



ASEAN Youth Connect: A Personal Perspective

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“In the face of fiercer economic competition from China, India and other rising markets, it is important for ASEAN to pursue economic integration, in order to compete more effectively on the global stage. Once this is achieved, ASEAN, as a regional institution, will be in a stronger position to explore both regional and international cooperation with other larger economies in East Asia and the Asia Pacific region.”

This was my main message to a lively audience that comprised over 80 youths from the ASEAN region, on the topic of “ASEAN’s Economic Co-operation with Rest of the World” at the 4th ASEAN Annual Youth Convention¹ (AYC), convened from 16 to 20 June 2012 in Singapore. Having had the opportunity to participate in the AYC for three consecutive years, it has given me grounds for optimism that the identity of ASEAN as a community is gradually taking root among the young. It was encouraging to witness how many young participants — who, among them, may comprise the next generation of ASEAN leaders — were keen to better understand how ASEAN can continue to be competitive and to get stronger and more cohesive amid the rise of growing competition for foreign direct investment, trade and services in the international platform.

ASEAN is Diverse

The students recognised that ASEAN has a diverse spectrum of economic systems — from advanced economies like Brunei Darussalam and Singapore, to the newer member states of Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar. They also recognised that, in order to enhance community building within ASEAN, additional technical and capacity-building assistance from the more developed members towards newer, less developed ones will be critical.

¹. AYC began in 2009 as an annual event that brings together energetic youths from all over Southeast Asia. The week-long convention is open to delegates from all ASEAN member states, namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as the ASEAN Plus Three dialogue partners (China, Japan and South Korea), normally aged 16 to 18 years. The AYC features distinguished speakers from various industries and organisations. The lecture topics vary according to specific issues that ASEAN faces each year, such as pertinent challenges that ASEAN faces in regional co-operation, economics, humanity issues, and other socio-cultural issues. Apart from the lectures, participants also engage in various panel discussions and group sharing, and get to showcase the best from their countries as the Convention celebrates the unique qualities of the region during the ASEAN Day celebrations.

While many ASEAN Member States have turned to export-oriented industrialisation to grow their economies, the youths at AYC questioned the feasibility of ASEAN continuing to rely on this strategy as the way forward to achieve economic development. This consideration is especially relevant since global demands are likely to slack due to weak economic conditions in North America and Europe in the near future. While it was noted that the export model brought about growth in the past, one youth in particular remarked that this model could be a weakness for the ASEAN economies. Using the example of the significant lack of trade within the region on final manufactured goods, the participant noted that many ASEAN Member States exported raw materials or components to China, who in turn manufactured finished goods. Demand for ASEAN's raw components is therefore contingent upon the global demand for Chinese exports — should demand for the latter decrease, ASEAN's export-oriented economies will be hard hit.

The discussion at the AYC also broached the subject of ASEAN's capacity to respond to another economic crisis. I highlighted that while booms and busts are a natural part of business cycles, and recessions may become a regular feature of modern economic life, financial crises can be attributed to a number of reasons, including financial mismanagement, greed and complacency. To overcome this, ASEAN Member States need to work together to tighten their respective national financial regulations without affecting competitiveness, while at the same time transform themselves into diverse and thus resilient economies, so that they may cope better with future crises.

ASEAN's Connectivity

The concluding topic of discussion was on the new driver for community building in ASEAN — the initiative to improve connectivity² across ASEAN. As countries like Singapore face the constraints of space and a tight labour force, it is impossible for states to undertake economic development measures in every industrial sector. This means that certain business activities, such as heavy manufacturing and light industries production, may have to be relocated to land-rich ASEAN Member States with large populations, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.

It is therefore essential for ASEAN to improve connectivity — in particular, the physical linkages and transport infrastructures — for businesses to move raw materials and components, assembled products, as well as completed goods seamlessly across borders in the region. These include, among others:

- (a) Roads to be linked;
- (b) Seaports and airports to be well-connected;
- (c) Customs clearance to be made simpler to reduce both cost and time, and
- (d) The early realisation of the Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipelines (TAGP), which will bring gas to all corners of Southeast Asia.

² As S. Pushpanathan, former Deputy Secretary-General for ASEAN Economic Community, explains, "connectivity" in ASEAN refers to the "physical, institutional and people-to-people linkages that comprise the foundational support and facilitative means to achieve the economic, political-security and socio-cultural pillars towards realising the vision of an integrated ASEAN Community."

I reiterated that a connected ASEAN will give the trans-national and multi-national corporations an extra option when they evaluate the choice of destination for their next manufacturing bases and regional headquarter functions.

Conclusion

This session with the young ASEAN youths undoubtedly brought a fresh dimension to the way I look at this region. Through them, some of my immediate ideas are reinforced, that if the concept of an “ASEAN Community” is to be strengthened, the young citizens of ASEAN need to have more exchanges and interactions, and possibly co-operate with one another in their academic syllabuses. These young people, the future leaders in this region, can then learn and appreciate more about unity and harmony.

Some students openly expressed during the plenary that they know little about ASEAN. They felt that ASEAN is a mere high-level policymaking issue, of direct concern to only high-ranking elites. They also hold the view that ASEAN is an organisation where decisions are made by the governments, and not by the people. This, I feel, is where the foreign affairs and education ministries of the 10 respective ASEAN Member States should undertake a higher level of awareness creation on ASEAN to their students at the national level.

After all, for ASEAN to succeed and be relevant at the international arena, it is critical for the younger generation of ASEAN citizens to be aware of the challenges and accomplishments made by the 45-year-old regional grouping.

The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of the Institute.

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