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Headline: How Asean can contribute to climate action

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Asian climate leadership is growing, with three major economies pledging recently to decarbonize their economies toward net-zero goals — Japan and South Korea by 2050, and China by 2060.

Our region is especially exposed to threats from climate change, including sea level rise and changes in weather that can impact agriculture and food production. The recent severe floods hitting Indo-China and the Philippines are but one reminder of the vulnerabilities.

Each country in the region has recognized the risks and accepted the Paris Agreement. Each has pledged to reduce emissions and energy consumption, or increase the use of clean energy, among other goals. But the path to implementation is not easy, especially as attention and resources have been diverted to managing the pandemic.

Take Indonesia for example — Asean's most populous country and one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gases globally. The country has reaffirmed its pledge to reduce emissions by 29 percent independently, or 41 percent with international assistance, by 2030.

But while commitments to tackle climate change have increased, more can and will need to be done.

Cooperation between Asean countries will be critical to complement and scale up the individual efforts of countries. This is fledgling at present. At COP25 in 2019, Asean countries released a broad and very limited joint statement regarding sustainable forest management, reducing energy intensity, sustainable land transport and fuel economy, as well as climate disaster risk mitigation. But it contained few specifics on implementation.

Moving toward a region-wide climate effort can be jumpstarted by bilateral arrangements. At the recent Singapore Dialogue on Sustainable World Resources, Singapore's minister for sustainability and the environment Grace Fu and Indonesia's coordinating minister for maritime affairs and investment Luhut Pandjaitan emphasized the gains to be had from innovating, investing, and cooperating. Three areas emerged as promising immediate opportunities for regional cooperation.

Firstly, both Singapore and Indonesia face food security issues—a challenge brought into focus by supply chain disruptions due to national lockdowns earlier this year. Peat-rich Indonesia and land-scarce Singapore will have different agricultural considerations. However, joint research and development activities will benefit both countries.

A second large and urgent opportunity lies in the clean energy sector. Indonesia, facing the mammoth task of delivering reliable energy access to more than 270 million citizens, is moving to make renewable energy almost a quarter of its energy mix by 2025, up from just 12 percent last year.

A similar effort is under way in Vietnam, which aims to double its use of solar and wind energy to 20 percent of power supply by 2030. This will reduce carbon emissions by 15 percent, or nearly double the reduction the country pledged under the Paris Agreement to achieve without foreign aid.

Singapore, with its strong infrastructure credentials, can partner with Asean neighbors to contribute investment, technology, and capabilities.

Thirdly, to motivate investment and win-win cooperation, carbon credits can be generated across the region. A share of this can come from nature-based approaches that link to conservation and rehabilitation of special habitats.

The pandemic has underscored the need to build resilience against future risks, especially climate resilience.

A truly multilateral effort is needed for meaningful progress. For Asean, the first step is to come together as a community focused on climate action, take stock, and reenergize efforts toward collective goals ahead of COP26 next year.

—The Jakarta Post/Asia News Network

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