

C is for Connectivity

In 2015, a power interconnection project linked Indonesia's West Kalimantan province and Malaysia's Sarawak state. By 2020, the Singapore-Kunming Rail Link (SKRL) will run through Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar.

Connections like the above are the arteries of building an ASEAN Community both in the form of hard infrastructure and 'softer' linkages through people-to-people, cultural or trade ties. They play a crucial part in strengthening and fostering ASEAN as a vibrant region for doing business, connecting its 10 Member States and their peoples.

Many of these intra-ASEAN links have been put in place under the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, which ASEAN Leaders adopted as a plan of action from 2011 to 2015 for a closer and more integrated ASEAN. The Master Plan identifies three types of connectivity - through the enhanced development of physical infrastructure (physical connectivity), effective institutions, mechanisms and processes (institutional connectivity), and empowered people for expanded opportunities (people-to-people connectivity). Synergistic efforts under sub-regional arrangements such as Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) and Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) could also play critical roles in catalyzing the building of ASEAN Community.

The physical connectivity projects cover a mix of initiatives to ease the flow of goods, services, and people in the region. These include the ASEAN Highway Network, 47 designated maritime ports, an ASEAN Broadband Corridor and ASEAN Power Grid, flagship infrastructure projects that seek to bring connectivity across borders and bring benefits such as improved competitiveness of regional production networks, better trade, services, investment flows and reductions in development gaps.

Three transport facilitation agreements also contribute to physical connectivity - the ASEAN framework agreements on the facilitation of goods in transit, facilitation on inter-state transport, and on multimodal transport - aim to reduce costs and boost the movement of vehicles, goods, services across borders. For example, Lao PDR and Vietnam had officially launched a single-stop inspection system at the Lao Bao-Dansavanh border checkpoint in 2015 to facilitate trade between the two countries and along the East-West Economic Corridor.

ASEAN Member States are making it easier to move goods at, within and across national borders, including through each Member State's National Single Window. By early 2016, the ASEAN Single Window will be implemented among exchange-ready Member States. ASEAN is also pursuing an ASEAN Single Aviation Market and an ASEAN Single Shipping Market as part of realising its goals of becoming a single market and production base, and to further open up progressively to investments from within and beyond the region.

Institutional connectivity measures include those that facilitate trade, such as the ASEAN Trade Repository and National Trade Repositories. ASEAN also continues to address non-tariff barriers to boost intra-ASEAN trade and investment and to harmonise standards and conformity assessment procedures across Member States.

Improving connections that make ASEAN a people-oriented and people-centered community includes initiatives and opportunities that bring its people together on a cultural and individual level, allowing them to get to know one another better. These range from initiatives that promote greater mobility through the progressive relaxation of visa requirements, the multilateral agreement on the liberalisation of air services, as well as mutual recognition arrangements, to educational initiatives like student exchanges, the ASEAN International Mobility of Students Program, and ASEAN studies courses that focus on forging an ASEAN regional identity. For instance, ASEAN Member States are promoting the use of the Curriculum Sourcebook for primary and secondary schools to complement their existing supplementary materials on ASEAN.

ASEAN has now embarked on the journey to formulate the Post-2015 Agenda for ASEAN Connectivity. It will analyse and address, among others, resource mobilisation, including new financing vehicles; and the strengthening of institutional mechanisms, including the alignment and coordination of stakeholders as well as engaging businesses, non-government organisations and civil society.

Overall, physical, institutional and people-to-people connectivity will promote economic growth, narrow the development gap, enhance regional competitiveness and promote deeper ties among ASEAN peoples and between ASEAN and the rest of the world. Strong and vibrant connectivity is essential to ASEAN's drive towards becoming a more competitive and resilient region that is firmly integrated in the global economy.