

Path to Paris: Why Should ASEAN Look Beyond Carbon Emissions?

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In the lead up to the path-breaking Paris Climate Summit – Conference of Parties (COP 21) in December, the phrase ‘Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC)’ has become a buzzword. Specifically, this refers to the need for each country to commit itself to a policy on carbon emission reductions. Much of this tacitly refers to climate change mitigation rather than adaptation—or about transforming or changing systems and institutions to enable us to live in a warmer world.

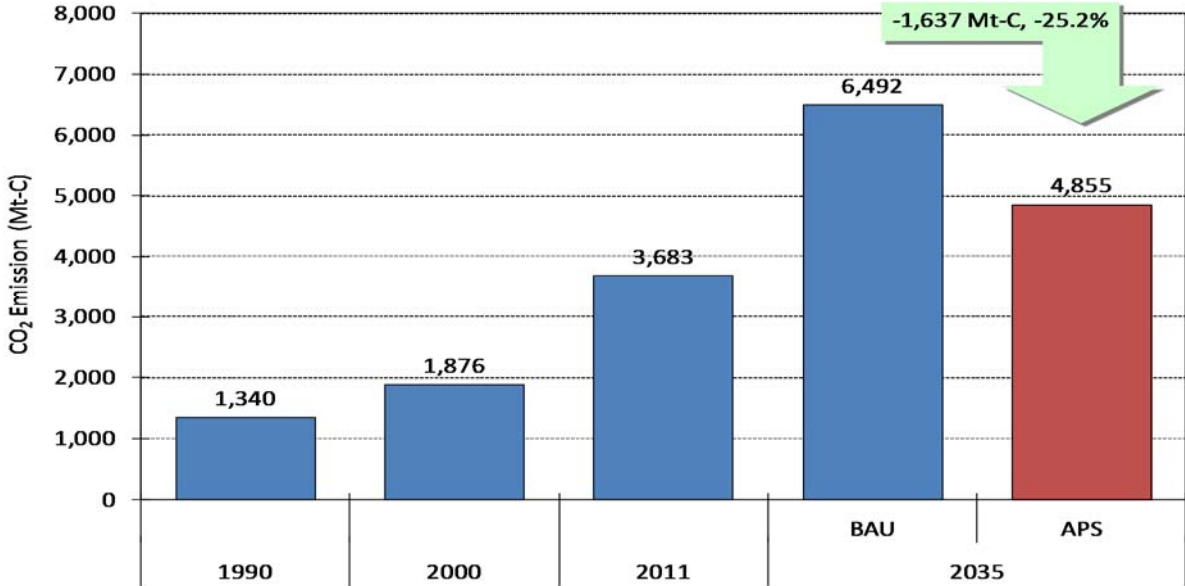
Southeast Asian countries are expected to experience some of the most harmful effects of climate change—more intense storms, variable precipitation, a rise in sea level, droughts, and floods. Emerging economies, with sizeable population such as Indonesia, Thailand, Viet Nam, face a dual challenge: they need to provide energy services, improve industrial productivity, raise the standard of living of poor people while adapting to global warming. Adapting to climate change will mean that policymakers use sensible approaches to protect freshwater systems, coastal regions, and livelihoods.

ASEAN member states could incorporate sustainable development goals into their INDCs. This means they would have to, for example, focus on reducing air pollution through clean energy sources, promote renewable energy for cooking, and plan cities to be compact; allocate greater space for bio-fuelled transportation; and build resilient industrial and agricultural practices, so that their goals of overall economic productivity, emission reduction, and social well-being are balanced.

ERIA studies indicate that such a choice—one that lets ASEAN member states develop a path away from their current fossil energy intensive use—would itself

reduce greenhouse gases (Figure). More importantly, it would also improve the quality of life of millions of people who may be left behind, if governments only applied policies to lower emissions. If the emerging economies of ASEAN, China, and India were forced to accept legally binding commitments to reduce their emissions, which will certainly come from energy sector interventions, they may get dangerously close to irreversible and abrupt changes in the ecosystems, while also bypassing the needs of the poor (ADB, 2013).

Figure. Carbon Reduction Potential of ASEAN +6 Countries under Alternate Scenarios



Source: ERIA (2014).

For example, Indonesia, where about 17 percent of its population have no electricity, is devising a policy that will reduce emissions by 26 percent by 2020. With international support, it could go as much as 41 percent (BAPPENAS, 2015). Most of its efforts are to involve planting more forests and managing peatlands (Table). While some of these changes will no doubt be good for farmers and forest dwellers, some of the cost-effective approaches to reduce emissions could be harmful to land ecosystems. The question then becomes whether implementation of a legally binding greenhouse target is the best way for Indonesia to meet its

enormous challenges related to energy access, inclusive growth, and regionally balanced development.

Table. Indonesia’s Low-carbon Development

Sector	Emission Reduction Target (Gton CO ₂ e) by 2020	
	26%	41%
Forest and Peatland	0.672	1.036
Agriculture	0.008	0.011
Energy and transportation	0.036	0.056
Industry	0.001	0.005
Waste	0.048	0.078
Total	0.767	1.189

Source: ERIA (2015).

With regard to other advanced economies, however, the Paris conference would insist on far more ambitious contributions. Such economies need to reduce their greenhouse emissions by at least 50 percent by 2030 over the 2010 levels. This is quite close to targets sets by the European Union and Japan, but well beyond the United States’ intention of 26 percent to 28 percent. Further upscaling innovative financial mechanisms such as Japan’s bilateral offset Credit Mechanism (BOCM) will help emerging economies of ASEAN achieve the targets with free flow of low-carbon technologies such as clean coal, solar, and wind across the globe.

Finally, with regard to the level of ambition of INDCs, the framework outlined here could be consistent, with a global budget that is adequate for limiting temperature rise to within safe limits. Beyond 2030, once advanced countries have diffused the technologies and innovated the financial solutions to reduce the emissions sharply and developing nations like ASEAN have met sustainable development goals, the entire international community could concentrate more fully on mitigation and adaptation to climate change. While we eventually have to reduce emissions to

zero to not completely destroy the ecosystems, we also need to live on a planet that is warmer by two- to three-degrees Celsius than in previous industrial times.

References:

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