

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

Institute of Malaysian and International Studies, National University of Malaysia

**Andrew Kam Jia Yi**, Senior Research Fellow

**Sufian Jusoh**, Deputy Director

**Rashila Ramli**, Director

Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs

**Wan Saiful Wan Jan**, Chief Executive

**Tricia Yeoh**, Chief Operating Officer

## Background

The Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia commissioned the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs, Malaysia, to carry out a public opinion survey to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2017. The Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs has an existing partnership with the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies to run a programme called the Southeast Asia Network for Development, whose purpose is to examine ASEAN policies, especially those related to economic integration. The survey was conducted in Malaysia by the Southeast Asia Network for Development team in January and February 2017.

Since its establishment, ASEAN's half-century journey has celebrated many milestones, from the formation of free trade areas to the creation of its charter and, more recently, the formation of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015. ASEAN aspires to realise deeper consolidation, integration, and stronger cohesiveness as a community by 2025.

---

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

The ASEAN@50: Retrospective and Perspectives on the Making, Substance, Significance, and Future of ASEAN project will give a voice to the ASEAN Community for expressing its aspirations, expectations, concerns, and hopes for ASEAN by 2025. This study focuses on Malaysia and is a national-level project that involves an online survey of 19 questions in six parts:

- (i) characteristics of the survey respondents,
- (ii) respondents' awareness and source of knowledge of ASEAN's progress,
- (iii) Malaysia's achievements and challenges in ASEAN,
- (iv) current and future challenges for Malaysia and ASEAN,
- (v) expectations and aspirations for ASEAN by 2025, and
- (vi) the role of the ASEAN Secretariat and the way forward.

The findings from the online survey were further complemented with feedback from three focus group discussions (FGDs), which included members from academia (academics and students), industry (business and private sector representatives), and civil society organisations (CSOs). The FGD participants were given the same survey questionnaire but were also asked to elaborate on various key questions.

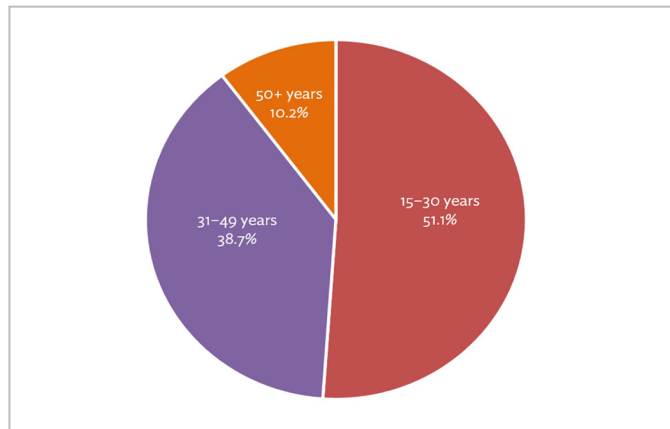
## Survey Findings

### Profile of the respondents

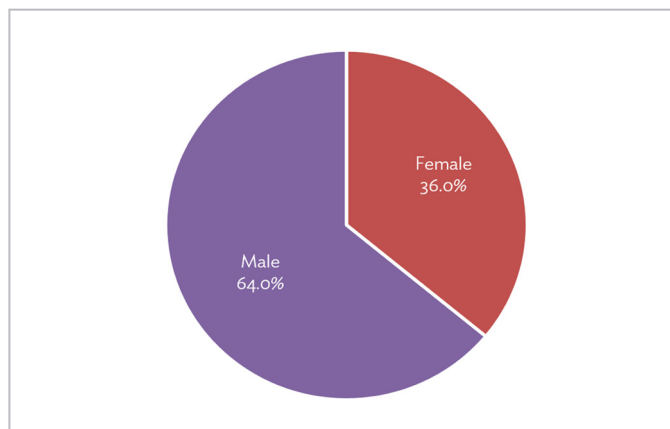
A total of 186 Malaysians, aged from 15 to over 50, participated in the survey (Figure 1). Respondents aged 15–30 comprised the largest share (51%). This was followed by those aged 31–49 (39%), while the remaining 19 respondents (10%) were aged 50 or above. The distribution of gender in the survey was skewed towards male respondents. There were 119 males comprising 64% of the respondents, while female respondents comprised only 36% of respondents (Figure 2). The FGDs had a similar composition.

As Figure 3 shows, the survey respondents were comprised mostly of students (27% of the respondents). These were followed by the respondents affiliated with the business community (16%), while the government officials and members of academia each represented 14% of the respondents. Those with 'other' affiliations (10.8%) included retirees and homemakers.

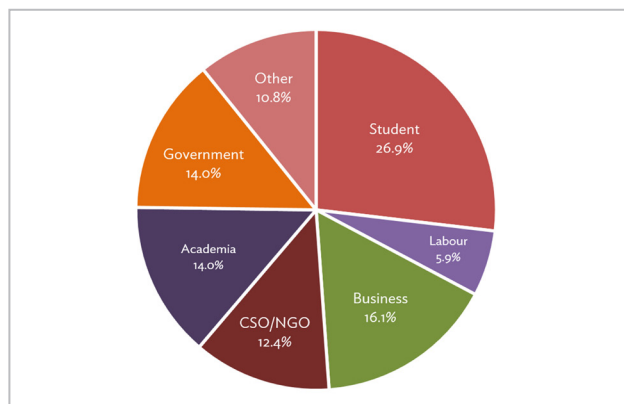
**Figure 1: Age of the Respondents**



**Figure 2: Gender of the Respondents**



**Figure 3: Affiliation of the Respondents**



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

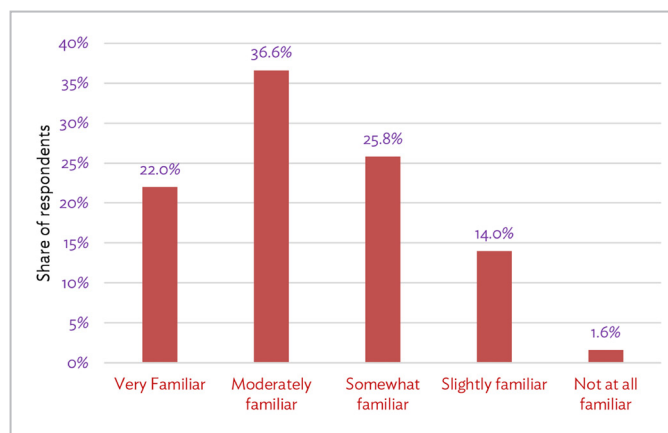
# Voices of ASEAN

## Awareness of ASEAN

The respondents were asked about their awareness of ASEAN and given five choices: ‘very familiar’, ‘moderately familiar’, ‘somewhat familiar’, ‘slightly familiar’, and ‘not at all familiar’. Figure 4 shows that most respondents (36.6%) were moderately aware of ASEAN, while almost equal shares chose ‘very familiar’ (22%) and ‘somewhat familiar’ (26%). The respondents’ awareness of ASEAN was also skewed towards the economic and business aspects of the regional organisation. For example, discussions during the FGDs with the industry and CSO representatives revealed that they were aware of ASEAN as a platform that represents regional business relationship strengths.

The CSO representatives, however, felt that ASEAN was too economic- and business-centric and were less aware of the activities and initiatives of ASEAN’s other pillars. They argued that engagements between ASEAN and civil society were not significant compared to many other regional cooperation organisations, such as the European Union. Meanwhile, the depth of their awareness was limited merely to the visual and physical presence, such as of tourism fair posters, sports events, and immigration counters at airports. They deemed the practical visibility and visible achievements in areas other than business to be lacking. The FGD respondents from academia added that they were aware of ASEAN’s presence, especially through the education network called the ASEAN University Network. Some even linked ASEAN with the old archipelagic reference of Nusantara.

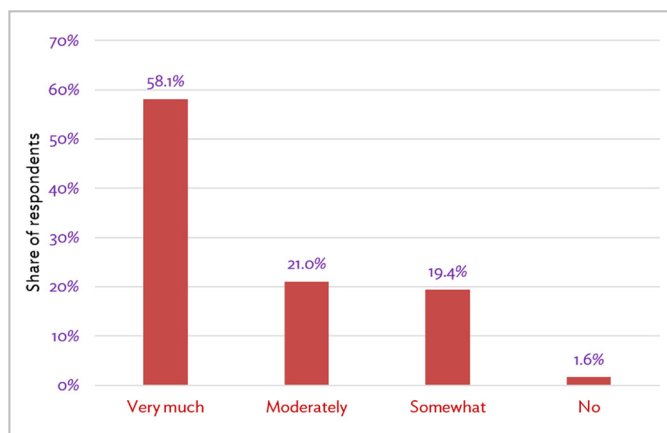
**Figure 4: Awareness of ASEAN**



Despite some superficial views of ASEAN’s presence, the majority of the respondents (58%) identified themselves as ASEAN citizens (Figure 5). However, during the FGDs, there were some participants who did not feel they were ASEAN citizens because they felt ASEAN was an elitist and state-centric organisation. However, respondents with this view were not in the majority.

Many of those who answered that they felt very much like ASEAN citizens also responded that they only felt so due to ASEAN’s geographical proximity. The CSO respondents from the FGDs questioned the mechanisms that directly link ASEAN with voices from the community. In the absence of such links, respondents said they remained pessimistic about the inclusiveness of ASEAN to its citizens. The industry FGD participants, however, stressed that such pessimism was due to the slow rate of business development in the region. Those from academia, on the other hand, believed that they would only be able to embrace the concept of ASEAN citizenship if ASEAN Member States were able to make collective decisions in areas crucial to people’s livelihoods (e.g. in the areas of human rights, welfare, poverty, and inequality).

**Figure 5: Feeling of Being an ASEAN Citizen**



## Aspirations, concerns, and hopes for ASEAN

In a semi-open-ended question asking respondents whether they had aspirations, concerns, or hopes for ASEAN, an overwhelming 134 respondents (73.2%) answered ‘yes’. The responses revolved around the three political-security, economic, and socio-cultural pillars of the ASEAN Community. In the political-security pillar, the core concerns were related to the issues of security cooperation and country governance, especially with regard to corruption. While many hoped that the region would grow stronger in terms of market integration and competitiveness, respondents also raised the issues of wealth distribution and income inequality.

Aspirations for a people-centred ASEAN came to the fore in most comments; however, equally pressing in the social dimension were concerns about human rights issues and development gaps (inequality) across ASEAN.

## Malaysia's membership of ASEAN

In a series of questions gauging respondents' opinions of Malaysia's benefit from being a member of ASEAN, more than 72% (135 respondents) responded positively about the country's membership of ASEAN. The results (Table 1) suggest that the respondents believed the country's membership was a good thing. This is consistent with the next question, where more than 60% of respondents believed that the country had 'very much' or 'moderately' benefited from being a member of ASEAN. Since most of the respondents had positive views of Malaysia's membership in ASEAN, it is understandable that 67% indicated they would be moderately or extremely concerned if the country were to leave ASEAN.

The participants from academia explained in the FGD that being a member of ASEAN, Malaysia benefited from many social programmes, such as the ASEAN Scholarship and the previously mentioned ASEAN University Network. They also believed that Malaysia should stay in ASEAN as it was one of the founding members of the association. The respondents mentioned that Malaysia could play a significant role in narrowing the development gap and accelerating the economic integration efforts of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam. Some students were unsure about the implications of Malaysia leaving ASEAN. According to them, Malaysia had its own problems, and they were unclear on whether leaving ASEAN would mitigate or exacerbate these problems.

The FGD participants viewed ASEAN as a coalition of 'strength in numbers' and agreed that Malaysia had benefited from being a member of ASEAN, especially in view of the many trade, services, and investment liberalisation efforts that have been undertaken over the years. The economic and business benefits were the main reason why respondents thought Malaysia should remain a member of ASEAN. However, not all industry participants felt the same. Some played down the market effect, meaning that while they acknowledged the country had benefited from having a larger market for trade, the facilitation of investment had left a lot to be desired.

The CSO respondents were pessimistic about the benefits of the membership beyond the scope of economics and business. They argued that community engagement had been questionable or insignificant, especially in areas such as human rights. They mentioned that the non-interference policy of ASEAN seemed to make members very selective in their actions. Again, top-level ASEAN engagement with the community

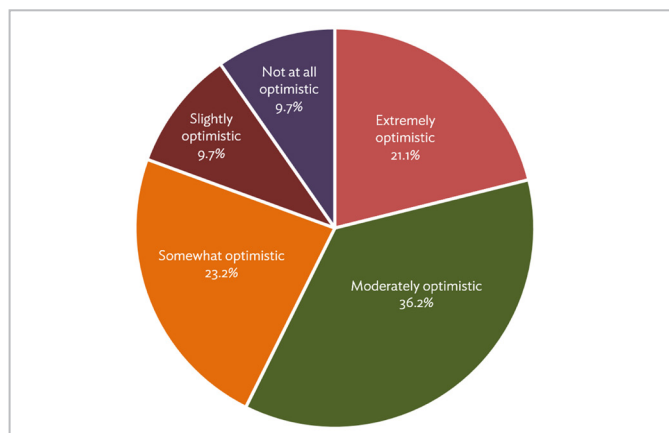
was said to be minimal, thus rendering the benefits questionable. Hence, in view of the limited involvement of civil society in ASEAN, some CSO participants felt that the country's departure from ASEAN would be insignificant. The mixed sentiments on Malaysia's membership in ASEAN were reflected in the level of optimism and pessimism about the future of ASEAN (Figure 6).

**Table 1: Benefits of Membership of ASEAN**

<b>What do you think of your country's membership in ASEAN?</b>		
<b>Answer</b>	<b>Share of Respondents (%)</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
A good thing	72.6	135
A bad thing	2.2	4
Neither good or bad	19.9	37
Don't know	5.4	10
<i>Total</i>	100.0	186
<b>Would you say your country has benefited from being a member of ASEAN?</b>		
<b>Answer</b>	<b>Share of Respondents (%)</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Very much	27.3	50
Moderately	33.3	61
Somewhat	25.1	46
Fairly	4.9	9
Don't know	9.3	17
<i>Total</i>	100.0	183
<b>How would you feel if your country were to leave ASEAN?</b>		
<b>Answer</b>	<b>Share of respondents (%)</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Extremely concerned	48.1	89
Moderately concerned	18.9	35
Somewhat concerned	16.2	30
Slightly concerned	9.7	18
Not at all concerned	7.0	13
<i>Total</i>	100.0	185

Figure 6 shows that most of the respondents were either somewhat optimistic (23.2%) or moderately optimistic (36.2%) about the future of ASEAN. The FGDs highlighted the source of this pessimism. First, many argued that the answer to the question was conditional. For example, they mentioned that the slow and selective decision-making process, referred to as the 'ASEAN Way' had been generating pessimistic views about ASEAN throughout the years.

**Figure 6: Optimism about the Future of ASEAN**



The business FGD participants questioned the extent of knowledge sharing and technology transfers among ASEAN businesses. The participants from academia were hopeful there would be preferential treatment in terms of university fees among ASEAN Member States. Participants across the FGDs exhibited one common source of pessimism, which was the link between weak domestic governance and the future of ASEAN. Many were not optimistic about the future of ASEAN as a regional-level organisation due to the inability of ASEAN governments (including Malaysia) to solve their own country-level problems.

## Media coverage of ASEAN

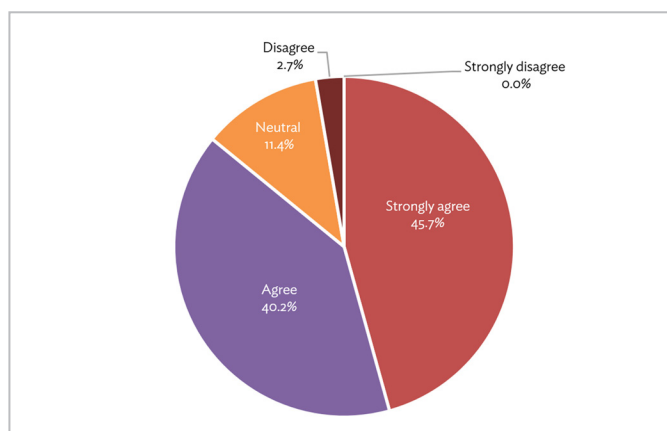
The next question asked respondents whether they agreed that the media (newspapers, radio, television, and online news) did not have enough coverage of ASEAN's progress, achievements, and challenges.

Figure 7 shows that an overwhelming 158 respondents (86%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Only less than 5% of respondents were aware of the media's coverage of ASEAN affairs. During the FGDs, some CSO participants defended the media by saying that the media had to be practical due to limitations in resources for covering vast amounts of news. Therefore, they said that practicality had to be taken



into consideration, and much of the space being given to local news rather than ASEAN news. They noted that to get coverage, ASEAN news had to be very engaging (an example was GOASEAN TV, which focuses on ASEAN tourism) or sensationalised, and most participants expected that negative news would get more coverage. The participants further elaborated on the current news about ASEAN, mentioning that apart from being uninteresting, the news was mostly about high-level meetings that were disconnected from the general public, leading to reduced interest in the media regarding ASEAN.

**Figure 7: Agreement on Insufficient Media Coverage of ASEAN**



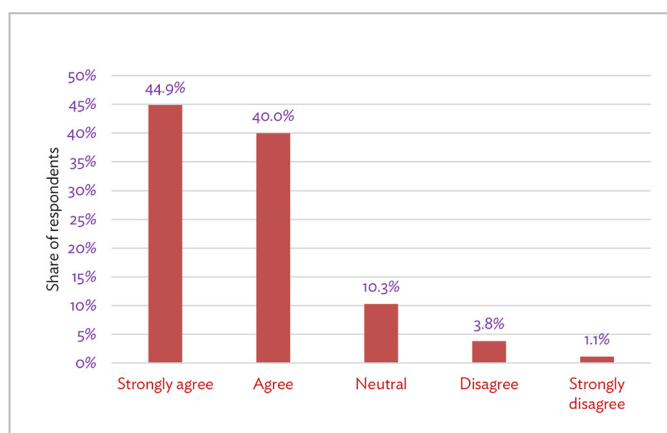
The industry FGD participants had similar responses. They mentioned that even when the media covered news about ASEAN, they at times felt lost in the rich soup of terminology, be it jargon, initials, or confusing abbreviations. More importantly, they stressed the inability of ordinary readers to capture business or market implications from the news.

Participants also argued that the issue was not only the amount of coverage but also the quality of coverage. Both the CSO and industry participants expressed doubts about the local media, which they said in many cases was not impartial when it came to reporting news, especially about the local government. The academia participants further added a caveat that the role of the media may be counterproductive in uniting ASEAN. They explained that some of the news may hinder ASEAN's community-building process. For example, they mentioned that at times it seemed like ASEAN was not united in solving important issues such as human rights violations under the long-celebrated non-interference policy and that media coverage of the policy was not always complimentary.

## Educational resources: School textbooks to socialise and educate youth

The respondents were next asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the use of school textbooks to socialise and educate young people about ASEAN's progress, achievements, and challenges. As Figure 8 shows, 83 of the 185 respondents (44.9%) answered 'strongly agree' for this question, while 40.0% answered 'agree'. In total, 84.9% of the respondents felt that textbooks were a good vehicle for promoting ASEAN to the younger generation.

**Figure 8: Agreement with Using School Textbooks to Educate and Socialise Young People about ASEAN**



During the FGDs, participants from academia agreed that the use of textbooks could help instil a positive image of ASEAN in youths. Their only concern was the level of dynamism in ASEAN. They mentioned that textbooks may only expose readers to the static history of ASEAN. They thought that knowledge of the dynamic goings-on in ASEAN would be difficult to capture merely in textbooks and would require more active encouragement for students to enquire about ASEAN. As such, they argued that simply reading may not be sufficient.

Echoing the academia participants, the industry FGD participants said they would prefer textbooks with applied knowledge rather than static history. They said that while the spirit and aspirations of ASEAN should be introduced, more important were the practicalities of the knowledge disseminated from the textbooks. They suggested that textbooks should include components on business studies or the business culture of ASEAN. Participants argued that proper content planning would be required to prevent textbooks from being overly exam-oriented. All three groups in the FGD, however, disagreed that textbooks were an effective socialisation tool. They highlighted that

textbooks were primarily tools for education and knowledge dissemination purposes and that socialisation would require a more active approach.

## **Top five pressing problems facing Malaysia and ASEAN at present and until 2025**

The respondents were given a list of 21 problems based on (i) economic, (ii) sociocultural, and (iii) governance and political themes. Among these problems, they were required to choose the five most pressing problems facing Malaysia today and until 2025. Next, they were required to answer similar questions but with respect to ASEAN. The responses are shown in Table 2. The final column in the table shows the differences in the respondents' selections. These differences show the problems that Malaysians perceive to be more important for their country than for ASEAN, and vice versa. From the data, we can ascertain the problems that respondents feel should be resolved at the country level and those that require collective ASEAN-level cooperation. We analyse the top five problems based on the number of respondents.

Of the respondents, 162 deemed corruption to be the top and main pressing problem facing Malaysia until 2025. This was followed by income disparity and social inequality (98 respondents), governance (90 respondents), human rights (75 respondents) and quality of education provision and access (62 respondents). For ASEAN, corruption (127 respondents) was also identified as the top problem facing the region. The other main problems were mostly the same as Malaysia, namely human rights (93 respondents), income disparity and social inequality (73 respondents), and governance (71 respondents). The only difference between Malaysia and ASEAN was the issue of poverty. Respondents deemed poverty (66 respondents) to be more important for ASEAN than for Malaysia. Examining the differences in perception shows the severity of corruption as the main problem facing the country. Respondents perceived public participation in policymaking and programme monitoring; income disparity and social security; governance; and energy provision and price to be domestic problems rather than ASEAN-centric problems, which were poverty; trade, investment, and regulatory coherence; climate change and natural disasters; human rights; and agriculture and food security.

In-depth discussions during the FGDs revealed that with regards to corruption, participants were worried about the tarnished reputation of Malaysia in the wake of various perceived unregulated financial practices. They cited problems with Malaysian politicians regarding corrupt practices. Some participants felt powerless in dealing with corruption as they said overcoming the problem required strong political will, which Malaysian leaders did not seem to have. Participants also viewed corruption as

embedded in the systems of many ASEAN Member States. They mentioned that the non-interference policy impeded accountability, meaning people in some ASEAN countries were free to engage in corrupt activities without being held accountable during high-level ASEAN meetings. This was closely linked to the problem of governance in the sense that poor governance was considered to be the main root of most problems (corruption and human rights violations, etc.).

Participants from the FGDs exhibited similar frustrations regarding governance in Malaysia. One common concern was the presence of development policies with limited institutions for credible monitoring and evaluation. Issues such as fiscal profligacy, which is documented in the Malaysian Auditor General's Report, have yet to be addressed properly, and many perpetrators have not been held accountable.

For ASEAN, industry participants expressed doubts about the governance of the ASEAN Chairmanship. Some pointed out the weakness of the annual rotation system and mentioned that one year was insufficient for a country to see through and evaluate new initiatives or programmes. They thought that the non-intervention policy further weakened the credibility of the organisation as a whole because important issues, such as corruption and human rights violations, were not discussed or tackled firmly at the senior leadership level.

In the FGDs, participants were asked about their definition of human rights. Some participants mentioned the provision and access of quality education, health services, and public participation in policymaking in their overarching definition (some included gender parity). Therefore, discussions on human rights generally encompassed these issues as well. The academia FGD participants felt there was a need to include the right to information and data in Malaysia. There was also a call for a free and fair media from the CSO participants. For ASEAN (and to some extent Malaysia), issues on human rights are documented in the media but not specifically discussed in ASEAN meetings. Participants also agreed that the issue should span beyond refugees and include groups such as children and women. A small group of FGD participants also expressed their fears of racial discrimination, religious extremism, and violence in the region.

The only problem specific to Malaysia was the quality of education. Declining Programme for International Student Assessment scores, graduate unemployment, and the inability of local universities to secure top global rankings were among the concerns raised. A problem specific to ASEAN, according to the respondents, was poverty. Participants were concerned about unequal economic growth, especially in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam.

**Table 2: Top Five Pressing Problems Facing Malaysia and ASEAN at Present and until 2025**

	Malaysia	Share of Total (%)	ASEAN	Share of Total (%)	Difference (%) <sup>a</sup>
<b>Economic Issues</b>					
Agriculture and food security	34	3.8	45	5.0	-1.2
Access to high-quality, affordable financial services	21	2.3	16	1.8	0.5
Accessible Internet connections (in relation to the digital economy)	16	1.8	17	1.9	-0.1
Customs efficiency	7	0.8	16	1.8	-1.0
Energy provision and price	30	3.3	12	1.3	2.0
Infrastructure availability and quality	40	4.4	38	4.2	0.2
Non-tariff measures/non-tariff barriers	12	1.3	23	2.6	-1.2
Trade, investment, and regulatory coherence	29	3.2	57	6.3	-3.1
<b>Sociocultural Issues</b>					
Climate change and natural disasters	30	3.3	50	5.5	-2.2
Gender parity between men and women	11	1.2	14	1.6	-0.3
Income disparity and social inequality	98	10.8	73	8.1	2.7
Land use, water use, and access	12	1.3	18	2.0	-0.7
Poor natural resource management and biodiversity loss	41	4.5	44	4.9	-0.4
Poverty	28	3.1	66	7.3	-4.2
Quality education provision and access	62	6.9	48	5.3	1.5
Quality health services provision and access	17	1.9	14	1.6	0.3
Unemployment	25	2.8	26	2.9	-0.1
<b>Governance and Political Issues</b>					
Corruption	162	17.9	127	14.1	3.8
Governance	90	9.9	71	7.9	2.1
Human rights	75	8.3	93	10.3	-2.0
Public participation in policymaking and programme monitoring	55	6.1	29	3.2	2.9
Other (please specify)	10	1.1	4	0.4	0.7
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>905</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>901</b>	<b>100.0</b>	
1 respondent 5 options, 186 respondents = 930 selected Missing = 930 – total responses	25		29		

<sup>a</sup> The difference in the percentages of respondents' choices for Malaysia and ASEAN. A positive value represents a problem that respondents perceived to be more pertinent for Malaysia than for ASEAN.

## Hopes and aspirations versus expectations: What will likely happen by 2025

The respondents were next given two sets of the same questions. For the first set, the respondents were asked to identify their aspirations for ASEAN, or what they wished the situation would be for ASEAN by 2025. Respondents were given 15 different options to choose from on a Likert scale. For the next set, the respondents were asked to identify their expectations on what they believed would most likely happen in ASEAN by 2025. They were again given the same 15 answer options. Instead of reporting the aspirations and expectations separately, we present the results using a method for analysing the aspirations and expectations based on how they match. Table 3 shows the findings and explains the method used. Respondents agreed on six aspirations that they wanted to see happen in ASEAN by 2025.

First, they wanted consumers to have easy access to goods and services from any ASEAN country. The industry participants in the FGD believed that trade liberalisation efforts and regional cooperation in trade in goods and services would continue to be active until 2025 and beyond. ASEAN has had a visible track record in economic liberalisation since the early 1990s with the introduction of the ASEAN Free Trade Area and a series of investment and services liberalisation initiatives over the years. With the demise of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, participants said they anticipated a focus shift to the upcoming Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement that would increase the movement of goods and services by 2025.

Second, the participants said ASEAN should be a region where regulations and procedures make it easy for skilled workers and professionals to find work in other countries in ASEAN. Some participants in the FGDs believed ASEAN to be host to a large pool of human capital and noted that ASEAN Member States should tap this resource. There was also a show of optimism from the academia participants regarding the effectiveness of mutual recognition agreements, which facilitate the movement of skilled labour among member states. Some participants agreed but imposed a caveat that the mobility of labour still depended on the demand and supply of the country. They mentioned that ASEAN countries may remain closed and reserved should issues of trust, job protectionism, and unemployment arise until 2025.

The third and fourth expectations were on the future of ASEAN connectivity. In terms of physical connectivity, respondents said they expected ASEAN to be a region where it would be easy to physically move around using roads, railways, air, and shipping. One participant from the academia FGD noted that ASEAN may be part of China's current One Belt One Road initiative, which focuses on the rapid development of

**Table 3: Differences in Aspirations and Expectations by 2025**

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
1	Consumers have easy access to goods and services from any ASEAN country.	-42	10	26	3	1	1
2	It is easy for skilled workers and professionals to find work in other countries in ASEAN.	-54	2	32	11	5	1
3	Basic social protection and health services are provided to migrant and temporary workers from other countries in ASEAN.	-36	-20	22	28	5	1
4	There is good governance and very much less corruption.	-93	-2	39	32	19	4
5	ASEAN countries are well connected through roads, railways, air, and shipping.	-56	18	20	15	-2	2
6	People and businesses can communicate easily with one another through information and communications technology.	-28	11	9	9	-1	0
7	ASEAN peoples are well aware of the ASEAN Community and its programmes.	-44	-2	43	0	1	-2
8	The ASEAN Community strongly engages and benefits its peoples.	-45	-21	41	16	7	0
9	There is equitable access to opportunities for ASEAN peoples.	-40	-26	34	22	9	-1
10	Human rights and minorities in the region are effectively protected.	-73	-13	31	31	18	2
11	The region's biodiversity and natural resources are sustainably managed and conserved.	-60	-2	23	27	7	2
12	ASEAN major cities are less polluted and more liveable than they are today.	-72	-1	30	30	8	2
13	ASEAN is able to anticipate, respond, and recover faster together from natural disasters and health hazards in the region.	-58	-5	43	14	5	-3
14	ASEAN is a strong voice and an important player in global negotiations and forums.	-59	3	31	10	14	-1
15	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.	-52	2	26	10	10	1

Note: The table shows the difference between the respondents' expectations and aspirations. A positive value means more respondents chose 'most likely to happen' over 'wish to happen'. For example, 72 respondents answered 'agree' regarding their aspiration for consumers to have easy access to goods and services from any ASEAN country. Meanwhile, 82 respondents answered 'agree' on their expectation to have easy access to goods and services. This gives a positive value of 82-72 = 10, meaning that according to the respondents, the aspiration will most likely be met by 2025. A negative sign indicates the opposite. A larger negative value means the respondents strongly wished the situation would happen, but in reality, many did not believe it would happen (e.g. governance).

transport infrastructure. With the support of the newly established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, ASEAN countries are expected to have well-developed systems of roads, railways, and ports by 2025. In terms of digital connectivity, respondents were very confident that by 2025, people and businesses will be able to communicate easily with one another through information and communications technology (ICT). This is based on the rapid development of ICT. One academia participant pointed out that ICT progress will be enhanced through the ASEAN Masterplan on Connectivity 2025.

The final two expectations were predictions of ASEAN's global stature by 2025. Respondents aspired and expected that ASEAN would have a strong voice and play an important role in global negotiations and forums. Participants from the CSO and academia FGDs stated that as a collective unit, ASEAN had 'strength in numbers' and experience when it came to trade negotiations with economic superpowers, such as through the ASEAN-China FTA, the ASEAN-India FTA, and the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership. This is related to the final aspiration and expectation that by 2025, ASEAN will deeply engage powers in the region and the world to ensure peace in the region and the Asia-Pacific region. Some participants assumed that ASEAN would ride on the rising role of China in the region. While globally, ASEAN's presence may be expanding, some participants hoped that individual state problems would also have a voice within the organisation. While currently only limited to certain issues, many FGD participants believed there was a need for strong voices on all issues within the ASEAN Community.

Table 3 also shows the disconnects between aspirations and expectations. The top three disconnects were the following:

- (i) There is good governance and much less corruption.
- (ii) Human rights and minorities in the region are effectively protected.
- (iii) ASEAN major cities are less polluted and more liveable than they are today.

While respondents hoped for good governance and less corruption in ASEAN by 2025, many did not expect it would happen. The FGD participants across the three groups were consistent in their pessimistic views about the level of corruption in ASEAN and Malaysia. Many conceded that corruption was embedded in the country's system and that it would be persistent even after 2025 unless political will were strong enough to create change. One reason for this pessimism was in part due to the lack of trust in existing institutions to protect whistle-blowers.



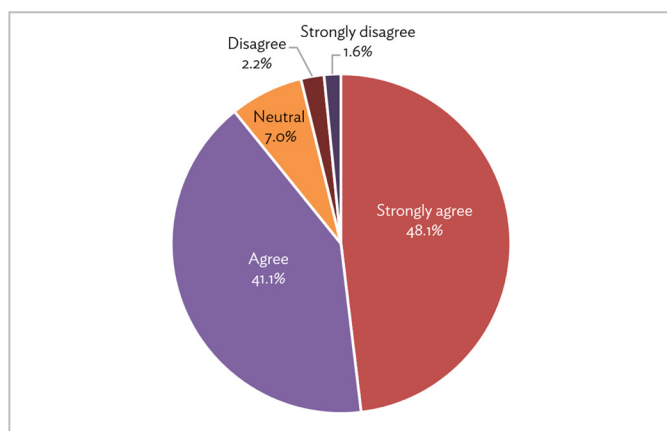
The second aspiration was for the effective protection of human rights and minorities in the region. Again, this was considered to be a far-fetched aspiration, as pointed out time and again in the FGDs, due to the non-interference policy of ASEAN. The academia FGD participants argued that solving human rights issues within the country itself was challenging enough and even more so at the regional level. The CSO participants added that solving this issue was conditional on the member states' priorities. They noted that when it came to human rights issues, almost all member states were 'ASEAN in spirit but nationalistic in vested interests'.

Third, respondents hoped that ASEAN major cities would be less polluted and more liveable than they are today. However, many did not believe this would happen because of the trade-off between development and environmental conservation. In the FGD, participants felt there was a strong correlation between development and pollution. The industry participants highlighted the lack of pollution management and green technology development in the country. Some argued that the removal of tax breaks on hybrid cars was a step backward in pollution management. In short, the participants noted that while the rhetoric of sustainable development and managed pollution was always on the table, priorities were very dependent on the will of the member states.

## The ASEAN Secretariat

When asked about the idea of gradually upgrading the implementing and monitoring capabilities of the ASEAN Secretariat, almost 90% of the survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the proposition (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Upgrading the ASEAN Secretariat**



The main challenge was the alignment of each country's political will with ASEAN's development plan. The organisation has limited avenues to push for change, leading to the possibility for the organisation to move into something more concrete that involves regulatory power sharing. The industry FGD participants said they would prefer to see ASEAN operating in a somewhat similar manner as the European Union. One change may be to revise the ASEAN Charter to allow intervention in crucial circumstances involving human security and rights. The upgrading of ASEAN's implementing and monitoring capabilities may also require additional responsibilities for each member state to ensure the organisation maintains neutral and transparent in its governance.