

# Ensuring ASEAN's Sustainable and Resilient Future

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), now in its 50th year, has dazzled the world with its robust economic growth over the past 3 decades, reducing poverty rates and delivering middle-income comforts to millions. But the region is also struggling to manage the unwelcome byproducts of traditional development – reduced air and water quality, depleted natural resources, and imperilled biodiversity – which are exacerbated by an increasing frequency of disasters and a changing climate. But transition changes also arrived when ASEAN Member States (AMS) agreed on blueprints for three community pillars – the ASEAN Political–Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), which all recognise the importance of sustainable and resilient development. Using flexibility, trust, respect, and consensus – ‘the ASEAN way’ – AMS are pursuing a green recovery, even if it has meant a painful transition for some. This paper assesses the path travelled by ASEAN on a sustainability front, and argues for further adjustments that are nuanced, context dependent, and modulated. An integrated collaborative framework is proposed to maximise, prioritise, and sequence the actions that derive different benefits from a sustainable and resilient environment.

## Governance Systems for Sustainability and Resilience

ASEAN cooperation for sustainability and resilience is listed under all the three community pillars, which have an extensive list of issues, though with varying levels of details and focus. There are strategic objectives for each area followed by actions, which are a combination of policies, programmes, and projects. Actions in the blueprint are not only generally agreed statements, but are some sort of informal monitoring mechanisms at regional level as progress has to be reported regularly and provide the basis for coordinating work across sectors and countries under each community.

The community councils coordinate work under each pillar. Whereas the sustainability agenda is straightforward for AEC and APSC, it is a challenge for the ASCC, as there are many sectors of cooperation – under sustainability and social inclusion – competing for attention and funding.

The ASEAN approach to regional cooperation for sustainability has differed from that adopted in Europe, where legal and economic mechanisms were created and institutionalised at the intergovernmental and supranational levels. Those mechanisms require European Union members to give up some of their sovereignty on issues like water quality, air pollution, disaster responses, and climate change mitigation. ASEAN institutions, on the other hand, are strictly intergovernmental. It started in the 1970s, as an expert group under the ASEAN Committee on Science and Technology. In addition to monitoring the progress of work by various groups in 10 specific areas under ASEAN environmental cooperation, the environmental management framework also monitored sustainability provisions of ASEAN legal instruments, such as energy trading and natural resource management, in many sectors of operation. ASEAN's senior officials carry out series of activities such as preparing for ASEAN's regional participation in international deliberations; establishing guidelines pertaining to ozone depleting emissions, pollution, biodiversity, climate change, forests, and related environmental matters; and working towards harmonisation of environmental standards for ambient and river water quality, electronic appliances, and impact assessment.

The regular preparation of the ASEAN State of Environment Reports serves as the overall monitoring mechanism of sustainability in the region. There is no core ASEAN environmental bureaucracy. In each AMS, national focal points are responsible for carrying out ASEAN initiatives. A summit of the ASEAN heads of state and governments, ASEAN's highest decision-making body, is held regularly. These high-level panels pave the way for ministerial-level meetings, and provide proposals for decisions to be discussed by senior level officials and adopted by consensus at the sectoral level. These meetings can also prepare for ASEAN's regional participation in international deliberations on sustainability and resilience.

The emphasis on trust and consensus is always reflected in the decisions. AMS agree on common sustainability and resilience measures, decide how to implement them, and contribute according to their capacities and capabilities, acknowledging that ASEAN has achieved different levels of development and therefore has differing capacities for action. Trust and non-interference and a preference for national implementation of programmes rather than reliance on strong region-wide bureaucracy – the ASEAN way – are always reflected in environmental governance.

## Interdependent and Inseparable Chain of Challenges

The ASEAN way of regional environmental governance has enabled AMS to build mutual trust and confidence, and has progressed at a pace comfortable for all. Nevertheless, as environmental and disaster related risks are becoming more complex and complicated, ASEAN is facing new challenges when it knits together programmes across three community pillars. Further ASEAN mandates of cooperation for sustainability should expand in tandem with global mandates, as reflected by new regimes like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Climate Agreement on Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and the Sendai Frameworks for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Sustainability concerns in ASEAN are increasing, particularly because economic growth in many of the AMS remains fuelled by energy-intensive carbon emitting production and polluting industries. As ASEAN continues to propel economic dynamism, its demand for energy will increase accordingly. The challenge is to achieve an orderly accelerated and affordable transformation towards growth that involves lower carbon emissions and sustainable management of natural resources. ASEAN's growth is also leading to rapid and often unplanned urbanisation and motorisation, which add to the region's sustainability challenges. Many of ASEAN's major urban centres have unacceptably poor air quality.

ASEAN's water bodies – including major rivers and their tributaries – are also under stress. The discharge of untreated waste and pollutants from households, agricultural fields, industries, and townships contributes to the spread of waterborne diseases and is a major public health care issue for low-income households. The region's environmental problems are increasingly caused by factors that cut across national borders. For example, haze caused by forest fire is a common occurrence in some AMS. Brown clouds that cover some of the AMS are caused by pollutants released by the burning of fossil fuels and rural biomass across the region. The unsustainable harvesting of marine resources that are shared by several countries is often a source of friction.

Moreover, historically the ASEAN region has been prone to greater hazards, big and small, that have resulted in many losses of lives and properties. Its geographical location makes AMS more vulnerable to typhoons, floods, landslides, and storm surges. Earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions are common occurrences as the region lies at the intersection of four tectonic plates. Forest fires are also common and epidemics such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and influenza A (H1N1, aka swine influenza) caused havoc and hardship amongst the populations affected.

The Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) and the Ebola and Zika viruses are major scares and they pose threats to the region given the number of ASEAN migrant workers in affected parts of the world.

Climate change-induced events are likely to exacerbate these sustainability and resilience challenges. Recent assessments have found that climate change is likely to diminish continued progress on regional food security through production disruptions, leading to local availability limitations for households and price increases, diminished water availability, and health and safety issues. The risks are greatest for the poor in the coastal regions. The economic impacts of all disasters and climate change are so immense that it is affecting the region more than any part of the world (World Bank, 2012).

## **Current Pathways towards a Sustainable and Resilient ASEAN**

Notwithstanding the evident need within ASEAN countries to devote greater attention to implementation of shared policies, ASEAN has been remarkably successful in shaping a common policy framework for sustainability and resilience. Region-wide agreements have been reached in the following areas:

- (1) Natural Resources and Biodiversity
  - (a) Nature conservation
  - (b) Heritage Parks and Protected areas
  - (c) Sea Turtle Conservation and Protection
  - (d) Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species
  - (e) Heart of Boreno Initiative on Eco-systems
  - (f) ASEAN Center for Biodiversity
- (2) Forestry, Agriculture, and Food Security
  - (a) Trans-boundary pollution
  - (b) Forest law enforcement and governance
  - (c) Food security
- (3) Cultural Heritage
- (4) Coastal and Marine Environment
- (5) Water Resource Management
- (6) Health
  - (a) Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
  - (b) Avian Influenza
  - (c) Swine Influenza

- (7) Energy and Climate
  - (a) ASEAN Petroleum Security Agreement
  - (b) Agreement on ASEAN Energy Cooperation
  - (c) Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline
  - (d) ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation
  - (e) Cebu Declaration on Energy Security
  - (f) Singapore Declaration on Climate Change
  - (g) Green Cities
- (8) Minerals
  - (a) ASEAN Mineral Action Cooperation Plan
  - (b) Manila Declaration on Intensifying ASEAN Minerals Cooperation
- (9) Disaster Management
  - (a) ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Response
  - (b) ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management
  - (c) ASEAN Disaster Management Training Institute Network
  - (d) ASEAN Disaster Management and Monitoring and Response System
- (10) Environmental Education
  - (a) ASEAN Environmental Education Action Plan

Leadership and shared vision have been fundamental to the development of such coordinated programmes and the political leaders of ASEAN should be congratulated for recognising the need for change and taking cooperative steps towards sustainable and resilient development, which could be replicated in other sub-regions. ASEAN is remarkably efficient at making diverse cultures and political traditions share a common vision and pragmatic policies, within the region and from the region to global community. It does so by respecting each country's international procedures, and building the capacity within each nation to meet agreed programme objectives.

## Recognising the Challenges of Change

Despite the proliferation of policies, declarations, resolutions, plans of action, and programmes on sustainable and resilient development, the implementation of agreements within ASEAN is usually rather slow. Table 1 presents the environmental performance index of ASEAN. The effectiveness of implementing policies and thus the performance of AMS varies across the region. Though steady improvement has been observed over the past 10 years, most of them are still far away from achieving the sustainability and resilience targets and do not rank highly at the global level.

**Table 1: Environmental Performance Index of ASEAN Members**

EPI	2016 - EPI	Global rank	10-year change (%)
Brunei Darussalam	67.89	98	67.89
Cambodia	51.24	146	17.52
Indonesia	65.85	107	10.45
Lao People's Democratic Republic	50.29	148	8.52
Malaysia	74.30	63	13.05
Myanmar	49.80	153	-
Philippines	73.70	66	16.30
Singapore	87.04	14	-0.43
Thailand	69.54	91	17.68
Viet Nam	58.50	131	20.67

Source: Yale EPI Report 2016.

Some of the key limitations and barriers that may explain the less than optimal sustainability performance include:

- (a) Inadequate capacity – lack of information, data, funding, and organisational support within ASEAN and thus dependence on development partners.
- (b) Inadequate monitoring mechanism – absence of an integrated surveillance mechanism limits the ability of ASEAN to identify risks and respond in a cohesive way.
- (c) Lack of a dispute resolution mechanism. Because the ASEAN way emphasises decision-making through consensus building and non-intervention ways, it undermines the possibility of adopting practical measures to cope with common regional problems.

This has led some thinkers (Amitav, 2001; Khang, 2013; Mo and Park, 2014) to call for stronger emphasis within ASEAN on implementation of policy reforms within states. Balancing economic development and social pressures with environmental protection is a critical issue for ASCC development. Win-win opportunities – in particular the idea of green growth – need to be exploited. A reorientation of economic growth itself is a precondition for environmental protection, i.e. a win-win situation is possible. There are also technical solutions to sustainability challenges. Done properly, such coordinated policies as clean energy promotion, disaster risk reduction, and sustainable consumption bring net benefits in terms of jobs, reduced emissions and pollutions, and lower prices, and need to be exploited (ADB, 2008; ADBI, 2014).

## Uncovering Transformative Pathways through Policy Adjustments

Many approaches to sustainable and resilient development have evolved over the decades at national and regional level, reflecting different national contexts and priorities, sectoral concerns, and transitional strategies. But the missing legal dimension at the regional level is often cited as one of the reasons for ASEAN having reacted slowly in implementing urgent actions on sustainability and resilience at national and sub-national level (Kheng, 2013; Label et al., 2014). Effective cooperation for sustainability and resilience requires a substantial strengthening of institutional structures and decision-making processes, and a solid enforcement system. On the one hand, ASEAN is attempting to emulate the European Union's common environmental conservation framework to meet the challenges, but on the other hand member countries are reluctant to cede power to a central body and the implementing organisations within AMS are asked to follow binding ASCC community laws without enhanced funding.

Economic competition amongst ASEAN countries, a narrow focus on national interest, and the fear of losing sovereignty have hindered implementation of stronger binding common policies (Robinson, 2002). As a direct consequence of such conflicts of interests, ASEAN has come up with a more flexible approach, characterised by the 'ASEAN minus X' and 'ASEAN plus' formulas. The ASEAN minus formula allows specific AMS to join ASEAN agreements at a later stage, and the plus formula explicitly allows AMS to form sub-regional and international agreements within the ASEAN framework. Nevertheless, there is no institutional architecture in place to monitor or limit the agreements. Moreover, such agreements contradict efforts to cooperate on previous agreements and may eventually lead to a weakening of the older ones.

The decision-making process on environmental governance can be described as an informal diplomacy based on consultation and consensus. Like other areas, sustainability and resilience governance within ASEAN follows the common principle. In general, decision-making in ASEAN takes place at two levels – the interstate level and the national level. In ASEAN meetings, senior officials represent the positions of individual member states. Key environmental issues like biodiversity and climate change only have a chance to be dealt with by ASEAN when they are put on the agenda of this highest level of decision-making. Actors at the national level include business associations, interest groups, and community organisations that have been invited by the government organisations – the second level in the ASEAN decision-making process. Though ASEAN encourages the participation of other stakeholders like civil society organisations, there has been slow progress in the overall integration of non-state actors

in the policy formation process. As a consequence, ASEAN governance on sustainability is mainly determined by a top-down hierarchal structure. Trans-boundary issues like haze from forest fires, climate change, and cross-border solid waste management need not only interstate collaboration but also enforcement at local level, which necessitates strengthened capacity and coordinated actions by different stakeholders.

ASEAN has come a long way in building resilience capacity and supporting national disaster risk management capacity since the ratification of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) Treaty. AADMER is one of the most ambitious and comprehensive disaster risk management treaties in the world. AMS have the opportunity to build a unique regional resilience system that is tailored to the needs of the people and that significantly reduces losses. With reference to the three pillars of the ASEAN community, AADMER is seen as economic in structure, political in sense, and socio-cultural in spirit. Many observers (Amitav, 2011; Robinson, 2012; Mo, 2014) believe that the tipping point in the adoption of a vigorous supranational policy approach to disaster management was the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004. The scale of the devastation caused by the tsunami was so massive that people realised that disasters can strike at any time and resilience of the system is key to sustainability. The successful role of ASEAN in the 2007 Nagris cyclone response resulted in building capacity at the regional level. While regional and intra-regional capacities have certainly increased since AADMER entered into force, many programmes and initiatives are still in their early stages and remain at a small scale. For ASEAN/ASCC to become a powerful human actor, a larger financial commitment from member states would be required, amongst other things. To prevent, mitigate, and respond to climate change and disasters, ASEAN must continue to adjust national budgets and finance the projects accordingly. Even given the ASEAN way, it would be good to see ASEAN also take a stronger stance on guiding members towards similar frameworks, standards, and practices on other issues, especially in terms of a rights based approach to environmental sustainability.

Though there have been considerable governance innovations over the last decade at national level, horizontal and vertical integration across the pillar continues to be problematic throughout ASEAN for several reasons. While it is true that the quantity of environmental policies and regulations has increased due to the pressure and lobbying of both international and domestic stakeholders, environmental ministries or equivalent agencies in the region are often ill-equipped either to enforce existing regulations or to design, implement, monitor, inspect, and enforce, new effective environmental and resilience polices. The protection of the environment is regarded as a niche area and left to often powerless ministries that usually find themselves in the lower ranks of the government hierarchy. Few countries in ASEAN effectively mobilise other ministries to deal with this challenging regionally agreed task. Achieving greater policy coherence



and implementation demands sustained efforts towards the integration of sustainability and resilience in sectoral policies, to ensure consistency in the choices made by the decision-makers, especially local governments, the private sector, and community based organisations. The success of these efforts depends on legislative adjustments, economic and fiscal policy reforms, innovating new technologies, changes in financing, and stronger institutions that are specially geared towards social and ecological floors. The following 10 framework conditions may well fit into the ASCC, AEC, and APSC agendas of sustainability and resilience.

- Investment in resilient infrastructure: Amongst the public assets, recognise the central role of eco-systems to secure long-term wellbeing, peace, and economic opportunity, and improved social outcomes. Recognise, measure, and respond to the economic significance of sustainability and resilience as a large fraction of the ‘GDP of the poor’ – a people-centred approach.
- Innovation for sustainability and resilience: Recognise economic, social, and environmental opportunities in all forms of innovation – social, institutional, financial, and technological. Incentivise and invest in an innovation-based inclusive and green economy that will produce less, remanufacture more, reuse, recycle, and restore and set the evolution on course towards a truly low-carbon and resilient economy.
- Resource conservation: promote resource efficiency, clean energy, sustainable consumption, and production to address resource security concerns.
- Focus on public eco-system services: Develop, maintain, and invest in physical ecological structure, constitutions, laws, e.g. property rights, environmental legislation, industrial standards, and corporate governance norms.
- Operationalising risk mitigation. Recognising today’s risks as tomorrow’s costs to well-being, legislate for protective action or precaution against climate change and disasters, based on the proof of major environmental and health risks.
- Human resource development: Invest in human capabilities to enable communities to determine the sustainability outcomes. Missed capabilities misalign their development choices and lead to unsustainable development.
- Institution building: Invest in effective legislation and strong institutions for governance at local, regional, and national levels, whilst ensuring transfer of knowledge and finance between these levels ensuring sustainability buy-in for policy adjustments by providing clear fiscal stakes at different levels of government; encourage collaboration amongst ministries.
- Centrality to local economy: seek cross-sectoral adjustments by addressing all dimensions of sustainability and resilience, and hence promoting sustained, sustainable, and resilient growth and productive employment at local level.

- Private sector engagement: Private sector choices today largely determine the future sustainability and resilient growth directions, but regulations influence and incentives motivate firms to make choices. Identify and implement effective micro policy adjustments in key areas such as corporate taxation, financial reporting, standards, etc., so that the private sector can be positively engaged, and generate gains from, not losses to, public assets.
- Long term versus short term: Broaden the focus of APSC and AEC policy mandates to align with ASCC-related regulations from short-term stability to medium-term resilience to address the real horizons of long-term sustainability challenges, by integrating financial markets and the real economy to serve the well-being of people.

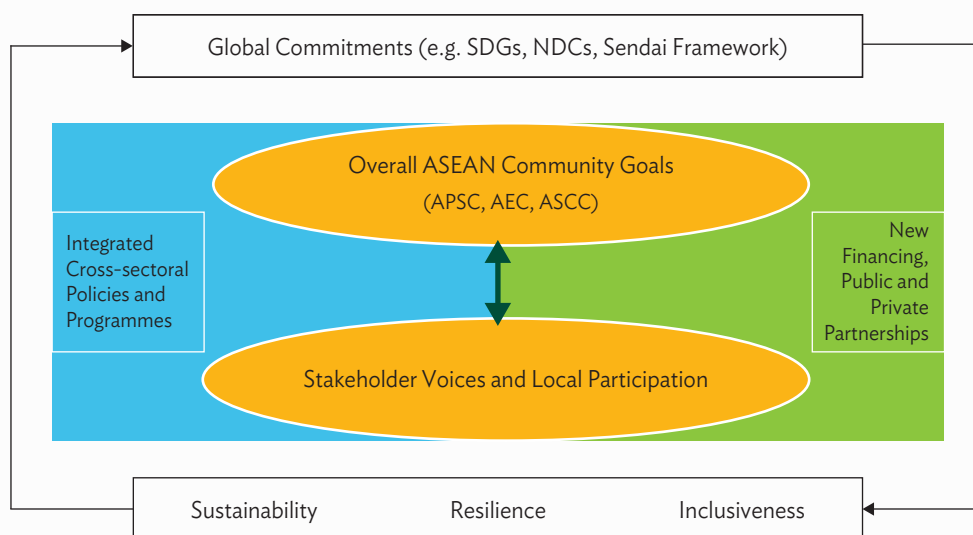
## Pursuing Inclusive Outcomes through Local Champions and Global Interfaces

ASEAN initiatives on sustainability and resilience complement, rather than substitute, its global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Accord on Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) to mitigate climate change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, etc. To this end, global mechanisms and multilateral environmental agreements are needed to strengthen ASEAN initiatives.

Successfully delivering the SDGs and other targets requires a strong systems approach at the regional level across the sectors that involve the public-private stakeholders. For ASEAN, rising to the challenge means operating at three stages – working together to achieve individual goals; taking into consideration the inter-relationships amongst the goals; and finally, delivering the goals in a way that models the characteristics needed for a sustainable and resilient society. Mapping the activities around the individual goals will certainly accelerate progress. But looking across the goals to assess possible synergies and trade-offs takes us to the next level. Clearly, the SDGs do not work in isolation – health (SDG 3) is impacted by food and nutrition, sanitation, education, and, increasingly, climate change; the sustainability of cities (SDG 11) is an amalgamation of several of the other goals such as food (SDG 2), education (SDG 4), water (SDG 6), energy (SDG 7), and infrastructure (SDG 9); and so on.

A network of targets with a clear understanding of SDG interactions is needed. With 2030 set as targets for SDGs and NDCs, over the next 14 years ASEAN needs to learn more about rigorously leveraging these interactions, particularly when it comes to the more cross-cutting goals. ASEAN governments should adopt a joined-up approach, because once it is understood how the goals are linked, it is easier to see how to develop actions and policies to tackle several at once.

**Figure 1: Integrated Approach and a Cooperative Model for a Sustainable and Resilient ASEAN**



AEC = ASEAN Economic Community; APSC = ASEAN Political–Security Community; ASCC = ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community; ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations; NDCs = Nationally Determined Contributions; SDGs = Sustainable Development Goals.

Source: Author.

In many situations, scaling up activities to achieve resiliency and sustainability requires a multi-pronged approach and a cooperative model, as illustrated in Figure 1. There is ample evidence of the power of finance and public–private partnerships to drive change, where technological innovations and integrated policies and programmes are being adopted and scaled up as a result of policy innovations.

Collaboration and local championships are essential drivers of the changes; AMS should seek to replicate success and scale up their approaches to achieve an inclusive, resilient, and sustainable economy. It is not widely understood how such multi-tiered cooperation needs to be formulated and by whom for delivering cumulative success. Integrated approaches are needed to bring together all important stakeholders – businesses, financiers, technical communities, local government authorities, and academia – to tackle barriers at multiple levels that hinder the ability to attract, access, and absorb sustainable technologies and finance. The unique position of local governments and the capabilities of private sector leaders to leverage communities and to solve problems is very important for an inclusive development to take hold and be scaled in.

Clean energy, safe drinking water, sanitation, and other services can be provided by micro-, small, and medium enterprises through cost effective, low-carbon, and eco-friendly technologies.

The engagement of civil society and consumers through institutions, open platforms, and governance frameworks need to be ensured. Empowerment of resilient and sustainable communities will be driven through recognising and protecting different sets of rights and privileges that underpin a democratic society, including property rights, public participation, and access to justice and the rule of law. In this regard, information disclosure and public hearings of major environmental decisions are essential mechanisms of transparent and collaborative governance.

It is good news that despite the predominance of unsustainable practices around the region, there are numerous stories emerging of the success of sustainable and resilient approaches. These success stories need to be told and retold. The Philippines, an island nation, with frequent natural disasters boasts highly resilient communities. Singapore has created and sustained an economy of services that is highly decoupled from resource consumption. Myanmar, an emerging economy, adopted a national low-carbon growth strategy well before the Paris Agreement. Thailand's sufficiency economy, Malaysia's green technology policies, and Viet Nam's Living Resiliency Program all respond to global needs to decouple socio-economic progress from environmental degradation. These countries were and are, in their own ways and contexts, champions of a new and sustainable economy. We can learn from these countries because they recognised early on that resource efficiency, self-reliance, and local innovation are the drivers of improved sustainability and the well-being of people in the absence of unlimited stocks of natural resources that are susceptible to climate change and disasters. However, the power of positive stories and the inspiration of champions can only be felt if such stories are told and retold across the region. And whilst emerging social media may provide some channels for such communication, they need to be reinforced through a concerted and collaborative effort by governments, businesses, academia, the media, and the billions of concerned and aware citizens of ASEAN.

Given the complexity of numerous challenges, three forms of cooperation between ASEAN and the international community could be valuable.

- Information Systems: Global agreements serve as an important source of data and information, allowing more effective regional policy formulation. A repository of data on sustainability and resilience indicators from reporting and monitoring systems across different regions of the world will also help ASEAN to assess the risks, trends, and possible responses. Being part of global reporting in areas such as

biodiversity and climate change accelerate information gathering and facilitate a two-way flow of information. National and regional agencies, the private sector, and non-governmental actors could access a wide range of relevant data and resource deployment. ASEAN can serve as an intermediary repository function for national and local level information efforts with broader engagement of public and community-based organisations.

- **Capacity Building:** information sharing on implementation of strategies, technologies, and policies may be another area of collaboration between ASEAN and other international organisations. Best practices in air quality control, greening of cities, climate change adaptation, etc., could provide a useful tool for countries facing the same or similar challenges. While ASEAN can learn from other regions, one area in which ASEAN could share its experience is resolving open trade and environmental conflicts, which are increasingly becoming a flashpoint that divides advanced countries and other developing countries. In areas where it is difficult to reach global consensus such as social sustainability standards for biofuels, title free harvest of shrimps, and value chain resilience, ASEAN can contribute to global standard setting. In partnership with institutions like the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), the ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE), the ASEAN Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA), and the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), ASEAN, becoming part of a global information clearance house on selected issues, will also bring together individual AMS – which are diverse in environmental, socio-economic, and cultural terms – prompting them to adopt best practices, which will in turn make AMS a global forum on sustainability.
- **Innovative Financing:** In the global negotiations developed countries committed to the goal of mobilising several billions of dollars to address the needs of developing countries regarding specific actions like climate change. The ways in which both public and private finance at the ASEAN level could be mobilised remains a relatively unexplored field. A wide range of public and private sectors including governments, banks, insurers, investors and individual business, and multilateral finance institutions like the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), are exploring the opportunities for investment in a sustainable ASEAN. Given the pressure for increased financial capacity to implement action programmes, ASEAN can act as inoculator for leveraging public finance, mobilising private finance, and channelling international development assistance from the rest of the world to the region.

## Epilogue

Many efforts have been made to enhance the sustainability and resilience of ASEAN; they have hinged on reducing risks, rebounding quickly, reinvigorating leadership, responding better, and reviving ASEAN's sense of community built on the values of trust and consensus. Many of these narratives have been translated into declarations, action plans, and blueprints for collective action. Not reflected though are the deteriorating environmental conditions and lives lost during the disasters.

This is probably the main impetus for ASEAN to push the discussion beyond the levels of general consensus. As urgent actions are needed to tackle biodiversity loss and climate risks, and improve the disaster resilience capacity, readily available decisions and binding resources should be at the disposal of the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC). What is needed is a strong coordinating body within ASEC that can easily be deployed for immediate interventions at any level. Target setting should be accompanied by enabling mechanisms, including financial support for regional initiatives. A substantial amount of funds should be readily available for disbursement for implementing plans and actions at national level.

A good implementation framework and monitoring and reporting mechanisms at different levels are also imperative for the ASCC, to give it enough substance to have an impact. As an organisation, ASEAN should focus more on the potential gains than on the process for implementing transformational strategies with cross-cutting sectoral policies through cooperation. A concerted effort could provide competitive gains, boost productivity, and provide public goods that are unlikely to be produced by markets or individual AMS. It is in the environmental and social self-interest of AMS that the actions are implemented on a priority basis through cooperation and coordination. As the window of opportunity is closing, the cost of taking action is much smaller than that of not acting. Delaying action on those fronts will only increase the costs of building a resilient and sustainable ASEAN.

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