

Event Highlights

The 2020 Extraordinary Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN)- China Social Development and Poverty Reduction Forum 29 July 2020

On 29 July 2020, the 2020 Extraordinary ASEAN-China Social Development and Poverty Reduction Forum themed "Joining Hands & Fighting against COVID-19, Promoting Poverty Alleviation" was organized online by the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development (LGOP) in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the ASEAN Secretariat, and the International Poverty Reduction Center in China (IPRCC). Around 80 participants attended the forum comprising Ms. Guoxia Su, Director, LGOP; Mr. Kung Phoak, Deputy Secretary-General, ASEAN; Mr. Xijun Deng, Ambassador of the PRC to ASEAN; representatives from ASEAN countries, ASEAN Secretariat, international organizations (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO), Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), World Food Programme (WFP), World Bank (WB), and Asian Development Bank (ADB)), and news agencies.

The ASEAN-China Social Development and Poverty Reduction Forum provides a platform for the PRC and ASEAN to share knowledge, explore ways to narrow development gaps and share best practices to achieve harmonious development based on mutual benefits and win-win spirit. This year's forum, the 13th in the series, discussed the COVID-19 impact on regional poverty alleviation agendas, and shared effective practices in combating the pandemic and efforts to protect poverty reduction achievements.

Highlights

Below are key highlights of the forum:

- The PRC has made substantial progress in eradicating poverty, but COVID-19 has brought new challenges. From 2012 to 2019 alone, people living in poverty fell from 98.99 to 5.51 million according LGOP Director Guoxia Su. At the same time, rural areas have been revitalized lifting the poor's income and improving their working and living conditions. However, COVID-19 has reversed some of these gains due to reduced working hours and in turn income of the poor in cities, slow resumption of work of poverty alleviation workshops and enterprises, and the difficulty the poor find in selling their products. To overcome these, the government has helped migrant workers return to work, more closely monitored and assisted vulnerable communities in the remaining poor counties and villages, and facilitated the purchase of products from poor areas.
- To prevent the poor from falling back to poverty, the PRC is committed to working closely with ASEAN. WB estimates that in 2020, 70 to 100 million people will fall into extreme poverty due to the pandemic. And by 2030, there will still be 6% extreme poverty in the world. Recognizing this, the PRC will strengthen research on the COVID-19 impact on poverty reduction in the world, further promote experience sharing and deepen cooperation, and strengthen innovation and jointly develop more useful knowledge products with other countries.

- ASEAN has displayed solidarity through collective actions in tackling the pandemic since the very beginning, but the pandemic has caused some setback in poverty reduction. ASEAN Deputy Secretary-General Kung Phoak mentioned that ASEAN's poverty rate fell from 47% in 1990 to 15% in 2015, but COVID-19 has jeopardized gains in economic, social, and human development, especially for vulnerable groups. To tackle poverty, more investment in terms of financial allocation, human capital development, and knowledge-building to empower vulnerable communities would be important.
- As neighbors and partners with a shared future, the PRC and ASEAN should strengthen cooperation in anti-pandemic and anti-poverty efforts. Ambassador of the PRC to ASEAN Xijun Deng pointed out that ASEAN and the PRC need to improve counter-pandemic collaboration and support post-pandemic poverty reduction. These can be done through creating synergy in development programs, deepening the Belt and Road cooperation, cultivating innovation, and promoting digital economy.
- ASEAN countries have responded to the pandemic by stimulating economic activity and employment, providing special funds for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and helping vulnerable communities. For example, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines introduced stimulus packages; Myanmar and Cambodia, cash for work programs; Myanmar and Malaysia, special relief funds for villagers and SMEs. In addition, Singapore has provided psychological support through hotlines for seniors and vulnerable people, and Thailand has implemented the Backyard Vegetable Gardening program to ensure food security.
- COVID-19 has severely affected the poor underscoring the importance of social protection programs to cushion the impact:
 - According to UNICEF Chief of Social Policy and Reform for Children Christina Popivanova, about 106 million more children could live in poor households by the end of 2020. As such, UNICEF has provided social protection assistance to help children, families, communities, and economics to build resilience to fight the crisis.
 - ADB Principal Social Sector Specialist Shamit Chakravarti shared how ADB's conditional cash transfer program in the Philippines have helped the poor during the pandemic. In particular, he emphasized that the fundamentals of any sound social protection program remain the same, whether in normal or crisis times.

Next Step:

- To continue with the 14th ASEAN-China Forum on Social Development and Poverty Reduction in Thailand with the Thai Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2021.

Contact Person

Jie Tang, Assistant Programme Officer, International Exchange Division, IIPRCC, tangjie@iprcc.org.cn, +86-10-84419612.