

ASEAN-in-Practice Episode 1 Transcript

Denis: A very good morning to all of you and welcome to the inaugural episode of the ASEAN in Practice podcast series. My name is Denis Hew, and I am a senior research fellow at the Centre on Asia and Globalization at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. ASEAN in Practice is a new initiative launched by our centre and it is a podcast which aims to invite practitioners from around the region that spent many years working on ASEAN issues, particularly experts who have applied or used knowledge of ASEAN or ASEAN policies in their professions. We hope to gain some valuable insights from their experiences, which ideally would feed into policymaking level in the form of policy papers and future research on ASEAN. Our guest for today's podcast is Mr Ruhimat Soerakoesoemah, friends like me – we call him Rony. Rony is currently the head of Southeast Asia subregional office at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific – ESCAP for short. ESCAP is a UN agency that has its headquarters in Bangkok, Thailand. Rony, thank you for joining us today. So, let me just kick off by asking you two questions back to back – so what are the main objectives of ESCAP? Rony, you are the head of the subregional office for Southeast Asia, one of the five sub regional offices – I believe, so what are your main responsibilities as head of the subregional office?

Rony: Yes, thank you Denis. First of all, it is a privilege to join this inaugural podcast. It is always good to join with yourself and your institute in terms of learning more about what the UN is doing with respect to ASEAN. So just in response to your question of what are the objectives of ESCAP, ESCAP, is an organization that fosters cooperation among the 53-member states and 9 associate members in addressing the sustainable development challenges. So, our members comprise of countries in the Asia Pacific – from as far as Afghanistan all the way to the Pacific for example like Vanuatu, Fiji. So, the regional commission itself, ESCAP, are one of five regional commissions. So, the head of the UN itself is based in New York but we have satellite secretariats in five regions besides the Asia Pacific. So, the secretariats functions basically to help develop and generate practical knowledge and provide technical assistance and capacity building to these countries that they serve. As you know, we have the 2030 agenda for the UN, and here at ESCAP, we also work towards assisting, facilitating and supporting countries in the Asia Pacific on the 2030 agenda. For example, in Southeast Asia, we work with the national partners, not only governments but also CSOs, private sectors, NGOs and so on, in terms of implementing them to our intergovernmental frameworks and agreements and other relevant institutions. And in terms of what ESCAP does at the national level, we have five main objectives or at least outline of the initiatives that we work with countries is promoting inclusive economic growth, enhancing regional connectivity through transport, trade, energy and so on. And also, we promote advancing social development and as part of the 2030 agenda – we promote sustainable development. And number five is, as you know, achieving any SDGs require cooperation and partnerships both at the regional as well as global level. And in terms of your second question, what is it that we do as part of ESCAP, as you mentioned, we are part of five subregional offices in the Asia Pacific. So, for Southeast Asia, this is the most recent subregional office. This is based in Bangkok, established in 2019. So similar to the other subregional offices, our main focus, at least in Southeast Asia, are the 11 Southeast Asia countries. As you all know, ASEAN is part of that, and we working very closely with SEA or ASEAN in terms of achieving the SDGs. And basically, it is to strengthen their contribution both at the national, regional and international level for sustainable development. So that, it is in line with the priorities of SEA. And again, what we do, is deliver knowledge products, capacity building and we also work with countries at the regional level, basically through the

ASEAN-UN plan of action. So, this is our form of intervention and we also – the recent plan of action, covers the period of 2021 to 2025. And we also have the complementary road map which puts together both the ASEAN vision 2025 and the 2030 agenda. So, these are the frameworks of cooperation or partnership so that ASEAN and the various UN specialised agencies such as FAO, ILO, UN women, UNEP and so on can contribute to ASEAN's own objectives of poverty eradication, infrastructure connectivity and so on. So, I guess, this is just in general, of what we do at ESCAP and also under the UN flag.

Denis: So, you mentioned working with ASEAN and SEA, at the national level and also at the regional level. But we know that there is also a lot of diversity, economic diversity, within ASEAN member states, there are different levels of economic development so priorities might be different depending on member states. So how do you work or coordinate at the national level with member states and at the regional level – which I assume you work with the ASEAN secretariat.

Rony: Yes, of course. When we talk about regional organizations like ASEAN, it is important to engage them both at the regional level through the ASEAN secretariat and also through their ASEAN sectoral bodies at the various levels such as the leaders, ministers, and at the working level. But at the same time, we want to ensure that there is bilateral cooperation where initiatives at the national local level and even at the subnational level can take place. Because as you know Denis, when we talk about the impact, it is really at the country level that we work with. So, it is important that these initiatives or its resolutions made at the global level – at the UN level, all translates into initiatives that get transposed into national law, rules and regulations and have an impact at the community level in order for them to better understand the global issues. So of course, when we work at member states, this is where to diversify or distinguish between the countries themselves, as I mentioned earlier – ASEAN is a very dynamic region. Countries have various political, cultural, social structure and economic as well – you know some are centrally planned, market driven- so we have to take into consideration in terms of how we approach them. Although, as you know how ASEAN works, there is an agreement at the regional level but when we work at the national level this is where things get to differentiate. Because some countries may be advanced or developed in terms of their infrastructure, legal, physically and so on. But it is those countries, the lesser developed ones, that we need to provide more capacity building, provide more resources. So here at ESCAP, we focus on those countries but we also tap on the expertise, resources of the more developed countries. And this is where South to South cooperation really comes in. These countries provide their expertise, the lessons learnt, the knowledge that they can convey to these countries so that they can go through the transition much faster – understanding the challenges and issues much better. But again, this really depends on how the governments themselves would like to approach. Because there are no one-sized fits all for these member states, so we are very mindful of that. And in any implementation at the national level, we always go through a consultative process where they will understand the issues, that whatever comes out of it, the outcomes, outputs of the initiatives are taken in and they can be adopted in some form as rules or regulations in the country or at the subnational level. But in the end, it is all supporting their own development agenda. So of course, when we work with governments, we try to ensure that it is part of the long-term objectives, so that it is not a one-off trade off. So again, we are mindful of ensuring that any regional initiatives are supported by national mandates and activities.

Denis: So, let's talk about the regional level, so ASEAN community has a vision by 2025 and the ASEAN community has – I believe, 3 main strategic pillars – the ASEAN Economic

Community, the ASEAN Socio-cultural community and the ASEAN political and security community. So which pillar do you work most closely with and in a way – it is also quite cross-cutting right? So how do you work with that?

Rony: Well for ESCAP, we cover economic and socio-cultural because that is basically our mandate as a commission for Asia Pacific. And for political-security, we leave it to our colleagues in New York to cover that side of the cooperation or pillar. So here, we really focus on economic and social sustainable development so that includes trade, social development, transport, energy and environment. So, these in itself are very wide, comprehensive, complex, complicated issues that you rightly mention that are both intertwined and interconnected. So, this is where we try to ensure that there is policy coherence and integration – the economic and social pillar. So, when you ensure trade efficiency, we also make sure that the environment is also well-maintained or kept, because you do not want have a situation where all the resources are used up in terms of trying to achieve economic growth but then the implications for the social side, cultural side and environment – there is a negative impact. There has to be a balance and this is where ESCAP tries to put into the policy framework, tries to build capacity of officials, government agencies as well as stakeholders to ensure that any policies the national level takes into consideration all these factors. At the same time, it does not deplete natural resources, does not affect those that are vulnerable – for example - the minority groups, those that are affected or impacted the most – in this case it could be the women and children as we have seen. So that is why it is important that there is an interagency coordination both within social affairs ministry, the labour ministry, environment, agriculture and so on. So, this is where we try to look at topics or address issues at a thematic level rather than just at the sectoral level – which has been the case for some time with ASEAN. So, this is where we at least try to provide the perspective of how the SDGs cover many aspects – they are multisectoral, but whatever one sector does, also has implications to other sectors.

Denis: We know that the COVID-19 pandemic over the past few years has had a devastating economic and social impact on the region. So how has that pandemic impacted the process of achieving the SDG goals? We know that there is an agenda – the UN has an agenda for 2030 to achieve the 17 sustainable development goals. So how has that affected progress among the ASEAN member states?

Rony: Well quite a bit really, the impact has been devastating. As countries in ASEAN was striving to achieve or making very good progress in achieving the SDGs by 2030, then came along COVID-19, and the pandemic you know, at that time, nobody really knew how long it would have lasted right? We were all preparing for the short-term. But the impact was devastating because it really showed that whatever infrastructure we had – trade, social, was not really there or at least not as good as what we thought it would be – in terms of responding to the crisis and the crisis really hit a lot of these countries quite bad. So, you witness that many things were just shut down – services, and overall tourism was hit badly. And for Southeast Asia, tourism – in many countries - is the number one industry right. Because airlines, travel, hospitality was just not functioning. And of course, these had implications to the people. Livelihoods were affected – both in terms of health – there were many deaths, people were sick and they were not able to get the medical services that was required, because one the medication or vaccines were just not available at the time, and the medical support was just not ready to attend to all this surge in people getting sick. So, the total effect – really - was that it caused challenges and disruptions at various levels where countries were already struggling or making little progress in some of the SDGs before the

COVID – are now even facing much more challenges because the system that was being built up either did not function well and needs to be fixed but then some were just a total breakdown. For example, supply chains and SMEs were just totally wiped out and there even some of the financial services were not functioning to provide support to these countries. So, all in all, the COVID affected the economic both in terms of increasing poverty in the country, it affected the food security – making it food insecurity, the nutritional level of the children in Southeast Asia were affected – so you know the pandemic strained a lot of the healthcare systems and resources, and very much diverted the attention and resources for long term development in terms so in a way this affected SDG 3 – in terms of health and well-being. And also, the shutdown affected many of the schooling systems in SEA, particularly in the rural areas even more than the urban areas that have access to education; and the quality of education pretty much went down – where you had a shift from personal, physical classroom to online. And you know a lot of the countries did not have that telecommunication infrastructure. And of course, when we talked about those who reacted, gender has always been a concern – even before COVID- where inequalities have disproportionately affected women and girls - this is under SDG 5 – increased. And this has been a concern, particularly in the lesser developed countries. And with respect to climate action and environmental sustainability, again, pollution went up as you can see from the pollution that was caused from let's say the delivery of food to the household to again marine pollution. Environmental conservation - there was a lapse because basic resources at the national level was being affected. So, all in all, it was just devastating for the countries in Southeast Asia.

Denis: When you talk about the pandemic also having an inadvertently environmental impact as well right, because during that time, that was increased use of facemasks, and PPEs and increased use of single use plastics. As we move forward towards post-covid world, what is your office doing? What is your subregional office doing to help ASEAN member states to rebuild their economies? You mention about many setbacks, right? So how are you helping them?

Rony: We say that the pandemic– at least in terms of the virus – is now well-managed. We have vaccines, we have `hospitals, the medical services are up and running. But the impact is still there Denis because the social infrastructure still needs to be improved because COVID has shown evidence that those that were the most vulnerable or those that did not have the necessary resources somehow all showed up – and these were mainly from the informal sector. So, government agencies now have to ensure that all these people and systems needs to be included so that the government who has now taken positive or good responses to the pandemic can prepare themselves for the next pandemic because we can never know when that will come. So that is why governments are now building their infrastructure – their social infrastructure. And that is what ESCAP is also helping in terms of policies and preparedness. But at the same time, to ensure that these people who are mostly affected are included in the system. So, when we talk about health, economic and even the political impact of COVID, cuts across all Southeast Asia. And we are helping governments to ensure – through our various programs, they focus not only in terms of the short-term stimulus measures but also look at the long-term policy changes and measures to build back better. And that involves ensuring that you address the needs of the vulnerable groups – people in the informal economy, women, girls, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees and so on. So, all these need to be taken into consideration. And also, we also stressing the need to bridge the digital divide across Southeast Asia because what we have seen that this can be not only as a tool but can also help build the economy better by ensuring inclusiveness. So not only facilitating day to day needs but also to ensuring that those that are not part of the system can now be part of

it. And I think, beyond the national, when we look at trade, we saw that COVID affected not only one country but also neighbouring countries. So digital transformation can also help alleviate the trade relations between countries in Southeast Asia. So, these are the things that we are working with countries, making sure that access to financial resources. Digitalisation is part of their tool to improve or build back better. But at the same time, ensuring that all countries in the region have the necessary frameworks or platform to not only recover but build back better from the COVID-19.

Denis: I think you are right Rony, and I think when we talk about digital connectivity, in many ways, the pandemic has kind of widen the economic divide and has also widened the digital divide among different member states. There's a lot of work to be done to strengthen digital connectivity. Let's talk about the future – especially about the younger population and the next generation who are going to be the main beneficiaries of the sustainable development goals by 2030. So, what is ESCAP doing as a whole in trying to reach out to the younger generation and as well as other stakeholders.

Rony: That's a very interesting question, Denis. Because a lot of the time, when we talk about ASEAN, we talk about officials, we talk about chambers of commerce, private sector, businesses, and even SMEs. But another important stakeholder in all this, is really – you know - focusing on the youth. And that involves not only youth organizations but also working with universities who are trying to better understand how to cope with pandemics like COVID, how to deal with climate change and all these global issues and how they can participate in being active and having their own agenda for the future. So, this is where ESCAP has many youth platforms or youth forums to encourage youths to participate in the 2030 agenda. So even in Southeast Asia, we work with many universities here in Southeast Asia, to better understand SDGs. Because their involvement, their participation is very important, because it is they who will decide the direction that will be taken beyond 2030 beyond 2050. So, we need to prepare them by not only informing them and building their understanding of what SDG is but also involving them at least in how the policy making works. So that is why when we have our own SEA SDG forum at ESCAP, we invite the youths to share their perspectives, to share what they are doing in terms of addressing the various SDGs in SEA. And then we take them on board and we have them discuss with policy makers, we help them to have substantive discussions with experts from the various UN agencies to ensure that their work is taken into consideration and mandated as part of the whole UN system. So, they are a very important partner in this, if you will, because again a lot of our policies will have an impact in their future, so it is very important to always engage them in our various political platforms and active participation on the national level. They are very interested, they are very engaged and they are very active. And it is just about providing them that space to ensure that their voice is heard.

Denis: I think when we talk about ASEAN, we know their policy makers will start to work on a new economic blueprint post-2025 and I am assuming the same goes for the ASEAN community vision post-2025. You work very closely with ASEAN and the ASEAN secretariat, what would be your wish list of new initiatives that should be included in that future strategic vision?

Rony: We have to ensure that renewable energy transition is taken into consideration. We have to stop looking at fossil fuel as a means and at the same time into renewable energy but also provide space for businesses and governments space to do it because energy transition is not instant- it takes time. Governments that have provided already investments in these areas

need to have alternatives – we need to make sure that governments have these other options as they move towards renewable energy. Another initiative that needs to be taken into consideration is ensuring gender mainstreaming or women empowerment. You know, that has to be at the forefront in economic development so we need to ensure that these are all embedded in the principle and practices across all sectors and policies within ASEAN member states. Another would probably be deepening economic integration, you know removing barriers to trade and investments within the region, to reduce tariffs and so on. That has been ongoing, but has to be part of the listing. Another would perhaps be enhancing connectivity, both physical and digital infrastructure, to facilitate trade, investment, movement of people, services and so on. So that has to be part of it. We mention connectivity related to the digital transformation. We have to promote and innovate the digital economy itself because that is one way of not only fostering innovation but also promoting inclusivity. Another would be first and foremost, supporting sustainable development, you know making sure that you integrate sustainable development principles into economic policies and initiatives – and that means including promoting green and inclusive growth, supporting clean renewable energy. Another, that we saw from the COVID, is did affect M and SMEs. So, we need to strengthen SMEs and their entrepreneurship. Because as you know, SMEs are the backbone of ASEAN economy, in some countries it is as high as 80%, but then they also provide the very foundation of a lot of the livelihoods of people and community in Southeast Asia. So, we need to strengthen their capacity. And by that, I mean providing finance, promoting entrepreneurship, technology transfers and so on. And I think one last list that should be included is strengthening regional cooperation and partnership. That is a very important element. Because in ASEAN, it is one of the most successful regional grouping or blocs. And even countries or groupings within ESCAP's own subregions, are looking to ASEAN as a model for how economic trade and cooperation could be. And this is due to the leadership of ASEAN themselves in trying to foster communication, build partnerships not only within Southeast Asia but also globally. So, these are the things that I think should be included when we talk about a wish list if you will. But beyond that, Denis, I think I would also like to include a to do list of things. So, we have number 1, is the various UN-ASEAN frameworks, declarations and resolutions, they are all there. Countries need to complete them, they need to undertake them. There are just too many to list, but there are very clear indicators that if ASEAN wants to progress, they have to make sure that these are implemented. And of course, a second, would be related to the 2030 agenda. It is to undertake the national SDG prerogatives and initiatives. These are very critical to the future and success of the country individually but regionally as a whole. So, countries need to take their voluntary national reviews seriously because it is at the national level – where we mention earlier – has the most impact. So, SDGs at the national level are linked to the success of ASEAN as a whole, achieving the 2030 agenda. And number 3, is to provide the necessary resources and financial capacity and so on to these UN frameworks, ASEAN framework and to address the SDG prerogatives. We believe that there are resources, but again, it is up to the political will to ensure that they are implemented. And to me, as part of this to do list, these are all doable, Denis, it is just of setting the priorities there at the national level, at the regional level, and ASEAN is well on its way to have or to develop a post 2025 agenda that will have far more success than the vision 2025 that it has completed.

Denis: Thank you very much Rony, for taking the time today to speak with us and I think it was useful for you to highlight for us not only a wish list but also the to do list to support ASEAN to achieve its goals by 2025 and beyond. As a final word, I think from this podcast session, we have certainly learnt a lot on ESCAP's role in ASEAN, how the institution continuously supports the development of the ASEAN community both at the national level

and at the regional level. We also learnt at how some external events like the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted the ASEAN region and the importance of working with different stakeholders toward achieving the sustainable development goals. Thank you again for taking part in the first podcast episode, and I hope that all of you will look forward to the coming episodes ahead. Thank you!

*The podcast was recorded on June 26, 2023.