ASEAN Community Built Through Education: With Thailand as a Key Contributor

Nisarat Karnrat
College of Liberal Arts, Shanghai University
faithhims@163.com

Abstract: ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) was established in 1967 with the Declaration of Bangkok. In 1976, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation was signed among member countries, which set the basis of ASEAN as a regional security organization. At its 30th anniversary, the ASEAN leaders proposed the ASEAN Vision 2020 to deepen further integration of member states, to form a resilient ASEAN Community, which will be based on three pillars – political-security community, economic community, and socio-cultural community. The Cha-am Hua Hin Summit in 2009 adopted the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community to guide the member countries to work for this common vision. Education is considered as an important way to realize such kind of integration process. For this, ASEAN ministers passed two important documents: the Five-Year Work Plan on Education and the Curriculum Sourcebook. Communication via English is put as a key tool. Thailand has played an important role during this process as one of the founding states. In 2018, when Thailand took the chairmanship again, it became a new opportunity to push cooperation between ASEAN and Thailand. For example, the Thai government adapted its education policy according to the ASEAN education plan, including promoting English teaching in primary and secondary schools. As the only country never colonized in South East Asia, Thailand really has some privileges compared to other member countries. In particular, its meditative role between the East and the West through the Cold War era, will also help it develop as an education hub, to push forward the ASEAN community.

Key Words: ASEAN Community, Education, Thailand, English

1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is set up with the aims of maintaining and managing the increasing internal and external conflicts and threats to the region after the Second World War as well as during the Cold War. Around the 1940s and 1960s, Indonesia (1945), Philippines (1946), Malaysia (1963), Singapore (1965) were achieving independence from colonization respectively. Thailand avoided dominion status during the 19th and early 20th centuries, but like the others occupied by Japanese troops. These newly born countries, in terms of national building, faced internal problems such as civil war and internal conflicts. These problems have motivated Southeast Asian countries to consider a form of regional organization that can be an alternative for regional peace foundation so that they can concentrate more on building a nation. ASEAN was a viable political alliance in a political atmosphere chilled by ideological conflicts of the Cold War tension, the renewal of “armed struggle” in Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, as well as regional disputes between Malaysia and Philippines over Sabah and Sarawak. In the 1970s and 1980s, ASEAN gained a substantial local and international profile through its role in coordinating opposition during Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia.

The organization for regional cooperation, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA),¹ attempted to create peace and improve regional ties in Southeast Asia during the post-WW2 era. It was not long after when the ASA fell short of becoming a viable sub-regional organization due to the conflicts between member states and difficult negotiations with Indonesia about joining ASA. Southeast Asian nations again tried to revive relations between themselves. Therefore, a conference was held on August in 1967 and produced the Declaration of Bangkok.² The five founding member states, Indonesia,

¹ The ASA was set up on the July 31, 1961 and involved the union of three countries: Malaya, Thailand, and Philippines. It fell short due to numerous factors, including ASA's inability to obtain endorsements from other Southeast Asian countries, most crucially Indonesia, and the breakdown of bilateral relations between two of its members – Malaya and Philippines – over the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.
Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, agreed on a “treaty of amity and cooperation” for the “peace settlement of regional dispute” under the principles of non-interference and decision making through consensus. It was during the 30th anniversary of ASEAN when the ASEAN leaders adopted the ASEAN Vision 2020.

With the need to achieve more cohesive growth through greater regional cooperation, the ASEAN Leaders issued the Declaration of Bali Concord II during the Summit in 2003 to establish the ASEAN Community in 2020. The primary aims of the ASEAN Community were to increase its collective bargaining power and competitiveness of ASEAN in the international arena and to increase ASEAN's capacity to cope with new global threats affecting the region. That is to say, an ASEAN Community would make the region more connected, implying improved exchange, strength capability and immunity like a family. The launch of the ASEAN Community has drawn lukewarm responses in comparison unfavorably with the European Union. The founding members of both organizations initiated the regional integration processes as a means of developing a greater region. While the European Union (EU), a political and economic union of 28 European states, achieved in a highly integrated community, but is not the model for ASEAN Community building. ASEAN still being in the process of regionalization means that it tends to work stronger intra-ASEAN relations to make it more effective for solving problems.

Meanwhile, ASEAN Charter used as the Constitution of ASEAN, sets the rules for closer cooperation. Therefore, the agreement on ASEAN depends on the member countries whether or not to follow, distinct from the EU that the member states have voluntarily agreed to give up part of their sovereignty to European Commission on behalf of the member states. ASEAN leaders adopted an ASEAN Charter to make ASEAN a legal basis and institutional framework for ASEAN in 2007 in order to realize these aims. At the 14th ASEAN Summit in 2009, in Cha-am Hua Hin of Thailand, the Leaders adopted the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community (2009-2015), which set out as an outline of the steps that the members will take towards establishing the ASEAN Community. According to Bali Concord II, the ASEAN Community has structured around three pillars of cooperation, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Since then, ASEAN states have made considerable efforts in three dimensions of ASEAN Community in order to build a community of peace, economic prosperity, cultural diversity, and social stability.

This move towards achieving greater regional integration and an enhanced position on the international states has brought increasing attention on the role of Education as a tool. However, it is challenging to promote ASEAN Community through education as the member states still cling the education systems to a colonial method, and do not share a common education policy, with each state choosing to priority various aspects of their educational landscape to focus on and develop further. As a result, the diverse educational system in the region does not support students and staff mobility. Therefore, to deepening education cooperation across Southeast Asia to build a strong Community, ASEAN Education Ministers adopted two critical documents in the education sector between the members and regional partners. The 5-Year Work Plan relating to higher education is a general statement which involves promoting greater student mobility, while the Curriculum Sourcebook, a
teaching resource for primary and secondary schools, aims to facilitate students' learning of the essential concepts in five themes.

In brief, although ASEAN's purpose and objective at the time of establishment were to strengthen regional co-operation and to deal with political and security issues during the Cold War era. However, in the new era of international relations and globalization, the association expanded its framework broadly to add social and cultural dimensions. Thailand has played a crucial role since ASEAN was established in Bangkok 51 years ago as one of the founding members together with Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore. In 2018, Thailand took over the ASEAN chairmanship from Singapore, and it is crucial for the country to drive ASEAN forward to achieve the ultimate benefits for Thais and people across the ASEAN regions. The ASEAN Community will be formed in order to improve the region, linking and opening up the borders of the ten nations. Education is used as a particular force to move from concerned political and security issues to social-cultural concerns. This leads to my questions: Why there is a need for ASEAN Education Policy to build a strong Community? Did Thai government have problems in cooperation with education policy for promoting ASEAN community? To Strength the project of ASEAN Community, education as a vital tool to achieve the goal of an active community, this research makes policy suggestions at teacher's ability and teaching-learning methods with some reflections on nation-building.

1. State of the Research Field
This section discusses literatures on regional integration, ASEAN's history, achievements, and problems, as well as the idea of ASEAN community building and the role of education in supporting its goals written by both international and Thai scholars.

1) ASEAN: To Build a Regional Community through Education
Regarding the founding of ASEAN, national building during the post- World War II era is the main reason. As Mohamad et. al proposed,7 at the end of the 1950s and 1960s, the Southeast Asia countries were considered at its infancy since most achieved independence. The world at that time was struggling with ideological conflict of two opposing major power blocks with the different political, economic and social system. As the confrontation grows, smaller countries feel their security more venerable, thus the Southeast Asia countries were concentrating more on strengthening internal security. Donald E. Weatherbee (2009) also found that ASEAN is an intergovernmental platform to promote inter-state cooperation to supplements its member countries’ interests. The concept of Southeast Asia as a geopolitical region is a product of World War II in the Pacific. At the outset of World War II, Thailand was the only independent Southeast Asian state. Southeast Asia countries were pushed for their independence which began in Burma, becoming independent from British Commonwealth in 1948, Indonesia 1949, Cambodia and Laos PDR in 1953, Vietnam 1954, Malaysia 1957 and Singapore 1965 respectively. ASEAN was created in response to the environmental uncertainties after they were independent of Western colonial.

The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace, a monograph to honor ASEAN for its extraordinary achievements in facilitating and fostering regional and global peace, particularly peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region, points out that ASEAN has developed an ecosystem of peace which has benefited many of its neighbors, dialogue partners, the region itself and the wider Asia Pacific region. Five key factors explain this resilient ASEAN ecosystem of peace: the fear of communism, the role of strong leaders, geopolitical luck, market-oriented economic policies, and ASEAN-based regional networks. Suriya Jindavong says, ASEAN was set up to build trust between countries in the region.


ชาญวิทย์เกษตรศิริและกาญจนีละอองศรี (Charnvit Kasetsiri and Kanchanee La-ongsari). อาเซียนศึกษา (ASEAN studies).
The founder thought that it was inevitable that they had to work together to stop the war between them. Therefore, ASEAN is a tool to eliminate conflicts in order to allow each country to develop its economy and society, according to the principle that each country needs without interfering with each other’s internal affairs.\footnote{Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng, “The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace” (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017).}

However, due to “ASEAN way” its aversion to intervening in any member states’ affairs, ASEAN demonstrated a little capability to handle either traditional or non-traditional regional challenges, although it helps to mediate peace talks between the two countries. Pia Ranada (2017) mentions that there are many that have emerged in discussions at the 31st ASEAN Summit about how ASEAN can strengthen its core and build more resilience. The issues that were put on for discussion are: to lessen barriers to trade among ASEAN countries; to improve the investment environment; to better coordinate with each other to address the Muslim extremism; to work more effectively with national border; and the run from state persecution of Muslim Rohingya. Prapat Thethepattrarung says that although ASEAN has been accomplished in the past 50 years, ASEAN has not yet achieved its mission of “one vision, one identity, and one community.” There are internal and external factors preventing the progress of ASEAN. The origin causes of the problem are that the member countries do not trust each other and the difference in the ASEAN member states contributes to the lack of a common identity. These can often lead to many serious issues such as political conflict, border conflict, economic competition, and easy to have interfered.

The dramatic change in the political, economic and social contexts of the 21st century caused ASEAN facing new challenges such as terrorism, natural disasters, drug trafficking and trafficking in persons. Besides, there is a need to increase the bargaining power and the ability to compete with neighboring countries in the region and on the international stage. In addition, ASEAN recognized that sustainable economic development requires a secure political environment based on a strong foundation of mutual interests generated by economic cooperation and political solidarity.\footnote{An article by the Ministry of Education and some others\footnote{ASEAN Center, “รายงานการประชุมผู้นำอาเซียนฉันท์ 2558 (ASEAN Community),” วิทยาลัยอาชีวศึกษาลำปาง (Lampang Vocational Education College), Accessed April 3, 2019, http://www.lamvanuev.ac.th/lvcasean/index.html.} acknowledges that ASEAN leaders agreed that ASEAN should work together to be stronger and more stable, therefore announcing Declaration of Bali Concord II to establish an ASEAN Community by 2020. As stated in the Declaration, the ASEAN community thoroughly supports integration and cooperation in three aspects. In term of politics, they launched ASEAN Political, and Security Community (APSC) aims to ensure that the people and ASEAN Member States countries live in peace with one another to solve international problems in peaceful means and democratic and harmonious environment. Besides, to promote and strengthen the interaction between ASEAN and other worldwide civil societies. To facilitate the movement of goods and integrated economy within ASEAN as well as to increase the ability of the region to compete with other major economies, to foster balanced economic development and to facilitate economic integration, ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was founded. Regarding Socio-Cultural issues of ASEAN countries, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) was established with aims to improve the living standards in ASEAN Community and to build a community of ASEAN nations in harmony, caring and sharing towards people.

Rapid environmental changes are creating uncertainty and complexity in society. Therefore, investing in education is critical to economic development. Learners of all ages are required to develop analytical and critical thinking, skills and attitude that would make them more familiar with new
technologies in order to deal with rapidly changing at the national and global level. Ramon R. del Rosario Jr. (2015), observed that education played a crucial role in supporting the ASEAN economic integration. The aim of ASEAN integration in 2015 was to address the problems of unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Education responded to make the lives of the ASEAN population as many people as possible. The youth must be ready to face the opportunities and challenges of the regional economy. Schools must provide the youth with the skills that are required by the regional market.

They are very few studies that focus on the third ASEAN Community: the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community especially education. Nevertheless, there are many articles as well as news reports on the education integration provided by ASEAN, because it is the newest one in comparison with the other two in the community (political and security, and economic (AEC)). Another reason for the lack of literature on the ASCC, in particular, Thailand, may be the complexity of the social and cultural dimensions in regional integration. The ASEAN, as an object of study, has received attention from many regional and international scholars, while most focus on political-security aspects of ASEAN regionalism or economics integration issue.

2. Methodology and Content

The main primary resources are official statements, policy papers, as well as news reports, both from ASEAN and Thai government, and either in English or Thai language. The author would like to find a balanced view according to the descriptions respectively from both sides and in different languages. In each part, some policy analysis will be followed, with reference to research papers.

Following this introduction, the central part of the thesis is divided into two chapters. The first will be focused on the establishment of ASEAN, the evolution of the ASEAN Community, including the Political and Security Community (APSC), Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, Education’s Role and Significance in ASEAN Community Building, 5-Year Work Plan on Education (2011-2015), ASEAN Curriculum sourcebook, ASEAN Education: Policy and priority on cooperation, and well as ASEAN and its partnership nation's education cooperation. The second moves to a general overview of Thailand’s education, the current education policy, structure of schooling, students' outcomes, Administration Management, as well as Thailand and External Partners’ cooperation on education, including ASEAN member states and Dialogue Partners. In conclusion, I will draw up the conclusions of this study and make the suggestions for policy on education.

3. Conclusion

ASEAN, a regional intergovernmental organization, consists of ten Southeast Asian states: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam and Thailand. The genesis of the ASEAN can be traced at the height of the Cold War which was responsible to reduce tensions between members as a mean to attain political stability. In 1967, five founding member states, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand came together to form ASEAN. The reason was for collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interests, to promote Southeast Asian studies and to maintain close beneficial cooperation with similar aims and purposes. It tends to a more secure Southeast Asia region to enable the countries of the region to concentrate more on their nation-building and national integration. The reason became clear after the TAC was concluded to the foundational basis of ASEAN in 1976. The principle stipulated the conditions in their relations with one another by non-interference in the domestic affairs of nations and the consensus to resolve issues. This means that member states are able to defend their interests and resist regional integration, including respect of sovereignty, a friendly and cooperative relationship, as well as maintaining the privacy of the domestic affairs of described countries.

Challenges like the Asian financial crisis of 1997, in which the devaluation of the currency hit the Asian Tigers and in particular Thailand, and the rise of China and India, whose size and growth rates in economics and lower-priced capital goods have attracted foreign investment, and trading partners prompted ASEAN to contemplate again its mission of maintaining peace, stability within the region.
and supporting national strategies for development. Consequently, at the 30th Anniversary Summit in Malaysia in 1997, ASEAN Leaders approved the ASEAN Vision 2020 which seeks to further deepen the integration of ASEAN member states and resilient ASEAN Community. The ASEAN Community would be based on three pillars of cooperation: security, economy, and socio-culture. Member states also agreed that a common identity was necessary to forge closer cooperation of member states and 600 million citizens to build a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and harmonious and in which the well-being, livelihood, and welfare of its citizens are enhanced. The essential to the success of a common identity can be created through education, such as communication in English for general understanding. Education is a form of socialization whereby people learn about ideas and attitudes, and people with greater knowledge will have more positive attitudes towards other ASEAN member states. Thus the Roadmap for the ASEAN Community was adopted by the ASEAN Leaders at the 14th ASEAN Summit in Cha-am, Thailand.

The ASEAN Community will foster mutual cooperation among its ten members especially in terms of economic by creating a single production base that will lead to increasing demand for more skilled and high quality of labor due to these economic activities within the region. The ASEAN Community clearly has the potential to lead to significant job growth in the region. AEC could increase overall growth of GDP by 7.1% and create 14 million additional jobs by 2025, according to the study of ILO-ADB on "ASEAN Community 2015: Managing Integration for Better Jobs and Shared Prosperity." It clarifies that if any ASEAN member citizen has professional skills with better English-speaking such as Singapore, Malaysia and Philippines, there will be greater changes and high benefits for them over like Thailand. As education sector played a vital role in supporting the ASEAN Community in all three pillars, the number of education-related projects and training were carried by ASEAN Ministers of Education in order to implement, for example AUN Program. The main activities of the program are student exchange program through common credit transfer systems and other enabling mechanisms, joint research between member universities and cooperation among education institutes in the region. The regional cooperation in education can help to facilitate the exchange of best practices and acquisition of new techniques among its members which will help Thailand to improve its educational quality.

After the launch of five-years Work Plan on Education and ASEAN Curriculum Sourcebook, the Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards, Ministry of Education of Thailand revised on Basic Education Core Curriculum of Thai curriculum which based on the sourcebook of ASEAN. With the five-years Work Plan on Education, Thai government has launched relevant strategic goals and enhancing closer cooperation on education with other ASEAN member states through the various projects to improve the ability of students and staff. Moreover, the Ministry of Education adjusted the academic calendar of Thailand from mid-May to June in accordance with the other ASEAN member states to support students and exchanges program.

The cooperation in education themes is a political instrument to develop positive impression and instrumental aspects. International education cooperation is a positive aspect of the relations among countries that were contributing to social development which involves learning the values, knowledge, and skills such as respect for cultural diversity. Moreover, directed to the qualification of the workforce of a country, education cooperation contributes to economic development. To enlarge the knowledge and experience base for students and staff, many institutions provided more internationally diverse student body and faculty and more opportunities for their faculty to join international research networks. The the Commission on Higher Education statistics in 2013 shows that the vast majority of international students come from Asian neighboring countries, with China being the largest sending country to study in Thailand. Therefore, it is possible that Thailand will becomes the education hub of ASEAN member nations.