
The Road Traversed and in the Horizon for ASEAN's Socio-Cultural Community

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Through its journey as part of the ASEAN Community, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) has been shaped by a host of ASEAN and international thinkers and theorists – and oftentimes seismic events – that mirrored the ebbs and flows of contemporary regional and international relations and development cooperation, selectively picking up concepts, theories, and practices along the way. Indeed, ASCC's history is interwoven into the ASEAN Community, even changing the organisation's overall characteristic, credo, and primary goals. Peeling away the many layers of its rich history gives a better understanding of the theoretical constructs behind its existence and why the ASCC has steadily changed its scope and purpose. With a multitude of motivating forces behind its existence, making change is indeed a constant in ASCC's journey for relevance in ASEAN community building.

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Former Prime Minister of Thailand Abhisit Vejjajiva's essay in this volume lauds this journey and commends ASEAN's remarkable progress in driving its integration agenda and giving the organisation a global voice. He cogently argues for the need to distil important lessons that help define a regional solution to the increasing complexity of globalisation. The former Thai Prime Minister asserts that ASEAN needs to work on social integration if it hopes to strengthen the organisation and highlight the potential in the ASCC's role in developing an underpinning principle for community building.

Former President Fidel Ramos of the Philippines, in recounting the beginnings of ASEAN, discerns that moderating the dominant influence of the United States (US) and China and developing an ASEAN-led free trade framework, known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), have today allowed the organisation greater leverage in regional and global relations. He sees a need for ASEAN to strategically balance the dominant influence of the US and China, while capturing the moderating influence of globalisation, compelling ASEAN to emphasise the ASEAN-led free trade frameworks such as RCEP and community building in an integrated way and bridging the many gaps between its membership while addressing higher labour cost, complex policy uncertainties, and fragmented national markets. He argues for an ASEAN economic strategy to make up for higher labour costs by raising workers' productivity and cutting costs across the production value chains. He stresses that to achieve these goals, ASEAN needs further 'internal reforms and deeper national integration'. In his view, the ASCC is at once the easiest and the most difficult for the ASEAN Leaders to organise, transcend elite arrangements, and engage the interests of ordinary ASEAN people. He points out that in embracing the 'Community' in its economic, political-security, and socio-cultural dimensions, ASEAN peoples must see it as a pervading, beneficial influence on their daily lives and regard the ASEAN vision as their own where economic growth helps 'reduce the poverty of their families and of their communities and brings better public health, housing, basic education services, and jobs, as well as higher incomes for everyone. Thus, a great deal of ASEAN's work in building 'Community' must focus on encouraging, assisting, and, if need be, pressuring the ASEAN members to promote good governance, strengthen the rule of law, build an inclusive economy, and defend human rights and representative democracy.'

Behind arguments put forth lies the reality that, by a wide measure, the ASCC is the most adaptive, re-engineered, and reinvented pillar of the ASEAN Community. Often deemed as the soft side of development or sectoral cooperation, conflated with technical cooperation among developing countries, and eclipsed by political-security and economic cooperation for the first 2 decades of ASEAN, socio-cultural cooperation grew out of ideas and concepts of functionalism, neo-functionalism, and was significantly influenced by globalisation. This dimension of regionalism was given the official name ‘functional cooperation’ in 1987. On the wave of the sustainable development movement, its scope of work was expanded and then labelled ‘socio-cultural cooperation’ by 2004. The coming of age was its elevation as a legal ASEAN organ under the ASEAN Charter in 2007. Soon after, it was armed with a stronger sense of purpose, with the ASCC Blueprint 2009–2015, among others, giving it responsibility for championing and defining the ASEAN identity. Today, the socio-cultural community is a vital and highly complex constituency, poised to take a significantly greater role in the post-2015 ASEAN Community projects. Its strength and arguably its weakness are its eclecticism and adaptiveness to the political, economic, and social demands of the day. Will these characteristics enhance or constrain achievement of the ASCC Blueprint 2025 and the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as it faces the challenges of the ASEAN Community in the next 10–15 years?

The Third Pillar: Then and Now

The ASCC is sometimes referred to as the ‘Third Pillar’, an ambiguous label that elicits a range of descriptions and false equivalencies, e.g. a subordinate community, the quintessential people pillar. These wide-ranging descriptions of the socio-cultural community suggest a body that remains one of the least researched and understood of the ASEAN Community pillars and thus ranks as the least known and recognised in public perception surveys. Its size, scale, and breadth tend to bring forth broad-stroke sectoral analyses that merely break down the ASCC into its constituent parts, i.e. the education, health, children, women, and labour sectors.

The ASCC is a ministerial council of Senior Officials that coordinates and monitors the work of more than 20 sectors, each with a head at the ministerial level, supported by Senior Officials who are in turn supported

by groupings of experts and subject-matter specialists that may, on an expanding pool of dialogue and external partners, be from non-governmental organisations, private sector organisations, civil society, and traditional and nontraditional partners.

The ASCC's great misfortune as a pillar is having to face a general perception that it is an afterthought, mired in classic third-child syndrome of waiting and reacting to the initiatives of the other two pillars. Rather than leading change as *pari passu* in the ASEAN community-building process, it is sometimes seen as mirroring the change taking place around it as if it were a nominal agent, compared to the more prominent communities that oversee political-security and economic cooperation and that can contend more adeptly for the title of *primus inter pares* (or 'first among equals'). Labels, however, fail to capture the richness of socio-cultural cooperation as championed by its many sectoral bodies, commissions, professional networks, institutions, and growing partnerships of stakeholders that make up the ASCC, a virtual snapshot of ASEAN peoples in transition and more often at the centre of the transformation of the ASEAN Community.

In the first decade of existence of the socio-cultural pillar, functionalism (Mitrany, 1975), a forerunner of globalisation theory and strategies, significantly influenced the shaping of this pillar, with its focus on regional cooperation in limited but common areas such as health, education, and a selected number of transboundary concerns. By the 1990s, an even stronger impetus was driven by neo-functionalism (Haas, 1961; Sandholtz and Stone Sweet, 1997) promoting a theory of regional integration based on the European experience. Indeed, it is not lost on ASEAN observers that the ASEAN-European Union (EU) partnership dates back to 1972.

Another layer of conceptual thinking adding to the ASCC's value proposition was ushered by the landmark Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) which extolled multilateralism and interdependence towards a sustainable development path to support economic growth, environmental protection, and social equality. The report had a profound effect on ASEAN Leaders, development thinkers, and opinion makers, particularly in bringing the term 'sustainable development' into world public consciousness and echoed by ASEAN in its call for greater concern for environmental dimensions of development (Koh, Robinson, and Lye, 2016). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, social development

entered ASEAN discourse and evolved into an important aspect of ASEAN regionalism. Indeed, the term ‘social development’ displaced, albeit temporarily, the term ‘functional cooperation’ and was employed in the seminal 1976 Declaration of ASEAN Concord (known as the Bali Concord I).

‘Functional cooperation’ became a formal term and was first defined as an area of ASEAN cooperation in the Manila Declaration of 1987, which stressed that such cooperation’s *raison d’être* is to ‘promote increased awareness of ASEAN, wider involvement and increased participation and cooperation by the peoples of ASEAN, and development of human resources’. By 1992, with the signing of the Singapore Declaration, the parameters and contours of functional cooperation were further expanded in unprecedented detail to encompass regional identity, environmental protection, women participation, recognition of the role of non-governmental organisations, problems of drug abuse and drug trafficking, and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Under the Bangkok Summit Declaration of 1995, functional cooperation was elevated to ‘a higher plane to bring shared prosperity to all its members’, with the intention that cross-cutting and common themes be integrated into the work of the other pillars. Just 2 years later, in 1997, the ASEAN Vision 2020 was announced in Kuala Lumpur and introduced a much broader all-encompassing notion of securing a ‘society of caring communities’, henceforth capturing what remains today as the essential definition of the new functional cooperation in ASEAN. The ASEAN Vision 2020 was reinforced by the 1998 Hanoi Plan of Action (1999–2004), the first in a series of action plans building up to the realisation of the goals of the Vision, and was succeeded in 2004 by the Vientiane Action Programme (2004–2010) (ASEAN Secretariat, 2004).

From Functional Cooperation to Socio-Cultural Cooperation

In large measure, the Vientiane Action Programme rebranded and relabelled functional cooperation as the ‘Socio-Cultural Community’ to place more emphasis on social responsibility, social justice, and social protection, and to promote ASEAN awareness and strengthen its identity. The programme was a landmark document in its introduction of rights-based approaches, the significance of which continues to be debated even today.

Superseding the Vientiane Action Programme was the ASEAN Community-Building Road Map (2009–2015) supported by the three Community Blueprints. This was only made possible by the Cebu Declaration (2007) and the Cha-am Hua Hin Declaration (2009), which accelerated the establishment of the ASEAN Community to the end of 2015 instead of 2020, partly to be coterminous with the Millennium Development Goals and, in effect, resetting and compressing the original time frame of the ASEAN Vision 2020.

The ASCC Blueprint emphasised the human dimension of ASEAN cooperation and offered a commitment to lift the ASEAN quality of life. Maintaining the spirit of the ASEAN Vision 2020, the ASCC Blueprint is now the primary strategic and operational framework to bring ASEAN closer to peoples' heart and to promote a caring and sharing ASEAN Community by strengthening its belief in their peoples, increasing appreciation of their shared cultural heritage, upholding and extolling shared values, and strengthening the capacities and effectiveness of institutions. The implementation of the ASCC Blueprint was generally satisfactory and helped move the ASEAN Community project forward (ASEAN Secretariat, 2013).

From an instrument of functional cooperation, the ASCC was conferred a central role to play in driving and defining regional societal principles that would shape the identity of the ASEAN Community. In 2011, at its third meeting, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Council, the ASCC's highest decision-making body, adopted the first ASCC Communication Plan to enhance public awareness and shape their perceptions, and generate greater participation of the public in building the ASCC by 2015. Formulated with the leadership of the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Information, the ASCC Communication Plan was a culmination of the review of National Communication Plans on ASEAN Awareness and Understanding and was aimed at showcasing the relevance and need for the ASCC to the public. The first of its kind, the ASCC Communication Plan also explained the impact and benefits in terms of what the ASCC would do to realise an ASEAN Community that is people-centred and socially responsible, calling on stakeholders to support the ASCC (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012).

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community: Regional Presence in the Global Community

Functional cooperation and its reconstituted form as socio-cultural cooperation was very much in the minds of the Founding ASEAN Leaders and enshrined in the ASEAN Declaration of 1967 in Bangkok which defined cooperation as aiming ‘to accelerate ... social progress and cultural development’ through a collaborative process in the ‘social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields’, and as promoting mutual assistance in training and research ‘in the educational, professional, technical and administrative spheres’. The Bangkok Declaration also encouraged the promotion of Southeast Asian studies (ASEAN Secretariat, 1997). The Founding Fathers may not have referred to these as functional cooperation or socio-cultural cooperation as such, but they would have understood the principles of sustainable development behind them and the impact such cooperation would have on global issues and concerns. Under a new generation of Leaders, these concepts were further crystallised in the ASEAN Charter (2007), the organisation’s founding document which laid out key principles (Article 2) applicable to all pillars. Of relevance to socio-cultural cooperation, the Charter now enshrined work norms and principles, precepts, qualities, and guideposts that should be observed and maintained:

- Paragraph 2(b): Directs socio-cultural cooperation to work a sense of ‘shared commitment and collective responsibility in enhancing regional peace, security and prosperity’.
- Paragraph 2(g): Guides socio-cultural cooperation to pursue ‘enhanced consultations on matters seriously affecting the common interest of ASEAN’.
- Paragraph 2(j): Seeks an alignment of socio-cultural cooperation in ‘upholding the United Nations Charter and international law, including international humanitarian law, subscribed to by ASEAN Members States’.
- Paragraph 2(m): Lays down the idea that the process of socio-cultural cooperation should adhere to ‘the centrality of ASEAN in external political, economic, social and cultural relations while remaining actively engaged, outward-looking, inclusive and non-discriminatory’.

These norms and principles were further augmented into what is arguably among the most far-reaching of ASEAN's declarations. The Bali Declaration on ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations (ASEAN Secretariat, 2011) expands the socio-cultural cooperation horizon with its statement: 'Building on current practice and achievements, we will identify key global issues of common interest and concern, enhance ASEAN coordination and cooperation on these key global issues in relevant multilateral fora and international organizations, such as the United Nations, and raise ASEAN's profile and constructive role in the global stage'. It calls on ASEAN to adopt '[a] more coordinated, cohesive, and coherent ASEAN position on global issues'. The declaration made several key commitments that would buttress the community's efforts:

- to increasingly speak in a common voice on international matters of mutual concern at related international forums;
- to enhance ASEAN's capacity to respond and contribute solutions to those global matters; and
- to empower the ASEAN Secretariat so that it can support the vision and development of the ASEAN Community in a global community of nations.

Bali Concord III called on the ASEAN Community to assess 'key long-term trends, including the evolution of the global architecture, and develop appropriate adjustment and response strategies to such trends'. From the socio-cultural cooperation perspective, this was a quantum leap from its neo-functionalist antecedents, raising the bar and ushering in a new wave of challenges and opportunities. A major change swept through socio-cultural cooperation that would open up a unique role in community building, one that paved the way for leadership cooperation with dialogue partners and external parties and through accelerating a community-building process that rapidly became consequential in international development, that is, the recognition of the intrinsic value of the regional mechanism.

A powerful vision such as Bali Concord III provides an enabling environment and impetus underpinning ASEAN agreements. Leadership came just as much from the collaboration of more than 20 sectoral bodies and mechanisms that now form the ASCC and started a remarkable period of ASCC-related ASEAN declarations, treaties, and obligations; integrated into their respective sectoral plans the programmes of ASEAN's dialogue

partnerships; pioneered partnerships in a range of areas with the UN system, international non-governmental organisations, and civil society organisations; and public-private partnerships involving the private sector. A strong example of the impact ASEAN has on international frameworks is highlighted by the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, which also addresses achieving the Millennium Development Goals/Sustainable Development Goals. A focus on results and operational response is key in accelerating how ASEAN agreements are adopted, internalised, and institutionalised into the regional mechanism and presence. The ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response is touted as a replicable model, and efforts have been made to translate its experiences to other cross-sectoral and thematic issues. Its organisational framework is a unique regional mega-agreement that can serve as a model or template to address cross-cutting issues. It is a case study on how sectoral bodies can define and operationalise ASEAN centrality and realise ASEAN's contribution to regional public good and reach out to the global community of nations.

The ASEAN Identity and Its Role in Building a Single ASEAN Community

Divining the ASEAN Identity has been an exercise of countless papers, symposia, workshops, expert group meetings, and scholarly work since the organisation's formation. The ASCC was given an important role in championing the ASEAN Identity and facing the challenges among political, economic, and social scientists. The ASEAN Identity is enshrined in the ASEAN Charter (2007) with emphasis on promotion. The ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage (2000) draws on the strength of the region's multiplicity of cultural and traditional identities. As a characteristic in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint (2009-2015), the ASEAN Identity is defined as 'the basis of Southeast Asia's regional interests. It is our collective personality, norms, values and beliefs as well as aspirations as one ASEAN community. ... [The strategic objective is to] [c]reate a sense of belonging, consolidate unity in diversity and enhance deeper mutual understanding among ASEAN Member States about their culture, history, religion, and civilisation ...' (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009). The ASCC's definition of the ASEAN Identity is the most widely quoted and

plausibly very compelling, with the ASCC Blueprint stating that the strategy to achieve this is to ‘mainstream and promote greater awareness and common values in the spirit of unity in diversity at all levels of society’.

The ASCC initiatives to define and promote the ASEAN Identity has been a daunting task, even armed with the ASCC Communication Plan. In the waning years of the ASEAN Road Map, the Committee of Permanent Representatives gave the search for an ASEAN Identity further impetus by shepherding the formulation of the ASEAN Communication Master Plan. The master plan articulates an overarching message for ASEAN as ‘ASEAN: A Community of Opportunities’, identifying ASEAN as ‘a community that aims to instil a sense of belonging and identity among its citizens, and that brings new opportunities to the people of ASEAN and the broader global community’ (ASEAN Secretariat, 2014a). The ASEAN Communication Master Plan is composed of integrated communications strategies and tactics aimed at achieving heightened awareness of the initiatives that create a shared community of opportunities and benefits across ASEAN’s governments, peoples, and dialogue partners.

ASEAN Community Vision 2025: Challenges and Responses

In the post-2015 period, the ASCC faces multidimensional concerns, cross-sectoral issues that involve complex relationships to manage and comprehend, and made more challenging by overlapping, contrasting, and intersecting national and regional interests. The very multidisciplinary and multidimensional nature of issues such as climate change, food security, energy security, and disaster management has witnessed an expansion in the participation of a range of traditional and nontraditional entities and stakeholders in the ASEAN Community. Cognisant of the complexity of the environment, the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 embodies the resolve of ASEAN ‘to consolidate our Community, building upon and deepening the integration process to realise a rules-based, people-oriented, people-centred 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’

(ASEAN Secretariat, 2015a). The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 is built on the Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2015 Vision in 2013 and the Nay Pyi Taw Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2015 Vision in 2014, abiding by the central tenets of a community that is politically cohesive; economically integrated; socially responsible; and a truly rules-based, people-oriented, people-centred ASEAN. The Vision is of a 'peaceful, stable and resilient Community with enhanced capacity to respond effectively to challenges, and ASEAN as an outward-looking region within a global community of nations, while maintaining ASEAN centrality'. In addition, ASEAN is envisioned as vibrant, sustainable, and highly integrated economies, enhanced ASEAN Connectivity as well as strengthened efforts to narrow the development gap, including through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration. Also envisioned is an ASEAN empowered with capabilities to seize opportunities and address challenges in the coming decade.

Conclusion

How the ASCC traversed through and became shaped by waves of ASEAN regionalism, integration, and globalisation is a fascinating study of institutional adaptation. It is perhaps not surprising that the ASCC is the most adaptive, re-engineered, and reinvented pillar in the ASEAN Community. It has become an important constituency and assumed a critical role in the ASEAN Community project. A people-focused ASCC Blueprint presents new challenges to conventional ASEAN norms and practices. Paths are opened or opening for ASCC work to intersect and potentially impact on and move across different pillars, platforms, and partnerships. The ASCC has demonstrated a capacity to be an incubator of great ideas and an ability to take initiatives on its own. It should not ignore the opportunity provided by the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 to elevate its effectiveness and relevance by taking steps towards a people-centred corporate mission and vision, strengthen policy coherence, address results and data gaps, and manage its outreach and partnership strategies.

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