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"AFTERALL, WE LEAVE SOMEONE(S) BEHIND": INVESTIGATING THE DISCOURSES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDG) 7 IN ASEAN

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7 can achieveits goal in ASEAN, which is to ensure that everyone in the region has access to affordable, dependable, sustainable, and modern energy. To achieve the objective of this study, three SDG 7 indicators (2018-2021) were chosen: (i) the percentage of the population with access to electricity; (ii) the fraction of renewable energy in total final energy consumption; and (iii) energy intensity measured by primary energy and GDP. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed as an approach in this study. According to the findings of this study, the discourses around SDG 7 have not adequately promoted collaborative efforts among stakeholders. As a result, SDG 7 may fall short of its goal of providing everyone with access to affordable, dependable, sustainable, and modern energy, leaving someone(s) behind. Thus, it is critical to shift the discourses surrounding SDG 7 to support the collective efforts, by bringing together multiple backgrounds, interests, and disciplines using an interdisciplinary approach.

Keywords: SDG 7, Discourses, Energy, ASEAN, Interdisciplinary.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

It becomes a primary objective of the sustainable development goal (SDG) 7 to realize sustainable, modern, and reliable energy for all [1]. Halfway to 2023, the world is still struggling with unequal access to electricity, and billions of people still rely on conventional solid fuels, such as wood for cooking [2]. Consequently, it raises a question whether the progress of SDG 7 may veer off track. This research intends to assess the progress of SDG 7 by analyzing discourses related to this goal. Discourse delineates the construction and use of knowledge, individuals, behavior, and events through statements, assumptions, concepts, themes, and shared ideas [3]. When it comes to SDG 7, discourses shape how the goal is perceived, dictating how the goal is governed as well as its progress in a community. There is a scarcity of research that examines discourses around SDG 7, particularly in emerging economies, such as ASEAN. Most studies concentrate on examining the prominent discourses of corporate sustainability in more advanced economies to assess power asymmetry relations amongst stakeholders as undertaken by Ofori-Parku and Koomson [4]; or Exploring discourses used in the United Kingdom (UK) innovation policies to assess in what way and to what extent the social and environmental aspects of sustainability have been embedded in the policies as carried out by Tuckerman et al. [5]. Pietarinen et al. [6] also used discourse analysis to comprehend how the concept of sustainability has been framed and reflectd in Finland's forest policy.

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2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study aims at investigating how SDG 7 can fulfil its target in ASEAN, that is, ensuring modern energy access for all in affordable, reliable, and sustainable manner. In this study, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed as an analytical framework to examine not only how SDG 7 is prominently perceived in ASEAN, but also its governance by looking at interplay among ASEAN key stakeholders , which includes how state and non-state actors work together to advance the goal in the region. The study delved into discourses by examining them in three dimensions: as written texts, as processes involving the production, distribution, and consumption of text, and finally as discursive events, that is, prominent practices in ASEAN to achieve SDG 7 measured by three indicators: (i) percentage of population with electricity access; (ii) renewable energy share in the total final energy consumption; and (iii) energy intensity measured in terms of primary energy and GDP [7]. Document analysis was carried out in this study to collect data on the aforementioned indicators, using reports by ASEAN Centre for Energy (2020), IEA (2022) and references from World Development Indicators (n.d.). This research chose the period between 2018 and 2021 as the benchmark timeframe for examining the indicators. The interpretation of the discourse took place at societal levels. Insights produced from interpreting the prominent discourses of the three indicators of SDG 7 in ASEAN were used to assess the progress of the goal, to identify potential disparities that may emerge, and way forward. In this study, two research questions were formulated as follows:

i.) What are prominent discourses around SDG 7 in ASEAN?
ii.) How to transform discourses around SDG 7 in ASEAN to achieve Goal 7 in the region?

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Percentage of Population with Access to Electricity

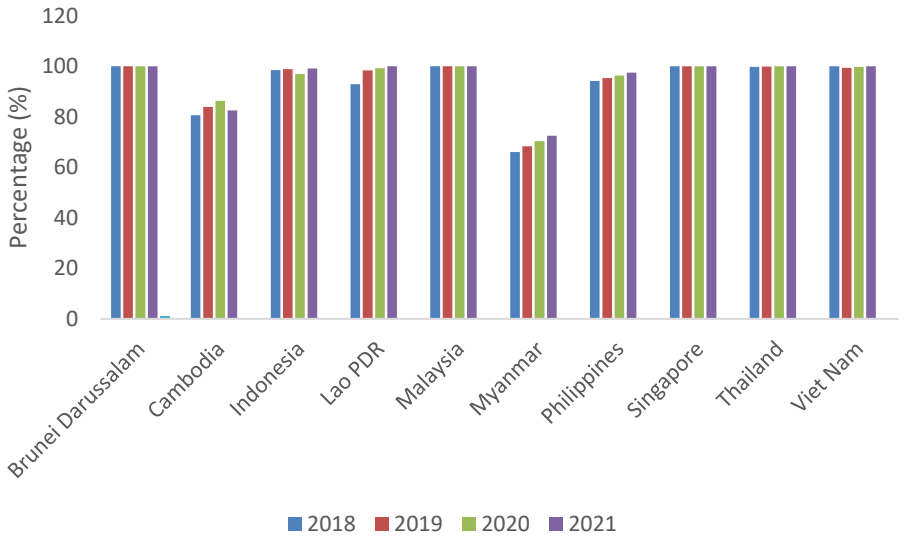


Figure 1. Access to electricity (% of population) in ASEAN 2018–2021 [8]

According to **Figure 1**, most ASEAN Member States (AMS) are on track to realize universal electricity access. Nevertheless, 45 million people in ASEAN still grapple with blackouts, brownouts, and pitch-black areas [9]. As described by **Figure 2**, this study found that "electricity access" discourses in AMS refer to the electrification rate, indicating electrified population at country levels. Guided by a binary measure, the accessibility of electricity in AMS has not comprehensively embraced the diverse aspects of electricity access, as evaluated through a multi- tier matrix encompassing seven criteria for assessing electricity provision: (1.) capacity; (2.) duration; (3.) reliability; (4.) quality; (5.) affordability; (6.) legality; and (7.) health and safety [10]. Considering the multi-tier matrix, discussions within ASEAN regarding access to electricity have prominently focused on capacity and duration, with the remaining five criteria frequently receiving less attention. Consequently, electricity access levels vary in AMS from reliable well-served (electricity access: 99.9%–100%) to priority served (electricity access: less than 85%) [11]. Kenya, a nation with a history of limited electricity access, successfully doubled its electrification rate in under five years. A key strategy was

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the government's phased investment approach, which initially focused on providing communities with basic electricity access and later improved its density and intensity by optimizing both on-grid and off-grid solutions. This strategy is indicating country's efforts to extend the criteria of multi-tier matrix, not only focus on providing access to electricity to all (capacity, duration), but also striving for enhancing reliability and quality of the access, a shift of discourse on electricity access that could be adopted by AMS [15].

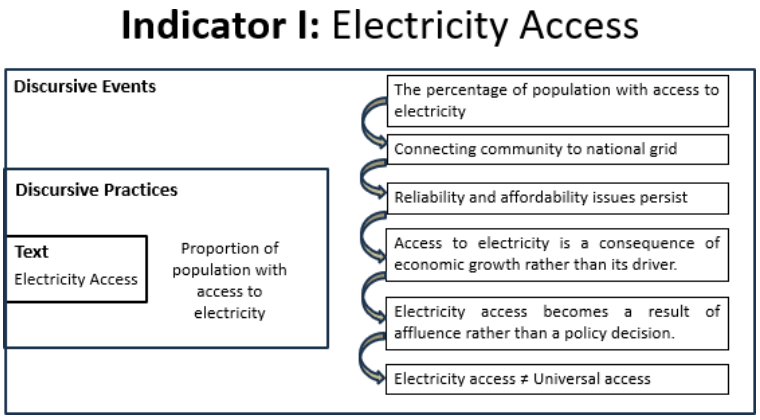


Figure 2. Discourses around electricity access in ASEAN

3.2 Renewable Energy Consumption in ASEAN Measured as a Percentage of Total Final Energy Consumption

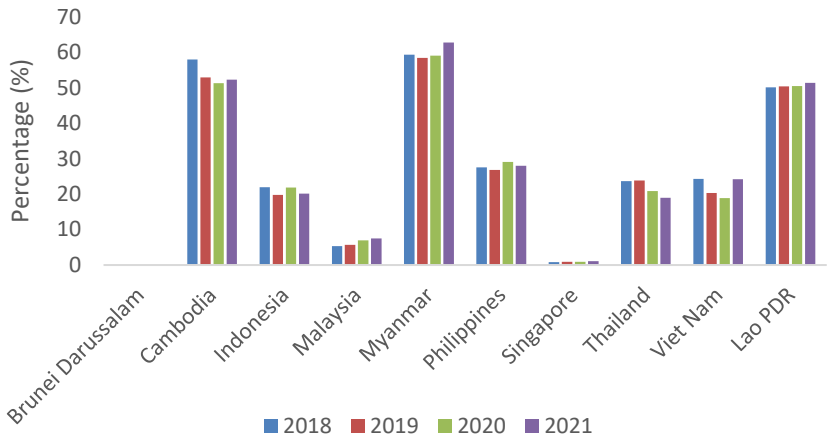


Figure 3. Renewable energy consumption (% of total final energy consumption) in ASEAN 2018–2021 [12]

Renewable energy resources in AMS are dominated by variable renewables, such as solar and wind [13]. Figure 3 shows that the utilization of renewable energy varies widely across AMS, ranging from below 1% to over 50% of the total energy consumption [13]. "Renewable energy" discourses in AMS are closely linked to decarbonizing fossil fuels rather than fully adopting green energy. Such discourses emerge prominently in ASEAN due to the domination of fossil fuels in Southeast Asia's energy mix (more than 70%) until mid-century [13]. India, motivated by the need to meet its growing energy demand, is actively pursuing the potential of green energy. The country aims to maximize the advantages of aligning its policies with initiatives like carbon pricing and competitive green power, a shift of "renewable energy" discourses that ASEAN can adopt in advancing its green energy [16].

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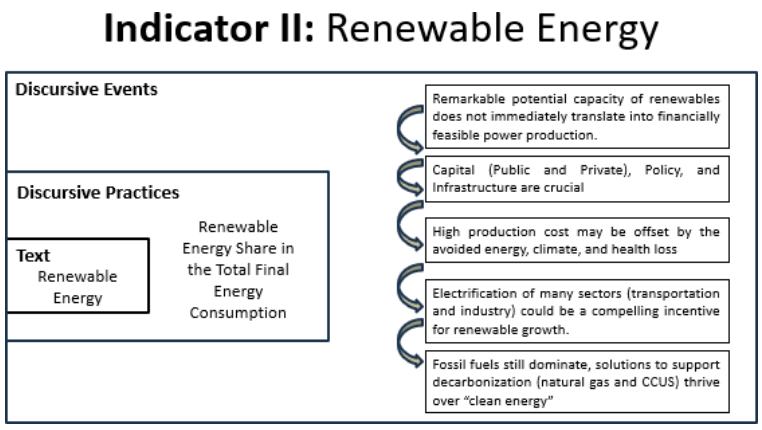


Figure 4. Discourse around renewable energy in ASEAN

3.3 Energy Intensity Measured in Terms of Primary Energy and GDP

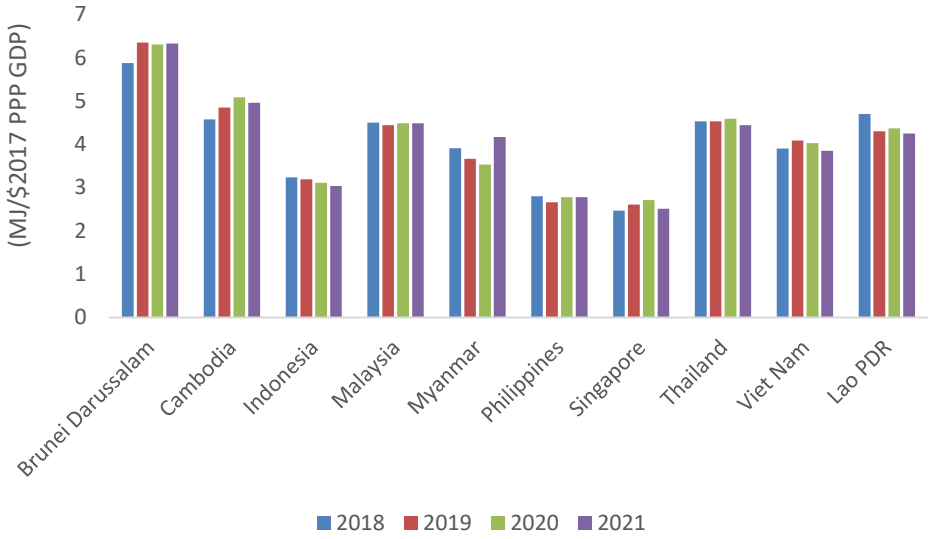


Figure 5. Energy intensity level of primary energy (MJ/$2017 PPP GDP) in ASEAN 2018-2020 [14]

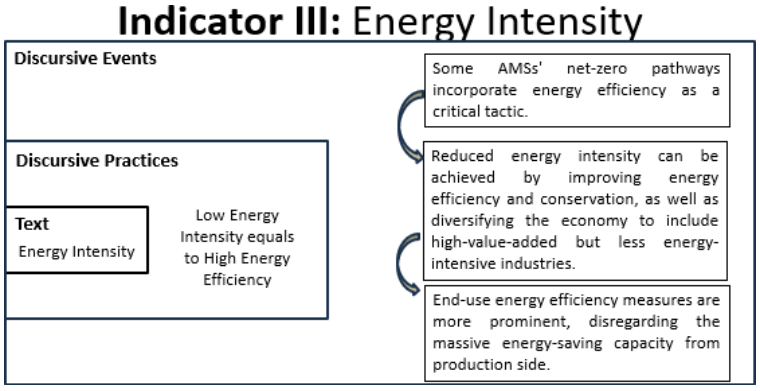


Figure 6. Discourses around energy intensity in ASEAN

This study found that the prominent discourses around energy intensity in ASEAN are shown by **Figure 6**. Reduced energy intensity levels signify increased energy efficiency, meaning that a smaller amount of energy is utilized to generate a single unit of output [13]. Discourses on enhanced efficiency within AMS revolve around shifts in the economic structure towards less energy-intensive light industries and the implementation of more rigorous energy standards, particularly for household cooling systems [13]. Socioeconomic obstacles

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and technological constraints have emerged as hindrances for AMS to align with such discourses. Variations in socioeconomic circumstances and technological capabilities have resulted in each AMS showcasing distinct levels of energy intensity. To satisfy the targets of SDG 7 in ASEAN, it becomes paramount to narrow the gaps between the current capacity of AMS and their targets. To do so, transforming the prominent discourses around SDG 7 in the region becomes crucial. It is because such discourse has dictated how SDG 7 is governed in the region, determining whether the progress of the goal is on track or deviates from its target in ASEAN. Transforming discourses around SDG 7 in ASEAN will require collective efforts from extensive stakeholders in the region. These collaborative efforts can only succeed by integrating a diverse range of backgrounds, interests, and disciplines through an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on best practices and lessons learned from countries like Kenya and India that have made significant strides in advancing their SDG 7 goals.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discourses around SDG 7 have dictated how the goal is governed in a community, such as ASEAN. Driven by this premise, this study aims at examining the prominent discourses around SDG 7 in ASEAN and how to transform such discourses to succeed Goal 7 in the region. Using critical discourse analysis as an approach, this study found that the discourses around SDG 7 have not sufficiently accommodated extensive perspectives necessary to promote collective efforts among stakeholders. It is quite striking that each discourse is either disintegrated from others or conflicting with each other. This is where an interdisciplinary approach is crucial. It serves as the first step to promote the confluence of these discourses, by aligning them under the same umbrella, that is, safeguarding universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy in ASEAN by 2030. Interdisciplinary approach is crucial in transforming SDG 7 discourses because it strives for collective efforts by integrating a broad set of background, interests, and disciplines.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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