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Enhancing ASEAN Connectivity Through Subregional Initiatives

By Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit

SYNOPSIS

Although attention to ASEAN connectivity tends to focus on regional initiatives, subregional ones are also important. This commentary calls for more attention and resources to be mobilised for subregional initiatives to enhance ASEAN connectivity and provide for a better future for the regional community.

COMMENTARY

When one talks about ASEAN connectivity, regional initiatives usually come to mind. One is the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025, which seeks “to achieve a seamlessly and comprehensively connected and integrated ASEAN” by focusing on galvanising sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence, and people mobility. Another is the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025, with its eight strategies ranging from broadband infrastructure to e-government services, aimed at transforming the grouping into a “leading digital community and economic bloc by 2025”.

Less attention has been given to the roles played by subregional schemes such as the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), and Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), which are important jigsaws in realising regional connectivities. These cooperative arrangements support ASEAN’s economic integration in several ways.

Subregional Schemes in ASEAN Connectivity

First, subregional projects can unlock the untapped potential of local communities and enable them to better participate in the ASEAN economy. These communities are

often resource-rich, having members with unique skills such as cultural designing, crafting, and sewing, which can add significant value to products. Improved connectivities due to subregional programmes facilitate cross-border flows of goods and link these communities to wider markets, increasing revenues and uplifting livelihoods.

Second, linking subregional projects with regional supply chains will interest entrepreneurs and investors looking for opportunities beyond individual states. They may be attracted to setting up factories in second-tiered or third-tiered towns due to relatively low costs (e.g., land prices and wages) compared to those in the cities and can utilise land and maritime networks to ship their goods. In short, subregional initiatives increase ASEAN's ability to attract foreign direct investments (FDI) into the region.

Third, these schemes enable localities to develop multiple forward and backward supply chain linkages, strengthening their economic resilience. Well-connected local economies have alternative routes to source inputs or export products when main transportation lines are disrupted. Hence, they can lessen the negative impacts of supply chain disruptions and achieve faster recoveries.

Finally, subregional programmes tend to involve resource-rich areas away from the capital cities. BIMP-EAGA includes four provinces from Indonesia, two states from Malaysia and two provinces from the Philippines in a collaborative relationship. Also, ten Indonesian provinces in Sumatra and fourteen towns in southern Thailand participate in IMT-GT. As a result, they play a crucial role in narrowing development gaps within and between the ASEAN members. This further advances the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025's goal of a "[Resilient, Inclusive, People-Oriented, and People-Centred ASEAN](#)".

Driving ASEAN Economic Integration Through Subregional Projects

There are several ways for policymakers to increase the effectiveness of subregional programmes in propelling economic integration further.

First, the countries in the subregional schemes should have explicit strategies and action plans regarding subregional cooperation. This will strengthen policy coordination and implementation at the national level.

Second, synergies between subregional and regional initiatives should be enhanced to increase their complementarity. As an illustration, the BIMP-EAGA crafted some of its measures to jive with the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework's broad strategies. Specifically, the BIMP-EAGA's Tourism Recovery Framework was developed to align with ASEAN's recovery plans following the COVID-19 pandemic. This modality is laudable, and its spirit should be replicated or extended to other sectors.

Third, establishing robust communication and consultation channels between subregional and regional platforms is essential. Doing so will enable municipal and provincial authorities to provide feedback to national-level or regional-level policymakers, helping to ensure that regional initiatives bring concrete benefits to

people on the ground. It will also allow officials at all levels to jointly identify and address problems promptly.

Fourth, subregional schemes can be used to test innovative ideas to assist policymakers in arriving at feasible means for successful regional economic integration. This “sandbox” approach allows controlled experimentations and helps reduce adverse effects if they fail. Successful cases can eventually be scaled up and implemented region-wide.

Finally, policymakers should emphasise fostering the people-to-people aspect of subregional programmes. Specifically, they can be used to cultivate an ASEAN identity that co-exists with national ones. This identity is a vital component of ASEAN community-building. For instance, it can counter xenophobia and protectionism that could undercut regional integration efforts. It can also unite the group when faced with a common threat. Therefore, more programmes are needed to encourage socio-cultural interactions among different nationalities and societies. These can take the form of dialogues and exchanges between artists, historians, youth, and civil society actors to craft shared narratives, but they need not be limited to these. These interactions can help inform the broader development of an ASEAN identity.

Going Forward: The Need for Political Will

Leveraging subregional initiatives to support regional economic integration is difficult, especially amidst rising geopolitical rivalries and tensions. This environment can induce the ASEAN governments to adopt inward-looking policies and de-emphasise regional initiatives. Hence, strong political will is needed to mobilise resources to leverage subregional initiatives for a better future for the ASEAN community.

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