

ASEAN Plan of Action for national disaster relief

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Introduction: ASEAN's Natural Disaster Dilemma

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region has long suffered adverse climate changes to higher extents than the rest of the world. Natural disasters are the greatest cause of human suffering, including loss of life, loss of homes and livelihoods, loss of income and wealth, destruction of infrastructure and dislocation of people from their homes.

A prominent example is the Philippines, described by the UN as 'the most prone to natural hazards in the world... The Philippines, with its 7000 islands and many coastal cities, has always

been extremely vulnerable to intense weather events and natural hazards. Each year there are some 20 typhoons [hurricanes]... There are also around 20 active volcanoes across the country, and according to experts, we can expect a 7.2 magnitude earthquake at any time.'¹



Can ASEAN plan better? Photo: 'Streets turn into rivers as Typhoon Gaemi sweeps over Philippines', Al Jazeera, 24 July 2024,
<https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2024/7/24/streets-turn-into-rivers-as-typhoon-gaemi-sweeps-over-philippines>

Less severely affected but vulnerable to similar disasters are virtually every one of ASEAN's fourteen other member states.

According to figures compiled by ASEAN's Project *Disaster Risk Reduction including Climate Change Adaptation*, the organization's member states suffer damage in excess of an average of USD 4.4 billion annually from natural disasters, especially floods, storms, rain-induced landslides and droughts. This region accounts for 50 percent of the world's total disaster fatalities.²

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/10/1155516>

² "Disaster Risk Reduction by Integrating Climate Change Projection." Institute for Global

¹ 'Waiting for the 'big one' – natural hazards in the Philippines', *United Nations News Centre*, 11 October 2024,

Southeast Asia will continue to experience devastation from tsunamis, earthquakes, landslides, forest fires and other natural disasters. Many see a need for a streamlined and enforceable ASEAN action plan to minimize the devastating natural disaster aftershocks caused to the region from these adverse climate changes. Whether ASEAN Member States agree on that principle and can agree on action is another matter.

Are natural disasters best managed by strengthening national sovereignty or through collection action? ASEAN's traditional goals of strengthening its member states and building

regional responses may work against each other on this issue. Resolving the dilemma poses a foundational challenge to the organization and its working principles.

Many believe ASEAN governments are fully capable of addressing these issues alone. Ever jealous of their national sovereignty and freedom of action, ASEAN states often resist cooperation that would give outsiders a determining voice in their own affairs, especially in times of national emergency. Others believe only through coordinated preparations for disaster management can ASEAN be ready to respond efficiently when disaster strikes. Resolving this dispute is essential to the outcome for ASEAN at ODUMUNC 48.

**Table 1. Not a small problem:
Southeast Asia's worst known natural disasters**

Date	Event	Country	Fatalities
1883 May-Oct	Krakatoa volcano, tsunamis, landslides	Indonesia, others	120,000
2004 Dec 26	Sumatra earthquake-tsunami	Indonesia, others	227,898
2008 Apr 27 - May 3	Cyclone Nargis	Myanmar	138,373

Background: ASEAN member states and natural disasters

This vulnerability to natural disasters is concurrently highlighted by ASEAN's existing and expanding body of *Guiding Documents for Cooperation and Disaster Management*, and intersects with past, present, and future risks posed by natural disasters. What makes this difficult to implement is that ASEAN is hard

pressed to adjust its long history of non-interventionism and does not know which countries will be able to fund reconstruction projects in donor disaster areas.

The ways ASEAN deals with its natural disaster problems, and how they impact the region on a country-by-country basis speaks volumes about ASEAN's capacity of implementing resilient approaches to solve their on-going natural disaster crises.

**Table 2. Contemporary experience:
Southeast Asia's worst natural disasters, 2000-24**

Date	Event	Country	Fatalities	Cost in then year USD
2000 Oct 26-Nov 6	Typhoon Goni	Philippines, others	32	359 mn
2003 Mar 12	Mount Marapi eruption	Indonesia	24	781 mn
2003 Dec 28	Davao earthquake	Philippines	1,000	
2004 Dec 26	Sumatra earthquake-tsunami	Indonesia, others	228,000	14.0 bn
2006 Apr 27	Yogyakarta earthquake	Indonesia	5,749	3.1 bn
2007 Feb 2-12	Jakarta flood	Indonesia	80	400 mn
2008 Apr 27-May 3	Cyclone Nargis	Myanmar	138,373	12.9 bn
2009 Sep 30	Sumatra earthquake-landslide	Indonesia	1,115	745 mn
2016 Oct 14-26	Typhoon Haima	Philippines	19	972 mn
2019 Dec 15	Davao del Sur earthquake	Philippines	13	37 mn
2024 Aug 31-Sep 8	Typhoon Yagi	Philippines, others	830	16.5 bn

Example: 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami

The most devastating natural disaster in contemporary memory was the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. This hit the entire Indian Ocean region on 26 December 2004. Indonesia, closest to the epicenter of the underwater earthquake that triggered the tsunami, suffered worst of all. Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand also were greatly affected, as were countries of South Asia (especially India and Sri Lanka) and on the African side of the Indian Ocean (especially Comoros Islands, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique Seychelles and Tanzania).

The tsunami was caused by an undersea earthquake off the west coast of Indonesia. It created waves traveling at 500 mph, the speed of a jet plane, and topping 100 feet. Entire regions of the coasts were destroyed completely; all entire villages, cities and towns, all buildings in many cases, with tens of thousands drowned immediately or dragged into the ocean.



A mosque amid the rubble in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, after the 2004 tsunami which killed a total of 228,000. *Source:* https://walrus.wr.usgs.gov/tsunami/sumatra05/Banda_Aceh/0702.html

This tsunami resulted in the approximate deaths of 230,000 people in multiple countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand. Among the dead were tens of thousands of foreign tourists, especially East Asians and

Europeans, making this a global tragedy.³ Almost as serious were the consequences for survivors. The tsunami left millions of survivors across the region without food or shelter.⁴

In the wake of this chaos, regional states were mostly on their own. ASEAN was slow to react. Funding and resources were slow to arrive, and releasing funds for emergency response has proven difficult. The collective response came instead from the United Nations' *Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific* (ESCAP), which created a *Trust Fund for Tsunami, Disaster and Climate Preparedness*. This relatively small body was the best organized multi-national responder, although its capabilities were limited. Among its goals are organizational support for improving early warning tsunami technology through a multi-hazard system. In 2010, the UN Trust Fund broadened its operational scope to encompass disaster and climate preparedness to manage the problem before it becomes a full-fledged natural disaster.⁵ ASEAN still lacks a comparable body of its own.

Examples: subsequent disasters

The extraordinary effect of relatively predictable disasters was illustrated in 2008, when Cyclone Nargis—a category 4 storm—slammed into lower-Myanmar's Irrawaddy River delta, the most populous region in the country. The cyclone

caused approximately 140,000 deaths from drowning and left some 887,000 homeless and displaced, according to the United Nations.⁶

In 2018, the Indonesian island Sulawesi was traumatized by a 7.4 magnitude earthquake which triggered a tsunami, affecting nearly 1.5 million people on the island. More than 2,000 people died and 212,000 were displaced. Illustrating the scale of secondary effects, 1,200 schools were destroyed, shut permanently or for an extended period.⁷

More recently, another natural disaster has befallen Myanmar. Typhoon Yagi hit the country, along with parts of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, in early September 2024. This caused fewer fatalities but was destructive of the country's infrastructure such as roads, railroads, bridges and electrical networks. Schools, farmlands, and other crucial types of infrastructure washed away or damaged. The officially confirmed death toll rose to 384, with an additional 89 people missing.⁸

Other recurring disasters are not entirely natural. They are caused or worsened by human intervention, especially climate change due to deforestation and global warming. Between 2001 and 2019, researchers indicated the region had lost 610,000 square kilometers of forests (larger in comparison than Thailand's total land area), and projects Brunei is on pace to lose about 220,000 km sq of its forests between 2010-2030, claiming 30 percent of its total land area.⁹

³ Omer, S. "2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami: Facts and FAQs." World Vision, <https://www.worldvision.org/author/somerworldvision-org>

⁴ Gentner, p. 5. 2006.

⁵ ESCAP. "ESCAP Trust Fund for Tsunami, Disaster and Climate Preparedness." *ESCAP*, <http://www.unescap.org/disaster-preparedness-fund>

⁶ Gottlieb, G. "10 years after, Cyclone Nargis still holds lessons for Myanmar." *The Conversation*. (2 May 2018), <https://theconversation.com/10-years-after-cyclone-nargis-still-holds-lessons-for-myanmar-95039>

⁷ UNICEF. "Deadly earthquake and tsunami hit

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<https://www.unicef.org/stories/deadly-earthquake-and-tsunami-hit-indonesia>

⁸ AFP. "Myanmar flood death toll jumps to 384." *France24* (21 September 2024).

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240921-myanmar-flood-death-toll-jumps-to-384>

⁹ Chen, S., et al. "Review of drivers of forest degradation and deforestation in Southeast Asia." *Remote Sensing Applications: Society and Environment* 33. 6: (23 December 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rsase.2023.101129>; and Lai, O. "Deforestation in Southeast Asia: Causes and Solution." *Earth.Org*, 2,

Generally, climate and environmental problems are not considered natural disasters. But when addressing the subject, the sovereign member states of ASEAN are free to consider such problems too, if they wish to.

Previous ASEAN Plans of Action

Dealing with natural disasters has been on ASEAN's agenda almost since the birth of the organization. The greatest successes have been encouraging member states to better prepare. Member states also have been encouraged to cooperate, to plan together and share resources to maximize response capabilities. But cooperative initiatives have few achievements to show. In general, member states continue to be preoccupied with their own problems, hesitant to share resources when this might reduce their own ability to respond, unwilling to push each other to do more.

The original declaration for ASEAN cooperation in natural disaster matters is its flagship guiding document, the *ASEAN Declaration on Mutual Assistance on Natural Disasters*, signed in Manila on 26 June 1976. This agreement said that when lack of financial and human resources make it impossible for a disaster-affected country to respond as it would like, the member country will be provided with materials and medical supplies for other member states.

Each country agreed to designate a national government agency to serve as an internal coordinating body.¹⁰ These agencies are responsible for compiling and sharing disaster data, and coordinating integrated, multi-national relief cooperation plans.

Another early example of ASEAN-proposed

disaster relief cooperation is seen in ASEAN's 1997 *Regional Haze Action Plan* (RHAP). The catalyst for action came in August 1997, when massive forest fires on the Borneo (part of Indonesia) got global attention, prompting ASEAN member states to take action, partially out of worry that if they failed to act, the United Nations would do it instead.

With immense air pollution from forest burning spread across Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and even the Philippines, ASEAN overcame more than thirty years of resistance to telling each other what to do and responding together. Instead of protecting each member state's right to make independent, sovereign decisions, ASEAN agreed its members should cooperate. The decision was not well received throughout the organization. Many member states let their great unhappiness be known and pledged never again.

In this first coordinated effort, ASEAN 'encouraged' its member states to do what they could to address blinding, choking "haze". The agreement called for the establishment of a *Haze Technical Task Force*. This plan did not commit any member state to specific action. The members retained complete control over their policies, their independence and sovereignty were undiluted. But the agreement opened a door for ASEAN's as an organization to cooperate with the UN, the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the European Investment Bank, and other interested financiers in the international community.¹¹

A similar initiative came in 2005, when ASEAN created its *ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response* (AADMER). It formally became effective in 2009. AADMER sets, "the basis for regional cooperation, coordination, technical assistance, and resource mobilization in all aspects of disaster management and emergency response." AADMER established a series of pilot programs

<https://earth.org/deforestation-in-southeast-asia/>

¹⁰ Gentner, p. 4. 2006.

¹¹ Gentner, p. 5. 2006

to coordinate member states policy and activity. Cooperation is strictly voluntary.

The current AADMER five-year plan (2021-25) seeks to implement five priority programs, 15 sub-priority programs, 30 outcomes, and 117 outputs.¹⁶ The current path of AADMER's vision calls for deeper inter-sectional cooperation when it comes to capacity building and scalable innovation applicable to different countries on a case-by-case basis. Creation of partnerships between disaster management organizations in different member states, making it easy for them to communicate with each other and share important information, Also is an important part of AADMER's work.

ASEAN also is engaged with global institutions to combat regional natural disasters, including the UN Environment Program (UNEP), the UN Development Program (UNDP) and the World Food Organization (WFO). Individual member states, acting on their own, have started unique projects to warn their people when natural disasters seem imminent. Timor Leste—an ASEAN observer state, not a full member—is a leader in this regard.¹² No large, formal ASEAN member state has established anything comparable to date.

Some of these engagements include ASEAN's relationship with the UN, which began in the early 1970s. Since then, ASEAN cooperates closely with various UN Agencies on all fronts of disaster-related management. One is the *Joint Strategic Plan of Action on Disaster Management* (JSPDAM). The JSPDAM is coordinated by the UN and involves 16 different UN Agencies.¹⁷ UNICEF is one of these agencies, instrumental, for example, helping Indonesia cope with the devastation of the 2018 earthquake and tsunami.¹³

Outside powers like China and Japan, as well as others like Australia, Germany and the United States, also have helped ASEAN member states manage natural disaster challenges. For example, China sent a 25-member search and rescue team to Indonesia. Japan sent 120 civil emergency workers to tsunami-hit areas.¹⁴

The Japanese Government, through its and Japan International Cooperation Agency, has supported ASEAN in the establishment of the *Aha Center* and the *Joint Asian Response Plan* (JARP), a project endorsed on 11 October 2016 at the 29th ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management Meeting. This calls for ASEAN to collaborate with the greater Asian continent to enhance ASEAN solidarity in managing its regional natural disaster risks.¹⁵

Why do ASEAN Initiatives Fail?

Indonesia: Certain initiatives like the RHAP failed due to Indonesia's resistance in its adoption. Rather than fostering greater regional cooperation, the "haze" caused diplomatic rifts between Suharto's autocratic regime in Indonesia and the rest of ASEAN. Government officials in Jakarta refused to implement a national haze prevention plan in accordance with ASEAN policy. Instead, Jakarta saw the issue as a domestic (not regional) one. Hence, Indonesia gravitated more towards policies of non-interventionism, which remains a Founding Principle of ASEAN's Charter. Another key reason for why the RHAP and ESCAP plans go awry is found in lesser developed ASEAN states being unable to build up broad-based institutional solidarity or incapable of independently

¹² UNEP. "An early warning system for disasters takes shape in Timor-Leste." UNEP, 11 August 2023, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/early-warning-system-disasters-takes-shape-timor-leste>

¹³ UNICEF, p. 6. 2018.

¹⁴ Gentner, p. 6. 2006

¹⁵ The Aha Centre. "ASEAN Joint Disaster Response Plan: AJDRP." *The Aha Centre* (September 2017). <https://ahacentre.org/publication/ajdrp/>

improving their own technological capacities.

Myanmar: A contemporary example of these incapacities is Myanmar. Any progress made by the country over the past decade to adopt such strategies like ESCAP's coordinated field surveys targeting areas vulnerable to natural disasters, has been cast aside by the government junta's fraught relationship with international and local relief agencies attempting to enhance disaster preparedness in the Irrawaddy-Mekong Deltas.¹⁶ Regardless of these evident shortcomings, these initiatives among others have seen some successes that can be viewed as learned lessons to be enhanced for future projects.

Disaster Relief Success Stories

Indonesia: A particular success in RHP is how a coalition of ASEAN member countries (led by Singapore) launched a media campaign to ramp up international pressures against Suharto's noncooperative actions. This stance was not taken by ASEAN, yet it created a situation of behind-the-scenes, quiet diplomacy where Indonesia made concessions without facing international embarrassment.¹⁷ Even though Indonesia failed to comply with these concessions, ASEAN was able to avoid a diplomatic collapse on how it handles regional natural disasters. Indonesia has emerged as a beacon of regional cooperation. As one of ASEAN's few democracies, and its largest member in land, population and economy, Indonesia has been more willing to press other member states. One is Myanmar, which has avoided regional commitments. Indonesian leadership led to more activity from Myanmar, especially regarding disaster preparedness.

Some possible proposals for

action

While there have been moments of evident pushback for regional cooperation efforts in disaster relief by the ASEAN member countries, like not living up to SFDRR's anticipated 2043 targets, more progress has been made by ASEAN in natural disaster recoveries than has been attempted in past efforts. The objective of this Committee is to continue this trend by enhancing future intra-ASEAN and ASEAN-inter-organizational operations to facilitate good and sustainable disaster relief preparedness practices. The potential implementation of these strategies perhaps will expand regional cooperation in disaster relief to make ASEAN more resilient and self-sufficient in handling its many natural disaster challenges.

Fast-track future, new member states entering ASEAN. Increase assistance efforts to build disaster preparedness capacities of recipient states.

This proposal means that ASEAN's most developed countries (Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia) must take more of a consolidated effort to assist East Timor's project to develop a battery system of radars and underwater sensors to help the country's meteorologists better forecast weather emergencies for its 1.3 million people population.

Pro: A positive outcome coming from this proposal is that East Timor (as a severely underdeveloped member-in-waiting) will make for a good testing ground to see if ASEAN is a capable institution in driving regional cooperation. Countries in favor of such a proposal are Indonesia/East Timor (which have seen a positive change in the historically tumultuous diplomatic relationship since Timor-Leste's independence) and the rest of the stronger ASEAN member countries.

Con: Fast tracking admission, and making it a condition, could threaten current members, who

¹⁶ Gotlieb, 2018.

¹⁷ Gentner, 2006, p. 5.

may fear they will be next to receive demands, or that new member states will press them to match. The conditionality also might be rejected by prospective members.

Focus on single countries: ASEAN traditionally respects the sovereignty of its member states above all. The principle of sovereignty ensures each member state has complete authority over all activity within its borders. But some ASEAN member states, led by democratic Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines, have become more outspoken about mistakes and oversights in more repressive members, especially Myanmar, and to a lesser degree Cambodia.

Myanmar and Cambodia are dictatorships with limited state capacity. Unable to solve their own problems, they require outside help, but they usually direct this aid only to parts of their societies. Typically this means ethnic and party supporters of the governments—loyal regions—get everything. Other ethnicities, groups and regions get nothing. Both countries refuse outside assistance that is highly conditional, that leaves control in the hands of donors or foreigners who want to distribute aid more fairly, including helping opponents of the governments.

ASEAN could agree to target specific countries where natural disaster preparedness is especially inadequate or politicized. This would be difficult normally, since ASEAN always prefers to work through consensus. Since targeting countries can block consensus, acting in ways they reject could be impossible. Instead, careful diplomacy might be required, stressing offers of tailored assistance and emergency support they find acceptable.

Pro: It can demonstrate that ASEAN has adopted a serious tone in combating regional noncompliance on natural disaster issues.

Con: This approach risks the chance of Myanmar Junta's retaliation where it becomes more uncooperative. If expelled, Myanmar could close corridors/escape routes for marginalized ethnic

groups within its borders (like the Rohingya) or other armed ethnic factions in opposition of the government preventing them from fleeing the country in case of a natural disaster emergency. Further, ASEAN countries with similar pro-military elements might take exception to this ruling, which goes against the 'ASEAN Way' of nonintervention.

Facilitate programs for institution-wide information sharing technologies. This strategy further advances disaster relief efforts by promoting greater surveillance, sharing of data reports, and joint technological testing exercises between countries.

Pro: This will improve ASEAN's transparency in handling domestic disaster issues, with the potential of spilling over across the region.

Con: Countries hesitant to regionally integrate like Myanmar will deny such initiative.

Expand international partnerships for assistance from foreign governments. This proposal can make ASEAN's domestic structures more resilient in making sure their populations are well-protected in natural disaster crises. It is possible because ASEAN is becoming a global economic powerhouse, including some of the world's fastest growing economies.

Pro: Engagement with foreign governments brings dramatically new capabilities. It strengthens ASEAN governments by showing they are accepted as legitimate international actors. This also opens the door for greater involvement from the international community in the region, such as Australian aid in ASEAN disaster relief efforts.

Con: ASEAN governments are distrustful of foreign governments and aid agencies, because they usually make preconditions for granting assistance, including not just freedom of action, but often demanding aid be distributed according to their principles, not the principles of the

recipient government. countries like ASEAN members like Cambodia and Myanmar could use this move to greater defy regional cooperation since they may feel empowered. It can also create a greater risk between hegemonic influences in the region, like US-backed aid agencies and their Chinese counterparts

Conclusion

Whether or not ASEAN can implement these proposals or enhance its preexisting ones, remains to be seen. What is certain is that despite ASEAN's achievements in facilitating greater autonomy and cooperation in its natural disaster management strategies, there is a major need for improvement. But overcoming ASEAN state's emphasis on national sovereignty is a major problem.

Overall ASEAN compliance is still in its rudimentary stage. Many ASEAN countries have yet to implement advanced strategies for disaster preparedness and relief management. This puts ASEAN in an impasse, where its development goals in disaster relief are in jeopardy of meeting its desired outcomes. A consolidated effort of

ASEAN growing its regional, continental, and global resources and relationships is necessary to preserve and expand on its stated achievements in attending to Southeast Asia's natural disaster crises. However, this progression cannot be contingent on the continued reliance of international agencies, such as the UN, in primarily funding ASEAN-led initiatives in disaster relief.

ASEAN has long proclaimed that absolute solidarity within the association is unassailable. In many ways, this platform is true, as disaster relief has become a major issue for the region that necessitates comprehensive and forward-thinking action plans. However, when national sovereignty is tested by expanded cooperation efforts, its plans to implement key initiatives across the association (like early warning systems creation) are torpedoed and sunk by ineffectiveness.

ASEAN has been accused of self-sabotage. Even many within ASEAN agree that the international community's primary role in funding disaster relief programs is not the ideal answer to solving natural disaster catastrophes in the region. Unequivocally, ASEAN should be the key player in forging a path for sustainable success to achieve its disaster relief development plans.



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