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ASEAN's Post-2015 Vision: Inclusive and Non-Elitist?

By Dylan Loh Ming Hui and Don Rodney Ong Junio

Synopsis

2015 is the marker year for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to be realised. Whilst the focus will invariably be on the AEC, the formulation of a post-2015 ASEAN vision requires equal care and attention. It should be more inclusive and grass-roots driven.

Commentary

ONE OF the cornerstones of the ASEAN Community building project is its “people-centred” approach to regional integration as opposed to the elite-driven and state-centric approach that ASEAN has been generally associated with.

As ASEAN enters 2015 - a watershed year with the realisation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) - it is timely to examine how successful has ASEAN become in ensuring that voices from below are included in its various efforts to institutionalise a sense of regional community in Southeast Asia, especially in the context of formulating a post-2015 ASEAN vision.

The ASEAN Way as the Elite Way?

Well-established norms such as the *ASEAN Way* have limited the space for non-state actors to engage ASEAN. This is true for regional cross-cutting issues such as migration, human rights, and environmental protection that are being championed by civil society groups. However, this does not mean that there are no direct channels of engagement between civil society and ASEAN.

For example, one of the well-established regional fora held in parallel with the ASEAN Summit is the ASEAN Civil Society Conference / ASEAN Peoples' Forum which was initiated in 2005 and has been held every year since then except in 2008. The forum brings together Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) across the region to discuss various issues affecting Southeast Asia.

The outcome of the forum is an official statement that is presented to an “interface meeting” where government representatives from ASEAN member-countries are present. Whether recommendations submitted by civil society groups are taken up by ASEAN is a different issue. There are also various

issues associated with the ASEAN Civil Society Conference such as alleged intimidation and restrictions imposed by host governments during these meetings.

This brings into question the commitment of ASEAN in engaging civil society groups and its willingness to accept views coming from other stakeholders. Nonetheless, for some civil society groups, having this direct channel of engagement to ASEAN government officials, albeit weak, is counted as a small victory.

Even in the lead up to the AEC 2015, there were mutters of confusion from businesses, both small and large, on the impact and benefits that the AEC would bring. While governments in ASEAN are certain of the economic benefits arising from the AEC, the 'lay stakeholders' – general ASEAN citizens and businesses - are left to wonder what the fuss is all about.

ASEAN is 48 years old this year. However, the general awareness of ASEAN amongst the populace is worryingly low. In a 2007 survey conducted by the ASEAN Foundation, 60% of ASEAN respondents agreed (and strongly agreed) that if ASEAN were to disappear, it would make no difference to their lives.

An inclusive and grassroots-driven process

Moving forward, ASEAN should recognise that it does not have the monopoly of promoting the interest of ASEAN and its peoples. A people-centred approach to regional community building embraces and accepts the diversity of views from within ASEAN. To that end, ASEAN in constructing its post-2015 vision should embrace an inclusive and grassroots-driven modality in its community building efforts.

Firstly, more spaces should be opened for collaboration between ASEAN together with its instrumentalities and civil society groups. In this regard, increased interface between civil society and ASEAN and the institutionalisation of such interface are crucial steps in the right direction. However, this is not enough to shed ASEAN's perceived elite-driven approach to regional integration.

The growing number of attendance in the ASEAN Civil Society Conference over the years indicates the willingness of civil society members to take ownership of the ASEAN project and help shape the future of the region. ASEAN should capitalise on these knowledge and sentiments developed from the ground. Doing so can help ASEAN enhance its input legitimacy and help establish ASEAN as a truly people-centred community.

Secondly, ASEAN's profile and awareness should be raised among ASEAN citizens. It is not that nothing has been done in that regard, it is just that it has not been given strong weight in the lists of priorities currently undertaken by ASEAN. Both the style and substance of how ASEAN is promulgated should change.

For instance, most people discover about ASEAN through official government and news outlets. But such dissemination of information about ASEAN – mostly through official accounts - only serve to reinforce the motif that ASEAN is an abstract entity reserved only for governments and political leaders and not for 'people like us' to understand. Governments could initiate an ASEAN-wide team of volunteers or activists to solicit views on what the ASEAN peoples would like to see in a post-2015 vision. Through this process of solicitation, people can come to better understand what ASEAN is about and raise issues that an elite-driven process might not see.

Not just for eminent people, experts and leaders

Thirdly, it is critical to engage the views of youths in ASEAN because it is the youths that will be affected most from the post-2015 ASEAN initiatives. A 'whole-of-ASEAN' approach to educate and communicate 'ASEAN' to the young people of ASEAN is needed. It is a tall order, no doubt, but not an impossible feat.

One way to start this is through ASEAN classrooms. Instead of studying the glorious Chinese and Indian empires, why not calibrate and explain the history of ASEAN and its importance in the region?

There are signs that key stakeholders recognise that need for greater inclusion in ASEAN activities. Malaysia, as the ASEAN Chair in 2015, has indicated that one of its main priorities would be to engage ASEAN citizens and to promote greater understanding of ASEAN initiatives and projects. Indeed, Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak noted that: "We also hope to steer ASEAN closer to the people of Southeast Asia: to make this institution part of people's daily lives, by creating a truly people-centred ASEAN".

If ASEAN is to genuinely aspire to be a 'people-centred' community, it would be prudent to ensure that the construction of a post-2015 ASEAN vision is an inclusive, open process that engages ASEAN citizens - not a closed process solely in the domain of eminent people, experts and political leaders.

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