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Headline: How Asean can truly matter to its people

Byline: Zelda DT Soriano

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations was established 44 years ago, but it was largely within the last decade, and in particular, in the last three years following the passage of its charter, that Asean has finally started to establish its relevance. The past decade has also seen Southeast Asian peoples increasingly suffering from the effects of climate change: extreme weather, rising sea levels and so on. With the bulk of its populations and economic activities concentrated along its long coastlines, agriculture-based economies and dependence on natural resources, our region is among the most vulnerable and least prepared to face this global crisis. A 2009 study by the Asian Development Bank suggests that on average the region “is likely to suffer more from climate change than the rest of the world, if no action is taken.”

Addressing this priority issue therefore comes to mind when we think about how Asean can make a difference to its citizens. Last month, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, as Asean country chair, declared: “We must make Asean matter to our people. We must ensure that Asean improves the quality of our lives. And equally important, we must strive to include our people in everything that Asean stands for and achieves.”

But while he hinted at a list of the region’s priority issues, most of them concern politics and security. Unfortunate, because despite all the talk about Asean connectivity and the Asean Community, ASEAN is still a long way from addressing, as one unified body, the most important issues that face the region and its nearly 600 million residents.

In fact, for the past several years, even as its leaders voice concern on climate change, the political will of the group to act collectively has consistently fallen short. In the latest summit, for example, climate change was pushed out of the agenda.

But the future of Southeast Asia will not be secure without strong, unified Asean action on climate change. Concerns on food security, access to clean water and energy, poverty alleviation, and disaster mitigation are all hinged on how these countries together are able to deal with this global problem.

There is therefore a serious disconnect between reality and the Asean vision of connectivity. While Indonesia continues to initiate bold efforts for a more unified region, in practice Asean has only been able to work together as a trading bloc. Political and security issues, as Yudhoyono’s speech pointed out, still need to be addressed. But over and above all these challenges, and cross-cutting most—if not all—of the issues which need a unified response, is climate change.

Thus, when talking about connectivity the first priority Asean needs to address is how it would contribute a strong and unified voice to international climate change negotiations. It is important to recognize that the UN climate change negotiations is not the realm of mere government bureaucrats, but should be a priority concern of Asean leaders who care about their people and their region. The future of this international agreement would weigh more heavily on Southeast Asia than any trade agreement that Asean leaders are so keen at negotiating. It should therefore receive more deliberate attention and greater Asean teamwork.

An important aspect in the international climate change negotiations remains on developed countries' unambitious targets for emissions cuts which would set the world on course for catastrophic 3.2°C warming. Keeping global temperature rise under 2°C, as agreed in the previous UN climate meeting in Cancun, Mexico, will be almost impossible unless carbon emissions peak by 2015 and begin to fall within a decade. Many experts predict that the economic costs to Southeast Asia will be huge if the world continues the "business-as-usual" emission trends. Asean must therefore use its voice to demand deeper emissions cuts from developed countries.

But while this peaking issue is critical in the climate change talks, it has never been raised in any of previous Asean leaders' joint statements on climate change, even though they did call for developed countries to raise their ambitions in a globally binding deal and according to the principle of common but differentiated responsibility.

What then is the point of being an association and adopting in 2007 the regional platform of Asean Climate Change Initiative (ACCI) and organizing annual meetings of the Asean Working Group on Climate Change (AWGCC) when it cannot negotiate for stronger demands as a bloc? Asean stands to avert climate disaster and benefit greatly from a fair, ambitious, and binding global climate deal; so its lack of a strong unified voice in the negotiations is incomprehensible.

Connectivity should not just be about linking markets, roads and power grids. They will be disrupted by more frequent and intense storms, floods, drought and other extreme weather events under a regime of dangerous climate change. Connectivity is relevant if it is for defending the natural and inherent links of Asean. Such links are in the common vulnerability of the region's ecosystem, the intertwined historical circumstances of the 10 nations, and the present interest of its mostly poor peoples. Connectivity, more than material and physical connection, is about political unity as a group to address the greatest threat to the very life and health of more than 600 million peoples and the development of the region.

Under these circumstances, an Asean collectively demanding for the peaking of carbon emissions by 2015 in the upcoming rounds of UN climate change talks in Durban, South Africa, will manifest Asean connectivity—and relevance to its people—in its most fundamental sense.

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Zelda DT Soriano is political adviser of Greenpeace Southeast Asia.