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Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN)

ASEAN Plan of Action for national disaster relief

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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, tsunami, 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 disar1

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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]

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[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 Indonesia." *UNICEF* (October 2018). 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

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

improving their own technological capacities.

Myanmar: A contemporary example of these incapabilities 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.

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