

**NEAT Working Group on
“Towards Building a Sustainable Society in East Asia”**

Final Report

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1. Background

In East Asia, regional cooperation and integration have been promoted, as seen in the cases of the establishment of ASEAN+3 (APT) in 1997, East Asian Summit (EAS) in 2005, and ASEAN Community in 2015, focusing on the fields of economy, finance, education, disaster prevention, etc. in particular. Especially, economic mutual dependency has deepened as East Asia observed a rapid economic development, which promoted the formation of supply-chain within the region. In the meantime, as the integration progressed, the negative side effects of it including various trans-border threats are spreading regionally and globally. Such threats can only be dealt with the multilateral cooperation, because it would make a major impact politically, economically and socially, therefore no single country is able to combat alone.

Then, what is the global/regional challenge the East Asia is facing today? That is to say, whether we could build a sustainable society and continue the development accordingly, with the Sustainable Development Goals in mind. The “sustainable society” is generally defined as the society in which the natural environment is appropriately preserved, and the development is conducted to fulfill the needs of the current generation while not passing down the cost to the future generation. In East Asia, the building of the sustainable society and its development is being disturbed by the severing environment issues, and various related issues are surfacing.

For example, disaster risks originating from the climate change are rising in Asia, and the ocean is polluted by 8 million ton of disposed plastics annually, posing a serious threat to the marine bio-ecosystem. What makes those issues challenging to tackle originates from the lack of region-wide information sharing platform, or of an environmental education, hence the lack of a multinational cooperation scheme.

Under the framework of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), Meeting of the Ministers of the Environment has been held once a year since 2002, and twice since 2015. The ASEAN+3 Marine Plastics Debris Cooperative Action Initiative that aims to promote environmentally friendly management of plastic wastes and of 3Rs –Reduce, Reuse, Recycle- was proposed, which was widely welcomed at the APT Summit Meeting last year.

In a case of Indonesia, the understandings to the environment cycle were deepened thanks to the environment education given to the youth of the community and females, so they turned to organic farming or growing various products in small units. The

community businesses were further supported with micro-financing, and it generated the cash revenue for those who sell the manufactured farm products (e.g. chocolates, vegetable snacks, etc.), helped decline the number of females and younglings moving out of the city, while in return increasing the number who moves in and remains to stay. In Japan, 'recycle stations' have been placed in the cities to promote habitants-led collection of recyclable products and the environment education. It is observed that the activities related to the recycle station has let not only the reduction of the wastes, but also made the area friendly for senior citizens, single-parents, or children living in poverty to live in, resulted in having strengthened the social capital of the area.

Such good-practice can be adopted in other countries, too, though it still remains to be an example within that area due to lack of measures to analyze it or of information sharing platform. While APT framework has ASEAN Working Group on Environmental Education (AWGEE), providing a platform for a mutual reference on the environment education practiced in the member countries, yet it has not given a function to collect region-wide data of good-practices or to transfer know-hows to abroad. Based on such circumstance, building of a rapid response scheme particularly in the environmental issues is inevitable to further promote the sustainable development in East Asia.

2. Objective

This Working Group examines the possibilities of developing a new approach as well as constructing the network of cooperation on the environmental issues in particular, such as ocean plastic pollution, building of 'Smart City,' the environment education, while utilizing the current existing schemes, to further develop a sustainable society in East Asia. The WG was expected to identify the major challenges, examine possible areas to improve or further develop and prepare recommendations to the APT Summit from the standpoint of Track II diplomacy.

3. Challenges

Given such backgrounds, how shall we consider the possibilities of developing a new approach as well as of constructing the network of cooperation especially on the environmental issues, such as ocean plastic pollution, building of 'Smart City,' the

environment education, while utilizing the current existing scheme, to further develop a sustainable society in East Asia, to further promote the sustainable development in the region? In the upcoming Working Group, we would like to propose to discuss (1) how shall the member states of APT cooperatively tackle the ocean plastic pollution to further promote the sustainable development of the region, and deepen such notion as a region-wide, collective one, as well as to enhance and strengthen the measure internationally; (2) how shall APT members promote its cooperation and enhancement in building 'smart city' concept, and the regional environment education; (3) what kind of system would be created based on a cooperative network to tackle the environmental issues regionally, to achieve a sustainable development.

4. Discussions at the Working Group meeting

25 experts from APT countries and the sponsoring organization, the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR), took part in a working group meeting in Tokyo on 6 August 2019 which was organized in a keynote address and three sessions.

In Session I "Promoting the Cooperation and Enhancement in Building 'smart city' Concept, and the Regional Environment Issues," the idea of "smart city" is not necessarily commonly shared among East and Southeast Asian nations, but this concept is closely related to various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all), SDG 7 (Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all), SDG 11 (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable), and SDG 13 (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts). It also points to some technological elements to suggest the integration of energy, transport and industry managing by the Internet of Things (IoT) and artificial intelligence (AI), by promoting renewable energy resources, the electrification of local communities, and integrated water and waste management schemes, etc. The notion of smart city should go beyond the boundary of the city to include rural communities seeking a fair, resilient, livable, family-minded and environment-friendly society.

In Session II, "Cooperation on Tackling the Ocean Plastic Pollution," each member countries have been conducting efforts of improving waste management, including promoting 3R (recycle, reuse, reproduce), introducing quality environment infrastructure

for final disposal treatments of the plastic debris, enhancing public awareness through information sharing. On the other hand, these are not enough to reduce marine plastic debris, because there is lacking a sense of reducing plastic products. We should take additional ways to reducing plastic products, such as to invent alternative materials of plastic which can be biodegradable with economic reliability, and to promote the change of life style from using one-way plastic products to multi-time use plastic products, and the infrastructure developments (e.g., public water supply). In addition, change of minds and attitudes of ordinal persons are necessary. Therefore, enhancing public awareness of plastic pollution should be targeted for our action and we should to try to change activities of daily lives and economic activities relating plastic pollutions.

In Session III, "Further Development of a Sustainable Society in East Asia," the definitions and agenda of "sustainable society" include very wide aspects, such as wellbeing dimensions of environment, human aspects and economic dimension. In a more narrow sense, it is often considered as reducing pollution of air and water (including ocean), improving sanitation and waste water management, reduction of CO₂ emission and use of renewable resource, more efficient farming technique, and efforts of reducing consumption aiming to 3-R (reduce, reuse, recycle) oriented society, etc. To improve the situations towards sustainable society, there are several pillars of efforts such as: (1) formation of effective plan and goals improving environmental situations (such as country-based SDGs), (2) improvement of infrastructure of reducing waste (improvement of water supply/waste management, etc.), (3) increase of the awareness of the people to preserve clean environment, eliminate waste and needless consumption, and to take actions to promote sustainable practices. (4) improvement of poor governance relating to the environmental issues (such as the lack of responsibility and accountability). In the discussions, the differences of the situations and the level of technology among member countries were also mentioned, but we are sharing the common agenda and importance of the joint actions and intra-regional cooperation to tackle the common challenges.

5. Policy Recommendations

In East Asia, various problems caused by severe environmental issues are hindering the construction of a sustainable society and the development that follows. Therefore, it is necessary for East Asia to promptly act on the environment issues, such as

combating ocean plastic pollution, and building of smart cities. The following are key policy recommendations:

- (1) To create the information-sharing platform for smart cities and ocean plastic wastes in ASEAN+3 and to share the examples of best practices to promote a sustainable society among member countries.
- (2) To galvanize all the stakeholders such as public officers, entrepreneurs, industrialists, financiers, civil society organizations (CSOs), and local people to participate in planning and building a smart and sustainable society.
- (3) To build smart cities by incorporating local culture and traditional wisdom into the blueprint of a sustainable community.
- (4) To educate all generations to be aware of health and environmental impacts of plastic debris and to enhance environmentally friendly practices in daily life.
- (5) To promote additional interdisciplinary researches to precisely grasp current situations and future impacts of the marine debris, by using scientific methods and sharing the results with reliable data.
- (6) To create new market-based mechanisms of effectively reducing waste and promoting alternative material usages.

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