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What is the ASEAN Community 2015?

By Raman Letchumanan

Synopsis

The ASEAN Community is to be established this year. ASEAN should convey, very early in the new year, a coordinated message on what exactly the ASEAN Community 2015 is and what the people can expect come 31 December 2015.

Commentary

MANY PEOPLE have a vague idea of what the ASEAN Community 2015 (AC15) is all about and how it benefits or impacts them. The lack of clear coherent messaging by the authorities leads some to benchmark the AC15 with the European Union (EU), while others have the impression the AC15 is all about the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) which invariably gets the most attention in public discourses.

ASEAN must make a concerted effort to convey in specific quantitative, if not qualitative, terms what it had planned to achieve and how well it is doing, regularly throughout the year. Otherwise the public who are being primed to expect “delivery” of the AC15 on 31 December 2015 will be greatly disappointed if they are anticipating a Cinderella-like transformation on that day. ASEAN, under Malaysia’s Chairmanship, has a heavy transformative agenda this year, namely (i) delivering on the AC15 (ii) designing the post-2015 agenda which spans a decade to 2025 and (iii) hopefully reviewing the ASEAN Charter which was due in 2014. This commentary deals with the first task.

Framing ASEAN Community 2015 (AC15)

The ASEAN Leaders have declared that the 2009-2015 Road Map consisting of the three Community Blueprints - Economic (AEC), Political-Security (APSC), Socio-Cultural (ASCC) -shall form the basis of the overall ASEAN Community (AC15). Of course, the ASEAN Charter and other subsequent key initiatives would also define the AC15. By focusing on the broader goals, objectives, strategies, and targets set in these instruments, the contours and key markers of the AC15 can be easily framed, both in quantitative and qualitative terms as appropriate.

However, assessing the establishment of AC15 based on the implementation of the 1000-odd mostly operational actions - which at recent count by authorities averages 90% - is just not right nor valid. The achievement of regional and national development goals is a combined effort from all sources

particularly national efforts; it is certainly not only from the Blueprint's regional actions which is just a drop in the ocean.

Describing AC15 as "work-in-progress" so early in the year seems apologetic and back-tracking. Indeed the successes so far should lay the foundation for future work on ASEAN community building, while learning from failures and what works and what doesn't.

Building the foundation: Prosperity, peace and people

The AEC is on track to eliminate tariffs on almost all goods by the end of the year. However, the share of the intra-ASEAN trade in total GDP (2009-2013) has been stuck at about 24%, even lower than the previous corresponding period. While intra-ASEAN investment (2009-2013) has increased, the rate of increase is less than for extra-ASEAN. AEC is not fully utilising its own single market and production base.

More work needs to be done on trade facilitation, expedited uniform customs clearance, removal of non-tariff measures, and facilitated movement of skilled persons. The Open Sky policy has clearly benefitted the people resulting in a dramatic increase in air travel, physically bringing ASEAN people closer for meaningful interaction and regional integration.

The fact that ASEAN has been a relatively peaceful region compared to the rest of the world should score high for APSC. The Preah Vihear Temple, Sipadan and Ligitan Islands, Pedra Branca, and even development issues such as the Malayan Railway Land deal between Malaysia and Singapore have shown the States' maturity in using bilateral, regional and international mechanisms to resolve disputes amicably while accepting the verdicts gracefully.

Such multiple channels of dispute settlement should be pursued concurrently for the South China Sea disputes.

ASEAN has also been affected by terrorism and transnational crimes. Ensuring a drug-free ASEAN by 2015, on hindsight, is way off the mark, but with recent record-breaking seizure of illegal drugs, coordinated enforcement, and severe penalties we should be moving steadily towards that goal. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights is already operational, and more needs to be done on human rights protection.

Surprisingly, ASCC gets the least attention though the issues are all about the people and their daily lives. It is making its mark on disaster response, becoming more resourced, capable, and confident and being recognised as the essential first responders in the region. The ASCC is already operating on the basis of higher targets than that of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG Plus).

The region has well-coordinated response mechanisms for pandemics based on the experiences of SARS and Avian Influenza. The haze situation is still hazy, dictated by the vagaries of weather, but countries are responding through well-coordinated regional and national mechanisms through legislation, enforcement, and preventive activities on the ground.

AC15: Measuring and communicating progress

Contrary to its name, the AEC Scorecard is just a monitoring and compliance tool of agreements and actions which, though necessary, does not articulate the impacts and benefits of the AEC. However, to its credit, communications such as the AEC's 2014 publication; *AEC 2015: Thinking Globally, Prospering Regionally* setting out key messages and explaining clearly the impact of the AEC, quoting real examples of how businesses and people have benefitted, should be ratcheted up this year.

The ASCC has developed its own comprehensive Scorecard based on key impact indicators related to the ASCC Blueprint goals, strategies and targets. It should now work on those agreed indicators and quickly publish the 2015 ASCC Scorecard Report which should give a clearer perception of what the ASCC, and consequently the AC15, is and how it has impacted the people.

Diverse voices speaking as one

Malaysia and the ASEAN Secretariat should lead and coordinate the framing, scoping, delivery of targeted information, and assessment of the AC15. Only recently the ASEAN Secretariat has opened a tiny window on AC15 on their website; the Malaysian website could be more than an event management site.

The wide-ranging multifaceted efforts of community building should be properly classified into clusters, subjects, or thematic areas targeting the main interest groups - businesses, intellectual community, and the general public - for a year-long constructive discourse on the AC15. Greater use of social media should make these platforms fully interactive to generate interest, engagement, discussion, feedback and effective participation.

Malaysia could emulate the well-structured communication strategy of its National Transformation Policy for AC15. All other member states should equally do so, for example, pitching AC15 on their national commemorative events such as Singapore's SG50.

ASEAN may well engage relevant stakeholders for working level interactions during its over 1000 official meetings this year; and all these meetings should singularly focus on generating key outputs and messages for AC15, and planning for the post-2015 agenda.

In other words, ASEAN should seriously start implementing the ASEAN Communication Master Plan which has elaborated in detail what should be done for communicating AC15 – beginning right now.

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