment and social inclusion. Through initiatives such as the ASEAN Business Incubator Network (ABINet), JAIF supports the development of business and technology incubators to enhance the capacity and competitiveness of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in the ASEAN region. By providing training, resources and access to markets, these projects enable entrepreneurs, particularly women and those from marginalized communities, to create sustainable livelihoods and improve their quality of life. Such economic empowerment is essential to foster self-reliance and ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to live with dignity (Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, 2023).

In addition, JAIF supports projects that promote social justice and protect vulnerable populations. While specific projects in this area are not detailed in the search results provided, JAIF's primary objective is to reduce disparities and enhance ASEAN integration, which inherently involves addressing issues of inequality and discrimination. By working towards a more inclusive and equitable ASEAN Community, JAIF helps create a society where all individuals are treated with respect and dignity, and where their rights are protected and upheld.

The Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) plays an active role in promoting "Freedom to Live with Dignity" through various initiatives that empower individuals and communities in ASEAN. JAIF understands that dignity can only be realized if everyone has equal access to opportunities, rights, and participation in society. Therefore, JAIF supports programs that strengthen governance, promote gender equality, and empower vulnerable groups. These efforts are in line with ASEAN's people-centered vision and aim to create an inclusive and equitable environment. By targeting the most vulnerable, JAIF ensures that no one is left behind in the development process, in line with the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

One of JAIF's main contributions to realizing a dignified life is through strengthening human resources and institutional capacity. The Attachment Programme, for example, provides training to young officials from CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) to improve their administrative skills at the ASEAN Secretariat. By strengthening governance capacity, the programme ensures that CLMV countries have more responsive institutions to protect human rights and social justice. Stronger institutions will be able to promote more equitable, transparent, and inclusive governance, which ultimately contributes to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by creating more accountable and people-oriented systems.

In addition to institutional strengthening, JAIF also contributes to economic empowerment and social inclusion, particularly through capacity building for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). The ASEAN Business Incubator Network (ABINet) program, for example, provides training, market access and technology support for entrepreneurs, especially women and marginalized groups. This economic empowerment not only increases individual independence but also reduces social and economic disparities in the region. By ensuring that all individuals have equal opportunities to improve their lives, JAIF directly contributes to the achievement of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). These efforts demonstrate that the freedom to live in dignity can only be achieved if everyone has access to equitable and sustainable socio-political and human rights opportunities.

Challenges in Achieving Human Security and SDGs: Barriers to JAIF's Effectiveness

The Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) plays a vital role in supporting sustainable development and human security in Southeast Asia. However, the implementation of JAIF programs is not free from the evolving geopolitical challenges in the region. The tensions in the South China Sea involving ASEAN countries and China pose a dilemma for JAIF projects aimed at strengthening regional stability. In addition, the competition between the United States and China for influence in Southeast Asia further complicates the situation. JAIF must ensure that its initiatives remain neutral and do not become a tool for Japan's geopolitical interests that could potentially affect ASEAN's relations with other major countries. In addition, the sustainability of funding from Japan is also a challenge, given that Japan's domestic political dynamics could affect its financial commitment to JAIF.

Another major challenge is JAIF's inability to directly address the internal political crises occurring in several ASEAN countries, especially Myanmar. Following the military coup in 2021, Myanmar has experienced a prolonged conflict that has negatively impacted human security, including increased displacement, human rights violations, and political instability. Although ASEAN has proposed the Five-Point Consensus as an effort to resolve the crisis, its implementation is still far from expectations due to the weak commitment of the Myanmar military junta. JAIF has limitations in responding to the crisis due to ASEAN's principle of non-intervention, so that the funded programs focus more on humanitarian assistance than more strategic conflict resolution. This is a challenge for JAIF in ensuring that the assistance provided is truly effective in helping affected communities without violating ASEAN diplomatic norms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023).

Socioeconomic gaps in ASEAN provide a significant impediment to JAIF's achievement of long-term development goals. The idea of compressed development, in which ASEAN member countries experience quick but uneven economic growth, results in major inequities. Singapore and Malaysia already have advanced economic infrastructure, whilst Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar continue to struggle with industrial development. JAIF must ensure that its

investments can help to close this gap, whether by expanding human resource capacity, assisting MSMEs, or strengthening a more inclusive digital economy sector. However, in fact, JAIF initiatives frequently face challenges in terms of equitable distribution of economic gains, as the dominance of major corporations and bureaucracy in recipient nations can impede access for those in most need.

In addition to economic challenges, climate change also poses a serious threat to human security in Southeast Asia, especially for countries vulnerable to natural disasters such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam. JAIF has contributed to funding disaster mitigation and climate change adaptation projects, including enhancing emergency response capacity and building more disaster-resilient infrastructure. However, the effectiveness of these programs still faces major challenges, especially in terms of coordination among ASEAN member countries and sustainability of funding. Several disaster mitigation projects are often hampered by weak infrastructure and lack of community preparedness in facing disasters. In addition, weak implementation of environmental policies in several ASEAN countries can hinder the achievement of the long-term goals of JAIF projects.

Infrastructure development and economic connectivity are among JAIF's top priorities in strengthening ASEAN integration. However, these infrastructure projects often have negative impacts on the environment and local communities. For example, the construction of highways, ports, and industrial areas can result in environmental degradation and displace people who have long lived in the area. In addition, the inequality in the distribution of infrastructure projects often benefits countries that already have strong economies, while countries with lower economic capacity still experience limited access to adequate infrastructure. JAIF needs to ensure that infrastructure development policies are not only oriented towards economic growth alone, but also pay attention to the principles of sustainability and inclusiveness for all ASEAN communities.

Finally, JAIF confronts challenges related to establishing social and cultural ties between Japan and ASEAN, particularly through educational collaboration and academic exchange. Despite various endeavors, such as scholarship programs and student exchanges, some ASEAN countries' engagement remains limited due to budgetary restrictions and a lack of access to information. In addition, there are still gaps in the use of Japan's soft power to strengthen ties with ASEAN peoples. JAIF needs to increase efforts to ensure that the educational and cultural programs it funds reach a wider audience, including rural communities and disadvantaged groups. In addition, collaboration with universities and research institutions in ASEAN should be strengthened so that the long-term impact of this educational cooperation is more significant in building understanding and solidarity between Japan and ASEAN.

Discussion

The study's findings indicate that JAIF plays a significant role in ASEAN's framework for sustainable development and human security, notably in tackling human rights issues. JAIF-funded activities have supported initiatives in socioeconomic empowerment, security, and capacity building, in line with earlier research on regional cooperation mechanisms. Nevertheless, the study revealed that JAIF's impact can be impacted by regional constraints, such as geopolitical tensions and economic inequality. As with earlier research on regional funding agreements, JAIF's effectiveness is limited by ASEAN's non-interference principle, which limits its involvement in governance issues. Nonetheless, the JAIF remains a crucial instrument for sustaining regional stability and ensuring that ASEAN countries can collaborate together to address human security challenges.

One of the main results is the importance of JAIF for social as well as financial development, especially in narrowing the economic gulf between ASEAN member states. The impact of JAIF is uneven as a result of differences in economic structures across nations even if it has helped to foster the digital economy and MSMEs. Research done previously on ASEAN economic integration has shown that external funding sources often find it difficult to guarantee equal benefits, especially in developed countries with already well developed infrastructure. Less developed ASEAN countries like Myanmar and Laos show in this research persistent slow economic development even with JAIF assistance. Still, JAIF' s initiatives reflect SDGs 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 10 (Reduced Inequality), therefore underlining its dedication to long-term development.

In the area of security and governance, the study finds that JAIF plays a significant role in humanitarian assistance, especially in conflict-affected areas. This finding is consistent with previous research on international aid programs, which emphasize the importance of neutral funding in crisis response. However, JAIF's influence is still limited, nevertheless, in tackling political core causes of security issues including the current crisis in Myanmar. In line with other studies on ASEAN's diplomatic approach, the findings suggest that JAIF's ability to promote governance reform is limited by ASEAN's policy of non-intervention, with its interventions focusing more on humanitarian assistance than on strategic conflict resolution. Nevertheless, JAIF's support in crisis response and governance is in line with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and contributes to the achievement of human security in ASEAN.

Environmental sustainability is also an area where JAIF has made contributions, particularly in disaster mitigation and climate change adaptation projects. The study found that JAIF-supported initiatives have helped ASEAN countries improve their resilience to natural disasters, a conclusion consistent with previous research on the effectiveness of climate assistance. However, the study also identified weaknesses in policy implementation at the national level, which mirrors challenges faced by other international climate funds. The findings suggest that while external funding can improve technical capacity, long-term effectiveness requires stronger domestic policy enforcement and sustainable funding. By supporting climate resilience and sustainable development projects, JAIF plays a role in achieving SDG 13 (Addressing Climate Change) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements), reinforcing its commitment to human security.

Other findings underscore JAIF's role in education and cultural interaction, particularly in improving ASEAN-Japan relations through scholarship programs and academic collaboration. Previous research on soft power diplomacy have emphasized the importance of education in fostering regional cooperation, and this study backs up those conclusions. However, despite JAIF's efforts to promote access to education, barriers such as insufficient funding and accessibility remain, particularly for impoverished areas. The study's findings are consistent with previous research, which has shown that inclusive education programs require more funding to reach more participants while providing a better long-term benefit. These efforts contribute to achieving SDG 4 (Quality Education) by boosting access to learning and knowledge exchange within ASEAN, hence strengthening regional collaboration.

Overall, these findings indicate that although JAIF plays a crucial role in ASEAN development, its effectiveness is influenced by the regional political structure, economic disparities, and institutional limitations. These results are consistent with studies on other regional cooperation mechanisms, which emphasize the importance of balancing external support and enhancing internal governance. JAIF's commitment to economic development, security, environmental sustainability, and education directly contributes to achieving human

security and various Sustainable Development Goals. To enhance its impact, stronger collaboration with ASEAN institutions and national governments is needed to make JAIF-funded programs more adaptive and inclusive. By addressing these challenges, JAIF can further strengthen its role in maintaining stability and sustainable development in ASEAN.

Conclusion

This research underscores the significance of the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) in enhancing human security within ASEAN by employing the principles of freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the freedom to live with dignity. The research indicates that JAIF not only contributes to socio-economic development but also significantly addresses human rights issues in the region. The novelty of this research resides in the application of the human security framework to analyze the effectiveness of JAIF in strengthening the well-being of ASEAN peoples in a more comprehensive manner, particularly in promoting sustainable development.

Practically, the findings of this study provide insights for policymakers and donors in improving the effectiveness of aid programs in ASEAN. JAIF can optimize its role by strengthening collaboration with ASEAN, increasing funding for empowerment programs for vulnerable communities, and ensuring the sustainability of projects that focus on disaster mitigation and climate resilience. In addition, this study can serve as a reference for JAIF recipient countries in designing more inclusive and human rights-oriented policies, in order to achieve a balance between economic growth and social protection.

The theoretical contribution of this study is the integration of the concept of human security with the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals within the context of regional collaboration. This study contributes to the literature on human security by demonstrating how a human security-based approach can be applied to regional development initiatives. By emphasizing the importance of policies that focus on human security, this study proposes that a cooperation model such as JAIF can serve as an example for similar initiatives in other regions in strengthening people's well-being and resilience in a more sustainable manner.

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