Final Report Summary - SEATIDE (Integration in Southeast Asia: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion)

Executive Summary:
Four Southeast Asian and five European institutions made up the consortium that ran the project SEATIDE (2012-2016), funded under the European Commission’s FP7 programme to do research on Integration in Southeast Asia: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion.
National, transnational and regional integration were studied from the perspectives of diversity (political and cultural identities in national and regional frameworks), prosperity (frameworks and practices of mobility and work), knowledge (localisation of imported technology and models of development) and security (the impact of interdependence of political communities on human security). Qualitative and
quantitative research was conducted in several disciplines of the social sciences and humanities (anthropology, economics, history, international relations, political science, sociology), and distinguished political integration (ASEAN and other state-led frameworks) from grassroots integration (non-state initiatives). Working in eight countries of the region (Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam), the project’s 50 researchers’ main concern was to identify the exclusions that necessarily accompany processes of integration. These were analysed at different ‘sites of interaction’: city, small town, village, peri-urban area, cultural region, border, government office, school. Offering historically informed analysis of contemporary Southeast Asia, the research reveals a region characterised by unprecedented change, with deep consequences for rural and urban populations alike. These results were discussed in research workshops, shared with stakeholders and policymakers at dissemination workshops and policy forums, and published as policy briefs, online papers and academic articles. A synthesis of SEATIDE’s main findings is presented in this Final Report, with conclusions, recommendations for policymakers, and appendices detailing the project’s meetings, publications and researchers.

Project Context and Objectives:

1.1. Rationale
Southeast Asia, a politically pivotal and economically vibrant region home to 600 million people of diverse languages and cultures, is made up of 11 countries, 10 of which are pursuing an ambitious regional integration experiment in the framework of ASEAN. The differences between Europe and Southeast Asia (SEA), particularly in terms of integration model, are multiple: yet both have much to learn from the other. Europe’s knowledge of SEA, however, does not reflect that region’s geopolitical importance. Few European universities produce research on SEA or disseminate knowledge of SEA into public awareness. Research on SEA continues to be led by institutions in North America, Australia and Japan.

This was the context for the launch in 2012 of the project SEATIDE – Integration in Southeast Asia, Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion. Coordinated by the École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO), the project was funded by the European Commission’s 7th Framework Programme as part of its ‘Europe in the World’ research focus in the Social Sciences and Humanities. The goal of its consortium of five European and four SEA institutions was do research on integration processes at two levels, national and regional, that was grounded in specific localities and accompanied by analysis of their broader geopolitical significance.

This grassroots approach was vital to the project’s aim to avoid reproducing generalised, macro-level studies of regional integration, framework building and the institutions of ASEAN, on which much research has already been produced by universities, thinktanks and other research bodies. In these contexts, the term ‘integration’ has become emblematic of a globalisation agenda urging SEA countries to ever greater integration into the wider economy. Challenging these perspectives, the consortium planned to use its knowledge of the region’s cultures and languages and its long experience of field survey in SEA to investigate how integration processes were effecting social, economic and political transformations on the ground. Our ambition was to obtain historically and geographically informed knowledge of specific groups of people, and produce an empirical portrayal of contemporary SEA and the agencies and impacts of integration there.

Context
This ambition was considerable, given SEA’s historical development as a space of vast intra-regional
diversity and multiple international connections. As we wrote the project, we were conscious of the fact that no common cultural tradition united the region’s inhabitants, as Christianity did in Europe. Instead, a bewildering diversity of population, language, ethnicity, religion and culture formed the indigenous basis for localisation of influences from overseas. The region’s centrality to long-distance trade and responsiveness to outside faiths and ideas meant that many parts of SEA were marked by flows of merchandise, migration and information, forging links to India and China, Japan and Korea, Arabia and Africa. Whether writing theoretically or empirically, all scholars of SEA must come to terms with this internal and international diversity.

SEA’s clearest geographical distinction – mainland/maritime – is reflected in its main imported cultural differences. The arrival of Islam and Christianity emphasises the divide between Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia where these religions dominate, and the countries of the continent where the Hindu-Buddhist substrata that formerly gave religious unity to the entire region continue to prevail. On its north-eastern edge, Vietnam remains culturally in the Chinese world of Confucianism and ‘greater vehicle’ Buddhism.

The region’s international porosity relied, in turn, on the vitality of its intra-regional linking and localisation mechanisms. Across the region, maritime export networks drew forest goods from the hinterlands, sold by hill people to coastal traders down the valleys that served as arteries for overland communication. Without dense intra-regional networks, international forces could have had little influence. As a result, SEA has long operated as a melting pot in its adaptation to and adoption of outside influences, hosting important diasporas and, more recently, sending diasporas to other parts of the world.

In this respect, colonial rule operated a hiatus. Southeast Asians’ integration into European imperial frameworks disrupted intra-regional connections. Territories under British rule (Burma, Federated Malay States) and influence (Siam), or governed by the French (Indochina) and Dutch (Dutch East-Indies) connected with their metropole to a greater extent than with each other.

After 1945, these divisions were perpetuated by the Cold War, with the creation of a US-supported anti-communist alliance (SEATO, 1954) to oppose Chinese/Soviet influence over Indochina’s decolonisation. The cleavage fell away only in the 1990s with the adherence to ASEAN of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. Those nations’ conversion to the market economy gave a new unifying perspective to SEA, that of a great single market, inspired by the European example to defend its members’ interests in the global economy.

This reading of the region’s historical development informed the project’s research ambitions. We did not deny SEA’s modern reality as an organised group of nation states, but were aware that this is a recent development. Looking beyond its fragmentary surface, we saw that SEA had long been a theatre of circulation that transcended today’s national borders. In the course of history, those movements resulted in the emergence of a range of different political and economic groupings within the region’s geographical space. The contemporary relevance of those historical processes was to become central to the project.

Objectives
SEATIDE set out to achieve two objectives: to do research on integration and disseminate its results, and to create a network to do the research. How these objectives were achieved is described in the following pages.

Objective 1 was to investigate processes of national and regional integration in SEA. To do this, we asked the following question: in processes of integration, who is excluded? Our central concern was the marginalisation of specific groups and the risks it presents in the fields of human development/security.
This aim – to study SEA integration from the perspective of inequality, foregrounding the issue of exclusion – is conveyed in SEATIDE’s subtitle: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion.

Our definition of integration reflects this emphasis. At its heart lies the notion of convergence, understood as movement within a common space towards a common set of values and interests, but also as a capacity for the management of difference through the creation of spaces of peaceful disagreement.

History can be interpreted as a series of movements leading human beings to ever greater communality, with globalisation as its latest manifestation. Yet many organisations resulting from convergence – from the foundation of cities to the emergence of civilisations – do not follow linear or peaceful processes of formation and do not contribute to the welfare of all participants. History is shaped by conflict, divergence and ‘disintegration’ too: communities break up, cultures disappear, nations fall apart.

The project paid attention to the connecting forces that drive integration. Some integration is politically motivated. Convergence arises from the development of networking instruments by authorities according to deliberate projects: we call this ‘political integration’ or ‘framework integration’. Alternatively, convergence may stem from accumulations of actors’ movements and gestures with no political initiation: this is ‘grassroots integration’. The two may coincide; they may form contradictory impulses. This binary – framework integration/grassroots integration – proved a key analytical tool in the framing of our research.

Empirical studies on grassroots integration, and on how integration played out at different levels were preferred to research focusing solely on the frameworks of political integration: individual ASEAN member states’ nation-building and the ASEAN project itself. The most recent developments in what is normally thought of as regional integration – the ASEAN Community, SEA countries’ Free Trade Agreements signed with the EU and other partners, the Trans-Pacific Partnership – are not foregrounded here. Much research has already been done on these projects. Our investigations took them into account only in so far as we investigated the social, economic and political realities created by integration projects and by forces of integration acting independently of them: the perspective is from the grassroots.

This gave us a way to approach the issue of ideologies of integration. When used in international contexts, ‘integration’ has become a mantra of globalisation, a slogan of trade liberalisation. In other contexts too, the term is widely used and misused, and usually implied to be a positive force, a harbinger of added value and condition of general prosperity. The focus on grassroots realities may be observed in many SEATIDE case studies as serving to test the particular ideology of integration at play.

The grassroots perspective was well suited to our main research concern: the study of exclusion. Our premise was that no integration process is socially, economically or politically neutral: integration excludes even as it includes. Convergence towards a centralised space implies loss of autonomy on that space’s margins. Adoption of ‘shared’ cultural values means abandonment or subordination of other values.

Circulation of goods undermines and transforms local production. Integration involves socio-economic choices with hard political ramifications and disastrous consequences for particular groups of people.

The project thus aimed to deliver empirical observations in real places and among specific groups on the way these and other types of exclusion operated in processes of integration. Research was conducted in all of the member states of ASEAN except Brunei and Singapore, with particular strengths on Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

Objective 2 was to bring together people and institutions with the capacity to do the research, with a view to strengthening the European Research Area in Asian studies and building European research capacity in Southeast Asian studies. With this aim in mind, a consortium was assembled and coordinated by the École française d’Extrême-Orient, consisting of institutions from five EU member states – Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom – and four ICPCs (non-European countries) in SEA – Indonesia,
Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. These institutions conducted multidisciplinary research, contributing expertise in anthropology, history, economics, sociology, international relations and political science. SEATIDE’s methodology stemmed from its premise that understanding integration requires knowledge of specific groups in specific places. Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered in field survey and analysed in case studies within a Research Framework that targeted four strategic issues.

1. Diversity. Focus on national/transnational identities. Can integrated identities cope with multi-centred political/economic systems and ethnic/religious/cultural diversity?
2. Prosperity. Focus on national/transnational circulation of people and goods. Does increased circulation contribute to national and regional development?
4. Security. Focus on national/transnational political integration and the role of ASEAN. Does increased interdependence of political communities contribute to human security?

Project Results:
The results of SEATIDE respond to the themes of the project’s research framework – diversity, prosperity, knowledge and security – as well as an additional dimension that is covered by no single theme but cuts across all of them. This is the presence of history in Southeast Asia’s present. This is summarised first, followed by the thematic conclusions. No attempt is made here to provide citations of the project’s output: a fully referenced account of its research activities, synthesis of its published/disseminated results and list of publications is available in the Final Report.

Southeast Asia’s past in Southeast Asia’s present
Many legacies impacting on contemporary processes of national and regional integration date from the period of colonial rule. Through the 19th to mid-20th centuries, SEA was connected to Europe and other parts of Asia in imperial frameworks; hard borders and other barriers between its countries were drawn; transformative in-migrations took place from China and India; economic and administrative modernity fuelled vast growth in the reach of the state. From this period, we may date the arrival of the nation as the region’s main political idea, and the emergence of Southeast Asia as its name.

Geopolitical and socioeconomic vestiges of Europe’s past presence turned up in SEATIDE research at many sites. On the borders, the conflict over Preah Vihear is a case of raw friction between past and present. Thai nationalist readings of colonial border arrangements posit a mapping error that placed the temple in Cambodia. Yet in 1930, in the shadow of the French tricolor, Siam’s archaeologist Prince Damrong allowed scholar Henri Parmentier to show him around the temple. In 1962, the International Court of Justice found that by not objecting to the flag Damrong had tacitly consented to the 1908 border. What was not said during this colonial encounter and how that silence was later interpreted had consequences for the contemporary security and development of nationalism in both countries.

In the cities, Penang offers insights into the ‘colonial present’ at several less evenementiel, more structural levels. The economic importance of historical heritage is one: the displacement of workers from coastal kampongs was caused not by the proximity of a nice beach, but by the beach’s proximity to a nice city with colonial buildings. The social integration of colonial-era migrants is another: a certain nostalgia is the main effect of Pakistani communities’ merging into the Malay majority. At a third level, the end of empire did not destroy the administrative and commercial frameworks of integration created in Penang: they were
reworked rather than replaced. The inclusions and exclusions here are multiple and complex; many of their roots are colonial.

At the level of state development, continuities were noted across SEA: the colonial inheritance – states’ embrace of technologies and ideologies of rule, modern bureaucracies, and patterns of authoritarianism imported from Europe – is manifest. Yet, these points made, the colonial era is only one of SEA’s pasts. SEATIDE found other legacies too: from the experience of the Cold War, and histories dating from the centuries before European conquest.

The Cold War exposed the region to new ideologies possessing unprecedented power to penetrate and integrate populations and institutions. This is particularly true of mainland SEA where, as the theatre of a major proxy war, the lines were starkly drawn. Upland areas took on a new geopolitical centrality as, home to international borders and strategically vital forested hills, the terrain and the ideological loyalties of its inhabitants were hotly contested. SEATIDE recorded legacies of this at several sites. In the uplands of Laos and Vietnam, a study was made of the Bru-Van Kieu minorities’ integration into state-framed modernity. Shared wartime experiences, habits of cooperation and social mobility facilitated this transition, giving minority leaders and officials – men in power today who spent their youth on the same side in the war – a common language for dialogue. In northern Thailand, by contrast, such transitions were hindered by Cold War ideological legacies. Research explored the assimilation into mainstream Thai society of the Lua minority, through their resettlement in the valleys or the development of their land in the hills. This was an anti-insurgency policy, at the heart of which was the historical reality that the Lua took part in a Maoist insurgency in Nan province (1967-1990). Today, integration is pursued for other reasons, but research reveals its obstruction by the agents of its implementation. There are no insurgents now, yet official suspicions of highlanders’ loyalty persist. Residual fears of communism and habits of discrimination mingle with contemporary security concerns with a transnational dimension to prevent the national integration that the central state aimed to achieve.

The resulting situation is a hybrid set of exclusions, with a cleavage between land – integrated into national/global regimes of resource exploitation – and people – who seek integration, despite its cultural cost, yet find it eludes them. As SEATIDE research found, “Policies for the integration of minorities subject to Communist influence have indeed deeply marked the life trajectories of thousands of hill dwellers, and the situation of the Lua minority is a direct outcome of such policies”.

Down in the plain, research on migration was done in Cambodian villages, where a transition was observed from late 20th-century war-related out-migration – of people associated with the Khmer Rouge – towards today’s development-related mobility, linked to resource seeking and monetisation. Previously an extreme example of the Cold War’s impact on ordinary people, Cambodia’s experience today reflects regional trends: legacies of war that impinge directly on individual lives are diminishing. Yet the Cold War’s influence is still felt in national frameworks, owing to its intensity during the mid-20th century when the region’s political models took shape. Depending on their alignment, SEA states borrowed Western or Soviet frameworks of national integration. In particular, SEATIDE research noted how states’ use of ethnicity to classify, control and integrate ethnic groups shows divergences influenced by Cold War alignments.

The socialist states of Vietnam and Laos adopted strategies influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideas on nationalities and ethnic groups. But in Thailand, notions of nation, ethnicity and identity were shaped by the appeal of Western European ‘civilisation’ and the threat of French colonialism; most groups were
assimilated to the majority Thai but the Cold War framed a set of exclusions for non-Thai hill tribes. Cambodia’s neutralist Sihanouk regime followed Thailand’s suit, with Muslim Chams denoted Khmer Islam and highlanders Khmer Loei (Upland Khmer) in arrangements that persist today. These assimilation policies were inherited from Europe, with colonial and Cold War influences. Among all SEA’s political models, however, the most striking debt to the Cold War is owed by the regional integration model itself. ASEAN’s foundation, as a successor organisation to SEATO, was a direct consequence of the global conflict’s manifestations in the region, particularly the threat perceived from Vietnam. As Muhadi Sugiono noted, “it is difficult to regard ASEAN’s establishment during the Vietnam War, with increased threats of communist insurgencies in all five founding countries, as a coincidence”. The timing of ASEAN’s 1990s expansion further proves this point, as does the association’s concern with inter-state security and the principles of non-intervention and respect for national sovereignty. One of its major achievements – peace in the context of post-Cold War restructuring of international relations – should be read in this light. If Cold War fear first led the group to form ASEAN, the vanishing of Cold War fear led to ASEAN’s enthusiastic embrace of the later entrants. At the level of security, after the USSR’s fall, ASEAN’s members could see countries that remained outside the framework as posing a greater threat than countries – whatever their political regime – that were included.

The pre-colonial legacies in SEA are multiple, and it was to highlight some of these that one of the sites listed in Part 2 is ‘imagined’. This is the cultural region (see section 2.6 above). As elsewhere, many cultural regions in SEA are vestiges of ancient political formations, which may – through the political manipulation of identities and symbols – stage potent contemporary resurgences. Cultural regions are key sites of SEA’s past in SEA’s present, and take us to the heart of the issue of the region’s diversity.

Diversity: national integration and the question of assimilation

SEATIDE research investigated cultural vestiges of ancient principalities at sites in Thailand (Lan Na), Laos (Phongsaly) and Myanmar (Rakhine). Elsewhere, as in Myanmar (Kachin) and among the Kui of the Thai–Cambodian borderlands (around Preah Vihear), the mobilising factor is ethnicity. The relation of ethnicity to the cultural region is a matter for debate, notably in cases of deterritorialisation (such as the Karen in Myanmar and Thailand). A broader finding of SEATIDE is that it is fruitless to attempt too precise a definition of cultural region – whether on the basis of language, ethnicity, religion or history. Matters of identity are fluid. This fluidity becomes all the more apparent when one considers the political manipulation of historical symbols recorded by this research. It is clearest in the case of Lan Na, where all sides in Thailand’s national contested politics staked claims at monuments to ancient queens and kings: these local symbols are political tools available to Thai nationalists and Lan Na secessionists alike. The symbols’ versatility is, in turn, a factor of the success of Thailand’s assimilation policies. Since the teak companies first set up here, the Bangkok state’s nation-building achievements in the northern territories have been notable, especially if compared with neighbouring Burma.

The task of constructing national identities amidst such diversity presented a formidable challenge. Study of the integration processes it required raises the question of assimilation at a fundamental level. Can the national integration of religious, ethnic and other groups and territories be conceived only in terms of assimilation? When SEA states borrowed Europe’s notion of the nation and its practice of assimilation, they effected a rupture with the political models of the pre-colonial past. In pre-modern SEA, integration did not necessarily involve assimilation. It formed interethnic, interreligious, often hierarchical social
structures, in which all components preserved their specific identities by accepting a shared cosmological system. These arrangements created multiethnic, multireligious societies that proved stable over long periods. Two such models were discussed by SEATIDE’s historians. One was the Sanskrit cosmopolis, studied in the context of the segmentary kingdom of Champa and its integration of politically and ethnically diverse principalities. The other was the Chinese ideology of Tianxia – ‘all under heaven’ – that underpinned the empire’s tributary system into which SEA states were integrated. Both systems mixed soft and hard power but relied on strong ideological foundations to frame situations of vast diversity.

At the same time, SEATIDE research finds that European-style assimilation is not always an optimal strategy from the minorities’ point of view – involving losses of identity and culture – or even that of the state, for which the aspired-to national unity must always be more discursive than real. On the ground, the social realities of modern SEA are examined in terms of relations between nation-state and cultural region. They show conflicting trends. For minorities, transnational movements connect members of the same ethnic groups, even as the economic and social opportunities offered by nation-states in a globalised world exert strong attractions.

Two points emerge from this analysis of assimilation. One concerns the emergence of non-state nationalism. If it is true in many areas inhabited by ethnic or religious minorities that “post-colonial national governments are sometimes obsessed with the idea of control and inclusion of these territories and populations into the nation state dominated by the language and culture of the majority population”, this does not mean that minorities always lack options. Political mobilisations based on cultural regions and ethnic identities have been observed in the southern Philippines, pre-tsunami Aceh, many parts of Myanmar, Vietnam’s Central Highlands. If European experiences are any guide, inroads into the centrality of the state and progress in regional integration will vitalise the politics of autonomy and secession. Movements of self-exclusion from national frameworks are the unavoidable ‘other side of the coin’ of the assimilative model of nation-building.

The second point relates to a country where the assimilative nation-building project has manifestly failed: Myanmar. The current political transition presents risks and opportunities for state-minority relations. Among the risks, SEATIDE research suggests, is that democracy’s new responsiveness to local interests will unleash tensions – both intercommunal and non-state nationalist – that for decades have been dormant, repressed by military rule. This appears to have happened in the case of the Rohingya. Yet the situation offers the opportunity that, in dialogue with the old assimilation model, a framework may be developed that will allow the peaceful integration of ethnic groups, the conservation of their identities and cultures, and their participation in political processes. Myanmar may become the site of an experiment in non-assimilative national integration. If Myanmar’s nationalism is to succeed, it must not be exclusively a political expression of ethnicity.

In this, it may seek inspiration from Malaysia, the site of a long-standing attempt to build a modern nationalism that is not based on the ethnic identity of the numerically and politically (but not economically) dominant ethnic group: the Malays. Introduced in 1991 Mahathir’s Vision 2020 included a scheme to create a ‘Malaysian identity’ encompassing all ethnic groups in the country while not antagonising ‘Malay nationalism’, grounded in the primacy of the Malay language and Islam as the state religion. The result is a never-ending process of negotiation and balancing between two seemingly mutually exclusive concepts of nationalism: Malay versus Malaysian.

Negotiations in Myanmar will centre on giving real political and cultural autonomy to the ‘ethnic states’
which have existed for decades, though mostly on paper: Shan, Karen, Kachin, Mon, etc. This would imply central government acknowledgement of these groups as separate nations and legitimate their respective nationalisms. It would also imply acknowledgement by the federated states of their own ethnic and religious heterogeneity, to avoid situations like that of Rakhine and the tensions between majority Buddhists and minority Muslims there.

The challenge is to find a common idea, value or narrative that can hold Myanmar together and avoid antagonising the sensitivities of the majority Burmans. Part – but only part – of the solution might be Buddhism, which could serve as an integration tool among most ethnic groups (Shan, Rakhine, many Karen, Mon) but not all. For the integration of non-Buddhists other ways must be explored. A regionalisation of neighbouring Thailand, with more autonomy granted to outer regions (such as Lan Na), might help to create larger regional entities (such as the Salween-Upper Mekong region) encompassing present-day nation-states and encouraging cooperation between Myanmar and her neighbours, particularly Thailand.

Whatever the solution adopted, it will require investment and support from its neighbours, ASEAN and the international community.

Regional integration: borders, transnationalism and connectivity

From the late 18th century, under the impetus of colonial rule, borders were created as principalities were absorbed into larger polities embracing multiple languages, ethnic groups and identities. Nations developed institutions, centralised administrations and promoted popular identification with the state through education, festivals, military service and law. Fixed borders and national territories became part of the ideological foundations of nationhood.

As a border project, the Long Wall of Quang Ngai was an exception that twice proved the SEA rule. First, it separated two ethnic groups: in modern SEA, state boundaries and linguistic, religious and ethnic groups rarely coincide. Second, it was a SEA construction: most of the region’s linear borders were colonial. At the same time, analysis of the wall as apparatus reminds us that, even here, borders consist of more than just barriers and checkpoints. As sites of intersection between territory controlled by one regime and another, they are places where exchange, dialogue, trade and mobility develop in response to historical circumstances.

In the early decades of independence, the border was mainly construed in security terms. It was a militarised place on the periphery, remote in jungle or far out to sea, criss-crossed by refugees, smugglers, armed insurgents and other threatening marginals. Some of the refugees are still there, in camps along the Burma-Thailand border. But with this exception and that of the Rohingya boat people, SEA is no longer associated with refugees as it was in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. A security rethink took place after the end of the Cold War – with security framed now as ‘secure with’ rather than ‘secure from’ – and heralded a set of transformations in the border’s role.

These transformations set the border at the heart of SEA’s ambitions for regional integration. International development organisations, the ASEAN Community and SEA’s powerful neighbours – especially China – increasingly recommend something called ‘connectivity’. Connectivity means more capital, commodities (including electricity), people and information flowing freely across borders. The border is no longer conceived as a space for national security and smuggling. It is an arena for economic opportunity, a hub for the connection of economies, and a stage post on the road linking former frontiers to the global market.

The above paragraphs describe the border as it is officially constructed by nation-states’ border policies.
Alongside it, we must consider another narrative. We may call it a parallel story of SEA’s borders, encapsulated in the image of ‘under-the-bridge’ cross-border traffic observed by Muhadi Sugiono during a research visit to the Thai-Burma border. This grassroots narrative of frontier travel interacts with the official narrative but has its own dynamics. Local Southeast Asians do and always have freely ‘transgressed’ the border. Some are doubtless unaware even of transgressing. More commonly, however – as case studies on several borders (Thailand-Myanmar, Laos-Vietnam, Malaysia-Indonesia on Borneo) show – people consciously navigate the structuring devices of national administrations, and cross in full knowledge of the resources available among the state-framed modernities existing on either side.

This grassroots narrative, moreover, describes vast quantities of SEA’s transnational connections. Borders were laid down without respect to language, ethnicity or identity, nor paid attention historical the routes and practices of circulation and trade, and regional transnationalisms are by consequence many and varied. Global transnationalisms – entailing media connections with the Rohingya, Middle Eastern Islamic influences on Indonesian politics or education, to mention two examples – are similarly carried by grassroots conduits. Indeed, many official projects of transnational connectivity – Highway 9 linking Laos and Vietnam is an example – draw ancient grassroots networks into today’s official narrative of integration.

This example illustrates a fundamental dynamic of contemporary regional integration. At the Laos-Vietnam border at Lao Bao, the official narrative of the frontier has changed. A border that used to close two territories is now equipped with roads and special economic zones to assist connectivity between them. What we are observing is a realignment of the official narrative on the grassroots narrative. Today’s container trucks are the direct descendants of the Lao ox-cart and Bru Van-Kieu elephant caravans that crisscrossed the passes to the end of the 19th century. The colonial, Cold War and nation-building periods turn out to be a historical anomaly, a 20th-century hiatus when the roads were closed.

Not all were closed, of course. The colonial period saw the region divided into territories ruled by half a dozen European powers, with few links between them but strong ties to a metropolitan power and its colonies in China, India and elsewhere. An unprecedented Asian ‘age of mobility’ from the late 19th century thus created individual men and families with meaningful ties in multiple locations. The movement stopped on independence, as SEA divided along Cold War lines and border barriers rose as its nations – and their guarantor, the ASEAN regional project – came into being. Meanwhile the 21st century is seeing its own ‘age of migration’, a more feminised one, placing new demands on family life, as official barriers are removed, state borders are losing their function as physical and mental barriers, and the region becomes increasingly borderless.

This account links past and future in a celebration of SEA as unbounded space. But celebration may be premature if the project fails to account for the fact that borders are not only barriers, but also consist of knowledge, surveillance, dialogue, trade, ideological frameworks, legal systems and other instruments. Consider the ID card, and the use in Thailand of this artefact of citizenship to facilitate integration, but also to exclude minorities. Or the vulnerabilities of legal passport- and contract-holder (‘on-the-bridge’) migrant workers from Indonesia to Malaysia. If diplomatic missions do not uphold the rights of citizens working abroad, then boundaries between nations still exist despite the disappearance of borders.

SEA’s unbounded space thus raises a question of regulation. Colonial-era mobility was assisted by transnational conduits of imperial legal regulation, but the region’s current age of migration is bereft of such frameworks. Unregulated travel, particularly travel for work, is not free travel and poses risks for human security. This is a key interface between SEATIDE’s two types of integration: political and grassroots. To provide security for grassroots integration, political integration must create instruments to
flatten distinctions between national territories. The ASEAN Community acknowledges this, but is far from achieving it. Until it does, the celebration of a borderless SEA will continue to enliven official integration discourse, grassroots integration will continue to develop, and migrants will continue to move and work at considerable personal risk.

These unspectacular developments in the conception and use of borders shape the long-term evolution of SEA’s integration and impact on many members of its population. For many observers, however, they are obscured by the geopolitical theatrics of the border dispute in the South China Sea. This is not to downplay the concerns raised by China’s claims in these waters: the sea is part of a shipping lane that passes through other maritime areas and connects the region with the rest of the world: only four SEA states are directly involved (Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam), but countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Japan, the USA and EU member states all have a strategic interest. Geopolitically, the sea has become the site of a contest between China and the US, a manifestation of China’s growing awareness of its dependence on a maritime connectivity hitherto secured by American naval power, and a dimension of China’s expansion of supremacy in its ‘backyard’. It has also had the effect of revealing the weakness of ASEAN regional cooperation.

At the same time, the exclusive focus of international and ASEAN attention on this particular sea is made to the detriment of both other seas in SEA and the region’s maritime sphere as a whole. Issues are neglected – including maritime security in the Malacca Strait and the challenge of piracy; the development of the eastern sector of SEA’s maritime region (eastern Indonesia and Philippines); and the construction of a regulatory framework that will govern SEA’s increasingly integrated regional space to the benefit of its travelling citizens.

Prosperity: mobility, gender and a new moral economy of work

One of the aims of an integrated, borderless SEA is prosperity. The city centres of contemporary SEA are already remarkable for their prosperity and its consumption by a middle class that is growing in numbers, confidence and political significance. But questions arise over the inclusiveness of the new prosperity. These were addressed by SEATIDE in research focused on people whose labour creates the region’s wealth. The study of mobility and its relationship to work served as an analytical tool allowing close examination of the human dimensions of SEA’s economic integration.

The research started from the idea that the quest for prosperity through mobility to obtain work is a positive, creative drive for self-improvement and social transformation. At the same time, this quest leads people to interact with local, national or global orders that affect people’s exclusion from the prosperity they were seeking. The research shows that these exclusions are not just temporary side-effects of mobility and integration into world economic and social systems, but are often a permanent consequence of it.

The type of mobility studied was small-scale. SEATIDE did examine transnational mobility, but looked mainly at near-to-home, to-and-fro types of movement that do not count as migration, and might be seen by long-distance migrants as forms of immobility. Amid the wide differences in work systems that exist across the region, the focus on short distances was adopted in an attempt to gain a sense of work normality as experienced in contemporary SEA.

The case studies show that work is gendered and gendering. Local gender roles are not swept away on a tide of globalisation, but are reworked to comply with the demands of modernity. This was observed at the construction sites and mines of Indonesia. These are male spaces where illicit behaviour (alcohol, drugs,
paid sex), high personal risk and dreams of fast money articulate a masculinity which is external or parallel
to homes and parenthood, suspended from the expected norms of adult life.
In Hanoi’s electronics industry, meanwhile, operators embody a new femininity: the young body exists for
intensive work, not reproduction. Working mothers in industrial parks find their own childcare solutions,
like their mothers’ migration to the factory hamlets. Conversely, the informal environment of Bangkok’s
slums is dangerous, yet enables women who cannot get wage work to earn a living (as vendors, recyclers)
and – for some at least – to live with their husband and children. Migrant girls working as laundry
employees in Banda Aceh, on their side, are seen as perpetual children to be lodged, guarded and poorly
paid. Islam plays a role in structuring these infantilised lives, although exchanges of information embolden
individuals to make unexpected moves: overseas migration, quick marriage, second wife status or drug-
dealing.
Contemporary SEA men and women must do paid work and the working couple is a trope in official
discourses of modernity throughout the region. Yet this remains a middle class ideal to which unskilled
labour is increasingly unable to aspire. And no hierarchical distinction is made between the ‘formal’ and
‘informal’ sectors: on this count, slum dwellers fare better than contract holders, as they can plan a more
integrated life. Migrant workers enter spaces where marriage, health and personal security pertain to other
universes: the homes, villages and kinship ties that they have left behind. Deeply gender-insensitive,
SEA’s integration brings separation of men from women and long-term exclusions from family life.
The practice of mobility operates other exclusions. SEATIDE research records migrants leaving village
environments to seek cash, noting that when they leave, they neither sever themselves from home nor
resettle away, but live instead suspended in a precarious condition. This option is particularly attractive for
migrants to proximate destinations, which offer the illusion of safer spaces than those reached along long-
distance transnational routes.
Some – like the Cambodians making the short illegal crossing into Thailand to work in agribusiness – leave
as circular migrants, intending to return. However, this does not mean that they do go back to their home
village: migration is leading Cambodians to adopt new habits of marriage, which finally settle them
elsewhere, modifying traditional matrilocal practices. In Thailand, political marginalisation and
criminalisation forces the Lua ethnic group to enter unsafe employment by agribusiness companies.
Others sign contracts that set them at the heart of ‘best practice’ globalised labour relations at Thang Long
Industrial Park, yet trap them into a non-urban/non-rural situation centred on functional dormitories and the
prospect, ten years later, of a return to the farm. With the pace of land-use transformation in Vietnam’s
rural areas, however, the farm is often no longer there: the land has been turned into a factory.
In the archipelago, these trends take on variant configurations. The Javanese construction workers
studied by SEATIDE are urban-to-urban movers, a human commodity allocated where needed by brokers
of work. As they travel, they complain about their job – dangerous, precarious, tiring and ill-paid. Former
Acehnese miners react differently to the challenge of mobility: they handle their movement around the
region and across the Straits to Malaysia in a historical way, voicing the idea of merantau that defines
males as wandering. Young Acehnese women displaced by catastrophe cannot adjust to rural life and
seek solutions in town, where they find low-paid jobs, illegal activities or unplanned pregnancies: they
handle all these through and in mobility. Local traditions adapt quickly to new social realities: the traditional
Indonesian idea of migration as a source of knowledge and income for men – “I want to have an
experience” – has now become a motto for moving women as well.
The studies show that small-scale mobility has become a stable, generalised condition throughout the region and not a phase to pass through before attaining a more prosperous way of life. The culture of permanent mobility is experimental but also socially acceptable. The idea of living ‘on the go’, impermanently, for at least part of the year, or for a big part of one’s life, is now important feature of SEA modernity. It is SEA’s precarious new sojourning.

Living in this suspended way is now an option for many. What does this mean for SEA’s future? If we regard an integrated society as a landscape of healthy and safe working families, when we encounter situations where danger and dislocation are structural, we must see those situations as marginal. As the borders lose their peripherality, new types of margin are emerging in peri-urban areas and other connected places where mobile people travel to work. By promoting the suspension-creating type of mobility, integration has been creating exclusions – and in the long term these will deeply dislocate social and family life.

In SEA’s villages, meanwhile, poverty has been reduced. But a new function is now added to their role as producers of farm products: villages have become providers of young workers for ‘integration’ and – in some countries – of the welfare resources that states and companies have decided not to afford. As SEA’s industrialisation proceeds, different phases are observed in different places: in Vietnam, the employment model operated by firms and authorised by the state fails to invest in the creation of an industrial civilisation, while in Thailand that civilisation is created in some places, not in others. Villages thus assume responsibility for the work and well-being of the ex-workers after they turn thirty and their stint as integrated subjects ends. For the idea that village communities are automatically enriched by industrialisation, empirical evidence is found wanting.

Workers complain, but not in these terms. Conversations across the region reveal little concern with the difference between contractualised employment and informal work. They distinguish, rather, between jobs which enable them to act in moral compliance with their society and those which do not. There is something more than hypocritical correctness when jobseekers, in Aceh, say they would accept any job “as long as it is not impure” (asal halal).

The amount people are paid is relevant in this ‘moral economy of work’. Workers feel they have no real ties when their wage does not allow them to live decently. They know they are commodified, bought and sold. Whether or not this leads them to increase their income through illegal activities, bad work and low pay is another form of marginality and suspended living. It contains multiple risks, for the individual and for society. And yet, while all agree that it is immoral and unacceptable to treat workers badly, throughout SEA a vast array of jobs exist only because they are very poorly paid and there are people willing to come and do them.

Knowledge: flows of technology, models of development and the environment

It is on these jobs, moreover, that SEA’s current quest for prosperity through global integration is founded: the factories are here because labour is cheap. SEATIDE’s findings form the basis for a new understanding of the ‘middle income trap’ identified as limiting SEA’s economic growth. Doubts about the current arrangements’ ability to improve livelihoods lead to a questioning of the models adopted for the region’s development and integration into the global economy.

Analysis of thirty years of SEA’s inclusion in the regional production system suggests that outcomes are less positive than expected. Most SEA countries have achieved industrialisation, but production remains confined in low-value adding operations, relying on cheap labour as the competitive factor. Urban jobs are
created for rural people and absolute poverty is reduced. But the reliance on export-led and foreign-invested industry puts pressure on labour in terms of salary, welfare and rights. Why is this?

A prevailing view argues that integration in the Japan-led regional production system allowed industrial development and technology diffusion in East Asia, while SEA’s failure to benefit is ascribed to national blockages defined as a lack of market reforms. This view is promoted by the World Bank and mainstream economists as the ‘middle-income trap’, a key concept in the neoliberal development paradigm since 2008. SEATIDE research counters this, showing that the first wave of inclusion in the regional system allowed South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore to receive technology transfer, while the second wave since the 1980s took place in a less generous international environment. FDI flows became a substitute, not a facilitator of technology transfer. Integration operated at the level of capital and merchandise, but the flow of knowledge was blocked: foreign firms organised their production to prevent technology spillover. Empirically, this was studied at the new ‘frontier’ of the regional division of labour, Vietnam. This country is emerging as a manufacturing hub in electronics and garments that benefits from rising labour costs in China (where state-led industrial policy is pushing firms to invest in technology-intensive production). But at the grassroots, integration has resulted in new exclusions: in labour-intensive production skills are low, so workers are easily replaced; low wages push them into a restless search for better jobs; industrial employment is a temporary phase in a person’s life trajectory. This contrasts with Thailand and Malaysia in the years before the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, where movement to industry and urban life was permanent and inclusive, and led to the formation of an industrial civilisation.

The Vietnamese case may indicate that the regional division of labour – in line with world trends, including in EU countries – is placing stronger pressure on labour. Ultimately this model of global integration and industrial development allows an escape from poverty neither to the young industrial workers nor to the countries which rely on it to catch up with more economically advanced economies. For this reason, the term ‘uneven development trap’ is preferred to ‘middle income trap’. This term acknowledges the fact that, by excluding SEA from global flows of technical knowledge, the current model structurally inhibits the region’s development.

Models and notions of development and the environment were investigated by SEATIDE as arenas for economic competition and political contestation. Taking grassroots perspectives on interactions between local actors, the state and global forces, research showed how models and paradigms are used by elites to promote, inhibit or channel flows of technical knowledge, and how these ideas are contested.

In the Philippines, the effects of integration into global trade regimes on its shoe industry were revealed in Marikina: a weakened domestic sector with increasingly informal labour relations. This is not news to many in the Philippines, where there is a long tradition of challenging the neoliberal development paradigm, led by social movements supported by local and transnational alliances. Coordinated protests contested the hegemony of neoliberalism in areas like agrarian reform, market liberalisation, and privatisation. Some gains were made, but overall success was hampered by the movement’s inability to provide a coherent alternative paradigm, and by its political marginalisation. Local elites retained their dominance in country’s political economy, making no concession that would compromise the hegemony of the neoliberal model.

In Thailand, an alternative paradigm did emerge. After the Asian Financial Crisis, the king’s idea of a ‘sufficiency economy’ rose to hegemonic position, allowing the state to co-opt ‘radical’ activist networks and promote new models of natural resource management. Research into one such network – the eco-Buddhist movement in northern Thailand, now allied with the state – shows how the battle of ideas continued to rage at local levels. In the implementation of a royal project to restore the Nan River’s hydro-
geological balance, ethnic minority farmers became targets of a new moralised vision of rural landscape: not surprisingly, they resented and resisted the Buddhist ecological paradigm prescribed by the state and allied movements.

Comparison of the Philippines and Thailand brings these threads together with a focus on the dynamics of contestation over modern agricultural biotechnology. While both countries were eager biotech pioneers in the mid-1990s, the Asian Financial Crisis undermined faith in ‘globalisation’ in Thailand, but not in the Philippines, and this undermined support for GM crops. In Thailand, the new ‘sufficiency’ paradigm became the keystone of official economic nationalism, and NGOs opposed to the gene revolution forged alliances with state actors to halt the (official) commercialisation of biotech crops. In the Philippines, opponents of GMOs were never able to challenge the dominance of the pre-crisis developmental paradigm, according to which globalisation and technology were seen as boon rather than bane for the country’s farmers.

The global, regional and national circulation of ‘ideas’ and ‘knowledge’ presents dangers as well as opportunities for SEA proponents of hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic ‘models’ of economic development and environmental conservation. New knowledge does not circulate in an ideational, institutional, or social vacuum; it may destabilise as well as reinforce pre-existing ‘models’ and the structures of power associated with them. In some parts of SEA, new ‘social’ notions of development have been ‘captured’ by political elites and incorporated into existing modes and ideologies of governance in ways that reduce their potential to facilitate change. In the era of integration, meanwhile, global economic models are becoming increasingly intrusive in the lives of ordinary people across the region.

Security: state centrality, human security and the ASEAN integration conundrum

These models also intrude on the prerogatives of SEA’s states. Indeed, the era of integration is a period of challenge from many quarters to the self-confidence and centrality of SEA’s states. With the World Bank and IMF development models, moreover, the intrusion is permitted - sometimes welcomed – by political elites. In other cases, challenges are met with resignation or resistance. SEATIDE research identified several quarters from which they came.

The neoliberal paradigm’s influence is rising across the region. Since SEA nations joined the World Trade Organisation, Singapore and Vietnam have concluded Free Trade Agreements with the European Union, the Trans-Pacific Partnership has entered its final negotiating stages and other regimes of trade liberalisation and economic integration will follow. These reduce state centrality directly, in ways laid down in the respective agreements, and indirectly, in ways that include the legitimation of state withdrawal from welfare provision and the creation of marginalised workforces, as noted above.

Regional powers, especially China, also challenge the centrality of the SEA state. This is dramatically illustrated by research on the Myitsone dam, where the local conflict of nationalisms (Burmese/Kachin) provoked by the project led Myanmar to rethink its reaction to its resource-hungry neighbour’s intrusions, pivoting from resignation to resistance. This is one example of Chinese ‘one belt, one road’-type projects for regional integration. Its overseas development model is based on exchanging resource extraction for infrastructural investment and non-interference in domestic politics, but the rising superpower’s sway is such that while non-interference is formally respected, such exchanges have tangible political impacts. No SEA state today can afford not to take China into account.

With investment in the transport sector, Chinese infrastructural projects make additional inroads. Roads, railways and airports carry Chinese development aid and public investment, but are also used by Chinese visitors, settlers and businesspeople – economic actors with no link to the Chinese state, whose impact is
all the greater for their apparent political irrelevance. This grassroots integration process is manifest in Laos, and there are signs of its extending further south. SEATIDE research found that “the economic activeness and activity of Chinese small businesses and traders in Laos enables China to stretch its ‘state-space’ into the everyday lives and activities of Laotians. While Chinese entrepreneurs and petty traders act as economic agents creating new power dynamics and linkages, they also unintentionally become instrumental for China to negotiate its ‘state-space’ and power deep into SEA without making any territorial claims.” China’s proximity means that the development of grassroots regional connectivities have deep political implications for the region’s states.

The state’s centrality is challenged too from within: from non-state nationalisms, localised transnational forces and sub-regional centres. Internal disputes make up the majority of the region’s live conflicts, in the southern Philippines, southern Thailand and Burma. In the era of integration, the capacity of local forces to challenge the state or to carve out spaces of autonomy is strong, as several SEATIDE studies record. In Burma, ethnic groups (Rohingya, Kachin) make skilful use of global resources. In Laos, officials in border provinces (Phongsaly, Luang Namtha) develop transnational linkages in their own interests, not those of the state.

These are examples of a tug-of-war between national policy, sub-regional centres and transnational influences that shows no sign of diminishing. The Lao state’s vulnerability is well-known, yet its neighbour Thailand is a spectacular case of democracy collapse: a decade of stand-offs between urban elites and rural electorates was followed in 2014 by a military coup and protracted constitutional crisis. The two cases are extremes in a matrix of the challenged present-day SEA state: weak capacity, cautious decision-making and authoritarian reflexes.

In the era of integration, state logics are no longer the only logics. The state is no longer the only player – and the other players’ moves amount to something that resembles what we call ‘integration’. Yet the state, for all its vulnerabilities, remains the dominant player. It is influential and often highly intrusive in the lives of ordinary Southeast Asians, challenged yet unassailable, and still enjoying unstinting support from the structure it created to protect itself: ASEAN. From many of SEATIDE’s case studies emerges a sense of integration’s challenge to the centrality of the state – along with the persistence of state centrality.

This has implications for the political construction of regional integration which – if frameworks are to be meaningful in their enactment – requires the participation of strong, self-confident and politically inclusive member states. Unfortunately, the low level of inclusion of much of SEA’s people in the national political process and their vulnerability to authoritarianism means that the era of integration is also the era of integration without participation.

On the frontline of these regional implications is ASEAN, a regional body founded in the context of the Cold War to facilitate problem-solving dialogue between member states and thus avert intervention by outside powers. As its principle of non-interference indicates, ASEAN was built to uphold the national framework – not to operate as a supranational engine of integration.

Yet it is precisely this institutional role that ASEAN is now asked to take up, with its latest manifestation the ASEAN Community and its three ‘pillars’ holding up the roof of a regional cooperation project involving political and security engagement (political-security pillar), a single market with circulation of goods, services, capital and labour (economic pillar), and a platform of social, cultural, educational and environmental aims (socio-cultural pillar).

In line with its informal dialogue-based style (‘ASEAN Way’), it has already shown a capacity for pragmatic response (‘flexibility’) to the realities of global and transnational integration and the challenges these
present for SEA’s nations. Yet until it develops new core values reflecting its new mission in the 21st-century context, it remains a body that was designed to frame nationalism that must now frame regional integration. This is the ASEAN integration conundrum, and how it plays out over the coming years will determine the success – or rather the quality – of political integration in SEA.

That quality can only be measured at the grassroots. Resolving the ASEAN integration conundrum means adding to the existing mission of safeguarding the security of states a new mission of safeguarding the security of humans (becoming ‘People-Oriented, People-Centred’). The new mission will have to be equipped with ideals about people’s welfare and with the capacity to achieve results. But this is a conundrum: placing human security at the ASEAN Community’s core contradicts the framing principle of non-interference. Even resolving it at the rhetorical level will be hard. The rhetoric can only be done with a fudge using notions like ‘flexibility’. Flexibility is of course a euphemism for divergence from the nationalist framing principle, and cannot serve to reduce the ideals deficit in SEA’s regional integration project.

SEATIDE research throws light onto specific areas of the ASEAN framework, where future thought and construction efforts could usefully be deployed. These areas share a common factor: all founder on the shoals of the ASEAN integration conundrum.

With regard to migration, research identified areas where forms of grassroots integration are already taking place but no regional framework exists to regulate them. This was observed among transnational migrant workers, observed as effectively stateless after crossing a border, despite doing so in full legality, with passports, work permits and labour contracts. The failure here lies, first and foremost, with ASEAN’s nations, whose states have not developed the will or capacity to protect their citizens when outside the national territory. Yet the lack of a regional framework setting standards for migrant labour means that human security is jeopardised.

The lack of a regional framework is similarly regretted in the case of refugees. This applies to the Rohingya boat people, for whom the regional response was slow, and to the extended crisis on Thailand’s land border with Burma, where registration and day-to-day management of refugees lacks is done by different agencies, without the unifying policy that a regional approach would offer. Yet in these cases, weaknesses within the nations concerned inhibit resolution. Neither Thailand nor Burma have the capacity to offer citizenship to all their inhabitants: any ASEAN framework on statelessness and refugees would have to address this issue, possesses relevant instruments that could allow it to do, and yet it cannot, owing to the principle of non-interference.

As for regional disputes, the inadequacy of ASEAN’s response to the bilateral Preah Vihear issue, and its inability to forge regional unity over the more complex issue of China’s actions in the South China Sea are also raised. A multilateral approach to the maritime dispute was inhibited after member states prioritised national interests – bilateral ties with China – over the regional framework. Over Preah Vihear, politicians’ nationalist rhetoric for domestic audiences blocked dialogue. This finding is confirmed in other contexts by research identifying domestic politics as a significant factor in the resolution of intra-regional disputes and suggesting that, by reducing the traction of nationalism, a common regional identity could help strengthen regional security.

Obstacles to regional framework-building initiatives are thus placed by the member states themselves. These obstacles, moreover, owe much to states’ economic and geopolitical vulnerabilities, as the above cases suggest. Research shows that, in the light of these realities and of challenges to state centrality, to assign the task of building a political framework for the region to ASEAN – a small body designed for other tasks – is to ask a great deal. This does not mean that it should not be attempted, only that expectations
for the early delivery of concrete results cannot be high. To judge ASEAN, however, solely on the basis of its delivery of concrete results would be to miss the regional organisation’s main strength. ASEAN is already delivering something more intangible but no less valuable: through joint statements at diplomatic meetings or by offering a focus for “ASEAN feeling” among ordinary Southeast Asians, it offers a sense of SEA identity. For Muhadi Sugiono, “ASEAN has been instrumental in making the region more dynamic and more visible. It has been relatively successful in politically constructing the region in ways that reflect the notion of an ASEAN community. This notion most clearly represents conceptions among ASEAN’s leaders of Southeast Asia being a single political, economic and social space.”

The ASEAN framework is not the whole story or only narrative of integration in the region – and demonstrating the relevance of the grassroots is one of SEATIDE’s aims. ASEAN’s role in the construction of a SEA identity is an essential part of the region’s future integration at the grassroots level.

Southeast Asia and the integration/exclusion nexus

In a study of preparations for the European Union’s 2005 eastward expansion, the term ‘integration/exclusion nexus’ was coined to describe a temptation observed in the EU to use exclusionary rhetoric against Russia to ease the inclusion of central European states. It noted that this – “the EU’s supranational temptation” – represented a borrowing from nationalism, the strengthening of one identity through the exclusion of others.

This idea, that integration is relational, and by definition involves exclusions, is similar to the one – described in section 1.3 above – that SEATIDE used to guide its research. The results allow us to extend the application of the term ‘integration/exclusion nexus’ beyond the construction of regional political frameworks to some of the other forms of integration investigated by the project and reported on the above pages.

We observed suspension-type exclusions resulting from integration, when the options of people working in the mainstream globally-integrated sector, like peri-urban Vietnam’s electronics and garment industries, require men and women to live apart, and workers to leave the village without any prospect of settling somewhere else.

We saw displacement-type exclusions, whereby development negatively impacts on people living and working on land required for the project: the kampong inhabitants of land used to build coastal residences on Penang, the shopkeepers at the Densavanh rest-stop on Highway 9 between Laos and Vietnam where the vehicles no longer stop.

We studied environment-type exclusions resulting from economic integration, as when the pollution arising from the development of Indonesian cities such as Balikpapan reduced local communities’ access to mangroves and other natural resources; or when integration processes had contradictory impacts on the same land, with the simultaneous promotion of export-oriented industrial agriculture and eco-Buddhist conservation policy in the landscape of Thailand’s Nan province; or when Kachins saw land loss associated with the Myitsone dam as an existential threat to their nation.

There are assimilation-type exclusions stemming from attempts to link cultural integration with administrative integration. Thailand’s highlanders policy made administrative inclusion (citizenship) dependent on cultural assimilation, but in some cases achieved neither. In Myanmar, meanwhile, failure to make a place for Rohingyas in the national framework ultimately had disastrous consequences. The majority/minority model of national integration followed on SEA’s mainland is particularly liable to cause this form of exclusion.
The integration/exclusion nexus takes these and other forms. Each has its own consequences, some unforeseen, some measurable. Each is the result of choices, usually linked to a development model, government policy or administrative decision – or combination of these. Some of these exclusions are the normal and necessary result of social and economic transformation – like the shopkeepers on Highway 9 – and one may only hope that new opportunities arise from development that compensates the loss of original livelihood. But it is important to stress that few of these situations of integration/exclusion are either inevitable or neutral: other choices could have been made but, for many reasons, were not.

The integration/exclusion nexus is not the only narrative of integration in SEA: indeed, it stands as a counter-narrative to a global integration discourse that exerts considerable power in the region today. Promoted by international development organisations, this discourse favours pro-growth and inclusive policies on condition that the global economic integration agenda is not questioned. Unfortunately, as much of this research shows, processes of exclusion often result from policies, such as trade liberalisation, that the prevailing discourse says should be part of the solution.

The many forms of the integration/exclusion nexus is the main finding of SEATIDE research, but the project has achieved more than this. The multidisciplinary work done by fifty researchers with deep knowledge of the region has produced a new view of SEA, a portrait made at a particular point of time, which scholars and other practitioners of the region will recognise as pioneering. SEA has changed immensely over past quarter century, the pace of its transformation has been breath-taking, and SEATIDE offers a new updated vision.

This change is especially striking when viewed from the grassroots. People no longer live where they are and no longer stay where they were. Mobility and migration are the new norm. New types of space are emerging that are neither rural nor urban. The village is now the place you grew up in – and may return to, or maybe not. And if a factory has not been built on its land, the new SEA farm may be planted with rice, papaya and other crops grown from first Green Revolution grains or from second Green Revolution seed bought on the global GMO market.

SEA’s borders were never very relevant to people who lived near them, but as barriers and ideological framing devices they appeared mighty and meaningful to the rest of the population. This is no longer true. Crossing SEA’s borders in the post-Cold War era of integration continues to entail risk, but has become part of normal life for ordinary Southeast Asians, both under-the-bridge and on-the-bridge.

The grassroots perspective similarly highlights the dysfunctional, challenged yet dominant presence of the state, the lasting power of allegiances to cultural regions and minority identities, and SEA’s unending openness to transformations driven by foreign ideas and external powers. These continuities manifest themselves at the local level, which gives the grassroots level of analysis adopted across the region by SEATIDE’s researchers its relevance and perceptiveness of insight. At the same time, new social and economic forms are coming into being, new modes of work, ways of moving, types of connection and interaction, many of them operated by grassroots actors without reference to political frameworks.

Scholars working in SEA Studies keep up with many of these trends. What the joint EU and SEA research effort mobilised by SEATIDE has achieved collectively is a new panorama, a historically informed, empirically grounded and thematically focused vision of 21st century SEA. Through a multidimensional portrayal of the integration/exclusion nexus in the areas of diversity, prosperity, knowledge and security, it has shown – from Kachin State to Marikina City, from Surabaya to Phongsaly – how grassroots integration is an inescapable part of SEA modernity and how the formal structures of political integration increasingly struggle to frame it.
Potential Impact:
SEATIDE had three types of impact, which may be summarised as follows:

1. Europe-Southeast Asia social science network development. On its launch in December 2012, SEATIDE established a consortium of research institutions doing Asian Studies research in Europe and SEA. This led to the development of networks between higher education institutes and universities in different European countries and between European and Southeast Asian institutions and researchers cemented through the undertaking of joint research projects and regular meetings for the reporting of results. SEATIDE thus contributed to the integration of the European Research Area (ERA) through the promotion of joint research programmes on multidisciplinary themes. Many of these relationships, as well as the partner institutions’ ability to develop such relationships (network creation capacity), will outlive the project to continue strengthening the knowledge generation capacity of the partner institutions, as well as providing a model for other similar initiatives.

2. Social science research on integration in Southeast Asia. The teams of European and Southeast Asian researchers involved in SEATIDE did field research related to integration in SEA in line with the project’s Objective 1. In terms of scientific impact, SEATIDE has made a substantial published contribution to academic knowledge of integration in SEA.

3. Disseminating research broadly and bridging boundaries between academia, civil society, and policy makers. In addressing the need for more culturally and historically informed dialogue between Europe and Asia, the project has built on the achievements of the EU-FP7 project IDEAS in the development of an innovative strategy for linking the fields of diplomacy and SSH research. In particular, through the organisation of dissemination workshops, policy forums and SEA briefings that examine geopolitical and cultural issues from a long-term perspective, SEATIDE is demonstrating the advantages of bringing together researchers and diplomats both in Brussels and in the countries of SEA where they are deployed. In the long-term, the implementation of SEATIDE has established the foundations for a policy-relevant SESH knowledge base on Southeast Asia, providing stakeholders in Europe and SEA with up-to-date information on socio-economic and cultural issues and assisting in the formulation of international and external relations policies.

The details of these impacts are as follows:

1. Europe-Southeast Asia social science network development. SEATIDE delivered coordinated EU-SEA academic exchange, joint research and result delivery, and the promotion of a new generation of researchers on SEA. As a result SEATIDE strengthened the European Research Area through the creation of an effective and integrated EU-SEA research network. The network is international, multidisciplinary and durable, thanks to SEATIDE’s development of relationships between researchers and promotion of habits of working together.

In this respect it fulfilled Objective 2 of the project, which was to bring together people and institutions with the capacity to do the research, with a view to strengthening the European Research Area (ERA) in Asian studies and building European research capacity in Southeast Asian studies. Coordinated by the École française d’Extrême-Orient, the consortium consisted of institutions in five EU member states – Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom – and four ICPCs (non-European countries) in SEA – Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

The European partner institutions were as follows: the Ecole française d’Extrème-Orient (French School of Asian Studies, EFEO); the Asien-Afrika-Institut, University of Hamburg, Germany; the Centre for History
and Economics, Magdalene College, University of Cambridge; the Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University; and the University of Milano-Bicocca. The SEA partner institutions were as follows: Universiti Sains Malaysia; the Center for Southeast Asia Social Studies, University of Gadjah Mada, Indonesia; Chiang Mai University, Thailand; the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

The impact on the ERA was considerable. In Europe, the consortium embraced institutions with a strong presence in SEA studies (France, Germany, UK), as well as others with expertise that is less visible or emerging, and needs support. This is the case for Italy, possessing a strong profile in European associations such EUROSEAS, but limited research capacity at home, despite the appearance of a new generation of doctoral students. It is also true for some new EU member states, notably those from the former Eastern bloc with a long and currently reviving history of research on Asia. In Estonia, the University of Tallinn’s participation in the consortium brought a specific ‘eastern’ view of SEA, focused on Myanmar.

The opportunity for European and SEA scholars to form intercontinental relationships and working habits is a significant achievement. It is not, however, original: all consortium members had prior experience of Europe-Asia bilateral relations. What sets SEATIDE apart is the opportunity it also gave Europeans to work with colleagues in other European countries and Southeast Asians to work with colleagues in other SEA countries, and for all these relations to be set within a multilateral framework that formed an international academic community. No one needed to forge relationships for themselves: they were created for our use by SEATIDE.

The existence of this network had, in turn, a direct impact on member institutions, through its fostering of the mobility of consortium members, the emergence of a generation of young scholars and other forms of strengthening of research capacity. This was most specifically noticeable among the Italian and Estonian members of the consortium. The Italian and Estonian teams shared similar profiles: both were led by senior scholars who had almost single-handedly trained a number of young researchers and brought an under-funded and isolated team into the project. The research resources and opportunities for exchange and debate with colleagues provided by SEATIDE is matched by the quality of these teams’ scientific production and the enthusiasm of their embrace of the highest standards of social science practice.

In Italy, young scholars based at the University of Milano-Bicocca and the University of Naples-Orientale figure prominently in the research activities of SEATIDE, as reflected in the strength of their contribution to its published results. In Estonia, SEATIDE drew attention at the University level to the value of channeling resources into research/teaching on SEA, as opposed to other areas, in times of cutbacks everywhere. This took concrete expression in a vacancy announcement, circulated in April 2016, for the newly created position of associate professor in Southeast Asian Studies at Tallinn University. Here, SEATIDE helped lay the foundations of SEA studies in a very concrete sense.

2. Social science research on integration in Southeast Asia. SEATIDE produced ground-breaking multidisciplinary research offering innovative empirical and theoretical perspectives on integration/exclusion in SEA and on the contemporary state of the region. To facilitate access by scholars, the public and policymakers, SEATIDE’s research is published on a website (www.seatide.eu) in the form of online papers, policy briefs, thematic reports, documentary films and other content as well as in academic forums, and through dissemination to stakeholders and policymakers (see below).

In fulfilment of the project’s Objective 1 – the production of research on integration, in case studies framed by a concern with marginalisation and its risks to human development/security – a synthesis of the project’s research results with conclusions and recommendations is presented in the Final Report, along
with a full list of publications and other deliverables. The Final Report will be available on the website.

3. SEATIDE disseminated research

3. Disseminating research broadly and bridging boundaries between academia, civil society, and policy makers.
The project’s dissemination activities took three forms: dissemination to policymakers and stakeholders in Europe and SEA; a policy dialogue established with the Southeast Asia division of the European External Action Service in Brussels, with the organisation of Policy Forums and a series of EEAS Southeast Asia Briefings; in the form of Policy Briefs.

I. Dissemination workshops with policymakers, stakeholders and the public.
A key objective of the project was dissemination to stakeholders and policymakers in Europe and SEA. One model adopted was the Dissemination Workshop. Attendance was high, between 40-50 people at each event; press coverage was extensive; the audience and host partners’ response was enthusiastic. Reports for each are available at http://www.seatide.eu/?content=activitiesandresults&group=6. Three were held:

Dissemination Workshop 1, ‘Dynamics of Integration and Dilemmas of Divergence in Contemporary SEA’, Lone Pine Hotel, Penang, 18 September 2014. Presentations were made in panels on ‘Settling the Region’s Borders’ and ‘Coping with Religious Diversity in SEA’. NGO representatives, university faculty and journalists attended the workshop. It closed with a roundtable discussion on ‘Fractures and Predicaments in Southeast Asian Identities’.

Dissemination Workshop 2: ‘Economic Integration, Mobility, and Work in Southeast Asia’, Museum of Ethnology, Hanoi, 2 February 2015. Presentations were made in two panels on ‘Industrialisation, Labour and Poverty’ and ‘Work and Small Scale Mobility’. Officials of Vietnam’s Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, labour organisations and European embassies attended the workshop. It closed with a roundtable discussion on ‘How Can Southeast Asia and Europe Cooperate to Promote Access to the Labour Market and Better Working Conditions?’

This workshop resulted in invitations for Pietro Masina (University of Naples L’Orientale) to present his research on Middle Income/Uneven Development Trap to diplomats in Hanoi and officials in Brussels. He gave talks organised by the EU Embassy in Vietnam on ‘Middle income or uneven development trap? Industrialization, labour and poverty’ to development counsellors at EU member state embassies (21 April 2015) and EU member state ambassadors (23 April 2015). He also presented the research as part of a policy dialogue event ‘Trade, Sustainable Development and Human Rights in EU-Vietnam Relations: Roundtable for discussion with EU stakeholders’ European Commission, Brussels, 12 May 2015, with speakers including the EU Trade Commissioner.

Dissemination Workshop 3, ‘Maritime Southeast Asia: Conflicts and Cooperation’, Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia to Belgium and the European Union, Brussels, 4 June 2015. Presentations were made in two panels on ‘Historical Contexts’ and ‘Contemporary Developments’. The meeting was very well attended by SEA, European and US diplomats and stakeholders.

Full details of the programmes of SEATIDE’s Dissemination Workshops, are available in the Final Report, Appendix 2.

II. Dissemination through Policy Dialogue between SEATIDE and the European External Action Service.
An innovative and effective model of policy dialogue was developed by the project. The supply-side character of many forms of dissemination was avoided thanks to conversations established with target audiences, notably at the Southeast Asia Division of EEAS, the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and the Indonesian Embassy in Brussels. In particular, SEATIDE accumulated valuable expertise in the dissemination of research results to policymakers at the European External Action Service (EEAS) in Brussels.


Representatives of EEAS and the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD) concurred in finding the programme’s content informative and relevant, and this interest was reflected in the quality of the discussion. This success launched a conversation between SEATIDE management and the EEAS’s Division of Southeast Asia allowing both sides to explore suitable formats for their future communication. The conversation took a new turn with the conference ‘Research meets diplomacy: Europe as a Global Actor’ organised by the European Commission in Brussels on 5 June 2014, attended by SEATIDE’s management team. Meeting after the conference, the two sides agreed to discuss the details of SEATIDE’s dissemination activities at the EEAS in advance of the briefings, and that the sessions – renamed EEAS Southeast Asia Briefings – should be short. Three were hosted by the EEAS’s Southeast Asia Division:

EEAS Southeast Asia Briefing 1, ‘Patterns of Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia’, 11 May 2015, Brussels. Topics included historical and contemporary influences on authoritarianism, capital punishment and state violence in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

EEAS Southeast Asia Briefing 2, ‘The Emerging Middle Class in Southeast Asia’, 12 May 2015, Brussels. Topics included middle class politics in mainland Southeast Asia and democratisation in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

EEAS Southeast Asia Briefing 3, ‘The Crisis in Thailand in Long-term Perspective’, 18 February 2016, Brussels. Topics included the current political crisis, the demographic challenge to Thailand’s economic development, and the issue of refugees.

Full details of the programmes of SEATIDE’s Policy Forums and EEAS Southeast Asia Briefings are available in the Final Report, Appendix 2.

III. Dissemination of results in written/film formats via www.seatide.com. The project’s 12 Online Papers targeted a general public of interested readers, while the 7 Policy Briefs were aimed at an audience of policymakers. Also available on the website are SEATIDE’s 5 Documentary Films and the project’s 2 Thematic Reports.

Online Papers
Available at http://www.seatide.eu/?content=activitiesandresults&group=3


3. Volker Grabowsky, ‘Heritage and Nationalism in the Preah Vihear Dispute’ (response by Sok Udom Deth: ‘Voices from Cambodia: Discourses on the Preah Vihear Conflict’).


10. Michael J. Montesano, ‘Praetorianism and 'the People' in Late-Bhumibol Thailand’.


Policy Briefs
Available at http://www.seatide.eu/?content=activitiesandresults&group=4.

Jacques Leider, ‘Dilemmas of Diversity in Southeast Asia’.

Amalia Rossi, ‘Natural and Human Resources in border areas: Northern Thailand and the Mekong Sub-Region’.


Muhadi Sugiono, ‘Maritime Southeast Asia & Regional Integration: Potential and Challenges’.


Matteo C. Alcano & Runa Lazzarino, ‘Gender and Mobility: Displacements, Borders, Social Values’.


Documentary Films
Available at http://www.seatide.eu/?content=media5.

Development (2015), Michael’s Anecdotes from the Rohingya Diaspora (40 mins). Michael’s Anecdotes from the Rohingya Diaspora was screened at 2nd AGITPROP International Film Festival on People’s Struggle, Manila, Philippines, 12 November 2015; ‘Hope of ASEAN’, by ASEAN-China International Studies Program and Film Kawan, Bangkok, Thailand, 10 November 2015; ASEAN Film Festival 2015 ‘All about Love’, Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, Bangkok, Thailand, 15 August; 19th Thai Short Film Festival by Thai Film Institution (1st Runner-up in the Duke Award – Thai Documentary); and is scheduled for screening at the Inter Congress of IUAES (International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences), Dubrovnik, Croatia, 4-9 May 2016; 5th Southeast Asian Studies Symposium, University of Oxford, UK, 15 April 2016; Ethnografilm 2016 Festival, Paris, France, 29 March-2 April 2016.

Parsifal Reparato, with Silvia Vignato & Giacomo Tabacco (2015), REZEKI: Gold and Stone Mining in Aceh (52 minutes). REZEKI was screened at the Lund University’s Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies workshop on ‘Scholars, activists and filmmakers: The multiple roles of film in and on Asia’, 2-3 May 2016, Lund, Sweden; the 14th European Association of Social Anthropologists conference, ‘Anthropological Legacies and Human Futures’, University of Milano-Bicocca, 22 July 2016, Milan, Italy; and submitted to Association Filmer le Travail, Poitiers, France, for its 2017 festival.


Jean Mathis, with Anne Guillou, What is left. Untold stories about memory in Cambodia (provisional title), a film on how a village in West Cambodia integrates those who died or left the village during the genocide (in post-production).

Thematic Reports
Available at http://www.seatide.eu/?content=activitiesandresults&group=2.

Silvia Vignato, ‘The Unexpected Consequences of SEA Integration: Structural Marginalities and Original Solutions in Mobility, Work and Life Planning’.

Tim Harper, ‘The Place of Knowledge and the State of Knowledge in Southeast Asia’.

Other dissemination activities included a stand at the 3rd EU-ASEAN STI Days ‘Showcasing Science, Technology and Innovation’, Hanoi 10-12 May 2016 (SEA-EU.NET II project, funded by EC-FP7).

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Related documents

* final1-seatide-final-report-ah.pdf

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