

The ASEAN Statistical Community and the Role of External Partners



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The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) launched the ASEAN Community in 2015 structured around three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Recognizing the gradual and process-oriented nature of ASEAN integration, member states adopted ASEAN Community Vision 2025 upon the establishment of the ASEAN Community, thus establishing a broad framework of blue-prints for each pillar which is also supported by the Initiative for ASEAN Integration Work Plan III and Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity 2025.

Having started as a security-oriented cooperation mechanism in the late 1960s struggling with considerable economic, political, and cultural heterogeneity, ASEAN has come a long way to establish itself as an example of an enduring and resilient regional community unparalleled in the developing world. In later decades, market-driven economic integration has taken over ASEAN integration, accelerated by globalization and the spread of regional production networks. This has in turn facilitated the slow but steady institutionalization of the ASEAN regional architecture we see today.

The institutionalization of ASEAN integration requires more active ASEAN-level policy making, and this requires institutionalized support in, among others, statistical services. Building a regional statistical system to support ASEAN integration is an increasingly important task and deserves greater attention. Compiling, processing and disseminating reliable, timely, and comparable data across member states and at the regional level will provide ASEAN policy-making with a solid basis. Broadly speaking, the ASEAN-level statistical system has two goals. The first is to provide statistical support to ASEAN policy making in general and the second is to monitor progress in ASEAN integration. At the same time, creating a coherent statistical system across the region will also help build a sense of community among the ASEAN public by providing them with comparable information and presenting the ASEAN as a community of reference.

ASEAN has been making strenuous efforts to realize this goal. ASEAN established the ASEAN Community Statistical System (ACSS) in 2011, where the ASEAN Community Statistical System Committee – which is made up by national statistical offices of member states and reports to the ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting – and its decisions are implemented by the ASEAN Statistics Division (ASEANstats) within the ASEAN Secretariat. Under the ASEAN Framework of Cooperation in Statistics (AFCS), a series of strategies and plans were adopted and implemented, recent examples of which include the ACSS Strategic Plan 2016-2020 and its action plan. Creating a reliable regional statistical system is a daunting task. It requires not only coordinating between national statistical agencies, developing common standards, creating dissemination systems, but also building statistical capacity in lower-income countries to narrow development gaps.

ASEAN has been working closely with external partners who are willing to share their expertise and financial support in creating its statistical system. Over the last decade, ASEAN statistics have made considerable progress in certain areas of statistical data processing and dissemination. It is noticeable that the European Union (EU) has been instrumental in this progress.

Drawing from its own experiences in harmonizing, coordinating, and disseminating regional statistics, the European Commission has been cooperating with ASEAN first through the EU-ASEAN Statistical Capacity Building Programme (EASCAB 2009-2013), and later the EU-ASEAN Capacity Building Project for Monitoring Integration Progress and Statistics (COMPASS) 2014-2018. The improvement we see today in the ASEANstats website owes much to these efforts. The Compass project has prioritized and made most progress in merchandise

trade and foreign direct investment statistics, while trade in services saw some, but more limited, progress. The statistical data collected, processed, and communicated using this system are already used in the ASEAN Community Progress Monitoring System, the latest figures of which were released in 2017.

Nonetheless, daunting challenges remain ahead. As discussed by the ACSS itself, progress in statistical development in fields other than trade and FDI, such as national accounts, labor market indicators, and manufacturing statistics, has been slow. To make ASEAN statistics have a stronger presence in high-level ASEAN processes, the scope of ASEAN statistics needs to be broadened while political support from the ASEAN leadership should be intensified.

ASEAN member states will continue their endeavors, and external partners can extend support to expedite the development of an ASEAN statistical system. Greater investment in project funds and expertise will go a long way. Korea could probably find a role here, at least in supporting already-existing arrangements ASEAN has created without duplications. For its part, Korea is one of the top donors of development cooperation in statistics. It is an active country partner of the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21), which was established by the United Nations, the European Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank in 1999 to promote the better use and production of statistics throughout the developing world. In 2015, Korea was the fourth largest bilateral donor, following Canada, Sweden, and UK, in statistical development among OECD DAC members.

The Korea International Cooperation Agency, the primary grant-aid giving government agency in Korea, has implemented a range of programs to promote capacity building in statistical development, funding projects and dispatching expert advisors to assist in statistics-related agencies in the partner countries. Statistics Korea, Korea's national statistical office, likewise has provided technical assistance and training. Recently, the Korean government has pledged to expand its ASEAN- Korea Cooperation Fund to US\$ 14 million. It has been restructuring the Fund on the basis of its dialogue with ASEAN and now seeks to take a more mid- and long-term program-based approach. ASEAN-Korea cooperation therefore can draw on the past experiences of bilateral cooperation and now explore new avenues in statistical development at the ASEAN-Korea level. **KIEP**