DISASTERS IN COVID-19
IMPLICATIONS FOR NEXUS GOVERNANCE

Policy Report

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Alistair D.B. Cook
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, its effects have been seen across society the past year. What had started as an emergency response to curb the deadly disease has emerged into protracted crisis management straddling the boundaries of humanitarian and development actors, with significant implications for governments and non-state actors. The global reach and consequences of COVID-19 has highlighted the need to move beyond individual sector responses towards more comprehensive and systemic thinking. A nexus approach that bridges sectoral divides is therefore essential for how states and societies respond to emerging security threats.

Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic has proven to be extremely formidable with more than 107 million cases and 2.3 million deaths reported globally as of February 2021.[1] Southeast Asia was the first region affected by the COVID-19 pandemic outside of China, with Thailand reporting the first case in early January 2020.[2] While some countries in the region have gained a measure of control over the pandemic, others have not. As of February 2021, the number of known COVID-19 cases in ASEAN countries had exceeded 2.2 million, with infections continuing to surge in various countries.[3] Like most humanitarian crises, this pandemic has compounded the effects of pre-existing hazards and tensions in the region.

Disasters are increasing in frequency and intensity while deviating from their usual patterns. In 2018, almost half of the 281 disaster events worldwide (including eight of the 10 deadliest disasters) occurred in Asia and the Pacific.[4] With growing environmental degradation, the number of disasters, particularly climate-related hazards, has risen steadily. According to the UN Asia-Pacific Report 2019, the average annual loss for the region due to disasters was approximately USD$675.4 billion, a four-fold increase since the previous report in 2017.[5] As such, it has become more difficult to apply historical records for analysis and to inform policy.

While the region's prior experience with SARS in 2003 had prepared countries somewhat, the scale of COVID-19 has dwarfed previous pandemics, even for the leaders who responded early to the crisis such as Singapore and Vietnam.[6] With a global pandemic on its hands, it is time for the region to reflect on its approach to

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[1] World Health Organization. "WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard." https://covid19.who.int; John Hopkins University & Medicine. "COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University." Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020. https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html

[2] World Health Organization. "Listings of WHO's Response to COVID-19." 30 June 2020. https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/29-06-2020-covidtimeline

[3] Center for Strategic & International Studies. "Southeast Asia COVID-19 Tracker." 22 September 2020. https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0#ASEAN

[4] United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. "The Disaster Riskscape Across Asia-Pacific: Pathways for Resilience, Inclusion and Empowerment." *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2019.* https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/Asia-Pacific%20Disaster%20Report%202019_full%20version.pdf

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Huong Le Thu. "Why Singapore, Taiwan and Vietnam have been effective in fighting COVID-19." *Australian Strategic Policy Institute: The Strategist*, 16 April 2020. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/why-singapore-taiwan-and-vietnam-have-been-effective-in-fighting-covid-19

the intersection of multiple crises. The nexus approach is a multi-sectoral collaborative approach that allows for burden sharing between the various actors involved in the region's responses to COVID-19 and natural hazards. This approach informs longer-term planning and can better position governments to lead in managing future crises. This policy report aims to adapt this approach to the intersection of disasters and pandemics in the Asia-Pacific.

Methodology

This policy report was prepared based on information gathered through desktop research and 20 semi-structured interviews with multiple actors. These included participants from the international humanitarian community, and government, private sector, and civil society organisations in several ASEAN states. The interviews were conducted online using structured open-ended questions. Each session lasted between 50 and 90 minutes.

Interviewees were first selected through desktop research via convenience sampling. The snowball sampling method was then applied due to the sensitivity of the topic, as well as the difficulty of accessing subjects with the target characteristics. This method entails asking the selected participants to refer others with similar views or situations to participate in the research.[7] The snowballing sampling method aids in the development of trust between the researchers and the subjects due to perceived familiarity with the first set of subjects.[8]

Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, in-person fieldwork was not possible. Instead, the interviews were conducted using online audio and video meeting platforms. The limitations to this study included the hesitance of some interviewees to fully engage through an online medium due to a perceived lack of confidentiality. Moreover, based on the convenience sampling process and the specific background of certain participants, the results cannot be generalised to the broader public. However, these results can be used to gain a deeper understanding of how ASEAN societies respond to emerging threats.

[7] Mahin Naderifar, Hamideh Goli and Fereshteh Ghalaei. "Snowball Sampling: A Purposeful Method of Sampling in Qualitative Research." *Strides Development Medical Education* 14, no. 3 (Summer 2017). Doi: 10.5812/sdme.67670

[8] Nissim Cohen and Tamar Arieli. "Field Research in Conflict Environments: Methodological Challenges and Snowball Sampling." *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 4 (2011): 423–435. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343311405698

Disaster-Pandemic Nexus

What is the Nexus Concept?

The nexus approach is a multi-sectoral approach requiring collaboration among various actors or sectors. It is a strategic and holistic style of thinking that considers long-term implications across multiple areas, as well as the balancing of social, economic and environmental goals. In the case of COVID-19, this may involve different ministries in a national COVID-19 taskforce, who had to assess the various risks and their interrelationships, rather than viewing any one perspective in isolation. The institutionalisation of information-sharing or knowledge-sharing practices to inform the operational practices of the different ministries was a good way to overcome siloed processes.

Developed in 2017, the nexus approach had been implemented by the United Nations (UN) through its "New Way of Working". This approach centres on "collective outcomes" ahead of siloed working styles and "can be described…as working over multiple years, based on the comparative advantage of a diverse range of actors, including those outside the UN system, towards collective outcomes".[9] Although the nexus approach was viewed as a viable model for collaboration between different sectors at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, little nexus thinking had been put into practice, with the various actors reinforcing the "usual" siloed approaches instead.[10] Early efforts to develop the nexus approach had focused on bringing together the Triple Nexus of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors as a first step in demonstrating the importance of inter-sectoral and trans-sectoral approaches.

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[9] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Policy Development and Studies Branch. "New Way of Working." OCHA, 2017. http://agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/20170228%20NWoW%2013%20high%20res.pdf

[10] Damian Lilly. "What Happened with the Nexus Approach during the COVID-19 Response." International Peace Institute, 19 June 2020. https://reliefweb.int/report/world/what-happened-nexus-approach-covid-19-response

Disaster-Pandemic Nexus in the Asia-Pacific

Disasters and pandemics (or more broadly health, for the latter) are mutually reinforcing, with discussions being focused on the stronger links.[11] Together with the increase in incidences of infectious diseases including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the study of the disaster-health nexus has become particularly relevant. It has also become clearer that public health issues can worsen the impact of disasters, increase the recovery period and undermine future attempts at comprehensive disaster governance. Humanitarian responses alone are unable to address the impact of COVID-19 on people.[12] The need for ongoing support to national health systems would require preventive mechanisms, preparedness planning and coordination with regional, national, and local authorities, as well as the private sector and non-governmental organisations. Investments would also be necessary to plan ahead for future risks.

In Southeast Asia, disaster governance developed quickly after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. This is evidenced by the legally binding ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in 2008, and the subsequent establishment of its operational arm, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre). Until recently, such developments have not extended to the management of pandemics.

While terms like "cross-sectoral", "inter-sectoral", "multi-sectoral", "whole-of-nation", "whole-of-society", "whole-of-government" demonstrate awareness of the multiplicity of policy dimensions that emerge from the nexus approach, regional policymakers remain hesitant to put the approach into practice. For instance, at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, there was a push for the AHA Centre to broaden its mandate to include public health emergencies, thus leveraging a pre-existing mechanism as part of a cross-sectoral approach together with the health sector.[13] This led to the ASEAN Strategic Framework on Public Health Emergencies and

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[11]Ilan Kelman. "Catastrophe and Conflict: Disaster Diplomacy and Its Foreign Policy Implications", *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–76. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/24056006-12340001; Charlie Whittaker et. al. "A disaster diplomacy perspective of acute public health events." *Disasters* 42, no. S2 (August 2018): S173–S195. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12306

[12] Sarah Dalrymple. "Looking at the coronavirus crisis through the nexus lens – what needs to be done." *Development Initiatives*, 8 April 2020. https://devinit.org/blog/looking-at-the-coronavirus-crisis-through-the-nexus-lens-what-needs-to-be-done/?nav=more-about

[13] ASEAN. "Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)." 14 April 2020. https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/FINAL-Declaration-of-the-Special-ASEAN-Summit-on-COVID-19.pdf

the announcement for the creation of the ASEAN Regional Centre on Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases in November 2020.[14]

With the cost of disasters rising in the region, and the escalation of infectious diseases further complicating humanitarian responses, there is a need to bring together the threads of disasters and health to further examine (how/why) complex humanitarian emergencies turn into protracted crises.[15]   By analysing these situations through the nexus approach, the aim would be to reinforce and strengthen the capacities that already exist at regional, national, and local levels, rather than creating new capacities that would lead to further problems of coordination between different levels of governance. Given the necessary sectoral expertise in the region, collaboration that draws on intersectoral experience could strengthen and inform a strategic and holistic response.

Nexus Approach – Conceptual Dynamics

"Planetary Health" is a potential manifestation of the nexus approach that is gaining traction in the region. Defined as the "the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends", this concept seeks to encapsulate the intersectionality between natural systems and human health. It also emphasises a collaborative and multi-sectoral approach to examining issues within this field.[16] During the study, it became evident that this concept had emerged in the regional landscape as a useful tool for actors — both governmental and non-governmental — in assessing the links between animal health, environmental health, and human health in the wake of zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19.[17]

The idea of "Humanitarian Diplomacy" has also emerged as an alternative to overcoming the siloed nature of individual ministries during times of crises. It allows the state to integrate the capabilities of its ministries including defence, disaster management, and health, to facilitate aid to another state, while continuing to lay

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[14] ASEAN. "ASEAN Strategic Framework for Public Health Emergencies." 12 November 2020. https://asean.org/asean-strategic-framework-public-health-emergencies

[15] United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. "The Disaster Riskscape Across Asia-Pacific: Pathways for Resilience, Inclusion and Empowerment." *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2019.* https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/Asia-Pacific%20Disaster%20Report%202019_full%20version.pdf

[16] Sarah Whitmee et al. "Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on planetary health." *The Lancet* 386, no. 10007 (2015):1973–2028. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)60901-1

[17] The Lancet Planetary Health. "The bigger picture of planetary health." *The Lancet* 3, no. 1 (January 2019). Doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(19)30001-4

the groundwork for their long-term relationship. For example, during the COVID-19 outbreak, many states had participated in humanitarian diplomacy via the delivery of vaccines, masks, medical equipment and staff to other states. While disaster-related activities cannot be directly relied upon to forge substantial connections or achieve fundamental progress in foreign policy, such sectoral diplomacy can catalyse future policy goals by drawing on established relationships in the region.[18]

Challenges to the Nexus Approach

Using a nexus approach allows for burden sharing and long-term planning between the various actors involved in the region's responses to the current pandemic and natural hazards. A commitment to the nexus approach was prioritised at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. However, there remain significant challenges including the absence of a common vernacular between the sectors, non-alignment of planning frameworks between various actors, specificity of funding requirements, protection of the independence of the humanitarian space, as well as the existing siloed nature of the humanitarian sector. It is the silos themselves and their individual "eco-systems" that prohibit any meaningful collaborative effort.[19]

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[18] Ilan Kelman. "Catastrophe and Conflict: Disaster Diplomacy and Its Foreign Policy Implications." *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–76. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/24056006-12340001; Charlie Whittaker et. al. "A disaster diplomacy perspective of acute public health events." *Disasters* 42, no. S2 (August 2018): S173-S195. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12306

[19] Marc DuBois. "Searching for the nexus: Why we're looking in the wrong place." *The New Humanitarian*, 7 January 2020. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/1/7/triple-nexus-international-aid-Marc-DuBois; International Council of Voluntary Agencies. "Topic 1: The "nexus" explained." August 2018. https://www.icvanetwork.org/system/files/versions/ICVA_Nexus_briefing_paper%20%28Low%20Res%29.pdf; Sarah Dalrymple. "Looking at the coronavirus crisis through the nexus lens – what needs to be done." *Development Initiatives*, 8 April 2020. https://devinit.org/blog/looking-at-the-coronavirus-crisis-through-the-nexus-lens-what-needs-to-be-done/?nav=more-about

Policy Recommendations

1. **Establish comprehensive assessments, plans, programmes, and results frameworks at the country level to respond to COVID-19**

   A partnership between civil society, and government and private sectors, created KitaMATCH in Malaysia. It is an independent, national-level collaborative platform founded as a short-term response to the current COVID-19 crisis, with a longer-term vision of strengthening the nation's humanitarian crisis preparedness and resilience.

   Similarly, states should look at establishing a national data-driven platform that matches funders with community projects while acting as the basis for coordination. Actors from different sectors could utilise the platform as a trusted avenue for engagement that optimises humanitarian support to affected communities.

2. **Develop knowledge partnerships to inform strategy with operational experience**

   A key priority for organisations should be to activate institutional memory through partnerships with the academic communities and independent policy think tanks. This is particularly important for humanitarian organisations due to their high staff turnover rate. Institutional memory must move beyond identifying lessons to reflecting on them to inform future decision-making.

   As such, systematic appraisals and reflections of past experiences ought to be captured and made accessible to others within and outside an organisation. Nexus thinking can cultivate a more proactive institutional memory through knowledge partnerships. Within organisations, communications, operations, and partnerships teams should be convened to put nexus thinking into practice.

3. **Enhance interoperability across ministries and with stakeholders**

   Interoperability within and between ministries – particularly the health, disaster and defence sectors – have proven vital to address the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a challenge that has emerged in this study is the absence of a common operational picture across government ministries. The absence of

interoperability disrupts communication and information-sharing due to differences in organisational culture, priorities and language.

This is compounded by information over-classification, restricting the knowledge pool to a select few within an organisation, and impeding cross-sectoral collaboration. Frameworks to ensure a "need to share" approach, rather than the current "need to know" approach, should be the default to enhanced interoperability.

4. Increase multi-sectoral engagement through military collaboration with civilian actors

With the global challenges posed by COVID-19 varying in scale and nature, a multi-sectoral and whole-of-society approach is vital. With their surge capacity and efficiency, militaries are key to a government-led "whole-of-society" approach. Militaries should enhance operational frameworks and further define their role as humanitarian actors to leverage their niche capacities in areas such as logistics, transportation, distribution of relief items, and building infrastructure to support civilian-led humanitarian responses.

5. Empower local and trusted humanitarian actors

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of local staff and organisations, particularly for large international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who rely on international staff. With the disruption of international travel, most organisations have had to rely on remote contact and local staff members. This underinvestment in local capacity has shown a gap in trust and capacity, with NGOs in sectors not directly affected by COVID-19 likely to see a strain on resources. After all, the need caused by the pandemic's indirect effects, such as widespread job losses and increased poverty, is no less urgent. As such, international NGOs would need to implement their Grand Bargain commitment to make funding arrangements simpler and more flexible. With more reliable funding streams, local offices or partnered NGOs would be able to develop technical expertise and improve operational abilities to ensure sustainability. Localisation efforts should reinforce and strengthen the capacities that already exist at national and local levels, from investment in actors to equipment and suppliers.

6. Create or adapt a civilian unit for surge capacity in times of crisis

States should create or adapt a civilian unit of prepared and qualified individuals who can be deployed in an emergency situation, like Australia Assists. Funded by the Australian government, Australia Assists is a programme that involves a stand-by roster of expert civilians — both national and international — who would step up in times of crises.[20] These experts include firefighters, police officers, medical officers, and other technical specialists that draw on expertise outside and within the government sector. In emergency situations, these specialists would work with governments, multilateral agencies, and communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from natural disasters and conflict.

Although Southeast Asian states generally prefer to rely on their own militaries for humanitarian relief efforts, civilian units would be particularly useful in sensitive situations or low-intensity disasters, where deploying a military force is inappropriate. Such units could be rapidly mobilised and sent in as part of a state response when needed.

7. Invest more resources in multilateral and regional health mechanisms

A weakness of ASEAN is its dependence on external donor funding (or low financing from within the region). Despite the creation of a vaccine, COVID-19 is likely to remain even after the pandemic ends. The indirect consequences will compound long-term vulnerabilities and set back sustainable development goals. Given the clear transnational impacts of the pandemic, substantive investments in multilateral and regional health mechanisms is important. Ensuring the ASEAN Regional Centre On Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases is sustainably funded, mandated, and integrated into the ASEAN Community is essential. Building a "whole-of-society" approach, with links to individual sectors, would be key to this Centre's success.

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[20] Australian Government. "Australia Assists Factsheet." Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020. https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-assists-fact-sheet.pdf

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The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a think tank and professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An autonomous school, RSIS' mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. With the core functions of research, graduate education, and networking, it produces research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-traditional Security, Cybersecurity, Maritime Security and Terrorism Studies.

NTS Centre conducts research and produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness and building the capacity to address non-traditional security (NTS) issues and challenges in the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The Centre addresses knowledge gaps, facilitates discussions and analyses, engages policymakers, and contributes to building institutional capacity in areas which include: Climate Security, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, Food Security, and Nuclear Safety and Security. The NTS Centre brings together myriad NTS stakeholders in regular workshops and roundtable discussions, as well as provides a networking platform for NTS research institutions in the Asia Pacific through the NTS-Asia Consortium.

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