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New Series on the Haze Issue (1)

Road Map for a Transboundary Haze-Free ASEAN by 2020: Time to Implement Agreement

By Raman Letchumanan

Synopsis

As the ASEAN Summit approaches, we explore a set of integrated solutions, which if implemented with full commitment and vigour, can progressively minimise by 2020 severe crises of transboundary haze pollution such as being experienced now.

Commentary

THE CURRENT smoke haze crisis that has battered a major part of the southern ASEAN region over the last two months is showing signs of abating. Along with the disappearing haze, it is hoped that the rapt attention, passion, anger, commitment and resolve demonstrated by all parties, especially governments, will not just vanish, only to surface again during the next haze episode.

Promises and commitment have been made. The Indonesian president has asked for three years to resolve the issue. The Malaysian prime minister has made an appeal to a gathering of chief science advisors at their recent APEC meeting to propose science-based solutions to resolve the haze issue which has plagued the region for the past 18 years. However, any solution will only work if it addresses the root causes that generate uncontrolled fires, spanning macro-planning - economic, social, development, and land use – to work on the ground involving large and medium plantation and agriculture concession holders, small holders, and communities. Hence it is just not enough to react only when fires flare up.

Time for renewed commitment and enhanced actions

After the 1997 haze crisis, the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution was adopted in 2002, where ASEAN Member States (AMS) stated the conviction that “an essential means to achieve collective action to prevent transboundary haze pollution is the conclusion and effective implementation of the Agreement”. However, 13 years after its adoption and implementation, the transboundary haze pollution issue has yet to be resolved.

Severe incidences of land and forest fires and the resulting haze episodes are strongly correlated to adverse weather conditions. Human interventions have not had much of an impact to mitigate it, though numerous regional and national initiatives have been implemented under the Haze Agreement. Climate change has compounded this further by causing unpredictable weather conditions with prolonged and severe dry seasons.

It is time for an honest reflection of what works and what does not, to build upon the successful lessons and experiences, to avoid pitfalls and more importantly to move collectively and progressively towards addressing the transboundary haze issue. This renewed commitment comes at an opportune time based on the following developments:

- (i) Indonesia’s ratification of the Haze Agreement in January 2015, making all ten AMS Parties to the Agreement. As the country with the largest land mass and greatly affected by land and forest fires, full participation of Indonesia is key to ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of the Agreement.
- (ii) The ASEAN Leaders are expected to adopt the post-2015 ASEAN Agenda later this month outlining their vision and mission in building the next phase of ASEAN Community for the next ten years. A renewed commitment and serious collaborative action to prevent haze, which has been the most severe transboundary environmental issue in the region, will generate greater confidence in ASEAN acting as one Community.
- (iii) The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been recently adopted, and a new global agreement on climate change is due to be adopted later this year. ASEAN can leverage on more effective implementation of its Haze Agreement by tackling forest fires and haze to contribute to these inter-related global environmental and development accords.

It should be stressed that fires and the resulting smoke haze can occur in any forested, agriculture or abandoned land. While transboundary smoke haze is most felt in the southern ASEAN region, many more fires are occurring in the mainland or Mekong countries of ASEAN. Sustained collaborative action should be taken by all member states, either as the source of fires or its victims from transboundary effects.

The ASEAN Haze Agreement, which has been globally touted as a role model for tackling transboundary air pollution, should continue to be the mainstay of any future roadmap for addressing the smoke haze in the region.

Road Map for a Transboundary Haze-Free ASEAN by 2020

ASEAN ministers responsible for the haze at their meeting on 28 October 2015, convened on the heels of this devastating haze crisis, have called for a Road Map towards a Vision of a Haze-free ASEAN. It should be noted that localised fires and haze will occur despite human interventions. In fact, fires are necessary as a natural process of regeneration, pest control, and religious and cultural practices. Hence it is not feasible to aim for a totally haze-free ASEAN.

However, the ASEAN Haze Agreement is premised on the fact that uncontrolled fires are not only most damaging at the place it occurs, but also causes transboundary effects, therefore all affected nations should act collaboratively.

A transboundary haze-free ASEAN will certainly require work on addressing the root causes of fires at the national level, and will benefit in the first instance the communities in the affected areas. Therefore the vision of a transboundary haze-free ASEAN will certainly benefit the countries directly affected by fires and haze.

The following ten recommendations are proposed as key elements of the proposed Road Map to enable ASEAN to move into a more effective implementation phase of the Haze Agreement - with all AMS as Parties - towards a transboundary haze-free ASEAN by 2020:

- (i) Commit and work towards making ASEAN a transboundary haze-free region by 2020;
- (ii) Implement fully the ASEAN Programme on Sustainable Management of Peatland Ecosystems 2014-2020 (ASMPE);
- (iii) Operationalise immediately the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control as the main operational entity of the Haze Agreement;
- (iv) Undertake concerted national efforts based on the Haze Agreement for the mutual benefit of each AMS and the region;
- (v) Enhance and implement an effective work programme for the Haze Agreement consisting of both regional and corresponding national activities;
- (vi) Prioritise appropriate national legislative instruments for better enforcement, compliance and necessary appropriate punitive actions;
- (vii) Enhance the monitoring and surveillance systems emphasising on early warning and better forecast modelling;
- (viii) Shift from emergency response towards better prevention and preparedness in mitigating fires;

- (ix) Effectively involve all stakeholders – plantation companies, financial/development institutions, private sector, consumers, communities and NGOs;
- (x) Implement obligations of AMS to related global accords, such as climate change and conservation of biodiversity, through leveraging complementary efforts under the Haze Agreement.

These recommendations will be further elaborated with specific successful and tested initiatives by governments, the private sector and the community in the following commentaries. Indeed, the ASEAN Member States should take up this challenge of addressing the haze issue head on, which they have promised time and again, and work sincerely towards realising it this time around.

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