

## *ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations*

ASEAN is a regional organization which has built a strong sense of community between nations of great diversity. It was founded on August 8, 1967, by five original countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. These small Southeastern Asian countries were motivated to unite under a common cause: the fear of communism. As they watched surrounding countries being swallowed up by communism, they had many reasons to fear the same fate. They were small, relatively poor countries who were already being targeted by the Communist party. They had experienced several terrorist attacks and even an attempted coup from the Communist party. Working together would give them a much better chance of resisting the attacks.

Since its founding, ASEAN has grown to include a total of ten countries. They include Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Singapore as well as the original five countries. Although the countries have many languages, cultures, religions and governments, they have united around ASEAN and created a spirit of regionalism lauded in the ASEAN anthem:

Raise our flag high, sky high  
Embrace the pride in our heart  
ASEAN we are bonded as one  
Look-in out to the world.  
For peace, our goal from the very start  
And prosperity to the last.

We dare to dream, we care to share.  
Together for ASEAN  
We dare to dream,  
We care to share, for it's the way of ASEAN.<sup>1</sup>

ASEAN has continued to reach out to other countries in the larger Asian regions, and in 2008 formed ASEAN 6 which added China, Japan, Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand to

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<sup>1</sup> ASEAN anthem. <https://asean.org/asean-anthem/>

multi-regional dialogue. ASEAN also holds summits with other countries and most recently held a summit with the United States in November of 2022.

ASEAN works to cooperate in three main areas: economic, cultural, and political which includes security, energy, environment, health and migration. Although it is a small organization, ASEAN has signed seven free trade agreements in comparison to the much larger European Union's ten and have opened up their economies to other countries including the United States and Japan. These free trade agreements have helped ASEAN countries to export their supplies of palm oil, rubber, tin, petroleum and timber around the world. As ASEAN exports increased, its countries then saw their own home economies improve. Vietnam, for example, has seen its level of extreme poverty drop from 50% to about 3% in the thirty years it has been part of ASEAN (Mahbubani 1). Singapore has virtually no unemployment and has "one of the highest per capita GDPs in the world" (von Feigenblatt 100), and Brunei, the smallest nation in the region, has the sixth highest GDP per capita in the world (von Feigenblatt 108). By working together on trade, the region has become the fourth largest market in the world and has greatly improved the living conditions and economies of these countries.

ASEAN has also developed a "Blue Print for Socio-Cultural Community" (ASCC) that sets forth many important goals for the region. One of these goals is education. ASEAN plans to give "universal access to primary education across ASEAN," (ASEAN, 2009, p 2 in von Feigenblatt 243), eradicate illiteracy, and eliminate a difference in access because of ethnicity or social class. Unfortunately, many ASEAN member countries have traditional cultural practices which discriminate against women, creating tension between traditions and international human rights. ASEAN works towards establishing social justice and rights, especially for women, the disabled, and the elderly. The ASCC also deals with another important goal - building an

ASEAN identity. This section of the ASCC plans to promote ASEAN identity through government officials, to publicize ASEAN programs through the media, and to promote ASEAN Day in schools.

ASEAN has even played an important role in resolving conflicts in the region. ASEAN gained world-wide recognition for its diplomatic actions in the conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia in 1978. ASEAN also solved a tense dispute between Cambodia and Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple, an ancient heritage site both lands were claiming to control. Although it is not a military pact, ASEAN cooperates to build security, and many members share air force and defense training. They also have use of each other's military facilities for repairs and hold joint military exercises. Since many of the ASEAN member countries are smaller than other world powers, uniting militarily is important in maintaining regional security in the "ASEAN Way" of "consensus, consultation, and non-interference" (Yukawa 1).

Despite all its accomplishments, ASEAN is not without imperfections. It has no natural custodian, no sanctions, no enforcement of decisions and few ties with its citizens. Most citizens in ASEAN countries do not even realize ASEAN's existence. But ASEAN has made major improvements to its citizens' lives, even if they are not aware of it. For example, in Vietnam, the forty-five percent of people having access to sanitation facilities increased to seventy-eight percent after joining ASEAN. Southwest Asia, which has been the most bombed region in the world since WWII (Mahbubani 7), has had relative peace since ASEAN's founding, and not one of its members has gone to war with one another. ASEAN has brought peace, unity and strong relationships to impoverished communities and sets an example for the whole world to follow.

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