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Planetary health: An alternative framework for disaster governance in ASEAN?

By S. Nanthini and Lina Gong

SYNOPSIS

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the search for a better way of managing human activities and their environmental impact thereby zeroing in on the specific actions needed to maintain a balance for Planet Earth's sustainability.

COMMENTARY

As countries around the world are learning to co-exist with COVID-19, the implications of the pandemic for policy management of varied issues facing them should not be overlooked. Disaster governance is one of the sectors that have been [significantly affected](#) by pandemic-related restrictions and resource constraints. Climate change further increases the complexity and challenges in disaster governance.

With concurring natural hazards further stretching national and regional capacities and resources in the region over the past two years, ASEAN have deliberated and assessed necessary changes and reforms to prepare itself better for natural hazards in the future. Exemplified by the release of the [ASEAN Disaster Resilience Outlook](#) in October 2021, ASEAN is shifting towards disaster resilience, emphasising its ability to not only deal with disasters but also recover from them.

Within this shift, planetary health is gaining momentum, increasingly appearing as an agenda item in international and regional forums. The upcoming ASEAN Strategic Policy Dialogue on Disaster Management (SPDDM) 2022 on 19 August in Singapore is an influential platform in the Asia-Pacific that recognises its importance for the future of disaster governance.

Planetary Health: What is it?

[Planetary health](#) was initially conceived as an approach to public health that highlights the inextricable linkage between human health and the state of surrounding natural systems. As the environment and other natural systems are being increasingly degraded, so are human health and overall wellbeing – whether as individuals, communities or nations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn [increasing public and policy attention](#) to planetary health. Having caused millions of deaths and significant economic losses, COVID-19 is a powerful reminder of the correlation between human health and the natural systems. A zoonotic disease in the vein of SARS and H1N1, COVID-19 is merely the latest example in an [increasing trend of known zoonotic diseases being passed from wildlife to humans over the past 80 years](#).

Motivated by economic purposes and sometimes supported by government policies, unsustainable human activities such as large-scale deforestation for farming, resource extraction, and infrastructure-building have contributed to the spread of zoonotic diseases. Emphasising the intersection and linkages of human activities and the planet, planetary health represents a comprehensive framework that can guide a collaborative and cross-sectoral approach to address the array of challenges facing humanity, not just public health issues.

Planetary Health and Disaster Governance

The relevance of planetary health to disaster governance is two-fold. First, a public health crisis can create barriers in disaster relief and prolong recovery periods. Border closures curtailed the deployment of international staff to disaster-affected areas, leading to a shortage of manpower in the field.

COVID-19 responses have used significant financial, human, and material resources in most countries, which likely means resource constraints in disaster governance. Pandemic-related restrictions such as safe-distancing and quarantine measures have resulted in [slower evacuation](#), greater demands for sheltering space, and more complicated process in the deployment and acceptance of international assistance.

Experiences from disaster relief efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that an effective response to concurring natural hazards requires better coordination and collaboration between [different sectors](#).

Second, the ominous spectre of irreversible climate change is currently looming over the world, reflected by the barrage of extreme weather events across the world in 2022, from [heatwaves and wildfires across Europe to extreme rainfall and flooding in Bangladesh and China](#). Southeast Asia is not spared from this trend, evident in the [deadly floods](#) in Malaysia at the beginning of 2022.

Unsustainable human activities have significantly contributed to the changing climate, which in turn increase our vulnerabilities to climate-induced disasters.

Planetary health provides a useful framework to assess the links between the health of natural systems and human activities. Adopting planetary health represents a long-term approach to disaster governance, one which takes into account the possible

social, political, environmental and economic factors that influence human-climate interactions.

Challenges in adopting planetary health

While useful, challenges still remain in the journey towards the adoption of planetary health in government policies. A major challenge is the tendency of policymakers to focus on economic indicators such as GDP as the main marker of human progress. It is particularly relevant in a world where the global economy has been devastated by the economic fall-out of COVID-19, from which governments are eager to recover from.

However, the aim of this recovery should not be to replicate the status quo as it existed before COVID-19, but instead to ‘build back better’ and improve the resilience of both natural and human systems. Regional organisations such as ASEAN should take the lead in promoting a resilience-oriented approach to development, including disaster governance.

Another challenge in the adoption of a collaborative and cross-sectoral approach informed by planetary health is the differences in organisational cultures, priorities and languages between stakeholders of disaster governance, which hamper communication and information-sharing. Forums and dialogues such as the annual ASEAN SPDDM can play an important role in facilitating the development of such an approach, which brings together actors from different sectors across the world to share best practices and discuss national and regional disaster policies.

Emphasising the links between human and natural systems, planetary health represents a more holistic thinking of disaster governance. By prioritising resilience as an area of primary importance, rather than as an afterthought to short-term economic agendas, policies should be formulated and implemented to stabilise the already volatile natural systems and thus protect human wellbeing and security. After all, as the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us, the health of human beings and the planet are irrevocably entwined.

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