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Managing Disasters: Three Key Elements in ASEAN Cooperation

By Said Faisal

Synopsis

As the world's most disaster-prone region, cooperation in disaster response and management in ASEAN has been critical. Where will the successes of this regional cooperation take us?

Commentary

ASEAN PROVIDES the Southeast Asian region with a strategic umbrella for important economic, political, security and socio-cultural initiatives. The ASEAN experience has demonstrated that it offers a successful and progressive model of regional cooperation in disaster management. It is most notable in disaster response where the ten ASEAN member states have come together to provide a regional coordination mechanism for disaster relief.

In 2011, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre on Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) was established -- a significant milestone in regional cooperation on disaster response and disaster management. Five years on, reflecting on its successes, three key elements can be identified – political will, operational capacity and emotional bonds – that were critical to regional cooperation in disaster response.

Political Commitment

Since the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami killed an estimated 230,000-280,000 people and devastated coastal communities in 14 countries, the ten ASEAN member states have solidified their political commitment to disaster management. The ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) was signed on 26 July 2005 in Vientiane, Laos – six months after the tsunami – which was

a quick turnaround for a regional agreement. It reflected the scale of the disaster and the political will to cooperate in such a crisis.

The AADMER was essentially the political and legal commitment to deepen cooperation on disaster management in the region. Embodied in the agreement was the commitment to establish the AHA Centre. The agreement came into legal force in 2009, and the AHA Centre was established two years later in Jakarta. This was made possible by the agreement to set up the AHA Centre signed at the ASEAN Summit in Bali, Indonesia in November 2011.

More recently, in 2015 ASEAN member states unveiled the ASEAN Vision 2025 on disaster management, which outlined what the region should achieve in the next decade. In 2016, to achieve faster, bigger, and unified response towards disasters, Leaders signed the ASEAN declaration on One ASEAN One Response: responding to disaster as one, in the region and outside.

Operational Engine

After the AHA Centre was established in 2011 it became the full-time “operational engine” to turn political commitment, policies and decisions into action. It operates multiple aspects of coordination such as information management, operating procedures, regional response planning, resource mobilisation including the emergency response fund, the ASEAN Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ASEAN-ERAT), and the Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN (DELSA).

These form the main operational mechanism and instruments of disaster response at the regional level. The AHA Centre has the mandate, the mechanism and the funding to turn words into action.

This all came about because practitioners equipped with an emergency mindset sit together on the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) which focuses on execution and delivering fast tangible results. It is this committee that designed and governs the AHA Centre.

Emotional Bonds

Disaster management is a prime example of a people-to-people connection in ASEAN. In an ASEAN disaster response, the ASEAN-ERAT train together, deploy together and have their own network for keeping in contact. Similarly, the AHA Centre Executive (ACE) programme lasts for a six-month period during which time strong bonds of friendship develop.

The ACDM and its working groups also build trusting relationships and friendships through numerous meetings and events including the ASEAN Regional Disaster Emergency Response Simulation Exercise (ARDEX). This emotional bonding instills the “we feeling” because as soon as disaster strikes the responders are not meeting strangers but friends. This is a unique element of regional cooperation in disaster response as it is much easier to work with people you know and trust.

These three elements – political will, operational capacity and emotional bonds – are

mutually reinforcing. If invested together these three components are well placed for successful regional cooperation in the field of disaster management.

Seven More Years to Vision 2025

Scanning the horizon, it is important to recognise that there are seven years left to achieve ASEAN Vision 2025 to become a global leader in disaster management. ASEAN is well-placed to make this happen through sharing its expertise outside the region, developing stronger links with universities and think tanks like RSIS to provide global thought leadership on disaster management, and continue to build trust and capacity in ASEAN on disaster management.

However, it is important to consider two issues that will determine the future of the AHA Centre. The first is to ensure adequate financial contributions by member states to enhance the sustainability and the capacity of the AHA Centre. The second is the future role and function of the AHA Centre as it coordinates regional response beyond natural disasters.

Going forward, it is also important for the AHA Centre to remain focused on operations, continue to maintain the trust and confidence of the ASEAN member states, and for the ACDM to remain in the driving seat.

It is important to continue the momentum ASEAN has generated to reach its stated aim of becoming a global leader in disaster management by 2025. It is a bold, ambitious and important vision that will transform ASEAN and ensure it stays relevant not only in the region but also in the world in disaster management.

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