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Report

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Climate Change: Is Southeast Asia up to the challenge?



Southeast Asia will be the worst affected among the regions of the world by the ravages of climate change, which could cost the region twice as much as the global average by 2100. This is among the key findings of the ADB (Asian Development Bank) regional study on the economics of climate change which estimates that the total damage is equivalent to losing 6.7 per cent of GDP each year by the beginning of the next century.

This sombre assessment is reason enough to look at the region particularly and to ask – Climate Change: Is Southeast Asia Up To The Challenge? This was the subject of a workshop organised by the LSE IDEAS Southeast Asia International Affairs Programme (SEAP) before the Copenhagen climate change summit in December. Sadly, the consensus at the workshop, which was held in Jakarta on 5-6 November, was that the region was not up to the challenge, despite robust argument by representatives of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat, who collaborated in organizing the event, that much was being done.

The Copenhagen summit of course did not succeed. But it did not fail either, falling somewhere in between, perhaps closer on the side of failure. A similar lack of clarity seems to inform all the concern in Southeast Asia about the challenge of climate change. Much is being said (whether in the form of Road Maps, Blueprints and Declarations, much beloved of ASEAN), and there is plenty of hand-wringing, but on the ground, there is insufficient movement.

One problem could be that 2100 seems far away, another time. Another, there is a lack of leadership too, as states look to other countries to act first before they can get moving together. Overall, the participants at the workshop felt the level of awareness of the problem, let alone any sense of its urgency, is low in the region. The Southeast Asian public is not seized of the issue of climate change in the same way as civil society in Europe is. For instance in domestic political systems, to the extent issues of public interest are heard, climate change is not a matter that will make or break incumbent governments. If there is one clear conclusion from the workshop, it is that there must be a higher level of Southeast Asian public awareness of the threat of climate change. I would suggest this is not just a matter for governments, non-governmental organizations and civil society alone. The business community should get involved by sponsoring information and advertisement time, in both the digital and conventional media, to draw attention to the risk and to the threat of climate change, similar to anti-smoking and anti-drugs campaigns. This should be in addition to whatever green initiatives they may be involved in.

The findings of the ADB regional study, with all those dire predictions, have so far only been presented to ASEAN environment ministers. At the workshop, participants from the secretariat said they would next be brought to the attention of the energy ministers as well. Actually, they should be splashed across the region and drummed into the heads of public and policy-makers. All techniques of modern communication must be employed to put across the severe threat that climate change poses to their lives.

The pages that follow amply and vividly record how in Southeast Asia there is such an enormous gulf between statements of good intentions and what takes place - or does not take place - on the ground. The so-called "haze", for instance, which is really a euphemism for thick, sickly, seasonal smog, has consumed the good health of many people in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei especially in the 12 years since 1997 when open-burning first coincided with the El Nino phenomenon - and yet all that is being heard is that cooperative steps are being taken to address the issue. As reported at the workshop, almost 100 million people in Southeast Asia were exposed to acute health risks during the 1997 "haze" episode; 20 million people in Indonesia suffered from respiratory problems; in Malaysia 18 million people (83.2 per cent of the population) were exposed to health risks during the period.

It is hard to imagine in any free and open society such neglect of the well-being of citizens, with no sufficient care for the public good. But such tolerance has been the case in Southeast Asia and, tragically, it has encouraged continued neglect, insufficient concern and many empty words. The degradation of both the human and the environment is really reflective of what is at the heart of the challenge of climate change.

To take another example, the devastating floods that hit the Philippines in October 2009 were not inflicted by the hand of God but by the act of man, as was documented by an expert from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) at the workshop. A new study by WWF warns of greater devastation to come in a number of Asian cities, with Jakarta, Manila, Phnom

Penh and Ho Chi Minh City particularly vulnerable. Will governments take heed and take preventative and preemptive measures, or blame mother nature again for their own inaction?

Governments do not like to be told off, especially through arguments which could undermine their legitimacy. Therefore academic experts and climate change activists must show that theirs is a call to action to save the planet, and not for regime change. In this regard, the attitude of the ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan in seeking expert advice through a panel at the secretariat is positive and forward-looking. If his closing address at the end of the workshop is not to remain mere words, academic experts and activists should grasp at the invitation and meaningfully embark on a common cause. In particular, it presents an opportunity to the many experts from the LSE to get into the practical mix - be it in green development and stimulus packages, the issues of deforestation and land use and a myriad other climate change matters.

If nothing else, the main achievement of the workshop could be the active engagement of LSE academic experts, and other regional activists, with the ASEAN secretariat in helping Southeast Asia take on, more effectively, the challenge of climate change.

On behalf of SEAP, I wish to acknowledge the indispensable support of paper presenters and participants at the workshop. The ASEAN Secretariat, in particular its Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan, have been strong supporters and partners with whom SEAP looks forward to work with in the future. In the background, I also benefited from the assistance of John Pearson of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office based in Singapore and from numerous Indonesian friends generous with their time and suggestions of useful paper presenters. To everyone, including the SEAP Administrator, Vinna Baptist, I wish to express my heartfelt thanks.

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