



ASEAN Creative Economy
Sustainability Framework:

From Ideas to Impact - A Companion Guide

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The ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework: From Ideas to Impact – A Companion Guide is produced in conjunction with the adoption of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework at the 46th ASEAN Summit on 26 May 2025, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

This publication followed the convening of the ASEAN-UK Symposium on the Development of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework which was held on 20-21 February 2025, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The Symposium was held as part of the ASEAN-UK Advancing Creative Economy initiative, co-funded by UK Mission to ASEAN and British Council and in partnership with the ASEAN Secretariat.

UK Mission to ASEAN, British Council and the ASEAN Secretariat extend our sincere gratitude to ASEAN Sectoral Bodies, and would like to express our appreciation to the contributors to this publication for providing their perspectives which shall enrich the regional dialogue on promoting the development of the ASEAN Creative Economy.

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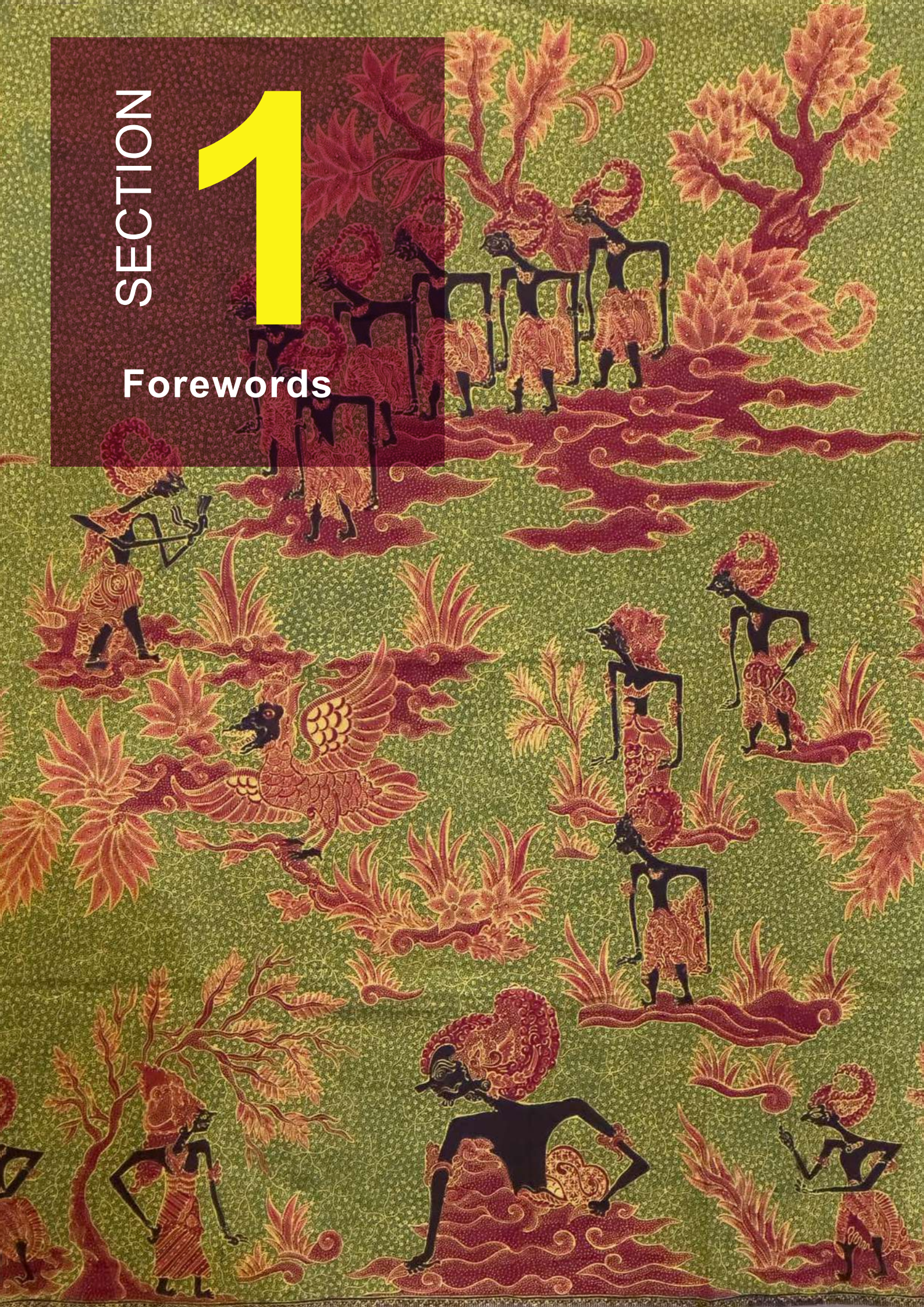
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SECTION

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Forewords



Foreword

HON. DATO SRI TIONG KING SING

Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia

Chair, ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts (AMCA) 2024–2026



As Chair of the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts (AMCA) for the 2024–2026 term, Malaysia is honoured to lead the regional cultural cooperation under the theme “*Bridging Cultures, Building Futures: Unity in Diversity*” which focuses on three key priority areas, namely **Youth, Creative Economy, and Digitalisation**. These priorities reflect our shared ambition to harness ASEAN’s rich cultural diversity and dynamic social fabric to build a future-ready, resilient, and inclusive ASEAN Community.

Among these, the creative economy holds significant potential to drive inclusive growth, foster innovation, and promote cultural sustainability. In cognisance of this, Malaysia together with the ASEAN Secretariat and the Government of the United Kingdom spearheaded the development of the **ASEAN Creative Economy (ACE) Sustainability Framework**. A dedicated regional workshop brought together experts, policymakers, and creative industry stakeholders to ensure the Framework aligns with both national priorities and regional goals. This collaborative process underscores ASEAN’s commitment to partnership and inclusive development

On behalf of AMCA Malaysia, I extend our sincere appreciation to all ASEAN Member States for their strong support and endorsement of the Advancing Creative Economy (ACE) Sustainability Framework, which was adopted as one of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community outcome documents during the 46th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This milestone marks a significant step forward. Much work remains to be done to fully realise the vision of the Framework that empowers communities, safeguards cultural livelihoods and unlocks lasting opportunities for a vibrant and creative future.

Malaysia remains committed to working closely with all stakeholders to advance the creative economy as a key pillar of ASEAN’s post-2025 development agenda. Together, let us continue building a culturally rich, economically empowered, and united ASEAN.

“On behalf of AMCA Malaysia, I extend our sincere appreciation to all ASEAN Member States for their strong support and endorsement of the ACE Sustainability Framework.”

Foreword

H.E. DR. KAO KIM HOURN

Secretary-General of ASEAN



ASEAN stands at the crossroads of a transformative journey – where the boundless talent and rich heritage of our peoples converge with cutting-edge technology and innovative spirit. This fusion is driving the emergence of a vibrant creative economy – one that fuels inclusive, sustainable, and resilient growth across our diverse communities.

The ASEAN Creative Economy thrives at the dynamic intersection of culture, innovation, and sustainable development – a realm where time-honored traditions engage with digital breakthroughs, and imagination ignites new pathways for prosperity. This convergence unlocks unparalleled opportunities for regional progress, honouring our past while building our shared future.

Creative professionals throughout ASEAN – from artists and designers to filmmakers and digital innovators – have demonstrated remarkable agility and vision, shaping cultural narratives that both celebrate our rich diversity and articulate our shared aspirations. Spanning design, film, fashion, digital content, and cultural heritage preservation, the creative economy serves as a powerful engine for job creation, cross-sectoral collaboration, inclusive growth, youth engagement, and meaningful people-to-people connections.

The development of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework represents a significant achievement in regional cooperation. Following the ASEAN-UK Symposium on its development held on 20-21 February 2025, this comprehensive Framework emerged through extensive consultation with a diverse coalition of external stakeholders, including civil society organisations, academic institutions, and industry practitioners. The process also benefited from the insights of ASEAN sectoral bodies across the ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community pillars, as well as ASEAN Connectivity, with support from the ASEAN Secretariat.

During the 46th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 26 May 2025, ASEAN Leaders adopted this comprehensive Framework, which establishes 10 guiding principles and 13 strategic priorities designed to achieve four critical outcomes spanning cultural, social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

“The ASEAN Creative Economy thrives at the dynamic intersection of culture, innovation, and sustainable development.”

This publication, ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework: From Ideas to Impact: A Companion Guide, serves as both a practical resource and an inspirational call to action. It aims to advance the implementation of the Framework while supporting key regional initiatives, including the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Strategic Plan, the ASEAN Economic Community Strategic Plan 2026-2030, and the ASEAN Community Vision 2045.

The Companion Guide offers important insights into the creative economy and documents our collective regional efforts to build a thriving cultural and creative sector across ASEAN. Through thoughtful contributions from creative policymakers and practitioners, this publication explores critical dimensions of the creative economy—from creative valuation to access to financing—with the goal of informing and inspiring readers to join our mission of realising a people-centred and people-oriented creative community throughout ASEAN.

Central to the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework is the principle that ASEAN's diversity constitutes our greatest strength – recognising that each Member State brings unique contributions to our collective creative economy development. As you explore this Companion Guide, I trust it will serve as compelling evidence of ASEAN's dynamism in harnessing emerging sources of competitiveness, including the creative economy, to advance our economic integration agenda while promoting truly inclusive and sustainable development across our region.

This publication exemplifies the strength of our collaborative partnership with the United Kingdom through the ASEAN-UK Advancing Creative Economy Programme, supported by the ASEAN-UK Dialogue Partnership, which has flourished since its formalisation in August 2021. I extend my appreciation to the UK Mission to ASEAN, the British Council, and Cultural Associates Oxford for their instrumental role in making this publication possible.



“ASEAN’s diversity constitutes our greatest strength – with each Member State bringing unique contributions to our collective creative economy development.”

Foreword

H.E. HELEN FAZEY

Ambassador of the United Kingdom to ASEAN



Creativity is a strategic driver of sustainable development. It fuels innovation, empowers communities, generates economic opportunity, and strengthens cultural identity. ASEAN's Creative Economy Sustainability Framework is an ambitious response to this opportunity — setting out a shared vision to integrate creativity into the region's development pathways.

This Companion Guide reflects the strength of ASEAN's regional cooperation and the value of open, inclusive policymaking. It draws together the insights of policymakers, industry experts, and cultural practitioners. It also serves as a practical reference for advancing the Framework's implementation across ASEAN's diverse social, cultural, economic, and environmental contexts.

The United Kingdom is proud to have supported the development of the Framework through our partnership with Senior Official Meetings on Culture and Arts (SOMCA) Malaysia, the ASEAN Secretariat, and the British Council. The ASEAN-UK Symposium on the Development of the Framework, held in Kuala Lumpur in early 2025, provided a platform for cross-sectoral dialogue and co-creation. It reaffirmed the potential of international partnerships to foster inclusive, forward-looking policy innovation.

The UK's own experience reflects the value of investing in the creative economy. Our Modern Industrial Strategy identifies the creative industries as one of eight high-growth sectors vital to long-term national resilience. We recognise creativity not only as a cultural asset but as an engine of job creation, digital innovation, and regional regeneration.

ASEAN's Framework is built on similar foundations. It sets out a cross-pillar vision that connects entrepreneurship, education, sustainability, and digital transformation. Its implementation offers opportunities to unlock regional value, strengthen creative ecosystems, and foster equitable and inclusive growth.

The UK is committed to supporting ASEAN's efforts to advance this agenda. I believe this publication will contribute to that effort—providing ideas, perspectives, and practical tools for those working to translate the Framework into action.

“ASEAN's Creative Economy Sustainability Framework is an ambitious response to this opportunity — setting out a shared vision to integrate creativity into the region's development pathways.”

Foreword

SUMMER XIA

Country Director Indonesia & Director of Southeast Asia
British Council



The British Council is honoured to contribute to the development of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework—a pivotal regional initiative that recognises the power of the creative economy to drive inclusive growth and shape sustainable futures across Southeast Asia.

This Framework marks a significant milestone. It recognises the creative economy not only as a source of cultural identity and social wellbeing, but also as a dynamic driver of economic growth, employment, and trade. With ASEAN's young, digitally connected population and vibrant creative sectors—from fashion, design, and music to gaming and film—the region holds tremendous potential as a global hub for creative innovation and enterprise.

Our contribution to this process is grounded in the British Council's long-standing commitment to cultural relations and people-to-people exchange. For over 20 years, we have championed the development of creative economies in more than 40 countries. By combining international expertise with local insight, we support the creative and cultural industries as a catalyst for sustainable and inclusive development—connecting ideas, building capacity, and fostering global collaboration.

Through our ASEAN–UK Advancing Creative Economy (ACE) programme, co-funded by the UK Mission to ASEAN and the British Council and delivered in partnership with the ASEAN Secretariat, we aim to empower policymakers, creative leaders and professionals. We also commission research, convene regional dialogue, and facilitate exchange between UK and ASEAN creative practitioners—strengthening the foundations for long-term cooperation.

This Framework—shaped through regional consultation and enriched by UK expertise—provides a shared vision and practical policy direction for ASEAN's creative economy. It also opens new opportunities for collaboration between ASEAN, the UK, and other global partners. At a time of global challenges, from climate change and digital disruption to social and economic inequality, the creative economy offers a hopeful, human-centred approach to recovery and resilience.

“We warmly congratulate ASEAN and its Member States on this bold and timely achievement. The British Council remains a committed partner in turning this vision into action—supporting creative ecosystems and unlocking the full potential of creativity across the region.”

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

SECTION

2

**ASEAN Creative
Economy
Sustainability
Framework**



ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework

Adopted by the 46th ASEAN Summit
26 May 2025

Part 1 Background

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, cultural and creative industries constituted one of the fastest growing sectors of the global economy and, as UN reports have indicated, the sector was growing in every part of the world, contributing significantly to the growth in trade of goods and services among developing economies.

Although the pandemic had a devastating impact on the whole creative sector, it has demonstrated its extraordinary resilience and adaptability by renewing those strong upward trends from 2022 onwards. It was therefore prescient of the ASEAN Member States to adopt the Siem Reap Declaration on Promoting a Creative and Adaptive ASEAN Community to Support the Cultural and Creative Economy in 2022, which committed the region to “promote and develop” its creative economy with a particular emphasis on “inclusive economic development”.

The region's global profile in the creative economy, and its emphasis on a balanced and inclusive approach to growth, is in line with the UN's Year of the Creative Economy in 2021 and the Sustainable Development 2030 Goals and contributes to the development of the World Conference on Creative Economy.

These achievements and commitments give a solid foundation to the ambition to make ASEAN a globally recognised powerhouse of sustainable innovation, cultural preservation, and digital transformation, empowering local creatives, driving inclusive economic growth and positioning the region as the leading hub for ethical and environmentally conscious growth.

ASEAN has developed an umbrella working definition of the creative economy as follows: “The ASEAN Creative Economy (ACE) is added value emanating from human creativity based on heritage, culture, the arts, design, science, technology, and innovation, that promotes sustainable, resilient, equitable and inclusive development by way of jobs, wealth and value creation. The ACE encompasses activities related to production, consumption, distribution and trade of intangible assets such as intellectual property rights and tangible assets such as goods and services”.¹

Part 2: Vision

The ASEAN Community Vision 2045 also envisages ASEAN as “an enterprising region as well as a hub and centre of excellence, that is able to leverage on advances in sciences, technology and innovation, and harness new sources of competitiveness, including creative economy and advanced industry, to elevate its economic integration agenda and create a thriving ecosystem” by 2045.

Part 3 Objectives

The development of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework aims to provide a platform and serve as a roadmap for ASEAN policymakers and relevant stakeholders to co-create a way forward in developing the cultural and creative industries (CCIs), provide an interface for the exchange of ideas and views about the Creative Economy, and appraise relevant research and evidence with a view to develop a whole-of-ASEAN approach in driving regional cooperation. The ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework:

- Outlines a shared vision and strategic direction in promoting the development of the ASEAN Creative Economy, aimed to achieve social, cultural, economic, and environmental outcomes unique to ASEAN developments;
- Emphasises a whole-of-ASEAN approach in promoting the development of the cultural and creative industries under the ambit of the creative economy through advocating a culture-centric, inclusive and sustainable-driven approach;

1. The working definition was deliberated and agreed during the 2nd ASEAN Regional Workshop on Creative Economy (ARWCE) that was held in November 2021.

- Identifies specific opportunities and challenges, including potential areas for inter-pillar and cross-sectoral collaboration, in promoting the development of ASEAN Creative Economy, with a view to frame and develop concrete implementation of policy and programme initiatives;
- Proposes recommendations on a way forward to promote the ASEAN Creative Economy, with a view to consider and implement a whole-of-ASEAN and multi-stakeholder approach.

Part 4 Guiding principles

This Framework outlines 10 guiding principles that underpin the concerted efforts to promote the development of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework:

Guiding principle 1: Cultural infrastructure is as important as physical infrastructure in development strategies.

Guiding principle 2: Good policies depend on good data. Regional policies need baseline definitions and metrics, acknowledged and shared across all Member States.

Guiding principle 3: The diversity of ASEAN is its strength – each Member State can make a unique contribution to the strategy.

Guiding principle 4: Every government Ministry has a role in developing the creative economy, and every Ministry can derive the benefits from it.

Guiding principle 5: Creative economy policies seek to promote social inclusivity, not exclusivity.

Guiding principle 6: Creative economy policies protect and, where possible, contribute to the health of the planet and the well-being of people.

Guiding principle 7: Creative economy policies draw from the skills and culture of the past to build a sustainable future.

Guiding principle 8: Successful outcomes for national and regional strategies are most often achieved by practical initiatives at a local level.

Guiding principle 9: Communities, government, business, academia, media and relevant intermediaries are the key stakeholders engaged.

Guiding principle 10: A robust Intellectual Property (IP) ecosystem is crucial for a thriving creative economy. Protecting, managing, and commercialising IP empowers creators, supports innovation, and contributes to sustainable and inclusive growth within ASEAN's economic integration.

Part 5 Strategic outcomes

In moving towards the development of the creative economy, ASEAN strives to achieve a balance amongst four interdependent goals:

Strategic outcome 1: Social: To promote social cohesion, inclusive development, and equitable growth through the creative economy, cultural tourism, and access to creative education.

Strategic outcome 2: Cultural: To strengthen ASEAN's identity and shared civilisational values.

Strategic outcome 3: Economic: To position CCIs as new sources of economic competitiveness, thereby increasing its value creation and optimising the region's workforce productivity, empowering IP creation and protection through strengthening the ASEAN IP ecosystem for innovation and entrepreneurship, and developing capacity-building programmes to enhance the skills of cultural and creative workers.

Strategic outcome 4: Environmental: To embed the role of culture and creativity in a green transition and become a hub for circular innovations, transforming production, distribution and consumption patterns and minimising waste toward achieving sustainable development.

“The ASEAN umbrella definition of creative economy and its subsectors provides a useful framework within which national governments can identify specific industries and occupations for which they collect data.”

Part 6 Strategic priorities

13 strategic priority areas have been identified, each with several proposed initiatives that will seek to advance the implementation of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework.

Strategic priority 1: Develop evidence-based methods of measurement and evaluation

The ASEAN umbrella definition of the creative economy and its subsectors provides a useful framework within which national governments can identify specific industries and occupations for which they collect data. These can then be aggregated at the regional level, with the long-term aim of regionally harmonised definitions and data sets. The interdependent goals of the ASEAN Creative Economy Framework will require a multi-stakeholder approach, including the involvement of creative entrepreneurs and businesses, in agreeing to the range of data that should be collected. Such data collation and analysis will be crucial for identifying market failures (policy problems) that may stand to benefit from regional cooperation, and to determine the common subsectors in ASEAN that can be prioritised for promotion and development at a regional level.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 1

- Establishing a multi-stakeholder approach that includes representatives of the creative sector, to identify the range of data that the ASEAN Member States should aim to collect to account for creative and cultural industries' contribution.
- Providing adequate capacity building for national statistics bodies in data compilation, methodological framework, and institutional strengthening from a fragmented sector such as the creative industries, and ensure their familiarisation with the internationally recognised framework and classifications related to creative and cultural economy.
- Encouraging knowledge partners, trade bodies and professional associations within the creative sector to be active participants in the collection of accurate data.
- Enabling ASEANstats or other relevant platforms, to analyse and evaluate relevant regional level indicators, and collaborating with an existing regional platform charged with analysing and evaluating data at the regional level empowered to encourage ASEAN Member States to commit to regular and systematic data collection which is the precondition for any evidence-based identification of trends, successes and weak spots.

“Increasing awareness of the value and potential of the creative economy in government, the investment community and the public at large can contribute to bringing the creative economy into the economic mainstream for policy-makers and investors.”

Strategic priority 2: Raising public and government awareness of the value and potential of the creative economy

Increasing awareness of the value and potential of the creative economy in government, the investment community and the public at large can contribute to bringing the creative economy into the economic mainstream for policymakers and investors. It would also present enhanced opportunities for individuals and communities to participate in and benefit from the creative economy, and help promote the creative economy as part of ASEAN's international 'brand identity', where the creative economy, including its cultural expressions, festivals, design, and digital innovation, can play a central role in shaping the region's narrative as a vibrant and culturally rich tourism destination, with consequent benefits for inward investment and international tourism.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 2

- Developing branded national and ASEAN level campaigns, based on a combination of good data and good stories, to highlight the growth and achievements of the creative sector and the individuals within it.
- Adopting a multi-stakeholder, hexa-helix approach that includes the active participation of the media in reporting the impact of the creative economy on the social, cultural and environmental dimensions of ASEAN society and its

contribution to innovation across the wider regional economy.

- Developing festivals, competitions and awards as well as joint cross-sectoral campaigns that promote the creative economy to ASEAN citizens and to the international community as part of ASEAN's international 'brand identity', with consequent benefits for inward investment and international tourism.
- Encouraging the different sub-sectors within the creative economy to adopt a cross-cutting and collaborative approach in their relations with government bodies.
- Harnessing the public procurement spending of local, regional and national governments to support the development of creative businesses.

Strategic priority 3: Creative education, through arts and critical thinking at every stage of the education journey

Putting creativity at the heart of the education system is fundamental to the future growth and success of ASEAN's creative economy, building the foundation of a future talent pipeline. Evidence also shows opportunities for creative experiences and expression within school can make young people happier, healthier, strengthen social skills and improve their attainment in other subjects. Creativity is also increasingly valuable across the wider economy. Creativity has consistently been identified as one of the most important skills for workers within the future economy. For example, the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2023) found that creative thinking was the second most important core skill after analytical thinking and that businesses predict a 73% increase in demand over the next five years.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 3

- Promoting creative study in the school timetable, providing young people with a broad and balanced curriculum, to give them a richer school experience and equip them with a multidisciplinary 'STEAM' skillset.
- Developing a modern creative education syllabus that explores the integration of creative learning and arts education throughout the education journey, aligned with national curriculum development strategies and local educational contexts.
- Strengthening specialist teaching for creative subjects with specific programmes, where applicable, to build the workforce through recruitment and training, while upskilling the existing workforce through continuous professional development.
- Improving careers information about the creative industries for young people, their parents and carers, so they are aware of the wide range of high value jobs available across the creative economy.

“Creativity has consistently been identified as one of the most important skills for workers within the future economy. For example, the World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs Report (2023) found that creative thinking was the second most important core skill after analytical thinking and that businesses predict a 73% increase in demand over the next five years.”

- Exchanging knowledge and promoting teaching methods as well as teaching technologies in relation to creative education among the ASEAN Member States.

Strategic priority 4: Common approach to cultural/heritage tourism, with a focus on the economic benefit remaining with local communities

ASEAN has existing policies and declarations on the importance and value of the region's cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, and its close relationship with tourism. Cultural heritage is valued by local communities as well as by domestic and international travellers, with the possibility of these interests conflicting with each other. Unmanaged growth may lead to unsustainable practices and risk diminishing the very cultural assets that attract visitors. As emphasised in the Action Roadmap for Sustainable Tourism Development in ASEAN, particularly under Priority 4: Cultural Diversity and Heritage Protection, there is a recognised need to protect, preserve, and revitalise cultural expressions and heritage sites while promoting inclusive and respectful visitor experiences. Effective strategies for cultural preservation and heritage tourism therefore require a thoughtful balance between nationally or regionally agreed regulatory frameworks and local autonomy, while also presenting the creative sector with opportunities to develop new technologies as well as the creative, technical and management skills that can benefit both local community and visitors. More importantly, cultural heritage should be positioned not simply as an object, but as a vital subject of the creative economy – enabling cultural heritage to actively contribute to innovation, livelihoods, and sustainable development; particularly by reinforcing efforts toward its preservation and continued relevance.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 4

- Developing new technologies that enhance the preservation of traditional skills, work methods and knowledge that are essential for the preservation of cultural heritage but can also make them more attractive as employment and study options for young people.
- Increasing initiatives to strengthen the role of cultural heritage and traditional practices in the creation of creative products and as sources of inspiration for the development of the creative economy.
- Developing immersive technologies that can enhance the visitor experience, promote deeper understanding and appreciation of local customs and serve as dynamic tools for creative marketing and education.
- Strengthening ASEAN's position as a single tourism destination through collaborative campaigns, heritage-based itineraries, and integrated tour management strategies that celebrate the region's diversity while promoting shared identity.

- Strengthening community ownership of cultural heritage sites to enable engagement in creative tourism ventures that ensure local communities receive equitable economic returns through sustainable revenue models, with the view to promote rural development and realise poverty eradication potential.
- Developing inclusive visitor management strategies that prioritise community-led experiences, ensure equitable economic benefits, and preserve cultural authenticity through local ownership of tourism and creative economy opportunities.
- Developing the existing City of Culture programmes and other awards and appreciation that encourage local authorities and communities to value and promote their own cultural heritage and practices.

Strategic priority 5: A common approach to Intellectual Property in safeguarding, promoting, and incentivising creative endeavours and innovations that drive the creative economy

IP is one of critical enablers of value creation in the creative economy. While major corporations across ASEAN are generally equipped to protect and commercialise their IP, many micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), freelancers, and creative entrepreneurs lack the awareness, tools, and access needed to safeguard and monetise their creative assets. To build an inclusive and sustainable creative economy, ASEAN must strengthen its IP ecosystem to better serve smaller actors, promote cross-border protection, and unlock commercial opportunities for creative works across all stakeholder group.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 5

- Raise awareness and build capacity among MSMEs, freelancers, and creative entrepreneurs on the value of IP, how to protect it, and pathways for commercialisation.
- Provide accessible support, such as IP registration and enforcement, especially for first-time or small-scale creators.
- Use of IP tools to protect and promote tangible and intangible cultural heritage, including traditional crafts, products and traditional knowledge.
- Encourage the use of the ASEAN IP Register and ASEAN IP portal to facilitate regional access of creatives to IP information, registration, and commercialisation opportunities.
- Support the harmonisation of IP regulation frameworks across all ASEAN Member States through accession to related World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO)-administered treaties and further regional IP integration.

“To build an inclusive and sustainable creative economy, ASEAN must strengthen its IP ecosystem to better serve smaller actors, promote cross-border protection, and unlock commercial opportunities for creative works across all stakeholder groups.”

- Create an ASEAN marketplace that supports the transaction and commercialisation of IP.
- Build a pipeline of creative industry valuation professionals through capacity-building initiatives, train-the-trainer programmes and regional certification.

Strategic priority 6: Strengthening business skills among micro-enterprises and freelancers with incentives for collaborations and partnerships

The creative industries globally are dominated by micro-enterprises, sole traders and freelance workers. Efforts to support the development of the creative economy should therefore focus on supporting the resilience and sustainable growth of these individual workers and micro businesses. ‘Success’ metrics for creative organisations should look beyond economic growth and consider the social dimensions since many of these micro-enterprises often form clusters of interdependent businesses and skills that hire women, young people and migrant workers. The ‘Success’ metrics may therefore encapsulate wider measures such as long-term sustainability, inclusive job generation, and a truly diverse creative economy with business founders and leaders from all backgrounds.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 6

- General capacity building and upskilling for freelancers, entrepreneurs and micro-enterprises, such as financial literacy, business development, and digital skills.
- Encouraging the development of networks or associations of freelancers and micro-businesses at both national and ASEAN levels, to enable information sharing and peer to peer support.
- Formulating and providing MSME development programmes targeted at specific barriers or opportunities. These could include digitisation and tech adoption; partnerships between cultural heritage practitioners and tourism businesses; ‘green’ creative businesses.
- Harnessing the ‘informal economy’. Incentivising through for example targeted tax reliefs, informal workers within the creative economy to formally register their contribution to the creative economy.
- Improving monetisation strategies for creative businesses through capacity building for MSMEs to allow stakeholders to better understand business models in their specific industries.

Strategic priority 7: Facilitating partnerships and collaborations between education institutions and businesses

Close cooperation between education institutions and creative businesses can make an important contribution to a strong creative economy. Higher and further education

are a central part of the sector's 'talent pipeline'. Engaging businesses can ensure institutions, especially those focused on vocational training, are equipping students with the up-to-date skills that the industry needs. This is particularly important in subsectors at the cutting edge of technology, such as computer games or visual effects. Entrepreneurship should also be a key component of any course that may lead to a freelance career, as well as those wishing to start their own business.

Education institutions are also a rich source of research and development, but academics may not recognise the full commercial potential of their work. Supporting collaborations between creative business leaders and academic researchers can provide a rich source of innovation, enabling new enterprises to 'spin-out' of academic research.

“Supporting collaborations between creative business leaders and academic researchers can provide a rich source of innovation, enabling new enterprises to ‘spin-out’ of academic research.”

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 7

- Incentivising businesses to work with institutions training students in that field, to ensure the curriculum reflects the needs of the contemporary creative economy, including ensuring entrepreneurship serves as one of core modules in creative courses, where appropriate, taking into account each country's unique capacities, laws, and regulations of respective ASEAN Member States.
- Incentivising businesses to offer work experience and placements, to give students 'real world' experience, strengthening their workplace skills.
- Encouraging entrepreneurship to be incorporated as a core module of creative courses.
- Incentivising collaboration between businesses and academic researchers to develop innovative new products and services. These could be 'mission' led, encouraging the partnerships to focus on specific societal or business challenges.
- Creating incubators within universities, giving students the support they need to translate their ideas into start-up businesses.
- Developing networks among creative economy players across the ASEAN Member States and Dialogue Partners.

Strategic priority 8: Contributing to a more sustainable and circular economy

Through its *“Framework for Circular Economy for the ASEAN Economic Community”*, ASEAN has already outlined its commitment to a new circular economic model that is “restorative, regenerative by design, and makes effective use of materials and energy”. Culture and creativity have a pivotal role to play in addressing the climate crisis. A focus on culture can help to safeguard and restore tangible and intangible cultural heritage and traditions, at risk through climate change. Design and adoption of new technologies can reduce harmful emissions at the beginning of the production process. Culture and creativity can raise awareness through communication and storytelling, they can connect with audiences in a way

“Culture and creativity can raise awareness through communication and storytelling, they can connect with audiences in a way that can mobilise action and drive behaviour change.”

that can mobilise action and drive behaviour change.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 8

- Align circular economy measures in the creative economy with the ASEAN Framework for Circular Economy including the harmonisation of standards, regulation or tax incentives to contribute.
- Introducing an education programme for creative practitioners, cultural organisations and entrepreneurs and business leaders so that they can access the information and advice needed to 'green' their supply chain, operations and production practices.
- Developing free and accessible carbon emission calculator toolkits for creative businesses to help them measure, baseline and then develop strategies to reduce their emissions in a way that can provide consistent information across the ASEAN region.
- Incentivising sustainable innovation to develop new, sustainable processes, products and services, through grant programmes for research and development, and fiscal incentives to leverage in investment.

Strategic priority 9: Enhancing access to financing

Accessing finance is key to unlocking business growth, enabling a business to take on new staff with new skills, innovate new products or services, or break into new markets. Yet many creative businesses find it hard to access finance from traditional lenders. Because their assets are predominantly intangible IP, which can be hard to value or resell; they are often project based, leading to intermittent cash flows. As the demand for their products is unpredictable and therefore uncertain, creative businesses can be perceived as high risk by mainstream investors, such as banks. In addition, creative businesses are often founded by people who are passionate about their creative speciality, but may lack the business planning and financial skills needed to attract investment.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 9

- Introducing 'investment readiness' training programmes for creative businesses keen to access finance including green financing and equipping them with the skills to develop the business and financial plans required by investors.
- Improving the valuation of intangible assets to encourage investment into the creative industries through a series of awareness-raising and capacity building programmes for investment entities.
- Explore the possibility of incentivising greater equity investment into the sector from Angel investors. Encourage greater investment through tax incentives and raise awareness of the potential of creative businesses with private investors.

- Incentivising specialist Venture Capital investors, with a strong knowledge of creative industry businesses, to develop dedicated funds for the creative sector, unlocking more high growth opportunities.
- Providing financiers with more accurate information on the risk profile of creative businesses by building data and evidence on the performance and return on investment of businesses within subsectors. This work could be carried out across ASEAN using a new data platform.

Strategic priority 10: Enhancing access to international markets - promoting regional export strategies

The rapid growth among developing economies in creative goods and services, coupled with the more general global acceleration of trade in creative services, provides the context for an ASEAN strategy. While policy and fiscal instruments to support access to international markets is critical at the national level, a common approach across ASEAN Member States could deliver an ASEAN 'brand identity' to raise the profile of ASEAN businesses in global markets.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 10

- Offering financial and fiscal support for exporters, including bursaries for attendance at international markets, (with a directory of the key global markets that should be targeted).
- Establishing markets and trade shows within the ASEAN region to raise ambition and encourage the growth of international partnerships.
- Encouraging export-oriented partnerships and co-productions, giving scale and profile to MSMEs that would not otherwise have the capacity to consider trading internationally.
- Establishing a platform to monitor the development of global trading opportunities and identify new opportunities for creative businesses and entrepreneurs.
- Showcasing creative business success through an ASEAN creative economy annual award, highlighting leading creative businesses across each country and subsector.

Strategic priority 11: Enhancing digital technologies for content development

Action to enhance the use of digital technologies for content development requires a broad multi-stakeholder approach, with the foundational elements being access for creative businesses to hi-speed and affordable e-connectivity, access to open-source software, an awareness of new and evolving digital tools and processes and, most importantly, an emerging generation of workers and potential workers with sufficient familiarity with the digital world to be creators as well as consumers of content.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 11

- Developing partnership and knowledge exchange programmes between creative businesses, universities and other research bodies, drawing on examples of good practice in other countries.
- Introducing fiscal or other incentives to encourage Research and Development, which can also serve to encourage inward investment and contribute to the overall goal of establishing ASEAN as a global leader in creative innovation.
- In the longer-term, promoting access to simple and affordable online tools for business development and financial management, thereby encouraging micro businesses to integrate digital thinking into their work processes and drive innovation throughout the sector.

Strategic priority 12: Developing competency standards and mutual recognition of qualifications

Facilitating the free movement of skilled labour is an important driver of innovation, diversification and growth in the creative sector. Given the rate of change and the evolution of new skills and business models within the creative economy, the identification and recognition of new skills is best undertaken by the sector itself, working in collaboration with governments and higher education institutions and certification bodies.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 12

- Identification of positive spillover effects of the creative economy to determine the effect of certain creative inputs in fostering the regional creative economy.
- Bilateral agreements on work visas for individuals with recognised skillset.
- Formal intergovernmental agreement on mutual recognition of professional qualifications.

Strategic priority 13: Enhancing social protection for gig workers

Social protection and welfare issues are areas of competence for national governments, but the creative sector has developed some of its own mechanisms, which can become more attractive and sustainable through formal recognition by governments. Growing recognition amongst international organisations, including ILO and IMF, of the need for social protection for freelancers and project workers makes this a policy arena in which close study of emerging international best practice is valuable, providing an opportunity for ASEAN itself to be seen as a global leader in innovation.

Proposed initiatives under Strategic Priority 13

- Voluntary and statutory agreements between governments and larger business organisations to establish codes of best practice regarding prompt payment, work conditions, notice periods and sick pay for casual workers.
- Formal recognition of mutual support organisations run by and for freelance and gig workers, such as partner-run business arrangements and forms of credit-union.
- Easy access to savings, health insurance and pension contribution schemes for gig workers.
- Easy access to courses on financial management and career-planning for informal and freelance workers.

“Collaboration with relevant international organisations will play a role in developing skills and promoting knowledge exchange that assists the ASEAN region in achieving its ambition to be a global leader in creative innovation.”

Part 7 Enablers

The rapid evolution of new technologies and business models within the creative economy means that effective strategies can best be developed by national institutions in close collaboration with the sector itself. Experience from various countries points to the benefit of joint government/industry dialogues where representatives of the sector can regularly discuss issues of skills, finance, regulation, IP protection and so on with the government at senior level. In addition to operating at the national level, such a body at the ASEAN level would identify challenges and opportunities that can best be addressed at the regional level.

The establishment of an ASEAN creative economy platform would underpin and inform the work of such government/industry dialogues and, in addition, analyse and evaluate emerging global and regional trends, disseminate information and promote the quality and harmonisation of systematic data collection and evaluation within individual ASEAN Member States.

In line with the hexa-helix approach, the active engagement of the media, both general and trade-specific media, would promote greater awareness of the benefits and potential of the creative economy for the ASEAN region, as well as for individual ASEAN Member States and communities.

Collaboration with relevant international organisations will play a role in developing skills and promoting knowledge exchange that assists the ASEAN region in achieving its ambition to be a global leader in creative innovation.

Part 8 Approach

As indicated above, the approach to developing the Framework should be cooperative, collaborative and multistakeholder. Whilst primarily led by the ASEAN Member States, developments should be co-created with the creative sector, welcoming ‘ground up’, innovative ways of implementation. The hexa-helix approach

should be a priority consideration when convening strategic dialogues with relevant external stakeholders. Related to this, national governments should consider a whole-of-government approach to unify policies and programmes on creative economy, engaging diverse state and non-state actors including the corporate, academic and non-government sectors.

As the creative economy is a cross-cutting issue that covers many policy areas, it will require strong coordination and convening between relevant sectors and multiple stakeholders to ensure efforts to promote the development of the creative economy is supported and sustained. The four strategic outcomes: cultural, social, environmental and economic will serve as a substantive basis for different stakeholders to develop pragmatic pathways to promote the development of the ASEAN Creative Economy.

Consideration may be provided to establish an ad-hoc thematic group focusing on creative economy issues, whereby relevant Sectoral Bodies on MSMEs, tourism, digital, IP, creative arts, as well as culture and information, can be called upon by respective Ministers to discuss relevant recommendations and proposals to promote and advance creative economy issues. Adopting an issue-based approach to address cross-cutting matters related to the ASEAN Creative Economy could help debottlenecking issues in implementing the identified Strategic Priorities as mentioned above.

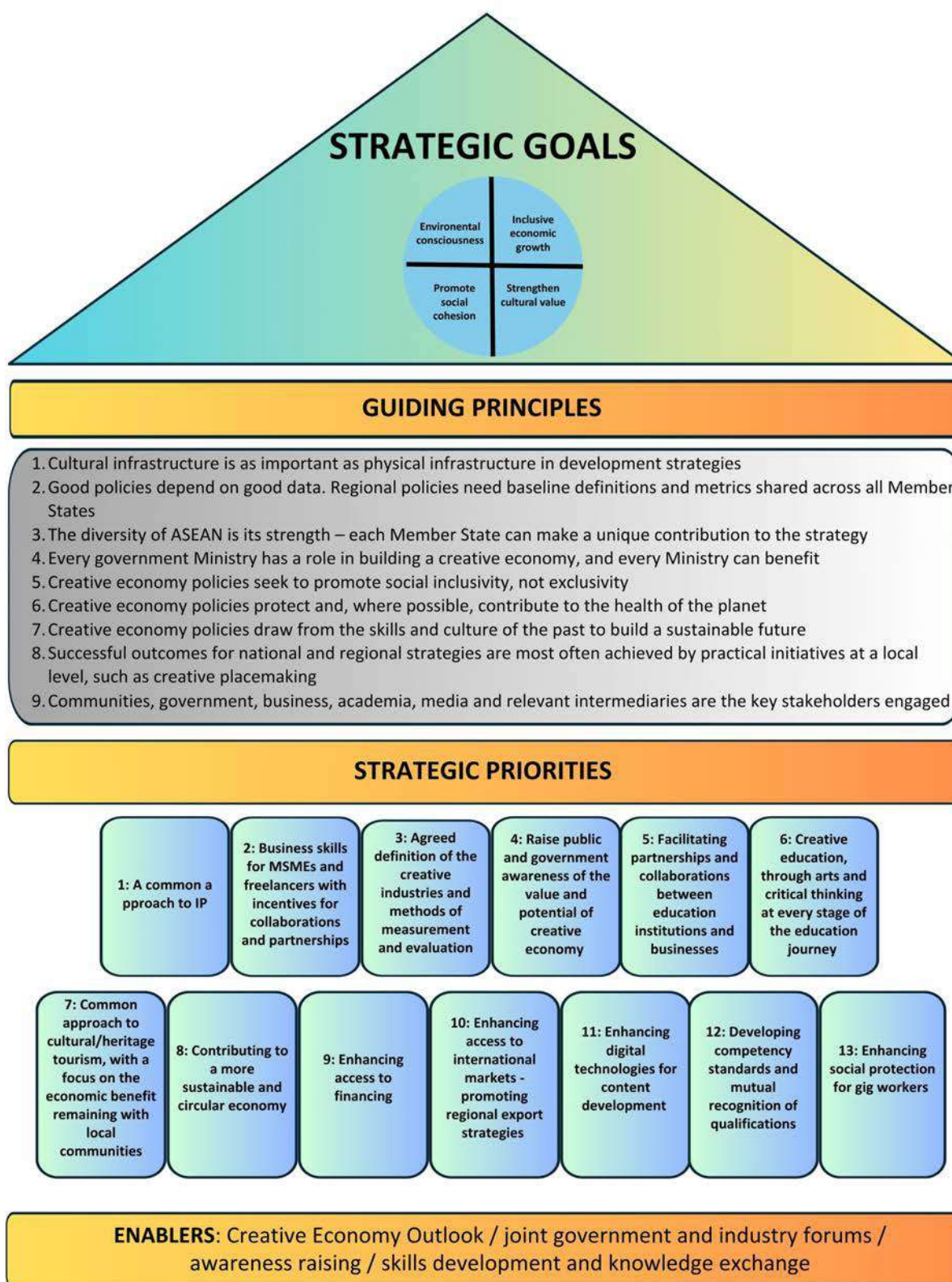
Part 9 Implementation

This Framework shall form the basis for socialising the awareness of the potential of the creative economy among ASEAN's stakeholders, and to mainstream a cross-sectoral, inter-pillar approach to promote the development of the creative economy in the work of ASEAN Sectoral Bodies.

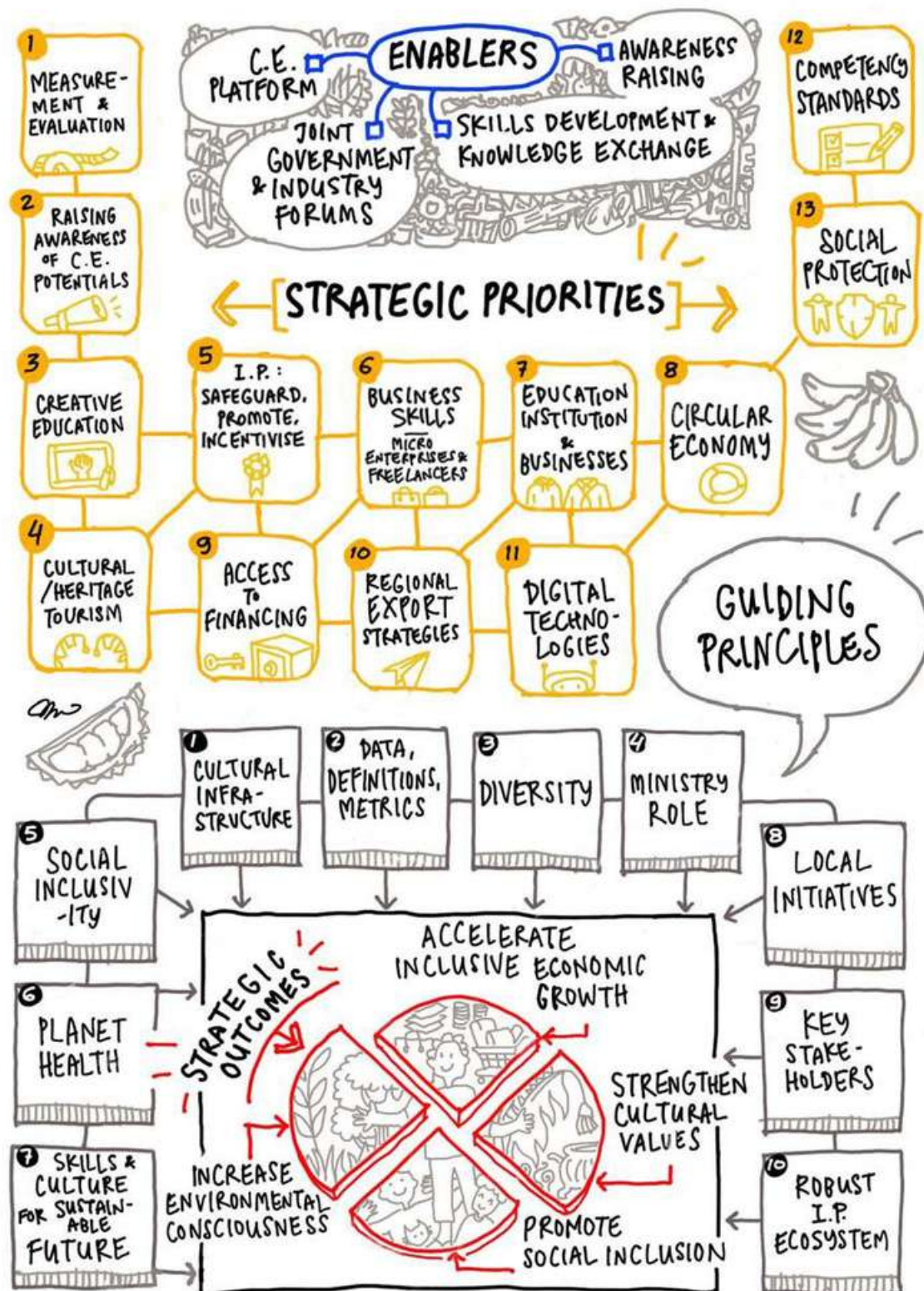
This Framework shall further contribute to advancing the implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 to support the implementation of the ASEAN Strategic Plans for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Connectivity that recognise the creative economy as an impetus for ASEAN's developments.

This Framework shall also serve as the substantive basis to initiate meaningful dialogues between ASEAN and relevant stakeholders including academia, business, community, media and intermediaries to develop and implement pragmatic and sustainable pathways to promote the development of the ASEAN Creative Economy for inclusive and sustainable growth.

To advance the implementation of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework, a corresponding implementation plan and monitoring mechanism that identify and categorise the strategic priorities into short, medium, and long-term targets can be further considered and deliberated.



Strategic Outcomes, Guiding Principles, Strategic Priorities and Enablers of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework



• ASEAN CREATIVE ECONOMY SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK •

The ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework in action

Illustration created by Tita Larasati



How to strengthen the economic dimension of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework

**Supplement Note from the ASEAN
Economic Community Department (AECD)
of the ASEAN Secretariat**

Background

The creative economy has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors globally, acting as a significant engine of economic growth, innovation, trade, and employment. In 2022 alone, global exports of creative services reached a record USD 1.4 trillion, while creative goods exports stood at USD 713 billion. At its core, the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) generate approximately USD 2.3 trillion in annual revenues, contribute 3.1% to global GDP, and support 50 million jobs,

accounting for 6.2% of global employment.¹

Rooted in human creativity, culture, innovation, and intellectual capital, the creative economy cuts across economic, cultural, and technological domains. It is driven by knowledge-based activities that generate value from ideas, creativity and intangible assets. Beyond its economic role, the creative economy also promotes social inclusion, empowers diverse communities, and advances sustainability by transforming a wide range of creative outputs - such as cultural heritage, performing arts, and traditional crafts, to design, animation, music, fashion, and contemporary digital content - into platforms for innovation, entrepreneurship, and youth employment.

In the ASEAN region, the potential of the creative economy to accelerate post-pandemic recovery, strengthen regional integration, and boost economic resilience is becoming increasingly evident. ASEAN Member States (AMS) have made significant strides in shaping their national creative economy strategies, such as *Brunei Wawasan 2035 Vision*, *Indonesia's Golden Indonesia Vision 2045*, *the Malaysia National Policy on Creative Industry*, *the Philippines Creative Industries Development Act*, *Singapore's Arts Plan*, *Thailand's five-year Creative Economy Strategies*, and *Viet Nam's Vision 2030 for Cultural Industries*. These diverse but complementary efforts reflect a shared ASEAN ambition to harness the region's creativity, innovation, cultural richness and entrepreneurial dynamism as engines of inclusive, sustainable, and digitally enabled growth.

With the rapid rise of artificial intelligence (AI), expanding digital economies, and growing regional integration, ASEAN is uniquely positioned to become a global leader in the creative economy. The ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework (ACE Framework) provides the timely structure for coordinated action. It offers ASEAN a strategic opportunity to elevate the creative economy as a core pillar of regional growth: unlocking economic value, empowering MSMEs and start-ups, generating quality jobs for youth, and strengthening ASEAN's global competitiveness.

To support the operationalisation of the ACE Framework, the ASEAN Economic Community Department (AECD) of the ASEAN Secretariat shares this **complementary note proposing four** strategic focuses to strengthen the economic dimension of the Framework and contribute to unlocking economic value from ASEAN's creative economy.

Strategic focus 1: Commercialisation of IP and intangible assets

Intellectual property (IP) and intangible assets (IA) are key to the development of the creative economy. They are core to value creation, competitiveness, and innovation. Across ASEAN, creative talents and cultural enterprises are generating an increasing volume of high-value intangible assets, yet much of this potential remains untapped.

While ASEAN has made important strides in strengthening IP protection frameworks,

“It offers ASEAN a strategic opportunity to elevate the creative economy as a core pillar of regional growth: unlocking economic value, empowering MSMEs and startups, generating quality jobs for youth, and strengthening ASEAN’s global competitiveness.”

1. UNCTAD (2024), *Creative Economy Outlook*, United Nations Publications Europe is the largest exporter of creative services (with the exports of creative services reaching US\$ 720 billion in 2022), followed by Asia (US\$ 359 billion), and Northern America (US\$ 274 billion). Asia is the largest exporter of creative goods (with the exports of creative goods amounting to US\$ 438 billion in 2022), followed by Europe (US\$ 211 billion) and Northern America (US\$ 51 billion).

the next frontier lies in actively enabling IP and intangible assets to become engines of economic growth. This requires building regional platforms that connect creators with markets, developing common frameworks that empower IP valuation and financing, and embedding intangible assets into the core strategies of ASEAN businesses. These actions are critical to empower MSMEs, freelancers, and creative start-ups to monetise their creative outputs and scale across the region.

Key directions:

a. **Strengthening regional foundation for IP commercialisation:**

ASEAN should develop and enhance dedicated regional platforms, such as IP marketplaces and investor-matchmaking portals, that connect creators with commercial partners, buyers, and investors. These platforms can serve as go-to hubs for licensing, co-branding, and collaborative opportunities, enabling creators to monetise their IP. The ASEAN IP Register and ASEAN IP Portal can serve these purposes effectively by integrating search, transaction, and promotion features beyond national borders.

b. **Developing a regional financing framework for IP valuation and commercialisation:**

A regional financing framework will help standardise how IP is valued and utilised as an economic asset, particularly by MSMEs and freelancers. This could include reference models for licensing, royalty structures, and IP-backed loan mechanisms, as well as guidelines for recognising IP in business valuations. Such a framework will empower ASEAN's financial institutions, investors, and start-ups to confidently navigate the IP economy, supporting innovation and enterprise growth.

c. **Promoting the recognition and economic use of intangible assets across ASEAN businesses**

ASEAN should expand efforts to raise awareness and capacity among business owners, investors, and financial institutions on the value of intangible assets, including brand equity, design, digital content, and traditional knowledge. This includes encouraging alternative income streams for creatives, such as royalties, digital licensing, merchandising contracts, and brand collaborations. *The continued promotion of the intangible economy will help embed creative outputs as a recognised part of enterprise value and investment strategy across ASEAN's broader economic ecosystem.*

“Continued promotion of the intangible economy will help embed creative outputs as a recognised part of enterprise value and investment strategy across ASEAN's broader economic ecosystem.”

Strategic focus 2: Development of an AI-enabled creative ecosystem

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping how creative content is generated, distributed, and consumed. From generative art to AI-augmented storytelling, ASEAN's creative economy stands at the frontier of a technological shift. AI offers unprecedented opportunities to scale content creation and improve productivity. At the same time, it raises new concerns

around authorship, copyright, data use, and ethical governance.

To ensure ASEAN stays ahead, the region should foster the development of an AI ecosystem that enables, not displaces, creative talent. This ecosystem should empower creators to engage meaningfully with AI, while also safeguarding cultural identity, promoting inclusivity, and reinforcing the region's innovation agenda.

Key directions:

a. **Establish a regional policy dialogue on AI and the creative economy**

ASEAN should initiate structured discussions among Member States, industry players, and creators to develop shared principles and governance models for the ethical and transparent use of AI in creative sectors. This includes addressing questions of authorship, IP rights in AI-generated works, and accountability in AI-driven content production.

b. **Support regulatory sandboxes and co-creation platforms to promote the use of AI powered innovation**

ASEAN should promote the development of cross-border pilot projects and innovation hubs where creatives, AI developers, and investors can experiment with responsible and commercially viable AI solutions. These initiatives can also serve to build local capacity in AI literacy and technology adaptation.

c. **Ensure interoperability and fair data access**

ASEAN can lead in promoting standards and frameworks that support ethical data use, equitable access to training datasets, and inclusive participation in AI value chains. This will ensure that the benefits of AI innovation are widely shared across ASEAN's diverse creative economy.

“ASEAN’s global competitiveness will depend on its ability to scale digital creativity, close skill gaps, and facilitate cross-border movement of creative talent.”

Strategic focus 3: Enhancement of digital skills and regional mobility for creative talent

A future-ready creative economy depends on talent that is both digitally equipped and regionally mobile. As creative industries evolve in response to AI and digital transformation, ASEAN must ensure that its workforce, particularly youth, women, and creators, have the skills and opportunities needed to thrive.

ASEAN's global competitiveness will depend on its ability to scale digital creativity, close skill gaps, and facilitate cross-border movement of creative talent. The development of regional creative human capital must be holistic, through upskilling, recognition of qualifications, and enabling flexible pathways for collaborative innovation across ASEAN.

Key directions:

a. **Advance a regional agenda on digital and creative skills**

ASEAN should develop a coordinated regional agenda for digital creative skills development, with emphasis on integrating AI literacy and creative entrepreneurship into training systems and lifelong learning. Upskilling programmes should target youth, women, and underserved communities to ensure equitable access to emerging opportunities across digital platforms and creative industries.

b. Promote mutual recognition of skills and credentials

ASEAN should work toward establishing mutual recognition frameworks for creative and digital qualifications. Portable certifications, digital credentials, and regionally aligned standards in priority areas such as animation, multimedia design, software development, and IP services will support creative talent mobility and strengthen ASEAN's regional labour market integration.

c.

Enable short-term creative mobility and cross-disciplinary exchanges

ASEAN should pilot regional schemes that allow creative professionals, freelancers, and entrepreneurs to participate in short-term residencies, collaborative projects, and regional co-productions. These exchanges can foster cross-disciplinary innovation and deepen linkages between traditional creative industries and emerging technologies such as e-commerce and immersive media.

“Creative start-ups are emerging as powerful engines of cultural innovation, job creation, and export potential. They are at the frontier of innovation in design, media, heritage, and immersive technologies.”

Strategic focus 4: Support for a creative economy start-up ecosystem

Creative start-ups are emerging as powerful engines of cultural innovation, job creation, and export potential. They are at the frontier of innovation in design, media, heritage, and immersive technologies. Positioned at the intersection of technology, culture, and entrepreneurship, they catalyse new business models, cross-sector collaboration, and regional value creation. Yet, many face critical barriers in accessing early-stage financing, IP advisory services, mentorship, and cross-border market opportunities.

To unlock the growth potential of ASEAN's creative start-up ecosystem, tailored support must be provided to integrate these enterprises into ASEAN's broader innovation, financing, and value chain strategies.

Key directions:

a. Integrate creative start-ups into ASEAN's regional innovation and de-risk financing platforms

Creative enterprises should be explicitly included in initiatives such as ASEAN start-up platforms and innovation ecosystems with dedicated instruments like challenge funds or co-investment mechanisms to reduce investment risk. Start-ups in areas like design, gaming, animation, digital heritage, and sustainable fashion should have access to the same networks and funding pipelines as technology-focused ventures.

b. Provide tailored support for IP registration, branding, and market entry

Creative start-ups often lack the legal and commercial guidance to scale their ideas. ASEAN should facilitate access to IP advisory services, branding support, and cross-border business development to help start-ups protect their IP, build visibility, enter new markets with confidence, and monetise their assets to attract investors and scale.

c. Integrate start-ups into regional value chains through innovation clusters

Creative start-ups should be linked into ASEAN's broader value chains in priority sectors such as tourism, education, cultural heritage preservation, digital design, and creative technology. This includes promoting collaborative projects, cross-sector incubation, regional accelerator programmes and matchmaking events to maximise their contribution to ASEAN's socio-economic goals. Through these initiatives, ASEAN can enable creative start-ups to access wider markets, collaborate with industry partners, and jointly develop export-ready offerings.

Enablers for Strengthening the Economic Dimension of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework

Given the cross-cutting nature of initiatives required to strengthen the economic dimension of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework, three key enablers focusing on governance modality, monitoring and evaluation, and partnerships shall be put in place.

1. Robust Governance Modality

A dedicated centre and/or body, serving as a region-wide institutional mechanism, should be established to coordinate, implement, and sustain the proposed economic priorities and strategies under the Framework. The Centre's composition should bring together ASEAN officials, industry players, creators, and financiers to ensure a holistic and inclusive approach to coordinating these initiatives.

2. Periodic Monitoring and Evaluation

Structured outcome and output monitoring should be conducted on a regular basis to assess progress, identify effective approaches, and determine areas for improvement. This monitoring should be complemented by evidence-based measurements drawn from meaningful qualitative and quantitative data. In addition, third-party evaluations may be conducted at the end of each implementation cycle to capture best practices and lessons learned.

3. Pentahelix Partnership

To support the implementation of these priorities, a pentahelix partnership involving government, academia, industry leaders, creators, and media should be established. This partnership will facilitate collaborative execution of key initiatives, promote holistic decision-making, and enhance resource mobilisation.

Through the combination of robust governance, periodic monitoring and evaluation, and a strong pentahelix partnership, the economic dimension of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework can be effectively strengthened. This will help ensure that creative ideas go beyond voluntary contributions and cultural showcase, generating meaningful and sustainable outcomes for ASEAN communities.



Things you need to know about the creative economy

John Newbiggin

1

The creative economy is diverse and dynamic with creative talent at the heart of its development.

The heart of the creative economy is a group of arts and culture-related industries, usually defined as the performing arts, visual arts, crafts, fashion, film, TV and music together with a wider group of businesses that depend on creativity and imagination, such as design, marketing, architecture and advertising. Some governments include other industries that have a strong cultural dimension, for example heritage, tourism or gastronomy. In 2013 the UK research organisation Nesta drew attention to the fact that 'creativity' was not confined to certain industries or sectors, and it would be more useful to define a wider creative economy as "those sectors which specialise in the use of creative talent for commercial purposes".¹

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1. <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/a-dynamic-mapping-of-the-uks-creative-industries/>

2

The creative economy depends on IP, but many creators lack the awareness to protect it.

The key feature of the creative economy is that its economic value is largely dependent on the registration and enforcement of Intellectual Property rights - often referred to as 'IP'. It's often said that the creative economy is one in which ideas are more valuable than products. But there is an inherent tension at the heart of the creative economy because much of its creativity depends on individual entrepreneurs who often do not understand how to protect their IP, while much of the commercial value of their creativity is owned and exploited by major transnational companies or digital platforms. As an example, three companies own and control 80% of the world's recorded music.

“The creative economy has bounced back after the pandemic so that by 2024 it was worth between 3 and 4% of global GDP.”

3

The creative economy remains human-driven and inclusive, offering low barriers to entry.

Even with the advent of AI, the creative economy depends on the creativity and imagination of people, not machines – so it tends to be labour-intensive not capital-intensive and in many economies is generating new jobs faster than any other sector. While some creative businesses require significant capital investment, most do not, so it is a sector that is especially attractive to young people, women, and marginalised communities that may not have easy access to capital or other finance.

4

The creative economy serves as a leading frontier for freelancers.

This means the sector is dominated by individual freelancers, micro businesses and informal partnerships. In many countries at least 30% of the creative economy workforce is freelance and, in some sectors, for example performing arts and the audio-visual industries, the percentage may be as high as 70% or even 90%.²

5

The creative economy demonstrates resilience in crisis.

The dominance of informal workers and the need of many art forms to have access to live audiences meant the creative sector was badly affected by the pandemic. The UN estimated that in 2020, ten million creative jobs were lost and the sector contracted by \$750bn³. But that same informality makes it very flexible and innovative, and the creative economy has bounced back after the pandemic so that by 2024 it was worth between 3 and 4% of global GDP.⁴

2. <https://www.unesco.org/creativity/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/01/380474eng.pdf>

3. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/reshape-policies-give-creators-adequate-protections-says-new-unesco-report>

6

Growth in creative services is twice that of creative goods.

Partly driven by the rapid growth of online services during the pandemic, the value of creative services (software, design, streaming services, festivals and so on) is now twice the value of creative goods (\$1.4trn as compared to \$714bn)⁵.

7

Skills development, and access to financing and IP protection are key to sustaining the growth of the creative economy.

The high proportion of informal workers and micro businesses, combined with the rapid pace of innovation and new technologies all mean that access to appropriate skills, adequate finance and the protection of IP is a major problem for many creative workers, and for governments wanting to develop the sector.

8

A growing number of intermediaries is forging meaningful connections between governments and creative entrepreneurs, offering vital support and finance.

One consequence of this is the widespread emergence of 'intermediaries' – these are agencies, some funded by government, some independent social enterprises and some joint public/private entities - that act as 'interpreters' between governments and creative entrepreneurs by giving a voice to the sector in lobbying and research and by offering specialised business support and investment services to individuals and micro businesses that are too small to be of interest to banks or conventional financial institutions.

9

A growing recognition of the creative economy's transversal role to advance economic growth and promote inclusive and sustainable development.

Many governments now recognise that the creative economy can also deliver cultural, social, and environmental benefits because it celebrates culture and heritage. It also helps to build social cohesion in communities, supports emotional well-being and resilience for people of all ages and, compared with many industrial sectors, has a light impact on the physical environment because it is not a heavy user of resources and energy and generates little waste, although the fashion industry remains an exception in this regard. In addition, the creative economy and creative thinking contribute to innovative solutions that help address the consequences of climate change.

4. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditctsce2024d2_ch01_en.pdf

5. <https://it-rc.org/2024/10/08/creative-economy-outlook-2024/>

10

The creative economy is gaining global attention, with the ASEAN Member States taking lead in the region and beyond.

Because of this, in December 2019, during the 74th session of the UN General Assembly, a resolution (74/198) was adopted declaring 2021 as the “International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development” – an initiative that was proposed by the Indonesian government and supported by Malaysia and the Philippines, amongst many others⁶. This resolution recognises the creative industries’ vital contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Indonesia has since established the Friends of Creative Economy (FCE) and the World Conference on Creative Economy (WCCE).

“In addition, the creative economy and creative thinking contribute to innovative solutions that help address the consequences of climate change.”

John Newbigin is the Mayor of London’s Ambassador for the Creative Economy

6. <https://unctad.org/topic/trade-analysis/creative-economy-programme/2021-year-of-the-creative-economy>

Cultural and Creative ASEAN:

An Overview of Regional Cooperation in Culture and the Arts to Promote the Development of ASEAN Creative Economy

Anne Luis and Fiori Rizki Djuwita

From the intricate patterns of artisanal crafts to the compelling narratives expressed in poetry, music, and dance, along with proud legacies of civilisations echoed through ornate ancient halls and majestic historical monuments and sites, creativity is the lifeblood of Southeast Asia. This vibrant cultural tapestry is woven into the fabric of everyday life, delighting residents and visitors alike on bustling street corners, in lively markets, and across digital platforms. For decades, this potent force thrived in visibility while eluding formal recognition—celebrated as heritage and consumed as entertainment, yet its possibility as an economic powerhouse remained underappreciated.

Recognising this latent potential, long before “creative economy” became a mainstream discourse, ASEAN, through its Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA) and Committee on Culture and Information (COCI), have championed the rich cultural heritage and diverse artistic expressions as not merely a cornerstone of regional identity but a vital engine for sustainable development. This core vision provides the bedrock for what is now understood as the creative economy—a

dynamic and evolving sector that also encompasses design, media, technology, and their intersections with intellectual property and entrepreneurship.

Established in 1978, the ASEAN COCI, as a foundational platform for cultural cooperation, has moved beyond cultural and artistic exchanges toward a socio-economic paradigm, designing and implementing a range of initiatives, such as conferences, festivals, and training programmes to support the growth of small and medium-sized cultural enterprises (SMCEs) and the broader creative industries, while promoting ASEAN awareness and identity. Although COCI's initial efforts were sporadic and involved only the ten Member States, they were later significantly bolstered by SOMCA's strategic policies and collaborative projects with external partners, steadily propelling the region toward a future of creative prosperity.

“ASEAN’s creative economy integrates rich and diverse heritage with forward-looking innovation.”

Forging the Currency of Culture

ASEAN’s creative economy integrates rich and diverse heritage with forward-looking innovation. The journey towards the region’s thriving cultural and creative industries is anchored in both far-sighted regional policy frameworks championed by SOMCA, with an array of concrete, collaborative project initiatives, all aligned with the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, reaffirming the creative economy’s role in building a “Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic and People-Centred ASEAN.”

Providing the strategic backbone for sectoral initiatives is the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016-2025, a ten-year framework to foster regional solidarity and a shared ASEAN Identity by promoting cultural diversity, heritage preservation, and intercultural dialogue. The plan also aims to promote the development of creative economy by building a supportive ecosystem for cultural industries, developing skilled human resources, facilitating cross-border collaborations in sectors like film, animation, and music, and coordinating on funding, intellectual property, and tourism linkages.

A commitment to strengthen the region’s cultural and creative economy as a key driver for post-pandemic recovery and sustainable development is affirmed through the **Siem Reap Declaration Promoting a Creative and Adaptive ASEAN Community to Support the Cultural and Creative Economy (2022)**. It tasks ASEAN bodies to intensify the promotion and development of the cultural and creative industries through practical actions, including establishing regular dialogues, promoting research, developing talent, and increasing public awareness. Furthermore, the Declaration calls for broad cooperation across various sectors like tourism, education, and intellectual property, and invites collaboration with international partners to achieve its goals.

Recently adopted by the Leaders during the 46th ASEAN Summit is the **ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework (2025)**. A comprehensive roadmap designed to guide the development of the region’s creative economy, the Framework aims to achieve balanced social, cultural, economic, and environmental goals through 10 principles, 4 strategic outcomes, and 13 strategic priorities, which include strengthening data collection, enhancing creative education, protecting intellectual

property, and promoting sustainability. The Framework advocates for a collaborative, whole-of-ASEAN approach, engaging diverse stakeholders to establish the region as a global hub for inclusive and sustainable creative innovation.

Building on this momentum, the forthcoming **Melaka Declaration on Cultural Heritage Value Creation** will translate the Framework's broad vision into targeted action. Expected to be adopted at the 47th Summit in October 2025, this instrument is deemed to contribute as a significant ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) outcome document. The declaration aims to strengthen cultural cooperation, expand inclusive economic opportunities, and enhance appreciation for ASEAN's shared heritage, reaffirming Southeast Asia's rich cultural legacy as a catalyst for sustainable economic growth, social cohesion, and creative innovation.

Investing the Cultural Capital

To complement and translate strategic roadmaps into reality, COCI's intra-ASEAN activities that are supported by the ASEAN Cultural Fund, alongside SOMCA's collaborative projects with external partners, provide the on-the-ground impetus, cultivating talent, strengthening networks, and building institutional capacity.

Among these efforts are several capacity-building and enterprise development initiatives that nurture creative talent, catalyse entrepreneurship, and transfer essential skills, such as **Improving the Current Status of ASEAN Mastercraft Designers (2016, Philippines)**, which was supported by the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund. This initiative aimed to raise standards in design and marketing while strengthening ASEAN's collective identity through enhancing the role of design in promoting regional identity through merchandising, packaging, and marketing of artisanal products. While it encouraged innovation by merging traditional techniques with contemporary world designs, building a collaborative network to ensure economic success and preserving invaluable cultural heritage, it sought to empower the region's artisans by providing essential business skills for global market access. Likewise, **the ASEAN Small and Medium-Sized Cultural Enterprises (SMCEs) Caravan (2018, Philippines)** introduced a mobile cultural showcase, combining exhibitions, performances, and expert-led workshops designed to be implemented across ASEAN. With a strong emphasis on intellectual property rights and best practices, the inaugural offering of the Caravan supported the growth and innovation of small and medium-sized cultural enterprises.

Meanwhile, projects like **Natural Dyes of ASEAN (2022, Bali)** and **ASEAN Cultural Green Entrepreneur (2023, Thailand)** bridged tradition with sustainability by promoting environmentally conscious production methods, including through revitalising natural dye techniques in textile crafts. Additionally, the latter also provided platforms for ASEAN cultural entrepreneurs to exchange successful green business models and showcase eco-conscious cultural products. It marked a strategic step toward aligning creative industries with sustainable development goals.

Further expanding on sustainable development, the **ASEAN Workshop on**

Sustainable Heritage Food Packaging (2023, Malaysia) engaged food producers and designers in reimagining traditional food packaging with sustainability at its core. Participants explored eco-friendly alternatives to modern packaging, with the dual aim of heritage preservation and global market readiness. Young chefs and culinary startups from across the region were also gathered for the **Empowering MSMEs in ASEAN Gastronomic Business (2023, Thailand)** to share business experiences and present their micro, small and medium enterprises' (MSME) culinary products. The event highlighted common challenges in the food industry and encouraged cross-border collaboration in gastronomy.

To address broader sectoral challenges, regional expertise was mobilised through the **Workshop on Cultural and Arts Sector Development in Southeast Asia (2023, Phnom Penh)**, where cultural policymakers and scholars discussed post-pandemic recovery strategies for the cultural and arts sectors. Emphasis was placed on revitalising artistic craftsmanship and ensuring long-term sectoral resilience.

An innovative undertaking was the **ASEAN Heritage Train – Enhancing Connectivity Towards Cultural Diversity (2024)**, which made its way from Lao PDR through Thailand and into Malaysia, bringing not just a moving exhibition, but a journey of cultural diplomacy on tracks. On board the train were dancers, craftsmen, and traditional chefs, turning carriages into corridors of cultural exchange. With public performances, artisanal showcases, hands-on workshops, and culinary demonstrations at every stop, the train served as both celebration and conversation. More than a cultural showcase, it functioned as a travelling marketplace where artists showcased their work and chefs engaged new customers, proving how shared heritage can become a direct driver for socio-economic progress.

Strategic partnerships further underscore SOMCA's commitment to global dialogue, including through initiatives such as the **ASEAN-UK Advancing Creative Economy Programme (2024-2025)**. With policy roundtables, capacity-building, research and mapping studies, networking of music festival organisers, festival management training, regional poll on creative economy, as well as a symposium to develop the ASEAN Creative Sustainability Framework, the initiative expands professionalisation and international connectivity, engaging expertise and network building, while deepening evidence-based policymaking.

Currently under development is the **ASEAN-Japan Youth Exchange Program**, which aims to unite young artists from ASEAN and Japan to co-create artworks using recycled and natural materials, promoting sustainable practices and eco-conscious creativity. Similarly, the **ASEAN-France “Creative ASEAN” Platform**, is being proposed to support artist residencies, a digital platform with a regional label, and professional exchanges to strengthen cooperation among stakeholders in the cultural and creative industries. With participation from ASEAN Member States, Timor-Leste, and France, it aims to foster deeper integration through shared creative practice.

These recent initiatives build upon a legacy of work that dates back over a decade. As early as 2010, SOMCA had already begun investing in cultural entrepreneurship through initiatives such as **Towards a Regional Cultural Enterprise: A Forum**

on the **ASEAN SMCEs (Indonesia)**, which spotlighted the potential of small and medium-sized cultural enterprises as drivers of regional development. Another creative economy-related initiative is the **Regional Training Workshop on SMCEs: The Role of Youth for Sustainable Development of SMCEs (Cambodia, 2014)**, which placed the youth at the forefront of sustaining creative industries across ASEAN. These programmes, among many others implemented over the years, reflect the breadth and depth of SOMCA's commitment to nurturing the creative economy as a key driver of regional integration, innovation, and sustainable growth.

ASEAN's Creative Future

The region's creative economy has evolved from a peripheral interest into a central foundation for ASEAN's sustainable and inclusive growth strategies. This transformation is driven by a dual approach facilitated through the COCI's targeted initiatives that empower grassroots creators, and SOMCA's guidance that forges regional and international partnerships. This integrated system is translating strategic goals into tangible results, building an ecosystem where creative innovation can flourish.

To maintain this trajectory, SOMCA, supported by the ASEAN Secretariat, remains committed to collaborative policymaking across various sectors and strategic investment in both human capital and infrastructure. Through SOMCA's sustained efforts, the transformation from a region rich in cultural assets to a global creative powerhouse is no longer just an ambition; it is an unfolding reality that promises a more resilient, dynamic, and people-centred ASEAN for generations to come.

Anne Luis is a Senior Officer, and Fiori Rizki Djuwita is an Officer in the Culture and Information Division of the ASEAN Secretariat.

“Through SOMCA’s sustained efforts, the transformation from a region rich in cultural assets to a global creative powerhouse is no longer just an ambition; it is an unfolding reality that promises a more resilient, dynamic, and people-centred ASEAN for generations to come.”

SECTION

3

Perspectives



Creatives Matter

Dr. Christina Yeo

“Creativity is the industry of tomorrow”. The year 2021 was declared the International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development at the 74th United Nations General Assembly. According to UNCTAD’s 2024 survey, the creative economy contributes between 0.5 to 7.3 per cent of the GDP and employs between 0.5 to 12.5 per cent of the workforce.

***“Creativity is
the industry of
tomorrow.”***

The creative economy has long assumed a meaningful role in Malaysia and across Southeast Asia, and its importance continues to grow as the world evolves through digital transformation, social shifts and mounting environmental challenges. Recognising this, ASEAN has taken a bold step forward by establishing a structured, inclusive and forward-looking framework that places creativity at the heart of sustainable development. The ASEAN Creative Economy (ACE) Sustainability Framework has been adopted during the 46th ASEAN Summit held in Kuala Lumpur, a milestone that marks a new creative turn for the region’s cultural and creative industries.

With support from the ASEAN-UK Advancing the Creative Economy Programme and the ASEAN Secretariat, the Framework serves as a comprehensive regional roadmap. It seeks to foster an integrated creative economy that not only drives economic growth but also upholds the values of social inclusion, cultural preservation and environmental sustainability.

The ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework

The adoption of the Framework could not have come at a more relevant time for Malaysia. It allows us to elevate our creative economy to a regional stage while aligning with key national development goals such as the National Cultural Policy (DAKEN) 2021. The Framework's emphasis on linking cultural heritage with sustainable economic practices reinforces Malaysia's ongoing commitment to preserving our national identity while driving inclusive, future-ready growth.

One of the most compelling aspects of the Framework is its focus on regional cooperation. It encourages ASEAN member states to share expertise, resources and best practices. Each of us brings unique strengths, whether in traditional crafts, performing arts, culinary heritage or digital design and fashion, this diversity is one of our greatest assets.

The Framework also supports the mobility of creative professionals across ASEAN. From joint exhibitions and artist residencies to collaborative performances and entrepreneurship exchanges, these cross-border opportunities will nurture fresh ideas, inspire creativity and help build a sense of regional solidarity. As a multicultural and inclusive society, Malaysia is proud to serve as a natural hub for ASEAN cultural diplomacy.

Turning legacies into livelihoods

As a cultural enthusiast working towards harnessing the potential of creative and cultural industries to national growth and development, I believe Malaysia is well-positioned to benefit from this Framework. Our creative landscape is vibrant, diverse and deeply rooted in tradition while increasingly responsive to innovation and new technologies. With strong institutional backing from agencies such as MyCreative Ventures, the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) and several key organisations under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, including the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (Kraftangan Malaysia), National Academy of Arts, Culture, and Heritage (ASWARA), and the National Art Gallery, Malaysia has built a nurturing ecosystem for cultural entrepreneurship and innovation.

Over the years, we have seen tremendous efforts aimed at empowering our creative talents in the context of Malaysia. For instance, **Kraftangan Malaysia's National Craft Day**, a vibrant and comprehensive yearly event, provides a platform for artisans and craft entrepreneurs to promote, develop and showcase Malaysian handicrafts to both local and international audiences. Key activities include a B2B Outsourcing Programme involving international buyers, craft sales, craft exhibitions, craft demonstrations, interactive craft sessions, craft seminars, arts performances and sales of Malaysian heritage food. In 2024, the event achieved remarkable success, generating a total sales revenue of RM14,612,513.63. This impressive figure was driven by the participation of 679 craft entrepreneurs and artisans, who collectively drew a substantial crowd of 238,675 visitors throughout the entire duration of the programme.

“Each of us brings unique strengths, whether in traditional crafts, performance arts, culinary heritage or digital design and fashion, this diversity is one of our greatest assets.”

At **ASWARA, the Future Creative School** offers programmes in animation and game art, preparing young minds for the evolving demands of the global creative economy, ensuring that traditional arts are integrated with contemporary forms and technologies. A total of 2,621 participants have been certified in the 2023-2024 cohort. Meanwhile, the **National Art Gallery's annual Young Art Entrepreneurs (YAE!) Programme** promotes sustainability and entrepreneurial thinking among emerging artists. Since 2017, a total of 155 participants have benefited from this programme which aims to provide career development opportunities, offer hands-on and continuous exposure and guidance, encourage income generation and stimulate growth of the arts ecosystem. These are just a few examples of how Malaysia is continuously cultivating a resilient and dynamic creative sector.

Creativity bridges culture, builds future

On a global level, the ACE Sustainability Framework bolsters ASEAN's standing in the international creative economy. By advancing a unified agenda on issues such as intellectual property protection, best practices in creative goods and services and the protection and preservation of cultural assets, we are better equipped to champion our collective interests. This cohesive approach will amplify ASEAN's voice globally, strengthen our cultural diplomacy and ensure our region is respected as a vibrant, values-driven creative powerhouse.

Ultimately, the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework represents more than a policy, it is a shared aspiration for a future where **creativity bridges culture, fosters inclusivity and propels sustainable regional development**. Malaysia is proud to be part of this journey. We remain deeply committed to working hand in hand with our ASEAN partners to ensure that our creative sectors not only thrive but also continue to inspire, connect and uplift communities across our region.

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“Ultimately, the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework represents more than a policy, it is a shared aspiration for a future where creativity bridges culture, fosters inclusivity and propels sustainable regional development.”



Leveraging Digital Innovation and Creative Talents for Sustainable Growth: The Philippine Experience

Lilian G. Salonga, Jo-Dann N. Darong and Catherine E. Nuqui

As digital transformations continuously reshape economies, ways of communicating, connecting, and conducting business have evolved¹. At the heart of this change is the ever-evolving landscape of the cultural and creative industries (CCI)², offering new pathways for economic growth, social change, and sustainable development³. In a given creative economy, the utilisation of intellectual capital and creativity serves as a primary input in the creation, production, and distribution of creative outputs.

1. Trotsenburg, A. (February 2024). World Bank: The Digital Era for All. Retrieved from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/voices/digital-era-all>

2. The Asean Secretariat (2021). Creative Economy: Culture, Identity, and Business of Creativity. Indonesia

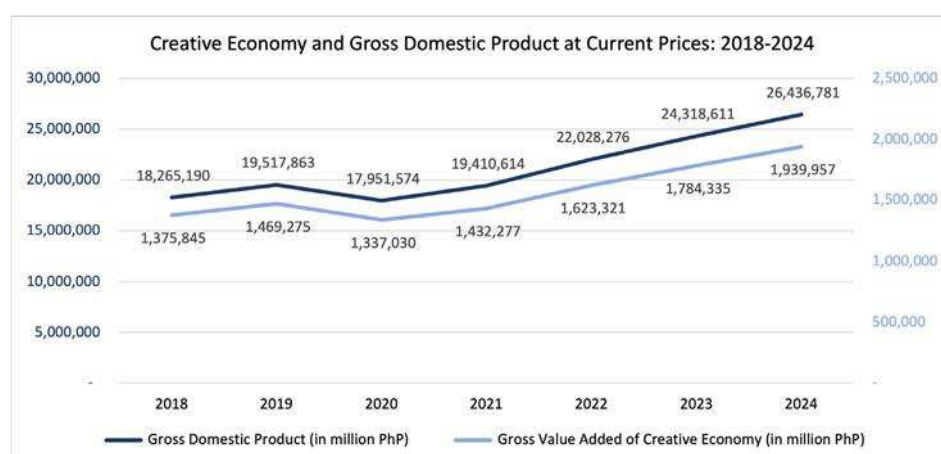
3. Asian Development Bank Institute (2022). Creative Economy 2030: Imagining and Delivering a Robust, Creative, Inclusive, and Sustainable Recovery. ADB Manila.

The creative economies are experiencing an unprecedented wave of globalisation. In today's more connected and digital world, creative goods and services are being produced, distributed, and consumed at a remarkable pace across borders. This is driving the exponential growth of market opportunities in the global creative industries and puts its development at the centre stage of national and international discussions. In 2020 alone, the CCIs already accounted for 3.1% of the global economy and 6.2% of global employment⁴. With sustained momentum, it is expected to contribute 10% of global GDP by 2030.

The expansion of global trade of creative outputs has contributed to this growth momentum. In line with increased global consumption, UNCTAD reports that creative goods exports have more than tripled from US\$208 billion in 2002 to US\$713 billion in 2022. Meanwhile, buoyed by digital technology, the creative services exports reached a record of US\$1.4 trillion in 2022⁵.

As global attention is increasingly focused on the dynamism of creative ecosystems in developing countries, the Philippines is establishing itself as a premier creative hub in Asia. The socio-economic contributions of the creative industries are increasingly recognised as an engine of growth. Given their 7.3 percent share of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2024, the creative industries are key drivers of job creation and value generation in the Philippine economy. In the same year, the industries employed 7.51 million Filipinos and generated PHP 1.94 trillion (approximately US\$33.7 billion) in gross value added (GVA)⁶.

“In line with increased global consumption, UNCTAD reports that creative goods exports have more than tripled from US\$208 billion in 2002 to US\$713 billion in 2022. Meanwhile, buoyed by digital technology, the creative services exports reached a record of US\$1.4 trillion in 2022.”



The following are the foundational elements of a thriving Philippine creative economy⁷:

- a. The Philippines is a hotbed of cultural diversity and progressive creativity;

4. UNESCO (2022). Reshaping policies for creativity: addressing culture as a global public good. <https://doi.org/10.58337/OILN3726>

5. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2024). Retrieved from https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditctsce2024d2_en.pdf

6. PSA (March 2025). Retrieved from <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/creative-economy>

7. Consists of the nine creative domains: Audiovisual Media, Digital Interactive Media, Creative Services, Design, Publishing and Printed Media, Performing Arts, Visual Arts, Traditional Cultural Expressions, and Cultural Sites.

- b.** The Philippines is home to a young, dynamic, and talented workforce;
- c.** The Philippines boasts a vast domestic base with strong linkages in the global market;
- d.** The Philippines is a nation of digital natives, mostly social media savvy;
- e.** The Philippines possesses industrial capabilities with linkages in the global market;
- f.** The Philippines has a strong structural capability to protect against illicit trade and a flourishing intellectual property rights ecology; and,
- g.** The Philippines has a committed and coordinated leadership, evidenced by strong institutions and creative industry players.

With the passage of the Philippine Creative Industries Development Act (PCIDA) in 2022, the national government intensified its efforts in leveraging the sustained performance and vast potential of the creative industries. Following the various policy pronouncements of President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., improving the competitiveness of the creative industries has been among the key national strategies under the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2023-2028. The medium-term goals for revitalising the services sector include achieving market expansion, strengthening creativity and innovation in the service value proposition, and enhancing inter-sectoral linkages.

Spearheading active promotions and building the capabilities of the creative industries, developing centers of creative excellence, showcasing the country's assets in creative tourism, and protecting creative workers are among the numerous initiatives espoused by the national government. Through the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the capacities of creative industries players, particularly micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), are enhanced by improving their access to training, financing, and technology.

After identifying the growing potential of the creative industries, as well as the cross-cutting constraints (e.g., a lack of firm-level statistics and limited financing options), the DTI has launched the *Malikhaing Pinoy*⁸ programme. This national flagship programme promotes the competitiveness of the creative industries. Since 2022, the Malikhaing Pinoy programme has advanced the Filipino creative agenda through (a) building more creative ecosystems, (b) empowering the creative workforce, (c) accelerating inclusive innovation, (d) mobilising financing support, and (e) seizing market and trade opportunities.



Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 2 Malikhaing Pinoy Program Strategy Framework

Source: Department of Trade and Industry

8. "Malikhaing Pinoy", a phrase in national language meaning "Creative Filipino".

The importance of advancing the creative industries through nurturing talent and creating a supportive ecosystem is also reflected in various government agencies that are mandated to preserve and promote Filipino culture and creativity. Leveraging the growing opportunities of the fusion of creativity and innovation, the emerging technological trends, and the expanding roles of creative industry players and partners (i.e., academe, diplomatic community, and international development partners) have been prominent strategies of the *Malikhaing Pinoy* programme.

DTI supports creative enterprises, fosters entrepreneurial pursuits, safeguards intellectual property, and facilitates access to international markets. The impact of these interventions and initiatives has been significantly magnified by sustained private sector support and involvement. Private entities complement the national government programmes through investment and innovation, creating a synergistic effect that enhances the scale and scope of creative projects. A case in point is the close and strong collaboration with creative industry associations and community groups across 18 regions and 1,634 cities and municipalities, which ensures that the *Malikhaing Pinoy* programmes are not only effective but also inclusive and transformative.

From an internationalisation point of view, the Philippines has clustered its 70-plus creative sectors into four major creative clusters, namely, (a) Entertainment Cluster, (b) Digital Creative Services Cluster, (c) Design Goods Cluster, and (d) Creative Tourism Cluster. The clustering is motivated by stellar past performances, global growth potential, existing industrial capabilities in the Philippines, and strong prospects for expansion, as well as the ability to generate spillovers to other creative sectors and the presence of robust institutional support.

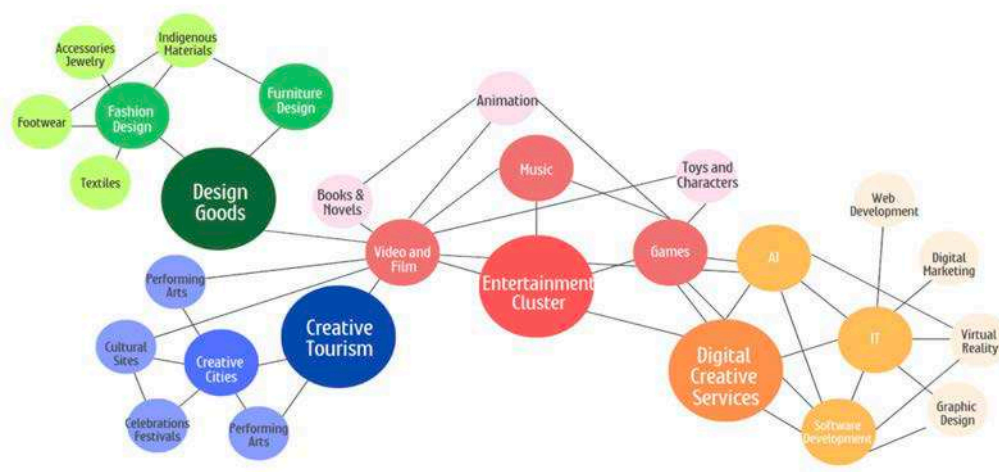


Figure 3 High-Growth Clusters in the Philippine Creative Industries

Source: Department of Trade and Industry

The global creative industry is moving towards a future characterised by the showcase of new and more culturally diverse and inclusive content, the democratisation of talent development, the integration of digital technologies, and a greater focus on environmental sustainability, in all stages of the creative process.

In this evolving regional landscape, the Philippines' young population and digital fluency, backed by policies and programmes, have positioned the country to lead efforts to position creativity as a core driver of sustainable and inclusive growth. The Philippines' leadership in creative industry development is reinforced by a growing regional momentum that recognises creativity as a vital driver of inclusive, sustainable growth.

With ASEAN's cultural richness and creative potential, and the right mix of policies, partnerships, and people-centered approaches, innovation and creativity can help shape a future that is economically resilient and globally competitive. As it assumes the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026, the Philippines will prioritise the development of creative industries as a key driver of sustainable development. For the Philippines, promoting a collective creative economy agenda presents an opportunity to open new markets, deepen cross-border collaboration, and enhance support for local creatives, especially MSMEs. Leading the conversation on shared frameworks, such as creative trade facilitation, intellectual property protection, and talent mobility, would enable the Philippines to contribute to shaping a more integrated, competitive, and culturally empowered ASEAN.

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“The global creative industry is moving towards a future characterised by the showcase of new and more culturally diverse and inclusive content, the democratisation of talent development, the integration of digital technologies, and a greater focus on environmental sustainability, in all stages of the creative process.”

Cultural Capital and the ASEAN Creative Economy: Unlocking Regional Value Through Identity and Innovation

Mohd. Abdoh Damit

Introduction

The creative economy has emerged as a powerful lever for inclusive, sustainable, and innovation-driven growth. Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the creative economy is increasingly viewed not only as a source of economic diversification but as a platform for cultural expression, social resilience, and regional solidarity. The recent adoption of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025) signals a policy commitment to build upon ASEAN's diverse cultural resources as foundational assets in the regional development agenda.

In parallel, the Narrative of ASEAN's Identity (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020) recognises that both inherited traditions and shared contemporary values contribute to the making of a common ASEAN identity. Cultural and creative industries (CCIs), therefore, do not operate solely within the market economy; they are embedded in

social systems of value, meaning, and collective memory. Drawing upon Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and informed by regional policy research (Abdoh Damit, 2021, 2024), this article offers a conceptual and policy analysis of how cultural capital can serve as a central pillar in ASEAN's creative economy strategy. It argues that operationalising cultural capital — embodied, objectified, and institutionalised — can bridge economic, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of regional integration.

Conceptual Framework

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital provides a critical lens through which to understand the social reproduction of inequality, legitimacy, and value within cultural systems. He outlined three interrelated forms: (1) embodied cultural capital, comprising competencies, knowledge, and dispositions acquired through socialisation; (2) objectified cultural capital, which exists in the form of cultural artefacts such as artworks, instruments, and crafts; and (3) institutionalised cultural capital, which confers legitimacy through educational credentials, awards, and formal recognition.

These forms interact within specific fields — social spaces where actors compete for resources, legitimacy, and power. Within ASEAN, the field of the creative economy includes governments, artists, communities, cultural institutions, and markets. Cultural capital becomes productive when it is recognised within this field, legitimised through symbolic power, and supported through institutional mechanisms.

Embodied capital is visible in traditional skills and creative practices such as dance, weaving, oral literature, and design—often passed intergenerationally but unevenly valued in formal economies. Objectified capital can be found in tangible expressions such as traditional textiles, architecture, and film, but also in contemporary innovations like digital media and design products. Institutionalised capital, however, remains underdeveloped in many ASEAN contexts. Limited formal arts education, gaps in creative labour certification, and inconsistent IP protection frameworks hamper the conversion of creativity into recognised and transferable value (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025; Abdoh Damit, 2021).

Understanding the creative economy as a field structured by cultural capital allows policymakers to go beyond economic metrics and engage with questions of access, legitimacy, and cultural rights — crucial to ensuring an inclusive creative ASEAN future.

“Within ASEAN, the field of the creative economy includes governments, artists, communities, cultural institutions, and markets. Cultural capital becomes productive when it is recognised within this field, legitimised through symbolic power, and supported through institutional mechanisms.”



Namaskara Mudra has evolved to indicate gestures of greetings, prayers and adoration. The variations of Namaskara Mudra can be found in the dance forms such as Alai Asyik (Brunei Darussalam), Apsara (Cambodia), Oleg (Indonesia), Nattakam (Laos), Mak Yong (Malaysia), Yama Zatdaw (Myanmar), Pangalay (The Philippines), Zapin (Singapore), Khon (Thailand), and Tra Kieu (Viet Nam).

Political Economy of Cultural Capital in ASEAN

ASEAN's political economy of culture is marked by both diversity and disparity. While several member states have made significant progress in developing creative economy policies, digital innovation clusters, and public-private partnerships, others face systemic challenges in infrastructure, funding, and recognition of cultural sectors. These imbalances reflect what Bourdieu (1986) identified as the unequal distribution of capital — where certain groups and geographies accumulate cultural legitimacy while others remain marginalised.

Across the region, many creative practitioners operate in informal economies, often without access to legal protections, stable income, or institutional support. This affects women, youth, and rural artisans disproportionately, leading to systemic exclusions that mirror broader social hierarchies. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence — where dominant aesthetic standards marginalise alternative forms of cultural expression — is evident when Indigenous art, traditional crafts, or vernacular languages are deemed less 'innovative' or commercially viable.

Moreover, cultural production often faces tensions between commodification and cultural integrity. Without safeguards, cultural expressions risk being extracted or appropriated for tourism, branding, or export, without returning value or control to local communities. The Narrative of ASEAN Identity (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020) calls for recognising both inherited values — such as traditions, spirituality, and community orientation — and constructed values like openness, mutual respect, and sustainability. These values should guide the development of creative economies that are not only competitive but ethical and culturally grounded.

ASEAN's political economy thus requires a multi-layered approach — strengthening local cultural ecosystems while building regional frameworks for mobility, IP governance, and funding access. Recognising cultural capital as a strategic policy resource can enable ASEAN to reshape cultural production toward a more inclusive and collaborative regional model.

Operationalising Cultural Capital in ASEAN

Operationalising cultural capital in ASEAN requires linking policy ambition with concrete mechanisms that nurture, support, and distribute cultural value. The ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025) outlines thirteen strategic priorities, many of which directly relate to the recognition and mobilisation of cultural capital.

Embodied cultural capital can be supported by integrating creative skills into formal education and community learning platforms. Creative literacy, artistic competencies, and cultural knowledge must be cultivated from early education to professional development. Regional programmes that support creative teacher training, cultural exchange, and apprenticeship pathways are crucial for this process.

Objectified cultural capital requires investment in infrastructure, platforms, and tools that allow creators to produce, distribute, and monetise their work. This includes cultural hubs, co-working spaces, craft incubators, and digital marketplaces. ASEAN-wide cultural mapping and digitisation initiatives can ensure that intangible and material culture is preserved and made accessible.

Institutionalised cultural capital can be advanced through national and regional certification systems, mutual recognition agreements, awards, and creative economy indices. Recognising creative work as valid, professional, and economically valuable is essential for legitimising careers in the sector. Moreover, strengthening IP education and enforcement across member states is vital to protect cultural capital from exploitation and enhance its market value.

Way Forward

To fully realise the promise of cultural capital within the ASEAN creative economy, an holistic and inclusive approach must be adopted — one that aligns cultural policy with education, innovation, and regional integration. First, ASEAN member states should invest in robust cultural statistics and indicators that allow for the tracking of cultural capital across demographic and geographic dimensions. Evidence-based planning is necessary for targeted support.

Second, national development plans must elevate culture from a secondary to a strategic sector, recognising its cross-cutting value in tourism, education, technology, and diplomacy. Regional policy coherence, facilitated by bodies such as the ASEAN Sub-Committee on Culture and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, will be vital.

Third, funding instruments should prioritise community-based cultural enterprises, Indigenous innovation, and women-led creative initiatives. Inclusive financing models will ensure that cultural capital is not concentrated in metropolitan elites or corporate stakeholders.

Finally, ASEAN must articulate a cultural vision that sees diversity not as an obstacle but as a strength. Cultural capital should be seen not only as economic potential but as the moral and imaginative fabric of a shared future. In doing so, the creative economy will become more than a sector — it will become a system for social transformation, identity-making, and regional belonging.

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A UK Perspective on Advancing the ASEAN Creative Economy

John Newbiggin

When Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, was asked why his company had grown so rapidly to become one of the largest and most profitable businesses in the world he replied “Because it is at the interface of liberal arts and technology”. In some respects, the story of the creative economy is the story of the evolving relationship between the arts and digital technology. In 1998 when the UK government produced a first tentative definition of the creative industries and attempted to value their contribution to the British economy, there were only 150 million internet users worldwide. In 2025 there are 5.6 billion. Apple’s iPhone was launched in 2007. Today there are an estimated 7.4bn smartphones in use. In 2000 no data set existed to estimate the value of global trade in creative goods and service. In 2022, and despite the COVID pandemic, UNCTAD valued the sector at over \$3 trillion. With change moving at such extraordinary speed, it’s easy to understand why UNCTAD is cautious enough to describe the creative economy as “an evolving concept”.

“With change moving at such extraordinary speed, it’s easy to understand why UNCTAD is cautious enough to describe the creative economy as ‘an evolving concept’.”

That initial 1998 definition and valuation was carried out by the UK’s newly established Department for Culture but it soon became evident that, as well as

having its roots in artistic and cultural creativity, the creative economy impacted on every part of government. Its dependence on individual entrepreneurs and micro businesses stimulated innovation in company structures and business practice. It called for fresh thinking about the valuation and protection of intellectual property and it needed effective fiscal policies to be internationally competitive. It benefitted from and contributed to education at every level from primary to tertiary. It impacted on local government policy, providing a source of identity as well as new economic opportunity for individuals and communities. It was generating innovative spin-offs that impacted on health, on social policy and on the wider life of the community. From the kind of workspaces that were needed, the skills that were needed, the financial and legal support that was needed, the new sector demanded action across a wide front and the UK has pioneered many innovative policies and structures at both national and local level.

“Creativity happens when cultures overlap.”

But it is the ASEAN countries that have taken the logical next step of fully embracing the fact that a creative economy demands a ‘whole government’ approach and beyond that, what might be called a **“whole society” approach that embraces the potential role that a truly creative economy can play in building a future that is sustainable;—a future that helps safeguard the natural resources and systems of our planet by driving an economy that is less about the exploitation of natural resources and more about using the resources of creativity and imagination; an economy that is about good moments as well as goods; about collective participation in experiences more than it is about the private consumption of commodities; a future that is socially sustainable and inclusive, able to offer accessible opportunities for women, young people and marginalised communities that have often found themselves at a disadvantage in traditional labour markets; and a future that not only protects and preserves the cultural heritage and identity of distinctive societies and communities, but builds on that heritage in imaginative ways, making it relevant for the future.**

You could say that if the last twenty five years has seen governments exploring policies to shape and steer the growth of a creative economy, the next twenty five years is going to be more about the ways in which the evolving creative economy shapes and steers government policies. That may seem a very extravagant claim but it’s clear that the combination of urban growth and intensification, the technology tsunami that has brought us AI and social media, accelerating resource depletion, the fragmentation of the long-established rules-based global order and, above all, climate change all pose unprecedented and interrelated challenges that call for a highly creative ‘whole government’, ‘multistakeholder’ approach in which the creative economy and the creative mind-set that drives it will have a critical and central role to play. The great Chinese/American musician Yo Yo Ma said “creativity happens when cultures overlap”. The experience and lessons learned in the UK, and the strategic thinking and future ambition of the ASEAN countries clearly ‘overlap’, each leveraging the value of the other and, together, ensuring that the creative economy will continue to be an “evolving concept”.

John Newbigin is Ambassador for the Creative Industries for the Mayor of London

Valuing Creativity: Unlocking the Engine of ASEAN's Creative Capital Futures

Justin Deimen

Towards a Creative Capital Operating System

As Southeast Asia moves into a defining era of cultural and economic integration, the creative economy has emerged not just as a vehicle of national pride or youth engagement but as a fundamental engine of sustainable development, soft power, and capital formation. With the forthcoming ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework set to offer a policy blueprint for regional growth, the missing mechanism is clear – valuation.

Not of culture in the abstract. But of creative intellectual property (IP) as a real and investable asset.

The truth is deceptively simple – if you can value something, you can invest in it. If you can invest in it, you can scale it. And if you can scale it, you can build ecosystems around it – all of which is to say that with the right frameworks, there's a tangible link between understanding storytelling and its larger purpose towards

“The truth is deceptively simple – if you can value something, you can invest in it. If you can invest in it, you can scale it. And if you can scale it, you can build ecosystems around it.”

creating infrastructures around employment, trade, technology, tourism, and innovation.

Yet across ASEAN, the systemic ability to assign risk-adjusted financial value to creative outputs such as scripts, music catalogues, performance formats, animation, digital content, and gaming IPs, is critically underdeveloped. And this absence is not academic. It is the single greatest barrier to accessing structured capital, especially non-dilutive, scalable financing either through debt or private equity.

From Inspiration to Infrastructure: The Core Role of Creative Valuation

Creative valuation is often misunderstood as a niche function, something that happens deep inside legal teams or IP licensing divisions. In reality, it is a discipline at the very centre of any sustainable creative economy because succinctly put – it links the intangible with the bankable.

While film, TV, and digital media often dominate the creative finance conversation, creative valuation has just as profound an application in theatre, the performing arts, and visual arts. From touring rights and stage production formats to exhibition licensing, merchandising, and brand collaborations – these sectors contain rich, replicable IP that, if properly valued, can also be collateralised and scaled.

Imagine regional performing arts institutions financing international tours through structured revenue forecasts or visual artists unlocking capital through catalogue-backed credit lines. For this to happen, we need valuation frameworks that go beyond screen content and embrace the full breadth of creative expression in ASEAN.

By enabling risk-managed forecasting of cashflows – via distribution contracts, licensing agreements, pre-sales, or platform partnerships – creative valuation translates artistry into financial instruments. It gives lenders confidence, investors visibility, and producers the leverage to scale without relinquishing control.

It also changes how value flows. Instead of a one-time grant or a donor-led fund, creative valuation enables repeatable, recyclable capital deployment. Think of it as infrastructure – a bridge between creativity and commerce. Without that bridge, no matter how much talent exists in ASEAN, the capital can't reach it at scale.

The Talent Gap in the Value Chain

Where structuring debt financing for creative projects globally is concerned, we've seen first-hand how a strong valuation layer can unlock entire production slates, build sovereign wealth-backed funds, and catalyse new studio ecosystems. But we've also seen how the lack of trained valuation professionals – dealmakers fluent in both the language of creativity and the rigour of finance – can bring even the best content strategies to a halt.

This is where ASEAN and its partner organisations in the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) have an opportunity to act boldly.

“Creative valuation is often misunderstood as a niche function, something that happens deep inside legal teams or IP licensing divisions. In reality, it is a discipline at the very centre of any sustainable creative economy because succinctly put – it links the intangible with the bankable.”

“Think of it as infrastructure – a bridge between creativity and commerce. Without that bridge, no matter how much talent exists in ASEAN, the capital can't reach it at scale.”

Just as engineers, accountants, and lawyers form the backbone of mature industries, creative economies require a robust pipeline of valuation professionals – specialists who can price pre-licensed IP, structure deals, assess collateral strength, and align creative production with international finance standards.

We need to build this talent – deliberately, strategically, and with the right policies.

Creative valuation should be embedded as a core skillset in universities, polytechnics, film schools, executive education programs, and even theatre schools. ASEAN should foster exchange programs, certification schemes, and practitioner networks that bring together financiers, producers, IP lawyers, and cultural economists.

The goal isn't to dilute the alchemic creation of art with bureaucracy – it's to empower creators to own, finance, and scale their work sustainably with the understanding that what they create matters and what matters is a sustainable function that feeds across the value chain for generations.

Without this middle layer of valuation expertise and its exercise, creators remain stuck in a cycle of undercapitalisation, limited scalability, and short-term monetisation that curbs their long-tail. And financiers, in turn, remain wary of engaging a sector they cannot underwrite with confidence, which ends up creating a negative feedback loop.

With strong valuation practices, however, the creative economy becomes a viable investment class – eligible for credit instruments, insurance mechanisms, trade finance, and impact capital.

ASEAN's Opportunity – Leading the World in Creative Capital Architecture

ASEAN is uniquely positioned to lead the next wave of creative economy structuring. With its unparalleled cultural diversity, high mobile penetration, and growing demand for regionally authentic content, Southeast Asia is not just a content exporter – it is a market-maker. But to move from output to ownership, ASEAN must prioritise the systems that enable its creators to retain rights, structure deals, and access financing on terms that align with global industry norms.

The ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework can serve as the catalyst and championing creative sector valuation as a national development objective. This means aligning policies to:

- Incentivise valuation-linked finance through co-investment, credit guarantees, or tax mechanisms that encourage lenders to enter the space.
- Standardise IP documentation and enforceability to allow cross-border investment and accurate pricing of rights.

- Create data transparency around market rates, content performance, and deal benchmarks to enable accurate valuation.

These are not technical luxuries. They are prerequisites for real capital formation that other industries traditionally enjoy and benefit from over the years. The goal is to align policies, practices, and standards to lay the groundwork for our creative economy to become an investment-grade pipeline for capital markets – one that is sustainable, accessible, and ensures that our creators, artists, and IP owners can continue producing and sharing their work in a protected and mutually beneficial way

Sustaining IP x Talent Ecosystems with Policy and Investment

In my professional capacities as both a media entrepreneur, a film producer, and a cultural policy strategist, I hold both sides of the commercial and cultural equations close to my heart in ensuring that we have viable and sustainable IP and talent ecosystems in full bloom. We want to build physical and financial infrastructure to support this transformation: creative hubs where studios meet education, capital meets content, and creators learn how to finance their visions without giving up ownership cheaply and early.

But we cannot do it alone. Governments, investors, and industry practitioners must commit to building an operating system for the creative economy - one that includes valuation as its central logic.

Creativity is ASEAN's competitive advantage – culture is capital. But capital doesn't flow to talent. It flows to structure. To unlock the full promise of Southeast Asia's creative economy, we must move beyond merely celebrating culture and begin financing it as the strategic asset it is in order for it to flourish across sectors.

This means building the valuation layer and creating an entire class of professionals who can bridge the worlds of art and finance, and who can translate stories into capital and capital into impact.

If we can value it, we can invest in it.

If we can invest in it, we can scale it.

If we can scale it, we can build futures around it.

Justin Deimen is the Managing Partner of Goldfinch International and Executive Director of Intercultural Theatre Institute



Access to Financing for the Creative Industries

Alice Hu Wagner

As set out in the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework, accessing finance is key to unlocking business growth, enabling a business to take on new staff with new skills, innovate new products or services, or break into new markets. Yet data from the UK shows that many creative businesses find it harder to access finance from traditional providers of both debt and equity.

This challenge stems from creative companies being both more volatile by nature and seen as riskier by finance provider perception because their performance behaves in ways that do not fit the approaches that mainstream finance providers, banks and private investors use to measure and assess risk. For example, as cited in the “Creative Pulse Cambodia” report commissioned by the Creative Industries of Cambodia Association for Development and Advocacy (CICADA, the most common significant challenge cited by Cambodian CCIIs (38%) was financial sustainability. Successfully and sustainably improving access to finance for creative businesses thus requires understanding and targeting these underlying issues.

Creative businesses are more likely to be M/SMEs working with freelancers who come together on specific projects and then dispersing than stable companies with many permanent workers. Mainstream finance providers, however, need legal

assurance that their investment will go to an entity that can return their investment, and so often require a multi-year track record of successful operation for a single corporate entity. In creative companies, where much of the valuable work is in the minds of individuals who can easily leave any given entity that has taken investment and then set up elsewhere free of an obligation to repay the investment, this is a challenge. It is shared with other SMEs but felt more keenly.

Furthermore, the paying projects that creative companies work on tend to be unpredictable, both in terms of if/when the cash flow will occur, as well as how much cash flow will be earned by a particular project. When deciding to finance a company, both equity investors and debt lenders thus focus on the probability of success or failure as well their loss / gain in the case of success or failure, plus how long they think it might take for that loss or gain to occur. Creative companies generally behave in ways that are particularly difficult to predict and so score badly when evaluated in this way.

Let's start with the probability of success or failure. First, there is massive diversity amongst creative companies, so there is not a single standard set of metrics that can reliably predict if any individual creative company will succeed or fail. Companies, even within the same sub-sector, behave very differently from each other, and the drivers of their demand / success are not well understood by general lenders or investors. Risk of failure for small creative companies is high and assessed as even higher as a result, resulting in either no finance or more expensive finance.

Second, specifically for traditional debt providers, it is difficult to predict if a creative company will be able to consistently make regular repayments on a loan, separate from whether it will ultimately be a success or failure. The timing and regularity of project-based creative company cashflows to support interest payments is often unpredictable and subject to delays. Although this can be smoothed out by having multiple projects, products, and/or customers, most small and early-stage creative M/ SMEs are not yet in that position. Small creative companies are thus also assessed as having a poor ability service a loan, even if they are deemed to be able to ultimately repay.

Beyond this, we move on to a finance provider's gain in the case of success. This is less relevant for debt providers who only get the value of their loans repaid when things go well, but critical to attracting early-stage equity finance providers such as angel investors and venture capital funds. Again, for small creative companies the range of potential gain is often difficult to reliably predict at the point of investment because of the hit or miss nature of creative projects, as well as the variable rate of building audiences / customers for IP. Given a general lack of data and certainty around creative companies, general equity investors tend to assume lower potential upside and decline to invest.

Of course, success is not assured, so finance providers will also focus on the size of their potential loss in the case of failure. Lenders, whose upside is limited to getting their loan returned with interest, are particularly sensitive to this. Creative companies, large and small, typically do not have fungible hard assets that are easily valued,

“There is massive diversity amongst creative companies, so there is not a single standard set of metrics that can reliably predict if any individual creative company will succeed or fail.”

“Creative companies, large and small, typically do not have fungible hard assets that are easily valued, repossessed as collateral and resold to recover part of the value of the loan.”

repossessed as collateral and resold to recover part of the value of the loan. The accurate valuation and legal recognition of IP in ASEAN could address this, once IP can be shown to generate a stable, repeatable income and efficiently sold to a third-party operator. However, at present this remains a barrier for creative companies to access debt from traditional providers.

Even where all of these issues are resolved, there remains the question for investors of **how long before a loss or gain will occur**. This will vary widely depending on the sub-sector a creative company is operating in and its individual characteristics. In general, equity finance (where profits are shared) is better suited than debt finance (where interest is paid in addition to a loan amount) when there is high uncertainty on time frames and a defined project, as is often the case for M/SME creative projects. The issues that creative sector companies have around unpredictable cash flows mean that they are still unlikely to qualify for bank loans, even with a government loan guarantee scheme. So effective government intervention for the smallest creative companies should include action on equity finance.

However, in many ASEAN countries, early-stage private equity is currently neither a well-developed nor widely accessible source of finance. Equity requires both capital and expertise, as well as patience to wait years for a return. The amount of work that investors require before deciding to invest can be substantial and demanding for the companies. Leaders of creative companies often are less able to write up the detailed business plans that both debt and equity investors require for decision-making. Without high quality, trust-worthy accounting data reflecting actual financial performance, mainstream finance providers are unable to assess risk with confidence. Assuming the worst, providers then price the cost of the finance up prohibitively.

To solve this failure of understanding, ASEAN policymakers need both sides to change. So general capacity building and upskilling for freelancers, entrepreneurs and microenterprises, such as financial literacy, business development, and digital skills including through 'investment readiness' training programmes can help creatives to successfully make their case for finance to providers.

Simultaneously, incentivising and supporting successful, experienced creatives to become active angel investors and venture capitalists specialising in the creative sector can create a base of professionals able to intelligently provide the capital and support needed. This can be done by placing state funds with venture capital or angel funds, where investment returns can be recycled and reinvested in future generations of creative companies. By also capturing and publishing the data on specialist fund performance that investing gives the state access to, policymakers can build a sustainable pathway and demand for money to be invested into creative companies over the long term.

Alice Hu Wagner is a strategist, financier, and supporter of inclusion, start-ups, and the creative sector.

“Equity requires both capital and expertise, as well as patience to wait years for a return.”

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The Creative Economy Data Model

A Framework for Measuring Creative Ecosystems

Dimiter Gantchev

Undoubtedly, the creative industries have recently become a topic of significant interest from the policy, social and academic perspectives around the world. While creativity-based growth has become a strategic choice for many countries willing to make full use of their creative potential, for others creativity has become a symbol of their contribution to world culture and their soft power. In an interconnected and rapidly evolving global marketplace creativity and entrepreneurship represent a new vehicle for boosting national competitiveness, driving growth and endorsing national identity.

The member states of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) have often raised the issues of how to improve the conditions for the creative economy and turn it into an engine of growth and what role does Intellectual Property (IP) play in this context. Empirical research has focused on various aspects of these issues, looking predominantly at measures of output, which provide only partial answers to these issues.

The new initiative of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) – the Creative Economy Data Model (CEDM) is addressing these questions in a systematic way, offering a framework for understanding and assessing the creative ecosystem of

“In an interconnected and rapidly evolving global marketplace creativity and entrepreneurship represent a new vehicle for boosting national competitiveness, driving growth and endorsing national identity.”

each country with the view of making better decisions and improving the conditions in which creativity can benefit all stakeholders in the creative economy.

Why is a new approach needed?

Creativity is a micro-level phenomenon, but it often thrives in economic systems in which an interdependent set of actors and factors enable new value creation. Economic systems where value is based on novel imaginative qualities are referred to as “creative ecosystems”. These systems are characterised by a large share of the creative industries. While creative industries are limited to specific sectors, creative economies benefit from creativity throughout the entire economy, thus contributing to economic, social and cultural development.

The conceptual evolution from industries to a more comprehensive creative economy reflects increased awareness of the systemic interdependencies underpinning creative productivity and innovation. This shift has practical implications: ecosystem-based thinking demands not only new metrics but also a new logic for interpreting data - one that privileges interdependence, non-linearity and complexity over isolated outputs. While the conceptual transition from industries to ecosystems is well supported, further clarification is needed on how this shift affects the operationalisation of indicators, particularly in terms of capturing dynamic interactions rather than static sectors.

The output metrics fail to explain the underlying causes and conditions which explain them, they cannot shed light on the sustainability dimensions of creative development. Furthermore, these approaches do not take into account the complex interplay between institutional contexts and resources. Consequently, policies informed solely by output-based measures have limited effectiveness in addressing systemic issues and promoting sustainable creative economies or linking creativity to broader measures of well-being and quality of life. Complex creative outputs and sustainable development outcomes result from interactions within dynamic systems rather than linear input-output relationships.

Applying an ecosystem data-based approach to creative economies is particularly compelling for several reasons. On the one hand, it captures systemic enablers - ecosystem approaches recognise factors typically neglected by output-centric frameworks, such as intellectual property rights, cultural norms, interpersonal trust and social networks, among others, as critical determinants of creative productivity and sustainability. Secondly, the ecosystem approach improves policy efficiency - it offers policymakers diagnostics for identifying structural weaknesses or bottlenecks. This supports targeted policy action to reinforce the underlying conditions critical for creative outputs and sustainable development. Thirdly, it aligns effectively with multilevel governance structures, capturing interactions between local, national, and international policy spheres and highlighting the systemic implications of policy choices at various levels. CEDM supports policymakers in articulating strategies that leverage local capacity within broader global and institutional contexts.

“While creative industries are limited to specific sectors, creative economies benefit from creativity throughout the entire economy, thus contributing to economic, social and cultural development.”

Intellectual Property Rights as a strategic horizontal pillar of Creative Ecosystems

Recent research of the creative economy highlights the role of critical systemic enablers of such non-market institutions as intellectual property regimes, educational and cultural institutions, and network intermediaries. WIPO's sustained focus on intellectual property rights exemplifies how important such institutional frameworks are to the functioning of creative ecosystems.

As a normative and analytical pillar of the CEDM, intellectual property rights, especially copyright, are conceptualised not merely as protective legal tools but as essential infrastructure for market formation, value capture, and sustainability in creative ecosystems. IP rights function as enablers of innovation, market stabilisers, and mechanisms to protect the interests of creators and balance them with societal interest. Effective copyright regimes allow creators to monetise their work, thereby incentivising sustained creative production, investment, and risk-taking. As such, they contribute directly to the economic sustainability of creative sectors, helping correct market failures.

Within the logic of the CEDM, intellectual property is treated as a key component of the institutional environment that underpins ecosystem performance. Indicators such as the strength of IP enforcement, the efficiency of rights management systems, and the accessibility of legal protection are used to assess the institutional capacity to support creative value generation. These metrics serve as diagnostic tools that reflect how well an ecosystem enables creators to transform ideas into sustainable economic and cultural outputs.

Objectives

The key objective of the CEDM framework is to provide a comprehensive overview of the national creative economy and assess its quality. The implementation of this new model will effectively establish a new standard framework for capturing the broader characteristics of the creative economy. Its regular update will provide solid evidence for policy making. The CEDM identifies strengths and weaknesses in the creative ecosystem and enables targeted and effective policies based on creative ecosystem diagnostics. The tool offers a dynamic analysis of input-output relationships within the creative ecosystem which allows for benchmarking the performance of the creative ecosystems of the regions to highlight comparative performance.

In pursuing these key objectives, WIPO works with interested governments to train national teams to apply the framework and improve national data capacities. The approach suggests involving different stakeholders and promoting collaboration among government agencies, cultural institutions, industry associations and civil society to reflect all relevant perspectives.

The main differences with other existing models is that the CEDM is focused on the national analysis and not on international rankings, it is focused on the horizontal

“The key objective of the CEDM framework is to provide a comprehensive overview of the national creative economy and assess its quality. The implementation of this new model will effectively establish a new standard framework for capturing the broader characteristics of the creative economy.”

effects of intellectual property and it applies a systemic ecosystem approach enabling a more dynamic analysis.

Key Features of the CEDM

The CEDM includes the following dimensions:

- **Environment:** Institutional, social, cultural, and policy conditions that shape the broader context of creative activities.
- **Resources:** Tangible and intangible inputs essential for creative production and innovation.
- **Outputs and outcomes:** Measurable creative outputs, and economic, social and cultural outcomes resulting from the interaction of the environment and resources.

The creative ecosystem is composed of the following input elements:

Institutions

- Legal & institutional environment
- Social & cultural values
- Networking institutions

Resources

- Knowledge, talent, skills & leadership
- Infrastructure
- Finance
- Intermediate products
- Demand

Output

- The output of the ecosystem will be treated as the proprietary creative activities that creators provide through creative experimentation, manufacturing, marketing, and distribution functions, as well as the new value produced.

The measurement procedure for the CEDM comprises two main parts: the National Diagnostics and the Creative Ecosystem Index. Each part addresses a different level of analysis. The National Diagnostics focuses on national-level data, while the Creative Ecosystem Index enables comparisons of creative potential at the sub-national (regional) level.

The National diagnostics involves gathering all relevant information and data on the country's creative landscape over time. For this component, time-series data at the national level is collected, categorised as either input or output elements of the creative ecosystem. The primary goal of the National Diagnostics is to describe the creative landscape by structuring scattered data into meaningful information using the concept of the ecosystem.

The second part of the CEDM is the Creative Ecosystem Index, which is a composite indicator of input elements that drive creative output. To calculate this index, the model requires comparable data across various levels to ensure its effective application. This stratified data includes spatial units to examine the ecosystems of the different regions. An input measure will be developed to cover the defined regions. This measure enables comparison and analysis of interdependencies between the regions, providing insights for policy interventions aimed at fostering and promoting creativity.

The way forward

The CEDM offers a comprehensive and forward-looking measurement framework. By aligning indicator design with ecosystem approach and real-world policy needs, the model provides an actionable foundation for evidence-based governance, targeted interventions and strategic planning in the creative economy. This affirms WIPO's commitment to advancing both the theoretical and practical frontiers of creative economy measurement.

WIPO is currently piloting the CEDM framework across diverse regions and invites Member States to collaborate in developing national baselines, testing indices, and training local teams in ecosystem analytics. This partnership-driven approach will ensure that creative policies are guided by tools built for complexity, inclusion, and measurable impact.

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Building the Future of the ASEAN Creative Economy Through An Affirmative Narrative

Jonathan Tan Ghee Tiong

The prospect of the creative economy is positively everywhere but nowhere near realising its potential. Arguably, the creative economy is not always cast in a positive light. It is widely seen as an industry that is constantly backstopped by financial support through subsidies and incentives, and sometimes adversely, where sub-sectors such as culture and heritage are seen as extraneous public expenditure rather than being championed as valued investments in cultural and social capital. Furthermore, the cultural and creative industries are not always fully understood and appreciated — where the investor community cannot place a finger on the true value of the creative businesses because they reside in both an intangible and informal economy. A significant part of the assets in the creative sector is intangible intellectual property (IP) which make it difficult to value or resell. As an informal sector made up of micro enterprises and freelancers, the lack of resources to build risk profiles

through proper accountability and transparency further poses a challenge for the investor community to make informed assessments.

According to the International Labour Organisation's estimates, the creative sector was among the hardest hit by the pandemic, with more than 10 million jobs lost in 2020, creating demand and supply shocks to the global economy. This development further demonstrated the vulnerability of the sector that is in dire need for a better narrative, despite the promising projection of the creative economy growing from 3.1% of the global GDP to 10% of global GDP by 2030¹. Relative to the size of other sectors contributions to the global economy, and relative to the projected growth of other sectors, building the narrative using such data may not make it convincing to direct interest, investments and scalability into the sector. If data is the language to point us to where the true value of the creative sector is, then we are not doing enough to make use of it to tell a better story. We need to change the narrative of how the prospect of the creative economy is told to better mobilise resources into the sector.

While culture is at the heart of the development of the creative economy, it is often the case that as a significant sub-sector, it remains on the margins. Take for example the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, where culture does not have a dedicated SDG but is given only passing reference embedded in the SDGs 4 (target 4.7), 8 (target 8.3 and 8.9) and 11 (target 11.4)². This is reflective of the state of culture in many jurisdictions worldwide where governments are long on ambitious policy pronouncements but fall short of sustaining crucial support.

Too often, culture has been overlooked as a valuable form of capital. While momentum is building around the importance of the cultural and creative economy — evidenced by the 2022 MONDIACULT Conference, which advocated for a dedicated post-2030 SDG for culture through the Declaration for Culture, affirming culture as a global public good and calling for its integration as a standalone development goal — we may risk placing the responsibility solely on culture ministries³. Yet, the cultural and creative economy plays a transversal role that demands coordinated action across all government ministries and agencies.

According to the Regional Perception Poll on the Creative Economy that was commissioned by the ASEAN Secretariat with the support of the UK through the British Council, only 47 per cent of the 4,117 respondents are somewhat familiar with the term “creative economy” which reflects the lack of understanding about the sector. In the same poll, 53 per cent of the respondents identified high cost as the main barrier to increasing their consumption of creative products and services. This suggests that more work could be done to better communicate the value proposition of the creative economy to the public.

To build a shared regional narrative on the creative economy in ASEAN, we need to better socialise and amplify the awareness and appreciation of the vibrancy and

“Too often, culture has been overlooked as a valuable form of capital.”

“To build a shared regional narrative on the creative economy in ASEAN, we need to better socialise and amplify the awareness and appreciation of the vibrancy and dynamism of the sector.”

1. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2021). Creative economy outlook: Trends in international trade in creative industries 2002–2020. UNCTAD <https://unctad.org/publication/creative-economy-outlook-2022>

2. United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>

3. UNESCO. (2022). Declaration for Culture: MONDIACULT 2022. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://www.unesco.org/en/mondiacult/2022>

dynamism of the sector. Given that more young people aged 15 to 29 reportedly work in the creative sector than in any other, a valuable starting point is to encourage them to share their experiences through youth-centric, human-interest narratives. These could take the form of case studies, personal backstories of impact, and parallel stories that reveal the interconnectedness of creative industries with other sectors — for example, the nexus between culture and health, or fashion and tourism. The UN Tourism report, “Fashion and Cultural Tourism” provides a relevant illustration of these linkages, showcasing how creative expression can drive development across multiple domains⁴.

Furthermore, as AI continues to reshape the creative industries by blending technology with art and music, digital storytelling and the development of interactive offerings — such as creating a series of ASEAN Creative Economy 101 collaterals from videos, quizzes to podcasts — may amplify awareness and showcase the opportunities emerging from this growing convergence. Similarly, we need to unlock the true value of the creative industries through a shared language that the public and investor community can understand. A core message is to exemplify the creative economy not only as an engine of economic growth, but qualitatively, as a vector of identity, solidarity, purpose and shared values emphasising inclusive and sustainable development as outlined in the UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity⁵.

As an extension of that mindshare for meaningful dialogues to take place between the creatives and the investor community, it is incumbent that creative professionals are equipped with financial literacy and risk management know-how, and not shun or relegate the idea of building risk profiles of their ventures as something secondary. It is equally crucial to cultivate business networks, particularly in having venture capital businesses that can mentor CCI startups on commercialisation and business development, and in enhancing knowledge on how they could promote, monetise and safeguard their IP.

In Asia, a good marketplace to appreciate and observe the dynamic value of IP is the Busan Story Market, organised as part of the Asian Contents and Film Market at the sideline of the Busan International Film Festival, which focuses on film and audiovisual adaptations of IP from literary books, webtoons and web novels among others⁶.

ASEAN is uniquely positioned to develop and champion a more affirmative narrative on the potential of the creative economy. A vital step in this direction is to harness the region’s rich cultural and creative diversity, drawing on its wealth of traditional knowledge and cultural expressions. Guided by this impetus, we have developed the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework to capture our collective aspirations and articulate a strategic vision for advancing the creative economy across the region. One of the Framework’s core principles affirms that “diversity of ASEAN is its strength – each Member State can make a unique contribution to the strategy.” Through this Framework, we aim to cultivate a compelling and inclusive

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4. UN Tourism. (2023). Fashion and cultural tourism <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/10.18111/9789284426287>

5. UNESCO. (2001). Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000127162>

6. Asian Contents & Film Market. (2023). Busan Story Market. Busan International Film Festival. https://www.acfm.kr/eng/addon/10000001/page.asp?page_num=26131

narrative that raises awareness, celebrates diversity, fosters meaningful dialogues, and unlocks the full potential of the cultural and creative industries where ASEAN creatives are at the heart of this development.

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Introducing CoSTAR

Prof Jonny Freeman

Prof Graham Hitchen

What is CoSTAR?

CoSTAR (Convergent Screen Technologies and performance in Realtime) is a £75.6 million national R&D network of laboratories, developing new technology to maintain the UK's world-leading position in gaming, TV, film, performance, and digital entertainment. Delivered by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Arts and Humanities Research Council, the programme is supporting new innovations and experiences that will enrich the UK's creative industries, economy, and culture. The network comprises the National Lab, the Realtime Lab, the Live Lab, the Screen Lab and the Foresight Lab. CoSTAR is funded through UKRI's Infrastructure Fund, which supports the facilities, equipment and resources that are essential for researchers, businesses, and innovators to do groundbreaking work, with match funding from industry.

UK Creative Industries are a driver of economic growth contributing around £124 billion to the economy each year, accounting for 6% of Gross Value Added. They have been identified by successive governments as a priority sector due to the fact that they are already world-leading and that additional global growth is likely, specifically in areas such as digital trade. To create the conditions for additional

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growth, UKRI has committed to providing R&D funding to support the adoption of transformative technologies that could enhance innovation and productivity.

CoSTAR Network structure

Comprising of four physical Labs with advanced media facilities (National, Live, Realtime, Screen), and one research Lab (the Foresight Lab) CoSTAR is a UKRI backed response to an increasing need for a collaborative, pan-UK network fuelled by cutting-edge technologies and world class research expertise to support the UK's next generation of creative companies. The four physical labs are:

- Live Lab - based at Production Park in Wakefield researching the future of live performance
- Realtime Lab - at Water's Edge in Dundee with close links to the UK Games Sector
- Screen Lab - in Belfast, part of the Studio Ulster advanced production complex
- National Lab - which will have a state of art facility opening at Pinewood Studios early in 2026 and which will co-ordinate collaborative opportunities across the CoSTAR Network.

Each provides technical facilities, new tools and equipment and dynamic spaces and resources, including expert R&D human resources, that are essential for businesses and researchers to perform innovative and transformative work. Through this network, CoSTAR will run programmes that lower the barrier of entry to R&D and the use of new and emergent technologies for small and medium sized businesses that characterise the makeup of the UK's Creative Industries.

These businesses will be given opportunities and funding to work in collaboration with researchers and labs, each with their own Creative Industries specialisms, to develop new and exciting forms of intellectual property and to surprise and delight audiences around the world.

Strategic Advice via CoSTAR Foresight Lab

Driven by the UK's leading Creative Industries experts, the CoSTAR Foresight Lab, led by Goldsmiths, University of London, in collaboration with Loughborough University, the University of Edinburgh and the BFI, is researching the adoption, use and impact of new, emergent and convergent technologies in gaming, TV, film, performance and digital entertainment.

Our findings will enhance research, development and innovation across the Creative Industries, including the R&D taking place through the CoSTAR programme, and the UK R&D network for creative technology.

- The CoSTAR Foresight Lab's work is conducted in close tandem and consultation with multiple industry groups, including:

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- The CoSTAR Foresight Lab Foresight Board, a group of 14 global leaders and innovators in the converged media production space who meet quarterly serving as a vital source of industry insight and foresight;
- The CoSTAR Foresight Lab Investor Network, which we run with Foresight Lab's investment partner, Station 12.
- A range of industry groups coordinated by individual Foresight Lab partners, for example the Screen Sector Taskforce coordinated by BFI.

CoSTAR Network – supporting the development of IP

CoSTAR is designed not only to foster innovation in the UK's Creative Industries but also to ensure that intellectual property (IP) generated through its programmes is managed in a way that benefits both individual creators and the wider sector. The network's structure and funding model, which includes significant public investment and industry match funding, underpin a set of IP policies that balance commercial opportunity, public benefit, and collaborative innovation.

The CoSTAR Access Programmes, for example, are designed to enable beneficiaries to develop and own new IP they create during their projects with the CoSTAR Labs. This encourages innovation and gives creators and companies the incentive to develop commercially viable products and services.

CoSTAR Policy Network

The CoSTAR Foresight Lab leads the Network's engagement with policymakers, working with regional and national government, national industry forums, and international policy networks. The Lab publishes a quarterly international scan of policy and industry signals relating to the adoption of technologies across the Creative Industries, and policy briefings on relevant debates and inquiries.

Recent focus on AI

Most recently, the network has undertaken research and engaged in a set of policy discussions relating to AI and copyright:

- The CoSTAR Foresight Lab in its Introduction to Moments report presented plausible and desirable foresight scenarios envisaging creatives maintaining more control over their IP than the current frameworks and trajectories point to.
- The CoSTAR Foresight Lab published a policy briefing on AI and Copyright, drawing on a body of knowledge and experience across the Network, and is working actively with government departments and policy agencies to influence policymaking in this area.
- The CoSTAR National Lab has developed a framework that prioritises access, control, consent, compensation, and transparency (the ACCCT framework) for IP in the context of generative AI and digital content.

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- The CoSTAR Foresight Lab has published its report, *AI in the Screen Sector, Perspectives and Paths Forward*, highlighting priority R&D and policy considerations in ensuring equitable futures for creatives and technologists in the converged media production space.

This body of work, together with the work of the Labs in funding and supporting new creative R&D, helps position CoSTAR as a leader not only in IP creation but also in shaping the future of IP governance for the Creative Industries, in the UK and globally.

Prof Jonny Freeman is Director of CoSTAR Foresight Lab

Prof Graham Hitchen is Policy Director of CoSTAR Foresight Lab



Virgin Labfest at 20: Cultural Innovation at the Heart of the Philippine Creative Economy

Maria Glaiza L. Lee

The year was 2005. In response to a gap in the Philippine theatre landscape, veteran playwright Rody Vera and theatre director-actor Herbie Go conceived a bold idea: a festival dedicated exclusively to staging original, experimental one-act plays by Filipino playwrights.

Their vision emerged out of necessity. At the time, most professional and semi-professional theatre groups in the country lacked structured programmes to nurture new writers or develop original works that explored unconventional themes or forms. With the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) providing Tanghalang Huseng Batute (CCP Studio theatre) as a venue, the Virgin Labfest (VLF) was born.

The festival premiered with eight plays presented as double bills over a single weekend. The productions were intentionally minimalist, featuring bare sets, limited props, and simple lighting.

In spite of this, the festival struck a powerful chord, as it provided a space for bold storytelling, emerging voices, and artistic risk-taking.

Over the past two decades, the Philippine theatre festival has transformed into an influential force in shaping the national theatre scene.

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“Hinog”: Stories Ready to Be Told

Celebrating its 20th anniversary, the 2025 edition of the Virgin Labfest embraced the theme “Hinog” (a Filipino term which means ripe), symbolising the maturity and readiness of its featured stories.

From over 200 submissions, 12 new plays were selected and grouped into four thematic sets named after varying stages of fruit ripeness: Bubot, Manibalang, Kinalburo, and May Asim Pa. An additional set, Panghimagas, revisited three standout plays from its 2024 edition.

Since its inception, the Virgin Labfest has been a safe space for stories rooted on the diverse realities of Filipino life, exploring themes ranging from social justice and historical memory to gender identity, migration, and science fiction — all reflecting the country’s dynamic cultural identity.

Building Creative Capacity and Professional Growth

For the past two decades, VLF has played a transformative role in shaping the Philippines’ pool of creative talent, acting as a critical springboard for countless Filipino theatre practitioners across a wide spectrum of disciplines.

What began as a modest platform for new playwrights has evolved into a comprehensive incubator and launch pad for actors and writers, as well as a cultivator of a new generation of directors, designers, stage managers, lighting and sound technicians, and production crew members.

The festival’s structure, which typically involves back-to-back-to-back stagings of multiple new works in a short timeframe, creates an intense, collaborative, and fast-paced environment that hones agility, problem-solving, and adaptability among production teams.

The VLF also incorporates educational components such as a Writing Fellowship Programme, where budding playwrights - selected from numerous applications and submissions - participate in various workshops on theatre elements to help them craft a short play at the end of a two-week workshop period. There are also theatre Talks and Playwrights Fair, where audiences can participate in various discussions and dialogue sessions on different production topics.

This ecosystem has helped bridge the gap between classroom learning and industry practice, particularly for graduates of arts and design programs from universities across the country. Through applied training and hands-on collaboration, VLF provides a unique platform for technical talent to gain visibility, build their portfolios, experiment with innovative approaches to scenography and design, and form lasting professional networks.

A Hub for Artistic Innovation

At its core, the VLF is a creative laboratory. While it prioritises originality and experimentation, many of its featured plays have gone on to reach wider audiences through film adaptations, musical stagings, publications, and academic use.

This cross-media success demonstrates the festival's far-reaching influence. It aligns closely with the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework (ACESF), which promotes innovation, inclusivity, and cross-sector collaboration in the arts. By supporting boundary-pushing work and promoting regional partnerships, the VLF embodies the values of creative innovation and cultural vitality.

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Catalysing Economic Activity Through the Arts

While best known for its artistic contributions, the VLF also plays an important role in the Philippine creative economy. As a collaborative, production-driven ecosystem, it generates both direct and indirect economic benefits.

Each festival edition mobilises a large network of freelance creatives, from playwrights, actors, designers, stage managers, lighting and sound technicians; many of whom rely on VLF, or performing arts and live events in general, for livelihood opportunities.

In addition, the festival drives entrepreneurship. Playwrights benefit from royalties when their works are adapted for other formats. Related industries, from costume and set design to event marketing and publishing, also gain momentum from the festival's demand and exposure.

With a steadily growing audience that includes local and international visitors, VLF has become a cultural tourism draw. Its potential for regional expansion could further boost economic activity through cultural exchanges, performances, and co-productions.

Looking Ahead: Toward a Regional Stage

As the Virgin Labfest marks its third decade, it is now looking toward a transformative new chapter, with plans to explore the inclusion of stories and artists from across the ASEAN region in future editions — opening the door to greater cultural exchange and regional collaboration. This forthcoming initiative will invite playwrights, directors, and theatre practitioners from Southeast Asian countries to present original works and engage in intercultural collaboration with Filipino artists.

By opening the festival to regional narratives and artistic exchanges, the VLF aims to foster mutual understanding, creative diplomacy, and economic integration, while giving audiences access to the lived experiences, histories, and imaginations of their Southeast Asian neighbors.

This initiative aligns with ACESF's vision to build a vibrant, interconnected ASEAN creative economy, and provides a model for how artistic exchange can serve both cultural development and economic growth. The VLF's proposed expansion stands to generate regional economic benefits through collaborative productions, touring performances, translation projects, and increased cultural mobility.

A Model for the Future of ASEAN's Creative Economy

From a humble experiment to a cornerstone of Philippine culture, the Virgin Labfest has proven what is possible when vision, institutional support, and community passion converge. Its growth into a potential ASEAN-wide initiative serves as a blueprint for how the region can nurture inclusive, sustainable creative economies. As Southeast Asia advances toward deeper integration and cultural resilience, VLF reminds us that theatre is both a form of expression and a vehicle for economic empowerment. Its future, as a platform for ASEAN stories and creators, promises not only an expanded stage but also new bridges between cultures, generations, and creative industries.

In doing so, the Virgin Labfest affirms its place as both a cultural treasure and a driving force in the region's creative economy.

Maria Glaiza L. Lee is Information Officer at the Cultural Center of the Philippines

“As Southeast Asia advances toward deeper integration and cultural resilience, VLF reminds us that theatre is both a form of expression and a vehicle for economic empowerment.”

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ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework: From Ideas to Impact - A Companion Guide

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