WHERE IS THE SUSTAINABILITY, CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT AGENDA?

Opinion

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The hottest year on record was 2025.

Global warming is not new to ASEAN. Since the Paris Agreement, there have been strides made in shaping regional dialogues and pushing for just transitions. Much of that progress remains underdeveloped, uneven, fragile, and easily overshadowed by economic priorities, no matter how enthusiastically ASEAN pledges action at the Conferences of the Parties each year.

As Malaysia took on the ASEAN chairmanship this year, optimism ran high, but so did expectations. While global geopolitical tensions have shifted much of ASEAN's focus toward trade and economic stability, they have sidelined the very climate commitments that define a shared future. Many of the expectations placed under Malaysia's leadership remain unfinished work. Malaysia may be entering a fast-growing phase of environmental reform, but the sustainability, climate, and environment agenda still misses the mark where it matters most - implementation.

The Second National Climate Change Policy, launched in late 2024, was meant to signal Malaysia's readiness for ASEAN leadership. It replaced the decade-old first iteration with a far more ambitious vision, tying mitigation, adaptation, and climate finance under one umbrella. Yet it avoids answering a fundamental question on how any of this will be delivered.

This mirrors the broader regional pattern Malaysia is stepping into. ASEAN has mastered the art of celebrating frameworks over results; most ASEAN climate frameworks are voluntary, non-binding, and structurally allergic to enforcement. ASEAN operates on a principle known as the "ASEAN Way", which emphasizes consensus, non-interference, and non-binding commitments. As a result, many regional climate-related frameworks, roadmaps, or action plans, such as the ASEAN Climate Change Strategic Action Plan, are non-legally binding and rely on voluntary national implementation. These then get shelved as a design for harmony rather than action, they prioritise not offending anyone over actually protecting anything. Soft commitments allow member states to applaud themselves for attendance, issue ambitious joint statements, and quietly resume business as usual the moment the meeting ends.

The same structural weaknesses are also evident at the city level in Malaysia. The Kuala Lumpur Climate Change Action Plan, launched in 2021, promised key actions by 2025, yet many remain unrealised. Despite its long-term vision extending to 2050, the plan lacks a monitoring and evaluation framework transparent enough to hold the city accountable to its own promises.

Looking into one of the pillars of the Kuala Lumpur Climate Change Action Plan: mobility and infrastructure, there were targets set for 2021 to 2025. In two out of the four goals, they aimed to develop street design guidelines that include universal design for active mobility, and to carry out walkability assessments with residents in 11 parliamentary areas each year.

However, there is little to no information on how far any of that has actually progressed. Some of the monitoring and evaluation indicators they use are too unspecific, such as "volume of water retention capacity created", which does not really equate to what the initiative is really about, nor give a metric to what is needed in this framework.

Over time, Malaysia has become increasingly skilled at projecting ambition. Ten years after the Paris Agreement, national progress still is behind national commitments. Community stakeholders continue to express low confidence in the government's climate delivery, and the distance between rhetoric and reality only grows wider. This recurring pattern, announcing new policies while old promises stagnate, raises an uncomfortable question for Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship: is the country prepared to deliver climate leadership, or merely perform it?

Given the steady production of new climate frameworks, it becomes essential to ask whether these policy instruments are genuinely capable of delivering effective outcomes. International environmental governance has accumulated at least five decades of momentum, from the 1972 Stockholm Declaration to the 1992 Rio Declaration to the 2015 Paris Agreement. Yet a decade after Paris, global and national targets remain unmet. Commitments continue multiplying, while action struggles to take root.

Malaysia's National Adaptation Plan (MyNAP), currently in formulation, aims to align with the Global Goal on Adaptation by identifying priority sectors and strengthening climate resilience for vulnerable communities. Yet many of those same communities still occupy the margins of climate policymaking, despite being the most affected.

If a framework is to be effective, it must begin with communities, not to be treated as an afterthought. Yet there remains a familiar pattern where policies are drafted in isolation, and public priorities are only considered once the document is already finalised. Climate policy is expensive, time-consuming, and resource-heavy; when communities are excluded from these conversations, trust is eroded before progress can even start.
Malaysia's National Planetary Health Action Plan shows that both the country and the global community can lead, when they choose to. The deeper concern is whether these frameworks were ever structurally designed to deliver results in the first place.

The situation becomes more concerning when there is no future-looking policy framework capable of uniting Malaysia and ASEAN under a shared climate direction. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) has already made clear that climate impacts are severe, escalating, and unavoidable without decisive, coordinated action. Yet under Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship, there is still no ASEAN Climate Change Strategic Action Plan 2025–2030. The ASEAN Strategic Plan on Environment 2030 remains nonexistent. Meanwhile, the long-promised ASEAN Centre for Climate Change during Brunei's chairmanship, has not materialised.

When a policy framework doesn't exist, the region defaults to something far worse - discretion disguised as governance. This vacuum leaves the region without clarity, direction, or a shared pathway, precisely when coordinated action is most needed. The result is predictable: fragmented efforts, duplication of work, chronic underfunding, and endless pilot projects that die quietly after the launch photos are taken.

As ASEAN delivered their Joint Statement on Climate Change for COP30, this is the moment to reaffirm resolve, advance collective action, and strengthen regional cooperation in the

face of accelerating global greenhouse gas emissions.

The 2025 Chairmanship did not mark a turning point for sustainability in the way it hoped.

Without a clearer pathway throughout the term, the consistent patterns become an unfortunate inconsistency. Policies must translate into action; years of lobbying that finally put words on paper do not hold weight without accountability and enforcement. When there is no implementation timeline that goes beyond overarching years, delivery milestones can become delayed and accountability suffers.

Commitments get louder but the mechanisms needed to realise them in a tangible capacity, building structure and proper implementation remain underdeveloped or absent. If policy remains only on paper, it won't just be the ink that fades, it will be our future.

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