

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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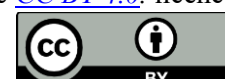
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ABSTRACT

The Southeast Asia region has continued to put great effort towards the development of poverty alleviation initiatives. A lot of these efforts have led to rapid economic growth and targeted initiatives. However, certain inequalities still exist among these countries. Even though a lot of research has been carried out on economic trends or programme outcomes, less systematic attention to institutional, deeper governance, and structural barriers still persists to shape the implementation of these programmes. Based on this, there is a need for a deeper understanding of both comparative and formulation of strategies to mitigate poverty in an integrated manner across the Southeast Asia region. As such, the current research addressed this gap by carrying out a systematic literature review of 20 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2024. The study's findings identified four main themes and eight sub-themes to reveal the consolidated current regional scenarios and recurring challenges faced. Furthermore, the result showed the contextual as well as broader institutional conditions that affected sustainability and programme delivery rather than merely programme results. The present study concludes that the Southeast Asia poverty reduction requires more than policy expansion or economic growth but strategic approaches that enhance institutional capacity, strengthen governance, and build resilience that mitigate shocks, as well as maintain diverse contexts of the region. The findings contribute to practical guidance for policymakers and academic debate on pursuing more sustainable and inclusive poverty strategies.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, poverty, governance, systematic literature review, implementation challenges



1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the Southeast Asia region has taken central development priorities as a step towards poverty reduction. Many activities, such as increased foreign direct investment (FDI), rapid economic growth, and targeted social policies, are some of the continuous efforts carried out towards lifting millions above international poverty lines, increasing living standards, and improving health and education across the region (Ahmad et al., 2019; Alam Siddiquee & Hamiduzzaman, 2021). Furthermore, regional integrations are being carried out to reinforce meaningful changes across the region, such as labour mobility, creating opportunities, and infrastructure development (Santos-Paulino et al., 2019). However, uneven benefits persist, as higher-income groups often capture greater advantages, which hinders the objectives of these programmes, except when there are explicit policies that promote inclusivity (Goh, 2025).

Available data have shown that, despite these strategic advances, significant disparities remain evident across the region. Between 2015 and 2023, countries such as Brunei and Singapore consistently ranked very high, as recorded by the Human Development Index (HDI) scores (Arisman, 2018; Sujahangir et al., 2020). Furthermore, while Thailand and Malaysia also fall into the high category (Arisman, 2018; Si et al., 2025), countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos all reported 10–30 per cent poverty rates, thus demonstrating low progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Sujahangir et al., 2020). Although there seems to be significant improvement in countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, certain elements suggest a decline in poverty reduction and HDI rankings (Arisman, 2018; Nguyen, 2022; Si et al., 2025).

Conversely, large segments of the population across the region remain vulnerable. Poverty persists in multiple forms, ranging from income insecurity, weak social protection, and limited access to education and healthcare (ASEAN, 2022). Even in relatively high-performing economies, deep inequalities are evidently seen between urban and rural communities, marginalised groups, as well as the broader population. Rural areas consistently experience higher poverty gaps and lower income than urban centres. Available statistics show that the rural poverty level is 1.23 times higher in Indonesia than in urban areas, which is mainly due to unequal access to productive resources and economic opportunities (Khamjalas, 2024a). In many instances, just mere infrastructure expansion, like the provision of electricity, which is one of the development programmes to alleviate poverty, has been seen as not able to reduce inequality, except that it is directly linked to income-generating activities (Khamjalas, 2024b). Additionally, there is evidence of educational disparities that continue to reinforce inequality and have significantly created regional gaps with rural populations lacking quality schooling (Imai & Malaeb, 2018). In Indonesia, as well as in the Philippines, there are urban-rural educational divides, which contributed substantially to overall expenditure inequality (Akita & Miyata, 2021). These structural disadvantages constrain upward mobility and perpetuate intergenerational poverty.

Based on this menace, the governments in Southeast Asia have attempted to address these challenges with various interventions, including economic growth strategies, rural development initiatives, social protection schemes, and targeted sectoral policies. This has yielded some significant poverty reduction in Vietnam and Malaysia through inclusive policy design, as well as innovative programme implementation leading to sustained growth (Manaf & Ibrahim, 2017; Pham & Mukhopadhyaya, 2022). This included many crucial social security systems, like pensions, healthcare coverage, and job-related benefits, which are carried out to reduce inequality, with varying effectiveness among countries (Cook & Pincus, 2014; Pattar & Kumar Mehta, 2024). Similarly, rural development, the promotion of non-farm employment opportunities and agricultural productivity remain central in countries with increasing rural populations (Akbar et al., 2018).

The question arises as to why, despite the strategic implementation of poverty alleviation programmes that have proven successful in various parts of Southeast Asia, inequalities still persist (Singh & Chudasama, 2020). The continuous inequalities reflect the nature of poverty in the region, which is represented by numerous economic factors (Michálek & Výboštok, 2019; Ncube et al., 2014; Ngubane et al., 2023), demographic and social conditions (Peng et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2024), institutional and political weaknesses (Brady, 2019, 2023; Kouadio & Gakpa, 2022), and external and environmental shocks (Angelsen & Dokken, 2018; Koo et al., 2021). Furthermore, cultural and psychological influences are also among the complex resilience-shaping behaviours and adaptation

strategies used to alleviate poverty (Park et al., 2025; Terol-Cantero et al., 2023). Based on this, Southeast Asian countries have taken poverty reduction as a crucial priority, ensuring political stability, economic growth, social equity, and that the people maintain a decent standard of living.

It is evident from the foregoing that even with extensive research on poverty alleviation in Southeast Asia countries, many of the studies seem fragmented and focus on country-specific programmes or economic drivers like FDI, government spending, and financial inclusion (Ahmad et al., 2019; Firmansyah & Kusreni, 2018; Wong et al., 2023). As such, there is an overlap with the wider political, institutional and structural barriers among countries in the region, thus overlooking the systematic challenges of understanding the implementation of these programmes among the countries. In this regard, policymakers face challenges if there is no consolidated perspective that addresses these interconnected barriers, inclusive strategies, and designs resilience. Accordingly, the present research carried out a systematic literature review (SLR) of poverty alleviation programmes in the Southeast Asia region. This was conducted through synthesising 20 peer-reviewed studies from 2020 to 2024 into four themes and eight sub-themes: The aim was to provide answers to “*What are the challenges in implementing poverty alleviation programmes in the region*”?

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The aim of a systematic literature review (SLR) is to answer a specific research question by critically appraising a comprehensive gathering of available studies in order to provide a summary that is reliable by identifying gaps or inconsistencies in the state of knowledge (Siddaway et al., 2019). The reduction of bias is ensured through SLR while improving the validity and dependability of results through employing a repeatable and open method. The effectiveness of this method ensures that all relevant evidence on a particular research phenomenon must be located, integrated, and critically assessed (Paul & Barari, 2022). Although numerous methods are available for carrying out a systematic literature review, the PRISMA 2020 approach is widely accepted and generally regarded as a benchmark (Page et al., 2021). Based on this, the current research used the PRISMA 2020 framework to ensure clear guidelines since it was a structured study. Methodologically, these guidelines ensured that the study was rigorous and thoroughly analysed. Accordingly, the current research SLR carefully followed the five steps (question formulation, locating studies, study selection and evaluation, analysis and synthesis, as well as reporting and using the results) outlined by a previous study (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009).

2.1 Question Formulation

In order to establish the scope of the present study and ensure consistency in identifying relevant publications, the Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes, and Context (PICOC) framework was applied (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Table 1 summarises the PICOC structure that guided the research question formulation for this review. The population of interest comprises stakeholders engaged in policy execution, including government agencies, NGOs, and community actors. The intervention refers to implementing poverty alleviation, without any fixed comparison specified, since studies were included regardless of whether they contrasted programme types or countries. The outcome emphasised the identification of barriers impeding effective implementation among Southeast Asia's diverse socio-political, institutional, rural, and urban contexts. Therefore, this study included all empirical studies on poverty alleviation implementation within the Southeast Asia region and focused on synthesising evidence of implementation challenges. Globally, poverty alleviation programmes often emphasise measurable gains in income or service coverage (Guerra et al., 2024; O'Donnell, 2024; Tang et al., 2022), but this review specifically focused on outcomes that constrain effectiveness in the Southeast Asia countries. Accordingly, this review was guided by the following research question (RQ): *What are the challenges in implementing poverty alleviation initiatives in Southeast Asia countries?*

Table 1: Summary of PICOC Structure

Database	Search Strings
Population (P)	Stakeholders
Intervention (I)	Poverty policy implementation
Comparison (C)	None

Outcomes (O)	Implementation challenges
Context (C)	Southeast Asia countries, covering both rural and urban settings and diverse socio-political environments.

2.2 Locating Studies

This research employed two reputable academic databases in order to identify relevant literature, ranging from Web of Science to Scopus. The main purpose of choosing these two platforms was for their extensive coverage, access to high-quality publications and comprehensive indexing (Baas et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021). According to Zhu and Liu (Zhu & Liu, 2020), the two databases are capable of reducing bias other than relying on a single source. The search strategy began by defining keywords and then searching for strings that aligned with the review question to identify relevant literature. Accordingly, key terms such as *poverty alleviation*, *poverty elimination*, and *poverty reduction*, as well as *challenges*, were used to capture a comprehensive range of literature. This ensures the identification of empirical studies that focus mainly on barriers to implementing poverty alleviation programmes. After this, the Boolean operators recommended by Denyer and Tranfield (2009) were applied to structure and refine the search. OR was used to combine synonyms within each concept, while AND linked concept blocks to restrict retrieval to studies on poverty-related programmes or interventions, implementation challenges, and the Southeast Asia context. Parentheses were used to make the Boolean logic explicit, and the complete search strings are reported in Table 2:

Table 2: The Search Strings

Database	Search Strings
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("poverty alleviation" OR "poverty reduction" OR "poverty elimination" OR "poverty eradication") AND (challenge OR challenges OR barrier OR barriers OR constraint OR constraints OR obstacle OR obstacles) AND (program OR programs OR programme OR programmes OR policy OR intervention OR interventions OR implementation OR delivery) AND ("Southeast Asia" OR ASEAN OR Malaysia OR Vietnam OR Singapore OR Philippines OR Myanmar OR Thailand OR Cambodia OR Indonesia OR Laos OR Brunei))
Web of Science	TS=(("poverty alleviation" OR "poverty reduction" OR "poverty elimination" OR "poverty eradication") AND (challenge OR challenges OR barrier OR barriers OR constraint OR constraints OR obstacle OR obstacles) AND (program OR programs OR programme OR programmes OR policy OR intervention OR interventions OR implementation OR delivery) AND ("Southeast Asia" OR ASEAN OR Malaysia OR Vietnam OR Singapore OR Philippines OR Myanmar OR Thailand OR Cambodia OR Indonesia OR Laos OR Brunei))

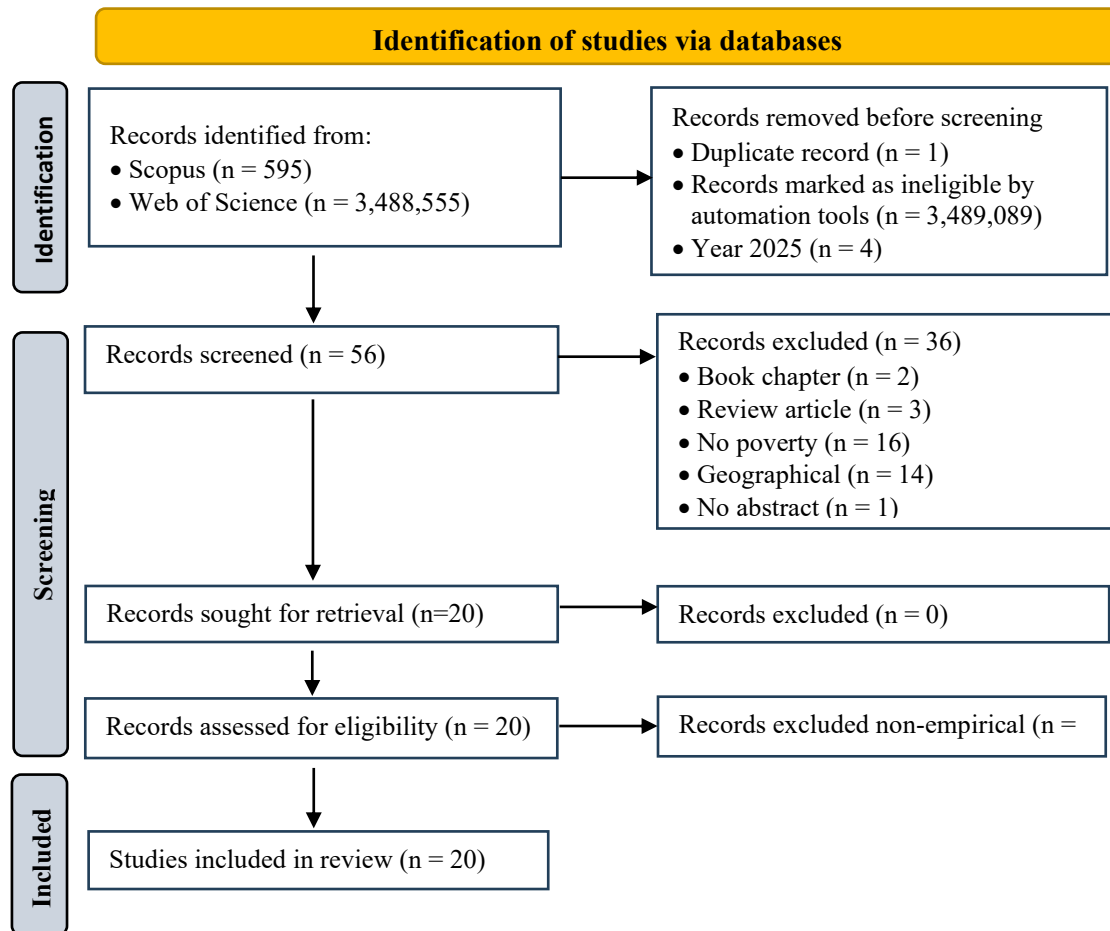
2.3 Study Selection and Evaluation

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for this review are outlined in Table 3, with concise parameters guiding the selection of empirical literature to ensure focus and consistency. Only articles from peer-reviewed journals published between 2020 and 2024 were considered to ensure the inclusion of recent research (Kraus et al., 2020). Eligible studies focused on poverty alleviation, elimination, or reduction with attention to implementation issues for poor households. The selected articles must be empirical, English-written, and available in full text. Other literature, such as conceptual or technical studies, review papers, and non-journal formats like thesis, conference proceedings or book chapters, were all excluded. Additionally, studies outside the Southeast Asia context or centred on middle-income groups were also omitted to ensure the study was within its scope.

Table 3: Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Year	From 2020 to 2024	Prior 2020 and after 2024
Scope (context and geographical)	Poverty alleviation, poverty elimination, poverty reduction, challenges, Southeast Asia context, focus on poor households	Not directly address poverty alleviation, poverty elimination, poverty reduction, or related implementation challenges, not Southeast Asia context, focus on other than poor households
Language	English	Non-English
Research type	Empirical	Review-based, conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and technical studies
Type of Document	Journal Article	Book chapter, series, monograph, thesis, conference proceeding, review
Text availability	Full text articles	Unable to access in full text

The search strings and selection criteria outlined earlier were applied to Scopus and Web of Science. A total of 3,489,150 records were initially retrieved across the two databases. Following automated retrieval and systematic screening, duplicates, ineligible records, and publications dated 2025 were excluded at the identification stage. In total, 56 records were screened by title and abstract. During screening, 36 publications were excluded for predefined reasons (e.g., incorrect document type, outside the scope, not poverty-focused, outside the ASEAN context, or missing abstract). Full texts were retrieved for 20 articles, all of which met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The study selection process and exclusion count at each stage are summarised in Figure 1.

**Fig. 1:** The systematic review process flowchart

The quality of each article was assessed to ensure the inclusion of robust studies, thereby establishing the overall rigour of the review and supporting its refinement as well as focus. Once the relevant high-quality publications were identified, data were extracted and summarised in a table before being analysed for similarities, differences, as well as patterns. This synthesis process was used to examine whether the findings were consistent or contradictory. The final data extraction was completed on 5 August 2025. Two researchers independently conducted the article search and selection, comparing their results to ensure that no relevant studies were missed. This process resulted in identifying 20 publications which were deemed relevant to the study. These selected publications met the established inclusion criteria and were subsequently assessed against three predefined quality evaluation criteria as follows:

- QA1: Is the topic addressed by the study pertinent to poverty alleviation challenges?
- QA2: Is the geographical context within Southeast Asia clearly described?
- QA3: Is the research methodology clearly explained?
- QA4: Is the data collection procedure clearly described?
- QA5: Is the data analysis method clearly described?

The quality of each paper was classified as high, medium, or low based on its score against the specified quality assessment criteria. Each study was scored based on the extent to which it met the quality criteria, such as 1 point for full compliance, 0.5 points for partial compliance, and 0 points if the criterion was not met. Studies receiving a total score of 3 or above were classified as high quality, those scoring between 1 and 3 as medium quality, and those scoring below 1 as low quality, which resulted in their exclusion from the review, as adapted from Nidhra et al. (2013). As shown in Table 4, all 20 selected articles achieved high-quality scores with a total score of at least 3, with no studies being excluded at this stage.

Table 4: Results of the quality assessment of the 20 selected studies.

Paper ID	QA1	QA2	QA3	QA4	QA5	Total
P1	1	1	0.5	0.5	1	4
P2	1	1	1	1	1	5
P3	1	1	1	1	1	5
P4	1	1	1	1	1	5
P5	1	1	1	1	0.5	4.5
P6	1	0.5	0.5	0.5	1	3.5
P7	1	0.5	1	0.5	1	4
P8	1	1	1	1	0.5	4.5
P9	1	1	1	1	1	5
P10	1	0.5	1	1	1	4.5
P11	1	1	0.5	0	0.5	3
P12	1	1	1	1	1	5
P13	1	1	1	1	1	5
P14	1	1	1	1	1	5
P15	1	1	1	1	1	5
P16	1	1	1	1	1	5
P17	1	1	0.5	0.5	0	3
P18	1	1	0.5	0.5	0	3
P19	1	1	1	0.5	0.5	4
P20	1	1	1	1	0.5	4.5

The following sections highlight the analysis and synthesis used to connect the study findings, followed by reporting results that present the problem, methods, and findings. Thereafter, conclude with insights, limitations, and recommendations.

3.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Selected Primary Studies

This section describes the descriptive accounts and analysis of challenges that produced the themes from 20 articles. The descriptive accounts highlight key characteristics, including the number of studies by country, year of publication, authors, article titles, and study context. The descriptive analysis (Figure 2) highlighted the geographical distribution of the selected 20 studies, which spanned six Southeast Asia countries, where Philippines (6 studies) emerged as the most frequently researched context, followed by Vietnam (4 studies), Indonesia (3 studies), Malaysia (3 studies), Singapore (2 studies), Cambodia (1 study), and Myanmar (1 study).

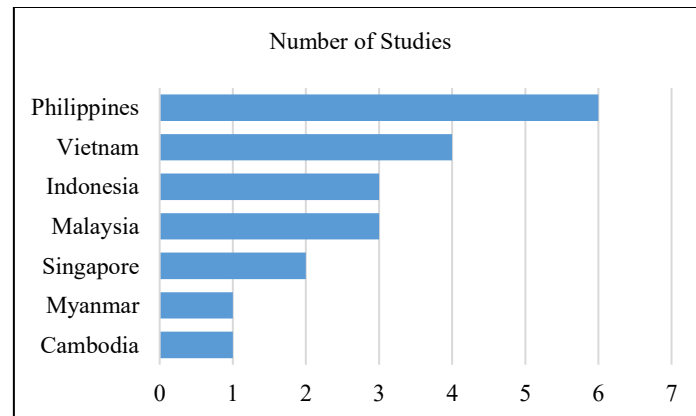


Fig. 2: Geographical Distribution among Southeast Asia Countries

Most studies were published between 2023 and 2024, including 2024 (7 studies) and 2023 (5 studies). While 60 per cent of the total publications mark the peak years, reflecting heightened scholarly attention to poverty alleviation challenges in the post-pandemic and disaster recovery periods (Figure 3).

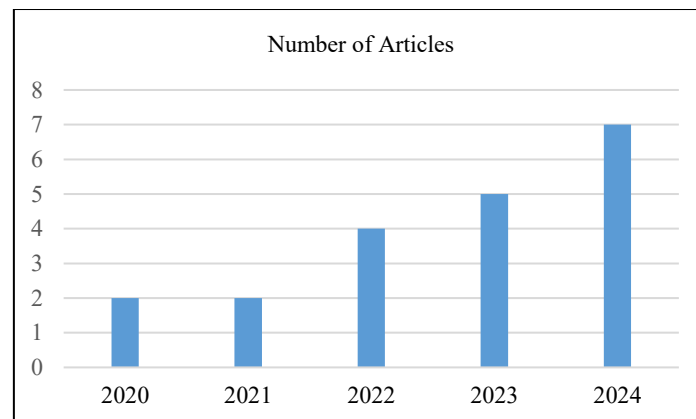


Fig. 3: Distribution of Articles by Year of Publication

Based on this, in order to streamline the process of synthesising data from selected studies, the following information was extracted and summarized in Table 5 within the results and discussion section: (1) author and year of publication; (2) title of the publication; (3) context of the study; (4) country; and (5) findings regarding the challenges in implementing poverty policy.

Table 5: Summary of Selected Studies on Poverty Implementation Challenges

Author(s)	Publication Title	Context of study	Country	Key Findings
Wibawa et al. (2024)	Towards Inter-Village Collaboration in Sustainable Economic Development: How Does Local Commitment and Participation Make Everything Appear Simple?	Poverty reduction through collaboration.	Indonesia	Absence of a dedicated local institution to manage partnerships.
Dodd et al. (2024)	Limits to Transformational Potential: Analysing Entitlement and Agency within a Conditional Cash Transfer Program in the Philippines	Conditional cash transfer programme	Philippines	Strict enforcement of programme conditionalities limits beneficiary agency.
Dung et al. (2024)	The impact of natural disaster on multidimensional poverty of rural households in Vietnam: The regulating role of social assistance	Rural households	Vietnam	Natural disasters increase multidimensional poverty and social assistance.
Nurlinah et al. (2024)	Comparative study of social welfare programme effectiveness perception in peri-urban and rural in Indonesia	Social assistance	Indonesia	Information gaps and coordination issues, programmes in urban area more successful than rural, broader targeting issues.
Samama and Bidad (2024)	Sustainability assessment of community-based enterprises in selected fragile and conflict affected areas in the Southern Philippines	Fragile, conflict-affected region	Philippines	Externally initiated community enterprises weaken local motivation and hinder sustainability
Wang et al. (2024)	Social safety net features in East Asia: A comparative analysis using the model family approach	Social safety nets	Singapore	Welfare model puts more burden on individuals, limiting help for the vulnerable.
Ariyanto and Nugraha (2024)	Population vs. Poverty Level in the Future in Indonesia: Holt's Linear Trend Method	Population and poverty forecasting	Indonesia	Slow pace of poverty rate offers policymakers to manage aids.
Cleofas (2023)	Internet access as a moderator of mental health and satisfaction with life during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from young Filipino undergraduates from income-poor households	Mental health during pandemic	Philippines	Mental health and internet access jointly enhance life satisfaction amid poverty.

Dinh et al. (2023)	Decoding the livelihood vulnerability of flood-prone communities in Vietnam: Implications for disaster risk reduction and sustainable rural development	Flood vulnerability	Vietnam	Low adaptive capacity drives greater poverty in flood-prone fishing communities.
Dung and Le (2023)	The relationship between government spending and poverty alleviation in emerging markets: empirical evidence from Vietnam	Government's poverty spending	Vietnam	Government spending reduces poverty but increase income inequality.
Tri and Thanh (2023)	Strategies for poverty reduction to meet the requirements of sustainable development	Achieving SDG1	Vietnam	Overemphasis on unconditional support without enhancing self-reliance.
Minten et al. (2023)	Agricultural value chains in a fragile state: The case of rice in Myanmar	Rice value chain	Myanmar	Rising prices, limited market access, and disrupted logistics worsen poverty
Antunes et al. (2022)	Sensitivity analysis and methodological choices on health-related impoverishment estimates in Cambodia, 2009–17	Health expenditure	Cambodia	Limited data quality and rarity of health impoverishment complicate measurement.
Hassan et al. (2022)	The effect of project management through e-business and garage sales on poverty reduction	University's students exploring e-business	Malaysia	Lack of financial resource and awareness of SDG1.
Salamzadeh et al. (2022)	Entrepreneurial universities and social capital: The moderating role of entrepreneurial intention in the Malaysian context	Youth unemployment among graduates	Malaysia	Graduate unemployment, weak entrepreneurship programmes, and evolving university processes.
Wen et al. (2022)	Hope in Low-Income Families - A Study of Family Hardiness in Singapore	Family's economic hardship	Singapore	Strengthening family-level hardiness, development and culture.
Andriesse and Lee (2021)	Resisting the coastal squeeze through village associations? Comparing environmental, organizational, and political challenges in Philippine seaweed-growing communities	Coastal seaweed livelihoods	Philippines	Environmental vulnerability, market failures, political complexities, and institutional weaknesses.
Alinsunurin (2021)	Governmentality and gendered realities: experiences from the	Conditional cash transfers programmes	Philippines	Conditionalities emphasise compliance over

	Philippines' cash transfer programme			empowerment and structural change.
Vaughan et al. (2020)	Enabling Action: Reflections upon Inclusive Participatory Research on Health with Women with Disabilities in the Philippines	Health of women with disabilities	Philippines	Ending funding increases the risk of returning to poverty.
Zakaria et al. (2020)	Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Microcredit Program in the Elevation of Borrowers' Quality of Life in Malaysia	Microcredit impact on programmes	Malaysia	Insufficient financial support and training weaken microcredit programmes.

3.2 Theme Distribution

The analysis phase focused on synthesising 20 selected research articles using a matrix format to review and summarise findings. This is followed by thematic analysis as a systematic method for identifying, categorising, and interpreting patterns in textual data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The approach provided a comprehensive overview of the studies, ensuring transparency in the review process (Hiebl, 2023), and revealed four overarching themes with eight sub-themes that reflected interconnected challenges in implementing poverty alleviation programmes in Southeast Asia. Table 6 shows the summary of challenges in implementing poverty alleviation programmes. Governance and institutional weakness, which represented the first theme, comprised four sub-themes, ranging from governance and stakeholder fragmentation, capacity gaps and weak institutions, to political and bureaucratic barriers, as well as lack of comprehensive national frameworks. While the second theme, which includes data, policy tools, and resources, addressed resource and fiscal constraints alongside weak data systems and targets gaps. On the other hand, the third theme captured socio-cultural, social and spatial barriers, with geographic obstacles to inclusive development. Finally, external shocks and vulnerabilities were present in the fourth theme to highlight the impacts of climate risks and exposure to shocks. All together, these themes and sub-themes provided a structured lens for understanding the region's complex barriers to poverty alleviation.

Table 6: Summary of Challenges in Implementing Poverty Alleviation Programmes

Theme	Sub-theme	Summary of Key Findings	Authors
Governance and Institutional Weakness	Governance and stakeholder fragmentation	Fragmented partnerships, weak community engagement, and politicised dynamics undermine sustainability and inclusivity of programmes.	Andriesse & Lee, 2021; Dodd et al., 2024; Wibawa et al., 2024
	Political and bureaucratic barriers	CCTs focus on compliance over empowerment; unclear rules and rigid enforcement erode trust, flexibility, and dignity.	Alinsunurin, 2021; Dodd et al., 2024
	Capacity gaps and weak institutions	Low education, weak entrepreneurship, and inadequate training limit effectiveness; youth, women, and PWDs remain vulnerable.	Nurlinah et al., 2024; Salamzadeh et al., 2022; Samama & Bidad, 2024; Vaughan et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2022; Zakaria et al., 2020
	Lack of comprehensive	Absence of integrated poverty strategies, poor targeting, and	Dung & Le, 2023; Tri & Thanh, 2023; Wang et al., 2024

Resources, Data, and Policy Tools	national frameworks	weak redistributive impact hinder equity-focused outcomes.	Hassan et al., 2022; Samama & Bidad, 2024; Vaughan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024
	Fiscal and resource constraints	Limited funding, donor withdrawal, and modest welfare systems weaken programme momentum and reduce self- reliance.	
Social and Spatial Barriers	Weak data systems and targeting gaps	Exclusion/inclusion errors, weak surveys, and inconsistent thresholds undermine accuracy and fairness in targeting.	Antunes et al., 2022; Ariyanto & Nugraha, 2024; Dodd et al., 2024; Nurlinah et al., 2024 Andriesse & Lee, 2021; Ariyanto & Nugraha, 2024; Cleofas, 2023; Hassan et al., 2022; Nurlinah et al., 2024; Samama & Bidad, 2024; Vaughan et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2022; Wibawa et al., 2024
	Socio-cultural and geographic barriers	Rural isolation, cultural norms, weak infrastructure, and digital divides reinforce exclusion, especially for women, youth, and students.	
External Shocks and Vulnerabilities	Climate risk and vulnerability to shocks	Climate disasters and political crises repeatedly undo progress, exposing fragile safety nets.	Andriesse & Lee, 2021; Dinh et al., 2023; N. Q. Dung et al., 2024; Minten et al., 2023

3.2.1 Governance and Institutional Weakness

The Southeast Asia countries' poverty alleviation programmes continue to be undermined by governance weaknesses attributed to fragmented decentralisation, partnerships, and competing political interests. These barriers disrupt coordination, weaken empowerment, erode trust, and leave beneficiaries dependent rather than resilient.

Accordingly, stakeholder and governance fragmentation often undermine collective efforts. For example, there is weak community engagement in Indonesia that limits local ownership and hinders programme sustainability because community passivity, individualism and traditionalism obstruct mobilisation with cooperation (Wibawa et al., 2024). Furthermore, capacity limitations, ranging from minimal mentoring and poor education to weak socialisation, represent a constraint on local organisations by lowering their role in economic development (Wibawa et al., 2024). A similar situation is seen in the Philippines, where fragility is pervasive in seaweed producer associations, as there continue to exist insufficient household-level support and politicised local dynamics that compromise long-term inclusivity (Andriesse & Lee, 2021). Accordingly, Indonesia is not the only country where coordination challenges persist; other nations, such as the Philippines, also have decentralised social and health service systems, producing unequal practices that undermine the implementation of these flagship programmes (Dodd et al., 2024).

Evidently, bureaucratic and political barriers are among the main challenges shaping poverty interventions more, thus representing instruments of control rather than empowerment. Also, conditional cash transfer is seen as one of the viable practices employed in the Philippines over gender structural or equality reform. These practices no doubt reinforce behavioural regulation, while deeper social outcomes have been neglected (Alinsunurin, 2021). The problem with this type of programme lies with transparency, as eligibility rules are unclear, which invites sentiment of politicisation, trust and eroding fairness in such a country (Dodd et al., 2024). Such programmes also experience delays in cash disbursement and lack of enforcement, thereby reducing flexibility, particularly for seasonal workers, and reinforcing reliance by making support appear discretionary rather than a right (Dodd et al., 2024). In the long run, such rigid practices reduce dignity, agency and positioning recipients as passive individuals instead of active participants in the nation (Dodd et al., 2024).

Equally, human capacity and weak institutional gaps limit the sustainability of interventions. For instance, in rural areas, restricted mobility and low education blunt the effectiveness of social assistance (Nurlinah et al., 2024). In some countries, such as Malaysia, universities have underdeveloped entrepreneurial processes, which hinder the transformation of graduates despite significant investment in education (Nurlinah et al., 2024; Salamzadeh et al., 2022). At the same time, enterprises that comply with regulations at the community level still face insufficient training and continuity gaps, which restrict their ability to scale up (Samama & Bidad, 2024). Other than that, programmes such as microcredit schemes in Malaysia even fail to empower borrowers, as training and financial support seem inadequate (Zakaria et al., 2020). Beyond these programme-specific limitations, broader issues such as women's economic insecurity, youth unemployment, and weak social protection for citizens with disabilities further entrench poverty, especially during crises (Vaughan et al., 2020). However, increasing financial pressures in Singapore continue to undermine long-term recovery and erode household resilience (Wen et al., 2022).

This and many other reasons show that many countries in Southeast Asia still lack comprehensive national frameworks with clear equity-driven priorities and accountability. Fragmented approaches continue in services such as education, digital access, and health, while poorly targeted government spending risks widening inequalities (Dung & Le, 2023; Tri & Thanh, 2023). Furthermore, Singapore's inconsistent welfare ideologies undoubtedly weaken redistributive impact even with broad coverage (Wang et al., 2024). Overall, these gaps among the nations highlight systemic failures in aligning goals, sustaining inclusive poverty strategies, addressing inequities, and underscoring the pressing need for integrated national frameworks.

3.2.2 Resources, Data, and Policy Tools

Another challenge faced by poverty alleviation efforts in Southeast Asian countries is resource shortages, as well as inadequate policy and data instruments, which continue to limit the effectiveness and reach of poverty programmes. Limited support mechanisms and chronic underfunding remain recurring barriers as many community-based enterprises (CBEs) comply with regulations in order to receive some government assistance. However, the received support is often insufficient, thus long-term momentum is hindered due to the fact that once external aid is withdrawn, programmes reliant on donor funding struggle (Samama & Bidad, 2024). In another vein, women with disabilities in the Philippines have been abandoned to take responsibility for the financial burden of sustaining programme gains, even though they do not have the resources needed for empowerment and advocacy (Vaughan et al., 2020). Even in wealthier contexts like Singapore, limited redistributive policies and modest benefit levels weaken the welfare system's capacity to lower poverty meaningfully (Wang et al., 2024). At the same time, financial hardship in Malaysia prevents youth from pursuing income-generating ventures such as informal retail or e-business, narrowing opportunities for self-reliance (Hassan et al., 2022).

Evidently, in Southeast Asia, it is significant that precise and accurate data remain a critical shortcoming. For example, the Philippines Listahanan system's periodic updates often fail to capture the fluid nature of poverty, limiting programme inclusivity and excluding eligible households (Dodd et al., 2024). Other than that, broader targeting challenges, such as inclusion and exclusion errors, further weaken efficiency and fairness (Nurlinah et al., 2024), while recipients frequently report dissatisfaction with aid allocation and level of accuracy, reinforcing the notions of unequal support (Nurlinah et al., 2024). Household surveys, like the CSES in Cambodia, overlook health-related costs, while poverty estimates fluctuate depending on whether national, food-based thresholds or the World Bank are applied, complicating cross-study comparisons (Antunes et al., 2022). Also, regional disparities are poorly measured as a result of the absence of consistent rural–urban price deflators, which usually distort cost-of-living adjustments (Antunes et al., 2022). Although only reliance on poverty estimates neglects multidimensional drivers like health, education, and jobs, it limits policy capacity to respond effectively (Ariyanto & Nugraha, 2024).

3.2.3 Social and Spatial Barriers

Other than resource and institutional challenges, the presence of poverty is reinforced as a result of spatial and social divides that limit inclusiveness. Countries like Indonesia have faced stark limitations in education, mobility, and economic activity around their rural districts, such as Central Mamuju, compared to peri-urban areas, highlighting how spatial divides undermine even opportunities (Nurlinah et al., 2024). This imbalance continues to increase due to rapid urbanisation as rural poverty persists even with the presence of growth (Ariyanto & Nugraha, 2024). Remoteness allows intermediaries to dominate market exchanges among coastal seaweed farmers, making farmers passive price takers (Andriesse & Lee, 2021). Also, community-based enterprises in isolated municipalities are confronted with armed violence, poor infrastructure, and clan conflicts, which persist to disrupt the operational stability and livelihood continuity (Samama & Bidad, 2024). These groups also face socio-cultural tensions that require balancing economic aspirations along religious or spiritual values, making financial sustainability difficult to achieve (Samama & Bidad, 2024). Furthermore, local traits of passivity, individualism and traditionalism continue to obstruct collective mobilisation, weakening the foundation for development (Wibawa et al., 2024). In a most acute situation, this is more experienced by vulnerable groups as women with disabilities often exit advocacy roles due to resource shortages, caregiving burdens, and geographic marginalisation (Vaughan et al., 2020). Connectivity gaps deepen exclusion as poor internet access restricts students' access to services and learning in remote regions (Cleofas, 2023). In Singapore, cultural interpretations complicate responses even in urbanised settings; low-income children view resilience differently, thus complicating strategies to foster coping and having hope (Wen et al., 2022). Similarly, in countries such as Malaysia, university students remain unaware of Sustainable Development Goal 1 (SDG1) initiatives, highlighting a gap between socio-economic and youth awareness challenges (Hassan et al., 2022). These spatial and cultural barriers reveal how place, as well as social context, interact to limit the inclusiveness of poverty alleviation policies and reinforce vulnerability.

3.2.4 External Shocks and Vulnerabilities

Southeast Asia countries' poverty alleviation programmes are highly vulnerable to external shocks. These programs are sensitive to various crises, such as climate disasters and political instability, which sometimes undermine continuity and show the fragility of safety nets. In coastal regions, recurring events like El Niño, typhoons, soil salinity, and land subsidence often devastate seaweed farms, leaving households with severe livelihood losses as well as little financial protection (Andriesse & Lee, 2021). Additionally, destructive floods heighten poverty risks for fishing-dependent households, whose limited land, weak food storage, flood-prone Quang Phuoc, and poor healthcare access in Vietnam deepen their vulnerability (Dinh et al., 2023). The nature of disaster is also decisive, as droughts sometimes impose harsher consequences on poor households than storms or floods, underscoring the need for disaster-specific social assistance strategies (Dung et al., 2024). These show the crucial comprehensive interventions that address the multidimensional risks faced across different contexts in rural households (Dung et al., 2024). Beyond climate risks, elements of systemic shocks are another strain in Myanmar. This is evident as the 2021 coup triggered sharp rises in rice prices due to economic instability, worsening poverty for already fragile rice-dependent households (Minten et al., 2023). These shocks underscore the need for more resilient systems, particularly through poverty alleviation programs, to adapt over time.

Taken together, the themes identified in this review can be situated within broader theories of poverty and governance. From an institutional perspective, recurring fragmentation, weak enforcement capacity, and inconsistent targeting suggest that implementation outcomes are shaped by the strength of formal rules, coordination norms, and shared understandings across implementing actors (Scott, 2014). Complementing this, the capability approach highlights that implementation barriers are not only administrative or fiscal constraints, but also limits on people's real opportunities to access services, convert support into improved well-being, and withstand shocks (Komarawati et al., 2025; Smith & Frankenberger, 2018). Viewed through these lenses, the review highlights that effective poverty alleviation necessitates both stronger institutional arrangements for coordinated delivery and enabling conditions that enhance agency, inclusion, and resilience.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This review underscores the interrelated and complex challenges faced by poverty alleviation programmes in Southeast Asian countries. The synthesis of 20 studies highlights four overarching themes, ranging from governance and institutional weaknesses to social and spatial barriers, resource and data constraints, and external shocks and vulnerabilities. These challenges are mutually reinforcing as fragmented cultural norms, governance, weak targeting, insufficient resources, and climate risks undermine programme effectiveness. There are identified isolated issues like integration of fragmented evidence into a single thematic framework in previous studies, which is the key contribution of this review to offer a comparative lens on implementation barriers across the Southeast Asia region. Collectively, the evidence shows the urgent need for coherent strategies that improve coordination, strengthen institutional capacity, and ensure that interventions are sensitive and resilient as well as to the context of shocks.

Just like any study, the review is not complete without its limitations. The present study relies solely on peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2024 in English, excluding local-language works, earlier studies, and grey literature that may provide deeper community-level insights. Methodological differences are another limitation of this study because the usage of qualitative case studies in quantitative assessments may introduce inconsistencies, limiting comparability across contexts. Furthermore, ground-level evaluations or unpublished policy reports are not included, which could enrich the understanding of lived implementation challenges.

It is recommended for future research to focus more closely on governance and institutional weaknesses, as this theme encompasses the broadest range of barriers. Issues such as political interference, fragmented partnerships, weak institutional capacity, and the absence of comprehensive national frameworks consistently undermine programme delivery. Another important insight from this review is the recognition of governance as the most critical cross-cutting challenge, which sharpens the focus for future comparative research in Southeast Asia. Deeper studies of governance structures, institutional reforms, and comprehensive national strategies could enhance both theoretical knowledge and practical guidance for creating inclusive, equitable, and adaptive frameworks for poverty alleviation in the region.

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