Civil Society Challenging ASEAN (JENINA JOY CHAVEZ is Senior Researcher with Focus on the Global South, Manila, Philippines.)

Jenina Joy Chavez

Global Social Policy 2007; 7; 260
DOI: 10.1177/14680181070070030204

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://gsp.sagepub.com

Published by:

SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Global Social Policy can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://gsp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://gsp.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
Community (SADC), transforming it in dialogue with South–South peoples, which made the task all that more complex.

In practice, the People’s Dialogue initiative, in cooperation with the Alternative Development Center (AIDC-South Africa) took concrete shape throughout 2006. The question of ‘land and common wealth of nature’ was identified as a unifying theme, especially given the onslaught of processes of competition for territories and natural resources now in play. Many social movements, communities, indigenous peoples, quilombos, human rights networks and environmental networks are facing the question of land and the common wealth of nature as bases of life and, moreover, of alternatives for the region, as much in South America as in Africa. What rights then emerge? What forms of social inclusion and life are possible? What mode of democratic management is necessary? These are questions for an alternative region and integration project. And this has to be elaborated in a context of confronting powerful groups of multinationals and their global strategies of exploitation and control. A second broad theme for the dialogue, to be launched in 2007, has already been identified as a common question for Latin Americans and Africans – namely, the theme of ‘work and inclusion in the cities’.

The People’s Dialogue on Alternatives for Regional Integration has only just begun. Determined efforts from organizations and social movements will be necessary to move it forward. But, without a doubt, the agenda set out to date already points towards a promising trajectory and the energy and fervour around the project is enormous. (For more information, see http://www.peoplesdialogue.org)

Please address correspondence to: Cândido Grzybowski, Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analyses, Av. Rio Branco, no. 124, 8o andar, Centro, Rio de Janeiro, CEP 20040–916, Brazil. [email: candido@ibase.br]

JENINA JOY CHAVEZ
Focus on the Global South, Philippines

Civil Society Challenging ASEAN
(JENINA JOY CHAVEZ is Senior Researcher with Focus on the Global South, Manila, Philippines.)

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one of the most established regional groupings in the world. Turning 40 years old this year, ASEAN has been hailed for various successes, not least for its ability to avoid intra-regional conflicts despite the tenuous peace and security situation in the region at the time of its founding and up to this day. ASEAN’s adherence to non-interference and decision-making by consensus has worked to build confidence among its political leadership. However, ASEAN has yet to develop a broad constituency and has been slow in socializing itself to the region’s populace beyond the technocratic and diplomatic elites. It has been asked many times whether ASEAN, which has been established as a political association of
governments protecting themselves from a feared communist menace, could be a genuine popular regionalist project. The long history of autocratic and dictatorial rule and the varying degrees of political space available in Member Countries add skepticism as to how open its political leadership will be to people’s participation, and in turn, how much people support ASEAN can have.

On the economic front, none of ASEAN’s preferential arrangements in trade or industrial complementation had been widely successful or used. Only a small percentage of ASEAN trade, for instance, is accounted for by the ASEAN Free Trade Arrangement. Some estimates place it at only 5%, covering barely one-fifth of intra-ASEAN trade (which hovers around 25% of total ASEAN trade). The ASEAN Industrial Complementation or AICO Scheme has been tapped by few corporations, none of which is endogenously ASEAN. To the extent that the regionalization of markets and capital has been generally faster than the regionalism of states, the failure of ASEAN’s economic projects to be socialized even among its business enterprises is ironic. And if on the economic front ASEAN’s popularity is already on the low side, even more questions are raised on how well it fares on the social and cultural fronts. Many blame it on the economic competition among ASEAN Members, while others argue that it is because ASEAN lacks a clear vision for the region. ASEAN itself would contend that it does have a vision, which at the moment is that of a community of caring and sharing societies with the aim of forging a Single Market and production base by 2015. What it cannot deny, however, is that it has a long way to go to be within reach of its peoples.

ASEAN is home to a relatively active organized civil society. Whereas before it was mostly the think-tanks and the academic community that had been engaging ASEAN predominantly in security issues, today a variety of groups from business councils and trade unions to farmers’ associations and women’s groups engage ASEAN in a wide range of issues from human rights, biodiversity and the environment to migration, workers rights and regional identity. Civil society interest in the business of ASEAN is fairly recent, and comes after a wave of relative democratization in the region in the past 20 years. It also coincides with the general internationalization of civil society advocacy for economic justice, fair trade, participation, etc. and the realization that the region is an arena as important as the national and the global. Most importantly, civil society interest in ASEAN is in line with stakes claiming and demanding accountability, and a desire to define the kind of regional community ASEAN should become.

In the last two years, civil society in the region began networking among themselves to address the question of regionalism and the building of a regional community. Slowly they introduced themselves as strong advocates for rights and justice, as well as credible sources of ideas and as links to the grassroots. The timing of their engagement could not be more auspicious as ASEAN decides to finally come up with a bold and visionary Charter for a people-centered community. In 2006, limited civil society inputs were received by the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) on the ASEAN Charter, and
civil society organizations (CSOs) initiated national discussions on the Charter and on the question of ASEAN regionalism generally. The EPG was an independent advisory body that had more latitude in terms of consultation and in being bold and visionary, but its successor group, the current High Level Task Force on the Drafting of the ASEAN Charter, is an official body that takes its cue from ASEAN’s political leadership. How much influence present-day political exigencies have on actual provisions will determine how visionary the ASEAN Charter will be. As for how far ASEAN believes in people being at the center of the regional community depends in part on how the Charter will be ratified. Current civil society advocacy is for ratification by national referendum to ensure the socialization of the ideas in the Charter, to give citizens a direct participation in its adoption, and to make clear to them the responsibility of ASEAN States in upholding the Charter.

As it is, civil society is doing ASEAN a favor by bringing the issue of regionalism to the people, and by generating public debate on it. ASEAN would do well to accept civil society as a necessary pillar to genuine regionalism, as the Charter process is but the start of an increasing interest in ASEAN. Having people involved means that ASEAN should be prepared for greater scrutiny and demands for openness. People’s participation improves governance but does not make it any less difficult. The onus of participation, which ASEAN conveniently insists should be with civil society having a unified voice, also needs to be re-examined. The advantage of civil society groups lies in their ability to represent a variety of advocacies and perspectives. It is no more possible for all civil society groups to come up with a singular response as it is for ASEAN Governments to have the exact same position on issues every time. It is equally pointless to expect civil society to compromise on basic principles of accountability and participation for fear of losing the space they are just starting to get from ASEAN. For now, the greatest challenge for civil society is to continue challenging ASEAN and reclaiming the region for a broader people’s agenda.

Please address correspondence to: Jenina Joy Chavez, Focus on the Global South – Philippines Programme, No. 19 Maginhawa Street, UP Village, Diliman, Quezon City 1108, Philippines. [email: j.chavez@focusweb.org]

DOT KEET
Alternative Information and Development Center (AIDC), South Africa

Alternative Regional Strategies in Africa
(DOT KEET is former Senior Researcher at the Center for Southern African Studies at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, and is currently Research Associate at the Alternative Information and Development Center in Cape Town, South Africa.)

African social movements have long been accustomed to hearing constant references by their governments to the importance of African unity and