ASEAN Labour Migration Engagements and Recruitment Reform Developments (2024–2026)

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1. Introduction

This document provides a consolidated overview of key ASEAN labour migration engagements and recruitment reform developments during 2024–2026, from the perspective of the ASEAN Confederation of Employers (ACE).

The objective is to reflect employer contributions to regional policy discussions and to support the development of practical, balanced, and sustainable labour migration systems across ASEAN.

2. Overview of Key ASEAN Engagements

During the reporting period, ACE participated in major ASEAN and ILO platforms, including:

* ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML)
* ASEAN Regional Workshop on Fair and Ethical Recruitment (Philippines)
* ASEAN Employment Outlook Validation Workshop
* ASEAN Intersectoral Workshop on Post-2025 Child Labour Roadmap
* PROTECT Regional Project Advisory Committee (RPAC)
* TRIANGLE in ASEAN RPAC

These engagements reflect ASEAN's transition toward post-2025 frameworks, with increasing emphasis on implementation, coordination, and protection of vulnerable workers.

3. Employer Interventions and Contributions

Across these platforms, ACE actively contributed to discussions by:

* promoting practical implementation of policies
* emphasizing balance between protection and sustainability
* highlighting enterprise realities, particularly SMEs
* raising concerns regarding:
    * recruitment costs
    * employer risk exposure
* advocating for greater employer involvement in policy design and implementation

These interventions aim to ensure that ASEAN labour migration policies remain grounded in operational realities.

4. ASEAN Recruitment Reform Developments (2025–2026)

4.1 Regional Workshop on Fair and Ethical Recruitment (Philippines)

25–26 June 2025

The ASEAN Regional Workshop on Recruitment Fees and Fair and Ethical Recruitment Practices served as a key platform to pilot the ASEAN Checklist and advance regional discussions on recruitment reform.
Key focus areas included:

* recruitment cost structures
* transparency in recruitment systems
* operationalization of the Employer-Pay Principle

4.2 Development of the ASEAN Declaration on Fair, Ethical and Sustainable Recruitment (FESR)

The development of the ASEAN Declaration on Fair, Ethical and Sustainable Recruitment represents a major regional initiative under the Philippines' ASEAN Chairmanship.
Timeline:

* May 2025: Adoption of ASEAN Checklist
* June 2025: Regional workshop (Philippines)
* February 2026: Multi-sectoral consultation
* 2026: Expected formal adoption

4.3 Key Elements of the Draft Declaration

The draft Declaration focuses on:

* Zero recruitment fees for workers
* Prevention of exploitative practices, including contract substitution and passport retention
* Strengthening regional cooperation, including monitoring of recruitment agencies

5. Employer Perspective on Recruitment Reform

ACE supports the direction toward fair and ethical recruitment.

However, for long-term sustainability, ACE emphasizes:

* the need for shared responsibility among stakeholders
* the importance of practical and implementable frameworks
* the need to avoid disproportionate burden on any single party

Core Principle

Balance between protection and sustainability

This principle is essential to ensure that recruitment systems remain effective, fair, and viable for both workers and employers.

6. Employer-Pay Principle: A Balanced Approach

ACE supports the objective of eliminating recruitment fees for workers. However, successful implementation requires:

* alignment with worker mobility frameworks
* consideration of employer investment risks
* development of fair and transparent cost-sharing mechanisms

A sustainable system must balance: Protection – Mobility – Investment

7. Strengthening Ethical Recruitment Governance

ACE supports efforts to improve transparency and accountability in recruitment systems.

Key proposals discussed include:

* establishing an ASEAN network of recruitment agencies
* strengthening regulation of intermediaries
* promoting data-driven monitoring systems

Contributions from member organizations, including

* Singapore National Employers Federation
* Malaysian Employers Federation
* Asosiasi Pengusaha Indonesia

have played an important role in strengthening regional discussions.

Notably, proposals included identifying and addressing non-compliant recruitment agencies to promote ethical practices.

8. Building Sustainable Enterprises

ACE emphasizes that effective labour migration systems must be supported by strong enterprises.

Key priorities include:

* skills development to improve long-term workforce quality
* occupational safety and health (OSH) as a driver of productivity and competitiveness
* strengthening enterprise capacity to ensure sustainable employment

A strong enterprise is the foundation of sustainable worker protection.

9. Supporting ASEAN Policy Frameworks

Recent ASEAN milestones supporting recruitment reform include:

9.1 18th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour Recommendations (2025)

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/18th%20AFML%20recommendations.pdf

9.2 ASEAN Checklist on Fair Recruitment and Decent Employment (2025)

https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/17.-Checklist-for-AMS-Governments-Labour-Recruiter-and-Employers-on-Fair-Recruitment-and-Decent-Employment-Practices_adopted-ALMM.pdf

9.3 Vientiane Declaration on Skills Mobility and Recognition

These milestones reinforce ASEAN's movement toward coordinated, practical, and evidence-based migration governance.

10. Strengthening ASEAN Employer Coordination

To enhance regional representation, ACE is strengthening mechanisms for collecting member inputs through:

* simplified templates
* structured questionnaires
* clearer timelines

This will support the development of a stronger, evidence-based ASEAN employer voice.

11. Call for Member Inputs

ACE invites all member organizations to contribute inputs on:

* recruitment practices and cost structures
* investment protection and worker mobility
* practical safeguards and cost-sharing mechanisms
* protection of vulnerable workers
* national priorities for ASEAN, ILO, and UN discussions

12. Conclusion

ACE remains committed to supporting ASEAN labour migration systems that are:

* fair
* practical
* balanced
* and sustainable

Through continued collaboration, ASEAN employers can play a critical role in shaping policies that benefit both workers and enterprises.

5/5/2026