The OECD held its first Southeast Asia Regional Programme (SEARP) Ministerial Conference in Tokyo, Japan on 8-9 March 2018 in cooperation with the Government of Japan. The events included the Ministerial Forum on Inclusive ASEAN and the Steering Group of the SEARP. OECD Members and Southeast Asian countries were represented at Ministerial or Vice-Ministerial level expressing strong support and appreciation for the OECD SEARP.

Under the umbrella theme of “Inclusive ASEAN,” the Ministerial Conference addressed the issue from two angles, “Inclusiveness through Connectivity” and “Inclusiveness through Participation,” taking into account the particularities of the region. After almost four years of working in the region, Ministers and Vice Ministers all underlined that SEARP is now an established platform supporting economic policy reforms on a broad range of issues, fostering regional integration efforts, and bringing countries from the region closer to the OECD. Ministers reiterated the need for making additional efforts to focus more on inclusiveness considerations going forward in the “Next Phase of SEARP”. Ministers called on OECD to work on digitalisation and competition and agreed that the SEARP needs to focus on mainstreaming gender aspects through all parts of the programme.

Ministers noted that Southeast Asia has made remarkable progress over the past years in raising income, reducing poverty and integrating into the world economy. Despite such achievements, there remain various challenges, including socio-economic development gaps between and within countries of the region. It is a priority for ASEAN that “no one is left behind” and that the benefits of growth are spread throughout the region. The ASEAN Secretary-General spoke of the need for a holistic and multidimensional approach across all the pillars of ASEAN to narrow the development gap, especially with the new ASEAN members Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar.

The ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025 underlines ASEAN’s commitment to develop an inclusive, resilient, people-centred and people-oriented community. Ministers and participants discussed policy challenges and opportunities for benefitting from economic integration and achieving inclusive and sustainable development in Southeast Asia, with particular focus on “Inclusiveness through Connectivity”. They covered digitalisation, trade and investment, good regulatory practice and sustainable infrastructure.

Participants spoke of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 which promotes inclusive connectivity through sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, trade, investment, and good regulatory practice. The ASEAN SG noted the contribution of the OECD in furthering inclusive connectivity and support for the Master Plan.

On International Women’s Day, participants noted the need for inclusivity more than ever in ASEAN and OECD countries. Speakers referred to the need to enhance women economic empowerment and women's entrepreneurship in particular which have a great potential for enhancing business dynamism and innovation in Southeast Asia – a key finding highlighted in the OECD/ASEAN report “Strengthening Women’s Entrepreneurship in ASEAN”.

The Steering Group meeting on 9 March discussed the way forward for the Next Phase of SEARP: strengthened support to ASEAN including on competition policy, inclusiveness and digitalisation; and a Bureau supporting the co-chairs of SEARP and comprised of for the OECD and ASEAN countries.