

Keynote Address
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Reporting ASEAN: A Media Forum

31 March 2015
Bangkok, Thailand

Friends from the media, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen: Good Morning!

Let me first convey to you the greetings of our Secretary-General, Mr. Le Luong Minh, who is unable to join you in this forum due to prior commitment. In his stead, my presence here tells you how much we value our partnership with journalists and the media. After all, we believe in the famous adage by the British playwright Edward Lytton who said that “the pen is mightier than the sword.”

I also wish to convey our appreciations to the organizers for having this forum. “Reporting ASEAN” is certainly an apt theme as the momentum toward the ASEAN Community heightens. This Forum testifies to the power of communication in building united, prosperous, and caring communities.

That brings me to my first point: We are 275 days away from the establishment of ASEAN Community on 31 December 2015. This is a landmark event for ASEAN – a milestone that will change people’s lives in this region. The ASEAN Community is the realisation of the dream that our Founding Fathers envisioned when they signed the Bangkok Declaration right in this very city in 1967: a Southeast Asian region of peace, freedom and prosperity for their peoples.

Forty eight years and five more members thereafter, we are on track to building that community, comprising three pillars: political-security, economic, and socio-cultural. While the ASEAN Economic Community has received much fanfare, our envisaged Community is not just about economics. It is also very much about freer movement of people, harmonising our educational standards, respecting and appreciating our diverse cultures and sharing a stable, peaceful and people-oriented future, amongst others.

The challenge in connecting with the peoples is in conveying understanding on the whole spectrum of what ASEAN is; in short, what ASEAN means for their lives. The peoples of ASEAN need to understand what it means to be part of an integrated region where there are shared, equitable opportunities for personal, business, and community growth. Findings of our survey conducted in 2012 revealed that the majority of our people know ASEAN, but their interpretations on what ASEAN does and its relevance to their day-to-day lives differs greatly.

We are addressing this gap through the ASEAN Communication Master Plan (ACMP) which was launched in November 2014. With the theme of "ASEAN: A Community of Opportunities," the Communication Master-plan provides guidance on messaging ASEAN: explaining the character, structure, and overall vision of ASEAN and the ASEAN Community to key audiences. They include local communities, youth, women and children, governments, businesses, Civil Society Organisations, influencers, media and global audiences.

Given the size and spread of the ASEAN citizens, our digital platform has become increasingly instrumental in conveying ASEAN messages and updates. The ASEAN website now serves a gateway to what is happening in ASEAN. Last year, we had over 2 million unique visitors, and the number is increasing.

We are also social: ASEAN's Facebook Page is now followed by more than 245,000 fans (March 2015) with average reach of about 2 million monthly. You can also follow us on Twitter (@ASEAN), which has more than 34,000 followers (March 2015). Our combined re-tweets and mentions reach 10 million monthly.

For those who still like to physically flip pages in their hands, we also produce ASEAN publications, which are also available online on our website.

For our media contacts, we provide real-time news about ASEAN through press releases sent via email, website, and social media. The news includes events, statements/declarations and other pertinent information. You are welcome to subscribe to ASEAN mailing list by sending an email to news@asean.org and help us spread the news on ASEAN to your people.

As part of partnership with the media, we organize trainings for journalists of Member States. This is our way of improving both the quality and quantity of coverage on ASEAN; it is also a way to bring together journalists from the region, enabling networking and support for each other, and hence, a win-win strategy for us and our media partners.

Another example of collaboration with the media is the "ASEAN Today", a monthly TV program aired by The Indonesia Channel. The show is broadcasted in a few ASEAN countries and is co-anchored by a different announcer from ASEAN every month.

In a couple of months from now, we are set to roll out another TV program: "The ASEAN Spotlight." This will be a 30-minute weekly TV programme in national languages to be aired throughout the ASEAN Member States. This programme disseminates the ASEAN Community to the peoples in an informative and entertaining way. The scripts/texts of the episodes will be shared to the media for their own spin.

My final note would be on our take regarding media's portrayal of ASEAN issues. With regard to media reportage on ASEAN, the slant towards political issues such as the South China Sea or on issues like human rights is understandable given the legitimate need to sell stories.

However, we feel that there are a number of other interesting stories associated with ASEAN's community building efforts that are underreported. Sometimes, we get this feeling that much of the coverage is on *what is not done* rather than on what is already done. This is like a choice of whether to write about a 'glass half-full' or 'a glass half-empty.'

Admittedly, there are still gaps to be covered as we make our way towards ASEAN Community. But there are also accomplishments that merit media spotlight even though they may not be as sexy.

Some of these 'glass half-full' stories might be the Mutual Recognition Arrangements that allow selected professionals to work in other ASEAN countries if they meet the minimum standards and certifications; ASEAN cooperation in biodiversity which has led to the preservation of the region's diverse flora and fauna with the involvement of youth and civil society; recognition of common testing standards within the region such that for instance manufacturers in one ASEAN country can export their products to another ASEAN country by presenting the testing results obtained in the source country and not having to repeat the same test in the destination country.

Finally, ASEAN presents a rich tapestry of culture, history, politics, natural wonders, and human talents. Media stories on ASEAN would become more meaningful when this context and diversity are taken into account.

I hope this gathering will contribute to a more considered and improved reporting of ASEAN now and in the future and that the stories you will generate will enlighten, empower, unify and illuminate our people as we build a community of opportunities for all.

Thank you and I wish you success in this meeting.
