

Knowledge Economy: Linchpin Of ASEAN Integration

Keynote Speech by Dr Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary-General of ASEAN, on 17 October 2008 (Day Two) at the "Bridging Worlds 2008 Conference", organised by the National Library Board of Singapore and the NGO Learning Summit, in collaboration with the Asia Dialogue Society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We celebrated the 40th anniversary of ASEAN last year here in this island state of Singapore with the inauguration of the ASEAN Charter. In December of 2008 we will celebrate the full ratification of the ASEAN Charter by all 10 member states. The Charter represents a new threshold of collective and collaborative integration on three definite fronts: the Socio Cultural Community; the Security Community and the Economic Community. In the last 40 years, ASEAN, driven by the exigencies of regional political and security circumstances, had focused on the security and economic community. The economic front gained momentum in the latter half of the last century and the better half of this decade, culminating in the ASEAN Economic Integration Roadmap. This meeting, which has brought the community of librarians, foundations and the NGOs together, is therefore timely. Let me congratulate the National Library Board of Singapore and the Asian Dialogue Society for this initiative.

The economic integration plans, however, will face several challenges given the current global financial crises. While we will weather this crisis together with the rest of the world, the one thing that remains a constant for ASEAN and Southeast Asia is their sociocultural heritage. The soul of ASEAN rests on this pillar and unmistakably tops the Secretariat's agenda going forward. ASEAN is working towards developing a blueprint, and I believe this conference would contribute significantly in terms of ideas, inspiration and inputs into this blueprint.

ASEAN's perspective of the socio-cultural pillar is closely intertwined with the Security and Economic community and mutually reinforcing. To illustrate the intertwining or converging worlds of politics, economics and socio-cultural axis, allow me to highlight the issue of youth employment in ASIA and more specifically ASEAN. The Asia Development Outlook 2008 analysed that India, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand, together, account for close to half the young population in Asia – 33% from India and 12% from Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand combined. ASEAN's "Youth Bulge" provides an opportunity to reap a long term "demographic dividend" which is expected to peak in 2010. It can be a demographic curse if the vitality of the youth is not garnered for regional integration. By and large Southeast Asian countries have been slow to capitalise on engaging the youth productively in their own economies, and this opportunity will soon close its doors on Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand. Countries can only yield demographic dividends when their young people are productively employed and as they grow older, accumulate assets and reinvest, thereby generating higher national income. But the enabling factors are not in place in many Southeast Asian countries.

The "Youth Bulge" can have negative consequences for

governments that are largely administered by silver-haired politicians who maybe less sensitive to the changing demand patterns on the ground. ASEAN youth are more exposed today than before, but are less culturally integrated with their immediate neighbours compared to their predecessors. Each is living in isolation from the other. ASEAN's stability in 2010 will be contingent on socialcultural freedoms and not on economic freedoms alone. We need to urgently inculcate this in our younger citizenry. 2010 is not far away. Socio-cultural connectivity lags behind communication leaps in the region. My son recently shared that he had gone out for dinner with some of his friends and no sooner did he realise that all of them were SMSing and communicating with their friends on the other end of the world instead of communicating with each other while seated at the same table waiting for dinner to be served. The Singapore-led digitisation model in the region will have a social impact that needs to be balanced with community bonding initiatives of libraries.

I am glad that ASEAN is in the business of bridging worlds. ASEAN aspires to create an "operating system" for the region and we propose to build the region as a social compact premised on sound policies, strong political and social interrelatedness with people connectivity. What do we mean by socio-cultural freedoms?

While economic freedom and sovereignty defines the scope of economic and security community outcomes, socio-cultural freedoms underpin all three domains of economy, security and culture. How do we conceive of socio-cultural freedoms or what environment does it presuppose? May I propose some initial thoughts?

In my mind, socio-cultural freedoms can be exercised in an environment that bridges diversity. ASEAN's ability to embrace diversity has been a key determinant of our social and economic success as a region. The region in itself is a melting pot of a myriad of cultures, crusted by waves of religious and political influences from all over the world. The wider world's footprint is found in this single region with ASEAN as the paramount architect of ASIA's peace and security. ASEAN has created a platform for emerging and existing powers to dialogue and network, understand and collaborate with others while maintaining our rich diversity and savouring our differences. The region needs to regenerate its cultural creativity to compete with the larger continents. While we value diversity, we also need to bridge diversity. Tolerance enables a stable and peaceful ASEAN. ASEAN Cultural Exchanges, the ASEAN Virtual Museum Network and ASEAN INFO NET are early attempts at bridging diversity.

On this bedrock of diversity, the region needs to create an environment where human potential can be enhanced. The human development agenda is of primary concern to ASEAN at this point in time.

Socio-cultural freedoms can only be exercised in the context of a participatory environment. A strong participatory framework championed by civic institutions, NGO's and Foundations will enhance the ASEAN Secretariat's efforts to bridge the region's resources with its aspirations. Developing close ties between the governed and the governing, talent and capital, business-academia-government creates a networked impact fostering greater participation and ownership to the region. ASEAN citizens need to be stakeholders in this new enterprise and invest in their destiny. The participatory environment is best fostered through a networked secretariat where responsibility and accountability are devolved from the power centre in Jakarta to its constituencies in all 10 ASEAN countries. You the custodians of knowledge, the depositories of cultures, are one such constituency that we want to and must work with.

KNOWLEDGE AS STRATEGY

How can libraries and cultural institutions, therefore, play a part in this regional socio-cultural community building effort? Filipino analyst Serafin Talisayon argued that information, knowledge and values underpin community building and sustainable development. Knowledge is the supporting framework of societies and is undisputedly at the core of ASEAN's integration strategy. Firstly, libraries will be integral to the ASEAN Secretariat's human capital development agenda. Libraries and cultural institutions, as you know, serve as public education platforms. Public education in the areas of health, farming, crop extension, post harvest management, natural disasters, climate change, gender and religious issues etc are becoming increasingly important. While we can work with schools for early education, libraries on the other hand can offer a wider communication and public education outreach for the larger citizenry. The ASEAN Secretariat will be happy to work with libraries to promote not only an ASEAN identity but also to develop a shared understanding of ASEAN, and consequently a better life and living standard for our people.

Secondly, libraries offer affordable access to lifelong learning opportunities for the adult workforce through their services and literacy programmes. From remote rural libraries in rice communities of Thailand, the islands of Indonesia, fishing kampong of Malaysia, the rice farms of Vietnam, the monasteries of Myanmar, the peaceful valleys of Laos and the Kampung Ayer of Brunei to sophisticated hi-tech, hi-touch libraries in Singapore, librarians are at the forefront of community literacy, providing opportunities for those who need an alternative. Many people have said that their first experience with technology was at the libraries. The aggressive reading and storytelling initiatives in the region are a testimony to the fact that libraries can do a lot more if there was greater endorsement and support of their initiatives. Libraries in the region can cooperate and collaborate to achieve greater efficiencies in cost and quality of their service. Digitisation is another key activity that libraries could leverage on both in terms of cost and labour efficiencies. An integrated ASEAN must first be manifested in the way cultural institutions collaborate and share. The European Union's Cultural Commission serves as a good example and model to emulate.

Thirdly, libraries and cultural institutions are excellent vehicles for participatory networks and community bonding.

I don't need to further belabour on this point as it is the focus of this conference. Libraries are at the forefront of social capital building, utilising new social media tools to enhance social proximity between communities in many societies. Libraries are actively experimenting on gaming and second-life alternatives to develop a new learning paradigm. The ASEAN Secretariat would be keen to tap into these networks and create opportunities for ASEAN citizens to embark on region-wide projects. And ASEAN citizens residing outside of the region need to be connected to the activities in the region so that our ASEAN community footprint, our cultural reach, our economic weight, our political influence go beyond our regional boundaries. They too need to be inspired by the ASEAN spirit, moved by the ASEAN pride, and contribute to the ASEAN community building efforts.

Libraries are our gateways; libraries are our bridges; they are depositories of our cultures, the guardians of our regeneration. NGO's and Foundations can collaborate with learning institutions to narrow the growing divide in the region. The ASEAN Secretariat will welcome proposals from the regional community to strengthen the role of libraries so that ASEAN's regional initiatives will have a wider reach and lasting impact. We hope to work with Foundations and Governments alike, businesses and academia together to ensure that ASEAN rides on the knowledge economy to create value for its citizens in the shortest time possible.

A shared platform is the key to the delivery of socio-cultural freedoms in the region. May I challenge libraries in the region to create this shared platform for regional integration in the knowledge sector. Knowledge strengthens the region and libraries serve as the cradle of this new renaissance that is emerging in Asia. Knowledge has the power to integrate and aggregate.

The ASEAN Secretariat looks forward to working actively with libraries and cultural institutions - The British Library included, to build the ASEAN socio-cultural community, and that will be a solid foundation for our ASEAN with a big "C" Community by 2015.

Thank you.

