Conclusion

This research work has analyzed the process of community building and the existence of multiple meanings about regional communities in the imagined region of Southeast Asia by focusing on the activities of ASEAN and various other civil society organizations that operate in the region. As it has been discussed in detail in the previous chapters, multiple actors have multiple imaginations about community in the Southeast Asian region. Therefore, ASEAN’s model of creating a people-oriented ASEAN Community by 2015 comprising three pillars (political-security community, economic community and socio-cultural community) is only one such imagination that essentially reflects the ideas and imaginations of the political elites of the member states of ASEAN. In fact, it can be stated without much skepticism that there exist sharp differences regarding the meaning of community between the ASEAN elites and the activists of the non-elite based civil society organizations, particularly those that operate at the Track III level in the Southeast Asian region. These civil society organizations at the Track III level are in favour of establishing a people-centered regional community in Southeast Asia, the idea of which is markedly different from the ASEAN elites’ preference for creating a people-oriented ASEAN community. These civil society organizations in Southeast Asia with their multiple alternative visions of people-centered regional communities are significantly trying to mould the kind of regional community that the ASEAN elites are trying to establish. While critically looking into the processes associated with building a regional community in Southeast Asia, this research work has also underlined the manner in which regions and regionalism are in reality imaginary constructs and have evolved as a result of very complex processes and interactions.

The very concept of regions and regionalisms is subject to a variety of interpretations. Regions can be considered as unclear and transient social constructs (Fioramonti 2013: 1). It needs to be remembered that regions are not natural, objective and ontologically given spaces as they are implied in the official discourse on regions like Southeast Asia, which are reflected through the process of ASEAN regionalism. Regions are spatial and temporal constructs contingent on a variety of interests and agenda (Nair 2008: 112). In fact, Southeast Asia’s evolution as a distinct region can never be understood by simply focusing on its geographical proximity or shared cultural attributes. What constitutes regions like Southeast Asia and where does it begin and end remains a matter of imagination and is subject to multiple interpretations. As it has been stated at
the introduction, regions like nation-states and nationalism are imagined communities and can be created through the implicit decision to imagine them into existence (Anderson 1998: 5-6; Acharya 2012: 12). As a result, boundaries of regions like Southeast Asia remain a matter of imagination and are subject to multiple interpretations. The crucial question that remains to be answered and critically debated in this context is: who defines a region. Is it the nation-states, including the major powers and particularly its political elites? Is it the international institutions? Or is it the common people who reside within that particular imaginary construct? As it has been argued in this thesis, in the case of Southeast Asia, as a meaningful imaginary, its naming came from outside and as a result, even today, only very few among the masses who inhabit this imaginary construct ever consider themselves as Southeast Asians. Therefore, the very label Southeast Asia was externally imposed. Indic, Sinic civilizations in the past called Southeast Asia ‘the land below the winds’ and ‘Nan Yang’ respectively, although there is little evidence to show that people of this imaginary construct ever regarded themselves as part of a coherent region (Ortuoste 2011: 3). By the nineteenth century, Southeast Asian polities were reorganized into colonial states separated by Westphalian principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. This pattern of external representation of Southeast Asia was also repeated during the period of second World War when imperial Japan under the ‘Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’ occupied the space that now constitutes the ten member states of ASEAN together with Papua New Guinea and East Timor. On the contrary, the relatively limited geographic scope of Southeast Asia Command under the allied powers during the Second World War reflected both the tactical military concerns and the colonial interests of the allied powers. Thus the then Southeast Asia Command included the British and Dutch colonial possessions while the Philippines and East Timor were placed under the United States and Australian command respectively. In fact, the idea of Southeast Asia as a separate region was a product of the Second World War in the Pacific (Weatherbee 2009: 7).

The emergence of the Cold War in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War also changed the manner in which the United States government viewed the region that came to be known as Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asian states were perceived by the United States government as fragile dominoes, which might fall under the influence of the former Soviet Union and also the People’s Republic of China, the latter being involved in aiding and abetting
communist insurgencies in many Southeast Asian states in the decades of 1950 and 1960. The United States took the lead in forming the SEATO in 1954 to combat the proliferation of communist influence in the region in which only two Southeast Asian states, Thailand and the Philippines joined. Therefore, it becomes clear that initially, it was the non-regional states like Great Britain, United States and other former colonial powers that defined the imagined reality of Southeast Asia as a source of natural resources and then as countries, which required to be protected from communism, as well as poor states that needed economic assistance in the form of developmental aid. The Southeast Asian political elites thereafter began to define their region with the specific purpose of reclaiming their independence and building their states and in this endeavour, their ideas and imaginations about defining their region had very close resemblance with the imaginations of their former colonial elites. While actors, both within and outside the imagined reality of Southeast Asia made the initial definition of the region, ASEAN as an institution provided that very definition of Southeast Asia some permanence (Ortuoste 2011: 7).

It is interesting to note in this connection that East Timor is still not a member of ASEAN and the reason for this remains significant. East Timor since 2002 has only attained an observer status within ASEAN. When the Fretilin declared independence for East Timor on November 28, 1975 after the end of Portuguese colonial rule, the ASEAN elites through their own imaginations by that time had already defined the geographical scope and anti-communist character of the imagined region of Southeast Asia. The ASEAN elites neither supported East Timor’s independence nor welcomed its membership. Further, when Indonesian military invaded East Timor on December 07, 1975, ASEAN member states with the exception of Singapore’s abstention, constantly voted against the United Nations resolutions that condemned Indonesia’s annexation of the province of East Timor. The reluctance of the ASEAN elites to support the cause of East Timor at that time was influenced by the fact that the activities of Fretilin in East Timor was viewed as a potential communist threat that could destabilize Indonesia’s state building efforts. The anti-communist character of ASEAN provided the interpretative frame through which the regional elites viewed East Timor as a potential communist threat at that point of time. As a result, during that time, what constitutes Southeast Asia followed ASEAN elite’s representation of a group of non-communist states whose geographic boundaries did not include an independent and potentially communist, East Timor (Ortuoste 2011: 10).
External representations of Southeast Asia as a region were increasingly adopted and modified accordingly by the Southeast Asian elites. The case of East Timor demonstrates how such mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion provided some coherence to an ASEAN/Southeast Asian identity based on elite imagination at the cost of denying independence to a country in 1975. Even after gaining independence from Indonesia on May 20, 2002, East Timor is still confronting many challenges on the path towards becoming the eleventh member of ASEAN. There remains a dilemma in the minds of the ASEAN elites regarding the kind of implications East Timor’s inclusion, if it at all happens in the foreseeable future within ASEAN, will have for the emerging ASEAN Community. There is still enough skepticism in the minds of the ASEAN elites on whether it would be possible to adjust an independent but troubled and volatile East Timor to their vision of an inclusive ASEAN Community.

In the specific case of Southeast Asia, realism (both classical realism and neorealism) and neoliberal institutionalism with their emphasis on material explanations have been less able to offer satisfying explanations regarding the role of ASEAN in managing regional security. As it has been analyzed in the first chapter of this dissertation, theoretical perspectives like realism and neoliberal institutionalism are also unable to explain appropriately the process of building a regional community and the existence of alternative imaginations of regional communities by various civil society based actors in the region. By contrast, the constructivist perspective offers better explanation regarding ASEAN’s role towards building a regional community and the multiple alternative imaginations of communities that prevail among the diverse civil society groups in the Southeast Asian region. Constructivists claim that reality is socially constructed and have given emphasis on non-material factors like norms, identity, culture and ideas, which play an important role in determining the behavior of actors. In this respect, while analyzing ASEAN’s role in maintaining the regional order in Southeast Asia, the importance of the role that ideas play in politics cannot be ignored. Ideas provide prisms through which actors interpret the significance of events that directs actors towards specific actions over others. Ideas have an important influence on the imagination of political elites and in Southeast Asia, ideas have been critical to explaining how the political elites of diverse and divergent states came to view Southeast Asian regionalism as an important response to their perceived problems of domestic, regional and global order. The case of ASEAN highlights the way ideas have moulded elite
imaginations that shaped regional politics through arguments about the relationship between intra-regional and extra-regional forces. The ASEAN’s founding arguments have helped make meaningful and thus influential two big ideas in the shaping of regional order. The first is the belief that there does exist some space called Southeast Asia and that Southeast Asia must provide ASEAN its organizing principle (Ba 2009: 225). The second important idea was the notion of resilience, both national and regional, through which the ASEAN elites considered their states as weak, fragmented powers and vulnerable to divisions, both internally and also in relation to extra-regional powers.

ASEAN’s role towards maintaining regional order in Southeast Asia is based on the inter-governmental approach and not on the supra-national approach to regional integration. The relatively low priority attached to regional integration in its traditional sense by the ASEAN elites reflects an approach to community building that is quite different from the path outlined by Karl W. Deutsch. For Deutsch, a security community is the end product, or terminal condition, of a process of integration that is driven by the necessity to cope with the conflict-causing effects of increased transactions. The increasing levels and range of transactions that includes political, cultural and economic, leads to the possibilities for likely conflict among actors, forcing them to devise institutions and practices for peaceful adjustment and change. But in the case of ASEAN, regional cooperation was undertaken in the absence of high levels of functional interdependence and interaction. ASEAN therefore, evolved as a sort of imagined community despite low initial levels of interdependence and transactions and the existence of substantial political and other situational divergences among its member states (Acharya 2001: 195). In the case of ASEAN, the imagination of community in many respects had its origins in the minds of the ASEAN’s founding elites rather than being a result of the political, strategic and functional interactions and interdependence among its members.

Further, it is also worth noting that ASEAN’s approach to regional cooperation also differed from its counterparts in Europe and North America as the member states of ASEAN lacked a shared political culture of liberal democracy and an emerging trend towards close economic interdependence that facilitates the process of establishing a security community. It is primarily because of this fact that the neoliberal institutionalist theoretical perspective could not adequately explain ASEAN’s role in maintaining the regional order and its initiatives towards building a
regional community in the imagined region of Southeast Asia. Most of the ASEAN member states cannot be labeled as liberal-democratic in accordance with the conventional Western idea of liberal democracy. Only one ASEAN member state, which is Indonesia, can be termed as a functioning democracy in the Western sense of the term. Since the downfall of the authoritarian ‘New Order’ regime under former Indonesian President Suharto in May 1998, periodic parliamentary and presidential elections have taken place in Indonesia, which were largely free and fair (The Economist 2009). Most of the other ASEAN member states are still governed by authoritarian regimes (Burma, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam), while others like Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines are governed by regimes that can only be termed as different forms of soft authoritarianism. Democracy in Thailand remains fragile and has been frequently interrupted by periods of military coups and internal struggle for power between the military and the civilian political elites. Unlike in the case of the Europe Union (EU) member states, the member states of ASEAN do not share a liberal democratic political culture even today, although the common goal of regime survival against a common internal threat of spread of communism was an important factor behind the emergence of ASEAN in 1967.

It is also noteworthy that in the case of the EU, contrary to the popular notions of the dilution and erasing of national borders among the member states, in reality borders have been re-mapped or re-designed among the member states of EU. In fact, Europe in its existing form can be described as a ‘borderland’ (Balibar 2003: 323). The important point to note in this connection is that as far as the process of building the European Community leading to the emergence of the EU in 1992 is concerned, it appears that the interests of the civil society groups within the EU member states are mostly in convergence with the interests of the political elites of the EU member states. The interests and aspirations of the civil society groups within the EU member states are by and large implicated within the process of European integration leading to the realization of the EU in 1992. Since the interests and aspirations of the civil society organizations within EU are mostly implicated within the process of EU, there is hardly any demand among the civil society groups within the EU member states for alternative regionalism or building alternative regional communities in Europe, which will be different from the idea of the regional community as it exists in the form of EU at present. But in the Southeast Asian region, by contrast, the interests and aspirations of the civil society groups (particularly those at the Track
III level) and the political elites of the ASEAN member states differ widely and are mostly divergent from one another. Therefore, unlike in Europe, the civil society organizations in the imagined region of Southeast Asia are increasingly voicing their demands for implementing alternative ideas about regionalism and have alternative visions of multiple regional communities in Southeast Asia, which are markedly different from the kind of regional community that the ASEAN elites are trying to establish.

As it has been analyzed in chapter two, central to the process of community building by ASEAN is a set of norms, among which non-interference, non-use of force, peaceful settlement of disputes, regional autonomy, avoidance of collective defence along with decision making on the basis of consensus and consultation are the most salient. While some of these norms were adapted from universal legal-rational principles, others had their origins in what the ASEAN’s founding elites claimed to be a part of the unique socio-cultural practices of the region. Together, these norms led to the emergence of what the political elites of the ASEAN member states claimed a culture-specific and sociological approach to decision making and conflict management, known as the ASEAN Way. The ASEAN Way in general emphasized upon informality, organizational minimalism, inclusiveness, intensive consultations leading to consensus and peaceful settlement of disputes. As far as the process of community building by the ASEAN elites is concerned, one of the most crucial questions that has been analyzed in this thesis is whether the ASEAN norms have given rise to a sense of collective regional identity within ASEAN and whether this form of identity has been able to transcend other more important national and sub-national identities that persist in the region. It can be seen from the analyses in the previous chapters that as far as the regulatory effects of the ASEAN norms are concerned, the norms of the ASEAN Way did have significant regulatory impacts although they have not been exceptional. The regulatory impact of the ASEAN norms refers to the degree of norm compliance by the governments of the member states of ASEAN individually or collectively in different issue areas.

However, while the norms of the ASEAN Way did have some regulatory effects, the impact of the constitutive effects of those norms remain more amorphous and doubtful as far as developing a collective regional identity by ASEAN is concerned. Development of a collective regional identity has been an important objective of the ASEAN’s founding elites and the ASEAN norms
played a crucial role in this quest for regional identity building (Acharya 2001: 71). It is significant to note in this connection that while the social and cultural diversity among the ASEAN member states made it difficult to speak of a common cultural identity, socialization process developed around the norms of the ASEAN Way did contribute to a kind of ‘we-feeling’ within ASEAN in accordance with Karl Deutsch’s terminology. Moreover, two very important points need to be noted in this connection. First, even if the norms of the ASEAN Way have indeed led to the development of a sense of ‘we-feeling’ or shared collective identity within ASEAN, this sense of ‘we-feeling’ has only been confined to the political elites of the member states of ASEAN. It has not been translated into the development of a sense of ‘we-feeling’ among the people at the societal level within the ten member states of ASEAN.

Second, although ASEAN forms the foundation of a regional identity in the imagined region of Southeast Asia, the very nature of this kind of regional identity fostered by the ASEAN elites is very weak, particularly when it is compared to the diverse range of ethnic identities that criss cross the entire region (Narine 2002: 208). The member states of ASEAN favour and encourage the growth of regionalism, but their more pressing concern is the creation of national identities among their own national or domestic constituencies. A sense of regionalism does exist in Southeast Asia, but it is invariably too weak to motivate the policies and actions of the ASEAN members. This weak sense of regional identity is also confined to the political elites of the ASEAN member states without any meaningful involvement of the people of the region. There exists a constant interaction and contestation between ASEAN’s attempt to forge a collective regional identity and various national and sub-national identities that are present within the various states in the Southeast Asian region. This relatively weak sense of regional collective identity that has been imagined by the regional elites within the institutional structure of ASEAN has been discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. Looking at ASEAN from this backdrop, it can be argued that ASEAN can be described as a nascent security community, which might decay into anarchy if it fails to cope with the burdens brought about by increased or new forms of interactions (Acharya 2001: 208).

There are also different views on this point according to which ASEAN can only be described as a security regime in its present form and in order to become a security community, it will need to generate a regional identity among the people of the region and give them a stake in the
development of ASEAN (Collins 2007: 222-223). So long as ASEAN remains a club for the political elites of the member states, it will remain detached from the general population of the region and thus unable to establish a sense of community or ‘we-feeling’. The rhetoric of community building undertaken by ASEAN can only become meaningful if the region’s governing elites gradually decrease their control over the decision making process and transform ASEAN from being an organization for the exclusive club of elites.

ASEAN has always moved along a narrow trajectory between encouraging a sense of regionalism among its member states while implementing practices and promoting norms that gives preference to the value and primacy of state sovereignty. These two approaches are incompatible but managed to coexist so long as expectations from ASEAN were low and its activities could be focused outside its own membership. But the issues that now demand regional management are emanating from within the Southeast Asian region itself or are directly affecting the domestic policies of ASEAN’s member states. As it has been discussed in detail in this research work, there had been several issues in the past few decades where there were differences of perception and opinion among the political elites of the ASEAN member states. Some of the pressing issues where such differences among the governments of the member states were reflected include the concept of flexible engagement of 1998, the issues concerning promotion of democracy and human rights in Burma, membership expansion and the issue of ASEAN’s engagement with the civil society organizations in the region. One of the most critical challenges before the ASEAN elites is to manage these issues as these have important implications for ASEAN’s community building initiatives.

Moreover, the idea of regional cooperation and community building, including mutual responsiveness and socialization, remains narrowly confined to the inter-governmental level within ASEAN. The ASEAN elites may have developed a sense of ‘we-feeling’ and shared understanding among themselves as a result of interaction in closed door ASEAN meetings, but such a sense of collective identity is yet to develop at the larger societal level within the imagined region of Southeast Asia. In this connection, it is significant that since the latter half of the decade of 1990, a network of civil society organizations in the region are trying to promote a different idea of regionalism and community building primarily with the objective of opposing human rights abuses by governments of some of the ASEAN member states. This network of
civil society organizations, particularly at the Track III level has been considerably strengthened as a result of the economic meltdown due to the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98 leading to the collapse of the New Order government under former President Suharto in Indonesia in May 1998, growing challenges to authoritarian regimes in other parts of Southeast Asia and the advent of proposals like ‘flexible engagement’ that encouraged transboundary criticism of domestic repression within the ASEAN member states. The emergence of regional civil society organizations in Southeast Asia criticizing the official ASEAN regionalism on issues such as human rights, environment and democracy promotion demonstrates at the very least, the dissatisfaction with and the incompleteness of the community building enterprise undertaken by the ASEAN elites (Acharya 2001: 207). The regional civil society organizations like the SAPA, ALTSEAN and networks like ASEAN Peoples’ Forum have alternative visions of people-centred regional communities in Southeast Asia that is markedly different from the elite centric model of ASEAN Community.

Moving beyond the institutional framework of ASEAN, this research work has analyzed in detail the activities of various civil society based organizations in the region, which have their respective own imaginations of alternative communities for the region and are trying to influence and significantly mould the form of regional community that the ASEAN elites are trying to establish. Among the civil society groups in the region, there are organizations both the Track II and Track III levels. While the Track II level civil society groups like the ASEAN-ISIS and the ASEAN People’s Assembly have tried to influence official ASEAN policies through open, inclusive and informal dialogue processes, it is the non-elite grassroot level civil society organizations at the Track III process that are more important from the point of view of having different alternative visions of regional communities for the imagined region of Southeast Asia. It is these civil society organizations at the Track III level, which have contested and tried to modify ASEAN’s prevailing policies and practices in order to ensure greater participation of the people in the regional community building process. The ASEAN elites have publicly contested the civil society organizations’ vision of a ‘people-centered ASEAN Community’ and preferred the concept ‘people-oriented ASEAN Community’, which has also been documented in the ASEAN Charter of 2007. It has already been discussed in chapter five of this research work the conceptual difference between a ‘people-oriented ASEAN Community’ preferred by the ASEAN
elites and a ‘people-centered ASEAN Community’, which has been the goal of the non-elite based civil society organizations in the region. The concept of a people-oriented ASEAN can be interpreted as a commitment by the ASEAN elites to emphasize people’s concerns and welfare while formulating regional policies without necessarily integrating people of the region in the policy consultation and decision making process. On the contrary, the regional civil society organizations are demanding a ‘people-centered ASEAN Community’ that will embrace a more democratic decision making structure in which the region’s people (its stakeholders) are empowered through their involvement in deliberations on policies that ultimately affect their welfare. Discursive contestations over these terms of people-oriented and people-centered ASEAN clearly reflects attempts by both the ASEAN elites and civil society activists to impose distinct constructions of ASEAN that will cater to their respective interests (Nesadurai 2012: 173). It seems unlikely that ASEAN will facilitate and institutionalize greater civil society participation in its internal deliberations and decision making process. The sentiments of the ASEAN elites in this respect were also quite clearly reflected in the ASEAN Charter of 2007 in which there is no institutional mechanism for participation by the civil society organizations in the ASEAN consultative processes. Due to these factors, the future of engagement between the civil society representatives from forums like the ASEAN Peoples’ Forum and the ASEAN leaders and officials remains uncertain.

The governments of some of the ASEAN member states like Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Singapore are unhappy with these interactive sessions and have even questioned the mandate and legitimacy of these civil society activists claiming to represent the people of the Southeast Asian region. The Malaysian government was even criticized for failing to control the participation of the civil society organizations at the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference held at Kuala Lumpur in December 2005. The discomfort of the regional governments with the interface between the ASEAN elites and civil society activists prompted senior ASEAN officials in 2009 to decide that these interface sessions would be optional rather than a permanent fixture of ASEAN Summits. It is also significant that five out of the ten civil society representatives chosen by participants at the fifth ASEAN Civil Society Conference or the ASEAN People’s Forum in October 2009 to participate in the interface session were rejected by their respective governments, which include the governments of Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore and the
Philippines. The moderator of the interface session, a civil society representative from Thailand was only allowed to speak at the interface session between the civil society delegates and the ASEAN elites. The statement of the ASEAN Peoples’ Forum in October 2009 mentioned with deep disappointment the absence of government officials in this meeting as it constituted a step backward on ASEAN elites’ commitment towards creating a people-oriented ASEAN and is also contrary to principles on peoples’ participation mentioned in the ASEAN Charter of 2007 (ACSC 2009). The five individuals had been rejected as their names had not been vetted as interface participants by ASEAN officials, who had earlier approved five other individuals more acceptable to the governments of the concerned countries. Even if one accepts that this episode involved a lapse in protocol on the part of regional civil society organizations, the existence of the vetting process calls into question the official commitment to a genuinely participatory ASEAN (Nesadurai 2012: 175). The vetting process has been adopted in order to prevent the representatives of civil society organizations with opposing political views from using the interface as a forum to voice their grievances to the leaders of the ASEAN member states.

Therefore, despite an increasing rhetorical commitment to engagement with the civil society organizations, in reality, the ASEAN as an elite based institution continues to resist the demands of regional civil society for its greater involvement in the ASEAN processes of agenda setting, deliberation and decision making. ASEAN’s sanctioned spaces for participation by regional civil society groups have in reality constrained the civil society organizations from using them to contest ASEAN policies and advancing agenda that conflict with the overall goals of the ASEAN elites. By inviting some of the civil society organizations to contribute to the official ASEAN discourse while limiting their ability to contest policies, participation by civil society groups in its existing form only serves to legitimize ASEAN’s broader reform agenda (Gerard 2014: 273-274). With the objective of restricting and regulating the activities of the regional civil society groups, the ASEAN elites in 2008 initiated a plan to create their own civil society forum, which came to be known as the ASEAN Social Forum. The ASEAN Social Forum was mentioned in the draft of the framework on the ASEAN Socio-Cultural blueprint. The forum, which was supposed to be organized on an annual basis, was intended to explore the best means for effective dialogue, consultation and cooperation between civil society groups and ASEAN. However, it was not clear as to what added value to this kind of a forum due to the presence of
an extensive network of civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region. One possible explanation of having an ASEAN led civil society forum could be the objective of the ASEAN elites to exercise greater control over the activities of civil society groups in the Southeast Asian region (Chandra 2009: 8). It is likely that a forum like ASEAN Social Forum will generate enthusiasm among only the government backed civil society groups and because of this, such a forum is unlikely to bring about any kind of significant or critical inputs that would reform ASEAN’s existing policies and practices.

As it has been outlined in chapter five of this research work, civil society organizations in the region have responded to the restrictions by ASEAN on their activities by pursuing their agenda through ‘created spaces’. The regional civil society organizations have pursued their activities through three types of ‘created spaces’ that include parallel activities, protests and production as well as dissemination of critical knowledge that challenges the existing elite centric nature of ASEAN policies. In the case of ‘created spaces’, parallel activities, protests and the production and dissemination of critical knowledge have allowed the civil society groups to promote an alternative perspective to that presented by the ASEAN elites (Gerard 2014: 283). As far as parallel activities are concerned, civil society groups in the region organize a number of activities parallel to various ASEAN gatherings that mimic a variety of official events, including workshops, forums and even the drafting of agreements. These activities are intended to demonstrate to the ASEAN elites the perspective of the civil society groups relative to official ASEAN proceedings, in the hope that these activities may produce desired outcomes. They have also been organized in instances where ASEAN has not established a channel for civil society participation to show the willingness of civil society organizations to contribute and highlight their absence from official proceedings. But it remains to be noted that unlike forums such as ASEAN Peoples’ Forum and other platforms established by the regional civil society organizations that have been recognized by the ASEAN, the parallel activities involving the civil society groups takes place without any structured interaction between the ASEAN officials and the civil society groups. Protests constitute another instrument through which the civil society organizations can politically conduct their activities outside the spaces sanctioned or recognized by ASEAN. However, protest as a form of political participation has its own limitations and does not always produce the intended outcomes. Also, several civil society organizations conduct their
own research and disseminate information that contests different aspects of ASEAN policy. This information can be disseminated to ASEAN officials with the objective of presenting an alternative source of information regarding any policy or activity, and also to the citizens, so as to inform them of the manner in which the policies of ASEAN and its member states impact on their lives and what needs to be done to challenge these policies (Gerard 2014: 278-280).

In the case of ASEAN, it can be stated quite unequivocally that the rules and restrictions governing the participation by civil society organizations in spaces sanctioned by ASEAN provided very limited means for the civil society organizations to contest policies, largely as a consequence of controls over who can participate and what terms such participation would take place. Like restricting and controlling activities by the civil society organizations in the sanctioned spaces, ASEAN has also tried to regulate the activities by civil society organizations in ‘created spaces’. But due to organizational and managerial distance of these activities from ASEAN, regulating activities by civil society groups in ‘created spaces’ becomes relatively difficult. At times, the ASEAN elites have responded to the activities in ‘created spaces’ by declaring them as prohibited or unlawful by resorting to legal means. In fact, there seems to be limited possibilities for the civil society organizations to meaningfully influence and modify ASEAN policies by participating in ‘created spaces’. But the fact that these civil society organizations are organizing conferences and meetings periodically to deliberate on issues concerning different alternative ideas on people-centered regional communities constitutes a significant development. The alternative ideas on regional communities in Southeast Asia that the civil society organizations are voicing for have not yet taken place and it remains to be thought of and discovered. It appears that these alternative ideas or imaginations on regional communities that are prevalent among the various civil society organizations have not yet crystallized along the lines of their projections and are somewhat akin to what can be termed as inoperative communities (Nancy 1991: 31-32). Although these alternative ideas on regional communities have not yet been materialized in Southeast Asia, they nevertheless reflect to a considerable extent the prevalence of multiple alternative imaginations on regional communities among the civil society groups, which in a way contradict and contests the elite based idea of an ASEAN Community.
This research work has emphasized that the activities of the various civil society groups in the Southeast Asian region indicate a willingness on their part to become active stakeholders in the community building process with their own multiple imaginations of communities for the region that stands apart from the vision of a regional community being promoted by the ASEAN elites. Various civil society organizations have multiple ideas of imagined people-centered regional communities and these civil society based actors are experiencing critical challenges towards their objective of initiating modifications in the nature of regional community that the ASEAN elites are trying to promote. As it has been seen from the above analyses, ASEAN prefers to have civil society organizations in the region that will facilitate the process of achieving the already established goals and projects of the governing elites of ASEAN instead of having civil society groups that will assist ASEAN to set these goals and agenda through a free and fair two way deliberation. The very idea of civil society groups acting as agents to raise the profile of ASEAN among the people of the Southeast Asian region is more in tune with the top-down process, with very little input from the civil society organizations in the decision making process. If the ASEAN elites continue to view these civil society organizations as conduits through which they can make ASEAN better known to the people of the Southeast Asian region, the process of building a regional community will remain top-down instead of bottom up and ASEAN will remain as an elite driven organization without any real empowerment of the people.

However, the very existence of several civil society based organizations in the imagined region of Southeast Asia constitutes a significant development as far as alternative ideas about regional communities are concerned. Civil society organizations in the region like APF, SAPA, ALTSEAN and several others are meeting periodically every year to discuss and deliberate on issues relating to the interests of the people of the region. APF sessions are now held parallel to almost every ASEAN summit at different places across Southeast Asia. This periodic meetings organized by the non-elite based civil society actors at the Track III level in the region is itself a very significant development from the standpoint of alternative imaginations of communities that prevails in the region. These multiple alternative imaginations of communities that exist in the region are markedly different from the elite based idea of ASEAN Community that is being articulated and promoted by the ASEAN elites. It also important to note that these diverse imaginations of communities that exist in the region among the various civil society networks are
primarily people-centered in nature instead of being only people-oriented. Therefore, beyond the official ASEAN Way, the existence of several alternative imaginations of people-centered regional communities symbolizes the desire and aspirations of a significant section of the population, whose voices get represented through these regional civil society groups. Although the regional civil society groups do not always represent the views and aspirations of the people of the region, at least to a certain extent, they do tend to reflect the views and aspirations of a significant section of the population that inhabit the Southeast Asian region. The activities of these civil society organizations, particularly at the Track III level, bears testimony to the fact that several alternative imaginations of regional communities are present within the Southeast Asian region, even if they do exist in embryonic forms.

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