

NOTES FROM

HOME:

Re-imagining Southeast Asia post-COVID

**SEGMENT[^].1 of animals,
environment and the ACSDSD:
getting ASEAN to respond
cohesively to a changed paradigm**



Conversations with
APICHAJ SUNCHINDAH

In a series of calls during Malaysia's and Thailand's versions of lockdowns, Edmund Bon (EB) and Apichai Sunchindah (AS) spoke on matters of mutual interest. The essence of these conversations held between May and June 2020 is documented here for reflection.



APICHAI SUNCHINDAH

Apichai Sunchindah is a development specialist whose work has spanned four decades. He started his career as a researcher on water resources at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) situated on the outskirts of Bangkok, Thailand. He has had assignments with the development cooperation agencies of Australia, the United States of America (USA), Switzerland and most recently, Germany. He spent a good proportion of his professional career with the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN Foundation, both located in Jakarta, Indonesia; and also at the Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Bangkok.

Apichai is a keen observer of regional developments with a focus on the Mekong sub-region. He regularly comments on water and environmental issues. As an independent consultant, he provides technical and advisory services. In the past few years, Apichai has been working with various organisations to build their capacity and strengthen their institutional core.

Apichai obtained his Bachelor of Science in Biology (1975) and Master of Science in Water Resources Management (1977) both from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. He may be contacted at apichai_sun@yahoo.com.

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EB: What has ASEAN done in response to the Corona Virus Disease-19 (COVID-19)?

AS: Back in 2003, ASEAN initiated various measures against the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) disease outbreak, a closely related illness. Now, ASEAN has enhanced its response to COVID-19 by taking steps to consolidate sharing of information and strengthening coordination. It wants to set up an **COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund** which would amalgamate the funds already available within ASEAN and those from donors. With these funds, ASEAN would be in a better position to explore further the mobilisation and disbursement of needed resources to address COVID-19 related matters.

The whole world has been focusing on this pandemic and the impact it has on us, humans. However, we should also start recognising the lessons COVID-19 wants to teach us such as drastically changing how we view the world. What really matters? Which systems are sustainable and resilient, and which ones are not?

02

EB: Have we not learnt anything?

AS: COVID-19 is similar to SARS. They come from the same coronavirus family, but they are not identical. While both SARS and COVID-19 primarily affect pulmonary functions, COVID-19 also attacks other organs such as the heart, brain, kidney, digestive, nervous and circulatory

systems. When a patient displays multiple symptoms, he or she will need a team of medical specialists rather than just one or two of them. By analogy, many of the challenges humanity face require multi- and inter-sectoral responses. The issues are increasingly intertwined.



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EB: What is your view of the COVID-19 lockdown imposed by the countries?

AS: As COVID-19 is primarily transmitted through respiratory droplets and contact routes, countries have been following guidelines on personal hygiene and social distancing to keep the virus at bay. Lockdowns are extreme measures. They are to help reduce transmissions between people to minimise overwhelming existing health systems and facilities. However, there is a huge collateral damage to economy, society, livelihood and privacy. We are now starting to see countries easing their **lockdown** restrictions to cushion the economic fallout. In my view, the lockdowns have certainly done the job to stabilise the situation, but only to a limited extent. Subsequent waves of infections have occurred and may still recur.

We should compare countries which did not impose a lockdown with those that did to see how well their respective economies and societies fared. It is still an evolving situation. But down the road I would like to see evaluations comparing the outcomes of the lockdowns and the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the respective countries.

EB: Has ASEAN responded well enough? What else could be done?

AS: In the immediate future, ASEAN should urgently operationalise the **ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Animal Health and Zoonoses (ACCAHZ)** as suggested by some experts. An agreement to establish this Centre was already signed by all 10 ASEAN Member States in 2016. It is pending final ratification by one remaining country.

We have seen emerging zoonotic diseases such as SARS, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and the bird flu over the last two decades. These originate from animals. We still have not learnt to act fast enough. If the ACCAHZ has been up and running by now, ASEAN could have sent out early warning signals to prepare for infectious diseases like COVID-19.



Photo by Adam Nieścioruk on Unsplash

EB: Does this show that ASEAN cannot rapidly respond? What are some of the deficiencies that we can address?

AS: Start by recognising that human health, animal health and ecosystem health are all inter-connected under the “One Health” concept. We can never be safe and secure so long as zoonotic diseases exist. To completely get rid of any animal-to-human disease transmission, we must make concerted efforts to take good care of the health of animals. In turn, we must halt any destruction of ecosystems and habitats like deforestation and hunting and the consumption of wildlife. Keeping wild animals at bay in a relatively safe manner away from us is essential.



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EB: Jeremy Bentham once said animals feel pain and suffering. He said this to the effect that their interests should be accounted for. Are we to accord them rights?

AS: Yes, perhaps. We should protect all animals on conscientious grounds. Be careful not to disturb them or destroy their habitats. To take the argument one step further, we should be careful towards everything that we are coming in contact with: living and non-living systems. For example, human-induced global warming has accelerated glacial melting in the high mountains and the permafrost in the Siberian and Canadian tundras. Some scientists are concerned that the frozen ancient microbes will likely be released as the glacier and permafrost melt. That could bring another round of new afflictions.

Therefore, many things have to be handled in an integrated, inter-sectoral way. Not only has COVID-19 posed challenges to our resources, it has challenged our mindset. Someone said this is not only a health and economic crisis but also a cognitive crisis that we are facing. We have been so focused primarily on public health. But COVID-19 has multi-dimensional ramifications. It has induced collateral damage due to the lockdowns. We cannot treat it in isolation. We shouldn't just rely on only the doctors to perform their functions. **Ideally, we should step back and think of the kind of future we really want.** In the final analysis, what really matters in life? If we want to be completely free of zoonotic diseases, we could start pushing for greater "rights" for those who have no voice whether humans or otherwise. Like the refraction of light through water droplets or raindrops in the air as prisms creating rainbows, COVID-19 is asking us to see the full spectrum of colours.

EB: What about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? Do the SDGs really work? Are we still playing catch up?

AS: Each SDG can have a positive or negative impact on one or more of the other SDGs. Take COVID-19. It falls under the SDG3 to ensure good health and well-being. We were not prepared. We were not alert. When the virus attacked, we got knocked out. But the rivers, oceans and air are cleaner, and pollution has been reduced as a result of the lockdowns. SDG3 failed because it allowed an infectious disease to emerge and kill. However, through human-initiated lockdowns, parts of the environment are recovering. The water and air have become cleaner. The animals and plants have started to regenerate. So, there are positive and negative interactions involved.

SDGs on climate and life below water are better. But SDG12 regarding sustainable consumption and production has worsened. We have increased the use of plastic for our food take-aways and delivery during lockdown. There will inevitably be trade-offs. We need to find the right balance. So, the question to consider is how to rebuild a better world that minimises negative impacts? We have to project ourselves into the future and identify the dangerous points ahead and things we need to avoid. We have to look at the collateral impacts. **Do a scenario analysis of the future and design a system of options to achieve our goals accordingly.**

Latest statistics show that Southeast Asia is falling behind on many of the SDGs which require us to redouble efforts to accelerate actions on these. Worse, there are some SDGs that have been regressing which need to be reversed immediately.

EB: Is there anyone in ASEAN doing this kind of research you are suggesting?

AS: Unfortunately, none. At the moment, ASEAN is still very sectoralised and operates in silos. Take forest fires as an example. It is no longer just a fire and haze issue. Rather, it is a governance and economic issue. People want to buy palm oil at cheap prices by burning to clear land and there are unscrupulous practices involved. Many issues fall into a multiplex kind of situation. We have to undertake a longer-term view. Gather multiple teams with people from different disciplines to synchronise and to synthesise – in an integrated fashion.

EB: ASEAN has been built in a way that works by specific sectors. Specialisation it is called. Does it mean that its institutional design is flawed?

AS: Well, not just ASEAN. Our whole social structure from our education system to the private sector to governments are compartmentalised. Industries are similarly differentiated as well. To steer away from sectoralisation, we need to go lateral and have a more horizontal kind of linkage. Bring people from different spheres of knowledge together. Of course, easier said than done. **But we must be the change we want to see in the world as Gandhi once said.**

EB: The human rights world is also very focused on certain thematic issues. How do we get out of this?

AS: Yes, this is what I call a “systemic issue”. We need to flatten out and reduce the gaps between entities, lateralise and multi-sectoralise to gain a better understanding of what exactly the drivers or the causes are of our ills. The different sectors need to be speaking more to each other. This is the problem when we have too much expertise in only a certain area and then they often go off on their own in a tangent.

EB: How should ASEAN move from here?

AS: Ideally, it would be great if our ASEAN leaders could be persuaded to take certain **corrective actions** right away. But in reality, sometimes reaching up to the top may be too slow a process as it needs to go through many bureaucratic levels. We would initially need to have discussions to analyse how one SDG affects another and work out the possible solutions. The sort of negative-positive interactions I mentioned earlier between the various SDGs can already be analysed at a lower, more operational level to get buy in first.

EB: Assuming that you are the ASEAN Secretary-General today, what would you do to operationalise your ideas?

AS: I don't expect such things to be radically turned over within a short period. Now that ASEAN is very focused on addressing the pandemic, it is unlikely we will see major paradigm shifts. ASEAN usually moves carefully due to its need to seek compromise and consensus among its various member countries. **However, the Secretary-General, besides being the chief executive officer representing ASEAN is also accorded the role as ASEAN's humanitarian coordinator.** COVID-19 is a humanitarian disaster that requires a pro-active response and thus the crisis actually presents an opportunity for more concrete action.

EB: Would the ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) network help address these issues?

AS: I don't think that the ASEAN-ISIS network is the right institutional set-up to tackle such inter-sectoral issues. There are many good minds there. But they are too compartmentalised on geopolitical and security issues. I don't think that they have the full range of expertise on many of these developmental-related issues.

In 2019, the **ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue (ACSDSD)** was established during Thailand's chairmanship of ASEAN. It is housed in Mahidol University's College of Management. It is supposed to serve as the advocate, coordinator and facilitator for actions on SDGs in ASEAN. I can foresee that analytical studies and dialogues undertaken by the Centre can help play an important catalytic role to address the gaps and identify the shortcomings. Then to move forward on the complementarities between the UN SDG 2030 Agenda with the ASEAN Vision in the ASEAN Blueprint 2025.

I think the ACSDSD is a more suitable entity to start with as its core functions deal with all of the 17 SDGs endorsed by the UN. First order of things should be to undertake a rapid assessment on the most important cross-sectoral issues in the region. Particularly like what I indicated earlier, about the interactions – positive, neutral and negative – among the SDGs to map out ways for ASEAN to get back on track towards realising them quickly.

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EB: People are more interested in feeling the impact on the ground. How will the ACSDSD operationalise its recommendations?

AS: To find out whether the recommendations will work or not, we need to come up with some potential scenarios or feasible models and work out the possible solutions.

The ACSDSD may not be able to do it alone, but it may link up with other organisations and disciplines from other sectors, such as human rights and economics or similar like-minded institutions. **All sectors need to talk to each other.** However, right now, I don't see any structure within ASEAN that can cross-reach different sectors except for centres like the ACSDSD.

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EB: Any final thoughts?

AS: COVID-19 has posed an existential threat or challenge to ASEAN by exposing some of the flaws. Building on Viet Nam's chairmanship theme for this year to be "Cohesive and Responsive", ASEAN should become more humble, nimble and agile. It needs to respond to the needs of the people so that we can continue to maintain our cohesiveness and resilience in good and bad times. COVID-19 has provided an opportunity and is a silver lining. We should not wait too long to strike while the iron is hot.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Co-exist with Mother Nature.

Adopt a multi-dimensional approach.

Stop working in silos.

Stop guarding sectoral borders as if they were real borders.

Specialisation has its limits.

Use the ACSDSD.

Operationalise the ACCAHZ.

Take a more holistic and whole-of-ASEAN approach.

Prepare for the next pandemic.

Aggressively start ideating new responses to build a more cohesive, safe and resilient ASEAN.

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