

7. ASEAN 2040: ‘ASEAN Vision as ASEAN Peoples’ Vision’: ASEAN Community and ASEAN Identity

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‘ASEAN Vision as ASEAN Peoples’ Vision: ASEAN Community and ASEAN Identity’

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Background: Southeast Asia’s long history

Before the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1967, Southeast Asia had two distinct and disconnected entities – one covering the broad mainland Southeast Asia and the other the maritime countries. On the continent, there were three zones divided amongst its colonial masters. The first one, under the British Empire, comprised Malaysia, Singapore, and Burma, also now known as Myanmar. The French colonies of Indochina – Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam – made up the bulk of mainland Southeast Asia. Only Thailand has not been colonised by any foreign power. Meanwhile, in maritime Southeast Asia, the Netherlands took over Indonesia, while Spain and America ruled over the Philippines.

For centuries, the combined experiences of Southeast Asian countries and their foreign governors made this diverse region even more distinctive, adding to their already colourful languages, religions, cultures, and traditions. Local resistance to foreign domination was the hallmark of the freedom fighters of these countries. Their struggle for independence took different paths depending on local conditions.

On the mainland, the fight for independence was fiercest in Viet Nam due to France's strong determination to continue its dominance. Other colonial masters such as the Dutch, the Spanish, and the Americans were more docile, wanting to extricate themselves from local uprisings, knowing full well that their rule must come to an end sooner rather than later.

After the countries in Southeast Asia gained independence in the 1950s, they had to learn how to coexist with other newly independent countries in the most unusual and indigenous ways. They for the first time have to come to grips with their own non-protective selves – struggling to move quickly with nation-state building and new narratives untarnished by their colonial past. Their colonial experiences implanted in their home cultural, traditions, and norms created regional dynamism as never before seen, yielding a myriad of unintended consequences and repercussions. The regional environment, not to mention the wider international circumstances, was equally fresh but tense as ideological struggles between the great powers began in earnest at the same time.

Development options were limited as Southeast Asian nations tried to proceed with nation-building after decolonisation. Post-independence leaders must mobilise local human and natural resources in all areas for economic and social development to revive and strengthen nationhood, identities, and pride. As they were left on their own without any supervision, they quickly learned that rather than venturing ahead on their own it was more expedient to work together with neighbours to achieve shared goals.

Such a realisation did not come naturally, and early efforts to collaborate and forge collective entities failed due to a lack of mutual trust and confidence. The experience of Maphilindo¹ was typical. The subsequent construction of Association of Southeast Asia (ASA)² yielded similar failures. In post-independent Southeast Asia, the political and social environment was left fragmented and battered by heavily enforced foreign dominance and ideas that would necessitate/require strong and sustained leadership to overcome centuries of Western dominance. Roughly a decade following independence, Southeast Asian leaders from the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia attempted to form a new collective entity to protect themselves from intra-fighting and most importantly so they could fight jointly against external threats. After long debates and deliberations, these leaders overcame their mutual suspicions and forged new commitments in Bangkok, Thailand, in the first week of August 1967 when they agreed unanimously to establish ASEAN.

Unity in Diversity

Southeast Asia has been the crossroads of the world. It is one of the world's richest regions in terms of cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. In a relatively small geographical space, there are 240 million Muslims, 130 million Christians, 140 million Buddhists, and 7 million Hindus (Mahbubani and Sng, 2017).³ This remarkable diversity has often been seen as a challenge for the people-to-people relationships in ASEAN. However, this diversity is increasingly viewed as an asset that forms the basis of 'unity in diversity'.

In October 2017, an online poll was conducted by Blackbox in Singapore where 3,040 adult ASEAN citizens were surveyed across the 10 ASEAN nations.⁴ The study revealed that nearly three in five (58%) of Southeast

¹ Maphilindo, which stands for Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, was formed in July 1963 with the initiative of the Philippines to form the Greater Malayan Confederation. It was dissolved a month later with the start of konfrontasi by Indonesia with Malaysia.

² The Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) was formed in July 1961 by the Philippines, Thailand, and the Federation of Malaya (now part of Malaysia). It lasted until the establishment of ASEAN in August 1967 which effectively replaced ASA.

³ Mahbubani, K. and J. Sng (2017), *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace*. Singapore: NUS Press, p. 5.

⁴ Blackbox (2017), *ASEAN Turns 50: A Study of Southeast Asian Perceptions.*, p.1.

Asians believe that people born and raised in Southeast Asia have a lot in common while 31% think they have at least a little in common. Also in 2017, ERIA conducted an ASEAN-wide survey of over 2,322 people with a series of questions regarding the concerns, aspirations, and expectations of ASEAN people for ASEAN. More than three-fourths of all respondents felt 'moderately' to 'very much' like ASEAN citizens. Combined with those who indicated feeling somewhat as ASEAN citizens, a sense of ASEAN belonging was shared by virtually all the respondents. Much of this sense of ASEAN belonging is shaped by geography. A full sense of ASEAN citizenship may call for ASEAN to be more deeply engaged and more aligned with the concerns and interests of the non-elites. Only 3% of the respondents said they did not feel like they were ASEAN citizens.

However, in the Blackbox poll, less than half of the respondents (43%) said they define themselves as Southeast Asian first ahead of being Asian (51%). Despite the lower self-identification with being Southeast Asian, nearly three in four (74%) rate the current state of relationships between ASEAN member states to be positive.⁵

In contrast, government officials and ASEAN Leaders possess stronger mutual trust and confidence amongst each other. It is the ASEAN Leaders who feel the responsibility of maintaining and strengthening the sense of ASEAN identity. There is deep camaraderie and community that has developed amongst the ASEAN officials over the course of ASEAN meetings. This is the ASEAN institutional identity that ERIA's 2015 report highlighted which covers 'ASEAN institutions, programmes, initiatives and processes. The prominent ASEAN institutions and processes are the ASEAN Summits and ASEAN Secretariat. They also include the numerous ASEAN Committees and Working Groups as well as the hundreds of meetings being held every year'.⁶

Ownership of ASEAN has always been with the governments in the region. By 2040, the ownership of ASEAN has to be more inclusive and

⁵ Ibid., p.9 and p.10.

⁶ Intal, P. et al. (2015), Framing the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Post-2015. Jakarta: ERIA, p.211.

to include the people. It is building the communal identity, the 'we feeling', the 'ours feeling' and the 'we are in together' that have to be cultivated. Mahbubani observed that 'the relative enthusiasm of the member countries for ASEAN changes when governments change' and 'to protect ASEAN from the vicissitudes of changes in government, the people of ASEAN need to feel a greater sense of ownership.'⁷ The sense of ownership comes from understanding ASEAN's history, the interconnectedness and shared destiny.

Embedding ASEAN into the curricula of national education system has always been recommended to strengthen ASEAN awareness and ASEAN identity. There is evidence that elements of ASEAN are incorporated in the national educational system of ASEAN Member States. FGDs conducted in 2017 through the ERIA survey revealed 'a number of participants said they had learned about ASEAN first in their primary school, high school, or university classes, while there were also a number who had learned about ASEAN only in 2015 from news and media as the ASEAN Member States prepared for the realisation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

Comparisons with earlier studies conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and the ASEAN Foundation in 2007 and 2014 indicate that awareness of ASEAN increased significantly after 2014 – perhaps as a result of all the news about the establishment of the AEC in 2015. In the ISEAS's 2014 survey of students, only 56% were aware of ASEAN – this jumped to 87% in ERIA's survey in 2016. However, comments during the FGDs made it clear that much of the participants' awareness was related to ASEAN's economic pillar. Indeed, several respondents stated that they believed the AEC and ASEAN were the same. Many respondents could not identify the other two pillars of ASEAN.⁸

⁷ Mahbubani, K. and J. Sng (2017), *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace*. Singapore: NUS Press, p. 222.

⁸ Intal, P. and L. Ruddy (eds.) (2017), *Voices of ASEAN: What Does ASEAN Mean to ASEAN People?*

Moving ahead to 2040, we anticipate a steady increase amongst ASEAN citizens with regards to awareness of ASEAN and stronger articulation of ASEAN identity by understanding its shared history, geographical proximity, and shared interests. The following sections will outline how to create more ownership of the communal identity amongst ASEAN people.

Nationalism and Regionalism

There is a strong tendency to juxtapose nationalism versus regionalism when discussing ASEAN community and identity. Viewed within this framework, a sense of national community and identity invariably trumps the regional. Given that ASEAN is at core an intergovernmental entity and, unlike Europe, does not have a historical experience of devastating wars amongst AMS, there is less motivation for developing a stronger regionalism if presented as two contrasting possibilities. The more fruitful area of inquiry may be 'how can the pursuit of regionalism enhance nationalism?' In other words, how can regional measures contribute to the national agenda and how can regionalism temper nationalism for the benefit of all?' For example, regional measures that constrain national policy agendas may actually lead to better human welfare for everyone at both national and regional levels. Similarly, environmental issues, climate change, and disaster management are all policy areas where action at the regional level is far more likely to improve the situation at national levels, than disparate and uncoordinated policies at the national levels.

Since ASEAN identity is largely a matter of feeling, impression, and expression of one's self, awareness and ultimately the incorporation of 'ASEANness' (e.g. welfare or understanding of other ASEAN peoples or of the region) as part of a person's 'utility function' or sense of overall welfare are what we would like to aim for in engendering an ASEAN identity and an ASEAN Community.

Role of Youth

The youth, both as active agents of change as well as representative of the future of ASEAN, play a key role in building ASEAN identity. ASEAN's current population is 645 million people of which 153 million people are

between 15 to 29 years of age.⁹ Overall, ASEAN is viewed as a young region except for countries like Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam. To strengthen the communal identity amongst the youth, opportunities for student mobility whether for studies and for work have to be increased. The mobility of students, especially those involving region-wide internship, are constrained as long-term internship visas are not available. The ASEAN Council of Teachers (ACT), an entity affiliated with ASEAN raised this constraint at the recent 2nd Forum of Entities Associated with ASEAN in Jakarta on 15 October 2018. By 2040, such barriers should be removed and replaced with a visa-free internship scheme that allows for greater mobility of students. The most effective way to inculcate the communal identity is to create opportunities for youth to interact. Greater interaction amongst the different nationalities of youth in the region certainly builds strong connections and through the sharing of knowledge can spark a robust exchange of ideas that can lead to greater collaboration to grow their countries and ASEAN as a region.

Role of ICT

A young ASEAN is defined as a 'digital natives', tech savvy, digitally nimble, and multitasking individuals who are fluent in digital devices and the Internet. A young ASEAN multitasks. Eight to 24-year olds in Asia fit 38 hours' worth of activities in a 24 hour-period. They spend 10 hours on media whether the Internet, watching TV, or DVD/VCD/videos, reading newspapers, or magazines and listening to the radio. Of the youth who were interviewed in the region, 37% said they could not live without the Internet and 29% would be unable to function without their mobile phones.¹⁰

By 2040, digital platforms are the norm to build and strengthen relationships with citizens in the ASEAN Community. Hence, existing official social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Youtube, Twitter, of the ASEAN Secretariat and other ASEAN bodies,

⁹ ASEAN Secretariat 2018

¹⁰ Emmanuel C. Lallana, PhD, Chief Executive, Ideacorp in his presentation on ASEAN and ICT: A Tale of Two Cities

need to constantly engage users by exploiting digital features on these platforms to actively respond to queries. Furthermore, content on these social media platforms have to reflect the eclectic blend of ASEAN news items, quizzes, news stories from the region (sometimes trivial, sometimes serious), material showcasing individual countries and various kinds of discussion-starters.¹¹ Such content is the interactivity and openness of the format, combined with the immediacy of the response potential allows for people who can access social media platforms, an excellent way of experiencing something of the 'real' Southeast Asia, motivating users, perhaps, to support ASEAN's regional linking endeavours.¹²

By 2040, prominent influencers identified from the interconnectedness of youth in ASEAN Community through strong networks of students from their mobility, will be a permanent feature to increase the salience of ASEAN related issues. These influencers become role models for promoting ASEAN values from an alternative angle.

Role of Private Sector

The private sector can play a key role in developing a stronger sense of ASEAN community and identity. In particular, the private sector can contribute to the development of ASEAN community and identity by addressing some of the concerns and aspirations that ASEAN peoples have expressed for ASEAN.

In ERIA's 2017 'Voices of ASEAN' Survey the top priority concerns across the region, for all types of respondents including the private sector were (1) corruption and (2) climate change and natural disasters. The fifth most pressing concern was agriculture and food security. The private sector is already heavily engaged in each of these issues, but mostly at national levels. But the survey results clearly mandate that the people of ASEAN see these as ASEAN issues.

¹¹ Linda Quayle (2013), 'Promoting "Diplomatic" or "Cosmopolitan" Culture? Interrogating ASEAN Focused Communication Initiatives', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 35(1), pp.104–28.

¹² Idem.

In the same survey, ASEAN peoples shared their aspirations for ASEAN and again sectors that involve the private sector topped the list: (1) ease of communication through information and communications technology, (2) easy access to goods and services for other ASEAN countries, (3) good physical connectivity via land, air, and water. As aspirations, these sectors are less politically charged than the concerns expressed above and thus there is more potential for action through ASEAN-level platforms that involve the private sector. Again, ABAC can play a key role, but individual companies are also able to advocate policies and capacity building that could help them deliver their products and services to the ASEAN market. Chambers of commerce could also actively engage on these issues.

Note that two out of three of the top aspirations have to do with connectivity. The importance of connectivity and people-to-people contact cannot be over-estimated as a mechanism to help individuals and groups to become aware that citizens of other ASEAN Member States share many of the same values and perspectives. The industries of travel and tourism can support package tours of Southeast Asia for Southeast Asians – this is a largely untapped market that is in the process of ‘coming of age’ as southeast Asians have begun to show increasing interest in exploring their own unique heritages instead of travelling to the more traditional destinations in Europe and the United States.

On this topic it is also important to consider the work being done on smart cities and digital connectivity. Singapore has already started creating networks of smart cities throughout ASEAN members under its chairmanship in 2018. These networks will play a pivotal role in connecting peoples in all member states living in urban areas (39 cities selected). Digital technology and seamless connectivity will enhance exchanges and pool common resources amongst people and communities in all areas including transportations, energy, healthcare, education, local government administration and security. As digital connectivity becomes more and more widespread, diverse forums for sharing common interests are flourishing. Some examples of forums that have already been created include:

- ASEAN Affairs: A division of Time International Management Enterprises Company Limited (T.I.M.E.), ASEANAFFAIRS provides a broad range of information and services to the growing audience of governments, businesses, academia, and individuals interested in ASEAN;
- ASEANER: a youth-oriented ASEAN magazine;
- ASEAN Forum: a business magazine devoted to Southeast Asia;
- c-ASEAN Centre with a mission to build a regional knowledge hub on business start-ups and promote public knowledge, awareness, and understanding on regional integration
- CIMB Young Leaders ASEAN Summit where 50 or so outstanding university students and fresh graduates in ASEAN debate on issues related to ASEAN economic integration.

More attention needs to be paid to how to better integrate the private sector into the ASEAN process. According to the Rules of Procedures for Private Sector Engagement under the ASEAN Economic Community. 'The private sector organisations/councils to be engaged with ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM)/ASEAN sectoral bodies or ASEAN Leaders should be associated with ASEAN and listed in Annex 2 of the ASEAN Charter as Business Councils, Business Organizations, Industry Associations, and Other Stakeholders in ASEAN; or as suggested by ASEAN sectoral bodies.' According to these procedures, ASEAN bodies can create working committees composed of private sector representatives that report to the body. For example, the ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs Network, which worked directly with the Senior Economic Officials Meeting to prepare the Manila Statement on Women's Economic Empowerment in 2017.

Role of the Media

It is important to note the vital role of the media. Although the ASEAN Social and Cultural Community mentions the role of media in promoting an ASEAN sense of belonging and identity, ASEAN leaders have never paid much attention to the ASEAN-based community. ASEAN media still report about the grouping's activities in an ad-hoc manner, most of the time focusing on controversies or bilateral matters. Very few media outfits or journalists write about ASEAN as an entity with vision and aspiration.

They tend to follow narratives from outside rather than of their own making. The ASEAN Secretariat and Secretary General must adopt an open-house policy so that media can access materials related to ASEAN easily. World Bank, IMF, and ADB have adopted open-house policy for quite a while. It is interesting to note that given the importance of ASEAN, as it enters its 51st year, there are no journalists or media outlets assigned specifically to cover ASEAN as an institution, which convenes more than 1,000 meetings annually. In contrast, nearly one hundred journalists are registered to cover the EU in Brussels.

Role of People–Private–Public Partnership

Developing the communal identity of ASEAN can be enhanced when the people of ASEAN see their national issues as ASEAN issues, as highlighted in the previous section. This people’s mandate offers a clear opportunity to at least partially reframe national issues so that they become part of the ASEAN discussion. People–Private–Public Partnership can support the development outcomes of ASEAN or ASEAN priorities by encouraging different stakeholders to participate and be involved in ASEAN priorities. By 2040, we would like to see sustained people–private–public partnership platforms. Below are examples of existing and potential platforms that we should certainly strengthen as a way forward.

An example is the ASEAN Heritage Parks system that fosters cooperation, awareness, and appreciation for the need to conserve and manage the 40 heritage parks in ASEAN. The ASEAN Mayor’s Forum, while not an official ASEAN sectoral body, can support the communal identity of ASEAN. It is a platform that promotes networking amongst local governments in ASEAN to build a stronger ASEAN by improving awareness of local stakeholders for the regional agenda of ASEAN.

More sister cities in ASEAN can be developed to promote cultural and commercial ties through the ASEAN Smart City Network as well.

Strengthening Coordination and Collaboration amongst ASEAN Bodies

All sectoral bodies from the three pillars of the ASEAN Community are expected to promote ASEAN awareness, identity, and ASEAN Community. Particularly in the ASCC pillar, several sectoral bodies like SOMY, SOMCA, SOMRI, and SOMED's have specific objectives in their 5-year work plan to work on ASEAN awareness.

Currently, the Community Relations Division (CRD) of the ASEAN Secretariat is actively doing outreach activities with different stakeholders. CRD has initiated the organisation of the Forum on Entities Associated with ASEAN since 2017 to update the entities on development in ASEAN. It also encourages ASEAN bodies in Jakarta to share information and explore collaboration with one another as well as with entities affiliated with ASEAN. With more interactions amongst the ASEAN bodies, these increase possible collaboration to work together. By 2040, we would expect to see better resources from the member states, the private sector, and the public to support ASEAN in its community building process using a people-private-public approach.

In summary, ASEAN has a lot of measures to promote ASEAN awareness to ensure ownership of ASEAN by the ASEAN peoples. It is time that ASEAN implements these measures and funds these programmes particularly student academic mobility using people-private-public partnerships. We need to explore sustainable business models to sustain these measures and programmes. We also need to leverage more on the Digital Economy and Fourth Industrial Revolution particularly the new technologies – digital platforms, big-data analytics, and cloud-based services to sustain the ASEAN Community.

References

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