TRANSBOUNDARY HAZE, SOUTHEAST ASIA

Does preventing transboundary haze require a political and economics rethink?

Headline points:

- Transboundary haze in Southeast Asia, a region of approx. 660 million people, caused by forest fire burning for land clearance is an intermittent problem in the region.
- In 2023 and 2024 a haze disaster was avoided, perhaps by luck more than anything else.
- Putting a stop to regional haze requires the right mindset to change the economics of land management, including opportunities for people to develop new sustainable livelihoods.

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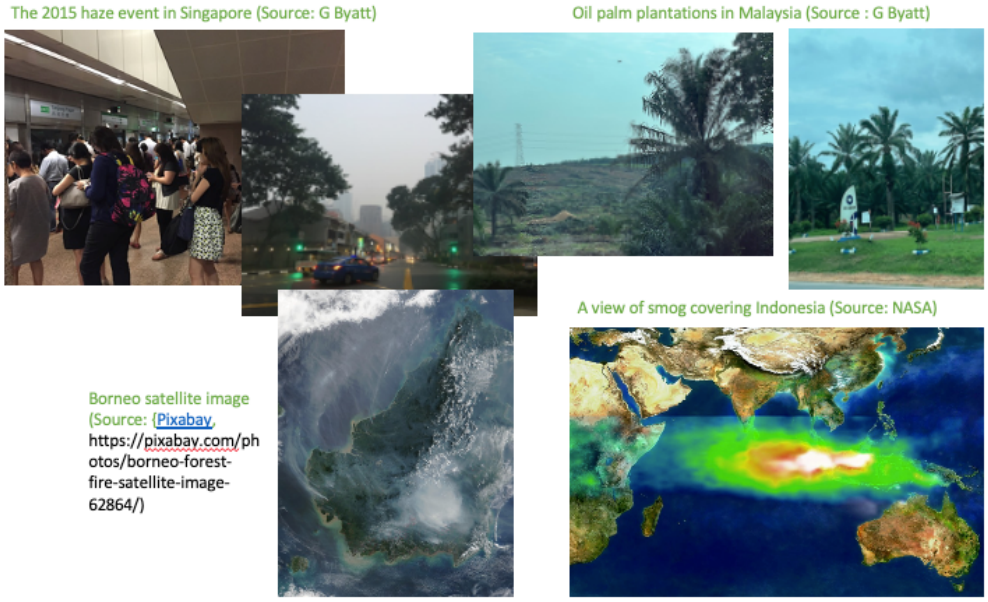
Transboundary haze in Southeast Asia is a complex matter to address (Images collage: various)



- Transboundary haze in Southeast Asia has become a recurring intermittent problem in the region in recent decades. It doesn't bring economies to a halt. Rather, it is a "slow onset" problem that is particularly suffered by the vulnerable.
- "The haze season", typically July-October, is primarily caused by land clearance by fire for crops, particularly palm oil. El Niño events influence the spread of transboundary haze.
- Three transboundary haze events in 1997, 2015 and 2019 led to publications and announcements about how the problem can and should be tackled. In 2003 the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution was agreed. Its effectiveness is debatable.
- Systemic policy solutions are required to stop haze. Proactive action by the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia (the major oil palm growing countries) has helped to prevent severe haze periods across Southeast Asia in recent years. Nonetheless, land clearance by fire continues despite efforts to control and reduce it. 2023 and 2024 were lucky years, it would seem. Haze can easily occur again if factors align, "like holes aligning in Swiss cheese".
- Can natural habitat that would otherwise be burned for high yield but unhealthy crops be given an economic value and put to sustainable use to provide meaningful local livelihoods? The private sector has an important role to play in finding good solutions.

References:

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