Preparedness of Lao People's Democratic Republic to Implement ASEAN Common Visa (ACV)

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Abstract

The concept and practice of free migration has long existed, but the modern border pass and common visa have only been used since the establishment of the Schengen Agreement of the European Union in 1995. Since its establishment, the Schengen Visa has been an extraordinary example of the success of a borderless region and led to vibrant in growth and social development. ASEAN, as a new economic community that tries to set itself as a beneficiary of the lessons learned from the European Union, has been struggling in establishing its own common visa region. The reasons encompass economic, political, and social-cultural concerns. This study focuses specifically on the Lao PDR and it aims to assess the preparedness of the country if the region were to establish the common visa system. The study employs a qualitative approach and collects data via an interview questionnaire. Research data are collected from interviews of six high-ranking government officials. Using the theme generating and data coding approach in ATLAS, a qualitative data analysis program, this study found that the preparedness of the Lao PDR in implementing the ASEAN Common Visa (ACV) spans nine key factors: (1) geographical location, (2) visa policy, (3) immigration control, (4) quota of foreign workers in the private sector, (5) information and communications technology (ICT) in connectivity development, (6) electronic systems in the consular sector, (7) infrastructure, (8) population mobility, and (9) attitudes towards the ACV. After categorizing these factors based on economic, political, and social-cultural dimensions, it was found that population mobility is a common concern among the three dimensions. This suggests that the Lao PDR needs to focus on improvements in border management, synchronization of information and communication technology, infrastructure, and human resources development among the relevant sectors.

Keywords: ASEAN, common visa, economic, political-security, social-cultural, Lao PDR

JEL Classifications: F22, N45, O53, R58, Z38

1. Introduction

At present, the scale of tourism, labor workers as well as unwanted migration flows has affected host countries in Southeast Asia and the region as a whole. Czaika and Neumayer (2017) noted that the mobility of individuals across borders is seen to be a double-edged sword by most governments. On the one hand, many countries receive economic benefits that are typically linked to this mobility in the form of trade, tourism, and the investment of foreign capital (foreign direct investment, or FDI). On the other hand, the cross-border flow of people is of concern both for the legal and policing issues related to illegal immigrants and for security reasons (Czaika & Neumayer, 2017).

Concerning cross-border movement, a visa is a crucial component of the border regime (Neumayer, 2006; Czaika & de Haas, 2017; Czaika & Neumayer, 2017; Bertoli & Moraga, 2018). According to the Worldwide Visa Bureau (2018), it is important to have an understanding of various visa types and the requirements of a country because the types of visa depend on the purpose of travelling and duration of stay, like a temporary or permanent visitor. Visas are typically divided into four different categories, which are no visa, visa on arrival, eVisa and visa required (UNWTO, 2015). In this regard, Neumayer (2006) highlighted that it is necessary to consider the role of passports and visa restrictions in regulating the entrance of travelers. Visa restrictions have a direct relevance for governments that attempt to control and eventually prevent immigration by certain groups of people (Neumayer, 2006). The most extensive control of

travelers takes place at diplomatic representations during the visa application process (Bigo & Guild, 2005). A study conducted by Beine, Bertoli and Moraga (2016) identified significant factors affecting the flows of international migration, namely origin or destination-specific factors (including income, credit constraints, expectations, general immigration policies, unemployment rate and environmental factors), and dyadic factors (including networks, bilateral immigration policies, as well as linguistic and cultural proximity). Peri and Ortega (2012) also identified the key determinants of international migration flows of people and goods, which were income and immigration-migration policies.

It is also important that researchers and policy makers evaluate the effectiveness of immigration restrictions in order to control immigration flows. In this context, a number of regional blocs have been created by member nations around the world. The reasons why countries have decided to create their own blocs are economic, security, identity promotion, or sometimes just because they are situated next to each other, i.e., geographic proximity (Albertin, 2007; Mapuva & Muyengwa-Mapuva, 2014; Kerremans & Switky, 2018). According to Brand (1992), the most well-known is the European Union, the regional bloc of Europe. The corresponding regional bloc of Africa is the African Union, while in South America it is Mercado Comun del Sur. In Southeast Asia, the regional bloc is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Brand, 1992).

According to the ASEAN framework, broadening and deepening regional integration is the main goal, and this plays an important role in the economic development of the Lao PDR, particularly in investment, trade and tourism. As an ASEAM Member State (AMS), to be consistent with the ASEAN framework, the Lao PDR has to adjust its national policy frameworks, including for security, social-cultural and economic development (ERIA, 2017). Good evidence is visible in the 7th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan for 2011-2015, which set the goal for the Lao PDR to succeed in the co-establishment of the AEC in 2015. Another example is that the Lao PDR had to promulgate the new Law on Anti-Human Trafficking in order to facilitate the implementation of the ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (ERIA, 2017). At the same time, the Lao PDR will keep playing a crucial role for ASEAN development. Economically, currently there is a short railway running from Vientiane to the Lao-Thai borders which then connects to the railway network of Thailand. By constructing the Lao-China railway through the Lao PDR, the Lao PDR could shortcut the route from the ASEAN region to a big market like China. This railway will be the starting portion of the China-Malay Peninsula Railway, which is one of China's most important "Belt and Road" plans (Anan, 2017).

The aim of the present study is to advance and deepen the understanding of how the proposed ASEAN Common Visa could impact the Lao PDR in terms of economic growth, security management and social-cultural impacts. This then leads to the mapping of indicators of preparedness that the Lao PDR should have in order to implement the ASEAN Common Visa. Conducting this study through qualitative methods will illustrate how the ASEAN Common Visa can influence the Lao PDR as well as determine how Lao PDR policy makers can contribute to the common visa's policy characteristics.

2. Literature Review

The preparedness of the Lao PDR in implementing the ASEAN Common Visa is limited within the scope of literature of the ASEAN Economic Community region. To some extent, it will be compared with the case of the European Union. This includes assessment of the effects and influences of the political-security, economic, and social-cultural considerations.

Previous research has mostly studied the common visa in Schengen countries (Meloni, 2005; Lavenex, 2006; Zaiotti, 2011; Dumbrovská & Fialová, 2014; UNWTO & WTTC, 2012; European Union, 2013a; Bigo & Guild, 2005). Studies have discussed the work before its implementation and the impacts on the European Union (EU) countries. Discussions have mostly covered several aspects, including policy, cultural, and immigration issues. A number of case studies have examined the effects of facilitating visas on tourist arrivals (UNWTO & WTTC, 2012; European Union, 2013b). Furthermore, the EU has also issued guidelines on implementing agreements for visa facilitation. As agreements on visa facilitation are to promote connections between EU citizens and non-EU citizens, it is also important to strengthen internal security (European Commission, 2018). However, there have also been some difficulties in regard to the procedure for visa application. For instance, the process of applying for the Schengen visa is very costly for certain applicants, and indirect costs for obtaining the supporting documentation also need to be taken into account in order to meet the requirements of the visa process (European Union, 2013a).

Regarding visa facilitation in the AMS, the Habibie Center conducted its comprehensive study on whether it is feasible for the ASEAN region to have a common visa. This study was also used to consider political-security, economic and social-cultural issues affecting implementing the ASEAN Common Visa (ACV). General and technical

recommendations were also provided for the AMS and the region as a whole. It is of concern that the management of the ASEAN border should be harmonized and that the wider policy of immigration should assert the purpose of sharing information and improving security across ASEAN (Chandra et al., 2017). In addition, the ACV is primarily focused on facilitating the movement ease for non-ASEAN visitors in the region, but in parallel, it is necessary to put effort into scoping arrangements regarding visa free travel for AMS travelers in their own region.

2.1 The Concept of a Regional Common Visa

Apart from ensuring security and immigration control and being a measure of reciprocal treatment between friendly nations, Visa is also a means of generating revenue for a country (Chandra et al., 2017). In other situations, countries use visas to limit the number of tourists for capacity reasons, such as to support efforts to avoid physical, economic, and social-cultural or environmental destruction, and so on (UNWTO, 2012). Increasingly, a visa is also used for the development of the tourism industry. Indeed, international tourism has rapidly grown in the last six decades, a phenomenon which has been accompanied by an evaluation of the quality, reliability, and functionality of visas, as well as other travel documents (UNWTO, 2013). Furthermore, a study conducted by Neumayer (2010) provided an estimation of the damaging impact that is exerted by visa restrictions on bilateral travel in a country dyad dataset covering the period 1995 to 2005. It was found that visa restrictions decrease such travel by on average between 52% and 63%, depending on the exact model and specification chosen.

The 2017 Habibie Center study demonstrated that a regional common visa can bring potential benefits to a region. The study found at least five key reasons why countries in a regional setting may wish to pursue a regional common visa policy (Chandra et al., 2017). Firstly, the policy of a regional single visa facilitates ease of travel for visitors coming from outside the region. Apart from easing the procedures for obtaining a visa for visiting travelers, such a policy attracts tourism, which would, in turn, generate spill-over effects on job creation and economic growth in the participating countries (Chandra et al., 2017). Secondly, the imposition of a region-wide single visa regime may also positively affect the image of the issuing region. Thirdly, the introduction of a regional common visa policy may also pave the way for reform in immigration- and border-management related policies. The fourth reason is the potential role of a regional common visa policy as a model for the deepening of integration in other areas of cooperation amongst countries in the regional group. Finally, it may also serve as a collective bargaining tool to enhance the foreign policies of a regional group (Chandra et al., 2017). For instance, the Schengen Agreement is broadly considered to be one of the greatest achievements of internal integration by the European Union (EU) (Wang, 2016). The Schengen Area permits the free movement of people, capital, and goods (Wang, 2016). However, citizens from some non-EU countries need to apply for a visa in order to travel to the Schengen Area (Wang, 2016). According to the European Commission (2018), a short-stay visa from one of the Schengen States authorizes its holder for up to 90 days in any 180-day period to travel throughout the 26 Schengen States. Visas for visits exceeding that period remain subject to national procedures.

There also exist potential disadvantages. According to a study by the European Migration Network (EMN) on the impact of visa liberalization on countries of destination, the major immediate consequence of visa liberalization has been a high increase in the number of asylum seekers, accompanied by criminal activities such as human trafficking (EMN Sweden, 2018). Concern over this issue has also been commonly voiced amongst immigration and foreign ministry officials in the ASEAN region, with many arguing that a single visa initiative could make it difficult for national authorities to monitor the coming and going of terrorist suspects in the region (based on an unofficial discussion between a member of the research team from the Habibie Center and officials of the Member States of ASEAN that took place in Manila, in November 2016) (Chandra et al., 2017).

2.2 Historical Background of the ASEAN Common Visa

The ASEAN Common Visa (ACV) aims to enhance intra and inter ASEAN travel by making the region a single tourism destination (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). As more people around the world see Southeast Asia as an attractive place to visit, invest in, and live, the ASEAN region is working on easing visa requirements for ASEAN nationals and foreign tourists, and at the same time, designing a common visa framework to boost foreign visitors. The development of facilitative and innovative visa arrangements and the consideration of an ACV will stimulate greater business and tourism growth in the region. While the advantages for the private sector include a relaxed regulation process and increased business opportunities from tourism, the public sector will benefit from increased revenues through direct and indirect resources (Chandra et al., 2017).

An ACV was, therefore, officially first talked about at the 13th meeting of the Directors-General of Immigration Departments and Heads of Consular Affairs Divisions of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (DGICM), conducted in Manila in November 2009. The outcome was cautious, for the issue was postponed for further consideration until all AMS were ready to act. Later, advocacy commitment to a "Single Visa" within the Southeast Asian region was

renewed by all ASEAN Ministers of Tourism in the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan 2011-2015 in 2011. Moreover, it was stated in the Chair's Statement at the ASEAN Foreign Affairs Ministers' Meeting on 19th July 2011 that all the ministers agreed to order ASEAN Senior Officials' Meetings and its sectorial bodies, including DGICM, to conduct feasibility studies on progressive visa relaxation and common visa development for non-ASEAN nationals based on the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity. Then, at the 'ASEAN–Australia Regional Approaches to Risk Mitigation Workshop' that took place in Bangkok, Thailand in August 2015, AMS discussed the formation of two key bodies, namely an *Ad-Hoc* Working Group on the ACV for considering the feasibility of the ACV, as well as a body for coordinating the meetings of the working group and managing the ACV operation. In parallel, the workshop also proposed that Indonesia initiates and coordinates the inaugural meeting of the said Working Group, with all AMS to provide representatives to this newly established institution (Chandra et al., 2017).

2.3 Status-quo of the Lao PDR

For the case of Lao PDR, ASEAN Common Visa is likely to generate positive impacts on its economy including job creation, trade and investment opportunities with and from partner countries, and welfare enhancement for its citizens (Chandra et al., 2017). The visa would allow visa holders to travel to Lao PDR from other ASEAN countries with only one visa applied at any of the ASEAN Member States' borders. Nevertheless, establishing the ASEAN Common Visa may bring a lot of challenges, specifically in security matters, as escalating movement across borders has increased the number of transnational crimes in the region, which includes trafficking in person and drugs as well as money laundering in the country. Chandra et al., (2017) explains that for country such as Lao PDR and adopt regional common visa policy, the government needs to seriously take in consideration the cost and benefit of national policies and regulations form, fee structure and revenue distribution, human resources arrangements, the environment protection, challenges to social norms, and impacts on cultures and so on.

Tourism and Visa Policy in Lao PDR

Lao PDR is strategically situated in the center of Southeast Asia and Indochina, and it is considered to be an add-on destination (UNCTAD, 2018). The development of tourism in the country is probably influenced in various aspects by issues at the regional level. These begin with worldwide tourism trends regarding the movement of tourists, which are influenced by economic and political situations, climate change, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, etc. Furthermore, the development of unique tourism products for the Lao PDR, tourist circuits linking the Lao PDR with neighboring countries, and an increase in tourism cooperation with regional countries will be necessary aspects in contributing to tourism success in the Lao PDR (UNCTAD, 2018).

Tourism is one of the eight priority programs of the socio-economic development strategy of the Lao government (TDD, 2018). The National Tourism Strategy for the period 2016-2025 was set up by the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism in 2016, in the line with the policy of the Lao government (TDD, 2018; UNCTAD, 2018). The visitor numbers increased every year in the period 1990 to 2016 (TDD, 2018). This trend has changed since 2016, with a decrease of 10% in 2016 (4,239,047 visitors) and a further decrease of 8.7% in 2017 (3,868,838 visitors), but tourist arrivals slightly increased in 2018 by 8.2% compared to 2017 (4,186,432) (TDD, 2018). The main visitors are from China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Korea, France, the USA, Germany, the UK, Australia and Canada (TDD, 2018). Furthermore, the overall trends of tourist arrivals to the Lao PDR in 2018 increased. The Lao PDR experienced a 19% increase from the Asia Pacific, a 5% increase from other AMS, an 8% increase of Americans, and a 2% increase of European; however, the market from the Middle East and Africa dropped 19% (TDD, 2018).

Other than the number of visitors, the length of stay and the amount of spending per day are significant measures (TDD, 2017; TDD, 2018). The first measure looks at the number of visitor days, meaning the visitor numbers multiplied by the average length of stay. Accordingly, the biggest market is still international visitors, with 38% of all visitor days (TDD, 2018). Taking the average expenditure into consideration, the group of international visitors is even more important, as it accounts for 50% of all estimated expenditure. For instance, China accounts for 19.3% of all visitors and 19% of estimated expenditure in 2018, compared to only 6.5% of visitors and 4% of expenditure in 2012 (TDD, 2018).

Public Security and Social-Cultural Concerns of the Lao PDR

The foreign policy of the Lao PDR upholds the principle of peace, independence, friendship and cooperation to pursue its national security and development agenda. Over the past decade, the country has become an active and responsible member of various sub-regional, regional and international organizations (United Nations, 2018). In terms of the immigration sector, the country currently has 27 international checkpoints, comprising four international airports (Vientiane, Luangprabang, Savannakhet and Champasack), one train station in Vientiane, four friendship bridges

(Vientiane, Savannakhet, Khammouan and Bokeo), and 18 border checkpoints where visitors cannot obtain visas on arrival (Immigration Department, 2014). The overall security situation does not appear to be dire. In 2018, only four fraudulent passports and seven passports that contained fake stamps were confiscated, and 53 cases involving investigations into illegal smuggling were conducted. In general, the Lao PDR has political stability, peace and security. However, one of the obstacles which limits the Lao PDR's ability to fruitfully deal with problems is the coordination mechanism with other AMS to repatriate deportees AMS (MPI, 2016).

The implementation of the ACV raises social-cultural concerns for the government of Lao PDR. More specifically, a more open visa policy could leave some loopholes for transnational crime, human trafficking, and the cross-border sex trade businesses. For instance, Molland (2012) explains the human trafficking along the Lao-Thai border as a phenomenon due to three influences, namely the institutional practices that shape and respond to the external world, the range of strategies and maneuvers being used by individuals and groups to achieve their goals, and bad faith or deliberate ignorance among anti-traffickers and the authorities.

3. Research Framework

3.1 The Selection of Research Methods

A research study can use a range of research methods depending on the kind of research and the form of research questions (Madison, 2011; Yin, 2013; Opoku, Ahmed & Akotia, 2016). Yin (2013) identified four research methods, namely document analysis, interviews, case studies, and experiments. These four methods can be classified based on three significant conditions, which consist of the form of research questions, the requirement for controlling behavioral events, and the focus on contemporary events. In this study, the researcher attempts to investigate what factors can impact the preparedness of the Lao PDR as regards implementing the ASEAN Common Visa by undertaking qualitative research through document analysis and interviews. This is because the research involves the interpretation of explanations and meanings of people' behaviors, and also because it focuses on contemporary events (Barbour, 2013; Yin, 2013). Moreover, the researcher is close to the respondents, thus can accurately capture the existing perceptions and experiences of participants involved in the process under investigation (Barbour, 2013).

Data collection relies on document analysis of primary data sources, for example a country report related to ASEAN cooperation, as well as on interviews of important bureaucrats and officials as another primary data source, and on secondary document data sources. Interview data were acquired by employing an interview form with government officers who work closely on issues related to the ACV. Using an interview form for discussions with key informants can provide information in greater depth, especially if it provides appropriate opportunities to intervene with questions, to open the discussion to answer questions on the reality of theoretical premises, and to give information with the most freedom (O'Leary, 2004; Walliman, 2011; Opoku, Ahmed & Akotia, 2016).

The researcher selected six participants with whom to conduct the interviews, comprising government officials, including representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ASEAN Department and Consular Department), the Ministry of Public Security (Foreigner Management Department and Immigration Department), the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (Tourism Management Department), and the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (Labor Management Department).

4. Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis process includes (1) description of the data, (2) generating themes, and (3) data coding.

The description of data describes the nature and attributes of the data being collected. More specifically, this step describes the data in terms of who, what, when, where, and how. The goal is to transform data into findings by bringing order, structure, and meaning (Patton, 2002). This process will help in reducing the volume of information, sorting out significant facts, and identifying trends and patterns to construct a framework and render research findings (De Vos et al., 2005).

In generating themes and data coding, I used ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software to organize interviews and sort out recurring regularities in the form of similar terms or concepts that appeared repeatedly across the six interviews (Merriam, 1998). In these steps, I took caution to note that the purpose is to explain and make sense of the inquiry, but not to use evidence from something that occurs repetitively (Smit, 2002). In other words, the goal is to illustrate and elicit meanings from the data in a systematic, comprehensive, and rigorous manner (Smit, 2002; De Vos et al., 2005).

4.1 Description of the Data

Interview data were collected from six participants from the following government units: (1) Representative of the ASEAN Department, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA); (2) Representative of the Consular Department, in

the MOFA; (3) Representative of the Foreigner Management Department, in the Ministry of Public Security (MOPS); (4) Representative of the Immigration Department, in the MOPS; (5) Representative of the Tourism Management Department, in the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism; and (6) Representative of the Labor Management Department, in the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

Each interview was conducted privately as some of the questions and related information cannot be discussed openly. On average, one interview took approximately two hours and 15 minutes, including time spent on interview introduction.

Although the interview process received good cooperation from participants, there were some challenges and limitations. For instance, I came across moments when I found it difficult to ask sensitive political questions. In such cases, I had to rephrase the questions or tried to incorporate softer questions that make similar sense for the participants and that still kept the authenticity of the original questions. However, the challenge of using this method is that I did not often receive direct answers to the questions, and there were cases where I had to substitute one interview question with multiple questions. Subsequently, this kind of challenge required more time for the interview. Similarly, the time factor imposed an overall limitation on the entire interview process.

In analyzing the data, interview notes were organized and interpreted based on the questionnaire included in Table 3 (Chapter 3). This process required engagement with the data, especially regarding how I was to make sense of the data by acknowledging the liminal experience of dealing with familiarity and strangeness (Kerdeman, 1998). To overcome this challenge, I had to remind myself to stick to the plans and rules (Janesick, 1998); more importantly, I had to remain neutral and open minded.

4.2 Generating Themes

After gathering the interview data from the six participants, I carefully read the responses from each set of interviews in order to have an overall understanding and then identify themes in accordance with particularities and generalizations. This means that I took into account an awareness of participants and I tried to find the connection between the answers of each participant and a chosen theme. Using the ATLAS.ti program, I highlighted significant quotes and phrases from the interviews one at a time. Following the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I went back and forth among transcripts until arriving at consistent yet distinctive categories (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Appleton, 1995). Using this process, I was able to identify a total of nine common themes from the six interviews. However, on average, I found that the participants mainly mentioned between three to five themes. This is because their understanding, their perspectives and their experiences related to specific themes. Table 1 illustrates the themes that the respondents raised.

Table 1. Generated interviewing themes

Participant / Theme	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Geographical location	✔					✔
Current visa policy	✔	✔		✔		
Current state of immigration control			✔	✔		
Quota of foreign workers in the private sector			✔	✔		✔
Current information and communications technology (ICT) in connectivity development			✔		✔	
Electronic systems in the consular sector		✔				
Infrastructure				✔	✔	
Population mobility		✔	✔		✔	✔
Current attitudes towards the ACV	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

4.3 Data Coding

After generating the themes identified above, the next process was data coding. In terms of a coding process, I first identified the key concepts through the expressions in the transcripts from the interviews and looked for relations within and across the themes. I then tried to code and identify the patterns or categories of the themes. The patterns or categories can be characterized by differences, similarities, frequencies, sequences, correspondences, and causations (Elliott, 2018; Saldaña, 2016; O'Connor & Gibson, 2003). In this regard, the patterns or categories were determined by the three dimensions identified in the literature review, which are the political-security, economic, and social-cultural dimensions. This means that the participants mentioned themes that were included in each dimension. Furthermore, the similarities and differences of participant statements were grouped in each dimension and were summarized as follows:

Political-Security Dimension: Four participants typically emphasized between three to four themes regarding the political and security concerns. One statement was that "it is important to consider the political and security system in the Lao PDR as when talking about the ACV, it is necessary to improve, enhance and set up some systems, such as visa policy, immigration control, and ICT, as well as to consider the geographical location of the country."

The interviewee from the ASEAN Department, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), stressed that in the current visa policy "the system of collecting data on the entry and exit of visitors and foreigners is not centralized yet. It has been challenging to manage the entry and exit of visitors and foreigners in regard to tracking the arrival and departure of the visitors."

The interviewee from the Foreigner Management Department, in the MOPS, stated that "it is necessary to enhance the system of the entry and exit of visitors and foreigners in order to have a centralized system of collecting data on the entry and exit of travelers."

The interviewee from the Consular Department, in the MOFA, emphasized that "it is vital to consider immigration as related to the political-security and stability of the country."

The interviewee from the Immigration Department, in the MOPS stated that "the Lao PDR is a landlocked country, which means it's very important to have clear boundaries with neighbors and to have an effective management system in terms of the political security of the country. Moreover, it is important to consider the impacts of boundary issues on the relationship between the Lao PDR and its neighbors in regard to the establishment of the ACV."

Economic Dimension: Four participants commonly stressed between four to five themes with regard to the economic considerations. One statement was that "the implementation of the ACV is challenging when connecting with the economic sectors in the Lao PDR. It is said that the ACV can potentially bring benefits to the country in terms of the tourist sectors and foreign investments. However, it is essential to assess and evaluate the factors based on the geographical location, ICT, electronic systems, infrastructure and population mobility."

The interviewee from the Consular Department, in the MOFA, indicated that "the geographical location of the Lao PDR can attract tourists and investors, as well as foreign laborers, which would also boost the economy of the country. Furthermore, the free movement can increase the contribution of visa revenue to the Lao economy as there is the electronic system of e-passports and e-visas that can facilitate the foreign travelers."

The interviewee from the Tourism Management Department, in the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (MICT), stressed that "the establishment of the ACV can promote tourism, which may increase the number of visitors, leading to boosting the economy of the country. It is also useful to improve the ICT system in order to promote tourism and enhance the infrastructure."

The interviewee from the ASEAN Department, in the MOFA, emphasized that "the establishment of the ACV can generally increase the economic benefits from population mobility."

The interviewee from the Immigration Department, in the MOPS highlighted that "the establishment of the ASEAN Common Visa ACV can promote foreign investment and economic growth. However, it is important to consider the system of monitoring of investors and law enforcement in order to help with reducing the problem of over-staying immigrants."

Socio-cultural Dimension: Three participants generally highlighted between two to three themes concerning the social-cultural issues. One important statement was that "it is crucial to consider the factors that can have impacts on society and culture in the Lao PDR when implementing the ACV, especially the population mobility, the attitudes towards the ACV, and infrastructure."

The interviewee from the Tourism Management Department, in the MICT, stated that "the establishment of the ACV provides population mobility with different cultures, behaviors and attitudes, which can directly and indirectly impact the society and culture in the country, like the cultural lifestyles of local people. Moreover, the ACV can promote and increase tourism and investment. It is also important to consider the infrastructure in the country as poor infrastructure can continue to hinder the tourism industry."

The interviewee from the Labor Management Department, in the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, highlighted that "the ACV can promote foreign investment and bring in foreign investors as well as foreign workers in the country, which includes a diversity of cultures and lifestyles that may affect the society and culture in the country."

The interviewee from the Consular Department, MOFA, emphasized that "the attitude towards the ACV is crucial in terms of the impact of the ACV on the socio-cultural situation in the country. In particular, the social issues include drugs, smuggling, human trafficking, illegal marriages with foreigners, and so on. Furthermore, the infrastructure at the international checkpoints also needs to be improved and enhanced to facilitate implementing the ACV."

Based on the interviews of all the participants, in line with the identified themes, and comparing with the coded interviews through the three dimensions, I will highlight the main issues for the readiness of the country in implementing the ACV in the next section.

4.4 Results

Results from the theme generating and data coding indicate that the readiness of the Lao PDR in implementing ACV spans nine significant components. They comprise (1) geographical location, (2) visa policy, (3) immigration control, (4) the quota of foreign workers in the private sector, (5) information and communications technology (ICT) in connectivity development, (6) electronic systems in the consular sector, (7) infrastructure, (8) population mobility, and (9) attitudes towards the ACV. Categorizing these components into three dimensions, namely the economic, political, and social aspects, this study found that the economic readiness of the Lao PDR with regard to implementing the ACV depends on geographical location, information and communications technology, electronic systems in the consular sector, infrastructure, and population mobility. The readiness in the political aspect depends on visa policy, immigration control, and population mobility, while the social-cultural aspect of the country is most concerned with population mobility and overall attitudes towards the ACV.
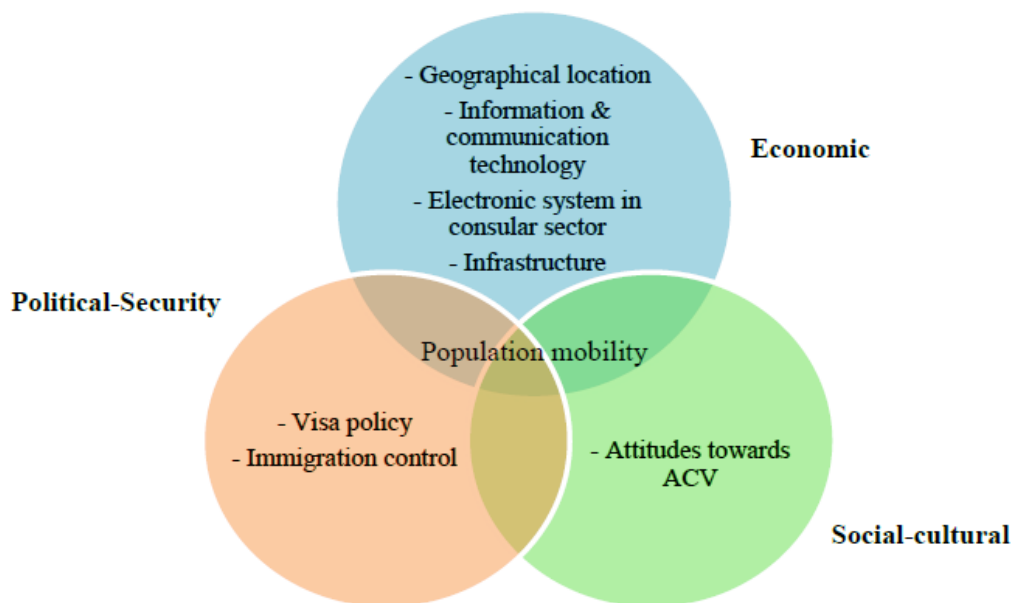

Figure 1. Venn diagram of the readiness of the Lao PDR in implementing the ACV

Figure 1 illustrates the logical relation between the three dimensions of the readiness of the Lao PDR in implementing the ACV. While each dimension has its own specific relevant factors, population mobility appears to be a mutual factor in the ACV readiness of all three dimensions.

5. Conclusion

The ACV has the potential to cause political-security, economic and social-cultural impacts on the Lao PDR, which needs to consider the nine factors highlighted and described above. In terms of the potential political-security opportunities and challenges, the adoption of the ACV could strengthen cooperation between the Lao PDR and the other ASEAN countries in order to combat transnational crimes, which means that the Lao PDR can build up the necessary capabilities to combat potential security threats. However, the country has to put effort into setting up and improving security at the national and local levels, such as by amending visa policy, imposing immigration controls, and improving information and communications technology. For the potential economic opportunities and challenges, the Lao PDR has to seriously note the impacts on the main economic indicators, such as job creation, tourism spending, international tourist arrivals, and investment, as well as trade. In other words, the country needs to consider the economic impacts of ACV implementation in both the short term and long term. Regarding the potential social-cultural opportunities and challenges, the ACV could allow a number of both ASEAN and non-ASEAN visitors into the Lao PDR, which could provide opportunities to benefit from tourism development. However, it is vital to consider the serious social-cultural consequences for the Lao PDR when adopting the ACV.

The results of this study suggest that the readiness of the Lao PDR in implementing the ACV is principally determined by the issue of population mobility, which concerns border management, the synchronization of information and communication technology, infrastructure, and human resources among the relevant sectors.

This suggests that, prior to implementing the ACV, the Lao PDR needs to improve its border management through immigration control at each of its international checkpoints. Currently, the country has a total of 29 international checkpoints, only 22 of which are currently in active service. To effectively manage immigration at the borders, the country needs a better synchronization of information and communication technology. Evidence from the interviews indicates that the lack of synchronization between electronic systems across checkpoints has caused mistakes and inconsistencies in visa issuance on arrival. This issue could lead to illegal immigration, over stay visitors, and illegal marriages, etc.

With regards to infrastructure and human resources, the Lao PDR needs significant improvement in equipping its international border checkpoints with an adequate amount of facilities, such as restrooms for visitors and tourists, offices for immigration staff, and reliable electronic systems. Furthermore, domestic and foreign travelers have widely complained that the immigration staff of the Lao PDR at the border checkpoints lack professionalism and service mindedness. Furthermore, stationing less capable staff at the border checkpoints could cause inefficient workflows and loopholes for corruption and illegal trafficking. Therefore, in addition to improving infrastructure, the Lao PDR needs to improve its staff development and equip its staff with adequate systems at the border checkpoints.

Although the findings of this study reveal some significant evidence and factors affecting the preparedness of the Lao PDR in implementing the ACV, the study itself suffers from constraints on the data and limitations in accessing good sources of statistical data that could support the evidence found in the interviews. For future research in a similar field and on similar topics, researchers should try to incorporate a statistical analysis approach, such as via a projection of the economic impacts that could occur if the country were to implement the ASEAN Common Visa Policy.

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