

## **ASEAN's socio-cultural pillar: A child with "special needs"**

The "achievement" of prominence for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) in 2010 seems to be the inauguration of the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) at the 16<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in April 2010 at Hanoi. The Commission, hailed as a turning point for the ASEAN region at its launch in Hanoi, is seen by ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan as the starting point for the creation of a "compassionate community, a sharing and caring community". With the ACWC's launch, there is now a shared platform to discuss and address pivotal issues of human trafficking, gender discrimination, child labour, and migration.

However, not many are aware of a separate mechanism – the ASEAN Committee on Migrant Workers – which had been established under the labour cooperation framework of the socio-cultural community. A more legally-binding instrument on migrant worker protection is being developed.

There is fading memory of the ASEAN-led coordination mechanism that brokered a breakthrough on humanitarian assistance and cooperation in ASEAN, and opened up more venues of strategic cooperation in disaster management and emergency response. One could also cite the adoption of the UN-ASEAN Strategic Plan on Disaster Management (at the 3<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN-UN Summit held in October 2010 in Hanoi) as another "boasting point" for the ASEAN socio-cultural community. This, following the entry into force of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in December 2009 and the operationalisation of the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) in 2011, will establish ASEAN's mark in tackling disasters and humanitarian emergencies.

For every headline, the many areas of ASEAN socio-cultural cooperation can list several quiet accomplishments in their ongoing work.

Mechanisms and procedures on pandemic preparedness are now entrenched in the ASEAN health cooperation framework, building on the 2003 SARS outbreak and ongoing avian flu concerns in the region. Cooperation in science and technology are supporting ASEAN efforts on disaster risk reduction, climate change, energy and food security. The ASEAN Television News Exchange has extended beyond ASEAN borders to Eurovision. A regional database on poverty and well-being is being developed.

Socio-cultural priorities are spread across the three ASEAN community pillars. Stakeholders at whom the benefits of socio-cultural cooperation are aimed – i.e. the peoples of ASEAN – are at the core of every ASEAN process, be it security, economic or social. It has always been difficult to define and communicate the developments and achievements of ASEAN socio-cultural cooperation because of this diffuseness.

Perhaps this was at the back of many ASEAN officials' minds when they adopted a Communication Plan for the ASCC to "enhance public awareness and shape their perceptions and generate greater participation of the public in building the ASCC" at the 16<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in April. The ASCC Communication Plan, according to the ASEAN Secretariat, aims to illustrate the relevancy and need for the ASCC to the general public.

The plan is a recognition of sorts of the shortcomings in ASEAN community-building. While communities of practice have been built by bringing together experts and practitioners in the many areas of ASEAN cooperation, this has not yet been translated or expanded to generating

a sense of community among the citizens of ASEAN member states. With 2015 and the deadline for the ASEAN Community looming, the ASCC Communication Plan has its work cut out in explaining what the ASCC can do for a people-centred, socially responsible ASEAN Community and in engendering ownership and support for the plan.

The ASCC has been likened in the past to an afterthought to the two other ASEAN community pillars – the ASEAN Political Security Community and the ASEAN Economic Community. With security the logical extension of ASEAN’s founding imperatives, and economic survival driving the realisation of an integrated ASEAN market, socio-cultural priorities have had to be justified as “linked inextricably with the economic and security pillars” on the grounds that “economic integration and security alone will not be sufficient” to achieve the ASEAN Community. In fact, echoes of these justifications can still be found in the list of priorities set by the latest meeting of the ASCC Council in October 2010. Human resource development for economic recovery is included as one of the priorities for community-building, together with responding to global challenges (epidemics, climate change and disasters), improving social welfare for women and children, and improving ASEAN awareness through cultural cooperation.

ASEAN’s focus on the challenges that ASCC has to tackle, and the recurring stress on the elusiveness of a shared ASEAN identity, suggests that the ASCC is like a child with special needs. While this seems a rather tragic and extreme analogy, ASEAN is taking the right approach by planning for an uncertain future and adjusting milestones and expectations. Pessimists may mourn this incrementalism as lost potential but an optimist will try to find strengths in the weaknesses. Child development experts have said that parents with children of special needs are often more flexible, compassionate, stubborn and resilient than other parents. ASEAN will have to be such a parent if the ASCC is to triumph over its challenges one day.

*The author is Lead Researcher for Socio-Cultural Affairs at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS. These are her personal views.*