

THE ASEAN WAY & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

This report discusses whether the values and processes that have served ASEAN since its creation are appropriate for effectively negotiating the challenges of the present. In particular, is ASEAN well-positioned to make positive progress on sustainable development?

When the Association of South East Asian Nations, or ASEAN, was created in 1967, it had half the number of member states that it does today, and its challenges were immediate, obvious, and shared.¹ Dealing with the Vietnam War, the Cold War, Communism, the newly-created state of Malaysia, the Indo-China refugee crisis, and Vietnam-Cambodia border conflicts, among others, were early key priorities. The group agreed to principles and structures in both the 'what' and the 'how' of what it wanted to achieve. ASEAN's goals were stability via economic growth, social progress and cultural development (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009). The set of behavioural and procedural norms established to prescribe approaches to regional engagement, known as the 'ASEAN Way' were, and remain, consensus-based decision-making through effective cooperation and enhanced consultation amongst equally represented member states; non-interference in the internal affairs of other member states, respecting independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity; and peaceful dispute settlement including the renunciation of aggression and any use of force.²

The bloc's values and processes managed the challenges of the time successfully – the region is one of the most stable in the world, and is considered to be a prosperous economic zone.

Over the past five decades, five more members have been added.³ The addition of new member states and the broader range of national interests that came with them raised new challenges to ASEAN's cohesion and shared purpose. In addition, over that time the contextual landscape has also changed considerably. Cross-border, non-traditional risks to national wellbeing have come to the fore. As a result of these internal and external factors, the issues that once bound the group together have been largely replaced by very different considerations. In fact, over the past five decades, different Southeast Asian state actors have had quite different understandings of the meaning and practical application of the 'ASEAN Way', and the norms of non-interference, consensus, and peaceful dispute settlement have shifted over time.⁴ "One Vision, One Identity, One Community"⁵ is an ambitious official motto for such a diverse region,

given the variations in populations, incomes, political systems, and levels of development.⁶

In addition to its norms, ASEAN as a regional grouping is quite different from others such as the European Union (EU). The model of regionalism that operates within ASEAN focuses on the maintenance of sovereignty, as opposed to the model in the European Union (EU), which is characterised by supranational institutions and the pooling of sovereignty.⁷ Structurally, ASEAN has no central bureaucracy. A small Secretariat has a limited facilitation role. ASEAN embraces the ideal of common but differentiated responsibilities, that is, members contribute according to their capabilities, acknowledging the varied degrees of development among them. In terms of implementation, members agree on common measures, and decide at the national level how to undertake activities for implementation. Nothing is legally binding.⁸

1 The original five member states were Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.

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3 Membership is currently Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam

4 Yakuwa, Taku (2018).

5 <https://asean.org/asean/about-asean/asean-motto/>

6 Albert & Maizland, 2019

7 Varkkey (2012), p. 80

8 Koh and Robinson, p. 4

Sustainable development and the ASEAN Way

Fifty years ago, sustainable development was not on ASEAN's agenda, either for individual countries, or the bloc as a group. The environment as an area of concern was added after the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972.⁹ Today, all ten ASEAN countries are signatories to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and draw on the language and ideas of international approaches to sustainable development. As a bloc, ASEAN has explicitly committed to sustainability in the region. The 2015 ASEAN Charter sets out that ASEAN is committed to ensuring "sustainable development for the benefit of the present and future generations and to place the well-being, livelihood and welfare of the peoples at the centre of ASEAN community building process."¹⁰ Likewise, the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 emphasises a regional focus on environmental protection for now and the future, adapting and responding to climate change, and green technology and development.

This determination to embed sustainability into ASEAN's future development is positive. However, despite these declarations, according to the most recent United Nations review of progress, Southeast Asian countries are not on track to meet any of the 17 SDGs by 2030.¹¹

The two goals showing the most potential to be realised are 'quality education' and 'industry, innovation and infrastructure'.¹² Indeed, the goals of 'reduced inequalities' and 'peace, justice and strong institutions' have regressed across the region. The values and processes that underpin the ASEAN Way, and which have done so much to maintain peace and stability in the region may also be undermining the ability of the bloc, and its member states, to pursue sustainable development.

The progress against the goal of 'peace, justice and strong institutions' provides an illustrative example of where ASEAN values – in this case the principle of non-interference – may be undermining achievement of some of the SDGs. Concerns over interfering in others' sovereignty has arguably circumscribed the scope of ASEAN's regional humanitarian activities such that their remit excludes human-induced crises or violent conflict because of concerns over political sensitivities.¹³ The principle of non-interference in others' sovereignty also underpins challenges in translating ASEAN-level commitments into binding agreements for national level actions and the implementation of effective environmental programs.¹⁴

Similarly, the principle of consensus-based decision making has tested ASEAN's ability to deal with regional environmental challenges like transboundary haze pollution. While the issue is a regional one, ASEAN-led initiatives to mitigate haze have repeatedly been unsuccessful, as member states have tended to act in their own national interest rather than the collective regional interest.¹⁵ The ASEAN Way, it was argued, was to help Indonesia cope with its fires, rather than to blame it for the problem.¹⁶ According to this perspective, without ASEAN's mechanisms, the countries affected by the haze smoke from Indonesia would have "been up in arms against Indonesia already."¹⁷ In the ASEAN approach, without agreement from all members, no action can be undertaken. While ASEAN states want the problem of smoke haze to be overcome, taking action without full consensus is an even stronger imperative.¹⁸ Overall, the ASEAN style of regionalism, with its emphasis on sovereignty and consensus, has not been conducive to effectively addressing cross-border environmental issues in Southeast Asia.¹⁹

9 Koh and Robinson, p. 4

10 ASEAN Charter, 2015: 2

11 ESCAP, 2020: 57, https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/ESCAP_Asia_and_the_Pacific_SDG_Progress_Report_2020.pdf

12 ESCAP, 2020: 57, https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/ESCAP_Asia_and_the_Pacific_SDG_Progress_Report_2020.pdf

13 Spandler, 2020

14 Koh and Robinson, p. 1

15 Varkkey (2012)

16 Chalermpananupap, Termsak (1999), 'ASEAN-10: Meeting the Challenges', <https://asean.org/asean-10-meeting-the-challenges-by-termsak-chalermpananupap/?highlight=ASE-AN%20Way>

17 Chalermpananupap, Termsak (1999), 'ASEAN-10: Meeting the Challenges', <https://asean.org/asean-10-meeting-the-challenges-by-termsak-chalermpananupap/?highlight=ASE-AN%20Way>

18 Varkkey (2012), p. 81

19 Varkkey (2012), p. 80

Regional and global sustainable development

ASEAN's local sustainable development challenges are magnified by the impacts of climate change at a global level. As ASEAN's working group on climate change notes, Southeast Asia is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change on development. The region relies heavily on agriculture, natural resources, and forestry for livelihoods. However many of these are threatened by rising temperatures, decreasing rainfall, and rising sea levels. Natural disasters like heat waves, droughts, floods, and tropical cyclones are increasing in their intensity and frequency.²⁰ The IMF, among others, notes that the negative economic impact looks set to be considerable.²¹ Sustainable development cannot but also suffer.

Climate change brings into clear relief how the issues that challenge sustainable development do not neatly contain themselves into regional zones. Policies and events all around the world – like wildfires in Australia or far-off Brazil – impact ASEAN countries' sustainable development challenges. Therefore, as well as taking action locally, engaging at a global level on the borderless issues critical to achieving sustainable development is also of great importance. A second, and arguably equally critical component of addressing sustainable development is actively shaping the global development agenda to ensure your local issues are on it. The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 does clearly articulate ASEAN's goal to "proactively contribute to the global community" (p. 16). However, the way ASEAN currently operates, with its prioritisation of national sovereignty and focus on utilising collectivity for the benefit of individual member states, undermines ASEAN's ability to project its interests in the international system.²²

A good example of a regional grouping which has successfully influenced the global sustainability agenda in its collective and ultimately also individual interest is the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). The PIF's 18 members has pushed hard on the global stage to ensure its sustainable development issues are on the regional and global agenda, particularly when in fora with larger powers such as the European Union (EU), China and the United States.²³ The PIF builds its approach on a strong sense of interconnected geographies, shared identities and responsibilities,²⁴ and in particular, the idea of 'Blue Pacific' as a collective and shared 'ocean identity', 'ocean geography' and 'ocean resources'.²⁵ This collective sense is also strengthened by a common and powerful concern that climate change is "the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific".²⁶ These conditions have been fundamental to the success of the small island states in the Pacific in getting their sustainable development issues an influential public voice. One example of the strength of this unified voice to the global stage can be seen on the inclusion of 'stand-alone' sustainable development goals related to oceans and climate change by the United Nations.²⁷

20 <https://environment.asean.org/asean-working-group-on-climate-change/>

21 <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2018/09/southeast-asia-climate-change-and-greenhouse-gas-emissions-prakash.htm>

22 Narine (2009)

23 Tuilaepa, 2017

24 Hau'ofa, 2008

25 PIF Secretariat, n.d

26 PIF Secretariat, 2018

27 Manoa in Fry & Tarte, 2015. Pp. 96-97.

Conclusion

Although ASEAN is predicated on the idea of a shared ASEAN identity, its modus operandi and underlying principles arguably in fact hinder the creation of a collective identity which is capable of exercising influence stronger than that of the individual member states. Despite being a bloc, norms are not broadly shared, and a truly collective identity has not been formed.²⁸ Regional cooperation is not founded so much on the pursuit of the collective good per se, as much as for individual national interests.²⁹ Indeed, the principal of consensus, in the ASEAN context, when combined with the principle of non-interference, translates de facto into each state's overarching power to act individually and prevent collective action when it contradicts any one of its individual member states' interests.³⁰

ASEAN values, in particular the principles of non-interference and consensus decision-making have over the years been subject to intense public debate and scrutiny. The principle of consensus has been critiqued as being "inefficient, ineffective, and in the eyes of many, produces nothing much beyond the lowest common denominator in the decision-making process of the regional organisation."³¹

And while the principle of non-interference to guard against infringements of national sovereignty seems reasonable given the history of colonialism and the struggle for independence many Southeast nations have experienced, it is worth asking whether this value is still appropriate given the current challenges the region faces.

At the same time, in many aspects the ASEAN Way has served Southeast Asia well. It is over-simplistic to conclude that ASEAN commitment to cooperation and achievement of sustainable development is little more than empty rhetoric. It is naïve to overlook the enormous complexity of the challenges in the region, the necessity for continued cooperation among state authorities, and the general political and institutional conditions of ASEAN cooperation.³² It is a delicate balancing act for ASEAN governments to manage when they themselves are protective of the norms which arguably undermine their ability to address contemporary challenges – where and when to exert pressure on member states, versus the imperative to minimise internal differences in order to maintain regional stability.

Certainly, the principles of the ASEAN Way can be credited with uniting and maintaining cohesion and cooperation among ASEAN nations despite the diversity among them. However, in the face of borderless challenges to development and wellbeing, there appear to be some fundamental tensions which limit ASEAN's capacity to undertake the kind of influential collective action seen from the smaller and less economically weighty Pacific Island nations.

Over the past fifty years, the principles of non-interference and consensus decision-making central to the ASEAN Way have evolved in how they are understood and applied by member states. Given the current global and regional environment and the cross-border nature of many of the major challenges facing a nation-state, it may be time for Southeast Asian governments to actively reconsider whether the ASEAN Way of consensus, non-interference, and non-violence will be sufficiently effective in response.³³

28 Yukawa (2018) and see also Narine (2009)

29 Yukawa (2018) p. 300

30 See for example Nguyen, 2016; Luqman, n.d.; Hiep, 2016; and Houdre, 2018.

31 Luqman, <https://www.reportingasean.net/asean-consensus-blessing-curse/>. See also Aggarwal & Chow, 2010.

32 Spandler, 2020

33 Yukawa p. 310

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