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Research Paper

Reflexive Governance: ASEAN in Energy Transition

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Abstract

In tackling climate change, there have been numerous angles that need to be addressed. One of the efforts is through energy transition, which involves moving towards the use of renewable energy. The Southeast Asia region, as one of the vulnerable regions to climate change, needs to pay more attention to mitigating this uncertain condition. The responsibilities to do so are not just falling upon each government in the region, but also need to be considered by the leading intergovernmental organization, such as ASEAN. The issue of energy is not a current concern, as the energy ministers of ASEAN Member States have convened annually to discuss it since 1986. In relation to this, the purpose of this paper is to examine how ASEAN, as the leading institution in the region, has been governing to achieve a common goal in terms of renewable energy. In conducting this study, qualitative content analysis will be employed as the methodology, applying the reflexive governance concept to assess ASEAN's capacity through three lenses: institutional learning mechanisms, cross-sectoral participation, and cognitive and normative adaptability. Based on the findings, we concluded that ASEAN, as an institution, has a moderate capacity for governing energy transition. Despite the limitations of this paper, the use of this emerging concept of reflexive governance can serve as an alternative framework for understanding how renewable energy governance should be implemented.

Keywords: *ASEAN, AMEM, Reflexive Governance, Renewable Energy, Energy Transition*

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is among the global challenges that require attention from every sector. It is a global problem of unprecedented scale, not only geographically but also in terms of multiple sectors and actors involved. Based on the latest global public opinion survey on climate change, 87% of the world's population thinks about climate change regularly (UNDP, 2024). The study of (Tskipurishvili, 2022) also explained that each of the last four decades has been continually warmer than any decade that preceded it since 1850. Such a massive undertaking requires a comprehensive global cooperation.

One of the significant efforts in climate change mitigation is the energy transition. According to (Yang et al., 2024) this transition effort will be able to preclude the substantial negative impacts of projected climate change on the ecological environment. Moving towards renewable energy usage is a global effort since we are experiencing the same crisis in terms of climate change. Governments, international organizations, including intergovernmental organizations at the regional level, have been formulating strategies and initiatives in the context of energy transition. ASEAN, for example, is among the leading actors for countries in the Southeast Asia region in configuring energy transition strategies and initiatives. ASEAN, as a regional intergovernmental organization, matters for two reasons. First, more than half of ASEAN Member States (AMS) still heavily rely on fossil fuels

to run their industry and economic growth (Sony et al., 2024). Second, the Southeast Asia region is included in the vulnerable region categorization due to climate change impacts, and moreover, it might imperil its economy and population (Zarim & Sastry, 2024).

This intense circumstance raises a question about how the capacity of ASEAN, as a regional intergovernmental organization, responds to it. Precisely, the question this paper tries to answer in terms of ASEAN's capacity is to what extent reflexive governance has been applied in the context of its role in governing the energy transition in the region. Despite numerous studies on the energy transition in ASEAN, most attention has been focused on the capacity of member states or their energy transition dynamics (Johnstone, 2022; Zhang, 2023; Mu'min et al., 2024). Considering that there is still a need for an in-depth study on ASEAN as an institution, the authors hope this paper can contribute to providing a new perspective on assessing the practice of ASEAN in the energy transition effort. As this organization is characterized by a consensus-based decision-making process, it would be worthwhile to examine how ASEAN provides an adaptive platform for policymaking processes and norm formation. This paper will be structured as follows: in the subsequent section, a more comprehensive background on ASEAN's energy transition will be outlined, along with the reflexive governance principle that will serve as the analytical framework for this study. This framework is chosen due to its fundamental role in explaining the process of collective learning in addressing a complex issue. Then, the research method and how data will be collected are explained in the methodology section. The subsequent part, which is the findings and discussion section, will focus on explaining the results of this study. Lastly, the conclusion will summarize the entire discussion and provide additional recommendations for further study on the related topic.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper will be conducted through a qualitative research method. The capacity of ASEAN will be analysed by using three indicators - institutional learning mechanism, cross-sectoral participation, and cognitive and normative adaptability - under the reflexive governance concept. Specifically, the chosen method is qualitative content analysis, allowing for in-depth observation. According to (Lyhne et al., 2025), qualitative content analysis, which originated in the first half of the twentieth century, was primarily used to investigate the content of newspapers to draw the dominant opinions in a society through the mass media. To put it into context, it allows researcher to have a richer and more comprehensive interpretation of their data. Through this method, the authors will collect all information and narration that are suited to each indicator mentioned earlier. Moreover, the patterns that the authors are focusing on are the frequency, consistency, and evolution of renewable energy explanations. For illustration, when assessing cross-sectoral participation, the authors will examine the number of external actors involved in the ASEAN decision-making process and whether there is a growing number of actors or a changing involvement scheme within this indicator.

The data will be collected from primary sources, specifically the Joint Ministerial Statement (JMS), which serves as the official document from the annual convening of AMEM from 2015 to 2024. In total, eleven JMS documents will be analyzed. Another important official document that will be examined was APAEC 2016 – 2025, which was formulated to support the implementation of the 23% renewable energy target. The ASEAN Energy Outlook (4th – 8th edition) will also be analyzed accordingly, as these documents are interrelated with AMEM. The time range considered for this paper is generally 2015 – 2025, as it encompasses the target escalation of RE in TPES, which was formulated in 2015. For the secondary data, we will obtain information from academic articles that specifically deal with renewable energy, energy transition, global governance in energy transition, and are related to the context of sustainable

development

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Institutional learning mechanism

In less than a month (from the time this paper was concluded), the 43rd ASEAN Ministers on Energy Meeting (AMEM) will be held in Kuala Lumpur. This meeting will be a crucial moment, as phase II of APAEC is also expected to conclude this year. In terms of how ASEAN as an institution has been governing the process, it could be assessed firstly through the institutional learning mechanism. Based on Radtke (2025), continuous learning for related actors and feedback loops are among the necessary elements that can be examined to facilitate reflexive governance. In the case of ASEAN, in the process of fulfilling its target in RE, there have been several mechanisms created to support the learning process for related actors. In 2016, ASEAN Center for Energy (ACE) and Singapore's Nanyang Technological University collaborated in doing preliminary research and capacity building activities in the context of ocean renewable energy development in the region through the Southeast Asian Collaboration for Ocean Renewable Energy (SEAcORE) program (ASEAN 2016). Another collaboration in relation to the learning process in the context of renewable energy occurred in 2020 with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) through the ASEAN-German Energy Programme (AGEP) in developing the FGD on Nodal Network Framework of Research and Development on Renewable Energy in ASEAN.

In terms of feedback loops of policy implementation, collaborative programs with the International Energy Agency (IEA) have been reviewed annually in conjunction with AMEM. In 2019, for instance, they reviewed the extensive range of collaboration between them (ASEAN 2019). Besides IEA, ASEAN also strategically collaborates with the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). Since 2017, their annual discussions have been held alongside AMEM, which extensively discuss global trends that might affect the implementation of ASEAN policies in renewable energy. In 2021, for instance, the discussion highlighted the perspective presented by IRENA's World Energy Transition Outlook, which laid out the necessity to accelerate the global energy transition in order to be in line with the Paris Agreement objective to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C (ASEAN 2021).

Cross-sectoral participation

Following the explanation of reflexive governance by (Feindt & Weiland, 2018), this type of governance can occur if institutional and procedural arrangements involve actors from various levels of governance and/or various epistemic backgrounds and practical contexts. In this context, ASEAN can be considered to have the capacity to do so. The next question that might arise is who the relevant actors were that have been involved in renewable energy efforts, and how ASEAN engaged them in the policymaking process, and also the implementation. In the Joint Ministerial Statement of the 33rd – 42nd AMEM, specifically in the context of renewable energy, there are around 16 different external actors involved along the way. In 2022, the Joint Statement of the 40th AMEM acknowledged those international organizations and dialogue partners who have been helping in the context of renewable energy policy and capacity building such as GIZ, National Science and Technology Development Agency, (NSTDA) of Thailand, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) of Japan, China Renewable Energy Engineering Institute (CREEI), Energy Foundation China (EFC), the Energy and Resource and Institute of India (TERI) (ASEAN 2022).

Moreover, in relation to how ASEAN invited multiple actors to participate actively, another example is when IRENA and IEA were invited to AMEM. Usually, the discussion between them happened during a different meeting, which was still in conjunction with AMEM. However, during the 36th and 37th AMEM, both institutions invited full attendance during AMEM (ASEAN 2018;

ASEAN 2019). Inserting a collaborative notion into this policymaking process, in line with what was stated by Schutter and Lenoble (2010), who explained that in reflexive governance settings, interactions are deliberately shaped to enable the development of knowledge, novel perspectives, and a shared understanding of the common interest that transcends contingent particular interests.

Cognitive and normative adaptability

As defined by Feindt & Weiland (2018), reflexive governance occurs in an effort to reflect on and possibly adapt their cognitive and normative beliefs. To put it into context, it is not just about the adjustment of policies but also in terms of the fundamental value of why specific actions should be taken. In 2015, the 33rd AMEM began with stating that energy sustainability is needed due to rising energy demand against the backdrop of declining oil prices and amidst a volatile geopolitical situation in the Middle East (ASEAN 2015). There was no underlying reason in relation to the climate change crisis at that time. However, it has undergone gradual changes.

In 2016, the importance of the Paris Agreement was mentioned in explaining the urgency to run the new ASEAN Plan of Action on Energy Cooperation (APAEC) 2016-2025 Phase 1 (2016-2020) vigorously. Regarding the alteration of the underlying cause of renewable energy efforts, it was also stated that it was initially based on policies to reduce oil consumption, but later included policies to mitigate the environmental impacts of fossil fuel use, including the potential effects of climate change (ACE 2015). From the strategic framework, ASEAN adjusted the theme for APAEC II, which stressed the point of energy transition. The general theme for both phases was "Enhancing Energy Connectivity and Market Integration in ASEAN to Achieve Energy Security, Accessibility, Affordability and Sustainability for All". However, for the second phase, a sub-theme was added: "Accelerating Energy Transition and Strengthening Energy Resilience through Greater Innovation and Cooperation" (ACE 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents an assessment of ASEAN capacity in the context of renewable energy policies through the lens of reflexive governance. In answering the question of the extent to which ASEAN has played its role, it can be concluded that ASEAN does have the capacity to implement the reflexive governance moderately. Each indicator in the previous section aligns with ASEAN practices, and it can be argued that its continuity would be valuable for ASEAN in addressing climate change issues, which are characterized by constant changes. However, in answering whether this practice can be concluded as the most pivotal element in achieving 23% target of renewable energy by this year, will still be debatable due to the fact that in 2022, the share of renewable energy (RE) in the TPES comprised only 15.6% of the total supply in 2022, a modest rise from 15.4% in the previous year (ACE, 2024).

Moreover, this study has a few limitations, particularly in terms of how ASEAN's practices influence the process of achieving renewable energy targets in the region. First, in terms of methodology, this study focuses solely on a specific time range, which may not provide a solid basis for concluding the effectiveness of ASEAN in governing renewable energy efforts as a whole. Second, in terms of data collection, this study specifically focuses on the targeted official documents of ASEAN, such as the JMS, APAEC, and ASEAN Energy Outlook, which may not fully capture the complexity behind their processes, making them potentially fruitful for further in-depth analysis. Considering these limitations, for the purpose of learning continuity, as suggested by the reflexive governance concept, a wider or different scope of data collection and a more extended time range might provide stronger evidence on how reflexive governance plays its role in ASEAN's renewable energy context. Furthermore, a comparative study with other intergovernmental organizations, using the same analytical framework, would also be beneficial for assessing the contributing factors

in achieving renewable energy goals in the context of climate change.

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