Algo: Nature-based solutions for enhancing climate resilience in Southeast Asia

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THE year 2020 has reminded us that a healthy humankind is impossible without a healthy planet. From the familiar impacts of climate change to the systems shock brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, all nations experienced more dire impacts of disrupted ecological balance, triggered by harmful human activities.

We must never lose sight that what lies in nature is not the root of our problems, but the road to true sustainability.

Among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the least prioritization and progress are Goals 14 and 15, corresponding to biodiversity and ecosystems. Their decline would undermine up to 80% of the targets under the SDGs related to key issues such as poverty, public health, and climate change; this has been exemplified by several global crises being experienced today.

With this context, it is clear that key to the economic development of Southeast Asia is the protection, management, and restoration of its biodiversity and ecosystems. The region hosts around 20 percent of all plant and animal species and four of the world's biodiversity hotspots. It is also home to the biggest blue carbon stock in the world, with the largest areas of mangrove swamps and seagrass meadows found in Indonesia and the Philippines. This, along with the 500 million hectares of tropical forests, represent significant potential for absorbing excess carbon dioxide from the environment.

However, the region is not exempted from global trends for biodiversity and ecosystems. Factors such as increased demand for goods and services, urban expansion, and institutional failures have driven the loss of habitats, overexploitation, and other indicators of ecological degradation.

The loss of biodiversity and ecosystems would result in higher socioeconomic losses for Southeast Asia, especially when viewed through the climate lens. The degradation of carbon sinks such as forests and blue carbon results in less absorbed carbon dioxide from our atmosphere and oceans, leading to higher warming. It would also cause losses in livelihood opportunities for communities and ecosystem benefits critical for adaptation, including the provision of food, water, and fuel, nutrient cycling, and flood regulation.

Furthermore, Southeast Asia itself is one of the most vulnerable regions to the impacts of climate change, posing grave threats to natural and human systems alike. Limiting global

warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial temperatures by 2030 is perhaps the most important goal needed to be achieved to address this crisis, which is especially critical for the region.

The case for nature-based solutions

There is no question that developing nature-based solutions (NBS) is a necessity to address the climate emergency and enhance the resilience of biodiversity, ecosystems, and communities. This has been recognized globally, with NBS being one of the five primary themes of focus on the road to the 2021 UN climate conference (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland.

While the case for developing NBS is undeniable from a scientific, environmental, or moral lens, the same has not been as strong from an economic perspective. Despite the potential to provide a third of the global mitigation action necessary to attain the 1.5-degree target, less than three percent of global climate finance is allotted for NBS.

Recent studies are making the business case for enhancing investments and other actions for developing NBS, including in Southeast Asia. A joint report led by Conservation International showed that the potential climate change mitigation and financial benefits brought by reforestation efforts surpasses those from corresponding engineered solutions. The protection of tropical forests in the region alone may result in USD27.5 billion worth of return-on-investment every year. The advantages of NBS over man-made solutions are even greater when factoring in additional benefits in terms of ecosystem services, reducing disaster risk, and increased resilience of social systems.

Realizing the potential for NBS also needs improvements in existing domestic governance. For instance, mainstreaming ecosystems-based adaptation into national planning across Southeast Asian countries is key to more inclusive and effective development policies. This may include integrating ecosystem considerations, such as assessments of ecosystems services and associated benefits and risks to societies, into strategies, measures, and objectives related to climate change adaptation and disaste risk reduction.

Southeast Asian governments must also overcome existing governance issues such as weak institutional arrangements, lack of adequate financial resources, and lack of capacities for monitoring, reporting, and validating quantitative indicators for implementing relevant policies and programs.

The need for measurable targets and other stronger commitments for developing NBS must be presented in each country’s Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), or their self-determined pledge of measures towards limiting global warming and increasing climate resilience.

Successfully deploying NBS in a vulnerable region like Southeast Asia requires the buy-in of not just governments and businesses, but also communities, civil society groups, and other sectors. Without this collective approach, reversing our destructive trends that became extremely pronounced in 2020 would continue to this year and beyond.

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