Non-state Actors' Engagement with ASEAN: Current State of Play and Way Forward

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Introduction

Gone are the days when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was the sole business of national leaders, high-level officials, and the intellectual elites of the region. ASEAN has come a long way from being an entirely elitist, 'top–bottom' Association to a regional organisation that is more accommodative – albeit slowly – towards a genuinely 'people-oriented', 'people-centred' and/or 'people-driven' regional community. Efforts to democratise ASEAN have, indeed, been a painstakingly long process. Following its interaction with the business community in the early 1970s, ASEAN began its engagement with the region's intellectuals and a handful of so-called 'ASEAN-affiliated non-governmental organisations' in subsequent decades. It was only in the late 1990s, however, that the Association began its engagement with the wider civil society organisations (CSOs). While initially showing a rather ambivalent attitude towards ASEAN for its ineffectiveness at addressing national and regional concerns that affect the common citizens in the region, attention towards the grouping amongst non-state actors (NSAs)[1] took off following the Association's 2003 ambitious plan to launch the ASEAN Community by the then deadline of 2020.[2]

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[1]   Non-state actors are generally referred to here as groups, movements, organisations, and individuals that are not part of the state structures (Teftedarija et al., 2013: 88), but are pursuing aims that affect vital interests of the state (Pearlman and Cunningham, 2011). While many of such actors are heroes, they can also be villains in different narratives of international politics (Josselin and Wallace, 2001: 1).

[2]   The schedule of the launching of the ASEAN Community was then accelerated to 2015 during the ASEAN Economic Ministerial Meeting in 2006.

Indeed, interactions between ASEAN officials and NSAs have intensified since then. Although many such interactions have been taking place on a rather ad hoc, informal basis, many other forms of interactions have been carried out in a more institutionalised manner. For example, annual meetings have been organised between the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ASEAN–BAC) – as representative of the business community in the region – and Senior Officials, Economic Ministers, and even the Heads of State/Government of ASEAN Member States (AMS) since 2003. Annual meetings between the ASEAN Leaders and CSOs and youth representatives have also taken place since the mid-2000s. Meanwhile, other platforms of engagement have also been initiated by NSAs. The ASEAN–BAC, for example, has been organising the so-called ASEAN Business and Investment Summit on an annual basis, while other prominent business networks, such as the ASEAN Business Club, have also been carrying out similar endeavours. Likewise, CSOs have been active in pushing their advocacy agenda vis-à-vis ASEAN with a degree of success. Platforms, such as the Solidarity for Asian Peoples' Advocacies (SAPA) – which used to have an active Working Group on ASEAN – has been playing a critical role in facilitating greater interaction both amongst the region's CSOs and between the CSOs and ASEAN, as well as in organising the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) and/or the ASEAN Peoples' Forum (APF); both of which are the main civil society platforms to engage on ASEAN-related issues on an annual basis.

Despite the myriad of engagement platforms between ASEAN and NSAs, the relative effectiveness of such ASEAN–NSAs engagements remains hazy. Amongst other things, concerns over the effectiveness of platforms that facilitate engagements between the two actors have been commonly heard amongst NSAs. Aside from their ad hoc nature, many of such engagement forums, especially those that are ASEAN-led, are merely seen as a requirement amid increasing calls for the Association to move away from its traditional ASEAN Way of doing things, and democratise its policymaking process.

This chapter is an initial effort to assess the effectiveness of ASEAN–NSAs engagement, as well as existing mechanisms that facilitate interactions between the two parties. Using the outcome of an online survey carried out amongst the region's NSAs between April and June 2016, this chapter mainly argues that the ASEAN–NSAs engagement and the mechanisms that facilitate such interactions are still far from perfect. For ASEAN integration to move ahead effectively, ASEAN–NSAs engagement should not only be enhanced and deepened; they should also move beyond rhetoric to ensure that the benefits of regional integration could be directly felt by normal citizens of the region.

The Evolution of ASEAN–NSAs Interactions

While reputed to be an elitist regional organisation, ASEAN's interaction with non-state actors (NSAs) is not new. Over the years, the grouping has pursued engagement with a diverse group of stakeholders, ranging from the business community, intellectuals, and, increasingly, the wider civil society. This section highlights the key evolution of such engagements.

Business Community

Early ASEAN engagement with NSAs was carried out with the business community. Set up in 1972 under the initiative of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers, the ASEAN Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ASEAN–CCI) serves as a platform in which the region's private sector could channel their aspirations to relevant ASEAN decision-making bodies (Young, 1986: 690; Chng, 1992: 58; Yoshimatsu, 2007a: 232; Collins, 2008: 315). Having wanted to intensify economic relations with Western industrialised countries, ASEAN policymakers were of the opinion that the establishment of a business organisation modelled after those in Western countries could help enhance foreign investors' confidence and spur integration in the region (Rüland, 2014). Although initial engagements between ASEAN and the Chamber were relatively limited – discussions were often conducted in 'monologues rather than dialogues' (Urgel, 1994: 41) – ASEAN–CCI eventually played a key role in introducing the implementation of the ASEAN Industrial Cooperation (AICO) scheme in the late 1970s (Cordenillo, 2011: 142) and the formation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area in 1993 (Bowles, 1997; Chandra, 2006: 73).

ASEAN–CCI's influence, however, waned along with the deepening of economic integration in the region. Rather than serving as a partner in policy formulation, ASEAN's preferred role for ASEAN–CCI was for it to play what Rüland (2015: 5) refers to as 'transmission-belt functions' to help drum up support for the Association's economic policies amongst economic actors (Yoshimatsu, 2007b) and deflect criticisms from groups that might be adversely affected by AFTA (Bowles and MacLean, 1996: 339). Over time, however, ASEAN governments were unsatisfied with ASEAN–CCI's lack of ability to help businesses exploit opportunities within the region. Aside from ASEAN–CCI's weak relations with its constituents at the national level, internal politicking and the pursuit of vested, often protectionist and rent-seeking interests amongst its members also affected the cohesion of the Chamber badly (Rüland, 2015: 15).

The role of the ASEAN–CCI as the official private sector voice of the region's private sector was eclipsed when ASEAN Leaders decided to set up the ASEAN Business

Advisory Council (ASEAN–BAC) in 2003. Composed of three business persons from each ASEAN Member State (AMS), ASEAN–BAC is mandated 'to provide private sector feedback and guidance to boost ASEAN's efforts towards economic integration' (ASEAN–BAC, n.d.). Although the members of the Council represent the corporate sector in the region, they are also business persons who already possess close ties with policymakers prior to their appointment (Rüland, 2015: 6). Despite having more frequent meetings with Senior Economic Officials, ASEAN Economic Ministers, and the ASEAN Leaders than its predecessor, many such meetings were initially focused on economic policies in rather general terms. It was only in 2009, under the chairmanship of Thailand, that the interactions between ASEAN–BAC and the ASEAN Economic Ministers became more pronounced when the latter decided that the membership of the former was to include representatives of specific economic sectors.[3]

ASEAN–BAC's role as the official private sector body of ASEAN became prominent following the launching of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in January 2016. Through its new ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025, which outlines the Association's economic priorities for the next 10 years, ASEAN governments want to see an enhanced role for the Council in the post-2015 ASEAN.[4] ASEAN–BAC, however, is very likely to encounter major challenges in delivering these high expectations. Firstly, although the majority of its members are chief executive officers (CEOs) of large companies, the Council's resources are surprisingly limited. The infrastructure and activities of its Secretariat, which is based in the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, for example, are largely determined by relatively meagre resources derived primarily from profits generated through ASEAN–BAC's main annual public event, the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit. Secondly, the membership of large companies' CEOs whose time is divided between their own businesses and their involvement in ASEAN–BAC – and sometimes in other business councils and/or associations – also means that the Council can be ineffective in delivering strategic policy inputs in a timely fashion. Thirdly, despite attempts to help businesses exploit the potentials of ASEAN's economic integration initiatives, ASEAN–BAC faces difficulties in reaching out to businesses at the grassroots level. The statutory requirement that one of the three appointed ASEAN–BAC members should represent small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), for example, is difficult to implement since many such economic actors are

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[3] See, for example, ASEAN Secretariat (2009).
[4] In addition to coordinating policy inputs from 9 of the so-called ASEAN+1 business councils and 66 business entities that interact directly with various ASEAN sectoral groups, the 2025 Blueprint also calls for ASEAN–BAC membership to have stronger linkages with business stakeholders, build in a more structured engagement processes with business councils and/or entities, and establish an adequate structure to monitor progress of key initiatives, as well as more effective coordination with the ASEAN Secretariat and other relevant ASEAN bodies. For further details on the 2025 Blueprint, see ASEAN Secretariat (2015).

less inclined to devote their resources, time, and energy to the regional policymaking process, leaving representatives of large companies, usually those with relatively strong business linkages with SMEs, to take up the space instead (Rüland, 2015: 6).[5]

Think Tanks and Academia

Think tanks and the wider academic community occupy an important role in ASEAN's policymaking process. They have been known to articulate their own visions for an integrated Southeast Asia (Chandra, 2006: 73). Initiated in 1984, but formally established in 1988, the ASEAN Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN–ISIS) network of ASEAN-based research organisations is probably one of the most successful NSAs to engage with ASEAN (Stone, 2000; Lallana, 2012: 32).[6] In addition to being a key actor that gave birth to the concept of Track 2 diplomacy,[7] the extent to which the network has penetrated ASEAN's foreign and security policymaking bodies is also feasible through the institutionalisation of meetings between ASEAN–ISIS and the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings (AMM), as well as the acknowledgement given to the network in the Joint Communiqués of the AMM since 1991 and the occasional requests made by Senior Official Meetings (SOM) of the views of the ASEAN–ISIS on issues they wish to understand better prior to making official policy (e.g. South China Sea disputes, etc.) (Hernandez, 2006: 20). ASEAN–ISIS has also been credited in facilitating initial interactions between ASEAN and the wider civil society stakeholders through its ASEAN People's Assembly initiative, which will be discussed in the next sub-section.

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[5] The relative ineffectiveness of ASEAN–BAC in representing the voice of ASEAN businesses has also prompted other business – ASEAN engagement mechanisms. For example, set up in 2011, the ASEAN Business Club (ABC) has become a key rival of ASEAN–BAC. Unlike ASEAN–BAC that is an ASEAN-led initiative, ABC is a private sector–led initiative whose activities are funded by local ASEAN companies (Sim, 2011). Aside from being the Secretariat for the Club, the CIMB ASEAN Research Institute (CARI) also coordinates the daily activities of the ABC. Since its establishment, the Club has been advocating for the same consultative roles accorded to ASEAN–BAC. To date, however, it appears that ASEAN is more comfortable in dealing with a business council of its own design rather than one that is initiated by the private sector. In 2015, however, ASEAN–BAC leadership was held by Tan Sri Dato' Mohd Munir Abdul Majid, one of leading intellectuals behind the formation of ABC. During his chairmanship of ASEAN–BAC, policy inputs from the ABC, including the outcomes of studies carried out by its secretariat, or CARI, were quite pronounced in the official ASEAN–BAC Report to ASEAN Leaders 2015. For further details on the ABC, see its official website at: http://www.aseanbusinessclub.org/ (accessed 2 May 2016).

[6] Members of ASEAN–ISIS include Brunei Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, the Indonesian Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Laos Institute for Foreign Affairs, the Malaysian Institute for Strategic and International Studies, the Philippines' Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, Thailand's Institute for Security and International Studies (ISIS), and Viet Nam's Institute for International Relations.

[7] Track 2 diplomacy is primarily the conduct of policy dialogue amongst government officials, think tanks, and other policy analysts and practitioners on various issues that range from economic, political–security, to the social (Hernandez, 2006: 19). Accordingly, the designation Track 2 is usually used to distinguish non-governmental or non-official meetings from official and formal diplomatic channels normally referred to as 'Track 1' activities (Kraft, 2000: 344).

Other regional think tanks have also been very influential in ASEAN's decision-making process. The Singapore-based Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, which was established in 1968, and later renamed as the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute in 2015, is an independent research organisation that dedicates itself to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia.[8] As in the case with the ASEAN–ISIS, ISEAS was very much involved in the process leading to the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community in the early 2000s,[9] as well as in the debate on the launching of the ASEAN Charter in 2009.[10] Furthermore, although considered the brainchild of the Japanese government, the Jakarta-based Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) is increasingly playing a leading role in providing intellectual and analytical policy recommendations and capacity building initiatives to ASEAN and its AMSs, particularly in the area of economic integration (Kitano, 2014: 223). The contributions of ERIA towards ASEAN economic integration efforts are visible in, amongst others, the development of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) in 2010 and, more recently, the AEC Blueprint 2025.

Civil Society Organisations

ASEAN's engagements with civil society organisations (CSOs),[11] often referred to as Track 3 or people-to-people diplomacy, are probably the most dynamic one amongst NSAs. Although traditionally indifferent towards ASEAN and its activities, there has been a steady increase of interest amongst CSOs to engage with ASEAN in recent years (Chandra, 2006; Lopa, 2012: 56). The region's CSOs are of increasing recognition that the need to influence ASEAN policymaking process, especially in light of the recent

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[8]   Although both ASEAN–ISIS and ISEAS have similar research programmes, the two institutions differ in that the former is comprised of think tanks with regional interests at the national level while the latter is simply a regional think tank. ISEAS attended the formation of ASEAN–ISIS in Bali, Indonesia in 1984. However, since ISEAS considers itself a regional think tank, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs joined the ASEAN–ISIS to represent Singapore in the network (Chandra, 2006: 73). For further details on the ISEAS is available on its official website at (accessed 3 May 2016): https://www.iseas.edu.sg/

[9]   With regard to the AEC formation, ISEAS advocated for the so-called 'FTA-plus', which argued for an AEC that includes a zero-tariff FTA with some elements of a common market, such as free movement of capital and skilled labour added to the initiative (Hew, 2005: 4–5). ASEAN–ISIS, on the other hand, proposed that the AEC should entail the creation of a common market-minus approach, which, according to one of its notable economists, Soesastro (2005: 23), has its additional advantages than ISEAS's 'FTA-plus' proposal, including the explicit formulation of some kind of a 'negative list' that can be brought under the umbrella of the integration project.

[10] For details on ISEAS's inputs on the issue of ASEAN Charter, see, for example, Severino (2005).

[11] The term 'civil society' generally refers to the sphere of public social life that excludes government activities (Meidinger, 2001), and has been used as the classification for persons, institutions, and organisations that have the goal of advancing or expressing a common purpose through ideas, actions, and demands on governments (Cohen and Arato, 1992). However, the concept of civil society continues to be contested (Connolly, 1983), particularly over the question of membership. While it is commonly assumed that membership of CSOs is 'diverse, ranging from individuals to religious and academic institutions to issue-focused groups[,] such as not-for-profit or non-governmental organizations' (Gemmill and Bamidele–Izu, 2002: 3), and the business community, some civil society activists acknowledge that certain societal groups that have close links with those in power, such as government-backed academic think tanks and large multinational corporations, should not be defined as civil society groups.

launching of the ASEAN Community, is becoming imperative. Aside from promoting the protection of human rights and human security in the area of political–security of ASEAN cooperation, CSOs are also keen to have a bigger say in the decision-making of the economic affairs of the association, an area where the influence of big businesses is significantly apparent. The scope of CSOs' interests are even more diverse when it comes to the socio-cultural aspect of ASEAN cooperation, ranging from environment, women, youth, all the way to the question of the regional identity of ASEAN.

Contrary to popular belief, civil society's engagement with ASEAN is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, as early as 1979, the association had adopted an accreditation system that allowed CSOs to become ASEAN-affiliated non-government organisations (NGOs), with official guidelines for relations between the official ASEAN structure and NGOs established 2 years earlier.[12] By 1984, the ASEAN Secretariat had reported the existence of 42 of such organisations (Anwar, 1990: 242), but the number expanded to 72 in 2004 (Chandra, 2008a: 205–206). These guidelines, however, were stringent, with more stress on responsibilities than rights, and this indicated the extent to which ASEAN governments wished to impose control on private groups that wanted to involve themselves in ASEAN-related activities on the one hand, and discouraged many important NGOs from associating themselves with ASEAN, on the other (Anwar, 1994: 243). Except for ASEAN–CCI, which at the time was considered as an 'NGO' by ASEAN, and was by far the most active ASEAN non-government entity, the activities of most other ASEAN-affiliated NGOs were in the form of visits to other ASEAN countries, meetings with ASEAN officials, and organising conferences involving citizens from the AMSs (Anwar, 1994: 246).[13]

It was the ASEAN–ISIS, or Track 2 network, however, that facilitated the initial engagement between ASEAN and non-ASEAN-affiliated CSOs. Following the proposal from Thailand for the establishment of a Congress of ASEAN People at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Brunei in 1995, ASEAN–ISIS responded with an idea to set up an Assembly of the Peoples of ASEAN (or APA for short) which transcended the idea of ASEAN officials at the time to set up a regional inter-parliamentary union (Caballero–Anthony, 2006: 63; Chandra, 2008b: 6–7). In its evolution, APA became a

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[12] Although the ASEAN Tourism Association, which was established in 1971, was the first not-for-profit organisation bearing the name of ASEAN (Anwar, 1994: 242), it was the Federation of ASEAN Public Relations and the ASEAN Bankers Association that were certified as the first two ASEAN-affiliated NGOs (Gerard, 2015: 8).

[13] Following the launching of the ASEAN Charter in 2007, which highlights the association's intention to become a more 'people-oriented' regional organisation, ASEAN issued a revised CSO accreditation guidelines in 2012. Criteria for accreditation in the new guidelines, however, are still beyond the reach of many CSOs, many of which lack financial and decision-making reporting systems (Chong, 2011: 14). The new guidelines also favour middle-class organisations with established formalised and legalised systems of operation, as well as groups with links to the states and other national (but not external) financiers (Gerard, 2015: 8). For further details on the revised CSO accreditation guidelines, see ASEAN Secretariat (2012).

general meeting platform amongst diverse types of civic organisations that aim to serve as a channel for articulating and conveying people's views and interests outside the formal political channels (Hernandez, 2003: 1). Despite various setbacks, such as lack of funding and the reservation of ASEAN officials towards the idea (Caballero–Anthony, 2006: 65), the first APA was launched in Batam, Indonesia on 24 and 25 November 2000. Up to seven APAs were organised between 2000 and 2009. Although APA was relatively successful in building a bridge between ASEAN and CSOs, a broad consensus was reached amongst scholars and activists concerning the limitations of APA in advancing CSOs' interests and their agenda (Gerard, 2013: 1). APA, for instance, failed to facilitate actual interactions between CSOs and the ASEAN bureaucracy, while its agenda was very much driven by the ASEAN–ISIS. Although recognised as an official ASEAN–CSOs engagement forum, the organisation of APA had to be discontinued following a significant decline of CSOs' interests to participate in it.

CSOs' frustration towards APA led them to initiate their own advocacy platforms to engage with ASEAN. Under the initiative of several regional NGOs, such as Forum Asia, Southeast Asia Committee for Advocacy (SEACA), and the Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia (Asidhrra), representatives of CSOs across the region got together in Bangkok in October 2005 to discuss ways in which CSOs could engage more effectively with ASEAN. The meeting that was attended by high-level officials of the ASEAN Secretariat and the then Secretary-General of the Association, Ong Keng Yong, was important as it gave a signal to CSOs for the possible deepening of engagement in the future. Furthermore, upon the invitation of Secretary–General Ong, representatives of CSOs agreed to participate in the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) about a month later, which ironically was organised under the initiative of the Malaysian government as the ASEAN Chair then (Lopa, 2012: 56). The organisation of the first ACSC was noteworthy for it marked the first time that CSOs were invited to present their deliberation to the heads of state/government of AMSs (Collins, 2013: 66). The subsequent ACSCs, however, were organised by CSOs, and by 2008 during Thailand's chairmanship of ASEAN, a new name was added to the conference to reflect the desire of grassroots-level organisations to have a bigger say in the initiative: the ASEAN People's Forum (APF).[14]

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14   On average, ACSC attracts about 300 or so CSO delegations. During the first APF or fourth ACSC in 2009 in Thailand, the event drew participation of about 1,000 CSOs delegation. The number of participants, however, has been fluctuating, much of which depends on the level of the democratisation in the host country, as well as available resources to organise such public events.

Another important CSOs-led initiative to engage with ASEAN is the establishment of a network known as the Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA). Initially set up to serve as a networking platform for South and East Asian civil society groups, the activities of the network have always been dominated by its Working Group on ASEAN. Conceived at the Strategic Action Planning for Advocacy Meeting that took place in Bangkok in February 2006, SAPA was created to serve as a platform where information and resources could be shared amongst like-minded CSOs to enhance the effectiveness of their engagement with various intergovernmental processes at the global and regional levels (Chandra, 2006: 76). The role of SAPA in CSOs' engagements with ASEAN is particularly crucial not only in coordinating the organisation of the initial ACSCs/APFs, but also in consolidating CSOs' inputs and policy recommendations in the process leading to the making of the ASEAN Charter.[15]

While there exist diverse venues for ASEAN–CSOs engagements, the effectiveness of such engagements remain far from ideal for both parties. Many non-democratic ASEAN governments, for example, remain frustrated at the grouping's inability to fully control CSOs, especially those vocal in criticising their own governments. CSOs are equally frustrated over ASEAN's continued insistence to exercise control over their activities. Annual direct interfaces between ASEAN Leaders and representatives of CSOs, for instance, were often clouded by uneasiness between the two parties. One such interface had to be disrupted in 2009 during Thailand's chairmanship of ASEAN, when a Myanmar CSO representative, Khin Ohmar – known to be a vocal critic of the then military junta in the country – and Pen Somony – a Cambodian who was then unknown to the government – sat amongst the 10 CSO representatives in the interface with ASEAN Leaders. The refusal of both the Myanmar and Cambodian governments to accept the presence of these two activists led other CSO representatives to withdraw from the interface (Chongkittavorn, 2009; Collin, 2013: 74). Elsewhere, ASEAN officials were also adamant that CSOs' voices are too diverse, and they have insisted for the latter to come up with a single, united voice each time they engage ASEAN. This is, of course, impossible given the extremely diverse views amongst community groups in the region.

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[15]   For further assessments on SAPA Working Group on ASEAN's engagement with the so-called Eminent Persons Group and, subsequently, High-Level Task Force on the ASEAN Charter, see, inter alia, Chandra (2006; 2008b) and Collins (2013).

Measuring the Effectiveness of ASEAN's Engagement with NSAs

This section examines the effectiveness of ASEAN–NSAs engagements, as well as various mechanisms that facilitate the interactions between the two actors. Our assessment in this section is based on a simple online survey that was carried out between April and June 2016 amongst NSAs in the region. Although the survey gave attention to NSAs with experience in pursuing direct engagements with ASEAN, it was also open to others wishing to express their views on the subject. The survey involved 100 respondents, representing diverse types of NSAs (e.g. business community, academia, NGOs, trade unions, youth groups, and so on) from nine AMSs.[16]

The majority of respondents were from Indonesia and the Philippines, who together made up 60% of respondents; on the other hand, no responses were received from Brunei Darussalam. Indeed, it was interesting to note the significant gap between responses from the original ASEAN–6 countries[17] and the CLMV countries.[18] Whereas the former group represented 81% of respondents, the latter group only represented 12% of respondents.[19] While this may be the result of the location in which the authors are based, i.e. in Indonesia – and consequently greater ties with NSAs located in the original ASEAN–6 countries – it may also reflect the view that ASEAN holds more meaning for the original ASEAN–6 countries having had more time to establish its presence in those countries.

In terms of the type of organisations represented by respondents, the online survey drew a largely balanced spread with no single category dominating. The majority of respondents (32%) identified themselves as 'research institute/think tank/university', while 19% were from NGOs and 16% from the private sector. The healthy response from the private sector in particular suggests that ASEAN is moving away from its image as an elitist regional organisation and the sole business of leaders, high-level officials, and intellectual elites of the region. Interestingly, in terms of the issues being advocated by respondents, 33% answered economic issues, 31% answered socio-cultural issues, and only 10% answered political–security issues. This is somewhat surprising given that political–security issues usually attract the most attention within ASEAN and given that socio-cultural issues are traditionally seen as the 'unsexy' pillar of ASEAN.

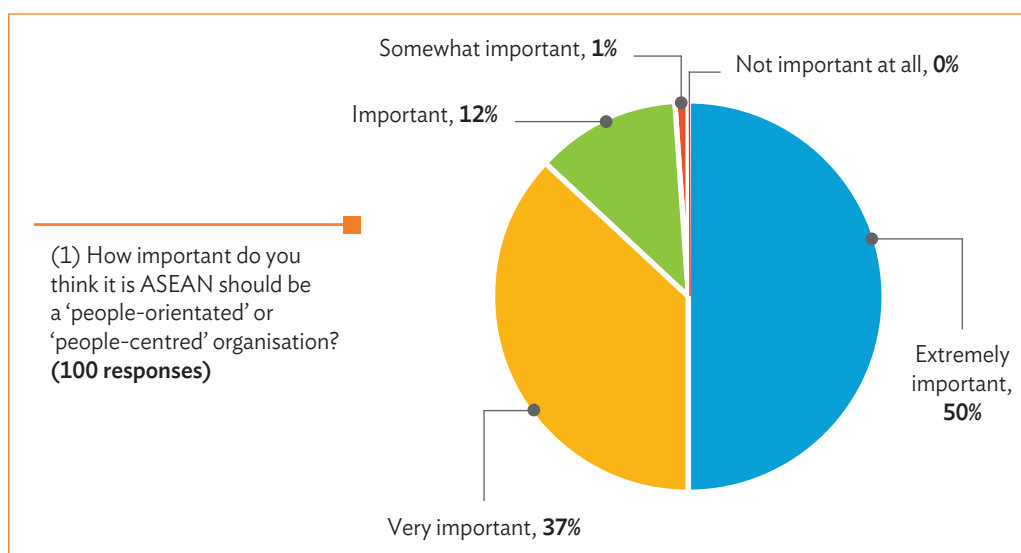16   It should be noted that the survey was open to respondents from all 10 AMSs.
17   ASEAN-6 is made up of Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.
18   CLMV is made up of Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam.
19   The remaining 7% represented respondents who identified themselves as regionally based or from outside the ASEAN region (including Bangladesh, India, and Nepal).

Respondents were asked seven questions, all of which are listed below. In some questions, a complementary open-ended space was also provided to respondents to elaborate further their views on the questions asked.
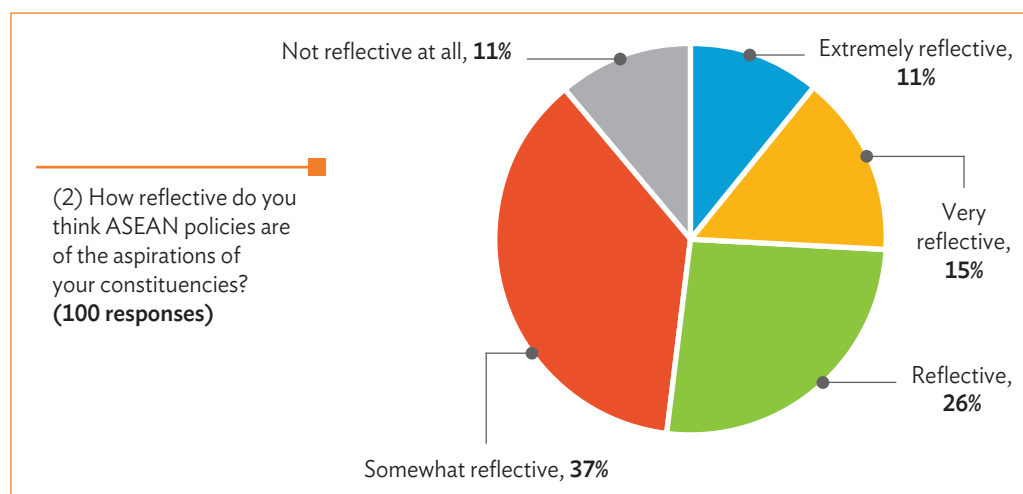
Question 1 asked respondents how important they felt it is that ASEAN should be a 'people-oriented' and 'people-centred' organisation, as well as the reasons for their answer. Half of the respondents answered that it was 'extremely important' that ASEAN should be a 'people-oriented' and 'people-centred' organisation, while a further 37% answered that it was 'very important' and 12% answered 'important'. Only one respondent answered it was 'somewhat important' and no respondents answered it was 'not important at all'. As such, respondents overwhelmingly felt that it is important for ASEAN to be 'people-oriented' and 'people-centred'.

The reasons given for their answer were varied, but a number of key issues are worth highlighting. Several respondents underlined the importance of people in any community building/regional integration process. The people were described as an 'asset' to the region, and seen as the 'drivers' or 'engine' in the ASEAN Community process. The youth sector, in particular, was highlighted for their potential contribution to the development of ASEAN. At the same time, focusing on people was seen as a possible means to address the diversity and inequality found in the region. It was suggested that the people of ASEAN shared some identical socio-cultural factors, and that this should be utilised to bridge the political, economic, and social divides that could undermine the ASEAN Community. There was also an expectation amongst respondents that ASEAN should

work towards benefiting the people and that the ultimate beneficiaries of ASEAN are the people rather than the member states of the association. For example, one respondent suggested that 'if ASEAN is to be a meaningful entity, it has to be people-centred', while another respondent stated that 'without the people, there is no community'. Such remarks suggest an evolution in ASEAN's raison d'être from serving the states that make up the regional organisation to serving the people that call the region their home. Lastly, it is interesting to note that some respondents answered it was important for ASEAN to be 'people-oriented' and 'people-centred' simply because it was stated in ASEAN documents such as the community blueprints. In this sense, respondents felt it was important for ASEAN to be 'people-oriented' and 'people-centred' because it was what the regional organisation had committed and obliged itself to become.

Question 2 asked respondents on how reflective they felt ASEAN policies were of the aspirations of their constituencies as well as the reasons for their answer. The majority of respondents replied that ASEAN policies were 'somewhat reflective' at 37%, with the next largest answer being 'reflective' at 26%, and 'very reflective' at 15%. Interestingly, if those who answered 'somewhat reflective' and 'not reflective at all' were combined, this group constituted 48% of respondents. And if those who answered 'extremely reflective' and 'very reflective' were combined, this group only constituted 26%. As such, almost half of respondents felt that ASEAN policies were 'not at all reflective' or 'only somewhat reflective' of the aspirations of their constituencies.

Not reflective at all, **11%**

Extremely reflective, **11%**

Very reflective, **15%**

(2) How reflective do you think ASEAN policies are of the aspirations of your constituencies? **(100 responses)**

Reflective, **26%**
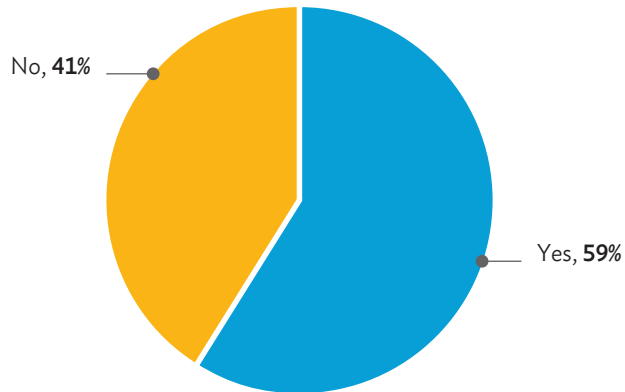
Somewhat reflective, **37%**

The reasons given for their answers raised a number of interesting points. For those who felt that ASEAN policies were reflective of the aspirations of their constituencies, it was argued that ASEAN was still in the preliminary stages of consolidation, and that the association needed more time before it could be truly reflective. Respondents acknowledged that while there was consultation, more could be done to improve the 'reflectiveness' of ASEAN policies. Nevertheless, one respondent stated that the ASEAN Economic Community is very reflective of the aspirations of business persons as it aims to grow business markets and opportunities. Interestingly, the focus on economic issues was also cited as a reason for those that felt ASEAN policies are not reflective of the aspirations of their constituencies. For example, some respondents argued that ASEAN policies prioritised markets and profits at the expense of the needs and rights of people, including labourers and trade unions. Whereas respondents had in the earlier question identified the people as ideally the main drivers and beneficiaries of ASEAN, they felt that in reality big businesses and transnational corporations were the main drivers and beneficiaries of ASEAN policies. Respondents suggested that ASEAN and its member-state governments were tilted towards business interests and cited the so-called powerful lobbying influence from business groups.

Respondents also felt that the ASEAN policymaking process remained a state-centric one and reflected national priorities. While respondents acknowledged that ASEAN did provide space and opportunities for consultation on ASEAN policies, they nevertheless felt that such exercises lacked formalisation/institutionalisation and that their recommendations were ultimately largely ignored and not taken seriously. For example, it was suggested that ASEAN Leaders did not read the statements produced by the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC)/ASEAN People's Forum (APF). For the most part, ASEAN policies were still seen as the exclusive realm of certain government institutions and think tanks, and so not inclusive enough of other NSAs. One respondent pointed out that while youths represented 65% of the region's population, ASEAN did not pay any specific attention towards youth development. Others highlighted the view that certain groups and their issues were 'invisible' in ASEAN. These include indigenous peoples, irregular migrants, stateless persons, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, who instead found their issues repressed by AMSs. Respondents also expressed frustration with the pace of ASEAN policies. ASEAN was criticised as a 'relic of the 1970s' and seen as too bureaucratic whereas respondents wanted a 'democracy of thought, engagement and **action**' [emphasis added].
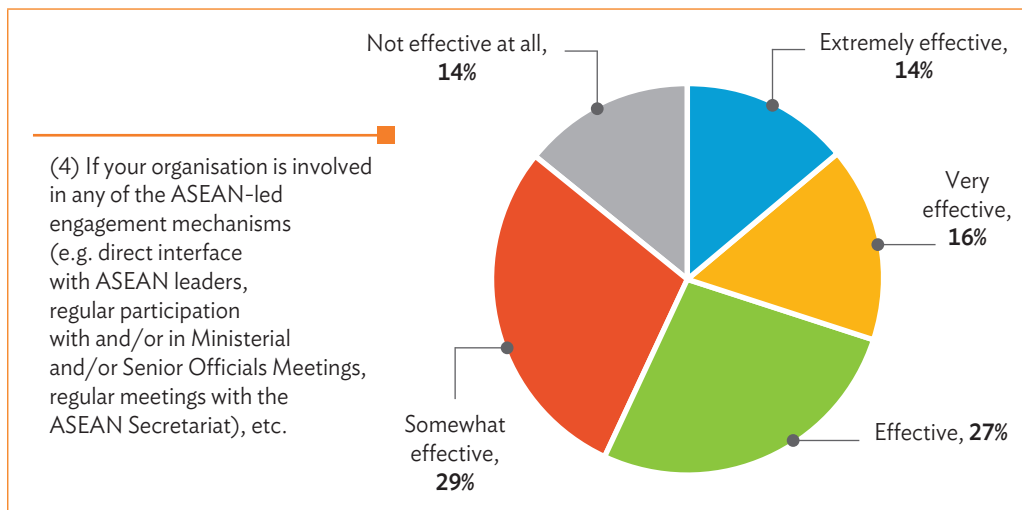
Question 3 asked respondents if their organisation was involved in any of the existing people–ASEAN engagement mechanisms, including both ASEAN and non-state actors–led initiatives. In response, 59% answered positively, while another 41% said that they were not involved.

(3) Is your organisation involved in any of the existing people–ASEAN engagement mechanisms, including both ASEAN- and non-state actors–led initiatives? **(100 responses)**

No, **41%**

Yes, **59%**

Of those that were involved in existing people–ASEAN engagement mechanisms, respondents were asked to state the name of those engagement mechanisms. Amongst those cited were the Regional Tripartite Social Dialogue Conference (RTSDC), the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), the ASEAN University Network (AUN), the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Centre for History and Tradition (SEAMEO–CHAT), the ASEAN People Forum/ ASEAN Civil Society Conference (APF/ACSC), the Network of East Asia Think Tanks (NEAT), ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ASEAN–BAC), Human Rights Task Force, ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour, the Network of ASEAN Studies Centres, the ASEAN Social Forestry Forum, the ASEAN Occupational Safety and Health Network (ASEAN–OSHNET), and the ASEAN Seafood Association. Interestingly, in stating a people–ASEAN engagement mechanism, one respondent felt the need to include 'if invited' in his answer, suggesting that such engagement mechanisms were still ad hoc rather than sustainable and still lacked formalisation/institutionalisation.

Question 4 went on to ask respondents that were involved in any of the ASEAN-led engagement mechanisms (including direct interface with ASEAN Leaders, regular participation with and/or in Ministerial and/or Senior Officials Meetings, regular meetings with the ASEAN Secretariat, etc.) if they felt such mechanisms had been effective. The highest number of respondents (28.8%) answered ASEAN-led mechanisms were 'somewhat effective', with 27.4% replying such mechanisms were 'effective'. If grouped together, 57.5% of respondents felt ASEAN-led engagement mechanisms were 'extremely effective', 'very effective', or 'effective' compared with 42.5% of respondents who felt that such engagement mechanisms were either only 'somewhat effective' or 'not effective at all'.

(4) If your organisation is involved in any of the ASEAN-led engagement mechanisms (e.g. direct interface with ASEAN leaders, regular participation with and/or in Ministerial and/or Senior Officials Meetings, regular meetings with the ASEAN Secretariat), etc.

Not effective at all, **14%**

Extremely effective, **14%**

Very effective, **16%**

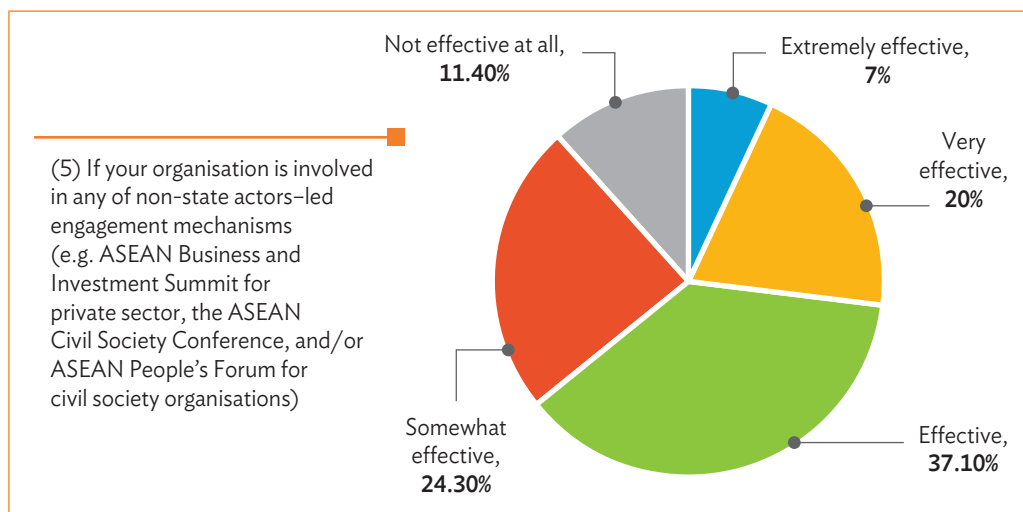Effective, **27%**

Somewhat effective, **29%**

In stating the reasons for their answers, respondents pointed out that ASEAN-led engagement mechanisms allowed for inputs and criticisms to be directly conveyed to ASEAN officials. They also stated that ASEAN-led engagement mechanisms were effective in providing some space or opportunities to work with ASEAN. For example, one respondent argued that 'regular interface with the governments and the ASEAN Secretariat will bridge the gap of understanding on issues and challenges'. But other respondents contested that ASEAN was not always sincere in its engagement with NSAs. ASEAN officials were criticised for only 'sitting politely and listening' to recommendations, and there were suggestions that ASEAN's engagement with NSAs was merely ceremonial and amounted to paying minimal lip service. As one respondent noted, 'most times, civil society is consulted just to tick a box'.

Respondents pointed out that people–ASEAN engagements were mostly ad hoc and irregular in nature. At the same time, ASEAN Leaders were criticised for 'behaving like members of an exclusive club … lacking confidence in going out of their comfort zone'. For example, one issue raised by respondents was the different views of the governments of AMSs as opposed to that of NSAs over the selection of CSO representatives to participate in the APF/ACSC. Governments asserted their right to nominate/approve CSO representatives while NSAs maintained that they should be able to freely select their representatives without state interference. This disagreement led respondents to argue that the APF/ACSC was merely a symbolic window-dressing exercise rather than a meaningful example of people–ASEAN engagement. Another issue raised by respondents to demonstrate the ASEAN Leaders' 'lack of confidence to move out of their comfort zone' was the problem of proceeding at a pace comfortable to all AMSs. Respondents stated that this slow pace of working meant ASEAN was not able to

make progress on urgent or important matters. The lack of follow-up action, uncertain time frames, and no legally binding implementation were also cited as reasons for the lack of effectiveness of ASEAN-led engagement mechanisms. Lastly, respondents also highlighted that any decisions that resulted from ASEAN-led engagement mechanisms remained ultimately with the governments of AMSs.
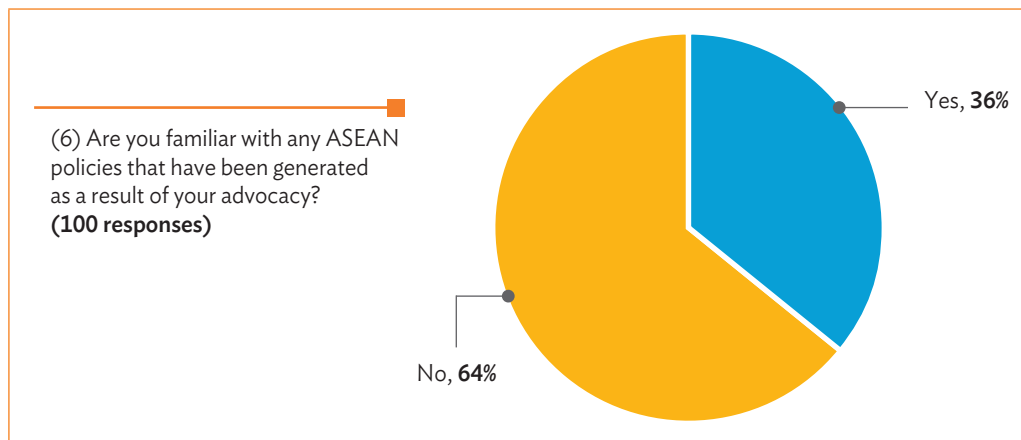
Question 5 was similar to Question 4 but focused on respondents' views on non-state actors–led engagement mechanisms (including the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit for the private sector, the ASEAN Civil Society Conference, and/or ASEAN Peoples' Forum for CSOs). Since a number of respondents had previously cited the APF/ACSC in their responses to Question 4, there was clearly some misunderstanding about which engagement mechanisms were ASEAN-led and which were NSAs-led. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents answered that NSAs-led mechanisms were 'effective' at 37.1%, with 24.3% answering 'somewhat effective' and 20.0% answering 'effective'. If grouped together, 64.3% of respondents felt NSAs-led engagement mechanisms were 'extremely effective', 'very effective', or 'effective' compared with 35.7% of respondents who felt that such engagement mechanisms were either only 'somewhat effective' or 'not effective at all'. Interestingly, these results meant that more respondents felt that NSAs-led engagement mechanisms were more effective than ASEAN-led engagement mechanisms. At the same time, fewer respondents felt that NSAs-led engagement mechanisms were only 'somewhat effective' or 'not effective at all' when compared with ASEAN-led mechanisms.

(5) If your organisation is involved in any of non-state actors–led engagement mechanisms (e.g. ASEAN Business and Investment Summit for private sector, the ASEAN Civil Society Conference, and/or ASEAN People's Forum for civil society organisations)

Not effective at all, **11.40%**
Extremely effective, **7%**
Very effective, **20%**
Effective, **37.10%**
Somewhat effective, **24.30%**

In explaining the reasons for their answers, respondents highlighted the relative ease of following up and implementing policies at the business-to-business or people-to-people level when compared with the government-to-government level. Respondents cited the simpler structures involved in NSAs-led engagement mechanisms, as well as the greater flexibility and larger inclusiveness found in such engagement mechanisms. These were seen to be more effective in fostering commonalities amongst stakeholders. On the other hand, other respondents argued that the absence of state actors in these engagement mechanisms limited their effectiveness. In their view, decisions remained the reserve of governments of AMSs and, at best, NSAs-led engagement mechanisms were a consultative exercise. In this sense, the 'outsider' status of NSAs-led engagement mechanisms meant they could not get directly involved in the decision-making process.

In contrast to the argument that NSAs-led engagement mechanism was more conducive to finding commonalities amongst stakeholders, some respondents argued that the nature of such engagement mechanisms in fact made it difficult to find a common agenda. This was due to the large numbers and diverse range of NSAs found in the ASEAN region. Respondents explained that as a result of this, it was difficult to focus on current/topical challenges and concerns affecting ASEAN and that they could only address sweeping 'big picture' themes. This admission is worth underlining as it has often been cited by ASEAN officials as the reason they find it difficult to work with NSAs. Similar to criticisms of ASEAN-led engagement mechanisms, respondents also questioned the sincerity of governments of AMSs to listen to recommendations produced from NSAs-led engagement mechanisms. One respondent felt AMSs had no interest in the outcome of NSAs-led engagement mechanisms, making the process 'virtually useless'. Meanwhile, another respondent argued that ASEAN was only interested in the recommendations of big businesses and multinational corporations, underlining the view that engagement mechanisms were only effective for business groups. Lastly, respondents also highlighted cases of state intervention that resulted in NSAs-led engagement mechanisms being far from reflective or effective. One respondent argued that in the selection of NGO representatives for some NSAs-led engagement mechanisms, 'many are selected by the government'. The presence of the so-called 'government-organised NGOs', especially from the Lao PDR and Viet Nam, was seen to prevent truly independent NGOs from participating effectively at NSAs-led engagement mechanisms.
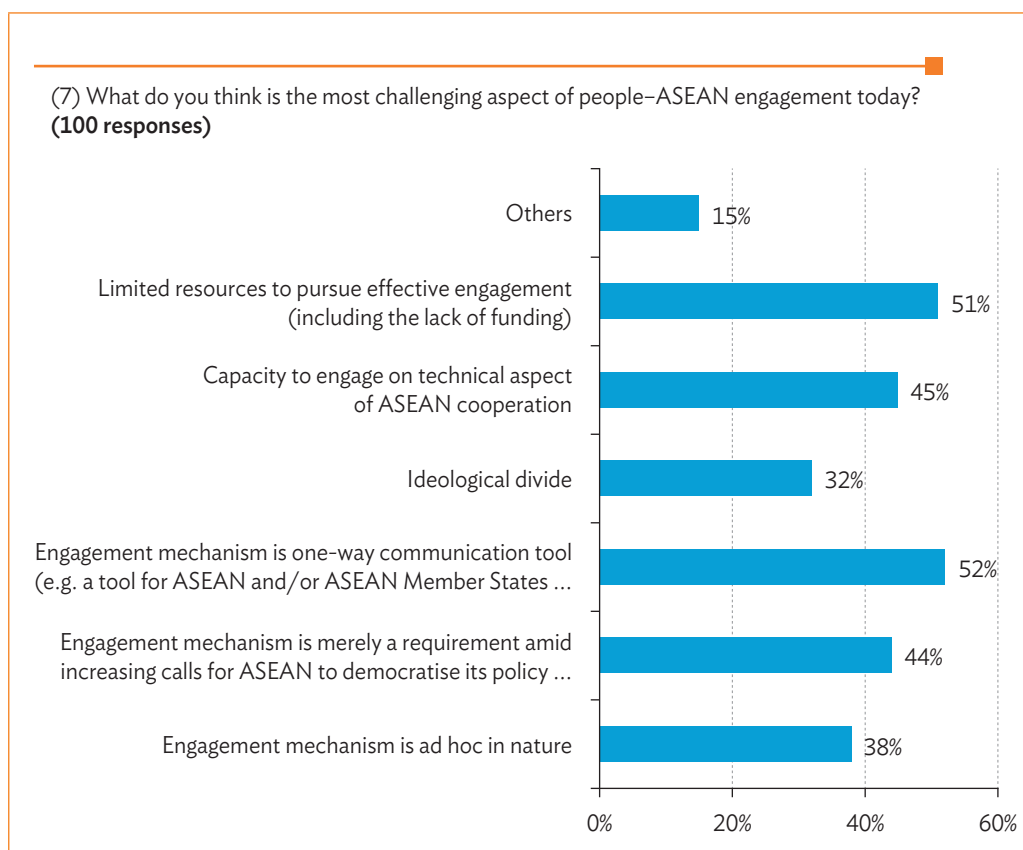
Question 6 asked respondents if they were familiar with any ASEAN policies that had been generated as a result of their advocacy as well as to state the policy in question. Thirty-six percent of respondents answered that they were familiar with an ASEAN policy that had been produced as a result of their advocacy, while the majority of respondents, or sixty-four percent, answered that they were not familiar.

(6) Are you familiar with any ASEAN policies that have been generated as a result of your advocacy? **(100 responses)**

Yes, **36%**

No, **64%**

Of those who answered positively, the most prominent ASEAN policies to have emerged from respondents' advocacy related to labour rights. One respondent pointed out that ASEAN Leaders' Statements had acknowledged the importance of decent work and that the AEC Blueprint 2025 had noted the relationship between economic integration with changes in the labour market. It was pointed out that ASEAN had tasked relevant officials to 'manage labour adjustments'. Another respondent highlighted ASEAN's call for meaningful and constructive social dialogues between trade unions and employers to work towards raising labourers' standards of living, create decent jobs, and generate better employment terms and conditions for all workers. Other respondents cited the inclusion of corporate social responsibility as part of the new ASEAN 2025 agenda, as well as the adoption at the 27th ASEAN Summit of a regional framework and action plan to implement the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection – including the call for more social dialogues with workers' organisations. Thus, while respondents had earlier criticised ASEAN for focusing only on the interest of business groups, it was interesting to observe how respondents cited labour rights–related ASEAN policies. Other examples of ASEAN policies that had been generated as a result of NSAs advocacy was the recognition of the synergy between the economic and socio-cultural pillars in the ASEAN Vision 2025, as well as the efforts of AICHR in addressing human rights issues.

Question 7, the last question in the online survey, asked respondents what they felt was the most challenging aspect of people–ASEAN engagement today. Respondents were given a choice of six answers as well as the option to give their own answer. At the same time respondents were allowed to select more than one answer. The most popular answer at 52% was the view that the engagement mechanisms are merely a one-way communication tool of ASEAN and/or its member states to socialise ASEAN policies to stakeholders, rather than as a venue to gather inputs from stakeholders.

Certainly, throughout the online survey, respondents had earlier questioned the sincerity of ASEAN officials to listen to their recommendations and follow up on them.

(7) What do you think is the most challenging aspect of people–ASEAN engagement today? **(100 responses)**

Category	Percentage
Others	15%
Limited resources to pursue effective engagement (including the lack of funding)	51%
Capacity to engage on technical aspect of ASEAN cooperation	45%
Ideological divide	32%
Engagement mechanism is one-way communication tool (e.g. a tool for ASEAN and/or ASEAN Member States ...	52%
Engagement mechanism is merely a requirement amid increasing calls for ASEAN to democratise its policy ...	44%
Engagement mechanism is ad hoc in nature	38%

The second most popular answer at 51% was the limited resources to pursue effective engagement, including the lack of funding. Some respondents had highlighted the myriad of meetings that ASEAN officials had to attend and had suggested that, consequently, the limited human resources available to ASEAN meant they were unable to pay as much attention to people–ASEAN engagement. At the same time, respondents also highlighted the lack of policy implementation monitoring, which may also be related to limited resources.

The third most popular answer at 45% was the capacity to engage on technical aspect of ASEAN cooperation, closely followed by the fourth most popular answer at 44%, which was the view that the engagement mechanism is merely a requirement amid increasing calls for ASEAN to democratise its policymaking process. A number of respondents had earlier mentioned that people–ASEAN engagement was simply a window-dressing

exercise to tick certain boxes and provide minimal lip service. More interesting were the respondents who decided to give their own answers. Amongst the chief challenge cited by these respondents was the lack of trust between ASEAN officials and NSAs, which makes genuine cooperation difficult. One respondent also highlighted some of the shortcomings of NSAs, namely their lack of organisation and coordination, which made it difficult for ASEAN to engage with them.

NSAs–ASEAN Engagement: The Way Forward

ASEAN has, indeed, come a long way from being an elitist, 'top-bottom' association to a more 'people-oriented', 'people-centred', and 'people-driven' regional organisation. Despite the myriad of engagement platforms, the engagement between ASEAN and NSAs remains complex and far from perfect. Overall, our research findings reveal the following key points:

- Despite overwhelming aspiration amongst NSAs for ASEAN to become a 'people-centred/oriented/driven' organisation', ASEAN policies are far from being reflective of the interests of NSAs' constituents. Aside from being state-centric, ASEAN policies were perceived by NSAs to be prioritised towards markets and profits at the expense of people's needs and rights.
- While allowing inputs and criticisms to be directly conveyed to ASEAN officials, ASEAN-led engagement processes and mechanisms were seen to be organised rather irregularly, usually involving only a select few NSAs, and lacking follow-ups in their implementation.
- Most NSAs-led engagement processes and mechanisms are seen more favourably amongst NSAs compared with ASEAN-led ones as they are easier to follow up, follow simpler structures, and allow greater flexibility and inclusiveness. Having said that, the extreme diversity of NSAs in the region also means that it is more difficult for these actors to determine a common agenda amongst themselves. In addition, ASEAN was also perceived to be lacking interest in the outcome of an engagement processes that it does not sanction.
- The majority of NSAs was also unable to determine any ASEAN policies that had been generated as a result of their advocacies. Those that responded positively towards this question highlighted labour rights, corporate social responsibility, and social protection issues as good case examples where NSAs were able to exert some level of influence on ASEAN.

- As far as the most challenging aspect of ASEAN–NSAs engagement to date is concerned, most NSAs still view existing engagement processes and mechanisms as being a one-way communication tool for ASEAN to socialise its policies to, rather than gather inputs from, its stakeholders. Furthermore, the lack of resources and the lack of capacity to engage on technical aspects of ASEAN cooperation are also seen as a key stumbling block in ASEAN–NSAs engagement today.

In view of these findings, the authors propose the following recommendations:

- The institutionalisation of engagement process between ASEAN and its stakeholders, as well as the mechanisms that facilitate such engagements, must be enhanced. While many ASEAN-led engagement processes and mechanisms (e.g. annual meetings between ASEAN organs and selective NSAs) are already formalised, they are not only heavily influenced by the agenda and interests of ASEAN and its member states but also lack inclusivity to allow the diverse NSAs in the region to participate in these activities.
- Engagement between ASEAN and NSAs should not be confined within the existing formal mechanisms and processes. While it is certainly beneficial for NSAs to engage the highest decision-makers in the association, formal engagement between the two sides should be fully institutionalised and conducted on a regular basis at the technical (e.g. working group, task force, etc.) and national (ASEAN national secretariats and other relevant national agencies) levels.
- Rather than be used as a one-way communication tool and a way to defend ASEAN's policies to the public, engagement processes and mechanisms should instead be used to genuinely gather inputs from NSAs. There are too many challenges in the region that cannot be solved by ASEAN and its member states alone. ASEAN needs NSAs to solve these problems and should pay attention to creative proposals and recommendations generated from NSAs-led engagement processes and mechanisms.
- Given expanding interest amongst NSAs of all types to engage with ASEAN, the latter should consider easing its engagement procedure with the former. Criteria attached to existing Guidelines on Accreditation of Entities Association with ASEAN, for example, remain too complex and out of reach for many NSAs in the region. In addition to improving public awareness towards the association, such a policy move could help inculcate a real sense of belonging towards ASEAN amongst the region's citizens.
- Engagement processes and mechanisms should be accompanied by robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that would allow ASEAN and NSAs to track the progress of recommendations submitted by the latter to the former. The ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN–BAC have been pursuing such an approach for the

last couple of years now and this could perhaps be emulated in the engagement between ASEAN and other NSAs.

■ Despite the presence and participation of officials and/or representatives from ASEAN organs and member states in NSAs-led engagement processes and mechanisms, the association could give these initiatives greater recognition. As indicated above, NSAs-led engagement processes and mechanisms can be the source of unconventional and out-of-the-box inputs and recommendations that are often too difficult to attain as a result of its own complex and lengthy bureaucracy.

■ Our survey suggests that ASEAN is not entirely closed to engagement with NSAs, with the latter being able to exert some level of influence towards the association's policies over the years. ASEAN should highlight such good case examples in its public outreach activities to encourage more NSAs to engage constructively with it.

■ In addition to its own resources, ASEAN should also encourage its dialogue partners to engage, contribute, and support NSAs-led engagement processes and mechanisms. Aside from better communicating ASEAN's development cooperation with its dialogue partners, it should also ease the resource burden carried by the majority of NSAs to engage effectively with ASEAN.

■ As for NSAs themselves, given the increasing complexity and expanding scope of ASEAN cooperation these days, knowledge building regarding the technical aspects of the association's cooperation is needed if they wish to be able to engage more effectively with ASEAN in the future. For this to happen, however, the role of ASEAN's dialogue partners and the wider international donor community needs to be better structured to ensure that the assistance they provide to ASEAN-related institutions trickles down to relevant NSAs in the region.

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