

# NOTES FROM

# HOME:

## Re-imagining Southeast Asia post-COVID

**SEGMENT<sup>^</sup>.3 on carbon tax,  
embracing human security,  
and ASEAN's protection of the  
environment**



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 final 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).

**EB:** People say that ASEAN is very sheltered because not much information about its sectoral bodies' work reaches the public. What are the existing ASEAN initiatives undertaken to protect the environment?

**AS:** The ASOEN has been around for about 40 years. It recently developed its Strategic Plan on Environment. I was part of the team that helped finalise the Plan. Seven working groups were established under the ASOEN: nature conservation and biodiversity, coastal and marine environment, water resources management, environmentally sustainable cities, climate change, chemicals and waste, and environmental education. The latter includes sustainable consumption and production.

There is also a parallel institutional structure that addresses the transboundary haze pollution issue. This structure was put in place due to the huge blaze in 1997/1998 in our region, which cost an accumulated loss of around \$10 billion. That brought drastic adverse impacts on the economy and the region's image and reputation. We now have an ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution in place.

We know that ASEAN has been trying to address environmental issues by issuing statements delivered at meetings of the Conference of the Parties (CoP) of various international environmental agreements. However, there are existential problems. Delegates to these CoP meetings attend as representatives of their member states rather than collectively as ASEAN members. The crux of the matter is that while ASEAN has many plans and strategies on paper, we still face problems on the ground.

**EB: What are the challenges so far? What measures can we take?**

**AS:** One of the measures that we can take is to impose environmental taxes, and one of these is the **carbon tax**. This could be a revenue-generating instrument, but the proposition is that people would start reducing their carbon footprint or emissions to avoid the tax and thus benefit the environment. Nonetheless, it depends on whether the politicians have the will and appetite to impose the tax. With COVID-19's negative impact on the economy, it seems that it will be tough to implement. But the silver lining is that we can start laying the groundwork to introduce it once the economy recovers and the enabling environment exists.

**EB: Will we ever be ready? No business will say that it is ready. When is strategic?**

**AS:** Every country has an inventory of how much carbon is produced, and we could find out how much CO<sub>2</sub> has been pumped by each country. **Depending on how much pollutants they produce, we can charge the taxpayers – it works like a penalty or fine for being dirty.**

Take the fire and haze issue as an example. If a government imposes a heavy carbon tax by setting a relatively high price that each party must pay for the

pollutants they emit, it will force factories to go carbon neutral fairly quickly. Carbon emissions would thus reduce drastically, and this could prevent the problem from recurring.

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**EB:** It is never a popular issue. The poor do not care about this tax. They want food on the table. How are you going to talk about it with the grassroots?

**AS:** Yes, it is less attractive for people who are in dire straits. So, the question is, how can we build popularity and attractiveness? We have to bring the people to recognise that in the end, the environment also counts – that if we do not take good care of the environment, we may have even more suffering in the future.

Another question is how can we make it convincing? Perhaps through environmental education or some soul-searching activities by the ASEAN working groups? How do we push the ASEAN leaders on sustainable consumption and production?

The funny thing is that even though we have cleaner air and water due to COVID-19 imposed lockdowns, plastic waste has increased due to higher demand from takeaways and deliveries. Deforestation did not cease during the lockdowns. There is a dynamic of counterbalance which needs to be managed.

So, we need to adopt an integrated, holistic way of

looking at things. **The renaissance or reset or re-  
imagination needs to be more clearly articulated and  
advocated so that the people can realise the importance  
of environmental protection.**

05

**EB: What do the environmentalists say as a measure that governments can take? Why don't we tax the rich countries and big companies – those that do not have sustainable practices?**

**AS:** There have been discussions about taxing the rich in many forums. However, there is no political will for that – the politicians still think this can be set aside. Hopefully, someone will develop a counter-argument and show the politicians that we do not have much time left. The planet is overtaxed already, and the environment is getting very bad. We do not want another COVID-19 pandemic to hit us. We do not want to wait until it happens and start imposing costly restrictions again to avoid overwhelming the health system.

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**EB: What do you see has been the impact of COVID-19 on the environment in the region?**

**AS:** Looking at the report on the SDGs, we are still lagging

quite a bit on some of the SDGs. There is still a lot that needs to be done. Due to COVID-19, we can rejoice a bit because the air and water are cleaner, with a marked decrease in industrial waste. On the other hand, the economy has been badly hit, and many livelihoods have been severely affected.

How do we balance the economy and the environment? Is this just a temporary pause to allow the environment to recover? If we resume normality without putting in place environmental safeguards, will the situation worsen in the future?

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**EB: What about the people? Do the people feel the work of ASEAN in protecting the environment?**

**AS:** When we talk to the more impoverished people struggling to have enough to eat and earn little, environmental issues will not be at the top of their minds. However, specific sectors recognise that we cannot continue doing things as before. COVID-19 shows us that environmental degradation through deforestation and destruction of animal habitat makes us worse off. They recognise that we must have a green new normal.

In the end, human beings have to come to their senses and realise that we cannot have infinite economic growth without a living and sustainable environment. There is no point in having financial riches if we have a dead planet to live on.

**EB:** How will the COVID-19 pandemic change the way ASEAN operates? If we talk about more specific measures in the economic pillar, would the carbon tax idea work?

**AS:** As an environmentalist, I would go ahead and tax any environmental pollution. But I can't think of any leader in ASEAN at the moment who will be willing to bite that bullet.



Photo by Chris LeBoutillier on Unsplash

**EB:** If you are to re-imagine ASEAN in terms of the environment post-COVID-19, what can governments do?

**AS:** There should be a levy on the sources of carbon pollution. They should persuade the people to go carbon-neutral or carbon-free. Just like income tax, everyone in business will be taxed but in a more progressive fashion. In other words, society and the community need to be ready and willing to absorb this type of approach. We have to be more integrated with our advocacy and get public opinion on our side to put pressure on governments for change.

**EB:** What other specific measures can we talk about?

**AS:** ASEAN being ASEAN, there is no such thing as a legally binding kind of measure. It will be a quantum leap. As we know very well, ASEAN moves incrementally. The environmentalists have discussed many kinds of pollution taxes regarding water, air, soil and chemicals. Carbon tax is a sub-set of pollution tax. The environmentalists have been talking about how CO<sub>2</sub> causes harm and global warming for a large part of the last 30 years. The more advanced and developed countries have started to put measures in place, but most developing countries like us are still lagging because we prioritise economic growth.

There is a silver lining, though. ASEAN has been thoroughly implementing the ASEAN Blueprint 2025, a kind of a 10-year roadmap. It is divided into three key components: political-security, economic and socio-cultural. The environment is in the latter. The political-security side has made references to the environment, such as marine pollution and transboundary challenges, but they relate to the priorities of the political-security sector, such as good governance and transnational crime.

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) has made, in my view, the most dramatic of changes. In previous blueprints, there was no specific mention relating to the environment in the economic chapters. Now at least the catchwords of “sustainable”, “green”, and “environmentally-friendly” appear in every significant sectoral area of the AEC. This opens the door to enable us to operationalise them.

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**EB:** Have you seen them operationalising that?

**AS:** Not quite yet, and this is where the ongoing mid-term review of the Blueprint is supposed to show. We are to look into their indicators on each of these actions and benchmark the performance.

**EB: What is the target for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) regarding the environment?**

**AS:** Section C in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 focuses on the environment, and it categorises the elements into four key result areas.

The **first** key result area is on conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity and natural resources. There are numerous strategic measures. The goal is to increase the number of regional initiatives regarding conservation and natural resources in ASEAN countries.

The **second** key result area is on environmentally sustainable cities. We are urbanising, and as a result, many environmental issues arise. The key is to enhance environmentally sustainable initiatives in urban areas. That includes participatory planning and management of resources such as water and air in the cities of member states.

The **third** key result area is to maintain a sustainable climate. We need to foster regional cooperation and call on ASEAN to adapt to and mitigate climate change in alignment with international agreements. The indicator is to enhance the capacity of ASEAN Member States to achieve their respective nationally determined commitments.

The **fourth** key result area is to have sustainable consumption and production (SCP). This includes integrating SCP strategies and best practices in national and regional policies with corporate social responsibility. The indicators are to establish policies and institutional

arrangements, incorporate SCP initiatives, and promote green jobs in member states.

In my view, these indicators are probably not good enough although we are comparatively doing better than previously. However, these are still primarily checklists. We need to tighten them and ask: How effective are the initiatives? What impacts do the policies have? This is where the real monitoring and evaluation comes in. ASEAN still has a long way to go, but as the saying goes, a journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step.

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**EB:** How do the ASCC and AEC link to the targets under the Paris climate change agreement?

**AS:** I haven't seen any direct links other than the generic ones. ASEAN is not going into detail. Because in essence, if you want to go to that level of specificity, then each ASEAN Member State has to do its homework to come up with ways to reduce carbon dioxide emissions in the region. **Each country has their own, but at the ASEAN level, there is no consensus yet.** They have not even started thinking about how to achieve such a consensus. Perhaps this is something that needs to be pushed. We need to ask ASEAN for follow-ups on the statements they issued and monitor and evaluate how far they have kept to the promises they made.

**EB: How does ASEAN evaluate if the targets are vast and unknown?**

**AS:** That's the challenging part. Right now, just like when we did several years ago with the previous Blueprint review, we came up with a standard yardstick. We said we have to look at whether it will be effective, efficient, relevant, sustainable and impactful. Each action that we do has to be measured against these criteria. However, ASEAN said it is new to such things and only starting on them, so we should only begin with a checklist. It does not want to move so fast forward quite yet. In the current Blueprint monitoring and evaluation system, more specific quantitative measures are in place.

**EB: How do you think ASEAN should accelerate its commitments to the Paris Agreement?**

**AS:** Operationally, one way is to say, look, you have been presenting ASEAN statements at many COPs on climate change. Doesn't that mean that you are expressing a common position on climate change? Like how each member state has to present its targets through the Paris Agreement, can we make sure that ASEAN as a collective is also held to account like its individual members?

ASEAN is represented by 10 member states rather than as an entity. When the time comes, they will release a

statement collectively. But in essence, they do not have an ASEAN “policy” to speak of save for generic or non-specific ones only.

We need to do reports on the state of ASEAN’s climate, water and biodiversity. It should not be just a ministerial or leaders’ statement only – they are too general. We need to get down to the specifics and quantify. Only then will we be compelled to seek more data and statistics. We should not be shy or stingy about it.

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**EB: How would you evaluate the ASEAN Member States’ progress on the Paris Agreement?**

**AS: ASEAN still uses too much coal for energy and power production.** The trend is still increasing and will continue to do so for about 20 years down the road before it reaches a peak. So, some people say that we will not reach that half-century or 2050 goal of being carbon neutral like many countries are trying to commit to. Nevertheless, if we don’t start now, we will be even more delayed.

Many of the pollutants come from the AEC sector, be it from the transport, agriculture or energy sectors. So, the AEC and ASCC should sit down and start working things out. They are still pumping out more, even on energy production alone. What is the balance sheet like? Just like an accountant, one has to balance the input and the output. This kind of analysis needs to be an inter-sectoral, cross-ministry exercise.

**EB: Is it sufficient if we meet the SDG goals? How do the SDG goals link to the Paris Agreement?**

**AS:** Yes, they are inter-linked, and SDG 13 deals explicitly with the climate issue. The whole idea is that if you meet one SDG goal, you can hopefully also help to satisfy another – not in its entirety as each SDG has slightly different objectives and indicators, but it will help nonetheless. We will be going in the right direction if we do that. However, right now, many of the SDGs are not moving fast enough. Some are even regressing to its year 2000 predecessor, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

There are yearly SDG progress reports on this, but my view is that it goes back to the data. The statistics for the ASEAN region are of increasing importance, as a lot of the data we have now are based on scarce information or flimsy grounds. Without accurate and timely data, we cannot make reliable projections. They are nothing more than just guesstimates. We still have a long way to go.

For example, I used the 2019 SDG report, which has a subsection on Southeast Asia. According to the report, climate action has been regressing since 2000, which is not surprising because we still keep pumping CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. Just like accounting, the nett is still positive. We need to be able to say that we are moving towards achieving the target. AEC and ASCC should work very closely on this as it would be mutually beneficial. **AEC has put on paper that it wants to meet specific environmental goals, but they need to define the goals further and tell us what the actual reduction**

target is. And what is the actual increase in sustainability they talk about? It has to be time-bound, quantified and scientific, rather than just political or generalised statements. If we do not want another calamity like a pandemic to hit us again in the future, we need to start the work now.

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**EB:** How do you link the ASEAN human security argument with environmental protection?

**AS:** Like infectious diseases and terrorism, the environment is another form of “non-traditional security”. We cannot ignore it. We have seen think tanks and researchers doing analyses on these, but they tend to be brushed aside by the leaders.

I hope that there would be a redeeming light, where the higher-ups will think things differently. The same goes for the citizens and individuals. **We need to start thinking and doing things differently.** We can start moving things forward if there is a groundswell movement and a tipping point is reached.

**EB:** Is the term “human security” contained in any ASEAN document?

**AS:** I am afraid not because it is a touchy issue. So far, ASEAN has not been able to overcome this non-traditional security challenge. Nonetheless, we should try! Many human security issues have widespread ramifications on the economy, social welfare and other things.

We cannot ignore them as they stare at our faces. **This COVID-19 pandemic has brought us to the mirror and forced us to look at ourselves.**

**EB:** What do you mean by non-traditional security?

**AS:** Non-traditional security is broadly defined, but it is part of human security. In general terms, security means that we feel safe and not threatened. So, we are defining it in a military and territorial defence kind of sense, including anything that prejudices the safety of human lives and livelihood – be it personal or as a collective.

**Infectious diseases certainly fall within this definition. The effects of climate change, such as floods and typhoons, are also included.** Therefore, in simple terms, anything that affects each individual and the community’s safety, resilience and livelihood is a security issue.

I hope that we will increase the security level of these different components as they are linked. If we do not take care of the environment, it will cause more disease, and another pandemic may recur in the future.

We could plot the **misery projection index** over time and think of how to flatten that. Right now, many people are struggling to find food or a job. Besides trying to flatten the COVID-19 curve in some parts of the world, we should think of flattening the misery curve in the long term. If we don't do it now, we will have a tougher job in the future, which could overwhelm the health system.



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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Impose carbon tax.

Big polluters to pay.

Governments to introduce robust regulations to bring down the global atmospheric temperature.

Human and non-traditional security issues, including climate matters, should take centre stage.

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