The region’s farmers, rural entrepreneurs and agricultural workers are essential stakeholders of ASEAN. It is important to enhance their participation in high-value markets, facilitate their access to affordable rural credit, and promote innovation through science and technology.

Equally important is their participation in producer organizations to allow them to attain economy of scale and competitiveness. The ASEAN Foundation, through the Japan-ASEAN Solidarity Fund, is committed to support farm workers to organize, train leaders, and empower women and young farmers.

Farmers’ Exchange Program

From 2000 to 2003, the ASEAN Foundation supported a farmers’ exchange program titled Asian Farmers’ Exchange Learning and Network Building and Solidarity Program, a three-year project that brought farmer leaders to visit different farming communities in different ASEAN countries and in Japan.

The exchange program took place in the Philippines in 2000, Indonesia and Japan in 2001, and Malaysia in 2002. 185 participants from ASEAN countries including representatives from South Korea, Taiwan, and Nepal joined the program. The exchange program objectives were designed to:

- Facilitate the sharing of experiences and insights on local productivity systems development, rural enterprise development, and farmers’ network-building;
- Establish linkages among different farmers’ organizations and cooperatives; and
- Initiate discussions on regional advocacy efforts on issues such as food security, sustainable agriculture, and farmers’ and civil society cooperation.

The program provided participants the opportunity to hold dialogues and interaction with local farming communities visited. They participated in discussions with experts on various issues affecting farmers providing them the opportunity to understand and appreciate evolving trends, globalization, trade agreements and policies that affect their lives and livelihood.

A directory for each of the exchange visits has been produced and distributed to all participants and their organizations. Several reflection papers representing the participants’ own insights and lessons on agriculture in a global economy have been compiled as part of the program.

A major accomplishment of this project is the establishment of the Asian Farmers Alliance (AFA) that represents about 10 million farmers in the Southeast Asian region.
“Farmers and agricultural workers are important stakeholders in the region. To attain the vision of a caring and sharing ASEAN community, it is essential that farmer organizations and rural societies are provided the means to participate actively in shaping the future of the region.”

Dr. Filemon A. Uriarte, Jr., Executive Director of the ASEAN Foundation

Linking Small Farmers to Market

The ASEAN Foundation launched this project in June 2008 during a regional forum and training workshop in Hanoi. The project is designed to strengthen the entrepreneurial capacity of non-governmental organization workers and their partners in farmer organizations. Specifically, the project aims to establish an on-ground marketing link between small farmers group and market players and collaborate with policy makers at national and regional levels to respond to agricultural marketing issues faced by the small farmers.

The project is expected to:

- Install farmer-friendly database and information system focused on selected crops as tool for decision making and negotiation on market-related engagements of farmer organizations.
- Enhance knowledge and skills of 168 NGO workers and farmer leaders on engaging small farmers with the market and managing on-ground marketing projects.
- Strengthen and establish market intermediation mechanisms with direct involvement of farmer organizations.
- Establish healthy partnership among various market players towards improved marketing arrangement benefiting small farmers.
- Enhance dialogue between farmer organizations and national and regional policy-making bodies.

Both the farmer exchange program and training projects are being implemented by the Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Area (AsiaDHRRA).

Capacity building in Aquaculture Farming

The ASEAN Foundation is working with the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific (NACA), Thailand, the ASEAN Fisheries Working Group, UN Food and Agricultural Organization and INFOFISH to help small-scale aquaculture farmers in ASEAN improve their livelihood. Because of the increasingly strict food safety and environmental standards now being applied in most ASEAN countries, small-scale farmers find themselves at a disadvantage to participate in modern value chains and increasingly vertically integrated business structures. They also lack effective servicing facilities such as credit, insurance, quality assurance, and marketing.

The project Strengthening Capacity of Small-holder ASEAN Farmers for Sustainable Aquaculture aims to assist them in being competitive in markets by adopting better and sustainable farm management practices to produce and deliver quality aquaculture products. The project is expected to

- Refine understanding of key capacity building needs of small-scale aquaculture farmers for
competitiveness around five key ASEAN commodities;
• Prepare training materials and educational tools to help aquaculture farmers improve their knowledge, promote market access, competitiveness and better management practices among small holders;
• Build capacity in supporting servicing institutions and create a network of trainer of trainers, to conduct training using the materials developed through the project; and
• Conduct farmer training to strengthen the capacity of farmers to organize and operate self-help groups or formal associations.

Harnessing volunteer experts for agricultural modernization

As Southeast Asia’s poor reached 522 million in 2000, the World Bank assessed that policy changes and institutional transformations were necessary to accelerate efforts to reduce poverty. In this regard, the ASEAN Foundation supported the need to tap volunteer experts and professionals who could help address regional concerns in agriculture and rural development in Southeast Asia.

In cooperation with SEAMEO Regional Centre for graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) the ASEAN Foundation supported the formation of the Regional Volunteer Experts for Agricultural Modernization (REVEAM). This was organized in August 2000 with volunteers coming from the alumni ranks of SEARCA.

REVEAM has assisted Southeast Asian countries in various capacity-building activities. Over a three-year period, the project has expanded its regional network of volunteer experts in agriculture and related sciences; identified regional sustainable agriculture development issues and implemented programs specially those concerning the preservation of the environment and conserving the natural resource base towards regional sustainable development.

Scientists, researchers, academicians, institutional development consultants, and executives who have had extensive experience in different disciplines served as volunteer experts and rendered their services for free. Project beneficiaries are institutions that need assistance in planning, project development and management, training in curriculum development, course module development, research projects, and others.

The demand for expert assistance in the area of poverty alleviation and food security is enormous. Through the REVEAM project, volunteer work has gained momentum though much can still be accomplished in agricultural and rural development.
The Foundation, to achieve its objectives, shall undertake the following activities:

- Provide assistance to uplift the social condition of the peoples in the ASEAN Member States
- Promote collaborative work among academics, professionals and scientists
- Collaborate with the relevant ASEAN bodies.

Excerpted from the Revised MOU on the Establishment of the ASEAN Foundation

JAPAN-ASEAN SOLIDARITY FUND

In May 1998, H.E. Mr. Keizo Obuchi, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, announced a contribution of US$20 million from the Government of Japan to the ASEAN Foundation to support projects in the area of education, human resources development, business exchanges and other activities to help ASEAN’s development and strengthen Japan-ASEAN cooperation. Unless otherwise stated, projects of the ASEAN Foundation are funded by the Japan-ASEAN Solidarity Fund (JASFI).

ASEAN FOUNDATION

Established by the ASEAN Leaders on 15 December 1997 during ASEAN’s 30th anniversary, the ASEAN Foundation aims to help bring about shared prosperity and a sustainable future for the peoples of ASEAN whose member countries are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam. The Memorandum of Understanding on its establishment was revised in July 2000 and ratified by all ten member countries in July 2007. The Foundation has two objectives:

- Promote greater awareness of ASEAN, and greater interaction among the peoples of ASEAN as well as their wider participation in ASEAN’s activities inter alia through human resources development that will enable them to realize their full potential and capacity to contribute to progress of ASEAN Member States as productive and responsible members of society.

- Endeavour to contribute to the evolution of a development cooperation strategy that promotes mutual assistance, equitable economic development, and the alleviation of poverty.

On 20 November 2007, the ASEAN Leaders signed the ASEAN Charter at their 13th Summit held in Singapore. Article 15 of the ASEAN Charter mandates the ASEAN Foundation to:

- Support the Secretary-General of ASEAN and collaborate with the relevant ASEAN bodies to support ASEAN community-building, and
- Promote greater awareness of the ASEAN identity, people-to-people interaction, and close collaboration among the business sector, civil society, academia and other stakeholders in ASEAN.

The ASEAN Foundation is based in Jakarta, Indonesia.