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Disaster Management: Can ASEAN Be a Global Leader?

By Tavida Kamolvej

SYNOPSIS

Notwithstanding the growing frequency of natural disasters worldwide, it is difficult to strengthen disaster risk governance in ASEAN and globally. Several factors stand in the way. However, a recent pilot study in Thailand suggests that a regional disaster risk platform is within reach that could transform ASEAN into a global disaster management leader.

COMMENTARY

SOUTHEAST Asia shares a number of disaster risks which have increased in frequency over the past decade. Not only do disasters ignore national borders, but humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) for the communities affected are increasingly coordinated at the regional level.

Towards the integration of the ASEAN Community, regional mechanisms on disaster risk have established more systematic and coherent oversight for all phases of disaster governance. This includes prevention and mitigation efforts; countries being better prepared; developing systems to provide relief to affected communities; and more investment in recovery efforts to build communities back better.

Guiding Frameworks & Recent Developments

The effort has long been supported by allies and partners both financially and non-financially in the international community. These developments have been guided by the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction introduced back in 2015. The Sendai Framework improves understanding and sets out more practical tasks for all countries committed to achieving the disaster risk reduction goals.

It follows on from the Hyogo Framework, which was the global blueprint for disaster risk reduction between 2005 and 2015 to reduce disaster losses in terms of lives, and in the social, economic and environmental assets of communities and countries affected by disasters the world over.

In Southeast Asia, countries came together and signed the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in 2008. It came into effect the following year in 2009 and succeeds in signifying disaster risks as one of the most important threats to human security and sustainable development. It also identifies shared risks together with climate change as regional problems and frames them as a goal of national development.

This effort helps to promote partnerships with relevant players through an established mechanism which includes non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations which joins together all the expertise and resources in our region.

Coordination at ASEAN Level

As the regional grouping, ASEAN has also moved quite far to address aspects of coordination and collaboration among different types of government agencies, such as coordination between civilian agencies and the military in emergency responses to major natural disasters. Through ASEAN, Southeast Asian countries and their international partners have also developed better coordination in terms of disaster risk assessment and early warning systems.

Much of this activity is increasingly through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre).

In September 2016, ASEAN member states launched the ASEAN Declaration on One ASEAN One Response hoping that its Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ERAT) would operate increasingly seamlessly on the ground in disaster settings with the affected country's national and local response operations.

This also encouraged countries to consider sharing their risk assessments and collect big-data so they can share it as open-source data at the regional level to provide a more effective response in times of need. These ideas are also emphasised in the Sendai Framework as one of the expected global outcomes by 2030 is that risk data and information will be made publicly available to inform early warning systems around the world.

Challenges

Within our region, how much capacity there is at the national level is a major concern. ASEAN member countries differ in many dimensions including their economic status, disaster risk and awareness, management systems in place, cultural diversity and exposure to hazards. The different levels of economic development means that there are diverse capacities to prioritise disaster risk to national policy. This is coupled with varying degrees of effectiveness in local government to distribute resources to the community.

Likewise the levels of awareness and understanding of risks and disasters in the region lead to a variety of interest in developing strategies to prevent and mitigate disasters, prepare for the next disaster or invest in building back better. Furthermore there is a real lack of an effective and systematic risk-data management system implemented across the region as a whole. This means there are large differences between how countries assess disaster risk.

As a very diverse region, Southeast Asia has a wealth of different cultures and communities. However, this also means there are a number of different traditions and cultures to engage with to understand their perception of disaster risk, learn from them and also share best practices.

Finally, Southeast Asia is also home to the spectrum of disaster risk in terms of countries exposed to hazards from Indonesia – the supermarket of disasters – and the Philippines – the ‘7-11’ of disasters – to Singapore, which is relatively unexposed by contrast. With all this diversity in mind, it is difficult to see how much substantive progress can be made at the regional level without addressing these fundamental differences at the national and local levels.

Way Forward

While the challenges are many, the region has made significant progress since the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004, as was seen in the recent coordinated response through the Jakarta-based AHA Centre to the 2018 Sulawesi Earthquake and Tsunami. ASEAN member states could regularise and strengthen disaster management policy coordination more. ASEAN must now invest more in disaster prevention and mitigation than the emergency response domain.

Mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction into national policymaking and implementing it is in vain if the involved agencies do not understand the risks, coordinate their assessments, and share data with one another. The AHA Centre can extend their efforts, together with expert partners, in translating its regional platform into national ones across the region.

Currently there is a pilot risk data platform at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) based in Khlong Luang, near Bangkok, which offers a way to systemise the management of the top disaster risks that the region shares. A regional and multinational system can be built upon the existing main system at AIT where scientific data for risk simulation and modelling exists.

This offers a potential pathway forward to realise ASEAN as a global leader in disaster management by 2025 as outlined in its ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management.

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