

International Cooperation and Environmental Policy: Asian Perspectives

Charit Tingsabadh

The environment in the ASEAN context is mostly a national issue. It is the basis of the national economies whereby agricultural production is sustained by the natural environment. The cities in ASEAN are mostly small urban settlements (less than 1 million inhabitants) and are service centres of the respective regional areas. Exceptions are cities such as Singapore and perhaps Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, which serve a more regional and global roles.

Yet within the context of ASEAN, the environment was recognized as an important regional issue. As early as 1981 the ASEAN governments established the ASEAN Committee on Environment in the context of the restructuring of ASEAN. A number of ASEAN agreements on the environment have been concluded since then. To quote a recent report (2003) from the ASEAN Secretariat:

Other milestones include the signing of the revised ASEAN Declaration on Heritage Parks, which now includes all ten ASEAN Member Countries and recognizes a total of 27 protected areas as ASEAN Heritage Parks, the adoption of the Framework for Environmentally Sustainable Cities in ASEAN, and the ASEAN Long-Term Strategic Plan for Water Resources Management. Significant progress has been made in the implementation of activities based on the objectives of the Ha Noi Plan of Action.

Cross-Border Environmental Policy Issues in ASEAN

The establishment of the ASEAN Environment Committee was inspired more by the “common environmental issues faced by the people of the ASEAN countries” than by any transboundary environmental concerns, at least until 1991 when the region suffered the phenomenon of the Haze caused by forest fires particularly starting in Indonesia but affecting neighbouring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and less severely Thailand. The reactions and ensuing efforts to deal with the Haze resulted in the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution in 2002. To quote the ASEAN report:

The ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, which was signed by all the ten ASEAN Member Countries in June 2002, entered into force on 25 November 2003 following the ratification by six ASEAN Member Countries, namely Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. This signifies the culmination of concerted and intensive regional efforts over the years to address transboundary haze pollution since the 1997/98 severe haze episodes. The agreement is the first legally binding ASEAN regional envi-

ronmental accord to have entered into force. The United Nations Environment Programme considers the Agreement a global role model for tackling transboundary issues.

In detail, the agreement provides for, among others:

The ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution seeks to institutionalise and enhance existing arrangements under the Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP, 1998) and to provide a legal framework to better facilitate regional and international cooperation in addressing transboundary haze pollution problem more effectively.

The Agreement essentially calls for Parties to undertake, among others, (i) legislative and administrative measures to prevent and control activities related to land and forest fires that may result in transboundary haze pollution; and (ii) national as well as joint actions to intensify regional and international co-operation to prevent, assess and monitor transboundary haze pollution arising from land and forest fires.

The ASEAN Haze Agreement also calls for the establishment of an ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control to facilitate cooperation and coordination in managing the impact of land and forest fires in particular haze pollution arising from such fires. Pending its establishment, the ASEAN Environment Ministers have agreed on a set of interim arrangements using existing institutions and resources. The functions of the Centre are currently shared among the ASEAN Senior Officials on the Environment-Haze Technical Task Force (ASOEN-HTTF), the ASEAN Specialised Meteorological Centre (ASMC) and the ASEAN Secretariat.

A comment may be in order here. The occurrence of the Haze is due to events in one country and affects other countries as a result of the forces of nature (wind direction and seasonal monsoon climate). A similar case in Europe is acid rain, which causes damage to trees in countries downwind from the source of the sulphur emissions which caused the rain to turn acidic.

As for other transboundary environmental concerns, there appears to be no other issue. The only international river is the Mekong River, shared between China (Yunnan Province), Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) has been defined as an area for special development efforts and cooperation among the member countries, but is not really an ASEAN project.

ASEAN Environmental Cooperation

In other areas of environmental concern, ASEAN has tended to focus on expression of general principles and guidelines for national policies and measures. The main areas of attention have been: nature conservation and biodiversity, coastal and marine environment, global environmental issues, water resource management, environmentally sustainable cities, and environmental education.

As of the latest policy statement on environmental cooperation, the following is a quote from the Cambodian prime Minister at the launch of the ASEAN Environment Year 2003: