**Alternative Practices in Southeast Asia: Towards a New Model of Peoples’ Regional Integration[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Introduction**

The perceived failure of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to meaningfully address the issues and concerns of Southeast Asian peoples is viewed by the Asean Civil Society Conference/Asean Peoples’ Forum (ACSC/APF) as rooted in ASEAN’s being locked in a market-centered and state-supported process that was conceived by regional and national elites to perpetuate their control over the region’s natural resources and productive capacities.

Under the mantra of “profits before people,” ASEAN’s decisions are made without the participation of the marginalized and disenfranchised peoples of the region and are accountable only to the narrow vested interests of economic elites and political oligarchies. This has only further widened the gap beween rich and poor within and between countries and caused unparalleled debasement of the environment. ACSC/APF notes that ASEAN’s continued adherence to a neo-liberal model of development prioritizes corporate interests and elite groups over the interests of the people.

**Need for Alternatives**

This dire situation brings up the need to search for an alternative model of regional integration that challenges the ASEAN paradigm – one that is based on what Southeast Asian peoples are already doing on the ground and is guided by cooperation, solidarity, mutual benefit, the commons principle, and joint development, not cutthroat competition, the insatiable thirst for profits and narrow patriotism and chauvinism.

Everywhere in the world, particularly in Asia, there are a large number of spirited individuals and communities, projects and programs, proving through action and achievement that there are other ways of doing things. These undertakings are not merely economic.[[2]](#footnote-2) Being made voluntarily by (highly) motivated people, these efforts are also creating new social relationships in which practitioners are empowered socially, economically, and culturally, eroding and undermining the basis of maldevelopment, thus foretelling, if partially, the configuration of a just culture of a future society.

It is important to note that, in many cases, the traditional wisdom of Asian communities is inherited, rediscovered, refined, and successfully applied - defying the (dominant mode) that destroys the basic eco-cyclical linkages of human activities with nature for the sake of immediate profits and efficiency. In these efforts are identified vibrant elements of a new civilization that we need to build.

Southeast Asian peoples and communities have, for many years and on their own, been engaged in alternative, heterodox, and non-mainstream practices that encompass economic, political, and socio-cultural aspects. In some instances, people-to-people relations and networks for various purposes have also been set up.

Yet, these models are still spatially dispersed, and many of the efforts still localized. To cope with the dominant systems managed by transnational corporations and transborder “free market” mechanisms, there certainly should be linkages among the diverse models so that they may eventually grow into alternative systems that can sustain themselves and, eventually take over the dominant system. This is what an alternative peoples’ regional integration is all about.

**Economic Alternative Practices**

On the production side, social enterprises, producer cooperatives and communities, and solidarity-economy-based initiatives engage in exchanges on the technologies of sustainable food production systems that are environmentally and people friendly. At the same time, they promoted productivity and import substitution for food crops. Examples are:

1. alternative trade
2. organic family farming,
3. agroecology,
4. biodiversity,
5. zero-waste production, and,
6. indigenous agronomic practices (e.g., plant breeding and production).

In the power generating sector, bright prospects exist for community-based renewable energy systems such as solar, wind, and biogas technologies.

In the marketing aspect, there are direct-consumer-producer linkages via the media of alter-trade organizations and producer and trading cooperatives. The goal is to strengthen cooperation between farmers and consumers and to revive local markets. These people-to-people trading patterns are founded on the principles of fair trade and mutual exchange and can take the form of counter trade arrangements such as barter trade. In the matter of financing, there are credit cooperatives and alternative currency systems.

**Political Alternative Practices**

Politically, informal and formal networks of civil society organizations and social movements have been operating for decades on issues related to environmental issues, women’s rights, workers’ and peasants’ rights, human rights, social inequality, rights to natural resources, human security, and many other concerns.

Joint political advocacies and corresponding actions have been undertaken via mass mobilizations during international gatherings as well as lobbying with states and multilateral organizations. Alternatives to traditional political parties have also emerged such as a party-list system. A recently revived phenomenon is that of direct actions undertaken by peoples’ organizations or spontaneously by marginalized and deprived communities through the unilateral occupation of land and housing projects.

Communities have also engaged in integrated regional socio-economic planning and have practiced age-old conflict settlement mechanisms. Social media with emancipatory messages has also been utilized extensively.

**Social Alternative Practices**

In the social aspect, self-help groups have long existed and local networks have coordinated their social protection activities. Examples are community-based health systems guided by primary health care principles, “barefoot” health practitioners, and the development and fine-tuning of age-old healing practices including the use of organic and generic medicines.

In education, we have seen alternative learning practices such as folk schools, non-formal centers, and lifelong learning advocacies. In the provision for a people-oriented and directed shelter program, there are initiatives using vernacular architecture/housing principles that utilize indigenous designs, technologies and construction materials. As in other practices, peoples’ empowerment is a guiding principle and primary goal.

**Cultural Alternative Practices**

On the cultural aspect, visual artists and other performers have been networking through regional events that showcase the richness, diversity, and historical depth of Southeast Asia’s creative arts. More significant, political, social, and economic issues of marginalized sectors of society are also highlighted and represented via these cultural interactions and presentations. While it has often lagged behind other aspects of society, culture is essential in lending a human and spiritual face to political and economic dimensions and should therefore be nurtured and developed.

**Filling in the Gaps**

If the above practices are already existing, what would be the role of any initiative in crafting an alternative regionalism model, especially by civil society and movement-based networks? The answer to this question lies in looking at what these popular initiatives lack or are deficient in. First, they are still largely disparate and somewhat disconnected. Many local and national groups are unaware of similar developments in neighboring societies or if aware, are unable to reach out and connect with other groups and programs. Regional solidarity is based on groups and actions in countries being able to know each other, exchange information and knowledge, enhance their capabilities and expertise, and work together. This is a networking gap that needs to be strengthened and filled.

Secondly, research and documentation and constant monitoring of these popular initiatives are also lacking. This is important in order to build a data base of practices, examine each one, identify the best and model features and point out the inadequacies and deficits. Thorough research and meticulous documentation are skills that grassroots organizations and practitioners pay less attention to. This is understandable as their lives are taken up by the day-to-day demands of organizing, mobilizing of resources, and production. Research studies of this type will provide the service needed by the grassroots in order to further develop and scale-up their pioneering activities. This is the second gap that needs to be filled.

Thirdly, these practices are generally viewed as marginal and confined to an insignificant section of society, some even being dubbed as “elitist.” At best, they remain at the pioneering stage with scarce attempts to scale up and advance to higher levels. Some of them eventually fold up and cease operations. The task, therefore, is to mainstream these innovative practices in order to challenge and eventually supplant the orthodox models of production, marketing, and distribution. To do this requires the coming and working together of grassroots organizations, local communities, civil society groups, and social movements in massive information and advocacy campaigns. This is the third gap to be filled.

Fourth, and probably most important of all, is making sense of everything that is taking place. Popular practices constitute a rich trove of empirical data that need to be distilled, subjected to the rigorous test of comparisons, and finally, conceptualized and developed into a paradigm, a narrative, a framework, a theory, and a guide to action. This is a reflexive process, one that is continuous and never-ending. As human actions continually evolve and change and new practices emerge, so too must our concepts, perspectives, and philosophies change and evolve. This is the fourth and most crucial gap that needs to be filled.

**Towards an Alternative Peoples’ Regionalism**

In looking at an alternative model of regional integration, the project should take on a prominent role in filling these four gaps and any others that may arise and require regional interventions. By doing so, it will pave the way towards developing an alternative model of regional integration and peoples’ solidarities that transcends boundaries, borders, and nationalities. It can do these by undertaking the following activities:

1. Researching and documenting the practices and building a data base;
2. Coordinating the interactions between the alternative practices;
3. Convening and organizing conferences and workshops of the groups and communities involved in alternative practices;
4. Conducting alternative learning and training programs based on grassroots needs;
5. Conceptualizing and making sense of the practices and developing new paradigms and strategies of development;
6. Mobilizing the entire universe of alternative practices, regional interactions and the communities and organizing joint actions and initiatives;
7. Promoting the replication of the alternative practices in order to mainstream them;
8. Developing a model of regional integration that is based on the interactions and cooperative practices between these alternative practices; and,
9. Conceptualizing alternative regional structures that are decentralized and creative where different tasks and responsibilities are distributed throughout the region and rotated regularly.

**Preliminary Case Studies of Alternative Practices (30)**

Panel 1: Access to Justice

1. Holistic approach to handling migrant cases – Philippines
2. Paralegal training for vulnerable sectors as a peace initiative – Pattani, Southern Thailand

Panel 2: Ecology and Food Sovereignty

1. Alternative Land Management – Surat Thani, Southern Thailand
2. Local Food Movement and Sorghum – Flores, Indonesia
3. Farmers’ Union – Ermera District, Timor Leste
4. Organic and Sustainable Agriculture – Sakon Nakhon, Thailand
5. Agro-ecology Trends and Seed Banking in Southeast Asia

Panel 3: Gender Justice and Governance

1. Women Organizing for Governance (Indigenous Ayta) – Philippines
2. Empowering Women-Headed Households – Indonesia
3. Peace House Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Vietnam
4. LGBTIQ and the Fight for Gender Equality – Timor Leste

Panel 4: Solidarity Economy (Part One)

1. Building a People’s Economy – Philippines
2. Collective Action for Achieving a Full Life – Bulacan, Philippines

Panel 5: Culture as Alternative

1. aMP3’s Music for Change: Building a Village – Southeast Asia
2. Art for Human Empowerment – Indonesia

Panel 6: Alternative Health Care

1. Health in the Hands of the Indigenous Dumagats – Philippines
2. Community Health Watch – Bulacan, Philippines

Panel 7: Right to Housing and Social Protection

1. Bamboo housing as pathways to alternative living - Philippines
2. Anti-demolition campaign and land acquisition for urban poor – Metro Manila, Philippines
3. Informal sector living in a Danger Zone – Philippines
4. Housing and social protection – Thailand
5. Social protection as a human and democratic response to crisis – Southeast Asia

Panel 8: Alternative Pedagogy

1. Education from the academe to a movement for caring spaces – Philippines
2. Rural internship training program – Sarawak, Malaysia
3. Education for sustainable development – Laos
4. Lifelong Learning – Philippines

Panel 9: Solidarity Economy (Part two)

1. Renewed change and rise of Gaya-gaya sewers – Bulacan, Philippines
2. Trimona multi-purpose cooperative – Metro Manila, Philippines
3. Sustainable economy from the local level – Indonesia
4. Collective enterprise as a workplace – Isabela, Philippines

**Agenda for 2019**

1. We need to generate more case studies especially from other Southeast Asian countries
2. Bring in other countries in Southeast Asia – Myanmar, Cambodia, Singapore, Brunei, peripheries of Southeast Asia (Southwest China and Northeast India).

(The Northeast Indian states are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. The Southwest Chinese provinces are Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and parts of Sichuan.)

1. Initiate people-to-people visits and exchanges across the region – start with the 30 case studies of alternative practices
2. Sharpen and elaborate on the concept of an alternative peoples’ regional integration
3. Coordinate with the Asean Civil Society Conference /Asean Peoples’ Forum (ACSC/APF) with Thailand as host country for 2019
4. End of the year conference to formalize the alternative peoples’ regional network
5. Fund raising – collective effort

**Conclusion**

In many ways our agenda for an alternative peoples’ regional integration based on the alternative practices on the ground is a pioneering effort. Previous initiatives along this line have primarily been confined to engaging the state and the state-led regional bodies, hoping against hope that the political oligarchs and their allies in the corporate world will listen to the demands of the marginalized and deprived sectors. We have seen that hope disappear in the mists of indifference, apathy, and outright resistance to meaningful and lasting change.

It is time to take our future into our own hands, rely on our efforts, and trust in the collective wisdom and resilience of our peoples and their ability to overcome all obstacles. We have a challenging task ahead of us. It is a long-term vision that cannot be accomplished overnight. It will take years of perseverance and commitment to realise an alternative regional system and implement it.

With the principles of solidarity, cooperation, mutual benefit, and the commons behind us, and the judicious and responsible use of human and natural resources and the peaceful and harmonious relationship with other peoples and with nature and the environment, together we shall forge a new Southeast Asian peoples movement, one that will serve as a model for all other peoples and societies in other parts of the globe.

1. Excerpted with some revisions from “Beyond Boundaries: Solidarities of Peoples in Southeast Asia: Draft Vision of the Asean Civil Society Conference/Asean Peoples’ Forum (ACSC/APF) 2017 and Beyond”, December 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These succeeding three paragraphs are excerpted From:“Preface”to **Integrating Alternative Development Efforts in Asia”** (1997),By Muto Ichiyo, Ed Tadem, and M.P. Parameswaran [↑](#footnote-ref-2)