

What Does ASEAN Mean to ASEAN Peoples? Survey Findings from Singapore*

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Introduction

This chapter contains key insights and takeaways gleaned from an online survey and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted from September to November 2016 by the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA). The SIIA team reached out to 160 respondents, comprised of students, youth, civil service organisation (CSO) and non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives, and respondents from the private sector.

As a city-state and the most developed Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Member State, there is broad knowledge and understanding of the importance of ASEAN to Singapore in terms of economics, politics, and security. This investigation finds that there is general optimism across all sectors for what ASEAN has achieved and how ASEAN is relevant to Singapore. Although the respondents commended ASEAN's efforts on the economic front, they were generally unaware of ASEAN's politico-security achievements.

The concept of ASEAN identity and citizenship, however, is still relatively weak at this stage of ASEAN's development. Differences in perceptions and understanding of ASEAN are due to diverse political, cultural, and social backgrounds and are reinforced

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

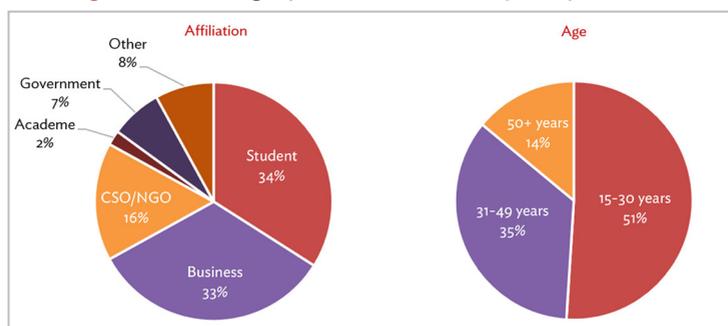
by the absence of coordinated common efforts by ASEAN governments, the public, and social media to cultivate a sense of regional identity.

Moving forward, ASEAN must invigorate its institutional and administrative structures with a view to developing more cohesive and coherent policies against external threats and internal challenges. With more enlightened common policies and better coordination, Singaporeans are optimistic that ASEAN will become more united, prosperous, and resilient over time.

Profile of the Respondents

A total of 160 respondents completed the survey. Of these, 34% were students, 33% were business sector individuals, 16% were from the CSO/NGO sector, and 7% were from the government sector (Figure 1). Due to limitations on the dissemination of the survey, which will be explained in the next section, we were unable to obtain any respondents from the labour sector.

Figure 1: Demographics of the Survey Respondents



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

In terms of age, the 15–30 age group was the most well represented, with a share of 51% of the respondents. This was in part because all of the students were in this age group as well as a number of the young working professionals.

Research Methodology

The online survey and FGDs were conducted between September and November 2016. To disseminate the survey to students, we reached out to the student unions of the National University of Singapore, Yale-NUS College, Singapore Management University, and Nanyang Technological University. The student unions sent out the survey link in their weekly mailers to their students. To obtain respondents from the other sectors, we asked members and friends of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, disseminated the survey at our corporate seminars, and contacted members of our mailing list.

We initially reached out to the National Youth Council, Singapore Business Federation, Civil Service College, National Trade Unions Congress, and People's Association, and asked whether they would be able to help us disseminate our survey to their members. Unfortunately, they were unable to do so because of restrictions under the Personal Data Protection Act. In accordance with the act, organisations and government statutory boards are not permitted to disclose personal data on their members to third-party organisations. As such, these organisations were unable to use their portals to disseminate the external content to their members as this would have been a violation and misuse of their members' personal contact information. Due to such limitations, we were only able to receive a total of 160 responses for the survey.

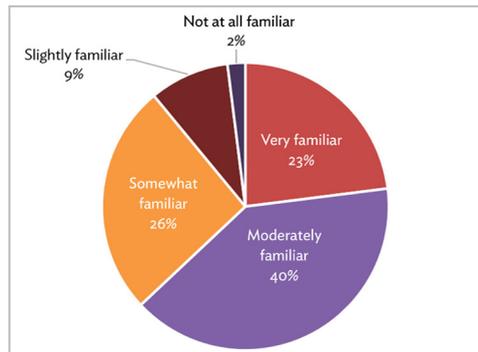
We also carried out four FGDs. The first FGD was conducted with a group of students at Yale-NUS College. The second was conducted with a group of respondents representing the CSO/NGO sector. The third session was conducted with a group of business professionals across all sectors, and the last session was conducted with a group of working professionals at an international bank in Singapore.

Research Findings

General knowledge and awareness

The survey results show that the largest proportion of respondents, 40%, were moderately familiar with ASEAN. Meanwhile, 23% indicated being very familiar with ASEAN, and 26% were somewhat familiar with ASEAN (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Extent of Awareness of ASEAN

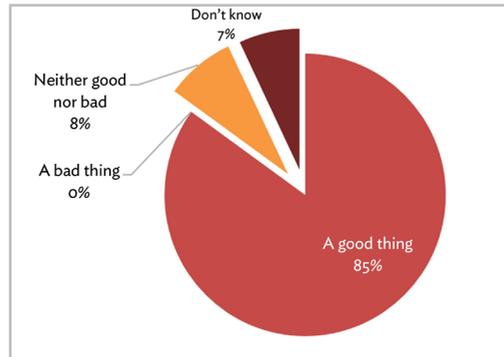


While most respondents were moderately aware of ASEAN, during the FDGs, respondents across all sectors agreed that ASEAN did not feature much in their typical day-to-day lives. Participants from the private sector who did business with the region were generally more exposed to ASEAN, albeit only in a business context. Respondents from the CSO/NGO sector and the student group said that they did see or hear the occasional mentions of ASEAN on the television or radio or in local newspapers, often related to economic issues, such as exports or trade agreements. Respondents across all sectors mentioned the ASEAN lane they had seen at airports in some member states while travelling overseas as a pleasant experience that brought out a sense of ‘ASEAN-ness’.

The respondents from the CSO/NGO sector and the student group said that they were first made aware of ASEAN during compulsory primary school education, when they learnt about the benefits that ASEAN had brought to Singapore. Several respondents noted that the economic benefits of ASEAN were usually emphasised over the politico-security benefits. Even in local media, which informs the public’s perception of ASEAN, respondents noted that the economic benefits of ASEAN usually took precedence over the politico-security benefits of the association. This perhaps explains why most respondents did not have a good grasp of these benefits from ASEAN.

Regardless of their level of knowledge of ASEAN, the respondents, in general, felt that ASEAN was good for Singapore. An overwhelming 85% of the respondents said that Singapore’s membership of the association was a good thing, with no respondents answering that it was bad.

Figure 3: Perception of Singapore's Membership of ASEAN



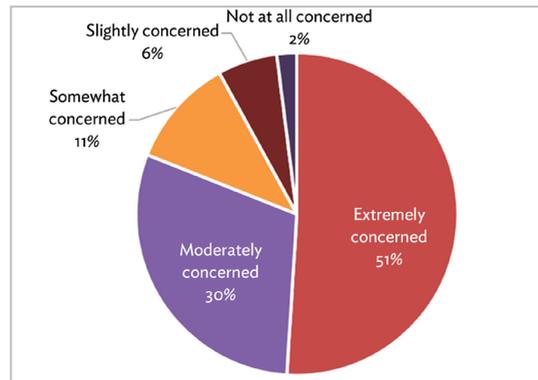
When asked to elaborate in the FGDs, respondents across all sectors were quick to point to the economic benefits from access to ASEAN's larger markets for imports and exports, and the expansion of investment and trade linkages within the region. The private sector respondents substantiated this fact by saying that ASEAN policies had been crucial for reducing tariffs, enhancing trade, and promoting business expansion across the region.

The private sector respondents also mentioned that economic growth in Singapore had plateaued in the last few years, and there was a need to look outward. ASEAN had provided Singapore with regional markets to expand to in terms of procurement, supply chains, and exports. They noted that as Singapore taps into the industrialisation processes of key ASEAN economies, the republic's economy could also grow in tandem.

Respondents, particularly from the private sector, also felt that Singapore had much to offer to the ASEAN business community. As a country with a reputation for transparent processes and strong institutions, including the rule of law, Singapore is well known for being the ideal location for the regional headquarters of multinational corporations (MNCs) targeting ASEAN opportunities and ASEAN-domiciled businesses. Singapore is also a strong logistics, banking, and financial hub with good connectivity to the rest of the world. Singapore's value proposition is thus to brand itself as a gateway to the rest of the ASEAN business community.

From the FGDs, it was clear that the politico-security benefits of ASEAN for Singapore were not well understood. Only a few respondents were cognisant of the enduring regional stability that ASEAN had brought to the region, and they mentioned it only in brief. As much as 92% of the respondents indicated they would be somewhat to extremely concerned if Singapore were to leave ASEAN, with 51% of the respondents indicating extreme concern (Figure 4). Four respondents said they would not be at all concerned.

Figure 4: Concern if Singapore Were to Leave ASEAN



The survey results were supported by the FGDs, where respondents were quick to point to the negative economic repercussions that leaving ASEAN would bring to Singapore’s economy. They noted that access to markets would be compromised and transnational business operations would be affected. Further, respondents across all sectors said that as one of the founding members of ASEAN, Singapore’s decision to leave would send a strong negative signal to the international community and be detrimental to the country’s international reputation.

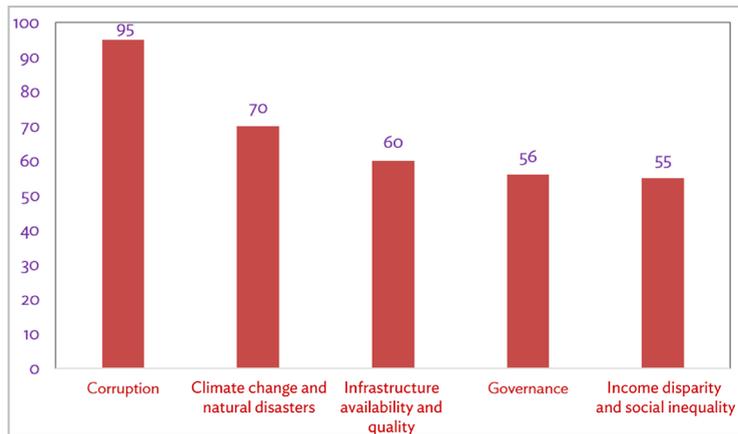
Respondents also felt that leaving would be harmful to Singapore’s bilateral relations with countries both within and outside of ASEAN. Without ASEAN’s strategic umbrella, Singapore would be left to fend for itself in negotiating with its difficult or more geopolitically powerful neighbours.

In the politico-security realm, some well-informed student respondents felt that Singapore’s departure from ASEAN would cause significant disruptions to regional stability and fissures in regional unity. Some respondents also raised concerns that Singapore’s departure from ASEAN would undermine the association’s credibility and encourage more aggressive foreign policies by major powers.

Top issues facing ASEAN

The survey asked respondents to identify what they thought were the five most pressing problems facing the ASEAN region today and until 2025 from a list of 21 economic, socio-cultural, governance, and political issues (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Top Issues Facing ASEAN
(number of votes)



Corruption was identified as the top challenge to the region, with a total of 95 votes. This was followed by climate change and natural disasters (70 votes), infrastructure availability and quality (60 votes), governance (56 votes), and income disparity and social inequality (55 votes). Other significant issues identified were quality education provision and access (51 votes); trade, investment, and regulatory coherence (48 votes); and agriculture and food security (44 votes).

However, during the FGDs, the participants also raised and discussed other issues of concern. While the CSO/NGO sector and student participants mentioned the issues of corruption and climate change, discourse on these issues took a back seat to other soft issues. Both groups of respondents highlighted ASEAN's lack of focus on soft issues, such as human rights violations and the protection of vulnerable populations, as their greatest area of concern. Examples raised included the Rohingya refugees in Myanmar; the impoverished populations in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam (CLMV); and the persistent transboundary haze pollution.

The respondents also identified the rise of nationalism in Southeast Asia as a worrying trend, noting that the tendency for countries to increasingly and more aggressively place their national self-interests first served as an impediment to the attainment of regional goals and objectives.

Some respondents also recognised the 'ASEAN Way' of consultation and consensus as a lowest common denominator approach that imposed low ceilings on what could be achieved. Respondents felt that the ASEAN Way had worked well in terms of economic progress for the region, but not in the politico-security domain. They mentioned that

each ASEAN Member State had its own vested interests and, especially in the politico-security dimension, where many issues were related to state sovereignty, ASEAN was not able to achieve consensus on such decisions. Both groups of respondents also mentioned the rise of China as a cause of concern and referred to the South China Sea disputes between China and the four ASEAN claimant states as examples of the limitations of the ASEAN Way in achieving progress on key political issues. As a result, respondents were worried that ASEAN lacked a coherent strategy to stand up to a more proactive China in the region.

Private sector respondents, on the other hand, were more concerned with the challenges to the business community. Respondents from the sector felt that the implementation of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) policies had worked to reduce tariffs, which had been very beneficial for businesses. However, most respondents echoed concerns that non-tariff barriers still remained a huge challenge for doing business with other ASEAN localities. One respondent raised the example of the bottlenecks in production that were sometimes experienced in ASEAN shipping ports because trade regulations and standards were not harmonised across the region. Respondents added that these non-tariff barriers caused significant delays in the time taken for products to enter markets, raising logistical costs.

Another respondent raised the concern that economic nationalism still existed rather strongly in ASEAN Member States, and the ensuing protectionist measures tended to market ASEAN as a costly region to do business in. Further, respondents mentioned that even though the AEC had ensured greater opportunities for businesses, the reality on the ground was that the ease of doing business still remained relatively unchanged or only slightly improved because of bureaucratic politics and institutional inefficiencies. Business sector representatives lamented that the implementation process in ASEAN had been relatively slow. Private sector respondents also said that more work needed to be done by the AEC to move towards regulatory convergence. They added that in anticipation of the establishment of the AEC, there had been much hype and optimism within the business community towards the end of 2015. However, a year later, nothing new seemed to have been achieved, and given that the initial momentum of the AEC had slowed down, respondents were worried that progress moving forward would be even slower.

The private sector respondents also voiced their concerns that foreign direct investment within the ASEAN region still faced many bureaucratic inefficiencies, and that there had been a lack of differentiation between ASEAN and non-ASEAN investments within the region. Several respondents expressed the hopes that ASEAN would work towards greater investment liberalisation and the removal of complicated bureaucratic

procedures so that investment would be easier and more forthcoming from businesses. Respondents also felt that differentiating between ASEAN and non-ASEAN investments would provide a greater incentive for intra-ASEAN investments to take place.

Aspirations versus expectations by 2025

The survey twice presented the respondents with a set of 15 scenarios in the form of statements. The first time, the respondents were asked to state the extent to which they agreed ASEAN should aspire to each scenario. The second time, they were asked to signal the extent to which they thought ASEAN could realistically achieve each scenario (see Table 1).

Table 1: Key Issues of Concern: Expectations Fall Short of Aspirations

Issue of Concern	Number of Respondents	
	Aspiration	Expectation
There is good governance and very much less corruption	113	26
There is equitable access to opportunities for ASEAN peoples	95	38
The ASEAN Community strongly engages and benefits its peoples	101	48
Human rights and minorities in the region are effectively protected	107	35
The region's biodiversity and natural resources are sustainably managed and conserved	107	41
ASEAN major cities are less polluted and more liveable than they are today	119	58

ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Across all issue areas, the survey results show that the expectations of the respondents generally fell far short of the aspirations, signalling pessimism and a lack of confidence in ASEAN achieving its goals. In areas such as good governance, equitable access to opportunities, improvements in human rights, and the conservation of biodiversity, there was overwhelming pessimism that ASEAN would not be able to achieve the desired scenarios.

However, in the area of hard and soft connectivity, expectations matched up well with the aspirations, signalling optimism for ASEAN's ability to fulfil its infrastructural connectivity agenda (Table 2).

Table 2: Key Issues of Concern: Expectations Match Aspirations

Issue of Concern	Number of Respondents	
	Aspiration	Expectation
ASEAN countries are well connected through roads, railways, air, and shipping	124	118
People and businesses can communicate easily with one another through ICT	121	115

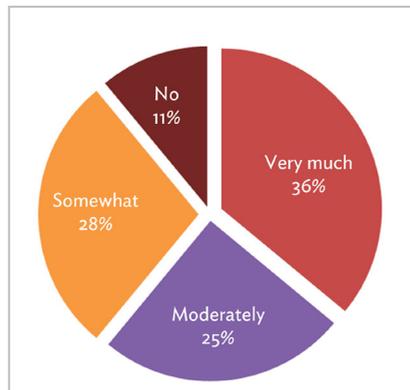
ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ICT = information and communications technology.

This could be explained by the fact that the developing ASEAN economies have come to understand that infrastructure development is the key engine of developmental growth and have actively put this as a top priority on their agendas. China and Japan have also been proactive in bidding for infrastructural projects in ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia, Myanmar, and Cambodia, and these bids have often been covered in local news. The respondents could see that infrastructural connectivity within ASEAN is being actively improved upon, and this could perhaps explain their optimism.

Sense of ASEAN identity

The survey asked the respondents how much they agreed with the following statement: 'I am an ASEAN citizen.' Of the respondents, 36% agreed 'very much', 28% agreed 'somewhat', and 25% agreed 'moderately', while 11% of respondents disagreed with the statement (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Feeling of Being an ASEAN Citizen



The FGDs, however, painted quite a different picture than the survey results. Participants across all sectors unanimously agreed that there was no concept of an ASEAN identity and, as such, said they did not identify with the idea of citizenship of ASEAN. Respondents from the CSO/NGO sector and the students said they felt that ASEAN functioned more like an economic bloc rather than a regional organisation with common goals and purposes. As there was no concept of citizenship of an economic bloc, they said they did not identify with being ASEAN citizens. Respondents from the business sector said they felt they had no affinity with the concept of ‘ASEAN identity’ because each ASEAN country was uniquely different, and there was no known or established understanding of what being an ASEAN citizen meant. Moreover, they mentioned that there had been no visible push for an ASEAN identity within the region.

Respondents from the CSO/NGO and business sectors also felt that the idea of citizenship of ASEAN was an abstract concept. They said that if one were to understand the concept of citizenship as bringing with it a host of benefits, such as voting rights and legal protection, then, in that sense, the concept of ASEAN citizenship did not exist. One student respondent raised the point that Singapore’s citizens lived in an ivory tower and were disconnected from the issues that other ASEAN citizens face. They said that because there was no ability to emphasise with or understand the day-to-day realities of other ASEAN citizens, there was no sense of solidarity with other ASEAN peoples. Some respondents also made the distinction between ASEAN as a regional organisation and Southeast Asia as a geographical region, saying that by geographical default they did identify with being a citizen of Southeast Asia but not a citizen of ASEAN.

Recommendations: The Way Forward for ASEAN

As ASEAN enters a new phase of development, it should better communicate what it has done and is doing for ASEAN peoples and not let what it has not done drown out the overall narrative.

In the FGDs, the participants were asked to give their recommendations on how ASEAN needs to improve in order for it to be resilient and adapt to the changing circumstances ahead. Respondents from the student group and the CSO/NGO sector overwhelmingly felt the need for ASEAN to take a stronger stance on the soft issues facing the region, particularly in the areas of human rights violations and vulnerable populations. Respondents voiced their concerns that ASEAN had traditionally tended to relegate these issues to the domestic realm and had been reluctant to address such sensitive issues using the ASEAN platform. Some respondents commented that for them to feel a sense of pride and identity for ASEAN, they needed to see the association making

an effort to engage with these issues and help those most in need of help. ASEAN's tendency to not engage critically with such issues that affect people on a more emotional level could perhaps explain why the respondents stated they did not feel a strong sense of ASEAN pride or, hence, ASEAN identity.

Respondents across all sectors felt that policymaking within ASEAN was currently conducted among the elite, with little consultation with stakeholders on the ground or at the mid-levels of society. The respondents felt that this top-down approach needed to evolve to become a more people-centred, bottom-up approach that considered the voices of the CSO/NGO community and the business community. The CSO/NGO group, in particular, felt that their sector was the one sector within ASEAN that had developed organically with strong regional integration efforts and achievements in terms of tangible progress. With their first-hand experience in interacting with communities across ASEAN, the CSO/NGO and business sectors can provide valuable insights for policymaking.

To improve the sense of ASEAN identity, respondents suggested creating more opportunities to promote cross-cultural understanding through people-to-people connections, which they said would enhance regional solidarity. Suggestions included more student exchanges under the ASEAN brand name. Some respondents also mentioned that the way ASEAN is taught to students as part of their compulsory education needed to be improved so that the focus was not purely economic and instead would allow students to better understand ASEAN's other intangible marks of progress, especially in the politico-security domain. A recommendation was also given by a respondent from the CSO/NGO sector for ASEAN to attach its brand name to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities to strengthen its brand recognition and boost ASEAN awareness.

Respondents across all sectors were also unclear of the role of the ASEAN Secretariat and the relationship between the secretariat and the country chairman of the year. As such, in educating the general public about ASEAN, they said the distinction between the two should be made clearer. Respondents from the student group raised the need for greater continuity in agenda setting and policy implementation between the ASEAN Secretariat and the country chairman, given the annual rotation of duties. Some respondents were concerned that when countries took on the chairmanship, they tended to prioritise different issues on the agenda in line with their national interests, which sometimes served as impediments to the attainment of regional goals. Some respondents also commented that the budget of the ASEAN Secretariat needed to be increased.

Respondents also felt that the ASEAN Way needed to be revisited and evolved to meet the rising global challenges ahead.

Conclusion: Key Takeaways

Students

The student respondents were keenly aware of how ASEAN worked as a regional institution and had a good grasp of the guiding principles of ASEAN. However, they felt that ASEAN had done little to nothing for human security in the region. The students thus felt that ASEAN needed to take a stronger stance and take better action on softer issues, such as transboundary haze and human trafficking. These are issues that students can relate to on a deeper and more emotional level, as opposed to economic issues.

As an extension of the above point, for people living in Southeast Asia to relate to ASEAN, there is not only a need for the grouping to take a stance on soft issues but also a need for ASEAN to create the opportunity for the wider community to have a healthy public discourse on these issues. The respondents had a strong sentiment that ASEAN tended to sweep such issues under the carpet and to make statements of fact rather than take action. By facilitating discourse on these issues, ASEAN can help to communicate its purpose more effectively and be seen as doing something rather than nothing. Consequently, greater engagement with these issues can then sow the seeds of a stronger ASEAN identity that students can identify with.

Civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations

The CSO/NGO sector respondents felt that ASEAN needed to change the way decision-making is done and adopt a bottom-up approach to understanding the issues that ASEAN peoples face rather than the existing top-down approach that is disconnected from actual issues happening on the ground. They said that ASEAN must welcome the voices of alternative actors and make an effort to consult those within civil society. A bottom-up approach would allow for more participation and consultation from ASEAN peoples themselves, making ASEAN more relatable to the common man. This would consequently go a long way to building up an ASEAN identity that people can relate to.

The CSO/NGO sector felt that CSOs and NGOs within the region had already been successful in building organic cross-border networks, but the participants said ASEAN could do more to foster greater coordination and collaboration between CSOs and

NGOs throughout the region. They said that unlike in interactions at the G2G level, there was no bureaucracy at that level, and, hence, integration had been rather seamless. One respondent involved with humanitarian work in ASEAN commented that ASEAN-CLMV still remained rather fragmented in the CSO realm and suggested that ASEAN could become the enabler for CSO integration to flourish in these countries.

Private sector

Respondents from the private sector generally thought that ASEAN had been moving on the right trajectory, although progress had been slow. One respondent commented that although the initial enthusiasm and optimism for the AEC had worn down over the past year, ASEAN was seen as ‘an increasingly bright spot’.

The immense potential of ASEAN has been recognised by businesses across the world, and investments in the region in recent years have increased massively. If ASEAN continues to build up robust hard and soft infrastructure across all ASEAN markets, this will be even more beneficial for business expansion and economic integration in the region. Another respondent commented that digitisation was providing optimism for the region. Increased connectivity to the rest of the world through digital platforms is giving people in less-developed ASEAN countries the chance to access banking opportunities and e-commerce brands, and this will further drive connectivity and economic growth in the region.

Most importantly, in this time where a rising and increasingly vitriolic anti-globalisation sentiment is sweeping across the world, ASEAN stands at a crossroads where it must decide which of two divergent paths to take. On the one hand, ASEAN could ride the waves of the anti-globalisation movement and adopt more nationalistic and anti-trade policies; or it could fight against the waves of anti-globalisation. The obvious choice is that ASEAN needs to stand united and go against the waves of anti-globalisation because globalisation still has much to offer to many of the ASEAN economies.

Moreover, major powers are beginning to look increasingly inward, and this leaves the small ASEAN states vulnerable as traditional security umbrellas become less dependable. ASEAN must thus stand united and fend for itself, and globalisation and the ensuing connectivity and integration it brings will help to facilitate this. Surging ahead with the consensus-based approach and going against the waves of anti-globalisation have to be the new way forward for ASEAN to prosper.

Focus Group Discussion with Students

Knowledge and awareness of ASEAN

The students generally had a good-to-strong understanding of what ASEAN is and how it functions. They first learned about ASEAN through their compulsory primary and secondary school curriculums. Those who pursued the study of history at the junior college level were substantially well versed about ASEAN. However, all students appeared to have acquired at least a basic level of understanding of the association.

All students agreed that ASEAN did not feature much in their daily lives, especially not in non-academic settings. Some examples of how ASEAN did feature included the various cultural programmes offered to students from secondary school to the university level, the ASEAN travel lane at airports in ASEAN Member States, and occasional mentions in newspapers or other media.

Students were aware of the positive contributions that ASEAN had brought to Singapore, and those who had studied ASEAN in an academic context were able to list tangible examples. In general, all students were aware that the economic benefits of ASEAN had been strong, and some students mentioned the regional defence infrastructure and security benefits.

All students said they would be worried or shocked if Singapore were to leave ASEAN, citing economic and security repercussions.

ASEAN identity and consciousness

When the students were asked whether they felt like ASEAN citizens, the general sentiment was that they did not feel any real sense of ASEAN identity. One student commented, 'there is no concept for it', and another student commented, 'ASEAN citizenship is just an abstract concept that I have no affinity with'.

As one student mentioned, the reason for this lack of identity can be attributed to the fact that ASEAN rarely features in people's day-to-day lives. Another student stated that Singapore was very much an anomaly among the ASEAN nations, with Singaporeans living in an 'ivory tower', giving rise to a sense of dislocation from other ASEAN peoples.

Another salient reason raised by a different student was that to the knowledge of average citizens, ASEAN played more of an economic rather than political role. The students

were more aware of ASEAN's trade agreements and less knowledgeable about the association's politico-security arrangements. As such, ASEAN's economic contributions to Singapore had not had much of a trickle-down effect to the people in terms of the creation of an ASEAN identity. One student likened ASEAN to an economic bloc and said there was no need to have citizenship of an economic bloc.

Recommendations for ASEAN

Evolving the ASEAN Way

The students were aware of the ASEAN Way and ASEAN's consensus approach to solving regional issues. They believed that while this had worked well for ASEAN, the current geopolitical climate and China's rise would pose a threat to regional unity and the resilience of ASEAN. Additionally, the students felt that the lowest common denominator within ASEAN was too low, with each country having vastly different national interests. As such, they believed that while ASEAN could continue to be effective socio-economically, they were far less optimistic about the politico-security dimension in the future.

When discussing the politico-security future of ASEAN, most students were aware of the ongoing disputes in the South China Sea and expressed their fears that China's rise had not been peaceful and had increased tensions within ASEAN. Some students expressed their fear that ASEAN would not be able to stand united against China, signalling pessimism for ASEAN's political future.

Given the above, some students mentioned the need to evolve and institutionalise the ASEAN Way to adapt with the changing times.

Role of the ASEAN Secretariat

When asked about how the ASEAN Secretariat could be improved, all of the students were unclear as to what the role of the secretariat was in the first place. One student mentioned the need for greater coordination between the ASEAN Secretariat and the country chairman of the year, and hoped for the secretariat to play a greater role in agenda-setting with the country chairman for ensuring continuity in goals and agendas even as the chairmanship rotates.

Others

The participants also mentioned the Rohingya problem in Myanmar, the haze situation, climate change, corruption, and the lack of quality infrastructure as pressing problems for ASEAN to tackle.

Conclusion

The first main takeaway from the FGD was that the students did not feel any sense of ASEAN identity. This was because their main perception of ASEAN was informed by its economic contributions to Singapore. As such, they viewed ASEAN as more of a trade and economic bloc and did not feel any affiliation to it culturally or politically. According to the students, this was compounded by the fact that ASEAN is such a culturally diverse region, that ASEAN typically does not take a solid stance on political issues, and that the main focus of ASEAN has always been on building an economic community.

Secondly, the students were keenly aware of how ASEAN worked as a regional institution. They understood the ASEAN Way, the principle of non-interference in each member country's sovereignty, and its consensus-based approach. However, the students felt that ASEAN had done little to nothing for human security in the region. Thus, they felt that ASEAN should have a stronger stance and take better action on softer issues, such as transboundary haze and human trafficking. These social issues are what students can relate to on a deeper and more emotional level, as opposed to economic issues.

As an extension of the second point, the last key takeaway, therefore, is that for students to relate better to ASEAN, there is not only a need to take a stance on soft issues but also a need for ASEAN to create the opportunity for the wider community to have healthy public discourse on these issues. There was a strong sentiment from the students that ASEAN tended to sweep such issues under the carpet and make statements of fact rather than take action. By facilitating discourse on these issues, ASEAN can help to communicate its purpose better and be seen as doing something rather than nothing. Consequently, greater engagement with these issues can then sow the seeds of a greater ASEAN identity that students can identify with.

Focus Group Discussion with Civil Society Organisation and Non-governmental Organisation Representatives

Knowledge and awareness of ASEAN

Respondents from the CSO/NGO sector had a basic understanding of what ASEAN was and what it had done for the region. There was unanimous agreement from respondents that their first introduction to ASEAN had been through their compulsory primary and secondary school curricula.

The participants generally felt that ASEAN did not feature significantly in their daily lives or outside of their work obligations for some respondents. Their main interactions with ASEAN were through reading articles in newspapers or through other content in local media.

The participants felt that Singapore had benefited much from ASEAN, and the overwhelming opinion was that these benefits had manifested economically rather than in the security and political domains. They did not seem to be aware of how Singapore had benefited from being in ASEAN from a politico-security perspective. As one respondent suggested, the reason for this could be because in school, students first learn about the economic benefits of ASEAN before the security benefits. Another respondent mentioned that there were many incentives for Singapore to be a part of ASEAN in terms of trade, finance, and banking. They mentioned that other countries in ASEAN also stood to benefit from Singapore's expertise as a trade, logistics, and transport hub.

All respondents agreed that they would be concerned if Singapore, as a founding member, were to leave ASEAN. Economic reasons were cited as the first concern, with regional stability and other security considerations taking a backseat. Other respondents mentioned the damage that leaving the association would bring to Singapore's reputation on the international stage and the negative repercussions for bilateral relations with countries both within and outside of ASEAN.

ASEAN identity and consciousness

The participants were asked whether they felt like ASEAN citizens, but the collective agreement was that an ASEAN identity did not quite exist and that they did not identify with the label of an 'ASEAN citizen'. One respondent mentioned that the concept

of an ASEAN identity was not as robust as that of identity in the European Union. Respondents elaborated by saying that by geographic default they identified with being Southeast Asian. However, they said this was different to feeling a sense of connection to ASEAN as a bloc.

One respondent homed in on the idea of citizenship, saying that if one were to understand the concept of citizenship as bringing with it a host of benefits and legal protection, then the concept of ASEAN citizenship did not exist. Another respondent commented that identity and pride go hand in hand, and for one to identify with ASEAN, one had to feel pride in belonging to ASEAN. The respondent elaborated that to feel proud of ASEAN, he would have to see that ASEAN was making an effort to protect its most vulnerable citizens. However, he explained that because he had not seen ASEAN doing this, he did not feel proud of ASEAN or have a sense of ASEAN identity.

Recommendations for ASEAN

Human rights

The respondents felt that within ASEAN, there was a tendency for issues concerning politics and human rights to be viewed as domestic issues rather than regional issues that needed to be tackled as a bloc. As such, ASEAN had always invested more effort into the economic realm, with little effort to tackle the softer issues with which people could feel an emotional or tangible connection.

Education

The respondents felt that the way students were taught about ASEAN from a young age as part of the compulsory national education needed to be improved to make ASEAN more relatable to the general public. One suggestion was to create more initiatives for student exchange within ASEAN to promote cross-cultural understanding and friendship. All respondents agreed that more opportunities for people-to-people connections were imperative and would go a long way in community-building and creating a collective ASEAN identity.

Bottom-up participation

The respondents felt that decision-making in ASEAN needed to be improved to allow the voices of those at the bottom and middle levels of society to come through. They felt that policy-making within ASEAN was a top-down initiative driven by the government, with little consultation with different members of society. They suggested establishing a mechanism for understanding challenges at the ground level before they move up to policymakers. This bottom-up and top-down approach would help create a more people-centered ASEAN.

The ASEAN Charter and the principle of non-intervention

Two respondents mentioned that there were many ceilings to what ASEAN could achieve because of the principle of non-interference. One respondent thus suggested revisiting the ASEAN Charter and removing the principle of non-intervention or reforming the charter so that the principle of non-intervention could be applied selectively to certain countries.

Conclusion

The first main takeaway, which is similar to that of the student group, is that respondents from the CSO/NGO sector did not feel any sense of ASEAN identity. In their daily lives, they only felt the trickle-down effects of the economic benefits that Singapore had accrued from ASEAN. The respondents felt that ASEAN had not done much to ease the social problems faced by vulnerable populations. They also felt that a sense of ASEAN pride and identity could only come from seeing ASEAN working to help those most in need and said that they did not have a sense of ASEAN identity because they had not seen this happening.

The second takeaway is that ASEAN needs to change the way it works and adopt a bottom-up approach towards understanding the issues that ASEAN peoples face instead of the existing top-down approach, which is disconnected from the actual issues happening on the ground. ASEAN must welcome the voices of alternative actors and take efforts to consult those within civil society. A bottom-up approach would allow for greater participation and consultation from ASEAN peoples themselves and make the association more relatable to the average citizen. This would consequently go a long way to building up an ASEAN identity that people can relate to.

The last takeaway is that respondents from the CSO/NGO sector believed that their sector within ASEAN had already been extremely successful in building organic, cross-border networks but that ASEAN could do more to foster greater coordination and collaboration between CSOs and NGOs throughout the region. The respondents believed that integration between CSOs and NGOs within the region had been rather seamless, in part because unlike in interactions at the G2G level, there was no bureaucracy at that level. However, one respondent involved with humanitarian work in the region stated the opinion that ASEAN-CLMV still remained rather fragmented in the CSO realm and that ASEAN could become an enabler for CSO integration to flourish even further in those countries. A recommendation was for ASEAN to attach its brand name to HA/DR activities to strengthen its brand and boost ASEAN centrality.

