Strategies for supporting inclusive innovation: insights from South-East Asia

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About the authors:

Alex Glennie Nesta
Juliet Ollard Nesta
Isaac Stanley Nesta
Robyn Klingler-Vidra King's College London

Foreword

Innovation is not neutral: it has both a rate and, crucially, a direction. The style of innovation frequently touted as the answer is often not inclusive at all – it can exacerbate social and economic inequality and have unintended environmental consequences.

As current events across the globe are demonstrating, the "move fast and break things" mantra so dear to techno-utopians is producing many detrimental effects, eroding trust and locking us up into obsolete logic of development.

We believe that there is a major opportunity for policy makers in the Asia Pacific region to play an active role in creating the conditions for a different type of innovation: one that is not focused on single point solutions but more coherent to the nature of the complex challenges faced by the region. A type of innovation that fosters inclusion and reinforces the SDGs, rather than exacerbating inequality.

So, this report is driven by one fundamental question: are we seeing models of inclusive innovation emerging in the Asia Pacific region and, if so, are they pointing to concrete alternatives to the dominating innovation narrative (driven by Silicon Valley)?

To answer this question, we partnered with Nesta, building on their comprehensive framework of inclusive innovation, to produce case studies from across ASEAN countries, particularly Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia and Viet Nam. The research team conducted dozens of interviews with key stakeholders from grassroots to government to seek patterns and outliers. In Viet Nam, UNDP is currently hosting a series of conversations with different stakeholders on the practical implications of adopting an inclusive innovation framework.

This report draws on the insights from these case studies, to present concrete recommendations for policymakers in Asia and the Pacific who are interested in developing a more coherent approach to innovation as a means of addressing societal challenges and fostering more inclusive ecosystems. We hope that many will take up the challenge. We firmly believe that those governments who shape the innovation narrative around inclusion will reap major benefits and induce new dynamics that will help achieve the SDGs.

Please take a look and let us know your thoughts, considerations, and if you note gaps. More importantly, do get in touch if you want to further pursue this research agenda and if you want to work on concrete initiatives that can demonstrate the value of an inclusivity in innovation policies and projects.

The strategies set forth are not a final statement – they are a starting point for a collective inquiry.

Join us on Twitter **@ricap_undp** and join the **#inclusiveinnovation #NextGenUNDP** conversation.

Giulio Quaggiotto,
Head of the Regional Innovation Centre, UNDP Asia and the Pacific

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Introduction

A mostly vacant office block in Yangon might not be the first place you would picture if asked where innovation is happening in South-East Asia. But the Tamwe Plaza is more than meets the eye.

Its sixth floor is home to 360ed – an education startup that uses cutting edge technologies and ideas to address challenges in the education system in Myanmar. In a series of soundproofed rooms and art studios, designers, developers, and technology students are creating a range of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) tools and products to be used by teachers and students across the country. Work is also being done to pilot new teacher training models and provide access to educational technologies in remote or conflict-affected areas.

The organisation's founder started her career as an elementary school teacher in Myanmar, following in the footsteps of her mother and grandmother. She came up with the idea for 360ed while going through an incubator programme in Silicon Valley, after studying for a postgraduate degree in education at a university in the United States. Sharing her motivation for launching the initiative, Hla Hla Win told us that "the teacher training model in Myanmar is 100 years old. We don't want to replace the teachers with technology, but instead to use technology to upgrade their abilities to create a culture of self-learning and confidence."[1]

At the time of publication, Nesta has gathered stories and insights from entrepreneurs like Hla Hla, as well as from practitioners, experts and policymakers across a range of ASEAN countries.[2] Working with the UNDP, we have been researching the ways in which different innovation models are being applied in this region to address key development and sustainability challenges.[3] Interest in developing more inclusive forms of innovation is growing in many parts of the world. Various theories and frameworks have been developed to conceptualise what this might look like, including by Nesta.[4]

However, policymakers remain in need of inspiration and examples of what this looks like in practice, as well as support in selecting and applying the approaches that will be most relevant for their own context.

This report aims to make a contribution to that agenda. **Section 1** shares the findings of a rapid literature review of the ways in which inclusive innovation is understood in the ASEAN region, while **Section 2** starts to build a typology of some of the 'strategies' that we observed different actors using to bring these ideas to life. It includes case studies illustrating different approaches from the four ASEAN countries in which we conducted field research: Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam (see Appendix for a note on methodology and a full list of interviewees). A concluding **Section 3** offers some ideas for governments and other actors in the innovation ecosystem about how they could develop their approach to supporting these models of inclusive innovation.

Image: 360ed Myanmar

1. The context for inclusive innovation policies in South-East Asia

Image: Vulcan Augmetics, Viet Nam

Inclusive innovation describes the pursuit of innovation that has social aims, and local context, at its heart. One can think of it as either – and both – a more inclusive approach to innovation, or a more innovative approach to driving social inclusion.

The myriad promise, and understandings, of inclusive innovation has led to the development of numerous approaches that consider the social purpose of innovation, the distribution of its benefits and the roles and power relationships of those involved.

The concept of inclusive innovation has roots in the 'appropriate technologies' movement which emerged in the 1970s, advocating the pursuit of context-relevant technologies in emerging economies. Inclusive innovation as a specific lexicon was established in 2007, when Mark Dutz used the phrase 'inclusive innovation' in a World Bank report on sustainable innovation in India. He defined it as "knowledge creation and absorption efforts that are most relevant to the needs of the poor".[5] Shortly after the term appeared, inclusive innovation was invoked by practitioners, academia, and policy makers across the ASEAN region.[6] An early study on the topic, published by the International Development Research Centre, identified "innovation in and for the base of the pyramid (BOP)" as a key issue for ASEAN.[7]

From 2008, the thrust of inclusive innovation efforts in ASEAN was clearly on engaging poor and rural communities. The focus on the BOP persisted in major initiatives in the region, such as the 2010 Krabi Initiative on Science, Technology and Innovation for a Competitive, Sustainable and Inclusive ASEAN.[8] The World Bank's Viet Nam Inclusive Innovation Project, the Bank's first inclusive innovation effort globally, was initiated in 2013 and emphasised sustainability, the environment and the BOP.

There has been a broadening in the engagement with inclusive innovation, as the term is increasingly invoked as a form of mission-oriented policy, with social distribution[9] and the importance of 'social missions'[10] at the fore. For innovation to matter, so the argument goes, there needs to be a social purpose.

Research has identified four themes that animate the recent proliferation of inclusive innovation policies:

1   **Production versus consumption orientation:** Producer-oriented strategies aim to activate more segments of society as producers of innovation. Consumption-focused initiatives, comparatively, focus on encouraging the development of technologies, business practices or services in order to solve social challenges for particular demographic groups, such as applying innovation to agriculture in order to improve crop production and benefit farmers.

2   **Criteria according to demographic, spatial and industrial characteristics.** Demographically-motivated efforts point to ascriptive groups, meaning disadvantaged groups according to factors assigned by birth, not achievement, such as gender, age, and minority or ethnic status. Spatial efforts aim to diminish the gap between urban/rural, wealthy/poor and core/periphery. The third realm is that of promoting innovation in traditional industry, which strives to infuse technological innovations or socially innovative approaches into firms' production processes.

3   **Technological innovation and/or social innovation.** Efforts focused on technological innovation speak of the need to insert a greater section of society into high-technology innovation, to help the marginalised better reap the gains to come from high value-added employment. Simultaneously, technologically-focused inclusive innovation initiatives strive to protect underrepresented groups from downside risks of emerging technologies. For example, innovation is associated with "unfavourable

or even dangerous working conditions (e.g. in recycling of heavy metals used in ICT), jobless growth (e.g. through automation of services) and environmental damage through pollution or degradation of ecosystems (e.g. overfishing due to the use of more efficient nets)".[11] Another brand of efforts promote social innovation, emphasising the benefits to come from new ways of organising communities and productive activities. In the realm of social innovation, the emphasis is on the novelty of the process rather than the technology.

4   **Distinct efforts across governments.** Within government, inclusive innovation policies have been initiated by numerous ministries, often without coordination across government. Ministries of Social Affairs and Education, for instance, act by way of active labour market policies, skills training, benefits transfer and redistribution more broadly.[12] Ministries of Science and Technology, without linking with the Social Affairs initiatives, strive to craft

"distribution-sensitive innovation policy", in which R&D budgets are more dispersed, in demographic and spatial terms, across society.[13] The net result is that governments have an opportunity to better leverage their myriad policies to promote more inclusive innovation across society. Drawing on state-of-the-art scholarship, as discussed above, Nesta has developed an inclusive innovation policy framework.

It incorporates a focus on equitable outcomes and the need for more active governance of innovation, in view of the fact that innovation can increase as well as decrease inequality.

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