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## **ASEAN's Move Towards Proactive Disaster Management**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*In the face of the intensifying climate crisis, a more proactive approach to disaster management is needed for Southeast Asia to enhance its resilience to disasters. **S. NANTHINI** writes that integrating early warning systems and an anticipatory action approach into the mainstream disaster management infrastructure is essential for the region moving forward.*

### **COMMENTARY**

The reality of intensifying climate change is clearly highlighted by the recently released [Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2023](#), which expanded on the “increasingly serious threat” that climate change-induced disasters pose to the broader Asia-Pacific region. Southeast Asia is particularly vulnerable, with Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam among [the top 10 countries by number of disasters in 2022](#). Given this vulnerability, enhancing disaster resilience is increasingly a key concern of policymakers in Southeast Asia.

This concern is reflected in this year's edition of the ASEAN Strategic Policy Dialogue on Disaster Management (SPDDM), which was launched in 2015. SPDDM 2023 will be held under the theme of “Disaster Resilience: Investing Today for a Sustainable Region” and will include a keynote discussion on building resilience to climate-induced disasters, a high-level panel discussion on communication and early action for proactive disaster management, and a thematic session on risk governance and innovative technology.



Given the heightening climate risks in the Southeast Asian region, platforms such as the ASEAN Strategic Policy Dialogue on Disaster Management (SPDDM) and ASEAN Disaster Management Week remain all the more vital in allowing policymakers and stakeholders in Southeast Asia to discuss how to enhance disaster resilience.

*Image by SCDF.*

As one of the world's most disaster-prone regions, Southeast Asia has a relatively developed disaster response capacity. In recognition of heightening climate risks, the region is now moving towards proactive disaster management to ensure its resilience amid increasing challenges. In view of the ongoing climate security challenges and ASEAN's aim to be proactive to deal with disasters, there is an urgent need to strengthen the use of early warning systems and mainstream anticipatory action across regional, national, and local policy frameworks to ensure the region is able to act early.

### **Strengthening the Use of Early Warning Systems**

[Early warning systems](#) have long been recognised as a cost-effective tool to mitigate the impacts of disasters. Even 24 hours' notice of an impending hazard can reduce damage by [30%](#). The worsening climate crisis highlights the urgency to ensure that coverage of early warning systems extends to communities at risk of disasters. In 2022, the United Nations launched the "Early Warning for All" initiative, aiming to ensure that everyone across the world is protected by early warning systems by 2027.

[Southeast Asia](#) has achieved fairly good early warning system coverage from regional to local levels. Examples include the [ASEAN Disaster Monitoring and Response System](#) (DMRS), which is run by the AHA Centre, and national systems, including [Indonesia's InAWARE](#) and Vietnam's [VinAWARE](#). Based on constant information feeds from the Pacific Disaster Centre system, these early warning systems show real time information of the hazards in the region as they happen, warning communities of incoming hazards accordingly.

However, the effectiveness of early warning systems varies across countries as well as communities in the region. This variation is due in part to the digital divide. In Southeast Asia, access to the Internet ranges from [44% in Myanmar to 98% in Brunei](#), due to differing levels of digital infrastructure. Bridging this divide will require satellite broadband and connectivity solutions including building a more robust national digital infrastructure.

Variations in accessibility are also evident according to gender and a rural/urban divide. As such, even though early warning systems exist, their ability to effectively communicate risk to certain segments of the population may be limited, in which case,

the vulnerability of these groups to disasters is further heightened. Therefore, efforts should be made to strengthen vulnerable and under-privileged communities' access to early warning information. Additionally, in order to strengthen risk communication during disasters, it is imperative that public awareness of early warning systems be raised and the public be educated about every component of local and national early warning systems.

## **Mainstreaming Anticipatory Action**

Anticipatory action goes one step further by aiming to reduce the impact of disasters through a series of pre-planned and pre-financed actions, such as equipment distribution, cash transfers, and even infrastructure protection. In case of an oncoming disaster, once certain pre-planned triggers are met, action plans are activated. Such proactive actions would then mitigate the impact of the disaster – and importantly, reduce the need for resources during the response phase, ensuring a more cost-effective approach overall.

The usefulness of anticipatory action is particularly evident in slow-onset disasters such as droughts. For example, studies have shown that distributing funds prior to a drought can [reduce its impacts by four to five times](#) by allowing communities to use these funds to prepare, reducing their vulnerability and enhancing their resilience in the face of oncoming disasters. This means that anticipatory action is especially useful for Southeast Asian countries as the region is predicted to be vulnerable to [droughts](#) due to climate change.

In 2019, [joint anticipatory actions were planned in Hanoi](#) between the Vietnam Red Cross, the German Red Cross, and the Vietnam Institute of Meteorology Hydrology and Climate Change ahead of predicted heatwaves. According to the arrangements, a forecast of extreme temperatures would immediately trigger funding to be released for particular plans, including the opening of cooling centres and awareness efforts on managing the health impacts of heat. With the launch of the ASEAN Framework on Anticipatory Action in Disaster Management in 2022, anticipatory action is being explicitly integrated into the broader disaster management structure in Southeast Asia.

While ASEAN and its member states have made initial attempts to integrate anticipatory action into disaster management policy and practice, more work needs to be done to ensure anticipatory action contributes to the region's disaster resilience. First, anticipatory action is heavily reliant on early warning information or forecasts. It is therefore important to strengthen the accuracy of early warning so as to allow more lead time for action. Second, the definition of triggers still faces technical challenges, such as availability of data of sufficient quality. Partnerships with data and climate scientists with suitable technical skills and context-specific knowledge are crucial for proper trigger definitions. ASEAN should promote collaboration in this regard between scientific communities within the region and also with those from ASEAN dialogue partners. Third, financing schemes need to be adapted to allow timely release of funding to communities in need.

## Conclusion

Southeast Asia is a region with limited resources, and a more cost-effective approach to disaster management is in the best interest of Southeast Asian countries. Proactive disaster management featuring early warning systems and anticipatory action clearly serves this purpose. While challenges still exist that might limit the effectiveness of a proactive approach, the region should start to transform its disaster management by strengthening early warning systems and making greater efforts to integrate anticipatory action in policy and practice.

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