Best Sustainable Practices: A Comparative Study of Environmental and Developmental Strategies among Southeast Asian Countries

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a comparative analysis of sustainable development practices across the 10 ASEAN member states, addressing gaps in cross-national evaluation, transferability of best practices, and alignment with global frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using a qualitative comparative case study approach and documentary analysis (2020–2025), the research identifies key innovations in sectors including energy, tourism, and urban planning. Notable patterns include innovation-driven strategies in Vietnam and Singapore, and community-based initiatives in Thailand and Myanmar.

Despite progress, sustainability implementation remains uneven due to policy fragmentation, capacity gaps, and financial disparities. A SWOT analysis and cross-case synthesis highlight shared success factors, such as stakeholder engagement and policy coherence, while proposing a flexible regional framework grounded in governance alignment, capacity building, and inclusive financing. Limitations include reliance on secondary data and lack of triangulation. The study provides actionable insights for fostering cohesive, adaptive, and equitable sustainability transitions across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Sustainability, ASEAN, Environmental Policy, Comparative Study, Sustainable Development Goals

INTRODUCTION

The climate crisis, rapid urbanization, and increasing socio-economic pressures have elevated sustainability to a global priority. In Southeast Asia, countries are progressively adopting sustainable development frameworks to balance economic growth with ecological integrity. Given the region's ecological diversity and vulnerability to environmental hazards, sustainability has become central to national development agendas. ASEAN member states have pursued varied policy responses shaped by their distinct political systems, economic capacities, and environmental contexts.

While numerous studies have documented national efforts in areas such as climate mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and resource management (Leong et al., 2024), the region's overall environmental performance remains uneven and generally lags behind global standards (Ding & Beh, 2022). Challenges such as resource overexploitation, urban sprawl, and fragmented governance continue to strain ecosystems, particularly in urbanized regions like Greater Bandung and Greater Kuala Lumpur (Lechner et al., 2021). Despite growing interest in nature-based solutions, successful implementation varies across countries.

Although several country-specific studies highlight best practices in green energy (e.g., Vietnam), sustainable tourism (e.g., Thailand), and waste management (e.g., the Philippines), existing literature lacks a comprehensive, comparative analysis that systematically evaluates the transferability and effectiveness of these practices across ASEAN. Moreover, the interplay between top-down policies and bottom-up initiatives, and their alignment with global frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), remains underexplored (Yusof et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the need for adaptive strategies and regional cooperation, yet scholarly work has seldom examined how such crises reshape sustainability trajectories in a cross-national context.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a comparative analysis of sustainability strategies in all 10 ASEAN member countries. It aims to document key innovations, identify enabling and constraining factors, and evaluate how national practices contribute to or diverge from regional and global sustainability goals. By highlighting cross-cutting themes and country-specific approaches, the research seeks to provide actionable insights for fostering a more cohesive and effective regional sustainability agenda.

Research Objectives:

1. To identify the best sustainable practices implemented in each of the 10 Southeast Asian countries across various sectors (e.g., agriculture, tourism, energy, and education).

2. To compare the sustainability strategies of Southeast Asian countries based on key indicators such as environmental impact, policy implementation, community involvement, and innovation.

3. To analyze the common challenges and success factors in the implementation of sustainable practices in the ASEAN region and propose a regional framework for shared improvement.

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

Sustainability efforts across Southeast Asia reflect a diverse but fragmented landscape, with sector-specific progress influenced by socio-economic, institutional, and policy factors. While advancements have been made in areas such as agriculture, tourism, education, and corporate governance, these efforts often lack integration and consistent implementation across the region.

Sectoral Progress and Divergence

In agriculture, sustainable rice cultivation is widely promoted as a means of reducing environmental degradation. However, adoption remains low due to socio-demographic and institutional barriers (Chang et al., 2024; Liao et al., 2022). Similarly, while eco-tourism practices are gaining ground, countries differ in approach: Vietnam emphasizes community-based tourism, whereas Thailand and Malaysia rely more on centralized, government-led strategies (Boonyasurat, 2023). This variation highlights both adaptive potential and the absence of a unified framework for tourism sustainability.

Corporate and Institutional Engagement

Corporate sustainability reporting is more established in countries like Indonesia, while nations such as Cambodia lag behind (Kono et al., 2023). Airport sustainability programs and green initiatives in hospitality are being pursued through energy management and waste reduction strategies, yet they often lack robust metrics and policy coherence (Sreenath et al., 2021; Sirivadhanawaravachara, 2025). In higher education, Thailand's universities have integrated sustainability into curricula and institutional culture, offering a model for regional alignment (Filho et al., 2021).

Country-Specific Patterns and Constraints

Thailand stands out for its relatively holistic adoption of sustainability across agriculture, hospitality, and education. Malaysia demonstrates moderate engagement, particularly in the software and MSME sectors, where cost-saving motives are dominant, but weak government support limits broader adoption (Ahmad, 2022; Wei et al., 2024). The Philippines presents a mix of regulatory compliance and private-sector initiative, with varying levels of sustainability integration across education, banking, utilities, and zero-carbon programs (Vidal & Mendoza, 2023; Alban, 2023; Manalo, 2022).

Emerging Themes and Gaps

Across these studies, three key themes emerge: (1) institutional and regulatory support plays a pivotal role in shaping sustainability outcomes; (2) community participation and local adaptation drive success in tourism and agriculture; and (3) economic incentives, such as cost reduction, often trigger corporate adoption of

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sustainability practices. However, the literature also exposes gaps, most notably, the lack of cross-sectoral and cross-country collaboration, inconsistent metrics for evaluating impact, and limited knowledge transfer within ASEAN.

Despite notable efforts in isolated sectors and countries, Southeast Asia lacks a coordinated, interregional sustainability architecture. Without enhanced public-private cooperation, regional policy alignment, and strategic capacity-building, current initiatives risk remaining siloed and insufficient to meet the region's shared sustainable development goals.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study design to examine and evaluate best sustainable practices across the 10 ASEAN member states. The approach enabled a contextual and cross-national analysis of sustainability strategies in key sectors: agriculture, tourism, energy, education, and infrastructure, highlighting both shared frameworks and country-specific innovations. Comparative case study methodology was selected for its strength in capturing variation across diverse governance, socio-economic, and environmental contexts.

Data Collection and Sources

Data was gathered through documentary analysis, focusing on materials published between 2020 and 2025. Sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, government sustainability reports, institutional publications, and regional frameworks such as the ASEAN sustainability policies and UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) alignment reports. A purposive sampling strategy ensured that only relevant and up-to-date materials were included. Key databases and repositories consulted were ScienceDirect, Springer, MDPI, JSTOR, and institutional sources such as WWF, UNDP, and national sustainability agencies.

Data Analysis and Limitations

The collected documents were subjected to qualitative content analysis using thematic coding to identify patterns related to environmental management, social inclusion, economic resilience, and policy innovation. A cross-case synthesis was then used to compare practices among countries, highlighting both convergences and divergences. To further assess national strategies, a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) was conducted for each country. These findings were then compared against regional benchmarks, including ASEAN and SDG targets, to evaluate alignment and implementation gaps.

However, the study has notable limitations. Exclusive reliance on documentary sources may introduce subjectivity, particularly in interpreting policy intentions versus implementation outcomes. Additionally, the lack of triangulation with field data, interviews, or direct stakeholder input limits the ability to validate findings beyond published reports. Despite these constraints, the methodology provides a structured, comparative foundation for understanding sustainability practices and informing future regional cooperation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification of Best Sustainable Practices Implemented in Southeast Asia

This section presents a comparative overview of selected best practices in sustainability across the 10 ASEAN countries. Case selection was guided by three main criteria: (1) alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), (2) policy innovation and replicability, and (3) documented outcomes in academic or institutional sources from 2020 to 2025. Each case highlights sector-specific initiatives in tourism, energy, agriculture, and urban development. While this documentary-based approach offers valuable insights, findings should be interpreted with caution due to limitations in validation beyond secondary sources.

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Vietnam

Vietnam's sustainability strategy is strongly oriented toward innovation and clean energy integration. Policies emphasize green infrastructure, financial innovation, and energy diversification, with notable results in carbon emission reductions and economic resilience. For example, Vietnam ranks among the top ASEAN countries in solar capacity per capita (IRENA, 2024), driven by strong feed-in tariff programs. The country's "asymmetric innovation frameworks" support green startups and integrate education and public engagement, representing a systems-level approach.

Thailand

Thailand leads in community-based low-carbon tourism, particularly through initiatives like the Khaosok Tourism Cluster, which combines local participation with policy support and private sector collaboration. While the initiative lacks formal regulatory and financial structures, its success in aligning livelihood development with environmental preservation offers a model for decentralized, inclusive sustainability. Thailand also performs relatively well in the ASEAN Green Future Index (2023), particularly in tourism and education-led climate initiatives.

Philippines

The Philippines' Zero Carbon Resorts (ZCR) Program in Palawan is a leading example of private sector participation in low-carbon tourism. Guided by the 3R principle (Reduce, Replace, Redesign), it includes solar panel installation, waste recycling, and water conservation. Unlike other ASEAN countries, the Philippines emphasizes participatory monitoring and policy dialogue, making ZCR a replicable model. However, broader scalability is constrained by uneven infrastructure and limited regulatory enforcement across regions.

Singapore

Singapore is the ASEAN frontrunner in urban sustainability and smart infrastructure, underpinned by the Sustainable Singapore Blueprint (SSB). The city-state scores highest in energy efficiency, smart mobility, and waste management according to the Environmental Performance Index (EPI, 2024). Its success is largely due to policy coherence, long-term fiscal commitment, and multi-agency coordination, which enable consistent implementation across urban systems.

Malaysia

Sustainable practices in Malaysia are most prominent in the hotel and service industries, where green certifications and waste-reduction programs have seen moderate uptake. While basic eco-practices are widespread, long-term sustainability strategies remain limited by inconsistent certification and implementation (Rassiah et al., 2024). Government incentives and stakeholder collaboration, especially in green HR practices, play a growing role, yet high-end hospitality sectors tend to perform better than small operators.

Indonesia

Indonesia's sustainability focus includes urban ecological planning and renewable energy transitions in cities like Jakarta and Bandung. These efforts integrate green mobility, pollution control, and infrastructure investment. However, coordination remains a challenge across provinces, and national frameworks are often fragmented across sectors. The country is also confronting deforestation and waste management issues, despite national targets for clean energy and ecotourism development.

Laos

Laos has adopted a Green Growth Strategy (2023) centered on education, innovation, and local institutional capacity. The Green Growth Promotion Fund supports local sustainability projects in agriculture and energy. However, limited technical capacity and financial constraints hinder effective implementation. Laos relies

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heavily on support from international donors and ASEAN-based training partnerships, especially for green skills development and infrastructure planning.

Cambodia

Cambodia is in the early stages of integrating renewable energy and sustainable agriculture into national policy. Pilot programs in solar electrification and organic farming are underway, supported by ASEAN cooperation on capacity building. However, weak institutional infrastructure and a lack of enforcement mechanisms hinder broader adoption. Cambodia scores lower in sustainability indices due to intra-governmental fragmentation and limited budgetary allocations to green initiatives.

Brunei

Brunei's Green Plan 2035 focuses on energy efficiency, green building codes, and sustainable construction, with strong central governance as an enabler. However, the country's heavy dependence on fossil fuels remains a critical barrier. Efforts to diversify the energy portfolio are underway, alongside nationwide green education campaigns, yet structural economic reliance on oil continues to challenge long-term sustainability goals.

Myanmar

Despite political and economic instability, Myanmar demonstrates grassroots sustainability leadership through community-based MSME initiatives focused on waste recycling, composting, and green vocational training. NGOs and local networks compensate for weak state capacity by advancing sustainability through training, community engagement, and informal policy dialogue. These efforts highlight the potential of local actors to drive sustainable development, even in fragile states.

Cross-Case Reflections and Limitations

The selection of initiatives emphasized those with measurable impacts, documented stakeholder involvement, and regional relevance. However, the reliance on document analysis limits real-time validation. There was no direct triangulation through interviews, surveys, or field visits, which restricts the depth of analysis for implementation fidelity. Future studies should integrate mixed methods and stakeholder feedback to enhance empirical grounding and policy relevance.

Country	Sector	Key Initiative	Type	Notable Outcomes	Challenges
Vietnam	Energy, Infrastructure	Innovation in clean energy, sustainable infrastructure	National policy-driven	Reduced emissions, increased public health and resilience	Institutional scaling, rural access
Thailand	Tourism, Community Dev.	Khaosok Low-Carbon Tourism Cluster	Community + Gov't hybrid	Community empowerment, eco-conservation	Lack of formal financing and regulation
Philippines	Tourism, Energy	Zero Carbon Resorts (ZCR) in Palawan	Private-sector led	Reduced carbon footprint, participatory monitoring	Uneven adoption across regions
Singapore	Urban Planning, Mobility	Sustainable Singapore Blueprint (SSB)	Centralized, cross-sector	High energy efficiency, green mobility, global sustainability leader	High implementation costs
Malaysia	Hospitality, HRM	Green certifications in hotel industry	Mixed public-private	Moderate uptake of eco-practices, improved green HRM	Inconsistent enforcement, limited innovation
Indonesia	Urban Dev., Environment	Urban ecological planning (Jakarta, Bandung)	Multisector initiative	Green mobility progress, improved city planning	Policy fragmentation, weak provincial links

Laos	Agriculture, Energy	Green Growth Promotion Fund	Donor-supported policy	Pilot projects in resource conservation and clean energy	Financial and technical limitations
Cambodia	Renewable Energy, Agri.	Pilot solar & sustainable farming programs	Community + regional aid	Promising pilots, ASEAN cooperation on training	Weak enforcement, limited institutional capacity
Brunei	Energy, Construction	Brunei Green Plan 2035	Centralized policy	Initiated energy efficiency & green building codes	Fossil fuel dependency
Myanmar	MSMEs, Waste Management	Grassroots MSME sustainability (recycling, green training)	NGO and community-led	Local innovation, women/youth participation	Political instability, weak government capacity

Comparative Analysis of Sustainability Strategies Using SWOT and Key Indicators

Country	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Vietnam	Innovation-led policies, clean energy growth	Regulatory delays	Investment in renewable sectors	Rapid urbanization
Thailand	Community-based tourism, policy support	Funding gaps	Low-carbon tourism leadership	Climate variability
Philippines	ZCR replicability, local enterprise support	Limited tech access	Green enterprise expansion	Energy dependence
Singapore	Blueprint governance, urban planning	Land/resource scarcity	Smart city exports	Regional haze impacts
Malaysia	Sectoral focus, green HRM	Uneven implementation	Hotel certification expansion	Cost-driven mindset
Indonesia	Ecological urban plans	Deforestation	Circular economy innovation	Natural disaster risk
Laos	Capacity building, external aid	Technical deficits	Green donor funding	Infrastructure lag
Cambodia	Renewable pilot projects	Weak policy system	ASEAN green alignment	Institutional gaps
Brunei	Energy efficiency, top-down governance	Oil dependency	Clean energy leadership	Market volatility
Myanmar	MSME inclusiveness, community training	Political instability	Local innovation hubs	Conflict & governance issues

Synthesis and Policy Implications

The SWOT analysis highlights a divergent yet complementary landscape of sustainability strategies across Southeast Asia. Countries like Vietnam and Singapore demonstrate top-down, innovation-driven sustainability pathways, emphasizing state-led planning, clean energy integration, and exportable urban solutions. By contrast, Thailand and the Philippines adopt more bottom-up, community-centered approaches, leveraging local tourism and enterprise for sustainable development. These differences reflect variations in governance structure, economic maturity, and institutional capacity.

Systemic weaknesses, especially in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, are tied to underdeveloped regulatory frameworks, technical deficits, and political instability. These factors limit the scalability of promising pilot programs and delay the implementation of national plans. Similarly, the uneven adoption of certification schemes (e.g., in Malaysia's hospitality sector) and inconsistent inter-agency coordination (e.g., in Indonesia) suggest that sustainability remains sectorally siloed in several ASEAN nations.

At the regional level, opportunities lie in deepening collaboration through green technology transfer, harmonization of SDG reporting, and joint infrastructure investment. ASEAN's institutional platform could be leveraged to develop a shared sustainability benchmarking system, offering technical assistance and financial

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instruments, particularly for lower-capacity states. This aligns with regional integration theories that emphasize policy convergence and collective governance in addressing transboundary challenges.

Moreover, threats such as rapid urbanization, climate variability, and energy dependency demand an integrated response. Regional frameworks can mitigate these risks by advancing green finance mechanisms, educational campaigns, and policy coherence across sectors and borders. A coordinated effort would not only accelerate progress toward SDGs but also strengthen ASEAN's position in global sustainability leadership.

Common Challenges, Success Factors, and Proposed Regional Framework for Improvement

Pillar	Proposed Regional Initiative
Policy Integration	Explore the development of an ASEAN Sustainability Scorecard and a shared SDG localization roadmap to guide national strategies while respecting domestic policy autonomy.
Capacity Building	Pilot an ASEAN Sustainability Training Network (ASTN) that connects existing institutions to deliver context-sensitive programs for government agencies, SMEs, and tourism stakeholders.
Innovation & Finance	Assess the feasibility of expanding an ASEAN Green Finance Mechanism, which may include a regional green bond platform or shared sustainability investment fund.
Community Empowerment	Establish regional grant schemes or co-financing programs to support community-driven sustainability projects, particularly in lower-capacity member states.
Monitoring & Evaluation	Develop a Regional SDG Dashboard, in partnership with ASEAN bodies and UN agencies, to track progress and promote voluntary benchmarking.

Synthesis of Challenges and Success Drivers

Despite progress, ASEAN countries face persistent and interconnected challenges in advancing sustainability:

- Fragmented policy implementation, due in part to varying national development priorities;
- Disparities in institutional and technical capacity, particularly among the least-developed members;
- Limited access to sustainable financing at both national and community levels;
- Underutilization of indigenous knowledge and grassroots innovation.

However, across the cases reviewed, three critical success factors emerged:

1. Innovation-led governance (notably in Vietnam and Singapore), driven by strategic state intervention and technology adoption;
2. Community-based approaches (as seen in Thailand and Myanmar), which foster local ownership and cultural alignment;
3. Regulatory coherence and private-sector partnerships (visible in Malaysia and the Philippines), enhancing program replicability and market alignment.

Toward a Realistic Regional Pathway

While the proposed GAPD Framework (Governance, Alignment, Participation, Development) outlines aspirational goals, its adoption must consider real-world constraints:

- Political sensitivity and sovereignty concerns may hinder uniform policy adoption across states.
- Economic inequality and divergent fiscal capacities challenge equitable program rollout.
- Varying levels of administrative readiness necessitate a phased and flexible implementation approach.

Rather than prescriptive, these proposals should be viewed as starting points for dialogue, fostering gradual convergence toward sustainability goals while respecting the diversity of ASEAN member states. Building on existing platforms, such as the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue, could provide a pragmatic foundation for regional cooperation, enabling mutual learning, resource pooling, and strategic alignment with global climate and development commitments.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights both the progress and persistent challenges in the adoption of sustainable practices across Southeast Asia. While several ASEAN countries have made significant strides, Vietnam and Singapore through innovation-led models, Thailand and Myanmar via community-based approaches, and Malaysia and the Philippines through regulatory alignment, implementation remains uneven. These gaps are often rooted in fragmented policy frameworks, limited institutional capacities, and disparities in financial and technical resources.

Despite these challenges, the analysis reveals shared success factors across contexts: policy coherence, multi-stakeholder engagement, and the integration of innovation and education. These elements consistently underpin effective sustainability initiatives, regardless of country-specific starting points or governance models.

To support more inclusive and coordinated progress, this study recommends the development of a flexible regional sustainability framework grounded in policy alignment, capacity-building, and context-aware financing. ASEAN platforms can play a catalytic role in embedding sustainability principles across member states through joint training, innovation facilitation, and SDG monitoring mechanisms. However, such initiatives must be tailored to account for political sensitivities, economic disparities, and varied institutional maturity.

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study relies primarily on documentary analysis of secondary sources, which limits the ability to validate findings through triangulation with fieldwork or stakeholder interviews. The subjectivity inherent in thematic coding may also influence how cases were interpreted and compared. Additionally, while care was taken to include recent and regionally balanced data, variations in data availability and reporting quality across countries present constraints in comparability.

Future research would benefit from a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative indicators, in-depth field studies, and interviews with local actors to enhance the validity and applicability of findings. Expanding analysis to include private sector roles, cross-border environmental impacts, and intergenerational equity would also provide deeper insight into the sustainability landscape of ASEAN.

In sum, Southeast Asia's sustainability transition will require both national-level innovation and regional solidarity, supported by adaptive frameworks that recognize diversity while striving for collective resilience and environmental integrity.

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