

Headline: Climate change: Asean not doing enough

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As one of the most economically dynamic regions in the world, Asean should be at the center of the decarbonization transition, and its primary regional architecture mechanism should be at the forefront of the debate.

Asean released a common position, the so-called Asean Joint Statement to COP28, about three months ago. As usual, however, it is pretty much devoid of substance and it certainly lacks bold statements and targets to ensure that the region will leapfrog in the upcoming decarbonization era: "Considering national circumstances, through achieving the aspirational target of 32 percent energy intensity reduction [based on 2005 level] and achieving 23 percent renewable energy share in Asean's energy mix, with a 35 percent renewable energy share in installed power capacity by 2025."

What do you make of these targets? Not much, right?

The problem is that, as per all projects of regional cooperation and integration, national governments want to have full strategic autonomy to leverage and maximize their interests.

That's why, the three words, "Considering national circumstances" of the Asean Joint Statement are so heavy, burdensome, and troublesome but also normal all at once.

The statement also refers to the Asean Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation and the Asean Working Group on Climate Change Action Plan.

Have you ever heard of them?

There might be reasons why international media covering the United Nations climate conference, COP28, in Dubai do not pay much attention to Asean. It lacks depth, boldness, a real vision, and a narrative.

No wonder the world is not concerned about Asean and its plans for a just and equal transition.

I feel a lot for all the folks working at the Asean Secretariat. They should be rewarded for their endurance and resilience, a continuous test amid daily frustrations.

Even if I was hoping to find some interesting news about Asean at COP28, it is not surprising that Asean is basically silent on COP28.

Yet even if the COP28 Joint Statement is the lowest common denominator that was ever possible to agree upon, the Asean Secretariat could have played a more ambitious, though symbolic, role in Dubai.

Why not have an Asean pavilion or an Asean house that would have contained all the national pavilions? It could have been a great idea to locate all of these under a big "Asean tent" that, at least, would have reminded the international community that Southeast Asia has a regional mechanism, that, as slow as it is, tries to forge common policies.

Admittedly, it would have been mostly an exercise in PR. Still, it would have helped channel a sense of unity and an idea that, while dealing with the most intricate issue of our times, climate change, Asean had a common vision.

Yes, the member states are devising their new national determined contributions and their new long-term low emissions development strategies, both essential and extremely complex mitigation-focused tools, but, ultimately, they are in this existential fight together. The latest relevant publication by Asean on climate was the Asean State of Climate Change Report, which was published in 2021 when Lim Jock Hoi was the Asean secretary general. Why not come up with a partial update of the report, a document that would have reflected the latest scientific findings and the evolution of policies that many nations in Asean are undertaking? Why not at least highlight what each capital is “plotting” in terms of their energy transition plans?

The Asean Centre for Climate Change was slated to open in September in Brunei. What happened to this undertaking? It is not that we should expect that this new institution would do the “heavy lifting” when the leaders and their ministers are not visionary and bold enough to enable a closer common position on climate change. Still, it could be a significant development, a fresh initiative that could play as important a role as the Asean Centre for Biodiversity, which is based in the Philippines and has been punching above its own weight. Even the Asean Foundation came short. Its latest Asean Young Climate Leaders Program was organized in September 2021.

Perhaps at COP29 next year, there will be a real Asean pavilion and the grouping’s leaders will have decided to reach far more ambitious common targets in the matter of climate action.

Let us get rid, at least for once, of the “Asean way” and push for doable, achievable actions, starting with climate education. Let us also hope to hear good news from Brunei about the Asean Centre for Climate Change. The Jakarta Post/Asia News Network

Simone Galimberti comments on social inclusion, youth development, regional integration, Sustainable Development Goals, and human rights in the context of Asia Pacific.

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