

## A STUDY OF NON-STATE ACTORS IN ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING POST-ASEAN CHARTER

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### ABSTRACT

*The article examines the role of non-state actors (NSAs) within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), spanning the period from 2009 to 2022, following the implementation of the ASEAN Charter in December 2008. The study discerns a pattern wherein NSAs have garnered influence within the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Nevertheless, their integration into the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) remains circumscribed. This phenomenon is primarily attributed to the entrenched state-centric approach that underpins ASEAN's operational modality, creating inherent complexities for effective NSA engagement. NSAs predominantly occupy advisory and technical roles, with limited agency in developing and implementing ASEAN decisions, policies, and initiatives. However, expanding their purview is imperative to augmenting the substantive contribution of NSAs to the broader ASEAN community-building endeavour. This imperative aligns seamlessly with the people-centric ethos championed by the ASEAN Charter. By capitalising on the specialised knowledge and resources of NSAs, even the norm-centric APSC can be invigorated, ultimately amplifying the effectiveness of community-building initiatives. Establishing enduring and mutually enriching partnerships necessitates a paradigm shift in the perception of the state-NSA dynamic. Member states ought to show a heightened willingness to incorporate NSAs into policymaking. At the same time, NSAs, reciprocally, should endeavour to grasp the intricate workings of ASEAN's processes and procedures. Drawing upon a synthesis of extant literature,*

*case studies, and empirical evidence, this research evaluates the extent of NSA participation, illuminating the attendant challenges within the three sectoral communities of ASEAN.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN, non-state actors, state actors, community-building, participation

## INTRODUCTION

The interactions of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with non-state actors (NSAs) are not new and can be traced back to the pre-ASEAN Charter era from 1970 to 2008. ASEAN has engaged diverse stakeholders, including business organisations, strategic institutes, academia, and civil society. These engagements have become more organised and focused after the ASEAN Charter was enacted in December 2008. NSAs in ASEAN refer to entities and individuals not affiliated with government institutions. These entities are listed in Annex 2 of the ASEAN Charter under the “Register of Entities Associated with ASEAN”. This diverse group includes parliamentarians, business organisations, accredited civil society organisations (CSOs), and other entities within ASEAN, such as the ASEAN Chief of National Police (ASEANAPOL) and the Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism (ASEAN 2023a). While some entities consist solely of non-governmental individuals, others may include former senior officials (state actors) from certain ASEAN countries.

ASEAN developed procedures in accordance with the ASEAN Charter, which called for the systematic engagement of NSAs to “support its purposes and principles” (ASEAN 2008: 19). The Association adopted the Rules of Procedure and Criteria for Engagement for Entities Associated with ASEAN in September 2016 (ASEAN 2016). This provided the modality for engagement between ASEAN and NSAs. The Rules guide NSAs seeking affiliation with ASEAN on the process, privileges, obligations, and suspension or revocation of accreditation with ASEAN. Regarding the criteria of engagement, the ASEAN norms of mutual respect, tolerance, awareness, and understanding of each other’s roles, as well as their strengths and constraints, were some of the key provisions. The Rules also stated the need for “constructive and meaningful dialogue, positive thinking, and goodwill in cooperation”, as the agendas of ASEAN and NSAs could differ, and both sides need to “work collaboratively towards the common interest of the ASEAN Community and its people” (ASEAN 2016: 6). This safeguards the ASEAN norms while engaging the NSAs more purposefully.

Besides, it was a tacit understanding that building a people-oriented ASEAN community would require the engagement of NSAs operating at national and regional levels. Being resource deficient, ASEAN could leverage the knowledge, expertise, and resources that NSAs bring to its community-building agenda. Although NSAs have a history of engagement with ASEAN, the extent to which they are permitted to participate in policymaking at the ASEAN level raises concerns about their involvement within the Association. The NSAs typically engage with ASEAN through platforms like the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) or by invitation to ASEAN meetings and summits, which brings them closer to the ASEAN process. However, this also implies that NSAs' involvement is often selective and restricted to those whom ASEAN deems valuable.

This article examines the extent of NSAs' involvement in ASEAN, reviewing their level of engagement and participation across the ASEAN Community and their role within each sectoral community during the post-ASEAN Charter period from 2009 to 2022. Notably, adopting the ASEAN Charter signals a shift towards a more people-oriented ASEAN, aiming for decisions that better reflect the people's aspirations and needs. The inclusion of NSAs in the Charter holds significant implications for a traditionally state-centric Association, potentially leading to more robust engagement of NSAs and greater integration of their input into ASEAN decisions. Therefore, this study seeks to uncover the role NSAs play in ASEAN's policymaking process and the nexus between NSAs and ASEAN supporting the interaction with state actors in the post-Charter era.

ASEAN's engagement with NSAs has evolved over the years, transitioning from informal collaborations to more structured interactions following the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2008. Historically, NSAs have provided technical expertise and resources, contributing to the intra-ASEAN trade and socio-cultural cooperation agenda (Chandra et al. 2017). Scholars such as Breslin and Nesadurai (2018) have noted that NSAs help bridge implementation gaps and introduce innovative solutions into ASEAN's policy networks. However, the levels of NSA engagement remain inconsistent across the three sectoral communities. For instance, the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) continues to exhibit a strong state-centric orientation, limiting NSA participation in sensitive areas such as security (Chandra et al. 2017; Madu and Kuncoro 2022). Conversely, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) have demonstrated greater openness to NSA contributions, particularly in areas requiring specialised knowledge, such as economic integration and pandemic response (Qiao-Franco 2022).

Furthermore, the inclusion of NSAs in ASEAN's processes has highlighted the importance of policy networks, as noted by Howlett (2002), who emphasises that the structures of policy networks influence outcomes. For example, in the AEC, the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC) serves as a platform for private sector engagement with ASEAN economic and sectoral ministers, encouraging collaboration on critical issues such as digital transformation and food security (Karim and Heryanto 2022). In contrast, the ASCC's reliance on NSAs during public health emergencies illustrates the flexibility of policy networks in addressing urgent challenges, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic (ASEAN 2020). This difference underscores the limitations and opportunities in enhancing NSA participation across ASEAN's sectoral communities.

Despite the growing body of literature, gaps persist in understanding ASEAN's institutional design and the effectiveness of NG in fostering collaboration with NSAs. Much of the existing scholarship emphasises the normative dimensions of ASEAN's engagement with NSAs or provides descriptive accounts of specific case studies (Chandra et al. 2017; Breslin and Nesadurai 2018). However, few systematically examine the extent of NSA participation across ASEAN's three sectoral communities or assess their impact on policy outcomes from a comparative perspective (Madu and Kuncoro 2022). Given ASEAN's state-centric nature, where member states often prioritise sovereignty and non-interference, NSAs face challenges in securing formalised access to ASEAN's policymaking processes. This tension is particularly evident in the APSC, where security concerns limit NSA involvement to consultative or advisory roles, while the AEC and ASCC offer relatively greater openness due to their reliance on the technical expertise of the private sector and collaborative initiatives with them (Karim and Heryanto 2022; Qiao-Franco 2022).

Network governance offers a valuable framework for understanding how inclusivity, trust, and accountability can influence NSA contributions within ASEAN's policy networks (Howlett 2002; Poocharoen and Sovacool 2012). The disparities in NSA engagement across sectoral communities highlight the necessity for ASEAN to adopt more collaborative governance approaches. For example, mechanisms like the ASEAN-BAC have effectively integrated NSAs into economic policymaking, showcasing the potential of NG in fostering public-private partnerships (Karim and Heryanto 2022). Likewise, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ASCC utilised NSA expertise through initiatives such as the ASEAN Centre

for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED), demonstrating the adaptability of policy networks in times of crisis (ASEAN 2020). Nevertheless, the absence of formalised channels and trust deficits remain considerable obstacles to deeper NSA engagement, particularly in sensitive areas such as security within the APSC (Caballero-Anthony 2014; Madu and Kuncoro 2022). Addressing these limitations requires ASEAN to align its governance frameworks with its stated commitment to a people-oriented community, as outlined in the ASEAN Charter (Koh et al. 2009).

Drawing on the policy network theory (PNT) approach developed by Howlett (2002), this article investigates the dynamics of interaction between NSAs and ASEAN across different stages of policymaking. These stages include agenda setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation. By doing so, the points at which NSAs wield the most significant influence and where their influence diminishes can be discerned. Besides, instances where ASEAN norms and principles constrain NSAs' engagement are explored, and any exceptions to these constraints are identified. The article also highlights the advantages NSAs would hold, such as the increased likelihood of being accepted by ASEAN if they could better understand ASEAN's values that impact the policymaking processes. This is because ASEAN, being state-centric, depends on how member states view the NSAs' involvement and consider if their roles could be eclipsed, which could impact the preservation of the ASEAN norms and principles.

## **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

Established in August 1967, ASEAN was founded against the backdrop of the Cold War. While distrust and suspicions still lingered, the fear of member states gradually falling to the influence of communist ideologies brought the five founding members of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand together. ASEAN is characterised by the “ASEAN Way”, construed by the principle of non-interference and strong regard for the “independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations” (Severino 2003: 475). The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), established in 1976 by ASEAN, further laid down these norms and principles, forming the “legally binding code for inter-state relations in the region and beyond” (ASEAN n.d.a).



At the core of the Association, these norms and principles colour decision-making and underscore the state-centric nature of ASEAN, where member states are autonomous.

The persistence of member states in keeping with the ASEAN Way has made it difficult for NSAs to enact a difference (Chandra et al. 2017) and has posed a challenge to NSAs who wish to be involved in ASEAN's decisions. Notably, ASEAN can be hostile to the activities of NSAs, especially when these actors (e.g., lobby groups and activists) challenge state agendas and offer alternative ideas of governance on key issues (Breslin and Nesadurai 2018). Thus, member states are akin to gatekeepers of the involvement of NSAs, such as civil society, business networks, scholars, or experts in governance, tolerating their actions only if they do not undermine the power and authority of member states (Breslin and Nesadurai 2018). Upon examining the current relationship between NSAs and ASEAN, it is discovered that NSAs consist of either ASEAN or external entities aiming for member states to champion their agendas or are actively engaged in executing ASEAN policies and decisions. Regional and local state actors collaborate with these entities to implement ASEAN initiatives. This scenario highlights a potential implementation gap in ASEAN's community-building endeavours, as member states are solely responsible for executing policies, decisions, and initiatives endorsed by ASEAN.

Moreover, the coordination process between member states and relevant stakeholders (mostly NSAs in enacting the policies), also referred to as the "horizontal network arrangements" of ASEAN, relies more on "central agencies to coordinate activities between upstream and downstream participants" (Kim 2006: 27). Therefore, the principle of non-interference and sovereignty of member states could result in a reluctance to work with NSAs. This is due to political sensitivities or differences that halt or slow down the implementation process at the national level. Hence, ASEAN would see unequal implementation phases among member states, often making the Association less integrated and committed to its set policies or goals. However, to conclude that the significance of NSAs is limited would be a conflating statement as ASEAN engagement with NSAs is not new.

Numerous such interactions have occurred between "ASEAN officials and NSAs on a rather ad hoc, informal basis, as well as many other forms of interactions carried out in a more institutionalised manner" (Chandra et al. 2017: 222). On the other hand, NSAs can further refine their conduct to be seen as essential and relevant to the policymaking process by member states. This underscores the importance of NSAs adapting and learning

practices in line with ASEAN's regional normative contexts and interests (Qiao-Franco 2022) to better socialise themselves with the Association's norms and principles. Nonetheless, there are limits to how much NSAs can learn about ASEAN since it can be difficult to approach or initiate substantive interaction with member states due to the intergovernmental nature of ASEAN.

Besides, the lack of trust in actors outside the Association results in NSAs unaware of crucial information for state-confidential reasons. This prevents them from active or constructive participation in policymaking, hindering any learning or practical experiences with ASEAN. While the key here is not to dub ASEAN an exclusive club of elites (Gong and Nanthini 2020), member states no doubt hold power over the participants in the policymaking process. As such, this article seeks to provide an approach that allows to assess NSAs' compatibility with ASEAN. It helps to facilitate a benign understanding of NSAs, where NSAs are seen as contributors to the policymaking process rather than opposing entities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The approach of PNT by Howlett (2002) gives impetus to “thinking about policymaking as involving more-or-less fluid sets of state and societal actors linked together by specific interests” (235). Through the PNT approach, actors and institutions are organised into identifiable sets of policy-relevant interactions (Howlett 2002). This way, it looks beyond structure (institutional mode of analysis) or agency (behavioural mode of analysis) when assessing a policymaking process. It can emphasise the interaction among actors' roles, ideas, and interests. This would also constitute the behavioural undertones of member states and detail their will (determination) or interest in the respective ASEAN communities. As such, when assessing ASEAN policymaking practices, such as the extent to which NSAs participate in policymaking, member states' degree of will and interest will be the focal points. Since PNT looks beyond structure or agency, assessing policymaking processes in ASEAN will be highly applicable. This is because member states significantly shape ASEAN's decisions within the confines of their norms and principles. This will be key to examining the dynamic between member states and NSAs, highlighting the significance and potential NSAs hold to ASEAN's policymaking. Here, the two concepts, policy universe or system and policy subsystem, are essential to map the applicability of PNT to ASEAN.

First, the concept of a policy universe can be thought of as an all-encompassing aggregation of all possible state, private, and social actors at various levels (local, national, regional, and international) working within the institutions that directly or indirectly affect a specific policy area (Howlett et al. 2017). This allows for studying the dynamics and relationships between member states and actors or stakeholders outside of ASEAN (e.g., NSAs). In addition, the idea of a policy universe is a nuanced means of conceptualising ASEAN's institutional arrangement. This concept helps to solidify the notion that, for example, the Association's decision to pursue a highly autonomous, loosely binding organisation should be understood as a reflection of the will of member states. This places further emphasis on the will of these states as the determining force towards shaping ASEAN's institutional design and goes beyond to understand that the final decision is the interaction between member states and other variables at play, such as external or foreign interactions either by major or regional powers and geopolitical factors. While ASEAN remains more state-centric, a more susceptible or permeable Association (for NSAs) would mean that the final decisions made for ASEAN can incorporate the views and recommendations of NSAs.

Based on the above, the three ASEAN sectoral communities will be understood as policy subsystems. These refer to the actors active in each sector and are “forms of networks which encompass the interrelationships existing between elements of the policy universe active in specific knowledge and political spaces” (Howlett et al. 2017: 233). It encapsulates each community's ubiquitous dynamics by defining them as separate policy subsystems. Finally, policy network(s) shall be understood as an issue area, agreement, or collaborative nexus that falls under an ASEAN sectoral community.

While such an understanding may oversimplify the significance of sectoral bodies, partnerships, and agreements that come under each ASEAN sectoral community, this article is keen to focus on the dynamics in these networks to understand what motivates or drives decision-making in each of these networks and, as such, colours the nature of that ASEAN sectoral community. In this context, a policy network presents a “group of various stakeholders (people) who are connected or are held together by common interests for certain policy problems” (Poocharoen and Sovacool 2012: 409). It allows us to look at how these groups of stakeholders navigate or steer their will according to the agenda set for the specific network. Under the



three sectoral communities of AEC, APSC, ASCC, the AFTA, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting (AHMM) are respective examples of policy networks (also understood as policy subsystems). Figure 1 depicts an understanding of ASEAN’s institutional arrangement alongside concepts of the policy universe, policy subsystem, and policy networks based on PNT.

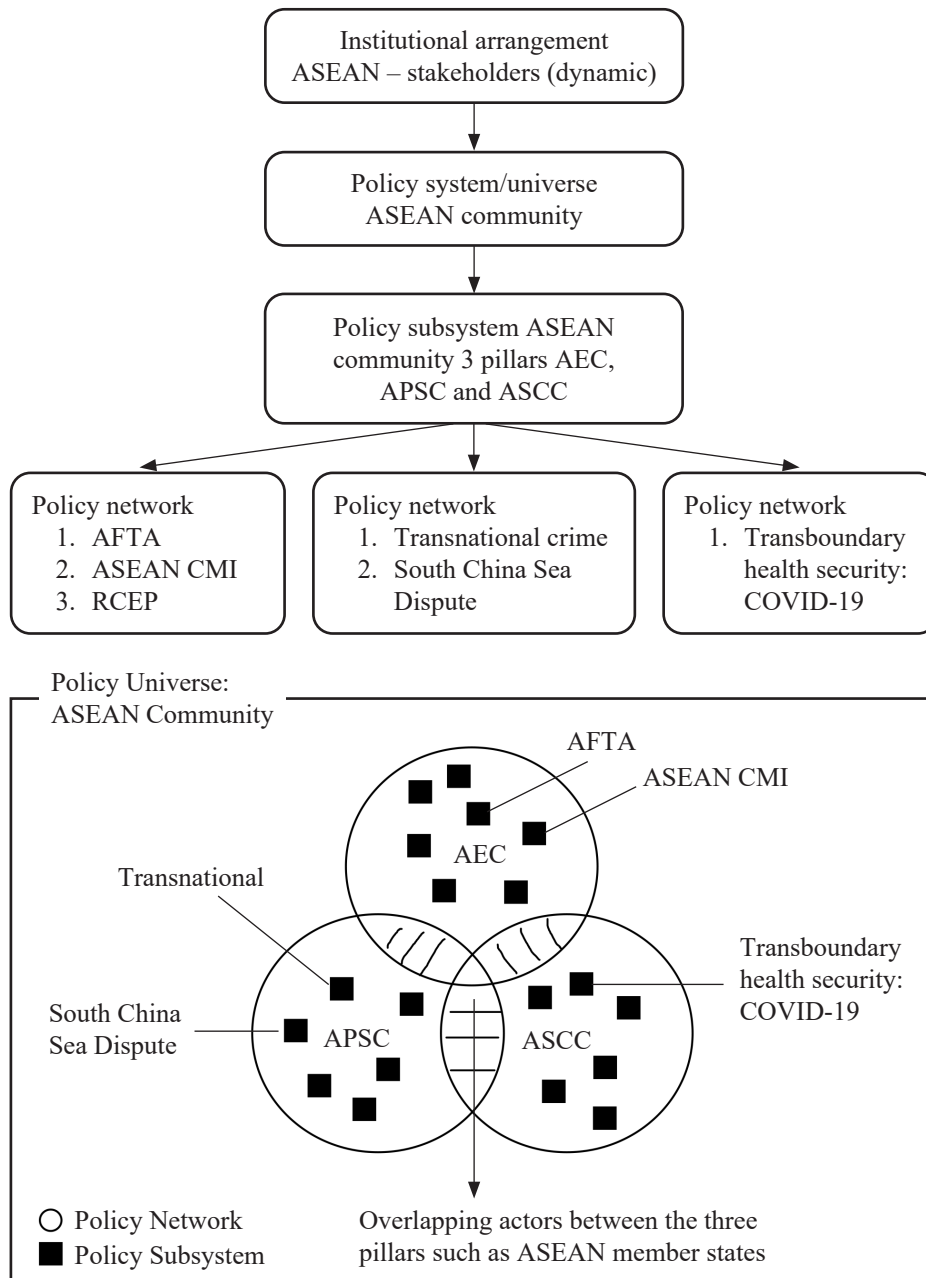


Figure 1: ASEAN’s institutional arrangement (PNT approach).

Through PNT, we draw closer to studying the impact of the interests or will of the member states as a significant force in moving the policymaking process and deciding the outcome of policy networks in ASEAN. For example, Thailand is passionate about sustainable development, a topic supported by Vietnam. This has helped put agriculture and forestry, rural development, and women's role in development on the ASEAN agenda. It also determines how ASEAN asserts its will, norms, and values as an organisation, which relates to ASEAN's centrality. With ASEAN coloured by its vulnerability and susceptibility to changes in the geopolitical landscape within the region shaped by major powers, regional interests, and transnational issues, the international society will heavily assess the organisation's capacity and capability to handle a myriad of topics and problems. This would mean that one of the essential roles of ASEAN is to manage its centrality in regional geopolitical arrangements.

In this research study, navigating ASEAN's centrality is crucial in ASEAN's policy landscape. The focus is on addressing the state-centric nature of ASEAN and exploring how NSAs can effectively navigate this aspect. ASEAN's centrality does not simply refer to its identity in the region. It also stresses and signals the capacity, in terms of influence and power, that ASEAN wields in the region. It would be apt to refer to how "centrality is seen to indicate the social power of an actor based on how extensively it is connected to the entire network" (Caballero-Anthony 2014: 569). This provides us with an alternative perspective on the notion of power. The management of ASEAN's centrality ultimately defines the will or interests of member states within the context of the ASEAN institutional arrangement, and as such, how best NSAs can contribute to that objective will most likely be the criterion by which member states evaluate the effectiveness of NSAs. Hence, not only do NSAs have to recognise that the degree of their participation is dependent on member states, but it is crucial as well for NSAs to acknowledge that a better understanding of ASEAN's goals, on top of the norms and principles shaping the policymaking processes, would increase their appeal to member states, making ASEAN more susceptible to NSAs.

An illustrative example highlighting NSAs' contribution to ASEAN's performance is the Asia Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia (Asia DHRRA), a collaborative effort involving social development organisations and countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Laos PDR (Asia DHRRA n.d.). This organisation plays a crucial role in enhancing the socio-economic well-being of rural people's

organisations in Asia by serving as a promoter and catalyst of partnership relations. It fosters genuine people-to-people dialogue and exchange, facilitates human resource development processes in rural areas, and mobilises resources and opportunities to strengthen solidarity among Asian rural communities (Asia DHRRA n.d.).

A notable initiative by Asia DHRRA is the Rural Leadership Awards proposal, a concept note submitted to ASEAN to recognise exemplary models in rural development and poverty eradication (RDPE). The proposal supported and promoted development initiatives in rural communities. Subsequently, the award programme was officially launched by ASEAN in 2012, with the inaugural award presented in 2013 and subsequent editions held biennially after that (Asia DHRRA n.d.). The successful alignment of Asia DHRRA's initiatives with ASEAN's priorities, such as poverty eradication and infrastructure development, highlights the importance of strategic alignment by NSAs with the overarching goals of the ASEAN Community. Here, the susceptibility of NSAs is understood as the significance of NSAs as perceived by member states. The varying interests of member states in different nexuses determine the involvement or engagement level of NSAs in the policymaking processes. The underpinnings of ASEAN inevitably shape this, and how they perceive them is pertinent to the region. Furthermore, member states' interests will define how NSAs can penetrate the ASEAN policymaking processes and contribute to the various policy subsystems and networks.

By being adaptive, NSAs can better align with the “belief system” overarching the policy subsystem of ASEAN. As such, the first consideration of this article is the member states' acknowledgement of NSAs. Consequently, this article examines the differing susceptibilities of the three sectoral communities: AEC, APSC, and ASCC. We will also see how NSAs' participation and contribution can be enlightening to ASEAN's performance by producing outcomes associated with dynamic and innovative policy outcomes. This is done by developing an open policy subsystem, a more permeable structure with NSAs than a closed state-centric one, closely related to producing status quo-oriented policy outcomes (Howlett 2002). However, it should be highlighted that dynamic policy outcomes or performance improvement may not always be reasons viable to member states. If threats to the belief system of ASEAN policy subsystems are detected, member states will be less keen to work with NSAs, focusing on ensuring the core values of ASEAN are safeguarded.

This article adopts Howlett’s concept of “opened” and “closed” networks (Howlett 2002) as a valuable framework for understanding NSAs’ engagement with ASEAN. In this context, opened networks are characterised by greater permeability and accessibility to actors beyond the established group, typically leading to more dynamic and vibrant outcomes. Conversely, closed networks are less accessible to external actors and often result in maintaining the status quo. Since opened networks tend to drive progress, advocating for NSAs’ involvement encourages their contribution to ASEAN’s policy subsystems and networks.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study employed a multi-faceted research approach to comprehensively analyse the involvement of NSAs within the three sectoral communities of ASEAN during the post-ASEAN Charter period (2009–2022). The research methodology encompassed a combination of literature analysis, document reviews, and in-depth interviews, providing a holistic perspective on the role and challenges faced by NSAs. Due to their relevance and historical context, it deliberately focuses on specific areas or issue domains such as the AFTA, ARF, and policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed in the AHMM. The AFTA, in particular, represents a significant milestone for ASEAN, encompassing crucial agreements like the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Services (AFAS), and the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA). Given its extensive history, AFTA constitutes a significant policy network in the AEC that is worthy of examination.

The ARF case study delves into the influence of ASEAN norms and principles, shaping the degree of NSAs’ participation in the APSC. Lastly, selecting the AHMM policy network allows for exploring the recent policy issue of the COVID-19 pandemic. This demonstrates the importance of ASEAN member states’ willingness to involve and even rely on NSAs’ expertise to address critical policy matters in the ASCC when necessary. It underscores the value of the PNT framework in analysing NSA-ASEAN interaction, capturing the interplay between norms and the will of ASEAN member states.

Existing literature, including research articles, case studies, and empirical evidence, formed the foundational basis of this research. The sources were systematically reviewed to discern the extent of NSAs’ participation

and significance within ASEAN's sectoral communities. The process involved examining ASEAN reports, official documents, and scholarly works authored by stakeholders such as state officials, think tanks, and academia. The aim was to compile an overview of NSAs' contributions and their perceived importance within ASEAN.

A qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews was employed to delve deeper into the subject matter. These interviews were conducted with diverse participants, including current and former senior officials from ASEAN member states and representatives from NSAs affiliated with ASEAN, such as think tanks, business councils, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and academia. The interviews were carried out over four months between September and December 2020. The selection of interview participants was purposeful and aimed to ensure a well-rounded representation of perspectives. Participants were chosen based on their expertise, experience, and involvement in ASEAN cooperation. This diverse selection process helped gather insights from various vantage points, enriching the depth of analysis. Interviews were structured around predefined questions to elicit nuanced responses about NSAs' roles, challenges, and potential contributions within ASEAN. These questions were crafted to cover a spectrum of relevant topics, including the perceived impact of NSAs, the obstacles faced, and possible avenues for enhanced collaboration.

The qualitative data gathered from interviews underwent a thematic analysis. Patterns, recurrent themes, and significant insights were identified and coded systematically. This facilitated the extraction of meaningful conclusions regarding the extent of NSAs' influence and the challenges impeding their full integration into the ASEAN processes.

While every effort was made to ensure a comprehensive analysis, it is essential to acknowledge the inherent limitations of this research. The study's scope was primarily focused on the post-ASEAN Charter period, and it deliberately selected only one case study for each ASEAN Community to provide a more precise illustration of the relevance of NSAs' participation and support to ASEAN's mandate. However, this approach may result in findings that are not exhaustive, which could be considered a limitation of this study. The research also relied on the willingness of participants to share their perspectives, introducing a potential source of bias. For future research, delving into the interconnectedness between diverse NSAs' advocacy efforts and their tangible contributions to policymaking, especially



in implementation, is vital. More case studies within specific domains under the three ASEAN sectoral communities could offer valuable insights into this dynamic.

Whilst striving to offer a balanced portrayal of NSAs' interactions across the ASEAN Community through case studies, this article acknowledges the challenge of categorising examples as "successful" or "unsuccessful" regarding NSAs' influence within ASEAN. Instead, it examines the notion of "success" regarding effective NSAs' influence relative to the three pillars of the ASEAN Community. By doing so, it aims to recognise the diverse challenges in each policy network or subsystem, requiring varied approaches and management to foster a more NSA-centric environment. In this regard, the article discerns NSAs' engagement based on the openness or closedness of ASEAN policy networks, reflecting the dynamics within the ASEAN Community. It highlights the level of NSAs' contribution and where their influence faces hurdles. It emphasises the need to account for exceptions observed in the ASEAN Community.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF CASE STUDIES**

Based on interviews, analysis, and case studies, insights into NSAs' perceptions of their interaction with ASEAN emerge. In an interview with the head of an ASEAN NGO, the sentiment was shared that governments alone cannot solve problems. Similarly, a leader of an ASEAN dialogue partner business council expressed that a "lot of what is happening in ASEAN or some of the reasons things go so slowly in ASEAN is because the relationship between NSAs and the state actors is not very smooth". However, extrapolating the relationship between NSAs and state actors proves challenging due to varying levels of engagement across ASEAN member states, influenced by factors such as democracy and openness. For instance, a leader of a business council with close ties to ASEAN economic officials noted that in Indonesia, there are more discussions about political security issues than those related to the AEC. Therefore, to better assess the role of NSAs, an overview of ASEAN's engagement with NSAs would be studied based on their level of participation in each policy subsystem, allowing for an understanding of where NSAs' contributions are more valued. This assessment would be conducted through interviews rather than an intrinsic study of how each member state perceives NSAs.

## **ASEAN Economic Community**

The AEC embodies the goal of economic integration, which aligns with the objectives outlined in the ASEAN Vision 2020. ASEAN seeks to advance economic integration and cooperation by creating a stable, prosperous, and highly competitive ASEAN economic region in which there is a free flow of goods, services, and investments, a freer flow of capital, equitable economic development and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities (ASEAN n.d.b). In AEC, NSAs' participation has been quite forthcoming, likely due to the less politicised nature of the policy subsystem. Notably, the mutually beneficial collaborative engagements demonstrating responsible citizenship by supporting ASEAN's core purposes and principles and its causes, as reflected in the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN 2021a), were seen via the ASEAN Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ASEAN-CCI) interaction with ASEAN. It serves as a platform for the region to channel its aspirations to relevant ASEAN decision-making bodies (Chandra et al. 2017).

To help intensify economic relations with Western industrialised countries, the ASEAN-CCI played a key role in introducing the implementation of the ASEAN Industrial Cooperation (AICO) scheme in the late 1970s and the formation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area in 1993 (Chandra et al. 2017). However, with the growing economic ties among countries in the region, the ASEAN-CCI saw their influence wane. A key observation was that ASEAN did not see the ASEAN-CCI as a “partner in policy formulation” (Chandra et al. 2017: 223). Instead, ASEAN hoped the ASEAN-BAC would “drum up support for the Association's economic policies amongst economic actors and deflect criticisms from groups that might be adversely affected by the ASEAN Free Trade Area” (Chandra et al. 2017: 223). As such, while member states acknowledge the role NSAs play, the significance that ASEAN accords to NSAs is debatable. In the case of ASEAN-CCI, ASEAN's true interest did not lie in engaging with NSAs as a partner but only in exploiting their technical expertise (Chandra et al. 2017), which caused frail relations between both. Since then, the ASEAN-CCI has been replaced by the ASEAN-BAC, established in 2003 and recognised by ASEAN as a leading NSA representing the business entities in the region.

Currently, the ASEAN-BAC is the “apex private sector body of ASEAN” (ASEAN BAC n.d.a), where the majority of its members are chief executive officers (CEOs) of large companies (Chandra et al. 2017). It is recognised by the ASEAN leaders as the official ASEAN linkage to provide private sector feedback and guidance to boost ASEAN's effort

towards economic integration, identify priority areas for consideration by the ASEAN leaders, and offer policy recommendations (ASEAN n.d.b). The ASEAN-BAC adopts different themes annually. The themes in the past three years were: ASEAN Centrality: Innovating towards Greater Inclusivity in 2023 under Indonesia's chairmanship; ACT: Addressing Challenges Together in 2022 under Cambodia; and Recover. Stronger. Together. Sama-Sama in 2021 under Brunei Darussalam's chairmanship. These themes reflect the priorities of businesses in the region and are aligned with ASEAN's agenda. For 2023, the focus was on various regional risks and the role the private sector could play. Steered by Indonesia, this encompasses digital transformation, food security, health resilience, sustainable development, and trade and investment facilitation. The aim was to instil confidence among businesses in the region's growth potential amid global headwinds, persistent geopolitical tensions, and the fragmentation of the global economy (ASEAN BAC n.d.b).

Hence, the AEC shows a reasonable degree of susceptibility to NSAs under the ASEAN-BAC's mandate provided by ASEAN Heads of Government, which allows the entity to take up various themes over the years. This permits a focus on different priorities each year that can facilitate richer engagement between ASEAN and the private sector. This highlights how ASEAN's belief system is less pronounced since the AEC as a subsystem provides an official linkage with NSAs, establishing robust horizontal network arrangements. However, as a senior economic advisor of a think tank in ASEAN puts forward, "policy implementation depends on how robust the coordination process is at the national or domestic level". Since ASEAN decisions require implementation at the national level, there needs to be close coordination between NSAs and member states, such as the local officials. If not, a weak link between NSAs and member states, coupled with the differential economic levels of development, makes implementing ASEAN initiatives at the national level challenging.

The ASEAN-BAC meets twice a year with economic ministers and once with leaders of the ASEAN member states (Karim and Heryanto 2022). It operates at the regional level with ASEAN committees such as the ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (ACCMSME). It collaborates under an international initiative called the Joint Business Councils (JBC) initiative, involving members of more than 20 ASEAN business councils and associations (Karim and Heryanto 2022). The JBC serves as a platform to unite businesses within the ASEAN dialogue system, aiming to foster collaboration and advocate for a more coordinated

public-private sector approach to address business concerns and issues. While individual dialogue partner business councils can pursue initiatives within their respective countries, they recognise the value of sharing insights, collaborating, and operating as a cohesive business entity under the guidance of ASEAN-BAC. Despite this, ASEAN-BAC's role is primarily limited to advisory and technical, notwithstanding its official status with the Association. Thus, existing engagements between ASEAN and NSAs remain unclear (Chandra et al. 2017), and the link between ASEAN-BAC and businesses in the ASEAN member states is weak. However, the ASEAN Charter aims to promote a people-oriented ASEAN in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in and benefit from the process of ASEAN integration and community building (Koh et al. 2009). Hence, it can be argued that member states need to accord more significant roles to NSAs such as ASEAN-BAC in policymaking beyond their current roles.

With the tendency to develop more open policy networks, it would be noteworthy to pinpoint that NSAs' engagement has provided visibility for the subsystem in the AEC. According to another business council leader representing enterprises of a dialogue partner, "the ASEAN-BAC has been extremely good at being very inclusive, involving business councils from various Dialogue Partners and interested bodies". The leader also mentioned that the ASEAN BAC would call sector champions, like Food Industry Asia, to support food issues. By making themselves very inclusive, ASEAN-BAC successfully invites people into privileged meetings, touching points with ASEAN Leaders through their annual public event, the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit (which, without the ASEAN-BAC, they previously could not do). However, the engagement can be one-sided, where invited NSAs do not get a chance to speak.

This is where it will be necessary for NSAs to understand the working norms of ASEAN to engage and increase their chance of recognition and participation. The engagement provided by ASEAN BAC still benefits NSAs because of ASEAN's intergovernmental structure. Another leader of a dialogue partner business council expressed that the influence of NSAs in AEC is strongly connected to the influence the business councils wield. Considering the status of several council members, they "should have a lot more influence than they really do". The leader mentioned that "not all council members have the degree of passion and determination" to play a more significant role in ASEAN or even further the significance of NSAs. In supporting their own business interests, these individuals may be too preoccupied to propel the ASEAN-BAC further.

This reflects what the article highlighted regarding the will or interest of member states, which is a crucial factor in driving the policymaking process forward. While the AEC is unique in that members of the ASEAN-BAC may have significant influence, they may choose not to exert it for various reasons. The current level of engagement between ASEAN and the ASEAN-BAC reflects a deliberate decision of both parties, considering the potential differences in interests between them. The ASEAN-BAC may opt not to take on heavier responsibilities for their own reasons. A key takeaway is that fostering engagement in a community requires time commitment, drive, and determination. These factors ensure the exchange of information and the continuity of efforts within a policy network. Since policy networks ultimately depend on the actors involved, their interests play a significant role. Thus, the susceptibility of policy networks in the AEC or as a subsystem relies on member states and some established NSAs like the ASEAN-BAC, with member states holding the ultimate stake.

### **ASEAN Political-Security Community**

As a sectoral component of the ASEAN Community, the APSC oversees political and security cooperation to safeguard peace and security in the ASEAN region. Unlike the AEC, issue areas within the APSC often directly intersect with ASEAN norms and principles, such as the principle of non-interference, which can lead to halts and standstills in policymaking processes. Implementation gaps are particularly notable within this context. While approaches to addressing non-traditional security issues may vary slightly, member states often require cooperation and sometimes collaboration with NSAs to achieve their objectives. However, state actors predominantly rely on international organisations to address non-traditional security issues, reinforcing ASEAN's state-centric nature. Even when NSAs play significant roles in supporting the implementation of critical activities, their reduced involvement in advisory roles underscores how member states' will and interests largely determine the extent of NSAs' participation within this domain and the broader ASEAN Community.

In this context, an interview with an ASEAN official from one of the less developed ASEAN member states provided insights into why NSAs are often excluded in areas concerning traditional security. The interview noted that a purposeful restriction imposed on the participation of NSAs in the political and security realm is due to the sensitive nature of the issues.



States are unlikely to welcome the involvement of NSAs since they are also part of the citizenry. Moreover, the participation of citizens in the “security apparatuses” of the state, like the ARF, would be tricky since citizens are seen as a “sub-set of the state”. A former ASEAN official, now an ASEAN expert, shares a similar notion that states are often seen as the primary actors in political and security issues. The former ASEAN official believes that it will be challenging to conceive more participation and involvement of NSAs. Hence, while NSAs are mainly limited to consultative and advisory roles in the AEC, a relative comparison of NSAs’ participation in the APSC shows that the interaction and collaboration between member states and NSAs in the APSC is far less.

Moreover, it is assessed that the limited participation of NSAs in policy networks, whether in APSC or other subsystems, may be attributed to ASEAN member states’ unfamiliarity with NSAs and working with individuals at a non-state level. The nature of APSC is such that maintaining security and peace concerning national interests can take precedence over implementing ASEAN-level agreements or seeking concrete improvements in performance. This policy subsystem may thus be particularly affected by this unfamiliarity, breeding distrust from member states towards those outside ASEAN’s inner circle. Interviews found that NSAs’ contributions to political-security measures such as public policy, regulatory standards, and institutional building are less effective. NSAs’ participation would be more significant in specific subsystems or the other sectoral communities. It also explains why we currently witness more NSAs’ participation in AEC than in APSC. There is also a perspective that relates to how ASEAN has too many non-ASEAN and international NGOs whose agendas may not align with the region. In this case, the proposed suggestion was to develop ASEAN-funded CSOs. The interviews conducted revealed about the politicised nature of NSAs’ involvement, which is more extreme, where ASEAN sectoral bodies tend to engage only with carefully selected NSAs they are already accustomed to. At the same time (backed by minimal observation), certain NSAs already in the ASEAN circle attempt to monopolise the opportunity by impeding others. Besides, NSAs with regional representation may not necessarily reflect the diversities at the national level. The NSAs that have access to the ARF, for example, are “mainly given to business interest groups and elite think tanks” (Madu and Kuncoro 2022: 275), such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP), which provides policy recommendations.

In non-traditional security areas, the involvement of NSAs is more accepted. For example, an interview with an ASEAN official from a founding member state conveyed that there are some engagements with NSAs on counterterrorism, cybercrime, and people smuggling to implement plans. Besides, it was shared that there are sentiments that NSAs could play a role in the political security areas of community building and that involvement in issues stemming from non-traditional security would warrant more participation of NSAs. In this regard, the nature of transnational crime dictates the importance of maintaining transparent communications between ASEAN member states and NSAs involved at the national and regional levels to address the issues effectively. This reveals a highly dynamic policy network in non-traditional security operating in ASEAN and shows the inclusion of NSAs as non-obstructive to policymaking depending on the issue area.

Nevertheless, in the transnational crime policy networks under the ARF or ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), extra-regional cooperation often includes “enhancing information exchange with ASEAN Dialogue Partners, regional organisations, relevant specialised agencies of the United Nations, and other international organisations, particularly towards the sharing of critical information on the identities, movements, and activities of known transnational criminal organisations” (Sundram 1999). In this regard, it is appropriate to mention the growing threat of cybersecurity and that today’s changing nature of transnational crime puts cybersecurity in the spotlight, as shared by a former ASEAN Permanent Representative of a member state in an interview. However, most examples of cooperation in the APSC still pertain to partnerships with intergovernmental organisations and local authorities.

A recent example is Operation HAECHI-II (Ministry of Home Affairs 2021). A transnational joint operation supported by South Korea and coordinated by INTERPOL between September 2020 and March 2021 involved investigators and law enforcement agencies from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, China, and South Korea. Over 500 arrests and USD83 million were intercepted across Asia-Pacific (Ministry of Home Affairs 2021). Local authorities often partner with ASEAN to carry out effective implementation and enforcement, and this example shows how the politically sensitive nature of APSC, in particular, directs the preference for member states to work with those who can effectively execute their will or interests. It suggests that states ultimately take the lead in transnational crime operations, and although NSAs’ interaction with ASEAN is acknowledged as supportive of these operations, it remains somewhat limited.

This dynamic is further illustrated in the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), an ASEAN consultative body tasked with regional cooperation for promoting and protecting human rights (ASEAN n.d.d). AICHR, composed of commissioners appointed by and accountable to their respective governments (Cohen 2010), hold vibrant discussions with NGOs and advocacy groups at the grassroots level. Still, the follow-up actions need to be more substantive. While AICHR convenes meetings to discuss human rights developments in the region, these discussions are primarily led by AICHR representatives from Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, resulting in minimal direct engagement with NSAs. Besides, efforts by stakeholders like the Southeast Asia National Human Rights Institutions Forum (SEANF) to collaborate with AICHR (SEANF n.d.; ASEAN 2023b) have yet to produce significant outcomes. SEANF, established on 28 June 2007, consists of human rights institutions from Indonesia (Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia), Malaysia (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia), the Philippines (Commission on Human Rights), and Thailand (National Human Rights Commission) and are recognised by ASEAN. This underscores that NSAs' engagement often hinges on acknowledgement or recognition by ASEAN member states. Typically, such engagement is formalised through ASEAN-endorsed institutions, highlighting ASEAN's preference for maintaining oversight over NSAs in specific issue areas. This approach may perpetuate the status quo and limit engagement with other NSAs needing more attention.

The management of ASEAN's centrality is one of the most prominent objectives of the APSC and ASEAN since it relates to concepts of non-interference and sovereignty. As such, when viewed in tandem with NSAs such as the ACSC or ASEAN Peoples' Forum (APF), which seeks to build solidarity through voicing against the rise of militarism and authoritarianism, as well as democratic rights against the Myanmar crisis and other threats to human rights, they can easily be neglected or least prioritised by ASEAN member states given other priorities like geopolitics which immediately concerns member states' sovereignty. Furthermore, the different development levels of ASEAN countries and the fact that implementation is state-driven rather than organisation-driven means that each member state will implement the APSC initiatives as they see fit. Conversely, policy implementation within the AEC may exhibit better performance or more active adoption due to economic imperatives. This elucidates how the motivations and will of member states can shape decisions and define

the susceptibility of NSAs, particularly when NSAs can serve as valuable partners in driving the implementation of policies deemed essential or crucial to ASEAN.

In contrast to the ARF policy network, a reference to policy networks in transnational crime paints a different picture, with more active NSAs involvement and successful implementation. The potential to exemplify and “maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN in a regional architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive” (ASEAN 2009: 2) exists but would be challenging for a norm-driven ASEAN to embody. While evaluating implementation within APSC may be somewhat complex, it underscores the implementation gaps that ASEAN encounters. It also highlights the diverse capacities of member states, prompting exploration of how NSAs could help bridge the gap if member states’ interests or willingness support a more inclusive policy network. This is particularly relevant in issues where member states demonstrate greater openness to NSAs’ involvement.

### **ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community**

The ASCC is part of an endeavour by ASEAN to provide more significant support for the ASEAN community by addressing environmental, social, and other issues concerning the lives of its people. The ASCC addresses “problems of human capital development, social protection, pandemic response, humanitarian assistance, green jobs, and the circular economy” (ASEAN n.d.c). Therefore, the ASCC wields a people-centred approach and contains policy networks targeted at “realising the full potential of ASEAN citizens” (ASEAN 2017: 1). In this policy subsystem, the COVID-19 pandemic unravels how the interests of member states can accelerate the policymaking processes in ASEAN. This also highlights what was shared in the previous section on how the level of NSAs’ participation in ASEAN would depend on member states’ perspectives. NSAs’ involvement is also coloured by member states’ interest in the issue areas of that policy network(s), including their will in the maintenance of ASEAN norms and principles.

The COVID-19 pandemic-related policies and work would fall under the AHMM. This body determines the policies of the issue area of ASEAN health and endorses decisions and reports of the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Health Development (SOMHD). The SOMHD is responsible for strategic management and guides the overall implementation of the ASEAN Post-2015 Health Development Agenda (APHDA), ensuring that all goals and targets are achieved (ASEAN n.d.c). Due to the race against time to

establish coordinated actions between ASEAN member states, its affiliates and respective partners to address the COVID-19 crisis (ASEAN 2021a) and protect the people of ASEAN, there is no doubt that member states' interest or will to partake and escalate this issue-area was at its peak since the onset of the pandemic. This is seen in the development of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) and its Implementation Plan adopted by the 37th ASEAN Summit on 12 November 2020 (ASEAN 2021a). Also, as part of the initiative led by ACRF, the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) launched a series of webinars on the region's COVID-19 response covering enhancement of health systems and resilience through ACRF, digital technology for enhancing healthcare delivery (ASEAN 2021b), and the safe reopening of economies and communities. In addition, ASEAN worked with its partners and NSAs from the health industry with the establishment of the ACPHEED. This partnership with Japan enhanced ASEAN's preparedness, response, and resilience to public health emergencies (ASEAN 2020). It also sees potential collaborative efforts with ASEAN Dialogue Partners or stakeholders involved with ASEAN, highlighting the extensiveness of the AHMM policy network.

Besides, the development of the ASEAN Public Health Emergency Coordination System further collaborates with the US to provide support for ACPHEED (ASEAN 2020). This offers dynamic and active examples of ongoing efforts under the AHMM to work towards securing ASEAN's health with NSAs and partners outside of ASEAN. It shows how the will and interest of ASEAN member states in curbing ongoing and future pandemics can draw "regional cooperation and adopting approaches designed to adapt to the cross-border and cross-sectoral nature of the pandemic" (ASEAN 2020: 13).

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Given their relevant technical expertise and resources, the role of NSAs in the various policy networks in ASEAN has been limited to being a knowledge and advisory partner. However, it is still noteworthy to highlight that since the level (degree) of NSAs' participation depends on the will and interest of the member states, NSAs' contribution to ASEAN is partially valid. Instead, it pinpoints the importance of NSAs understanding the needs of ASEAN and where they can contribute. As noted in the earlier sections, since ASEAN's core principles and values are tied to historical



reasons, the Association would not find itself lenient to NSAs or forgo their norms, making it difficult for NSAs to participate fully. Hence, it is significant to understand the compromises NSAs require if they wish to work with ASEAN.

Across different interviewees for the article, a common concern is the varying socio-economic levels of ASEAN member states, which makes the pace of implementation of ASEAN integration policies uneven. As such, a possible entry point for NSAs is to assist with policy implementation at the national level. Since member states are critical in driving and accelerating decisions in ASEAN, a shift in paradigm where NSAs can be more than consultative partners needs to be forged. The article provides an understanding of the differing susceptibility of the policy subsystems to NSAs. Alongside this, even in APSC, with ASEAN norms and principles working at the strictest level, the transnational crime policy networks show moderately successful implementation and collaboration with NSAs. Table 1 summarises an understanding of NSAs' participation in ASEAN sectoral community building.

Table 1: Degree of NSAs' participation in ASEAN community building

ASEAN community	Level of NSAs' participation	Policy networks	Role of NSAs
AEC	Moderately high. Mainly involved in the agenda-setting and formulation stages of policymaking and lesser in the implementation stage.	AFTA	Knowledge and advisory partners with limited implementation support.
APSC	Low. Limited NSA participation due to state-centric nature.	ARF	Ideas generators and feedback providers.
	Moderate. Support from local NSAs in implementation and enforcement, primarily at the national level. Limited channels for participation at the regional level.	ARF/ AMMTC	Knowledge partners with limited roles at the regional level.
ASCC	High. Rely on medical experts to propose contingency plans and support actions to curb pandemics.	AHMM	Technical expertise providers and involved in implementation.

Enhancing the role of NSAs in ASEAN requires a strategic approach that addresses the current limitations in their participation and influence. One critical step is institutionalising more inclusive mechanisms facilitating meaningful engagement between NSAs and ASEAN member states. This involves creating formal channels for NSAs to contribute to policymaking,

from agenda-setting to implementation. Strengthening these channels can be achieved by expanding the scope of advisory roles to include more substantive decision-making responsibilities in coordination with the state actors, thereby, ensuring that the expertise and perspectives of NSAs are effectively integrated into ASEAN's initiatives (Chandra et al. 2017).

Another essential measure is to foster a culture of collaboration and mutual understanding between NSAs and state actors. This can be promoted through regular dialogues, capacity-building workshops, and joint initiatives and projects that highlight the value of NSAs' contributions. By enhancing transparency and building trust, NSAs can better align their objectives with ASEAN's goals, increasing their legitimacy and influence within the organisation (Breslin and Nesadurai 2018). Besides, leveraging digital platforms and technologies can help bridge communication gaps and facilitate real-time collaboration, making it easier for NSAs to participate actively in ASEAN's community-building efforts (Kim 2006) and reduce the cost of their participation, as most NGOs in ASEAN face financial constraints. These steps collectively will help to create a more inclusive and dynamic ASEAN, where NSAs can play a pivotal role in shaping the region's future.

There are indeed opportunities for ASEAN to optimise NSAs' participation and turn it into a meaningful partnership for implementation. Using PNT, the dynamics between NSAs and member states of ASEAN can be better established by understanding that the performance of individual policy networks depends on the will or interest of the member states. As such, PNT helps to gain insight into the potential for collaboration and how increasing the involvement of NSAs in ASEAN's policy networks complements the goal established in the ASEAN Charter. This goal aims to promote a people-oriented ASEAN community in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in and benefit from the process of its integration and community building (Koh et al. 2009). This would also support the performance of ASEAN and build effective policy networks.

## **CONCLUSION**

With growing interest in engaging the NSAs to support building the three ASEAN sectoral communities, institutionalising the NSAs' role in the various policy subsystems and networks could provide a strong incentive for ASEAN to reconcile implementation gaps or fulfil its people-centred goal. However, this would need to go beyond recognising NSAs in the ASEAN

Charter as entities associated with ASEAN to provide space for their involvement in the ASEAN policymaking process where they can add significant value, especially in policy implementation. This calls for the consistent application of the Rules of Procedures for the engagement of entities associated with ASEAN and in addressing the concerns of the NSAs regarding their participation in ASEAN community building.

Therefore, in recognising that the interest or will of member states determines the susceptibility of ASEAN policy networks to NSAs' involvement, this article underscores the importance of viewing the ASEAN-NSAs relationship as a two-way process. ASEAN can benefit from having NSAs within its policy initiatives formulation and development. NSAs can earn a better standing in ASEAN member states' perception by better understanding and aligning with the Association's commitment. This helps to foster a reciprocal relationship where NSAs accept a degree of responsibility in understanding the mechanisms of ASEAN. At the same time, the Association strives to recognise the benefits of involving NSAs to bridge implementation gaps in community-building efforts. Overall, it will help unlock the NSAs' potential and empower them to collaborate with member states in building a people-oriented ASEAN Community.

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## **COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS**

Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, assuring anonymity and confidentiality. The research design and implementation were conducted with transparency, integrity, and respect for the privacy and rights of all involved parties. All interview data were anonymised and stripped of identifying information to ensure participant confidentiality and comply with ethical research standards. Each participant was assigned a unique identifier code, and any specific details that could potentially reveal their identity were carefully omitted from the analysis.

## **NOTE**

- \* Dr. Pushpanathan Sundram is the CEO of PublicPolicyAsia Advisors, a leading business advisory and government affairs firm based in Singapore with a significant presence across Asia. With over 30 years of experience in government, international organisations, and the private sector, he is an expert in ASEAN and Asia-related public policy and governance. He offers strategic guidance to governments, international bodies, and industry. As a Visiting Fellow at the School of Public Policy (SPP), Chiang Mai University (CMU), he mentors PhD students and lectures on ASEAN matters and public policy. His research has advanced the perspectives on network governance, food security, and transnational crime within the ASEAN framework, shaping academic thought and policymaking. His career includes 15 years as a senior official with the ASEAN Secretariat, where he served as the first professionally recruited Deputy Secretary General (Deputy Minister) for the AEC. He was instrumental in developing the first AEC Blueprint and Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity and establishing the ASEAN Integration Monitoring Office (AIMO) at the ASEAN Secretariat. He holds a PhD in Public Policy from SPP-CMU, a Master's Degree from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in collaboration with Harvard Kennedy School, and a Bachelor's Degree in Economics and Political Science from NUS.

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