

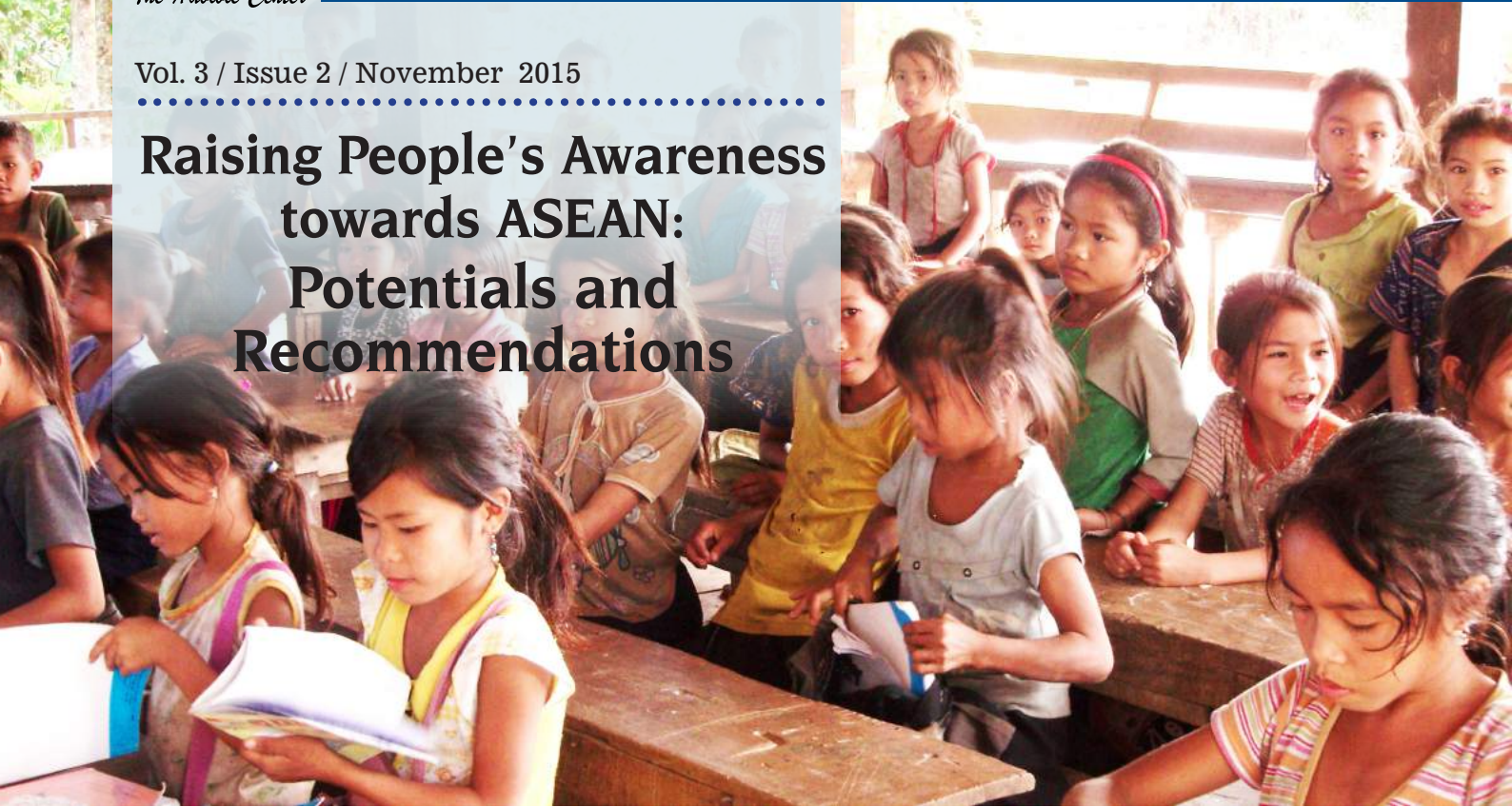


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Raising People's Awareness towards ASEAN: Potentials and Recommendations



ASEAN Briefs is a regular publication about current developments on ASEAN regionalism, especially in the Political-Security, Economic as well as Socio - Cultural Pillars.

The Habibie Center
ASEAN Studies Program ASEAN Briefs

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SUMMARY/BRIEF

At its inception, ASEAN initially placed much of its focus on the political and security aspect of the region. Nowadays, the Association has expanded its reach to include the participation of the people to support the regional integration project, the ASEAN Community. This was done in recognition of the fact that for the ASEAN Community to be a success, it is crucial to have the people's consent and involvement.

This edition of *ASEAN Briefs* explores ASEAN's agenda towards becoming a people-oriented regional organization and examines how well the peoples of the ASEAN region are aware about the Association's very existence. It further explains what ASEAN has been doing in increasing the awareness of the people and analyses what existing constraints are found in ASEAN's endeavor.

In response to those hindrances, this *ASEAN Briefs* presents a number of recommendations for policy makers to help foster greater people's awareness of ASEAN and to reach as wide an audience as possible. These include: using local or multiple languages in raising people's awareness of ASEAN; utilizing more traditional mainstream platforms in promoting ASEAN to complement its use of digital platforms; and engaging local and rural communities to expand its network engagement.



Introduction

December 31, 2015 marked the establishment of the long-anticipated ASEAN Community. When fully realized, this regional integration project will see the fulfillment of the founding fathers' aspirations that the peoples of Southeast Asia should determine their own political, economic and sociocultural courses following decades if not centuries of colonial rule. This is a major development from ASEAN's previous engagement. When it was first incepted, ASEAN was simply projected as a regional mechanism to minimize conflicts among its members and to deal with numerous political and security issues which are commonly found in newly independent states.

Despite its original security and political objective, ASEAN later embarked on a new path by formulating the ASEAN Community initiative. Such an initiative would see the realization of a people-oriented, people-centered and rules-based ASEAN that will allow the peoples of Southeast Asia to:

“enjoy the benefits from a more integrated and connected Community encompassing enhanced cooperation in the political-security, economic and socio-cultural pillars for sustainable, equitable and inclusive development.”¹

A vital prerequisite for the successful fulfillment of the ASEAN Community is the support and involvement of the peoples of Southeast Asia themselves. Without the active engagement of the people, the benefits of the ASEAN Community will be largely limited in its breath and its depth, thus threatening its long-term sustainability. People's awareness is also crucial not only so that the ASEAN Community will provide greater opportunity for them, but it is also essential for ASEAN in fulfilling the Association's goals. Furthermore, the lack of awareness may translate into pessimism, skepticism and rejection towards the entire ASEAN regional integration if it becomes portrayed as only an elitist, state-centric project.

Further, the people's awareness will provide a set of new measure in the contemporary landscape of ASEAN. Arguably, the current state of ASEAN with the numerous transboundary non-traditional challenges it faces directly affects the livelihood of millions of ASEAN citizen. By being aware of their position in this ASEAN Community, the people will be able to determine the role that they could contribute in overcoming those challenges. This is a leverage that ASEAN did not get to enjoy previously when it was still a relatively state-centric association and which a people-orientated ASEAN Community is hoped to rectify.

The Current State of People's Awareness towards ASEAN

It is widely considered that the level of ASEAN awareness is varied across many sectors. A study conducted by the ASEAN Secretariat on 2,200 respondents from the general public across the ten ASEAN member states found that 76% lacked a basic understanding of what ASEAN is and what it is striving to do. This was despite the fact that 81% were initially familiar with ASEAN's existence.²

Nevertheless, ASEAN's awareness appears to be positive among the youth, especially university students. An average of 92.9% of ASEAN university students from the 10 member states showed a positive attitude towards aspects of regional integration and cooperation. The promising youth awareness is an important aspect of the ASEAN Community building process as the youth of ASEAN represents one of the region's greatest assets. With 65% of the ASEAN region under the age of 35 years old, the youth represent one of the most important groups in ASEAN that will help ASEAN realise its vision of the ASEAN Community.³ This is true not only because they will be the ones that will experience the ASEAN Community, but also as future leaders, they will be the ones that shape the ASEAN Community as it moves forward.

In the economic sector, the situation appears somewhat discouraging. Singapore as one of the largest economies in ASEAN disclosed that an average of 2 out of 5 firms lacked adequate understanding on the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).⁴ Meanwhile, a total of 82.60% people did not know about their possibility to work in other ASEAN countries following the implementation of the AEC. In the case of Indonesia, the figure was more worrying with only 25.9% of the population aware about the existence of the AEC. This is not much different compared to the level of awareness among businessman which is 27.8%.⁵ This low level of comprehensive understanding arguably will result in the business sectors of ASEAN member-states' having inadequate capacity and skill preparation to fully take advantage of the AEC as well as to respond to the challenges that the AEC poses.

It might be expected that government officials have the highest awareness about the ASEAN Community. However, the apparent lack of interest from some ministries and even some governments is worrying. Although the trend towards regional economic integration emerged ever since 1977, successive Indonesian governments appear little late in preparing themselves for it. For example, ASEAN does not seem to be an important priority for the government as it has not been included in Indonesia's National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN). Furthermore, the State Ministry of National Development Planning (BAPPENAS) also has no Directorate of ASEAN.⁶ This is concerning

as it is difficult to imagine how the people will take an interest in ASEAN if the government itself has little interest towards the Association's regional integration project.⁷

The lack of awareness towards ASEAN as shown above is certainly worrying. However, the above arguably only illustrates the level of awareness among certain segments of society. It is also crucial to remember that the awareness gap will be larger among those at the grass roots level, particularly those in rural communities. Indeed, it is important to remember that the ASEAN Community means more than integrating the capitals of ASEAN member-states and that those living in border areas will likely be most affected by the AEC's implementation.

In 2015, 330.6 million of the ASEAN population lives in rural areas. By 2025, it is expected that 80% of the region's population will live in rural area and small cities.⁸ This group of people, therefore, requires further attention in the awareness promotion as they will be significantly impacted by the ASEAN Community. However, current ASEAN's attempt does not seem to be crafted around the characteristics of this certain group.

In order to demonstrate this point, it may be helpful to highlight some of ASEAN's attempt to raise awareness. This includes for example, ASEAN's active campaigning about the ASEAN Community and its activity through internet and popular social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. ASEAN also has regularly produced publications and seminars on ASEAN-related issues. Not to mention are the many fun and public engagement events undertaken as one of the means to introduce ASEAN to people.

The Association has also worked closely with separate entities such as the ASEAN Foundation which was established in 1999 to help raising ASEAN's profile among the people.⁹ It is also mentioned in the Charter that the ASEAN Foundation "shall support the Secretary-General of ASEAN and collaborate with the relevant ASEAN bodies to support ASEAN community building by promoting greater awareness of the ASEAN identity, people-to-people interaction, and close collaboration among the business sector, civil society, academia and other stakeholders in ASEAN" (ASEAN Charter, Article 14)

ASEAN has also invited certain Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to take part in awareness promotion. The 2008 ASEAN Social Forum identified a few important characteristics from the CSOs in order to help ASEAN and its goal to expand people's knowledge about ASEAN. In collaboration with the ASEAN Foundation, CSOs are given the task in promoting ASEAN identity as well as supporting the creation of ASEAN Community.¹⁰ In this regard, the ASEAN Charter accredited certain CSOs as special entities and listed 58 of them in the Appendix section of the ASEAN Charter.

Constraints in Raising the ASEAN Awareness

Despite the efforts undertaken by ASEAN to raise awareness about the ASEAN Community, there are a number of constraints that exists. Among the roadblocks that need to be addressed in popularizing ASEAN among the people are as follows:

1. *The use of non-down-to-earth language in introducing ASEAN to the people.*

Despite ASEAN's current ideal to move from its elite-centrist nature and embrace the people-centered notion, many of the Association's effort has not been formulated to fit with this objective.

First, the majority of ASEAN's news and issues are unfamiliar to the people. While negotiations on a Code of Conduct for Parties to the South China Sea may be interesting for policy makers and international relations analyst, they are of little use to the general public. Thus far, ASEAN coverage is dominated by stories about its summits or meetings, and there is not enough exposure to what the Community will bring to the people once fully realized. It is also apparent that there is not enough focus on ASEAN as a multi-issue body, since most coverage barely invests in ASEAN as local issues. The Head of the Thai PBS, Thepchai Yong identified that the word 'ASEAN' is closely revolved around the body. Meanwhile the important stories that people need to grasp are beyond the organization and its meetings.¹¹

Second, the use of English language as ASEAN's major engagement tool with the people is arguably ineffective. Most of ASEAN's publications, campaigns and other materials use only English. As shown in the images below, ASEAN is trying to create a sense of importance towards its ASEAN Community by tapping into popular social media and using English as a mean to reach a wider audience.



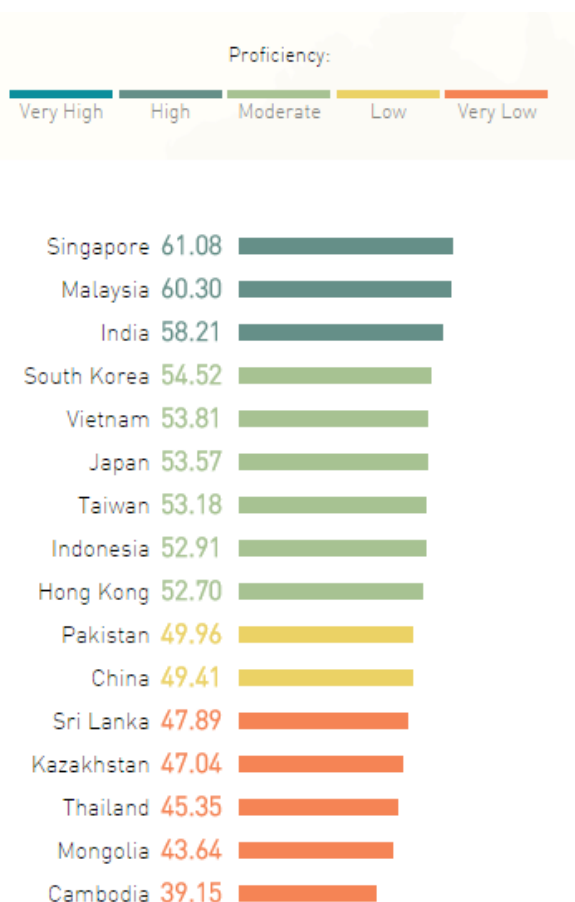
Image 1. ASEAN's Twitter Page

Such attempts by ASEAN is quite understandable as English has become increasingly important. It is also stated officially in Article 34 of ASEAN Charter that “The working language of ASEAN shall be English.”¹² However, in order to create a comprehensive understanding for the whole ASEAN population, the use of English alone would not be effective, since the level of English proficiency in each of the countries are varied.

Indeed, the English proficiency found in ASEAN member states falls into two major categories. The first one is the Outer Circle countries, including Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. This category explains those that were formerly colonies of an English-speaking country. Therefore, their level of English proficiency is relatively high compare to the so-called Expanding Circle countries, such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.¹³

This following survey discloses similar result, with Singapore and Malaysia having high level of English proficiency, Indonesia and Vietnam on the moderate level, as well as Thailand and Cambodia sitting at the very low end.¹⁴ In this sense, the focus on English to promote ASEAN awareness comes into question given that a significant segment of the ASEAN population lacks English proficiency.

Figure 1. English Proficiency Index in Asia



Source: English First (2015)

2. The use of internet platform

One of the major problems with the use of internet in raising the ASEAN awareness is that internet privileges are not enjoyed by the majority of population.

Despite the growth of internet usage in the region, there remains a major gap of internet availability across ASEAN member states. The region’s internet penetration varies from as much as 73% population in Singapore to only 1% in Myanmar. Currently, the internet penetration rate in ASEAN as whole is approximately 30% with rapidly expanding use meaning a staggering 70% are not at all impacted by ASEAN’s use of digital platforms to promote ASEAN awareness. Indeed, several ASEAN member states suffer from not only poor internet coverage but also low bandwidths, latency, network congestion and other service quality issue.¹⁵

This illustration resonates well in the case of Indonesia. The country is home for only 3 million households with internet access at their houses. This number reflects only 5% from the 57 million households that enjoy broadband internet access. Moreover in Indonesia, there is a significant gap in internet access for those living on the islands of Java and Sumatra with those living in the outer islands. ASEAN DNA expressed that the average internet speed contributes to this small number of internet users.

A test data obtained between March 2014 and April 2015 shows that Indonesia ranked at 104th among Asian-Pacific countries in terms of average internet speed. It achieved a score of 4.1 Mbps, slower than most ASEAN countries, such as Brunei and Myanmar (4.9 Mbps), Malaysia (5.5 Mbps), Cambodia (5.7 Mbps), Vietnam (13.1 Mbps), Thailand (17.7 Mbps) and Singapore (61 Mbps). It also described Indonesia’s internet speed as a walking hippopotamus.¹⁶ The full data of the average ASEAN internet speed can be found below:

Figure 2. Average ASEAN Internet Speed Index (in Mbps)

Philippines	3.6
Laos	4.0
Indonesia	4.1
Myanmar	4.9
Brunei	4.9
Malaysia	5.5
Cambodia	5.7
Vietnam	13.1
Thailand	17.7
Singapore	61.0

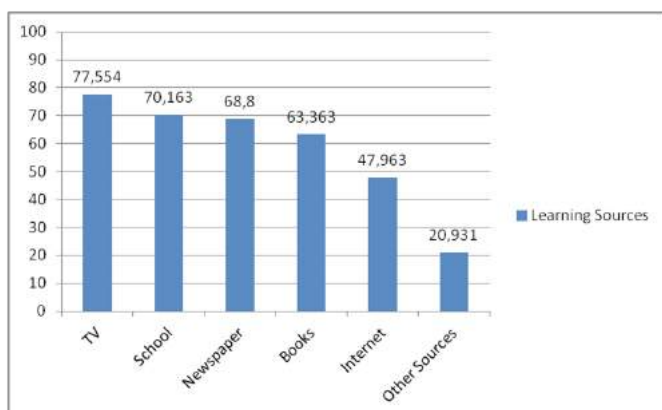
Source: <http://www.netindex.com>

On a bigger picture, the above numbers also give a glimpse of ASEAN countries' average internet speed with the number of 12.4 Mbps, while the average global internet speed is 17.5 Mbps.

In this regard, these figures further emphasize that the use of internet in supporting the raise of ASEAN awareness is ineffective due to the low level of internet penetration in the region and therefore its availability is limited and exclusive to those who can obtain such access.

Some existing surveys recognize other forms of sources to be the most effective ways of learning about ASEAN, especially among the youth. Examples include more traditional mediums such as television, school, newspaper and books. Unfortunately, although the internet is the most-employed media by ASEAN to mainstream its efforts, it is actually ranked lowest in popularity among the people in how they learn about the Association.

Figure 3. How young generation learned about ASEAN?



Source: ASEAN Foundation (2007)

This following table also shows how media platforms are ranked in Indonesia, given that the country is ASEAN's most populous country. Confirming the previous data, internet does not have as much popularity as television in being the people's preference as a source of information.

Figure 4. Top 5 Indonesian Media

Television	95%
Internet	33%
Radio	20%
Newspaper	12%
Tabloid	6%
Magazine	5%

Source: AC Nielsen (2014)

Arguably, ASEAN has placed too much focus on popularizing its profile through the internet and social media despite data showing such platforms provides the least impact in increasing awareness. More popular sources, such as television or radio has greater potentials to deliver maximum exposure to the people, especially to those who live in rural communities with little access to digital platforms.

3. Invisible Supporting Entities

Despite the noble objectives that each of the ASEAN-accredited CSOs and other entities holds, their presence in supporting ASEAN's profile and awareness is questionable. For instance, the ASEAN Foundation's role with CSOs is limited in providing IT program, and therefore it has not created a direct space for people to understand about the ASEAN Community.¹⁷

With regards to the ASEAN-affiliated CSO's, accredited status was only awarded to 58 CSOs. Out of those 58, only 10 of them are development or society-oriented organizations. Meanwhile, the rest of the number comprises of professional groups or industries.¹⁸ Curiously ASEAN-accredited CSO's include groups such as the ASEAN Kite Council and the ASEAN Vegetable Oils Club.

In order to achieve accredited status by ASEAN, CSOs have to explain the background of their application, including the details of the organizations' constitution, membership, and activity. ASEAN also requires them to invite state officials to participate in their event.¹⁹

At the grass roots level, such requirements will turn into a limited means to promote ASEAN among the people. Such formal criteria are major roadblocks for local or home-grown CSOs with their humble standard of operation to take part in the community building project. Only established CSOs with well-formulated operation system are feasible for the accredited status.

This particular CSO policy from ASEAN would not be effective in reaching the excluded part of population, especially those who have no prior knowledge about the Association. It will only be effective in covering the professional or industrial community as the major group in the accredited CSOs. Therefore, it will further create gap in the attempt of understanding ASEAN and leave a certain groups unknowledgeable.

Recommendation

This *ASEAN Briefs* has pointed out the importance of ASEAN awareness and knowledge. It has also recognized the current state of people's perception and stances towards ASEAN. After evaluating the existing constraints,

this edition of ASEAN Briefs would like to offer some recommendations to increase ASEAN awareness for the peoples of the region.

First, ASEAN should employ multiple languages in raising people's awareness. ASEAN's efforts to raise awareness should not be limited to the use of English given the limited proficiency of English among the peoples of ASEAN. ASEAN should recognize and utilize the great linguistic diversity of different local languages in order to communicate about the ASEAN Community better. It will further create a sense of inclusivity to the people. ASEAN also needs to articulate the idea of the opportunity to the people, that being identified as an ASEAN citizen will give them additional leverage to just identifying themselves as a citizen of their own country.

Second, ASEAN should utilize more traditional mainstream platforms to raise people's awareness. The Internet, as ASEAN's main tool of promotion does not reach enough of ASEAN's population given that internet penetration across the region is still relatively low. Therefore, an outreach program to get every population exposed to the idea of ASEAN should be done through more popular mass of communication, such as television or radio.

Third, ASEAN should consider more effective partners to expand its network engagement. A certain engagement with local and rural community will create a sense of inclusiveness for those people located far from the capitals of ASEAN member states who will no less feel the impact of the AEC. Local approaches by local communities are crucial in transferring the idea of ASEAN among them. One example includes the action taken by Indonesia's President Joko Widodo who gathered local leaders under the Mount of Merbabu at the end of 2015 and explained a few important facts about the AEC in a very down to earth manner. While, this might be not a grand gesture, it has a profound significance in ASEAN's attempt to promote the Community. Other ASEAN Leaders should therefore do similar activities in their respective states.

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About ASEAN Studies Program

The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights.

The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.

About Talking ASEAN

Talking ASEAN is a monthly public dialogue held at The Habibie Center in Jakarta. Covering a wide array of issues related to ASEAN, Talking ASEAN addresses topics of: Economic Integration, Socio-cultural, & Democracy, human rights and regional peace, among others. Featuring local and visiting experts, Talking ASEAN is one of a series of twelve dialogues regularly held each month and open to a target audience consisting of ASEAN officials, foreign ambassadors & diplomats, academics, university students, businesses, and the media.



The **Habibie Center** was founded by Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie and family in 1999 as an independent, non-governmental, non-profit organisation. The vision of The Habibie Center is to create a structurally democratic society founded on the morality and integrity of cultural and religious values.

The mission of The Habibie Center are **first**, to establish a structurally and culturally democratic society that recognizes, respects, and promotes human rights by undertaking study and advocacy of issues related to democratization and human rights, and **second**, to increase the effectiveness of the management of human resources and the spread of technology.

Cover Image : A primary school in a village in northern rural Laos, Wikipedia



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