

Check against delivery

**Remarks by Mr Ong Keng Yong  
Secretary-General of ASEAN  
Plenary Session on "Civil Society and Regional Cooperation"  
31<sup>st</sup> International Conference  
International Council on Social Welfare  
Kuala Lumpur, 18 August 2004**

**Community Building in ASEAN's Social Sector**

**(I) A Vision of an ASEAN Community**

1 In 1997, the leaders of ASEAN set themselves an ambitious and serious task. They sought to build an ASEAN Community by 2020.

2 The design of this ASEAN Community was simple. The Community would rest on three pillars: economic cooperation, political/security cooperation and socio-cultural cooperation. The premise was that the ASEAN Community could only come about when the ten disparate member countries channelled their energies to their key common interests – maintaining regional security, driving economic integration and solidifying social stability.

3 Building these pillars, however, was not going to be simple. And of the three, the task of building the socio-cultural pillar was the most unwieldy – issues in the socio-cultural sphere are numerous and by nature tend to be more intangible. The Leaders harboured no illusions. Strengthening the social fabric across the region would be a challenge. But it was essential.

**(II) The Role of Social Cohesion**

4 Right from the start, ASEAN had realized that intense cooperation in the economic and political sectors alone would not bring about lasting regional integration. The 1967 Bangkok Declaration (which is ASEAN's founding document) put the acceleration of social progress and collaboration in the social field as one of the main aims of ASEAN. The ASEAN Leaders have repeatedly reaffirmed this goal and have highlighted the need to improve participation by the relevant groups in our respective societies. It was clear to them that unless income gaps were narrowed; unless the disadvantaged were no longer disenfranchised; and unless the potential of women and the young were actively developed, the ASEAN member countries would lack the social stability that was so necessary for reinforcing the regional integration effort. In other words, the overarching ASEAN Community could not become a reality if we did not first build a cohesive and caring community among the peoples of ASEAN.

5 However, since the early days, it came down to a question of limited resources, both human and financial. ASEAN took a conscious decision to focus on economic integration. This was the means to fast-track the larger regional integration goal, and generate more resources to ramp up regional cooperation in strengthening social cohesion.

### **(III) The Nuts and Bolts of Regional Cooperation**

6 The way I see it, ASEAN initiatives in the social sector have been gaining some momentum over the last few years. ASEAN member countries can see that there are advantages in tackling social welfare and development challenges on a regional scale. Capacity-building workshops can be held at a regional level. A regional approach provides a wider database from which to share knowledge and experiences. Above all, a regional approach allows for a holistic look at problems that are no longer confined by national borders. Desperate poverty in one country can have knock-on effects on the social stability of neighbouring countries - the flow of illegal migrant labour, the transmission of communicable diseases and the trafficking of narcotics.

#### **(a) The Challenge in Undertaking Regional Cooperation**

7 Yet tackling social issues on a regional level is not always feasible, nor necessarily the most effective approach. Not one policy fits all countries. Nor is a particular social sector activity even relevant to all. Especially when I am talking about a regional grouping where GDP per capita across countries can range from US\$180 to US\$21,000; where populations can be as small as 360,000 or as large as 220 million; where dependency ratios (the young to the proportion of working-age population) range from 0.3 to 0.8; or where literacy rates could be 66% or 90%. If you add the mix of political and economic systems, it is clear that needs are not uniform and generic solutions do not work.

8 Furthermore, in ASEAN, there are no supranational institutions to mandate region-based action. Member countries are still very much their own sovereign power. Regional action on a particular area works only if the national and regional agendas are aligned. Many issues in the social sector are ultimately national responsibilities.

9 These are the realities and ASEAN pursues its regional agenda within these parameters. Goals are scoped to the realm of the doable. The social sector, with its pressing needs that affect ASEAN citizens at a very personal level, is not the place for extravagant plans, just practical action.

#### **(b) A System for Practical Action: The "Regionality" Criteria**

10 Which begs the question: What activities can be done or should be done at the regional level?

11 Because resources are scarce, activities should only be undertaken if they have a clear value-add beyond what can be done on the national level. At the level of nuts and bolts, ASEAN's Framework for the ASEAN Work Programme on Social Welfare, Family and Population (2003-2006) sets out some criteria on what issues and activities require a regional approach.

12 Let me elaborate.

First, the social issue tackled has to be transboundary in nature or require inter-country cooperation.

For example, there are efforts to address trafficking in women and children under the Work Programme of the ASEAN Plan of Action to Combat Transnational Crime through measures like information exchange, cooperation in law enforcement and capacity building.

Second, the activity has to facilitate the implementation of or commitment to international conventions and other regional and international instruments on social welfare and development. (This provides an opportunity for member countries who are signatories to international conventions to share experiences on the challenges and solutions encountered in implementation.)

For example, by 1996, all ASEAN member countries had become signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Third, the activity should promote the formulation of an ASEAN consensus at international forums.

For example, ASEAN presented the Declaration on Commitments for Children in ASEAN to the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children in 2002.

Fourth, the activity should promote learning from best practices in the region. This could be through physical meetings, or compiling best practice models, guidelines and standards.

For example, the ASEAN-Australia Social Safety Nets project increased the capacity of policy-makers to design social protection and social safety net programmes based on a comparative understanding of best practices from ASEAN and other countries.

Fifth, the activity should promote intra-ASEAN linkages among centres of excellence. We are looking at how to promote the networking of social development institutions, professionals and practitioners in the region.

For example, senior officials responsible for social welfare and development have mooted an ASEAN Social Workers Exchange Programme.

Sixth, the activity has to build a capacity for compiling regional indicators and trends

For example, ASEAN has a joint project with the ILO that conducts research on the impact of regional integration on labour and unemployment.

Seventh, the activity should take advantage of economies of scale.

For example, holding one regional training session for all member countries rather than having ten separate sessions.

13 There are many project ideas out there and member countries of ASEAN are enthusiastic to lead them. But projects will not get approved for implementation if they do not fit the "regionality" criteria. This pared-down approach is out of practical necessity. We do not have unlimited resources to run numerous projects and for the ones we do take up, we want them to be effective. We are also mindful that funding partners who work with ASEAN had earmarked specific funds to help the entire region.

14 Of course, each country can and will continue to work on a national or bilateral level to deliver benefits for its own citizens. Indeed, in some cases, bilateral undertakings can be more effective. Moreover, several bilateral activities can be linked up eventually to an ASEAN-wide undertaking. But as to what is undertaken under the umbrella of ASEAN, we insist that the project must have regional relevance.

15 I have sketched the broad framework of how ASEAN goes about cooperating on a regional level so you can better understand our operational context in the social sector – what sort of activities we feel we can do to further social development in the region. Now I would like to turn to what we have chosen to do.

#### **(IV) The Approach to Regional Cooperation: People-centred, Community-based**

16 Ultimately, work in the social sector is about helping and empowering the citizens of ASEAN, enabling them to lead dignified and meaningful lives. Relying only on top-down policies and action is not enough – in fact, it is somewhat incongruous. ASEAN's chosen approach in building social cohesion is people-centred and community-based. It has to be.

17 We focus our energies in two key areas. The first area is about developing the 'software' of the social sector, namely, building the capacity of the practitioners who work in the sector. The second area is about building the 'hardware' of a cohesive society, namely, setting up the people-based infrastructure and networks - within a country and across the region - that will get things done.

**(a) Capacity Building is critical**

18 Capacity building and human resource development is one area that works well in a regional framework. ASEAN relies on information exchange, training and knowledge sharing. A regional approach not only leverages on the different experiences and expertise of ASEAN member countries, but also that of dialogue partners and international organizations and agencies.

19 Let me cite a few examples.

20 ASEAN has worked with the New Zealand Government on a Training Workshop on Prevention of Domestic Violence and with the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) on ICT access for the disabled. In the area of co-operation on children, ASEAN and UNICEF are working to build capacity of personnel across agencies like the police, social workers and health workers to develop a multidisciplinary framework for child protection and abuse intervention. ASEAN, with assistance from the Republic of Korea, also completed an epidemiological assessment of need and resources for frail elderly people and a project focussed on home care for the elderly in ASEAN.

21 Such joint projects do not necessarily cost a lot of money. Creative and innovative ways can be used to keep costs low. For our project with the World Bank to mainstream social development into the national development agenda, we have used technology like video conferencing to cut travel time and costs.

**(b) Engaging the Stakeholders: Working Together for the Common Good**

22 Whereas human resource development increases the efficacy of the practitioners, community building in the social sector is about putting in place an infrastructure that supports social development initiatives. As I mentioned, this is ASEAN's second area of focus.

23 The definition of 'community' necessarily goes beyond the ASEAN governments because the challenges of the social sector are complex and cannot be met without the help of key stakeholders. The logic is simple. No one has a monopoly of knowledge, expertise and experience when it comes to tackling social issues. To begin with, policy formulation and policy implementation is a massive task for a government to undertake on its own. It becomes a particularly difficult task without the buy-in of the stakeholders. A well thought-out policy still requires the efforts of committed implementers to turn the words on paper into action.

24 Stakeholders in the ASEAN social sector, member governments aside, fall into two broad categories.

**(i) The Regional Stakeholders**

25 First, there are what I call the regional stakeholders - the ASEAN dialogue partners and collaborators like the various international agencies that provide expertise and commit funds towards building a stronger ASEAN through enhancing

social stability in the region. These relationships with ASEAN have been established over the years and their roles in regional initiatives are straightforward.

26 While ASEAN's intent and motivation in tackling the social sector comes from a regional perspective, the corresponding follow-up action can often be local, requiring the active participation of what I call the in-country or local stakeholders – families and civil society groups.

#### **(ii) The Local Stakeholders**

27 The family and civil society groups form the bulk of non-government players in the social sector in ASEAN member countries. Many ASEAN declarations and statements have stressed the role of the family and community as cornerstones for social welfare, providing care for the children, young, women and the elderly. Recent statements have also highlighted the role of an empowered civil society in aiding the disadvantaged, disabled and marginalized.

28 As the role of these local stakeholders in ASEAN's social agenda is less structured than that of the regional stakeholders, I shall spend some time explaining how we hope to work with them.

#### ***The Family: How to Strengthen Their Role as Care-givers***

29 When it comes to provision of care, families play an important role. They are also a strong force of social cohesion. However, the changing structure of the nuclear family – fewer children, working parents or single parents – has affected the capacity of families to carry out traditional care-giving functions. As such, ASEAN has been looking at various ways to strengthen as well as supplement the role of families in care-giving. There are also plans to carry out assessments on the impact of national and regional development on family functioning. There is also a possible study on the changing structure of the family and its ability to provide care. The role of the family in care-giving increasingly needs to be supplemented by partnerships with NGOs and the private sector.

#### ***Civil Society – How to Harness a Vital Resource***

30 As for the civil society groups, the ASEAN Leaders recognise that they have an important role to play in the social sector. This is not just in service delivery. Even at the early stage of problem assessment, reliable information on the nature and extent of social problems in the region is lacking in government institutions. The local civil groups that have been dealing first-hand with such issues are valuable resources and can also help provide on-the-ground assessments.

31 Some projects targeted at enhancing ASEAN cooperation with NGOs have been mooted, for instance, a possible NGOs-ASEAN Network Cooperation Project where the national social welfare council (or equivalent) in each country could be linked as an ASEAN Affiliated Network. There is also discussion on an ASEAN coalition of NGOs in disaster relief.

32 ASEAN-NGO cooperation is still at a nascent stage. Both sides are still finding their way around each other. I am confident both the NGOs and the bureaucrats realise that they have much to gain from working with one another. In many ways, they are on the same side. We need to find a *modus operandi* to sustain a long-running and mutually rewarding relationship.

33 Building such a relationship requires some understanding of how ASEAN works so at this point it is probably useful to explain a little about the "ASEAN Way".

***How civil society can work with ASEAN –  
The "ASEAN Way": Taking it Step-by-Step, Incrementally***

34 There is an established culture, or as some would say, an "ASEAN Way". Over its 37 year existence, ASEAN member countries have worked to build a comfortable working relationship based on trust and a shared ethos of cooperation. This is not always easy given the diverse social and political backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities and religions that shape each member's perspective. Tolerance and patience are hallmarks of moving things along in the ASEAN Way. To outsiders, the pace of ASEAN can seem glacial, the dynamics baffling.

35 Those who have been serious in working with ASEAN understand that we are not looking for big bang solutions. Radical change that passes undue shocks to the system is out. We have learnt to be patient with one another in order to achieve a higher goal. We take modest incremental change over no change.

36 The ASEAN Way should not be seen as a barrier to engaging with us. Some NGOs have successfully worked with ASEAN. Indeed there are 58 NGOs registered with ASEAN and several are related to the social sector. ASEAN-NGO cooperation is a viable proposition.

37 Just ask the NGOs, religious and community leaders, academics and business representatives who worked with ASEAN government officials to draft the 7th Summit Declaration on HIV/AIDS and the 2<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN Work Programme on HIV/AIDS in 2001. Probably few would say it was an easy process. But then I am sure many would in the same breath express satisfaction that they were able to give their input and work together to bring an important plan of action to life, and play their part in combating HIV/AIDS in Southeast Asia.

38 It boils down to this. When people come together to further mutual interests, and if the mutual interest is sufficiently compelling, all parties will invest the time to hammer out a comfortable working relationship, one that can see them through successive projects. This is how a community-based approach can bring about a larger good. And so it is in this light that I hope interested civil society groups will view a potential working relationship with ASEAN and the ASEAN national governments.

(V) **Conclusion**

39 Regional cooperation in ASEAN's social sector for the first 30 years was generally ad-hoc and unseen. Even now, when there is more focus on the sector, ASEAN tackles social issues quietly in the background. The issues that ASEAN focuses on in the social sector – children, youth, women, the disabled, the poor, the elderly and families – are just not headline-grabbers unlike the other initiatives which are more publicly linked with the ASEAN 'name', say the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) or the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Initiatives in ASEAN's social sector are rarely publicised in the mass media. I hope this will change as we work more purposefully towards broader and deeper socio-cultural cooperation.

40 From the outset, the ASEAN leaders were clear that building a socially cohesive and caring ASEAN was critical. They envisioned an ASEAN where social justice and the rule of law would reign. The population would be free of hunger, malnutrition, deprivation and poverty. Strong families would form the basic units of society, tending to the children, the youth, women and the elderly. Civil society would join hands with government to give special attention to the disadvantaged, disabled and marginalised. This is not some pipe-dream but a vision ASEAN is committed to making into reality by 2020.

41 So with or without fanfare and acclaim, we will tackle the challenges of the social sector as a Community, step by step. And in making a better life for all our fellow ASEAN citizens, we will strengthen the Community that we have become.