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THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A DISASTER MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT IN ASEAN: TOWARDS REGIONAL PREPAREDNESS?

This NTS Alert offers an overview of the initiatives taken by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to operationalise the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), the first and only legally binding agreement on regional disaster management. It presents the decisions and activities that have taken place as well as efforts to complement and synergise existing disaster management policies within other regional fora where ASEAN interacts with its dialogue partners.



Credit: UN Photo/UNHCR

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Introduction

The ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) which was signed in July 2005 and entered into force in December 2009 is the culmination of ASEAN's work in building regional resilience to natural disasters, an effort which began in 1971 when the ASEAN Expert Group on Disaster Management first met. Nevertheless, this is only the beginning of a long journey towards its effective implementation.

Realising that the region is prone to natural hazards such as typhoons, floods, forest fires and earthquakes which have significant impacts on communities and on the development of member states and the region overall, disaster management has become one of the priority issues for cooperation among ASEAN members.

However, despite the consensus on the urgency of the issue, the disaster management capacities and capabilities of states in the region vary widely. Therefore, the implementation of AADMER is expected to address these gaps by providing support for regional disaster

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preparedness. The effectiveness of AADMER implementation will lie in its ability to provide regional support to national capacity in alleviating the risks of natural hazards and providing timely and sufficient response in the wake of natural disasters. The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) should be the focal point for cooperation. In order for this to materialise, ASEAN must be able to address the challenges it would face on the national and regional levels.

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ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER)

The AADMER provides a framework for joint efforts in disaster management. It is a legally binding agreement that commits ASEAN member states to promoting regional cooperation in reducing vulnerabilities to disaster risks and improving effective responses to natural disasters. It also obliges ASEAN member states to work together within the overall context of sustainable development. It has been noted that AADMER is the first of its kind globally (Reza, 2009).

This agreement marks a shift in ASEAN's disaster management approach from reactive to proactive as it encompasses the whole disaster management cycle, incorporating provisions for disaster risk identification, monitoring and early warning, prevention and mitigation, preparedness and response, rehabilitation, technical cooperation and research, mechanisms for coordination, and simplified customs and immigration procedures (ASEAN, 2009c, 2005). Two major natural disasters in the region, the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami and the 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, provided valuable lessons on the importance of, for example, utilising a community-based approach in disaster risk reduction (DRR); building national capacity to coordinate foreign assistance and provide timely responses; and mainstreaming DRR in the development process and rebuilding efforts. This agreement also places strong emphasis on DRR, based on the 'Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015: Building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters' (HFA). Further elaboration on DRR and the HFA can be found in the first issue of the September 2010 NTS Alert.

The AADMER also provides a platform for the establishment of the AHA Centre as the focal point for regional disaster management efforts. The ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM), which was established in 2003 and consists of the national disaster management agencies of ASEAN member countries, is tasked with the operationalisation of the AHA Centre. This Centre is expected to play a pertinent role both in preparedness and response to natural disasters in the region and to contribute to the global effort in reducing vulnerabilities to disaster risks. This role is strengthened by the ASEAN Secretary General being assigned to serve as ASEAN's Humanitarian Assistance Coordinator whenever requested (ASEAN, 2009a).

Since the signing of the AADMER in 2005, ASEAN has implemented measures stated in the agreement such as the formulation of standard operating procedures, training and capacity building, the establishment of a disaster information sharing and communication network, and the forming of a rapid assessment team (Reza, 2009). With the aim of improving response capacity, ASEAN also initiated the annual ASEAN Regional Disaster Emergency Response Simulation Exercise (ARDEX) in 2005.

In the lead-up to the signing of AADMER in 2005, the ACDM developed the ASEAN Regional Programme on Disaster Management (ARPDM), a platform for regional cooperation to be implemented in the period 2004 to 2010. The ARPDM outlined 29 activities under the following 5 major components: (i) The establishment of an ASEAN regional disaster management framework. This component aims to promote cooperation and collaboration through joint projects, research and networking; (ii) The strengthening of capacity building in priority areas and based on a country's needs; (iii) The promotion of the sharing of resources, information, expertise and best practices; (iv) The promotion of collaborations and partnerships among various stakeholders. The ARPDM not only involves ASEAN member states but also ASEAN dialogue partners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and civil society and international organisations; and (v) The promotion of public education, awareness and advocacy on disaster management (ASEAN, n.d.).

With the ARPDM set to expire this year, the ACDM has launched the AADMER Work Programme (AADMER WP) for the period 2010 to 2015 (ASEAN, 2010b). The first phase of the work programme will incorporate regional risk assessment and the setting up of a regional

AADMER Work Programme 2010–2015

Four strategic thrusts:

1. Risk assessment, early warning and monitoring.
2. Preparedness and response.
3. Prevention and mitigation.
4. Recovery.

Six building blocks:

1. Institutionalisation of AADMER.
2. Partnership strategies.
3. Resource mobilisation.
4. Outreach and mainstreaming.
5. Training and knowledge management.

system for early warning and monitoring. Also, the work programme will look into ways to integrate DRR into national development plans as well as urban and community action plans, and develop a tool kit for effective disaster recovery planning for ASEAN member states. It also aims to formulate a more effective and timely relief and response strategy. In addition to the AADMER WP, ASEAN also aims to finalise the Standard Operating Procedure for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief (ASEAN, 2010a).

6. Information management and communication technology.

Source: Reyes (2010:6).

Challenges

Despite ASEAN's success in taking a common approach to alleviating the risk of natural disasters in the region, there are some notable challenges to the implementation of the AADMER (Thin, 2010):

- The ASEAN Secretariat and the upcoming AHA Centre are constrained by existing lack of capacity and resources.
- Although legally binding, the AADMER does not include any provisions for sanctions.
- The AADMER is only legally binding at the regional level, hence translating this agreement into national and sub-national laws and regulations may take years.
- When looking at disaster management as a comprehensive approach which encompasses aspects ranging from DRR to relief and rehabilitation efforts, there is clearly a need to link disaster management to the development process. This would involve multi-sectoral cooperation among different ministries and departments which are used to working independently.
- The fields of disaster management and development are well established. AADMER has to be able to find its niche within these 'crowded' fields.

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Harmonising Various Disaster Preparedness Initiatives in the Region: The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS)

ASEAN Regional Forum

Disaster management has been one of the key issues discussed at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the principal platform for regional security dialogue among ASEAN member states and its dialogue partners. This forum currently has 27 participating countries, comprising 10 ASEAN member states and 17 dialogue partners. The strong focus on disaster management is reflected in the ARF Inter-Sessional Meetings on Disaster Relief (ISMDR) which have been held regularly since 2007 and the adoption of the ARF General Guidelines on Disaster Relief Cooperation at the 14th ARF Meeting in 2007. Moreover, the importance of the disaster management issue to countries in the region is also reflected in the annual security outlook submitted by countries to the ARF (ARF, 2008, 2009).

In response to the security challenges posed by the risk of natural disasters, ARF participating countries stated in the 2006 ARF Statement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response that they would enhance support and cooperation in four areas, namely: (i) Risk identification and monitoring; (ii) Disaster prevention and preparedness; (iii) Emergency response and disaster relief; and (iv) Capacity building (ARF, 2006). The statement also highlights the need to harmonise these efforts with existing regional and international disaster management initiatives.

The ARF has been relatively active in disaster preparedness activities. Looking at 2010 itself, ARF had two meetings in August related to the ARF Disaster Relief Exercise (DiREx) 2011, one on the Development of Table Top Exercise Concept and an initial planning conference and site survey; it also hosted a second seminar on Laws and Regulations in International Disaster Relief by the Armed Forces in late August to early September; and the 10th ARF ISMDR was held recently in early September 2010 (ARF, 2010). The ISMDR has been working on the ARF Strategic Guidance for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, a non-binding document that is subject to continuous review and amendments (ASEAN, 2010c).



ARF voluntary demonstration of response on disaster relief in the Philippines, 4 May 2009.

Credit: <http://www.13af.pacaf.af.mil>.

The ARF highlights the importance of civil-military cooperation in disaster relief. It has developed a concept paper on the use of ASEAN military assets and capacities in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and the DiREx is conducted regularly to strengthen civil-military cooperation. The ARF is also planning to develop tools such as arrangements for foreign military assistance (O'Brien, 2010). The ARF highlights that its disaster preparedness initiatives should complement the work of ASEAN.

East Asia Summit

The East Asia Summit (EAS) is a regional forum currently comprising the 10 ASEAN states plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. This year, the US and Russia will be joining the EAS. The EAS recognises the importance of pursuing the goal of a disaster-resilient region as can be seen in the Cha-Am Hua Hin Statement on East Asia Summit Disaster Management it adopted in 2009. In this statement, EAS participating countries agreed to (ASEAN, 2009b):

- Provide support in strengthening the disaster management capacity of countries in the region.
- Develop integrated preparedness and DRR capacities for transboundary, multi-hazard disasters; and enhance the linkages and networks among the local, national and regional disaster management agencies, in cooperation with international organisations.
- Provide support to the regional multi-donor voluntary trust fund for tsunami early warning system arrangements in the region.
- Support ASEAN efforts aimed at enhancing humanitarian coordination and strengthening leadership to respond to major disasters.
- Enhance post-disaster management and recovery efforts, and encourage greater integration of early recovery activities in the immediate post-disaster phase to ensure a smooth transition from relief to recovery.
- Assist governments in formulating and mainstreaming DRR into strategic development, policy regulation and planning.
- Develop more effective community-based DRR tools and approaches.
- Assist governments in the formulation of relevant laws and the enhancement of capacity for law enforcement in the area of the exploitation and management of natural resources.
- Promote the networking and sharing of best practices, experiences and operational manuals.
- Support the operationalisation and enhancement of standard operating procedures especially those developed by ASEAN and ARF.
- Reinforce the technical capabilities of local, national, regional and international early warning arrangements to improve scientific and technical methods for risk assessment, monitoring and early warning information.
- Support the operationalisation and the strengthening of the capacity of the AHA Centre.
- Support efforts of other relevant organisations in the region in providing technical support and capacity building, as well as encourage more comprehensive research in the region.
- Encourage local, national, regional and international capacity building programmes to enhance the capacity of EAS participating countries in DRR and disaster management.

The EAS acknowledges the centrality of ASEAN in the effort to improve the resilience of the region to natural disasters. It highlights that the plan of action provisioned in the Cha-Am Hua Hin Statement will be implemented through existing regional frameworks and mechanisms in ASEAN (ASEAN, 2009b).

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Conclusion

Although the AADMER has just recently been ratified, initiatives in regional disaster management have been implemented as early as 1971. Based on existing plans and activities, a large part of ASEAN disaster management efforts remain focused on disaster relief and responses. To meet the aspirations of the ARPDM 2004–2010, more attention has to be given to integrating DRR into member states' development processes. Moreover, in accordance with the pursuance of a people-centred ASEAN, the implementation of the AADMER should feature the more active involvement of civil society actors within ASEAN member states. It is also important to harmonise disaster management efforts among different regional fora that ASEAN is involved in, so that these efforts may complement – and not duplicate – each other, and thus strengthen the resilience of communities, states and the region in the face of natural disasters.

Disaster management is part of the roadmap to building the ASEAN Community by 2015. Thus, in view of the AADMER being fully adopted, now is a good time to review and address the challenges of ASEAN disaster management. The acceleration of the implementation of AADMER is an important agenda to be addressed at the upcoming ASEAN 17th Summit along with its other related summits (namely, the

8th ASEAN-India Summit, the 2nd ASEAN-Russia Summit, the 3rd ASEAN-UN Summit, the ASEAN-Australia Summit and the ASEAN-New Zealand Commemorative Summit) that will be held at the end of October 2010 in Hanoi, Vietnam.

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