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3R

ACES INSTITUTE

RESILIENCE, READINESS, AND RESPONSIBILITY

The 3Rs of Organisational Excellence from the ASEAN Perspective

WHITE PAPER **2026**

FOREWORD

Across ASEAN, organisations are navigating an increasingly complex operating environment shaped by climate volatility, geopolitical shifts, technological disruption, and rising expectations for responsible governance. In this context, organisational excellence is no longer defined solely by financial performance or market position. It is increasingly measured by the ability of institutions to remain resilient, prepared for emerging risks, and accountable to the societies they serve.

This white paper examines these evolving expectations through three interconnected capabilities: Resilience, ESG Readiness, and Responsible Leadership. Together, these dimensions form the 3Rs of Organisational Excellence, a framework that reflects how institutions in ASEAN are responding to the demands of a rapidly changing regional and global landscape.

The analysis draws insights from organisations participating in the ACES Awards 2025, providing a cross-sector perspective on leadership practices, sustainability initiatives, and governance approaches across the region. While the study focuses on ASEAN-based organisations, the patterns observed reflect broader shifts shaping the future of responsible enterprise.

The findings suggest that resilience, readiness, and responsible leadership are not separate pursuits but mutually reinforcing capabilities. Organisations that integrate these dimensions into their strategies, systems, and cultures are better positioned to navigate disruption while creating long-term value for stakeholders and society.

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Resilience, Readiness, and Responsibility: The 3Rs of Organisational Excellence from the ASEAN Perspective

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SETTING THE CONTEXT

Organisations today operate in an era of sustained disruption marked by climate volatility, geopolitical tensions, and technological acceleration, reshaping how organisations make sense of sustainability, leadership, and resilience. In the ASEAN context, the COVID-19 crisis served as a critical inflexion point, highlighting that an organisation's capacity to withstand disruption in pursuit of innovation is anchored upon the competencies and lived experiences of its workforce, reinforced by responsible leadership practices [1]. The region's rapid progress in digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) has further strengthened organisational resilience and preparedness to navigate recovery from major crises. Concurrently, the post-pandemic landscape has generated unprecedented momentum around Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) commitments, emphasising the importance of sustainability, inclusion, and responsible governance across the region [2]. Drawing on the 2025 ACES Awards dataset, this white paper reports ASEAN-specific insights derived from participating organisations. While the complete dataset comprises 262 participants from both ASEAN and non-ASEAN countries, the analysis presented here focuses exclusively on 62 ASEAN-based organisations to ensure appropriate regional contextualisation. Table 1 presents the country distribution of all participating organisations to illustrate the overall scope of the dataset.

Table 1: Country Distribution of Organisations Participating in the 2025 ACES Awards (n = 262)

Country	Number and percentage of participants
Philippines	77 (29.4%)
Malaysia	46 (17.6%)
Thailand	38 (14.5%)
Indonesia	38 (14.5%)
Singapore	18 (6.9%)
Vietnam	9 (3.4%)
Hong Kong	8 (3.1%)
India	6 (2.3%)
United States	4 (1.5%)
Myanmar	3 (1.1%)
Brunei	3 (1.1%)
Taiwan	2 (0.8%)
United Arab Emirates, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Mongolia, Laos, Japan, Hong Kong, China, Cambodia, Angola	10 (4%)
Total Participants	**262 (100.0%)**

Note:

Percentages in are calculated based on the full dataset of organisations applying to the 2025 ACES Awards (n = 262), capturing participation across all represented countries. Countries with fewer participating organisations are retained to reflect the overall geographic coverage of the dataset. Of the total applicant organisations, 234 (89.3%) were from ASEAN member states, representing the primary regional focus of the ACES Awards. For the purposes of this study, 62 ASEAN organisations for which complete and accessible data were available at the time of analysis were selected as the analytical sample. The insights in this paper are therefore informed by the ASEAN organisations whose data was analyzed.

Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

As highlighted earlier, the qualitative analysis reported in this paper is confined to ASEAN-based organisations to support in-depth regional contextualisation. Table 2 summarises the profiles of the ASEAN subsample included in the analysis, including country distribution, industry sector, and organisation size.

Table 2: Profiles of ASEAN Organisations Included in the Qualitative Analysis (n = 62)

Profile Information	Number and percentage of participants
Country	
Philippines	17 (27.4%)
Malaysia	13 (21.0%)
Thailand	12 (19.4%)
Indonesia	8 (12.9%)
Singapore	5 (8.1%)
Vietnam	4 (6.5%)
Myanmar	3 (4.8%)
Industry Sector	
Public, Social & Support Services	12 (19.4%)
Construction, Real Estate, Utilities & Infrastructure	8 (12.9%)
Media, Marketing & Communications	8 (12.9%)
Healthcare & Life Sciences	7 (11.3%)
Financial Services & Investment	6 (9.7%)
Hospitality, Tourism & Lifestyle Services	6 (9.7%)
Education & Knowledge Services	5 (8.1%)
Manufacturing & Industrial Production	5 (8.1%)
Technology, Digital & Telecommunications	4 (6.5%)
Not reported	1 (1.6%)
Organization size	
Medium	19 (30.6%)
Large	17 (27.4%)
Small	13 (21.0%)
Micro	8 (12.9%)
Not reported	5 (8.1%)
Total	**62 (100%)**

Note:

Percentages are calculated based on the ASEAN subsample of the selected organizations (n = 62). "Not reported" indicates cases where respondents did not provide the respective organisational information.

The dataset used in this study is a randomly selected subset of ACES Awards 2025 participants and does not cover all ASEAN countries. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to the ASEAN region as a whole but provide preliminary insights based on the available sample.

Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

Based on the analysis of data from 62 participants from 7 ASEAN countries, we contend that ASEAN's future-ready organisations deliver three interdependent capabilities: Organizational resilience, operationalised sustainability (ESG), and responsible leadership. Aligned with the Sixth ASEAN State Report, this integrative approach is enabled by strategic technological advancement, while shifting environmental and social commitments from peripheral initiatives to governance-anchored business models [2]. Additionally, resilience is reframed as "resilience-by-design", embedded across systems, people, and partnerships that transform early-stage barriers and growth threats into strategic readiness (International Organization for Standardization [ISO], 2024). The relational value-based glue that converts strategy into practice is responsible leadership. We observed that companies that integrate people-centred leadership, governance discipline, and intelligent digital transformation exhibit faster recovery, sustained growth, and renewed market legitimacy. In essence, this paper synthesises empirical insights and extant literature into three substantive domains: Resilience (R1), ESG Readiness (R2), and Responsible Leadership (R3). It concludes by outlining practical pathways for ASEAN firms and policymakers to operationalise and embed a strategic roadmap for competitive, inclusive, and sustainable growth.

Table 3 shows the respective thematic importance for different practices across the identified capabilities/competences.

Table 3: Distribution of Practices Across the Three Future-Ready Competences

Profile Information	Number and percentage of participants	
Operationalized sustainability (ESG)		
Human Capital Development and Continuous Improvement	55	88.70%
Psychological safety and healthy workplace culture-building	41	66.10%
Ensuring DEI & Empowerment	20	32.30%
Performance-based recognition and rewards	17	27.40%
Community engagement & empowerment	15	24.20%
Policy and regulatory requirements for environment	15	24.20%
Eco-friendly Considerations	13	21.00%
Policies for Organizational governance	13	21.00%
Circular economy Practices	12	19.40%
Workplace structures & systems for upholding employee rights	11	17.70%
Environmental awareness, education & campaigns	7	11.30%
Instituting compliance and ethical practices	7	11.30%
Energy efficiency & clean energy	5	8.10%
Ensuring occupational health and well-being	4	6.50%
Industry and community engagements, collaborations and partnerships	4	6.50%
Water & Marine Conservation	2	3.20%
Organizational resilience (OR)		
Positioning through strategic adaptation and market engagement	31	50.0%
Embracing data & research, digital transformation, AI and emerging technologies	29	46.8%
Ensuring operational and systemic excellence & resilience	21	33.9%
Evolving products and services	19	30.6%
Forging partnerships and collaborations	14	22.6%
Organizational capacity building	8	12.9%
Responsible leadership (RL)		
Focus & Alignment	18	29.0%
Ensuring personal well-being	13	21.0%
A mentor needs a mentor	10	16.1%
Building worthwhile, lasting relationships	9	14.5%
Adaptability & flexibility	8	12.9%
Maintaining self-awareness	3	4.8%

Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

R1: ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE

Resilience in an organisational context refers to both individual and organisational responses to turbulence and discontinuities (Bhamra, 2015). In relation to organisational performance, this adaptation concerns the organisation's response to threats and disruptive events, as well as its ability to restore function. The ACES 2025 Award dataset provides important insights into key challenges affecting organisational excellence in the ASEAN region, along with best practices for managing them. ASEAN leaders tend to describe the most significant challenges to achieving organisational excellence as including pandemics, climate change, geopolitical tensions, the rise of nationalism, rapid technological advancements, and shifting workforce dynamics, aligning with recent studies [3], [4].

1.1 External and Market Dynamics

The most pressing concerns centre on macro environmental and market driven challenges shaping the ASEAN business landscape. These forces influence organisations' strategic direction and competitive advantage in significant ways. A key issue highlighted by the ACES 2025 Award participants is the need to navigate dynamic and diverse stakeholder expectations. As Muhammad, the relationship manager of an Indonesian state-owned bank noted;

> *"The financial services industry is undergoing rapid transformation, shaped by evolving customer expectations, regulatory shifts, digital disruption, and sustainability imperatives."*

As a major stakeholder, the consumer is reportedly pushing organisations to rethink their operations by exerting pressure, directly and indirectly. The ASEAN Ahead report notes that changing consumption patterns, paired with shifting consumer preferences, are accelerating major shifts in macro-environmental factors such as digital transformations [5]. Research indicates that there have been noticeable changes in consumer behaviours and patterns during the post-COVID-19 pandemic [6], [7]. For instance, ASEAN organisations represented in the ACES Awards reported that customers now demand quick responsiveness and 24/7 availability, personalised experiences, and community-driven solutions that reflect local realities. In sectors like healthcare, this shift is evident in the increasing demand for preventive and personalised care models, while in the hospitality business, guest experience personalisation has become a baseline expectation rather than a differentiator. These dynamic disruptions and evolving stakeholder preferences have triggered global uncertainties and increasing vulnerabilities [5].

Furthermore, companies, particularly Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and newly established or early-stage organisations, often encounter intense competition from and are more susceptible to market volatility than established firms. The liability of newness and liability of smallness literature demonstrates that competitive pressures are particularly acute for young and small firms competing with established incumbents, which benefit from superior resource endowments, institutional legitimacy, and stronger labour market positioning [8], [9], [10]. New and young firms often struggle to attract skilled labour and compete on terms of pay and security as well as build distribution networks, while established incumbents benefit from deeper resources, stronger market legitimacy, and customer loyalty, amplifying competitive disadvantages for younger entrants. For instance, the marketing manager of a growing telecommunications company in the Philippines revealed that they "encountered pricing arbitration challenges as competitors engaged in aggressive pricing strategies that threatened market stability." Mr Suntewar, a principal of school in Thailand also revealed that their young and growing academic institution faced significant competition from established schools.

Market volatility, triggered by fast-changing technology, AI, and other factors, poses a significant threat to businesses, both young and established. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupted global trade, investment, and supply chains, creating ripple effects that continue to influence price stability and logistics networks worldwide [11], [12]. According to the president for human resources, marketing, and talent acquisition of a large corporation in the Philippines,

> *"The pandemic tested everyone's wit and resilience. In the beginning, the ultimate challenge was to seamlessly serve the business and keep our employees safe and happy in a largely remote setting."*

As the crisis evolved, however, organisations shifted their focus toward stabilising operations, rebuilding supply chains, and adapting to prolonged uncertainty. Other participants highlighted additional challenges arising from the pandemic's impact on business, including market fragmentation issues, contraction of core markets, pandemic-induced client withdrawal/loss, sharp decline sales and revenues, supply chain disruptions, collapsing traditional workplace structures, drop in business and consumer activity impacting demand negatively, maintaining the employee morale, navigating post-COVID office vacancy challenges, and pandemic-driven shifts in customer behaviour. Similarly, geopolitical tensions like the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war have amplified uncertainty in commodity markets, trade flows, and financial conditions, prolonging volatility beyond the pandemic recovery phase.

Trade policy shifts, including the US–China tariff disputes, are reshaping global value chains, further completing international business operations and strategic planning within ASEAN economies.

Shifts in legal, regulatory and environmental policy also affect business operations negatively and may add to uncertainty. Sustainable development has become a central aspect of business operations as opposed to an elective consideration. This creates pressure for organizations to comply or risk adverse outcomes. For instance, the recently concluded ASEAN Summit 2025 saw increased calls for "inclusivity and sustainability". These calls prioritise sustainable development objectives, which signal an evolving policy and regulatory landscape that ASEAN businesses must navigate, with implications for compliance, investment alignment, and long-term strategic planning as national regulations adjust to support these regional commitments. According to [5], increased demand for eco-friendly manufacturing could trigger disruptions in industries with significant environmental footprints. Research also reports unpredictable policy environments within ASEAN, particularly due to ongoing international trade liberalization and transnational investment integration [13], [14]. The Chief Operating Officer of a major Mongolian cement manufacturing company echoed these sentiments, noting that "producers are expressing concern over inconsistent government policies." In the Mongolian cement sector, this inconsistency refers to shifts between earlier import-substitution strategies that encouraged domestic production and more recent reductions or exemptions of import duties on foreign cement. These shifts occur within a broader macroeconomic environment characterised by procyclical fiscal expansion and fluctuating trade conditions, which have contributed to rising imports and heightened market uncertainty in recent years [15]. While such liberalisation measures may support consumer price stability in the long term, they can disrupt domestic manufacturers in the short term by eroding competitiveness, increasing market uncertainty, and undermining investment recovery in recently established production facilities.

1.2 Internal, Operational, and Structural Challenges

Besides macro-environmental pressures, businesses also face internal challenges, particularly resource and financial constraints. These constraints disproportionately affect young, new, or small enterprises due to limited access to capital and institutional support, a persistent issue across ASEAN economies [16]. However, mature organisations are not immune, as rising operating costs, capital allocation pressures, and resource scarcity continue to constrain investment capacity and operational flexibility, especially amid economic uncertainty [17]. In addition to resource constraints, organisations also have to deal with complex, evolving operational approaches. Supply chain breakdowns, online disruption, and the emergence of the 'decentralised workplace' have presented significant challenges to organisational operations. Interestingly, one delegate revealed that they faced a critical decision at a point in their growth curve when demand surged beyond their in-house production capacity. However, literature shows conflicting reports, with some claiming overcapacity [18], while others agree that demand exceeds capacity, particularly for MSMEs [19]. Overall, the demand-versus-interval capacity imbalance seems to be a problem, especially for small and medium enterprises.

While digital platforms have grown in strategic importance for business, the fast-paced technological advancements are proving a challenge for many firms. Our analysis aligns with broader industry evidence indicating that organisations are under increasing pressure to adopt data analytics, machine learning, AI, robotics, and other digital tools across functions such as operations, customer experience personalisation, and decision-making. Global research consistently demonstrates that organisations failing to build digital and data capabilities risk declining competitiveness and strategic relevance in increasingly technology-driven markets [20], [21]. Yet, this shift comes with heightened expectations for measurable impacts, alongside growing concerns about data privacy and cybersecurity. Some organisations also struggle with the integration of AI into customer interactions, where building stakeholder trust for pre-launch solutions and overcoming low confidence in new tools remain critical hurdles. Compounding these challenges is the need for robust data management systems to track customer history and deliver personalised services effectively. In this rapidly evolving landscape, digital transformation is not just about adopting technology; it's about embedding trust, agility, and innovation into the core of business models.

The bedrock of any operation is the people who run it, and across ASEAN, organisations are confronting both longstanding and emerging workforce challenges. The rise of remote work and global collaboration has reshaped traditional organisational structures, while increasingly competitive talent markets and persistent skills shortages have made hiring and retention more complex. Leaders are required to balance employee wellbeing initiatives with rising burnout, workload pressures, and morale management, often while navigating pandemic-induced recruitment disruptions and rigid internal systems. In addition, brain drain and growing reliance on international talent add further complexity, demanding workforce strategies that extend beyond role-filling to fostering resilience, cohesion, and alignment with organisational goals [16], [22].

1.3 Strategies for Resilience and a Future-Ready ASEAN

In highly uncertain times, organisations need to develop a resilience capacity which enables them to cope effectively with unexpected events, recover from crises, and even foster future success. Our findings show that ASEAN organizations are deliberately and increasingly pursuing resilience by focusing on eight strategic pillars:

- Data-driven insights
- Digital transformation and AI
- Operational and systemic excellence
- Evolving products/services
- Forging partnerships
- Human capital development
- Institutionalizing compliance/sustainability
- Strategic adaptation and market engagement.

These pillars were echoed during the 47th ASEAN Summit when the Chair highlighted resilience through narrowing development gaps, inclusive and sustainable growth, digital transformation, and addressing climate challenges [23]. Resilience can be achieved through continuous strategic adaptation and proactive market engagement by adopting these pillars, as shown in Figure 1.

***Figure 1:** Identified Challenges and the Possible Strategies for Addressing them*

Organizational Resilience in ASEAN

Challenges

- Macro-environmental & systemic risks
- Business start-up hurdles
- COVID-19 pandemic realities
- Diverse stakeholder expectations
- Talent & workforce gaps
- Operational & logistical issues
- Career progression barriers

Solutions

- Digital transformation & AI adoption
- Operational and systemic excellence
- Evolving products/services
- Data & research-informed decisions
- Strategic adaptation & market engagement
- Partnerships & collaboration
- Human capital development
- Compliance & sustainability

Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

1.4 Embracing Digital and Technological Transformation

ASEAN organisations increasingly view digital transformation as key to resilience, embedding AI, advanced analytics, and digital platforms into core functions (e.g., marketing, compliance, healthcare) for efficiency and innovation. This is supported by investments in integrated systems, risk management frameworks, robust digital infrastructure, and enhanced cybersecurity. The CEO of a large organization in the manufacturing sector revealed that

> *We implemented a powerful CRM platform that seamlessly integrated with... existing systems... to centralize customer data, including not only basic information like addresses and birthdays but also valuable insights into customer and buying patterns."*

Relatedly, the project coordinator of a medium-sized technology and software development company also revealed that their company *"is not only introducing advanced cybersecurity technologies but also actively participating in policy development"* aiming to *"collaborate with government bodies to shape data privacy laws and support businesses in adopting cybersecurity measures that protect customers without adding unnecessary burdens."* This resonates with what a CEO of a large corporation in the information and communication sector said that they "adopted an integrated Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) framework led by the Chief Risk Officer to identify, assess, and mitigate risks." These comments indicate that capable organisations are proactively embedding modern technologies in their daily operation.

Workforce upskilling plays a central role in supporting AI integration. Participants described AI adoption not simply as a technical upgrade, but as an organisational adjustment requiring internal capability development and leadership direction. One respondent highlighted spearheading an AI Advisory Council in Malaysia, which involved supporting AI adoption and education within the company. As the chief strategy officer of a small technology startup noted, "We are investing in AI-driven tools and automation technologies to enhance efficiency, support innovation, and deliver smarter solutions to our clients." These accounts indicate that AI integration is accompanied by deliberate efforts to build internal competencies and align technological deployment with broader organisational objectives. This pattern is consistent with broader findings that systematic integration of digital platforms and AI capabilities enhances organisational productivity and adaptability [20], [21], signalling a shift toward more digitally enabled operating models.

1.5 Operational and Systemic Resilience

Operational and systemic resilience is a continuous process of alignment, adaptation, and optimization. Organisations strengthen core operations through strategic integration, digital connectivity, and centralised dashboards. Financial resilience measures (capital management, cost optimisation, and loan restructuring) are paired with workflow redesigns to mitigate technological and supply chain disruptions. Infrastructure is modernised, networks expanded, and modular sourcing adopted. Market-facing innovation includes diversified product portfolios, personalised service, and agile marketing [24], [25]. Key strategies include:

- Operational and financial discipline
- Digital enablement and systems modernisation
- Adaptive operating models and process agility
- Market-responsive product and service innovation
- Infrastructure and capability upgrading.

Systemic resilience is further strengthened through the institutionalisation of compliance, sustainability, human capital development, and collaborative ecosystems. Organisations embed ethical, regulatory, and ESG considerations into day-to-day operations, including data privacy, health and safety standards, renewable energy adoption, lifecycle assessments, and circular economy initiatives aligned with global norms.

Human capital has emerged as a central operational asset, with post-pandemic investments in employee wellbeing, skills development, and technology-enabled HR systems improving productivity, engagement, and retention [26], [27]. ASEAN enterprises also increasingly leverage their partnerships as resilience multipliers while forming alliances with industry associations, financial institutions, academic partners, technology providers, and local communities to accelerate innovation, strengthen governance, and expand market access. Together, these interconnected practices reflect a shift toward resilience as a systemic capability built on operational discipline, ethical alignment, talent readiness, and trust-based collaboration [28], [29].

The World Economic Forum (WEF), in collaboration with McKinsey & Company, outline six key drivers of organisational resilience that leaders should leverage in the current volatile business landscape [25]. Our study offers insights into strategies towards organisational resilience-building in ASEAN. Table 4 summarizes the integrated findings in this domain.

Table 4: Summary of the Key Strategies Driving Resilience in the ASEAN

WEF: Resilience	Our Study: Strategies to	Synthesis
Climate and sustainability	Instituting compliance, ethical and sustainability practices.	**Strong overlap**: On decarbonisation and climate transition. Our study adds ethics/compliance as explicit enablers; WEF also frames this theme to include energy and food systems resilience.
Digital and data capabilities	Embracing data & research, digital transformation, AI and emerging technologies.	**Full alignment:** Secure digital core, AI/analytics for sensing and response, and cyber/data governance as resilience foundations.
Supply Chain Robustness	Positioning through strategic adaptation and market engagement.	**Strong overlap:** On multi-sourcing, visibility, and risk mapping. Our lens is broader (market positioning & geopolitics), while WEF treats this under trade & supply chain exposure.
Financial resilience	Evolving products and services.	**Varied approach:** WEF focuses on balance-sheet & capital buffers as cross-cutting resilience levers, while we focus on excellence in terms of service delivery, market ready products, and operational agility that keeps the organisations competitive in the market.
Collaborative ecosystems	Forging partnerships and collaborations.	**Full alignment:** multistakeholder collaboration and public-private partnerships (PPP) "machinery" are core to scaling resilience solutions and sharing risk.
Organisational resilience	Human capital development and organisational capacity building. Ensuring operational and systemic excellence & resilience	**Strong overlap:** On building, leadership mindset, and governance are central. WEF also calls for formal assessment/measurement of resilience status; Both address operating-model agility (process redesign, incident playbooks, dashboards).

Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data & World Economic Forum Report

R2: ESG READINESS

ESG readiness among ASEAN organisations reflects a region in transition, moving from awareness and policy alignment toward operationalisation, yet still grappling with uneven depth, measurement, and governance maturity. The patterns emerging from this study suggest that while environmental and social initiatives are increasingly visible and embedded in daily operations, governance practices remain comparatively procedural and less integrated into strategic decision-making. While several organisations reported revising and aligning their standard operating procedures (SOPs) with updated global standards, local regulations, and ESG priorities, the available evaluation data does not clearly indicate the extent to which these revisions were embedded into core business operations and strategic decision-making processes. It therefore remains unclear whether such adjustments represent substantive strategic integration or primarily compliance-oriented enhancements. Rather than presenting ESG as a uniform capability, the pillar-level analysis indicates asymmetrical readiness across Environmental, Social, and Governance dimensions.

We interpret these differences as reflecting broader regional variations in regulatory environment, industry exposure, and differing stakeholder expectations across ASEAN economies. This asymmetry appears to be influenced by contextual factors such as across ASEAN economies. To further examine the observed asymmetry better, we conducted an analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) using the gathered data and external information.

This synthesis reveals three important dynamics. First, social sustainability appears to be the strongest pillar, expressed through organisational culture and people-centred practices, particularly workplace culture, inclusion, well-being, and community engagement. Secondly, environmental initiatives are also widely implemented, closely reflecting regional policy priorities on climate action, resource efficiency, and circular economy transitions. Third, governance emerges as the least developed pillar, dominated by compliance-oriented policies rather than integrated, board-level oversight and accountability mechanisms. Figure 1 shows the trends for the three ESG pillars across ASEAN. Collectively, these patterns confirm findings in the broader ASEAN ESG literature, which similarly identifies environmental leadership, socially embedded practices, and comparatively underdeveloped governance structures as persistent regional characteristics (ADB, 2023; WEF, 2026). Table 5 summarizes the results.

Table 5: A SWOT Analysis of the ESG-related Insights from the ACES Awards 2025 Campaign

	Key Thematic Areas	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities
Environmental Consideration	Energy efficiency & clean energy Environmental awareness, education & campaigns Industry and community engagements, collaborations and partnerships Policy and regulatory requirements Circular economy Water & Marine Conservation	Alignment of several countries with key ASEAN frameworks and recommendations for environmental protection and responsibility Widespread adoption of circular economy principles Industry-specific strategies guided by policies and regulations	Lack tangible data on targets and progress	Growing consumer demand for sustainable products Technology-driven solutions Development of harmonised, region-wide ESG reporting standards and data infrastructure to strengthen measurement, benchmarking, and investor confidence across ASEAN.
Social Considerations	Ensuring DEI & Empowerment Community engagement & empowerment Health, safety & well-being Policies, structures & systems for social sustainability Training, education & awareness	Strong DEI focus despite cultural diversity Increased attention to well-being post-COVID Active community engagement Anchored in internal policies and values	Lack tangible data on targets and progress Weak coverage of human rights and supply chain issues	Development of measurable social impact indicators (e.g., DEI metrics, employee well-being indices, and supply chain due diligence measures) supported by transparent reporting.
Governance	Policies promoting transparency and accountability	Policies on transparency and accountability	Overall weakest pillar Minimal focus on whistleblowing, leadership composition	Regional standardisation of data-driven ESG measurement and independent validation to improve transparency and investor confidence.

Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

2.1 Social Sustainability Initiatives and Considerations

The social pillar emerges as the most prominent and internally coherent dimension of ESG readiness among ASEAN organisations. Within this pillar, "Human Capital Development and Continuous Improvement" was the most prominent, being referenced by more than 55 (88.7%) of all 62 ASEAN-specific organizations that participated in the 2025 ACES Awards. Unlike environmental or governance practices, which are often compliance-driven or externally mandated, social sustainability appears deeply embedded in organisational culture, people management, and community-facing activities. This reflects a relational orientation to ESG, where employees, communities, customers, and partners are viewed not merely as stakeholders but as integral to organisational resilience and legitimacy. Table 6 shows the different ESG practices and the number of ASEAN organizations that mentioned implementing specific practices.

Table 6: ESG Pillars and Practices Across ASEAN

ESG Pillars and practices	Number and percentage of participants
Social Sustainability Practices	
Human Capital Development and Continuous Improvement	55 (88.7%)
Psychological safety and healthy workplace culture-building	41 (66.1%)
DEI & Empowerment	20 (32.3%)
Performance-based recognition and rewards	17 (27.4%)
Community engagement & empowerment	15 (24.2%)
Workplace structures & systems for upholding employee rights	11 (17.7%)
Occupational health and well-being	4 (6.5%)
Environmental Practices	
Policy and regulatory requirements for environment	15 (24.2%)
Eco-friendly Considerations	13 (21.0%)
Circular economy Practices	12 (19.4%)
Environmental awareness, education & campaigns	7 (11.3%)
Energy efficiency & clean energy	5 (8.1%)
Industry and community engagements, collaborations & partnerships	4 (6.5%)
Water & Marine Conservation	2 (3.2%)
Organizational Governance practices	
Policies for Organizational governance	13 (21.3%)
Instituting compliance and ethical practices	7 (11.3%)

Note:
Counts represent the number of organizations (cases) in which a given practice was referenced at least once. Percentages are calculated relative to the total number of organizational cases (N = 62) and indicate the relative salience of practices across participating organizations. Percentages do not sum to 100% because organizations may reference multiple practices.

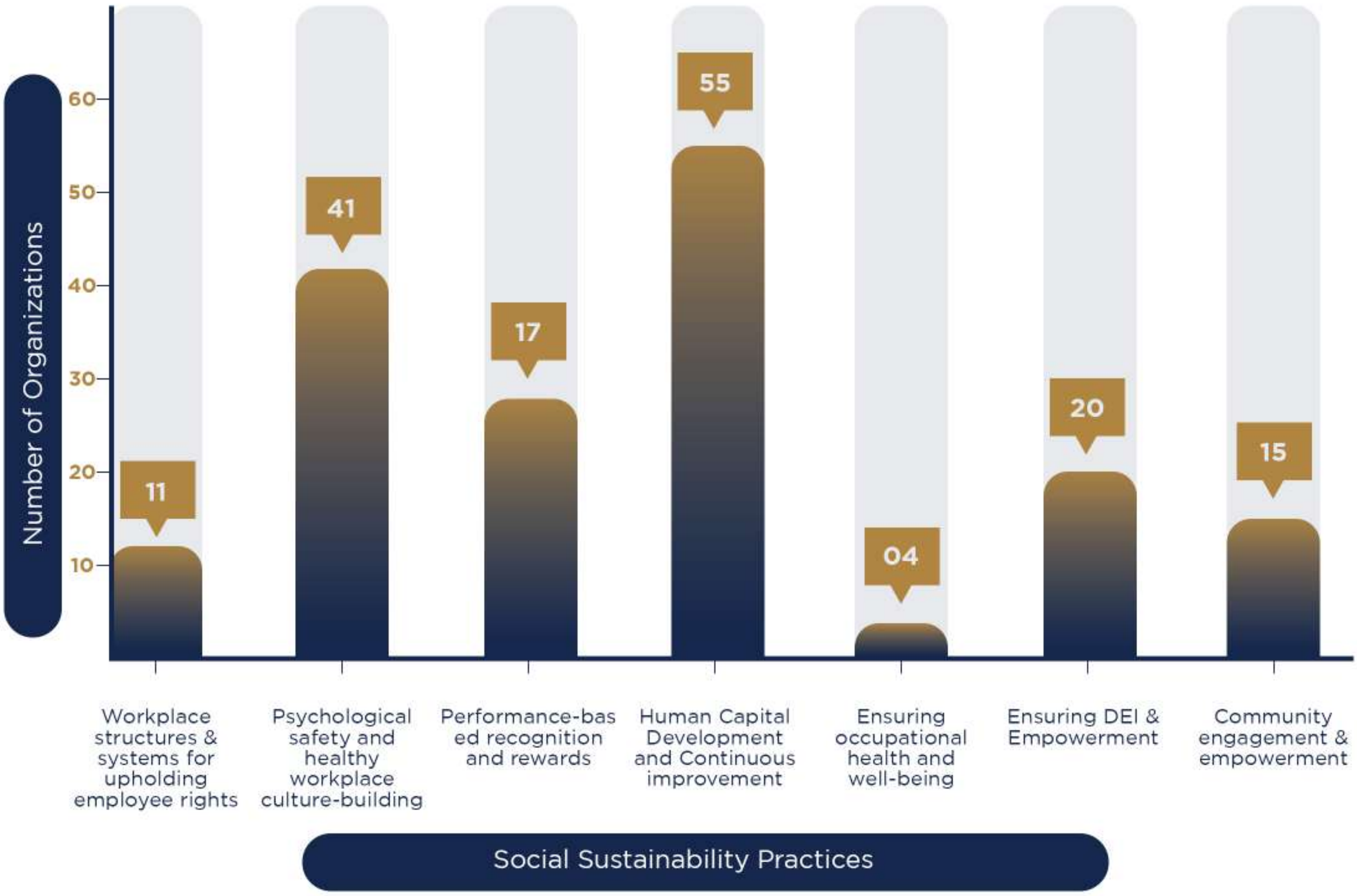
Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

Across firm sizes (micro, small, medium and large), sectors, and countries, organisations demonstrate strong emphasis on people-oriented practices such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), employee well-being, community engagement, and capability development. For instance, PT5, the general manager of a restaurant chain had the following to say about their hiring process;

"We have reviewed and refined our recruitment processes to ensure opportunities are accessible to all, regardless of gender, age, background, or ability. Job descriptions and interviews are designed to assess capability and potential, not just experience or privilege. We also partner with local training programs and community organisations to widen our candidate pool and encourage inclusive hiring.

This aligns with broader ASEAN developments, including the ASEAN Ahead agenda and outcomes from the 47th ASEAN Summit, which position inclusive growth, workforce resilience, and social cohesion as core enablers of sustainable development. Unlike environmental and governance dimensions which are both supported by ASEAN-level standards and scorecards [30], the social pillar lacks a unified regional measurement framework. Interestingly, this shows the strongest organisational uptake across ASEAN, suggesting that it is driven more by cultural, relational, and operational imperatives than by formal regulatory instrumentation. Although social sustainability seems dominant, the specific practices within this pillar also showed a level of heterogeneity, with a few workplace-focused practices being dominant in the pillar. The workforce-focused themes, "Human Capital Development and Continuous Improvement"and "Psychological safety and healthy workplace culture-building" were the most dominant practices, with 55 (88.7%) and 41 (66.1%) references respectively (Table 6). This indicates that although the social pillar is strong, organisations seem to put more efforts on.

Figure 2: *Social Sustainability Practices Across Organizations in ASEAN*



Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

Although social investment and CSR (external practices) are reportedly growing in ASEAN [31], [32], they seem currently less robust compared to intra-organisational people-oriented or human capital development practices (Table 6, Figure 2). From the data, only fifteen 15 (about 24.2%) of the participants referenced extra-organizational practices including industry and community engagement, collaborations and partnerships. This was merely a quarter of the participants who referenced to the largest intra-organizational practices, "Human Capital Development and Continuous Improvement," (55, 88.7% of all participants, see Figure 2 and Table 6). These practices reflect current relational business ecosystems, where firms often derive legitimacy through visible social contribution and proximity to local stakeholders [33]. However, such engagement is typically expressed in qualitative terms, with limited evidence of outcome measurement or long-term impact evaluation.

Despite its overall strength, the social pillar exhibits notable limitations. Measurement gaps persist across most social practices, with few organisations articulating clear targets, indicators, or progress tracking mechanisms. Moreover, social responsibility efforts tend to concentrate within organisational boundaries, while issues related to extended supply chains, human rights due diligence, and supplier labour conditions receive comparatively limited attention. This suggests that social ESG in ASEAN is strongest at the operational and cultural level but less advanced in systemic accountability. Nevertheless, social sustainability represents ASEAN's most advanced ESG pillar, characterised by strong cultural integration, people-centric strategies, and community orientation, even without formal frameworks for the same. Yet its long-term credibility and impact will depend on translating these relational strengths into measurable outcomes, broader value-chain accountability, and stronger linkage with governance structures.

2.2 Environmental Sustainability Practices & Considerations

Environmental sustainability practices among ASEAN organisations are widely articulated but display comparatively lower strategic differentiation than social sustainability practices. Drawing on the quantified qualitative analysis and SWOT assessment, environmental actions appear largely norm-driven, efficiency-oriented, and externally shaped, with limited evidence of sector-specific prioritisation or outcome-based measurement. This pattern is consistent with regional ESG literature, which observes that environmental adoption in ASEAN is often guided by regulatory alignment, certification regimes, and international norms rather than internally differentiated environmental strategies [2], [30]. A comparison of the ACES Awards data from the 2025 campaign shows various overlaps between literature and our findings in regards to the most common practices of environmental protection, revolving around energy use, waste reduction, recycling and resource management among others (Figure 3)

Figure 3: *Environmental priority areas for ASEAN vs. Our Findings on Environmental considerations*

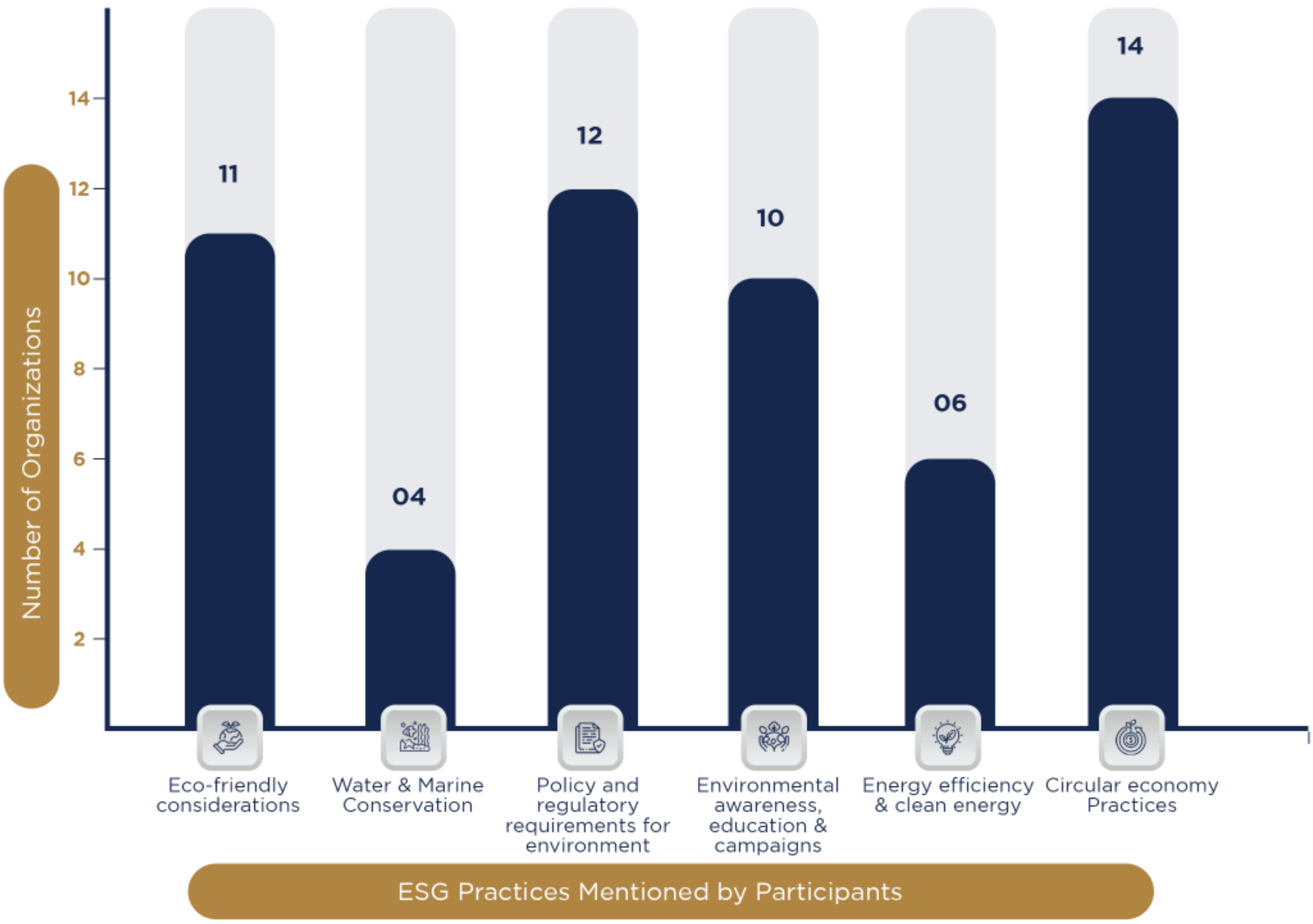
Note:

The overlap region shows the common priority areas from literature and the ACES Award 2025 data

Source: Compiled from the ACES Awards 2025 dataset and the 6th ASEAN "State if the Environment" Report.

Across sectors, organisations consistently emphasise eco-friendly practices and general environmental protection. Among these practices, those related to circular economy seem to be the most commonly referenced, along with ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements for environmental sustainability. They reflect ASEAN's longstanding commitment to promoting sustainable growth by conserving natural resources and improving environmental quality through enduring policies [34], [35]. The relative uniformity of these practices suggests that environmental engagement is anchored in low-barrier, replicable interventions that can be adopted regardless of sectoral environmental intensity. This contrasts sharply with the social pillar, where people-centric strategies exhibit clearer sectoral and organisational differentiation.

Figure 4: *Environmental conservation practices across different sectors*



Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

Circular economy principles underpin many environmental initiatives through a mix of practical operational actions and formalised frameworks. Organisations report reducing material use through digitalisation and remote work models; reusing resources via local sourcing and recyclable materials; recycling PET, e-waste, and organic waste; and, in more limited cases, recovering value from waste streams. The CEO of a Philippines-based Logistics and Supply Chain company said one of their main contributions to the company was *"driving environmental initiatives such as planting trees (hectares of lands) and introducing e-vehicles to our operations and collaborating with clients and industry collaborators for us to operate carbon neutral."* Relatedly, the CEO of an American insurance company revealed that *"I led our ISO 14001 initiative to formalize sustainable practices in our office operations. This includes reducing paper use, managing waste better, and improving energy efficiency."* Practices centred on the deliberate avoidance of environmentally harmful inputs like eliminating single-use plastics are typically embedded in internal policies and organisational culture as well as guided by regional guidelines, common environmental strategic planning and policies or standards [30], [36]. This practice-led operationalisation of circularity reflects broader regional trends, where circular economy adoption in ASEAN remains unevenly measured and weakly institutionalised [25]. Energy efficiency and clean energy adoption emerge as other significant environmental focuses (see Figure 4). Organisations report investments in LED lighting, smart energy management systems, optimised ventilation, and eco-efficient facility design. This finding aligns with regional assessments showing increased efforts towards energy efficiency in ASEAN, although deeper energy transitions may be constrained by cost, infrastructure limitations, and policy fragmentation [37], [38].

Beyond organisational boundaries, environmental engagement is primarily carried out through industry partnerships, community collaborations, and awareness campaigns. Organisations across multiple sectors like Manufacturing, healthcare, financial services and construction commonly participate in environmental awareness, education and campaigns. Others like hospitality & tourism and the public services sectors are commonly involved in other practices like water & marine conservation and industry collaboration efforts (Table 7). While these initiatives reinforce ASEAN's relational approach to sustainability and community legitimacy, they remain largely qualitative, with limited evidence of systematic impact evaluation or long-term outcome tracking. This gap is in line with regional critiques that environmental CSR in ASEAN tends to be activity-focused rather than results-oriented [31]. Notably, a counter-intuitive finding is that public, social, and support services sectors consistently articulate environmental practices more strongly than more resource-intensive sectors such as manufacturing and industrial production, though with only a marginal difference (Table 7). Rather than reflecting environmental footprint, this pattern appears driven by institutional mandates, regional regulations, public accountability, and reputational exposure, where visibility and policy alignment incentivise environmental signalling.

Table 7: Sectoral Distribution of Environmental Sustainability Practices Among ASEAN Organisations

Environmental Sustainability Practices	Distribution of Environmental Practices per Sector						
	Manufacturing & Industrial Production	Construction, Real Estate & Infrastructure	Technology, Digital & Tele-communica-tions	Financial Services & Investment	Healthcare & Life Sciences	Education & Knowledge Services	Hospitality, Tourism & Lifestyle Services
Policy and regulatory requirements for environment	5 (29.4%)	2 (25.0%)	1 (33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	1 (20.0%)	1 (33.3%)	7 (31.8%)
Eco-friendly Considerations	5 (29.4%)	5 (62.5%)	2 (66.7%)				4 (18.2%)
Circular economy Practices	2 (11.8%)	1 (12.5%)					3 (13.6%)
Environmental awareness, education & campaigns	3 (17.6%)			1 (33.3%)	1 (20.0%)	1 (33.3%)	3 (13.6%)
Energy efficiency & clean energy	1 (5.9%)			1 (33.3%)	1 (20.0%)		1 (4.5%)
Industry and community engagements, collaborations and partnerships	1 (5.9%)				1 (20.0%)		2 (9.1%)
Water & Marine Conservation					1 (20.0%)	1 (33.3%)	2 (9.1%)

Note:

Values represent the number of organisations within each industry sector that reported a given environmental sustainability practice, with percentages shown in parentheses. Percentages are calculated relative to the total number of organisations within each sector. Organisations may report multiple environmental practices; therefore, counts across practices exceed the number of organisations. Blank cells indicate that no organisations within the respective sector reported the corresponding practice. The final column presents the total number and proportion of each practice across all sectors (n = 10).

Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

Table 7 illustrates the sectoral distribution of environmental sustainability practices among ASEAN-based organisations. Overall, environmental practices were most frequently referenced in relation to policy and regulatory compliance and eco-friendly considerations, together accounting for over half of all environmental practice references across sectors. These practices were particularly prominent in manufacturing, construction, and hospitality-related sectors, reflecting a stronger emphasis on regulatory adherence and operational environmental controls. In contrast, practices extending beyond organisational boundaries—such as industry and community engagements, collaborations, and partnerships—were comparatively limited and concentrated in a small number of sectors, most notably hospitality and public or social services. Resource- and ecosystem-specific practices, including water and marine conservation, were the least frequently reported and appeared in only a narrow subset of sectors. Organizations within the Manufacturing & Industrial Production and Public, Social & Support Services seem to be the most 'active' sectors in regards to implementing environmental sustainably practices. Taken together, the findings suggest that environmental sustainability efforts within the sample are predominantly intra-organisational and compliance-oriented, with relatively less emphasis placed on collaborative or community-facing environmental initiatives across industry sectors.

Cross-country comparison reveals a differentiated pattern in how environmental sustainability practices are articulated across ASEAN economies. Relatively less developed economies, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia, report higher levels of visible activity across multiple environmental dimensions, including energy efficiency initiatives, environmental awareness efforts, and policy-related actions. This visibility likely reflects the use of discrete initiatives, signalling practices, and awareness-based interventions as accessible mechanisms for responding to environmental pressures and aligning with international sustainability expectations. In contrast, more developed economies tend to demonstrate environmental sustainability through more embedded and institutionalised approaches. For example, Singapore's practices are primarily reflected in circular economy strategies and regulatory integration rather than a wide range of stand-alone initiatives. In some cases, such as Thailand, reported environmental practices are concentrated within specific domains—most notably environmental awareness—reflecting both the thematic focus of participant responses and the limited number of organisations represented in the dataset.

These patterns align with prior observations that advanced economies often rely on regulatory systems, market mechanisms, and long-term structural frameworks, while middle-income economies emphasise initiative-based and policy-signalling approaches [34]. While ASEAN-level reports identify shared regional priorities, including energy transition, waste management, and water security [2], the present findings indicate partial thematic alignment but weaker alignment in terms of measurable targets and progress indicators Organisational environmental practices appear informed by these priorities, yet often lack the data-driven specificity required to demonstrate tangible contributions to regional environmental goals.

2.3 Governance

Governance functions as the central coordinating mechanism of ESG integration, anchoring organisational conduct in principles of transparency, accountability, ethical leadership, and regulatory alignment. While environmental and social dimensions manifest across multiple thematic practices, governance is expressed through a more concentrated set of formal structures, policies, and control mechanisms that shape decision-making and institutional integrity. In principle, governance provides the architecture through which environmental and social commitments are translated into enforceable rules, monitored practices, and accountable outcomes. However, despite this conceptual centrality, governance emerges as the weakest and least consistently articulated ESG pillar among ASEAN organisations (see Figure 2). Unlike social sustainability—which is deeply embedded in intra-organisational culture (See Figure 4), or environmental practices—which benefit from clearer regulatory signalling and external standards, governance commitments appear more fragmented, procedural, and unevenly internalised. This suggests a disconnect between governance as an enabling framework and its operational maturity within organisations, even as it remains essential to coordinating ESG performance [30].

Across organisations represented by ACES 2025 award participants, governance practices are most strongly associated with transparency and accountability, particularly in engagements with regulators, investors, clients, and suppliers. Common practices include transparent financial disclosure, open communication on operations, clear reporting lines, and procurement processes designed to minimise conflicts of interest. Ethical procurement emerges as a particularly sensitive governance domain, where standard operating procedures, supplier vetting mechanisms, integrity pledges, and zero-tolerance policies toward corruption are used to reinforce fairness and accountability. Beyond procurement, organisations increasingly seek to embed governance within structured, data-driven systems, including risk management frameworks and policies governing data privacy, ethics, food safety, and environmental compliance. Such systems are intended to reduce reliance on ad hoc decision-making and enable scalable, auditable standards aligned with internationally recognised governance principles [39]. However, the adoption and depth of these systems remain uneven, contributing to the overall weakness of the governance pillar. Governance commitments also extend to leadership representation and organisational values, with growing attention to gender diversity, non-discriminatory hiring, and inclusive leadership structures that enhance legitimacy and credibility. Core values (e.g., transparency, fairness, communication, and ethical conduct) are institutionalised through codes of conduct, ethics policies, sustainability onboarding, and internal awareness campaigns. Taken together, these findings indicate that governance in ASEAN is present but incompletely institutionalised, operating more as a set of procedural safeguards than as a fully integrated strategic system capable of consistently aligning environmental and social performance.

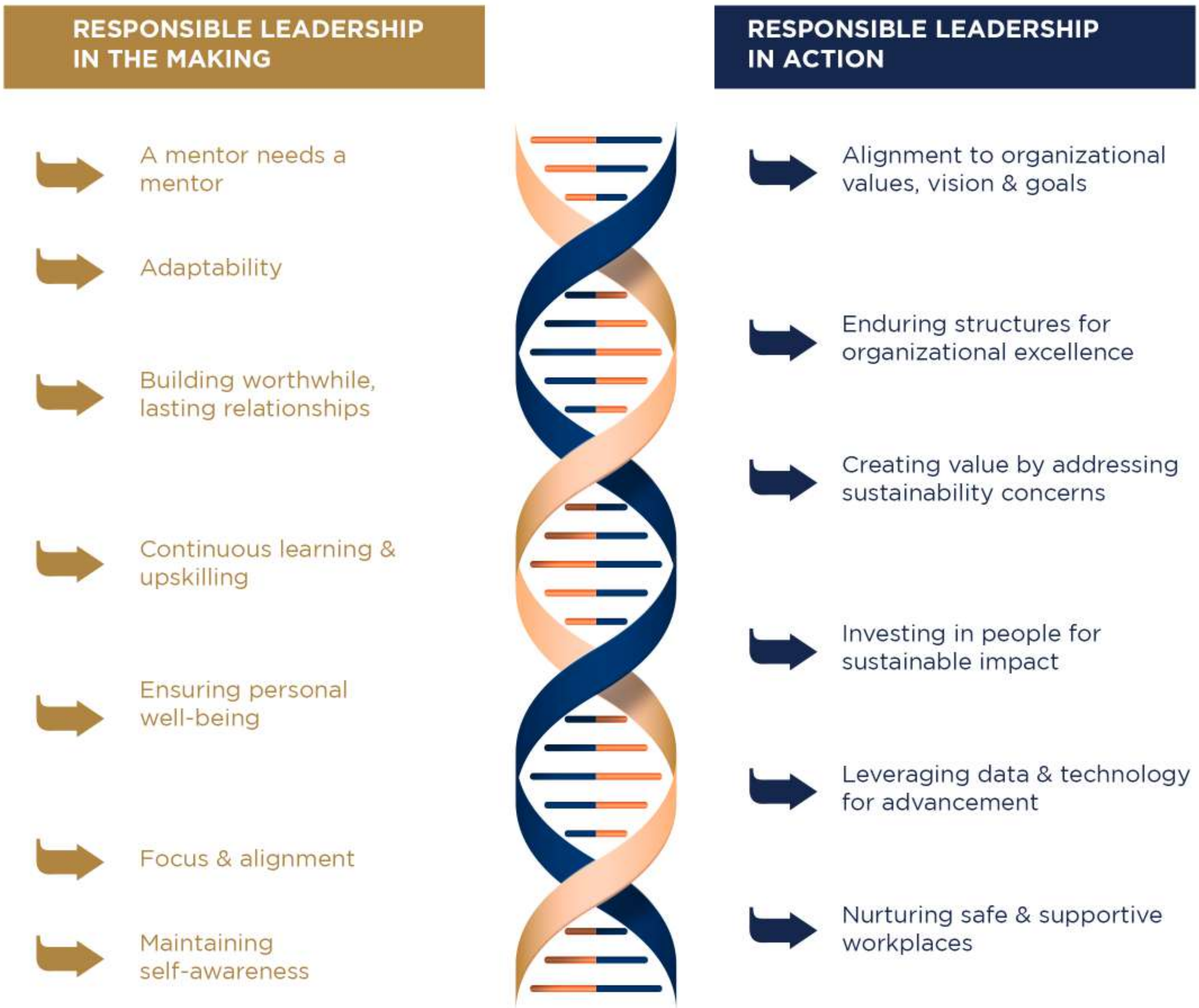
R3: RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

Across scholarly discourses and industry narratives, leadership is often assessed through visible actions encompassing strategic decisions, organisational alignment, and measurable outcomes. However, such an approach captures only part of the leadership equation often encapsulated in leadership theories [40]. From the ACES Awards 2025 dataset, we uncovered a strong sense of responsibility among ASEAN leaders in nurturing thriving communities, and this element permeates across diverse leadership traits and styles. Essentially, as [41] posited, 'to not be responsible is not to be effective as a leader' (p.7), with responsible leadership recognised as an organisational-level phenomenon which embraces an ethical and proactive stakeholder perspective toward constituents outside the organisation and the employees [42]. As observed in our findings, responsible leadership in the ASEAN context is shaped by a continuous interplay between the processes that form leaders and the actions leaders take. Here, we use the phrase *"Leadership in the Making"* to refer to the internal drivers that shape responsible leaders over time, including learning and upskilling, mentorship, and relationship-building, among others.

We also adopted the phrase *"Leadership in Action,"* to represent how these internal foundations are translated into practice—through aligning organisations to the organisational vision and mission, investing in people, building enduring systems, leveraging data and technology, and addressing sustainability concerns.

To integrate these two dimensions, R3 introduces the Double Helix Model of Responsible Leadership (Figure 10) which conceptualises leadership as a co-evolving process linking personal development with organisational and societal impact. The model was developed using data from the ACES Awards campaign 2025 through thematic analysis of leadership attributes evident in the dataset.

Figure 5: *Double Helix Model of Responsible Leadership*



Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

3.1 Responsible Leadership in the Making: The Inner Work of Leadership

Our study found that across sectors, genders, and organisational sizes, responsible leadership in ASEAN is not defined by a single dominant leadership attribute, but rather by a dual and recurring pattern of practice—continuous improvement through learning and upskilling, and sustained focus and alignment. These two leadership habits consistently emerge as the most highly referenced across the dataset, frequently alternating in prominence depending on sectoral context and leadership profile (see Figure 10). This pattern reflects a complementary leadership logic where learning enables capability expansion and adaptability, while focus and alignment provide strategic direction, coherence, adaptability and discipline [43]. Leadership research increasingly recognises this duality as essential for navigating complexity, where leaders must simultaneously evolve and stabilise their organisations [44], [45]. Figure 11 shows the different attributes of "nurturing responsible leadership" as a theme compared between the 22 male and 12 female leaders. Based on participant-level proportions shown in Figure 11, "Focus and Alignment" emerged as the most widely referenced sub-theme, mentioned by all male participants (22, 100%) and by a substantial proportion of female participants (9, 75%). This was closely followed by "continuous improvement through learning and upskilling", which was referenced by all male participants (22, 100%) and by 8 (67%) of female participants. These patterns indicate greater prevalence of both themes in male leaders' narratives within the present dataset. While prior literature has suggested that women leaders may place stronger emphasis on formal learning and skill development as a strategy for navigating structural barriers [46], the current descriptive analysis does not reflect this pattern. Given the absence of inferential statistical testing, these observed differences should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive.

Closely interwoven with learning and alignment is a nuanced triad of mentorship, well-being, and relationship-building. Based on participant-level proportions, the theme "a mentor needs a mentor" was referenced by a higher proportion of female leaders (67%) than male leaders (45%). This suggests greater prevalence of mentorship-related discourse among women in the present dataset. This pattern slightly deviates from prior research noting that men often engage more deliberately in informal and unstructured mentorship and sponsorship relationships whole women rely more on formal education as a strategy for navigating structural barriers to advancement and reinforcing professional legitimacy [47], [48]. However, given the descriptive nature of the analysis and the absence of inferential statistical testing, these observations should be interpreted as indicative patterns rather than definitive gender differences.

Conversely, ensuring personal well-being was referenced by a higher proportion of male leaders (68%) than female leaders (33%) in the dataset. This pattern reflects differences in thematic prevalence within leadership narratives rather than experienced well-being outcomes. Notably, prior research has documented that women leaders often face heightened workplace pressures, such as emotional labour, work–life conflict, and heightened scrutiny, which can negatively affect well-being. For instance, Williams [49] found that while both male and female leaders sought work–life balance, only men reported being able to achieve it. Similarly, Sahni et al. [50] observed that women still shoulder a disproportionate part of domestic and family obligations, which, when combined with comparable workplace demands, can constrain their ability to achieve work–life balance relative to their male counterparts.

A notable pattern emerges around relationship-building, where a slightly higher proportion of male leaders (36%) reported more instances of "building worthwhile, lasting relationships," than their female counterparts (33%, Figure 5). This is an interesting finding because women are often socialized to be more relational [51]. Nevertheless, this likely reflects different relational orientations, where men appear more deliberate in cultivating work-focused, instrumental relationships, while women often maintain broader, organically formed social networks that may not be explicitly framed as leadership capital. This distinction reflects leadership research differentiating relational intentionality from relational breadth [52], [53]. Collectively, these findings reveal that responsible leadership in the making is shaped by diverse developmental pathways that converge around learning, alignment, and relational maturity.

Figure 6: *A comparative visualization of responsible leadership attributes between male and female leaders.*

Note:
Since no statistical analyses were conducted, these results may only be used for descriptive purposes and are not appropriate for inferring any gender-related differences in the sample.

Source: ACES Awards 2025 Data

3.2 Responsible Leadership in Action I: People, Culture, and Everyday Practice

When responsible leadership moves from formation to practice, it is most clearly expressed through people-centric strategies and the deliberate cultivation of supportive organisational cultures. Leaders across ASEAN consistently emphasise investment in human capital as a cornerstone of organisational resilience. This includes embedding learning into everyday operations, encouraging knowledge-sharing, and creating environments where employees are trusted to take ownership, experiment, and learn from failure. Such practices reflect a shift away from authority-driven leadership toward relational and empowerment-oriented models, aligning closely with responsible leadership theory's emphasis on positive social impact and stakeholder inclusion [54]. Mentorship and coaching emerge as central mechanisms through which leadership capability is transmitted and sustained. Organisations describe a blend of institutionalised mentorship such as leadership pipelines, university partnerships, and talent incubation programmes and relational mentorship grounded in trust, accessibility, and reciprocal learning. Leaders recognise mentorship not merely as a tool for developing others, but as a reflective practice that sharpens their own judgment and adaptability. As one participant, the founder and director of a leading advertising company in Myanmar observed, *"By mentoring and helping others grow... I also learn and grow. It's a reciprocal process".* This reciprocal dynamic is well supported in the literature, which shows that mentorship enhances learning, innovation, and organisational adaptability for both mentors and mentees [55].

Beyond capability building, responsible leadership is enacted through the creation of psychologically safe and supportive workplaces. Leaders describe fostering open communication, encouraging dissent without fear of reprisal, and addressing conflict through empathy and early intervention. Well-being is increasingly framed as a strategic leadership concern rather than a peripheral HR issue, with leaders promoting flexible work arrangements, mental health support, and workload management. These practices reflect growing recognition—accelerated by the post-pandemic context—that sustainable performance depends on human sustainability [56]. As one country head for a multinational renewable ocean energy company in the Philippines noted,

> *"I actively foster a culture where people are encouraged to ask questions, share feedback, and speak up—even when it's uncomfortable"*

Such environments foster healthy working conditions, which may be associated with improved employee morale, engagement and performance [57], [58]. Thus, as a region, leaders who encourage and foster psychologically healthy environments are likely to see improved productivity.

3.3 Responsible Leadership in Action II: Strategy, Systems, and External Stewardship

At the organisational level, responsible leadership is further expressed through the deliberate configuration of strategy, systems, and structures, often described as the "hard" elements of organisational design, that translate values into scalable and disciplined action. Consistent with established frameworks such as the McKinsey 7S model [48], these tangible elements are complemented by "soft" dimensions, including leadership style, skills, and shared values, which shape how accountability and alignment are enacted in practice. Leaders increasingly rely on data-driven decision-making, technology-enabled governance, and structured performance frameworks to ensure consistency, accountability, and resilience. These include digital dashboards, automated HR platforms, analytics-driven monitoring of behaviours, and segmented financial reporting. Together, these practices reflect growing evidence that data and digital tools function as central enablers of responsible leadership by reinforcing transparency, alignment, and disciplined execution across both hard and soft organisational elements [59], [60].

Responsible leadership is further expressed through the construction of enduring strategy, systems, structures, and strategic positioning mechanisms that translate values into scalable action. Leaders increasingly rely on data-driven decision-making, technology-enabled governance, and structured performance frameworks to ensure consistency, accountability, and resilience. These include digital dashboards, automated HR platforms, analytics-driven monitoring of behaviours, and segmented financial reporting. Such practices align with growing evidence that data and digital tools have become central enablers of responsible leadership, supporting transparency, alignment, and disciplined execution [59], [60].

Strategic market positioning also features prominently. Leaders consistently emphasise balancing purpose with performance, recognising that social and environmental responsibility must coexist with financial viability. Responsible leadership does not reject profitability; rather, it reframes it as a condition for sustaining employment, innovation, and stakeholder trust. Leaders describe developing high-quality, customer-centric products and services, forging strategic partnerships, and embedding compliance and quality standards into operations to remain competitive in increasingly regulated and globalised markets. This integrative approach aligns with contemporary leadership scholarship, which positions responsible leadership as a synthesis of ethical commitment and operational excellence rather than a trade-off between the two [54], [61]. Finally, responsible leadership extends beyond organisational boundaries through engagement with sustainability and societal concerns. ASEAN leaders report embedding ESG considerations into strategy, mentoring external stakeholders, supporting community development initiatives, and collaborating with public and civil institutions. These actions reinforce the understanding that leadership responsibility is relational and systemic, not confined to internal performance alone. As one participant articulated,

> *We offer strategic counsel rooted in a deep understanding of our clients' challenges and the broader industry context" (Ms. Ruby, Founder and CEO of an advertising Company based in the Philippines).*

In this way, responsible leadership in ASEAN reflects a pragmatic yet values-driven orientation—one that balances learning, people, systems, and societal impact amid persistent uncertainty.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE 3RS AS AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANISATIONAL EXCELLENCE

This study synthesises insights from organisational leaders across diverse sectors and geographies to demonstrate that Resilience, Readiness, and Responsibility operate not as discrete pillars, but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of organisational excellence. While analytically distinct, the 3Rs frequently overlap in practice. Resilience often begins as a reactive capacity, responding to crises, market volatility, regulatory shifts, or stakeholder pressures, but evolves into proactive readiness when organisations institutionalise lessons learned. Readiness, in turn, extends beyond compliance or preparedness; it reflects structured anticipation, ESG integration, and capability-building that enable organisations to respond before disruption fully materialises. Responsibility acts as the integrative force that anchors both resilience and readiness within ethical intent, governance discipline, and long-term stakeholder orientation.

The findings suggest that the 3Rs are not sequential stages but dynamically intertwined capabilities. Responsible leadership shapes how resilience is exercised and determines whether readiness initiatives translate into meaningful ESG impact or remain symbolic. Conversely, organisations lacking responsibility may display operational resilience but fail to embed sustainability into strategy. The synthesis therefore positions Responsibility not as a third parallel pillar, but as the normative compass that aligns adaptive capacity and preparedness with values-driven action. Importantly, the ASEAN context introduces distinctive conditions that elevate the salience of the 3Rs. Rapid economic development, regulatory heterogeneity across member states, strong relational business cultures, and increasing exposure to global sustainability expectations create a dual pressure environment: organisations must remain agile in emerging markets while simultaneously aligning with international ESG frameworks. In such contexts, resilience is frequently shaped by resource constraints and infrastructural variability; readiness reflects the growing institutionalisation of sustainability practices amid evolving regulatory regimes; and responsibility is often expressed through leadership-driven initiatives rather than purely compliance-based mandates. These contextual dynamics help explain why the integration of the 3Rs emerges as a pragmatic model of excellence rather than an abstract ideal.

Moving forward, organisations seeking sustained excellence should adopt the 3Rs as a governance-oriented capability system rather than a checklist of initiatives. First, resilience strategies should be codified into structured learning mechanisms to convert crisis response into institutional memory. Second, readiness should be operationalised through measurable ESG integration, cross-functional coordination, and forward-looking risk assessment frameworks. Third, responsibility must be embedded at the leadership and board level, ensuring that strategic decisions reflect long-term stakeholder value rather than short-term optimisation. Policymakers and award bodies may likewise use the 3Rs as an evaluative lens to assess not only performance outcomes but also the depth of organisational integration across these dimensions. Taken together, the 3Rs framework advances a contextualised understanding of organisational excellence in ASEAN, one that recognises excellence as a dynamic, values-anchored system of adaptive capacity, anticipatory governance, and responsible leadership. Rather than isolated competencies, the 3Rs represent an interdependent architecture through which organisations navigate complexity while sustaining legitimacy and long-term value creation.

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