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ASEAN connectivity: The hows and whys

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In 1997, the member-states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) first envisioned of an ASEAN Community—"a concert of Southeast Asian nations that are outward looking, living in peace, stability, and prosperity".

Formally established in 2015, the envisioned community stands on three pillars: Economic Community, Political-Security Community, and Socio-Cultural Community. This vision entails making sure that ASEAN member-states build on one of its integral foundations—connectivity.

What is ASEAN connectivity?

Connecting a region of countries with diverse backgrounds is not an easy feat. In the case of ASEAN, while proximity binds them together, the 10 member-states differ on various aspects—from history, to culture, to languages and religions. Collectively, the ASEAN region has a population of around 600 million, with Indonesia the largest (over 246 million) and Brunei the smallest (over 436 thousand).

In 2010, five years before the implementation of the ASEAN Community, the leaders adopted the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (Figure 1), which has the goal of achieving "a seamlessly and comprehensively connected and integrated ASEAN that will promote competitiveness, inclusiveness, and a greater sense of Community" by year 2025.

The said vision aims to connect the region in three dimensions: physical, institutional, and people to people. To attain this, the organization has to strategically work on the following areas: sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence, and people mobility.

In other words, the ASEAN connectivity will serve as the backbone of all efforts to bring member-states together and achieve the vision of a single community.

Connecting lands and seas, opening ports

Among the crucial aspects of the ASEAN connectivity is physically linking the 10 member-states that have a combined geographical area equivalent to about 3 percent of the world's land mass.

To strengthen infrastructure critical to transport, communications, and energy, projects would basically involve

improving roads, bridges, railroads, and runways to make transportation of goods and services, and people mobility across ASEAN easier and more efficient.

Furthermore, ASEAN's strategic location in between bodies of water makes it necessary to open up ports. The region has about 51,000 kilometers of navigable inland waterways (ASEAN Secretariat 2016). If the plan on upgrading ship and cargo capacity in 47 ports becomes successful, about 30–40 percent of the costs will be reduced in some ASEAN areas. This can be advantageous especially for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which aims to create a single market and production base.

ASEAN's Deputy Secretary-General for AEC, S. Pushpanathan, emphasized the importance of physically connecting the member-states of ASEAN, noting that "the distance that separate countries become less formidable when infrastructure can literally build highways and bypasses to the hubs of commerce and the hearts and minds of peoples" (Pushpanathan 2010). An efficient transportation infrastructure could also significantly reduce logistics costs for businesses.

In an opinion piece, he added that infrastructure projects will greatly benefit the member-states, especially the lower-income and landlocked countries and the hinterlands, as they "will gain

Figure 1. ASEAN Community 2025



Source: ASEAN Secretariat (2016)

access to mainstream economic activities, which include exports to larger regional markets and linkages with regional production networks and industrial zones" (Pushpanathan 2011).

In a digital era where people all over the world can easily connect with each other across time and distance, ASEAN connectivity also means improving the communications infrastructure so that no country is left behind.

Moreover, a steady supply of energy is also imperative to boost trade in the region. Velautham (2015) said that about one-fifth of ASEAN still has no access to electricity despite having abundant energy resources. ASEAN connectivity aims to address this by connecting energy resources—through the setting up of pipelines—across the region.

By the end of 2015, the fourth ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation 2016–2025 has been finalized. It lays down the region's framework for achieving energy security, accessibility, affordability, and sustainability in the next 10 years.

Easing regulations, facilitating free flow of goods

One of the main advantages of having an integrated region is having seamless trade. Once the means to move from one country to another has been provided, there would be freer flow of goods, services, and workers within and across the region, bolstering the perception that the region is an attractive market.

This requires making trade and investment less cumbersome by streamlining regulatory processes and harmonizing procedures, requirements, and standards across ASEAN. However, the respective laws and regulations of each country would pose a great challenge to achieve this. Member-states should be able to work on being "independent but connected" (ASEAN Secretariat 2014).

The driving force of economic growth in the ASEAN region are the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that comprise 90 percent of companies in the region and contribute to as much as 60 percent of the region's gross domestic product (ASEAN Secretariat 2014).

Right now, ASEAN is recognized as one of the world's largest economic zones. Making it easier to transport goods and services, reducing cumbersome processes, or simply opening more ways for people to move around the region would help facilitate the growth of ASEAN SMEs.

Boosting tourism, cultural identity, and knowledge sharing

Despite all the possible opportunities that an ASEAN Community can bring, efforts will not be felt if the peoples of ASEAN do not appreciate their own region and ASEAN itself. In a PIDS study by Siar et al. (2017), Filipinos were found to have moderate awareness of ASEAN as well as moderate appreciation of its

benefits. These findings resonate with the surveys conducted in other ASEAN countries, as revealed by the consolidated findings from the 10 member-states analyzed and released by the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (Intal et al. 2017). Enhancing information, promotion, and education activities could address this problem and promote connectivity at the same time, creating a stronger sense of cultural identity and more harmonious relations among ASEAN peoples.

The ASEAN University Network is one of the most exciting projects under the ASEAN connectivity. It is expected to bring significant benefits to students by giving them an opportunity to study in any ASEAN member-country of their choice.

Promoting ASEAN connectivity will also boost tourism by capitalizing on the diverse history and culture of the region. Easing visa requirements across ASEAN would encourage greater mobility of people.

Knowledge sharing will also be one of the positive impacts of a connected region. Skilled laborers and professionals in the areas of engineering, architecture, nursing, tourism, medicine, dentistry, accountancy, and land surveying can move freely to any country of their choice through mutual recognition arrangements (Siar and Malana 2015).

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