

## **ASEAN AND THE PANDEMICS: SOUTHEAST ASIA COPING AGAINST COVID-19**

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**I**n a crisis scenario caused by the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemics, a number of social, political, and economic vulnerabilities, which were coming up in the past few years, are aggravated. This set of vulnerabilities do not limit itself to a local reality, since it exposes some deficiencies at the national and international levels. Regional mechanisms for integration and multilateralism, promoted by international organizations, have been an option used as countries are facing the virus. The exchange of information and data about infected people worldwide, the development of a cure, or even a vaccine have been at the top of international institutions' discussion agenda, and the Southeast Asian countries apparently do the same.

The Bangkok Declaration, elaborated in a regional conference between Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia, had made official in 1967 the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Many factors led these countries to agree to come up as one and create their own regional organization. One of these can be described as the common desire to avoid that the region, inserted in the Cold War tensions, was used as a stage for great powers to protect its interests (BROINOWSKI, 1990, pp. 5-7).

Furthermore, the southeast Asian countries were willing to face problems related to economic growth, political and institutional stability together. In exchange, there needed to be a collective compromise to not harm each other's sovereignty along the way. Beeson (2008, pp. 20) believed that their newly independent existence made them

demand this compromise as a safeguard, inasmuch as defining self-determination as the ultimate limit to regional integration.

Moving further, the Association began to acquire more institutional robustness from 1976 and this process kept going until the end of the 1990s. At that first moment, the ASEAN Secretariat was established, which was and is until these days responsible for creating consensus about regional agendas and its resolutions. Moreover, it was also the beginning of an enlargement of member states participating in the initiative, as it included countries such as Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, respectively (SEVERINO, 2008, pp. 4-5).

Being part of a regional organization, ASEAN members have already joined each other to face complex challenges. For instance, there was a regional economic crisis which fell upon the southeast Asian countries in 1997. According to Jones (2012, pp. 107-109), this crisis was about the financial sectors suffering from the banks falling out and from the big inflow of speculative capital coming into the national economies all over the region.

However, regionally dealing with a sanitary crisis seemed to be a novelty to the southeast Asian integration framework. The COVID-19 outbreak imposed challenges to ASEAN members, whereas it affected fundamental agendas to regional cooperation, as economy and finance, as well as impacting more sensitive agendas, like human rights, supply chain connectivity, and food security.

An article published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (2020) argues that Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore registered 299.000, 267.000, and 58.000 infection cases until September 27th, 2020, respectively. It was also expected, according to this article, due to the fact that the regional economy would be directly affected by the new pandemic.

In one of its reports taking into account the financial situation of the southeast Asian countries during the pandemic, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said it was expected that regional growth would be around -0,6%, not so great of a result as the preview expectations circled a regional growth of 4,8% to 2020. A little more pessimistic, the World Bank (WB) projected growth that could range from -1.5% to -5%, with the exception of the Vietnamese economy which would spike a positive rate of 1.5% (SEARIGHT, 2020).

Based on these economic projections and also on the disease development framework around the world, there was an institutional movement pushing ASEAN members to create a collective response to face the pandemics. This could be justified based on data published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2020) asserting that the health care systems of countries like Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia were very vulnerable to high demands of services, electing the regional initiative as the best opportunity for mitigating the crisis effects without great costs.

Therefore, it was assured that creating and enhancing regional mechanisms related to public health was fundamental, through optimizing the coordination between members and with extra-regional countries, mainly because it would be possible then to safeguard regional health security. Thereafter, it was declared during the 36th ASEAN Summit the establishment of the Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies (RRMS) and the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund (ASEAN, 2020, pp. 3-6).

Taking into account the predictions about the economic retraction, a sector of great importance for ASEAN and which has become a source of concern is agriculture, due to its responsibility for 72% of jobs in Laos and about 33% of the Thai economy in 2018. Thus, the maintenance of food security in the region was considered another concern, as preventive measures characterized by the low mobility of the population due to the pandemics contributed to: 1) the lower availability of labor, goods, and purchasing power; 2) the discontinuity in food distribution; and 3) the uncertainty of maintaining food prices (FAO, 2020a, 2020b).

In this sense, in June 2020, through greater economic cooperation and supply chain connectivity between ASEAN members, the Hanoi Action Plan was concluded. This joint plan aimed to facilitate the distribution of essential goods such as food and medicine by land, sea, and air, to the point of ensuring the minimum availability of these products to the greatest number of people possible, maintaining the prerogative of stability of food security in the region (ASEAN, 2020c, pp. 2-4).

Amidst the pandemics, political tensions influenced by the securitization of health and ongoing domestic adversities were also noted. In the Cambodian case, the political authorities, even in the face of a few national cases of COVID-19 infected people, passed the Emergency Law in April 2020, giving Prime Minister Hun Sen indefinitely

unlimited political powers, surveillance of the media, and restriction of media information (DEFALCO, 2020).

A similar situation occurred with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who authorized the security services to shoot people who did not comply with the isolation rules (BILLING, 2020). In addition, episodes of ethnic intolerance took place in Myanmar, through the application of discriminatory policies created by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. Nachensom (2020) demonstrated that the police had the premise of arresting people who entered the country illegally, in addition to exposing the names and addresses of newly repatriated people in state newspapers. This would mainly affect the Muslim minority Rohingya and discourage the search for health facilities by vulnerable social groups.

However, as highlighted by Heng (2020), although ASEAN aims to promote regional stability, the organization has not built a structural framework effective enough to combat the increase of authoritarianism, as well as guarantee respect for the lives of nationals, migrants, and refugees. This may stem from the prerogative from which the regional organization was created, known as the “ASEAN way”, which safeguards the norm of non-intervention and respect for the sovereignty and self-determination of nations participating in the integration process.

Considering how the effects of COVID-19 could influence the well-being, freedom, and political expression of society, in May 2020 the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights highlighted the paramount importance of the member countries and sectoral bodies of the organization in creating responses to the pandemic that included human rights as an essential aspect. To this end, it was recommended to safeguard the right to health access inherent to all people, regardless of gender, nationality, and social situation, and that free access to information needed to be promoted, to preserve civil rights and freedom of expression (ASEAN SECRETARIAT NEWS, 2020).

Regarding international cooperation to tackle the pandemic, it's possible to mention the ASEAN Summit Special Declaration on COVID-19. An example of a partnership established on this declaration, based on the principle of collective combat of the virus through cooperation, was the so-called “Mask Diplomacy”. In this project, the Chinese government donated 75,000 surgical masks for distribution and use among the countries

belonging to the Association, in addition to health equipment delivered individually to the Southeast Asian countries (ASEAN, 2020b, pp.1-2; CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, 2020).

Concurrently, there was also the ASEAN+3 meeting, composed of ASEAN member countries in dialogue with other three Asia countries: China, South Korea, and Japan. At this meeting, the present countries agreed to promote the circulation of essential goods such as commodities, food, and medicines extra-regionally, as well as efforts to strengthen the resilience of supply chain connections between these governments (ASEAN, 2020d, pp. 1).

In terms of foreign direct investment, the United States allocated approximately US\$ 77 million to strengthen the public health system of ASEAN member countries (TAMARA, 2020). At the same time, the European Union has allocated around € 800 million for regional cooperation plans between both organizations and activities of the World Health Organization (WHO) in the region. Individually with each member, there was a commitment to developing programs related to economic recovery budgets, policies to protect vulnerable communities, and humanitarian assistance (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2020).

Hence, it was noted that ASEAN's fight against the effects of COVID-19 was based both on multilateral measures adopted between its member countries and on extra-regional cooperation with different states and other international organizations. Nevertheless, on issues such as the violation of human rights during the pandemics, institutional aspects as for instance respect for sovereignty and non-intervention prevented the Association from adopting more incisive measures. Thus, while cooperation policies in the fields of health and the economy had greater institutional support to be carried out, the inability to contain attacks on vulnerable social groups and cases of state authoritarianism may become issues for future debates regarding the regionalism promoted in Southeast Asia.

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How to cite:

DIAS, Maurício Luiz Borges Ramos; HONORATO, Raí Luis. ASEAN and the pandemics: Southeast Asia coping against Covid-19. **Cadernos de Regionalismo ODR**, São Paulo, v. 4, 2020, p.96-105. ISSN: 2675-6390.

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