

The Challenge of Cultural Diversity in Regional Integration: A Comparative Analysis of the EU and ASEAN

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ABSTRACT

With the trend towards globalisation and increasing economic, political and cultural interconnectedness, the need for regional integration has become more pressing. However, cultural differences between member states, including differences in ethnicity, background and values, often pose an obstacle to regional integration. The European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are two very important regional organisations, although they both aim to promote regional integration and thereby develop regional economies and provide the region with international competitiveness. However, the different historical backgrounds, economic structures and political formations between the two regions have led to different models and objectives for regional integration, and thus the challenges of cultural diversity are similar as well as different in many ways. With the trend towards globalisation and the prominence of cultural diversity issues in the region, comparing the challenges and opportunities of cultural diversity in the regional integration process between the EU and ASEAN, both regions, helps to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the different models of regional integration and why policies related to cultural diversity need to be tailored, rather than copied, to the local context.

KEYWORDS

Regional Integration; Cultural Diversity; EU; ASEAN; Localisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalisation and the promotion of regional organisations, regions are experiencing rapid economic development and increased political cooperation in the common pursuit of sustainable development, peace and stability for the region, as well as joint responses to challenges to enhance international competitiveness. However, cultural factors are often overlooked in this process. In the early stages of regional integration, member states cooperate for the common good and common challenges, and perhaps economic growth is the basis for union in the early stages, but as regional integration deepens and the degree of economic and political integration develops to a whole new stage, cultural factors begin to come to the fore. Differences in geography, historical backgrounds, ethnicity, religion and values lead to cultural diversity within a region, and different values and ways of doing things pose a challenge for inter-regional member states to reach agreed policies. Moreover, the increased integration within a region, trade and movement of people have brought together people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and this integration or clash of cultures has had an impact on local economic development, political policy and social order.

However, the EU has been considered such a success story in regional studies that many other regions have tried to emulate the EU model, including the way in which cultural diversity has been dealt with. However, with the rapid growth of non-Western regional organisations, more and more scholars are

realising the power of non-Western regional organisations and their specificity, advocating a move away from Eurocentrism, focusing on the characteristics of each different region and tailoring policies to local contexts. Among the non-Western regional organisations, ASEAN is a very representative one that has developed a different model of regional integration from that of the EU, and faces challenges and opportunities in cultural diversity that are mostly different from those of the EU. The aim of this paper is to analyse the challenges of cultural diversity faced by the EU and ASEAN in the context of regional integration and to explore what opportunities there are for the EU and ASEAN in terms of cultural diversity in the future regional integration process. It is hoped that it will contribute to the debate on the challenges and opportunities that cultural diversity presents to different regions and provide theoretical support for regional organisations to take greater account of regional specificities when developing responses related to cultural diversity.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

Based on the background and purpose of the study, the following research questions and research hypotheses are proposed to facilitate further research on the impact of cultural diversity on regional integration and the similarities and differences in the challenges and opportunities of cultural diversity in the EU and ASEAN.

2.1. Research Questions

Q1: Why does cultural diversity pose a challenge to regional integration?

Q2: What are the challenges and responses of the EU and ASEAN in terms of cultural diversity? What are the similarities and differences?

Q3: What are the opportunities for the EU and ASEAN in terms of cultural diversity in the process of regional integration in the future?

2.2. Research Hypothesis

Cultural diversity can also be a contributor to the regional integration process to a certain extent, provided that the EU and ASEAN respond to the challenges of cultural diversity in a reasonable manner and seize the opportunities.

3. THE REASONS WHY CULTURAL DIVERSITY POSES A CHALLENGE TO REGIONAL INTEGRATION

In discussing the reasons why cultural diversity affects the process of regional integration, it is first necessary to understand the concept and objectives of regional integration. Regional integration is a complex process whereby sovereign states establish common economic, political and social institutions for collective governance for the sake of common interests and external challenges.[1] The main objective of regional integration is to strengthen cooperation and enhance the international competitiveness of the region in response to the changing global situation.[2] Cooperation in regional integration usually starts with economic integration and gradually spills over into political integration as it progresses.[3] However, many factors can hinder the progress of regional integration in this process, of which cultural diversity is a very important one, and the potential problems that cultural diversity can bring, as described below, can pose a challenge to the goals in the regional integration process.

3.1. Socio-Cultural

Differences and conflicts in language, religion, customs and values characterise cultural diversity. On the one hand, it becomes difficult for people from different cultural backgrounds to communicate and understand each other in social life. On the other hand, different value orientations complicate the development of inter-regional policies, trade negotiations and the implementation of regional agreements, especially when there are deep-rooted historical conflicts between countries or regions, which can hinder the building of trust and cooperation and thus the process of regional integration.

3.2. Political Ideology

Cultural diversity can lead to countries or regions becoming concerned about the loss of their identity and sovereignty. It makes people from different cultural backgrounds live together under the same policy, which makes them more worried about the sovereignty and uniqueness of their country and region. At another level, when there is uneven economic development between member countries or regions and a wide gap in their position in the international community, some countries or regions may fear that regional integration will diminish their autonomy in decision-making. This fear, in turn, inadvertently hinders the process of building mutual trust and cooperation, thus posing a challenge to regional integration.

3.3. Historical Heritage

Cultural diversity can lead to nationalism and protectionism, with some countries or regions prioritising the preservation of their cultural identity, but as regional integration processes become more frequent with trade flows and exchanges of people, the trend towards integration leads them to become concerned about the erosion of their national or regional cultural identity and fear that regional integration will erode their cultural heritage. This can lead to resistance to policy harmonisation, trade barriers and impede the free movement of goods, services and people, thus creating an obstacle to the regional integration process.

4. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY CHALLENGES FACING THE EU AND ASEAN

4.1. Similarities

The similarities between the cultural diversity challenges faced by the EU and ASEAN are reflected in two main areas. One aspect is linguistic, as both EU and ASEAN member states have their own local languages and linguistic differences create barriers to mutual communication and understanding. Another aspect is cultural conflict. Regional integration has fostered national and regional ties, and the frequent trade flows and movement of people have led to the intermingling of different cultures, but different cultural backgrounds and values are often prone to conflict. This social instability and ethnic conflict can be exacerbated especially when faced with inequality or discrimination in terms of resources, opportunities and social services.

4.2. Differences

The EU and ASEAN face different situations in terms of the cultural challenges of diversity. One of the main challenges in Europe is the tension between national identity and a common European identity. Due to the high degree of regional integration in Europe, a common European identity is a value that the EU has always promoted and adopted policies to encourage. The values of common European identity are more widespread within the member states, but often contradicted by the member states' identification with their own countries and nations. On the other hand, ethnic and

religious conflicts in Europe are on the rise. Since the beginning of the 21st century, concerns have arisen about the Islamisation of Europe due to the rapid growth of Muslim immigration to Europe, particularly in Western European countries. This has, to some extent, led to an increase in ethnic conflicts arising from cultural diversity.

However, ASEAN's principle of non-interference has played a limited role in incidents of violence resulting from religious and ethnic conflicts. This also relies on the characteristics of the ASEAN political environment, but how to ensure inter-regional peace under the principle of non-interference and the impediments posed by cultural diversity is a major challenge for ASEAN. On the other hand, the implementation of ASEAN policies has become difficult due to the diversity and specificity of some historical and cultural backgrounds of ASEAN member states, particularly the influence of religious factors, which have excluded some groups from ASEAN decision-making, and the consequent impact on regional integration.

5. DIFFERENCES IN REGIONAL INTEGRATION OBJECTIVES AND RESPONSES TO CULTURAL DIVERSITY BETWEEN THE EU AND ASEAN

5.1. Similarities

For both the EU and ASEAN they recognise the importance of the challenge of cultural diversity and have developed and implemented a range of policies to address it, including measures to encourage intercultural exchange and protect cultural heritage. For example, the EU's cultural exchange policies such as the European Cultural Journey and Creative Europe,[4] and ASEAN's policies on arts and cultural exchange programmes and traditional arts and cultural festivals, all aim to promote inter-regional cultural exchange and enhance mutual understanding between cultures.

5.2. Differences

The EU and ASEAN differ in terms of their models of regional integration and responses.

The first is the model and objectives of regional integration. The EU pursues a higher level of political and economic integration, aiming at a single market, common policies and shared systems. ASEAN, on the other hand, has adopted a more flexible approach to integration, emphasising regional cooperation and consensus building, while respecting the principle of non-interference in internal affairs.

Secondly, there is the aspect of identity. The EU attaches great importance to the development of a common European identity and values that transcend national borders. ASEAN, on the other hand, has taken a more cautious approach, recognising and respecting the different cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds of its member states.

Also, in terms of migration policy. The EU has taken measures to promote the integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees, for example, the EU has developed a series of policies to receive and help integrate refugees from Ukraine as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, ASEAN has been largely silent on the issue of refugees and migrants, and although the political situation in Southeast Asia has been volatile in recent years and the conflict in Myanmar has made it difficult for large numbers of refugees to survive, some ASEAN members have actively resisted efforts to provide support or protection for these populations.

Finally, the EU and ASEAN also differ significantly in their approaches to response and decision-making processes. The EU has developed supranational institutions and decision-making mechanisms to address cultural diversity and promote integration. However, ASEAN relies primarily

on intergovernmental processes, which can be more challenging in terms of reaching consensus and implementing regional policies related to cultural diversity.

6. CULTURAL DIVERSITY BRINGS SIMILAR AND DIFFERENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN THE EU AND ASEAN

6.1. Similarities

There are many similar opportunities for the EU and ASEAN in terms of cultural diversity in regional integration processes.

Firstly there is the potential for inter-regional cooperation, where cultural diversity allows for increased understanding between larger regions, and cooperation between the EU and ASEAN, as well as with other regions, will not only contribute to cultural understanding and respect within and outside the region, but will also potentially increase the attractiveness of their regions to the rest of the world.

Secondly, there is an increased economic and trade potential, with cultural diversity leading to products produced in different cultural contexts and with a blend of many cultures. Artistic expressions from a variety of cultural backgrounds help to stimulate innovation. The EU and ASEAN can tap into the economic potential of cultural diversity by promoting cultural industries, creative industries and tourism.

Lastly, there is social cohesion and inclusiveness. By promoting respect for cultural differences, understanding and ensuring the equal participation of all cultural groups through education, cultural exchange activities, the EU and ASEAN have the opportunity to build more cohesive and harmonious societies.

Taken together, these opportunities contribute to economic development, increased international influence and greater social cohesion, all of which can play a positive role in the regional integration process.

6.2. Differences

The different models of regional integration between the EU and ASEAN and the economic, political and socio-cultural differences of the member states also make cultural diversity present different opportunities for both the EU and ASEAN respectively.

The EU has a high prevalence of English and fewer language barriers to communication than ASEAN. This makes communication between member states more efficient and easier to understand each other, thus facilitating exchange and communication. In addition, the European Coalition for Cultural Diversity (ECCD) has been established to promote diversity in cultural expression.[5] Compared to ASEAN, the EU already has relatively well established mechanisms to address the challenges of cultural diversity, which makes the EU more responsive to the challenges it faces.

However, the ASEAN region, with its lower level of economic development and greater urgency for economic development than the EU, has a stronger unity in its vision of joint and common development. This makes it easier to agree within ASEAN due to common economic and political interests and challenges when faced with challenges such as cultural diversity. In addition, ASEAN countries have been subject to varying degrees of invasion by Western powers during their development, have a history of intermingling multiple cultures from within and outside the region [6], and the cultural background of different cultures co-existing in this region for a long time makes it easier to understand different cultures to some extent.

7. CONCLUSION

In the context of globalisation, regional integration is an inevitable trend, and as the process of regional integration progresses and intra-regional contacts become closer, the issue of cultural diversity comes to the fore, posing many challenges to the regional integration process, which is an inescapable issue that needs to be considered and worked on. The EU and ASEAN represent two different models of regional integration development. ASEAN is not the next EU, their integration models and goals are different, the challenges and opportunities they face have similarities and differences, and they have largely different ways of dealing with them. While there are some lessons to be learned from each other in terms of similarities, their historical backgrounds are different and more needs to be adapted to local conditions. Of course, there are two sides to the coin, and while cultural diversity presents challenges in the process of regional integration, it also offers many opportunities that can be seized. The EU and ASEAN can also benefit from it if they use it well. Indeed, sometimes the challenge itself is an opportunity, as it means that there is a breakthrough to work towards a solution. Therefore, the EU and ASEAN are not helpless in facing the challenges of cultural diversity in the regional integration process. By addressing these challenges wisely and making effective use of the opportunities presented by cultural diversity, they have the opportunity to make cultural diversity a contributor to the regional integration process to some extent.

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