

AHEAD50 (ASEAN Human Educational Development Scholarship Partners) for FAFD Officials and IAI & NDG Officials of the ASEAN Secretariat (Short-term Invitation Program to Japan-Mission #4) Report

1. Program Overview

【Program Objective】

From February 8 to 14, a total of eight officials—four each from the Food, Agriculture and Forestry Division (FAFD) and the Initiatives for ASEAN Integration and Narrowing Development Gap Division (IAI & NDG) of the ASEAN Secretariat—visited Japan.

The delegation aimed to strengthen institutional capacities in addressing key challenges in ASEAN's food and agriculture sectors.

The program focused on addressing issues in the food, agriculture, and forestry sectors, promoting ASEAN integration, and narrowing development gaps, with particular emphasis on Timor-Leste and the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam).

Participants explored practical approaches and enhanced their knowledge in areas such as the application of digital technologies in agriculture, sustainable resource development and management, and climate change mitigation. Strategic themes including sustainable agriculture, community empowerment, circular and green economy approaches, and financial mechanisms to support these initiatives were also discussed.

These activities were carried out in collaboration with Japanese universities, research institutions, and private-sector partners. The expertise and best practices gained through the visit are expected to serve as valuable resources in promoting inclusive growth and strengthening resilience across the ASEAN region.

【Overview of AHEAD50】

AHEAD50 (ASEAN Human Educational Development Scholarship Partners) is an invitation program launched on the occasion of the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation in 2023. The purpose of this program is to provide promising staff of the ASEAN Secretariat and other related organizations with an opportunity to learn about Japan's policies, systems, and positions, thereby strengthening the ASEAN Secretariat through human resource development and enhancing smooth cooperation with Japan.

【Participants】 Total: 8 staff (1 Assistant Director / Head of Division, 2 Senior Officers, 5 Officers) from the Food, Agriculture and Forestry Division (FAFD), Initiatives for ASEAN Integration and Narrowing Development Gap Division (IAI & NDG) of the ASEAN Secretariat

【Locations】 Tokyo, Kanagawa

【Schedule】

■ Invitation Program :

- Feb. 8 (Sun) Arrival at Narita International Airport
 【Briefing】
- Feb. 9 (Mon) **【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】**
 Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)
 Lecturers:
 - A total of 8 officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) and the Forestry Agency, including:
 - Mr. INADA Yoshiaki, Director and Negotiator for Southeast Asia, Bilateral Affairs Division, Export and International Affairs Bureau.
 【Observation】 AQUPONI INC. (Mr. HAMADA Kengo, CEO)
 【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】
 The Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)
 “The Status and Future Direction of Climate Change and Decarbonization Initiatives in ASEAN, with a Focus on the Impact on Agriculture”
 Lecturer: Dr. ARINO Yosuke, Senior Research Manager / Lens Facilitator, Strategic Management Office
- Feb. 10 (Tue) **【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】**
 Central Union of Agricultural Cooperatives (JA-ZENCHU)
 “Japanese Agricultural Cooperatives and our Challenges”
 Lecturer: Mr. ICHIYA Takuo, Senior Manager, Agricultural Policy Department
 · Lecture on farmers’ cooperatives, whose purpose is to protect and enhance agricultural management and the livelihood of farmers in the spirit of mutual assistance.
 · Lecture on farm guidance, produce sales, provision of production supplies, and mutual assistance among farmers’ cooperative members in local regions.
 【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】
 Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences, The University of Tokyo
 “The effect of the enhancement of agricultural productivity on economic growth and poverty reduction”
 Lecturer:
 Prof. SAKURAI Takeshi, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics
 · Research focuses on agricultural and poverty issues in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia using approaches from agricultural economics and development economics. Specifically, the studies analyze how improvements in agricultural productivity contribute to economic growth and poverty reduction, with attention to environmental and resource management, technology, and market institutions.

【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】

National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

“Linking farmers and MSMEs to markets and finance: Barriers, solutions, and policy options for sustainable development”

Lecturer:

Prof. SONOBE Tetsushi, Tetsushi, Professor of development economics

Feb. 11 (Web)

Holiday

Feb. 12 (Thu)

【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

“JICA’s forestry sector cooperation in the Asia and Pacific region”

Lecturer: Mr. KEGASA Takahiro, Associate Expert, Natural Conservation Team 1 Forest and Nature Conservation Group, Global Environment Department

· An introduction to one of JICA’s mangrove or forest ecosystem conservation projects, particularly those that engage local organizations and communities as key implementing actors and aim, among other objectives, to contribute to sustainable livelihood improvement.

【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 Japan Finance Corporation (JFC)

“Agriculture & Agricultural Finance in Japan and the Role of JFC”

Lecturer: Mr. MURAKAMI Yuki, Deputy Group Chief, Overseas Business Development and International Cooperation Group, Information Planning Department Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Food Business Unit (AFFF Unit)

· Japan Finance Corporation (JFC), a wholly government-owned institution established, serves as a comprehensive financial body that leverages expertise across diverse fields to provide wide-ranging services aimed at contributing to society and fostering a bright, prosperous future. The lecture also including information gained through initiatives by APRACA (Asia-Pacific Rural and Agricultural Credit Association).

【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 United Nations University (UNU)

Lecturer: Dr. SUZUKI Aya, Senior Vice-Rector of United Nations University; Assistant Secretary-General of United Nations

“High-Value Agriculture and Challenges for Smallholders: Based on Empirical Studies”

· One of the lecturer’s main research themes is high value-added export agriculture in Africa and Asia. Drawing on extensive field studies conducted in countries such as Viet Nam and Indonesia, the lecture and discussion will explore the social and economic impacts of adding value to agricultural products, while also examining how developing countries can reduce poverty by focusing on agriculture and industrial development.

【Cultural Experience】 Tea ceremony experience

Feb. 13 (Fri) **【Workshop】** Preparations for the Reporting Session (summarizing program findings, confirming social media posts, preparation of action plans)
【Reporting Session】 Presentations of Program Findings and Action Plans

Feb. 14 (Sat) Departure from Narita International Airport

2. Program Photos

Invitation Program

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| <p>February 9, 2026 【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)</p> | <p>February 9, 2026 【Observation】 AQUAPONICS</p> |
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| <p>February 10, 2026 【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 The Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)</p> | <p>February 10, 2026 【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 Central Union of Agricultural Cooperatives (JA-ZENCHU)</p> |
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| <p>February 10, 2026 【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences, The University of Tokyo</p> | <p>February 10, 2026 【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIIPS)</p> |



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| February 12, 2026 【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 United Nations University (UNU) | February 12, 2026 【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 Japan Finance Corporation (JFC) |
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| February 12, 2026 【Lecture, Opinion Exchange】 United Nations University (UNU) | February 12, 2026 【Cultural Experience】 Tea Ceremony Experience |

3. Voices from the Participants (excerpt)

- The session provided a valuable opportunity for ASEAN Secretariat staff to learn about Japan's strategies and policies on smart agriculture and forestry. This knowledge sharing was timely, as the relevant ASEAN strategies—namely the Food, Agriculture and Forestry Sectoral Plan 2026–2030 and the IAI Work Plan V—have recently been adopted. We had great discussions on agriculture related issues. It helped us understand better on the smart agriculture initiative & projects in Japan.
- The session on aquaponics provided valuable insights into how integrated aquaculture and hydroponic systems can be utilised to promote a circular economy. It highlighted sustainable resource use, efficient water and innovative approaches to strengthening both aquaculture and hydroponic production while reducing environmental impacts.
- We really enjoyed the sessions as they provided us with lots of information related to ASEAN climate-smart agriculture initiatives, the role of IGES in agroforestry and agrivoltaics, water management as well as environmental sensitive area assessment. It was also good to learn about IGES collaboration with the Mekong River Commission (MRC).
- The program provided new insights on how cooperatives play an important role in improving the livelihood of farmers by providing guidance, promoting smart technology, providing loans to the farmers, and so much more. We heard that the cooperatives also provide non-agriculture related support through Better Living Guidance, which is an approach that can be replicated in other ASEAN countries.

- The lecture was very clear and gave us deep insights backed by plenty of true knowledge. Even though the main focus was on practical agricultural techniques, it also offered important ideas that can help the ASEAN Secretariat develop policies for rural development, especially for Least Developed Countries (LDC), based on their stage of development and available resources. The program was extremely valuable.
- We gained amazing insights from the very easy to understand lectures from different experienced professionals on many topics including economic development through agriculture, importance of capacity building for farmers, and the variety of roles in the agri and msme supply chain.
- The session on JICA's forestry sector cooperation and projects in the Asia and Pacific Region was really insightful to understand more about JICA's initiatives, their cooperation with AMS, and how the ASEAN Secretariat could explore further collaboration with JICA in the future in different sectors, including food, agriculture and forestry.
The session was quite insightful, as it gave us a deeper understanding on JICA's Cooperation for Forestry & Nature Conservation, Japanese ODA and scheme, JICA's wide range of cooperation schemes and financing approaches including technical cooperation, loan and grant assistance, and external funds such as the GCF (Green Climate Fund). Overall, we found that the program was very much useful.
- The research papers presentations provided by the speakers, especially the introduction to case studies in ASEAN such as Viet Nam, were very informative. What we learned can be modified and applied to what we at the ASEAN Secretariat do in project management and at the policy level.

4. Presentations of Program Findings and Action Plan at the Reporting Session (excerpt)

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| <p>Lessons learnt, Insights and Key Takeaways</p> <p>ASEAN Human Educational Development Scholarships Partners AHEAD50 Mission# 9-13 February 2026, Tokyo, Japan</p> | <p>Some Follow up Actions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Translate learning into ASEAN pilot initiatives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop initiative such as smart agriculture and sustainable forestry demonstration projects in ASEAN Member States, adopting Japan's smart forest farming systems, cooperative-based services, forest restoration approaches in rural contexts with emphasis on strategic and social technologies. 2. Strengthen policy and technical collaboration with Japanese institutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve cooperation with MAFF, JICA, JICA JA Centre, and resource institutions to support AHA-AH smart agricultural implementation. Enhance sustainable forest management and restoration and improve cooperative-based agribusiness models. 3. Integrate lessons into ASEAN strategic frameworks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce training activities with ASEAN Smart Agriculture initiatives, One Billion Trees Growing Programme and others within. 4. Establish continuous ASEAN-Japan dialogue platform <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create regular policy and technical exchanges by inviting Japan agencies at relevant sectoral bodies meeting. 5. Mobilise financing and private sector engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore collaboration with Japanese development finance institutions and private companies to support smart agriculture infrastructure development, forest land restoration and REDD+ initiatives and promote green investment and climate finance for agriculture and forestry. | <p>Strategic Value of AHEAD 50</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strong practical exposure to advanced technologies and models The training provided first-hand experience on smart agriculture systems, sustainable forest management practices, cooperative-based agribusiness models, and innovative financing mechanisms, offering concrete examples that may be adopted in ASEAN. 2. Integration of policy, technology, and field implementation Participants benefited from a comprehensive approach combining policy dialogue (MAFF, JICA), research insights (universities), and site visits, enabling better understanding of how strategies translate into real-world outcomes. 3. High relevance to ASEAN priorities Key themes such as climate resilience, aging farming populations, forest restoration, digital technologies, and cooperative development aligned well with ASEAN's Smart Agriculture Initiatives, sustainable forest management goals, and climate action frameworks, and the JH Work Plan V (2025-2030). 4. Strong networking opportunities The program facilitated engagement with Japanese governmental agencies, research institutions, cooperatives, and development partners, creating foundations for future ASEAN-Japan cooperation. |
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【Results of the Program】

- ◆ Results of the Program and Future Prospects
 1. We deepened our knowledge and practical understanding of smart agriculture, sustainable forest management, the development of agricultural cooperatives, and innovative financial mechanisms. This has helped us align even more closely with ASEAN's regional priorities.
 2. The program also gave us a valuable opportunity to strengthen our network with Japanese counterparts. This will help deepen cooperation in the agriculture and forestry sectors and contribute to reducing development gaps across the region. Below are some initial ideas for strengthening collaboration:
 - Research and Development: In collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), and JICA, we will

analyze the current status, gaps, and priority needs for implementing smart agriculture in ASEAN Member States (AMS). This includes exploring smart agriculture as a way to address the aging farming population, strengthening climate adaptation, and promoting sustainable forest management.

- Smart Agriculture Pilot Projects: We will adapt Japan's smart agriculture models to local conditions and conduct pilot projects in selected countries, prioritizing CLMVT countries. Instead of high-cost, cutting-edge solutions, we will focus on high-impact, cost-effective technologies such as drone-based crop monitoring and automated water management systems that fit local needs.

【Action Plan】

1. Translate Learning into ASEAN Pilot Initiatives

We will develop initiatives we observed in Japan such as smart agriculture and sustainable forestry demonstration projects in ASEAN Member States, including smart models (smart farming systems, cooperative-based agribusiness, forest restoration, digital village) relevant to each country's priorities and available technologies.

2. Strengthen Policy and Technical Collaboration with Japanese Institutions

We will explore collaboration with MAFF, JICA, IGES, JA-ZENCHU, and various research institutions to support the implementation of smart agriculture in ASEAN, promote sustainable forest management and restoration, and improve agri-business models built around agricultural cooperatives.

3. Integrate Lessons into ASEAN Strategic Frameworks

The lessons from this program will be incorporated into the ASEAN Food Systems Future Initiative, One Billion Trees Growing Programme, and related ASEAN initiatives.

4. Establish Continuous ASEAN–Japan Dialogue Platforms

We will invite Japanese institutions to relevant sectoral discussions and create regular opportunities for policy and technical exchange. Joint projects and programs will also be developed in areas where ASEAN and Japan share common challenges.

5. Mobilize Financing and Private Sector Engagement

We will seek collaboration with Japanese development finance institutions and private companies to support smart agriculture infrastructure, scale up forest restoration and nature-based solutions, and promote green investment and climate finance in the agriculture and forestry sectors.

Implementation Agency: Japan International Cooperation Center (JICE)