

ASEAN Integration: *A two-sided coin*

Jiraporn Phansawang Ph.D.

Mahamakut Buddhist University, Roi Et Campus

Introduction

Last 2015 (B.E.2558), all the ten ASEAN member countries will be unified as one community, that has one identity and one vision. By this, it means that people in such countries as Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines and so on, will no longer be just Thai, or Vietnamese, or Filipino, but they will be “ASEANese”. Like a two-sided coin, the integration of ASEAN nations, amidst their disparity in the fields of economics, politics, religion and culture, will be sure to yield inevitably both negative and positive effects on the residents of the region.

A Positive Viewpoint

The ASEAN integration means all the ten member countries become a member of a large and diverse community of 600 million people, living in a region spreading over 4.46 million square kilometers. They will relate to one another and work together under the motto, “**One vision, One identity, One community.**” Our connection to each other will not just be geographical, but also institutional and inter-personal.

From being a small loose coalition comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, ASEAN will be an integrated community of 10 countries. Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Brunei and Myanmar have also been added to the original list.

As an integrated community, ASEAN will become a more vibrant force in the world, better to compete against its more powerful neighbors such as India, China and other East Asian countries.

If integration is implemented as planned, trading of goods, inter-country investments and movement of labor within the region will become much easier. This will significantly reduce the cost of production for the businesses and economic growth of member-countries and of the entire region will accelerate.

With this favorable scenario, Southeast Asia will become more attractive to investors and thus receive more direct investments from multinational companies from outside the region. Integration will also create a single market and production base that will allow the free flow of goods, services, investment, and capital throughout the region.

Under the ASEAN integration plan, tariffs on most goods coming from member-countries will be brought down to zero or near-zero, employment restrictions will be eased so that Southeast Asians would find it easy to find jobs in any country within the region.

A Negative Viewpoint

Though the vision is grand, the task of integration is not easy. There are many challenges facing the ASEAN members as follows:

1. Cultural Diversity: Although Southeast Asian nations have several shared characteristics, there are still many differences that exist from one country to another. Take for example a religious belief. Out of ten ASEAN members, five countries, namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, are Buddhist countries, three are Muslims, i.e. Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia and Malaysia, one is a Christian nation viz. the Philippines, while Singapore is a mixture of Confucius, Buddhism, Hinduism and Mohammedanism.

2. Uneven Economic Development among Its Members: From the economic perspective, ASEAN member states are diverse in terms of how big a piece of the regional pie each gets to enjoy. Singapore and Brunei lead the per capita income scale, with US\$62,100 and US\$51,600 respectively, leaving Lao PDR with only US\$986. Countries may see each other more as competitors than comrades.

3. Political Disparity and Tension Among Members: The political difference prevails in the member countries, as can be seen in the case of Lao PDR and Vietnam that are socialist, Brunei Darussalam is absolute monarchy, and another seven are regarded as democratic nations. Moreover, there exists a political tension among members: Thailand and Cambodia still have not resolved their conflict over the Preah Vihear Temple. Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei also have conflicting interests over territories in the South China Sea. ASEAN also does not have a single strong voice when it comes to territorial conflicts between ASEAN member countries and China.

4. Diversity in Educational Standards: So far as the educational standards are concerned, the prominent distinction is detected, thus leading to a failure in the university mobility program run by the region-based international educational organizations like RIHED, SEMEO and so on.

5. ASEAN Identity Is Still Not Strong: The ASEAN identity campaign has not been far-reaching. The people in ASEAN community do not wear regional spectacles as do their European counterparts. Without a solid regional identity, ASEAN's road to integration may

be long and winding.

Conclusion and Suggestions

ASEAN integration should not be a concept understood and appreciated only by academicians, diplomats, businessmen and governments. It also needs to be understood and appreciated by the average people. The way to help the people understand and support ASEAN integration is through promoting ASEAN identity. As educators, you need to start with your students. The students will help to spread the knowledge to others at home. The following suggestions should be tested and tried:

1. Organize friendship forums inviting young people from fellow ASEAN countries to join.
2. Organize volunteer projects across ASEAN countries.
3. Develop courses that promote ASEAN identity. The culture of ASEAN should be introduced to children during the primary age. And the concept of ASEAN should be introduced as early as possible and be taught simultaneously with national identity.
4. Organize special activities that promote ASEAN awareness – ASEAN Quest Game; special events on ASEAN Day (8 August of each year).
5. Organize regular singing of ASEAN anthem in the school. All students should be able to sing it by heart.

Bibliography

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