SINGAPORE: The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation risks becoming irrelevant according to a study by the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council - the only non-government official observer of APEC.

APEC leaders, including Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, last met in South Korea last year and will meet again in Vietnam this weekend.

But the report shows 44 percent of those surveyed feel the 17-year-old organisation has no relevance to issues facing ordinary citizens.

63 percent see the member economies as having weak commitment and not taking concrete actions, while 56 percent feel APEC lacks focus.

The findings also showed that those in Southeast Asia had the same percentage of respondents agreeing and disagreeing that APEC is as important today compared to when it first started.

Ultimately, only 42 percent feel that APEC is still as important.

"The challenge for the APEC leaders is to change perceptions. One way to change perceptions, of course, is to act or to be seen to be acting beyond just the declarations that occur at the end of the meetings. We have talked of bird flu and there are meetings about the bird flu, there are ministerial meetings on it and there are discussions under APEC. Apart from the broad framework does that translate into something that normal citizens in each of these countries see as an APEC effort? I'm not too sure about that," said Assoc Prof Tan Wee Liang, Coordinator, Singapore Pacific Economic Cooperation Council.

The State of the Region Report was compiled within three months. Some 370 people were surveyed from the various APEC member countries. They include business leaders as well as government officials, and the report is timely because it is released just before the leaders meet at the APEC meeting in Hanoi.

This may also lead to discussions in Hanoi on how APEC plans to re-engage and re-energise itself.

"In the Hanoi APEC Summit, the renewal of the US engagement and support to APEC, I think, is very vital. The future of APEC, to a great extent, depends on the multilateral trading system that promotes vigorous trade and investment flow across borders and also as a result of it, it'll result in higher global economic growth and that would in turn accelerate the APEC process. APEC also in Hanoi will refocus the importance of APEC goals, for example, the Bogor goals of 2010 for developed economies and 2020 for developing economies will have free trade across the Asia-Pacific," said Dr Hank Lim, Director of Research, Singapore Institute of International Affairs.

Dr Lim said progress in APEC would also serve as an impetus to ASEAN's promotion of business and investment across the region. - CNA /dt