

# NOTES FROM

# HOME:

## Re-imagining Southeast Asia post-COVID

**SEGMENT<sup>^</sup>.2 traffic lights,  
inclusive development and  
economic growth: for who? when?  
and where?**



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. This is the second part of a series of three.



# 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](mailto:apichai_sun@yahoo.com).

01

**EB: How do you see the cost of lockdowns imposed by governments around the region due to COVID-19?**

**AS:** We have to ask: What kind of impact and cost for whom? Are not these lockdown and physical distancing measures relatively acceptable for the middle-class and wealthy who can afford to stay in their homes and comfort zones? They do not worry about how to live on a daily wage. The poor have no choice. They also have to stay in crowded places. I am not saying that there should not have been any lockdowns. However, after a certain period when they have run their course, we should conduct a post-mortem and evaluate their costs and benefits. See if it was worth it compared to those countries that didn't impose lockdowns.

02

**EB: Businesses often pay less attention to human rights and environmental issues. The different ASEAN Community pillars do not talk to each other enough. Now businesses are affected, and the economy is going to dip. Is there a way out?**

**AS:** Yes, each of the different pillars are basically doing their own things. They carry out their work in the traditional sense. But if we want to deal with cross-sectoral issues in an inclusive manner, we need to adopt different approaches. **The renaissance that we need to create is to do things differently. We need out-of-box-thinking to**

**escape from this recurring conundrum.** Increasingly, more business people are aware that they have to work together with the local communities to protect the environment. They realise the profit bottom line would not be realised if we don't have a sustainable and viable planet to live in.

03

**EB: But how is this going to take place? Are you sure the businesses have really woken up? Already there is now talk of a fast recovery. Are we going back to business-as-usual?**

**AS:** The terms “ecology” and “economics” share a common root word. The term eco is derived from the Greek word *oiko* (*οικο*), which means home or household. *Logiá* (*λογία*) means the study of something. Therefore, “ecology” is the study of one’s home or household environment. On the other hand, the suffix of “economics” is derived from the Greek word *nomiká* (*νομικά*) which means the management of something. Therefore, “economics” is literally the management of one’s home or household.

Economics in ancient times was very home-based in agricultural or rural settings as people adopted the barter system and exchanged household goods for other commodities. In my view, if we want to see good economic growth, we need to first study and understand ecology, or *oiko*-logy, meaning the study of the home or household environment.

However, as the agrarian economy transitioned to an industrial one, people start forgetting our roots. We forget that farmers are actually the original economists who knew how to manage their resources in the most optimal way. Similarly, we have lost touch as to what “healing” actually means. Doctors and nurses help patients to recover from their illnesses, but healing is making a person wholesome again and something more than just prescribing medication.

We need to expand our horizons and start understanding things by looking at their original meanings. The ASEAN Senior Officials on the Environment (ASOEN) and the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Energy (SOME), for example, should start seeing, planning and implementing things together from a more integrated and coherent perspective. Ecologists and economists should start working together. It is only when we truly understand the real meaning behind each term that we will appreciate what they all entail when they are brought together. We should not forget the original roots or ideas behind those applied concepts.

04

**EB:** How do you link what you just said with the SDGs?

**AS:** Nowadays, many businesses are becoming more conscious of the SDGs. Economic growth can never be everlasting or continue forever. Uncontrolled or limitless growth is just like cancer. **An economy can grow, but we need to answer first these questions: Who benefits from the growth? At**

what point in time? In which geographical space?

For instance, many investors want to do business within the Mekong sub-region. But in the end, who will benefit from the resulting development? When and where? We need to be able to answer these questions. The distributional effects or quality of growth is just as important as the amount or quantity of growth itself.

05

**EB:** So what are your tentative feelings on who the growth is for, when and where? Do you think the ASEAN economy is suffering from cancer?

**AS:** Unfortunately, yes, in some areas. When one has grown to the extent that he or she is concerned more about profits and forgets about the rights or welfare of others, it is cancerous and dangerous.

For example, with all the hydropower dams that are being built along the mainstream and tributaries of the Mekong river, who will benefit from the energy produced? The electricity that would be generated by the dams in Lao PDR, for example, are exported to neighbouring countries to earn revenue. Generally, the electricity goes to the big cities and people residing in Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh City. They are located outside of the Mekong basin. The native Laotians do not benefit as much. People living in the basin where the dams are situated will tend to gain less. On the contrary,

they bear the cost if the dams collapse or cause other damage and adverse impacts.

06

**EB: What do you prescribe as a practical solution?**

**AS:** I would like to see a set of “**traffic lights**” in the Mekong or even in ASEAN. Someone has to do the hard work to input the data to generate information like what appears on Google maps. Why can't we superimpose flashing green, yellow and red lights on these maps. When a certain proposed developmental course of action is being undertaken, the lights will indicate the concerns regarding the area and population. When we see these, we will tell whether certain areas are no-go areas where actors have to be very cautious. The red-lighted areas would indicate that some initiatives at those places are barred or severely restricted.

I would like to see someone rolling out this sort of technology for Southeast Asia. **Yellow would indicate a warning or alert sign where potential problems have to be taken care of. Red indicates hazardous situations which must be avoided. Green is all clear to proceed.** We should utilise computer and data science in different dimensions for economic, environmental and social purposes.



Photo by Hermes Rivera on Unsplash

07

**EB:** Economics in the formal sector is driven by the elites. How do you expect them to listen to the affected communities? They are not the ones toiling in the sun to feed their families. They have less exposure to risks and threats. Instead, they sit in air-conditioned rooms in large office towers.

**AS:** We should draw on COVID-19 and transform our thinking. Some are very enlightened now. **More people are waking up.** Get the ones who are converted first to convince the others. I am sure there are people in the business circles of ASEAN who are concerned. They recognise the importance of working together with local communities. **We need the triple bottom line – people, planet, profit – in the paradigm.** More will start to see that

picture. Eventually, we can bring them on board and let them be the ones who propagate these ideas to the rest.

08

**EB: But are you saying that ASEAN is going to be irrelevant?**

**AS:** No. What I am saying is that ASEAN may need to change the way it values things but this would come rather slowly. That's why I am hesitant about doing it with large organisations like ASEAN as we are going to hit a brick wall. There is more potential to start small outside with the low-hanging fruits first. Slowly let the success gradually seep into ASEAN by osmosis. We may be able to move further if we have more proactive ASEAN leaders, but I do not expect that ASEAN would be the frontrunner at this point. In due course though I hope that ASEAN will ride along in the right direction.

09

**EB: How about the voices of the community? The community has biopower which we often do not realise. How do we include them in effective policymaking?**

**AS:** We should localise the issues. For instance, a

neighbourhood watch group is more efficient than the police patrolling the area to fight crime alone. The locals know their area well and can act as the ears and eyes on the ground. **If we let the communities manage their own resources, such as the forest, timber and livestock, they would alert us when a problem occurs and often provide useful solutions.** Isn't this better, more effective and cheaper?

10

**EB:** You are giving the benefit of doubt as if everyone would act rationally. What about people who take advantage of this at the expense of the environment? Most businesses focus on accelerating economic integration without much to say about preserving the environment or upholding rights. Are things going to change?

**AS:** Remember the Black Death plague back in the 14th century? If we want to co-exist with nature and fellow human beings, we should look for some paradigm or operating system that is better. What happened in Europe with the Renaissance following the plague was an era of transformation and new thinking in many spheres of life. We should learn from those lessons. We are all part and parcel of a bigger picture. There are already many legally binding agreements within ASEAN particularly in the economic sectors. But they are stuck from **a lack of adequate implementation** such as in controlling land fire and transboundary haze. We have seen restrictions in the name of national sovereignty and

non-interference, or simply unpreparedness.

Scenario-based projections at local community levels should be done now. See what can be done. **Let the facts speak for themselves, and we will see what the liabilities and assets are through a “balance sheet” accounting system.** A lot of the good things in life, such as air and water, are free, and that’s why we often take them for granted. COVID-19 is telling us that it is **too costly** if we don’t take good care of these life-sustaining elements. We should look at the broader picture of what the costs entails – not merely in the monetary sense, but also our common shared environment, the people’s livelihood, culture, legacy and way of living.



Photo by 烧不酥在上海 老的 on Unsplash

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Establish “traffic lights” to map the potential dangers and no-go areas.

Create protected areas.

Implement binding measures to stop environmental degradation and rights violations.

Start experiments for sustainable community living at local areas.

Be sincere and sensitive to those affected by development. Who benefits from the growth? At what point in time? In which geographical space?

We need a second Renaissance to catapult new thinking and action.

Transcribed and edited by Lee Yee Woei  
Design and layout by Suzoo Studio

Published in Malaysia in 2021



**CALR**  
Collective of  
Applied Law &  
Legal Realism



Contents of this document may be freely cited, quoted or reproduced with acknowledgment and attribution as follows: (2021) SUNCHINDAH A. & BON E. ‘Segment 2: traffic lights, inclusive development and economic growth: for who? when? and where?’, *Notes from Home: Re-imagining Southeast Asia post-COVID*.