

Moving ahead with Southeast Asia

Knowledge for strengthening Ocean Resilience

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Bonn, 25 June 2021. The Ocean is an existential part of Southeast Asia's cultural identities and heritage. At the same time, Southeast Asian countries are highly exposed to complex ocean-related risks and the consequences of global mean sea-level rise. Coastal communities are shaped by disaster histories, and they have developed considerable knowledge about surviving them. These experiences are, however, no longer sufficient in view of rapid population growth, increasing human mobility, infrastructure and technological developments. Recently, Peter Schoof, Germany's Ambassador to Indonesia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Timor-Leste, emphasised the need to change the international perspective on Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific, not only in view of its influential role regarding economic growth, but also its resilience towards natural hazards and disasters. The UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development has just begun – and Southeast Asia will be in the limelight in 2022 with several political processes anchored in the region.

Southeast Asian countries manage marine risks and their knowledge of the ocean is formed by their interconnectedness, as well as by their cultural diversity. The interlinkages further the achievement of a practical everyday ocean resilience, as reflected in the "One ASEAN One Community" identity. Yet, what are the lessons and imminent challenges related to risk governance and ocean literacy in the region?

The ASEAN member states, both as individual players and as a regional entity, stand out with their exemplary performances in transregional coordination through marine-related hazards warning systems, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA), and joint disaster preparedness and mitigation programmes. In recent years, the Southeast Asian region substantially invested in adaptation infrastructures for flood control and coastal protection such as seawalls and polder dykes, tsunami warning and mitigation systems, and furthermore established institutions with strengthened disaster management capacities to reach the 'last mile', meaning to improve the resilience of coastal communities. Nevertheless, technological advancements in early warning and disaster risk management systems require better understanding of the significance of ocean risk governance in the region. Countries in the region should collaborate more to ensure that these achievements are sustainable and depart from land-based practices for handling marine risks. Another challenge lies in the consistent integration of ocean risk governance as part of national grand strategies, negatively exemplified by the silencing of Indonesia's doctrine as a global maritime fulcrum during the second term of President Joko Widodo.

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Raising coastal risk awareness builds on the "understanding that the ocean and humans are inextricably interconnected", one of the 'Essential Principles' of ocean literacy developed through a community-wide consensus-building process. This also means that we need to find innovative ways to communicate ocean science. Transregional events like the forum on ocean heritage and literacy at the ASEAN-Republic of Korea commemorative summit in 2019 strengthen the debate at the science-policy interface. Creative forms of promoting ocean literacy at regional and national level include interactive platforms in science journalism or exhibitions, art projects, movies, graphic novels and school projects. These contemporary approaches narrate current research and knowledge as well as ancestral wisdom. Simultaneously, in a digitalised society, they enable broader accessibility: the use of social media and mobile apps in Southeast Asia is among the highest in the world. Empowering communities at risk through disaster literacy takes the people to the centre stage, complemented by technologies. Certainly, the downside in form of hoaxes and 'fake news' comes along with it. This might incite anxieties about risk perception and mistrust in warning systems or, on the contrary, induce a false sense of security. The Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 best exemplifies how robust ocean literacy and education strengthens resilience: the devastation and the inspiring stories of survival became a turning point for ocean disaster literacy.

Next year, Southeast Asia will again be in the spotlight: Indonesia will preside over the G20 and also host the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in Bali. Furthermore, the World Climate Research Program (WCRP) will hold its international conference 'Regional Sea Level Change and Coastal Impacts' in Singapore, with one of the new 'core projects' focusing explicitly on providing regional information for societies. Southeast Asia should use these events to showcase examples of global collaborations and leadership in ocean risk governance, and fostering ocean literacy in an archipelagic region. 2022 is a good year for changing the world's perception of Southeast Asia and building on its experiences and knowledge at the outset of the Ocean Decade, for a better and safer future.