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by  
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## **Promoting Southeast Asian Identity**

***“Tolerance, inter-cultural dialogues and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world where peoples are becoming more and more closely interconnected”***

**Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the UN from 1997-2006**

### **Background**

At the 41<sup>st</sup> SEAMEO Council Conference held in 2006, the SEAMEO Council President, HE Mr. Tharman Shanmugaratnam, cited the promotion of regional understanding as a significant contribution of SEAMEO.

Statements that followed, made by the other Ministers of Education, when reviewed, show a recurrence of the words: equity, relevance, uniqueness, tradition, multi-ethnic, understanding, ethical, and moreover ‘**values**’.

It is certainly worthwhile to note excerpts from the statement made by the Minister of Education of Malaysia, HE Dato’ Sri Hishammudin Tun Hussein:

“...within SEAMEO our focus should not only be on children and youth but also on adults as well because education is a life-long project. We should seek to enrich the people with humanistic, ethical, cultural and international values...

As a regional organization, we must redouble these efforts not only to strengthen knowledge and **understanding of the diversity of our cultures** but also **promote greater dialogues** among Member States. These dialogues could uncover hidden questions, and sources of misunderstanding, dispel prejudices, identify and promote commonalities, promote better understanding and work for peace”.

### **Significance of a Southeast Asian Identity**

The UNESCO General Conference adopted the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005. This is the first international legal instrument containing a set of guiding principles related to cultural diversity at the global level. This is highly significant and is a

key component to help realize the goals of the UNESCO International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence of the World.

As expressed at the SEAMEO Council Conference by many of the Ministers, cultural diversity must be understood and respected. This can lead to a greater understanding with the benefits of constructive dialogues aimed at peaceful resolutions taking place. The concerns expressed at the SEAMEO Council Conference are akin to those voiced by ASEAN as well as UNESCO.

Identifying commonalties and in particular, with reference to values, whilst at the same time respecting diversity can be achieved through inter-cultural dialogues. This is clearly endorsed as a guiding principle as the above quotations from the past UN Secretary-General and the Minister of Education of Malaysia indicate.

### **Problems in defining a Southeast Asian identity**

Southeast Asia is the cradle of some the world's richest and most diverse cultures as evidenced by the existence of almost, if not more than, one thousand ethno- linguistic groups of people each with their own cultural history. Consequently as a region, there are as many unique distinctions as there are shared similarities. Identifying the special characteristics or traits that define the peoples of Southeast Asia is one thing but presenting them as a uniform and unified 'package' that gives each Southeast Asian person a common identity that is values-based is a difficult and sensitive issue.

The first question raised is: ***Who has the right to decide which persons should be engaged to identify a Southeast Asian identity?***

This question is critical because we need to ensure that the identity is all inclusive and truly representative. On this point we also need to recognize that it is not easy to reconcile the principle of 'respect for cultural diversities' along with the goal of trying to forge a common cultural identity for Southeast Asia. This is because both concepts would seem to be diametrically opposed.

Determining one's individual identity is a complex process because our sense of space, time and culture today has become more compact. Technology, mobility and progress have made our world seem smaller and closer, with transnationalism giving us the illusion of a borderless world. Information and experience through various media give us a sense that we have ready access and virtual consumption of other cultures. We think we are connected and an 'international' community.

However, this is the false assumption of globalization – the belief that we actually know our neighbours. We begin to imagine that the world is 'flat' and that mass and homogenized culture is everyone's inheritance. The truth, of course, is that

globalization has opened up our awareness that we are in fact living in a time of increasing hybridity and diversity.

There is no pure culture and all identities are hybrid. From historical times to present reality, cultural identity is constantly changing and because of the plural nature of culture, we witness increasing diversity. Differences do not disappear. They multiply. As a civilization grows, each community, state, nation and region faces the critical issue of 'difference' and 'identity'.

In order to understand and formulate one's identity, we have to negotiate on 'sameness' and 'difference'. This is a constantly evolving process we experience. In view of this, the concept of promoting a Southeast Asian identity that is acceptable to all is fraught with difficulties. This raises the second major question:

***What is the best way to determine what constitutes a Southeast Asian identity that can encompass the views of all concerned and be fully inclusive?***

A third key question we also need to ask ourselves is:

***Does the promotion of a Southeast Asian identity only serve to reinforce stereotyping of national characteristics whilst at the same time excluding the cultural diversity of each nation's various ethnic groups?***

It is important that we 'get it right'. Otherwise the outcome can be counter-productive. Instead of promoting harmony and a greater understanding within the region, we may cause offence. Further compounding the issue is that when comparing cultural ideals with actual realities/behaviours there is often a gap. Hogan (2007) points out that:

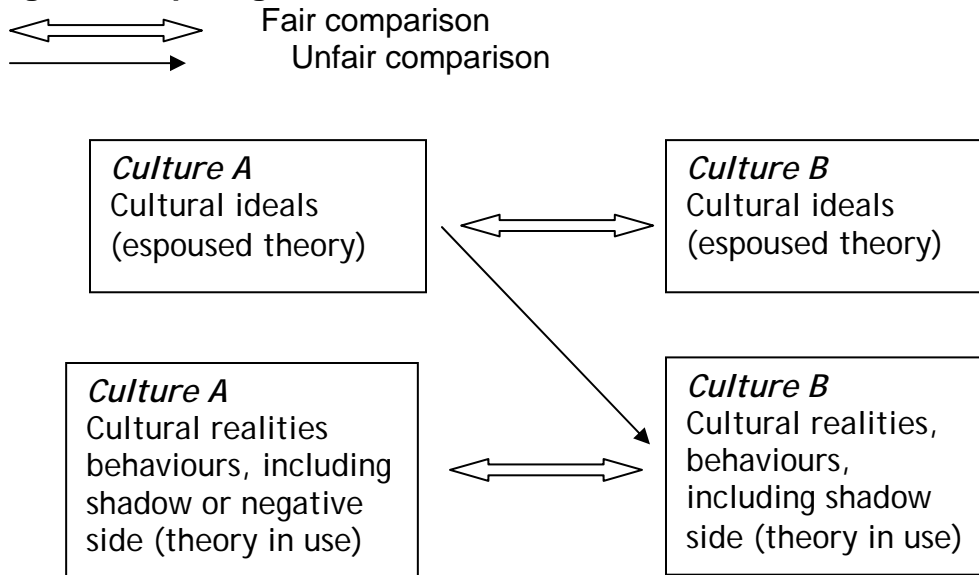
"Often we do not 'walk our talk'; there may be a huge gap that is not acknowledged".

She refers to the research of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1994) which focused on:

"The gaps between what people think they believe in i.e. their "espoused theory" as compared to their behaviour i.e. their "theory in use" and concludes that:

"There is a perceptual gap here which often occurs when we compare our cultures".

**Figure Comparing cultural ideals and cultural realities**



Hogan's (2007) figure above illustrates possible pitfalls in comparing cultures. She states that:

"We know that culture is not a product that we can put under the microscope, but a living changing entity. It is taken for granted much like the air we breathe, yet if someone violates our unwritten codes of behaviour we all react emotionally as well as intellectually".

### **Defining & Mapping Culture**

SEAMEO-SPAFA has been working intensely on the issues of culture and development since 2002 through a series of workshops and conferences with the support of the ASEAN Foundation and the Japan Foundation respectively. Ten workshops and two international conferences have been held with the participation of **over 800 persons**. Through these activities, one aim was to identify commonalities amongst Southeast Asians. The issue of cultural mapping and the determination of what represents a Southeast Asian identity comprised part of this culture and development series but no consensus was ever reached.

As the starting point, in trying to define what culture *means* numerous ideas were voiced. The recognition that there are so many variations on the understanding and interpretation of culture served to heighten the fact that we must learn not just to appreciate these different perspectives but *respect* them. A common acceptance of what culture means can not be enforced but this exploration does highlight that it can mean so many different things to different groups of people. A focus on cultural mapping was designed to encourage a deeper analysis of what

culture means from a more personal perspective examining examples of behaviours (what we do) and values (why we do it). Quite often it was found that values and behaviours did not always match. While one group from a similar cultural background may identify with certain values, behaviours can vary considerably, even among individuals within that group. Likewise, other groups may share those values, but they too may have different behavioural responses.

Understanding how values, practices, and beliefs affect human behaviour is essential in our efforts to try and define cultural identity. Just as cultures are in a constant state of change thus cultural analysis is an adaptive evolving process. As a process it raises awareness of relationships of power, influence, initiative and creativity. It encourages us to examine and better understand our own culture as well as the cultures of others we engage with. Importantly it helps us predict cultural constraints and devise ways to identify potential conflicts and thus manage to resolve possible conflict situations. Exploring definitions of culture and the cultural mapping of values and behaviours can thus be beneficial in promoting mutual understanding and building bridges.

What it does not do, however, is give us a definite answer as to what defines Southeast Asian identity.

### **Cultural Values**

For the purpose of trying to define any common identity, what cultural values would we be considering? Hogan (2007) lists descriptors she has found useful in the table shown below. She does advise though that:

“We have to be careful about generalising too much about our cultures. You will find some highly individualistic people in collective societies and some highly collective people in individualistic societies. I use the phrase “cultural values” as some descriptors are dimensions on a continuum, whilst others are values and impossible to measure or quantify.”

**Table showing cultural values**

A 1 Individualism “I” focus	A 2 Collectivism “we” “group” “team” focus
B 1 Respect rules of behaviour and protocol	B 2 Casual politeness informality
C 1 Hierarchy many levels in society, status, protocol	C 2 Equality less levels, equal treatment & access
D 1 Control over assertive, competitive	D 2 Harmony with cooperative, avoid conflict

E 1 Indirect Communication Diplomatic, circular, metaphor, analogies	E 2 Direct Communication To the point, blunt
F 1 Kinship Systems Not important	F 2 Kinship Systems Important
G 1 Task (Doing) Oriented efficiency, success, on the move	G 2 Relationship (People) Oriented friendly, hospitable
G 3 Being Oriented content to relax	G4 Having Oriented materialistic, possessions oriented
H 1 Time: Flexible	H 2 Time: Tight punctuality/deadlines
I 1 Time: Past Oriented history, stories, ancestors important	I 2 Time: Present Oriented in the here and now, spontaneous
I 3 Time: Future Oriented forward thinking, planning, imagining	I 4 Time: Cyclical seasons, events, rhythms of life & death
J 1 Religious & Spiritual religious practice permeates whole life	J 2 Secular work separated from religion
K1 Shame Save or gain face: individual, family, culture	K 2 Guilt individual responsibility for wrongs
L 1 Karma	L 2 Fate
M 1 Universalism One way of doing things i.e. our way is transferable to all cultures	M 2 Particularism There are many ways 'doing things' in different cultures
N 1 Multiculturalism is Valued	N 2 Monoculturalism is Valued
O 1 Multilingualism is Valued	O 2 Monolingualism is Valued
P 1 Risk taking	P 2 Risk avoiding

- NOTE: the values are not necessarily on a continuum (e.g. task and relationship) nor are they opposites.

### **Rationale and Advantages of Promoting a Southeast Asian Identity**

The region of Southeast Asia is not alone in trying to identify and formulate a positive common identity. There are many reasons for this but the overwhelming incentive appears to be the need to forge some form of common unity because we are living in an ever increasing insecure environment.

People all around the world feel threatened and are looking for common values that can unite them. This call for values is universal because we are increasingly concerned about and affected by violence, growing social problems, the lack of respect for each other and the world around us, and the lack of social cohesion. It is no surprise then that educators are, therefore, once again being asked to address problems which have arisen within their societies.

UNESCO's Commission, headed by Jacques Delors, reported in *Learning: The Treasure Within* (1996)

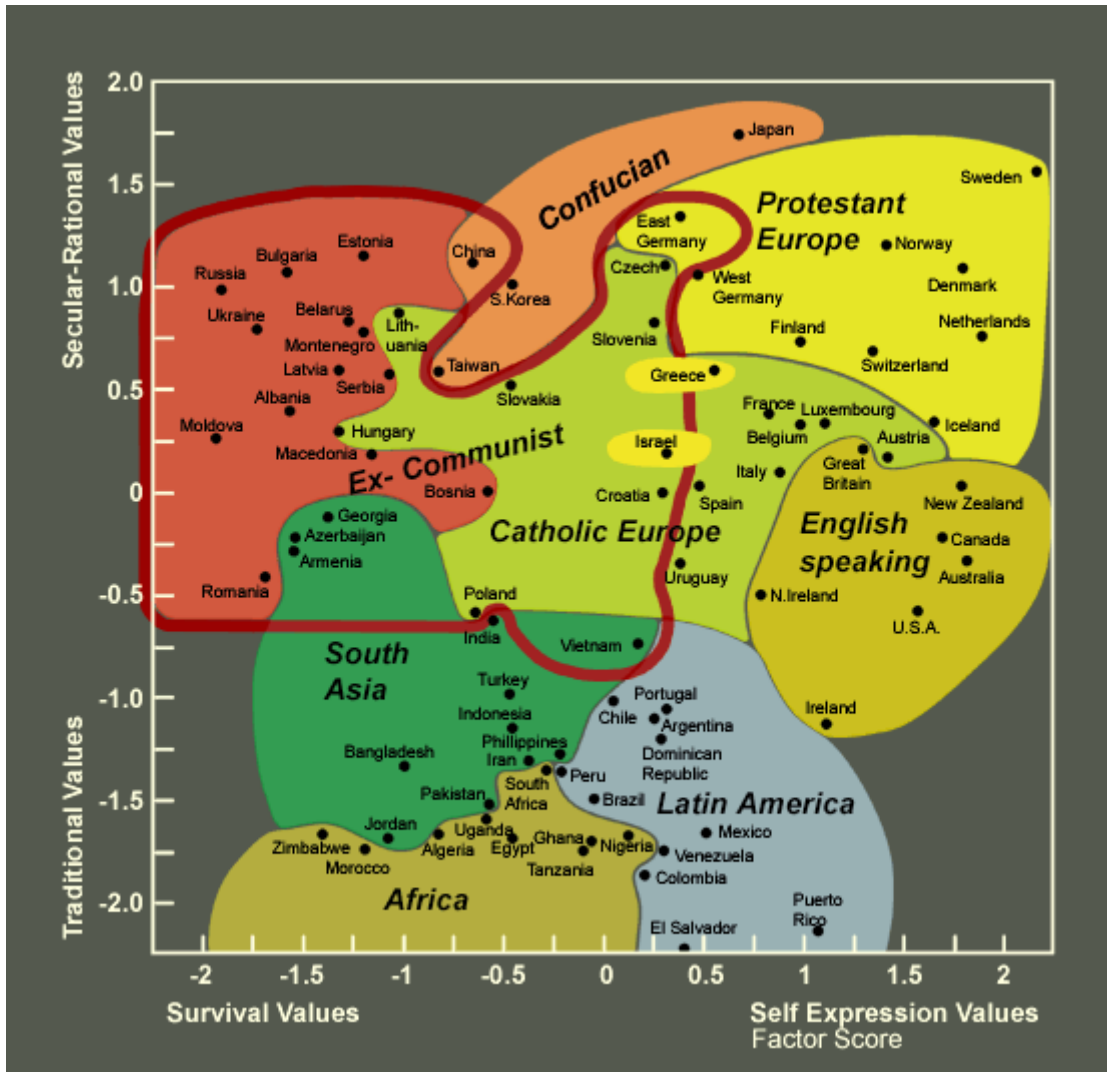
*"In confronting the many challenges that the future holds in store, humankind sees in education an indispensable asset in its attempt to attain the ideals of peace, freedom and social justice. The Commission does not see education as a miracle cure or a magic formula opening the door to a world in which all ideals will be attained, but as one of the principal means available to foster a deeper and more harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression and war."*

SEAMEO has a vital role to play but as previously indicated the search for a common identity is riddled with difficulties. Even defining a national identity is complex because of the dangers of the assumptions that are made and the reinforcement of stereotypes. Forging commonalities within one nation state will undoubtedly favour the predominance of the majority grouping to the disadvantage of various sub-groups. In the quest for a Southeast Asian identity we have to multiply this problem eleven times as we consider the cultural identities of the eleven SEAMEO Member States.

The World Values Surveys are shown below as an example of research already undertaken to try and define regional identities.

## World Values

### The Inglehart Values Map



<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>

The World Values Survey identifies Southeast Asia as an area that adheres to traditional as opposed to secular values. Additionally, as an area its people are more concerned with survival values as opposed to self-expression values. The World Values Survey website explains that:

“The World Values Surveys were designed to provide a comprehensive measurement of all major areas of human concern, from religion to politics to economic and social life and two dimensions dominate the picture:

(1) Traditional/ Secular-rational and (2) Survival/Self-expression values”.

Dimensions of the Traditional/Secular-rational values reflect the contrast between societies in which religion is very important and those in which it is not. Societies near the traditional pole are described as:

“Emphasizing the importance of parent-child ties and deference to authority, along with absolute standards and traditional family values, and reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. These societies have high levels of national pride, and a nationalistic outlook. Societies with secular-rational values have the opposite preferences on all of these topics.”

The polarization between Survival and Self-expression values is attributed to the transition from industrial societies to post-industrial societies. In the case of the latter, populations take survival for granted and thus:

“... priorities have shifted from an overwhelming emphasis on economic and physical security toward an increasing emphasis on subjective well-being, self-expression and quality of life.”

However, as the survey chart shows, Southeast Asia exhibits survival values.

### **Conclusion**

Researching the concept of finding a Southeast Asian identity it has become clear that it is no easy task. As the survey above illustrates, Southeast Asia as a region, is labeled as traditional, conservative and nationalistic. If our own efforts in the quest to define what constitutes a Southeast Asian identity produces similar labels, would this be an acceptable or satisfying outcome?

There is no doubt that defining and promoting a Southeast Asian identity could be beneficial but perhaps we should approach this task from the angle of trying to determine what are the common GOALS that define Southeast Asia; and not focus on ‘values’. It is crucial for us to view our work and efforts as forming part of the global vision for a better world that celebrates and respects diversity. And so if we could focus on common goals that transcend cultural values and identities we would be able to forge a common Southeast Asian vision and purpose that encapsulates core human values whilst maintaining and promoting RESPECT for the diversity of the region.

Common goals such as poverty alleviation, preventive health education, quality and equity in education already comprise some of the areas of SEAMEO's work. Other common goals could include embracing equality before the law, freedom of speech, democratic principles, tolerance of difference etc. Above everything else a focus on MUTUAL RESPECT can be presented as a unifying factor amongst the peoples of Southeast Asia, and in keeping with the objectives of SEAMEO all goals should be educationally-driven.

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### **Purpose of this paper**

- Through discussion to determine:
- How to reach consensus on what constitutes a Southeast Asian identity,
- Explore the rationale, advantages, and disadvantages, of defining and promoting a Southeast Asian identity.

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