

Preface

Project toward the Sustainable Automobile Society in East Asia

At the time of this writing the world is facing a financial and economic slowdown to the extent comparable to that happened in 1930s. The region, East Asia had its part attacked by an economic crisis in 1997/98 started in Thailand and hit other neighboring countries, most notably Indonesia. It took years before the hardest hit countries recovered to their pre-crisis economic stands. And today another catastrophe emanating from lax financial management in the United States has spread to the entire world. If in the 1997/98 Asian crisis the affected countries might be helped by other, non-affected countries, in the current one almost every individual country needs help. Many believe the only solution to this problem is a concerted effort in a global level, or at least at regional level. Tackling the crisis alone will not be long lasting at best. At worst, it will only give leeway to the rise of protectionism, beggar-thy-neighbors policies, etc. The consequence would be dire: an imploding world economy.

The paragraph above might be sufficient to summarize how the world economy today. But it obviously misses the big picture: the sustainability of economic development. Reducing the scope of concern is natural, and might even be acceptable, especially in a non-normal time, like in the current crisis. But one should not entirely dismiss the bigger platform of social, economic, and environmental nexus. These three interrelated dimensions make the backbone of the so-called sustainable development: a process that develops for the current generation while leaving the future generation with an option to enjoy at least the same as what the former has today. There is no doubt, this concept is very big and might even sound too idealistic. Therefore it is understandable that any attempt to realize it has to go through small, sometimes marginal steps. Even so, that would involve many conflicting interests that require political will of each party to make compromises so as to agree on some middle ground or common goal.

The project of “Sustainable Automobile Society in East Asia” is one such attempt. What the project really is described in the first chapter. Here, it suffices it to say that the project takes the notion of sustainable development seriously and uses it as a viewpoint to a particular, important sector in the growing economy of East Asia: automotive. The initiative came from Japan Automobile Research Institute (JARI) whose concept fit very well with planned research projects of the Economic and Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA). The key words in the working group that imply the marginal, yet important pieces of the grander sustainable development are: better public and private modes of transportation, improved air quality, and hence improved economy. While all this can fall into a narrow, manageable focus, the group inevitably had to face larger-than-expected complexity. First, as sketched above, the region is again facing a difficult economic time. It is a big challenge to convince ourselves, not to mention those outside the group, about the importance of this issue, whilst the buzzword today is economic crisis. Second, even when we all agreed that yes this issue is nonetheless important, almost every member from different countries had to face another big problem: data availability.

Against the two main constraints, however, we were determined to continue. The current report should be seen as a very initial stage to set up the platform for building the sustainable automobile society in East Asia. It is humble in its objective, therefore. That is, to set the common tone that would be used in the stages that follow. Identifying and recognizing problems and threats at this level is natural. Solving them is a longer term objective. This was vindicated in the workshops: we have discovered more problems and challenges than solutions. We however see it as an achievement. As wisemen have put it: knowing problems is part of success.

On behalf of the group, I would like to thank ERIA, especially Professor Fuku Kimura and JARI, especially Dr. Masahiko Hori and Dr. Kiyoyuki Minato to make this project possible – of course with an equally important role of Ms. Keiko Hirota. Each individual member of the working group, from various countries and different backgrounds, has been contributing significantly. Finally, I am very grateful to have been part of this important project.

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Arianto A. Patunru, Working Group Leader