



The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) flag (right) leads the flags of the member countries during an Asean Regional Forum meeting in Singapore recently. **With 2015 barely three months away, the Asean Economic Community ought to be on the lips and minds of many.** AFP pic

Is Asean ready for the AEC?

REAL IMPACT: This is one idea that cannot remain abstract and distant much longer

I AM, at present, lecturing at the newly-minted Asean Studies Centre (ASC) that is part of the Faculty for Politics and Social Sciences (Fisipol) of Gadjah Mada University (Universitas Gadjah Mada, UGM), Jogjakarta. Over the past two weeks I have been engaged in lectures, seminars, discussions and a conference about Asean integration and the likely impact and reaction to the Asean Economic Community (AEC) next year.

That those around me — scholars and students alike — know of the AEC and are looking into its impact is hardly surprising, considering that all of them are scholars of International Relations, Southeast Asian studies, International Political Economy and the like.

But the most surprising thing that happened to me last week was a conversation I had with my beca (rickshaw) driver Yudi, who was taking me to a conference venue. Yudi asked if I was going to talk about the MEA. "What is

the MEA Yudi?" I asked him. He immediately replied: "The Majelis Ekonomi Asean of course! (AEC)"

That my beca driver Yudi has heard of the AEC was, for me, simply astounding. We have known each other for more than a decade now, but it never crossed my mind that Yudi would be interested in the AEC — though I have to admit that that says more about my bias than his. Upon reflection it seems obvious that Yudi the beca driver would know about the AEC as his job happens to be one that is intimately and directly linked to external political-economic variables.

Yudi, as a Jogja-based beca driver, earns about 50 thousand Rupiah on a good day if he is lucky. He has a wife and two kids to support, and both he and his wife work to make ends meet. But as a beca driver in Jogja Yudi's income is directly linked to external economic conditions: During the peak tourist months of June to August, when European tourists come to Jogja in droves, his income rises. During the lean off-peak seasons his income can drop drastically and there are days when he earns nothing at all. I recall how in the wake of the Bali

bombings, tourist numbers to Indonesia dropped visibly, and Yudi was pushed to the edge of desperation as a result of having no passengers and

no income.

For Yudi, the Asean Economic Community is not a distant concept or something abstract: In real terms freedom of movement between Asean countries means more internal tourism which translates into more Asean tourists who come all-year round, thus spreading his income longer. This means that should Asean tourism increase, beca drivers like Yudi will be less affected by the rises and dips in Western tourist numbers. So in a very real sense the AEC is not something distant, but very real for him.

As we approach the year 2015 when the Asean Economic Community will come into existence, it is imperative that all Asean economies work towards further socialisation of the concept, so that it becomes something tangible and meaningful as it does for Yudi. The Asean Studies Centre (ASC) of UGM has already begun to organise AEC days, workshops, events and public education programmes in schools and other public domains in Jogjakarta and beyond.

But the question is has the same effort been made elsewhere in Indonesia, and across Asean?

As 2015 approaches — it is barely three months away now — the Asean Economic Community ought to be on the lips and minds of many. Owing to the fact that the AEC will eventually impact upon the lives of millions of Southeast Asians across the archipelago, this is one idea that cannot remain abstract and distant much longer.



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