

The Report of the NEAT Working Group on East Asian Socio-Cultural Connectivity

Introduction

Socio-Cultural Connectivity is an important factor in building East Asian Community as East Asia is a region of great social and cultural diversity. Further understanding of social and cultural diversity and a common vision for community is needed for the coordination of political economic interests within the region. There has been a great tendency towards developing a humanistic regional community through increasing socio-cultural exchanges in the process of building an East Asian Community that places enhanced importance on shared ideas and identity.

The spirit of socio-cultural community was enshrined in the 1998 ASEAN Plus Three Summit including statements on Asian identity, human exchanges, mutual cultural understanding, and so on. The East Asia Vision Group II (EAVG II) proposes the establishment of an Asian version of UNESCO, to foster education and science and ensure the preservation of historic sites and the rich cultural heritage of the East Asian region. A major challenge it confronts today is that cultural institutional networking lags behind expectations.

Recalling this spirit, the Network of East Asian Think-Tanks (NEAT) recognized the importance of building an East Asian socio-cultural community at the 2004 annual conference and the necessity of building East Asian identity at the 2005 annual conference. NEAT has organized a number of working groups to deal with general issues of cultural exchange and explore various ways to enhance cultural exchange in East Asia. The working groups, five led by NEAT Korea and one by NEAT Japan, have made practical policy recommendations on key areas of cultural cooperation in East Asia. A valuable output of the working groups is a broadened consensus on the necessity of cultural institutional networking in East Asia.

A network of socio-cultural institutions is of particular concern given the existing imbalanced progress in comparison with economic and political-security cooperation. There should be an institutional arrangement to project a new vision and policy recommendation over the longer period beyond segmented exchange programs in the region. There are increasing demands for regional arrangements for institutional connectivity in the socio-cultural sector by facilitating discussions and shared identity in a harmonious way.

The NEAT Working Group Meeting on ‘East Asian Socio-Cultural Connectivity: Building an Institutional Network’ was organized by NEAT Korea at the Yonsei University Wonju Campus, Korea on July 20, 2018 with the presence of 17 representatives from ASEAN Plus Three (APT). This report strives to put forward policy proposals on strengthening socio-cultural connectivity through an institutional

network in APT countries while it presents major points discussed during the meeting.

Socio-Cultural Elements and East Asian Community

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) as one of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community focuses on “*cooperative activities that are people-oriented, people-centred, environmentally friendly, and geared towards the promotion of sustainable development to face new and emerging challenges in ASEAN*” (ASCC Blueprint 2025, 2016). In the context of regional cooperation in East Asia, the importance of socio-cultural cooperation is widely acknowledged by the governments in the region. A notable example can be found in the East Asia Vision Group Report (EAVG II), which is concerned “with sociocultural challenges such as increase in the aging population, a decline in the working age population, along with the growing development gap in the region and environmental challenges” (EAVG II). The report also highlights the role of joint R&D activities for improving public health services. Reducing the gap among the various actors in society is one of the great concerns of the APT cooperation.

The region is now facing multi-dimensional concerns and cross-sectoral issues that involve complex relationships to manage and comprehend, which are made more challenging by overlapping, contrasting, and intersecting national and regional interests — for instance, disputes and conflicts among countries in the region, non-traditional security issues (climate change, food security, energy security, and disaster management), gaps in development and manpower levels, lack of trust due to historical issues, the low level of people’s awareness towards regional cooperation, the complexities of the regional situation and the influence of policies of major powers.

Other sociocultural issues considered in the process of building East Asian community include protecting the fundamental rights and dignity of migrant workers; improving access to education to help children complete primary and secondary school; facilitating the leading role of universities in the region; reducing the digital divide by giving ICT training programmes to less-developed countries; making efforts in forest cooperation through sound forest policies and proven technologies; sharing of information on water resources management and coordinating policies; strengthening of people-to-people connectivity through joint tour programmes; promoting intra-regional travel through visa facilitation, as well as an East Asian volunteers’ programme; strengthening of cooperation of East Asian public broadcasting stations; and increasing the support of East Asian nations for East Asian Studies at major universities. The promotion of cultural identity in order to increase awareness, mutual understanding, cooperation and cultural exchange has been mainly encouraged at the domestic level. At the regional level, APT countries have organized the ASEAN+3 Cultural Cooperation Network (APTCCN), which is a senior officers’ meeting.

However, the implementation of these socio-cultural visions has a long way to go. There is a lack of institutional governance to manage and monitor the implementation of the programs. Like the case of ASCC, the socio-cultural pillar is overshadowed by other pillars and, in particular, economic cooperation.

NEAT as a track II entity for the APT has organized a number of working groups on various socio-cultural issue. Also, culture institutional networking is needed for effective implementation of the cultural cooperation initiatives. The previous NEAT working groups proposed a number of programs in different cultural areas to make future cultural cooperation fruitful, such as to organize popular culture and cultural festivities; to promote mutual understanding of common history and culture from the elementary school level to secondary school level; to hold biennales and triennales in the region; to designate East Asian Cultural Capitals, whereby Asian cities take turns showcasing their cultures; to build an ASEAN+3 University Network (ASEAN+3 UNet); to promote systematization of regional quality assurance and credit transfer systems of higher education in ASEAN + 3; to develop cultural exchanges among youth; to establish a regional language training framework and create a knowledge sharing system on the culture and tourism of ASEAN + 3 countries; to develop academic collaborative research on historical artifacts; to promote preservation and protection of cultural assets and cultural heritage; to promote cultural industry development by making visible systems and capacity building of human resources. Those programs are all innovative and worthy of effective implementation.

The working groups on sociocultural issues were mainly based on a problem-solving approach to issues in which the hosting countries have interests. However, there was no attempt to draw an institutional framework for the socio-cultural community while the issues-based working groups are fragmented. At least three problems contributed to creating the difficulties for constructing clear pathways and institutional frameworks to develop socio-cultural connectivity. The first is the issue of complexity. Many different issues, sometimes overlapping with each other, are put under the term 'socio-cultural issues.' The second problem is that socio-cultural issues are often considered as lesser priorities compared to political-security and economic issues. For policymakers, political, security, and economic issues are more visible because they are the traditional measures for the success of their leadership. The third problem is the difficulty in measuring the progress of the socio-cultural agenda. This lack of clarity is seen in the progress of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. On paper, assessment on the implementation of the ASCC 2015 Blue Print concluded that most of the action plans are addressed.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Socio-cultural elements have increasingly become significant to building an East Asian Community given the increasing demand for harmonized policies in dealing with various sociocultural challenges. Realising the social and cultural value of the region is particularly important. Each country needs to protect and preserve her national cultural and artistic heritages so that these can become the identity of each country. In order to achieve this goal, each country in the region should have a long-term perspective on the process of strengthening cultural and social cooperation and building socio-cultural institutions. At the regional level, the institutionalization of socio-cultural connectivity is more necessary now, and calls upon cooperation among the governments to arrange

sociocultural policies in the process of community building in the region. Initiatives need to work with a people-oriented spirit to benefit their peoples, promote sustainable development and embrace the goals of United Nations SDG 2030. This is also the direction to enhance mutual trust and understanding among ASEAN+3 countries as well as the effectiveness of initiatives.

It is particularly significant to maintain the centrality of ASEAN and reinforce plus three's role. The network should operate under the principle of ASEAN centrality, which means that ASEAN plays a central role in the network; ASEAN norms, such as the principles of mutual respect, mutual benefit, consensus, and the comfort levels of all parties, should be adhered to; decisions of the network should be made on the basis of consensus on issues, following a principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of members from outside or within the region. Furthermore, newer members of the ASEAN countries need to be encouraged to get involved even more within socio-cultural cooperation.

Promoting dialogue and cultural exchanges should be a crucial element to build a network among ASEAN+3 countries to share best practices from education, youth, and sport policies and program implementations. It also requires us to take a more cross-sectorial and inter-pillar coordination approach on socio-cultural cooperation, particularly on the 'culture of prevention.'

In the process of building East Asian Community, common and shared identity is the fundamental issue. It is important to promote greater awareness and appreciation of each other's traditions, heritage and cultures, including through regularly held cultural festivals, art exhibitions, film festivals and other cultural events; discuss and exchange experiences on preserving traditional cultural values and work together to prevent theft, illicit and illegal trade and trafficking and the transfer of cultural properties. APT also needs to enhance the awareness and understanding of each other's culture, customs and faiths, including through regular people-to-people and cultural exchange activities such as cultural festivals, exhibitions, film festivals, youth camps and media exchanges. Socio-cultural cooperation should not solely depend on the market-oriented approach but people-oriented approach, which will also help to preserve the culture of minorities.

It should be noted that the cooperation among higher education institutions in East Asian countries will benefit the institutions, countries and region. The author offers some recommendations for action. In the context of East Asia, higher education institutions in East Asian countries should be encouraged and supported to open a joint-degree or double-degree program in their institutions, which include a joint degree program or setting the same standard in order to enhance cross-border cooperation. Support should be provided to higher education institutions to set up East Asian Studies programmes at major universities, which can contribute to socio-cultural exchange and collaboration.

It is also recommended to establish a NEAT Secretariat to enhance the role of NEAT to be the hub of think tanks and academics in East Asia, as well as the hubs-of-hubs of people-based initiatives for socio-cultural connectivity.

In this context, the following issues should be considered. First, it is highly

necessary to build a network among the sociocultural institutes in the member countries. Upon the recommendation of NEAT coordinators, the representing institute will share information and update the state of the member states national and regional sociocultural policies and challenges.

Second, to form a regional vision for more concrete socio-cultural cooperation, a regular policy forum needs to be conducted. The regional network of the sociocultural institutes conducts collaborative research on the socio-cultural community and various sociocultural challenges the region is facing. The regular forum will identify the priorities on sociocultural cooperation. This initiative would lead to the formation of an epistemic community that consists of scholars, policy makers and other stakeholders including those who participated in the NEAT process previously.

Third, for the medium- and long-term development plan, an inter-state research and monitoring unit for the sociocultural community needs to be put in place, the so-called Institute for Socio-Cultural Cooperation for ASEAN and East Asia. The institute can offer policy recommendations for the ASSC and East Asian sociocultural community. It may handle selected socio-cultural cooperation programs mainly in the field of education and research to fulfill its main task. Importantly it would monitor the progress of the ASSC and APT plans for socio-cultural cooperation.

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