



## Working with the ASEAN Secretariat: A 3-Year Journey



**Alicia dela Rosa-Bala**

When I reported to the ASEAN Secretariat as Deputy Secretary-General for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Department in September 2012, it was 3 years before the official launch of ASEAN integration. Prior to my posting, I was the Philippines' focal point for the Senior Officials for the Socio-Cultural Community and the Senior Officials for Social Welfare and Development.

The ASCC is the heart and soul of ASEAN as the issues and concerns under the different sectors of this pillar directly affect ASEAN people. The sectors include health, education, environment (which covers climate change, transboundary haze pollution, biodiversity, peatland, etc.), labour and migrant workers, civil service, disaster management and humanitarian

assistance, rural development and poverty eradication, social welfare and development (which include children, the elderly, persons with disability, among others), women, youth, science and technology, information, arts and culture, and sports.

One of the most challenging concerns confronting the region is its vulnerability to natural disasters (typhoons, floods, earthquakes, landslides, draughts, tsunamis, etc.) and impacts of climate change. In 2013, the Philippines experienced the fury of Typhoon Haiyan (locally named Yolanda), the strongest typhoon to hit the country and the strongest ever recorded in the world. Although the regional body has the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, the typhoon was a test for it. Prior to the typhoon's landfall, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), which was tracking and monitoring the movement of Haiyan and providing updates to the members of the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management, fielded two of its staff in Tacloban City, Philippines, to set up an office and a communications system.

As a result of ASEAN's experience when Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, the Secretary-General was designated by the ASEAN heads of state as the body's humanitarian assistance coordinator. We later defined the Secretary-General's terms of reference for this designation which were adopted by the ASEAN Summit.

In the light of disasters affecting ASEAN peoples, the Assistance for the Recovery of Yolanda-Affected Areas project was conceptualised to bring ASEAN closer to the people. Thus, for the first time, the ASCC Department, in coordination with the Committee of Permanent Representatives to ASEAN, convened in Jakarta a pre-conference with Dialogue and Development Partners to mobilise resources in support of the rehabilitation efforts in the Philippines. This was followed by a national conference in Manila with ASEAN, the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, and the Office of the Presidential Assistant for Rehabilitation and Recovery as co-convenors. Participating were Dialogue Partners, development organisations such as United Nations (UN) bodies, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, regional non-governmental organisations, local chief executives, and members of the diplomatic corps of ASEAN Member States. One component of the recovery project was 'Adopt a Municipality

for Resilient Recovery’. It was implemented in four areas each in Leyte and Iloilo provinces. With the local governments and the support of a team of consultants, this component produced documents on a comprehensive land use plan that integrated disaster risk reduction management, the first-ever plan in the Philippines with the said feature. As the first ASEAN project carried out directly with the local communities, it facilitated the enhancement of systems, infrastructure, and capacities of the communities through the integration of the concept of ‘building back better, safer, and smarter communities’, and served as model for resilient recovery efforts in the region and in the world. Moreover, the Senior Officials Meeting for Culture and Arts (as an initiative to concretise the Hue Declaration on Culture for ASEAN Community’s Sustainable Development) also mobilised its funds to support the restoration of a church and the livelihood of indigenous groups under the School of Living Traditions, also the first of its kind. In 2015, the ASEAN Summit adopted the Declaration on Institutionalising the Resilience of ASEAN and Its Communities and Peoples to Disasters and Climate Change, acknowledged globally as the first regional initiative in response to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 adopted at the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, in March 2015.

To protect ASEAN peoples from the impacts of financial crises, disasters, health concerns, and other factors, the ASEAN Summit adopted the Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection in the region, a cross-sectoral effort involving the following sectoral bodies: finance, development planning, labour, health, agriculture, social welfare and development, disaster management, rural development and poverty eradication, and women. Supporting this is the Regional Framework and Action Plan to Implement the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection in the region, adopted during the 27th ASEAN Summit in 2015.

In the area of women and children, all ASEAN Member States are party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. To fully concretise the said commitments of the member states, the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Rights of Women and Children formulated the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Elimination of Violence against Children which was adopted at the ASEAN Summit in 2013.

In the area of health, the ASEAN Member States are very proactive in responding to emerging concerns such as Ebola virus, re-emergent malaria, communicable and non-communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and anti-smoking. Other continuing challenging concerns under the ASCC are transboundary haze pollution and migrant workers. A number of areas are not covered here due to space limitations of this paper.

Let it be said that we acknowledge the support of our Dialogue and Development Partners in all our initiatives under the ASCC.

As we were preparing for the end of the ASCC Blueprint 2019–2015, my team conducted a midterm review in 2013 to determine the extent of the implementation of the action lines. We completed the review through the support of Brunei Darussalam as the ASEAN Chair in 2013 and the mobilisation of the ASEAN Development Fund. The results showed that almost 86% of the actions were achieved, although some salient findings revealed low awareness among government officials of the ASCC, limited financial and human resources to implement plans and projects at the national level, and lack of coordination among sectoral agencies. In hindsight, the challenge in the conduct of the midterm review was the lack of a monitoring and evaluation framework design in the blueprint. Henceforth, the study limited its scope on determining the extent of implementation of the action plans based on the six characteristics of the ASCC blueprint: human development, social welfare and protection, social justice and rights, environmental sustainability, building an ASEAN identity, and narrowing the development gap. The good thing about the midterm review is the involvement of all national agencies in a number of ASEAN Member States in the implementation of the blueprint, which signalled the start of cross-sectoral collaboration. The midterm review report was the only one among the reports of the three pillars that was adopted by the ASEAN Summit.

In 2014, a high-level task force on strengthening the ASEAN Secretariat was created and a review of the ASEAN organs was conducted. I saw this as an opportunity to strengthen the ASCC Department which has two directorates. Under the Cross-Sectoral Cooperation Directorate are four divisions: health and communicable diseases, disaster management and humanitarian assistance, environment, and science and technology. The Socio-Cultural Cooperation Directorate includes social welfare, women, labour and migrant workers, education, youth and training, and culture

and information. A staff of 39 provides technical assistance to the sectoral bodies and secretariat services and serves as resource persons during meetings of the sectoral bodies, which account for almost 50 organs, ranging from ministerial and sub-ministerial officials, senior officials, ASEAN+3 ministerial and senior officials, technical working groups, and expert groups to project management teams. People in the ASEAN Secretariat spend much time travelling to attend meetings or facilitate workshops, among others. The current department has renamed the Cross-Sectoral Cooperation Directorate the Sustainable Development Directorate and the Social Cultural Cooperation Directorate the Human Development Directorate. Also, the ASCC Analysis and Monitoring Directorate, a new creation, has been approved.

For greater cross-sectoral collaboration on cross-cutting issues in ASEAN, our department has also strengthened the coordinating mechanism for Socio-Cultural Matters (SOCCOM). Its terms of reference were revised specifically on introducing cross-cutting thematic areas among the different sectoral bodies under the three ASEAN pillar communities and allowing the participation of the concerned sectoral bodies, other ASEAN organs such as the Committee of Permanent Representatives to ASEAN, the ASEAN Foundation, the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity, the AHA Centre and other centres, the private sector represented by the ASEAN Business Advisory Council, and regional civil society organisations.

Again, in support of the recommendations of the high-level task force, the ASCC Department has followed up on the policy directives/instructions of the ASEAN Summit. We revisited and consolidated all declarations pertaining to the ASCC and requested the concerned sectoral bodies to provide updates on actions taken and presented to ASCC council meetings for their information and further actions.

In 2014, another high-level task force was organised to work on the ASEAN Vision 2025 and the blueprints. The ASCC Department organised a 1-day workshop to identify the basic elements of our vision and, at the same time, define a people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN. In crafting the ASEAN Vision 2025, we considered the results of the midterm review of the ASCC Blueprint 2009–2015. The central elements of ASCC Post 2015 that the task force adopted is an ASEAN socio-cultural community that engages and benefits the people and is inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and dynamic.

We then convened a weekend workshop of directors, division heads, and senior officers and extended invitation to the Senior Officials Committee for the ASCC (SOCA) leaders of Malaysia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic to chair SOCA for 2015 and 2016, respectively, and the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia. Probably one of the best features of the new blueprint was the participation of civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations at the national level consultation. Another first in the ASCC Department was the engagement of the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia to help us in framing ASCC 2015. We were very happy for its support and mobilisation of almost 50 regional and global experts.

The new feature introduced in the blueprint is a results-based management framework to ensure that ASEAN will be able to measure the outcomes and not just the outputs of its initiatives and its impact on ASEAN and its peoples.

On the other hand, to ensure support for the ASCC Department, we paid courtesy calls to the Committee of Permanent Representatives to elicit thoughts, views, and suggestions regarding the priorities of the ASCC and its strengthening. As we do yearly, we presented a report card on the accomplishments of the ASCC and its department, as well as issues and concerns. Our recommendations were acknowledged as enlightening and were in fact adopted as they encouraged the other three departments of the ASEAN Secretariat to do the same. During budget deliberations, we presented our accomplishments vis-à-vis our targets for the previous year, reasons for not achieving targets, and the rate of utilisation, and, for the current year, the regional situations, targets, outcomes, and budget utilisation for the past 3 years and the proposed budget for the year. In appreciation of our presentation, the Sub-committee on Budget approved our request for additional staff and increased budget. To some extent, the ASEAN Secretariat adopted the format.

To strengthen women and gender awareness by the ASEAN Secretariat staff, the ASCC Department initiated the conduct of gender sensitivity seminars for officers and staff of the ASEAN Political-Security Community Department, ASEAN Economic Community Department, Community and Corporate Affairs Department, and the ASCC Department. One of the results was the conduct of a study on the impact on women on ASEAN economic integration.

As ASEAN celebrates its golden year, I can say that it is a model of regional cooperation in the world. Consensual decision-making, persuasive negotiations, and respect for diversity are among the qualities that define ASEAN. I am proud to have been part of ASEAN as an organisation. Most importantly, I am proud to be an ASEAN citizen.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Alicia dela Rosa-Bala** is Chairperson of the Civil Service Commission, the central human resource body of the Government of the Philippines.

Prior to her appointment, she was Undersecretary for Policy and Plans of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) which she served for past 39 years. She was Deputy Secretary-General of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Department in Jakarta, Indonesia, from 2012 to 2015. Said department covers the sectors of civil service, environment, science and technology, health, women, youth, social welfare and development, disaster management, among others.

In 2004, she was DSWD's First Best Manager Awardee, and in 2012 she was awarded Outstanding Career Executive Service Officer by the Career Executive Service Board.

In 2010, she was appointed first child rights representative of the Philippines to the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children. She was head of the first session of the Commission on Social Development, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific in 2008.

She received her Master of Social Work from the University of the Philippines and her bachelor's degree in social work from the Centro Escolar University.

She was born on 11 May 1952 in Vigan, Ilocos Sur. She is married to Victorino S. Bala; they have three children.