Interface with the Secretary-General of ASEAN

2nd Forum of Entities Associated with ASEAN
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As Secretary-General of ASEAN for the next five years, what are your priorities?

If one looks at ASEAN, I would say we have done really well in the political-security and economic fronts. In the last 51 years, we are fortunate that there were peace and stability in the region, which itself anchors the cornerstone for ASEAN Member States to undertake their respective economic development. The region’s growth, especially in the past two decades, was at an average 5% p.a. and this is likely to continue for the next five years. Many ASEAN citizens today are also beginning to enjoy the benefits of regional economic integration.

Moving forward, what is outstanding is to speed-up the social-cultural integration. Personally, I see social-cultural as an area where everyone can relate to, i.e. from education, to health, to humanitarian assistance due to natural disasters striking the region. In this regard, I am glad to see the Jakarta-based ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance for Disaster Management (AHA Centre) doing well in responding to the needs on the grounds.
How can civil society organisations (CSOs) play their part in ASEAN integration?

The CSOs are a critical stakeholder in the ASEAN Community building process. In my interaction with them over the years, it was intriguing to see many of these CSOs/Entities grow, mature and progress to play an important role in improving peoples' livelihoods on-the-ground. This is why I reckon that the involvement of CSOs would help to pave the way for ASEAN to deepen our social cohesion.

Since assuming duties as the SG of ASEAN, I have tried to attend as many ASEAN ministerial meetings as possible. Through my participation in such meetings, I am able to identify the various cross-cutting/cross-pillar issues, which usually need inputs from all walks of life. It is therefore highly critical that I listen to the different CSOs’ views and we will try to find ways where we can fit in the socio-cultural elements with the economic and political security perspectives. These would eventually be a fitting contribution towards ASEAN integration.

Are you satisfied with the current level of ASEAN awareness in the region?

It is true to say that the current level of ASEAN awareness is limited. If one goes to the rural areas in some ASEAN Member States, the locals there would likely feel that the ASEAN Community Building process yields little benefits to them. This is where function of community development and roles of social media, and the task of corporate-social responsibilities (CSR) become relevant, i.e. impart knowledge on what ASEAN can do.

Let me use another example, about the micro, small and medium-size enterprises (MSMEs). They constitute almost 99% of our enterprises/companies in ASEAN. When these MSMEs gain
from the regional integration exercise, they would be able to translate this to the people in the streets. This is, hence, important that we should work with MSMEs to get certain projects – especially those with a label on ASEAN benefits – running.

In Europe, many Europeans benefitted with the no-roaming mobile charges as they moved across the continent, and as a result, many of them feel a sense of pride and belonging of being associated with the European Union (EU). I think we could undertake similar social awareness projects in ASEAN. Similarly, if ASEAN can encourage more young people/youth to travel across the region or to work in the ASEAN Member States, these youth will appreciate the culture, the value and the system in each Member State. This is why we are working and pushing the relevant authorities to generate more student-and-youth exchanges among Member States, which could spin-off and bring yields and gains to the airline, hotel, food, beverage sectors etc. These are regional projects that we can work with the private sectors/business communities and the CSOs/NGOs.

Please share with us the challenges in bringing all the CSOs/Entities together, given that everyone would have their own agenda, perspectives and sense of achievements.

Indeed, it is always a challenge to bring everybody of different priorities together. However, only by doing so could we understand the common barriers faced by all, and only then, can we work towards a common, win-win solution to overcome and to address the challenge(s), especially those relating to inter-pillar/cross-sectoral. Exchanging of views in a multilateral platform (like this forum) is therefore very important in calibrating the barriers.

Talking about cross-pillar issues, I would think the ASEAN Secretariat is in a good position to identify and to work on them. Since I assumed this post as SG, I have encouraged my officers to interact closely with one another – from different divisions and departments – to ensure that we know the gist of the problem(s) thoroughly. For example, when we work with the institutes of higher learnings, universities, private sectors, and business communities to promote internship opportunities for youth, we are effectively bringing together the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). There are also elements of ASEAN
Political-Security Community (APSC) since we need to work with the relevant authorities to overcome security and immigration barriers e.g. issuance of work-pass, student visa, or intern-residential permit.

When I attend the next ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting in November 2018 in Myanmar, I would emphasize the importance of having a curriculum for kids to appreciate ASEAN. There is presently no mandatory ASEAN curriculum in the teaching syllabus in some Member States.

I would also encourage all CSOs and Entities to work together with ASEAN to move forward the integration process, especially for projects with high impacts on ASEAN Community building and the people. Appreciations and benefits must really be disseminated to the people, and only then, do we have an inclusive, people-friendly ASEAN society.

What is your vision on the role of local government? Would ASEAN Secretariat be having a local government unit to support the thousands of local governments in the region?

Yes, local government is a very critical element in moving forward ASEAN projects, especially in economic and social integration, including in sub-regions like the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA). From local government, action plans can be elevated to national and regional levels. This is why, I am glad that the ASEAN Mayors Forum has been approved as an Entity, as we see the value to work with them.
It has been a challenge to invite ASEAN Secretariat officials to attend events and meetings staged by private sectors/business associations, e.g. in tourism. That being said, how can ASEAN make travellers/tourists feel welcomed at respective airports/gateways in ASEAN?

Whenever my schedule permits, I would attend the annual ASEAN Tourism Ministers Meeting, usually convened every January, as I reckon Tourism to be a key growth sector in ASEAN. It is a productive way to develop and contribute to the socio-economic growth of a country. Food and beverage (F&B) sector will prosper, and likewise, the hospitality and MICE (Meeting, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) industries.

At present, there are “Green-Lanes” for ASEAN travellers in most international airports for speedier and more effective immigration-checkpoints clearances. In addition, ASEAN citizens can stay in each ASEAN Member States for up to 30 days visa-free basis. Such perks are testimonies associated with intra-ASEAN travelling and the movement of people.

How would ASEAN measure human development? Would it be based on similar indicators adopted by the United Nations i.e. the UN Human Development Index?

In ASEAN, we currently do not have a standard measurement to benchmark our human development. Nonetheless, I concur that ASEAN should look into developing a set of indicators sooner rather than later, given that human capital is a vital component in economic and social developments. Based on a recent World Bank Report, Singapore is ranked top for its human development. Perhaps, ASEAN can adopt this finding as a reference when developing a regional indicator for human capital. Of course, we need to factor in related issues like “Education”, “Infrastructure”, and other socio-economic indicators as we develop such index.
Many businesses in ASEAN today are still profit-driven. How can ASEAN promote corporate social responsibility (CSR) as part of the regional socio-economic development?

I think there are various ways of dealing with this issue, including working with the national chambers of commerce and industry (CCIs), business advisory councils, commercial associations, and with the corporations/companies themselves. At the same time, it might also be relevant for both the economic and socio-cultural sectors to have a more profound discussion over this through a common platform, which the ASEAN Secretariat would be happy to facilitate.

What is ASEAN’s vision towards addressing corruption, given that it is a cross-cutting issue?

Stamping out corruption and the promotion of governance is a core area that ASEAN would like to address in our Community building programme, especially under the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). After all, it is widely recognised that curbing corruption and promoting transparency in business and government administrative processes would tend to increase investors’ confidence and to speed up the development of a country.

ASEAN Member States, in general, face a series of drug abuse challenges. In Indonesia, for example, there are 87 million young people, aged 18 and below. Out of these 87 million, 6 million are drug abusers. It means almost 10% of Indonesia’s millennial generation has been affected by drug abuse. I hope ASEAN will make this issue a priority.

This agenda is of great priority under the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drugs. It is an important issue that ASEAN views and takes seriously. Each ASEAN Member State also has their respective national programmes to rehabilitate drug and narcotic abusers, and thereafter, ensure that these people do not become repeat-offenders but stay healthy, useful, relevant to the local community, and to serve as anti-drug role-models/ambassadors.
What is ASEAN’s vision to address challenges related to epidemic or infectious diseases?

The diverse economic development statuses of each member state present a challenge to ASEAN when facing an epidemic. In some member states, poverty is the most important determinant for health status, mainly for marginalised and vulnerable groups, including those living in remote or isolated communities. ASEAN is thus vulnerable to natural diseases.

As an ASEAN Community, Member States believe that efforts and resources of each national health system geared towards protecting and improving the health of their peoples will have maximum outcomes when done in a collaborative, complementary and synergistic manner. Thus, guided by ASEAN Vision 2025, the ASEAN Health Cooperation adopted the ASEAN Post-2015 Health Development Agenda (APHDA) to encapsulate the shared goals, strategies, priorities and programmes of health sector between 2016 - 2020. To operationalise APHDA, four (4) ASEAN Health Clusters were established, each providing strategic leadership to identify and implement regional programmes, and initiatives in selected health priority issues.

Health Cluster 2 deals with responding to hazards and emerging threats.

What message would you like the ASEAN Entities/CSOs to spread for ASEAN?

The message is quite a simple one i.e. ASEAN and its Entities/CSOs are non-exclusive but indeed mutually reinforce each other. ASEAN and the ASEAN Entities/CSOs must work together to realise the ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together vision.

Together, we can realise a rules-based, people-oriented, people-centered ASEAN of “One Vision, One Identity, One Community”.

![Image of a forum event]