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PEOPLE - CENTERED ASEAN AS A WAY FORWARD TO THE WIDER REGIONAL INTEGRATION

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A people-centered ASEAN will certainly contribute towards regional integration as the needs of the larger segment of the population are met and they see the benefits of region wide initiatives. For integration to take place, not just the commercial interest need to be met but also the wider needs of the people who will then not be threatened with region wide measures.

People-centered ASEAN requires actions on two fronts:

- i) Individual actions at the national level; and
- ii) Collective actions at the regional level across all member states.

Awareness

Need to create greater awareness of ASEAN and its initiative. A one- off celebration of ASEAN day yearly is not enough.

Top down decision making process at the national and regional level on ASEAN matters need to be complemented with regular stakeholder engagement. Stakeholders include NGOs, civil society, small businesses, youths and other interest groups.

Regular people oriented activities need to be increased and bureaucrats' meetings reduced. ASEAN music, film, arts, food sports festivals need to be permanent features in each member's annual calendar of events.

How about creating an ASEAN blog?

Trade

Is trade benefitting all levels or just the big corporations. How to ensure MSMEs are part of the regional value chain.

Is services liberalisation creating cross - border opportunities for smaller service providers. Need for greater depth in AFAS liberalisation.

Is movement of natural persons being impeded? This is core to a people-centered ASEAN.

Potential In border trade need to be fully realised. Protectionist or lack of facilitative measures have reduced trade from RM 1billion to a mere RM 24 million at the Sarawak-Kalimantan border.

Connectivity

Imperatives for good connectivity includes physical infrastructure to facilitate movement of goods, services and natural persons. This includes roads, railways, airports and ports.

Rules and regulations should also be people and business friendly to enhance connectivity.

Digital infrastructure to enhance information connectivity is a must for a people-centered ASEAN.

Other people-centered initiatives

Measures must be integrated and inclusive so that everyone will benefit from both the national and regional initiatives.

We should move from the supply side and look at the demand side - what do the ASEAN community want.

Let us have a dedicated ASEAN social media for the people to provide feedback.

Equipping the people to face the fourth industrial revolution - training and retraining to develop new skills to serve in an environment filled with automation and robots.

Let us harness the MyASEAN Internship Programme launched in 2015 by Malaysia to enhance talent mobility. This Programme gives ASEAN youth the opportunity to intern in top companies in the region to expand their international experience and knowledge of their host country

RCEP and TPP

RCEP is making very slow progress, giving the impression that there is no collective will to conclude.

No one is willing to give up entrenched positions for the greater good of the overall enterprise.

No clear champion to push the process to the finishing line.

TPP has been given a fresh breath of life by TPP11 with the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Text of Agreement and provisions to be suspended have been agreed to by all 11.

Work programme to finalise remaining issues and side letters to begin early next year, before signing date is decided.

Agreement will be open to new members once it has entered into force.