



CHAPTER 12

A People-Oriented and People-Centred ASEAN Community: A Cambodian Youth Perspective

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ASEAN IN RETROSPECT AND ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING

ASEAN's development, in retrospect, can be categorized into four main phases. The first, from 1967 to 1978, was known as the inception and solidarity forming period. The five founding ASEAN states had reached common ground on the initial inception of the regional grouping. The second, from 1977 to 1999, was known as the membership expansion period, which saw the regional grouping grow from five to ten members by 1999. The third, from 1998 to 2007, was the formalization and vision-setting period. During this time, ASEAN established the Bali Concord II and initiated discussion on the creation of the ASEAN Community in 2003, while also adopting its first-ever legal document, known as the ASEAN Charter, in 2007. This document outlined the fundamental principles for member states, legal status, institutional frameworks and other governance structures of ASEAN.

Looking back, despite some internal disputes, ASEAN has achieved a reputation for maintaining regional peace and stability in Southeast Asia for more than five decades. Amitav Acharya for example has labelled ASEAN “a durable regional grouping in the developing world” (Acharya 2013). Such praise is generous but not without reason.

First, ASEAN managed to convince all of its member states to adopt the organization's core principle, the “ASEAN Way”. The ASEAN Way creates a culture of consultation and consensus diplomacy, norms which have enabled ASEAN to solve many problems peacefully over the last five decades. Amitav Acharya defined this type of diplomacy as “a high degree of discreteness, informality, pragmatism, expediency, consensus building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles, which are often contrasted with the adversarial posturing and legalistic decision-making procedures in Western multilateral negotiations” (Acharya 1997).

Second, the sometimes criticized “non-intervention” policy, which ASEAN has embraced for several decades, has also proven to be useful for the region. The West views it as a fragile policy, slowing the regional integration process and downgrading ASEAN's reputation for solving political-security issues. Nonetheless, ASEAN's rejection of such criticism proves that it can maintain peace and prevent its member states from using force to solve regional conflicts (Mahbubani and Severino 2014). In other words, the practice of non-intervention engages ASEAN's method of quiet diplomacy and the ASEAN Troika. Though it has not been completely effective in solving regional conflicts since ASEAN's inception, the chance of war breaking out in the region is lower as a result.

Third, ASEAN has shown its support for multilateral diplomacy and commitment to building a peaceful, rules-based regional order. This can be seen for example in the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) for political-security matters in 1994 and the ASEAN Plus Three to engage East Asian powers, namely Japan, China, and South Korea, in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997.

These developments were followed by other initiatives, such as the East Asia Summit in 2005 and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) in Hanoi in 2010, just to mention a few. In all of these meetings, ASEAN discussed various topics with major powers, including regional security, economic and trade cooperation, health, and environmental issues (Ibid.). These achievements highlighted ASEAN's effort towards the realization of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, a people-centred and people-oriented regional community that makes the region more politically cohesive, economically prosperous, and socially harmonious.

But ASEAN Community building goes well beyond the achievements mentioned above. Currently, building a people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN Community is one of the main priorities for ASEAN. In fact, during its inception period, ASEAN merely resembled a group of allies coming together to contain the spread of communism in the region. However, in the present context, the group's *raison d'être* has shifted away from such a limited initial purpose. With globalization, free trade and greater economic integration becoming dominant forces in the post-Cold War era, the idea of building an "ASEAN Community" first gained attention in the Bali Concord II in 2003. The concord defined the ASEAN Community as a "Community of Opportunities" for all ASEAN peoples, one which is "closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing [to ensure] durable peace, stability, and shared prosperity in their region" (ASEAN Secretariat 2012).

The ASEAN Community comprises of three main pillars, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community (ASCC). ASEAN's efforts in building a greater sense of a common identity reflect the member states' shared objective in enhancing the well-being of ASEAN people through promoting socio-economic development, maintaining regional peace and stability, and enhancing the prosperity of respective societies in Southeast Asia.

The ASEAN Charter elaborates the significance of the "inclusiveness of the community", stating that all sectors of ASEAN societies shall put more effort into regional integration and community building (Seksan Anantasirikiat 2021). For several decades, ASEAN has been seen as a top-down intergovernmental organization. The leaders at the top are the main decision makers regarding the realization of the ASEAN Community. Some argued that this so-called top-down approach might not be effective in promoting a "Community for all". The question therefore is whether such a conceptualization of the ASEAN Community is inclusive enough for its citizens? What are the opportunities and challenges facing ASEAN in building a people-oriented and people-centred community? Do ASEAN leaders ever think of youth participation as an important component in developing such a community? Does youth diplomacy have a crucial role to play in the process of ASEAN Community building?

A PEOPLE-ORIENTED AND PEOPLE-CENTRED ASEAN COMMUNITY

“People-centred” and “people-oriented” must be properly conceptualized if we are to understand what is meant by these two terms given that there are multiple possible interpretations. In this context, they focus on the “peoples” of ASEAN, but where exactly is the place of the people in terms of ASEAN’s working mechanisms? To what extent has ASEAN achieved the people-centred and people-oriented ASEAN Community it speaks of creating?

The term “people-centred” was first introduced by the Eminent Person Group (EPG) when drafting the ASEAN Charter in 2007 before it came into force in 2008. Since then, the term has been used in other official documents regarding ASEAN-related meetings. In 2014 for example, Malaysia first used it officially during its ASEAN Chairmanship under the theme “Towards the People-Centred ASEAN Community” (ASEAN Information Center, n.d.). The country also proposed an initiative in 2005 with an interface meeting between selected young ASEAN leaders and ASEAN state leaders. This commitment however led to an internal disagreement in ASEAN over the wording and differing interpretations of “people-centred” and “people-oriented” (ASEAN Information Center, n.d.).

It was argued that the term “people-centred” contradicts ASEAN’s status as an inter-governmental organization with a top-down approach, an identity held since its inception. In other words, decisions were to be made by the governments of member states, not ordinary people. Besides, some experts argued that the term could be wrongly interpreted as “mass-mobilization”, which is strongly prohibited in some ASEAN Member States.

Eventually, the regional grouping reached a consensus and decided to use both “people-oriented” and “people-centred” together to signify that policy inputs should come from all segments of ASEAN society, including civil society organizations, youth, and grass-roots groups (ASEAN Information Center n.d.). This consensus was reflected in the 26th Kuala Lumpur Declaration on “A People-Centred and People-Oriented ASEAN” in 2015, stating that “all people, stakeholders and sectors of society can contribute to and enjoy the benefits from a more integrated and connected Community encompassing enhanced cooperation in the political security, economic and socio-cultural pillars for sustainable, equitable and inclusive development” (ASEAN Secretariat 2015). The statement encourages the regional grouping to welcome involvement from all non-state stakeholders to gather fresh ideas and inputs that may be useful for policy formulation. However, some scholars see the process as potentially challenging, as it remains a question of how successful non-governmental activities can be and how effective they are in building a people-centred and people-oriented community (ASEAN Information Center 2016).

The ASEAN-China UNDP Symposium in 2018 also highlighted the significance of a “people-centred” approach in ASEAN. The term was likened to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the principle of “no one is left behind”. A people-centred and people-oriented ASEAN Community should therefore be one of inclusiveness, tackling regional inequality and adopting innovative working mechanisms to promote the implementation of the 2030 agenda on SDGs in a way that also contributes to the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 (UNDP 2018). Furthermore, Vongthep Arthakaivalvatee argued that such a community should emphasize “the desire of the peoples of ASEAN to live in a peaceful, harmonious, inclusive, resilient, and healthy community” (UNDP 2018).

ASEAN’s existing working mechanisms have always included “people-to-people connectivity” as a way to promote closer cooperation among and participation from the peoples of ASEAN. As such, “people-to-people connectivity” is seen as one of the pillars in the Master Plans on ASEAN Connectivity. Meanwhile, the ASEAN Communication Master Plan II (2018–2025) serves as a practical guideline for ASEAN’s awareness-raising campaign developed by the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta (Seksan 2021). Therefore, raising awareness about ASEAN and promoting a sense of belonging to a common community have become key tasks for the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN Foundation. The establishment of the ASEAN Foundation in 1997 during Malaysia’s Chairmanship constituted the first step towards “promoting ASEAN awareness through people-to-people interaction and collaboration within ASEAN stakeholders to build a caring, cohesive, equitable, and peaceful ASEAN Community” (ASEAN Foundation n.d.).

Building a people-centred and people-oriented ASEAN Community is an ongoing, collective job that requires closer collaboration between governments and grassroots civil society actors. Since the working mechanisms in ASEAN are non-binding, the extent to which governments support “people-centred” programmes in the region depends largely on the political will of each member state. In addition to adequate political will however, the successful transition to a people centred community will also require greater awareness and engagement from all segments of society, especially the region’s youth population which constitutes 213 million out of the region’s 620 million people (ASEAN Secretariat 2017).

THE ROLE OF YOUTH DIPLOMACY IN ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING

Diplomacy was conventionally known as an important political activity involving skilful manoeuvring for the purpose of building closer relationships between states. It is a peaceful instrument that allows states to achieve their foreign policy objectives without the need to use force or propaganda (Berridge 2015). For many years, scholars have debated about the complementary roles of track I and track II diplomacy. Track I diplomacy refers to the official diplomatic activities conducted by official representatives of the state.

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While track II experts have been afforded various roles and responsibilities, youth participation in diplomacy has not yet received adequate attention. Can young people play a role in diplomacy, especially given that youth participation in ASEAN is known to have contributed to the ASEAN Community building project? To what extent can youth diplomacy contribute to the process of community building?

As illustrated, the establishment of the ASEAN Foundation is a signal that ASEAN leaders are starting to consider the role of youth diplomacy in the realization of the ASEAN Community Vision. The ASEAN Foundation is a key tool for promoting youth diplomacy across Southeast Asia. Noticeably, in recent years the AF's campaign and hashtags on their social media channels have emphasized, "Think ASEAN, Feel ASEAN, and Be ASEAN (#ThinkASEAN #FeelASEAN #BeASEAN)". These hashtags try to stimulate young peoples' enthusiasm for ASEAN and thus increase their sense of belonging to the ASEAN Community. Meanwhile, the campaign has also created many initiatives seeking to raise awareness of ASEAN and develop the necessary skills for future career success among the youth population. Those initiatives include a digital internship programme, the Model ASEAN Meeting, ASEAN Data Science Explorer, the Social Journalism Competition, eMpowering Youths Across ASEAN, and the ASEAN Leaders' Program, just to mention a few.

These flagship programmes aim to provide young people with professional platforms to engage in ASEAN affairs, reflecting their participation in all three pillars of the ASEAN Community building project (ASEAN Foundation n.d.).

Besides, the ASEAN Youth Development Index highlighted the work of the ASEAN Youth Forum (AYF), providing a new platform for youth empowerment and engagement to build a people-oriented, people-centred, and youth-driven community (ASEAN Youth Development Index 2017). Furthermore, the AYF's slogan "No youth should be left behind" clearly signals that youth diplomacy programmes will inspire young people to engage actively and meaningfully at both the national and regional levels, without leaving any youth behind. (Ibid.).

I wish to share a few of my own practical experiences highlighting the significance of youth diplomacy in ASEAN. In recent years, I have joined several regional programmes on youth development and ASEAN knowledge advancement.

Firstly, a good example of youth diplomacy would be the Young ASEAN Leaders Policy Initiative (YALPI), organized by the Faculty of Political Science at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand. YALPI gathers young people with high potential from across Southeast Asia annually to participate in intensive ASEAN-policy training and equips them with necessary soft skills in public policy. The programme aims to bridge the gap between the experts and students. It supports the youths in providing policy inputs for ASEAN, with any ideas generated being submitted directly to the Royal Thai Government and other relevant ASEAN agencies at the end of the programme. After receiving such intensive training on public policy, YALPI believes that young people's ideas can often be fresh and innovative, which may come from their practical, real world experience with such issues, enabling them to produce a more human-centred policy input.

Secondly, another good example of youth diplomacy would be the Model ASEAN Meeting organized by the ASEAN Foundation and the professional training on ASEAN simulation at the ASEAN Secretariat. Model ASEAN is one of the flagship programmes of the ASEAN Foundation which was supported by the US Mission to ASEAN, attracting significant participation from young people across the member states. The objective of these programmes is to provide young people with a platform to gain an in-depth understanding of ASEAN's working mechanisms and ASEAN regional issues, as well as to offer policy recommendations in response to such issues. More importantly, young people can network, build up their cross-cultural skills, develop a greater mutual understanding and collaborate with one another. ASEAN is a very culturally diverse region. Through these platforms, youth diplomacy plays an increasingly important role in enhancing the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community by fostering people-to-people dialogue, cultural exchange, discussion, and capacity-building activities.

2025 is fast approaching and whether ASEAN can realize its Community Vision depends on its ability to overcome the current challenges it faces. Collective challenges require collective action from all stakeholders. Even though ASEAN is a top-down organization by design, the current pressing issues in the region, like it or not, require both bottom-up and top-down solutions. Therefore, both traditional and modern approaches to diplomacy should play complementary roles in tackling these challenges to ensure a peaceful, stable, and prosperous regional community.

ASEAN needs to prioritize youth diplomacy through regional youth networks. It also needs to equip the younger generation with the necessary skills so that they can become more resilient and innovative in dealing with the uncertainty and unpredictability of the future.

CAMBODIA'S YOUTH DIPLOMACY IN ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING

Unlike the wider ASEAN youth population, Cambodia has a very young demographic makeup after decades of civil war. This highlights the significance of young people's role in Cambodia's national development and membership in ASEAN. Aware of the young generation's importance in bringing positive change to society, the Royal Government of Cambodia adopted the National Policy on Youth Development in 2011, committing to the promotion of youth representation in the national, sub-national, and regional levels (Royal Government of Cambodia 2011). The Ministry of Education, Youths, and Sports has been working closely with the relevant institutions to implement the National Youth Policy, aiming to develop physical strength, consciousness, ethics, values, skills, and intellectual capacity among Cambodian youth.

In recent years, Cambodian youth has engaged not only at the national and sub-national levels, but also at regional level by participating in various programmes and conferences in the ASEAN region. There are also a growing number of initiatives created and led by Cambodian youth. For example, the Young SEAkars Cambodia Chapter is the first and only non-profit youth organization working on advancing ASEAN-China relations at the grassroots level. For almost a year since its inception, they have hosted up to ten webinars and discussions highlighting the importance of ASEAN to Cambodian and Southeast Asian youths. Their holistic programme implementation is centred on youth capacity-building, webinars, socio-cultural exchange, and soft-skills training.

Other initiatives include the Cambodia National Model ASEAN Meeting and Khmer Model ASEAN Meeting, both supported by the ASEAN Foundation. They are the only two regional conferences that allow participants to role play as ASEAN diplomats engaging in ASEAN related discussion and offering youth solutions. One more Cambodian youth initiative is the establishment in 2020 of a Phnom Penh based, youth-led think tank called VOHAR Strategic Sight Centre to nurture a culture of policy research on ASEAN affairs among young people in Cambodia.

Cambodian youth engagement at the regional level is on the rise. In 2018, the Cambodian youth delegation in the ASEAN Youth Exchange Programme-YLEAD at Chulalongkorn University represented the largest number of participants compared to delegations from other Southeast Asia countries.

Moreover, Cambodian delegations have participated in the Young ASEAN Leaders Policy Initiatives, Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Programmes (SSEAYP), and the China-ASEAN Youth Summit.

Youths can positively impact the ASEAN Community through creative social and cultural exchange, debate, interaction, networking, and panel discussions. Young Cambodians are happy to build connections and network with their peers across the region. More Cambodian youth engagement at the regional level is essential for promoting greater ASEAN awareness. This is important for Cambodia's contribution to the ASEAN Community building project, especially during Cambodia's Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2022. This is because youth participation helps to promote "people-to-people diplomacy", allowing the region to better achieve a people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN Community.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR YOUTH IN ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING

The world is entering an age of digitalization known as the information age which can also be considered the age of opportunities for young people. The reason is very simple. Youths are more adaptive to technological change in terms of their innovative perceptions and basic digital literacy skills. In this context, the ASEAN Community needs to be more adaptive by utilizing smart technology and innovation. With fast-changing technologies, the evolution of Industry 4.0, significant enhancements in artificial intelligence, and the emergence of 5G technology, there is no doubt that ASEAN youths have a more important role to play than ever before as an important agent of change and innovation. The ASEAN Leaders' Vision on Resilient and Innovative ASEAN joint statement highlighted their commitment to embracing technology and taking advantage of the new opportunities brought by the digital revolution. This can be achieved by investing in youth, for the young generation can contribute back to society through their superior technological skills (ASEAN Secretariat 2018).

From a personal perspective, young people are "eager and hungry" to learn, actively engaging in social community projects and capacity building programmes. We are living in a modern world where technological advancement is fast-changing, competition is intense, and new job opportunities require us to possess technological skills fit for the 21st century. Young people should not wait for opportunities to come to them; they need to be ready to unlock their potential, enabling them to effectively take advantage of the opportunities the digital age brings. The Young SEAkors (TYS), the first and only youth-led organization based in Southeast Asia, is advancing the ASEAN Community at the grassroots level. Their vision and mission are to help young people across the region develop their cross-cultural competencies and create a new generation of ASEAN regional youth leaders.

The Young SEAkors Cambodia Chapter has hosted a few webinars focusing on the opportunities for young people to be prepared for the future.

They expressed that youths need to keep themselves updated with the vast quantity of information available from the internet, which could help them to enhance their skills and knowledge. If they are eager to learn, they will be able to exploit opportunities both within the country and in the wider region (TYS Cambodia 2021). Although the global pandemic has taken away the freedom to gather in physical places, it is not a barrier stopping youths from learning and gathering online. Technology gives them full access to e-networking and e-social events. During the pandemic, young people have been able to learn virtually in higher numbers than ever before. Such online opportunities include soft-skills training, video conferences, competitions, webinars, and other cultural exchange programmes. In short, all stakeholders should collaborate to ensure that the process of ASEAN Community building involves youth participation for the betterment of their employment opportunities, education, health, and well-being, the four main domains reflected in the ASEAN Youth Development Index (ASEAN Secretariat 2017).

Opportunities and challenges often come together. According to the survey from the State of Southeast Asia 2021 published by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute based in Singapore, for which most of the respondents were youth groups aged 21 to 35, the top 3 challenges include the global pandemic (76%), unemployment (63%), and income disparity (40.7%). ASEAN people also demonstrated their concern about ASEAN's slow and ineffective work in addressing changing political and economic developments. They were also worried about ASEAN's ineffectiveness in dealing with the global pandemic and the geo-political tension between major powers (ISEAS 2021).

To demonstrate the challenges in the development of young people and their engagement in ASEAN Community building, I wish to highlight a few important points. One of the main challenges for young people is unequal opportunities. The development gap between remote and urban areas remains an obstacle in terms of access to technological equipment and digital infrastructure. Young people from these two areas do not benefit equally from the opportunities of the digital age. At the same time, some of them do not have equitable access to good health care, employment opportunities, and quality education, which in turn makes it difficult for them to compete in the job market.

Second, ASEAN awareness is relatively weak in Southeast Asian countries, especially among the youth. According to a Poll on ASEAN Awareness conducted by the ASEAN Secretariat in 2018, the public has relatively limited knowledge of the ASEAN Community. Only 23% know that it comprises three main pillars (ASEAN Secretariat 2018). ASEAN awareness among young people is important in that it helps them to increase their sense of belonging to the ASEAN Community and allows them to identify as an ASEAN citizen. Moreover, it gives them a sense of responsibility which makes them more likely to contribute back to this community.

Third, the lack of encouragement and financial support for youth diplomacy programmes is an enduring challenge. Based on the author's own practical experience,

young people find it difficult to lead youth initiatives which support ASEAN Community building. Financial constraints and limited official recognition from governments and relevant institutions remain a major concern for young people seeking to carry out self-initiated projects. In 2019 and 2020, a Cambodian student group organized a regional conference on the Model ASEAN Summit. The students role-played ASEAN diplomats discussing and debating regional issues concerning the three pillars of the ASEAN Community. Unfortunately, they faced financial issues in supporting their project. The project still went ahead, but with a reduced scale and a more limited impact.

ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING AT THE CROSSROADS: UPHOLDING CENTRALITY AND UNITY AMIDST GREAT POWER RIVALRY

There is a new great power contest in 21st-century international politics between the US and China. Amid such great power rivalry, ASEAN faces a huge challenge in maintaining its centrality and realizing its goal of ASEAN Community building. The rivalry is not an ideological confrontation. Rather, it involves strategic competition on complex issues, with Southeast Asia set to become a potential battlefield. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the US's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) are both competing for influence in the region (Lim 2020; Seksan 2021). ASEAN is now at a crossroads and seeking to navigate this great power rivalry to safeguard regional peace, stability, and the progress of ASEAN Community building (Le 2013).

To promote a rules-based regional order that is people-oriented and people-centred, ASEAN must take its centrality as a matter of necessity when navigating great power rivalry between the US and China. ASEAN centrality requires the bloc to maintain its own interests in the quest for deeper regional integration, security, stability, and prosperity (Yhome 2020). For more than five decades, ASEAN has successfully brought middle powers and superpowers to the discussion table a wide range of issues, a practice in line with the fundamental principles of the ASEAN Community. While ASEAN has been viewed as a potential hub for regionalism in Southeast Asia and beyond, ASEAN centrality is currently being questioned, especially given its apparent weakness in solving regional security issues such as the ongoing South China Sea Dispute, the Cambodia-Thailand border conflict in 2008–2011, and the current Myanmar political crisis. ASEAN centrality, however, should not be defined only by ASEAN's ability to gather regional and global powers to the discussion table, but also by the effectiveness of its mechanisms in bringing about consensus and coherent strategies to deal with emerging regional issues. (Julio 2021).

One of the major challenges facing the ASEAN Community is divergent interests and foreign policy priorities among its respective member states. This leads to the question of how can ASEAN navigate the great power rivalry while also maintaining unity and centrality? The divergent interests of ASEAN members are a clear signal that they may choose sides

if they are forced. For example, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia all seem to strongly support Beijing's BRI policy in Southeast Asia. In contrast, the other claimant states in the South China Sea appear to be highly suspicious of China. The US-China strategic competition in economic and political domains has caused ASEAN to think carefully about its collective position on sensitive issues such as the South China Sea dispute, the FOIP, the BRI, and the COVID-19 socio-economic recovery (East Asia Forum 2020).

Intensifying US-China competition affects ASEAN unity (Ibid.) and thus poses a challenge to the realization of its Community Vision in 2025. However, ASEAN still has space to manoeuvre using an ASEAN-centric approach by promoting the rules-based regional order and playing the role of "enhancer, legitimiser, socialiser, buffer, hedger, and lever of its role in regional and international affairs" (David 2020). One of the clear examples of ASEAN's manoeuvrability is the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific rather than following Washington's more assertive FOIP version (Ibid.).

At the crossroads between US and China, ASEAN will find it hard to remain truly neutral unless, as Julio Amador suggested above, it defines the term "centrality" as "not only being able to gather superpowers, but also to effectively solve regional issues". An effective working mechanism still requires multilateral involvement, which ASEAN needs to prioritize swiftly. This includes collaboration among expert groups, think-tanks, youths, civil society organizations, and other grassroots groups. The goal of the Community Vision calls for inclusiveness and greater unity, better allowing ASEAN centrality to be upheld. Therefore, ASEAN will need to continue to engage in multilateral diplomacy to shape the rules-based regional order and promote a more people-oriented and people-centred Community in the future.

CONCLUSION

Building a people-centred and people-oriented community is one of the major requirements for ASEAN to advance regional integration in Southeast Asia. Since the establishment of ASEAN Concord II in 2003, ASEAN has achieved significant progress towards realizing the Community Vision 2025. Such progress centres around promoting a resilient and inclusive community, a competitive and innovative market, and a sustainable society in Southeast Asia (ASEAN Secretariat 2015). However, ASEAN Community building requires more political will and effort. ASEAN is a top-down organization by design. Hence, it is time to re-think the role of bottom-up diplomacy, which has many roles to play and can meaningfully contribute to the community vision. Given that the youth population accounts for 213 million out of 620 million people in Southeast Asia, young people will play a greater role in shaping this community in the future. As such, their active engagement should be recognised and prioritized now.

The youth population represents the new face of ASEAN's digital transformation. They should exploit the opportunities offered by technological advancement and digitalization to achieve greater self-fulfilment and further contribute to regional progress.

Given that Southeast Asia is facing emerging non-traditional security threats, the disruptions of COVID-19, and growing geopolitical tensions between the US and China, ASEAN should recognize the complementary roles of track I and II diplomacy, particularly that of youth diplomacy.

A people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN Community can be achieved through a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches involving stronger collaboration between governments and grassroots institutions. The prospect of youth diplomacy in the ASEAN Community is on youth development. Young people in ASEAN should be empowered and allowed to effectively contribute to the ASEAN Community Vision. One way to enhance cohesion within the ASEAN Community is by promoting youth diplomacy (Alexander 2020). Youth diplomacy has the potential to nurture a culture of people-to-people interaction and a new generation of leaders that will shape better inter-state relations in ASEAN and beyond.

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