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## We Are All in This Together: An ASEAN Approach to Climate Change

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# We Are All in This Together: An ASEAN Approach to Climate Change

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## Introduction

The consequences of climate change continue to impact our daily lives. Extreme irregularities in climate patterns have negative multiplier effects on socioeconomic well-being, public health, and economic growth. For instance, prolonged and extreme heatwaves in Europe – with a record-breaking 45.9 C in Southern France this summer – have posed substantial health risks to the public, especially among elderly and children. From Florida to Fiji, more frequent and severe flooding due to the rising sea levels have interrupted economic activities and displaced coastal communities. Disruption in rainfall trends has threatened the agricultural yield in major food producers, leading to potential global food shortages. While climate change does not discriminate among countries, its effects are inherently disproportionate given the stark differences in climate resilience. That is, the high financial costs of both combating and recovering from climate change would amplify its effects on poorer countries. Therefore, considering how climate-induced political and economic instabilities (e.g. environmental refugees) can spillover beyond national boundaries, a multilateral approach towards climate change is indeed necessary.

On April 22, 2016, the world came together in New York City to sign a landmark agreement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to combat the looming threat of climate change. This agreement, also known as the Paris Agreement, intends to limit the increase in global average temperature within this century to 1.5 degrees Celsius, mainly through reducing the amount of man-made greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions. However, there have been ideological and practical differences on

the best strategy to tackle this credible threat. On one hand, climate mitigation is arguably a more optimistic approach as it assumes that changes in current practices can prevent, or at least, slow down, rising temperatures. In contrast, the rather practical perspective would arguably prefer climate adaptation given that climate change is already here, as illustrated by extreme changes in global climate patterns. But, judging from the instantaneous and gradual effects of climate change, a multiple-pronged strategy that combines both climate mitigation and adaptation is essentially required.

## Climate Mitigation

Climate mitigation has been at the heart of most climate change policies. As the undisputed science behind climate change can be traced back to unnatural and rapid increases in GHG emissions, climate mitigation involves either reductions in manmade emissions or increases in carbon absorption efficiencies. For instance, its scale can be observed with the worldwide trends in phasing out fossil fuels in energy generation (e.g., announced closures of coal-fired power plants in Germany) and transportation (e.g., future bans of vehicles with internal combustion engines), and major reforestation efforts in India and Pakistan. In the Malaysian context, recent government policies involving the environment also incorporate climate mitigation to directly and indirectly reduce GHG emissions. More specifically, the 2010 National Renewable Energy Policy and Action Plan, 2011 Renewable Energy Act, 2011 New Energy Policy, and 2015 National Energy Efficiency Action Plan reflected the Government's aspirations to develop and enhance renewable energy initiatives. This approach is somewhat unsurprising, given that the energy sector was the largest contributor of

GHG emissions in 2014 at 80% of total emissions. Therefore, this act of institutionalising climate-related policies essentially places the issue of climate change central of policy- and decision-making processes throughout national policies. Moreover, climate mitigation can also have positive socioeconomic spillovers as efforts to reduce GHG emissions would often rely on investments in alternative technologies and economic approaches. While mitigation might be perceived as at odds with private transportation, the prospects of a low or zero emission car can hypothetically expand the production capacity and innovation of a car manufacturing nation.

## Climate Adaptation

However, the alarming rate of climate change has turned a threat deemed for the distant tomorrow to the inevitable reality of today. Consequently, individuals, communities, and nations are forced to enhance their adaptive capacity – in concurrence with climate mitigation policies – to offset the lagging consequences of climate change. That is, even if the international community managed to reduce GHG emissions as stipulated in the Paris Agreement, the extent of climate vulnerability will plausibly persist as the Earth gradually reconfigures its biological systems to the pre-heating period. Hence, with extreme temperatures, rising sea levels, and irregular rainfall patterns, governments all over the world are scrambling to mitigate the extent of climate-induced damages to both individuals and vital infrastructure. For instance, Netherlands has constructed a kilometre-long dike underneath a new waterfront boulevard in The Hague to enhance its flood defences due to the greater occurrences of rising sea level and violent storms<sup>1</sup> while Bangladeshi rice farmers have altered their crop options

in the light of salt water spillover into their irrigation canals<sup>2</sup>. In fact, according to the World Bank, cities have transformed their approach in new urban planning to integrate disaster risk reduction (DDR) efforts in enhancing climate adaptation towards man-made, climate-induced disasters<sup>3</sup>. But this approach does not imply that climate mitigation does not work or is too slow to combat the issues of today – instead, this response allows countries to provide immediate and short-term reliefs as society adjusts to the rather bleak future of an ever-changing climate. Yet, the focus on improving infrastructure and individual adaptive capacities unsurprisingly comes at a high cost: the 2016 United Nations Environment (UNEP) report predicted that the cost of climate adaptation in developing countries could reach USD280 and USD500 billion annually by 2050. In other words, considering the level of socioeconomic development in those countries, this projection merely supports the idea of climate change having disproportionate effects on poorer countries. Thus, to ensure that developing countries do not face multi-fold consequences of climate change, major economies should then step up their efforts to provide climate financing and technological assistance to strengthen overall adaptive capacity.

### **Role of ASEAN in Combating Climate Change**

No man is an island, especially on an increasingly warming planet. In other words, despite the commendable efforts of country-level climate policies, a concurrent multilateral approach is possibly more impactful to accelerate reduction in GHG emissions and increase climate resilience. In the context of Malaysia, greater engagements with ASEAN on combating climate change can complement the effects of its domestic climate policies:

**Firstly, ASEAN can offer a common platform to streamline and harmonise climate initiatives among its Member States.** Malaysia can leverage upon the existing instruments, frameworks, and entities within ASEAN

to bolster the regional effort to combat climate change. For instance, the inaugural ASEAN Climate Change Partnership Conference organised by the ASEAN Working Group on Climate Change (AWGCC) in June 2018 illustrated a regional initiative to enhance cross-sectoral and multi-partner coordination in combating climate change<sup>4</sup>. With a common platform, Malaysia and other member states not only could explore potential avenues for mutual partnership, but also raise awareness of the country-specific climate issues and best practices – in which the extent of information-sharing is arguably more limited in a bilateral platform. Furthermore, the lack of such an avenue could be problematic in cases of cross-border environmental issues (e.g. a neighbouring country affected by the rather lax climate policy) as member states would perhaps be reluctant to bilaterally confront one another. In other words, the presence of a collective pressure could nudge countries without efficient climate mitigation and adaptation policies to streamline upwards to be in line with other member states. This approach essentially amplifies the stance of ASEAN and its member states on the pressing need to combat climate change, relative to a bilateral engagement.

**Secondly, ASEAN can form a new multilateral binding convention on climate change, akin to the Paris Agreement.** Given the rather universal nature of the Paris Agreement – albeit rather understandably as it attempts to cater to the whole international community – ASEAN could then formulate, sign, and ratify a regional-specific, legally-binding, convention on climate change to magnify multilateral efforts to limit increases in average global temperature beyond the targeted 1.5 degrees Celsius. Fortunately, ASEAN is no stranger to regional treaties and conventions, such as the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) declaration. From an environmental perspective, ASEAN could also replicate, modify, and incorporate key themes and lessons from the European Union (EU) and its multilateral instruments. For

instance, the European Commission (EC) has outlined its strategic vision for a prosperous yet climate-neutral economy in the EU by 2050. This unanimously binding initiative, launched in November 2018, is a long-term strategy and guiding framework that streamlines almost all EU climate policies in supporting the objectives agreed upon in the Paris Agreement. More specifically, it revolves around investments in realistic technological advancements and renavigations in economic policies whilst ensuring a just and fair socioeconomic transition<sup>5</sup>. For example, the EC has proposed EUR30.6 billion in the 2021-2027 EU Budget to facilitate investments in low- and zero emission vehicles and infrastructure<sup>6</sup>. While ASEAN inherently differs from the EU with regard to its financial status and extent of political-economic integration, it could still arguably benefit from even a much smaller regional partnership in mutually beneficial environmental investments. That is, if ASEAN manages to demonstrate and reinforce its commitments in combating climate change, it can then attract inward flows of climate financing that would further enhance the scale and effectiveness of such investments.

**Finally, ASEAN can form a joint task force to implement regional climate strategies.** That is, an effective multilateral initiative would require strong implementation and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that State parties do not falter in their commitments or free-ride other states. The Bamako Convention, a treaty signed by 27 African nations in 1991, is an example of a regional policy to ban imports of hazardous waste into the continent. Nonetheless, the absence of a competent authority to enforce strict implementations of the treaty and the lack of regional monitoring or follow-up among signatories have possibly contributed to the rather ineffective deployment and operations of the Convention<sup>7</sup>. Thus, ASEAN can then form a joint task force or an enforcement committee to ensure any adopted regional convention on climate change will be strictly adhered

to among Member States. In this case, ASEAN could emulate the EU on its emissions monitoring and reporting mechanisms whereby the EU and its member states conduct concurrent annual monitoring and reporting of GHG inventories, progress projections, and domestic strategies whilst providing regular progress updates on the regional and individual targets to the UNFCCC<sup>8</sup>. Considering the current role of AWGCC, ASEAN could then either elevate its status or include the environmental ministers from all member states to be the leading task force in the following: 1) formulate effective reporting, monitoring, and implementing mechanisms; 2) conduct frequent and regular cross-checks to ensure compliance; 3) determine the guidelines for reporting rules that could be submitted towards the UNFCCC for transparency and further scrutiny; and 4) delegate duties of policing and prosecutions of entities that fail to comply with the adopted conventions. While the scope of this proposed taskforce may be too ambitious in view of country-specific constraints, this approach is arguably important as a strategy without an efficient implementation would only remain an illusion.

## Conclusion

Effective climate policy in Malaysia will require a two-fold strategy: a comprehensive domestic climate mitigation and adoption and regional cooperation. In the light of the adverse

implications of climate change not contained within national boundaries, a collective approach is deemed imperative. Despite substantial limitations in resources and technical capacity, ASEAN Member States can embark on a more entrenched cooperation that is mutually beneficial to ensure greater climate resilience. In fact, a regional commitment towards climate goals could also elevate the status and relevance of ASEAN in international politics, which can then be leveraged to obtain not only greater climate assistance from multilateral agencies and established country donors, but also more favourable geopolitical and geo-economic concessions in other platforms.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Scott, M. (2019). Cities Are on the Front Line of Tackling Climate Change and They Need to Do More. *Forbes*. Retrieved on 5 June 2019 from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikescott/2019/06/05/cities-are-on-the-front-line-of-tackling-climate-change-and-they-need-to-do-more/#724fbc7a38fb>

<sup>2</sup> Ball, J. (2018). With Climate Change No Longer in the Future, Adaptation Speeds Up. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on 3 June 2019 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/climate/climate-change-adaptation.html>

<sup>3</sup> World Bank Group. (2011). *Guide to Climate Change Adaptation in Cities*. Washington DC: World Bank.

<sup>4</sup> ASEAN Secretariat News. (2018). ASEAN hold first Climate Change Partnership Conference. Retrieved on 20 June 2019 from <https://asean.org/asean-hold-first-climate-change-partnership-conference/>

<sup>5</sup> European Commission. (2018). 2050 long-term strategy. Retrieved on 20 June 2019 from [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/strategies/2050\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/strategies/2050_en)

<sup>6</sup> European Commission. (2018). *Our Vision*

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<sup>7</sup> Jeen, A.Y. (2019). What Asean can do about waste. Retrieved on 1 July 2019 from <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/letters/2019/07/01/what-asean-can-do-about-waste/>

<sup>8</sup> European Commission. (n.d.) Emission monitoring & reporting. Retrieved on 20 June 2019 from [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/strategies/progress/monitoring\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/strategies/progress/monitoring_en)

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