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ASEAN: Cooperative disaster relief after the tsunami*

Heide Haruyo Gentner**

1 Introduction

On 26 December 2004, a tsunami caused by an earthquake in the Indian Ocean struck the coasts of four ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) member countries: Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar and Malaysia. Altogether, the tsunami killed more than 200.000 people in these four countries as well as in Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka, and devastated their coastal regions (SOAa, 1/2005, p. 5).

In this article, I would like to examine how ASEAN responded to the tsunami disaster and define to what extent the member countries cooperated. The main question is, whether or not there was effective multi-lateral disaster relief activity among ASEAN member countries. If there was such cooperation, how was it organised? If there was no effective cooperation, what were the reasons? Hence the question arises, whether or not ASEAN is able to manage disaster relief by its own efforts.

Not only natural disasters, but other problems such as terrorism are issues in the East Asian region. We must therefore examine how ASEAN, founded in 1967, is able to manage disasters and how the organization does cooperate in cases of disaster. To improve disaster relief in the future, it is indispensable to analyse the attitudes of the ASEAN members countries.

The main premise of the paper is, that there was no cooperative disaster relief at ASEAN level, because the countries are unwilling to make any compromises concerning their sovereignty. To answer the main question, the problems of interacting within the organization will be pointed out in Section 2.2 following. For a better understanding of the difficulties, the natural sources and the political situation will be studied in detail in Section 2.1. In Section 2.3 the ASEAN declaration on disaster relief will be presented. Section 3 points out to what extent ASEAN members were affected and how they responded to the tsunami disaster. The reaction of non-ASEAN countries and the assistance given for disaster relief will be discussed in Section 4. In Section 5, the main topic of this paper will be examined, followed by an analysis of the problems of organizing disaster relief.

2 The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)

2.1 The ASEAN member countries – political and economical background

The regional differences between the South East Asian countries are very great. Most nations have been ruled for centuries by royal dynasties, which did not interchange with one another (Frost 1990: 2). Thus, each country developed a distinctive culture within its own region, resulting in various religious, political and economical systems. Also, the language and religion of each country became very distinctive, setting the stage for different political developments. This explains why various ASEAN countries are today governed by democracies, communist regimes, military autocracies or even monarchies.

Brunei is known for its rich oil reserves. It has a relatively high average income per inhabitant (2004: US\$ 14,412) (AA 2005b). Since independence from Great Britain, the country has been ruled by a Sultan, governing absolutistically. Wealth is distributed unevenly, resulting in a small but very rich upper class and a broad lower class. Thus, Brunei still has the characteristics of a Third World country. One of its official foreign policy guidelines is the maintenance of sovereignty and independence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2005).

Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy. After gaining independence from France in 1954, a parliamentary democracy was constituted (Samnang 1998: 108-110). Starting in 1970, the Communist “Khmer Rouge“ engaged in a civil war, bringing their leader Pol Pot to power in 1975. During his terror regime, which lasted only until 1979, approximately 1.5 million people died. In Cambodia, there are no serious problems due to ethnic demands. However, the people’s support of the ruling monarchy is not very firm, causing legitimacy problems for the current political system (Narine 2004: 435).

Indonesia has a population of approximately 220 million people and is the world’s most populous Muslim country. In the province of Aceh there are separatist rebels who have been fighting the Indonesian government since the 1970s. The conflict has attained the level of a civil war. Due to great ethnic diversity, Indonesia

has had to struggle with regional instability, weakening the power of the state. Apart from the problems of separatism, Indonesia also faces the threat of Islamic terrorism and economic problems (FAZ, 30.12.04).

Laos is ruled by a one-party government, the Revolutionary People's Party (LRVP), since 1975. Although economic growth rates are fairly high, per capita income is very low (US\$ 438) (AA 2005c). The government follows a foreign policy of isolation (Rüland 1998: 274).

Malaysia has been exposed to various foreign influences during the last centuries, leading to ethnic diversity within the population. Following British colonial occupation, the country has managed to become one of the most stable in the region. Also, ethnic coalition policies have led to strong political stability. The majority of the Malay ethnic group supports the ruling party, so that disadvantaged minorities may accept the state in a rather half-hearted way (Narine 2004: 432-434). The per capita GDP amounts to US\$ 9,700 (CIA 2005a).

Myanmar has been ruled by a military regime for the last 43 years. Following an uprising in 1988 the government suspended the constitution, which has not been reinstated. Although there are no dependable economic data on Myanmar available, it is considered one of the poorest countries in the region, with an estimated per capita GDP of US\$ 1,700 (Gateway 2005).

The Philippines were a Spanish colony for many centuries. After the American-Spanish war of 1898, the Philippines came under the influence of the U.S. which held military bases on the Philippines into the 1990s. The island state is a democracy. It is one of the poorer countries in South East Asia, with a per capita GDP of US\$ 1,051 (AA 2005a). Today, the government is plagued by regional conflicts and separatist movements (Narine 2004: 434).

Singapore is the wealthiest ASEAN country and a good example of how citizens tend to be more supportive of the government when there is economic prosperity. Yet, the state does not allow for a strong opposition and uses intimidation against members of non-government parties. Nevertheless, the 4.4 million inhabitants live in a prosperous country boasting a per capita GDP of US\$ 27,800 and economic growth rates of up to 8.1 percent (CIA 2005b).

Thailand is the only country that has not been colonized. After a period of military coups during the twentieth century, the monarchy was able to stabilise the country in the 1990s and establish democracy. However, the government is still struggling to find a more democratic relationship towards society (Narine 2004: 435). Meanwhile Thailand has gained economic stability, boasting a per capita GNI of US\$ 2,190 (World Bank 2005b).

Vietnam underwent many years of civil war, escalating to a war with the USA. In 1975, the last US troops left the country. Today, Vietnam is ruled by a communist one-party system, similar to Laos. Nevertheless, Vietnam's economy is growing at a fast rate. This is partly due to the government allowing foreign investment dollars entering the country. Foreign direct investment in

2003 was 8% of the total GDP, US\$ 1,450.00 million (World Bank 2005a).

2.2 Cooperation within ASEAN

With the founding of ASEAN in 1967 there was no intention to build an "Asian Union" (taz, 18.7.95). The member countries were not willing to give up sovereignty rights. The new institution was supposed to demonstrate closeness externally and supply a platform for dialogue, but without any interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN member countries. On 8 August 1967, the five founding members signed a paper in Bangkok, called the "Bangkok Declaration" (ASEAN 2005b). This has only a declarative character, without any obligations according to international law. Beside the acknowledgment of national sovereignty, they wished to promote effective cooperation, leading to regional solidarity.

The ASEAN member countries, in particular the five original members – Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines – have been practising a series of unique diplomatic norms, which comprise policies of non-interference in the internal affairs of other members – the so-called "ASEAN way". This form of dialogue is a determining precondition for ASEAN's multilateral diplomacy. Hence, it was possible for the ASEAN countries to practice dialogue without criticizing one other officially (Katsumata 2004: 237f.). This encourages continuous consultation and leads to a common consensus. Subsequently, members do not have to bow to decisions that are detrimental to their own national interests (Narine 2004: 437f.). In general ASEAN strongly emphasizes the national sovereignty of member states.

ASEAN is characterized by a lack of formal political institutions (Katzenstein 1997: 29f.). The member countries have been reluctant to transfer any decision-making authority to supranational institutions (Mattli 1999: 171).

Additionally, there is another insufficiency within the ASEAN decision making: declarations and papers of intent are not binding. This situation can be explained by the fact that each government in South East Asia is still struggling to gain legitimacy within its own country. Whereas great efforts are made to solve these domestic problems, there is little willingness to achieve greater firmness in international relations (Narine 2004: 428).

2.3 ASEAN and disaster relief

On 26 June 1976, during an ASEAN meeting in Manila, the "ASEAN Declaration on Mutual Assistance on Natural Disasters" was signed. The declaration pointed out that in case of a natural catastrophe there might be a lack of financial and human resources. Also, it was agreed to provide a catastrophe-stricken country with materials and medical supplies. Also, each country was supposed to designate a national government agency acting as an internal coordinating body. These agencies should gather and exchange data pertaining to natural

disasters. These government bodies were to implement relief cooperation plans. Yet the declaration failed to call for a central institution that could have organized an ASEAN-wide relief effort (ASEAN 2005a).

Five years before the Manila Declaration, in 1971, disaster management experts had already formed the ASEAN Expert Group on Disaster Management (AEGDM). Subsequently, these experts met every two years. The 12th meeting was held in September 2002 in Vietnam. There, the experts agreed on restructuring the AEGDM into an ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM). Also, they decided to intensify their efforts by meeting on an annual basis. Furthermore, the declaration stated that all decisions of the ACDM should be endorsed by the ASEAN states. These endorsements were to be obtained by meetings or by written papers of intent facilitated by the secretariat in Jakarta (ASEAN 2005c).

In August 1997, huge forest fires on the island of Borneo caused immense air pollution in wide parts of the region. A dense cover of smog caused great distress to the population of the region, especially in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and even the Philippines. In September, the so-called “haze“ had reached an intolerable level. In fact, the haze affected the region well into April 1998 (Hund 2002: 169). Similar air pollution problems had occurred before in 1982, 1983, 1987, 1991 and 1994 (Cotton 1999: 331). In September 1995, ASEAN Senior Officials on the Environment (ASEON) had already met in Bali. There, they agreed on establishing a Haze Technical Task Force. Two years later, with the haze of 1997, ASEAN was challenged to act as a single entity, in order to cope with an unprecedented regional problem. Thus in December 1997, ASEAN set up a “Regional Haze Action Plan“. Of all member countries, it was Indonesia which was reluctant to participate. The country failed to adopt and implement a national haze prevention plan. Government officials in Jakarta took a nonchalant attitude towards the haze, claiming it to be a domestic problem. The role of the other ASEAN countries during the haze was also questionable. They acted according to their policy of non-interference, proclaiming the haze a regional problem after it was no longer possible to deny it. Instead of cooperation, the haze caused diplomatic problems and irritations between Indonesia and the countries affected by the crisis. Untypical for the conduct within ASEAN, Singapore started waging a media campaign in order to step up international pressure on Indonesia. The other ASEAN members did not follow up on the Singaporean line, refraining from putting pressure on Indonesia via public platforms. The ASEAN member countries engaged in diplomatic efforts behind the scenes. This sort of quiet diplomacy was supposed to prompt Indonesia to put plans into action which should prevent future hazes. The concessions by the Suharto government were not very substantial. Instead, they were of tactical nature and did not even prove to be permanent. The issue was kept from public scrutiny, and it was only raised within ASEAN meetings and consultations. Hence Indonesia

did not have to fear international embarrassment. Yet, the haze resulted in discussions at the ASEAN level and the implementation of the Regional Haze Action Plan. After Indonesia failed to adopt it, ASEAN reacted by negotiating with the United Nations, thus avoiding internal controversy on the matter (Hund 2002: 170, 177, 179). The weakness of diplomatic means within ASEAN had become evident during the haze crisis (Cotton 1999: 348).

3 ASEAN: Cooperative disaster relief after the tsunami?

Besides killing more than 200,000 people, the tsunami also left millions of survivors without food or shelter. Thousands were injured or fell sick because of sanitary conditions. The coastal regions of four ASEAN members were hit by the tidal wave: Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand. Aceh, a province at Indonesia’s north-western tip, suffered the most fatalities: more than 100,000 persons were killed and about 500,000 were injured or left without shelter. The tsunami also struck the northwestern coast of Malaysia, where the deaths of at least 68 people were confirmed (BBC 2005a). The tsunami killed more than 5,300 people in Thailand: the tidal wave destroyed mainly the touristic infrastructure in the six western provinces. There is little information about the impact of the tsunami on Myanmar. The regime did file reports, claiming that the country to a large extent had been spared by the flood tide (SOAa, 1/2005, p. 7f.).

On January 6th 2005, during the tsunami aftermath meeting, the ASEAN leaders issued a “declaration on action to strengthen emergency relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and prevention on the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami disaster of 26 December 2004“. They expressed their condolences and solidarity. They stated that the tsunami disaster calls for “global response“ and appreciated the vast international help received. Furthermore, they confirmed the leading role of the UN in the disaster relief. ASEAN indirectly admitted their deficit in facing the tsunami disaster and proclaimed their plans for improving disaster relief.

Further, ASEAN leaders stated that they will support the affected countries in rehabilitating and reconstructing. They welcomed the offer of several creditor countries, which were willing to take the financial pressures off affected countries by a “moratorium of payments“. Also, ASEAN leaders wanted to persuade the private sector to participate in the rehabilitation and reconstruction. The ASEAN declaration requested the international community and international organizations, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the European Investment Bank, to give aid to the process of reconstruction and rehabilitation programs.

In order to prevent such a disaster in future, the ASEAN leaders declared their will to extend their regional mechanisms on disaster prevention and mitiga-

tion. This was to be done by training military and civilian personnel in disaster relief operations, as determined in the “ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action“. Further, they stated their aim to put the “ASEAN Disaster Information Sharing and Communication Network“ into action as provided for in the “ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Component of the Vientiane Action Programme“. Additionally, they stated that they would establish a regional instrument for disaster management and emergency response. Another important point in the declaration was the need to establish a regional tsunami warning system on the Indian Ocean and in the Southeast Asia region. They therefore affirmed the need to develop and promote “national and regional human and institutional capacity, transfer of know-how, technology and scientific knowledge“ together with international cooperation and partnership (ASEAN 2005d).

Apart from the ASEAN declarations and ASEAN as the host of the Jakarta Summit, ASEAN as a forum of regional cooperation was not mentioned in the media.

Also, there is not much information available on the reactions of individual ASEAN states to the tsunami disaster – neither in the media, nor on official web sites of the member countries.

The government of Myanmar refused help from other countries. Prime Minister Soe Win stated that his country was able to cope with the catastrophe by itself and that foreign aid should be directed to countries which had been hit much harder (SOAa, 1/2005, p. 8).

But some ASEAN member countries reacted openly to the calamity. Singapore dispatched 700 Air Force and Civil Defense Force personnel for military and rescue operations to aid the relief efforts (Kyodo, 31.12.05). Singapore was one of the first countries to assist Indonesia in managing the disaster relief. Singapore offered to raise its humanitarian assistance to US\$ 3 million.

One day after the disaster, Malaysia dispatched its “Special Malaysia Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team“ to Indonesia. It was the earliest team to arrive at the scene (Bernama, 5.1.05). The Malaysian government announced, that it had dispatched at least 300 soldiers to Aceh. Also, the Malaysian government announced its intentions to set up a relief center, in which at least 10,000 survivors of the catastrophe were to be sheltered (WSJ, 17.1.05). Additionally, at the request of the Indonesian government, the Malaysians sent one of their Royal Navy vessels including personnel to Aceh (Bernama, 3.1.05).

The Malaysian government announced its plan to implement an official tsunami warning system by the end of this year. Brunei has offered to take part in this project, which is said to cost an estimated US\$ 5 million (BBC 2005a).

4 Disaster relief from non-ASEAN Countries

In total, almost US\$ 4 billion have been pledged by the international community.¹ Chart 1 only lists non-ASEAN states, as there is no information available concerning whether or not ASEAN member countries offered donations. The exception is Singapore, which had offered US\$ 3 million.

Chart 1: Government donations for tsunami disaster relief

Country	Donations in million US\$
Australia	77
Netherlands	34
Canada	343
North Korea	0.15
China	83
Norway	183
Denmark	75
Qatar	25
France	66
Russia	10
Germany	674
South Korea	50
Great Britain	96
Spain	68
India	600
Sweden	80
Italy	95
United States	350
Japan	500
Total	3,409.15

Source: BBC 2005b.

Together with UN agencies and several non-governmental aid organisations, troops from the US, Australia, Germany and other nations helped assist the relief effort by supplying supporting measures (WSJ, 17.1.05). A 25-member Chinese search and rescue team arrived five days after the disaster occurred in Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh. The Chinese also sent medical staff to Thailand and Sri Lanka in order to help tsunami victims (Xinhua, 5.1.05). Japan sent 120 civilian emergency workers to the tsunami-hit countries. Great Britain sent two Royal Air Force planes in order to deliver aid to the affected countries. The government of Denmark dispatched a field hospital, transport vehicles and a ship to aid the UN disaster relief. Furthermore 350 military staff, military helicopters, troop transport ships and a military health support team as well as a water purification plant were sent to Indonesia. Germany sent a mobile hospital to Aceh and a military ship with two helicopters and aid supplies. India’s military engaged in

¹Even though the promised donations were generous, the majority of the 38 countries who had promised financial aid had not paid in February. On the other hand, countries who had not pledged any money did contribute later on, e.g. Saudi Arabia gave US\$ 100 million in cash. See *Tempo* Interaktif, 31.1.05.

its largest ever relief operation by sending about 16,000 troops, 32 navy ships, 41 aircraft and medical teams with relief supplies to Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Pakistan send 500 military personnel to Indonesia and Sri Lanka (BBC 2005b).

The US Department of Foreign Affairs initiated a structure that should coordinate international cooperation. By doing so, a more effective relief effort was to be implemented. The coordination was to be led by Washington and centered around a core group of countries, including Japan, Australia and India. This plan did not last very long, since the core group was dissolved after one week. After that, the United States assumed leadership in managing the catastrophe (*Japan Times*, 7.1.05).

On 6 January 2005, Indonesia hosted a summit to discuss the tsunami disaster. Originally, it was proposed to bring together not only the ASEAN leaders, but also the leaders and representatives of Australia, the EU, New Zealand, India, Sri Lanka, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. In total, the leaders of 26 countries and groups attended (Xinhua, 6.1.05).

In his opening speech at the summit, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono on behalf of ASEAN asked the United Nations to form a special body for an effective organizing of aid to the countries struck by the tsunami. He also asked the UN to play a leading role in managing relief efforts in these countries.

At the Jakarta Summit, China announced that it would hold a seminar with ASEAN to discuss a tsunami warning system in the Indian Ocean. This seminar took place on 25-26 January 2005 in Beijing (Xinhua, 6.1.05).

5 ASEAN and the tsunami: problems and challenges

ASEAN as the regional institution in the tsunami-hit area was hardly mentioned in the media. Instead, the US, the UN and the Asian powers China and Japan were recognized as the major players in the relief efforts. The reports mainly focused on ASEAN's contribution in hosting the tsunami aftermath conference. The fact that ASEAN failed to cooperate on disaster relief, mainly contributed to its minor role in public attention.

ASEAN's reaction to the tsunami catastrophe was limited to agreement on the "declaration on action to strengthen emergency relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and prevention on the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami disaster of 26 December 2004" (ASEAN 2005d). In this declaration, ASEAN announced steps which should be implemented urgently in order to minimize the post-calamity damage. This declaration was similar to other papers of intent, which had been put forward after previous states of emergency, such as the haze catastrophe of 1997. The declaration concerning the tsunami makes it clear that ASEAN seems to acknowledge its deficits in coping with disaster relief, especially when ASEAN speaks of having to "strengthen coordi-

nation and cooperation". The declaration shows some powerlessness on part of ASEAN, as it has many institutions but no real central organization, which would have been important for organizing the cooperation of the relief efforts. Thus the principle problems of cooperation on the ASEAN level became evident through the tsunami situation.

Interestingly enough, the declaration does not specify, whether ASEAN should assume a leading role in immediate disaster relief or reconstruction efforts. Further, ASEAN emphasises the need for international aid and the important role of the UN. This chain of reasoning on part of ASEAN shows its inability to cope with a scenario such as after the tsunami. The declaration thus reveals that ASEAN, even after 30 years of existence, has not managed to build up a structure enough to provide a pivoting point for decision-making and immediate response efforts among the member countries.

This adherence to sovereignty leads ASEAN into a system of checks and balances, which in turn lessens the effectiveness of any cooperative project (Fawcett 2004: 444). Another problem of ASEAN is the inability to discuss problems on a public platform. Hence, structural faults are not recognised as such. Rather than admitting to weaknesses within the system, ASEAN states are committed to the principle of a strong state, which does not allow for trying different solutions (Narine 2004: 424ff.).

When Southeast Asian national leaders came together to join into ASEAN, they saw the instability of their own political systems. Thus, ASEAN is the product of a collective aim to overcome fragility on a domestic and regional level. Taking this into account, it is unclear how ASEAN countries will try to achieve a more comprehensive way of cooperating, which would mean giving up some sovereignty (Yamakage 2004: 36ff.).

Only one day after the tsunami had struck, the Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono announced that his government would open up the Aceh region to foreign relief teams. This, despite the fact, that the region was subject to civil war and up to this time was off-limits for all foreigners. Soldiers from the US and Singapore did arrive in the disaster area. Yet vice-president Jusuf Kalle announced that they were only welcome for a limit of three months. The reason for this was the fear of losing control over the civil war region, which in turn could lead to international interference in the conflict. Indonesia has had such an experience with East Timor in 1999 and was therefore extremely wary of the situation (SOAa, 1/2005, p. 5). This is one example of ASEAN countries being reluctant to accept help from foreign countries, even though the offers from abroad were very generous.

The ASEAN leaders tend to proclaim that the solidarity within the association is unassailable (Yamakage 2004: 35). Yet new problems arise with the question of how to implement a tsunami early warning system in the region. Unquestionably, ASEAN should be the key player in this matter. At a meeting on regional cooperation at the end of January, the Chinese Foreign

Minister Li Zhaoxing said that China supports the role of ASEAN in this matter (*The Nation* online, 29.1.05).

Following the tsunami, an early warning system for the whole Indian Ocean region was the subject of several international conferences. So far, there has been no consensus on where it shall be based. Instead, the UN was asked to work out an interim decentralised network (BBC 2005a). Cooperation and coordination are important for an effective warning system. Nevertheless, there have been disputes among ASEAN members about the location of the warning system (*Economist*, 5.2.05). Indonesia, India and Thailand all insisted on being the best country to host the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) (*The Nation* online, 29.1.05).

When ASEAN was founded, it was supposed to demonstrate closeness to the outside, but due to lack of regional identity and mistrust, there is competition within ASEAN states, even in such an important matter as the location of a tsunami early warning system. The fact that ASEAN is troubled by so many internal divisions indicates its structural weakness.

In its declaration of January 6th 2005, ASEAN recognized the importance of the UN in the disaster relief effort and called for international assistance for the affected countries. The tsunami-hit countries also welcomed the global disaster relief assistance. The difference between the regional institution of ASEAN and the global institution of the UN exists due to the interests of their member countries. UN members have no interest in engaging in disputes over disaster relief efforts. Also, they do not have conflicting interests over security issues and do not have to worry over diplomatic consequences arising from actions such as sending troops. Due to the lack of control of ASEAN member states over global institutions such as the UN, the World Bank, the IMF, etc., they seek control over their own association and refuse to let decisions come from the outside (Narine 2004: 424).

As shown in Chart 1, the larger part of financial aid came from overseas governments. This is due to the fact that ASEAN member states were either affected by the catastrophe or did not have sufficient funds. ASEAN practically did not have any means of supplying financial resources for the disaster relief efforts. We should not forget that the economic growth rates as well as the present level of economic development of Asian countries differ widely (Fischer 2003: 12f.). Thus, the lack of resources could be one reason why ASEAN is not able to cope with such catastrophes on its own.

The tsunami disaster made evident the insufficient structure of ASEAN and its inability to deal with disaster relief. This calamity might enhance the pressure for reform. Other crises also lead to a call for reforms. But the problem is that for a more effective cooperation there must be cooperation across national boundaries. In 2000, when Thailand's Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan suggested intensifying the cooperation between ASEAN countries and presented a proposal, especially Myanmar and Vietnam took contrary positions and declared their unwillingness to lose their sovereignty. They

still insisted on the ASEAN principle of non-interference (taz, 25.7.00). This insistence on the principles of the ASEAN-way results in the ASEAN dilemma, namely the inability of the ASEAN member countries to solve their problems by their own efforts.

The various declarations of ASEAN summon up a visionary plan of action. Yet, this differs widely from reality, expressing itself in the insufficient intergovernmental plights of cooperation. This difference cannot be overcome by the principles of the "ASEAN way".

6 Conclusion

ASEAN is often cited in essays as "the most notable example of regional grouping in Asia" (Mattli 1999: 163). Yet, after the tsunami disaster, ASEAN was hardly ever mentioned in media reports on immediate relief efforts. This is part of a pattern exemplified by former failures of ASEAN to engage in disaster relief, such as during the haze catastrophes of 1967 and 1998 (Cotton 1999: 331).

Coordination of mutual interests among the six diverse states is still difficult. One reason is, that the ASEAN member countries are still trying to different degrees to establish their political legitimacy. In addition, they are committed to the ideal of sovereignty even though this may often be impossible to attain (Narine 2004: 428). Thus the importance of legitimacy and sovereignty to the ASEAN member countries remains an obstacle for effective coordination.

ASEAN must realize that there is not only the possibility of major natural disasters in South East Asia, but also the threat of terrorism (Suebsman 2004: 25f.). It is therefore important for ASEAN to strengthen its cooperation and overcome the ASEAN dilemma. Whether or not ASEAN is willing to change its structure and its policy in order to manage future challenges remains to be seen.

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