



ASEAN Community Statistical System: Two Decades of Cooperation in Statistics

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Abstract

The tenth of October 1997 marked the founding of the ASEAN Heads of Statistical Offices Meeting (AHSOM), which set the stage for a regional cooperation in statistics. The first informal meeting was convened in October 1998 in response to the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis in 1997. It was jointly held with the Asian Development Bank, World Bank and representatives from the five founding ASEAN member states, Australian Bureau of Statistics, National Statistics Office (NSO) of the Republic of Korea, IMF, UNESCAP, BIS, IDB and the ASEAN Secretariat.

The first regional cooperation as well as international partnership was facilitated by the UNSD with UNSIAP and UNESCAP through the project '*Strengthening Regional Capacities for the Statistical Development in South East Asia 2000-2003*' in 2000. The grant produced the first publication ASEAN in Figures 2003 in 2005², the Menu-based Information System³, and built capacities on webpage development in some ASEAN Member States (AMS).

AHSOM adopted the ASEAN Framework of Cooperation in Statistics (AFCS) in 2001, to chart the direction, set the spirit, and lay down the principles of ASEAN cooperation in statistics. Along with the AFCS, a Plan of Action in Statistics pursued four major thrusts, namely: support to ASEAN initiatives and policy making, harmonisation of ASEAN statistics, promotion of international standards and best practices, and capacity building.

Subsequent statistical activities followed through key initiatives toward establishing a regional cooperation in statistics, including the development of ASEAN Statistical Indicators, the establishment of a Statistics Division in the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEANstats) and launch of the ASEAN Community Statistical System. In particular, a unique approach on regional cooperation has been recently promoted and strengthened – we call the 'ASEAN-Help-ASEAN' scheme - to support the sustainability of statistical development in the region.

The three decades of regional cooperation has strengthened institutional framework, established enabling mechanisms, supported the harmonisation of ASEAN statistics, increased the availability and accessibility of ASEAN statistics and enhanced regional and international cooperation and collaboration.

Keywords: ASEAN Heads of Statistical Offices Meeting; ASEAN Framework of Cooperation in Statistics; ASEAN statistics; ASEAN Community Statistical System; ASEAN-Help-ASEAN.

1. Introduction

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² Compendium of ASEAN Member States' development indicators.

³ For internal data queries on trade, investment, and tourism statistics.



The paper aims to present the journey of the ASEAN Community Statistical System on regional cooperation and international partnerships and to highlight the challenges, lessons learnt, remaining issues and important achievements under several programmes, especially under the EU projects which played a major role in the development of ASEAN statistics. Most importantly, the paper intends to recognise the significant contributions of the ASEAN Member States in promoting the ASEAN-Help-ASEAN scheme in statistical cooperation.

The ASEAN stands for Association of Southeast Asian Nations, founded in August 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand to promote peace, freedom and prosperity in the region. Brunei Darussalam joined in 1984, shortly after its independence from the United Kingdom. The 5 founding members, including Brunei Darussalam, are referred to as the ASEAN6; while newer members such as, Vietnam (1995), Lao Peoples Democratic Republic and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999) comprised the CLMV. It was on 15 December 2008, when the ASEAN Charter entered into force and took the major step on the ASEAN Community building process.

The ASEAN Community and its three pillars: ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community - each pillar with its own Blueprint - constitute the *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together*, which succeeded the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community (2009-2015).⁴

2. Setting the stage for a regional cooperation in statistics - ASEAN Heads of Statistical Offices Meeting (AHSOM), 1997-2010

The tenth of October 1997 marked the founding of the ASEAN Heads of Statistical Offices Meeting (AHSOM), which set the stage for a regional cooperation in statistics. The agenda of the first AHSOM which convened in October 1998 dealt with regional economic and financial monitoring, measuring the economic and social impact of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and the role of bilateral and multilateral agencies.⁵

The second AHSOM adopted the Terms of Reference that led to the establishment of Statistics Unit in the ASEAN Secretariat in 2000. In 2001, the ASEAN Framework of Cooperation in Statistics provided the direction, set the spirit, and laid down the ground works on ASEAN cooperation in statistics on: support to ASEAN initiatives and policy making, harmonisation of ASEAN statistics, promotion of international standards and best practices, and capacity building.

The ASEAN Statistical Indicators⁶ was launched in 2002 to promote the improvement in the quality and comparability of ASEAN statistics through harmonisation of statistics in a graduated but progressive manner. At that time, assistance was provided by the ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Programme for short-term issues, and through the EU-ASEAN Statistical Capacity Building Program (2009-2012) for longer term issues.

It was in 2004 that statistics was integrated in the ASEAN process (Vientiane Action Programme), to address the statistical needs at the regional and national level, particularly emphasising the importance of ensuring statistical development at the national producer level.

⁴ Adopted in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 22 November 2015.

⁵ The Meeting was organised by the ASEAN Secretariat jointly with the Asian Development Bank and World Bank; and representatives from the five founding ASEAN Member States, Australian Bureau of Statistics, National Statistics Office (NSO) of the Republic of Korea, International Monetary Fund, United Nations Economic and Social Commissions for Asia and the Pacific, Bank for International Settlements, International Development Bank.

⁶ Consisted of 27 indicators, it served as main reference of ASEAN in sharing data on core statistical indicators and addressing developmental and comparability issues – high priority, selected in terms of relevance to ASEAN work.



The ASEAN Senior Economic Officials Meeting (SEOM), in 2006, decided that AHSOM reported its outputs, program, concerns to the Leaders through the SEOM and the ASEAN Economic Ministers. This decision provided a direct coordination link between SEOM/ASEAN Economic Ministers and AHSOM to enhance user-producer communication for better policy support to statistics.

With some of these basic mechanisms for statistical development and integration in place, AHSOM continued to further collaborative efforts to accelerate regional integration in statistics, including the harmonisation of ASEAN statistics on International Merchandise Trade, International Trade in Services, and Foreign Direct Investment.

AHSOM had served its purpose in building a strong network among the ASEAN Member States and between international statistical organisations, donors and development partners. As more donors and development partners took part in regional statistical cooperation, a medium-term strategy on regional cooperation in statistics was drawn to guide both major players and stakeholders in future programmes.

3. Providing a stronger mandate on statistical cooperation and development – ASEAN Community Statistical System (ACSS), 2010 - present

The birth of the ACSS is a call for concerted efforts to facilitate the collection, production, dissemination, and communication of ASEAN statistics in support of an evidence-based ASEAN Community.⁷

The ASEAN Framework of Cooperation in Statistics defines the ACSS as the “partnership between and among the national statistical systems of the ASEAN Member States, the ASEAN Secretariat and the region’s Development Partners.”

More than a mere reconstitution of AHSOM, the ACSS Committee shall be the highest regional policy-making and coordinating body on statistics in the region; composed of the chief statistician or head of national statistical office of all ASEAN Member States and the head of ASEANstats of the ASEAN Secretariat.

The NSO, as the country focal point on ASEAN statistics represents the entire national statistical system in the ACSS Meeting - with the appropriate coordination mechanisms in place at the national level.

The ASEAN Secretariat through ASEANstats serves as the technical arm of the ACSS Committee, the regional focal point, and the link between the ACSS Committee and the stakeholders in ASEAN and international organisations.

4. Putting in place institutional-building mechanisms to ensure the effective functioning of the ACSS

To ensure accountability, transparency, and effective performance of the ACSS, a number of institutional-building mechanisms have been set up, such as: the Terms of Reference of the ACSS Committee, the ACSS Sub-Committee on Planning and Coordination, ACSS Technical Working

⁷ The mandate of the ACSS contained in the ASEAN Framework of Cooperation in Statistics 2010-2015, adopted by AHSOM in 2010 and acknowledged by the ASEAN Leaders at the 17th ASEAN Summit in October 2010.



Groups; Rules of Procedures, Broad Framework on Sustainable Development of ASEAN Statistics, the ACSS Strategic Plan, Annual Work Plans, the ACSS Code of Practice, Harmonisation of ASEAN Statistics, and the ACSS Policies and Guidelines on Data Sharing, Confidentiality and Dissemination of ASEAN Statistics. The ACSS Working Groups usually convene once a year but may meet more than once as needs arise (i.e. Working Group on Data Sharing, Dissemination and Communication of Statistics, Working Group on International Merchandise Trade Statistics, Working Group on Statistics of International Trade in Services, Working Group on International Investment Statistics, Working Group on System of National Accounts, Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals Indicators)

5. Promoting regional cooperation through the ASEAN-Help-ASEAN scheme

There are two sub-groups that the Member States are commonly referred to – ASEAN6 and CLMV. The ASEAN6 comprises the five founding Member States and Brunei Darussalam; while the CLMV includes the newer Member States of ASEAN. In most instances, the CLMV country group is unofficially tagged as less developed compared to the ASEAN6 country group. This categorisation applies as well in terms of the Member States' statistical capacities and national statistical system development. In addition to these gaps, the language barrier and varying levels of English proficiency posed great concern in the attainment of ACSS goals. As the EASCAB programme was nearing its completion in January 2013, the ASEAN-Help-ASEAN scheme was carried out in order to sustain the activities began by the Programme. With some similarities in the Thai and Laotian languages, the Bank of Thailand experts on SITS and FDIS reached out and agreed to conduct a Technical Assistance mission and a national training on FDIS in Lao PDR to help their counterparts compile better FDI data. During the temporary relief from EU support in January 2013 until the successor Project was launched in mid-2014, ASEANstats facilitated the ASEAN-Help-ASEAN scheme to carry on the Programme's initiatives on the harmonization of ASEAN SITS and FDIS. This practice on the ASEAN-Help-ASEAN has been adopted by then incoming COMPASS project and other donor partners including the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, AANZFTA ECWP. The ACSS has also embraced the lead country approach whereby a Member State would head activities on key area of specialization, as in the case of BPS-Indonesia for SNA, and Philippine Statistics Authority for SDG. Both approaches are expected to benefit the two country groups in honing statistical skills and broadening capacities and knowledge on the subject matter. These approaches are also well-received by the beneficiary countries, as it provide a sense of ownership and familiarity on the regional ground situation; and build on a good camaraderie with their counterparts. Workshops conducted by the regional experts were supervised by international experts, to advise and help them improve on presentation and technical skills.

6. Remaining challenges and lessons learnt

It was after 30 years since the founding of ASEAN when the importance of statistics in the region was first recognised in 1997, during the Asian financial crisis. The ASEAN Heads of Statistical Offices Meeting (AHSOM) set the stage for regional cooperation in statistics in October 1997 with only nine Member States as Cambodia joined thereafter in 1999. Unlike the European Union, statistics was not initially part of the ASEAN framework. Hence, Member States' support to statistics was voluntary and agreements/decisions were based on consensus, the 'ASEAN way'. Three years after AHSOM was launched, the Statistics Unit of ASEAN Secretariat was created in 2000.

The first of its regional activities were mostly initiated by donor partners such as the ADB and some UN agencies; and largely thrived on external support to respond to global data needs. One of the earliest initiatives which still form part of the ACSS work is the harmonisation of ASEAN statistics on



the three core elements of ASEAN economic integration, namely, international merchandise trade (IMTS), trade in services (SITS), and foreign direct investment (FDIS).⁸

In 2010, the major groundwork on the harmonisation of IMTS, SITS, and FDIS took off under the EU-funded programme - the EASCAB – to include institutional building and narrowing the development gap. The EASCAB Programme, more than anything else, succeeded in promoting cooperation and coordination among the ASEAN Member States and in defining the role of the NSO as the focal point in the national statistical system. The Programme ended in January 2013; however, activities on SITS and FDIS continued through the ASEAN-Help-ASEAN scheme. The Bank of Thailand was one of the first Member States to support this endeavor; and recently followed by some ASEAN6 countries. Enabling mechanisms is currently being developed to institutionalise the ASEAN-Help-ASEAN scheme in sustaining statistical developments in the region.

By mid-2014, another EU support came into force under the COMPASS Project. The Project provided broader scope than its predecessor while it continued to build on EASCAB's initiatives. For instance, the Project included new areas of statistics, i.e. SNA and SDG. Efforts to better the availability, accessibility, dissemination and communication of ASEAN statistics continued to gain support from other donor partners such as the German Cooperation Project, ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area Economic Cooperation Work Programme, ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Programme, PARIS21, and Eurostat .

Over the years, cooperation and coordination at the national level have immensely improved owing to strong regional cooperation. The NSOs have established and adopted frameworks and institutional mechanisms to further strengthen and enhance the ACSS, including the review and amendment of statistics law in some Member States and the development and alignment of the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics in support of the initiatives in the ACSS Strategic Plan. In spite of these developments, constraints in financial and human resources remain to be a challenge in pursuing statistical progress at the regional and national levels to produce timely, comparable and quality ASEAN statistics.

7. Moving forward

In September 2015, the ACSS Committee was included in the ASEAN Charter as one of ASEAN's sectoral bodies. The goals of the ASEAN Charter and vision of the ASEAN Community will continue to guide the design, implementation, and monitoring of statistical cooperation activities of the ACSS. In the absence of a legal framework, an implementation plan with key performance indicators on the ACSS Code of Practice is being designed to ensure trust, accountability and highest professional standards in the development, production, dissemination and communication of ASEAN statistics. The 10-year ACSS Strategic Plan recognises the need for a review of the Broad Framework for the Sustainable Development of ASEAN Statistics to include new data requirements identified by the ASEAN Community in support of regional policy making, as well as the importance of international statistical developments in the areas of the sustainable development goals, open data, big data, and the use of geospatial data. The ACSS also promotes strong cooperation and coordination within the National Statistical System in the implementation of ASEAN Statistical Indicators Consolidated Template, containing data sets for regular updating at the national level. In its effort to promote the visibility and expand the use of ASEAN statistics, the ACSS Communication Strategy was endorsed in 2015 to enhance communication and consultation between data users and producers at the national and regional levels as well as highlight the need for collective action to gain more support and

⁸ Integrated in the ASEAN Framework of Cooperation in Statistics 2001 along with the promotion of international standards and best practices, and capacity building.



investment to further statistical development. A draft implementation and monitoring plan on the Communication Strategy is planned to be finalized this year.

These recent developments were made possible with assistance from the development partners, especially, the EU-funded projects EASCAB and COMPASS, which also provided access to higher education in Statistics to statisticians from the CLMV. An ACSS Training Strategy is being developed under the COMPASS project to ensure better mobilisation and maximisation of resources and avoid duplication of capacity building activities among its development partners.

The journey of the ACSS was that of a road less traveled, considering the diversity in the statistical capacity and development of the ASEAN Member States, the absence of a binding legal framework, and the lack of political support to statistics at both the regional and national levels, among others. Although it has benefitted a great deal from the support provided by the development partners; it is worthwhile to take note of the Member States' genuine interest to advance the ASEAN-Help-ASEAN initiative for stronger cooperation and collaboration between the sub-regional groups - ASEAN6 and CLMV - in specific areas of statistical priorities. The two decades of statistical cooperation has strengthened institutional framework, supported the harmonisation of ASEAN statistics, enhanced regional and international cooperation and collaboration, and increased the availability and accessibility of ASEAN statistics. The new ASEAN Community Statistical System will continually promote this form of regional cooperation towards a responsive provider of high quality statistics.