

What Does ASEAN Mean to ASEAN Peoples? Survey Findings from Viet Nam*

Central Institute for Economic Management

Thanh Tri Vo, Senior Economist

Duong Anh Nguyen, Deputy Director

Hang Thu Dinh, Researcher

Introduction

In decades of reforms, Viet Nam has sought to broaden the economic opportunities for its people and the business community while building the capacity to enable them to take advantage of these opportunities. Together with market-oriented institutional reforms, proactive economic integration has brought a more diverse range of economic opportunities and access to valuable resources, including capital, technical, and management expertise. On this basis, Viet Nam has improved itself economically in terms of livelihood and capacity, enlivening subsequent efforts to cooperate with other countries in areas such as science, technology, and food security. This has enabled Vietnamese people to participate in and benefit from the international development process.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) membership marked an important milestone within this process. Notwithstanding efforts under the ‘open-door’ policy since 1986, accession to ASEAN in 1995 remained the first most important breakthrough. ASEAN was the playground where Viet Nam was first exposed to trade and investment liberalisation. Over time, the association has gradually built on and realised initiatives to expand regional cooperation beyond economic issues. Viet Nam and other member states have worked to narrow the intraregional development gap and maintain regional stability to foster the improvement of their people’s well-being. The

* All tables and figures in this chapter were derived from the survey data.

voice of ASEAN, reflected in the collective efforts of the officials of its member states, has gradually become more influential in the regional setting.

Viet Nam has gone a long way to completing various measures for the ASEAN Economic Community by 2015. However, there is still an array of further work to be done by 2025. It is thus important to ensure that such future work continues to target and be inclusive of Vietnamese people. In light of this, an essential precondition is a comprehensive understanding of the current perceptions and aspirations of Vietnamese people for ASEAN.

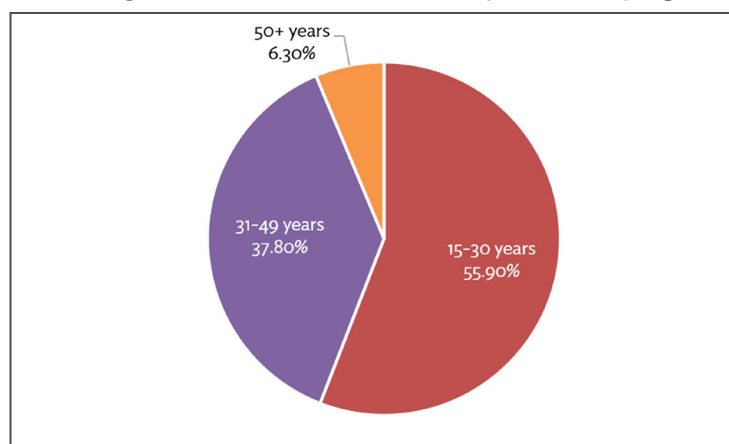
This chapter presents the findings from a survey of Vietnamese people on the importance of ASEAN. The survey was designed to capture the opinions of various groups in Viet Nam on the importance and priorities of ASEAN until 2025. It was complemented by three focus group discussions (FGDs) with respective participation from (i) young people, (ii) business representatives, and (iii) researchers and members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

This chapter first describes the basic information about the respondents. It then summarises the key perceptions and aspirations of the respondents about ASEAN. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of the implications of the survey findings.

Basic Information about the Respondents

Figure 1 depicts the shares of the survey respondents by age group. As shown, almost 56% of respondents were aged between 15 and 30 years old. Nearly 38% of the respondents were aged between 31 and 49 years old, while those aged 50 or older accounted for just over 6% of the respondents.

Figure 1: Distribution of the Respondents by Age



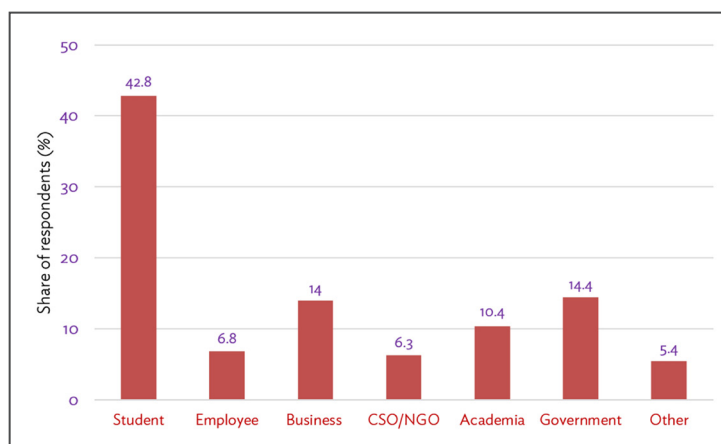
By gender, the number of male and female respondents were the same (Table 1). The share of men in the 15–30 age group (nearly 59%) was slightly higher than that for women (over 53%). Meanwhile, the numbers and shares for women in the 31–49 and 50+ age groups slightly exceeded those for men.

Table 1: Distribution of Survey Respondents by Age Group and Gender

Age	Number of Respondents		Share (%)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
15–30 years	59	65	53.2	58.6
31–49 years	43	41	38.7	36.9
50+ years	9	5	8.1	4.5
<i>Total</i>	111	111	100.0	100.0

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the respondents by profession. As shown, almost 43% of the respondents were students, outnumbering the other professions in the group. The business and government sectors accounted for roughly the same shares of respondents at around 14%. Just over 10% of the respondents were from academia. The remaining smaller shares of respondents were for employees (at almost 7%), members of civil society organisations or NGOs (just over 6%), and other professions (over 5%).

Figure 2: Distribution of the Respondents by Affiliation

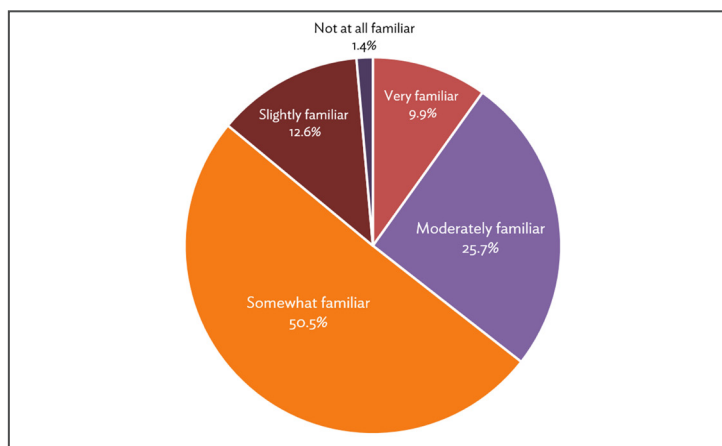


CSO = civil society organisation, NGO = non-governmental organisation.

Voices of ASEAN

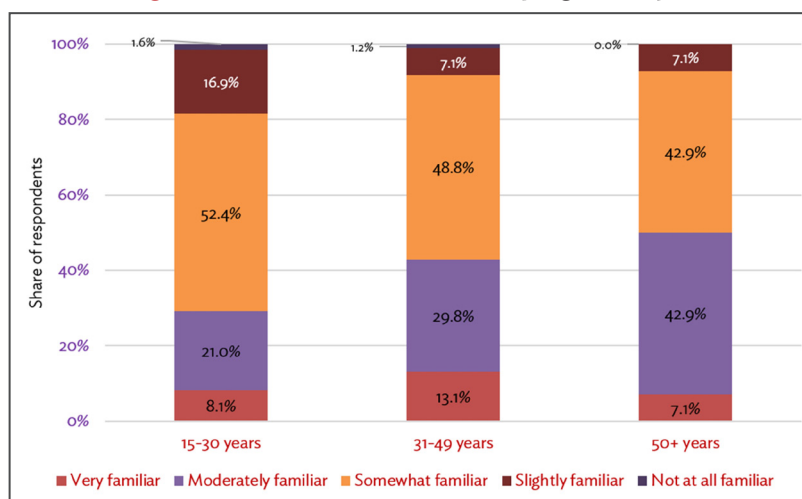
Figure 3 summarises the respondents' awareness of general ASEAN-related issues. Very few people were unfamiliar with ASEAN. Notably, more than a half of the respondents were somewhat familiar with ASEAN-related topics. Meanwhile, less than 10% of those surveyed indicated high familiarity, and around 25% of the respondents indicated moderate familiarity. More than 12% of the respondents admitted that they were only slightly aware of ASEAN issues. During the youth FGD, almost all participants stated that they mostly heard about the ASEAN Economic Community. Specifically, they kept hearing about the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Community interchangeably and thought these terms were the same. They mentioned that they never heard about the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community or the ASEAN Political-Security Community. In fact, the FGD participants added that the vast information on the World Trade Organization (WTO), the European Union-Viet Nam free trade agreement (FTA), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, etc. somehow diverted their attention away from ASEAN.

Figure 3: Awareness of ASEAN
(share of respondents)



The respondents' awareness of ASEAN only varied slightly by age group (Figure 4). In general, those aged 50 or older were the most familiar with ASEAN topics. In contrast, the share of respondents with only slight familiarity with ASEAN issues was higher for those between 15 and 30 years old than the other age groups. Consistent with this finding, the FGD with the young people showed that three out of eight participants only started to hear about ASEAN-related content from 2015, when the local media included more information on Viet Nam's preparation for the ASEAN Economic Community.

Figure 4: Awareness of ASEAN by Age Group



Details of the respondents’ awareness of ASEAN by profession are shown in Table 2. Overall, the largest share of respondents was somewhat familiar with ASEAN topics, and this holds across all professions. However, the students and employees were less confident about their understanding of ASEAN vis-à-vis other groups of respondents. This is reflected in the larger shares of students and employees who had only somewhat or slight familiarity with ASEAN topics. It should also be noted that the awareness of the business group is consistent with previous survey findings, especially by Nguyen (2014), as about 76% of those surveyed lacked knowledge about the ASEAN Economic Community.

Table 2: Awareness of ASEAN by Affiliation

	Students	Employees	Business	CSO/NGO	Academia	Government	Other
Very familiar	6.3	20.0	9.7	14.3	21.7	9.4	0.0
Moderately familiar	18.9	0.0	25.8	35.7	30.4	46.9	33.3
Somewhat familiar	52.6	73.3	48.4	42.9	43.5	43.8	50.0
Slightly familiar	20.0	6.7	12.9	7.1	4.3	0.0	16.7
Not at all familiar	2.1	0.0	3.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

CSO = civil society organisation, NGO = non-governmental organisation.

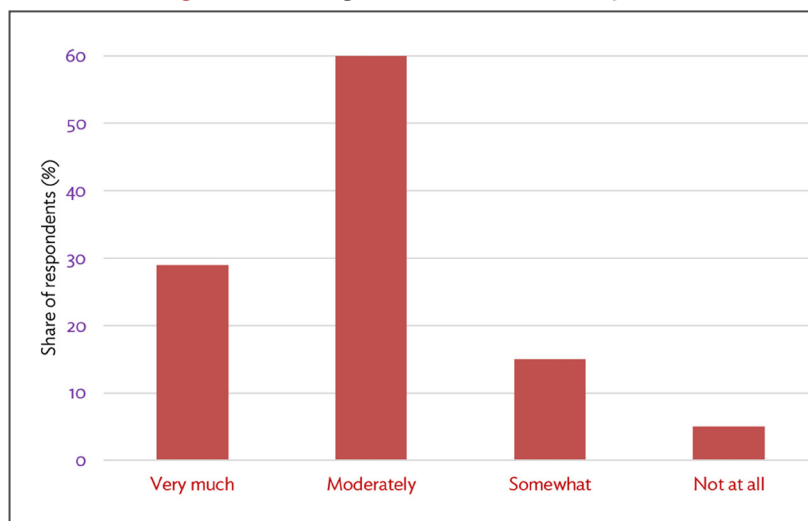
A large share of business representatives, meanwhile, were either moderately or somewhat familiar with ASEAN topics. The FGD with the business representatives also showed that all participants had heard of ASEAN, and some had even been acquiring information about ASEAN since the early 2000s. Still, the business representatives suffered from some lack of awareness of ASEAN. Four out of six business participants in the FGD knew that the ASEAN Economic Community was only a pillar of the ASEAN

Community but could not describe or list the other two pillars. The most important pieces of information that the business participants cared about were the reduction of tariffs and the related opportunities and challenges, especially those specific to their industries or products.

The FGD participants aspired to better understand ASEAN-related topics. The young people said they could find related information on the Internet but needed guidance on finding and accessing the relevant information. The business representatives wanted to know more about the conditions for utilising preferential tariffs and the main advantages of the cumulative rules of origin under ASEAN over the usual rules of origin under the WTO. They understood that the information was available on the Internet but said the language was overly technical with lots of jargon. As the concerned businesses were small and medium-sized enterprises, many had problems seeking assistance from lawyers about the related content in the ASEAN agreements. Meanwhile, the NGO participants and researchers suggested that more meaningful information should be made available through the Internet, possibly via the websites of government agencies, business associations, and research institutes.

Figure 5 shows the feelings of the respondents towards being ASEAN citizens. Again, less than 7% of the respondents did not feel they were ASEAN citizens. Notably, over 56% of those surveyed felt moderately as ASEAN citizens. Around one-fifth of the respondents felt very much as ASEAN citizens, while around 16% said they felt somewhat as ASEAN citizens.

Figure 5: Feeling of ASEAN Citizenship



Some differences appear when comparing the feelings of the respondents by age group (Figure 6). Again, the oldest age group had the highest likelihood (36%) of having a strong feeling of ASEAN citizenship. Respondents aged 15–30 had a relatively weaker feeling of being ASEAN citizens but had the highest share among those with a moderate feeling (almost three-fifths). The young people in the FGD indicated they did not feel they were citizens of the same region as people from Cambodia, Lao PDR, or Myanmar, although they strongly preferred being able to access the same services and opportunities as people in Singapore. They enjoyed most the ease of travelling to ASEAN countries without visas, an important consideration given that Viet Nam’s ordinary passport is only accepted visa-free in a limited number of countries.

Figure 6: Feeling of ASEAN Citizenship by Age Group

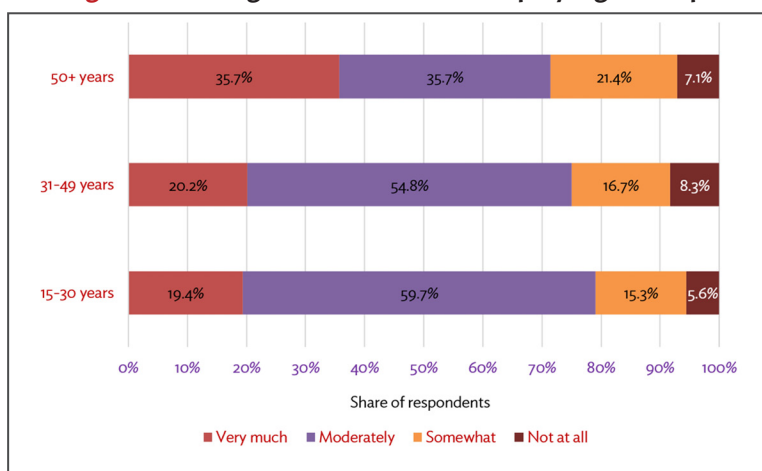


Figure 7 shows the respondents’ perceptions of Viet Nam’s membership of ASEAN. Consistent with the policy objective to enhance economic opportunities through economic integration, which effectively started with ASEAN, almost 79% of the respondents believed that ASEAN membership was beneficial for Viet Nam. However, about 14% of those surveyed claimed that the country’s membership had been neither good nor bad, and another 5% even argued that it had been unfavourable. Around 3% of respondents indicated they did not know whether Viet Nam’s membership in ASEAN had been good or bad.

The majority of the FGD participants appreciated the value that ASEAN membership had added to Viet Nam. For young people, travelling to other ASEAN countries had become a lot easier. Many had benefited from faster immigration procedures via expedited ASEAN lanes, though they had not recognised, prior to the FGD, that such measures had originated from the work of ASEAN. The FGD participants recognised the increased availability and greater diversity of goods from ASEAN countries. A concern

raised by some of the NGO participants was that by being a member of ASEAN, Viet Nam was suffering from a narrower policy space and could no longer protect its domestic industries (of which retailing services were an example).

Figure 7: Perception of Viet Nam’s Membership of ASEAN
(share of respondents)

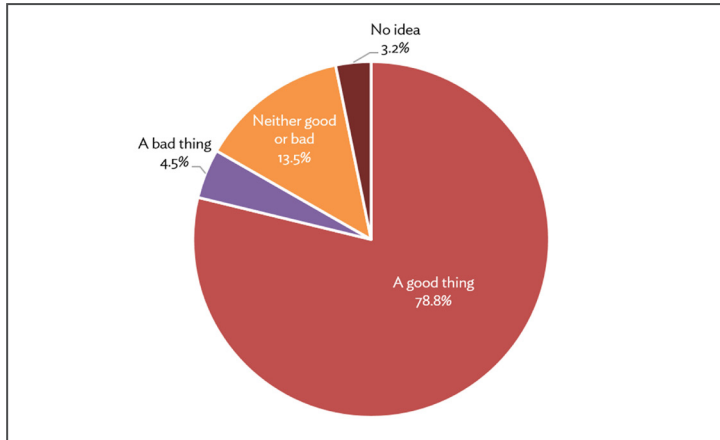
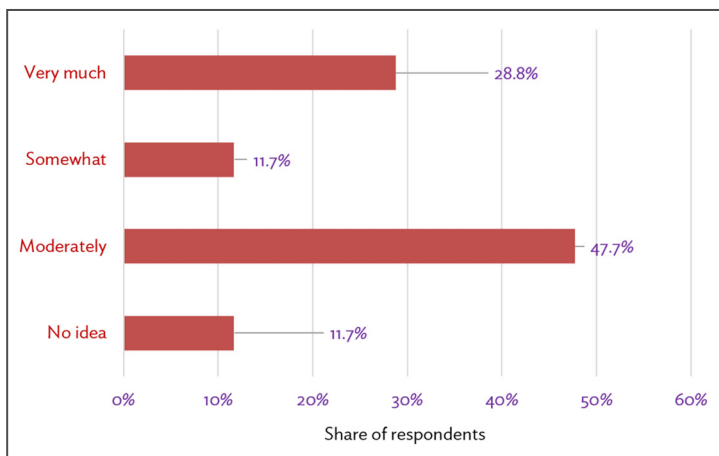


Figure 8 depicts the respondents’ assessment of Viet Nam’s membership of ASEAN. Nearly 48% acknowledged moderate benefits from Viet Nam’s membership, while around 29% indicated that the country had benefited highly from ASEAN. Another 12% claimed the benefits were subtle, and the same share had no idea about whether ASEAN had been beneficial for Viet Nam.

Figure 8: Perceived Benefits of Viet Nam’s Membership of ASEAN



The young people and business representatives in the FGDs elaborated that trade in goods, tourism, and job opportunities in ASEAN as a single market would continue to create benefits for Viet Nam. They cited the trend among some Vietnamese people of

going to Singapore to form start-ups as an example. However, a business participant added that benefits to Viet Nam and enterprises would be conditional upon further economic reforms in the country, especially in the areas of tax, business registration, and contract enforcement. Meanwhile, all NGO participants and researchers agreed that resolving various issues would require coordination and a common voice in ASEAN.

From another perspective, Figure 9 illustrates how the respondents stated they would feel if Viet Nam were no longer a member of ASEAN. As shown, more than 34% of the respondents said they would be extremely concerned. Another 26% said they would be moderately concerned, while 17% indicated some (less than moderate) concern. Around 13% of the respondents answered that they would be only slightly concerned about leaving ASEAN, and less than 10% said they would not be concerned.

Figure 9: Level of Concern if Viet Nam Were to Leave ASEAN
(share of respondents)

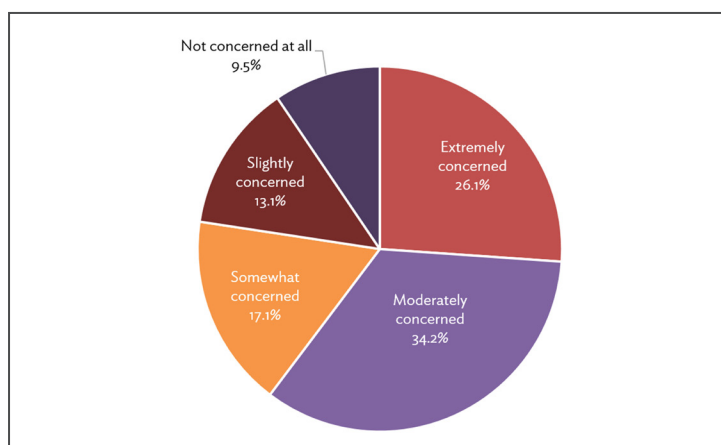


Figure 10 shows the perceptions of the respondents about the future of ASEAN. Very few respondents (around 5%) indicated they were not optimistic about ASEAN's future. Notably, more than half of the respondents expressed moderate optimism for ASEAN, and 19% were extremely optimistic. Meanwhile, similar shares of respondents were somewhat or slightly optimistic about ASEAN's future, at around 13% and 12%, respectively.

Figure 11 illustrates the respondents' perceptions of media coverage about ASEAN-related issues. This appears to be an area where the media in Viet Nam has failed to perform well. Less than 12% of the respondents claimed that media coverage of ASEAN's progress and challenges had been adequate, and very few people expressed strong agreement (less than 1% of the survey sample). In contrast, almost 48% of

the respondents agreed that media coverage of ASEAN was insufficient, and over 14% indicated strong agreement that the coverage was insufficient. Over 26% of the respondents felt neutrally about the media's coverage of ASEAN.

Figure 10: Perceptions on the Future of ASEAN

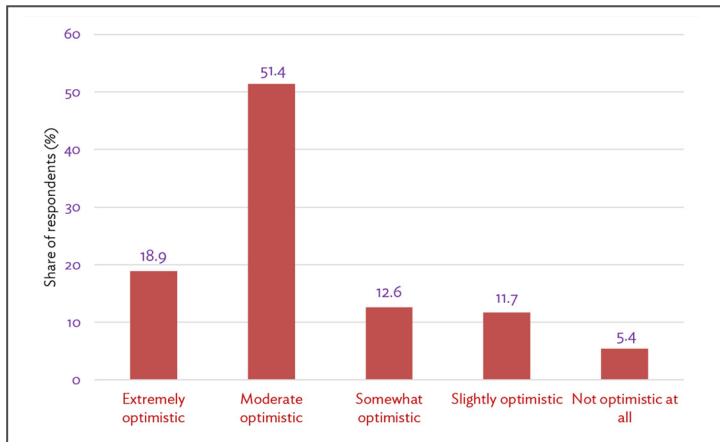
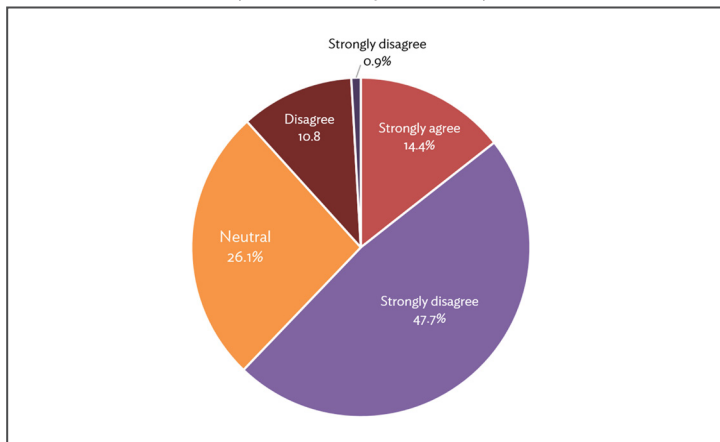


Figure 11: Agreement on the Inadequacy of Media Coverage of ASEAN
(share of respondents)



Similarly, Figure 12 shows the respondents' opinions on the need to incorporate ASEAN-related topics into textbooks. Only 7% of the respondents disagree with incorporating topics on ASEAN, while 3% expressed strong disagreement. Importantly, over 41% agreed that textbooks in Viet Nam should include content relevant to ASEAN, while 19% indicated strong agreement. Nearly 30% of the sample indicated neither agreement nor disagreement. The young participants in the FGD argued that existing information in official high school and university textbooks was limited. Most of the information was said to be outdated, focusing largely on the history of ASEAN.

Participants suggested that seminars and workshops were instrumental in delivering information on ASEAN but also complained that they often lacked the opportunity to go to such events. University students, for example, said they could not attend events on weekdays due to clashes with their class timetables. The participants also agreed that it would be difficult to include all the information in textbooks since other content of relevance to students must also be included. Meanwhile, all business participants in the FGD recommended that textbooks at both the school and university levels must include content on the work of ASEAN. The majority of the NGO participants and researchers suggested further that the core information on ASEAN (including its history, charter, major blueprints, outcomes until 2015, and directions until 2025) should be incorporated into textbooks.

Figure 12: Perceptions on the Need for Textbooks to Include Topics on ASEAN

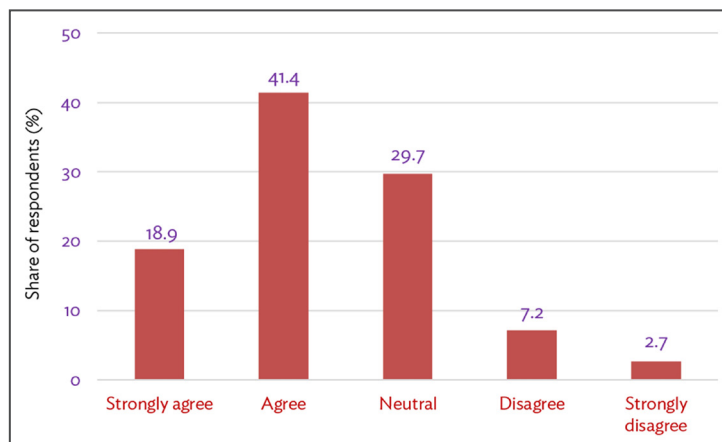


Table 3 summarises the responses on the pressing issues facing Viet Nam until 2025. The most pressing issue was corruption, chosen by almost 69% of respondents. Climate change and natural disasters followed with agreement by 64% of respondents. The availability and quality of infrastructure, and agriculture and food security emerged as other important issues for Viet Nam in the next decade, chosen by 36% and 31% of the respondents, respectively. Another important issue for Viet Nam was the poor management of natural resources and biodiversity loss, as indicated by over 28% of respondents. Conversely, the least important issues for the country by 2025 included gender equality, energy provision and prices, Internet connections, and customs efficiency.

Table 3: Pressing Concerns for Viet Nam until 2025

Issue	Number of Responses	Share of Responses (%)
Agriculture and food security	69	31.1
Access to high-quality, affordable financial services	36	16.2
Accessible Internet connections (in relation to the digital economy)	22	9.9
Customs efficiency	25	11.3
Energy provision and price	17	7.7
Infrastructure availability and quality	79	35.6
Non-tariff measures/non-tariff barriers	46	20.7
Trade, investment, and regulatory coherence	60	27.0
Climate change and natural disasters	142	64.0
Gender parity between men and women	5	2.3
Income disparity and social inequality	47	21.2
Land use, water use, and access	26	11.7
Poor natural resource management and biodiversity loss	53	23.9
Poverty	31	14.0
Quality education provision and access	59	26.6
Quality health services provision and access	63	28.4
Unemployment	43	19.4
Corruption	152	68.5
Governance	53	23.9
Human rights	26	11.7
Public participation in policymaking and programme monitoring	30	22.5

The ranking of issues in Table 3 is different from the outcome of the FGD discussions. In all three discussions, the common pressing issues for Viet Nam included trade, investment, and regulatory coherence, and climate change and natural disasters. Inadequate public participation in policymaking and programme monitoring was seen by the majority of NGO participants and researchers to undermine the quality and inclusiveness of public policies and programmes.

Table 4: Pressing Concerns for ASEAN until 2025

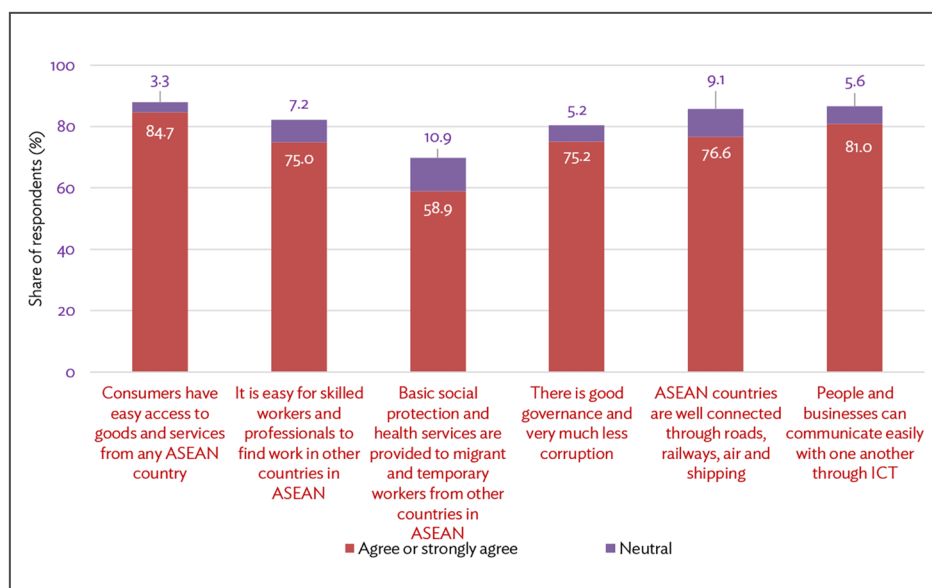
Issue	Number of Responses	Share of Responses (%)
Agriculture and food security	71	32.0
Access to high-quality, affordable financial services	25	11.3
Accessible Internet connections (in relation to the digital economy)	13	5.9
Customs efficiency	28	12.6
Energy provision and price	11	5.0
Infrastructure availability and quality	45	20.3
Non-tariff measures/non-tariff barriers	65	29.3
Trade, investment, and regulatory coherence	63	28.4
Climate change and natural disasters	163	73.4
Gender parity between men and women	16	7.2
Income disparity and social inequality	52	23.4
Land use, water use, and access	34	15.3
Poor natural resource management and biodiversity loss	88	39.6
Poverty	37	16.7
Quality education provision and access	37	16.7
Quality health services provision and access	31	14.0
Unemployment	29	13.1
Corruption	125	56.3
Governance	70	31.5
Human rights	4	19.4
Public participation in policymaking and programme monitoring	55	24.8

Table 4 shows the major issues that ASEAN as a whole faces until 2025. Climate change and natural disasters ranked first among the pressing issues, as indicated by over 73% of respondents. Corruption was the second most important issue, as indicated by 56% of respondents. In addition to these issues, the poor management of natural resources and biodiversity loss remained a challenge to ASEAN according to 40% of respondents. It should be noted that climate change and natural disasters, and the poor management of

natural resources and biodiversity loss were also indicated by the FGD participants as key issues for ASEAN. Agriculture and food security, and governance issues were indicated as pressing for ASEAN by 32% of respondents. Interestingly, the least important issues for ASEAN were Internet accessibility, energy provision and price, and gender equality, consistent with those for Viet Nam.

Figure 13 illustrates the respondents’ preferences for improvements in ASEAN in terms of accessibility issues. The most important aspect for improvement was access to goods and services from ASEAN producers, with strong agreement or agreement from almost 85% of the respondents. A couple of young participants in the FGD gave the example of having to buy high-quality, informally imported goods from travellers who had visited other ASEAN countries (such as milk powder for infants and toddlers from Singapore or Malaysia). They asserted that if there were more official import channels with lower or zero tariffs, then the availability of such products for domestic consumers would increase.

Figure 13: Aspirations for Accessibility-related Issues in ASEAN by 2025



ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ICT = information and communications technology.

Another important issue for improvement is the ease of ICT-based communication between people and businesses, indicated by 81% of respondents. One business participant in the FGD elaborated on how improvements in telecommunications services in Viet Nam had helped her business significantly in contacting partners, leading to a reduction of costs and more modern services. The only remaining issues were the stability and roaming fees of mobile phone services.

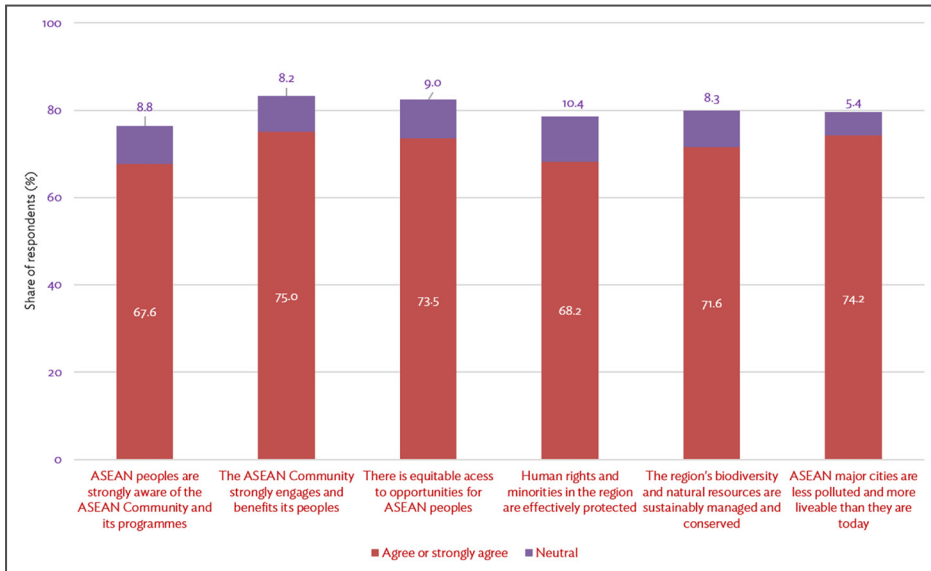
Transport connectivity, the ease of finding jobs, and improved governance and less corruption were other areas where respondents wanted improvements by 2025. Each of these issues was indicated by around three-quarters of the sample. The business participants in the FGD emphasised that these improvements were associated with improved access to goods and services from ASEAN.

Improvement in the accessibility of temporary workers and migrants to basic social protection and health services was the least chosen by the survey respondents, although the share of respondents agreeing to this improvement was almost 59%. The need for such improvement was rated differently by the NGO participants and researchers in the FGD. Three researchers and one NGO participant thought that immigrants and temporary workers should be treated the same as local workers as they said everyone should have the right to basic social protection and health services. The other researcher was neutral about the need for this improvement, while the other NGO participants contended that immigrants from foreign countries (including within ASEAN) should be treated differently in order to protect the welfare of Vietnamese people. These participants explained that having too many foreign workers would reduce the employability of local workers, and the state would need to do something to compensate for this.

Figure 14 illustrates the preferences of respondents towards improvements in ASEAN regarding inclusiveness and sustainability issues by 2025. As shown, the most essential improvement was the engagement and shared benefit of ASEAN to its peoples, as indicated by roughly 75% of respondents. Reducing pollution and improving liveability in ASEAN major cities was chosen by slightly fewer respondents (around 74%). Equal access to opportunities and the sustainable management of biodiversity and natural resources were other preferred improvements by 2025, with respective shares of nearly 74% and 72% of the respondents. Enhancing awareness of the ASEAN Community and the protection of human rights and minorities were other areas where progress was deemed necessary, each of which was indicated by roughly 68% of the respondents.

The FGDs showed, meanwhile, that several aspects of sustainable development need to be improved in ASEAN. Among the key aspects mentioned were the management of biodiversity and natural resources, the engagement of the people, equitable opportunities, and the reduction of pollution in major cities. In particular, the youth participants asserted that economic well-being was neither guaranteed nor meaningful in the absence of a clean environment. Three of the youth participants had volunteered in hospitals and with people with cancer and were shocked by the incidence of cancer due to poor environmental quality.

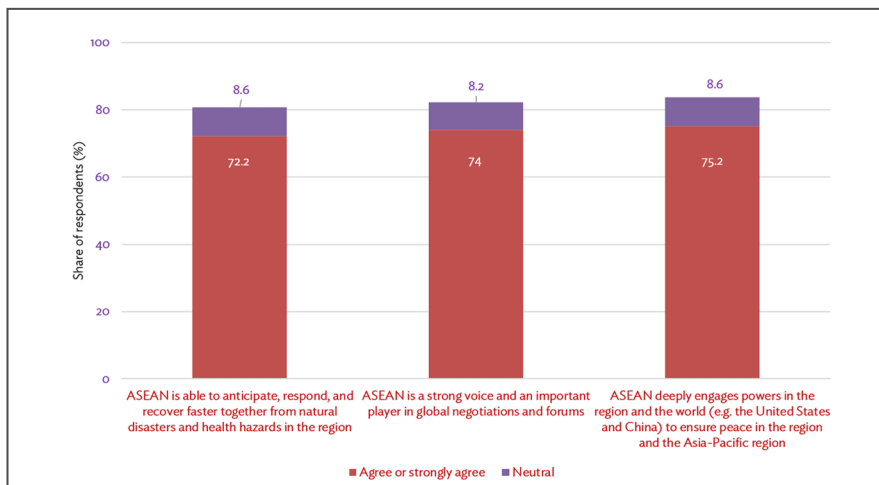
Figure 14: Aspirations for Inclusiveness and Sustainability Issues in ASEAN by 2025



ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Figure 15 focuses on the preferred improvements to general issues for ASEAN as a common community. The most important improvement, based on the respondents' preferences, is the engagement of international and regional powers in ASEAN affairs for ensuring regional stability. This improvement was suggested by over 75% of respondents. Next was the need for improvement in ASEAN's influence in international forums and negotiations, chosen by 74% of respondents. Finally, 72% of respondents wanted ASEAN to be able to anticipate, respond, and recover faster together from natural disasters and health hazards in the region.

Figure 15: Aspirations for ASEAN Issues by 2025

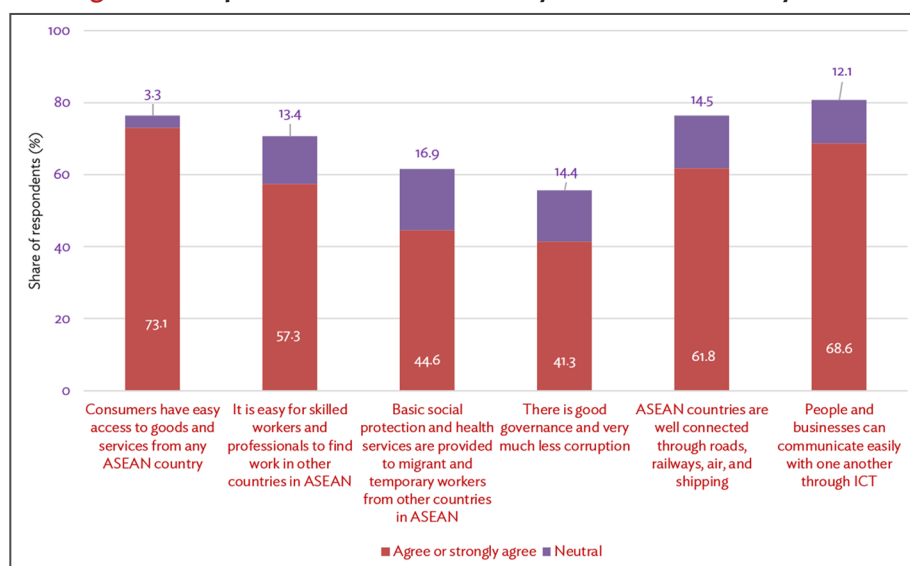


ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

In addition to their preferences for improvements in ASEAN, respondents were also surveyed on their expectations of reasonable progress for ASEAN until 2025. Figure 16 shows respondents' perceptions on the likelihood of improvements in terms of accessibility issues. Again, the most likely improvement was easier access to goods and services from ASEAN producers, agreed or strongly agreed with by over 73% of the respondents. Based on their knowledge of ASEAN, the business representatives in the FGD expected the most progress to be made in the trade of goods and services. This was the same for the young people, the NGO participants, and the researchers in the FGDs. Half of the business participants in the FGD doubted whether they would see more service providers from ASEAN since Viet Nam had already opened up to various services under the WTO and other FTAs.

Respondents also expected an increase in the ease of ICT-based communication between people and businesses and improved transport connectivity, albeit at lower likelihoods of 69% and 62%, respectively. Meanwhile, over 57% of the respondents believed in the likelihood of higher mobility for skilled workers in ASEAN. Improvements in governance and accessibility were chosen as the least likely to occur, and were agreed with by 41% and 45% of the respondents, respectively. It should be noted that this level of expectation appears to be less than the corresponding aspiration for all areas (Figure 13 and Figure 16).

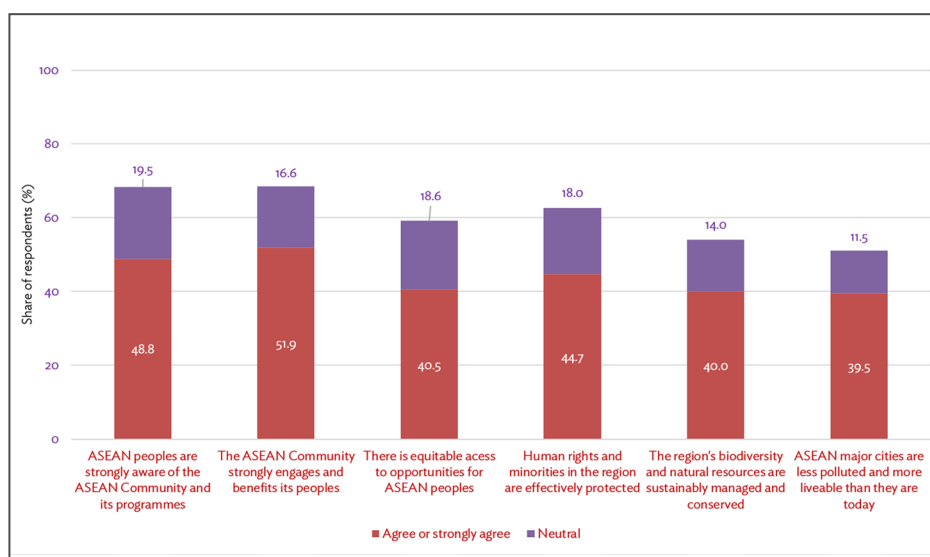
Figure 16: Expectations for Accessibility Issues in ASEAN by 2025



ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ICT = information and communications technology.

Figure 17 shows the beliefs of the respondents about improvements in inclusiveness and sustainability issues in ASEAN by 2025. In general, the level of expectation was lower than for the accessibility issues. The highest likelihood was attached to the engagement and shared benefits of ASEAN for its peoples, as indicated by roughly 52% of the respondents. Building awareness of the ASEAN Community and the protection of human rights and minorities were next, with respective shares of respondents in agreement and strong agreement of 49% and 45%, respectively. Respondents indicated that reducing pollution and improving liveability in ASEAN’s major cities, equitable access to opportunities, and the sustainable management of biodiversity and natural resources were least likely to see improvement by 2025. These issues were each agreed or strongly agreed with by around two-fifths of the respondents. For all areas related to inclusiveness and sustainability, the respondents’ expectations were again lower than their aspirations, while the level of neutrality for the expectations exceeded that for the aspirations (Figure 14 and Figure 17).

Figure 17: Expectations for Inclusiveness and Sustainability Issues in ASEAN by 2025

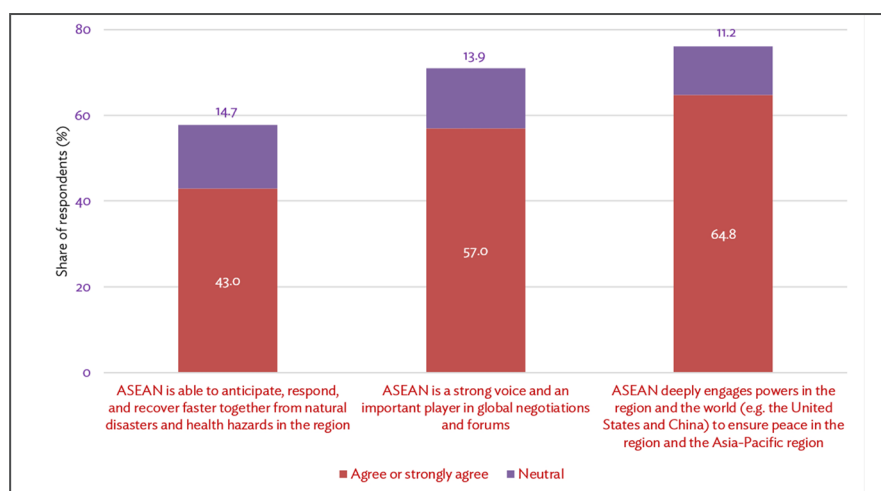


ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations

The unlikely reduction of pollution was a clear concern for the participants in the FGDs. The youth participants agreed that it would be very unlikely to see less pollution in major ASEAN cities. Some of the participants named several cities in ASEAN that they had visited, including Jakarta and Manila. All but one had been to Ha Noi before. They all complained about the existing levels of pollution and said they had seen few meaningful attempts to reduce pollution. The business representatives in the FGDs also argued that pollution and traffic jams were prevalent, if not getting worse, in major cities in ASEAN, with the exception of Singapore. Meanwhile, two-thirds of the NGO participants and researchers rejected the possibility of lower pollution in major ASEAN cities by 2025.

Figure 18 shows the respondents' perceptions of the likelihood of improvements to ASEAN as a common community. The most likely was the engagement of international and regional powers in ASEAN affairs for ensuring regional stability. As much as 65% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed this was likely to happen. Improvement in ASEAN's influence in international forums and negotiations followed, with agreement or strong agreement by 57% of the respondents. Around 43% of the respondents believed that ASEAN would improve in terms of its capacity to anticipate, respond, and recover faster together from natural disaster and health hazards in the region. Again, improvements in these three aspects was highly preferred by Vietnamese respondents, but the belief in the likelihood of such improvements was low.

Figure 18: Expectations for ASEAN-related Issues by 2025



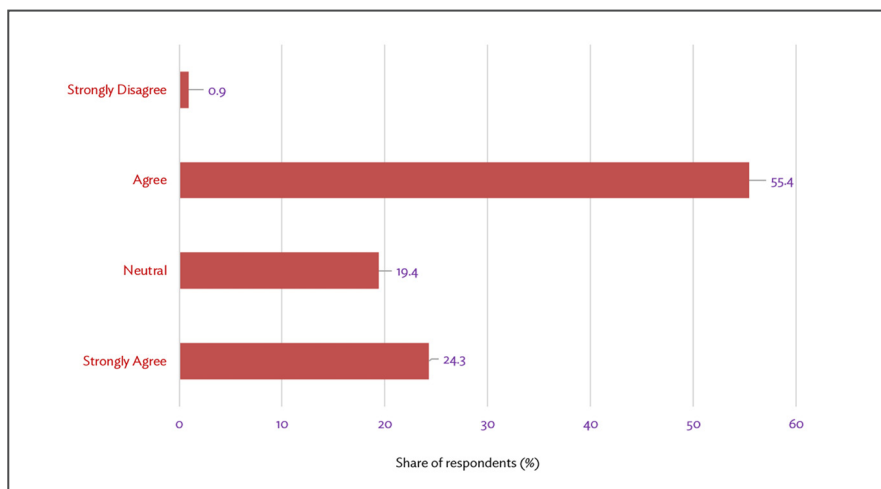
ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Figure 19 summarises the perceptions of the respondents on the need for capacity improvements to the ASEAN Secretariat. Only less than 1% of the respondents disagreed with the need for capacity improvements, while 20% were neutral. Almost 56% of the respondents agreed that the ASEAN Secretariat needed to gradually improve its capacity. Another 24% of the respondents were in strong agreement with the need for the improvements.

The FGD participants were not able to elaborate on the need for gradual capacity improvements to the ASEAN Secretariat. The key reason was their limited knowledge of the role and ongoing difficulties and challenges of the secretariat. The business participants were not able to make judgments on the capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat, especially in terms of preparing content or advocacy programmes for regional economic integration or coordination with major dialogue partners. A limited number of participants in the FGDs could not name the current Vietnamese secretary-general.

Even the NGO participants and researchers admitted that capacity building for the ASEAN Secretariat was necessary but could not explain in detail where the capacity improvements should be.

Figure 19: Agreement with the Need for Gradual Capacity Improvements for the ASEAN Secretariat



Conclusion

Various research and reports have elaborated on the significant implications of ASEAN for Viet Nam. Among the most important implications is the ‘ASEAN Way’, which has enabled Viet Nam to adapt to new rules, while building capacity for and engaging its citizens in the regional community-building process. Past work with the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint shows that achieving the regional ASEAN Economic Community – as per the definition of the community, i.e. a single production base and a single market with the free flow of goods, capital, and people – still requires further time and effort. As argued by Lloyd (2005), the definition of a single market is one in which the Law of One Price must hold in all goods, services, and factor markets. The progress towards ASEAN economic integration has been limited, and ASEAN is still far from having a single market.

Even if a true single market cannot be realised, it is crucial to make gradual improvements to the ASEAN community-building process, especially in building the sense of a common community. If this sense of community can be enhanced, the momentum for further integration of ASEAN will continue.

The survey described in this chapter has important findings. Most respondents were familiar with ASEAN, although those aged over 50 years old appear to have been more familiar with ASEAN-related topics. The students and employees were less confident about their understanding of ASEAN vis-à-vis the other groups of respondents. More than three-quarters of those surveyed felt moderately or strongly as ASEAN citizens, while almost 79% of respondents believed that ASEAN membership had been beneficial for Viet Nam. Meanwhile, about 60% of the respondents indicated they would be extremely or moderately concerned if Viet Nam were to leave ASEAN, and about 69% expressed strong or moderate optimism about the future of ASEAN.

However, Viet Nam is also facing several issues related to becoming a more integral part of ASEAN. Media coverage of ASEAN-related topics was generally perceived to be insufficient. Viet Nam also appears to be encountering pressing issues similar to those faced by ASEAN, including climate change and natural disasters, corruption, poor management of natural resources and biodiversity loss, and agriculture and food security. Most importantly, the respondents aspired to witness a range of improvements in ASEAN in various aspects, including accessibility, inclusiveness, and sustainability issues, although few respondents believed the realisation of such improvements was likely.

From Viet Nam's perspective, while promoting a competitive ASEAN remains important, engaging the people and inducing them to share in the benefits from the regional community-building process should be given priority. To begin with, information on ASEAN should be better disseminated, aimed at informing the people and preparing them ahead of community-building measures of the opportunities and challenges of regional integration. Incorporating ASEAN content into textbooks is also necessary, but will not suffice in the absence of measures to make the ASEAN community-building process participatory to the people. Fostering intergenerational dialogues and the sharing of experiences may further help to alleviate the differences in attitudes towards ASEAN across age groups.

The findings identify a range of challenges for Viet Nam and ASEAN, and many of them are not new, e.g. corruption, climate change, and natural disasters. It is, therefore, necessary for Viet Nam to incorporate measures to effectively address such issues in its domestic agenda. Central to such measures should be meaningful attempts to increase public participation in the rule-making process on the basis of complete information provision and the fostering of a sense of ASEAN citizenship. At the broader level, further capacity building for the ASEAN Secretariat should remain essential for ensuring that the region as a whole is proceeding 'from actions to decisive actions', rather than just 'from vision to action' (Nguyen et al., 2014).

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