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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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No. 026/2012 dated 16 February 2012

## **The Rio+20 Summit and ASEAN: Towards a Green Economy**

By Paul P.S. Teng

### **Synopsis**

*Rio de Janeiro will host the third Earth Summit, or "Rio+20", in June this year - 20 years after the first Earth Summit in 1992. At Rio+20 all governments will be asked to re-dedicate themselves to the goal of a "green economy". How will ASEAN respond to this significant event and its challenges?*

### **Commentary**

TWENTY YEARS after the first Earth Summit in 1992 – officially called the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) - preparations are underway to convene the third such meeting in the same city where it all began, Rio de Janeiro. The high-powered conference on 20-22 June 2012, which follows the second summit in Johannesburg in 2002, is also referred to as the Rio+20, because it is 20 years after the first Earth Summit in the Brazilian city. Hoping to attract most of the world's heads of state and government, Rio+20 will focus on the "green economy" and on creating an "Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development".

Rio+20 is crucial for ASEAN and East Asia. The proposals to be adopted will affect current development approaches and policies in ASEAN as well as the ASEAN Plus 3 countries covering China, Japan and South Korea. Regional preparatory meetings have been taking place as part of the build-up to Rio+20. At the national level, ASEAN delegates to Rio+20 need to become more familiar with the complex, inter-related issues so that the region's viewpoints are adequately reflected in the deliberations at Rio de Janeiro.

### **Rio+20 and ASEAN**

The World Resources Institute (WRI), an international environmental think-tank based in Washington D.C., has argued that for too long, nations have used a dominant economic growth model based on increasing GDP above all else. While this has improved incomes and reduced poverty for hundreds of millions of people, it has also been accompanied by significant and potentially irreversible social, environmental and economic costs. In the ASEAN region, pockets of poverty persist among the 600 million people while significant environmental degradation has occurred to coastal waters, coastal ecosystems and rainforests as a result of disruptions to the ecosystem.

WRI has also noted that the gap between the rich and poor has risen in more than two-thirds of countries worldwide, including ASEAN member states. The question that begs to be asked in policy circles is whether this GDP-fostered development model will generate the benefits to address all three pillars of sustainable

development, economic, environmental and social. While the number of millionaires has multiplied in the ASEAN Plus 3 region, there has also emerged a disadvantaged lower socio-economic class that can trigger social instability. Civil disturbances caused by food insecurity and unsustainable farming practices has occurred in recent years. There is a deeper appreciation today that the Earth is reaching its limits in the use of water, land and other natural resources.

The environmental and social costs of current economic growth models are becoming more and more apparent. Economic growth on its own is not enough if it leads to poverty and environmental degradation. ASEAN can avoid the pitfalls of a development model solely focused on economic growth. Rio+20 advocates sustainable development based on a “green economy” - one that simultaneously promotes sustainability and economic growth. To forge a global consensus on this goal, a raw draft of a future common position – the “zero” document – has been released for all stakeholders to fill in their preferred lines of action. As ASEAN participates in Rio+20, what positions will its representatives take on the many priority issues proposed for adoption in the “zero” document?

### **Reinforcing a movement towards a “Green Economy”**

Several countries in the ASEAN Plus 3 region have demonstrated leadership in addressing some of the issues to be tabled at Rio+20. There are new sources of growth that are environmentally sustainable. One example is clean energy. South Korea has adopted a national green growth strategy which accounts for two per cent of its GDP to invest in green sectors such as renewable energy and clean technology. China invests more than any other country in renewable energy. Its total installed wind capacity grew 64 percent in 2010, driven by a national policy that sees clean energy as a major market in the near future, and one in which China wants to be a leader.

Singapore’s “City in a Garden” approach to urbanisation exemplifies a small, resource-limited city-state striving to balance the three pillars of sustainable development with proper land-use planning; promotion of green corridors and mass transport; and measures to limit vehicle usage and rationalise water use. Singapore is also part of a global consortium to address urban food security matters. A scorecard of ASEAN nations however, shows varying progress in implementing the targets from the first Earth Summit of 1992, among which are sustainable agriculture, fisheries, and food security.

### **How to do more**

The Rio+20 Summit will be asking all nations to re-dedicate themselves to a greener form of sustainable development. It will call for the strengthening of regional and sub-regional mechanisms to promote sustainable development. It will also propose the formation of national sustainable development councils in countries where there are none to improve coordination and cross-sectoral synergies. However, most developing economies, including ASEAN’s, are concerned that the process of transitioning to a green economy may come at a cost - it will hinder economic growth and efforts to reduce poverty, because short-term disruptions are likely.

Rio+20 will be urging the international community to increase its support for developing countries and to develop new financing instruments for building green economies. Transitioning to a green economy will require a fundamental shift in thinking and acting on growth and development; production of goods and services; and consumer habits. Ultimately, today’s policies must take into account a longer-term planning horizon because sustainability requires time to achieve, and the courage to start.

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