Non-state regional governance mechanism for economic security: the case of the ASEAN Peoples' Assembly

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Abstract In Asia, the evolving dynamics in the development of civil society on the one hand and the re-conceptualization of security beyond the traditional notions of state/military security on the other are not mutually exclusive. These dynamics are essentially linked by a common need to broaden both the subjects and the objects of security. This paper looks at the emerging transnational civil society organization called the ASEAN Peoples’ Assembly (APA), established in 2000. In examining APA and locating it within emerging regional mechanisms for governance and security, the paper argues that APA can be a significant mechanism for governance since it provides the framework for the numerous civil society organizations in the region to engage with state and other non-state actors that are involved in defining security in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the genesis of APA offers salient developments that should not be missed in the study of civil society in this region.

Keywords Civil society; ASEAN; Track 3; human security; governance; economic security.

Introduction

This paper speaks to the broad question on how civil society organizations (CSOs) tackle the question of economic security. In particular, it looks...
at how these organizations, oftentimes referred to as Track 3, fit into the agenda of improving global governance by examining CSOs as part of the multi-level system of governance that are actively engaged in the overall quest of achieving human security. In doing so, this paper brings into focus the dynamics between actors and processes in constantly evolving conceptualizations of security.

Civil society and the re-thinking of security: convergence or divergence?

There are discernible trajectories in the rapid growth of civil society and the current widespread calls for the re-conceptualization of security. This trend can be found in Southeast Asia where there has been a dramatic increase in the number of civil society organizations particularly in the early 1990s, which have called attention to human developmental issues and challenged the prevailing models of economic models that many states in the region have adopted. This trend can be juxtaposed with the ongoing momentum to re-think the prevailing concepts of security conventionally rooted in threats to state/military security and instead promote human security (see Commission on Human Security 2003). The concept of human security, which calls for the protection of the vital core of human lives, essentially shifts the focus of security which privileged the macro-level concerns of state and economic development to that of the micro-level issues of individual development and empowerment.1

Several factors have led to these trends. The most commonly cited are the structural changes in the international environment brought on by the end of the Cold War, as well as the varying and complex forces of globalization which have had serious repercussions on the political, security and economic configurations in the global environment. The impacts of these changes come in many forms, not least the series of unexpected crises that have hit societies and states around the world. So far, the most significant crisis experienced recently in the region was the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. The ravaging onslaught of the economic crisis destabilized many governments and societies in a place once described as one of the most peaceful and fastest growing regions in the world. Over this period, civil society organizations have been at the forefront of calls to improve the plight of the poor and the disadvantaged, the minorities and displaced persons, women and children who have been victims of conflicts, and the many pressing concerns of communities left behind in the rapidly changing global environment. CSOs have asked questions, fought for their causes and challenged the governance of states and institutions.

The evolving dynamics in the development of civil society on one hand and the re-conceptualization of security beyond the traditional notions of state/military security on the other are not mutually exclusive. One could argue that these two ongoing dynamics are essentially interlinked by a
common need to broaden both the subjects and the objects of security. Thus, the idea in plotting these complementary trajectories is to reflect a critical fact – that is, security viewed comprehensively can only be meaningfully attained if it is defined by several actors of society, apart from the state. In this context, the role of civil society becomes a critical criterion since its inclusion in the ‘ideal’ multi-actor/multi-level approach in the attainment of security provides an alternative voice and creates added political space for different sectors of the society to be included in the processes of redefining security.

Thus, what we have in this region are two processes that are perceptibly moving in tandem. More significantly, these emerging processes reflect commonalities in agenda-setting and provide alternative modalities of state–society engagement aimed at highlighting the security concerns of individuals and communities and bringing these concerns to the international arena. These concerns could range from economic, political, environmental, food, health, personal and community security. The importance of these processes cannot therefore be understated.

Take the issue of economic security. Given the almost seamless nexus between politics and economics, alternative perspectives and approaches to economic development are increasingly getting the attention of the global community. These alternative modalities have questioned the prevailing canons of neoliberal policies on trade and development which presupposes that the opening up of the social space at the economic level would result in a similar process at the political level and vice versa. The consequence of this spatial opening also presupposes the realization of economic security defined loosely as the economic well-being of the state (and that managing the economy is vital to attain national security). Against this neoliberal perspective, the role of civil society organizations is seen to be fostering this process of political and economic pluralization by acting essentially as a barrier against strong state involvement in both political and economic spheres. But, there has to be more to this rather sanguine scenario.

The problem with this neat and simplistic perspective is the underlying assumption that the role of civil society is already fulfilled once these ‘spaces’ are opened up for them to contest the power of the state and market. This view does not go far enough to understand the context in which civil society organizations develop and the impact that this context can have on the trajectory that civil society takes. More significantly, it fails to identify and appreciate some of the avenues of actions that civil society organizations can and choose to take in different regional settings.

To be sure, identifying some of these problems raises several issues with regard to the role of civil society in promoting alternative discourses on matters of political, social and economic development. Moreover, there is also the question of how the development of civil society becomes part of the ongoing debates on the future of security in the region (Lizee 2000). In grappling with a number of complex issues and teasing out some of the
underlying relationships between actors and processes, two central themes will be addressed in this paper:

1. How do civil society organizations relate to the actors and processes which are currently engaged in the reconceptualization of security in the region?
2. To what extent does this configuration between actors contribute to governance for economic security?

The paper will analyse the above issues by looking at the emerging transnational civil society organization called the ASEAN Peoples’ Assembly (APA). The APA was established in 2000 under the initiative of the ASEAN-ISIS network, a Track 2 organization in Southeast Asia. In examining APA and locating it within the emerging regional mechanisms for governance and security, the main objective of this paper is to analyse the dynamics between actors and processes that are interacting in the ongoing enterprise of promoting human security in the region.

The paper is in three parts. The first part briefly examines the concept of civil society and discusses some of the conceptual problems in identifying civil society organizations. The second part identifies some of the civil society organizations found in the ASEAN region that are involved in the broad subjects of development, global governance and security. The third part traces the genesis of the ASEAN Peoples’ Assembly and examines the implications of this new configuration of Tracks 2 and 3 processes in the efforts at building regional mechanisms for economic security.

Understanding civil society

The dramatic growth of civil society and its critical role in filling the space between the state and market belie the fact that the very notion of ‘civil society’ is a contested concept (Hall 1995; Keane 1995). Within the Asian context, the definition of civil society differs among those who have studied the emergence of civil society in the region. One definition, for example, looks as civil society as ‘non-profit voluntary organizations’ that are engaged in developmental work (Serrano 1994). Another definition, which uses the same description of the concept, refers to civil society as NGOs, research institutes and philanthropic associations (Yamamoto 1995). A third definition referred to civil society as ‘the broader sphere beyond the state and private interests composed of non-governmental and non-commercial citizens and organizations devoted to social good’ (Coronel-Ferrer 1997: 1–15).

In a recent work that attempted to trace the evolution of civil society and its relevance to Southeast Asia, Lee ascribes the indeterminate characteristic of this concept to the descriptive (what is), as well as normative (what ought to be) dimensions that this concept carries. As a consequence, ‘its usage has been subject to intense and endless debate’ (Lee 2004). This indeterminate nature of civil society is not altogether surprising given that from its early
roots, which can be traced back to the eighteenth century, the term civil society has carried several different meanings, depending on the context when this term was introduced. In Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, civil society refers to the realm between the family and the state where individuals are free to associate to pursue their needs and interests. The Hegelian idea of civil society is (as paraphrased),

an arena which modern man legitimately gratifies his self-interest and develops his individuality, but also learns the value of group action, social solidarity and the dependence of his welfare on others, which educate him for citizenship and prepare him for participation in the political arena of the state.

(Kumar 2004)

While some thinkers have built on Hegel’s notion of civil society, distinguishing it as a ‘romantic alternative to the institutions of modernity’, others like Karl Marx basically rejected this idea. Marx’s *Das Kapital* found no place for populations and citizens to organize freely. From this historical context, one notes that the development of civil society in Eastern Europe emerged out of a history of oppression and intolerance for dissent. This historical experience largely informed one dominant view about civil society, i.e. a ‘conflict’ view that places civic societies as sites for resistance against two forces: the state and the market. The Eastern European-inspired conflict view of civil society regards the state in largely antagonistic manner and argues for the emancipation and empowerment of individuals and disadvantaged groups. The efforts at opening spaces for these individuals to organize and articulate their interest eventually led to the story of democratization in Eastern Europe. Within the prism of the conflict view of civil society, a democratic state is predicated largely on the presence of advocacy and public interest groups. Civil society is therefore a necessary countervailing force to the state that has elicited so much fear and distrust (Fine 1997: 11).

The alternative to the conflict view of civil society is drawn from Robert Putnam’s work that identifies civil society as sites where social capital is generated and developed, rather than as sites for resistance. Putnam, who studied civil associations in northern Italy, claimed that civil societies helped to establish democracy, while the absence of such could weaken it. According to Putnam,

Civil associations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic governments . . . because of their ‘internal’ effects on individuals and because of their ‘external’ effects on the wider polity. Internally, associations instil in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity and public spiritedness . . . Participation in civil organizations inculcates skills of co-operation as well as a sense of shared responsibility for the collective endeavours.

(Putnam 1993: 89–90)
Unlike the conflict view of civil society, Putnam’s social capital approach does not pit civil society against the state. Civil society and state are not locked in an adversarial relationship since citizens trust and have confidence in the liberal democratic state that is perceived to be reasonably responsive to the needs of its citizenry. Therefore, where the two views of civil society differ is in the nature of relationships between state and civil society (Lee 2004).

These two dominant, albeit contrasting, views on civil society are instructive in understanding the nature of civil societies found in Asia. This has not, however, resolved its conceptual ambiguity. Some scholars have argued that while civil society in the sense of opposition to the state is well developed in parts of Asia, like India, civil society in the sense of associational groups working with the state is not. Different human communities are concerned with establishing their own versions of civil society in their own differing ways, and ‘therefore the search for the replication of a universal (i.e. Western) model of civil society all over the world should be abandoned’ (Niraya 2001: 124). Suffice it to say that despite the conceptual and philosophical ambiguities of civil society, this has not stopped many academics, activists and policy-makers from using and promoting civil society. The most likely reason perhaps is the very desirability of civil society and the idea that its creation is a valuable goal or ‘desideratum’. Moreover, civil society carries with it the normative aspect that subscribes to the principle that it is accessible to all citizens. Being an arena of free engagement, deliberation, discussion and dialogue thereby mandates its democratic character, ‘not only because it has the potential to ensure [political] accountability but also because it is a genuinely participatory sphere, open to all’ (Niraya 2001: 126).

**Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Southeast Asia**

Given the interest that the formation of civil society has generated in Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia, it is no wonder that there has been a rapid proliferation of CSOs. This trend was particularly notable in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the region was in the throes of rapid structural and societal transformations. For the purpose of this paper, I shall adopt a very broad definition of civil society to refer to NGOs, advocacy groups and a variety of social movements that have, in one way or another, expressed their views on various issues including the rights of ethnic groups, the environment and economic displacement, to name a few. This broad definition, however, includes the specific characteristic of CSOs being non-profit and voluntary and would have also to be ‘transformative and innovative’ with emphasis on their alternative views of development, governance and security. Against these parameters, business groups (which are organized for the sole purpose of profit) and political parties are not included.

To get a picture of the development of CSOs in Southeast Asia, the following statistics of a recent study on NGOs/CSOs in the region are instructive. In
Thailand, there are 19,878 registered NGOs, 14,000 in Malaysia and 70,200 in the Philippines. The number in Indonesia showed a massive increase from 10,000 in 1996 to 70,000 in 2000, while in Singapore CSOs represented by registered charities and social organizations is placed at 4,562 (Hadiwinata 2003: 1). Another study, which included socialist states like China and Vietnam, reported that there are more than 200,000 registered NGOs in China and about 600 at the provincial level and several thousands at district and community level in Vietnam (Yamamoto 2000: 43).

Most of these CSOs share common concerns essentially rooted in helping and assisting local communities, alleviating the miserable living conditions of the poor, the underprivileged, and looking into the plight of abused women and children, among others. CSOs also share the common objective of empowering these groups to fight for social justice, human rights, improved environmental conditions and a better quality of life. Often, CSOs reflect the wide array of challenges faced by individuals and communities in areas related to poverty, economic and social injustice, women’s and children’s rights, minority rights, the environment and its resources – both land and water and so on, that neither the government nor the market are able to adequately address. And, in less democratic societies, civil societies essentially come in two different forms; those that concentrate on activities geared toward community development to promote the idea of people-centred development, and those that focus on organizing specifically defined constituencies to generate social movements (Hadiwinata 2003: 25).

While it is beyond the scope of a single paper to provide a comprehensive picture of the various types of civil societies found in Southeast Asia, a few NGOs are cited below to characterize the different features of CSOs found in the region. Some are locally (national) based while the others are regionally based.

In Thailand, the Assembly of the Poor is one of the more active and significant CSOs at the forefront of fighting for the interests of poor farmers in the country. This is in spite of the fact that it is a loosely structured CSO and lacks legal status. One of its recent achievements was to force the Thai government to negotiate with the Thai farmers who were displaced due to land appropriation for building dams and industrial estates. It did this by mobilizing thousands of poor farmers countrywide to participate in a ‘sit-in’ protest in front of Government House to demand fair compensation. The Assembly of the Poor is an example of CSOs in the region that are fighting for distributive justice and good governance (Jumbala 2000: 61–75; Bunbongkarn 2001: 66–88).

There are also the pro-democracy groups – PollWatch and the Confederation for Democracy – that played a significant part in the democratization and political reform of Thailand since 1992. PollWatch was created in March 1992 to serve as an election-monitoring mechanism. The activities of PollWatch raised the level of public concern over the proliferation of vote buying and money politics in election campaigns, which contributed to popular
demand for political reforms. Similarly, the Confederation for Democracy was a loosely organized group that fought against military rule in 1991 and 1992. It became the key organizer of the urban middle-class uprising in May 1992 which eventually brought an end to military rule in Thailand (Bunbongkarn 2001).

The work and experience of PollWatch and the Confederation for Democracy has its own equivalent in the Philippines. The National Citizens' Movement for Free Election (NAMFREL) along with several CSOs in the Philippines are notable for their contribution to the process of democratization in the country during the Martial Law period under the Marcos regime. NAMFREL was founded in 1983 by concerned individuals and activists to restore faith in the electoral process in the country which was restored after it was suspended in 1972. NAMFREL mobilized more than half a million volunteers in poll-watching activities during the 1986 elections. It became a powerful symbol of the power of civil society when thousands of its volunteers staged a dramatic walk-out – captured live on Philippine television – when the counting of votes was reportedly rigged. This was one of the events that precipitated the People Power Movement in 1986 that brought down the Marcos dictatorship.

Many of the CSOs in the Philippines have also established coalitions and networks within the country to strengthen their work and improve their engagement strategies with the government. Some of these include the Caucus of Development NGO Network (CODE-NGO), the Philippine Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (PhilDHARRA), and the NGO Coordinating Committee for Rural Development (NGO-CORD). The consolidation of NGOs in the country is part of the growing trend to improve their strategies for more recognition and access to state authorities in their advocacy work. The consolidation is done in an ad hoc, issue-defined manner (Ronas 2000: 49–60). Other examples of national coalitions in other countries include the NGO Coordinating Committee for Rural Development (NGO-CORD) in Thailand, the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia, and the Wahana Lingkungan Hidup (WALHI), a network of concerned environmental NGOs in Indonesia (Yamamoto 2000).

Southeast Asia is also home to many regional CSOs. These regional NGOs share many of the characteristics of the national NGOs and their organizations are also mostly issue-based. In this region, the prominent NGOs are usually those that are identified in their work toward democratization, promotion of human rights and advocacy against globalization. The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) based in Bangkok, Thailand, has been at the forefront in the campaign against human rights abuses in the region. There is also the Asian Cultural Forum for Development (ACFOD), also based in Bangkok that works on human rights and social issues.

Among the high-profile NGOs that have been continually campaigning against globalization include Focus on the Global South which is based in
Chulalongkorn University in Thailand and has been prominent in research and publication, networking and advocacy work. There is also the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA), a network of Asian scholar-activists that aims to foster exchange among scholars and formulate alternative development perspectives to counter corporate-led globalization. Similar NGOs also include the ‘Third World Network which was first established in Penang, Malaysia, and has now become an international NGO with offices globally, and the Southeast Asian Resource Institute for Community Education (SEARICE) that has been active in international campaigns against biotechnology (Tadem and Tadem 2002).

Labour-based regional NGOs include the Asian Migrant Centre (AMC), which focuses particularly on the plight of migrant workers, and the Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC), which initially started as a monitoring group for transnational corporations (TNCs). ISIS International, with headquarters in Manila, deals with gender and women’s issues, as well as the Committee for Asian Women (CAW) which regularly undertakes studies and conducts seminars on gender issues.

One could therefore argue that the CSOs in Southeast Asia are not only increasing in number but have also become equally vibrant. This is indeed significant given the fact that, in the early 1980s, many states in the region were characterized as semi-authoritarian states that stifled the development of CSOs. This was the period when the notions of state power and legitimacy were very much predicated on economic growth and development – otherwise known as ‘performance legitimacy’. The rapid regional economic growth and development largely made up for the absence of effervescent CSOs in many states in the region. There were of course exceptions to this picture, as in the case of the Philippines, which went through a difficult transition from martial law to democracy, aggravated by poor economic growth.

Thus, it was only during the 1997–98 economic crisis when the number of CSOs rose dramatically and their visibility increased. While there were already national and regional CSOs that had been struggling against the nature and social consequences of neoliberal approaches to economic development, it was with the onset of the regional economic crisis that their views and influence became popular and widely disseminated (Tadem and Tadem 2002). With the notion of ‘performance legitimacy’ losing its credence, and the growing dissatisfaction with prevailing neoliberal policies, many CSOs in Southeast Asia joined the ‘Battle of Seattle’ demonstration in 1999 with their own protests against the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF and even the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

As CSOs began to form coalitions and networks nationally, regionally and globally, their strategies of engagement also became more sophisticated, aided by the advances in information and communications technology. While the latter made many prominent NGOs media-savvy, the significance of building coalitions and networks has led to the ‘transnationalization’ of CSOs. As noted by Wilken:
The emergence of transnational network of civil society groups has brought together a wider range of NGO work in the fields of peace, security and development across national boundaries against both the interests and exploitation of the global forces of production and finance. These transnational NGO networks begin to ensure meaningful participation of civil society association in international decision-making. In addition to advancing resistance to the current orthodoxy of neo-liberalism, these emerging transnational networks of voluntary organizations are actively involved in creating alternative routes for development.

(Wilken 1995)

This emerging trend of transnationalization has not only increased the visibility of the CSOs in all levels but has made them significant actors in the arena of decision-making where they were once excluded. Because of their increasing numbers and spread across the globe, CSOs have now been described as powerful countervailing forces against states and markets.

To sum up, in spite of the increased visibility of CSOs, questions still remain with regard to their influence in policy-making and governance. At least in this region, the achievements of CSOs beyond the process of engagement of state-actors to actual policy inputs are at best anecdotal. Since the time when CSOs have made their presence felt in this region, many of the challenges CSOs face in engaging the centres of power – not least having to cope with a hostile and strictly regulated environment – still remain. A constant dilemma for CSOs relates to finding appropriate mechanisms to remain actively engaged in the arena of contestation among power centres (state and market) while continuing with the enterprise of coalition-building and networking. As we track models of constructive engagement – *modus vivendi* between CSOs and state/market – that are aimed at improving governance and attaining security, the emergence of the ASEAN Peoples’ Assembly (APA) provides an interesting case.

**APA: a mechanism for regional governance and security in Southeast Asia**

**The genesis of APA**

If civil society is a space between the state and the market, what this space includes and who occupies it is a question that should be of interest in the study of CSOs. In this regard, the genesis of the APA provides some interesting insights into the kinds of actors and processes at work in the establishment of this emerging transnational civil society organization, specifically with regard to their approaches to regional governance and security.

The idea of organizing a peoples’ assembly in ASEAN had been floated around for many years and has been a subject of discussion in the
‘Track 1’ and ‘Track 2’ meetings. In particular, many in the Track 2 circles in the region have been pushing this agenda of a people-driven mechanism for some time, as it had always felt that while Track 2 meetings and interactions with the ASEAN governments have increased and intensified, very rarely have NGOs had the opportunity to interact with Track 2 actors. Interactions with Track 1 actors have been even rarer. More importantly, NGOs have been excluded in the agenda-setting and decision-making in ASEAN.

Although ASEAN was set up to enhance economic development and economic cooperation in the region, as well as to foster political and security among member states, the organization has always been regarded as a ‘club of elites’, disconnected from the people in the region. A good indication of this state of affairs is the very fact that while ASEAN is well into its thirty-sixth year, it remains an unknown entity for most of the peoples of Southeast Asia (Hernandez 2002). As such, the ASEAN-ISIS took, as one of its missions, to continuously push for the idea of a peoples’ assembly in its interactions with Track 1 officials in ASEAN and in the various Track 2 forums, particularly at its annual Asia-Pacific Roundtable meetings in Kuala Lumpur. The opportunity finally presented itself at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Brunei in 1995 when the foreign minister in Thailand called for the establishment of a ‘congress of ASEAN peoples’. The Thai Foreign Ministry through ISIS Thailand assigned ASEAN-ISIS to conceptualize the modalities and procedures for such an assembly. The original idea of a peoples’ group was for it to be a kind of a regional inter-parliamentary union.

But ASEAN-ISIS came up with a different version and shaped its own concept paper, ‘an assembly of the peoples of ASEAN’. According to the principal author of the concept paper, given the fact that NGOs in the region have already organized activities parallel to and often opposed to those held by governments, it was critical to come up with a regional mechanism that can develop common responses to common challenges. The ASEAN-ISIS concept paper had argued that setting up a group similar to an inter-parliamentary union would not be appropriate since its idea of a multi-sectoral representation of a peoples’ assembly would include:

- national and local government officials in their private capacity;
- academia; business; culture and the arts; relevant rural-based groups;
- village leaders and community leaders; media; labour; sectors concerned with women and children; other professionals; undergraduate and graduate students; religious organizations; and other sectors as are relevant to individual ASEAN member states.

Moreover, it was envisaged that the assembly was to be expanded on a step-by-step basis to include ‘all sectors of ASEAN societies’.

APA was to be established with the objectives of: (a) promoting greater awareness of an ASEAN community; (b) promoting mutual understanding
and tolerance for the diversity of culture, religion, ethnicity, social values, political cultures and processes, and other elements of ASEAN diversity; (c) obtaining insights and inputs on how to deal with socio-economic problems affecting ASEAN societies; (d) facilitating the bridging of gaps between ASEAN societies through confidence-building measures; and (e) assisting in the building of an ASEAN community of caring societies as sought by ASEAN Vision 2020 (see Report of the First ASEAN Peoples’ Assembly 2001)

For ASEAN-ISIS, the APA was to be this regional mechanism, which was ‘meant to create a regular people’s gathering where they would meet on a regular basis, discuss issues they consider timely, important and relevant; seek solutions for them and make recommendations to government on these matters’. ASEAN-ISIS would serve as the ‘convenor of APA, its fund-raiser, its facilitator, its spokesperson, its driving force in the initial years, until it takes a life of its own’ (Hernandez 2002). ASEAN-ISIS envisaged that this Track 2 and ‘Track 3’ collaborative process would benefit ASEAN heads of state/government since APA ‘is meant to be more sensitive to the practical realities of ASEAN and is intended to be held every year to coincide with the regular and informal summits of ASEAN’. The timing of the holding of APA is therefore crucial to enable APA to provide inputs to ASEAN leaders on issues that are of concern to the people of the region and how they think these can be addressed.

The launching of APA

The ambitious APA project took about four years to be realized and during this period, it encountered several setbacks which almost jeopardized the launching of the project. First, was the problem of funding. Although ASEAN officials endorsed in principle the idea of an APA, the ASEAN Foundation, the donor agency that was approached by ASEAN-ISIS for funding support, turned down its application twice (1999–2000). Decisions for funding grants of the ASEAN Foundation were made by ASEAN senior officials who decided on the basis of consensus. The fact that the application was denied twice was indicative of the reservations that some ASEAN governments had about the launching of APA. The attitude of certain governments in ASEAN therefore became its second and most difficult obstacle. Ironically, the ASEAN Foundation was set up to promote the ASEAN 2020 project that had as its critical component – ‘building a community of caring societies’ (see ASEAN 1998). Moreover, when the ASEAN Foundation held its round of consultations about priority projects, there was apparently a consensus that APA would be one of these. It was therefore interesting that the implementation of this ‘consensus’ turned out to be problematic.

Third, the failure of ASEAN-ISIS to get funding from the ASEAN Foundation also revealed the lack of success and influence that some members
of this Track 2 body had with their own governments in pushing for this idea. This setback, however, did not deter some members within the ASEAN-ISIS network to press ahead and seek alternative funding. Encouraged by the fact that the APA project had the support of the ASEAN secretary-general and Japanese foreign ministry, ASEAN-ISIS looked for partners outside the region. By mobilizing its own networks, key players within ASEAN-ISIS lobbied hard and sought funding from outside sources, which included among others: the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)-funded Southeast Asia Cooperation Project, Japan Official Development Assistance, the Open Society, Batam Industrial Authority, and the Asia Foundation. ASEAN-ISIS successfully persuaded these agencies to back the APA project despite the lack of official blessing from ASEAN governments. Its success in doing so indicated that these donor agencies saw the potential of APA as a people-empowering mechanism.

Without much fanfare, the first APA was held in Batam, Indonesia, on 24–25 November 2000. The choice of the date and the place to hold APA was indeed symbolic. The launching of APA was set to coincide with the 4th ASEAN Summit Meeting which was held in neighbouring Singapore on 22–25 November 2000. Batam was less than an hour’s ferry-ride from Singapore and while it would have been more convenient to hold the meeting in Singapore, it was not possible to do so due to political reasons.

In spite of its initial setbacks, APA 2000 managed to bring together about 300 representatives of NGOs, grassroots leaders and activists, think-tanks and business. ASEAN-ISIS also managed to persuade some of the prominent regional NGOs like Forum Asia and Focus on the Global South to attend its inaugural meeting, as well as a few government officials who came in their private capacity. These were former Indonesia president Abdurrahman Wahid, Ali Alatas, former Indonesian foreign minister and Jose Almonte, former national security adviser of the Philippines. The ASEAN secretary-general Rodolfo Severino also attended.

The issues that were tabled for discussions covered a wide range of social, political and economic issues which included:

- the role of the people in setting ASEAN’s agenda;
- the impact of globalization;
- the power of women and their empowerment;
- the role of the media;
- the possibility of a regional human rights mechanism;
- the role of civil society;
- efforts to address poverty;
- the limits and opportunities of environmental management;
- events in Myanmar and East Timor;
- policies for education system reform;
- ASEAN’s role in regional community-building.
The dynamics of bringing together for the first time a diverse set of CSOs was best depicted in a piece written by a Malaysian participant of APA 2000, who described the Assembly as

... packed with 70 speakers into an intense couple of 14-hour days ... audiences nonetheless attentive; floor speakers often outshine panelists ... it was at times an incoherent babble of voices. ... The fact of it having been successfully convened at all was, for the moment, enough encouragement for the ‘people-to-people’ connection now seen as a critical element of ASEAN’s interrelationships.

(Rashid 2001: 237–40)

Inspired by its first success, ASEAN-ISIS convened the second APA two years later on 30 August to 1 September 2002 in Bali, Indonesia. Following its first theme of ‘An ASEAN of the People, By the People and For the People’, APA-II adopted ‘We the ASEAN Peoples and Our Challenges’ as its second theme. Having gathered enough momentum, the third APA was held in Manila on 25–27 September 2003. This time the theme of APA-III was ‘Towards an ASEAN Community of Caring Societies’, and one of the highlights of the meeting was the ASEAN Peoples’ Declaration on the ‘Principles of Good Governance’. The statement was APA’s version to realize the ASEAN Security Community (ASC) and the ASEAN Economic Community (ASC) based on the people’s perspectives. The declaration was also aimed at providing inputs into the policy process of ASEAN and its member states.

Prospects for becoming a regional mechanism for governance and security

Since the launching of APA in 2000, its progress reflects salient developments that should not be missed in the study of civil society in this region. I shall highlight some of these below.

First, the very fact that an Assembly took place with the participation of a wide range of NGOs and other CSOs is indeed a remarkable feat by itself. But even more remarkable is the fact that in spite of the ‘babble of incoherent voices and the cacophony’, a multisectoral regional mechanism has emerged comprising different actors who will find their relevant niches in and contribute to governance and human security.

Second, the establishment of this multisectoral and transnational CSO also indicates the emergence of yet another ideational network bound together by the need to be a part of a dynamic global system and the desire to help shape what that global system should be, based on shared ideals and aspirations of a just and democratic system.

Third, in examining the dynamics of bringing different actors together, APA is significant in that it showed how a Track 2 initiative could succeed in
getting the endorsement of ‘Track 3’ actors. Its significance becomes more palpable given that ASEAN-ISIS has been perceived in certain circles as being too close to government, an exclusive ‘elite’ club and ‘sometimes a gatekeeper for expanded popular participation in ASEAN concerns’. As noted by Carolina Hernandez, the head of the ASEAN-ISIS counterpart in the Philippines, who has been a key player of the APA process:

APA must have been seen as a window of opportunity to get the people’s views heard beyond their usual circles, never mind if through ASEAN ISIS. It must also be a sign of the times – one characterised by an increasing willingness by actors in the second and third tracks to engage including the unlike-minded for the achievement of the goals they cannot obtain in isolation from or in hostile opposition to each other. It can also be a sign of the level of trust earned by these actors within each track for those in the other track. Or it might have been a case of simply giving the APA initiative a chance.

(Hernandez 2002)

Fourth, the dynamics between these two tracks reflect their appreciation of the fact that while there are many different and specialized CSO networks in the region, there was still the need for a horizontal dialogue among networks, across different sectors. Equally important was the cognizance of the need to include such CSOs at the ASEAN level to make ASEAN more known and more accountable to its people – hence, highlighting the importance of a vertical dialogue among state and non-state actors. If the capacity to govern requires giving emphasis on pluralities and incoherence, as well as on the horizontal and vertical coordination of public policies in ways that ‘are more sensitive to the societal environment than the traditional mode of governing’ (Kazancigil, cited in Niraya 2001: 7), then APA can become that mechanism which could contribute to the quality of regional and global governance.

In this regard, the initiative of APA to produce a regional *Human Development Report* (SEA-HDR) is important. There is yet to be an HDR report for Southeast Asia, although the six other regions in the world have theirs. The SEA-HDR, which is patterned after the global *Human Development Report*, will develop a regional annual report by working on a set of measurable indicators to assess selected goals of the ASEAN’s Vision 2020. This initiative, which was conceived at APA-II, has already caught the interest and support of the Philippine Office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The objectives of this project are twofold: to develop a group of CSOs that will be engaged in monitoring the performance of ASEAN’s developmental goals, both at the country and regional levels; and through the discussion and dissemination of the report, to use the SEA-HDR as a major vehicle for influencing official policies in ASEAN.
Last, but certainly not least, APA reflects the broad agreement among CSOs on strategies for engagement with the centres of power. This is in contrast to the difficulties APA had with agreeing to a common set of issues to be pursued. Given the diverse set of actors, it is often unavoidable that some CSOs would push for more attention given to certain issues, e.g. human rights abuses in Myanmar rather than issues of internal displacement due to land reclamation. Nevertheless, the preferred approaches found in APA encourage peaceful participation and constructive dialogue while shunning extremism and violence.

Conclusion

Since its inception, APA has set in place an ambitious APA Action Plan that highlights the human security issues of the people in this region. The Action Plan identifies seven areas that deserve greater attention, more in-depth examination and for follow-up action by civil society groups (see Second APA 2002 Report 2003: 7). These are:

1. developing a human rights scorecard;
2. developing a framework to evaluate the progress of gender mainstreaming;
3. identifying threats to democracy by developing ‘democracy promoting indicators and/or democracy eroding indicators’;
4. developing a code of ethics for (governance in) NGOs;
5. promoting cooperation in tackling HIV/AIDS;
6. promoting cooperation among media groups; and
7. developing the Southeast Asian Human Development Report (SEA-HDR).

Currently, some ASEAN-ISIS members are already coordinating specific areas of the action plan. For example, ISDS Philippines is coordinating the SEA-HDR together with ISIS Thailand and CSIS Jakarta; while CSIS Jakarta, in collaboration with Forum Asia and ISDS are developing the human rights scorecard.

In assessing the prospects of APA as a regional mechanism for governance and security, it would be realistic as this stage to be more cautious and not offer definitive views. To be sure, much remains to be seen as to the way the APA process will unfold. Likewise, many other issues will arise with regard to the effectiveness and sustainability of this emerging transnational CSO. One of these is the question of participation. For certain countries in the region that have no democratic foundation (as in the case Myanmar), the question of participation arises. One would ask how their CSOs (or for that matter their governments) can participate and be part of the APA process. The other complex issue is the question of independence and commitment of CSOs that comprise APA. APA is for all intents and purposes a platform for CSOs
in the region to come up with a common agenda for human development and security. For countries that were perceived to be initially reluctant to the idea of creating an APA, how can they be prevented from possibly co-opting their CSOs or obstructing APA's work? There is also concern that while the APA concept is a novel mechanism for regional governance, the voices of the ASEAN peoples may yet fall on deaf ears.

To the sceptics, many more questions will be raised. But one could argue that what is more important is to be aware that a mechanism has emerged which has brought together different interest groups in this region. APA therefore offers a novel approach in the larger picture of myriad initiatives that share the common objectives of redefining security and promoting the all-embracing concept of human security.

Notes

1. The first definitive articulation of this concept can be found in the UNDP, Human Development Report 1994. Since then, several scholars have attempted to define this concept; see, for example, Suhrke (1999).

2. These categories of ‘human security’ essentially encompass the UNDP’s definition of what human security is.

3. The ASEAN-ISIS (ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies) comprises the Institutes of Strategic Studies in ASEAN countries. These are: Policy and Strategic Studies (BDIPSS), Brunei Darussalam; Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP), Cambodia; Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Indonesia; Institute of Foreign Affairs, Laos; Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Malaysia; Institute for Strategic and Development Studies (ISDS), Philippines; Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), Singapore; Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS), Thailand; and Institute for International Relations (IIR), Vietnam.

4. The literature on civil society is voluminous. Most definitions of civil society prefer to use John Keane’s definition as that social realm distinct from the state and the market.

5. It appears that by default, civil society has become always synonymous with NGOs. See Niraya (2001).

6. The information on the genesis of APA is drawn largely from Carolina Hernandez’s account of the processes involved in establishing APA in ‘A people’s assembly: a novel mechanism for bridging the north–south divide in ASEAN’ (unpublished manuscript, cited here with permission from the author).

7. The Japanese Foreign Ministry wanted to use half of the Japanese government’s contribution to the ASEAN Foundation Fund for the APA project but could not do so due to bureaucratic procedures. (Author’s interview with Carolina Hernandez, President of the Institute of Development and Strategic Studies (ISDS), the Philippine counterpart of ASEAN-ISIS, 3 September 2003.)

8. The lack of ASEAN official endorsement did not, however, stop the then Thai foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan and the deputy foreign minister from openly endorsing APA.


10. ISDS Philippines, along with its partner institutions, is currently developing the modalities of SEA-HDR.
References