Enhancing the Asean-ness of Asean citizens

The regional grouping turns 50 this year, but the concept of one community could be further enhanced by giving its citizens more benefits.

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The designation of the region as South-East Asia as the “lands below the winds” was first recorded in the book, The Ship Of Sulaiman, by Muhammad bin Thalib in 1646. The phrase was then borrowed and popularised by Anthony Field after he gave his magnum opus, the title of Southeast Asia in The Age Of Commerce (1400-1680). The Lands Below The Winds.

Three centuries later, five relatively new independent nation states—Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines—also lie “below the winds”, declaring their intention to set up a supranational institution that was named the Association of South-East Asian Nations, or Asean. This year marks the golden jubilee anniversary of Asean, the seventh-largest economy in the world and home to nearly 9 per cent of the population.

This regional grouping has been successful in bringing peace, stability and prosperity despite the fact that the initiative was established in the midst of the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War. As well, nation-borders were still coping with the impact of colonialism and imperialism.

Today, Asean has doubled its membership, which now includes Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. Within the half-century journey of regional cooperation, Asean has become more ambitious in transforming its diverse region into a single market, or Asean Economic Community (AEC). Inspired by the European Union, the AEC aims to create a mobility of goods, services, capital and skilled labour.

Despite Asean’s remarkable achievements and ambitious future organisational superstructure, its creation as a regional community has been far from satisfactory.

For five decades, the formation process of Asean has been characterised as elitist, where public involvement has been minimal, with the Asean-ness of the region at the state level.

This led to a situation where the “Asean-ness” of its citizens has not been strongly established.

The key to this involves two aspects: the need for awareness and participation. While awareness indicates knowledge about Asean and its institutions, participation involves public engagement in a people-centred Asean.

Furisting “Asean-ness” is undoubtedly a challenge, as Asean society is pluralist. South-East Asia is home to thousands of ethnic groups that are extremely diverse in terms of linguistics, religion, history and cultural practices.

GIVE MEMBERSHIP SOME PRIVILEGES

Given this high degree of plurality, Asean should focus on promoting itself as one community by celebrating Asean’s rich heritage, cultural practices and religious traditions that make it unique and distinctive.

For that, the regional community building process should take into consideration two aspects:

- Boosting public awareness and offering privileges to South-East Asian “citizens”. The former provides an opportunity for all South-East Asian citizens to build a sense of togetherness, while the latter enhances the sense of Asean ownership through the nature of a sense of “citizenship.” For a long time, the concept of Asean citizenship has been left unexplored. However, it could be a powerful, symbolic investment to interconnect and integrate the region with the people by mobilising the notion of citizenship.

South-East Asia citizens should be able to enjoy certain benefits and privileges, South-East Asia may just conceive of the regional institution as state-based, with few rights and entitlements for its people, many of whom are constantly on the move. A promising example is Singapore, which charges Asean citizens lower school fees than non-Asean foreigners.

This example illustrates what the Asean entity can and must do. Unfortunately, such privileges are still in their infancy. The free visa enabling Asean citizens to travel among each other member state is not something exclusive, as Asean countries also grant free visas to non-Asean nationals with a perception to promote tourism.

Asean also learns from “One vision, one identity, one community” that currently the prevailing trend is that if it should exist, it will be dependent on the willingness of each state to include Asean citizens within its national boundaries.

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* S.E.A View is weekly column on South-East Asean affairs.