

POLICY BRIEF

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Southeast Asia and the Outcomes of the COP16



The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) concluded its annual meeting in December 2010, reaching agreements that are relevant for the climate strategies and policies of states and regions worldwide. This policy brief explores the deliberations and outcomes of this 16th Conference of the Parties (COP16) as they relate to Southeast Asian responses to climate change at the community, state and regional levels. This brief proceeds in three sections. Section I reviews the diplomatic processes of the COP16, examining how they diverge from the approaches of the recent past, and critically assesses the agreements realised at the conference. Section II addresses the specific implications that these developments have for Southeast Asian countries and the region at large, paying particular attention to the unique vulnerabilities experienced to varying degrees throughout the region. Section III offers strategic recommendations relating to the current state of international climate negotiations and the existing policies and needs of Southeast Asian stakeholders.

I. COP16: Processes and Outcomes

Processes

The COP16 meetings, held in Cancún, Mexico, from 29 November to 10 December 2010, saw the goal of reaching a binding emissions reduction agreement slip further from its long-held position of primacy within international climate negotiations. With the relative failures of the 2009 climate negotiations in Copenhagen looming large, contributors to the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP16) elected to push the most contentious issues of the climate discourse to the future and seek agreements in sectors where debate has been less intractable. The results of this shift in approach were varied. The negotiation process avoided paralysis and made concrete progress in areas such as technology transfers and funding for developing countries, cooperation in forest management, monitoring of state level climate reportage and a wide range of climate adaptation measures. By steering clear of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles separating many primary actors in the climate negotiations, the COP16 realised some important gains. However, difficult climate change mitigation challenges went unresolved, and many of the entrenched positions that have previously led to diplomatic impasse will continue to challenge UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations.

The conduct of the Cancún negotiations was informed first by the widely held notion that a reversal of fortune in the form of tangible agreements was needed after the 2009 meetings in Copenhagen, and second, by the realisation that the most contentious issues on emissions control would not be surmounted in 2010. The outcomes of the Copenhagen climate meetings fell far short of expectations that had been building over a period of years. The 2007 and 2008 COPs in Bali, Indonesia, and Poznań, Poland, both focused mightily on establishing the foundation for a forthcoming

comprehensive Copenhagen agreement. When such an agreement proved unattainable, government negotiators, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN facilitators and a range of other stakeholders were forced to re-evaluate the efficacy of setting such high stakes for a single conference. This re-evaluation led to an incremental rather than encompassing diplomatic approach and prompted negotiators to seek agreement where it was most possible.

In addition to the fallout from Copenhagen, developments from outside the UNFCCC sphere also encouraged the COP16 stakeholders to aim for tangible outcomes. The negotiation process was influenced by the growing realisation that there was no guarantee that the UNFCCC would continue to be the primary body within which international climate response efforts are centred. The Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF) was founded in March 2009 as an arena within which the world's highest emitting countries could meet to complement ongoing discussions at the UNFCCC. While the MEF and other forums such as the G-20 can provide valuable supplemental venues for climate-related discussions, the UNFCCC Secretariat along with the countries, NGOs and other stakeholders outside of these exclusive groups have an interest in keeping discussions primarily within the UNFCCC structure. Thus, while expectations on outcomes were relatively low, pressure upon delegates to produce some meaningful deliverables from within the UNFCCC context was palpable during the COP16. This dynamic incentivised levels of cooperation among delegates that were lacking in previous years, particularly in areas outside the emissions reduction sphere. In combination, these atmospherics contributed greatly to a set of agreements that form Cancún's primary legacy.

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Outcomes

The COP16 had a number of significant outcomes, most notably in the monitoring, financing, technology transfer and adaptation sectors. Progress was made in Cancún on the reporting and verifying of national emissions reductions through standardised self-reporting and international verification mechanisms. Specifically, the COP16 outcomes seek to facilitate more detailed reporting of emissions activities in both developed and developing countries, including the submission of new biennial reports. These inclusions satisfied countries such as the US, which had cited transparency and effectiveness issues with previous monitoring structures.

In the financing sector, agreements in Cancún solidified previous monetary commitments and created a new framework for the management of financial transfers. Whereas the Copenhagen Accord discussed financial goals for helping vulnerable states address climate-related challenges, the Cancún meetings saw these goals codified into an action plan extending into the 2020s. Notably, this plan establishes a Green Climate Fund as the operational entity for climate finance, installs the World Bank as the facilitator for the creation of the Fund and locks in the pledge of USD30 billion in 'new and additional' resources from developed countries for the period 2010–2012. In the longer term, the agreement states the intention to mobilise USD100 billion of private finance annually by 2020. These developments assuaged some fears that the funding discussions undertaken in Copenhagen would lack adequate follow-up and institutional management capacities.

The transfer of clean energy and adaptation-focused technologies was also made easier via the actions of the COP16, primarily through the establishment of a Technology Mechanism that aims to match technology suppliers with appropriate areas of need. The Technology Mechanism will be comprised of an executive committee working in conjunction with a Climate Technology Centre and Network to recommend technology development and transfer, and encourage collaboration among governments, research institutions and the private business sector. This move was seen as a positive sign for developing countries that have long insisted that they require technological assistance, rather than simply financial transfers, in order to address climate-related challenges.

Finally, the COP16 made further progress in the broader field of climate adaptation. Negotiators established the Cancún Adaptation Framework to bolster the adaptation efforts of all parties to the UNFCCC, and formed a process to explicitly assist least developed countries (LDCs) with adaptation plans. A standing Adaptation Committee was also proposed in Cancún for future

formalisation at the COP17 in Durban, South Africa, in 2011. The Committee aims to provide technical support, facilitate information sharing and advise the COP on a range of adaptation-related matters. The Cancún Adaptation Framework consistently emphasised the vulnerability of developing countries and the capacity for developed states to help create greater resiliency for their less wealthy neighbours. Specifically, the Framework 'requests' that developed countries provide the most vulnerable states with 'long-term, scaled-up, [and] predictable' climate adaptation assistance. The previously discussed agreements reached on financing and technology transfers suggest that such adaptation assistance is likely to be supported in practice as a result of the Cancún meetings.

II. COP16 and Southeast Asia: Importance and Implications

Importance

The agreements reached at the COP16 negotiations are profoundly important for Southeast Asian states and the regional frameworks due to the high levels of climate vulnerability that exist throughout much of the region. These vulnerabilities are both physical, as the region exhibits a host of natural systems that are highly susceptible to climatic changes, and social, as low development levels, adaptive capacities and direct dependencies upon natural resources define much of the region. Assessing the nature of these dual vulnerabilities is necessary for the determining of relevance that COP16 outcomes have for the region.

While natural climate vulnerabilities in Southeast Asia vary widely, there are several physical characteristics and systems that warrant particular regional attention. In the medium- to long-term, the region faces myriad climate-related challenges impacting coastal resources and systems, agricultural production capacities and adequate freshwater access. Increasing ocean temperatures and rising sea levels associated with a warming climate can affect coastal resources such as coral reefs, mangrove forests and municipal fisheries upon which communities throughout much of Southeast Asia depend. Inland, altered precipitation patterns related to climate change will affect agricultural production zones, lead to increased flooding and combine with human-induced environmental degradation such as deforestation and soil erosion to alter freshwater systems. Freshwater access could also become an issue in pockets of Southeast Asia despite the region's overall abundance of water, due to the combination of growing demand and shifting rainfall trends. In the near-term, the region already faces acute risks from natural disasters, some of which will become more pronounced in a warmer climate. Warmer ground surface, air and water temperatures have the capacity to increase the

prevalence and strength of major weather events as well as alter and/or expand the areas where these events have traditionally been most dangerous. These natural vulnerabilities are unavoidable, and current climate trends suggest that changes which might exacerbate such vulnerabilities are occurring more rapidly than previously thought. Therefore, the region's various adaptive capacities are becoming increasingly relevant.

Like natural vulnerabilities, levels of social resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of climate challenges differ throughout Southeast Asia. Also like the region's physical characteristics, several areas of social vulnerability require particular emphasis. Firstly, as a largely developing region, it is unsurprising that significant percentages of the regional populace depend *directly* upon natural resources for sustenance and livelihoods. Such dependence increases climate vulnerability because climatic changes can lead to relatively abrupt declines in the agricultural production and coastal resource yields upon which people rely. These most vulnerable segments of society often struggle to quickly shift the sources of their essential goods and lack the capital necessary to seek other means of maintaining and advancing their development levels. Despite welcome economic growth trends throughout much of Southeast Asia, these challenges faced by the vulnerable poor will remain for the foreseeable future and will be exacerbated by climatic changes. It is therefore essential to closely monitor international developments aimed at addressing both the causes and effects of climate change, and evaluate the implications that these developments have for the Southeast Asian region.

Implications

On the surface, the agreements reached at the COP16 appear to be quite positive for Southeast Asia. The adaptation section of the Cancún agreement makes a priority of protecting those most vulnerable to the worst effects of climate change. The resulting measures, if adequately implemented, can potentially create renewed levels of social resilience to climate change and lessen the risks felt by underdeveloped Southeast Asian communities and individuals. Effective resilience in the face of climate threats is also a key strategy for ensuring that these threats do not lead to the devolution of stability and security in potentially volatile areas. Of note on this point, the Cancún Adaptation Framework mentions population displacements, often viewed as a primary climate-related destabilising driver, as a specific area for action. The strengthened codification of adaptation financing mechanisms through the Green Climate Fund is also a welcome development from a security perspective, as it will release and manage a growing level of financial resources to locations that are most in need of assistance. Such assistance

measures, which were unquestionably bolstered at the Cancún meetings, have the potential to significantly reduce climate-related risks to security and human prosperity.

COP16 outputs can also influence and potentially support Southeast Asian adaptation policies at community, national and regional levels. The Cancún Adaptation Framework calls for countries to enhance actions on adaptation through planning, prioritising and implementation based on a country-driven approach. This is pertinent for ASEAN members seeking to conduct further research on vulnerability, adaptation, needs assessment and sustainable development in their respective countries. Such studies are particularly appropriate for ASEAN countries which, in their National Communications submissions to the UNFCCC, lack a coherent and detailed policy on adaptation. The Cancún Agreement also provides an opportunity for countries in the region to tap into the resources of the Adaptation Committee and the Green Climate Fund. The Adaptation Committee is tasked with providing technical support and guidance, facilitating the sharing of information, knowledge and good practices, and promoting engagement with national, regional and international organisations on climate response strategies. These resources could benefit individual community-level projects, state-level policymaking and region-wide climate adaptation strategies that already exist within the structures of the ASEAN Climate Change Initiative (ACCI).

However, in addition to the positive developments on adaptation, the overall implications of the COP16 for both the negotiating process and climate policy in Southeast Asia are marked by a relative lack of progress on the mitigation front. Climate adaptation is by definition reactionary to the effects and/or predicted effects of climate change. While these efforts are invaluable and necessary, they may prove inadequate if the climatic changes progress at a rapid and unpredictable rate. The best adaptation intentions notwithstanding, addressing the foundational anthropogenic causes of climate change remains essential. Therefore, it appears likely that a strong effort combining robust mitigation with targeted, well-supported adaptation initiatives will be necessary to avoid the most pronounced of the climate-related threats. Without progressive and effective action in both of these primary sectors of the climate discourse, climate challenges will become increasingly acute in coming years. The following recommendations are constructed in pursuit of such a progressive dual-track strategy.

III. Recommendations

Climate Mitigation Sector

- *Take advantage of areas of opportunity afforded by the COP16 in the climate mitigation sector.* The primary area of opportunity in this respect stems from the UNFCCC's formal support for reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD). This is significant for Southeast Asia because such external funding will assist existing REDD projects in the region and potentially open up opportunities for future projects in the region's many forested areas. The extension of REDD, known as REDD+, is also important to the region as it goes beyond simple emissions control to codify policies on forest governance, corruption and enforcement, participatory decision-making and other issues associated with forest conservation.
- *Continue to apply pressure on major greenhouse gas (GHG) emitters to establish binding emissions targets over the course of the next two years.* The Copenhagen experience of 2009 demonstrated the difficulties inherent in reaching consensus on emissions control within a single COP. This lesson should not be discounted in the lead-up to the COP17 in Durban in 2011. However, with the implementation phase of the Kyoto Protocol set to expire in 2012, it is imperative that extended delays on an effective emissions reduction treaty are avoided. Therefore, Southeast Asian states, along with relevant ASEAN bodies and groups from civil society and the private sector, should persistently lobby China, India, the US and other parties with a large capacity to influence the future of emissions control negotiations during the months leading up to the COP17.
- *Pursue policies that demonstrate a commitment to emissions control in the region.* Development must and will remain a priority in Southeast Asia, but showing a willingness to mitigate emissions growth in the region as development occurs will strengthen the voice of ASEAN and its member states in the international climate mitigation discourse. The outcomes of the COP16 on clean technology transfers, most notably the Technology Mechanism and funding for mitigation efforts through the Green Climate Fund, should be viewed as opportunities to alter the region's emissions trajectory.

Climate Adaptation Sector

- *Take advantage of the areas of opportunity provided by the COP16 in the climate adaptation sector.* The Green Climate Fund promises a steady funding stream from developed countries for both adaptation and mitigation measures in the developing world. Southeast Asian states need to demonstrate that they can make effective use of this funding through implementing adaptation projects that appropriately address the unique conditions faced by areas most vulnerable to climate change. Reporting tangible results from these projects will also be essential for maintaining external funding and assistance flows into the future.
- *Work to gain recognition for the climate vulnerabilities of Southeast Asia.* The adaptation funding and resources emerging from the COP16 will be allocated to areas which can demonstrate acute need. Work is needed at the community, national and regional levels to ensure that an appropriate measure of these beneficial resources accrues to the vulnerable areas of Southeast Asia. Such work should focus on demonstrating both the physical and social vulnerabilities that define the region.
- *Utilise the ACCI as a resource for coordinating climate adaptation policies throughout the region in ways that can maximise the benefits made possible through the COP16.* Information sharing, collaborative research and project design initiatives, and collective lobbying all represent possibilities for the region to realise greater benefits than would be possible through unilateral actions. While recognising the unique circumstances of each community and member state, ASEAN-level collaboration and coordination can still prove invaluable for improving resiliency and adaptive capacity region-wide.

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