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Governing Poverty Reduction in Southeast Asia: Policy Portfolios and Administrative Capacity in Five Countries

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Abstract

Poverty reduction in Southeast Asia is often assessed through changes in poverty headcounts, yet the administrative arrangements that produce and sustain these outcomes differ substantially across countries. This study compares poverty-reduction governance in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam using secondary data only. It draws on the World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform, national poverty statistics, government policy documents, World Bank country assessments, and the Asian Development Bank's 2026 Social Protection Indicators of Coverage and Effectiveness framework. The analysis conceptualizes poverty reduction as a policy portfolio comprising five interdependent functions: protective reach, capability formation, productive inclusion, administrative integration and targeting, and territorial and shock adaptability. Findings show that the five countries have moved beyond narrow relief programs but through distinct institutional configurations. Indonesia is strengthening a large multi-program system through socioeconomic data integration; Malaysia combines broad assistance coverage with program fragmentation and benefit-adequacy concerns; the Philippines relies on an institutionalized conditional cash-transfer system linking protection to human capital but still requires dynamic beneficiary updating and stronger transition pathways; Thailand's very low extreme-poverty rate shifts attention toward aging, informality, exclusion errors, and regional disparities; and Viet Nam increasingly integrates multidimensional poverty reduction with territorial development. Across cases, sustainable poverty reduction depends less on adding isolated programs than on governing complementarities among social protection, services, employment pathways, data systems, and subnational implementation. The study contributes to public-administration research by reframing poverty reduction as a problem of policy-portfolio governance and administrative capacity.
Keywords: poverty reduction; social protection; policy capacity; policy integration; Southeast Asia

1. Introduction

Southeast Asia has achieved substantial reductions in monetary poverty over recent decades, but the policy problem has become more complex as extreme deprivation declines. Governments increasingly confront households that are above an official poverty line yet remain vulnerable to employment loss, food-price increases, illness, disasters, demographic change, or regional economic stagnation. In this setting, a poverty headcount is indispensable for monitoring welfare, but it is an incomplete indicator of governmental capacity. Public administration determines how poverty is defined, how eligible households are identified, how transfers and services are delivered, how agencies coordinate, and whether households obtain credible routes toward greater economic security.

The distinction between poverty outcomes and poverty governance is analytically important for cross-country comparison. The latest internationally comparable data place the five cases examined in this study at markedly different positions under the World Bank's US$3.00-a-day (2021 purchasing power parity) threshold. Yet national poverty lines produce different values because they reflect country-specific normative standards and statistical methods. A comparison that simply orders countries by national poverty rates would therefore mix policy performance with differences in measurement, economic structure, survey timing, and domestic living-standard thresholds. The appropriate question for governance research is not which country has the smallest number, but how states organize the policy functions required to prevent, reduce, and manage poverty.

Poverty is also multidimensional. Alkire and Foster (2011) show that deprivation may occur simultaneously across income, education, health, and living-standard dimensions. This insight has administrative consequences. A household may need income support, but durable poverty reduction can also depend on schooling, health care, nutrition, infrastructure, employment, financial inclusion,

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and protection against shocks. Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler's (2004) transformative social-protection framework similarly extends attention beyond short-term relief toward preventive, promotive, and transformative functions. The policy implication is that poverty programs should be analyzed as a portfolio rather than as a collection of isolated transfers.

Public-administration theory provides a second building block. Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett (2015) conceptualize policy capacity as the skills and resources needed to perform policy functions at individual, organizational, and system levels. Cejudo and Michel (2017) further distinguish coordination from policy integration: governments may coordinate agencies without creating an integrated decision logic around a complex public problem. Poverty reduction is precisely such a cross-cutting problem. Social assistance may be administered by one agency, health coverage by another, employment programs by another, and local implementation by subnational governments. The existence of each instrument does not ensure that households encounter a coherent pathway from protection to capability and opportunity.

The five countries selected for this study illustrate different institutional responses to this problem. Indonesia operates a large and decentralized social-policy architecture and has recently moved toward a single national socioeconomic data system. Malaysia combines extensive cash and in-kind assistance with a large number of programs across ministries and agencies. The Philippines has institutionalized the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), a conditional cash-transfer program with strong links to education and health. Thailand combines mature social services and very low extreme poverty with new efforts to revalidate welfare-card eligibility and reduce exclusion errors. Viet Nam has increasingly embedded poverty reduction within multidimensional, rural-development, and ethnic-minority policy frameworks, including a new integrated national target program for 2026-2030.

This variation creates a useful comparative setting because the cases differ in income level, demographic structure, degree of decentralization, program architecture, and the composition of remaining poverty. The study asks: How do selected Southeast Asian governments combine protective transfers, human-capital measures, productive inclusion, targeting systems, and territorial implementation in their poverty-reduction portfolios, and what administrative constraints are visible across these different configurations? The objective is not to estimate the causal effect of any single intervention. Instead, the paper identifies how policy portfolios are governed and where administrative complementarities appear strong or incomplete.

The paper contributes in three ways. First, it shifts the unit of analysis from individual anti-poverty programs to the governance of policy portfolios. Second, it combines social-protection and multidimensional-poverty perspectives with policy-capacity and policy-integration concepts from public administration. Third, it uses recent policy developments through September 2026 to show that the contemporary poverty agenda in Southeast Asia is moving from the narrow treatment of chronic poverty toward a broader challenge of economic security, dynamic eligibility, productive inclusion, and territorial resilience.

2. Conceptual Framework: Poverty Reduction as a Governed Policy Portfolio

2.1 From poverty relief to a portfolio of public functions

A portfolio perspective starts from the premise that poverty reduction rarely results from one instrument. Cash transfers can stabilize consumption, but they do not automatically improve school quality, create productive employment, insure against old-age risk, or correct spatial inequalities. Conversely, employment or enterprise programs may have limited effects for households whose immediate consumption and health needs are not protected. The relevant analytical object is therefore the combination of functions that a government attempts to provide and the administrative relationships among them.

This study organizes the portfolio into five functions. Protective reach refers to the capacity to provide transfers, subsidies, insurance, pensions, or other support to households exposed to deprivation. Capability formation concerns the connection between anti-poverty policy and education, health, nutrition, care, and other services that influence longer-term life chances. Productive inclusion refers to the extent to which poverty policy is linked to employment, skills, livelihoods, enterprise, agricultural productivity, or other income-generating opportunities. Administrative integration and targeting

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concern the data, eligibility, payment, referral, and coordination systems that connect programs and agencies. Territorial and shock adaptability refer to whether the policy portfolio can respond to geographic inequality and to households whose needs change following economic, health, climate, or demographic shocks.

These functions deliberately avoid treating a larger number of programs as evidence of stronger governance. Program proliferation can expand reach, but it can also create duplication, inconsistent eligibility rules, fragmented databases, and high navigation costs for citizens. Likewise, a sophisticated registry improves targeting only if it is updated, linked to delivery systems, and able to accommodate newly vulnerable households. The framework therefore examines complementarity: whether one component increases the usefulness of another and whether administrative arrangements reduce rather than reproduce fragmentation.

2.2 Policy capacity and integration

Policy-capacity theory suggests that poverty reduction requires more than fiscal resources. Analytical capacity is needed to measure deprivation, identify target groups, and use evidence for adjustment. Operational capacity is needed to enroll beneficiaries, verify eligibility, process payments, manage grievances, coordinate services, and implement programs across territories. System-level capacity is needed when multiple ministries, local governments, payment providers, health and education systems, and community institutions contribute to the same poverty objective (Wu et al., 2015).

Policy integration is equally important. Cejudo and Michel (2017) argue that integration goes beyond information sharing or interagency meetings; it requires decisions to be made around the complex problem rather than only around individual organizational mandates. Applied to poverty reduction, this means that a cash-transfer agency, employment service, education system, local government, and social registry should not be evaluated solely according to separate outputs. The relevant governance question is whether their decisions create a coherent sequence that protects households, builds capabilities, supports economic participation, and adapts when circumstances change.

The analytical framework in Table 1 is therefore diagnostic rather than evaluative. It is not a scorecard and does not generate a country ranking. Each dimension asks what administrative function is visible in the documentary evidence and what type of implementation risk arises when that function is weak.

Table 1. Analytical framework for poverty-reduction policy portfolios

Portfolio function	Administrative question	Indicative evidence	Risk if weak
Protective reach	Can poor and vulnerable households obtain timely and meaningful protection?	Cash transfers, in-kind benefits, insurance, pensions, health coverage, benefit adequacy	Exclusion, inadequate protection, repeated crisis coping
Capability formation	Does the portfolio protect or build education, health, nutrition, and care capabilities?	Service links, conditionalities, nutrition, health access, schooling, childcare	Intergenerational poverty and weak human capital
Productive inclusion	Are households connected to more durable income opportunities?	Skills, jobs, livelihoods, finance, enterprise, agricultural productivity, referrals	Dependence on transfers or repeated movement around the poverty line
Administrative integration and targeting	Do data, eligibility rules, programs, and delivery systems work together?	Social registries, interoperability, recertification, payment systems, coordination, grievance mechanisms	Fragmentation, duplication, stale eligibility, high administrative burden
Territorial and shock adaptability	Can the system respond to place-based inequality and rapidly changing need?	Subnational capacity, geographic targeting, scalable assistance, emergency top-ups, adaptive rules	Uneven implementation and delayed support after shocks

Note. The framework synthesizes multidimensional poverty measurement (Alkire & Foster, 2011), transformative social protection (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004), policy capacity (Wu et al., 2015), and policy integration (Cejudo & Michel, 2017). It is used for structured comparison rather than numerical scoring.

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3. Methods

3.1 Research design and case selection

The study uses a comparative qualitative secondary-data design supplemented by descriptive quantitative indicators. No interviews, surveys, field observations, experiments, or original household-level estimations were conducted. The empirical unit of comparison is the national poverty-reduction policy portfolio rather than a single program. The analysis therefore combines poverty statistics with documentary evidence on policy design, targeting, delivery, coordination, and implementation.

Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam were selected purposively. They are all Southeast Asian countries with substantial recent policy activity on poverty or social protection, but they differ in welfare architecture and development context. The selection also reflects documentary feasibility: each case has recent official statistics and sufficiently detailed public documentation to examine administrative arrangements. The sample is not intended to represent every member of ASEAN statistically. Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Singapore, and Timor-Leste are outside the empirical scope, so regional claims are limited to patterns observed across the five cases.

3.2 Data sources and comparability

The quantitative context is drawn primarily from the World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform (PIP), 2026 version, together with national statistical releases. PIP is used for the US$3.00-a-day poverty measure in 2021 PPP because it offers a standardized international threshold. National poverty rates are reported separately and are never treated as directly comparable outcomes. For Indonesia, the latest official national figure used is the September 2025 poverty rate released by Statistics Indonesia in February 2026. Malaysia uses the Department of Statistics Malaysia's 2024 poverty release. The Philippines uses the Philippine Statistics Authority's 2023 full-year official poverty statistics. Thailand and Viet Nam use the most recent national-line values available in PIP for the comparison table.

The institutional evidence comes from authoritative public documents available through 16 September 2026. Key sources include Indonesia's Poverty Assessment and government documentation on the Data Tunggal Sosial dan Ekonomi Nasional (DTSEN); Malaysia's official eKasih and Rahmah Cash Contribution (STR) information and the World Bank's 2026 assessment of social assistance; the World Bank's 2024 policy note on the Philippines' 4Ps; Thailand's 2024 Systematic Country Diagnostic and Ministry of Finance documentation for the 2026 State Welfare registration; and World Bank, UNDP, and Government of Viet Nam material on multidimensional poverty reduction and the integrated national target program for 2026-2030. Regional conceptual context is provided by the Asian Development Bank's 2026 SPICES framework.

Comparability is treated as an explicit limitation. Survey years differ, national poverty lines reflect different living-standard norms, and institutional documents vary in scope and evaluative depth. A reported program feature is therefore treated as evidence that an administrative instrument exists, not proof that it caused a poverty outcome. Likewise, evidence of fragmentation, exclusion risk, or implementation delay is interpreted as an administrative constraint documented by the source, not as a complete judgment of national government performance.

Table 2. Case focus and principal secondary-data sources

Country	Current governance focus examined	Principal evidence base
Indonesia	Large-scale social protection; integrated socioeconomic targeting data; subnational delivery	BPS (2026); Bappenas (2025a, 2025b); World Bank (2023)
Malaysia	Cash assistance, national poverty database, coverage, adequacy, and program fragmentation	DOSM (2025); Government of Malaysia (2026a, 2026b); Wan & Cheng (2026)
Philippines	Institutionalized conditional cash transfer, national targeting, human-capital conditionalities, graduation and payments	PSA (2024); Gudmalin et al. (2024)

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Country	Current governance focus examined	Principal evidence base
Thailand	Targeted welfare-card system, revalidation and exclusion error, aging and regional disparities	Ministry of Finance Thailand (2026); World Bank (2024)
Viet Nam	Multidimensional and place-based poverty reduction; integrated national target program; livelihoods and rural development	World Bank (2022); UNDP (2022); Government of Viet Nam (2026)

3.3 Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the most recent poverty indicators were assembled to establish the empirical context while retaining the year and definition attached to each value. Second, policy documents were coded using the five portfolio functions in Table 1. Coding focused on observable administrative features: target populations, data systems, transfer architecture, links to services and livelihoods, interorganizational coordination, subnational delivery, and mechanisms for updating eligibility or responding to shocks. Third, cross-case pattern matching was used to identify configurations that recur across countries and institutional problems that take different forms in different systems.

The design does not assign numerical scores. Public documents are not sufficiently standardized to justify a composite governance index, and numerical scoring would imply a level of measurement precision that the evidence cannot support. The analysis instead uses structured comparison to distinguish documented strengths, trade-offs, and unresolved administrative problems.

4. Results

4.1 Poverty reduction has advanced, but the remaining problem is not the same across countries

The standardized US$3.00-a-day indicator confirms that severe monetary deprivation has become very low in Malaysia and Thailand, while it remains more visible in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. PIP reports 0.00% for Malaysia in 2021 and 0.01% for Thailand in 2024. The corresponding values are 1.60% for Viet Nam in 2022, 4.04% for Indonesia in 2025, and 5.32% for the Philippines in 2023 (World Bank, 2026). These values are useful for a common international threshold but should not be interpreted as a complete account of poverty or vulnerability.

National measures show why the administrative agenda is broader. Indonesia reported 8.25% of the population below the national poverty line in September 2025, including 10.72% in rural areas and 6.60% in urban areas (BPS, 2026). Malaysia reported absolute poverty of 5.1% in 2024, with 10.0% in rural areas and 3.7% in urban areas; Sabah remained substantially above the national average (DOSM, 2025). The Philippines reported 15.5% of individuals below the national poverty threshold in 2023 (PSA, 2024). PIP reports national-line poverty of 5.4% for Thailand in 2022 and 4.2% for Viet Nam in 2022 (World Bank, 2026).

These figures cannot be ranked directly because the national poverty lines are country-specific. Their governance significance lies elsewhere: even where extreme poverty is nearly absent, governments continue to manage substantial populations facing national-standard deprivation, regional inequality, informality, demographic risk, or economic insecurity. The policy challenge therefore differs in composition. In Indonesia and the Philippines, scale and targeting remain central alongside productive employment. In Malaysia and Thailand, the agenda increasingly concerns adequacy, exclusion, aging, cost-of-living pressures, and distribution. In Viet Nam, chronic poverty is increasingly concentrated in disadvantaged territories and population groups while a wider set of households remain vulnerable to shocks and labor-market transitions.

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Table 3. Recent poverty indicators used as descriptive context

Country	Poverty at US$3.00/day (2021 PPP)	Reference year	Latest national poverty measure used	Reference year
Indonesia	4.04%	2025	8.25% (official national line)	Sep. 2025
Malaysia	0.00%	2021	5.10% (absolute poverty)	2024
Philippines	5.32%	2023	15.50% (individuals, national threshold)	2023
Thailand	0.01%	2024	5.40% (national line)	2022
Viet Nam	1.60%	2022	4.20% (national line)	2022

Note. The US$3.00 measure is internationally standardized; national poverty measures use country-specific definitions and must not be interpreted as directly comparable rankings. Sources: World Bank PIP (2026); BPS (2026); DOSM (2025); PSA (2024).

4.2 Protective reach is broadening, but coverage and adequacy are different administrative problems

All five countries operate substantial protection mechanisms, but their administrative problems differ. Indonesia's system is characterized by large-scale social-assistance and social-insurance instruments within a decentralized state. The World Bank's Indonesia Poverty Assessment argues that the next phase requires combining protection against poverty with better opportunities and pro-poor investment, because more than one-third of Indonesians remain economically insecure even after extreme poverty has fallen sharply (World Bank, 2023). The key point is that protective reach must extend beyond a static category of the currently poor if households can fall below the threshold after employment, health, climate, or price shocks.

Malaysia illustrates a different trade-off between breadth and depth. Wan and Cheng (2026) identify 189 federal social-assistance programs delivered by 26 ministries and agencies in 2024. They report high overall coverage and a pro-poor incidence of benefits, but relatively low benefit adequacy and substantial fragmentation. STR had the broadest coverage in their analysis, reaching 83.9% of B40 households in 2022, while the large number of programs complicated planning, coordination, and navigation. The case demonstrates that high coverage does not remove the need to examine whether benefits are sufficiently large and whether multiple schemes form a coherent system.

Malaysia's 2026 architecture also shows an attempt to differentiate broad assistance from more targeted support. STR provides direct financial aid to eligible low-income households and individuals, while eKasih functions as a national poverty database used by agencies to identify poor and extremely poor households. The SARA mechanism further uses eKasih status to provide more intensive basic-needs support to poor and extremely poor STR recipients. This layered design potentially improves differentiation by need, but the World Bank's fragmentation findings indicate that data interoperability and program consolidation remain important administrative questions (Government of Malaysia, 2026a, 2026b; Wan & Cheng, 2026).

The Philippines provides one of the clearest examples of institutionalized protective reach through a flagship program. 4Ps uses a national household-targeting system and conditions transfers on investments in children's health, nutrition, and education. Gudmalin et al. (2024) describe it as the backbone of the country's safety nets and focus reform attention on targeting, benefit levels and conditionalities, program duration, and payment modalities. The administrative issue is therefore not whether a national transfer platform exists, but whether it remains sufficiently current, adequate, accessible, and capable of incorporating newly vulnerable households while supporting appropriate graduation.

Thailand's 2026 State Welfare registration is especially revealing from a targeting perspective. The Ministry of Finance explicitly justified a new registration round by the need to address exclusion errors among low-income people who had been left out of the previous cycle and to reassess existing beneficiaries against current eligibility criteria. The program uses income and asset tests and provides support for essential consumption and selected utility and transport costs. This is an example of protective reach being treated as a dynamic administrative process rather than as a permanently fixed beneficiary list (Ministry of Finance Thailand, 2026).

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Viet Nam combines targeted assistance with area-based and development-oriented measures. The World Bank's poverty assessment argues that the social-protection system should play a larger role, with increased coverage and benefit levels and greater efficiency in a fragmented program mix (World Bank, 2022). At the same time, poverty policy is embedded within national target programs that combine household support with infrastructure, livelihoods, services, and territorial development. The result is a protection architecture that is less centered on a single flagship transfer and more closely tied to broader development programming.

4.3 Human-capital and productive-inclusion links distinguish poverty portfolios from simple transfer systems

A second cross-country difference concerns what happens beyond immediate protection. The Philippines' 4Ps explicitly links transfers to human-capital investments, making education and health conditionalities part of program design. This provides an institutional bridge between short-term consumption support and longer-term capability formation. However, the 2024 policy note emphasizes that sustaining program impact requires attention to graduation, payment accessibility, and changing household circumstances. Human-capital conditionality is therefore a necessary but not sufficient route out of poverty if labor-market opportunities remain weak or if households lose support before stable income sources are available.

Indonesia's challenge is more strongly connected to economic mobility. The World Bank (2023) finds that agriculture and low-value-added services have been major contributors to poverty reduction but often do not provide sufficiently productive work to secure durable economic mobility. The policy portfolio therefore needs to connect social protection to better jobs, financial inclusion, resilient infrastructure, and improvements in human capital. This changes the administrative problem from transferring resources to coordinating policies across social protection, labor, education, economic development, and subnational service delivery.

Thailand faces a related but demographically different problem. The 2024 Systematic Country Diagnostic identifies aging, weak productivity growth, human-capital constraints, household debt, and unequal access to opportunities as barriers to inclusive prosperity. It recommends targeted social assistance alongside pension reform, stronger human capital, improved central-local relations, and more efficient fiscal allocation (World Bank, 2024). In such a setting, productive inclusion cannot be designed only for working-age households moving out of poverty; the policy portfolio must simultaneously manage old-age income security, labor-force participation, and service access across the lifecycle.

Viet Nam's policy trajectory shows a particularly explicit integration of productive and territorial objectives. The World Bank's 'Last Mile to Next Mile' framing argues that poverty reduction now requires new and sustainable economic pathways, higher labor productivity, better education and skills, and stronger protection against shocks (World Bank, 2022). In 2026, the government moved toward an integrated national target program combining new rural development, sustainable poverty reduction, and socioeconomic development in ethnic-minority and mountainous areas for 2026-2030. The program's stated objectives include multidimensional poverty reduction, rural income growth, social security, and narrowing regional and group disparities (Government of Viet Nam, 2026). This institutional design treats poverty reduction as a development-system problem rather than only a welfare function.

Malaysia occupies an intermediate position. Cash assistance plays a prominent role, but the large program landscape also includes education and welfare instruments. The central issue documented by Wan and Cheng (2026) is not the absence of multiple functions, but whether the functions are coordinated and adequately resourced. This distinction matters: a country can possess protective, educational, and welfare programs simultaneously without providing a clear administrative route from immediate assistance to enhanced capabilities and more secure income.

4.4 Data integration is becoming a central instrument of poverty governance

Across the five cases, social registries and beneficiary data have become core administrative infrastructure. The shift is most visible in Indonesia. In 2025, the government developed the Data Tunggal Sosial dan Ekonomi Nasional (DTSEN) by integrating major existing socioeconomic datasets, including Regsosek, the integrated social-welfare database, and the database used for accelerated extreme-poverty targeting. Bappenas describes DTSEN as a unified basis for planning, implementation,

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and evaluation, and a 2025 ministerial regulation established guidance for data sharing (Bappenas, 2025a, 2025b). The reform directly addresses a longstanding problem in social policy: separate agencies using different household lists for related interventions.

Malaysia's eKasih serves a comparable, though institutionally different, role as a national poverty database used by multiple agencies. Its 2026 public guidance emphasizes current household profiles and the prevailing poverty-line income as references for assistance. The system's value depends on its interaction with other administrative databases because Wan and Cheng (2026) identify interoperability as a priority for improving targeting accuracy. Thus, the analytical significance of a registry is not simply its existence; it is whether it becomes the common information layer through which multiple programs make compatible decisions.

The Philippines' experience demonstrates the problem of registry aging. Listahanan provided the targeting backbone for 4Ps and other programs, but the World Bank's 2024 policy note stresses the importance of beneficiary revalidation and updating. A targeting system is a snapshot unless it incorporates periodic reassessment, exits, new entries, and mechanisms for households affected by shocks. The same principle is evident in Thailand's 2026 welfare-card re-registration, where the government explicitly sought to correct exclusion errors and reassess eligibility rather than rely indefinitely on an earlier list.

These reforms reveal an important shift in poverty administration: data are no longer merely a statistical input for estimating poverty; they are operational infrastructure for allocating rights and benefits. This creates both capability gains and governance risks. Integrated data can reduce duplication and improve responsiveness, but poor update mechanisms can institutionalize outdated classifications. Interoperability can simplify citizen access, but it also requires clear rules for data governance, privacy, institutional authority, and appeals. The quality of poverty policy increasingly depends on how governments administer these information systems, not only on the generosity of programs attached to them.

4.5 Territorial capacity remains a major source of variation within national systems

National policy design does not eliminate territorial inequality. Indonesia's latest poverty release shows a substantial rural-urban difference, while the World Bank emphasizes uneven human-capital outcomes and the importance of stronger subnational administrative capacity (BPS, 2026; World Bank, 2023). National targeting and financing may therefore be relatively sophisticated while service quality, labor-market opportunity, and implementation capacity vary across provinces and districts. The effectiveness of a portfolio depends on the weakest institutional links that households encounter locally.

Malaysia shows a similar territorial issue. Although national absolute poverty fell to 5.1% in 2024, Sabah recorded a much higher incidence of 17.7% and Kelantan 11.5% (DOSM, 2025). Such variation implies that national transfer rules operate in contexts with different costs, infrastructure, labor markets, and administrative reach. It also strengthens the case for combining household targeting with place-sensitive policy rather than assuming that national averages identify where administrative effort is most needed.

The Philippines' 2023 poverty statistics likewise show wide regional dispersion, with some regions recording very low family poverty and others above 20% (PSA, 2024). Thailand's Systematic Country Diagnostic highlights uneven development between Bangkok and secondary cities and calls for stronger central-local relations and local administrative capacity (World Bank, 2024). Viet Nam makes territorial targeting explicit through national programs focused on poor districts, rural development, and ethnic-minority and mountainous areas. In each case, the governance challenge is to balance national standards and economies of scale with enough local discretion and capacity to respond to distinct patterns of deprivation.

Territorial capacity also affects integration. A central registry can identify a household, but a local school, clinic, employment office, agricultural extension service, or district administration must often deliver the capability-building or productive component. If local implementation systems differ sharply, the same national eligibility rule can produce very different beneficiary experiences. Poverty-reduction governance is therefore partly a multilevel-administration problem.

4.6 Cross-country configurations: different architectures, recurring administrative tensions

The cases do not converge on one institutional model. Indonesia is moving toward a data-integrated

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multi-program architecture in which the central challenge is connecting broad protection to economic mobility and consistent subnational implementation. Malaysia combines broad assistance coverage with a highly plural program landscape, making adequacy, interoperability, and consolidation central issues. The Philippines has a more visible flagship architecture through 4Ps, with a strong protection-to-human-capital link but continuing needs for dynamic targeting and productive transitions. Thailand combines a low extreme-poverty environment with targeted welfare revalidation, mature social services, and growing lifecycle and regional challenges. Viet Nam uses a more explicitly place-based and development-integrated model in which poverty reduction is connected to rural transformation and disadvantaged territories.

Despite these differences, four tensions recur. First, targeting must be accurate without becoming administratively rigid. Second, broad coverage must be distinguished from benefit adequacy. Third, protection must be connected to capability and productive opportunity without assuming that every beneficiary can or should quickly 'graduate' from assistance. Fourth, national systems require local implementation capacity and mechanisms for responding to shocks. These tensions define the contemporary governance problem more clearly than a simple distinction between countries with high and low poverty rates.

Table 4. Comparative configurations of poverty-reduction governance

Country	Dominant portfolio configuration	Administrative asset visible in evidence	Principal unresolved tension
Indonesia	Large multi-program system with stronger national data integration and decentralized delivery	Scale of social protection; DTSEN integration; explicit shift toward economic security	Linking protection to productive mobility and equalizing subnational implementation
Malaysia	Broad cash and welfare coverage across many programs, with eKasih and STR/SARA targeting layers	Wide reach; national poverty database; differentiated assistance	Fragmentation, interoperability, and benefit adequacy
Philippines	Flagship conditional cash transfer linked to health and education through national targeting	Institutionalized 4Ps; human-capital conditionalities; established targeting backbone	Dynamic recertification, benefit design, payments, and transitions to secure livelihoods
Thailand	Targeted welfare-card support within a mature service system and very low extreme poverty	2026 revalidation explicitly addresses exclusion error; established social-service base	Aging, informality, regional inequality, and lifecycle income security
Viet Nam	Multidimensional and place-based poverty reduction increasingly integrated with rural and ethnic-minority development	Integrated territorial programming; explicit livelihoods and development orientation	Portability, informal-worker protection, implementation speed, and adaptation during transition

Note. The table summarizes documented institutional configurations; it is not a ranking and does not attribute national poverty outcomes causally to the listed arrangements.

5. Discussion

5.1 Poverty reduction is increasingly a problem of governing complementarities

The comparative evidence suggests that the institutional frontier of poverty reduction is shifting. Earlier stages of poverty policy often focused on identifying poor households and delivering targeted transfers or basic services. Those functions remain essential, particularly where poverty is still widespread. But the five cases increasingly face a more demanding problem: how to make multiple instruments reinforce one another. A transfer can protect consumption, a school or clinic can build capabilities, a livelihood or employment program can expand earning opportunities, and a registry can improve targeting. None of these functions alone constitutes a poverty-reduction system.

This finding is consistent with the distinction between coordination and integration in public administration. Coordination may reduce duplication or improve information exchange; integration asks whether programs are governed around the common public problem (Cejudo & Michel, 2017). Malaysia's large number of assistance programs shows the potential cost of policy proliferation without sufficient system coherence. Indonesia's DTSEN reform addresses the data layer of fragmentation, but the broader protection-to-opportunity sequence still depends on employment, human-capital, infrastructure, and local-government systems. The Philippines demonstrates stronger integration

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between transfer conditions and human capital, yet graduation and productive transition require coordination beyond the 4Ps program itself.

The comparison therefore supports a policy-portfolio interpretation of administrative capacity. State capacity in poverty reduction is not simply the ability to execute a large program. It is the ability to connect information, money, services, organizations, and territorial levels around changing household needs. This is a system-level capacity in the sense of Wu et al. (2015), and it becomes more important as the remaining poverty population is more heterogeneous.

5.2 Better targeting requires dynamic inclusion, not only tighter selection

A second implication concerns targeting. Anti-poverty debates often frame targeting as a technical exercise in reducing leakage to the nonpoor. The cases examined here show that exclusion and data obsolescence are equally important. Thailand's 2026 re-registration explicitly identifies exclusion errors as a reason for reopening the system. The Philippines' 4Ps reform agenda includes revalidation and replacement of households. Indonesia's DTSEN integrates previously separate national datasets. Malaysia uses eKasih as a poverty database while the World Bank recommends stronger interoperability.

These reforms point toward a dynamic concept of eligibility. Household welfare changes through job loss, illness, migration, family composition, price shocks, disasters, and aging. A highly accurate registry at one point in time can become inaccurate if entry and exit rules are slow. From a public-administration perspective, the key performance attributes are therefore not only targeting precision but update frequency, interoperability, transparency of criteria, grievance and appeal mechanisms, and the time required to translate changed circumstances into changed support.

This also changes how digitalization should be evaluated. Digital identity, integrated databases, and electronic payments can reduce administrative costs and speed delivery, but they can create new barriers when citizens lack documentation, connectivity, or administrative literacy. A mature targeting architecture must therefore combine data integration with accessible offline or assisted channels, as illustrated by Thailand's use of digital and bank-based registration routes and Malaysia's continued district and community pathways for eKasih registration.

5.3 The next poverty agenda is protection plus mobility, not protection versus mobility

A third implication is that social protection and productive inclusion should not be treated as competing approaches. Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004) already argued that social protection can be protective, preventive, promotive, and transformative. The current Southeast Asian cases show why that broader view matters. Indonesia and Viet Nam explicitly face a 'next stage' problem in which large numbers of people have escaped severe poverty but remain economically insecure. Thailand's aging population means that not all poverty prevention can be organized around labor-market activation. The Philippines must connect human-capital gains and program graduation to real employment and livelihood opportunities. Malaysia's adequacy challenge means that labor-market policies do not remove the need for meaningful short-term protection.

The analytical mistake would be to interpret graduation from a transfer program as equivalent to sustainable poverty exit. Administrative systems need to distinguish at least three situations: households requiring long-term protection because of lifecycle or disability risks; working-age households needing temporary protection while they rebuild income; and households for whom productive services can accelerate mobility but who still need insurance against shocks. A portfolio approach makes these distinctions visible and reduces pressure to use one policy instrument for incompatible objectives.

Human-capital policy is part of the same logic. Conditional transfers can encourage service use, but service quality and accessibility remain separate administrative tasks. Likewise, skills training is unlikely to produce mobility without labor demand, transport, childcare, finance, or local economic opportunity. Poverty-reduction governance therefore requires referral and delivery systems that cross conventional ministerial boundaries.

5.4 Territorial governance is the bridge between national policy and household experience

The country comparisons also show that spatial inequality is not a residual detail. Indonesia's rural-urban gap, Malaysia's high poverty in Sabah, the Philippines' regional dispersion, Thailand's secondary-city challenges, and Viet Nam's focus on poor and ethnic-minority areas all indicate that household poverty is embedded in places with different administrative, economic, and infrastructural conditions.

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National transfers may be standardized, but the services and opportunities that determine durable poverty exit are geographically uneven.

This creates a governance trade-off. Strong national standards can reduce local inequities in eligibility and financing, while local discretion is necessary to adapt interventions to labor markets, rural livelihoods, infrastructure, and community conditions. Too much fragmentation can create postcode-based inequality; excessive centralization can make programs insensitive to local constraints. The comparative evidence favors a layered arrangement: national data standards and minimum entitlements, combined with transparent fiscal support and measurable local discretion.

Viet Nam's integrated territorial program provides one institutional response by embedding poverty reduction within rural and ethnic-minority development. Thailand's World Bank diagnostic emphasizes stronger central-local relations. Indonesia's poverty assessment similarly highlights subnational administrative capacity. These cases suggest that future comparative research should measure not only national program coverage but also variation in local implementation quality, referral completion, service availability, and beneficiary outcomes.

5.5 Implications for comparative public administration

The study has two broader implications for public-administration scholarship. First, poverty reduction should be treated as a cross-cutting administrative system comparable to other complex policy domains in which outcomes depend on integration across organizations. The relevant variables include registry design, program interoperability, payment infrastructure, multilevel coordination, operational discretion, and learning mechanisms. These are governance variables, not merely social-policy details.

Second, the evidence cautions against institutional mimicry. No single country model can be transferred mechanically. Malaysia's problem is not identical to Indonesia's, and Thailand's low extreme-poverty context changes the relevance of different instruments. The useful object for lesson-drawing is therefore the administrative function rather than the named program. One country may learn about registry updating, another about linking transfers to human capital, another about place-based productive inclusion, and another about program consolidation. Functional comparison is more defensible than declaring one national architecture superior.

For evaluation, the ADB's 2026 SPICES framework is particularly useful because it separates inputs, outputs, and outcomes. A governance-oriented extension would add process indicators: registry update time, exclusion-error resolution, benefit-delivery timeliness, referral completion, interagency data interoperability, local implementation variance, and the speed of temporary expansion after shocks. Such measures would help distinguish program activity from administrative performance without collapsing diverse systems into a single composite score.

5.6 Limitations

The analysis has several limitations. Publicly available documents provide uneven visibility into internal administrative processes, and countries differ in reporting practices. Absence of public documentation is therefore not treated as evidence that an institutional mechanism does not exist. The comparison also relies on poverty indicators with different reference years, and national poverty lines are not harmonized. These limitations prevent causal ranking and make the study better suited to institutional pattern identification than to statistical inference.

The five-country selection also omits important Southeast Asian cases. Cambodia and Lao PDR would add lower-income and rural-development perspectives, Singapore would provide a distinct high-income welfare model, and Timor-Leste would add a younger state-capacity context. Future research could expand the case set, build a longitudinal database of administrative reforms, and combine secondary documents with interviews, implementation data, beneficiary surveys, and subnational comparisons.

6. Conclusion

Poverty reduction in Southeast Asia can no longer be understood adequately as a contest between national poverty rates or as a comparison of flagship transfer programs. The five cases show that contemporary poverty governance operates through portfolios that combine protection, human-capital services, productive inclusion, targeting systems, and territorial implementation. The composition of those portfolios differs because the remaining poverty problem differs across countries.

Indonesia's recent data-integration reforms strengthen the administrative foundation of a large and

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decentralized system, but durable economic security requires stronger links from protection to productive opportunity and more consistent subnational delivery. Malaysia has broad assistance reach and increasingly differentiated cash and basic-needs support, yet fragmentation and benefit adequacy remain central concerns. The Philippines has a deeply institutionalized conditional-transfer architecture that links protection to human capital, while dynamic targeting, payment access, and post-program mobility remain important. Thailand's 2026 welfare re-registration illustrates the need to correct exclusion and reassess eligibility even in a country with very low extreme poverty, while aging and regional inequality reshape the policy agenda. Viet Nam's integrated 2026-2030 national target program demonstrates an explicitly territorial and development-oriented approach to multidimensional poverty reduction, while labor-market informality and implementation complexity remain relevant.

Across the cases, the central governance lesson is that adding programs is not the same as building a coherent poverty-reduction system. Administrative performance depends on whether data systems can identify changing need, benefits are adequate and accessible, human-capital and livelihood instruments connect to protection, and national policy can be implemented across unequal territories. The policy portfolio must also remain adaptable when households move into or out of vulnerability after shocks.

For public administration, this reframes poverty reduction as a problem of governing complementarities. Future comparative work should therefore move beyond program inventories toward measurable administrative relationships: how fast registries update, how agencies share data, how beneficiaries are referred across services, how local implementation varies, how grievances are resolved, and how systems expand during crises. Such evidence would allow stronger conclusions about why some combinations of policy instruments generate more durable economic security than others.

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