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Disaster Management in Southeast Asia: 20 Years of Progress and Challenges

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SYNOPSIS

The management of consequences arising from natural hazards in Southeast Asia has seen laudable advancement in the last 20 years. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a positive role in this progress. However, there is emerging disaster policy inertia that reflect local realities at the ASEAN and global levels.

COMMENTARY

Among both proponents and critics, there is a shared perception and narrative that disaster risk reduction policy reform in ASEAN has been fruitful, marked by the steady development of the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) since 2003 that laid the foundation for the legally binding ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in 2009. AADMER led to the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) in 2011.

Since then, the AHA Centre has been instrumental in ASEAN disaster relief and humanitarian operations. It has built upon ASEAN's pivotal role during the response to Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008. It has since repeatedly proven its legitimacy to the member states, as exemplified during the Central Sulawesi earthquakes in 2018. ASEAN international partners, including bilateral and multilateral institutions, have supported the ASEAN disaster management systems and mechanisms; illustrating an important avenue for cooperation between countries in the region and the international community.

Since 2008, ASEAN mechanisms have been consistently facilitating and catalysing significant regional initiatives and policy changes leading to the "nationally-led,

regionally-supported and international-as-necessary” mantra often heard in disaster management and emergency response dialogues. The five-year work plan serves as a platform for the ACDM to operate in a shared and collaborative manner.

At the regional and diplomatic levels, 'everything' seems to be working and moving in the right direction towards implementing ASEAN disaster management commitments that have been strategically aligned with global agendas such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Sustainable Development Goals. However, there is a perception in some quarters that despite active engagement in global platforms and participation in the discourses and policies of international organisations and dialogue partners, there is less focus on reflecting local needs and voices.

Institutional Inertia?

Notwithstanding ASEAN's achievements in disaster management to date, there are significant challenges to maintaining the momentum built over the past twenty years. We have observed that policy developments at the regional level and the sustainable development needs and policy impact at the local level are diverging. The ASEAN Secretariat and AHA Centre appear frustrated at the lack of progress at the national and sub-national levels. This begs the question how ASEAN can provide global leadership when there is a lack of progress at these levels.

At global meetings and in their contributions to global initiatives, the ASEAN Secretariat and AHA Centre have collaborated with other entities and adopted much of the terminology and terms of reference. Such collaboration is necessary for a multi-stakeholder environment, but it needs to be carefully calibrated with its home constituencies. In the case of disaster management, this means that efforts need to be focused on the local level.

Over the past two decades, ASEAN's disaster management community has shown significant progress in terms of garnering policy priority within the regional organisation. ASEAN provides strong capacity building programmes to help member states advance disaster management as an important policy agenda but its local impact has plateaued.

It is becoming more apparent that trends are in reverse in the regional disaster management landscape in terms of achieving measurable goals. Regional meetings have received criticism similar to that of other sectors in ASEAN, where these meetings are seen as an end in themselves and implementation of their outcomes is at best sporadic.

Recent formal reports such as the Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2022, shows that across nearly all indicators, the region is regressing in terms of its 2030 targets. A report on Indonesia at the Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction held in Bali in May 2022 showed that 6 out of 7 indicators demonstrating progress to achieve the Sendai Framework goals by 2030 are likely to fall short. Countries in the region often regarded as disaster risk reduction champions can lose legitimacy among their peers in the global community if this trend continues.

Policy developments and pronouncements need to reconnect with the local community in ASEAN. One crucial component of this is the engagement of the university research sector at the local level. Strong relationships should be built with these institutions of higher learning to help them become not only repositories of local knowledge of disaster management, but also to inform and develop locally-led disaster management policy that shapes regional efforts within and outside the region to fully realise the original aims under the motto “One ASEAN One Response”.

It was not for regional entities to become dominated by global norms shaped by more powerful entities, but for them to contribute regional perspectives to inform the global dialogue, particularly in a policy realm where the grounds for multi-stakeholder cooperation are fertile.

While it is inevitable that socialisation and power politics occur within the global context, there is a need for this conversation to be heard, and to articulate the priorities of the people. This will generate much-needed momentum within the region to address disaster risk, build a more disaster-resilient society, and achieve the 2030 goals on time. This experience will even provide the global community with evidence-based policies to shape broader disaster policy conversations.

Revitalising Disaster Policy: An Important Agenda for ASEAN Towards 2043

At present, there is a lack of initiatives reflecting local realities to sustain and elevate disaster management policy to meet the challenges of today and those we will face in the next 20 years. The region faces two fundamental challenges that need to be addressed: (1) failure to meet Sendai Framework indicators and regression even by 2030; and (2) the loss of strong leadership that drives action, engages personnel, and provides direction in the coming years.

There is a very real possibility that ASEAN would not meet the Sendai targets by 2030. This prospect is not simply because of the COVID-19 legacy of the past three years but signals the divergence between local needs and policy action at ASEAN level. When measured by tangible outcomes at the societal level, including the ground-level real-risk trajectory, data suggests that the real risks should concern many players and stakeholders. For example, one small earthquake event can be disastrous, as shown recently in Cianjur, Indonesia.

We note that progress achieved in ASEAN disaster management policy has become weak. There are thousands of preventable hazards turning into disasters in the region. Furthermore, there is a lack of systematic evidence to show that sustainable recovery to avert future disasters, as promoted by the 'build-back better' framework, is underway. If the dual challenges of regressing on the 2030 targets and the loss of leadership are not tackled, then the progress achieved over the past twenty years will not be sustained for the next twenty.

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