

ASEAN Environmental Democracy Observatory: Regional Baseline Report August 2025

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The methodology used in this report is described in full detail in the [Environmental Democracy Observatory Assessment Methodology](#) document published by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in November 2024.

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Contents

- Contents..... 2
- Executive Summary..... 3
 - Key Takeaways 4
 - Policy Recommendations..... 4
- Assessment Results 5
 - Cambodia 6
 - Indonesia 9
 - Malaysia..... 12
 - Myanmar..... 15
 - The Philippines 18
 - Singapore 21
 - Thailand 23
 - Timor-Leste..... 27
- Reflections and Way Forward 30
 - Access to Information 30
 - Public Participation 30
 - Access to Justice 31
 - Policy Recommendations..... 31
- Annex 1: The Three Pillars of Environmental Democracy..... 33
 - Pillar 1: Access to Information..... 33
 - Pillar 2: Public Participation 34
 - Pillar 3: Access to Justice..... 36
- Annex 2: Developing the Methodology 38
 - Instruments, Baseline, and Guidelines 38
 - Network Activation 39
 - Guidelines for Partners..... 40
 - Foundations or Analysis 40

Executive Summary

The ASEAN Environmental Democracy Observatory (EDO) project provides a platform to assess the state of environmental democratic governance across Southeast Asia. In this inaugural report, we present findings for eight countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Timor-Leste. Assessment for Brunei, Laos, and Viet Nam will be included in a subsequent version of the report.

Our methodology examines progress and challenges faced by governments and other stakeholders in environmental governance through the three pillars of environmental democracy: access to information, public participation, and access to justice. Our aim is to establish a comprehensive overview of environmental democracy in the region to identify opportunities for cross-learning, exchange of good practices, and peer support. Conducted through literature reviews and interactive workshops, our assessment equips policymakers, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders with valuable insights and actionable recommendations.

The ASEAN EDO research found complex environmental governance reality in Southeast Asia. Many countries have laws governing the environment, but enforcement is often lacking. Corruption, civic space restrictions, top-down governance, and deep socio-economic inequality undermine the realisation of environmental democracy rights and the ability of democratic systems to deliver sustainability, including ambitious and just climate action. Most especially, indigenous people and rural communities face unique obstacles in obtaining information, participating in decision-making, and access to justice mechanisms. But we also found some positive trends, such as specialised environmental courts, digitisation of public information disclosure, and the initiation of regional collaboration on environmental rights and governance.

- ⇒ The Code on Environment and Natural Resources provides a foundation for access to information and public participation in environmental governance in **Cambodia**, but its top-down governance model renders opportunities for genuine engagement limited. Civil society and the media play a crucial role to raise public awareness and ensure accountability.
- ⇒ **Indonesia** has made efforts to comply with international environmental standards, but the government's move to centralise governance through the Jobs Creation Omnibus Law has added barriers especially for local and marginalised communities to actively monitor and participate in environmental decision-making.
- ⇒ The Environmental Quality Act serves as the primary framework for environmental governance in **Malaysia**, including the implementation of environmental impact assessments. However, public satisfaction remains low amid limited access to civil litigation for environmental cases.
- ⇒ While eager to comply with international standards, **Myanmar** struggles to ensure equity and inclusivity in environmental governance as the military continues to have full control of public resources. Introduction of frameworks such as environmental impact assessments and extractives sector transparency have not been followed by a responsive government.
- ⇒ **The Philippines** have a robust regulatory framework governing clean environment as well as freedom of information, but inconsistencies in implementation continue to hinder citizens from fully exercising their rights in environmental decision-making processes.
- ⇒ **Singapore** has made strides in promoting sustainability and environmental protection, but its top-down governance approach and strict regulatory frameworks for accessing information and environmental justice leave citizens with restricted opportunities to engage.
- ⇒ Despite its Right to Information and Environmental Quality Acts, environmental governance in **Thailand** continues to face significant challenges due to weak enforcement. Citizens also remain largely unaware about their environmental rights and remedies in the judicial system.
- ⇒ The Environment Basic Law established a strong foundation for environmental governance in **Timor-Leste**, but a lack of public awareness and technical capacity present enforcement challenges. Economic dependence on the oil industry and vulnerability to climate disasters mean that addressing environmental challenges demands a comprehensive strategy.

Key Takeaways

- ⇒ **On access to information**, all eight countries have some form of legal framework for access to environmental information, but implementation is hindered by bureaucratic obstacles, general lack of transparency, and digital divides. Rural and marginalised communities face significantly higher barriers in accessing information.
- ⇒ **On public participation**, legal frameworks also similarly exist albeit to different extents. However, current practices tend to be top-down and exclusionary. Marginalised groups, including indigenous people, are frequently excluded from spaces where governments attempt to engage citizens in environmental decision-making.
- ⇒ **On access to justice**, the countries assessed also have some legal mechanisms in place. Yet these mechanisms have remained ineffective due to high operating costs, technical complexities, and corruption. Environmental defenders (activists and journalists) are the most vulnerable groups under this pillar due to the frequent harassment and legal retaliation they face.

Policy Recommendations

- ⇒ **Strengthen legal frameworks** to ensure that environmental laws are not just comprehensive, but also enforceable and free from political interference. This would require closing regulatory gaps enhancing the capacity of the judicial systems to preside over environmental cases.
- ⇒ **Enhance public awareness and participation** by ensuring that marginalised communities are provided the necessary accommodation to have equal access to information and participatory processes. Governments can do this through designing outreach strategies that are culturally appropriate, extending consultation periods for citizens who require specific accommodation, and leveraging the use of digital platforms.
- ⇒ **Strengthen protection for environmental defenders** particularly activists, journalists, and whistleblowers. Regulations on strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) could be introduced to establish protection of environmental defenders from judicial harassment.
- ⇒ **Improve transparency and accountability** by establishing independent monitoring authorities that oversee environmental governance at-large. Governments could promote transparency further by maintaining open access databases and ensuring that relevant environmental data is up-to-date and easily accessible.
- ⇒ **Forge regional cooperation** to address transboundary environmental challenges, such as pollution and waste. Knowledge sharing and joint monitoring mechanisms can enhance environmental governance across the region, including in combating criminal activities in the extractives sector.
- ⇒ **Provide capacity building** to ensure that both government officials and civil society reformers have access to the latest tools, resources, and practices that can offer effective measures to address environmental governance challenges.
- ⇒ **Make decision-making inclusive** by widening access to formal processes and capturing the concerns of all stakeholders, especially marginalised communities. This includes integrating traditional knowledge and fostering community-led efforts that may not be well established within formal structures and procedures.

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