

Asia-Ready Webinar Series

Building a Sustainable Future: Vision for a Haze-free ASEAN

The Asia-Ready Webinar Series is co-curated with various partners to allow youth to gain a better appreciation of the regional developments and a greater awareness of Singapore's interconnectivity with the regional markets.

Sat, 27 Feb 2021

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Online Event



About the Webinar

Speakers

Mr Benjamin Tay – Executive Director, PM Haze

Ms Stephanie Lim – Senior Executive, Regional Corporate Communications (Smallholders and Landscape Projects), Musim Mas

Synopsis

Singapore experiences smoke haze from time to time, with the most recent incident in 2019 and the worst in 2015 where schools were closed, and outdoor activities and delivery services were suspended.

With the effects of climate change intensifying, coming years may see the haze problem recur or even worsen, bringing a variety of environmental, economic and health repercussions to Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

Fortunately, youths are becoming more vocal and active in the fight against climate change, offering a beacon of hope for the future. What are the main challenges in protecting the forests in the region? And how can ASEAN youths step up to fight climate change and contribute to a more sustainable future?

This webinar was brought to you by the National Youth Council (NYC) and the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA).

What We've Learnt

What is Transboundary Haze

The transboundary haze in Southeast Asia is a form of air pollution typically caused by forest and land fires in Indonesia, which often happen on peatland. Transboundary haze has been a recurring issue in Southeast Asia during the mid-year dry season, with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore as the most affected countries. Major drivers of deforestation in Southeast Asia include: commodity-driven agriculture (including palm oil), forestry (wood products), and small-scale subsistence agriculture (growing food for both own consumption and global supply chains).

Why Does Transboundary Haze Matter to ASEAN

The transboundary haze impacts several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. Peatland, a type of wetland rich in carbon, releases carbon dioxide and other climate change-causing pollutants when it burns. It also causes severe health hazards, especially for those with pre-existing respiratory ailments. As the fires burn in one country, the smoke can spread to neighbouring ones, impacting geopolitical relations and economic activities within ASEAN. The 2015 transboundary haze, which was the worst incident in recent years, cost Singapore \$1.83 billion overall, or \$468 per resident. The incident also led to school closures, while outdoor activities and delivery services were suspended.

Sustainable Palm Oil and a Haze-Free ASEAN

The palm oil industry has often been linked to the haze. Oil palm trees are replanted every 25 years to maintain its efficiency. Proper replantation incurs high cost and is labour

intensive, as compared to the slash and burn method which is more straightforward. Should we then boycott palm oil?

According to studies, palm oil is present in close to 50% of the packaged products we find in supermarkets. It is 10 times more efficient than other oil crops, is highly versatile, and is an important source of livelihood for millions of farmers.

Thus, advocating for haze-free or sustainable palm oil, rather than boycotts, will contribute towards all SDGs. For instance, as consumers, we can opt for sustainable palm oil products that are certified by the globally-recognised Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), which requires sustainable management of peatland and offers protection for biodiversity.

Questions Answered

By Mr Benjamin Tay and Ms Stephanie Lim

What are your thoughts on imposing carbon tax as a preventative measure?

It is good to have a carbon tax, but it is challenging to implement it across national boundaries. For example, if Singapore imposes a carbon tax on pulp and paper companies emitting carbon, it will only apply to operations within Singapore. Companies which have operations worldwide can also avoid the carbon tax imposed in that country by simply relocating to another country which does not have such measures.

With about 40 million Indonesians relying on palm oil for livelihood, carbon tax has real-life implications. We should therefore think of other measures that companies can take to reduce carbon emissions, such as participating in greenhouse gas reduction programmes or adopting low-carbon technologies that have been developed. In addition, there is a lack of established baselines for understanding the impact of degraded peatlands on carbon emissions. There is also no universally accepted metric to calculate carbon emissions on degraded peatlands. There is a need to develop more capabilities before we look at solutions such as carbon tax.

What are some ways that ASEAN nations can support more action on sustainability?

ASEAN operates differently from the European Union (EU). There are various standards and expectations regarding sustainability in use across the region. For instance, the definition of a forest differs amongst different ASEAN member states.

That said, ASEAN has a big stake in environmental sustainability. The region is seen as the frontier for possible conservation of forests, where investments are made to protect natural areas. There is a need to better understand the challenges on the ground – how do we as people living in Singapore better understand sustainable rural development in other ASEAN countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia?

As a small country, how much of an impact can Singapore have in sustainability?

While Singapore does not have the land size, we can leverage our status as a financial hub. Specifically, there are various ways we can contribute towards green finance. For instance, as the movement for the environment, social and governance (ESG) practices gains traction, many banks are implementing measures to prove that companies that they invest in abide with sustainability standards.

Movements such as the Singapore Green Plan 2030 will also bring green job opportunities. This means sustainability will increasingly be integrated into the workforce, and thus, capacity building on sustainability will become more important. Everyone in a company working across various department needs to have some kind of knowledge about what sustainability looks like in their line of work.

Sustainability should be the norm throughout the company, not just an offshoot department.