

# The Commitment of ASEAN Countries to Fight Climate Change

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Scientific studies published in the past few months have confirmed that our world is facing a climate emergency. Yet, the global commitment to the Paris Agreement is flagging. At [COP25](#), the UN Climate Change Executive Secretary, Patricia Espinosa, urged people to act: *“Each year at COP we are told that the window of opportunity could close soon ... My message is this. We need your decisions. We need your leadership. We are out of time.”* Such urgency could not be illustrated more starkly than by the climate vulnerability and stresses of Southeast Asia.

Cities in Southeast Asia are threatened by rising coastal sea levels. According to [Climate Central](#), by 2025, more than 66 million people in this region will be living below sea level, with the worst affected cities including Ho Chi Minh City, Bangkok and Jakarta. The sinking of cities in this region could be worse than previously understood, and the number of homes located below the level of average annual coastal flooding could be far more than previously thought.

Furthermore, the Mekong River basin – home to 70 million people – [has been experiencing harsher and more frequent droughts and flooding](#) because of climate change. This undermines the notion of hydropower as a

sustainable or appropriate solution for energy access. Academics, NGOs and scientists are urging decision makers and the international community to move towards suspending dam construction in favour of solar and other renewable options as the only way to mitigate this [climate stress](#).

An international research team found that [the ASEAN countries could be among the losers](#) if they do not get ahead in the renewable energy race. However, if they do manage to move forwards, they will be better positioned in the growing markets for renewable energy technologies and will defend their reputation in the international system.

## **Strong commitments are long overdue: young people have lost patience with governments**

There is no doubt that access to modern energy services is essential. At the same time people yearn for leadership from ASEAN in combating climate change while ensuring energy sustainability.

Young activists all over the world have taken to the streets to demand that leaders take immediate action against the climate crisis. They skipped classes to take part in environmental





strikes to put pressure on their local leaders in the hope that politicians and policy makers would take them seriously and respond with a wise decision and a real promise with prompt actions.

While such demonstrations were triggered by Greta Thunberg, a Swedish girl whose school strike has attracted international attention, they have also inspired young people in Southeast Asia to demonstrate their climate change wisdom, though to a lesser degree. In Cambodia, [50 young entrepreneurs and students joined the global fight](#) by finding innovative solutions in tackling climate change. In Thailand, a small group of pupils formed a climate strike and submitted [an open letter to the prime minister](#) for his urgent action on climate change.

The purpose of these young people is clear. They are protesting for their future, to send a reminder to the adults, the present decision makers, who have put their future homes at risk. The consequences of slowing down climate action will be adverse impacts that are borne by the young people of today. The youth have lost confidence in their governments. This can be seen in the results of a recent [YouGov survey commissioned by The Star](#) in which 64% of 1,101 young Malaysians expressed their concerns about climate change, while 95% believed that Malaysia was not yet prepared to deal with climate change impacts.

## Coal Phase-Out Challenges

Coal consumption has been reduced globally. However, this is not the trend in Southeast Asia, where coal remains the dominant energy source for electricity generation. Hence, the UN General Secretary, Antonio Guterres, has warned [ASEAN countries to cut their reliance on coal](#) to tackle the climate crisis.

For Indonesia, as one of the largest coal producers and consumers, coal phase-out will make a significant GHG emission reduction in this region. According to the Institute for Essential Services Reform (IESR), a Jakarta-based think tank, [Indonesia would have to stop burning coal by 2048](#) in order to contribute to limiting global warming to 1.5oC. However, this is unlikely, given that 39 coal plants are under construction, 68 are planned, and the installed coal-fired capacity is set to double over the next decade.

Likewise, although the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte has expressed his support for renewable energy, there is no mandate to change the country's [coal-dependent roadmap](#). With climate change not being a priority under his presidency, the Philippines will struggle to meet its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to the Paris Agreement, even though a majority of the cabinet voted in favour of ratification.

The ASEAN countries need to seriously take coal financing into account while planning their future energy supply. Many banks that used to be major financiers of coal have decided to stop financing coal projects. For example, [Standard Chartered has stopped financing three Southeast Asia coal plants, worth a total of nearly \\$7 billion](#). In the coming years, more banks plan to pull out of coal. This could put the ASEAN countries, which are highly depended on coal, into a situation of not only energy but also economic crisis.



## Voices from the ASEAN Countries at COP25

At the two-week COP25, which was held in December 2019 in Madrid, world leaders were urged to make serious progress on climate action. At the opening plenary of the conference, Malaysia – which was also representing the Like-Minded Developing Countries, such as China, India, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Egypt and 19 others – emphasised that the COP25 [outcome must not be mitigation centric](#). Adaptation to the adverse effects of climate change and addressing the losses and damages that are incurred was also critical. Thus, speaking earlier [at the 74th United Nations General Assembly](#), the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad stated that the principles of equity must prevail to ensure that the climate burden is not shifted to developing countries in the post-2020 period. He also emphasised that sustainability needs to be adopted by all people at all levels, especially in addressing the impacts of climate change. While appreciating the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, it is also important for ASEAN countries to commit to GHG emission reduction to the greatest extent possible in order to mitigate the risk of climate change impacts.

On the other hand, the [Minister for the Environment and Water Resources, Masagos Zulkifli](#), confirmed that Singapore will [update the climate pledge it made under Paris Agreement](#). In addition, Singapore will also support other developing countries, for instance by co-organising a regional workshop for ASEAN countries relating to updating climate pledges, which will include sharing best practice and available support. It is anticipated that ASEAN countries will not only update, but also enhance their second NDCs by 2020. According to the World Resources Institute (WRI), the term 'update' could include the provision of more transparent data and information, while 'enhance' could mean pledging to reduce more emissions or taking additional measures to boost resilience to climate impacts.

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