

Research Summary

The level of development of civil society varies widely in the ASEAN region, owing to historical factors and different political systems. Among the countries included in the study, Filipino and Thai CSOs have longer experience in advocacy, networking, social development work, and engaging with government. Legal frameworks also vary across the region from the more permissive to the more restrictive types. Aside from sectoral, issue-based or area-based NGOs, there are major national networks and umbrella organizations operating within one country, as well as regional and sub-regional networks. Only a few of them have been consistently engaged with the state, as well as with ASEAN and other organizations at the regional level. In the four countries studied, there is heterogeneity in ideological outlook and political stance of NGOs with respect to national and global issues.

Civil society engagement with ASEAN has evolved only in the last ten years, but more so since 2005 with ASEAN's attempts to become a more 'people oriented' association. CSO involvement started with academics, think tanks, human rights organizations and some regional groups, but has since then grown to include a wide range of NGOs and people's organizations. There are now various mechanisms for dialogue or interventions by CSOs with their governments as well as with ASEAN organs.

Among the problems in engagement with ASEAN identified by CSOs are: CSOs' lack of understanding of ASEAN processes and dynamics; governments do not recognize the autonomy of CSOs in choosing their own representatives who will dialogue with government; the methods of engagement are not institutionalized but ad hoc, depending on the host government's attitude toward NGOs; national governments feel they have no duty to involve NGOs even though ASEAN itself is willing to accommodate them; and ASEAN leaders appear to listen to NGOs during the interface but they perceive no real dialogue takes place. Nonetheless, while the processes of engagement have not been easy and the CSOs also admit to some disorganization among their ranks, they continue to buy into engagement opportunities, primarily because they recognize ASEAN's growing capacity to impact (positively or negatively) on their own constituencies. They believe that governments will likewise have to sustain the engagement because success in building the ASEAN Community depends on participation from civil society.

The study also observed that: during ASEAN summits, media played an effective role in generating interest in ASEAN-CSO issues; CSOs should learn to use both formal and informal channels for engaging with ASEAN; and that there should be more subregional networks among CSOs focused on shared advocacies. To this end, the government of Japan might consider supporting (a) ASEAN orientation programs held jointly for media and CSO networks, (b) capability-building workshops for CSOs on effective policy advocacy in the regional arena, and (c) strengthening subregional networks for critical trans-boundary development concerns, including, but not limited to, disaster response, migration and human trafficking, management of shared water resources.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)

Lecture before graduate students of Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya
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Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)

Book (Publisher and Date of the Book, Title and Author of the Book, etc.)
(still for submission to a journal)