

### EDITORIAL

## Deepening Connectivity and Mobility in Post-Pandemic ASEAN

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### Introduction

It has been widely discussed in the literature on regionalism that connectivity and mobility are two critical concepts that underpin the deepening of the regional integration project. Connectivity allows increased mobility of ideas, people, and goods, creating a more robust regional community. Connectivity enables a regional integration project to be economically sustainable and resilient against external shocks (Bhattacharyay, 2010). Arguably, regional integration should facilitate the mobility of welcomed and trusted travellers while concentrating their control resources on those prone to 'irregular' forms of migration. As a result, regional integration often deepens the establishment or reconfiguration of mobility spaces (Gülzau et al., 2016).

However, connectivity and mobility should not be seen merely as economic and infrastructural issues. We contend that these two issues are linked with the context of geopolitics, especially in light of the growing great power rivalry in the region. Connectivity could be mobilized as an instrument for a rising power to increase its domination in the region as a way to counter geopolitical competition with the great power (Flint & Zhu, 2019).

This is why the notion of connectivity has become the major impediment to ASEAN regional integration. In 2009, ASEAN member states' leaders envisioned the importance of increasing ASEAN regional connectivity among ASEAN member states. Such vision is translated into Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 adopted in 2010. Arguably ASEAN Connectivity is a cooperation program between ASEAN countries by building transportation and infrastructure connectivity between Southeast Asian countries in order to create an ASEAN Community. ASEAN Connectivity exists for the development of infrastructure, institutions and community empowerment.

ASEAN connectivity refers to three important things: physical connectivity, institutional connectivity, and inter-community connectivity. Physical connectivity includes connectivity in transportation, information, communication, and technology (ICT), and energy. Institutional connectivity covers trade liberalization and facilities, service and investment liberalization along with its facilities, mutually beneficial agreements and agreements, regional transportation agreements, inter-border procedures, and capacity-building programs. Lastly, inter-community connectivity focuses on the fields of education, culture, and tourism (Das et al., 2013). Concerning the logistics service sector, connectivity will determine the development of the logistics sector in ASEAN member countries, as well as determine the direction of continued cooperation in an effort to realize the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) (Permatasari, 2020).

Such connectivity then arguably allows for better regional mobility. In the context of regional integration, mobility within the region can be seen as an indicator of successful regional connectivity. That is why connectivity and mobility have become the primary objective under the Presidency of Joko Widodo (Wicaksana, 2017). President Joko Widodo's speech at EAS in November 2014 emphasized the connectivity aspect of the Global Maritime Fulcrum scheme. This can be seen in the government's emphasis on infrastructure development and maritime connectivity by building a sea highway along the Java coast, deep seaports and logistics networks, and the shipping industry and maritime tourism.

Meanwhile, in the Plan of Action for Indonesia's Ocean Policy 2016-2019, maritime connectivity and the maritime industry are among the five priority program clusters (Muhibat, 2017). For this reason, it is not surprising that ASEAN will always strive to synergize between MPAC 2025 and BRI and enhance regional connectivity while noting the principles of openness, transparency, inclusiveness, and ASEAN Centrality presented in the ASEAN regional initiative, ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific, which puts Connecting the Connectivity. Indonesia is ready to collaborate with foreign investors from ASEAN Plus Three (APT) countries, especially China, to develop connectivity infrastructure. One form of collaboration can be done by synergizing the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The main goal of ASEAN Connectivity is to make the Southeast Asian region more competitive in the global environment. The basic foundation for the development of ASEAN Connectivity is the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan (MPAC). Regional connectivity formed between the regions of ASEAN member countries is expected to increase the economic growth

of ASEAN member countries. Moreover, the ASEAN connectivity initiative should be put within the context of the ASEAN geopolitical objective. The objective of increasing ASEAN connectivity is to maintain ASEAN centrality amidst the growing regional tension. This is why Indonesia, as the largest country in Southeast Asia, puts so much emphasis on ASEAN connectivity, given Indonesia policymakers continue to view ASEAN as its priority for Indonesia's ambition to be a global player and regional manager (Karim, 2021; Rosyidin & Pattipeilohy, 2020).

### **The Challenges of Connectivity and Mobility**

In this pandemic era, mobility becomes very limited when borders become stronger, and mobility is considered a threat. In an effort to recover after COVID-19, ASEAN member countries agreed to take advantage of the momentum of economic recovery in promoting ASEAN financial stability and integration and affirmed their commitment to strengthen cooperation to mitigate economic risks and challenges after the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, digital disruption and geopolitical tensions (Mursitama et al., 2021). This ensures that connectivity and mobility remain integral to efforts to build the ASEAN regional community.

In creating capital mobility, ASEAN tries to encourage further integration of the regional financial services sector, including upgrading the Financial Services Annex in the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA) negotiations. In addition, ASEAN is completing studies on improving the ASEAN Banking Integration Framework (ABIF) guidelines toward increasing banking integration in the digital era. In the context of digital banking, ASEAN has undertaken a bilateral Cross-Border QR Code Payment Linkages initiative among ASEAN member countries, which is expected to be the first step toward developing a cross-border payment network in the Southeast Asian region. This initiative could position ASEAN as a global leader in inclusive retail payments connectivity. It is continuing the commitment to increase financial inclusion through increasing access, use and quality of financial services in the region. The meeting also appreciated the achievement of the average level of financial exclusion in ASEAN, which had exceeded the target and welcomed the publication of the "Policy Note on Digital Financial Literacy" and "Measuring Progress 2021: Financial Inclusion in Selected ASEAN countries", which supports financial inclusion measures. Such efforts to create capital mobility align with the notion of regulatory regionalism that dominates the approach to ASEAN banking integration (Karim et al., 2021). Despite the institutional connectivity that ASEAN aims to achieve, the domestic social forces dominating the banking industry might resist a deepening regional integration in banking by focusing on their respective domestic market rather than going abroad.

The biggest problems faced by ASEAN member countries in developing sustainable infrastructure are coordination, ownership, political leadership, funding (insufficient resource mobilization), and managing stakeholder expectations. At the regional level, the coordination problem becomes more complex because it does not only coordinate between countries and stakeholders within them but also with the subregional organizations that cover them. Each sub-regional cooperation organization likely has different development priorities with varying levels of complexity of problems in other regions. To illustrate, sub-regional

cooperation organizations such as IMT-GT and BIMP-EAGA have their connectivity projects and want their projects to be a priority. Therefore, ASEAN seeks to support the activities of sub-regional organizations as a form of cooperation in achieving common goals.

On the other hand, infrastructure projects are very vulnerable to external challenges from outside the Southeast Asia region. Uncertain world economic conditions will hamper the funding and project implementation. The global economic downturn will also hinder project completion because infrastructure projects are capital-heavy. Apart from economic problems, infrastructure projects also have big geopolitical nuances. Donor countries will tend to choose projects that provide not only economic benefits but also provide geopolitical leverage.

However, there is still a gap between the need for funds and the availability of funds for connectivity development. Based on data from the Asian Development Bank, the funds needed for connectivity development in 2016 – 2030 are around US\$ 26 trillion, or around US\$ 1.7 trillion per year, to meet regional infrastructure needs, including climate change mitigation and adaptation costs. Without climate change mitigation and adaptation costs, the essential infrastructure investment required for the region is about \$1.5 trillion per year (Ra & Li, 2018).

### **Understanding Connectivity and Mobility**

In this issue, we present seven articles that address the issue of connectivity and mobility in ASEAN. The first contribution, entitled *ASEAN Centrality: Comparative Case Study of Indonesia Leadership*, examines why ASEAN should maintain its centrality in the regional integration process in Asia. Centrality allows ASEAN to be the hub for any connectivity built to strengthen cooperation in Asia. Indraswari (2022) further argues that ASEAN Centrality varies as Indonesia's leadership depends on mutually inclusive variables. The three primary variables influencing ASEAN Centrality are individual country competencies to exercise leadership, especially the institutional mandate they received, the domestic interest of followers, and prevailing external pressures.

The second article, entitled *"A Visual Identity-Based Approach of Southeast Asian City Branding: A Netnography Analysis"*, focuses on the importance of city branding to boost their competitiveness among the global city brands. Mohamad et al. (2022) show how city branding enables a city to be metaphorically seen as an entity with the advantage of displaying its own visual identities and characteristics for attracting visitors and tourists and ultimately enhancing the city's economic value. This shows the importance of city branding in improving mobility within the region.

The third article, entitled *"Enhancing social integration through Intra-ASEAN travel"*, examines whether the social integration dimension connects individuals in preference to travelling within the ASEAN region. Fardhiyanti and Wee (2022) find a strong relationship between cultural adaptations, positioning, interaction and the growth of intra-ASEAN travel. They further show how ASEAN countries have developed a stronger familiarity and a sense of belonging to the community over the past five years since the ASEAN Economic

Community (AEC) establishment. In other words, cultural interaction is important in increasing regional mobility.

The fourth article, “The Effect of the Internet on Inflation: a Research on ASEAN-5 Countries”, examines how the internet connection has had a significant economic impact and provided financial benefits to nations worldwide to increase productivity and efficiency and reduce costs. Specifically, Çoban investigates the internet’s effect on inflation in ASEAN-5 countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand). He finds that internet usage increases and inflation rates decrease in ASEAN-5 countries. Çoban’s article focuses on an important yet unexplored aspect of connectivity, namely internet connectivity, in enhancing regional integration.

While all four articles above focus on how connectivity and mobility enhance regional integration, the other three explore how mobility and the lack of it may create a threat at the state and human levels. The fifth article, “Far from Home: Profile of pro-IS Deportees’ Mobility throughout 2016-2020 and Prevention Strategy of Indonesian Government”, discusses how mobility could relate to security concerns. While mobility should be celebrated as part of the regional integration project, it also has a negative impact. Ashar and Maharani (2022) show how Pro-Islamic State terrorists exploit loopholes in border and immigration control to join IS abroad and the shortcoming in the Indonesian government’s strategy to counter their mobility. In the previous edition, JAS published research on how cooperation at the state level through the framework of EU-ASEAN Counter Terrorism cooperation has mainly focused on building a common normative framework in responding to terrorism within the corridor of democracy and pre-empting the terrorist networks from exploiting connectivity networks (Wibisono & Kusumasomantri, 2020). This article contributes to further the debate by unpacking how the Indonesian state restrict the ability of a terrorist network to exploit the connectivity networks.

The sixth article, entitled “Conflict Potential of the Rohingya People in Bangladesh and Beyond”, investigates how Myanmar’s Rohingya conflict could generate a potential for conflict within the borders of Bangladesh and beyond. This is because Myanmar’s civil conflict had spilt over into Bangladesh’s borders due to a sequence of events starting from when Myanmar’s civil conflict erupted from its National Citizenship Act. Islam and Wara (2022) show how unregulated mobility might create potential conflict in other countries. In previous editions, JAS has published pieces on how the civil conflict in Southeast Asia can be resolved through the role of mediators that reduce the commitment issues of the negotiations and ensure the trust and confidence of the conflict parties (Candelaria, 2020). Such solution could be applied to the case of Myanmar by engaging ASEAN as the mediator.

The last article, entitled “Journey to Justice: The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Context of West Papua”, examines the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), focusing on the rights of the Indigenous Papuan people in the Indonesian provinces on the western half of the island of New Guinea, commonly referred to in English as Papua or West Papua. As suggested by Soetjipto (2022), as a result of migration, Papuans are becoming strangers in

their land, with tens of thousands of migrants coming to the region every year. As in many other regions in Indonesia where migration is high, resentment toward migrants is widespread in Papua. This study shows how mobility should be put within the local context. Mobility, in other words, may create marginalization of indigenous people.

We hope that this regular issue Vol 10. 1 2022 would invite further examination of the notion of connectivity and mobility in the post-pandemic order. We look forward to more studies that aim to conceptualize connectivity and mobility through the experience of ASEAN.

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