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BRIDGING DEVELOPMENT GAPS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: TOWARDS AN ASEAN COMMUNITY

AUTHOR:¹

MELY CABALLERO-ANTHONY
Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS),
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

“It matters little how much information we possess about development if we have not grasped its inner meaning.”

Denis Goulet, *The Cruel Choice*.

Introducción

Since the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) declared its *ASEAN Vision 2020* (1997) that envisioned a “Community of caring societies...living in peace...and bonded together in partnership in dynamic development,”² the impetus to work together toward closer and deeper economic integration in Southeast Asia appears to have gained considerable momentum. These efforts are reflected in a number of region-wide (or ASEAN) initiatives geared toward providing a regional framework to realise those goals. These initiatives include: the Hanoi Plan of Action (HPA, 1997) which followed the ASEAN Vision 2020; the Initiatives for ASEAN Integration (IAI, 2000) which aimed to assist the new (CLMV) members in the economic integration process in order to avoid the emergence of a two-tier ASEAN; and more recently, the Declaration of the ASEAN Community, also known as the Bali Concord II (2003).

The Bali Concord II has so far been the most significant among the regional measures adopted, in that it outlines the modalities and the extent to which ASEAN-member countries are willing to go to realise their idea of a Community—peaceful, prosperous and caring. Underlying these shared aspirations is the belief that absent any one of these elements (e.g. economic development), regional peace and security would remain elusive. Hence, the Bali Concord II can be seen as an embodiment of these aspirations and are translated in the goal to establish the three-pillared communities namely: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN Security Community (ASC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Communities (ASCC) by the year 2020.

¹ *Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI.* The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.

² See *ASEAN Vision 2020*, in <http://www.aseansec.org>.



While the Bali Concord II may be regarded as a culmination of ASEAN's efforts on regional cooperation, the frameworks for achieving these goals through the three-pillared communities are approached and pursued in a highly integrated manner—closely interlinked and almost seamless. The significance of which must not be overlooked since they reinforce a *leitmotif* that characterised the regional approaches found in ASEAN.³ Be it in the area of security or development, this *leitmotif* is reflected in the emphasis placed on adopting a “comprehensive” approach to any one of these areas. Similarly, this type of approach extends to the very conceptualisation of development and security in the region.

These regional concepts, frameworks and approaches of development and security become all the more relevant when we examine the issue of development gaps in Southeast Asia and when we delve into the specific issues like narrowing the development gaps in the region. Against these background, this paper proceeds in three parts. Following the introduction, this paper begins with a brief review of evolution of development thinking and how these shifts in emphases had informed the way development is assessed. This section includes a brief description of the various measures and indices used to measure development and how these have in turn influenced the way development has been measured in Southeast Asia. The second part proceeds to assess the state of human development in the region. It highlights some of the most visible disparities observed in the region and looks at some issues that emerge in identifying and addressing these development gaps. Finally the paper concludes with some thoughts on the current ASEAN mechanisms designed to address development issues in the region.

1. The Evolving Concept of Development and ‘Development Gaps’

Much has changed in the interpretation and understanding of the concept of “development”. In the broad field of economics for instance, development economists had been reconceptualisation of the notion of development beyond the narrow confines of economic development alone. One would recall the move in the late 1970s-early 1980s when development scholars like Michael P. Todaro had pushed for a re-thinking of development beyond the preoccupation with economic growth. Todaro defined “development” to mean the “process of improving the quality of all human lives”, and highlighted 3 important values associated with it, namely:

- raising people's living levels—(their incomes and consumption levels of food, medical services, education) through ‘relevant’ economic growth processes;
- creating conditions conducive to the growth of people's self-esteem through the establishment of social, political and economic systems and institutions which promote human dignity and respect, and
- increasing people's freedom to choose by enlarging the range of their choice variables.⁴

This reconceptualisation of development significantly influenced the way development was understood. For one, it signalled a move to assess development beyond the narrow economic objectives, i.e. “gross national products” to larger social and political goals. Advocates for this reconceptualisation proposed that development be defined as a “multi-dimensional process involving *changes in structures, attitudes and institutions*, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality and the eradication of absolute

³ ASEAN and Southeast Asia will be used interchangeably in this presentation.

⁴ See Todaro, Michael (1982): *Economics for a Developing World*, Essex, Longman, pp. 87-104.



poverty.”⁵ Todaro and others had argued that while economics must play a central role in the development process, “the impact of that role would be greatly diminished, even nullified, if at the same time, the importance of attending to the determinants of national and personal esteem and of striving to broaden society’s freedom to choose are not also afforded priority attention...by politicians and planners alike.”⁶

Although the shift in emphases during that period was reflective of and attendant to the “structuralist/reactionary” movements emerging from Third World/developing countries that questioned the dominant paradigms on developments, these attempts to provide a more comprehensive view of development found added voices in the influential works of scholars from the developing world in Asia. Among them were scholars like Mahbub Ul Haq and Amartya Sen. Mahbuh Ul Haq’s work on constructing the UNDP’s Human Development Index greatly influenced the global search for new development paradigms that focused on human basic needs and placed the well being of people at centre-stage in human development approaches, instead of rigid economic indicators. Similarly, Amartya Sen’s seminal work on *Development as Freedom* (1999) echoed the same concerns of Ul Haq, and had argued that human wellbeing cannot be measured by a person’s possessions alone but by what a person is, or can do. Development, according to Sen, should be seen as “a process of expanding the real freedom that people enjoy” and increasing their capability to function. Often referred to as the “capabilities school” of development⁷, this approach requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities and systematic deprivation, neglect of public facilities...and intolerance of repressive states.”⁸

To be sure, the concept of development remains a dynamic concept until today and continues to impact the way development has and should be measured. This trend is seen in the number of indices and indicators that has been crafted to more adequately measure development. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for example, has since the early 1990s come up with the annual Human Development Report (HDR) highlighting the Human Development Index (HDI) based on 3 basic qualitative indicators: living standards (GNP); life expectancy and literacy. It has also come up with the Human Poverty Index (HPI) in 1997 that examines 3 aspects of human deprivation in the dimensions of education, health and nutrition (the converse of the HDI). Similarly, the World Bank and the ADB have produced annual development reports that focus on *absolute* poverty—a condition of life so characterised by malnutrition, illiteracy and disease “as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency”.⁹ Notwithstanding these varying perspectives however, there appears to be an emerging consensus on the goals of development—beyond growth rates of GDP to achieve ‘human development’ or ‘comprehensive development.’ More recently, these notions of human and comprehensive development have found added resonance and articulation with the launching of the United Nation’s Millenium Development Goals (MDG) in 2000. The UN MDG had set out to achieve 8 key goals (See Table 1) and had set specific target dates to meet these objectives.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁶ *Ibid.* See also Meirer, Gerald and Stiglitz, Joseph (2001): *Frontiers of Development Economics: The Future Perspective*, New York, Oxford University Press.

⁷ See *Asian Development Report on Reducing Poverty, 2004*.

⁸ Sen, Amartya (1999): *Development as Freedom*, New York, Knopf.

⁹ See *World Development Report 1980*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 32.

*Table 1: United National Millennium Development Goals¹⁰*

Goals	Targets
1. Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day▪ Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling
3. Promote gender equality and empower women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferable by 2005, and at all levels by 2015
4. Reduce child mortality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five
5. Improve maternal health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS▪ Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; reverse loss of environmental resources▪ Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water▪ Achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020
8. Develop a global partnership for development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Develop further an open trading and financial system that is rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory. Includes a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction – nationally and internationally▪ Address the least developed countries' special needs. This includes tariff- and quota-free access for their exports; enhanced debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries; cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous official development assistance for countries committed to poverty reduction▪ Address the special needs of landlocked and small island developing states▪ Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt problems through national and international measures to make debt sustainable in the long term▪ In cooperation with developing countries, develop

¹⁰ UN Millennium Development Goals, 2000, at <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>.



decent and productive work for the youth

- In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries
 - In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies – especially information and communication technologies
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If one examines the impact of these evolving trends in development thinking in Southeast Asia, it is interesting to note that the salient dimensions of human and comprehensive development are not really alien to the region.¹¹ As indicated earlier, these adjuncts to the concept of development have been around for some time in ASEAN and are commonly seen in the myriad ASEAN declarations and documents.¹² While the approaches to achieve comprehensive and human development may not have been realised as reflected in the region's experience with Asian financial crisis where painful lessons were learnt, these ideas of promoting people-centred development and human security had been revived.¹³ Moreover, since the region's debilitating experience with 1997 economic crisis, efforts have been underway to further advance the notion of human development and human security in Southeast Asia.¹⁴ A significant initiative in this regard is the recent launching of the first Southeast Asian Development Report (SEA-HDR, 2005). The SEA-HDR is the first attempt in the region to examine the state of human development in the ASEAN, using several benchmarks such as the UNDP HDI index and related indices (GDI and GEM), plus indicators based on *ASEAN Vision 2020*. The Report was also the first attempt to assess the progress of human development goals by relating them to the UN MDG goals and targets, particularly on poverty reduction and education.¹⁵

In brief, the development thinking in ASEAN can be viewed as being part and parcel of the evolving global debates and the unending normative quest to promote the comprehensive and human-centred goals of development. And, an important aspect of this quest is to address the issue of development gaps.

1.1. The Notion of Development Gaps in ASEAN

The dynamic evolution of development thinking is significant when one attempts to examine this issue in Southeast Asia. At least two salient questions need to be raised in this discussion.

¹¹ For an in-depth discussion on ASEAN's notion of comprehensive security, see Alagappa, Muthiah "Comprehensive Security: Interpretations in ASEAN Countries", in Scalapino, Robert *et al.* (eds.) (1989): *Asian Security Issues Regional and Global*, Institute of East Asian Studies, Berkeley, University of California.

¹² See for example, the *Bali Concord I* or *ASEAN Declaration of 1967*.

¹³ For more discussion on the human development and human security in Southeast Asia, see Caballero-Anthony, Mely: "Human (and) Comprehensive Security", *Indonesia Quarterly*, No. 28, pp. 411-422, 2000; and, "Human Security in the Asia Pacific: Current Trends and Prospects", in Dickens, David (ed.) (2002): *The Human Face of Security: Asia Pacific Perspectives*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 144, Canberra, Australian National University, 2002, pp 18-29.

¹⁴ Caballero-Anthony, Mely: "Re-visioning Human Security in Southeast Asia", *Asian Perspectives*, Vol. 28 No. 3 (2004), pp. 155-189.

¹⁵ See the *Southeast Asian Human Development Report*, in <http://www.dirp3.pids.gov.ph/seahdr/seahdr.html>.



At the risk of sounding pedantic, some clarity might be useful given the extent to which the concept of development had evolved. Hence, before proceeding to identify what are these development gaps, the questions we may want to ask (again) are: (1) Are we following the UNDP's human and comprehensive definition of development? And, (2) what measurements and benchmarks are we going to use in identifying and assessing these gaps?

Given the current interest in narrowing development gaps in the region, these questions become especially relevant to ASEAN since its record of measuring development had been very disparate, even with the recent SEA-HDR. This will be addressed in the next section of this paper. But, suffice it to say at this point that clarity in concept logically requires us to also agree on what we mean by gaps or disparities in development. From the previous discussion, an implicit understanding of development gap could refer to the disparity (difference and/or inequality) between the multi-dimensional aspects of human development. Given the UNDP's definition for example, these could refer to gaps or differences based on the given macro indicators of the HDR—life expectancy, education, GNP per capita. One could also extend the analysis to include new indicators such as human development index, human poverty index, gender development index, and gender empowerment. With the new trends in producing regional HDRs, like the SEA-HDR, additional indicators may also have to be included such as good governance, environmental sustainability, and others. To be sure, development gaps are indeed multi-faceted.

The task is therefore daunting. The problem is further compounded when one takes up the more 'comprehensive' definition of human development using Amartya Sen's capabilities approach that seeks to gaps in '*freedom of choice and control of one's life*'. How should be assess this and how do we identify gaps? Moreover, in assessing these disparities, one may also ask at what level should the 'development gap' be optimally smaller for it to be considered insignificant?

In brief, while the evolving trends on reconceptualisation development allows us to have a broader and more informed view of human development, it raises however a practical issue of providing a more coherent, systematic methodology to measure an ever expanding notion of development. This problem becomes even more acute when one attempts to measure its qualitative dimensions, especially when doing a comparative analysis of a region with disparate conditions.

Having outlined some of the preliminary issues that one encounters in discussing development gaps, the next section will now proceed to examine the state of human development in ASEAN and identify some of the more visible gaps.

2. Understanding the Nature of Development Gap in Southeast Asia: Issues and Concerns

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive analysis of the nature and extent of the development gaps in the region. Hence, for the purpose of a more manageable presentation let me highlight/focus on three areas when examination the complex nature of development gaps in ASEAN.

2.1. Nature of economic differentials—Between, Among, and Within ASEAN states

From available data, there are three points that are worth mentioning here with regard to the nature of economic differentials observed in the region. The first is the more common fact



regarding the widening economic gaps between the states in the region. This is most visible when one compares the HDR of the ASEAN-6¹⁶ with the newer CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam), and where concerns have been raised about having a 2-tiered ASEAN. Based on the UNDP Human Development Indicators, Table 2 provides us with a good snapshot of the state of human development in the region.

Table 2: Human Development Indicators¹⁷

	Human Development Index (HDI) Rank 2002	GDP per capita (PPP US\$) 2002	Life expectancy at birth (years) 2002	Adult literacy rate (% age 15 & above) 2002	Gross enrolment ratio for primary, secondary & tertiary schools (%) 2001/2002	Public Expenditure on Health (% of GDP) 2001
Brunei	33	19,210	76.2	93.9	73.0	2.5
Indonesia	111	3,230	66.6	87.9	65.0	0.6
Malaysia	59	9,120	73.0	88.7	70.0	2.1
Philippines	83	4,170	69.8	92.6	81.0	1.5
Singapore	25	24,040	78.0	92.5	87.0	1.3
Thailand	76	7,010	69.1	92.6	73.0	2.1
Cambodia	130	2,060	57.4	69.4	59.0	1.8
Laos	135	1,720	54.3	66.4	59.0	1.7
Myanmar	132	1,027	57.2	85.3	48.0	0.4
Vietnam	112	2,300	69.0	90.3	64.0	1.5

From the above, one notes that among the ten ASEAN countries, it is the smallest states—Singapore and Brunei, that fall within the ‘high human development’ category based on the HDR indicators (HDI rank, GDP, life expectancy, education and health). Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand fall within the upper ‘medium human development category’, while Indonesia and Vietnam are categorised under the medium ‘medium human development category.’ The figures for CLM explain why they fall within the lower ‘medium human development’ category.

It is in the poverty indicators where this disparity is most revealing. (See Table 3 below). The figures for the CLMV countries reflect relatively high poverty levels. Based on the international poverty line (i.e. population living below US\$1 a day), a sizeable proportion of Cambodia’s and Laos’ population live below the poverty line at 34.1% and 39% respectively.

¹⁶ The ASEAN- 6 refers to the older members of ASEAN comprising Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand.

¹⁷ UNDP Human Development Report 2004, *op. cit.*



The economic picture becomes extremely stark when one compares the figures of the CLMV countries with the ASEAN-6. Singapore, the richest country in ASEAN, for instance has a per capita GDP that is 23.4 times more than Myanmar, the poorest country in the region. Life expectancy and adult literacy also tend to be higher in the ASEAN-6 countries (although Vietnam and Myanmar adult literacy rates are comparable to the ASEAN-6).

Table 3: Poverty and Income Inequality¹⁸

	Population in Poverty (National poverty line) (%)	Proportion of population below \$1 a day (%)	Gini Coefficient
Indonesia	18.2	7.5	0.34
Malaysia	7.5	0.2	0.44
Philippines	34	15.5	0.46
Singapore	0.43
Thailand	9.8	1.9	0.43
Cambodia	35.9	34.1	0.45
Laos	38.6	39.0	0.37
Myanmar	22.9
Vietnam	28.9	13.1	0.38

The second point in the study of economic differentials (at least from these indicators) is the fact that these gaps are also found even among the ASEAN-6. Malaysia, although coming after Brunei in the ranking of countries with high per capita GDP in the region, is only a distant third. (Malaysia's GDP per capita is US\$9,120 in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms compared to Singapore at US\$24,040 and Brunei at US\$19,210.) At the same time, Indonesia's GDP per capita is only about a third of Malaysia's. Meanwhile, the Philippines has the highest incidence of poverty among the ASEAN-6 countries where 15.5% of the population live below US\$1 a day compared to Thailand (1.9%) and Malaysia (0.2%).

It is also instructive to note that despite the declining rates of poverty incidence in the region over the last two decades, the region appears to becoming more unequal. Many countries exceed the Gini coefficient threshold of 0.40 of low inequality¹⁹. For instance, Malaysia's low poverty levels compared starkly with its relatively high Gini coefficient of 0.44 - see Table 3. (This also seems to be the case for Thailand.)

¹⁸ Asian Development Bank, *Key Indicators 2004*.

¹⁹ The Gini coefficient - which ranges between 0 and 1 - is a measure of income inequality. When the Gini coefficient is 0, there is perfect equality where everyone has the same income. At the other extreme i.e. the Gini coefficient is 1, there is perfect inequality where one person has all the income and everybody else has zero income.



The third point is the often ignored, yet salient fact that there are striking income disparities within a country (i.e. between the urban-rural; between provinces, districts and municipalities). In the Philippines, for instance, poverty incidence is highest at 66 per cent in the Southern Mindanao region compared with the capital, Manila's, 8.7 per cent. In Indonesia, inequality between regions, provinces, districts and cities are reported to be very high, with the province of Papua for example having half of its population falling below the poverty line compared with Jakarta's 3.4 per cent.²⁰ In the CLMV regions, it is in the remote rural areas where ethnic minorities live that one finds the most deprived and the most vulnerable groups in these societies. Furthermore, new dimensions of poverty are emerging in the more industrialized ASEAN economies such as Malaysia and Singapore, e.g. urban poverty, as well as poverty found among the most vulnerable segments of society such as single parent households, the elderly, the handicap etc. These are often caused by economic and social dislocation brought on by structural economic changes.

2.2. Institutional capacity and resource limitations.

Beyond the macro data are also salient disparities in institutional capacities and resources. While one would assume a certain minimum level of government capacity and a minimal level of economic capacity to be able to respond to and address these development gaps, there are severe institutional and resource constraints faced by almost half of the countries in the region. There are several reasons for these limitations. For one, most of the CLMV countries are agricultural based economies and are still in transition from centrally planned to market-oriented economic systems. Institutional capacities are known to be extremely weak reflected for instance in inadequate or even inchoate institutional frameworks for business and investments regulations. Many state owned enterprises (SOEs) are inefficient and sorely need to be reformed. Legal frameworks are not only weak but also rudimentary. Moreover, given that CLMV countries are heavily dependent on financial capital from abroad in the form of official development assistance (ODA), Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) and foreign loans, the problems become more pronounced with regard to their ability to optimally utilize and maximize these foreign assistance.

Lack of institutional capacity stems primarily from scarcity of qualified human resources and from lack of and poorly developed education systems, especially at secondary and tertiary levels. Training in technical and scientific areas is extremely limited, not to mention the poor access to ICT. Much has already been written about the need to close the digital divide in the region, but the progress on ICT within the CLMV is still at very low levels. Hence, a major challenge for most of these countries to hurdle is meeting the bare minimum requirement in institutional and economic reforms to facilitate its further integration in the region and the world. But as Vo Tri Thanh had noted, CLMV countries run the risk of being marginalized during the process of regional economic integration thus raising concerns regarding the widening development gap between the older and newer members of ASEAN.²¹

2.3. Governance and Accountability

Gaps in human development are now also linked to governance. With the growing emphasis on people-centred development, there has been pressure to include governance as an

²⁰ See *Southeast Asian Development Report, 2005*, p. 26, in <http://www.dirp3.pids.gov.ph/seahdr/seahdr.html>.

²¹ For more details on institutional and human resource challenges facing CLMV, see Trung, Thai Quan: "The ASEAN Economic Community: Perspectives from ASEAN's Transitional Economies", in Hew, Denis (ed) (2005): *Roadmap to an ASEAN Economic Economy*, Singapore, ISEAS.



important variable in measuring the quality of development. While one could readily agree with the argument that good governance creates the conditions conducive to the development of social, political and economic systems and institutions that promote human dignity and respect, the notion of *good* governance is however contested.

Notwithstanding the varying conceptions of governance, it generally refers to the “mechanisms and processes for citizens and groups to articulate their interests mediate their differences and exercise their legal rights and obligations”.²² Good governance therefore allows these processes to function through transparency, accountability, rule of law, efficient and effective institutions and participatory processes. Among the 5 components that define good governance, it is often the political—e.g. issues of participatory processes—that is contentious and where gaps are usually identified. Hence, measures for good governance are become problematic, particularly on the issue of deciding which variables are important.

Given that governance (at least as generally defined in the SEA-HDR) is rooted in the rights-based approach, to enable among others the “expansion of choice” for people to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, then variables such as: accountable political systems, respect for human rights, protection from gender and minority discrimination, free and fair elections, etc. make for complex and uneven measures especially when comparisons across the region are carried out. To be sure, there would be more divergence than convergence given the differences in political systems: from an absolute monarchy in the case of Brunei, to communist/socialist oriented systems of Laos and Vietnam, the military regime in Myanmar and the democratic systems—albeit arguably of different grades (?) in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. On the one hand, while other countries may score low for political rights, they may score high for economic rights and vice versa.

Hence, it is not surprising that the trends measured in the SEA-HDR on governance have been patchy and in some cases received more negative than positive scores. For example, using the governance index of ‘voice and accountability’ (referring to process by which those in authority are selected and replaced through the exercise of political rights, among others), it is interesting to note that only 3 countries—Philippines, Thailand and Singapore—scored positively while the rest scored negatively.²³ The contrast in having a positive score for Singapore and a negative score for Malaysia may be contested by some who could argue that while the former has a dominant single party system, the latter has in fact opposition parties that continue to pose serious challenges to the ruling party.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a comprehensive discussion on this particular subject, but the point that is being highlighted here is the difficulty in providing a systematic and coherent comparison of good governance in the region. This goes back to the issue raised in the previous section of this paper regarding the problem of clarity in concepts, indicators and measurements. Nevertheless, it must be also be pointed out that the current work on measuring good governance in the region, limited as they are, provide a sense of the problems faced by states and people in establishing a system that protects human dignity and human rights. These include the kinds of research and surveys that measure corruption, transparency, and democracy that offer instructive insights into the kinds of challenges faced by individual countries in the region and the rest of the world.²⁴

²² See SEA-HDR, p.40

²³ See SEA-HDR, p. 45. The measures used by SEA-HDR were adopted from the methodology prepared by Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi (or KKM). While more information need to be gathered to understand the mechanics of applying such methodology, the results on the surface are quite revealing yet puzzling to many.

²⁴ Such measures include, the Transparency Index, Freedom House Index, etc.



3. The ASEAN Community Framework: Advancing the Agenda of Narrowing Development Gaps

In spite of the mixed picture of development trends in the region and the complexity of issues that emerge when examining gaps, it is nonetheless useful to assess the current initiative by ASEAN in addressing these issues, especially within the context of the ASEAN Community. With the snapshot of development gaps provided above, it appears that the goal of establishing a community of caring societies appears to be a long way ahead given the daunting challenges facing the region—either between within the ASEAN-6 and CLMV countries in the context of economic integration and political-security cooperation, or within the ASEAN-6, and more importantly perhaps given the dynamics within each of these countries where serious development issues are present.

Yet, despite these hurdles, one could argue that the regional project of setting up this Community raises/brings the human and comprehensive development agenda right in the heart of each member's national policies. The recently concluded Vientiane Plan of Action (VPA, 2004) that provides the framework to realise the goal of an ASEAN community, has set out the specific areas in the political, socio-cultural and economic sphere where specific agendas needed to be addressed. In setting out the ASC, for instance, one of the strategic thrusts was political development. This specific agenda highlighted the need to promote human rights and obligations, allowing for the stock-taking of existing human rights mechanisms and equivalent bodies, including sectoral bodies that look into the rights of women and children; establishing a network of cooperation among existing human rights mechanisms; expanding/elaboration of an ASEAN instrument on the protection and rights of migrant workers; as well as the establishment of an ASEAN commission for the promotion and protection of the rights of migrant workers.

These measures are closely followed by establishment of programmes to strengthen the rule of law, judiciary systems and legal infrastructure, and good governance.²⁵ The emphasis on promoting good governance is indeed extremely significant given that this was an area that not too long ago ASEAN had been conspicuously silent on.

More importantly, the VPA had adopted the Vientiane Integration Agenda (VIA) which also outlined specific areas and measures to narrow the development gap between the old and new members, albeit, mainly in the economic sphere. Among the measures outlined include: the strengthening of the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) that explores modalities for more resource mobilisation, and programme on social development that will support the national poverty reduction programme with regional advocacy efforts.²⁶ Resource mobilisation under the AIA programme is an important agenda here since the quantum of resources committed under this programme especially those coming from the 'richer' countries in ASEAN are relatively smaller compared with other ODA received by CLMV.²⁷ It has been argued other ASEAN countries may need to participate more actively in this area as this would not only enhance regional economic integration, but could also strengthen the solidarity of this community. This is salient point that needs serious attention given the lacklustre performance of the IAI initiative.

The extent to which these goals are carried out under the AEC scheme would certainly still need to be assessed in due course. That focused assistance programmes are now being targeted with specific timelines indicate greater commitment in bridging the development

²⁵ See *Vientiane Plan of Action, 2004*, in <http://www.aseansec.org>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Tranh, op. cit.* p. 13.



gaps and enhancing prospects for integration. To be sure, the task must be carried not only between the ASEAN-6 and the CLMV, but also by every member of this community given that the notion of development has to be understood and achieved in a comprehensive way.

Such an approach would do well to reinforce the way ASEAN has been seen to undertake its regional endeavours. Given the seamless nexus between human development and human security, the goal of an ASEAN community that is secure, prosperous and caring can only be realised if member states are convinced of this integrated and comprehensive approach. Against the kinds of security challenges facing the region which range from the so-called traditional and non-traditional threats (irregular migration, infectious diseases, transnational crimes, etc) there are enough reasons why a comprehensive and human-oriented approach is all the more crucial. The sequential approach to development therefore is no longer tenable. As cogently argued by Amartya Sen, one can no longer “lose sight of the interlinkages between freedoms of different kinds.”