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Next Steps for Disaster Resilience in ASEAN

By Alistair D. B. Cook and Christopher Chen

SYNOPSIS

The challenges posed in responding to natural hazards during the global COVID-19 pandemic were felt across Southeast Asia. As travel restrictions and supply chain disruptions ease up, it is time to reevaluate disaster management and not simply revert to old ways.

COMMENTARY

Since the news first broke about the emergence of a zoonotic pathogen in December 2019, the subsequent global pandemic not only directly affected millions of people worldwide, it disrupted many aspects of everyday life. Disaster management was impacted by lockdown measures and disrupted global supply chains of money and goods.

At the end of 2021, the impact of Typhoon Odette in the Philippines during prevailing COVID-19 social distancing measures saw limits imposed on evacuation centres and is one example of converging risks faced in the region. As the types, dynamics, and dimensions of risk events are complex and require strategic analysis and preparation, the disaster management sector needs to re-think its strategies and transform itself to strengthen capabilities and capacities to be fit-for-purpose.

Disaster Governance for all

The disaster management sector is gradually recognising the importance of [planetary health](#) – the triple challenge of pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change – in how it affects the way we deal with disasters. The planetary health framework emphasises the [intersection and linkages](#) of human activities and the planet, and promotes working together regardless of which sector we work in to address the array of challenges facing humanity; from public health to climate change and the links between them.

In August 2022, the ASEAN community met in person once again after a two-year hiatus at the [2022 ASEAN Strategic Policy Dialogue on Disaster Management](#). The dialogue drew attention to several broad trends and identified areas in which policy makers and practitioners should focus on to enhance disaster resilience.

What became clear at the dialogue is that there are significant plans of action, impact assessments and initiatives. The challenge is that these commitments are often limited to an individual sector with an insufficient focus on working with other sectors to achieve their aims. For us to achieve societal resilience, it will require more concerted efforts to understand one another and to work where links exist.

Societal resilience cannot be achieved by governments, researchers, community groups or businesses alone. They need to work together. Over the past twenty years, other initiatives have sought to strengthen resilience. In the private sector, Environmental and Social Corporate Governance (ESG) has gained traction since it was first used in the 2004 UN report [Who Cares Wins – Connecting Financial Markets to a Changing World](#). These efforts seek to influence business decision-making to include impacts not just on profit but on people and the planet as well.

The challenge for ESG adherents is to connect with other sectors to change the way we work and avoid working in silos and at cross purposes. This falls alongside disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, '[One Health](#)', and other initiatives in different sectors.

Developments in the Asia-Pacific are currently underway to promote this agenda. Humanitarian leader Tan Sri Dr Jemilah Mahmood and committed colleagues established the [Sunway Centre for Planetary Health](#) last year in Malaysia. The centre advocates for a planetary health approach that designs holistic policies bringing the triple challenge together with a focus on Southeast Asia. Societal resilience and efforts to build back better need to ensure that communities not only recover but thrive.

Recast Innovation

For all the talk about the promise of new technologies and innovation, it often misses the critical element of human interaction. Discussions on the topic of innovation generally centre on the use of new product hardware and software. However, we often underestimate the important role that non-technological innovations can play in improving the way we work within organisations and sectors.

Faced with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarians re-allocated available resources. For example, they channelled funds originally meant for air travel towards digitalisation initiatives to strengthen their internal ICT infrastructure. This allowed their staff to run programmes virtually and provide remote assistance. They also negotiated with donors and requested more flexibility in project timelines and budget allocation to varying levels of success.

The result was that longer-term development projects were put on hold and funding was channelled towards pandemic and natural hazard crisis response. They 'innovated' by adapting pre-existing evacuation protocols and processes to fit pandemic realities.

While this demonstrated adaptability, it also highlighted the absence of holistic thinking and strategic foresight by its reliance on ad hoc and reactive measures. It is important to maintain sight of the big picture and consider the secondary impacts of crisis response. This is critical to minimise any disruptions to daily operations, which considering the nature of humanitarian work, arguably increases the cost of failure.

The organisational changes involved can be challenging, requiring many layers of arbitration and involving different components within an organisation. A proactive approach is essential to ensure a smooth transition to implement new processes while maintaining pre-existing arrangements and avoiding substantial adjustments in sustainability commitments.

Disaster Resilience Fit for Purpose

Over the past two years, there have been several frameworks and documents produced to strengthen and improve disaster governance in the region. These include the [ASEAN Framework on Anticipatory Action in Disaster Management](#), the [ASEAN Regional Framework on Protection, Gender, and Inclusion in Disaster Management 2021-2025](#), the [ASEAN Regional Plan of Action for Adaptation to Drought 2021-2025](#), and the [ASEAN Disaster Resilience Outlook in 2021](#).

Therefore, the next step is to turn these discussions into tangible actions and solutions to improve disaster management in ASEAN. This can take the form of a multi-pronged approach that includes accelerated domestic capacity development across the region and fostering of inter-sectoral cooperation.

ASEAN should also work towards building links with other regions and facilitating inter-regional cooperation on disaster governance. At the national and local levels, the building of bridges between stakeholders in different regions – who share similar challenges – will have an impact on the efficacy of future disaster responses. To this end, there is a need to increase investments in the development of more robust and empowered subnational entities to complement national efforts to ensure effective, comprehensive, and inclusive policy implementation.

Countries in Southeast Asia have vastly improved their capacities to manage disasters at the national level; however, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, we still need to further strengthen these capacities within countries to better serve those communities exposed to concurrent natural hazards and risk events.

Alistair D. B. Cook is Coordinator of the HADR Programme and Senior Fellow, Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Christopher Chen is an Associate Research Fellow with the HADR Programme in the same centre.
