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Floods and Regional Disaster Preparedness: Too Little, Too Late?

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Synopsis

As the floods in Thailand and Cambodia continue, the state of regional cooperation is proving critical in addressing the difficulties faced by affected countries. Disaster preparedness is increasingly vital.

Commentary

HEAVY RAINS in the Thailand and Cambodia since July 2011 have resulted in high socio-economic costs from flood damage and has claimed at least 500 lives. For Thailand with areas only two metres above sea level, the flood is said to be the country's worst in the past 50 years, with a third of its provinces declared disaster zones. However, such incidents are not all that new nor unexpected, for two main reasons:

Firstly, various studies have highlighted the increasing vulnerability of Southeast Asian countries to weather-related disasters. Among these is the Report by the International Development Research Centre, which has highlighted areas in Southeast Asia that are highly vulnerable to various environmental hazards. Similarly, other reports, such as those by the World Bank, United Nations and World Wide Fund have highlighted the socio-economic factors that increase vulnerabilities, such as rising population densities in cities. Secondly, there is existing knowledge and solutions to control floods, based on the region's long experience with disasters. These factors are particularly significant in Southeast Asia, which is home to at least three megacities – Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila.

Inertia and its sources

Yet, in spite of such information, there remains a strong dose of inertia within states to effectively integrate climate change adaptation strategies with disaster preparedness. Climate change adaptation refers to responses to reduce vulnerabilities to the effects of climate change.

It is particularly vital for disaster-prone areas as it not only enhances a community's level of preparedness but also resilience in coping with the increasing frequency and intensity of disasters. It is therefore important to understand why there is this inertia, much of which can be alleviated through increased regional cooperation and collaboration.

A primary factor contributing to the inertia to integrate climate change strategies into disaster preparedness is the often complex task of coordination across multiple agencies and stakeholders. The issue of climate change extends beyond the environmental realm and needs changes and inputs from various sectors related to the

economy. For flood management, this even comes down to issues such as waste management, irrigation systems and the extent of groundwater extraction and urbanisation.

The relocation of urban poor communities living in areas highly vulnerable to floods, for instance, requires a substantial amount of resources and time. Attention includes ensuring that new housing and dwellings are located near sources of economic livelihood. Such an overhaul of systems in the medium and long term is thus often not in the interests of policymakers whose terms in office are usually three to five years.

Adaptation and Mitigation

A second factor for the inertia is the belated importance given to climate change adaptation compared with climate change mitigation. While climate change mitigation emphasises reducing carbon emissions – the source of climate change - it does not prevent existing effects of climate change. Hence, this necessitates measures for adapting to climate change. Countries now have to make up for lost time as they had only recently channelled efforts to measure and control their carbon emissions in the lead up to the 2009 Copenhagen climate change summit

Reducing carbon emissions has also allowed policymakers to steer the focus to development-related issues such as energy security and meeting the increasing energy demands of developing/industrialising countries. While these issues are significant, they overshadow the effects of climate change which many communities in Southeast Asian countries are highly vulnerable to.

This relates to a third contributing factor to the inertia - economic growth as a priority. In terms of erecting flood defences, cities or other significant centres of economic activity are the first to be protected. Bangkok has occasionally been criticised for this, as its flood defences have caused a diversion of flood waters to other parts of Thailand such as Ayutthaya. While protecting the megacity is vital to prevent millions of economic losses, it does not ensure similar regard for communities that are most vulnerable to disasters in less urban areas.

Their losses are not just about economics, but about survival – that is access to essential supplies such as food, water and electricity. Recent studies have thus emphasised the need to build climate resilience in medium-sized cities, which may not have as much resources as the megacities.

Reducing inertia through regional cooperation

What message can be drawn from the slack in integrating climate change strategies into disaster preparedness? It is the fact that policymakers often relegate the problem to the lack of capacity. While this is true within national boundaries, it is vital for countries to collaborate across borders to build capacity.

Regional frameworks in Southeast Asia currently exist, some of which are in operation like the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management under the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). While such initiatives have been operationalised since disasters such as Cyclone Nargis in 2008, regional frameworks need to be further strengthened to enhance preparedness and climate change adaptation mechanisms, rather than just responding in times of disasters. In this regard, ASEAN's efforts to streamline and integrate its broad strategies on food and energy security with sustainable development must be matched with greater effectiveness in implementation. In addition, regional cooperation can facilitate the transfer of best practices.

While regional cooperation at the official level has been significant, more can be done to increase the level of cooperation between ASEAN civil society and business communities. ASEAN must increase its engagement with the scientific community to understand better how climatic changes, in addition to other existing natural and man-made disasters, will affect regional security. Greater engagement with the private entities that are keen on corporate social responsibility will also open doors for targeted funding in projects which may not have had enough government support.

It remains to be seen how regional cooperation in disaster preparedness in Southeast Asia will progress. Can ASEAN shift from merely reacting to disasters to be more pro-active in preparing for disasters? In light of the frequency of devastating natural calamities, ASEAN countries should not wait for another Cyclone Nargis or Typhoon Ketsana to move forward on this front.

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