standard chartered foundation

Oceans of opportunity

Unlocking jobs, growth and prosperity through ASEAN's ocean food systems

Today, young people across ASEAN are seeking opportunities to build meaningful careers, contribute to their communities and shape a more sustainable, resilient future. Yet many continue to face barriers to accessing the skills, networks and support needed to participate in emerging sectors.

Standard Chartered Foundation was established to address this challenge, enabling jobs and opportunities for under-served young people, and helping to ensure that the next generation is equipped not just to find jobs, but to lead and innovate within the economies of the future.

As we scale our work and impact across markets, we're committed to building and strengthening the systems that will help young people to develop skills, build sustainable livelihoods and participate in and shape economic growth, driving impact and prosperity globally.

Tanuj Kapilashrami

Group Chief Operating Officer,
Standard Chartered

Trustee, Standard Chartered Foundation

Introduction

In 2025, Standard Chartered Foundation announced a USD5million commitment to create and support jobs in the ocean economy across ASEAN. This paper shares a high-level view on what is required to help ASEAN's ocean food systems generate inclusive employment and entrepreneurship for young people and highlights emerging opportunities to strengthen the region's future of work, sustainable growth and prosperity.

ASEAN could become a global hub for employment in the sustainable ocean economy

The ocean economy is a critical driver of global growth, jobs and prosperity. Today, it generates approximately USD2.6 trillion in economic value annually and supports more than 100 million full-time equivalent jobs worldwide.[1]

The ocean also underpins a range of foundational systems that economies and societies depend on. Ocean food systems, for example, which encompass the interconnected activities involved in producing, harvesting, processing, distributing, and consuming food from marine environments, rely on healthy oceans.

When marine ecosystems degrade, the impacts are felt across entire value chains through declining productivity, reduced incomes, increased food insecurity, and fewer employment opportunities.

This relationship underscores how economic growth, employment and ocean ecosystem health are deeply interconnected. Therefore, if managed properly, a sustainable ocean economy could support shared growth and up to 184 million jobs globally by 2050.[2]

However, if managed poorly, the collapse of marine ecosystems will be devastating for economies and livelihoods globally.

This relationship is particularly significant in ASEAN. Home to more than 700 million people, the region sits at the heart of the global ocean economy. With approximately 34% of the world's coral reefs, 35% of its mangroves, and one-third of global seagrass beds, the ASEAN region is one of the most important centres of marine biodiversity.

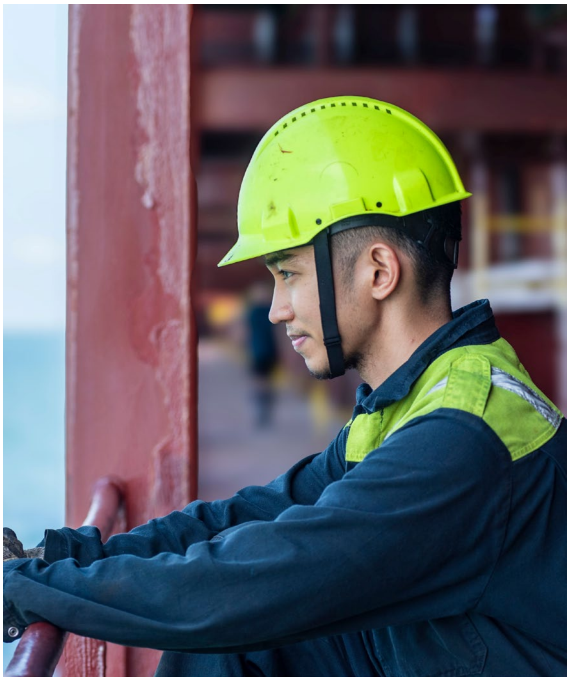
As a result, the health of ASEAN's marine ecosystems is inextricably linked to livelihoods and the long-term growth of its economies.

Yet the region is among the most vulnerable globally to climate change, biodiversity loss, overfishing, and ocean degradation. How the region manages the future of its ocean economy will shape not only the health of its marine ecosystems, but also its ability to create jobs and drive inclusive economic growth.

For the region's large and growing youth population, this presents a significant but underutilised opportunity for employment and entrepreneurship.

Recognising this opportunity and following its USD5 million commitment to support and advance economic inclusion across ASEAN, Standard Chartered Foundation is exploring a regional youth employment initiative focused on ocean food systems.

The aim of this initiative, which has a strong focus on gender and supporting women, is to help ensure the region's sustainable ocean economy creates high-quality, accessible jobs for young people, with Standard Chartered Foundation acting as a connector or catalyst that turns existing activity into coherent youth employment pathways that support commerce and long-term prosperity.



1. 10 ocean economy facts you need to know, OECD, https://www.oecd.org/en/blogs/2025/03/10-ocean-economy-facts-you-need-to-know.html [21/07/2026]
2. 7 Shifts That Could Unlock Millions of Blue Jobs in the Ocean Economy, WRI, How a Sustainable Ocean Economy Could Employ Millions of Blue Jobs | World Resources Institute [21/07/2026]
3. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Gender, Gender in fisheries and aquaculture | Gender | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [21/07/2026]

Strengthening the enabling environment for youth employment in the ocean economy

Research commissioned by Standard Chartered Foundation and led by Conservation International suggests the challenge in creating high quality, accessible jobs for young people in the ocean economy is not a lack of opportunity, but a lack of connection.

Ocean food systems have strong potential to generate employment, yet too few young people can access high quality, future ready careers. Awareness of the sector remains low, career pathways are fragmented, and much employment is informal.

Women play critical roles across ocean food value chains but continue to be concentrated in lower paid and less secure work. Given this context, Standard Chartered Foundation will therefore focus on where and how opportunities can be created for women in particular, who comprise the majority (over 50%) of workers in small scale fisheries.[3]

Across ASEAN, governments, businesses, NGOs, investors and research institutions are already supporting different parts of this ecosystem. However, these efforts often operate in isolation, focusing on individual challenges such as skills, finance or enterprise development rather than connecting them into clear pathways to employment.

By strengthening this enabling environment, Standard Chartered Foundation aims to help unlock a more skilled, inclusive and resilient workforce, ensuring ASEAN is not only home to globally important marine ecosystems, but also to the jobs, businesses and economic growth that a sustainable and resilient ocean economy can deliver.

1. 10 ocean economy facts you need to know, OECD, https://www.oecd.org/en/blogs/2025/03/10 ocean economy facts you need to know.html [21/07/2026]
2. 7 Shifts That Could Unlock Millions of Blue Jobs in the Ocean Economy, WRI, How a Sustainable Ocean Economy Could Employ Millions of Blue Jobs | World Resources Institute [21/07/2026]
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ASEAN's ocean food systems sit at a critical inflection point. The region combines strong natural capital, significant production capacity, and a large, youthful workforce with growing demand for sustainable and resilient food systems. At the same time, persistent structural constraints limit the translation of the sector's potential into inclusive, high-quality employment.

These constraints are not isolated. They are systemic and mutually reinforcing, shaping both current employment outcomes and the region's ability to transition towards a more sustainable and future-ready ocean economy. Opportunities for youth employment, and enterprise growth remain under-realised.

This creates a clear and timely opportunity for Standard Chartered Foundation and other ecosystem actors to play an additional, catalytic role. There is strong potential to add value by strengthening connections across the system: bridging gaps between training and jobs, research and industry, enterprises and finance, and local initiatives and regional platforms.

By targeting structural gaps, there is an opportunity to unlock greater impact from existing efforts, accelerate the transition towards more sustainable and inclusive ocean food systems, and support the development of a new generation of employment and enterprise pathways across the region.

Nalini Tarakeshwar

Global Head,
Standard Chartered Foundation
and Corporate Philanthropy

Assessing job potential across ocean food systems in ASEAN

Ocean food systems and associated processing, logistics, and market infrastructure, are central to economic and social development across ASEAN. They underpin food security, support livelihoods, and contribute materially to employment and trade.

While ASEAN is a major global producer of aquatic foods, employment remains concentrated in upstream and lower-value segments of the economy. However, evolving market requirements are reshaping labour demand, creating new roles across the value chain. Standard Chartered Foundation has mapped ocean food system sectors across ASEAN to help identify critical areas of focus for future job opportunities.

Table 1. Ocean food system sectors in ASEAN and their employment potential

Segment	Activities	Jobs (current)	Job opportunities (future)
Capture Fisheries	Harvesting wild fish and seafood	Fishers, crew, landing site workers, traders	Traceability officers, digital catch monitoring, compliance supervisors
Aquaculture (Shrimp, Fish)	Hatchery, grow-out farming, feed supply	Farm workers, technicians, feed operators	Biosecurity managers, data analysts, farm management systems operators
Seaweed Aquaculture	Farming, drying, aggregation	Smallholder farmers, post-harvest handlers	Quality grading, aggregation managers, downstream processing technicians
Processing & Manufacturing	Cleaning, grading, packaging, export preparation	Factory workers, sorters, packers	Quality assurance (QA), food safety compliance, production supervisors
Cold Chain & Logistics	Storage, transport, export	Warehouse operators, transport handlers	Cold-chain managers, logistics coordinators, export compliance officers
Trade, Finance & Innovation	Export, certification, financing, technology	Traders, brokers	Sustainability certification specialists, ESG officers, digital marketing, fintech-enabled trade services

> Healthy oceans underpin sustainable development, jobs and economies. Our research with Standard Chartered Foundation shows that investing in sustainable ocean food systems can create quality jobs for young people while protecting the ecosystems that communities and economies depend upon. Conservation and economic opportunity are not competing priorities, they are mutually reinforcing.

Dr. Sebastian Troëng

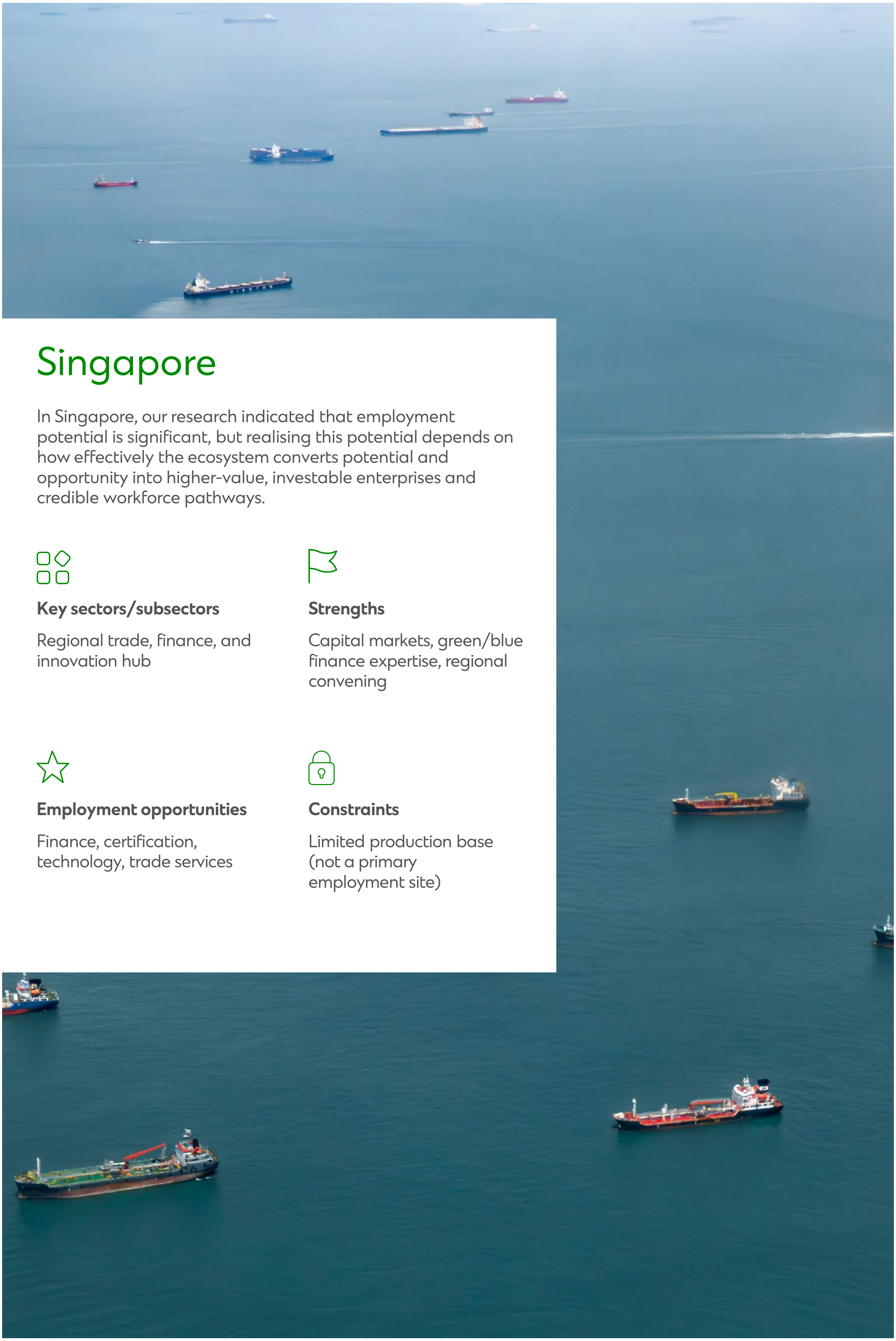
CEO, Conservation International

CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

Early snapshots across ASEAN

Standard Chartered Foundation will focus on four core markets within the ocean economy (Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia), focusing on driving systems change to create opportunities for under-served young people.

An early snapshot of the future of work in the ocean economy across these markets is provided on the following pages, highlighting potential areas of focus for this work.



Singapore

In Singapore, our research indicated that employment potential is significant, but realising this potential depends on how effectively the ecosystem converts potential and opportunity into higher-value, investable enterprises and credible workforce pathways.

Key sectors/subsectors

Regional trade, finance, and innovation hub

Strengths

Capital markets, green/blue finance expertise, regional convening

Employment opportunities

Finance, certification, technology, trade services

Constraints

Limited production base (not a primary employment site)

Indonesia

Our research highlighted that Indonesia presents significant scale potential, particularly around employability opportunities in seaweed and aquaculture. However, value capture remains concentrated in upstream production, with limited downstream processing and formalisation at community level.

Key sectors/subsectors

Capture fisheries, shrimp aquaculture, seaweed (global production leader)

Strengths

Large production scale, extensive coastal communities, strong policy focus on blue economy

Employment opportunities

Seaweed aggregation & processing; shrimp farm management, traceability, downstream product development

Constraints

Fragmented supply chains, raw exports, weak aggregation, enterprise governance gaps, limited investment readiness

Vietnam

Vietnam stood out in our research with its stronger value chain integration when compared to markets elsewhere in the region, but faces constraints in scaling small and medium sized businesses beyond mid-tier scale to support jobs and growth.

Key sectors/subsectors

Shrimp aquaculture (which makes up much of the market), seafood processing & export

Strengths

Strong processing and export capacity, integration into global markets

Employment opportunities

Quality assurance, export compliance, farm digitization, certification services

Constraints

Enterprise capability gaps, uneven SME investment readiness, workforce upskilling needs, financing gaps for growth-stage firms

Malaysia

Our research showed that Malaysia presents strong institutional infrastructure but requires stronger youth-to-enterprise pathways and value chain upgrading to support and scale employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Key sectors/subsectors

Fisheries, aquaculture, emerging seaweed, processing and trade

Strengths

Skilled workforce base, growing ecosystem intermediaries, structured employer platforms

Employment opportunities

Seaweed value-addition, aquaculture innovation, logistics & certification roles

Constraints

Limited structured youth employment mechanisms, SME financing gaps, uneven coordination between training and industry demand

Strengthening ocean food systems across the region

Emerging findings across these markets highlight that inclusive youth employment in ocean food systems is not constrained by a lack of activity. Across the region, governments, NGOs, investors, intermediaries, industry actors and research institutions are already advancing related work through:

- Policy development and sector planning,
- Livelihoods programmes and skills training,
- Enterprise support and access to finance,
- Conservation finance, research and innovation.

The challenge is that these efforts are often disconnected. Stakeholders are not consistently coordinated or aligned, which limits their collective ability to create coherent pathways into sustainable employment. The enabling environment is therefore best understood not as absent, but as fragmented.

Building the conditions for quality jobs

Realising the opportunity for employment, sustainable growth and prosperity, and unlocking the full potential of the ocean economy, will require an enabling environment that connects stakeholder efforts and supports sector growth alongside inclusive employment.

This means ensuring that future jobs are not only created, but are higher quality, more resilient and accessible to under-served young people.

Working across the region, Standard Chartered Foundation intends to support stronger alignment to help create and facilitate these opportunities for communities, markets and businesses, and the natural systems upon which both depend.

The challenge before us is not simply job creation, but to create accessible pathways into quality employment and entrepreneurship for young people.

As an international bank with a strong presence across most ASEAN markets, we see enormous potential to support innovative approaches that equip young people with skills, connect them to emerging opportunities and, together with like-minded partners, build and strengthen local and global ecosystems.

A sustainable ocean economy can become a powerful engine for both economic growth and social mobility across ASEAN when the collective power of partnerships is harnessed to scale and catalyse impact.

Patrick Lee

CEO for Singapore and CEO, ASEAN and South Asia

Trustee, Standard Chartered Foundation

The sustainable blue economy offers a major opportunity to align economic growth, environmental stewardship and social inclusion. At Standard Chartered, we've developed innovative financial solutions that support ocean health and sustainable development. Our debt conversion transaction for marine conservation in The Bahamas in 2025 showed how finance can unlock resources at scale to protect critical ecosystems and support long-term prosperity.

Alongside Standard Chartered Foundation, this experience gives us insight into the opportunities and challenges of building a sustainable ocean economy. By combining the Bank's sustainable finance expertise, public and private sector relationships, and the Foundation's focus on economic inclusion, we can help unlock its potential for young people across ASEAN.

Marisa Drew

Chief Sustainability Officer

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