

LESSONS FROM GO DIGITAL ASEAN

Driving Digital Innovation: Opportunities and Recommendations

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Driving Digital Innovation: Opportunities and Recommendations

Lessons from Go Digital ASEAN

Introduction

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) drive ASEAN economies, comprising 97 percent of private sector businesses, 85 percent of the workforce, and 45 percent of regional GDP. Yet despite their economic importance, many MSMEs face a range of structural barriers to participating in the region's growing digital economy due to fragmented policies on advancing digitization, limited access to affordable and relevant training, and scarcity of digital infrastructure and financing.

The Asia Foundation (TAF)—with funding from Google.org, Google's philanthropic arm—designed and implemented the Go Digital ASEAN initiative to address these challenges by expanding digital skills participation across the region, reaching individuals and communities with the most to gain from digital literacy.

The ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises endorsed the program, which, since its 2020 launch, has trained more than 400,000 individuals, 60 percent of whom are women, across its two phases. By providing targeted, practical training, Go Digital ASEAN empowered both aspiring and established entrepreneurs to navigate the digital landscape with greater confidence. MSMEs improved their understanding and ability to use online tools, deepened their financial knowledge, and enhanced their resilience against cyber threats, enabling them to unlock their digital potential and grow their businesses and revenues. By increasing sales, boosting financial inclusion, and opening access to new markets, these outcomes also contributed to broader economic recovery, job creation, and reduced dependence on aid.

This report provides an overview and key outcomes of the program, drawing insights from its impact on MSMEs and offering recommendations to inform future digital training initiatives and policy development across the region.



After completing Go Digital sessions on internet use and online safety, 73-year-old Luu Kim Hoa from Vietnam grew her seafood customers by 40% and boosted monthly profits by 10 million VND, all while learning to guard her business against cyber threats.

ASEAN Partnership: Deepening Regional Impact through Collaboration

The Go Digital ASEAN initiative was developed in close partnership with the ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (ACCMSME), beginning with a formal endorsement in June 2021. This collaboration enhanced implementation by grounding the program in ASEAN's regional vision and enabled TAF and Google.org to directly support ASEAN's broader recovery and development goals, as well as build credibility and engagement with member governments.

By working with ACCMSME, The Asia Foundation and Google.org tailored digital skills training to meet the specific needs of MSMEs in priority sectors such as agriculture, tourism, and informal trade. The partnership also enabled the program to align with the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, contributing to regional efforts to build MSME resilience in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

ASEAN's endorsement helped amplify the program's credibility across member states, encouraging stronger coordination with national ministries and supporting a shared commitment to inclusive digital transformation for all. Based on the strong outcomes and regional value demonstrated in the first phase, TAF and Google.org further refined Go Digital ASEAN through continued consultation with ACCMSME. In 2023, the committee endorsed the initiative's second phase, which introduced a more targeted approach to equipping underserved communities with digital tools for economic recovery and long-term competitiveness.

Recognized by ASEAN as a catalyst for the region's post-pandemic rebound, Go Digital ASEAN stands as a model for multi-stakeholder cooperation in digital skills development and leveraging public-private partnership to scale grassroots impact while contributing to regional policy priorities.

Go Digital ASEAN 1

Building Digital Readiness Amid Crisis

When the pandemic hit Asia, digital literacy surged in importance. With lockdowns, online skills often meant the difference between keeping businesses open or closing for good. The pandemic was a crisis for female entrepreneurs, as women were forced to shoulder a sharp increase in demand for unpaid care and domestic work. TAF and Google.org designed the first phase of Go Digital ASEAN (GDA1) to equip MSMEs and the emerging workforce, particularly those in rural and isolated areas, with digital skills and tools; expand economic opportunity across ASEAN countries; and minimize the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

TAF designed the GDA1 training curriculum for new internet users, combining foundational digital literacy and online safety basics with practical business or employability add-ons, delivered in local languages through a mix of in-person workshops, interactive webinars, micro-lesson apps, video playlists, quizzes, one-on-one mentoring, and even hackathons. Training for under-employed youth focused on CV building, job-search platforms, and interview skills, and MSME training guided small business owners on e-commerce set-up, social media marketing, digital accounting, fintech, and Google My Business. Inclusive design elements, such as micro-modules for persons with disabilities, also allowed participants to pick stand-alone topics or follow a tiered pathway from basic to advanced skills.

By focusing on practical content and locally delivered training, GDA1 reached more than 225,000 participants across all 10 ASEAN member states, with a strong emphasis on reaching rural communities, women entrepreneurs, and those with limited digital experience. The program enabled micro and small business owners, as well as young job seekers, to take their first steps into the digital economy. Even during the COVID-19 crisis, GDA1 demonstrated that accessible, context-specific digital training can open new pathways to resilience and economic opportunity and lay the foundation for more advanced skills development.





During training, we met female entrepreneurs like Silinphone, in Vientiane, Laos, who had put her career on hold when she had children but had never lost her entrepreneurial drive. She had opened a small convenience store in her house, allowing her to earn money while caring for her growing family. But during the second wave of the pandemic in Laos, when only essential workers were permitted to leave their homes, her sales plummeted. Customers began calling her directly to ask for a delivery option, but Silinphone had never used map applications before and wasn't sure how to share a location pin with delivery drivers instead of giving directions over the phone.

After completing the digital maps training module, Silinphone was able to search and pinpoint locations and share them with delivery drivers through the new social media site she created for her business. Not only did she restart her business and begin a rebound toward her pre-pandemic sales, but she was proud to have broken the stereotype that women her age are too old to learn digital skills. "When it comes to technology," she said, "I used to depend on my family for help. But now, I can go online by myself, and I am confident to conduct business online."

Year 2020-2022

Go Digital ASEAN 1 **225,778** MSMEs trained

62.1%
women

64.4%
youth aged 18-35

81%
MSME owners

18.9%
Job seekers

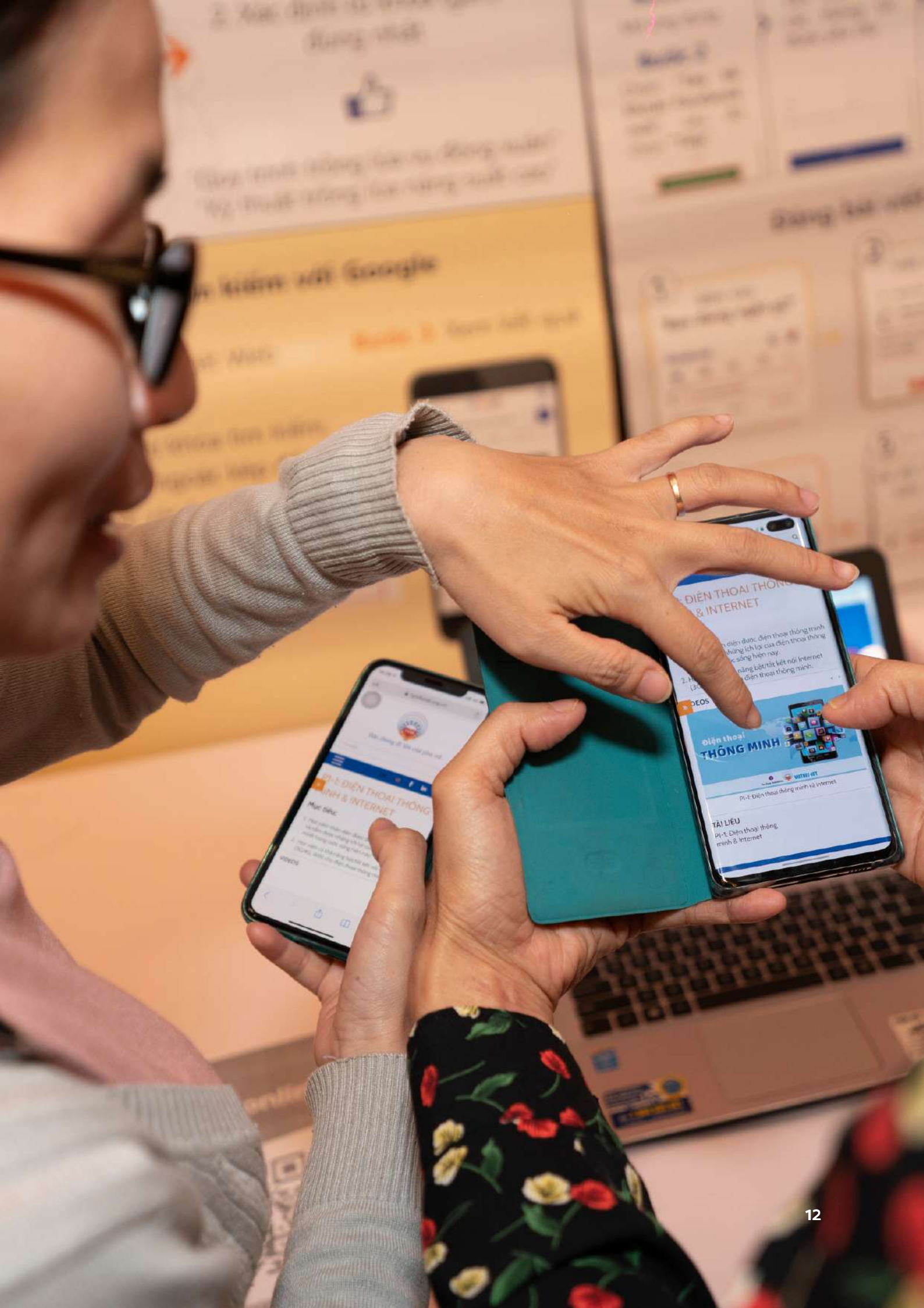
95% of MSMEs trained reported increased ability to use ICT tools to support their livelihoods

81% of MSMEs trained reported higher customer engagement

77% of MSMEs trained reported moving at least part of their business online

25% of MSMEs trained credited GDA for keeping their business afloat during the pandemic

**Findings from a post-training survey of 2,272 trainees conducted five months after the program.
[Read the full report here.](#)*



Go Digital ASEAN 2

Advancing Digital Growth and Resilience

The second phase of the program expanded the program's reach, providing advanced and specialized training on business and financial literacy, digital marketing, cybersecurity, and carbon footprint reduction. TAF and local implementing partners tailored the curriculum and implementation to support MSMEs at different stages of their digital journey through three specialized training segments.

GO DIGITAL

Equipping underserved business owners in Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam with basic digital skills to transition their businesses online.

GROW DIGITAL

Providing businesses in Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam with advanced digital skills, including e-commerce, cybersecurity, and AI adoption, to scale their business.

EXPLORE DIGITAL

Connecting businesses across ASEAN through a regional webinar speaker series, fostering peer learning and cross-border collaboration.

The implementation strategy expanded the foundation of local partnerships with trusted civil society and development partners to reach a broader audience while maintaining a tailored and practical approach. In Vietnam, for example, the program leveraged partnerships with national financial institutions, integrating digital skills training into existing support services for rural clients. While in Indonesia, the program partnered with local organizations to deliver grassroots training to women entrepreneurs. This multi-layered strategy ensured both consistency in core outcomes and flexibility to adapt to local business realities, ultimately enabling broad regional reach with tangible, on-the-ground results.





Take the experience of Sawitree Srijinda, a single mother from Buriram province in northeastern Thailand. In 2017, her mounting debt forced her to make the difficult choice of selling her farmland and relocating to Bangkok, where she began working long hours as a caregiver to support her two teenage daughters, who remained in Buriram.

After GDA1 introduced her to online commerce, she began marketing roses on Facebook and quickly landed a bulk order from Cambodia, proof that a digital side gig could out-earn her exhausting caregiver job in Bangkok. She enrolled in GDA2's digital payments module in 2023 and built on her core skills, giving her the confidence to leave the city, return home, and open a neighborhood food stall. She doubled overall orders by pairing Facebook promotions with cashless transactions, lifted beverage sales by 50 percent, and reclaimed evenings with her two teenage daughters.

Sawitree's story of digital transformation represents just one of the 215,896 MSME owners and workers across the region who benefited from GDA2 training.

Year 2023-2024

Go Digital ASEAN 2 **215,896** MSMEs trained



93% of MSMEs trained reported increased confidence in using digital tools

90% of MSMEs trained reported learning new ways of doing things to benefit their business

90% of MSMEs trained reported having the digital skills needed to grow their business online

91% of MSMEs trained reported taking action based on what they learned

**Findings from a post-training survey of 3,901 Go and Grow Digital trainees.
[Read the full report here.](#)*



Key Trends and Challenges

Understanding the Evolving Digital Landscape for MSMEs

Through a survey conducted three to five months post-training, the program's impact assessment also highlighted several key trends and challenges to digital skills development for MSMEs:

Online safety is a top concern.

Learning to protect businesses online was a top motivation to join the training across both Go and Grow Digital training segments. The more MSMEs become savvy with digital skills and tools, the more they are wary of scams, hackers, and online fraud. MSMEs are not just looking for ways to grow online; they also recognize the risks of digital expansion.

MSMEs want business-first solutions.

Trainees consistently emphasized the importance of training on digital solutions that directly support revenue generation, such as how to attract more customers, receive payments digitally, automate inventory, or track finances easily. Rather than broad, long-term digital transformation strategies or generic literacy content, small business owners prioritize digital tools that will have an immediate return.

Digital trust and confidence lead to action.

Ninety-three percent of trainees reported feeling more confident using digital tools, and 90 percent said they have already applied what they've learned through digital payments, marketing, or customer engagement. For others, the fear of "doing something wrong online" or "being scammed" often prevented them from using digital tools even after gaining basic familiarity, particularly amongst older and rural business owners.

Limited access to devices and connectivity continues to hold back digital adoption.

Especially in lower-income or remote communities, participants cited unstable internet connections and reliance on shared mobile devices as major constraints. These infrastructure constraints also limited the extent to which some MSMEs could implement what they learned.

Demand for AI-powered skills training is on the rise.

MSMEs are experimenting with AI-driven solutions, such as automated customer service, content creation, and financial tracking. However, many MSMEs lack the knowledge to integrate AI into daily business operations or see AI as an abstract concept rather than a business tool they can immediately apply. As digital adoption grows, the next challenge is ensuring MSMEs can effectively leverage AI for efficiency and scale.

Future Opportunities

Targeting High-Impact Skills for Inclusive Growth

The challenges identified above indicate the need for continued investment in holistic digital skilling for MSMEs, particularly in digital financial management, online safety, and AI. Based on feedback from trainees, implementing partners, and government counterparts, the following focus areas for future training opportunities were identified:

AI for MSME Growth and Digital Marketing

- AI chatbots to improve customer service and engagement
- AI-driven marketing automation and content creation for MSMEs
- Predictive analytics optimizing inventory and sales forecasting
- Safe social media practices, including recognizing misinformation and scams

AI in E-Commerce and Financial Inclusion

- AI-powered pricing and demand forecasting for online sellers
- AI-driven credit scoring expanding MSME loan access
- Secure digital transactions, fraud detection and cybersecurity tools reducing digital risks

AI for Productivity and Business Automation

- AI-powered workflow automation and process optimization
- AI-generated business insights improving decision-making

Beyond these broad focus areas, future programming impact can be further amplified by designing sector-specific training pathways for agriculture, women entrepreneurs, and growth-stage MSMEs, such as AI-driven crop monitoring and digital farm management tools; digital bookkeeping and mobile payments tailored to home-based businesses; and advanced modules on supply chain optimization, digital exports, and scaling e-commerce operations.



Opportunities to Improve and Expand Programming

Strengthening Delivery Models for Scalable, Localized Impact

The trends identified through GDA2 programming also provide insight into shaping effective outreach and implementation strategies for digital transformation programming:

Centering training around business outcomes.

Training efforts were most successful when tied directly to concrete business improvements—such as increased online sales, better financial management, or expanded customer reach. Future programs should continue to focus on outcome-oriented modules that help MSMEs immediately apply digital skills to generate income, reduce costs, or improve operations.

Tiered learning approach to improve engagement and retention.

A structured, multi-level curriculum like GDA's Go Digital, Grow Digital, and Explore Digital components enabled learners to progress from foundational to advanced topics. This approach ensured continued engagement and allowed MSMEs to build confidence over time, improving retention and relevance. Future programs should consider modular pathways that offer clear progression.

Recruitment through organizations embedded in local communities.

Community-based recruitment outperformed online campaigns in reaching rural and underserved entrepreneurs. Programs should prioritize working through women's groups, local chambers of commerce, and trade associations that already have trust-based relationships with target participants.

Framing online safety as a gateway, not an add-on.

Concerns around cybersecurity and online fraud remain a significant barrier to digital adoption. Positioning digital safety as a foundational skill —alongside digital marketing or e-commerce— not only builds user trust but also increases readiness to engage with digital platforms. Safety should be mainstreamed across all modules, not treated as a standalone topic.

Strengthening post-training support and peer learning and exchange.

While initial training was impactful, long-term success often depended on follow-up support and access to a community of peers. Embedding mentorship, alumni groups, or ongoing digital clinics into program design can help participants troubleshoot challenges, stay motivated, and continue learning beyond the training period.

Scaling impact to new regions.

The GDA model has strong potential for adaptation in other regions such as South Asia, Pacific Island nations, or remote provinces in East Asia. Key to successful replication will be local customization—adapting content, delivery modes, and case examples to local business and cultural contexts, while maintaining the core structure of blended, trainer-supported learning.

Fostering collaboration across sectors.

Digital skills adoption requires ecosystem-level coordination.

Governments, private sector partners, and training organizations must work together to align incentives, share data and insights, and co-invest in outreach, infrastructure, and innovation. Cross-sector partnerships should be built into program design from the outset to support scale and sustainability.

Building on the momentum of GDA2, these strategies can guide future programs toward deeper impact, broader reach, and long-term resilience for MSMEs.



Bridging Regional Vision with National Action

Governments have a vital role in accelerating digital transformation by creating regulatory frameworks and incentives that support the widespread adoption of digital tools. The Go Digital ASEAN approach was closely aligned with many existing policy priorities—particularly those focused on expanding access for women, rural entrepreneurs, and informal sector workers—as outlined in the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025, national information and communications technology and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) strategies, and the ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises’ Strategic Action Plan for MSME Development. At the same time, the results from GDA offer valuable insights that can help refine and inform future digital training policies. While individual training programs are critical, the long-term success of MSME digital adoption depends equally on broader policy and ecosystem alignment.

Collaboration between private and public sectors to scale skills uptake and promote broader access to free and localized training opportunities.

At the national level, governments can deepen partnerships with private sector actors such as digital platforms, telecom companies, and industry associations to co-invest in MSME digital skilling programs and expand access to no-cost, locally relevant training. At the regional level, ASEAN bodies like ACCMSME can facilitate alignment across countries by promoting regional knowledge products, supporting multicountry training models, and encouraging scalable, replicable frameworks that member states can adapt to local contexts.

Supporting ecosystem development through infrastructure investments and regulatory incentives.

Governments should continue investing in digital infrastructure in rural and underserved regions alongside policy mechanisms that incentivize digital tool adoption. National policies could offer tax incentives, startup grants, or access-to-market support for MSMEs that adopt e-commerce, digital payments, or cybersecurity systems. Regionally, harmonized standards and digital trade agreements could support interoperability, helping MSMEs participate in cross-border digital markets more effectively.

Engaging policymakers and civil servants in training opportunities.

Involving national and local government officials in digital skills training enhances institutional understanding and commitment. Ministries can embed digital transformation modules into civil service development tracks, and encourage participation in pilot programs like GDA. Regionally, ASEAN institutions can convene civil servants for peer exchange, knowledge sharing, and exposure to community-led innovations that are working on the ground.

Encouraging knowledge-sharing platforms and cross-country learning.

National governments can support MSME networks, chambers of commerce, and cooperatives in hosting regular forums or digital storytelling campaigns to showcase local success stories. At the ASEAN level, platforms such as the ASEAN SME Academy or ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement consultations can be used to find best practices, promote peer learning, and facilitate policy alignment for MSME support across member states.

Embedding digital skills into regional education, TVET, and workforce development plans.

National education ministries and skills agencies should integrate digital and entrepreneurial skills into primary, secondary, and vocational curricula. This includes updating TVET standards, supporting teacher training, and partnering with industry to ensure relevance. Regionally, ASEAN can support the development of shared competency frameworks, regional qualification standards, and exchange programs that ensure learners across member states are prepared for a digitally integrated economy.



After Grow Digital training, Nenah Nushasanah from Indonesia, replaced plastic packaging for her seblak snacks with eco-friendly practices, asking customers to bring their own containers. She overcame initial resistance, cut her costs, and inspired her community to reduce plastic waste.

Conclusion

Go Digital ASEAN has demonstrated that expanding access to digital skills is both possible and impactful. With more than 400,000 MSME owners, workers, and underemployed youth trained across the region, the program helped communities strengthen their livelihoods and increase participation in the digital economy.

The program's impact reinforces the growing recognition that many policymakers and development partners already understand: providing tools is not enough. Meaningful progress requires practical, locally adapted training, delivered through trusted networks, and backed by supportive infrastructure and policy. GDA's success demonstrates that when governments, civil society, and the private sector work together, digital technology becomes a force for broader economic opportunity.

Sustaining this momentum will require continued investment in grassroots training models, stronger alignment across national and regional ecosystems, and a forward-looking approach that equips MSMEs to navigate emerging tools like AI and digital finance. The economic case for these investments is clear: supporting MSMEs to digitize drives job creation, strengthens local supply chains, and builds inclusive growth.

Continued investment in these grassroots enablers offers a high return by translating digital capacity into real income gains, enterprise growth, and economic resilience across the region. Governments, private sector leaders, and civil society can continue to catalyze economic growth and digital transformation—if we keep investing in the MSMEs who are powering it from the ground up.

About Go Digital ASEAN

The Go Digital ASEAN initiative broadens digital skills participation across the region, reaching individuals and communities with the most to gain from digital literacy. Endorsed by the ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (ACCMSME), the program is implemented by The Asia Foundation with funding from Google.org, Google's philanthropic arm.

About The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation is an international nonprofit organization working to solve the toughest social and economic challenges in Asia and the Pacific. Informed by more than 70 years of experience and deep local knowledge, we work with partners across more than 20 countries through 17 offices to improve lives and expand opportunities.

To learn more about the program, visit godigitalasean.org.

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