



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ASEAN'S CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

Sharon Seah and Melinda Martinus

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Gaps and Opportunities in ASEAN's Climate Governance

By Sharon Seah and Melinda Martinus

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Although climate-linked impacts on ASEAN's economy, increasing vulnerability to severe weather, and interlinkages to transboundary haze, health, security and marine pollution are evident, a recent survey by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute reveals that Southeast Asians are ambivalent about ASEAN's effectiveness in tackling climate change.
- All ASEAN Member States (AMS) are fully committed to accelerating reductions to global emissions under the Paris Agreement and demonstrate political will to set up intersectoral climate governance on renewable energy transition, agriculture and food security, forest and land use protection, disaster risk management, conservation on biodiversity, among many other measures.
- Under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) pillar, the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings on the Environment (AMME) and the ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting on the Environment (ASOEN) meet annually to discuss environment-related issues, including climate change. The ASEAN Working Group on Climate Change (AWGCC), one of seven technical working groups reporting to the ASOEN, is tasked to enhance regional cooperation on climate change, promote collaboration between sectoral bodies, and articulate ASEAN's concerns and priorities at the international level.
- Climate change issues have become cross-cutting and involve various ASEAN sectoral bodies. The AWGCC's role, however, is still limited to the environmental mandate.

- ASEAN needs to establish a super coordinating body on climate change that can ensure information sharing across ASEAN bodies, convene support from dialogue partners, and engage with civil society organizations. The ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on Public Health Emergencies (ACCWG-PHE) model established during the COVID-19 crisis can serve as a precedent.

Gaps and Opportunities in ASEAN's Climate Governance

By Sharon Seah and Melinda Martinus¹

INTRODUCTION

Regional climate governance has gained traction over the past few years. Regional organizations are critical stakeholders in the international response to transboundary environmental challenges, and play an essential role in coordinating a state-dominated framework of ambitions and timetables for emissions reductions. Many studies on climate governance have pointed out that regional cooperation can help countries generate in-depth information, enable sharing of experiences, bridge gaps between national efforts and the global climate change framework, harmonize information, reduce redundancy and manage transboundary environmental problems.

The role of regional organizations in mobilizing climate action has been endorsed by many international institutions and development partners worldwide, particularly since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published the 5th Assessment Report 2014 spotlighting the importance of regional development and cooperation in

¹ Sharon Seah is Coordinator of the ASEAN Studies Centre and the Climate Change in Southeast Asia Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute; and Melinda Martinus is Lead Researcher (Socio-Cultural) at the ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. The authors thank Qiu Jiahui for providing data assistance and Terence Chong for comments and suggestions. A draft of this paper was presented at the ASEAN Symposium on ASCC Blueprint 2025 on 10 December 2020 and submitted to the Compendium on Analytical Views for the ASCC Blueprint 2025 (forthcoming) published by ASEAN Secretariat.

climate mitigation efforts.² The underlying argument is that numerous trade and technology cooperation as well as transboundary agreements related to water, energy, and transportation have been set in place by regional organizations, thus making it easier to find entry points to achieve mitigation objectives.

The role of regional organizations has been academically discussed since the early 1990s when security organizations such as NATO started to think about climate change as a form of non-traditional security threat.³ Drawing on the lessons of environmental problems, the discussion focused on the limitations of regional organizations, including the fact that regional organizations tend to be subjected to political influence from member states and whether these organizations, having political, economic and functional resources and experiences, could expand their activities to cover climate change.⁴ These early discussions were also constrained by governments that were not entirely convinced by the science behind climate change and the severity of the threat it posed.⁵

Over the decades, as scientific evidence became stronger, the discussion evolved to how regional organizations could view climate change through developmental lenses and address it by coordinating adaptation responses down to the community level, or to view it through security-related lenses.⁶ The United Nations, for instance, mobilizes its

² IPCC, “AR5 Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change”, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg3/> (accessed 9 March 2021).

³ Michael H. Glantz, ed., *The Role of Regional Organizations in the Context of Climate Change*, Nato ASI Subseries I: (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 1994), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-85026-4>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See, for example: Stacy-Ann Robinson and Daniel Gilfillan, “Regional Organisations and Climate Change Adaptation in Small Island Developing States”, *Regional Environmental Change* 17, no. 4 (2017); Florian Krampe and Malin Mobjörk, “Responding to Climate-Related Security Risks: Reviewing Regional Organizations in Asia and Africa”, *Current Climate Change Reports* 4, no. 10 (2018).

UN Regional Commissions to develop responses to the economic and social consequences of climate change. These responses complement climate change analyses with a regional perspective. UNESCAP has become a focal point in the Asia-Pacific region by coordinating climate action. Other regional intergovernmental organizations such as the European Union, the African Union and the Association of Caribbean States have been working on various frameworks on the issues of climate change and opportunities to enhance economic integration, regional connectivity, and socio-political resilience.

This paper explores ASEAN's (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) positionality and institutional framework on climate change in the context of ASEAN's vision to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development, and socio-political stability among the ten ASEAN Member States (AMS). It analyses ASEAN's institutional framework on climate change including the reasoning behind its institutional setting, as well as gaps and opportunities to leverage climate action to strengthen regional cohesiveness. The structure of this paper includes sections on growing climate change concerns across various sectors in Southeast Asia, an overview of AMS' Climate Governance, an overview of ASEAN's regional framework on climate change, and an analysis of institutional gaps and opportunities, followed by policy recommendations.

CLIMATE CHANGE CONCERNS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asia is a pivotal region for climate action. The region's share of global emissions is around 3 per cent, but could reach 5 per cent in 2030.⁷ Yet despite a small carbon emissions share, the region is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The Global Climate Risk Index 2018 by German Watch lists four among ten Southeast

⁷ IEA, "World Energy Outlook 2009: Analysis" (IEA, 2009), <https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-outlook-2009>

Asian states—Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand—as the world’s most affected countries in terms of fatalities in climate disasters in the last two decades.⁸ Some parts of the region, particularly urban areas situated along coastlines have seen an increase in sea-level rise. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) lists nineteen Southeast Asian cities among the world’s twenty-five cities most exposed to sea-level rise, seven of which are in the Philippines.⁹

Studies also suggest that the impact of climate change on the region’s economy is immense. The ADB predicts that Southeast Asia will see a reduction of 11 per cent total GDP in 2100 under business-as-usual circumstances.¹⁰ Climate change is affecting the agriculture sector, the main economic generator of the region. Rice yield in the Mekong River Delta is projected to decline by 6–12 per cent and the yield of other crops by 3–26 per cent in 2050.¹¹ In Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, climate change could reduce rice production by up to 50 per cent.¹²

Climate change was ranked among the top security concerns in Southeast Asia according to *The State of Southeast Asia 2020 Survey* done by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.¹³ 66.8 per cent of the 1,308 Southeast Asian experts surveyed expressed concerns about climate

⁸ David Eckstein, Vera Künzel, and Laura Schäfer, “Global Climate Risk Index 2018”, *Germanwatch.org*, November 2017, <https://germanwatch.org/sites/germanwatch.org/files/publication/20432.pdf>

⁹ Asian Development Bank, *A Region at Risk: The Human Dimensions of Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2017), <https://www.adb.org/publications/region-at-risk-climate-change>

¹⁰ David A Raitzer et al., “Southeast Asia and the Economics of Global Climate Stabilisation” (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2015), <https://www.adb.org/publications/southeast-asia-economics-global-climate-stabilization>

¹¹ Asian Development Bank, *A Region at Risk*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Siew Mun Tang, Thi Ha Hoang, and Glenn Ong, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020).

implications, up from 52.6 per cent in 2019. In the 2021 Survey, the view on climate threats has intensified. 52.7 per cent say that climate change poses an immediate threat to their country's well-being and the same number say that governments have not paid adequate attention to the problem. 53.7 per cent of Southeast Asians view climate change as a “serious and immediate threat to the well-being of their country”, a slight increase from 52.7 per cent 2020.¹⁴

Yet, in a subsequent survey, *The Southeast Asia Climate Outlook: 2020 Survey Report*, Southeast Asians are ambivalent about ASEAN's effectiveness in tackling climate change.¹⁵ While 31.3 per cent of respondents think that ASEAN member states are working together effectively, slightly more than 32.9 per cent disagree. More importantly, 35.9 per cent feel that they can neither agree nor disagree that ASEAN is collaborating effectively. This finding indicates that even regional elites and experts are not sure if ASEAN has been doing enough to tackle climate change collectively. There is room for ASEAN to change this attitude of ambivalence and to promote its role in mitigating and adapting to climate change impacts proactively.

INTERLINKAGES BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE AND OTHER ISSUES

There is evidence of growing interlinkages between climate change and other environmental problems. For instance, at the UN Climate Summit in 2020, a former Indonesian vice-president acknowledged that forest fires in parts of Sumatra and Kalimantan were worsened by climate change.¹⁶

¹⁴ Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021).

¹⁵ Sharon Seah et al., *Southeast Asia Climate Outlook: 2020 Survey Report*, (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020).

¹⁶ Dian Septiari, “Kalla Blames Climate Change for Forest Fires”, *Jakarta Post*, 25 September 2019, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/09/25/kalla-blames-climate-change-forest-fires.html>

Furthermore, there is growing scientific evidence of linkages between transboundary haze pollution and climate change. ASEAN will begin to see more intense forest fires and transboundary haze problems affecting this region as global temperatures keep rising. This is an example where climate change impact requires action beyond sovereign boundaries.

Studies show that global climate change can influence ocean circulation patterns and affect the distribution of marine debris. The breakdown of plastic debris in the oceans also increases the rate of release of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.¹⁷ Four of the AMS are among the heaviest world polluters of the oceans: Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand.¹⁸ ASEAN recently strengthened its commitment to combat marine debris in the ASEAN region.¹⁹ The ASEAN Framework of Action on Marine Debris can further explore how climate science can aid efforts to curb plastic debris that are harmful to biodiversity and public health.

Geopolitical studies also point to serious regional security repercussions resulting from climate change. The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) points to climate-induced migration from low-lying areas in Bangladesh, triggering political tensions in Myanmar and other AMS.²⁰ Southeast Asia could begin to see forced migration triggered by the loss of livelihoods brought on by drought and sea-level rise. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre,

¹⁷ Kerri Major, “Plastic Waste and Climate Change: What’s the Connection?”, *wwf.org.au*, 4 July 2019, <https://www.wwf.org.au/news/blogs/plastic-waste-and-climate-change-whats-the-connection>

¹⁸ Ocean Conservancy, “Stemming the Tide: Land-Based Strategies for a Plastic-Free Ocean”, September 2015, <https://oceanconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/full-report-stemming-the.pdf>

¹⁹ ASEAN, “ASEAN Framework of Action on Marine Debris”, Statement & Communiqués (2019), <https://asean.org/asean-framework-action-marine-debris/>

²⁰ Indra Overland, “Impact of Climate Change on ASEAN International Affairs Risk and Opportunity Multiplier”, (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and Myanmar Institute of International and Strategic Studies, 2017), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320622312_Impact_of_Climate_Change_on_ASEAN_International_Affairs_Risk_and_Opportunity_Multiplier

54.5 million people were displaced by climate-related natural disasters in Southeast Asia between 2008 and 2018.²¹ The report by NUPI also highlights changing dynamics in territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea due to sea-level rise.

The field of climate-conflict studies is a growing one. Within this field, climate change is seen as a “threat multiplier” by those who study the nexus between climate anthropogenic activities and conflict in society. The extended drought in Syria since 2006, which raised ethnic tensions and eventually the mass displacement of millions that led to an internal civil war, has been used in numerous studies as a reference point.²² But there are also cautionary notes that civil wars cannot be distilled down to single causes.²³ Nonetheless, the argument that climate change can play a role in destabilizing domestic and regional societies, particularly in agrarian economies, is a powerful one which bears observation, particularly in regions where ethnic tensions and sectarian conflict historically run high.

Finally, the linkage between climate change, planetary, animal and human health will become increasingly clear. Although investigations on the origins of SARS-CoV-2 have been inconclusive, there is sufficient evidence²⁴ to suggest that the anthropogenic effects on climate change, such as the constant diminishing of natural wildlife habitats, mismanagement of biodiversity, increasing proximity between wildlife and livestock and global travel patterns may have contributed, if not,

²¹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, “Global Internal Displacement Database”, IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data> (accessed 12 March 2021).

²² Jan Selby et al., “Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War Revisited”, *Political Geography* 60 (1 September 2017): 232–44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.05.007>

²³ Madhuri Karak, “Climate Change and Syria’s Civil War”, *JSTOR Daily*, 12 September 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/climate-change-and-syrias-civil-war>

²⁴ Netra Chhetri, *Human and Social Dimensions of Climate Change*, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.5772/3242>

exacerbated the spread of COVID-19.²⁵ One study predicts that the climate risks for the developing world are worse due to the lack of epidemiological studies on zoonotic diseases.²⁶ The intersections between animal, human and planetary health require deeper examination. At the international level, there is increasing coordination between the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and World Health Organization (WHO) with a greater emphasis on the One Health²⁷ concept to manage emerging zoonotic diseases but more needs to be done at the regional level.

ASEAN'S CLIMATE COMMITMENTS

All ten ASEAN member states are committed to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement. Under Article 4 of the Paris Agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, State parties are required to “prepare, communicate and maintain successive nationally determined contributions (NDC)” (Article 4.5) and to do so “every five years in accordance with decision 1/CP21” (Article 4.9). AMS are currently in the process of updating their NDC targets and are encouraged to plan their long-term low-emission development strategies to show progression and higher climate ambition. As of March 2021, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Brunei and Cambodia (in that order) have submitted their

²⁵ OECD, “Biodiversity and the Economic Response to COVID-19: Ensuring a Green and Resilient Recovery”, *OECD* (blog), 28 September 2020, <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/biodiversity-and-the-economic-response-to-covid-19-ensuring-a-green-and-resilient-recovery-d98b5a09/>

²⁶ Preneshni R. Naicker, “The Impact of Climate Change and Other Factors on Zoonotic Diseases”, *Archives of Clinical Microbiology* 2, no. 2 (2011), <https://www.acmicrob.com/abstract/the-impact-of-climate-change-and-other-factors-on-zoonotic-diseases-220.html>

²⁷ FAO-OIE-WHO, “The FAO-OIE-WHO Collaboration Sharing Responsibilities and Coordinating Global Activities to Address Health Risks at the Animal-Human-Ecosystems Interfaces”, April 2010, https://www.oie.int/fileadmin/Home/eng/Current_Scientific_Issues/docs/pdf/FINAL_CONCEPT_NOTE_Hanoi.pdf

revised NDCs to the UNFCCC Secretariat. Singapore is the only ASEAN country to have submitted a long-term low-emission development plan.²⁸ The remaining AMS are expected to submit their updated NDCs prior to the next Conference of Parties scheduled in November 2021.

AMS are increasingly aware of global developments on climate change. This is reflected in their efforts at accelerating reductions to global emissions and climate adaptation under the Paris Agreement. They are more proactive in setting up domestic climate initiatives such as renewable energy transition, agriculture and food security, forest and land use protection, disaster risk management, conservation of biodiversity, among many others. Since 2007, ASEAN has made declarations and statements regarding the critical importance of climate change. However, ASEAN has yet to recognize the commonalities and challenges faced by its member states in implementing their NDC targets. ASEAN regional climate officials cite problems in obtaining industry cooperation in helping governments meet mitigation targets, while on the adaptation front, they face problems with elevating traditional indigenous knowledge at the community-level to the national policy levels.²⁹

DEVELOPMENTS IN DOMESTIC CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

Climate change is a multifaceted challenge that involves multiple stakeholders at various levels of government and society. It is a problem that requires keen attention as its impacts are immediate on-set ones. Yet, at an intergenerational level, the warming of the globe moves at a glacial pace.

²⁸ National Climate Change Secretariat and Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office, "Charting Singapore's Low-Carbon and Climate Resilient Future", Singapore, 2020.

²⁹ National University of Singapore Centre for International Law, "Decoding the Paris Rulebook for Southeast Asia: Implementation and Its Challenges" (Singapore: CIL, NUS, 2019), <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/publication/decoding-the-paris-rulebook-for-southeast-asia-implementation-and-its-challenges/>

Governments, organizations and businesses are realizing that the climate change problem is not confined to one segment of society nor can it be solved by governments or civil society alone. It requires coordinated effort at all levels of society. Yet, how does a community, whether national or local, organize itself to coordinate climate efforts which range so widely from science to policy, from mitigation to adaptation, from desk-top accounting of carbon credits to climate strikes?

Governments around the world have begun to adopt a whole-of-government approach towards climate change. They have realized that the responsibility does not lie with one or two ministries; but, instead, requires coordinated efforts of all ministries and departments, including the ministry of finance. Some governments have created ministries of climate change while others have appointed special entities that report directly to the cabinet or the prime minister on the issue. The elevation of climate change to an inter-ministerial level issue deserving of top-level attention and the accompanying domestic institutional governance reforms within many AMS, have been underway in the last decade. These include:

1. Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Climate Change established in 2007, chaired by the senior minister and coordinating minister for national security and supported by the National Climate Change Secretariat;
2. Thailand's 2007 National Committee on Climate Change Policy, an inter-agency body chaired by the prime minister.
3. The Philippines' Climate Change Commission established by the Climate Change Act of 2009 and headed by the president;
4. Indonesia's Presidential Decree on National Action for Greenhouse Gas Emission ratified in 2011, delegating the coordination of the national plan to the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of National Planning, the Ministry of Environment (now Ministry of Environment and Forestry), and the Ministry of Home Affairs.
5. Vietnam's National Climate Change Committee (NCCC), an inter-ministerial committee chaired by the prime minister, established in 2012 as the country's highest institutional body overseeing climate

change policy.³⁰ It is supported by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and possesses the authority to issue directives to all line ministries and the People's Committees of all sixty-three provinces.³¹

6. Cambodia's National Council for Sustainable Development established in 2015 comprising representatives from the country's thirty-six ministries and twenty-five provincial governors and chaired by the environment minister with the prime minister as its honorary chair.
7. Myanmar's 2016 National Environmental Conservation and Climate Change Committee which mainstreams climate change into national development policies. It is an inter-ministerial committee chaired at the vice-president level.³²
8. Brunei's National Council on Climate Change established in 2018 and co-chaired by the Minister of Energy and Minister of Development to provide the highest level of strategic direction in addressing climate change.³³ The Council, which comprises four key ministries (Energy; Transportation and Infocommunications; Primary Resources and Tourism; and Development), is supported by the Brunei Climate Change Secretariat with the aim of developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating Brunei's climate policies and coordinating climate action across government and non-government agencies.

³⁰ National Communication to UNFCCC, "Viet Nam. National Communication (NC). NC 3", <https://unfccc.int/documents/192805> (accessed 12 March 2021).

³¹ Lisa Stauch, Julia Balanowski, and Yann Robiou du Point, "Multi-Level Climate Governance in Vietnam" (Berlin: Adelphi, 2018), <https://www.adelphi.de/en/publication/multi-level-climate-governance-vietnam>

³² AP-PLAT, "Close Collaboration with Multi-Stakeholders: Planning for Climate Change in Myanmar", https://ap-plat.nies.go.jp/plan_implementation/casestudies/db/2017-case-study-1-2/index.html (accessed 12 March 2021).

³³ Brunei Darussalam NDC, "Brunei Darussalam Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) 2020", n.d.

AMS are also developing new legislation to deal with climate change. Vietnam’s Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) has proposed a draft law on environmental protection to replace its 2014 Law on Environmental Protection and another draft decree on the mitigation of GHG emissions. The new draft decree on GHG emissions will give MONRE a legal basis to coordinate the work of different ministries on GHG mitigation. Similarly, Thailand has indicated plans to design new legislation on climate change.³⁴ In an unprecedented move, Singapore’s parliament declared climate change a “global emergency” on 1 February 2021 to signal the seriousness of the government’s commitment in addressing climate change to the nation and the world.³⁵ Collectively, these actions by AMS indicate political will to advance national and intersectoral climate actions.

ASEAN’S REGIONAL FRAMEWORK ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change comes under the remit of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Environment (AMME) and the ASEAN Senior Officials’ Meeting on Environment (ASOEN). The perennial preoccupation of the AMME had been the transboundary haze pollution caused by forest and peat fires in Indonesia. ASEAN started to pay greater attention to climate change in 2007 with the adoption of the Singapore Declaration on Climate Change, Energy and the Environment at the 12th ASEAN Summit. Parking climate change under the AMME was a natural extension of environmental management issues. However, as we discuss below, this is no longer sufficient in view of the cross-cutting nature of climate change.

³⁴ Neebir Banerjee, “Thailand Prepares Its First-Ever Climate Change Legislation”, *Climate Scorecard* (blog), 26 November 2020, <https://www.climatescorecard.org/2020/11/thailand-prepares-its-first-ever-climate-change-legislation/>

³⁵ Rei Kurohi, “Singapore Parliament Declares Climate Change a Global Emergency, Politics News & Top Stories”, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/singapore-parliament-declares-climate-change-a-global-emergency> (accessed 12 March 2021).

The ASEAN Working Group on Climate Change (AWGCC) was formed in 2009 to study climate issues, make policy recommendations and coordinate positions among AMS. The AWGCC, currently chaired by Cambodia (2019–2022), meets annually to report on the progress of the group’s action plan which includes projects on strengthening linkages between science and policymaking, scoping study on setting up facility/company level monitoring, verification and reporting (MRV) system for GHG emissions, capacity development for the establishment of an Enhanced Transparency System (ETS), a climate finance needs assessment study, improving capacity of ASEAN climate change negotiation teams and finally, a work-in-progress “ASEAN State of the Climate Report” slated to be completed by 2021.³⁶

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint 2016–2025 frames environmental issues into four key areas, namely, biodiversity and natural resources; environmentally sustainable cities; sustainable climate; and sustainable consumption and production. These four areas are translated into seven strategic priorities for which relevant working groups have been formed to study, put up recommendations, and coordinate positions. The ASCC blueprint specifically calls for enhancing the capacity of sectoral institutions and ASEAN governments to improve GHG inventories, strengthen global partnerships, and advance the implementation of the global framework on climate change, especially the UNFCCC. The AWGCC was mandated to achieve those targets and to focus on three priorities: (1) enhance regional cooperation in climate change via its Action Plan; (2) promote collaboration among ASEAN sectoral bodies; and (3) articulate ASEAN’s concerns and priorities at international fora.

The AWGCC held the first ASEAN Climate Change Partnership Conference in 2018 in Manila to introduce and build awareness on ASEAN-wide cross-sectoral and multi-partner coordination in addressing climate change issues. The second conference was held in

³⁶ NUS Centre for International Law, “Decoding the Paris Rulebook for Southeast Asia: Implementation and Its Challenges”.

Singapore in 2019 to provide a platform to share experiences and identify potential cooperation. Although the AWGCC has delivered a number of collaborative projects involving Dialogue Partners in recent years, it lacks a clear mandate to coordinate issues beyond the AMME working groups.

In order to coordinate regional issues, a regional consulting platform known as the ASEAN Climate Change Initiative (ACCI) was set up in 2010. The stated scope of collaboration was to formulate policy and strategy, share information, conduct capacity-building and facilitate technology transfer.³⁷ The ACCI seeks regional and international cooperation to address climate challenges and according to one study, since it is “grounded on ASEAN’s obligations under the (ASEAN) Charter”, ASEAN can “rightfully speak and negotiate for its common interest in the UNFCCC negotiations”.³⁸ However, it is still unclear exactly how the ACCI has operated in the last eleven years and exactly what common positions have been taken by ASEAN at the international level.

Given the region’s increasing awareness of its vulnerability to climate change and climate disaster risks, dialogues and programmes on climate change have started to emerge beyond the domain of the AMME and the ASCC blueprint over the years (see Appendix). At least thirteen programmes within ASEAN’s sectoral bodies have acknowledged climate threats.

The most prominent cross-cutting issue and development is the linkage between energy security and climate change. In this sector, ASEAN has consistently promoted renewable energy transition not only

³⁷ Raman Letchumanan, “Climate Change: Is Southeast Asia up to the Challenge? Is There an ASEAN Policy on Climate Change?” (LSE Research Online, 2010)

³⁸ Diah Apriani Atika Sari and Rachma Indriyani, “Loss and Damage Due to Climate Change in Indonesia: An Overview of the ASEAN Cooperation Adapting to Global Warming”, *Indonesian Journal of International Law* 12, no. 3 (2015): 382–98, <https://doi.org/10.17304/ijil.vol12.3.611>

to fuel the region's energy security and economic growth, but also to curb carbon emissions from the burning of coal, natural gas and oil for electricity, the largest single source of GHG emissions in the region. The Singapore Declaration on Climate Change, Energy and the Environment signed in 2007 served as an entry point to recognizing the interrelated climate challenges, energy provision, and other environmental issues in the context of sustainable development and regional energy security. ASEAN has offered a clearer target in the most recent guiding document. The ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (APAEC) 2016–2025 envisions a target of 23 per cent of renewable energy share in total primary energy supply by 2021. It is also committed to a 20 per cent reduction in energy intensity by 2020 and 30 per cent by 2025 based on 2005 levels.

In the agricultural sector, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture and Forestry has increasingly promoted collaboration in protecting agriculture, forestry and food security. An increase in global temperatures would significantly reduce crop yields and nutritional values, especially rice, the staple crop of Southeast Asia. This could affect the regional supply chain and market prices, thus disrupting economic stability. The ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Framework on Climate Change: Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry towards Food Security (AFCC) was developed under the purview of the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Agriculture and Forestry (SOM AMAF) in 2009 to provide the mechanism for coordinated action and collaboration to address challenges to food security.

In the health sector, the ASEAN Health Ministerial Meeting (AHMM) has acknowledged the challenge of climate change on public health. As the region is prone to natural disasters and is increasingly experiencing the impacts of climate change, ASEAN could see more cases of climate-triggered diseases such as dengue, malaria and respiratory diseases. National health facilities and health personnel must be equipped with knowledge and health infrastructure to mitigate this challenge. Although cross-cutting collaboration between climate science and public health has not been explored comprehensively, there is an increasing demand from the AHMM to integrate climate considerations in strengthening the region's health resilience.

In the financial sector, sustainable investments have also been gaining ground. ASEAN business communities, for instance, have been conducting dialogues to help the private sector enhance its environmental, social, and governance (ESG) mechanisms. Under such mechanisms, climate considerations are increasingly factored in business and investment decisions. Other initiatives such as the ASEAN Green Bond standards have been promoted by the ASEAN Capital Markets Forum (ACMF) under the auspices of the ASEAN Finance Ministers to support sustainable regional growth and meet investor interest for green investments.

ASEAN's current institutional arrangements on climate change, however, are inadequate. The AWGCC's role is still limited to its environmental mandate whereas the other sectoral bodies under the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) pillar are increasingly cognizant of the threats and challenges that climate change poses and the need to improve climate resilience. This is in contrast with the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) pillar, the strongest pillar of the three, which deals with climate change issues marginally (see Appendix) and therefore does not consider climate change an existential threat. As climate change dialogues intensify across the three ASEAN Community pillars and beyond the domain of AMME, the AWGCC's role must either be repurposed, or another overarching body be created to accommodate different, and sometimes competing interests within ASEAN bodies. The role of the ACCI as a consultative platform should also be clarified.

INSTITUTIONAL GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The chief institutional gap is the absence of a super coordinating body. Such a body would be apprised of every action plan, strategic recommendation, and policy approach; and empowered to highlight to the relevant ASEAN Charter governing bodies where the overlaps and gaps are, and to connect the dots, to make sense of the problems and issues.

The second institutional gap is the lack of basic information sharing protocols between the different ASEAN sectoral bodies, between sectoral

bodies and ASEAN entities, among sectoral bodies, and between ASEAN entities and the ASEAN Secretariat. In addition, this is prevalent at the different levels of bureaucracy where officers at the ASEAN National Secretariats may only share certain information with colleagues at the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) based in Jakarta but may not deem it fit to share the same information with their colleagues residing in other ministries dealing with the same issue. Studies show that regional organizations, with their experiences in handling transnational issues, can create an enabling environment for its members to address problems that are specific to the region.³⁹

The third institutional gap is the lack of leadership demonstrated by ASEAN. This is felt in its convening of support from its Dialogue Partners and in the channelling of much-needed resources to AMS to fulfil their Paris Agreement pledges. ASEAN has consistently affirmed its commitment to the global climate agenda. In the latest ASEAN Joint Statement to the United Nations Climate Action Summit 2019, ASEAN acknowledged “the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDRRC)” in the light of climate challenges and differences in national circumstances. As a regional organization vested in meeting transboundary challenges together, ASEAN is an institution that has the convening power to convince its Dialogue Partners to prioritize climate action, channel public financing, and provide capacity-building. ASEAN’s leadership and convening role is an untapped asset that can assist AMS’ governments in advancing their climate negotiations in the UNFCCC and seek necessary resources to improve capacity building and knowledge sharing globally.

The fourth institutional gap is the absence of a platform capable of engaging with civil society and the private sector on climate change issues. ASEAN can serve as a bridge for more dialogues between the private sector, civil society organizations, academics and governments on urgent issues such as environmental rights, health and environmental

³⁹ Florian Krampe and Malin Mobjörk, “Responding to Climate-Related Security Risks: Reviewing Regional Organizations in Asia and Africa”, *Current Climate Change Reports* 4, no. 4 (1 December 2018): 330–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40641-018-0118-x>

protection and climate transparency. Civil society organizations (CSOs) across ASEAN have been increasingly proactive in holding their national governments accountable and propelling efforts to incorporate climate risks into the planning and policy-making process. Their local networks in their respective countries are also valuable in mobilizing targeted outcomes of climate change programmes. Thus, the burden of work on climate efforts can be shared between governments and citizens equally.

Further, climate change is believed to disproportionately affect the poor, the marginalized, women and children, conflict victims and other vulnerable populations.⁴⁰ ASEAN has joined the effort to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is committed to lifting hundreds of millions of its population out of poverty. The role of CSOs, with support from the private sector, is needed to ensure that climate policies can be explored in parallel with other empowerment programmes to ensure that the vulnerable are not left behind.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

ASEAN's coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 shows that it is able to address urgent problems expeditiously. Instead of forming yet another Task Force or special ministerial body, ASEAN created an ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on Public Health Emergencies (ACCWG-PHE) in April 2020. Under Article 8.2 of the ASEAN Charter, the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) is empowered to coordinate ASEAN's agreements and decisions made by the Leaders, review reports submitted by ASEAN Community Councils, provide policy coherence and undertake assignments from the Leaders. The ACC is composed of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers and meets twice a year. Hence, it was far more expedient to task the ACC to look into pandemic response measures and create a Working Group comprising SOM officials.

⁴⁰ "Report: Inequalities Exacerbate Climate Impacts on Poor", *United Nations Sustainable Development* (blog), <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2016/10/report-inequalities-exacerbate-climate-impacts-on-poor/> (accessed 15 March 2021).

There is no reason that an ACC structure focusing on climate change and its inter-related risks cannot be established for the climate emergency as it was done for public health emergencies. An ACC on Climate Change (ACC-CC) will enjoy the necessary political gravitas endowed by the ASEAN Charter with a direct line to the Leaders. However, a follow-on question then is, would empowering the ASEAN Foreign Ministers, bearing in mind that the climate change is not at the core of APSC work, to examine the cross-cutting nature of climate change be in the best interest of the ASEAN Community. Given the complexities of climate problems at the national and regional levels, the Leaders should designate their highest national authorities who are at the apex of their domestic climate governance structures (detailed earlier in the section on domestic climate governance) to be part of the ACC-CC. The Senior Officials supporting the ACC-CC should similarly comprise officials from the national inter-ministerial committees that intersect with climate change—transport, energy, industry, forestry, agriculture, health, disaster relief, legal, aviation and maritime. In addition, these officials must be sufficiently senior to communicate with their relevant ministers the issues that are raised and the decisions that are required. The mandate of the ACC-CC should be to provide strategic direction in climate issues, give policy advice to the various sectoral bodies, coordinate decisions and actions to avoid duplication and give effect to the convening powers of ASEAN.

SUMMARY

The timeline for meeting the well-below 2-degree temperature goal has shortened considerably with the COVID-19 pandemic which has accelerated many issues and problems that were on the world's backburner. A business-as-usual scenario for ASEAN in its management of climate governance will not bring any changes nor benefit those members who are trying to meet their international obligations. Meanwhile, a coordinated effort on climate change will elevate ASEAN's credibility in the global stage and reassure global partners that ASEAN is serious about the climate fight. COVID-19 may be the crisis of a generation but it is also a critical opportunity for all stakeholders to meet new challenges head on.

Appendix 1: ASEAN Agreements or Initiatives That Are Linked to Climate Change (Non-exhaustive)

	Theme	ASEAN Pillar	Agreements or Initiatives
1	Air Pollution	ASCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Agreement on Trans-Boundary Haze Pollution • ASEAN Programme on Sustainable Management of Peatland Ecosystems 2014–20 • ASEAN Haze-Free Roadmap • 2016 Roadmap on ASEAN Cooperation Towards Transboundary Haze Pollution Control with Means of Implementation
2	Marine Pollution	ASCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Framework of Action on Marine Debris

ASEAN Cooperative Mechanisms, e.g., EAS, ARF, ADMM, ASEAN+3, ASEAN+1 and others	Agreements or Initiatives
ARF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ARF Workshop of Marine Oil Spill Emergency Response Management and Disposal Cooperation • ARF Statement on Cooperation in Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Restoration from Marine Oil Spill Incidents • ARF Workshop on Marine Environmental Protection Cooperation: Preparedness and Response to Pollution Incidents Involving Hazardous and Noxious Substances • ARF Seminar on Regional Cooperation on Offshore Oil Spill • ARF Concept Paper Annex B: V. Maritime Security Cooperation—highlights “Sea Level/Climate Monitoring System,” Conventions on the Marine Environment” (Dumping of Toxic Wastes and Land-based Sources of Marine Pollution), and “Explore the idea of joint marine scientific research” • 5th ARF ISM on Maritime Security: “Protection of Marine Environment” as a main topic
ASEAN-EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Platform on Circular Economy (in preparation)
EAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2018 East Asia Summit Statement on Combating Marine Plastic Debris • 2020 East Asia Summit Leaders’ Statement on Marine Sustainability • 2017 East Asia Summit Conference on Combating Marine Plastic Debris

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Appendix 1 — cont'd

	Theme	ASEAN Pillar	Agreements or Initiatives
3	Sustainable Energy	AEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation 2016–25
4	Urban Development/Smart Cities	ASCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Environmentally Sustainable City (ESC) Award Programme • ASEAN Initiative on Environmentally Sustainable Cities • ASEAN Smart Cities Network • ASEAN Cooperation on Environmentally Sustainable Cities
5	Natural Conservation, biodiversity and ecotourism	ASCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Action Plan for ASEAN Heritage Parks and Protected Areas, 2016-2020 • ASEAN Heritage Parks (AHP) Programme • ASEAN Cooperation on Nature Conservation and Biodiversity
6	Wildlife Trade	ASCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan of Action for ASEAN Cooperation on CITES and Wildlife Enforcement, 2016–2020 • ASEAN Regional Action Plan on Trade in Wild Fauna and Flora, 2005–2010 (includes the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network)
7	Sustainable Finance	AEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Green Bond Standards

ASEAN Cooperative Mechanisms, e.g., EAS, ARF, ADMM, ASEAN+3, ASEAN+1 and others	Agreements or Initiatives
ASEAN Plus Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN+3 Mitigation Cooperation Programme (e.g. Capacity Building Workshop held by ACE and Korean Energy Agency) • ASEAN+3 New and Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency and Conservation Forum
ASEAN-Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-Japan Energy Efficiency Partnership Programme (AJEEP), including the Energy Conservation Workshop (ECAP) • Energy Efficiency Market Transformation with Information Provision Scheme (EMTIPS) coordinated by Energy Conservation Center, Japan (ECCJ) and ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE)
ASEAN-China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China-ASEAN Clean Coal Conversion Technology Exchange and Promotion
ASEAN-China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-China Strategy on Environmental Cooperation 4.6: Cooperation on Environmentally Sustainable Cities
ASEAN-Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-Australia Smart Cities Initiative
ASEAN-China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-China Cooperation Plan on Biodiversity and Ecological Conservation
ASEAN-China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Dialogue on Combating Trafficking of Wild Fauna and Flora
ASEAN Infrastructure Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility, 2019–2020

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Appendix 1 — cont'd

	Theme	ASEAN Pillar	Agreements or Initiatives
8	Disaster Risk Reduction	ASCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) • ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (climate change and extreme events listed as a key issue) • 2015 Declaration On Institutionalizing The Resilience Of ASEAN And Its Communities And Peoples To Disasters And Climate Change • ASEAN Committee for Disaster Management
9	Public Health	AEC, ASCC, APSC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Health Cluster Work
10	Climate Security	APSC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Defence Establishment and Civil Society Organization on non-Traditional Security
11	Transportation	AEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Regional Strategy on Sustainable Land Transport • ASEAN Kuala Lumpur Transport Strategic Plan 2016–2025 (ST-1.4.2 green freight and logistics strategy)
12	Sustainable Development	ASCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue (ACSDSD) • 2006 Cebu Resolution on Sustainable Development • 2015 Declaration on ASEAN Post-2015 Environmental Sustainability and Climate Change Agenda

ASEAN Cooperative Mechanisms, e.g., EAS, ARF, ADMM, ASEAN+3, ASEAN+1 and others	Agreements or Initiatives
ARF (ASEAN, Australia, China)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ARF Workshop on Regional Climate Change and Coastal Disaster Mitigation
ASEAN-Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-Japan High Level Meeting on Caring Societies 2015 (theme of “People Centered Disaster Risk Reduction and Restoration”)
ASEAN-UN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Ministerial Discussion on Clean Air, Health and Climate • ASEAN Senior Level Workshop on Clean Air, Health and Climate
ASEAN-Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan Strengthening of Disaster Health Management in ASEAN (in Statement of the 6th ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Meeting 2014)
ARF Maritime Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ARF Workshop on Emergency Management of Marine Hazards in the Asia-Pacific Region
ASEAN-EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-EC Air Transport Integration Project (AATIP)
ASEAN-Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-Japan Best Practices on Green Logistics (under AJTP Work Plan for 2017–18) • Green Logistics Vision and Action Plans

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Appendix 1 — cont'd

	Theme	ASEAN Pillar	Agreements or Initiatives
13	Agriculture, Forestry, Food Security, Fisheries	AEC, ASCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision and Strategic Plan for ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry 2016–2025 • ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Framework for Climate Change: Agriculture and Forestry towards Foods and Nutrition Security and Achievement of SDGs • Strategic Plans of Action for ASEAN Cooperation on Forestry, Fisheries, Crops and Climate Change • ASEAN Working Group on Forest and Climate Change • ASEAN Strategy in Addressing the Impact of Climate Change on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Framework on Climate Change: Agriculture and Forestry towards Food Security (AFCC) • Reduced Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD-plus) • Vision and Strategic Plan for ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry 2016–2025 • 4th ASEAN Technical Working Group on Agricultural Research and Development (ATWGARD) Workshop on the Promotion of Resilience in Rice and Other Crops • ASEAN Regional Guidelines for Promoting Climate Smart Agriculture Practices, Vol I and II • Multi Sectoral Framework on Climate Change: Agriculture and Forestry towards Food and Nutrition Security and Achievements of SDGs (MSFCC)

ASEAN Cooperative Mechanisms, e.g., EAS, ARF, ADMM, ASEAN+3, ASEAN+1 and others	Agreements or Initiatives
ASEAN Plus Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation Strategy on Food, Agriculture and Forestry (APTCS)
ASEAN-India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity
ASEAN-Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-German Programme on Response to Climate Change: Agriculture, Forestry and Related Sectors (GAP-CC) • ASEAN-German Programme on Response to Climate Change: Agriculture, Forestry and related Sectors (GAP-CC)
ASEAN-Switzerland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-Swiss Partnership on Social Forestry and Climate Change (ASFCC)
ASEAN-Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-Korea Network on Climate Change Adaptation in Aquaculture. • 2011 Agreement Between the Governments of the Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Republic of Korea on Forest Cooperation (AFoCO)
ARF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ARF Workshop on Sustainable Fisheries Management and Food Security in Southeast Asia
ASEAN Plus Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR) Agreement • APT Food Security Cooperation Strategic Roundtable Conference • APT Bioenergy and Food Security Framework 2015–25 • APT Food Security Information System (AFSIS)
EAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declaration of the 8th East Asia Summit on Food Security

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Appendix 1 — cont'd

	Theme	ASEAN Pillar	Agreements or Initiatives
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Guidelines on Promoting Responsible Investment in Food, Agriculture and Forestry • ASEAN Guidelines for Agroforestry Development • ASEAN Integrated Food Security Framework and Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security

Source: Authors' compilation from various sources.

ASEAN Cooperative Mechanisms, e.g., EAS, ARF, ADMM, ASEAN+3, ASEAN+1 and others	Agreements or Initiatives

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