



ASEAN and humanitarian action: progress and potential

Jakarta expert roundtable

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Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played an increasingly active role in humanitarian action within its region, developing a binding Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) as well as the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre). With these frameworks and tools, ASEAN has responded to disasters in Myanmar, the Philippines and elsewhere.

To document and discuss these developments, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) and the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) organised a one-day roundtable discussion in Jakarta in late March 2014.

This document captures a selection of the key points and outcomes from the roundtable, which included key ASEAN and AHA Centre officials as well as representatives of several ASEAN member states and international and regional aid agencies.

Zones of engagement: regional action and humanitarian response is a research project explored by the Humanitarian Policy Group as part of the 2013 - 2015 Integrated Programme.

This project is designed to explore the role of regional organisations and the rationale for their involvement in humanitarian action.

ASEAN's role in responses to disasters and violence in Myanmar

Myanmar was put forward during the roundtable's first session given that it has faced both disaster-related and conflict-related humanitarian situations, including Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and on-going violence in Rakhine, primarily between the Muslim Rohingya minority and the Buddhist Rakhine majority. While ASEAN responded strongly to the cyclone in innovative ways, it has not engaged with the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine.

Cyclone Nargis

When Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar in May 2008, government officials were overwhelmed and feared the influx of a large number of international aid agencies. As the extent of the devastation caused by the disaster became clear, the humanitarian situation became political, with some members of the international community suggesting that individual countries or the United Nations had an obligation to intervene, by force if necessary, to protect affected people and deliver life-saving aid. Defusing the situation, ASEAN launched its first-ever Emergency Rapid Assessment Team, composed of officials, experts and NGO personnel from member states. Based on the resulting assessment, and at the recommendation of ASEAN Foreign Ministers, ASEAN established a coordination mechanism comprising the ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force (AHTF) and the Yangon-based Tripartite Core Group (TCG); the TCG brought ASEAN, the Myanmar government and the United Nations together to facilitate response operations in a manner that was acceptable to all three. Through the AHTF and TCG, ASEAN worked with all stakeholders to facilitate humanitarian access in a way that, in the words of one panellist, helped the government of Myanmar to 'save face'.

Speakers and participants noted that ASEAN's response to Nargis is unlikely to be repeated both because of ASEAN's new disaster management institutions and because of member states' continued concerns over the implications of foreign humanitarian assistance for their sovereignty. Yet lessons may be learnt from the experience. Firstly, ASEAN has a clear role to play in building trust between governments, the international community and others during crises. Even before crises, ASEAN may have a role to play in encouraging major donors to support regional governments' humanitarian



work (rather than financing a major influx of aid agencies). Secondly, when government capacities are insufficient – as in the case of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar – ASEAN should explore how national and regional non-governmental organisations can take the lead in responding with the support of the international community. One participant noted that international aid agencies said there was no 'humanitarian access' immediately following Nargis despite the fact that dozens of local organisation were actively involved on the ground. Lastly, participants noted that it was important for ASEAN and member states to increasingly de-politicise humanitarian activities and crisis response rather than approaching them through a political-security lens, as is currently the case.

The Rakhine crisis

In comparison to Cyclone Nargis, ASEAN has played almost no role in addressing the religious violence affecting Rakhine state in Myanmar. Participants noted that ASEAN's principles of non-interference in its members' affairs – and Myanmar's current position as Chair of ASEAN – made it nearly impossible for the regional organisation to play an active role. Participants suggested different ways forward. Some proposed a more robust and visible role for ASEAN in attempting to influencing the government of Myanmar. Others felt that ASEAN's newly established role in humanitarian action could be undermined if it overtly mixed humanitarian concerns with diplomatic activities. That said, a number of participants noted that ASEAN could approach the situation in a less direct way. According

to one, ASEAN could take a purely technical approach to the situation, not addressing the violence in Rakhine but instead emphasising limited access to healthcare; by avoiding discussions of the violence, ASEAN could indirectly press the government to address the situation or to at least enable aid agencies to provide support to those affected. Another participant suggested that ASEAN could, through its economic initiatives, work with businesses in Myanmar – which are closely linked to the government – to highlight the massive economic costs the country could face if the violence in Rakhine continued or escalated. Still others suggested that ASEAN may have a role to play in supporting civil society to promote religious cooperation and tolerance as an indirect way of promoting forces for peace.

Participants acknowledged the sensitivity of the situation and the fact that, in a situation such as that in Rakhine, ASEAN may have relatively limited options. It may influence the situation but does not have the ability to intervene. On the contrary, by speaking out too strongly on the situation, ASEAN may in fact harm the relationship it has built with the government there. Nor are ASEAN’s humanitarian organs authorised by member states to engage in activities which straddle the border between humanitarianism and diplomacy, despite the fact that many consider protection of civilians to be an indelible component of humanitarian action.

ASEAN and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines

ASEAN saw Typhoon Haiyan approaching the Philippines in late 2013, monitored the situation and rapidly responded. Yet, with the Philippine government

having excellent internal capacities and welcoming international civilian and military assistance, ASEAN’s role differed from the one it played in Myanmar. The AHA Centre, which is still in the process of establishing itself, and its 13 staff members were closely involved in the response – a situation akin to ‘building a plane while trying to fly it’. Specifically, the AHA Centre monitored the typhoon and disseminated information to stakeholders in the region through e-alerts and social media. As Haiyan began to approach land in the Philippines, the AHA Centre set up a team and deployed one staff member to Tacloban one day before the storm hit. ASEAN was able to set up emergency telecommunications to help capture information on the ground and, within six hours, began reporting to personnel in Manila and throughout the ASEAN region. Additional AHA Centre personnel arrived within 48 hours of the typhoon’s landfall on 8 November. ASEAN saw its role not as leading the humanitarian response but as a key source of information for ASEAN member states in order to help them intervene more effectively (if they decided to do so). Ultimately several ASEAN member states did provide assistance, including some from their militaries, in response to Typhoon Haiyan, though it remains impossible to tell to what extent they were motivated to do so by ASEAN or the AHA Centre.

While ASEAN received some criticism after the disaster for not responding quickly enough or not doing enough, participants in the roundtable noted that ASEAN and the AHA Centre are not intended to comprise a traditional aid agency involved in distributing assistance on the ground. Instead, ASEAN’s humanitarian institutions are intended to provide information and, as appropriate, support the government of the affected



country where it is requested and able to do so. While the AHA Centre could have established a Field Coordination Centre, several participants noted that it would have potentially duplicated existing coordination mechanisms and complicated the humanitarian response.

One speaker noted that different actors had divergent expectations for ASEAN's response to Typhoon Haiyan and other disasters. Some, for instance, felt that ASEAN and the AHA Centre should be involved in risk-mapping, coordinating a private sector response, supporting sub-national government structures, building local civil society capacity and so on. Yet participants generally felt that the AHA Centre's strategy should remain focused on a small number of core competencies for the time being rather than allowing the Centre to be pulled in several different directions.

Ways forward for ASEAN-driven humanitarian action

Despite its current strengths and ability to support humanitarian action in Myanmar and the Philippines, participants identified several areas where ASEAN could help the region and member states in innovative ways. Yet, as noted above, participants were broadly in agreement that ASEAN and the AHA Centre should not be expected to take on too many new roles too quickly lest they perform poorly and lose credibility. Several participants noted that, even where ASEAN and the AHA Centre have increased capabilities and resources, they should think twice before taking on new burdens.



Indeed, ASEAN's primary role may be understood as, firstly, *gap filling* – meeting crucial needs that non-regional humanitarian actors overlook – and, secondly, *catalytic* – enabling member states, the private sector, civil society, militaries and others to respond more effectively and in a more coordinated manner. Regardless of these caveats, the roundtable generated a number of recommendations for strengthening humanitarian action in the ASEAN region if and when the ASEAN Secretariat and AHA Centre have the ability and resources to do so. A number of these are captured below.

- *Fast track for humanitarian access.* In the case of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, a week and a half was required to facilitate humanitarian access. To avoid this in the future, participants felt that ASEAN could ensure that negotiations regarding aid access, where feasible, take place before a crisis strikes. Such negotiations might, according to participants, concern political issues and the role of the government – or they may address technical issues related, for instance, to customs clearance for aid materials and visas for aid workers.
- *Seek ways to address protection without raising the ire of ASEAN member states.* With communal and religious violence flaring in Rakhine state and pockets of conflict and tension elsewhere in the region, some participants felt that ASEAN had to clarify how it might address the associated protection challenges. As noted earlier, participants had several ideas, including approaching the violence in Rakhine as a purely technical (e.g., healthcare) issue rather than as a political one. However, it was also clear that ASEAN member states had to either authorise or prevent the AHA Centre and the Secretariat from engaging with protection issues. Such deliberations should be informed by future research and discussions among aid agencies, civil society organisations, the private sector, militaries and others.
- *Enhance leadership on humanitarian response.* The importance of individual leadership capacity in humanitarian operations was repeatedly emphasised during the roundtable. To this end, ASEAN has established the AHA Centre Executive (ACE) Programme, which provides six months of advanced capacity-building support to emerging crisis management leaders throughout the region. The initiative is valuable, and participants noted that it



should be well supported and expanded further by ASEAN member states and others.

- *Emphasise emergency preparedness, not just response.* Participants noted that, further into the future, ASEAN and the AHA Centre should take up the issue of emergency preparedness. Some participants noted that preparedness should be addressed first and foremost despite many stakeholders' preference for the much broader field of disaster risk reduction (DRR). Promoting preparedness would allow ASEAN member states to focus on mitigating the impact of future disasters; DRR could achieve the same by mitigating the underlying sources of risk and vulnerability, though it is generally far more costly and long-term in nature.
- *Create a technical information-sharing system.* While ASEAN is making strides with regard to knowledge management, participants suggested that a traditional online library or lesson learning system could instead be replaced with a repository of technical documents which are not often made public. These might include, for instance, technical specifications for cash transfer programmes, evaluation tools for particular types of programmes and schematics for the design of disaster-resistant shelters or schools. ASEAN could then make these materials available to national governments, civil society organisations and others. Without such a system, aid agencies may be forced to repeatedly start from scratch, or a small number of international agencies – despite financing from member states and their citizenries – may maintain a monopoly on these public goods.
- *Establish a regional humanitarian network among academics/researchers.* Despite the frequency of natural disasters and other crises in Southeast Asia, much of the research on the region is conducted by Western universities and think tanks. To overcome this, ASEAN should aim to promote and build links between research institutions focused on natural disasters, sectarian and religious issues, peacebuilding, protection and other matters pertinent to humanitarian action. This network would be instrumental in helping to further other possibilities put forward (e.g. creating a roster of national and regional humanitarian experts and promoting methodologically rigorous impact evaluations).
- *Facilitate and promote a role for business in crisis preparedness and response.* Noting the strong role played by Philippines-based businesses in the Typhoon Haiyan response, participants felt that ASEAN could help ensure that this experience is replicated across the region. For instance, ASEAN could promote the formation of national, humanitarian-focused business alliances in member states and help them to contribute to emergency response and preparedness.
- *Promote impact evaluations of humanitarian assistance.* Globally, humanitarian organisations have resisted rigorous impact evaluations despite their increase utilisation by development agencies. ASEAN could help to counter this trend and create a harmonised evaluation system with strict requirements for aid agencies (with some exceptions) to periodically subject their activities to impact evaluations and make the results available to host governments as well as to ASEAN and the public.



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HPG is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

The views presented in this roundtable note are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI

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- *Roster of national and regional experts.* If ASEAN was to create a roster of skilled and vetted humanitarian experts, international aid agencies may become less reliant on external (non-regional) aid workers and may be able to take advantage of existing capacities in the region. Such a list should be carefully managed and maintained, and clear systems should be put in place for joining the roster and for organisations, businesses and others which would like to draw upon it.
- *Reciprocal recognition of aid agency accreditation.* If member states agreed to a single accreditation process for humanitarian agencies, an aid agency registered in one country would be able to assist another ASEAN country affected by a crisis. Doing so would lessen the bureaucratic hurdles to humanitarian response. However, some participants were keen to note that such a reciprocal accreditation scheme should only apply to those organisations providing material assistance (e.g., food and non-food items) and not to more sensitive advocacy organisations.
- *Support governments as they lead humanitarian coordination.* Over time governments in the region may be better prepared to lead coordination efforts during and after crises, taking that role wholly or partially away from the United Nations. Some participants felt that such a situation would be valuable and suggested that, over time, ASEAN should work with and support member states to assume greater responsibility for on-the-ground humanitarian coordination.

Lastly, several participants discussed the issue of resourcing, noting that the AHA Centre remains reliant on donor funds from outside the region. Some participants felt that this could lead the Centre to be driven in part by external priorities and models. Hence, if ASEAN really wishes to demonstrate its concern for and commitment to humanitarian action, some noted that ASEAN member states must begin shouldering the associated costs.