

Management Of Haze; An Asean Regional Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Haze or smoke pollution resulting from land and forest fires has been a regular phenomenon in the ASEAN region since late 1980's. The 1997/98 haze occurrence was one of the most serious environmental incident experienced in the ASEAN region that had caused negative impacts on the socio-economy, environment and health of the people in the region. Due to the urgency and complexity of the haze issue which was transboundary in nature, the Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP), which sets out the cooperative measures needed to address the issue, was endorsed by the ASEAN Environment Ministers on 23 December 1997. Since then, the activities and programmes as prescribed in the RHAP has been progressively implemented. There have been many constraints in the implementation of the RHAP but with strong support, close cooperation and positive collaboration among ASEAN member countries and international participation, progress is being made. The situation is being monitored much more closely to avoid the recurrence of the 1997/98 episode.

A further effort to enhance ASEAN collaboration is the signing of an ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution by ASEAN member countries on 10 June 2002 in conjunction with the World Land and Forest Fire Hazards Conference held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 10-12 June 2002. This signing is subject to national ratification. The objective of the Agreement is to prevent and monitor transboundary haze pollution resulting from land and/or forest fires through concerted national efforts, and intensified regional and international cooperation. The Agreement also outlines the principles, obligations and mechanisms which encompass monitoring, assessment, prevention and responses, technical cooperation and scientific research, institutional arrangements, and procedures to strengthen cooperation and coordination.

This paper summarizes some of the important activities implemented nationally or regionally to manage haze in the region. It highlights the principles behind the ASEAN Agreement and the progress of its implementation in addressing the problem of haze, in particular on the establishment of an ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control and the interim arrangement.

INTRODUCTION

Haze, resulting from land and forest fires is one of the current and recurring environmental issues faced by the ASEAN region. In the earlier years, the problem of haze was not as prominent, largely as the haze was not as frequent and damaging as of now. An additional factor is the arising awareness and knowledge of the public at large, on the impacts of haze on the socio-economy, health and environment. The most critical incident, the 1997/1998 haze,

caused the ASEAN region a loss of billions of dollars from the negative impacts on the tourism and transportation industry, the productive and aesthetic values of the environment as well as the health of the people. The most affected countries in ASEAN were Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, parts of Southern Thailand and Indonesia (ADB 2001). Land and forest fires in the ASEAN region occur most frequently over large areas of peat land. Such fires burn very slowly without flame resulting in releases of extremely fine particles / particulate matters into the air. Extreme Drought conditions, aggravate relatively small scale, human initiated fires for land clearing and land use change, into uncontrolled large scale and wide fires resulting in serious haze situation. During the period, the air pollutant index (an indicator used to classify air pollution) could reach the hazardous level many times at many places.

This paper highlights the issues related to transboundary haze pollution in the ASEAN region, summarizes the components that encompass the Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP), ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution and some of the important activities implemented nationally and regionally to manage the haze. The review and analysis are based on information from available resources including reports of ASEAN transboundary haze meetings, conference and meeting papers, journal articles, and scientific and commissioned reports.

REGIONAL HAZE ACTION PLAN

The haze situation in 1997/1998 was extremely severe compared to the other years and had considerable negative impacts. Consequent to the incident, a Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP) was adopted and endorsed by the ASEAN Environment Ministers on 23 December 1997. The haze prompted action and not mere discussion and debate. The haze issue was given prominent notice and elevated to the attention of the highest levels of government and as a result, considerable effort has been made in seeking solutions to manage the haze problems in the region. The RHAP, which sets out the cooperative measures needed to address the haze issue, has been implemented progressively through various programmes and activities. This has involved strong support at high levels and close cooperation amongst the ASEAN countries across three fronts namely, prevention, monitoring and mitigation.

These three principal fronts are the centre framework of the RHAP that calls for:

- specific measures to prevent land and forest fires through better management policies and enforcement;
- intensified public education programmes;
- establishment of operational mechanisms to monitor land and forest fires; and
- strengthening of regional land and forest fire fighting capability

International participation, particularly technical assistance and financial support, have provided ASEAN members with increased capabilities in dealing with the haze issue. These range of ingredients play an important role in minimizing and mitigating the problem of haze (Ibrahim 2002).

Enhancement of capacity building, increase inter-agency cooperation, improve communication for early warning on the outbreaks of fire, raise awareness on impacts of biomass burning and dissemination of information, enhanced techniques to reduce biomass burning, and

enhancement of regional cooperation on information exchange and better establishment of networking in areas relating to the haze issues are some of the benefits gained by the member countries in their pursuit to understand minimize and mitigate the transboundary haze pollution in the region.

ASEAN AGREEMENT ON TRANSBOUNDARY HAZE POLLUTION

An additional effort to enhance ASEAN collaboration and further 'formalize' cooperative measures under the RHAP was the signing of an ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution by ASEAN member countries on 10 June 2002 in conjunction with the World Land and Forest Fire Hazards Conference held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 10-12 June 2002. The objective of the Agreement is to prevent and monitor transboundary haze pollution as a result of land and/or forest fires through concerted national efforts, and intensified regional and international cooperation. The Agreement outlines the principles, obligations and mechanisms which encompass monitoring, assessment, prevention and responses, technical cooperation and scientific research, institutional arrangements, and procedures to strengthen cooperation and coordination.

The development of the ASEAN Agreement was not a simple task and required concerted efforts from all member countries. Both national and international experts participated in the discussion before the Agreement was finalized. Initially, there were many issues contentious to most member countries. For example, there was concern as to whether the Agreement was punitive to those who were not able to respond or act in line with the Agreement. There were also concerns as to whether in the implementation of the Agreement, there would be a need for more funding than had been budgeted. These concerns were issues that had to be raised, discussed and settled before the finalization of the Agreement. Even then it took quite a while for the ASEAN Ministers on Environment to commit their countries to the Agreement.

Viewing both the RHAP and the ASEAN Agreement, many would agree that matters already implemented under the RHAP have helped to further evolve and strengthen the Agreement in managing the issue of haze in the region. The RHAP has provided a general framework of actions for the ASEAN member countries to develop and implement in tackling haze resulting from land and forest fires. Meanwhile, the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution has provided the overall framework and streamlined specific articles (sections) to manage the haze issue in the ASEAN region.

The ASEAN Agreement shall enter into force when a total of six ASEAN member countries have ratified the Agreement. To date, only Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Vietnam have ratified the Agreement. When the Agreement enters into force, the member countries will be guided further by those principles in the Agreement and in the implementation.

These principles recognize and state that:

- The Parties have the sovereign right to exploit their own resources, but also the responsibility to ensure that their activities do not have adverse impacts on the health and environment of the other States or areas beyond national limits;

- The Parties should strengthen cooperation and coordination and take precautionary measures to prevent and monitor haze pollution.
- The Parties should manage their resources in an ecologically sound and sustainable manner, and
- The Parties should involve all stakeholders, including local communities, non-governmental organizations, farmers and private enterprises, as appropriate, in their implementation of measures to prevent and minimize the transboundary haze pollution.

At this juncture, pending the entry into force of the Agreement and the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control, an interim arrangements is being organised to implement wherever possible, the provisions of the Agreement including institutional mechanisms using existing resources. An inventory is being done to determine resources available in member countries that could be shared in situations where such need arises.

As a long term measure, an ASEAN Peat Land Management Initiative is being developed to enhance cooperation among ASEAN member countries to build capacity, share best practices on peat land management and to develop a regional strategy to sustainably manage peat land including reducing the incidences of peat land fires by implementing the zero-burn policy as prescribed in the Agreement.

In all these efforts, local or national initiatives is of utmost importance to realise the various measures and actions required to prevent and mitigate haze; without which the problem will continue to persist and whatever measure being vigorously done internationally or regionally will not be able to tackle or resolve the issue of transboundary haze problem within the ASEAN region.

CONCLUSION

Recalling the severity of the impacts of 1997 / 1998 haze situation, the ratification of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, should not be a contentious issue (Abdullah 2002). The Agreement is the first international treaty addressing the transboundary air pollution amongst developing countries in the region. A similar international (legal binding) instrument among European countries, the Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP), has been set up and implemented (Sulaiman, et al 2002). The development and acceptance of CLRTAP required considerable time and effort. In a similar manner, the same trials and challenges are likely for the ASEAN Agreement to proceed to its final acceptance and implementation. In this respect, the continuing close cooperation, strong commitment and mutual understanding between member countries are most needed for the implementation of the Agreement.

The challenge that is faced by the ASEAN countries now is to ensure that, with the ratification of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, the implementation of the Regional Haze Action Plan will be successful and lead to the management of the haze in the region.

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