

Bibliometric analysis of income inequality in ASEAN countries

Hui Wei You^{1,2}, Bee Wah Yap^{2*}, and Hajah Mahuran Saro Dato' Haji Sariki³

¹*School of Economic and Management, Xiamen University Malaysia, Malaysia*

²*Centre for Research Consultancy, UNITAR International Malaysia, Malaysia*

³*Group Government Engagement & Facilitation and Women, DEI & Work-Life Practices, Talent Corporation Malaysia (TalentCorp), Malaysia*

* Corresponding author: bee.wah@unitar.my

Abstract

Income inequality affects economic and social development within a nation. This study examines income inequality trends, patterns, and determinants in ASEAN countries. A PRISMA systematic review was conducted on articles from Web of Science and Scopus publications. A total of 555 papers out of 1,500 publications were selected for bibliometric analysis. The analysis covers four time periods: 1979-2000, 2001-2010, 2011-2020, 2021-2024. Income Distribution Theory was found to be the dominant theoretical lens, while Journal of Asian Economics and Singapore Economic Review are leading journals. The income inequality focus shifted away from the Philippines and Malaysia (1979-2000) to Vietnam and Malaysia (2001-2010). In 2011-2020, Indonesia, economic growth, poverty and policy interventions were of interest, while in 2021-2024, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia continue to be the focus countries. The Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Brunei are relatively under-researched ASEAN nations. Recent research increasingly combines economic growth, finance, and sustainability. Progressive wage policies, such as Malaysia's Progressive Wage Policy and Singapore's SkillsFuture are designed to reduce wage disparities. More robust research is needed to address labor market inefficiencies, wealth concentration, and structural barriers to inclusive economic policy in education and entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Income inequality, ASEAN, Progressive wage policy, Bibliometric analysis, Thematic analysis.

Introduction

Income inequality in the ASEAN region continues to be a major concern, reflecting uneven economic growth, access to resources, and social mobility among member countries (Syadullah et al., 2019; Ghosh, 2020). While there has been notable economic advancement in the last several decades, the benefits of such growth have not been equitably shared, resulting in an increasing disparity between high- and low-income segments (Azam and Raza, 2018; Munir and Bukhari, 2020). These inequalities are especially stark in developing ASEAN countries, where a large share of the labor force remains employed in low-paid and informal jobs (Nurazi and Usman, 2019; Thye et al., 2021), restricting upward economic mobility (Ibrahim, 2018; Husaini et al., 2024).

Several structural factors shape income inequality in the region. Differences in labor market structures are key, with some economies having a predominance of high-productivity sectors and others a high dependence on low-skilled labor with low wage increases (Kusnic and DaVanzo, 1982). Differences in access to and quality of education also pose obstacles to skills acquisition, perpetuating income gaps across generations (Hutchinson, 2017). Government policies, including tax structures, wage controls, and social welfare programs, also significantly affect income distribution (Mahadevan et al., 2017; Rivera, 2020). In other ASEAN countries, limited access to finance exacerbates the issue because lower-income classes and small enterprises cannot access funds to move forward economically (Pritchard and Keen, 2016; Herianti and Marundha, 2024).

In addition, globalization and technological changes have uneven effects across ASEAN countries. Although technology-driven sectors have opened up new economic possibilities in advanced economies, they have also replaced old jobs in lower-income economies, exacerbating wage inequalities (Estudillo et al., 2000; Sitthiyot and Holasut, 2024). Similarly, such environmental issues as global warming and the exhaustion of natural resources affect the rural and poor communities disproportionately, further reducing their economic opportunities (Onphanhdala and Philavong, 2021; Aryal et al., 2024).

With these complications, policy interventions aimed at reducing income inequality have become increasingly important in ASEAN. The Progressive Wage Policy (PWP) is one of these policies and aims at establishing wage frameworks that offer decent wages and income growth, particularly to low-paid employees (Lim, 2022; Goh et al., 2023). PWP may help reduce income disparities and enhance economic sustainability through its relationship between wages and skills, productivity, and career development. Yet, the effectiveness of PWP in the different ASEAN economies is still understudied (Reyes, 2019; Vechsuruck and Pratoomchat, 2024).

Although the literature on income inequality is increasing across the world, there remains limited systematic understanding of how inequality studies have evolved within the ASEAN region. Existing studies are more inclined towards particular national settings or empirical determinants of inequality, but few have examined the intellectual organization, thematic evolution, and patterns of scholarly collaboration of inequality research in the ASEAN as a regional research domain.

In addition, ASEAN is a unique institutional and developmental context characterized

by diverse economic structures, heterogeneous welfare systems, and varying redistributive policies across member states.

This institutional diversity, marked by varying levels of economic development, and fragmented policy frameworks shape not only inequality outcomes but also the direction and structure of academic research, as reflected in the uneven thematic and geographic distribution identified in this study.

Such institutional variations influence ASEAN income inequality research. The existing literature reviews remain quite disjointed and descriptive, lacking a systematic mapping of knowledge production, prevailing research themes, and theoretical orientations in ASEAN income inequality scholarship.

Unlike broader global inequality literature, which is often dominated by redistribution debates, welfare-state frameworks, and class-based inequality discussions, ASEAN inequality scholarship demonstrates a more fragmented and policy-driven trajectory shaped by uneven economic development, institutional heterogeneity, and varying redistributive capacities across member states. This creates distinctive patterns of thematic evolution and geographic knowledge production that differ from global inequality research.

To fill this gap in knowledge, the current research focuses on three critical research questions: (1) What are the most critical dimensions and determinants of income inequality among ASEAN countries? (2) What are the key research trends, seminal publications, and scholarly outputs on income inequality among ASEAN countries? (3) What are the underpinning theories in income inequality research?

In order to answer these questions, this study employs bibliometric analysis to systematically map the intellectual structure, thematic development, and collaboration patterns of income inequality research within ASEAN countries. Bibliometric analysis provides a distinctive contribution to inequality scholarship by revealing intellectual fragmentation, thematic evolution, and institutional influences on knowledge production that conventional empirical inequality studies often overlook. Through synthesizing existing scholarship, the research offers a comprehensive overview of the evolution of inequality research in the region and identifies emerging research directions.

Comparative analysis of income inequality research within the ASEAN region provides valuable insights into the factors influencing inequality and their associated policy implications. Further, this paper aims to shed light on theoretical constructs that guide the research on income inequality in ASEAN countries, and propose ways to enhance standardization, accuracy of reporting, and improving harmonization across boundaries.

Through the use of bibliometric analysis, this study goes beyond descriptive mapping to provide a theory-informed interpretation of income inequality research in ASEAN. It contributes to the expanding literature by analytically linking bibliometric patterns to major theoretical perspectives, including neoclassical, political economy, and structural inequality frameworks. In doing so, it offers deeper insights into the evolution of research themes and provides meaningful implications for policymakers, researchers,

and stakeholders in promoting inclusive and sustainable economic development in ASEAN countries.

Specifically, it demonstrates how the evolution of research themes in ASEAN reflects shifts in theoretical emphasis from growth-based explanations toward institutional and policy-driven perspectives. This provides a clearer conceptual positioning of ASEAN inequality research within global inequality scholarship.

Literature Review

The Role of Income Inequality in ASEAN Economics

Income inequality plays a central role in shaping the economic and social structure of ASEAN countries. It affects labor markets, growth, poverty, and general social stability (Goh et al., 2023). In this regard, the more unequal the distribution of income, the lower the economic growth, social unrest, and fewer opportunities for the masses (Hutchinson, 2017; Pritchard and Keen, 2016). Conversely, a more equitable income distribution can increase the sustainable growth and the resilience of the economy (Aryal et al., 2024; Lim, 2022; Reyes, 2019).

Theoretically, various conceptual frameworks have been used to study income inequality in economic and social research. The neoclassical economic theory explains inequality primarily through differences in productivity, education, and human capital accumulation, suggesting that wage disparities arise from differences in skills and efficiency of the labor market (Lavetti, 2023). In contrast, political economy perspectives emphasize the role of institutions, governance structures, and policy decisions in determining the distribution of income, while taxation systems, labor regulations, and welfare policies influence inequality outcomes.

Structural inequality approaches also argue that the inequality is inherent in broader socio-economic systems, such as the segmentation of labor market, globalization pressures, technological change, and unequal access to economic opportunities. These perspectives indicate that inequality is not only due to the differences in individual productivity but also reflects institutional arrangements and structural constraints within economies.

Within the ASEAN region, these theoretical perspectives are specifically relevant since there is a wide range of economic development, institutional capacity, and social protection systems among the member states. As a result, the dynamics of inequality in ASEAN are influenced by different policy frameworks, redistributive institutions, and economic structures across countries. Understanding these theoretical foundations is essential when interpreting the evolution of inequality research and the dominant themes identified through bibliometric analysis.

These theoretical perspectives provide the analytical lens for interpreting the bibliometric results. Specifically, shifts in keyword clusters, thematic evolution, and collaboration patterns are examined in relation to how inequality is conceptualized across neoclassical, institutional, and structural frameworks within the ASEAN context.

Table 1 shows income inequality in ASEAN through the application of the Gini coefficient, and other basic measures such as the gap in wage, education, healthcare, and social mobility. Based on the average Gini score, Singapore has the highest income inequality (0.4603), followed by Thailand (0.4567) and Philippines (0.4474). However, only Philippines, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar were categorized as high in wage disparity. Malaysia has a Gini score of 0.4134 and categorized as ‘Medium’ in wage disparity. Only Singapore was categorized as low in wage disparity and high in access to education, healthcare availability and social mobility. Conversely, Malaysia and Singapore have better access to education and health care, supported by sound social infrastructure and a higher per capita GDP. These helps mitigate some of the negative consequences of income inequality. Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, on the other hand, face the widest wage disparities and worst access to fundamental services, suggesting very high structural inequalities that cannot lead to long-term economic development. Brunei is a unique case with an unreported Gini coefficient but has high education, health, and social mobility scores, most likely due to its oil wealth and comprehensive welfare packages. Indonesia and Vietnam scored medium in wage disparity and education, healthcare and social mobility scores.

Generally, income inequality in ASEAN countries is highly diverse, influenced by historical, political, and economic factors. Addressing these inequalities through progressive policies, stronger social infrastructure, and economic reforms is critical to create a more inclusive and sustainable future for the region. Table 1 shows the Income Inequality Gini score and categorization of wage disparity (WD), access to education (AE), healthcare availability (HA) and social mobility (SM) of the ASEAN countries.

Table 1: Comparative analysis of IE, WD, AE, HA and SM among ASEAN countries

Country	Average Gini Coefficient	Wage Disparity (WD)	Access to Education (AE)	Healthcare Availability (HA)	Social Mobility (SM)
Brunei Darussalam	NA	Low	High	High	High
Cambodia	0.3022	High	Low	Low	Low
Indonesia	0.3932	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Laos	0.3620	High	Low	Low	Low
Malaysia	0.4134	Medium	High	High	Medium
Myanmar	0.3250	High	Low	Low	Low
Philippines	0.4474	High	Medium	Medium	Low
Singapore	0.4603	Low	High	High	High
Thailand	0.4567	Medium	High	Medium	Medium
Vietnam	0.4099	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium

Note: **Gini Coefficient**: A measure of income inequality (0 = perfect equality, 1 = maximum inequality); **Wage Disparity**: Categorized as High, Medium, Low based on wage differences between high- and low-income earners; **Access to Education & Healthcare**: Evaluated based on enrolment rates, literacy levels, and healthcare access; **Social Mobility**: Refers to the ability of individuals to improve their economic status over time.

Being a rich country, Brunei has no official minimum wage policy, while the remaining nine countries have implemented minimum wage policies and social assistance programs. Table 2 shows the evolution of wage regulations and social assistance program in ASEAN countries across the four periods.

Table 2: Income inequality policies in ASEAN: A comparative overview of wage regulations and social assistance programs

Country	Key Policies Addressing Income Inequality	1979-2000	2001-2010	2011-2020	2021-2024
Brunei Darussalam	No official minimum wage policy. Government subsidies and free healthcare/education help reduce inequality.	Expansion of free healthcare and education (Nazir, 1990).	Introduction of housing subsidies (National Housing Scheme) (Hussainmiya, 2006).	Strengthening of welfare programs (old-age pensions and disability benefits) (Baker et al., 2018).	Continued investment in social safety nets, job creation initiatives (Lawrence, 2021).
Cambodia	Minimum wage for garment and footwear sectors. National Social Protection Policy Framework (NSPPF) in 2017.	Limited wage regulations, informal social safety nets (Kwon et al., 2015).	Minimum wage introduced for garment sector (2008) (Kwon et al., 2015).	Expansion of minimum wage coverage, launch of NSPPF (2017) (Jiao et al., 2015).	Strengthening of social assistance under National Social Protection Policy Framework (NSPPF) (Nakphong and Beltrán-Sánchez, 2021; Brussevich, 2024)
Indonesia	Provincial and sectoral minimum wages. Social assistance programs (PKH – Family Hope Program) in 2007 and National Health Insurance (JKN) in 2014.	Early social protection programs (rice subsidy for poor) (Garcia and Soelistianingsih, 1998).	Decentralization of minimum wage setting, Raskin food assistance (Hartono and Irawan, 2011).	Launch of PKH (2007), expansion of JKN (2014) (Mahadevan et al., 2017).	Strengthening of PKH, digital social assistance payments (Herianti and Marundha, 2024).
Laos	Minimum wage policy (revised in 2023). Poverty reduction programs under the National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) (2016-2020).	Initial poverty reduction programs (Onphanhdala and Philavong, 2021).	Expansion of rural development initiatives (Onphanhdala and Philavong, 2021).	National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) prioritizing poverty reduction (Aryal et al., 2024)	Minimum wage increase (2023), social welfare improvements (Aryal et al., 2024)
Malaysia	Progressive Wage Policy pilot program (2024). Minimum wage policy (RM1,500/month as of 2022). Cash assistance (STR - Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah).	New Economic Policy (NEP) focused on economic restructuring and reducing inequality (Kusnic and DaVanzo, 1982; Kwame Sundaram and Shari, 1982; Masud and Haron, 2008))	Minimum wage introduced (2005), Bantuan Rakyat Malaysia (BR1M) cash aid (Hutchinson, 2017).	Minimum wage raised to RM1,100 (2019), Prihatin Rakyat assistance during COVID-19 (Goh et al., 2023).	Progressive Wage Policy pilot (2024), increased minimum wage (Goh et al., 2023).
Myanmar	Minimum wage policy (MMK 4,800/day as of 2018). Limited social welfare due	Socialist economy reforms, limited welfare	Market liberalization but weak social safety nets	First-ever minimum wage law (2015), limited cash transfers	Political instability affecting welfare programs

Country	Key Policies Addressing Income Inequality	1979-2000	2001-2010	2011-2020	2021-2024
Philippines	to political instability. Minimum wage varies by Regional Tripartite Wages and Productivity Boards (RTWPB) in 2023. Conditional cash transfers (4Ps) in 2008 and Universal Health Care Act in 2019.	(Pritchard and Keen, 2016). Regional minimum wage system established (Leones and Feldman, 1998; Estudillo et al., 2000).	(Kmoch et al., 2018). 4Ps launched in 2007, Social Security System expanded (Canlas et al., 2009).	(Kmoch et al., 2018). Universal Health Care Act (2019) (Rivera, 2020).	(Pritchard and Keen, 2016). Strengthening of 4Ps, and cash transfers (Reyes, 2018; Reyes, 2019).
Singapore	Progressive Wage Model (PWM) in 2012; workfare Income Supplement (WIS) in 2007; and Silver Support Scheme in 2016.	CPF social security system strengthened (Mukhopadhyaya, 2004).	Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) introduced (2007) (Hoon, 2021).	Progressive Wage Model (2012), Silver Support Scheme (2016) (Mukhopadhyaya et al., 2013).	Expansion of PWM to more sectors (Lim, 2022).
Thailand	National Minimum Wage System in 1973, Universal healthcare (UHC), in 2002; Social Security Fund in 1990.	First minimum wage policies introduced (Sitthiyot and Holasut, 2024).	Universal healthcare introduced (2002) (Huang and Thananithichot, 2018).	Minimum wage raised (2012), welfare card scheme introduced (Aemkulwat and Amonvatana, 2015).	Minimum wage adjusted, social protection expansion (Vechnsuruck and Pratoomchat, 2024).
Vietnam	Regional minimum wages in 2008; National REDD+ Action Program (NRAP) in 2012; National (pro-poor) Target Programs (NTPs) for Sustainable Poverty Reduction in 2011 (Phan et al., 2017); and social insurance and cash assistance programs in 1995.	Economic reforms (Đổi Mới) initiated (1986), first labor policies (Fritzen, 2002).	Minimum wage introduced (2008) (Nguyen et al., 2020).	Social insurance expanded, cash assistance programs strengthened (Diem and Hart, 2024).	Continued wage adjustments and social protection (Diem and Hart, 2024).

Source: Author's own work

Potential Conflicts and Gaps

Income inequality remains a pressing issue in ASEAN, and policy responses vary due to economic, political, and structural differences. One of the challenges is the unevenness of economic development among member states. While Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand have wage policies and social protections institutionalized, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are confronted with informal employment and institutional fragility, which renders regional policy coordination more challenging (Lim, 2022; Goh et al., 2023; Onphanhdala and Philavong, 2021). Policies that are effective in high-income ASEAN nations are not likely to suit lower-income (Kusnic and DaVanzo, 1982). A second major gap lies in dissimilar wage systems. Progressive wage structures such as Malaysia's PWP and Singapore's SkillsFuture aim to fill gaps, but the majority of ASEAN countries lack any structured wage policies, minimum wage

coverage, and collective bargaining institutions (Sitthiyot and Holasut, 2024). The absence of a regional wage standardization demotivates economic harmonization and increases inequality (Estudillo et al., 2000). While a single wage standard may be unrealistic, sectoral or skill-based minimum wages and ASEAN's Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) can be utilized to harmonize wage structures (Hamanake and Jusoh, 2018). Educational inequality also exacerbates income inequalities. Singapore and Malaysia possess sophisticated education systems that provide workers with skills to compete in high-income occupations, whereas Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos struggle with access to quality education, which lowers upward mobility and entrenches individuals in poverty (Onphanhdala and Philavong, 2021; Herianti and Marundha, 2024). Low-skilled workers are disproportionately affected by technological advancement and globalization. The high-income economies of ASEAN are shifting to high-tech industries while lower-income nations remain reliant on labor-intensive sectors, which increases wage inequality (Goh et al., 2023; Rivera, 2020). The response of the government is highly varied, as some countries such as Thailand and Vietnam have social protection, whereas others lack any safety nets (Herianti and Marundha, 2024; Reyes, 2019).

These disparities demonstrate the importance of examining income inequality not only in terms of descriptive economic indicators but also in terms of theoretical and institutional approaches. In particular, redistributive institutions, labor market policies, and social protection mechanisms play critical roles in shaping inequality outcomes across ASEAN economies (Vechsuruck and Pratoomchat, 2024). Therefore, a systematic understanding of how these themes appear in the academic literature is required to identify dominant research trends and theoretical orientations in inequality scholarship within the region.

This study thus uses bibliometric analysis to map the intellectual structure of inequality research in ASEAN, providing insights into how various theoretical perspectives and policy issues are reflected in the academic literature.

Methodology

Data Collection

To review the existing literature systematically and comprehensively, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach was implemented (Okoli, 2015) using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) method (Page et al., 2021). The initial phase of the SLR was to identify the study objectives and develop clear research questions and targets. The PRISMA method guides researchers in identifying relevant articles through four steps: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

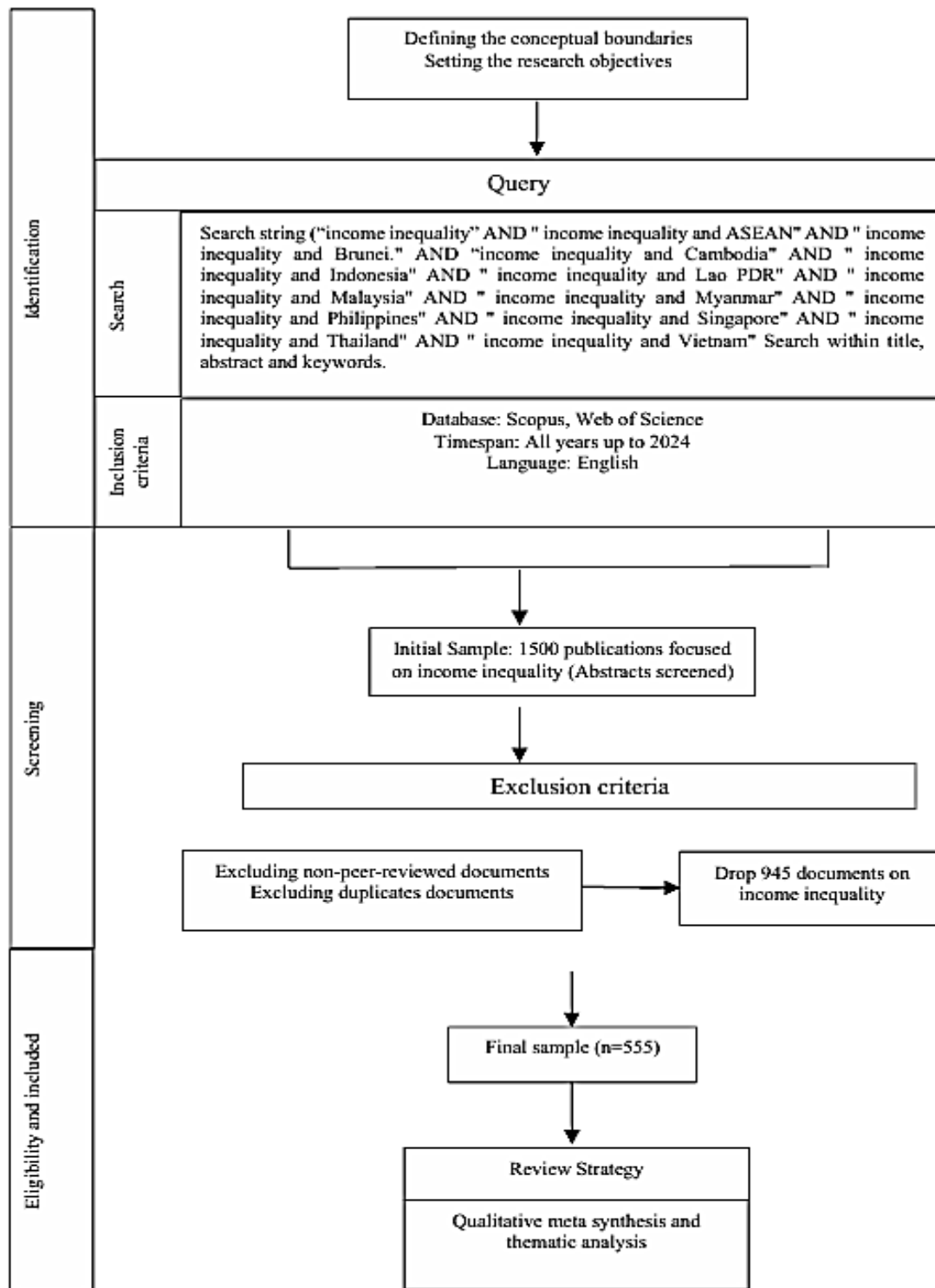
Table 3 provides a summary while the process of PRISMA is illustrated in Figure 1. We focused on two reliable academic databases, Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), because they cover a wide range of high-quality, peer-reviewed literature in economics and social sciences. The timeline includes all years up to 2024.

Table 3: Overview of the SLR method

Items	Description
Research Objectives and Target	(1) To identify the most critical dimensions and determinants of income inequality among ASEAN nations, examining factors such as wage disparity, education access, labor market structures, social mobility, and government policies that contribute to income distribution patterns across the region. (2) To analyze the main research trends, seminal publications, and scholarly outputs on income inequality in ASEAN, mapping the evolution of academic discourse, identifying influential works, and assessing the contributions of key authors and institutions in this field. (3) To examine the theoretical foundations of income inequality research in ASEAN, assessing the methodologies, analytical frameworks, and empirical approaches used to investigate economic disparities in the region.
Research Questions	(1) What are the most critical dimensions and determinants of income inequality among ASEAN nations? (2) What are the main research trends, seminal publications, and scholarly outputs on income inequality among ASEAN? (3) What are the underpinning theories in income inequality research?
Search Strategy	Databases: Scopus and Web of Science Search Terms: Examples include “Income inequality”, “Income inequality and Vietnam”, “Income inequality and Singapore”, “Income inequality and Philippines”, “Income inequality and Myanmar”, “Income inequality and Malaysia”, “Income inequality Lao”, “Income inequality and Cambodia”, “Income inequality and Indonesia”, “Income inequality and Brunei”, “Income inequality and Thailand”, and Income inequality and ASEAN. Timeline: All articles published till 2024.
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria	Inclusion Criteria: Peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical frameworks, book chapters, and conference proceedings published in English focusing on income inequality models. Exclusion Criteria: Non-English publications, irrelevant studies, and works published after 2025. Screening Process: Titles, keywords, abstracts, and conclusions were systematically screened to ensure relevance and alignment with research objectives.
Eligibility Screening	Relevant articles were identified and filtered according to the inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Source: Author’s own work

Figure 1: PRISMA flow steps in systematic literature review



Source: Author's own work

The initial dataset consisted of 1,500 publications focused on income inequality. This collection included only peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and book chapters indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. The accuracy, precision, and relevance of keyword extraction based on the titles, abstracts, author-assigned keywords, and source journals were improved by tools such as VOSviewer, NVivo, and BibExcel.

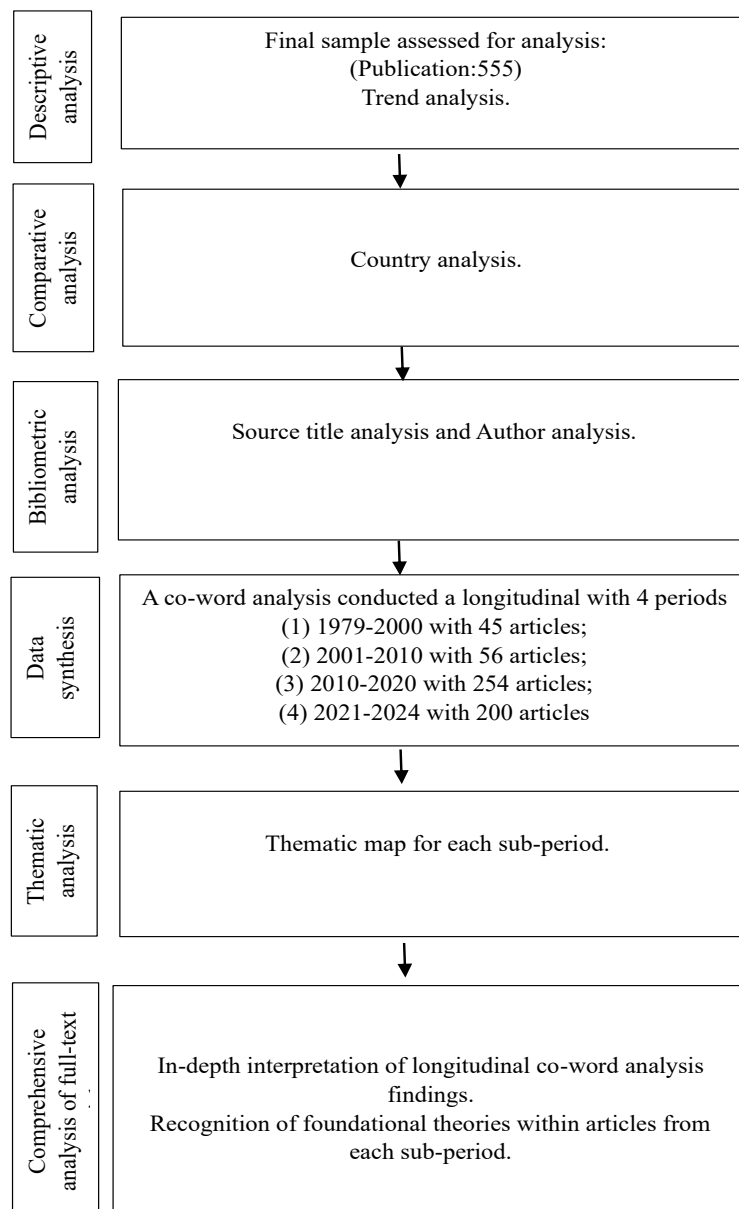
Publications that were not in English, studies that were irrelevant to the research on income inequality, publications published after the year 2025 and research that did not specifically discuss the income inequality were systematically excluded. The final dataset consisted of 555 articles (refer to Figure 1).

This study applies a longitudinal approach to examine the evolution of income inequality research over the years, dividing the data into four time periods, namely, 1979–2000, 2001–2010, 2011–2020, and 2021–2024, to account for major socio-economic and technological changes that have influenced scholarly discussion. The initial period, 1979–2000, aligns with the end of the Cold War, the beginning of globalization, and structural transformation of the economy that defined early discussion on income inequality. The second period, 2001–2010, coincides with the early 21st-century digital revolution, economic fallout from the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the 2008 financial crisis, which had extensive implications on income inequality. The third period, 2011–2020, was marked by technological acceleration, increasing social movements, and the global effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy. Finally, the latest period, 2021–2024, is characterized by post-pandemic recovery, growing dominance of AI industries, and changes in labor markets, further shaping discussions around income distribution and progressive wage policy. The study maps thematic changes, policy issues, and research agenda changes in the field of income inequality by placing the analysis in the four periods. This approach enhances the ability to trace the evolution of theoretical development and evaluate how past and current events influence academic research.

Data Analysis Process

The bibliometric approach has become widely used in recent years and is employed by the researcher to evaluate publications trends within a particular field and assess research collaboration among scholars, institutions, and countries. Figure 2 illustrates the methodological process used to review the research on income inequality in ASEAN, structured along a number of analytical levels. The descriptive review starts with the analysis of a final sample of 555 publications to provide an overview of the scope of the dataset. The comparative analysis includes the studies of income inequality by ASEAN countries and development status, with the differences in the contributions to the research. Intellectual relations are mapped in the co-word analysis (analysis bibliographic coupling), and it can be observed that the largest number of articles is in Indonesia (177), Malaysia (99), Vietnam (89), and Thailand (80). Data synthesis is in the form of a longitudinal trend with the research being divided into four periods namely: 1979-2000 (45 articles), 2001-2010 (56 articles), 2011-2020 (254 articles), and 2021-2024 (200 articles), with a steep rise in publications since 2010, which indicates the growth of scholarly interest. The thematic analysis, lastly, which splits the research into motor themes, niche themes, basic themes, and emerging or declining themes, which assists in tracking the shifts in research priorities over the decades. This systematic plan provides a comprehensive insight into the trends of ASEAN income inequality research, including historical evolution, research emphasis by country, and thematic progression.

Figure 2: Bibliometric analysis process



Source: Author's own work

Results

Descriptive Analysis

Table 4 presents the bibliometric profile of ASEAN income inequality research. The dataset comprises 555 publications published between 1979 and 2024 across 555 sources. A total of 1,564 authors contributed to the literature, with collaborative research dominating the field (collaboration coefficient = 0.65). The publications accumulated 7,064 citations, indicating sustained scholarly interest in income inequality across ASEAN countries.

Table 4: Descriptive analysis

Main Information	Description	Number of articles
Documents (D)	Total number of journal articles	1500
Sources (S)	Frequency distribution of sources (journals)	555
Timespan (T)	Publication years	1979-2024
Active years of publication (AY)	Total years of publications by research area	46
Productivity per active year (P)	Total documents divided by active years (D/AY)	32.61
Total citations (TC)	Citations received by documents	7064
Average citations per document (ACD)	Average number of citations in each document	4.71
Average citations per year (ACY)	Average citations per year of publications (TC/AY)	153.57
Authors (A)	Total number of contributing authors	1564
Authors of multi-authored documents (CA)	Number of multi-authored documents	1422
Authors of single-authored documents (SA)	Number of single authors per article	142
Authors per document (AD)	Average number of authors in each document	1.04
Co-authors per document (CD)	Average number of co-authors per document	0.04
Collaboration coefficient (CC)	Standardizes scholar collaboration extent (0–1)	0.65

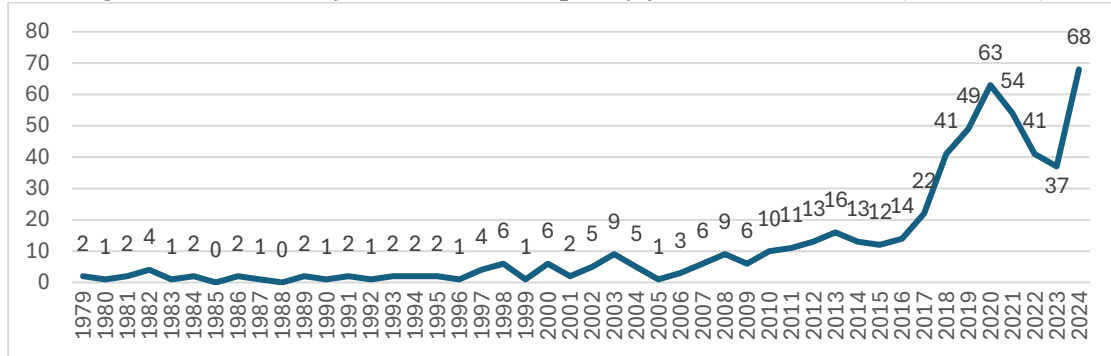
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Trend Analysis

Figure 3 shows a substantial increase in publications after 2010, with research output peaking in 2024. The growth reflects increasing academic and policy interest in income inequality, particularly following major economic disruptions and debates surrounding inclusive development in ASEAN.

The sharp increase in publications after 2010 can be linked to global concerns on inequality following the financial crisis and rising policy debates on inclusive growth. From a theoretical perspective, this trend aligns with structural inequality frameworks, which emphasize the role of systemic economic shocks, institutional responses, and policy interventions in shaping both inequality outcomes and research agendas. In the ASEAN context, the growing volume of research may also reflect increasing regional policy attention to inclusive development and socio-economic resilience. This pattern emerges because ASEAN's institutional heterogeneity creates differentiated policy responses, which in turn shape both inequality outcomes and research priorities across countries.

Figure 3: Trend analysis of income inequality journals in ASEAN (1979 -2024)



Source: Author's own work

Comparative Analysis

Country Analysis

Table 5 indicates that Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand dominate ASEAN income inequality research, while Brunei, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Cambodia, and the Philippines remain comparatively underrepresented. This pattern reflects differences in research capacity, funding availability, and data accessibility across ASEAN member states.

Table 5: Geographic distribution of income inequality research by ASEAN countries

Countries	Total of articles	Countries	Total of articles
Mixed-Countries	32	Indonesia	177
Malaysia	99	Vietnam	89
Thailand	80	Singapore	49
Cambodia	14	Philippines	10
Myanmar	2	Lao PDR	2
Brunei	1		

Source: Author's own work

Bibliometric Analysis

Source Title Analysis

Table 6 shows that income inequality research is widely dispersed across journals. The Singapore Economic Review is the leading publication outlet, followed by the Journal of Asian Economics and the Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business. This distribution suggests that ASEAN income inequality research is multidisciplinary rather than concentrated within a small group of journals.

Table 6: Number of articles per source (1979–2024)

Source title	Number of articles	Percentage (%)
Singapore Economic Review	15	2.7027

Source title	Number of articles	Percentage (%)
Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business	9	1.6216
Journal of Asian Economics	9	1.6216
Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy	8	1.4414
Sustainability (Switzerland)	7	1.2613
Asian Economic Journal	7	1.2613
Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies	7	1.2613
Social Indicators Research	6	1.0811
E3S Web of Conferences	6	1.0811
PLoS ONE	6	1.0811
Jurnal Ekonomi Malaysia	6	1.0811
Economies	6	1.0811
Journal with five articles	6	1.0811
Journal with four articles	7	1.2613
Journal with three articles	21	3.7838
Journal with two articles	42	7.5676
Journal with one article	387	69.7297
Total of articles	555	100

Source: Author's own work

Author Analysis

Table 7 highlights the most productive scholars in ASEAN income inequality research. Malaysian authors contribute substantially to the literature, while researchers from Japan, Indonesia, Tunisia, and the Netherlands demonstrate the international nature of inequality scholarship in the region.

Table 7: Top 10 most productive authors

Author	No of articles
Masseran, Nurulkamal (Malaysia)	8
Safari (Malaysia)	7
Akita, Takahiro (Japan)	6
Ibrahim, Kamarulzaman (Malaysia)	5
Hussain, Saiful Izzuan (Malaysia)	4
Kurniawan, Puji Agus (Indonesia)	3
Miyata, Sachiko (Tunisia)	3
Shari, Ishak (Malaysia)	2
Dietzenbacher, Erik (Netherlands)	2
Los, Bart (Netherlands)	2

Source: Author's own work

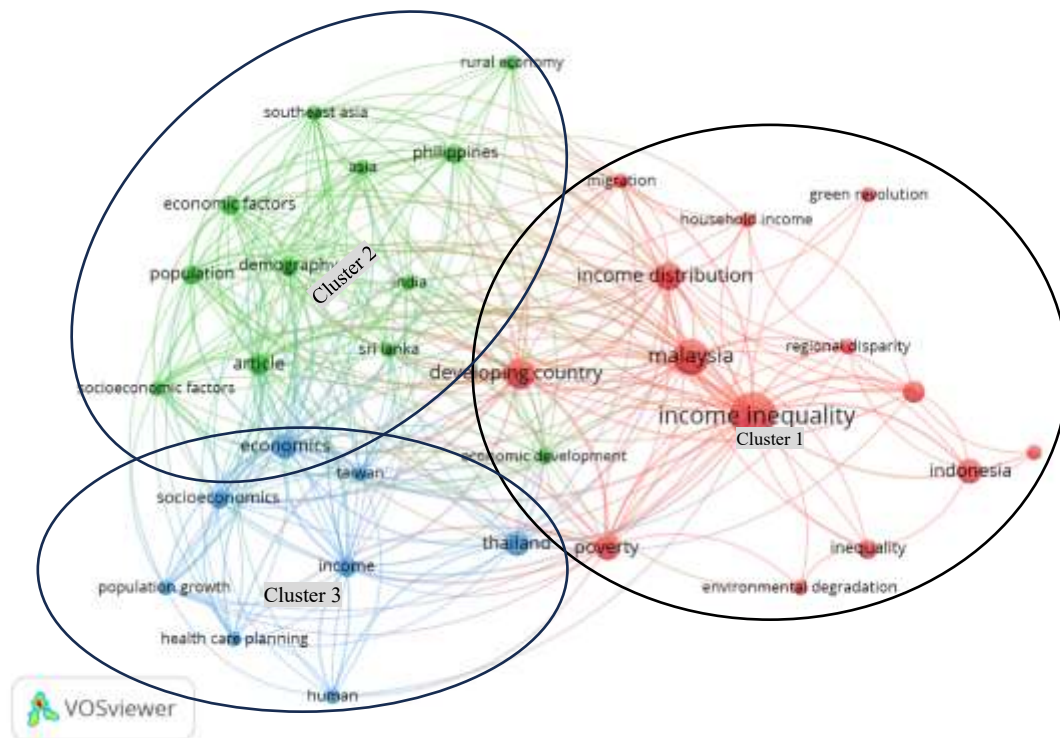
Data Synthesizing

Following the analysis, we synthesized and interpreted the findings of the co-occurrence analyses and bibliometric coupling in order to identify the underlying research themes and academic relationships of the field of income inequality research.

Co-occurrence of Keywords

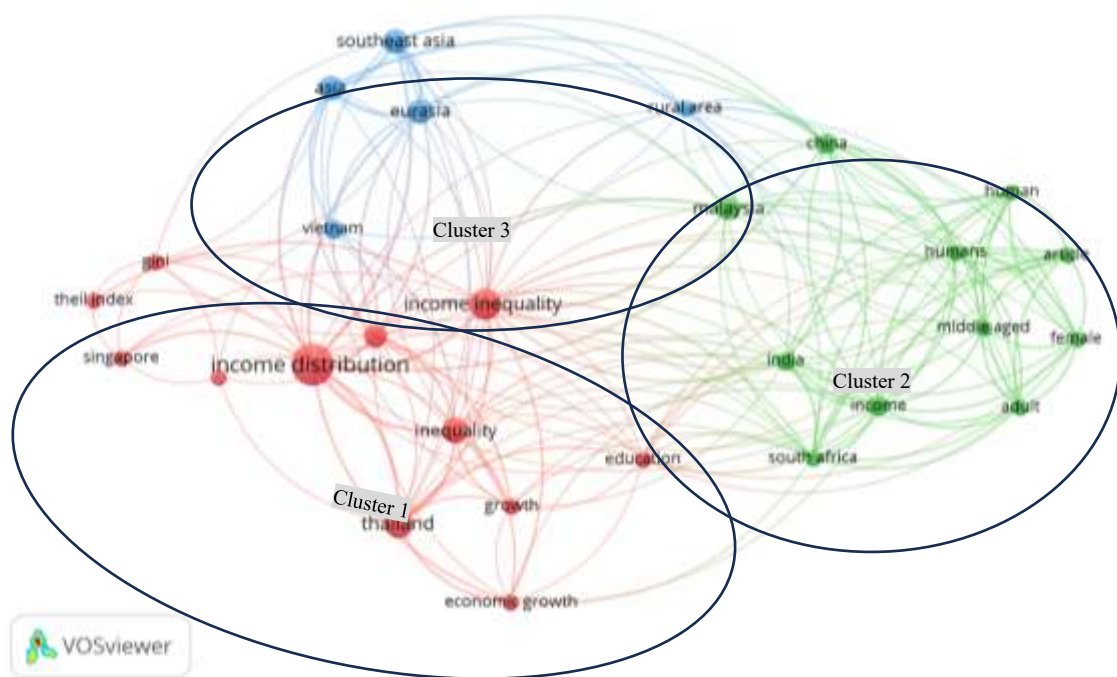
Figures 5 to 8 demonstrate the evolution of keyword relationships across four periods. During 1979–2000, research focused primarily on poverty, household income, and economic development. Between 2001 and 2010, studies increasingly adopted quantitative approaches using measures such as the Gini coefficient and decomposition techniques. During 2011–2020, financial development, education, and human capital emerged as important determinants of inequality. In the most recent period (2021–2024), research expanded to include sustainability, public health, household debt, and COVID-19-related concerns. Overall, the findings reveal a gradual shift from growth- and poverty-focused research toward broader institutional, social, and sustainability-oriented perspectives.

Figure 5: Co-occurrence of keywords for 1979-2000



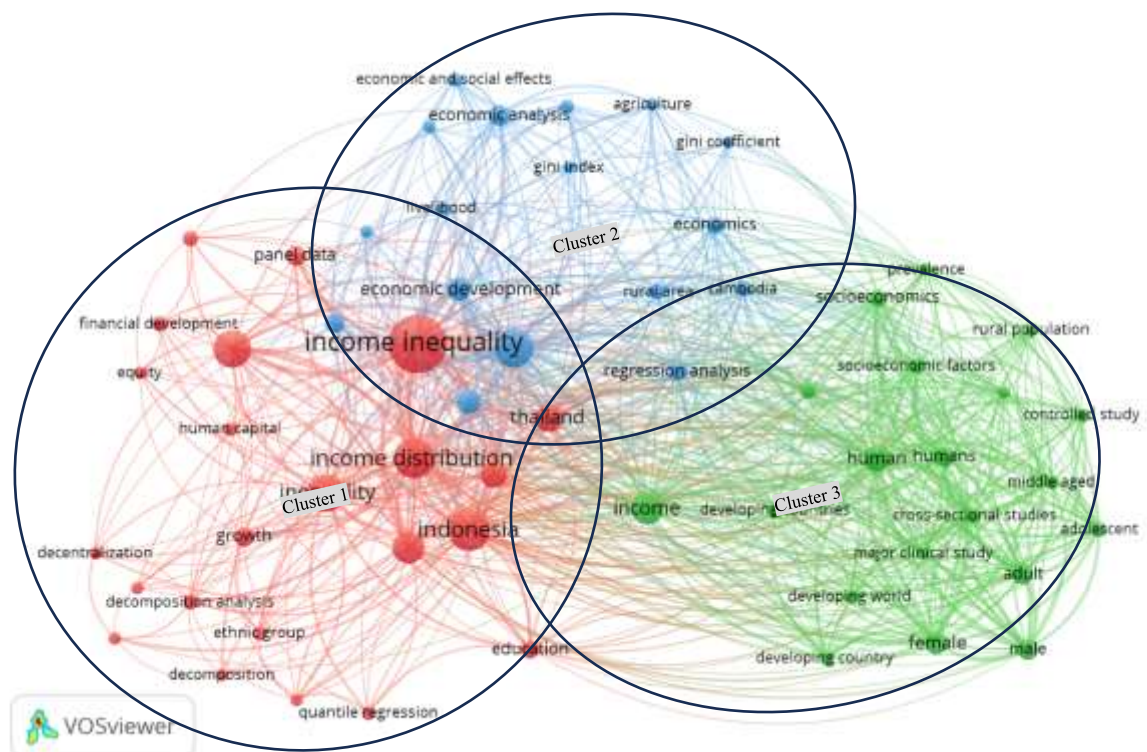
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Figure 6: Co-occurrence of keywords for 2000-2010



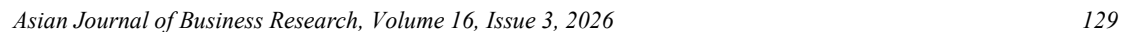
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Figure 7: Co-occurrence of keywords for 2011-2020



Source: Author's own work

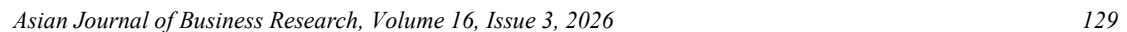
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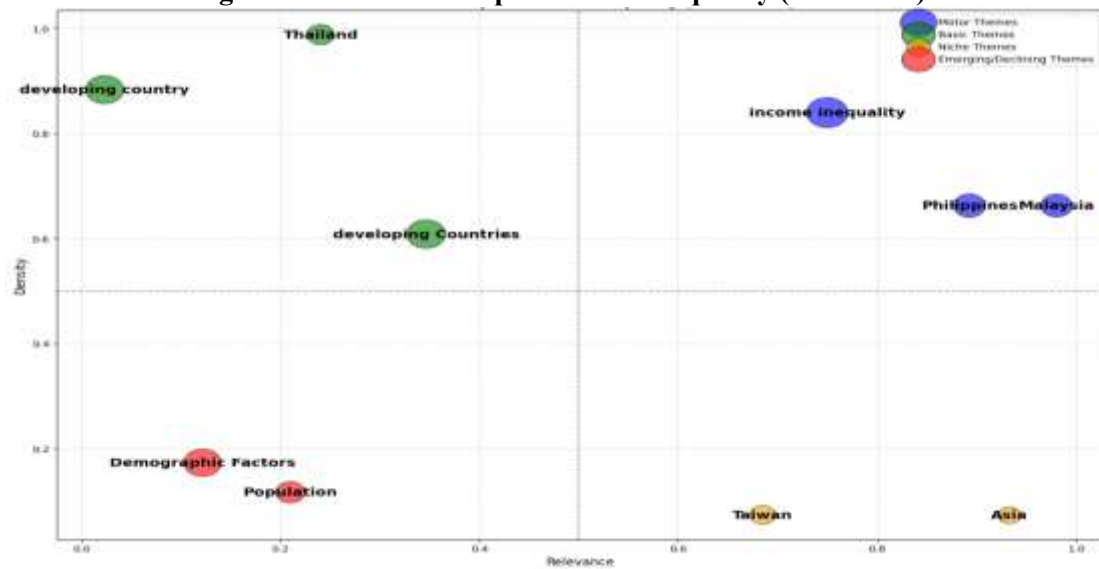


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Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis reveals a clear evolution of ASEAN income inequality research. During 1979–2000, studies focused mainly on poverty reduction, economic development, and income disparities in developing economies. Between 2001 and 2010, research expanded toward income distribution mechanisms and quantitative inequality measurement. During 2011–2020, economic growth, financial development, education, and poverty reduction became dominant themes. In the most recent period (2021–2024), sustainability, inclusive growth, governance, and social welfare emerged as increasingly important topics. Collectively, the findings indicate a shift from descriptive economic concerns toward multidimensional and policy-oriented approaches to inequality.

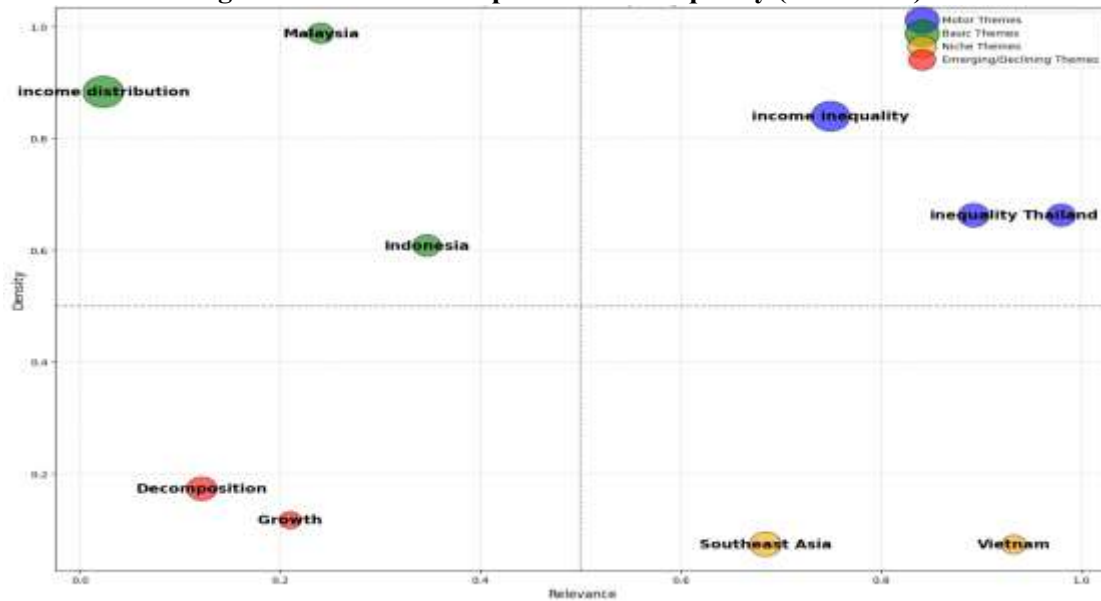
Figure 10: Thematic map of income inequality (1979-2000)



Source: Author's own work

Throughout the subsequent ten-year period (2001-2010), Figure 11 shows “income inequality” remained an omnipresent topic in research themes but increasingly focused on the national level with the example theme being “inequality Thailand.”. “Income distribution” along with Malaysia and Indonesia became a refined basic theme, reflecting a growing fascination with wealth distribution mechanisms. Sub-niche themes such as Southeast Asia and Vietnam presaged a growing concern with regional inequality trends. Comparatively with the previous era, themes such as demographic determinants disappeared, while decomposition analysis and economic growth emerged as new but underdeveloped fields of research. Overall, Figure 11 suggests increasing interest in measuring and explaining inequality through quantitative approaches and macroeconomic perspectives.

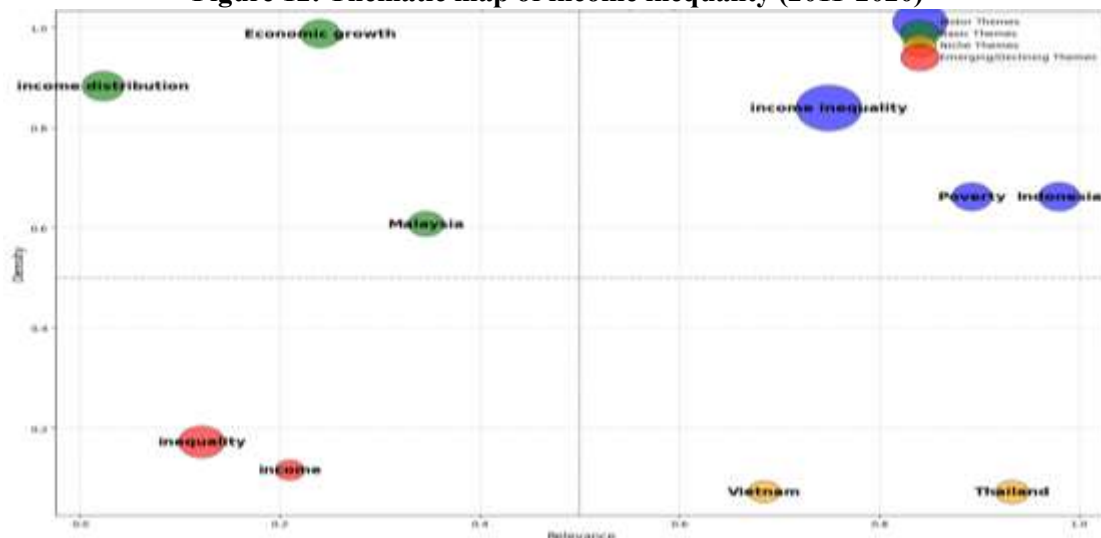
Figure 11: Thematic map of income inequality (2001-2010)



Source: Author's own work

Figure 12 shows that the period 2011-2020 was marked by growing concern with studies on poverty and inequality in Indonesia and putting Indonesia at the top of the most studied countries in the region. While “income inequality” continued to be a major topic of discussion, poverty became a significant study area, reflecting that inequality's direct impacts were now being focused on. Key themes like economic growth, income inequality, and Malaysia were current, but Vietnam and Thailand country studies were niche and nascent. Interesting to note was that inequality and income fell under emerging/declining, which meant that inequality issues were becoming mainstreamed with broader economic and policy-related themes, rather than being studied separately.

Figure 12: Thematic map of income inequality (2011-2020)

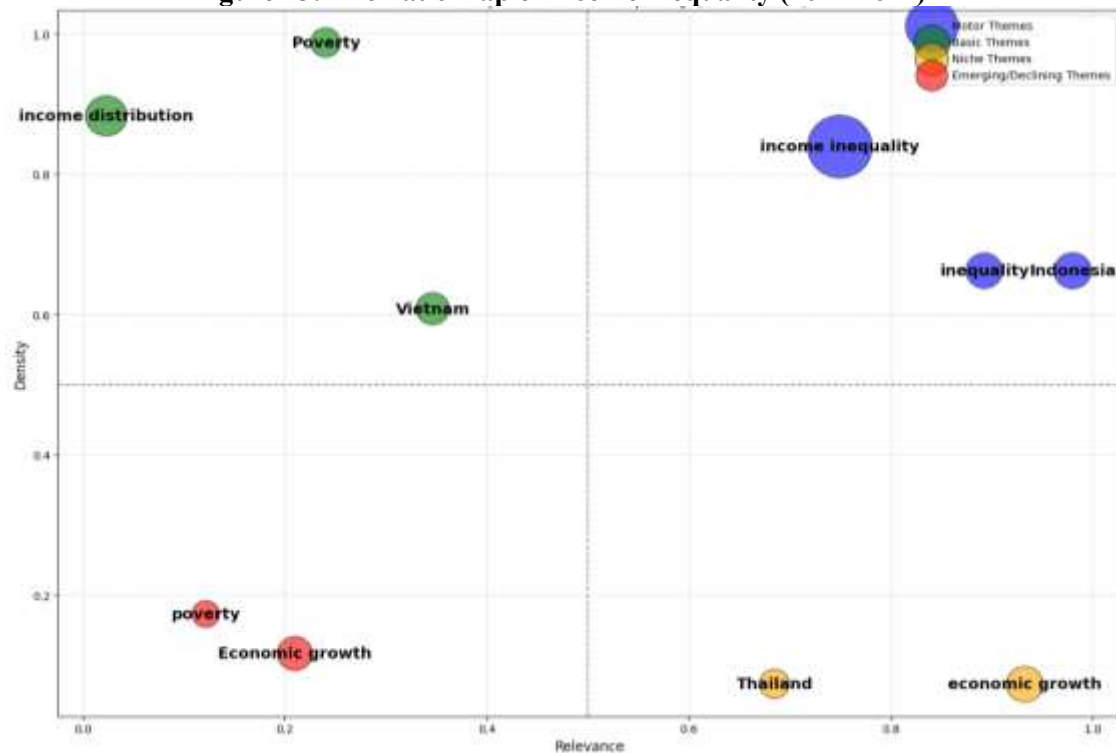


Source: Author's own work

In the 2021 to 2024, Figure 13 shows “Income inequality” remains the dominant theme, but Indonesia gets more attention, as a motor theme under “inequality Indonesia”. “Income distribution” and poverty continue to be central themes, with Vietnam gaining more research traction. But Thailand and economic growth are now specialist themes, as a result of which research on their contribution to inequality is specialist rather than central. Of particular interest, poverty is a core and emerging/declining theme, reflecting shifting perspectives in poverty studies. Economic growth is also a more polarized theme, appearing both in niche and declining themes. Compared to the past, Malaysia has disappeared from the thematic horizon, reflecting diminishing academic interest in income inequality in the country.

The thematic evolution further confirms a broader shift in ASEAN inequality research from descriptive economic analysis toward policy-oriented and structural perspectives. Earlier studies focused primarily on measuring inequality and identifying basic economic drivers such as growth and income distribution. However, more recent research increasingly examines policy responses, institutional arrangements, and socio-economic sustainability issues. This transition suggests that inequality research in ASEAN is moving beyond purely economic explanations toward more interdisciplinary approaches that integrate governance, social protection, and sustainable development considerations.

Figure 13: Thematic map of income inequality (2021-2024)



Source: Author’s own work

From 1979 to 2000 (Figure 14), most of the income inequality studies were not theoretically based, with 77.78% categorized as “No particular theory.” Among the limited theoretical applications, Income Distribution Theory was most commonly

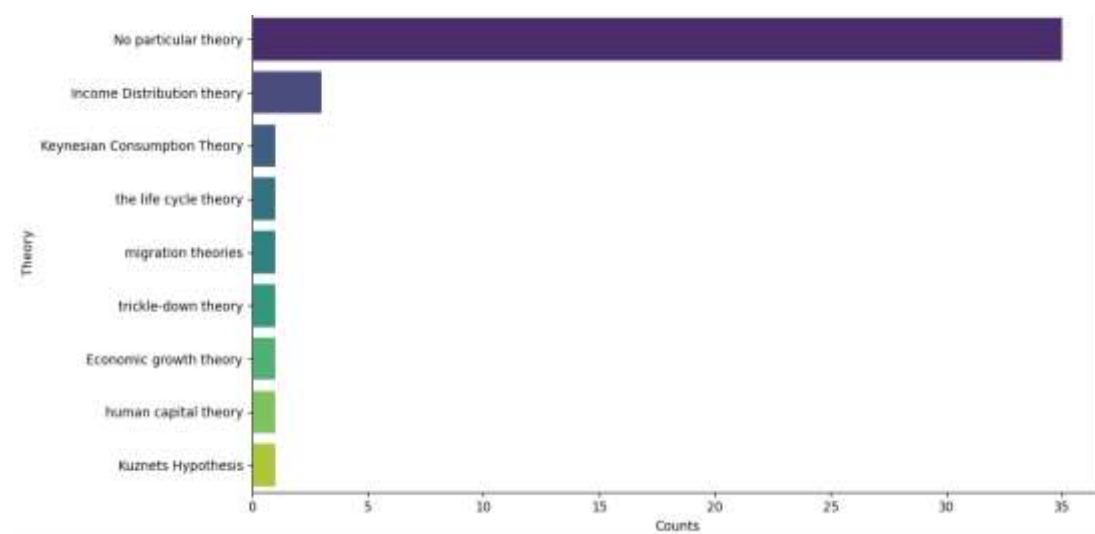
referenced (6.67%), followed by Keynesian Consumption Theory, Life Cycle Theory, Migration Theories, Trickle-Down Theory, Economic Growth Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Kuznets Hypothesis (each 2.22%). This suggests that research was more policy- or empirically driven rather than theory-based, though with some recognition of economic processes. The use of Kuznets Hypothesis and Trickle-Down Theory suggests efforts at trends in income inequality explanation.

Between 2001 and 2010 (Figure 15), theoretical applications broadened, even as 44.64% of studies remained without an express theoretical basis. Income Distribution Theory remained most applied (16.07%), followed by Human Capital Theory and Kuznets Theory (7.14%). Political Opportunity Theory, Economic Growth Theory, and Neoclassical Theory (5.36% each) reflected increased interest in market-based inequality explanations. The use of Social Capital Theory (3.57%) and Trade Theory (1.79%) reflected broader theoretical involvement.

From 2011 to 2020 (Figure 16), empirical or policy-focused studies still prevailed (52.14%), yet the theoretical applications became more diverse. Income Distribution Theory (8.56%) led the way, followed by Economic Growth Theory (5.45%) and Neoclassical Growth Theory (4.28%). Some new theoretical paradigms like Livelihood Theory, Institutional Theory, and Social Status Theory emerged, with interdisciplinary approaches being adopted.

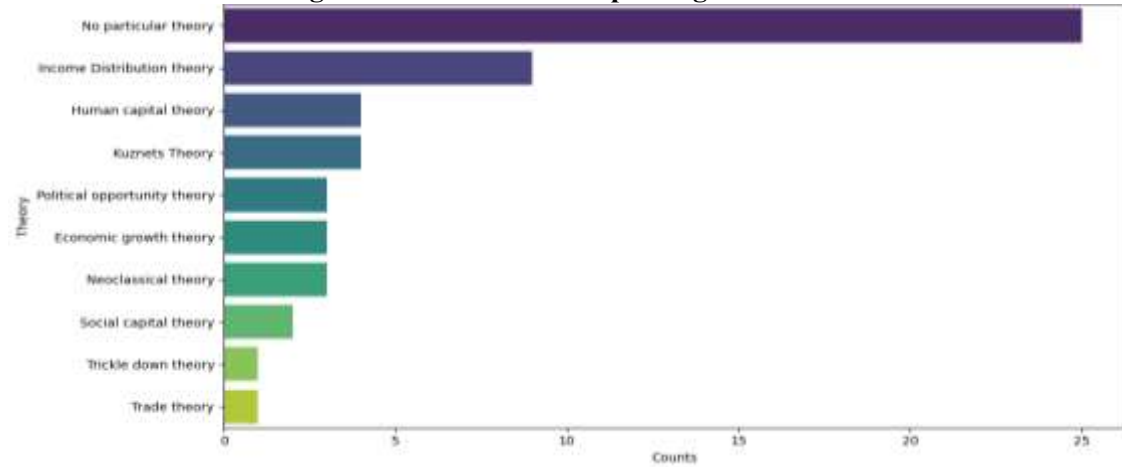
Between 2021 and 2024 (Figure 17), 51.5% of studies were theory-free, but theoretical diversification continued. Income Distribution Theory (12%) led, followed by Economic Growth Theory (7.5%) and Kuznets Curve Theory (4.5%). Human Capital Theory (4%) highlighted the role of education, while Social Capital Theory (2%) and newer frameworks, including Trickle-Down Effect, Decentralization, and Trade Theory, reflected shifting research directions in income inequality.

Figure 14: Theories underpinning 1979-2000



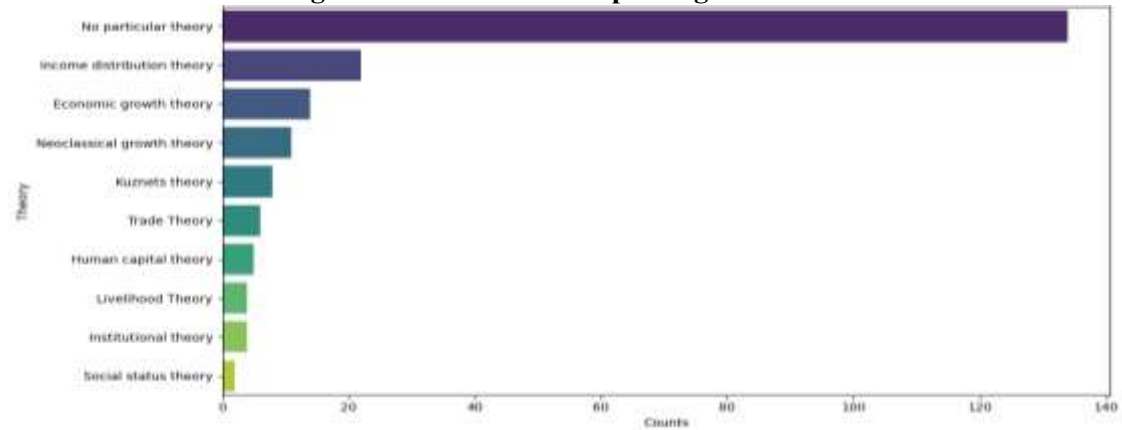
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Figure 15: Theories underpinning 2001-2010



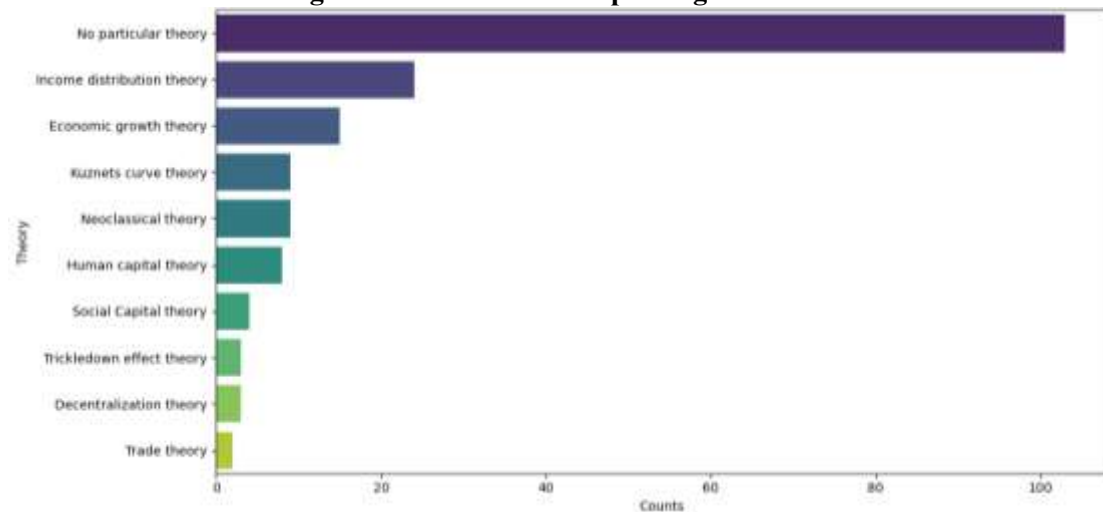
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Figure 16: Theories underpinning 2011-2020



Source: Author's own work

Figure 17: Theories underpinning 2021-2024



Source: Author's own work

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal important insights into the evolution, structure, and implications of income inequality research in ASEAN countries. Overall, the results demonstrate a clear and systematic transformation of the research field over time, reflecting broader economic, institutional, and policy developments within the region. In particular, the observed thematic evolution suggests that institutional and structural inequality frameworks not only interpret these trends but also explain why research has increasingly shifted toward policy-oriented and sustainability-related themes. This shift reflects the growing recognition that inequality in ASEAN is shaped not merely by market forces, but by institutional diversity, governance structures, and policy interventions that directly influence both inequality outcomes and research priorities.

Furthermore, the uneven geographic and thematic distribution of research highlights the fragmented nature of ASEAN as a regional context. Differences in economic development, institutional capacity, and policy frameworks across member states contribute to variations in both inequality dynamics and scholarly attention. As shown in the country distribution results, research output is heavily concentrated in a few countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, while several less-developed economies remain underrepresented. This imbalance suggests that academic inquiry is shaped not only by the importance of inequality issues, but also by disparities in research capacity, data availability, and institutional support across the region.

This concentration of knowledge production indicates a structural imbalance in ASEAN inequality scholarship, where more developed or research-active countries dominate the academic discourse. Consequently, the experiences and policy challenges of less-studied countries—such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Brunei—are insufficiently captured, limiting the comprehensiveness of regional understanding. This finding underscores the need for more inclusive and geographically balanced research efforts to better reflect the diverse socio-economic realities of ASEAN.

Theoretical Implications

The evolution of keyword trends, thematic structures, and co-occurrence patterns suggests that income inequality research in ASEAN has undergone a significant conceptual shift. Early studies were largely grounded in development economics and neoclassical perspectives, focusing primarily on economic growth, poverty reduction, and income distribution.

ASEAN inequality research has evolved from a predominantly neoclassical orientation toward more institutional and structural perspectives. This evolution reflects increasing recognition that inequality in the region is shaped not only by market forces but also by governance structures, labor market institutions, and social protection systems.

This is consistent with the observed emergence of themes such as financial development, sustainability, and policy intervention, which indicate a broader analytical scope beyond traditional productivity-based explanations of inequality.

From a theoretical standpoint, this transition can be interpreted as a shift toward more integrated frameworks that combine economic, institutional, and structural dimensions

of inequality. These findings reinforce the relevance of structural inequality frameworks, which emphasize the role of systemic economic conditions, institutional arrangements, and policy responses in shaping inequality outcomes. In the ASEAN context, this highlights the importance of understanding inequality as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than a purely market-driven outcome.

The dominance of Income Distribution Theory across the reviewed studies suggests that ASEAN inequality research has historically focused on how income is allocated among different groups within the economy, particularly through wages, capital returns, and productivity differences. Unlike Kuznets-based perspectives, which primarily explain inequality as a temporary outcome of economic development stages, Income Distribution Theory places stronger emphasis on the structural allocation of economic resources and labor-market outcomes. Compared to neoclassical perspectives that attribute inequality mainly to differences in individual productivity and human capital, Income Distribution Theory provides a broader explanation that incorporates institutional arrangements, wage structures, and redistributive mechanisms. Its dominance in ASEAN research may reflect the region's strong policy focus on wage inequality, labor-market transformation, and inclusive economic development.

Policy Implications

The geographic distribution of research highlights a significant imbalance in scholarly attention across ASEAN countries. Larger economies such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam dominate the literature, while countries such as Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Brunei remain underrepresented.

For policymakers, this uneven distribution of research across ASEAN countries highlights the need for greater regional collaboration and capacity building in less-studied economies such as Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. Strengthening research capacity in these countries is essential for developing more inclusive and evidence-based policy responses to inequality.

In addition, the increasing focus on sustainability, financial development, and social welfare reflects growing policy concern with inclusive growth and long-term socio-economic resilience. Policies such as Progressive Wage Policy (Lim, 2022; Goh et al., 2023) and social protection programs (Reyes, 2019; Vechsuruck and Pratoomchat, 2024) demonstrate the importance of linking wage growth with productivity, skills development, and institutional support. These findings further suggest that effective inequality reduction strategies in ASEAN require coordinated and multi-dimensional policy approaches. In particular, integrating labor market reforms, financial inclusion strategies, and social protection mechanisms is critical to addressing both short-term disparities and long-term structural inequality.

Research and Collaboration Implications

The bibliometric results also provide important insights into the structure of academic collaboration and knowledge development in the field. The dataset shows a total of 7,064 citations and a relatively high collaboration coefficient of 0.65, indicating strong collaborative research activity.

However, the relatively moderate citation impact combined with high collaboration levels suggests a growing but still fragmented research field. The dominance of multi-authored publications indicates increasing academic collaboration; however, the limited citation concentration may reflect a lack of highly influential or central works in ASEAN inequality research, pointing to opportunities for stronger theoretical consolidation. This fragmentation is also reflected in the dispersion of publications across a large number of journals, suggesting that the field lacks a clear intellectual core.

This indicates that, despite increasing research output, ASEAN inequality scholarship remains relatively decentralized and lacks strong theoretical integration. Future research should therefore prioritize the development of more cohesive theoretical frameworks and encourage cross-country comparative studies to better capture the diversity of inequality dynamics across the region. In addition, emerging areas such as digital inequality, environmental sustainability, and post-pandemic recovery should be further explored to ensure that the research agenda remains aligned with evolving socio-economic challenges.

Recommendations and Limitations

This study contributes to the field of inequality research by offering a systematic mapping of ASEAN inequality research and showing its shift towards institutional and policy-focused approaches. The evidence indicates that inequality can be successfully reduced only when there are not only wage policies in place, but also a high level of institutional coordination and enforcement. Policymakers should prioritize inclusive labor market reforms, improve social protection systems, and enhance regional policy alignment among the ASEAN economies. Moreover, it is necessary to enhance the transparency of data and interdisciplinary cooperation to contribute to evidence-based policymaking and more integrated solutions to income inequality.

Future studies need to increase the number of underrepresented ASEAN nations especially Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, but also include qualitative methods to enhance the ability of the study to capture the social and behavioral aspect of inequality. Digitalization, automation and platform economy also need to be analyzed and more sophisticated analytical methods like machine learning and longitudinal micro-level analysis should be implemented to gain a deeper insight into the dynamics of income distribution. Additional comparisons across regions with other economic blocs could also help to increase the generalizability of results.

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis is restricted to Web of Science and Scopus-indexed publications, which may exclude relevant studies from other sources. Second, the focus on English-language publications may limit the inclusion of locally contextualized research. Third, although Income Distribution Theory is dominant, other theoretical perspectives may not have been fully explored. Finally, the division into four time periods may overlook more nuanced temporal variations, and the study does not provide in-depth evaluation of specific national policies, which future research should address.

Practical Implications for Asian Business

Income inequality is not just a policy matter, it is a deeply rooted economic concern that touches the core of how businesses operate, conduct and develop across the ASEAN region. For companies and investors in Southeast Asia, recognizing the impact of widening income gaps is no longer optional. It is essential to get to know the dynamics of the workforce, consumer behavior, and the sustainability of long-term business strategies.

In countries where income inequality is pronounced, businesses often face challenges in attracting and retaining talent. When wages are not able to cover the cost of living or the skills necessary, dissatisfaction grows among employees. This can result in poor morale, high turnover, and rising cost of recruitment, especially in sectors that depend on skilled or semi-skilled labor. In the long run, the best talent might find an opportunity in other countries where wages are more competitive and the quality of life is perceived to be higher and better. This “brain drain” does not only deplete the talent pool but also disrupts innovation and productivity, which makes it more difficult to remain competitive by local firms.

From a consumer perspective, income inequality reduces the purchasing power of the majority. When large segments of the population have limited disposable income, domestic demand for goods and services shrinks. This is particularly an issue with businesses that are focused on the mass market, as the businesses rely on volume sales to both survive and expand. Conversely, short-term benefits can be experienced in luxury and premium markets because wealth concentration can occur, but this model is unsustainable and can even increase social resentment, which can create long-term volatility.

Besides, income distribution metrics are closely monitored by international investors. High inequality is usually viewed as a red flag and this is an indicator of a potential political unrest, weak governance, or erratic policy environments. Countries that fail to address inequality risk losing out on foreign direct investment (FDI), which is paramount in creating jobs, developing infrastructures, and transferring knowledge. In contrast, economies perceived as more equitable and socially stable tend to attract long-term investors who value predictability and inclusive growth.

Governments in the region are beginning to take action. The Progressive Wage Policy adopted by Malaysia and the SkillsFuture program adopted by Singapore are indicative of the attempts to enhance the wage frameworks, invest in human resources and achieve more equitable labor results. These initiatives are promising, but they also transfer some of the responsibilities to the business sector such as ensuring fair compensation, providing training opportunities, and aligning business operations with broader development goals.

For businesses, this shift presents both a challenge and an opportunity. While new regulations or wage expectations may raise operating costs in the short term, they also encourage firms to invest in innovation, automation, and smarter workforce strategies. Through upskilling, technology, and inclusive human resource practices, companies will be able to create more resilient businesses and a healthier socio-economic environment.

Asian business leaders should also be more actively involved in the policy discussions.

Engaging with government agencies, industry associations, and education providers can lead to practical reforms that facilitate and support both business growth and social progress. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities must not just be philanthropic but must also be aimed at activities that generate long-term value, including the support of small suppliers, investment in the local community, and encouraging upward mobility among the workforce.

In essence, tackling income inequality is not just a job for governments. It requires collaboration between the public and private sectors. Businesses that choose to lead instead than follow by promoting fair pay, developing and nurturing talent, and expanding access to opportunity, will not only build stronger their own foundations but also contribute to create a more balanced and dynamic ASEAN economy. As Southeast Asia continues to develop, the call for inclusive growth will only grow louder. Businesses that listen—and act—will be best positioned to thrive in the evolving regional landscape.

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