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Headline: Avoiding Pandora's Box

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There's a story in Greek mythology about Pandora's Box, which, when opened, released a host of evils and tribulations upon the earth.

The recently released report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides a terrifying glimpse of a future similar to a world where Pandora's Box has been opened, if humankind fails to significantly curb the emission of greenhouse gases that induce climate change.

The IPCC report warns that Asia will be severely affected by a broad range of climate-change impacts and that the most urgent development challenge for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) is how to avert runaway climate change and help its poor communities adapt to changing climate patterns.

Over the past decade, Asean had been busy forging and strengthening economic ties with some of the biggest and fastest-growing markets and economies in Asia, as it progresses toward the establishment in 2015 of the Asean Economic Community. It hopes that increasing trade and facilitating investment relations with the rest of Asia will spur regional economic growth and help member-countries attain their development objectives, which include reducing hunger and poverty.

According to the IPCC report, Asia, currently home to 4.3 billion people and to 900 million of the world's poor, will be affected by climate-change impacts including food and water scarcity, increased drought and floods, damage to coastal and marine systems, heightened danger of diarrheal diseases, dengue fever and malaria, and increased deaths and sickness in vulnerable groups because of more frequent and more intense heat waves.

Food insecurity, in a region where there are more than 563 million hungry people, will most likely worsen as rising temperatures lead to lower yields in rice—Asia's staple food. And because agriculture continues to be an important source of food, income and livelihood for millions of poor families in Asia, damage to crops as a result of increased floods and droughts is expected to lead to loss of livelihood and deeper poverty.

In Southeast Asia, the specter of hunger looms even larger, as the rise in sea levels endangers rice production along the Mekong River Delta. The IPCC report notes that Vietnam, one of the world's largest producers and exporters of rice, is in danger of having 7 percent of its agricultural lands submerged as a result of rising sea levels. Rice production is also threatened by salt-water intrusion in Burma (Myanmar).

Asean can and must help avert this future. It needs to have a stronger voice and presence in the global climate talks. Asean has established the Asean Climate Change Initiative (Acci), a regional platform where it agreed to undertake active participation in negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Some Asean member-countries are even now taking key roles in the climate talks. Asean needs to maximize the Acci and encourage all its member-countries to work together to ensure that the concerns and interests of the region are well-represented and addressed in the ongoing negotiations.

Asean also needs to start developing regional programs that will allow it to voluntarily contribute to reducing global greenhouse gas emissions, and help member-countries adapt to climate change. Adaptation that is complemented with mitigation measures will undoubtedly be more effective in reducing the impacts of climate change.

The regional bloc must start discussions on how to increase its renewable energy ambition in the next Plan of Action on Energy Cooperation as it prepares to become a common regional economy. Apart from contributing to stabilizing the global climate, renewable energy technologies offer economic benefits of fresh investments and job generation to the region.

Asean should likewise intensify efforts to help its member-countries develop and share knowledge on how communities across Southeast Asia can prepare for climate change. It should encourage its member-countries to invest in climate adaptation and to promote sustainable and agro-ecologically sound farming practices.

Yes, Pandora's Box when opened can release a host of evils and tribulations upon the earth. But all is not lost, because the story goes that from that same box also emerged hope. In the same way, there is hope for humankind as it faces the future. It is still possible to stop climate change and reverse the specter of greater hunger, poverty, sickness and death.

Asean must help release and give life to this hope.

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