

# Climate Change in ASEAN: Challenges, Initiatives, and the Road Ahead

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The ASEAN region is grappling with the harsh realities of climate change. From rising temperatures and fluctuating rainfall to escalating sea levels and increasingly severe weather events—droughts, storms, floods, typhoons, and heatwaves—the impacts are profound and far-reaching. These climatic shifts have wreaked havoc on human life and infrastructure, worsened water shortages, disrupted agricultural productivity, and posed severe threats to food security. Additionally, climate change has intensified forest and peatland fires, caused transboundary smoke haze, led to land degradation, soil erosion, and damaged coastal and marine resources. The increased risk of infectious diseases further exacerbates these challenges.

Looking ahead, ASEAN faces even greater vulnerabilities. The region will likely experience heightened water demand for irrigation, losses in rain-fed agriculture, increased disease morbidity and mortality linked to floods and droughts, negative impacts on fisheries, and intensified forest fires due to higher temperatures and lower precipitation. These challenges are compounded by the region's dense populations along coastlines, reliance on climate-sensitive sectors, high poverty levels, and limited financial, technological, and institutional capacity.

Despite the severity of these impacts, the region's adaptive capacity remains constrained. A lack of experts, accurate climate information, and financial resources hampers effective adaptation. Nevertheless, ASEAN and its member states have implemented various measures to address these challenges, albeit with mixed success.

Since the 13th ASEAN Summit in 2007, ASEAN has gradually expanded its role in climate change policy. The ASEAN Charter, effective from December 2008, established a rule-based framework for cooperation. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint guides climate action by addressing environmental sustainability and transboundary haze pollution. Simultaneously, the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) Blueprint emphasizes comprehensive security, recognizing climate change as a non-traditional security threat.

ASEAN's climate initiatives have also focused on disaster risk reduction. The ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management, in collaboration with the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) and the World Bank, has made strides under the Memorandum of Cooperation. Food security has been addressed by integrating climate adaptation into agriculture, fisheries, and forestry through frameworks like the Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry towards Food Security (AFCC). Additionally, ASEAN promotes resilient cities and supports regional initiatives like the UNEP Southeast Asian Climate Change Network.

One of the most pressing environmental issues in ASEAN is the recurring haze caused by land and forest fires in Indonesia. The ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (AATHP), signed in 2002, was a pivotal step in addressing this issue. This agreement aims to prevent, monitor, and mitigate haze pollution through concerted national efforts and regional cooperation. The haze crisis is not just an environmental concern; it also has significant economic repercussions.

During the severe haze episode in 2015, Indonesia estimated economic losses at up to US\$33.5 billion (475 trillion rupiah), equivalent to approximately 1.9% of its GDP that year. Singapore also faced economic costs estimated at US\$515.3 million (S\$700 million). These figures reflect the disruption to agriculture, tourism, transportation, and healthcare services caused by haze-related air pollution and reduced visibility.

Despite ASEAN's efforts, recent events underscore the region's vulnerability to climate change. In 2024, a record-setting heatwave swept through Southeast Asia, leading to thousands of school closures, unprecedented pressure on power grids, and fatal heat strokes. These events highlight the urgent need for a regional environmental rights declaration. Currently, an ASEAN working group is drafting such a declaration, which would recognize the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, as well as access to environmental information and participation in environmental decisions.

However, the draft declaration has significant omissions. It fails to include provisions on corporate accountability, climate-related mobility, and indigenous rights. Notably, it omits explicit recognition of Indigenous peoples' territorial and resource rights, despite ASEAN

member states endorsing international agreements like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This exclusion undermines the role of Indigenous communities as guardians of their environment.

Moreover, the draft lacks effective measures for corporate accountability. Documented cases of companies causing environmental harm and human rights abuses highlight the need for stronger regulatory frameworks. The absence of such measures reflects a broader issue within ASEAN, where economic interests often take precedence over environmental and human rights concerns.

ASEAN member states are also signatories to the United Nations Charter and the Paris Agreement, which obligate them to uphold environmental rights as human rights. However, implementing and enforcing these rights presents significant challenges. Many ASEAN countries prioritize economic growth, sometimes at the cost of significant environmental degradation. This development often leads to pollution, loss of biodiversity, and severe climate impacts, directly affecting people's health and infringing on their fundamental right to life.

A central challenge in addressing these issues is the "ASEAN Way," characterized by non-interference, consensus-based decision-making, and informal conflict resolution. While this approach has helped maintain regional stability, it also has significant drawbacks. The emphasis on national sovereignty and consensus often leads to inaction or diluted agreements on pressing issues like environmental rights and human rights violations.

To address these challenges, ASEAN should enhance its decision-making processes by adopting a more flexible approach, allowing for qualified majority voting on urgent matters. This would enable the organization to respond more quickly and effectively to critical regional issues without being hindered by the need for unanimous agreement. Striking a balance between maintaining its principles and ensuring decisive action is crucial.

ASEAN should prioritize strengthening regional cooperation and the implementation of existing agreements, such as the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (AATHP). This involves improving monitoring mechanisms and ensuring swift, coordinated responses to transboundary haze incidents. Centralizing efforts through bodies like the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control (ACC) would facilitate quicker and more effective regional responses.

ASEAN can also play a pivotal role in promoting sustainable practices across member states. Encouraging zero-burning policies, sustainable peatland management, and reforestation initiatives are essential. This involves sharing knowledge and building capacities among member states to foster environmentally responsible agriculture and forestry throughout the region.

Furthermore, ASEAN ought to improve regional and national institutional structures. Cross-sectoral discussions among environmental, economic, and social ministries should be supported by ASEAN's institutional capacity. This would promote thorough and coordinated approaches to environmental management, ensuring that environmental goals are integrated into broader policy frameworks and decision-making processes.

Involving a wide variety of stakeholders is essential for the success of these initiatives. ASEAN has the potential to establish public-private partnerships for sustainable development by leveraging the knowledge and assets of local communities, civil society organizations, and industry. These partnerships can enhance environmental stewardship and strengthen community resilience throughout the region.

Despite the significant challenges, implementing environmental rights in ASEAN is not impossible. By offering member states guidelines, resources, and best practices, ASEAN plays a critical role in facilitating the realization of these rights. Achieving this requires collective action from the public, governments, civil society, and institutions at all levels, united by the common goal of promoting environmental conservation as a vital component of human dignity and well-being.

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