

Time for Asean to prioritise climate action

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As 2018 chair of Asean, Singapore is ideally placed to prioritise climate change on Asean's agenda. After all, among the world's 10 countries most affected by climate change, four – Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam – are Asean members. And for Singapore to advance the regional agenda on climate action would be fitting in view of the twin themes of Asean 2018: resilience and innovation.

The World Economic Forum ranks climate change as the top global threat to prosperity.

But most businesses worldwide are not operating as if global warming is a major economic and financial threat, even in highly exposed South-east Asia. This must change: businesses and governments need to build stronger resilience and better coping capacities to confront global warming. As a regional response, Asean as an organisation can do a great deal to help lead the charge.

South-east Asia, and Asia and the Pacific more generally, have been at the forefront of extreme weather

events in the past decade, with estimated damages of some US\$750 billion (S\$995 billion) over that period. These events are also becoming increasingly abnormal in their timing and intensity.

One manifestation of this was the extreme dry spells of 2014 and 2015 that threatened Singapore's reservoir levels. Climate scientists predict that worse is yet to come, as intense storms and floods become more frequent, and storm surges move further inland because of rising sea levels.

South-east Asia compares well with other developing regions in building capabilities and infrastructure for disaster management.

But climate change has pushed the bar for risk management much higher, leaving vast gaps in disaster prevention and climate mitigation.

Asean can make a vital difference in addressing the deficits by brokering the expertise of countries at the forefront of technological innovation, energy efficiency, and disaster management, including within the Asean plus Three cooperation with China, Japan and South Korea.

Asean countries can further bridge the gaps by establishing resource pools that can be deployed across the region when disasters hit.

Japan's experience, as analysed by Dr Naomi Aoki of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, highlights how, in the face of severe manpower shortages, disaster-prone municipalities can create reciprocity in lending experts and other resources to each other.

The higher bar also means that climate mitigation through switching to low-pollution, low-carbon technologies is a must. That Asean countries have signed up to the Paris climate change agreement is a solid foundation for the organisation to formulate a regional contribution for reducing greenhouse emissions that would ideally exceed their country commitments under the Paris agreement.

A common threat in the way of achieving those targets, however, is the prospect that coal would become the region's largest energy source by 2040, counter to the spirit of the members' Paris

commitments. Failure to move away from fossil fuels, especially coal, will damage the international standing of Asean countries, and could very well lead to their failure to meet their commitments on cutting emissions.

The way forward will be to switch far more rapidly to wind, solar and other renewables in national energy mixes and to cut costly fossil fuel subsidies as India and Indonesia have started to do.

A big push towards renewables is not wishful thinking. Since the late 1990s, Asean has seen renewables as a key to greater regional trade and integration based on regional power grids. The regional power grids that are in place – 11 shared power lines between six pairs of Asean countries – need to handle better the intermittency of renewable energy.

But there is plenty of potential to expand this form of cross-border integration. Making progress on this is important as four of Asean's 10 member countries are energy importers: 98 per cent of Singapore's energy needs are met this way, 40 per cent in the Philippines, 42 per cent in

Thailand, and 33 per cent in Cambodia.

Singapore is promoting an Asean Smart Cities Network and, as Minister for Trade and Industry S. Iswaran has said, is keen to share its expertise and learning to help create this. Aside from national governments, cities and towns are the vital node for climate actions.

A way forward is for a more networked structure for dealing with disaster response and mitigation. Many state governors and city mayors in the United States are jointly advancing climate action, as is the Climate Alliance of European cities.

The topic of climate change was not evident in the agenda of the 2017 Asean Summit in Manila. As Asean members meet in Singapore for the 2018 Summit, it is hoped that they will prioritise climate action for the benefit of all.

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