

RESEARCH BRIEF

Understanding ASEAN–CSO Relations: The Limits of Its Scholarship and the Way Forward

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Introduction

The years following the emergence of independent states in Southeast Asia were a turbulent chapter in the region’s history. It witnessed the proliferation of various political and socioeconomic issues that provided a context for civil society organizations (CSOs) to slowly flourish (Chong, 2011, p. 21). This flourishing, however, was not met with interest by the region’s states and their organization—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Chandra, 2006; Gerard, 2014a; Lopa, 2011). It was only during the late 90s and early 2000s when ASEAN initiated reforms that encouraged engagements with CSOs (Chandra, 2006, pp. 73–74; Collins, 2008, p. 316; Gerard, 2014b, p. 267). Despite the sustained rhetoric of ASEAN, the initial optimism towards the growing ASEAN–CSO relationship soon crumbled as scholars, analysts, and CSO leaders themselves uncovered the limitations present in ASEAN’s engagement with CSOs (Gerard, 2014b, p. 269).

In light of the fluctuations in the ASEAN–CSO relations, a growing body of scholarly works has emerged to examine it. This article reviews the growing literature, particularly works that tackle the general state of ASEAN–CSO relations. It does not cover works that have a specific focus on certain areas of the relations such as ASEAN–CSO engagement on human rights, women, disaster risk reduction, etc. The examination of the literature reveals three main contentions. Firstly,

it finds that scholarly works concerning the limitations of ASEAN–CSO relations are widely scattered. This article groups these limitations into four categories: (1) inherent limitations imposed by ASEAN in the engagement spaces, (2) lack of institutionalization of the engagements, (3) hesitancy of the member-states, and (4) civil society fragmentation in the region.

Secondly, this article observes that the literature has followed a general trend of examining the relations using an “ASEAN-oriented approach.” This approach has emerged to be the mainstream thrust to understanding ASEAN–CSO relations. It analyzes the relations within the context of ASEAN’s institutional design. Through this approach, scholars have been able to call out the inadequacies of ASEAN–CSO engagements.

Thirdly, the article contends that there is a need to elevate the scholarship on ASEAN–CSO relations. Despite the critical perspective the ASEAN-oriented approach has provided, it prevents a holistic understanding of the relations. Its dominance has resulted in the lack of emphasis on the role of CSOs in shaping the relations. This article suggests a potential solution to shift the discourse.

These contentions are addressed in five stages. The first two sections of the literature review contextualize the emergence of ASEAN–CSO relations. They provide a general overview of the growth of civil society in the ASEAN region and the proliferation of ASEAN’s engagements with CSOs. The third section

discusses the limitations of ASEAN–CSO relations. It addresses the first contention by arranging the scattered scholarly works on the limitations into four categories. The fourth section discusses the second contention. It examines the observed trend in the study of ASEAN–CSO relations. It elaborates on the dominance and shortcomings of the ASEAN-oriented approach in understanding the relations. The fifth section provides a suggestion to future researchers on the possibility of elevating the discourse on ASEAN–CSO relations.

Literature Review

Civil Society and ASEAN Southeast Asian states faced unprecedented political, economic, and social changes after gaining independence (Croissant & Lorenz, 2018, p. 6). They were highly preoccupied with domestic problems and development issues that provided various CSOs with a favorable environment to grow in the countries of the region (Chong, 2011, p. 21). This growth, however, was not accompanied by broader regional engagement.

On the state level, the anticommunist agenda of the Cold War period and the intense process of state power consolidation repressed and narrowed political participation of the developing civil society in the region (Gerard, 2014a, pp. 52–53). On the regional level, ASEAN showed little interest in engaging with CSOs from its establishment in 1967 until the late 1990s (Chandra, 2006, p. 71; Lopa, 2011, p. 148). ASEAN was seen as a highly elitist organization where decisions were entirely decided by member-states' leaders in a "top to bottom" fashion (Chandra et al., 2017, p. 221; Nesadurai, 2012, p. 166).

ASEAN's initial effort to engage with CSOs began when it adopted an accreditation system in 1979 that allowed the accreditation of selected CSOs to become ASEAN affiliated (Chandra et al., 2017, p. 227). The official guidelines for this accreditation, however, were only adopted in 1986 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016a, p. 28). The latest version of the guidelines was released by ASEAN in 2012. CSOs that meet the rigorous criteria indicated in the guidelines are considered ASEAN affiliated, which provides opportunities for limited engagement with the organization. Formal documents concerning the organization's system of operation are required. While it is preferable that applicants should have a presence in all ASEAN member-states, they

should not have extensive links with international organizations or non-ASEAN governments. Moreover, only those approved by the member-states can be granted affiliation (Gerard, 2015, p. 82).

The stringent criteria of the accreditation system are inaccessible to broader regional CSOs who lack formalized operations. It only favored well-funded and well-connected organizations that do not challenge regional or member-state policies (Gerard, 2015, pp. 82–84). In 1984, only 42 CSOs were accredited by the organization (Anwar, 1990, p. 242, as cited by Chandra et al., 2017). In 2004, it reached 72 (Chandra, 2008, pp. 205–206, as cited by Chandra et al., 2017). In 2016, only 52 were listed (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016b). Aside from these disadvantages, the guidelines also emphasize more on the CSOs' obligations than on their rights (Chandra et al., 2017, p. 227). Engagements between the accredited CSOs and ASEAN were only limited to communication with representatives, meetings, visits, and conferences (Anwar, 1994, p. 246, as cited by Chandra et al., 2017; Gerard, 2015, p. 83).

Deepening ASEAN–CSO RelationsThe division between ASEAN and CSOs soon became narrow towards the end of the 1990s. The 1990s saw a revitalization of civil society in the region. Rodan (1997, p. 163), Lee (2004, pp. 11–12), and Gerard (2014a, p. 58) shared the observation that the economic development in Southeast Asia since the 1960s and 1970s led to the growth of a middle class in urbanized societies, which spurred social transformations in the region. There was constant pressure from the emerging business and middle classes and advocacy-led organizations to institutionalize reforms in the governments of the region (Rodan, 1997). There was also an emergence of different social movements rooted in various public interests such as student, women's, environmental, and human rights movements (Lee, 2004, pp. 11–12). Gerard (2014a) added that the activism during this period "was increasingly detached from radical sociopolitical change and class-based mass organizations, instead centering on the protection of rights, liberty[,] and representative forms of government" (p. 58). Even in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam or the so-called illiberal CLMV states, there was also a gradual improvement in their relationship with CSOs. "Undergoing market transitions, regimes in these states gradually supported a growing role for service-delivery CSOs, including

international organizations, to provide services that these regimes were unwilling or unable to provide” (p. 60).

The revitalization of civil society in the region was accompanied by a shift in ASEAN’s attitude. The encouragement of CSO participation in the regional affairs appeared in ASEAN rhetoric after the economic crisis of 1997 (Chandra, 2006, pp. 73–74; Gerard, 2014b, p. 267). Pivotal to the ASEAN–CSO engagement is ASEAN’s Vision 2020, released in December 1997, which called for the empowerment of civil society in the region (Gerard, 2015, p. 365). Several reasons are pointed out by scholars to explain ASEAN’s shift. Gerard (2015) explained the organization’s reassessment of its participatory mechanisms as part of its market-building reforms in response to the Asian Financial Crisis. Caballero-Anthony (2010, p. 2), on the other hand, saw it in the light of the emergence of nontraditional security challenges in the region. Some also viewed it as part of the democratization process in the region (Chandra, 2006, pp. 73–74). Factors such as the intensification of regional economic integration and the global governance trend of CSO inclusion (Gerard, 2015, p. 366) are also raised to explain the shift.

Since 1997, ASEAN has been consistent in highlighting the need for cooperation between the region and CSOs. ASEAN’s commitment to engage with the civil society was further bolstered by several pronouncements such as the ASEAN Eminent Persons Group (EPG)’s report in 2000 (Collins, 2008, p. 316), Bali Concord II in 2003, and the Vientiane Action Program (VAP) in 2004 (Gerard, 2014b, p. 268). On the side of the CSOs, the initial indifference towards ASEAN evolved into enthusiasm. CSOs now see ASEAN as a platform to influence regional and national policies (Chandra, 2009, p. 74; Collins, 2008, p. 317).

Several spaces were opened by ASEAN and CSOs to encourage regional engagements with civil society. Gerard (2014a) identified three broad categories of these spaces: (1) spaces established by ASEAN, (2) spaces recognized by ASEAN, and (3) spaces “created” by CSOs.

The first category, ASEAN-established spaces, is comprised of three official channels established by ASEAN where CSOs can seek to influence regional decision-making (Gerard, 2014a, p. 81). The first channel is the ASEAN accreditation system that

has existed since 1979. The second channel is the informal consultations organized by various ASEAN bodies. Since 2005, ASEAN has initiated multiple ad hoc consultations with various CSO representatives on several regional concerns (Gerard, 2015, pp. 373–376). The third channel is the annual sectoral dialogues between government officials, CSOs, and other concerned stakeholders. These dialogues, which have been organized since 2006, have focused on social welfare and development, migrant labor, and rural development and poverty eradication (Gerard, 2014a, p. 81; 2015, pp. 376–377).

The second category, ASEAN-recognized spaces, is composed of five nonofficial channels where ASEAN officials and CSOs interact (Gerard, 2014a, p. 107). The first channel is the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA). The APA was organized in the hopes of serving as a bridge between ASEAN and the diverse non-ASEAN-affiliated CSOs. In November 2000, the first APA was launched in Indonesia. The first assembly served as an official recognition of CSO participation in the region (Chandra, 2009, p. 72). With seven APAs organized between 2000 and 2009, these provided CSOs the platform to articulate their interests and advocacies to the region. The second channel is the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC). Organizing the ACSC was an initiative of the Malaysian government during its tenure as the ASEAN Chair in 2005 (Chandra et al., 2017, p. 228). Its inauguration in 2005 was an important step in ASEAN–CSO relations since it was the first time CSOs in the region were given the chance to present their deliberations to the heads of state of the region (Collins, 2008, p. 320). In 2008, the name “ASEAN People’s Forum” (APF) was added to ACSC, making the name of the annual conference ACSC/APF (Chandra et al., 2017, p. 228). The following ACSCs after 2005 were then organized by CSOs under the leadership of Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy (SAPA; Gerard, 2013, p. 417). SAPA is a network of CSOs in Asia that aims to unite the expertise, resources, and agenda of CSOs to effectively engage international institutions. Since its establishment in 2006, SAPA has been a leading CSO in engaging with ASEAN. The last three channels are the Regional Tripartite Social Dialogue, the ASEAN-ISIS Colloquium on Human Rights (AICOHR), and the Dialogue on Democracy and ASEAN Integration (DODAI; Gerard, 2014a, p. 107).

The third category, the “created spaces,” is

comprised of four independent CSO-led channels that are neither established nor recognized by ASEAN. These are the spaces “created” by CSOs as a result of the constraints present in the first two categories (Gerard, 2014a, p. 137). These channels are characterized by wide CSO participation and the lack of ASEAN’s direct engagement. The first channel refers to the parallel activities organized by CSOs that “mimic a variety of official events, including workshops, forums and even the drafting of agreements” (Gerard, 2014a, p. 138). The second channel refers to the protests led by CSOs. The third channel is the production and dissemination of knowledge that attempts to challenge ASEAN policy agenda. The last channel is the targeting of international institutions outside of ASEAN. Instead of engaging with ASEAN, some CSOs engage with institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Gerard, 2014a, pp. 148–150) in the hopes of gaining broader channels to influence regional agenda.

Limitations of ASEAN–CSO Engagements The spaces for ASEAN–CSO engagement fostered an unprecedented level of engagement between the two actors. Literature concerning ASEAN–CSO relations during the late 1990s to early 2000s initially saw a steady and welcome transformation of ASEAN’s regional decision-making framework. The burgeoning relationship between ASEAN and CSOs led observers to be optimistic about the “people-oriented” path ASEAN was taking. It was seen as ASEAN’s transformation towards a new brand of regionalism—a “regionalism from below” or “alternative regionalism” (Chandra, 2009; Nesadurai, 2012, p. 167; Palmujoki, 2001, p. 166). Caballero-Anthony (2004), for example, saw the APA as a “significant mechanism for governance” since it provided nonstate actors an opportunity to shape the concept of security in the region given the proliferation of nontraditional security issues.

Despite the initial optimism, several scholars and CSO leaders have pointed out inadequacies of the current state of engagement. As the engagements went further, the disconnect between ASEAN’s rhetoric and actual practice have become apparent. Even though there is an emphasis on the organization’s shift to a “people-oriented” thrust, there remains to be a lack of genuine civil society participation in the region (Gerard, 2014b, p. 269).

This portion of the article will discuss the various limitations expressed in ASEAN–CSO literature. The literature concerning these limitations is sporadic and not unified. Due to the differing focus of scholars in examining ASEAN–CSO relations, various limitations have been pointed out. This article consolidates these works and groups the observed limitations into four categories: (1) inherent limitations present in the channels, (2) lack of institutionalization, (3) hesitancy of member-states, and (4) fragmentation of civil society.

The first category refers to the inherent limitations present in the channels where ASEAN and CSOs interact. In ASEAN-established platforms, three main limitations can be observed. Firstly, not all interested CSOs can participate in official platforms since ASEAN controls which groups can participate (Gerard, 2014a, p. 104; 2014b, p. 271). Only CSOs that receive the endorsement of member-states can participate, which means that CSOs that are critical of regional and domestic policies cannot contest in the regional decision-making processes (Gerard, 2014a, p. 104; 2014b, p. 271). Despite the inclusion of diverse CSOs in ad hoc consultations, these channels are afforded with informal status, which “ensures that these deliberations are unlikely to have any impact on policy, given that all policy decisions require the endorsement of all member-states” (Gerard, 2014a, p. 104). Secondly, the nature of CSO participation in official channels is severely narrow. In the case of the ASEAN-accredited CSOs, the only guaranteed participation is the ability to submit written statements to the Committee of Permanent Representatives to ASEAN (CPR; Gerard, 2014a, p. 104). For the annual sectoral and ad hoc dialogues, their opportunity to impact regional policies is dependent on their status—whether or not they are given a formal recognition. Regardless, their recommendations still need to have the consensus approval of the member-states (Gerard, 2014a, p. 104). Thirdly, there is an unbalanced ASEAN–CSO interaction across different regional issues. ASEAN only engages openly with CSOs if the matter of concern is beneficial to its agenda. These concerns include migrant labor, poverty, rural development, and social welfare (Gerard, 2015, p. 379). However, politically sensitive issues such as human rights issues are treated with hesitancy and silence. In other words, ASEAN is issue specific in the CSOs that it is willing to engage with (Gerard, 2015, p. 379). In ASEAN-recognized

spaces, the major challenge is the limitation on the concerns being discussed. Organizers have to limit civil society agenda to attract the attention of ASEAN officials in the hopes of encouraging them to attend (Gerard, 2014a, p. 134).

The second category covers the lacking institutionalization of the official platforms established by ASEAN. The ASEAN Charter does not provide any mechanism for ASEAN, its agencies, and member-states to properly engage with the civil society (Lopa, 2011, p. 149). It does not institutionalize platforms of dialogues between the two sides. APA and ACSC/APF are not even mentioned in the ASEAN Charter (Collins, 2008, p. 321; Nesadurai, 2009; Rüländ, 2014). During the process of drafting the charter, the EPG consulted with various CSOs to ask for their recommendations. Despite CSO recommendations and EPG's commitments, the EPG did not recommend the integration of CSOs in regional decision-making. It only saw CSOs as bridges to publicize ASEAN's agenda to the broader masses (Collins, 2008, pp. 324–325). The lack of institutionalization entails that “ASEAN officials retain the ability to marginalize or exclude activities, as they deem necessary” (Gerard, 2014b, p. 273).

The third category points out the hesitancy and uncomfortable stance of ASEAN member-states towards CSOs. The distrust between the member-states and CSOs is high (Lopa, 2011, p. 149). Member-states' interaction with CSOs can be described as “one of toleration and at worst one of out-right opposition” (Collins, 2008, p. 319). This is particularly the case in nondemocratic member-states that are not open to CSOs that are vocal in their criticisms against domestic policies (Chandra et al., 2017, p. 229). There is even willingness on the side of the member-states to minimize civil society engagement in the region (Kraft, 2017, p. 114). There have been numerous instances that corroborate this observation. In 2009, Myanmar and Cambodia refused to accept the presence of two CSO representatives during a dialogue between ASEAN leaders and CSOs in 2009 (Chandra et al., 2017, p. 229; Kraft, 2017, p. 114). In 2012 and 2016, the organizers of ACSC/APF accused the host countries, Cambodia and Laos respectively, of harassment and restricting freedom of expression, which jeopardized the safety of holding the said conference (Kraft, 2017, p. 114).

The fourth category refers to the fragmentation of the civil society in the region. ASEAN is not alone

in the receiving end of criticisms towards the nature of ASEAN–CSO relations. For Nesadurai (2009, pp. 110–111), this fragmentation refers to the contrasting interests of different organizations speaking on similar issues. The fragmented stances of CSOs on similar issues allow ASEAN officials to engage with one faction at the expense of the other. Tadem (2017, p. 90) also raised the observation that civil society in the region is still disparate and disconnected. He added that this networking gap needs to be filled. Gerard (2014a) used the term *atomization of civil society* to describe this fragmentation. ASEAN officials utilize this fragmentation to justify CSOs' exclusion in decision-making. She explained that this atomization is a product of several factors such as the different attitudes of CSOs towards ASEAN engagement, financial inequality among CSOs, and ASEAN's selectiveness in engaging with CSOs (Gerard, 2014a, pp. 75–76). Outside of the contributions of Nesadurai (2009), Tadem (2017), and Gerard (2014a), topics concerning civil society fragmentation in the ASEAN region remain to be unexplored in the ASEAN–CSO literature.

Given ASEAN's limitations in meeting its participatory rhetoric, it has been noted that the rationale behind the organization's engagement with CSOs has less to do with opening up participatory channels for its stakeholders. Rüländ (2014, p. 256) argued that ASEAN's engagements with CSOs and other nonstate actors are “concession to increasing democratization pressures, making technocratic and elitist regional governance more sublime and paving the way towards enhanced ‘participation in implementation.’” Gerard (2015) added that its purpose “is directed towards boosting its legitimacy and furthering its narrow reform agenda, rather than creating opportunities for CSOs to contest this political project” (p. 379).

ASEAN-Oriented Approach The section above provides a clear narrative of the ups and downs of ASEAN–CSO relations. Even though there has been an unprecedented level of interaction between CSOs and ASEAN since the late 1990s, there is an overwhelming scholarly consensus pointing out ASEAN's limited engagement with CSOs in the region. These limitations prevent genuine civil society participation in the regional framework. Due to the scattered nature of the scholarly works scrutinizing the limitations, this article

groups these limitations into four broad categories. The limitations are more pronounced in CSOs that represent sensitive issues and are critical of regional and domestic policies. Civil society fragmentation in the region remains to be a less explored area in the ASEAN–CSO literature.

Aside from the literature’s decentralized attention on the limitations, this article also observes that ASEAN–CSO relations is mainly studied through an “ASEAN-oriented approach.” This approach pertains to the tendency of most scholars to investigate ASEAN–CSO relations from the vantage point of ASEAN’s institutional design. In the course of the relations’ scholarship since its emergence in the late 1990s, the dominant approach that has emerged is to situate or scrutinize the development of the relations within the context of what ASEAN can and cannot achieve. This approach utilizes ASEAN’s organizational structure, specifically in terms of the engagement spaces available, their limitations, and the norms observed, as a framework in examining ASEAN–CSO relations. Due to its analytical focus, this article refers to this approach as the “ASEAN-oriented approach.” The works of Gerard (2013, 2014a, 2014b, & 2015) and Chandra et al. (2017), for example, highlighted ASEAN–CSO relations in terms of the opportunities available and the constraints present in the engagement spaces between the two entities. Due to these institutional constraints, these scholars pointed out that despite increasing CSO engagement with ASEAN, their ability to influence regional decision-making has been minimal. Other scholars such as Collins (2008), Nesadurai (2009), Lopa (2011), and Rüländ (2014) emphasized the lack of institutionalization of ASEAN–CSO engagements. This lack of institutionalization entails that ASEAN maintains the prerogative to selectively engage or dismiss CSOs. Some focused on the differing attitudes of the member-states towards CSOs such as the works of Collins (2008), Lopa (2011), Chandra et al. (2017), and Kraft (2017). The hesitancy and sometimes opposition of member-states to engage openly with CSOs, which characterizes the region’s adherence to noninterference principle and state centrism, repress CSO participation in spaces available.

The works mentioned above expose a trend in the scholarship of ASEAN–CSO relations. The ASEAN-oriented approach takes ASEAN’s organizational

capacity or structure as the reference point in its analysis of the relations.

As seen in the literature review in the previous section, the usage of the ASEAN-oriented approach led scholars, analysts, and civil society leaders to expose the nature of ASEAN’s engagements with CSOs. Regardless of the openness to engage as reflected in ASEAN’s rhetoric, concrete participation in regional decision-making remains marginal. Nevertheless, the reliance on utilizing an ASEAN-oriented approach reveals a major shortcoming in the study of ASEAN–CSO relations. The reliance results in a neglect of CSOs’ role in accomplishing the relations. The dominant trend in the scholarship of ASEAN–CSO relations tends to view ASEAN as the primary actor dictating the course of the said relations at the expense of CSOs’ agency in contributing to the relations. While there are indeed works that emphasize the contributions of CSOs as seen in their advocacy work in specific issues and advocacies, the outcomes of these contributions are often refuted by the number of works that focus on the opportunities and limitations within the relations. From the point of view of an ASEAN-oriented approach, ASEAN’s institutional design dictates the extent of engagement between the two parties in the relations. The problem with the approach is that it does not guarantee that ASEAN’s institutional design completely constrains the ability of CSOs to engage or influence regional decision-making since it does not examine the agency of CSOs in accomplishing the relations. The approach does not tackle with emphasis the possibility of CSOs adapting to the constraints in the engagement spaces or the role of CSOs in shaping the norms observed in these engagements. Since it focuses heavily on ASEAN’s institutional design as a dictating factor in shaping the relations, there is no emphasis on the various nuances that CSOs could have taken in the course of their engagements with the regional organization.

This neglect furthers an uneven understanding of ASEAN–CSO relations. Without understanding the contribution of CSOs in the relations, the ASEAN-oriented approach cannot provide a holistic scholarly lens to understand the entirety of the relations. The literature reviewed in the above sections shows that CSOs’ experiences in engaging with ASEAN have yet to be explored widely. For instance, the lack of exploration on the issue of civil society fragmentation and its impact on ASEAN–CSO relations manifests

this inadequacy. In addition, Nandyatama (2021, pp. 38–40) observed that while there is a growing literature on ASEAN–CSO engagement, these works focus heavily on regional CSO networks, which marginalizes the examination of the potential role of other CSOs. He noted as well that there is a tendency to overgeneralize ASEAN–CSO relations as always adversarial, resulting in the lack of examination on the nuances on how CSOs shape the institutionalization process in the region.

The Unknown in the Study of ASEAN–CSO RelationsThe continued examination of ASEAN–CSO relations using the ASEAN-oriented approach produces a one-sided analysis of the relations. Its heavy reliance on utilizing ASEAN’s institutional design as a reference point in scrutinizing the relations resulted in the marginalization of scholarly focus on the nuances of CSOs’ experience in this engagement. CSOs’ role in shaping and constructing the relations remains to be an area yet to be explored widely.

With these gaps in the literature, this article calls for a shift in the discourse of ASEAN–CSO relations. This shift does not suggest a complete withdrawal from the mainstream ASEAN-oriented approach. Despite its shortcomings, the ASEAN-oriented approach remains to be a valuable approach in providing a critical examination of ASEAN’s engagements with CSOs. The shift in the discourse should come in the form of a compensation for the shortcomings of the approach, which is its neglect of CSOs’ role in shaping the relations. The experiences, agency, and nuances of CSO engagement in the relations should be integrated into the current ASEAN-oriented approach. To put it simply, a holistic understanding of the relations can only emerge once ASEAN–CSO relations is examined from the lens of ASEAN’s institutional design and CSOs’ roles.

To materialize the desired shift in the discourse on ASEAN–CSO relations, this article suggests the conceptualization of a framework to serve as a new approach in examining the said relations. This framework should be grounded in empirical data and constructed with ASEAN’s institutional design and CSOs’ agency as its two main variables. With this integration, the desired framework is hoped to deviate from the one-sided focus of the ASEAN-oriented approach. This entails the necessity to understand the agency of CSOs in shaping the ASEAN–CSO relations

to craft this desired holistic framework. Providing the narratives of these CSOs’ experiences in their engagements will not only fill the shortcomings of the ASEAN-oriented approach but will also enrich the discourse on ASEAN–CSO relations by highlighting the role of CSOs in the regional community building.

To understand the role and agency of CSOs in shaping the relations, an empirical examination of how CSOs actively engage with ASEAN should be pursued. The engagements of CSOs are the direct manifestation of their efforts to contribute to the shaping of the relations. Moreover, there should be attention given to other CSOs in the region aside from the large networks of CSOs that have been subject to scholarly examination. The narratives of CSOs’ experiences emerging from such examination can be integrated with the ASEAN-oriented approach to conceptualize the desired framework.

Once this proposed framework is conceptualized, scholars interested in ASEAN–CSO relations can undertake research with the proper tool to examine it holistically. This framework can redirect the study of ASEAN–CSO relations from the mainstream ASEAN-oriented approach to a new one.

Conclusion

ASEAN’s initial hostility towards CSOs ended during the late 1990s and early 2000s when the organization encouraged engagements with civil society. Since then, engagement spaces have been opened to cater to dialogue and exchange between ASEAN and CSOs in the region. Unfortunately, ASEAN’s rhetoric has not matched its practice as several limitations have been uncovered by scholars and CSO leaders. These developments in ASEAN–CSO relations have attracted scholarly attention and led to the emergence of a growing literature.

This article provides a review of this literature. Three main observations have been pointed out in this review. Firstly, scholarly attention on the shortcomings of ASEAN–CSO relations is scattered. This article consolidates these works to produce a categorization. Four categories of limitations to ASEAN–CSO relations have been identified: (1) inherent limitations present in the channels, (2) lack of institutionalization, (3) hesitancy of member-states, and (4) fragmentation of civil society.

Secondly, this article shows that the examination of ASEAN–CSO relations has been pursued using the ASEAN-oriented approach. This approach has been the mainstream approach in understanding the relations. It utilizes ASEAN’s institutional design as a framework to examine the relations. While this approach can be credited for uncovering the nature of ASEAN’s engagements with CSOs, its attention is only limited to the ASEAN’s side of the relations. The dominance of this approach resulted in the lack of emphasis on the role of CSOs in shaping the relations.

Thirdly, due to the gaps in the current state of scholarship, this article raises the need to elevate the discourse. It calls for a necessity to conceptualize a holistic framework, anchored on empirical data, that would integrate the lacking narrative on CSOs’ experiences to the mainstream ASEAN-oriented approach. A holistic understanding of the relations can only be undertaken through a framework that takes into consideration both actors, ASEAN and CSOs.

It is hoped that the points articulated in this review would give way to the conceptualization of the suggested framework. Such a framework will anchor further research on ASEAN–CSO relations from a more holistic perspective. Aside from proposing the conceptualization of a new framework, this article suggests the systematic review of the literature concerning specific areas of ASEAN–CSO relations such as engagements on human rights, social development, indigenous peoples, women and children, and more. By examining the literature on ASEAN–CSO relations with a specific focus, a more representative scholarly endeavor of the relations can begin.

Declaration of ownership

This article is my original work.

Conflict of interest

None.

Ethical clearance

This study was approved by my institution.

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