

Executive summary

The ten Southeast Asian (SEA) countries included in this publication together make up the world's seventh-largest economy, with average real gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 5.3% in 2017. Economic and social progress in the past quarter century has been outstanding. However, governments in Southeast Asia need to respond to constant change in an increasingly complex world. This raises challenges in many policy areas including: fiscal management, bureaucratic efficiency, civil servant capacity, and openness and transparency.

Achieving a citizen-centric civil service is a central goal for governments. It requires an in-depth understanding of citizens' expectations and experiences and a public decision-making process that puts citizens at the centre. Countries also need to strengthen public sector institutional capacities to foster well-being and inclusive and sustainable growth. *Government at a Glance Southeast Asia 2019* provides a set of indicators to guide public sector reform in the region and support the achievement of citizen centricity in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Community Vision 2025.

These data and indicators allow ASEAN countries to compare their performance to each other, to the regional average, to key OECD neighbouring countries, and to the OECD average. Such comparisons contribute to a robust assessment of public sector reforms in the region and provide good practices for future actions.

Key findings

The public finances of SEA countries are improving, but there are wide variations. Fiscal deficits, on average, dropped to 1.79% of GDP in 2016, compared to 2.73% in 2009, although still higher than in 2007 (0.19%). Fiscal balances ranged from a deficit of 21.5% to a surplus of 3.3% in 2016. Government debt across SEA countries also varies significantly, from a high of 107% to a low of 3% in 2016; between 2007 and 2016 debt increased in six out of 10 SEA countries.

Public sectors in the SEA region are relatively small. In 2016, public employment in the SEA region represented on average 15% of total employment, compared to 21% for OECD countries. SEA government expenditures were 20% of GDP, but 40.6% for the OECD.

Overall, women are well represented in the public sector, but face significant barriers in reaching senior leadership positions; women's political representation in parliament and in ministerial positions could also be improved. There are considerable differences among SEA countries in women's share in total employment, ranging from 49% in Vietnam to 38% in Malaysia, while women constitute 54% of public sector employment in the Philippines but only 36% in Lao People's Democratic Republic. In the political sphere, women are still under-represented in the region. On average, 10% of ministerial posts were filled by women in 2017, compared to 28% in OECD countries. On average, women held 20% of parliamentary seats in SEA countries in 2018, only 1.7 percentage points higher than in 2008. The share of women in parliament ranges from 30% in the Philippines to 5% in Thailand.

To strengthen fiscal frameworks, SEA countries should reinforce medium-term expenditure planning and make budget information more widely available. Budget transparency allows citizens to access information on how public money is raised and used. Two-thirds of SEA countries have established medium-term expenditure frameworks (MTEF) (compared to 91% of OECD countries). In Indonesia and Thailand the MTEF is enshrined in law while for most SEA countries they are part of a strategy or policy. It is noted that 50% of the SEA countries release the underlying methodology and economic assumptions of the fiscal projections supporting their budgets, compared to 85% of OECD countries.

SEA countries operate more centralised human resources management (HRM) practices than OECD countries. On average, SEA countries are less likely to delegate HRM to line departments and managers than OECD countries. All countries use employee performance evaluations. Some countries link performance to pay, particularly for members of the senior civil service (SCS), who are managed under different employment frameworks in most SEA countries. In fast-changing environments, candidates recruited from outside the civil service, at least for senior positions, can bring in different experiences and skills. However, only two SEA countries reported having an external recruitment process; in most, SCS are recruited internally.

All SEA countries have digital government strategies, but they are largely limited to general public services (e.g. permits, licences, certificates). SEA countries should broaden the scope of digital strategies to other areas of the public sector. Digital identification mechanisms, integrated with a national online portal for public services, can give citizens better access to services. Currently, seven of the ten SEA countries have a digital identification mechanism. Only three countries measure the direct financial benefits of information and communication technology (ICT) projects within their respective governments, and most do not measure the financial benefits of ICT investments for businesses and citizens.

SEA countries have begun laying the foundations for open government, but challenges remain. Only three countries in the SEA region currently have a “freedom of information” law. Furthermore, only four SEA countries have formal requirements for all public sector organisations to make their data open by default. Half of the countries surveyed monitor and evaluate the impact of open government initiatives. A major challenge in five SEA countries is that the co-ordinating institution lacks an adequate mandate.

People in Southeast Asia report relatively high satisfaction with public service quality based on available Gallup polling data. While these data have their limitations (see page 34) it is the only international dataset that covers at regular intervals a wide range of countries both OECD and SEA ones. There are considerable differences among SEA countries. For example, 93% of citizens in Singapore are satisfied with the quality and availability of health care, but only 62% in Vietnam. On average citizen satisfaction with the health system increased slightly (3 p.p. from 2007 to 2017). Satisfaction with the education system and schools remained stable, while satisfaction with the justice system and the courts increased the most (6 p.p.). However, the shortage of educational material is acute in some countries. SEA countries score lower (0.48) on the index of accessibility and affordability of civil justice services than OECD countries (0.62).



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