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Future-ready Humanitarian Action: Strategic Resilience in a Post-Covid World

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The frequently erupting Mount Sinabung, Sumatra. What could a volcanic eruption in combination with a pandemic throw up?
Photo by Yosh Ginsu on Unsplash.

SYNOPSIS

Asia-Pacific countries must deal with the overlapping effects of a pandemic and natural hazards. This new riskscape has generated a focus on safe movement measures,

securing supply chains, and building stronger relations with community leaders in order for governments and militaries to withstand shocks. Strategic resilience has emerged as a package which encapsulates these components by which countries may calibrate responses to future crises.

COMMENTARY

Even as the Covid-19 pandemic rages on, disasters continue to afflict populations in the region. [According](#) to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), it responded to 24 major climate-linked crises in 2020 in the region — up from 18 in 2019. Fifteen of those were in Southeast Asia, which affected more than 31 million people.

Over the past decade, Southeast Asian countries have tried to strengthen their resilience against natural hazards. At the regional level, ASEAN has improved its disaster management capabilities through the framework established under the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). It has also operationalised the One ASEAN One Response, which [envisions](#) meaningful and sustained collaboration between different sectors and stakeholders within the ASEAN community to respond to disasters collectively.

However, as the pandemic has demonstrated, the region is still ill-prepared for multiple overlapping crises. The pandemic, combined with climate change and multiple natural hazards, has reshaped and expanded the [riskscape](#) in the region. The need to provide aid to affected communities while also taking necessary steps to halt the spread of Covid-19 has stretched national and regional systems, [demonstrating](#) in the process the current limitations in responses to concurrent and sequential disasters.

From Resilience to Strategic Resilience

Resilience is the ability of an individual or community to bounce back from a shock. This is inadequate to maintain stability over the longer term and only offers a necessary last-ditch attempt [to react](#). Organisations and communities need agile processes to adapt to turbulence, complexity and uncertainty in their strategic environments. Resilience alone is insufficient in the context of concurrent and simultaneous risks like natural hazards and pandemics.

The past two years have illustrated the need to accept risks as a given, so as to inform decision-making beyond reactive measures. In 2019, the annual economic [losses](#) due to disasters in Southeast Asia, as calculated according to the average over several years, were estimated to be around US\$86.5 billion. Fast forward to 2021, the economic impact of the pandemic has definitely compounded this figure. In September 2021, the Asian Development Bank [lowered](#) regional growth projections for Southeast Asia to 3.1 per cent from its previous 4.4 per cent projection in April. This was largely due to the region's struggle to effectively contain Covid-19 outbreaks, the continued lockdowns and travel restrictions, and slow vaccine rollouts.

By accepting risk, institutions and communities should continuously strive to adopt more proactive approaches to offset and prevent crises. Strategic resilience is [not about](#) reacting to sudden, one-off events, but about the ability to anticipate and adjust

to trends in the environment, changing processes before the case for change becomes obvious, and seeking continuous improvement. It entails a much more forward-looking, deliberate and innovative approach towards change and improvement in an operating and strategic environment.

One area of focus can be supply chain management. The pandemic has led to disruptions of [supply chains and travel routes](#), affecting the provision of humanitarian aid to populations affected by natural hazards. A strategic resilience approach entails proactively establishing “[humanitarian lanes](#)” that can be quickly activated in the event of any crisis, to facilitate the quick transfer and distribution of humanitarian relief.

Future-ready

Developing strategic resilience in the region requires governments, institutions and communities to proactively reflect on potential future challenges. Rather than simply attempting to resolve immediate threats, they need to adopt a future-oriented attitude towards risk; envisioning what the future may look like, and the role they wish to play in it. This can be done by mapping out various risk scenarios and identifying ways in which the region can adapt and evolve to deal with these new circumstances.

Recent regional platforms and initiatives have helped ASEAN develop its disaster management capabilities to deal with future risks and threats. With the theme “Advancing Disaster Management: Into a Future of Possibilities”, [this year’s](#) ASEAN Strategic Policy Dialogue on Disaster Management endeavoured to spark discourse on future humanitarian trends, challenges and opportunities in the region. It identified three areas for ASEAN to prepare itself to deal with emerging challenges and risks in the future, which include the need to strengthen local responses, devise innovative disaster financing solutions, and use technology to support disaster management.

The [ASEAN Disaster Resilience Outlook \(ADRO\)](#), launched in October 2021, identified new and emerging risks posed by the rapidly changing humanitarian landscape in the region. It offers innovative solutions and strategic recommendations to ASEAN member states to improve their disaster management capabilities, while enhancing ASEAN’s profile as a global leader in disaster management. The overarching goal is to strengthen disaster resilience in the region and enable ASEAN to thrive in the decades ahead — the essence of strategic resilience.

These efforts demonstrate the region’s attempts to plan for and from the future, and develop solutions to manage evolving threats. The next step is to ensure the recommendations and ideas are operationalised and converted into tangible action.

Inter-sectoral Cooperation

Disruptions brought about by the pandemic point to the need to be prepared for simultaneous risk events. To ensure a holistic response to converging risks, the region needs to adopt a [nexus approach](#) that prioritises inter-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration. With the increasing occurrence of disasters in the region, coupled with the escalation of infectious diseases, the region needs to focus its efforts on examining the interactions between climate change, disasters and pandemics as a starting point. More cohesive and proactive mechanisms can be formulated by bringing together

institutions and entities involved in disaster management, health and biodiversity conservation.

For instance, the soon-to-be operationalised ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED) can work with the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre), and the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) to create a regional crisis management framework which could include [pandemic prevention mechanisms](#) and response protocols during pandemic-disaster situations. Further, at the national level, governments and line ministries should implement awareness building programmes which can help individuals and communities understand the associated risks of simultaneous disasters and disease outbreaks, and the intersecting impacts on different sectors.

Antifragility: An Indicator of Strategic Resilience

The pandemic has tested the world's capacity to bounce back from adversity. However, it also offers an opportunity for systems to change for the future. Nassim Taleb [coined](#) the term "antifragility" to describe systems that benefit from shocks and leverage on disruptions to thrive and grow. Antifragility [goes beyond](#) the notion of resilience and pushes us to develop systems that can survive a crisis and thrive through it. Applying this to the humanitarian context requires flexibility and understanding of what needs to change and when. It is a [constant process](#) of unlearning and relearning. This flexibility and willingness to adapt to a new way of working is essential to cope with future converging risks.

Towards a Safer and More Resilient Region

The complexity of responding to disasters and pandemics might mean that true antifragility is impossible to achieve. However, this does not mean that we should rest on our laurels. We need to continuously work towards building up strategic resilience across all levels of society to deal with future challenges. This requires us to reflect on the frameworks and mechanisms that we currently have in place and identify areas which require further strengthening. With so much experience in dealing with crises, the region must ensure that future generations are prepared to deal with imminent threats.

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