



ASEAN STUDIES CENTER  
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY  
ศูนย์อาเซียนศึกษา จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย



**The 4<sup>th</sup> Chula - ASEAN Week**  
สัปดาห์จุฬาฯ-อาเซียน ครั้งที่ 4

# **What is ASEAN? An analysis of 'Skywalk' interviews in Bangkok**

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## What is ASEAN? An analysis of 'Skywalk' interviews in Bangkok

### ABSTRACT

*ASEAN has become a buzzword worldwide due to the forthcoming full economic community of the ten Southeast Asian countries by the end of 2015. However, little has been known as to what extent the world knows about the region's 'one community'. Thus, this study presents the responses of peoples from forty-one countries in separate individual interviews to the question, 'What is ASEAN?', conducted at several 'Skywalk' locations in Bangkok, Thailand. Among one hundred and sixty four participants interviewed, 63% have indicated their lack of knowledge about the regional bloc. And of the 37% knowledgeable respondents, the most informed people are the Europeans. By using keyword analysis, 'countries', 'EU', 'Asia', 'trade' and 'economic' are on the top five word list while 'union', 'community', 'corporation', 'market' and 'visa' are at the bottom. Further, four themes of level of awareness emerged such as fact, purpose, outcome and challenge. It is strongly suggested that ASEAN policy makers must find ways to increase peoples' awareness beyond the key phrase - 'ten countries'.*

*Keywords: ASEAN, one community, ten countries, Skywalk interviews*

### INTRODUCTION

Corresponding to the 2008 Charter, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) aims to (1) create a single market and production base, (2) increase competitiveness, (3) promote equitable economic development, and (4) further integrate ASEAN with the global economy (ASEAN Secretariat). It was considered as a huge development beyond Bangkok's Declaration in 1967 as a "collective will of the nations of Southeast Asia to bind themselves together in

friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity" (ASEAN Secretariat).

The shift of focus was imminent in 1976 in Bali, Indonesia where the heads of member states directed their respective governments to "work for the promotion of peace, stability of progress in Southeast Asia thus contributing towards world peace and international harmony" (ASEAN Secretariat). At that time, member countries signed the Declaration of ASEAN Concord, in which, member countries recognized to move their cooperation into higher level especially on political, economic, social, culture, scientific and technological fields.

The Manila Declaration in 1987 declared to strengthen intra-ASEAN economic cooperation and expand its relationship with dialogue partners such as Australia, Canada, European Union, Japan, Republic of Korea and United States. The Singapore Declaration in 1992 encouraged the bloc's engagement with non-dialogue partners and international organizations. With an active role, a challenge was posed by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, who urged ASEAN 'to step-in into a truly global role' (Singh 1).

To date, it is the fusion of the global economy that is challenging ASEAN to continuously position itself as a 'regional trade' force onto the world stage unlike other regional organizations, for example, the European Union, which has significant impact on trade, foreign policy and developmental assistance globally. Hence, the complex economic interdependence of intra- and inter-regional associations and/or organizations is increasingly important for the Southeast Asian trade bloc, currently considered as an 'economic powerhouse', one of the 'world's most dynamic region' with a 'diverse market' and 'largest young labor force', and becoming known as a 'hub of consumer demand', 'home of globally competitive companies', among others (Asian Development Bank; HV, Thompson, and Tonby 1).

For over 50 years after its establishment, very limited number of studies have explored the extent of knowledge of the peoples in the region and the world with regards to ASEAN Community or its three pillars – ASEAN Political-Security Community (ASPC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Thus, through individual interviews, this paper presents the extent of what the *world* knows about ASEAN.

## PERCEPTIONS TOWARD ASEAN

Within its borders, Benny and Abdullah argued the importance of the ASEAN citizens' participation in the success of the region's integration. Among Indonesians, they claimed to have a high level of awareness and understanding in terms of the existence of ASEAN, founding year and its objectives. But the core information with regards to ASEAN's founding documents – structure, mode of operations, among others have not reached the general public's minds. Both researchers doubted the involvement of the *people of the region* in the formation of ASEAN Community.

In Jun Abad's blog, he noted that the future of the bloc depends on ASEAN's collective effort to work for the whole group, and not on individual nation's interests. A 'people-centered' ASEAN is seen as a key to win peoples support with regards to integration. In the same year, a survey on ASEAN's community building efforts showed dismal figures on how well ASEAN citizens understood the grouping. While most of urban dwellers recognized the name, 76% of those surveyed indicated their lack of knowledge of what ASEAN does (ASEAN Secretariat).

Mahubani pointed out the attitude of Singaporeans 'rubbishing' ASEAN despite the benefits the bloc provides for them. He authored a book for the 'Singaporeans and the world' to be well-informed about the regional grouping.

Among other citizens of ASEAN, there remains a positive outlook on the upcoming integration. Kheang Tang found out that for younger generations, the prospect of Asean Economic Community benefits all member countries. Specifically, they believed that the community provides job opportunities and reduce unemployment in less developed member countries such as Cambodia. However, the respondents exhibited little knowledge on the main pillars of ASEAN community. Among three ASEAN countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, the citizens hoped for positive results for their countries and for themselves (Benny, Yean, and Ramli 105). An 'ASEAN barometer' was also suggested to be set-up to monitor public opinion prior to decisions made by the bloc's executive committee.

Other previous studies have indicated that ASEAN is an 'elitist' organization where public participation or public voices are excluded (Benny and Abdullah; Benny, et al 106; Chavez 261). And so former Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos recommended 'public participation' and 'bottom-up' approaches.

Beyond its borders, ASEAN is becoming deeply entrenched with the world economically. On the positive note, ASEAN has partnered with various countries and organizations, for instances, ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan and South Korea), ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area, Asean-China Free Trade Area, ASEAN-India Free Trade Area, and ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The prospect of having an ASEAN-EU Free Trade Area is also being discussed.

To measure what the *world* knows, Edmund Sim's ASEAN Economic Community blog published top ten countries in terms of page views with only the United States of America, India and the United Kingdom included. The countries listed in the preceding paragraph as ASEAN free trade partners were excluded in the list, except India. It was highly recommended that ASEAN 'product' must be improved.

Despite the greater role ASEAN plays globally, very limited studies on the external perceptions of the *world* towards ASEAN has been published to date.

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD ABOUT ASEAN

This study aims to know what the *world* knows about ASEAN. We discussed the methods, the participants and the findings in the succeeding sections.

*Methods.* This study used interview to know the extent of the *world's* knowledge about ASEAN. The individual interviews were conducted at Bangkok Transportation System's (BTS) Skywalks located in the following stations, namely: BTS Chitlom, BTS Siam, and BTS Phrompong. The 'Skywalks' were chosen as it is frequented by the people around the world, close to the world's renowned shopping malls such as Siam Paragon, Siam Square, Central Chitlom, Emproium, Emquartier, among others. The sole question, '*What is ASEAN?*' may have elicited limited knowledge about ASEAN but is opted due to the very busy nature of the premises where the interviews took place. All interviews were transcribed. Computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) such as Antconc and Nvivo were used in keywords and thematic analyses.

*Participants.* A total of 164 respondents were interviewed. They are citizens of forty-one countries located in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Americas, Europe and Middle East (see Table 1 for the list of participating regions and countries).

Table 1. List of participants

Region	Country	Number of participants	Total
Africa	Botswana	1	3
	South Africa	2	
Asia-Pacific	Australia	8	63
	China	6	
	Hongkong SAR	7	
	India	8	
	Japan	3	
	Korea	1	
	New Zealand	3	
	Philippines	4	
	Sri Lanka	1	
	Taiwan	10	
	Thailand	11	
	Vietnam	1	
	Americas	Argentina	
Brazil		3	
Canada		2	
Columbia		1	
USA		13	
Europe	Austria	1	69
	Belgium	1	
	Iceland	1	
	Finland	2	
	France	7	
	Germany	19	
	Italy	1	
	Netherlands	2	
	Norway	1	
	Poland	1	
	Portugal	1	
	Russia	4	
	Serbia	2	
	Spain	3	
	Sweden	2	
	Switzerland	2	
	UK	18	
Middle East	Ukraine	1	9
	Egypt	2	
	Iraq	1	
	Lebanon	2	
	UAE	4	

*Results and discussion.* Among the respondents ( $N=164$ ), 63% indicated their lack of knowledge about the regional bloc. Key phrases indicating their lack of knowledge thereof include *'I don't know'*, *'I have no idea'*, *'Can you tell me about it?'*, and *'No'*. For instance, an Indian tourist said,

*"I don't know. I do not know anything about it."*

To understand more about the data, keywords were analyzed (see Table 2). The knowledgeable respondents (37% of  $N=164$ ) knew that ASEAN is composed of several countries, nations or states in Asia. Among foreign respondents, countries mentioned as member countries are the Philippines, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, and Vietnam except Brunei. There is also a strong indication that the regional bloc has a similar resemblance with that of the European Union in terms of economic and/or trade. The least emphasized keywords are market, union, community, corporation and visa. Most responses are collected from the Europeans.

Table 2. Keywords

Code	Number of times used
Country/Countries	28
European Union	17
Asia	16
Economic	16
Trade	11
Market	1
Union	1
Community	1
Corporation	1
Visa	1

The keyword analysis indicates well-known facts such as the composition of the regional bloc, its resemblance to the European Union albeit very different in many forms, for instances, global role, current economic focus, among others. The lesser known words are the bloc's goals

to have a single market and community. Visa is attributed to the open border extended to all citizens of the 10 member-countries.

Thematic analysis was used to deduce four themes from the responses. The first one is fact, which consists of information about the formation of the bloc. Second is purpose, which contains the goals of the regional grouping. Third is outcome, which includes the benefits and hopes about ASEAN. And lastly is challenge, which focuses on the perceived situations that hinder ASEAN integration. Among respondents who answered the question, responses are accounted as follows: 38% for fact, 32% for purpose, 20% for outcome, and 10% for challenge. This indicates that the level of awareness among the peoples is rather low.

Table 3 shows what ASEAN is known in the world. Most of the respondents understood that it is an alliance of ten Southeast Asian countries. The knowledge of what ASEAN is historically known for as a political organization has been replaced by member-countries' economic ambitions to create a single market and community this year – 2015.

*I know about 10 countries (Thai student)*

*The 10 countries in Southeast Asia (American tourist)*

*It's like an economic grouping of Southeast Asian countries (Businessman from Belgium)*

Table 3: Fact

Theme: Fact	Number of times uttered
10 countries	14
Nations together	10
Association of Southeast Asian Nations	4
Alliance of many countries	2
Cooperate together	2
Arrangement between countries	1
Political organization	1

The second theme is purpose. Table 4 indicates that ASEAN is becoming an economic regional force based on the planned integration in 2015. The creation of Asean Economic

Community features free trade, economic development, security and cooperation. The positive attitude of world, for example, is what the Spaniard tourist explained. It is also believed that development will spread among the 10 member-countries as hoped by the Filipino respondent. Overall, the economic integration is heavily emphasized.

Table 4: Purpose

Theme: Purpose	Number of times uttered
Economic corporation	6
Common market	4
Economic development	4
Free trade	4
One community	4
Integration 2015	1
Regional peace	1
Trade union	1
Connection among countries	1

*It's an alliance of many countries in Southeast Asia that is consisting of 10 countries and have a lot of cooperation between their country considering trade and regional peace (Taiwanese tourist)*

*It's kind of common market like Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, etcetera (Canadian tourist)*

*Just know about it's an economic corporation (Canadian student)*

*ASEAN is communities and going to be next year. It's good for Thailand and market, tourist and many countries (Spaniard Tourist)*

*Philippines needs to raise money from tourist (Filipino tourist)*

The sample utterances quoted above support the fact that ASEAN has become heavily economic-oriented organization. For instance, its four economic pillars are (1) single market and production base, (2) competitive economic region, (3) equitable economic development, and (4)

integration into the globalized economy. The five core principles of single market and production base include free flow of goods, services, investment, capital and skilled labor (ASEANUp).

Table 5 indicates the outcomes as well as the benefits and hopes ASEAN is hoped to deliver to the world. Sadly, there is lacking of knowledge with regards to what ASEAN has achieved in the past years. In the outset, it looks like the regional grouping is to that of the European Union. However, the two are very different multi-dimensional regional organizations based on their histories, aims, organizational structure, capacities and capabilities. For example, in the political front, ASEAN's principle of non-intervention clashes with that of EU's interventionist approach.

Table 5: Outcome

Theme: Outcome	Number of times uttered
Same as EU	8
Beneficial to ASEAN peoples	2
Export good food	2
Offer good things for tourists	2
Single visa	2
One currency	1
Attract more tourists	1
Beneficial for tourists	1
Trading bloc	1
More power	1

*It's economic corporation between South East Asia. Same idea EU economic corporation. I think will not happen because every country South East Asia very different. I will be difficult may be or happen ten years or twenty years. I teach about economic.*  
(Australian tourist)

*So of countries forming like an EU.* (Swedish tourist)

*We hope a lot of fish and food is very good and the culture. We like it here. Everything is fresh* (Austrian tourist)

The respondents are hopeful that ASEAN would offer better things to tourists such as exporting quality foods and the prospect of using a single visa and currency system. It is also hoped that the regional group would attract more tourist and become a more powerful regional entity not only on economic matters but beyond.

With the positive perceptions of the outcomes, however, are some of the challenges for the bloc listed in Table 6 such as diverse cultures, government set-ups, language proficiency disparities, religions, among others.

Table 6:Challenge

Theme: Challenge	Number of times uttered
Cultural differences	1
Deregulation	1
Each country different	1
Religious differences	1
Small governments	1
Takes long time	1
Use of English	1

*Asean is similar to European Union and may be in the future will get one currency, people need to speak English for communication , hope this can become like an EU and it has already come in 2015 (Netherland tourist)*

*I know Aseanis a trade union I think it is wrong to start with a trade agreement or having a deregulation also education because it will end up with protesting like EU (German tourist)*

The challenges are both internal and external. Internally, creating a single ASEAN identity could be an impossible task given the fact that each country and their regions within each borders have varying cultural orientations. Also, each of the countries faces domestic concerns as mentioned in Table 6. For example, deregulation has been fueling protest in the Philippines against the privatization of national assets. The protests and peoples opposition of government could lead to an unstable country, in both political and economic aspects.

Another challenge is the language disparity among member-countries. There remains a problem on peoples' English proficiency which could lead to imbalance workforce and affects the free movement of talents within the bloc. According to English First's (EF) English Proficiency Index, the following ASEAN countries are assessed: Thailand and Cambodia are under the Very Low Proficiency, Vietnam is Low Proficiency, and Singapore and Malaysia within High Proficiency. It would be improbable for low English proficient workforce, for example, from Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar to be able to find work in Malaysia and Singapore while it would be highly possible for the citizens of the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore to seize employment opportunities allowed in the Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) such as engineering, architecture, nursing, accountancy, surveying services, medicine and dentistry.

Regionally, cultural and religious differences as well as each nation's capabilities are questioned. The 'plethora of languages' in each country's regions and communities could be impacted by the adaptation of English as the bloc's 'working language'. Religiously, Philippines is dubbed as a 'Catholic' country; Buddhism and Confucianism are flourishing in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam; and, Islam in Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia. The diversity could prevent the peoples' feelings that they are part of a broader community.

Each country has its own political and economic challenges too. Politically, communist or authoritative-leaning governments would find restrictions by Western governments in terms of travel, finance, investments, among others. This would affect the competitiveness of the group as a whole into the global market. For instance, the ASEAN blueprint, which serves as a benchmark for the implementation of the single community, does not contain any provision of a regional watchdog that can measure each member's commitment and implementation (Chongkittavorn 1).

In the external part, global uncertainties can take a toll of ASEAN's economic health. Experts warned that deeper economic and financial integration must be implemented to act as cushion to the global market volatilities.

In the data above, there is a resemblance of the results of keyword and thematic analyses. Keyword analysis highlighted that the respondents' knowledge is based on fact, the first level of awareness deduced from thematic analysis. While it is plausible to know that the peoples are able to talk about the outcomes and raise their concerns about ASEAN, the number of knowledgeable respondents are significantly fewer (37%) as compared to total number of peoples ( $N=164$ ) who were interviewed.

Moreover, few of the respondents knew what ASEAN does. Keyword and thematic analyses showed that ASEAN is merely known as a regional organization with 10 member-countries and is aiming for economic integration, in which, free trade could result to economic development. Some of the challenges mentioned by the respondents cannot be ignored too. The challenges brought by diverse language, culture, religion and political landscape could negatively affect the goals ASEAN is aiming to achieve. The situations mentioned in the preceding paragraphs are just few examples and not to mention the current issues on Spratly's islands, dismal human rights records of some member countries, among others.

Despite the limitations of this study, this paper confirms previous research findings indicating a huge gap of knowledge with regards to ASEAN within the peoples in the bloc as well as peoples outside (ASEAN Secretariat; Benny and Abdullah). Also, it possible to gauge the peoples' opinions by using individual interviews.

## ASEAN AND THE POLICY-MAKERS

In this paper, it is recommended that the level of awareness among the world's citizens must go beyond fact and purposes. When mutual benefit is felt by the *world* on ASEAN's outcomes, there is a higher chance that the bloc would become accepted globally. Although the population of the participants does not yield any significant results in terms of representation of the whole *world*, the study provides yet another reminder for ASEAN policy-makers to make an impact at any rate for the world citizens. To reach outcomes, for instance, need the participation of the *world* citizens for ASEAN to become a truly 'economic powerhouse'. If the *world* knows what ASEAN does, peoples surely supports ASEAN in different ways as it struggles to overcome the challenges within and beyond its borders.

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