Constructing ASEAN cooperation on mitigating climate change

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Abstract. Southeast Asia is one of the world's most vulnerable regions to the impacts of climate change, including floods, droughts, typhoons, sea-level rise, and heat waves. This situation is exacerbated by high urbanization, deforestation, and pollution. Through ASEAN Vision 2045, member countries agreed to strengthen cooperation and be responsive to eradicate the impacts of climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and lead the transition to a green and blue economy. Through constructivism lens and qualitative methods, the objective of this article provides an evaluation of institutional building for cooperation in mitigating climate change. The results of this study indicate that although the commitment of various institutions to cooperation is quite high, it has not yet shown maximum results due to several obstacles, including financial issues, human resource capacity, and coordination. Consequently, ASEAN must improve its rapid decision-making mechanisms and increase its members' capacity building in countering the impacts of climate change.

1 Introduction

Southeast Asia is located along the equator, has a vast sea area connected to the world's oceans, and has the largest tropical rain forest in the world after the Amazon rainforest. The sea and forests are crucial for mitigating the impacts of climate change. People generally live in low-lying cities near the coast, and high levels of urbanization such as Jakarta, Manila, and Bangkok are highly at risk from rising sea levels. Furthermore, Southeast Asian countries are developing countries currently entering the industrialization phase. Southeast Asia contributes 3% of global emissions and is expected to continue to increase to 5% by 2030 [1]. Based on Germanwatch data, Southeast Asia is one of the regions in the world most affected by climate change [2,3]. This region frequently experiences floods, droughts, and extreme weather, threatening food and economic crises [4]. These conditions can also lead to disputes between ASEAN member countries. A map of Southeast Asia's vulnerability to the impacts of climate change can be seen in Figure 1.

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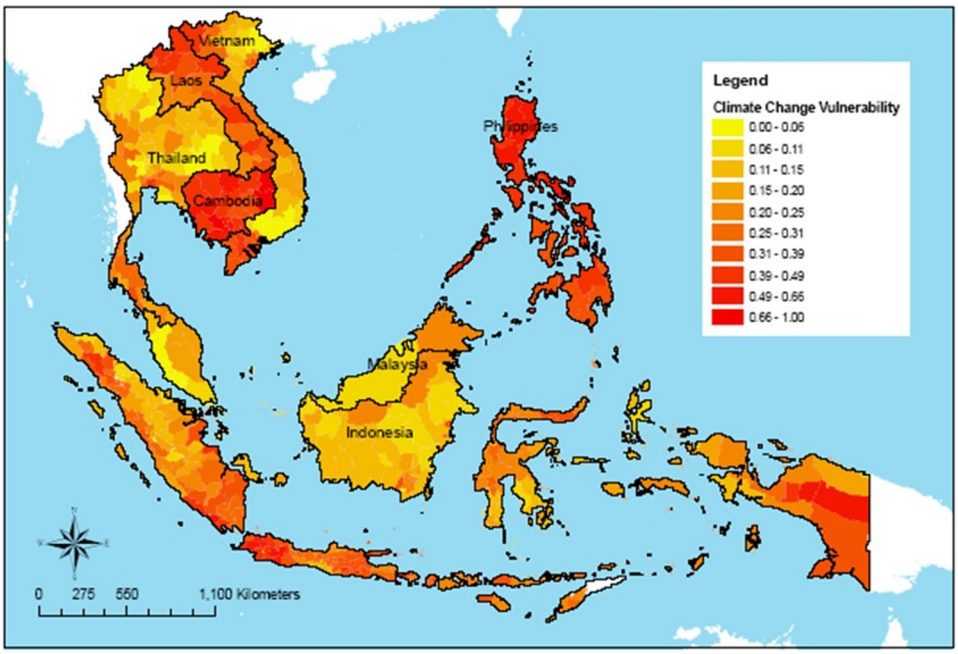

Fig. 1. Climate change vulnerability map of Southeast Asia [5]

Facing the serious threat of climate change, each Southeast Asian country cannot act alone but must collaborate with other countries, both regionally and internationally. This paper analyses how ASEAN member states are constructing cooperation to mitigate disasters caused by climate change due to the lack of cooperation's analyse with emphasis on ideational matters. The next section is a theoretical review of constructivism, followed by a section on method and findings and discussion. At the end of the discussion, several conclusions will be presented.

2 Theoretical framework

According to the constructivism theorist, international relations, including international cooperation, is basically a world of our own making [6]. In other words, international relations are the result of social construction. This social construction is the output of the interaction process between states (agents) and their environmental structures [7]. Alexander Wendt added that international relations consist of social structures which have three basic elements: shared knowledge, material resources, and practices. Therefore, constructivism emphasizes on ideational than material [8].

Southeast Asia was an unstable region during the Cold War because it became an arena for the struggle for influence between superpowers. However, since the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in 1967, tensions between countries have eased. ASEAN member countries began to develop interactions, sharing knowledge and cooperation among themselves to create security by implementing habits of avoiding the use of violence and prioritizing peaceful means for resolving disputes [9]. Continuous of interaction enable to provide social learning among members and can build trust for cooperation.

ASEAN was designed as an organization that fosters dialogue from the highest leaders to the wider community. The evolving dialogue is guided by norms known as the ASEAN Way,

namely behavioural guidelines with prioritizing informality, consultation and consensus-based decision making, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity [10]. Based on these norms, climate change mitigation cooperation is being developed among ASEAN member states.

3 Method

This research applies descriptive qualitative method because it only describes certain phenomena on climate change mitigation cooperation in ASEAN. This method is a process of understanding obtained through meaning and interpretation. Using library research techniques, data are collected through literature and official document inquiry and analysed with triangulation to reach validity [11].

4 Finding and discussion

When ASEAN was founded in 1967, environmental issues were not yet on the agenda among its members. Over the next 10 years, countries began to address environmental issues, leading to the establishment of the ASEAN Environmental Program in 1977 in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Program. ASEAN reaffirmed its commitment to the environment through the Manila Declaration on the ASEAN Environment in 1981. Furthermore, in 1984, ASEAN issued the Bangkok Declaration on the ASEAN Environment. Both documents were still statements and therefore not legally binding. Then, in 1985, ASEAN established the ASEAN Agreement on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, a regional international legal product. Since then, ASEAN has renewed its commitment annually to preserving the environment, making it a key agenda item at ASEAN meetings.

Meanwhile, at the international level, climate change issues have been widely discussed through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) since 1992. At the Conference of the Parties (COP) 21 in 2015, the UNFCCC adopted the Paris Agreement, a global commitment to address climate change and its impacts, particularly in limiting global warming. All ASEAN member countries are members of the UNFCCC and have ratified the Paris Agreement.

ASEAN explicitly stated its commitment to addressing the impacts of climate change through the 1997 Jakarta Declaration on Environment and Development to urge developed countries to commit the targets of limitation and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions [12]. Since the Jakarta Declaration, ASEAN has been continuously involved in climate change discussions through the UNFCCC framework.

Changes in ASEAN's organizational structure occurred in 2007 when the ASEAN Charter was adopted, establishing ASEAN as a rule-based organization. A year later, all ASEAN members ratified the Charter, and it came into effect on December 15, 2008. To implement the Charter's vision, the ASEAN Community was established in 2015, supported by three pillars namely Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural for a unified, peaceful, prosperous, and people-centered in Southeast Asia.

At the 2015 ASEAN Summit, ASEAN issued the Declaration on Institutionalizing the Resilience of ASEAN and Its Communities and Peoples to Disasters and Climate Change. This declaration responded to climate change in the Southeast Asian region by calling on member states to accelerate investment in disaster risk reduction and adaptation [13]. Then, at COP 24 in 2018 in Poland and COP 27 in Egypt in 2022, ASEAN collectively declared its commitment to implementing the Paris Agreement and accelerating greenhouse gas emission reductions.

Based on ASEAN Vision 2025 and updated to ASEAN Vision 2045, ASEAN will actively increase community resilience in facing climate change through cooperation with various parties by prioritizing people-centered orientation. It is also promised that ASEAN will be more responsive to eradicate the impacts of climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and lead the transition to a green and blue economy. The ASEAN Socio-cultural Community is the main pillar that addresses climate change issues, with the aim of creating an inclusive, resilient, and sustainable community through environmental protection, disaster risk reduction, and increasing adaptive capacity to social and economic vulnerabilities.

Within ASEAN's organizational structure, climate change falls under the domain of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Environment (AMME), which meets at least once every three years. Under the AMME, the ASEAN Senior Officials on Environment (ASOEN) meet annually. The ASOEN is assisted by various working groups namely Working Group on Multilateral Environmental Agreements, on Nature Conservation & Biodiversity, on Water Resources Management, on Coastal and Marine Environment, on Environmental Education, on Environmentally Sustainable Cities and on Climate Change. Beside working groups, under ASEAN Secretariat also has committee ad-hoc to handle some issues such as haze and energy. Based on ASEAN Secretariat structure, climate change and environment issues are managed by various agencies that need sophisticated coordination. Moreover, the working groups become a forum of policy discussion but lack of operational actions [14].

Although climate change is often discussed with long dialogues in ASEAN forums so it makes perception that climate change is a threat and has resulted various joint commitments to address the impacts of climate change, the progress achieved by ASEAN is still not optimal [3]. In fact, performance in addressing climate change in the ASEAN region still lags far behind other regions [15].

Several factors have prevented optimal cooperation on climate change mitigation. First, budget constraints and the ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, ASEAN member states are still focus on economic development and industrial capacity building. Therefore, climate change is not yet a priority. Third, limited human resource capacity especially on new comer member state including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Timor Leste. Fourth, coordination constraints, given the implications of climate change on numerous sectors and the increased number of member states with the addition of Timor Leste.

5 Conclusion

The existence of ASEAN has transformed Southeast Asia, from a tense in Cold War era to a stable and relatively peaceful region today. The practice of negotiating to foster cooperation, peaceful dispute resolution, and consensus-based decision-making, as outlined in the ASEAN Way, has constructed a sense of friendship among ASEAN members. This is fundamental to build cooperation in addressing climate change, a process that cannot be achieved in partial manner.

Through a long dialogue among its member, ASEAN success to construct that climate change is a threat so must be addressed together. Considering climate change causes a huge damage, numerous agencies were established in ASEAN structure and produced joint commitments, declarations and action plans to handle this impact. However, at national level, these products then are adjusted with priority of its member. Therefore, it can be a gap between regional and national level on mitigating action to overcome climate change impact.

This condition is exacerbated by budget constraints due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. furthermore, human resource capacity varies across member countries. Cambodia,

Laos, Myanmar and Timor Leste have limitation of this resource. In addition, due to the numerous agencies in its structure body, sometimes ASEAN faces lack of coordination.

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