

# What Does ASEAN Mean to ASEAN Peoples? Survey Findings from Brunei Darussalam\*

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## Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a grouping of 10 member states in Southeast Asia that fosters regional cooperation and facilitates economic integration amongst its members. ASEAN was formed on 8 August 1967 with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand as its founding members. ASEAN has expanded over the years with the joining of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam. Brunei joined ASEAN as its sixth member on 7 January 1984, a week after the country gained independence.

Based on the Bangkok Declaration of 1967 (ASEAN, 2016), ASEAN aims to promote economic growth, social progress, and cultural progress in the region through joint endeavours; foster regional peace and security; encourage active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical, and scientific fields; promote partnerships in the development of agriculture and industries, trade, and transportation and communication facilities within the region; promote Southeast Asian studies; and maintain 'close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organisations with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves'.

A few key highlights have shaped ASEAN in different ways from other associations. These highlights include the ASEAN Way, the ASEAN Charter, and the ASEAN Community.

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

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The 'ASEAN Way' refers to an approach to solving issues that respects the cultural norms of Southeast Asia. It can be summarised as

a working process or style that is informal and personal. Policymakers constantly utilize compromise, consensus, and consultation in the informal decision-making process ... it above all prioritizes a consensus-based, non-conflictual way of addressing problems. Quiet diplomacy allows ASEAN leaders to communicate without bringing the discussions into the public view. Members avoid embarrassment that may lead to further conflict. (Masilamani and Peterson, 2014)

On 15 December 2008, the members of ASEAN met in Jakarta to launch the ASEAN Charter, signed in November 2007, with the aim of moving closer towards being a community. The charter established ASEAN as a legal entity and aimed to create a single free trade area for the region encompassing 500 million people. This was a momentous development for ASEAN for consolidating, integrating, and transforming itself into a community. It was achieved while ASEAN was seeking a more vigorous role in Asian and global affairs and at a time when the international system was experiencing a seismic shift.

Another key point in ASEAN's history, considered as one of the major milestones in the regional integration of ASEAN, was the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015. The ASEAN Community is composed of three pillars: the ASEAN Economic Community, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and the ASEAN Political-Security Community.

Each pillar has its own blueprint. The ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint, adopted by the ASEAN leaders in November 2015, forms part of a general master plan, ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, which is geared toward the realisation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. The said concept envisages, among others,

a rules-based, people-oriented, people-centered ASEAN Community, where our peoples enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms, higher quality of life and the benefits of community building, reinforcing our sense of togetherness and common identity, guided by the purposes and principles of the ASEAN Charter ... a vibrant, sustainable and highly integrated economies, enhanced ASEAN Connectivity as well as strengthened efforts in narrowing the development gap. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015)

As ASEAN approaches its 50th founding anniversary in 2017, it is timely to ascertain the public's perception of the association to determine the gaps and areas for improvement.

The region and the world when ASEAN was born 50 years ago were very different to how they are now. Southeast Asia is no longer the divided region it was in the 1960s and 1970s. ASEAN has to evolve with and adapt to the times and must remain relevant and responsive to the needs of its peoples.

In a *titah*, His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam said at the 27th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur:

ASEAN needs to be more economically integrated and interdependent. This is possible by improving on what has been accomplished to facilitate trade and investment. Businesses, especially micro, small, and medium enterprises, should continuously be made aware of opportunities and be able to take advantage of ASEAN's integration efforts. (Borneo Bulletin, 2015)

His Majesty Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam highlighted the importance of raising awareness of ASEAN, especially among the youth, as they play an integral part in fostering a people-centred, people-oriented ASEAN. There is also the need to keep the youth informed of ASEAN's vision because they are the ones who will inherit its work.

His Majesty Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam further added:

It is hoped that ASEAN can continue to develop into a community that is more dynamic, based on the principles that have shaped the region today. ASEAN economies have enjoyed growth, the peoples of ASEAN have become closer, and most importantly, they have benefited from the efforts of ASEAN leaders. (Borneo Bulletin, 2015)

## Methodology

This study conducted a purposive online survey as well as focus group discussions (FGDs) with selected target groups, particularly focusing on youth aged between 19 and 25 (for the online survey) and business people as well as employees in the public and private sectors (for the FGDs). The instruments used for the survey were provided by the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA).

To solicit respondents for the online survey, invitations were sent to people from academe, the public sector, the business sector, non-governmental organisations, and

students. The survey was also disseminated through personal contacts to obtain random responses from the four districts in Brunei.

The FGDs comprised two sessions. The first was with the business sector and the second FGD was with employees from the public and private sectors. Given the time constraint for this project, the FGDs focused more on respondents' aspirations and expectations as well as matching the discussions on questions 16 and 17 as much as possible in order to cover a broad spectrum of views and opinions on ASEAN.

## Results and Discussions

### Profile of the survey respondents

The survey had a total of 280 respondents (completed surveys) and was answered by Bruneians from all four districts of the country. The students were the largest group of survey respondents, followed by those from the public sector, 'others', the business sector, labour, academe, and civil society organisations/non-governmental organisations.<sup>1</sup> Respondents in the 'other' category comprised unemployed respondent-retirees and people representing semi-government agencies.

More than half of the respondents were aged 15–30, while 33.57% were aged 31–59 (serving as a good representation of the general population, as described in Footnote 1). Only 6.07% of the respondents were aged 50 or above. Meanwhile, the number of female respondents was double the number of male respondents.

According to an International Monetary Fund report, about 56% of Brunei's citizens and permanent residents work in the public sector. Hence, it is not surprising that Table 1 shows about 26% of the respondents were from the public sector.

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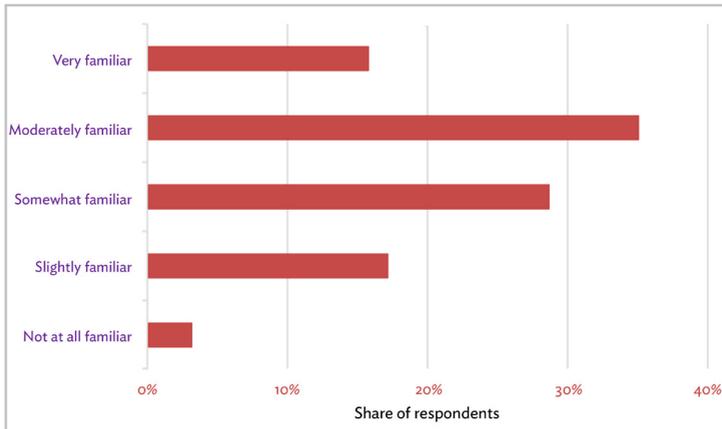
<sup>1</sup> The survey was intended to focus on youth aged between 15 and 30 years old. Brunei has a young population; the Department of Economic Planning and Development reported that in 2015, about 17% of the country's population was aged between 15 and 24 years old, and about 46% were between 25 and 54 years old.

**Table 1: Profile of the Survey Respondents**

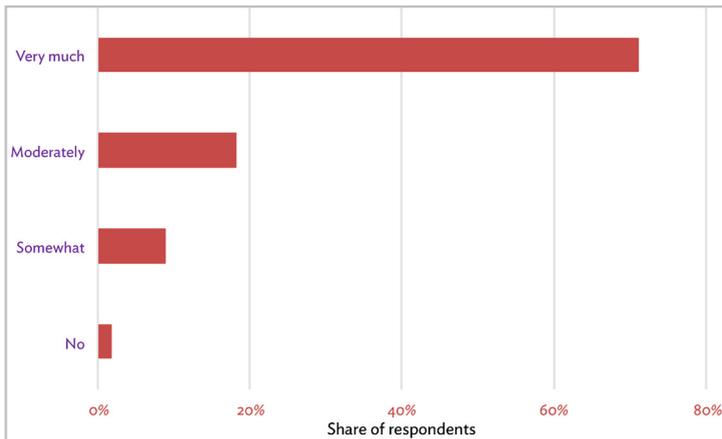
	Number of Respondents	Share of Respondents (%)
<b>Affiliation</b>		
Students	135	48.21
Government	73	26.07
Business	17	6.07
Academe	16	5.71
Labour	4	1.43
Civil society organisation/ non-governmental organisation	4	1.43
Other	31	11.07
<i>Total</i>	280	100.00
<b>Age</b>		
15–30 years	169	60.36
31–49 years	94	33.57
50+ years	17	6.07
<i>Total</i>	280	100.00
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	93	33.21
Female	187	66.79
<i>Total</i>	280	100.00

As shown in Figure 1, the largest share of respondents (35.13%) was moderately familiar with ASEAN. This was followed by those who were somewhat familiar, slightly familiar, very familiar, and, lastly, not at all familiar with ASEAN. When asked about their level of recognition of themselves as ASEAN citizens, 71.07% of the respondents indicated ‘very much’ (Figure 2). Meanwhile, 18.21% answered ‘moderately’, 8.93% responded with ‘somewhat’, and only 1.79% said they did not see themselves as ASEAN citizens. Figure 3 shows the respondents’ responses about their perceptions of Brunei’s membership of ASEAN. A high percentage of the total respondents, 82.86%, answered positively about the country being a member of ASEAN. Only 0.71% responded that the country’s membership was a bad thing.

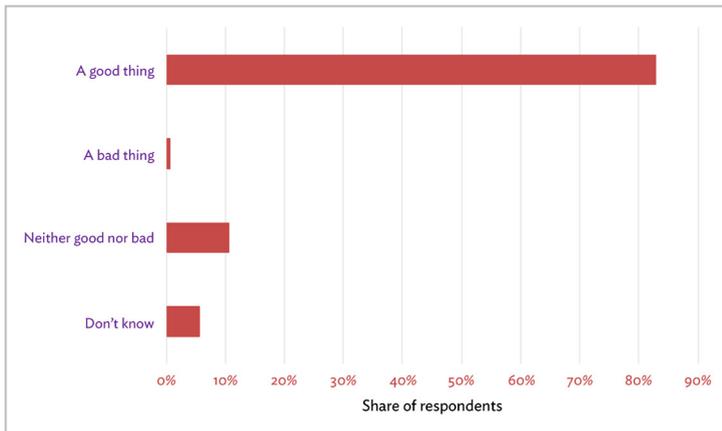
**Figure 1: Awareness of ASEAN**



**Figure 2: Identification as an ASEAN Citizen**



**Figure 3: Perception of Brunei's Membership of ASEAN**

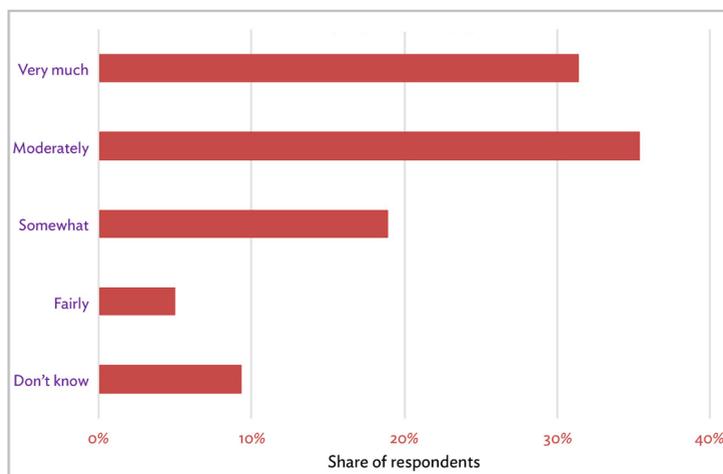


A Pearson coefficient was calculated, which showed that people aged 31–49 were more familiar with ASEAN than younger respondents. Nevertheless, Bruneians, irrespective of their age, positively expressed their aspirations, expectations, concerns, and hopes for ASEAN.

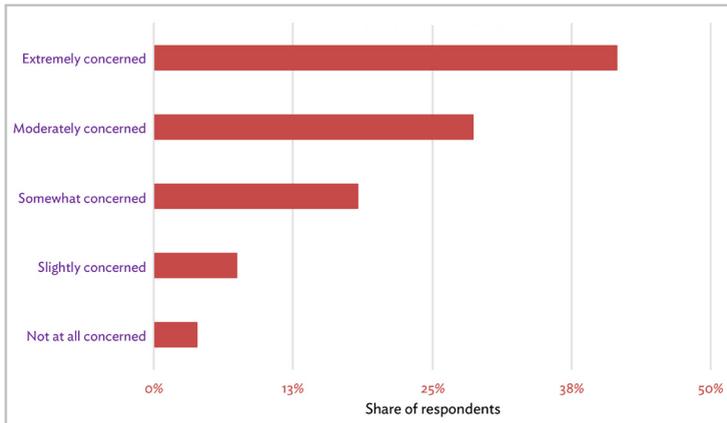
## The significance of ASEAN

When asked about whether Brunei had benefited from being a member of ASEAN, 31.43% and 35.36% of the respondents answered positively that the country had benefited ‘very much’ and ‘moderately’, respectively (Figure 4). This was in line with the responses for question 10 of the survey, which asked respondents how they would feel if Brunei were to leave ASEAN. The general consensus was that the respondents would be extremely concerned (as shown in Figure 5) if Brunei were to leave ASEAN as the country had played a key role in the association and in supporting intra- and inter-regional trade among ASEAN member countries. Meanwhile, a large share of respondents, 43.57%, was moderately optimistic about ASEAN’s future (Figure 6).

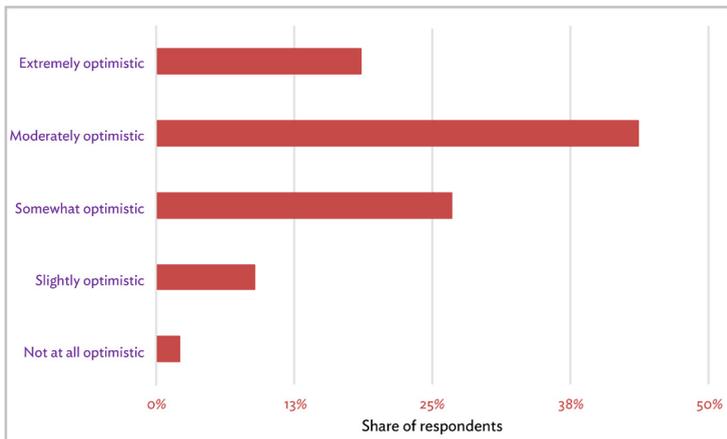
**Figure 4: Opinion on Brunei’s Benefit from Being a Member of ASEAN**



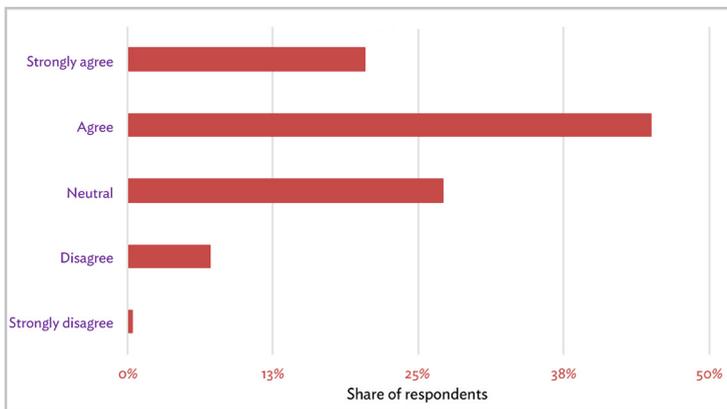
**Figure 5: Feeling if Brunei Were to Leave ASEAN**



**Figure 6: Perception of ASEAN's Future**



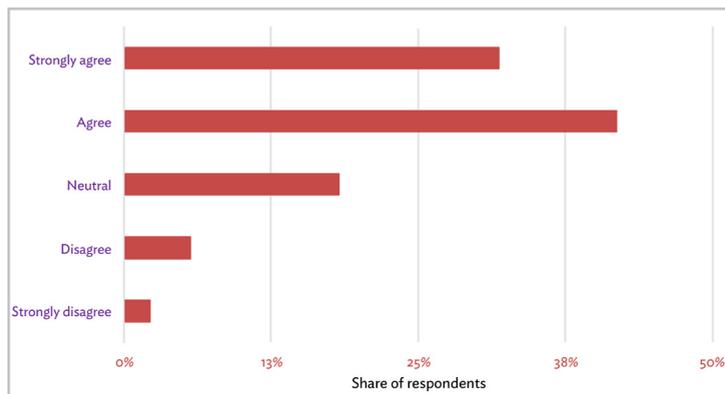
**Figure 7: Extent of Agreement that Media Coverage of ASEAN Is Not Sufficient**



Increased public awareness of ASEAN is necessary for achieving successful regional integration. The media plays a critical role in this process. As shown in Figure 7, 45% of the respondents agreed that the media (newspapers, radio, television, and online news) does not have sufficient coverage of ASEAN’s progress, achievements, and challenges. A smaller proportion, 27.14%, felt neutrally about the statement. Only 7.15% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that coverage is not enough.

Next, the respondents were asked about their perception of the use of textbooks to promote, socialise, and educate ASEAN youth about ASEAN’s progress, achievements, and challenges (Figure 8). Large proportions of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this use of textbooks, at 41.94% and 31.90%, respectively. A challenge arising from these results would be to convince the 18.28% of respondents who answered ‘neutral’ to also support this strategy. The FGDs participants also discussed this issue, and those from the business community noted that ASEAN was an integral part of the country’s trade development. They expressed strong support for schools to include ASEAN in their curriculum so students can be educated about ASEAN from an early age. Furthermore, the qualitative discussions in the FGDs highlighted the need for media coverage to include stories that relate ASEAN’s policy issues and decisions to the everyday lives of the communities they aim to serve, and to include the voices of these communities and other relevant sources. The participants expressed that in this way, people can understand ASEAN better and have more realistic expectations of the association.

**Figure 8: Perception of the Use of Textbooks to Promote ASEAN**



## Pressing problems facing Brunei and ASEAN

Next, from a list of choices, respondents were asked to choose five challenges they thought were most pressing for Brunei and ASEAN today and until 2025. The top five challenges for Brunei were: (1) unemployment; (2) agriculture and food security; (3) trade, investment, and regulatory coherence; (4) public participation in policymaking and programme monitoring; and (5) infrastructure availability and quality. Meanwhile, the most pressing issues for ASEAN were: (1) corruption; (2) poverty; (3) agriculture and food security; (4) climate change and natural disasters; and (5) unemployment. Brunei and ASEAN shared two common problems: agriculture and food security, and unemployment.

### *Agriculture and food security*

Agriculture accounts for less than 3% of Brunei's gross domestic product, and the country imports more than 80% of its food. Only around 2% of the population is engaged in agriculture, although Brunei technically has much more fertile soil to exploit. The country owns a cattle farm in Australia that supplies most of the country's beef. At almost 588,000 hectares, this ranch is larger than Brunei itself. Eggs and chickens are largely produced locally to the extent that the country is self-sufficient in these products. Thus, agriculture and fisheries are among the sectors that the country has selected for highest priority in its efforts to diversify the economy.

There are also efforts to produce more rice and train rice farmers in innovative farming techniques, such as hybrid rice planting, with the aim to reduce imports as well as introduce new brands of rice into the international market. Brunei also plans to do the same with tropical fruits, and all can fit perfectly together with the country's efforts to build up a burgeoning *halal* industry.

Brunei became a member of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in 2013. This marked the beginning of a proactive partnership and the country's close involvement in the FAO's regional knowledge networks. Recent FAO regional assistance pertinent to Brunei has focused on a framework for food security and a vision for the food agriculture and forestry sector. The objectives of current country-level cooperation include reducing and diversifying the origins of food imports and developing rice production with a view to attaining self-sufficiency in this food commodity.

The FAO is also cooperating with Brunei and other ASEAN Member States on the development of an Integrated Food Security Framework and Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security for the region. In addition, the FAO is providing important regional- and country-level technical support in response to transboundary animal disease threats. It is also helping countries to improve their nutrition and food safety approaches and to balance food security needs with developments in the bioenergy sector.

### *Unemployment*

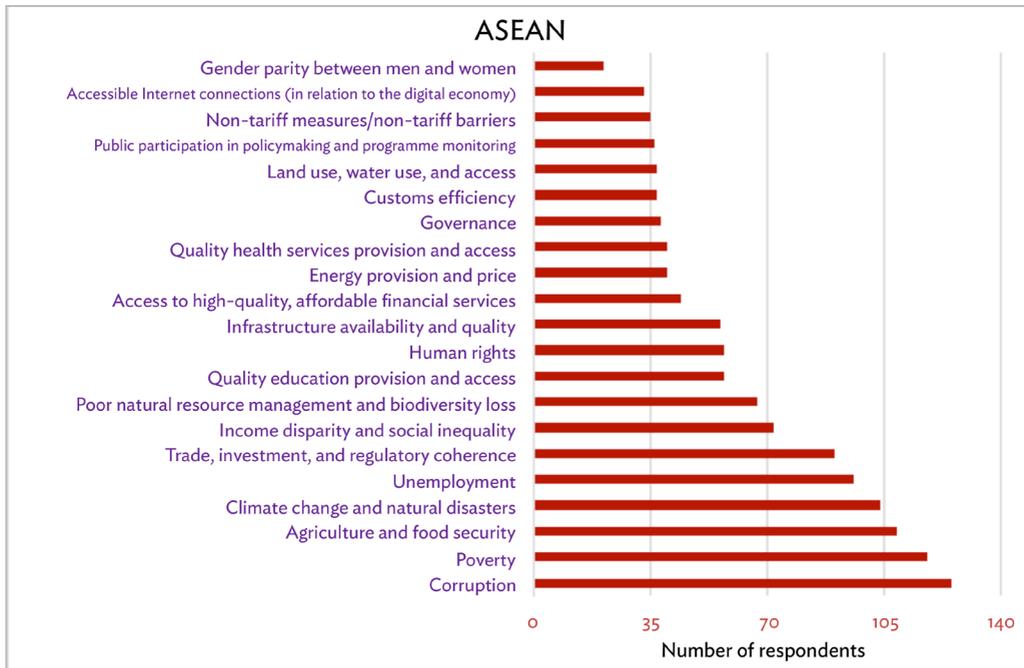
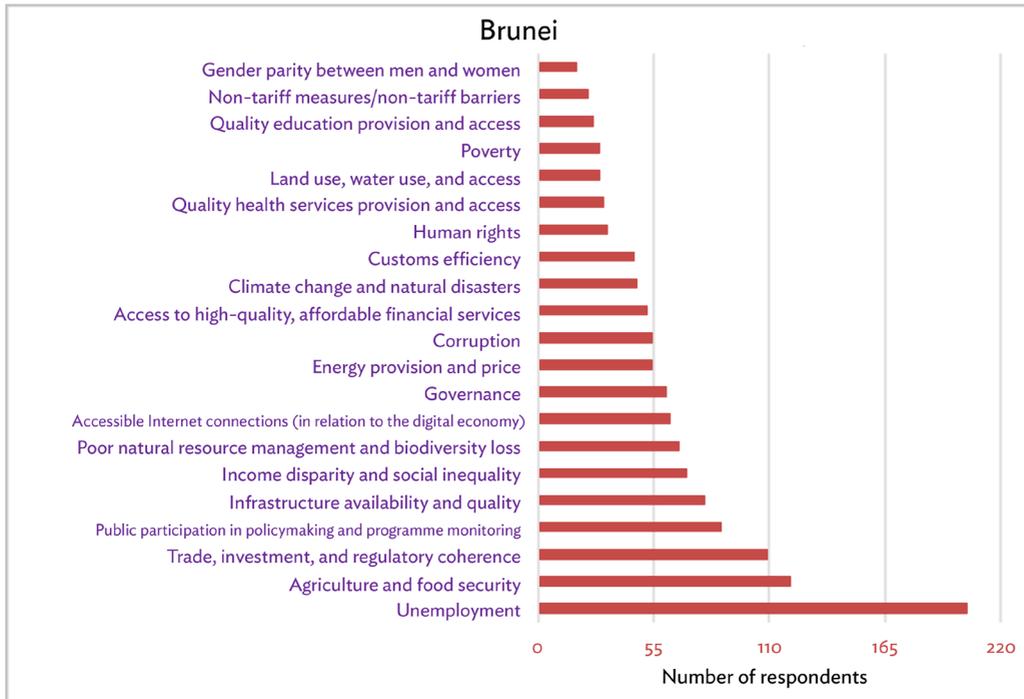
Borneo Bulletin (2015) reports that out of the 14,267 unemployed locals in 2015, 65% resided in the Brunei-Muara District (where the capital city, Bandar Seri Begawan, is located); 55% were women; 54% were between the ages of 20 and 29; and 63% had secondary education as their highest level of educational attainment.

A study on unemployment in Brunei conducted by Cheong and Lawrey (2009) argues that locals have to change their mindset in order to find jobs. According to the study, the local youth are not willing to work as their reservation wage is much higher than the salaries offered for the jobs they are qualified for. Brunei's Department of Economic Planning and Development states that in 2014, 58.5% of the jobless population were female (*The Economist*, 2014). Only 69.2% of the total jobless had completed secondary education, and only 5.7% had completed higher education. Hence, the issues of first-job salary expectations as well as the insufficient skills of job seekers have to be urgently addressed in order to foster the rapid development of the non-oil and gas sectors of the economy.

Another issue that has caused unemployment, particularly frictional unemployment, is the mismatch of career expectations and available employment. Employment policy needs to work to transform the attitudes and mindset of school-leavers. Further career guidance for various types of available jobs in manual, semi-skilled, and skilled professions should be given to students at the high-school level so they can make realistic job choices.

In terms of the issues facing ASEAN as a whole, the respondents highlighted the following as key issues for the region: (1) gender parity between men and women; (2) non-tariff measures/non-tariff barriers; (3) quality education provision and access; (4) poverty; and (5) land use, water use, and access. These reflect the respondents' perceptions that these issues are not of significant concern for Brunei but are significant for other ASEAN countries.

**Figure 9: Pressing Problems Facing Brunei and ASEAN**



In contrast, the problems facing Brunei now and until 2025 with the least number of responses were: (1) gender parity between men and women, (2) accessible Internet connections (in relation to the digital economy), (3) non-tariff measures/non-tariff barriers, (4) public participation in policymaking and programme monitoring, and (5) land use, water use, and access.

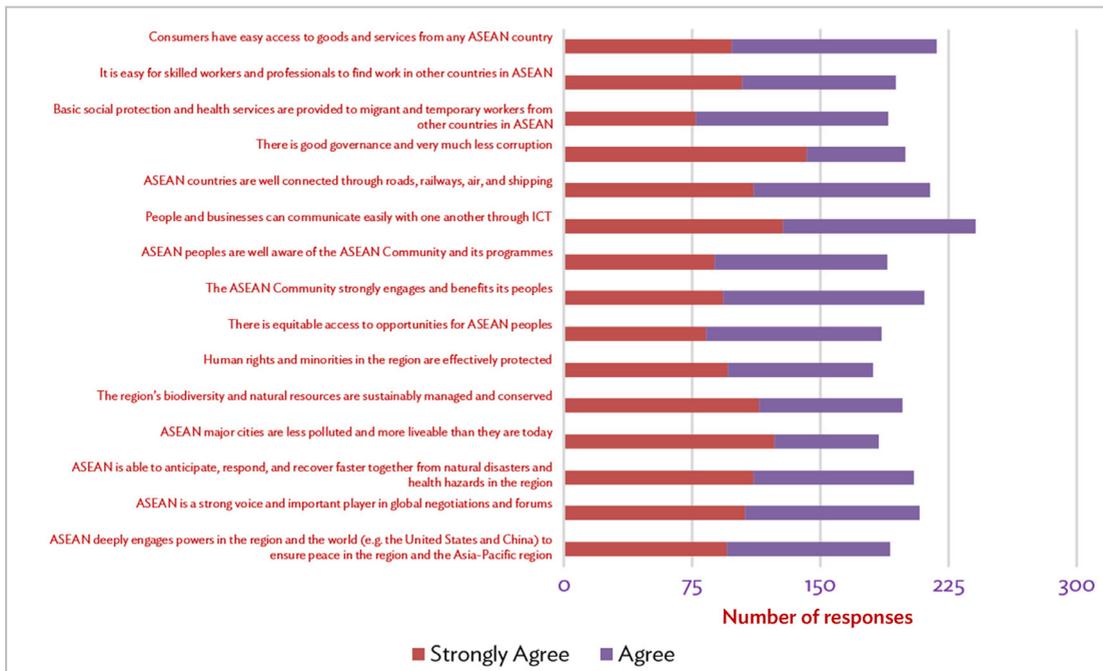
The least pressing problems of gender parity between men and women; non-tariff measures/non-tariff barriers; and land use, water use, and access were common at the domestic and regional levels. The issues of quality education provision and access and poverty were pressing problems for ASEAN but were not relevant for Brunei, according to the respondents. This was likely partly due to Brunei's high literacy rate of 99.8% for males and 99.7% for females during the period 2008–2012 (UNICEF, 2012).

When asked about the most pressing problems facing the ASEAN Community today and until 2025, the top five problems identified by the respondents were corruption, poverty, agriculture and food security, climate change and natural disasters, and unemployment.

## **Aspirations and hopes for ASEAN**

Based on the same set of statements, the respondents were also asked about their aspirations and hopes for ASEAN by 2025. A total of 123 respondents strongly agreed with the aspiration that ASEAN major cities would be less polluted and more liveable than they are today. For most statements, the responses were generally dominated by 'strongly agree' and 'agree'. Of the respondents, 118 agreed with the aspiration that the ASEAN community strongly engages and benefits its people. Meanwhile, 142 agreed with the statement regarding good governance in the ASEAN region and less corruption. However, a smaller percentage of respondents agreed with the aspiration that the basic social protection and health services provided to migrant and temporary workers from other countries in ASEAN will be sufficient. This is an area that cannot be neglected if we are to consider the holistic role of the ASEAN Community.

**Figure 10: Aspirations and Hopes for ASEAN**

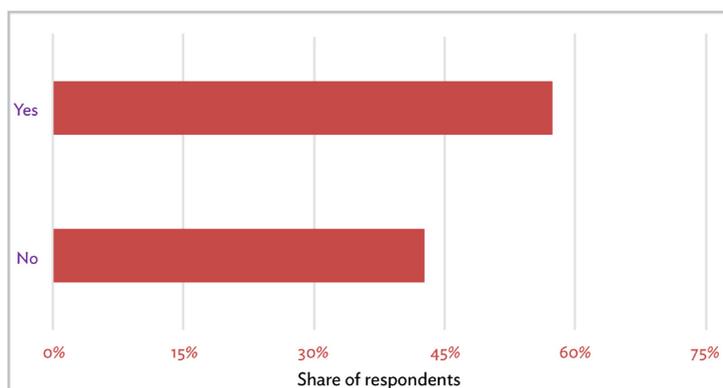


ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ICT = information and communications technology.

## Expectations for ASEAN

When asked whether they had aspirations, expectations, concerns, or hopes for ASEAN, 57.4% of the respondents answered 'yes' and gave reasons. The reasons included the hopes that ASEAN would become a stronger regional platform both socially and economically; be a more integrated community for achieving economic stability, free trade, and zero tariffs to encourage trade between ASEAN countries and emulate the European Union to be united as one; have the free movement of workers between ASEAN countries in order to reduce unemployment; have open innovation among ASEAN business partners to share and contribute ideas and systems to make ASEAN countries stronger; and provide aid in the form of programmes and volunteer work in the less economically developed countries of ASEAN.

**Figure 11: Having Aspirations, Expectations, Concerns, or Hopes for ASEAN**



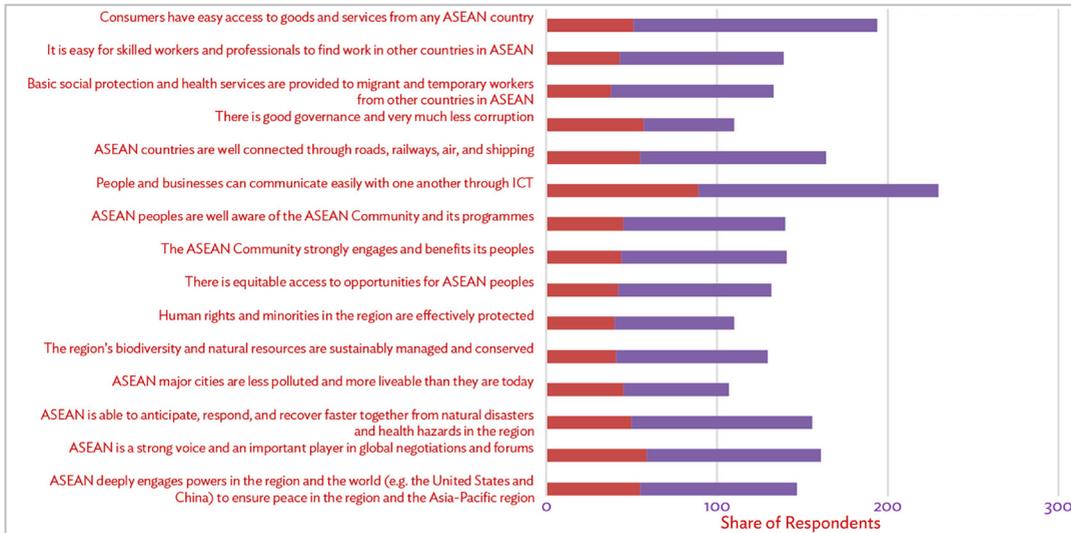
To further investigate their answers, the respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with 15 statements describing situations in ASEAN based on what they thought would probably happen in ASEAN by 2025.<sup>2</sup> The respondents were required to choose one of six options: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree, or don't know.

For all 15 statements, the majority of the respondents agreed that the situations depicted were likely to happen by 2025 (Figure 11). As many as 143 respondents agreed with the statement that consumers will have easy access to goods and services from any ASEAN country. This shows the respondents' expectations for trade openness and the deregulation of trade. This was further supported by 141 respondents who agreed with the statement that people and businesses will be able to communicate easily with one another through ICT. Both statements go hand in hand, which shows that a large percentage of respondents, especially those aged 15–30, supported the facilitation of trade in goods and services in ASEAN. Another important statement was: 'The ASEAN Community strongly engages and benefits its peoples.' For this statement, 100 respondents, approximately 36%, had a neutral view. It would be interesting to see in

<sup>2</sup> The statements were the following: ASEAN deeply engages powers in the region and the world (e.g. the United States and China) to ensure peace in the region and the Asia-Pacific region; ASEAN has a strong voice and is an important player in global negotiations and forums; ASEAN is able to anticipate, respond, and recover faster together from natural disasters and health hazards in the region; ASEAN major cities are less polluted and more liveable than they are today; the region's biodiversity and natural resources are sustainably managed and conserved; human rights and minorities in the region are effectively protected; there is equitable access to opportunities for ASEAN peoples; the ASEAN Community strongly engages and benefits its peoples; ASEAN peoples are well aware of the ASEAN Community and its programmes; people and businesses can communicate easily with one another through ICT; ASEAN countries are well connected through roads, railways, air, and shipping; there is good governance and very much less corruption; basic social protection and health services are provided to migrant and temporary workers from other countries in ASEAN; it is easy for skilled workers and professionals to find work in other countries in ASEAN; and consumers have easy access to goods and services from any ASEAN country.

future research how the perception of this 36% of respondents might be shifted towards the ‘agree’ response.

**Figure 12: Expectations for ASEAN**

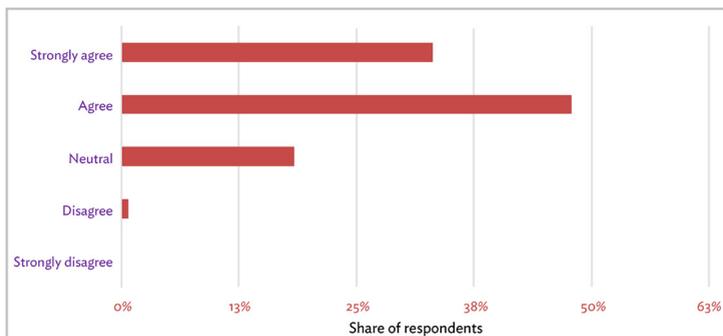


ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ICT = information and communications technology.

## The ASEAN Secretariat

The ASEAN Secretariat, based in Jakarta, serves as the liaison agency that facilitates and coordinates the collaboration between ASEAN’s stakeholders. Overall, the majority of the respondents responded positively to the idea of improving the implementation and monitoring capabilities of the ASEAN Secretariat in order to tackle the challenges ahead. To date, the ASEAN Secretariat is an organisation with 305 staff handling the workload of over 1,200 meetings annually.

**Figure 13: Agreement with Upgrading the Implementing and Monitoring Capabilities of the ASEAN Secretariat**



# Focus Group Discussions

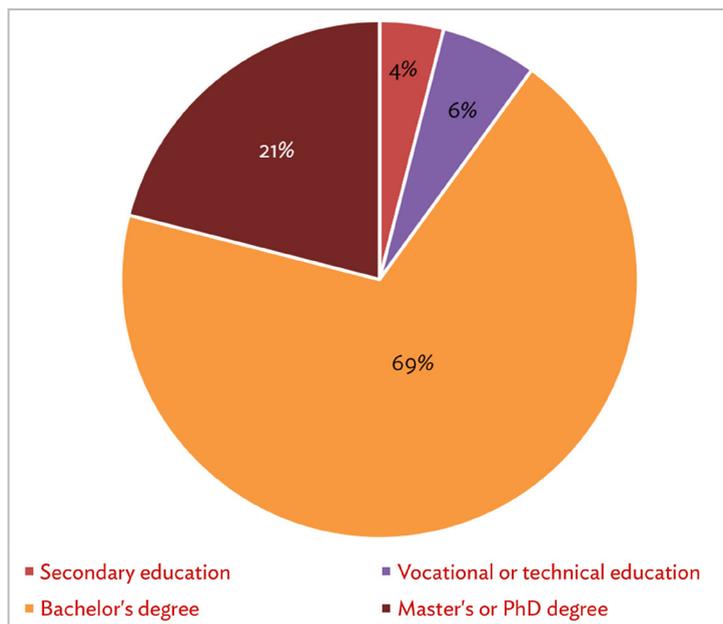
## Results of the FGDs

The study included two FGDs. The first session was with the business sector (32 participants) and the second FGD was with employees from the public and private sectors (53 participants). Given the time constraint for this project, the FGDs focused more on participants' aspirations and expectations as well as matching the discussions for questions 16 and 17 as much as possible in order to cover a broad spectrum of views and opinions on the future of ASEAN.

Many of the discussions focused on three issues: ease of doing business; technological innovation for driving efficiency and productivity; and, interestingly, as highlighted by a number of the business participants, the need to provide an enabling environment for free trade zone facilities. The average age of the participants of both FGDs was around 35 years of age. The oldest participant in the business group was 67 years old, while the oldest public and private sector group participant was 51 years old.

Of the FGD participants, around 69% had a bachelor's degree, while 21% had either master's or PhD qualifications (Figure 14). The other 10% of the participants had completed either vocational or technical education, or at least secondary education.

**Figure 14: Educational Background of the FGD Respondents**



The participants were also asked to list the top three factors they thought would drive overall business activities and foreign direct investment into Brunei and ASEAN. The top three key factors identified by the participants were: ease of doing business (67%), establishing high-tech warehousing and distribution facilities near main ports (62%), and the establishment of free trade zones near ports in ASEAN countries (59%).

Furthermore, there were discussions on the enabling factors for driving ASEAN's productivity and growth. The top three factors were: paperless procedures or effective paperwork procedures, greater private sector engagement, and a platform for hearing more of the community's voices and feedback. These results were incorporated into a poll, which indicated that 69% of the participants agreed (30% strongly agreed and 39% agreed) that these enabling factors would help to drive and support growth in ASEAN. They also thought these factors would improve efficiency and productivity by increasing ASEAN's competitive advantage.

## Summary and Conclusions

The survey and FGD results show the positive finding that the respondents recognised and were aware of ASEAN's role and activities, and identified as ASEAN citizens. They also had aspirations, expectations, concerns, and hopes for ASEAN as well as positive perceptions of Brunei's membership of the association. This was further supported as respondents agreed that Brunei had benefited from being a member of ASEAN, although a large share said the benefit was only moderate. One of the main ways to promote ASEAN further would be to increase the media's coverage of the association's progress, achievements, and challenges.

To overcome its challenges, ASEAN needs to be more alert and quick to react to the upcoming and persisting issues in the region, particularly corruption, poverty, agriculture and food security, climate change and natural disasters, and unemployment. The role of proper communication channels can also play a big part in overcoming these issues. On the whole, the respondents had the expectation that ASEAN would be able to pursue the ASEAN Community Vision through the mutual support of the people in the region. This will heavily rely on the will of the people to work together to achieve this goal. Unity of the ASEAN peoples will be necessary to face the region's development issues and challenges. Last but not the least, the ASEAN Secretariat will need to function more effectively, as revealed by the results in this perception survey, by strengthening its capacity to deliver the support and aid required for achieving ASEAN's goals.

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