

Governing Climate Change: Challenges for a coherent ASEAN policy on Climate change

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Many studies have indicated that Southeast Asia is one of the worst affected regions in the world by climate change. This was highlighted in various studies including the Asian Development Bank's study on the economics of climate change in 2009. The study indicated that the total damage in four ASEAN countries, (Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam) could cost the region twice as much as the global average by 2100, equating to a loss of 6.7 per cent of GDP per year.

ASEAN as a region is vulnerable to climate change due to a range of factors. Firstly, coastal areas are densely populated with economic activities taking place within these areas. Secondly, the ASEAN region is mega-bio diverse, accounting for more than 20 per cent of the global diversity with ASEAN mainly consisting of resource-based economies. Finally, geographically, ASEAN is one of the world's most geologically active regions consisting of the ring of fire as well as being exposed to a range of natural hazards such as typhoons and sea level rises.

Whilst various studies and impacts of climate change have been well documented, the regional response towards climate change is still unclear. On-going efforts have emphasised the importance of combating climate change within the region, though challenges remain for a coherent ASEAN policy on climate change.

One of the main stumbling blocks for a regional response is due to the unique nature of the problem. Climate change's impacts are discriminatory and vulnerability differs amongst the ASEAN countries.

The priorities in response measures depend on the particular impact on each country. Philippines for example, is vulnerable to natural disasters, as witnessed by the recent flood events, has to deal with the imminent issue of adaptation as the impact of climate change are already being felt. Other countries may prioritise longer term issues such as water security, rising sea levels and warming sea surface temperatures where mitigation measures may be more critical.

Furthermore, many tend to forget that vulnerability to the adverse effects of climate change is not purely based on natural conditions but also political, economic and social circumstances. ASEAN countries vary widely in stages of development, and hence, in their capacities to adapt to climate change.

This has led to non-traditional alliances to be established that transcends regional and geographical boundaries. Singapore, for example, is the only ASEAN country in the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), an intergovernmental organization of low-lying coastal and small island countries. G77 has also been active in international climate negotiations, representing a coalition of developing nations rather than any particular region. These alliances demonstrate that the priorities in responding to climate change may not necessarily be tied to regional factors. This poses the question to what extent can a coherent ASEAN policy be effective.

Progress has been made in establishing climate change as an agenda for ASEAN. The ASEAN Climate Change Initiative (ACCI), a consultative platform to strengthen regional coordination and cooperation in addressing climate change was established in 2010. The mandate was to undertake concrete actions to respond to climate change and its adverse impacts, including policy and strategy formulation, information sharing, capacity building and technology transfer.

Due to its cross cutting nature, climate change related issues have been embedded in various initiatives. The ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) has included climate change adaptation (CCA) as part of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) Work Programme, 2010-2015. In 2009, the ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (APAEC) 2010-2015 was adopted with the theme of "Bringing Policy to Actions Towards a Cleaner, More Efficient and Sustainable ASEAN Energy

Community", which includes achieving a collective target of 15% for regional renewable energy for total power installed capacity by 2015.

Whilst these efforts are encouraging, the end results are still unclear. With ASEAN's policy of non-intervention, it is unlikely for ASEAN to commit to concrete action such as setting a regional cap on carbon emissions, or setting up a climate fund to finance mitigation and adaptation measures. Many adaptation measures are still heavily reliant on external funding through Official Development Assistance (ODA) and bilateral agreements such as EU-funded projects.

Recent criticisms of international treaties on climate change have challenged their effectiveness along with any multilateral agreements and regional policies on climate change. The Conference of Parties (COP) meetings have not yielded much end results and it is increasingly being recognised that policy innovation must go beyond international treaties and regional policies.

Surprisingly, despite the perceived failure, a case for optimism can be found at the Rio+20 Sustainable Development summit which was held this summer. By establishing the green economy as its primary focus, private sector participation is seen to be a crucial part in responding to sustainable development issues.

While the summit was not attended by many influential worlds' leaders, the private sector provided key representatives to the event. Statements from the private sector highlighted their commitment to act on their own. Tangible examples of success stories were presented such as a claim by Tensie Whelan and Paul Polman, respectively President of the Rainbow Alliance and CEO of Unilever, that their efforts led to an increase of 'three percent of the world's working forests, 10 percent of the world's tea production and 15 per cent of the world's bananas' coming under sustainable management'.

The success stories were presented as evidence of a transformation of global markets evolving away from government decree and towards a market led governance of sustainable development and climate change.

Despite the promising commitments laid out by the private sector, one has to take this new found optimism with caution and not divert all responsibility towards the private sector. Perhaps more importantly is the recognition of the role and positioning of the private sector in the future dimensions of climate change policies. ASEAN should leverage on non-state actors to respond to the adverse impacts of climate change and provide a platform and policies that guide their actions towards concrete solutions in combating climate change within the region.
