Governance for climate change adaptation in Southeast Asia: history, anthropology, and political economy

Euroseas laboratory, Berlin, 11-13 September 2019

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Invitation

- How well have Southeast Asian societies responded to climate-related crises in the twentieth century?
- Did they learn from past crises? (That is, how much adaptive capacity was there?)
- How can we explain variance in their responses and adaptive capacities across Southeast Asia?
- What does this tell us about likely responses to such crises in the twenty-first century?
- How can these questions be most fruitfully investigated?

Organisers invite scholars of/ from Southeast Asia interested in developing an empirical understanding of climate change-related adaptive capacities in the real, historical world.

Participants will seek to develop ideas leading to a common approach, with a view to future research collaboration.

The laboratory will be interesting to historians, anthropologists, and political scientists, and to natural scientists interested in collaborating with them on policy issues.

(Gideon Mendel photo)

Background

Climate change threatens to undermine sustainable development and poverty eradication programs, wiping 6% off Southeast Asian GDPs every year by 2100. A country's resilience to climate change depends first and foremost on its adaptive capacity, which is primarily a matter for the national government (ADB 2009).

A flood of reports advises governments on what they should do. The recommendations are clear – governments must strengthen their capacities. But recommendations are not much use if we do not

know how well they will be implemented. In a region where governance indicators range from low to medium, we need empirical work that illuminates how adaptation measures have actually been determined.[1]

Vulnerability is now the key word in climate change adaptation (CCA). The IPCC (IPCC 2007: chapter 17) defines vulnerability as being a function of:

- *exposure* ("the nature and degree to which a system is exposed to significant climatic variations"),
- *sensitivity* ("the degree to which a system is affected, either adversely or beneficially, by climate-related stimuli"),
- and *adaptive capacity* ("the ability of a system to adjust to climate change (including climate variability and extremes), to moderate the potential damage from it, to take advantage of its opportunities, or to cope with its consequences").

Vulnerability is therefore inherently a multidisciplinary concept. *Exposure* is of special interest to climate scientists; *sensitivity* to disciplines focusing on human interactions with nature (geography, ecology, agriculture, fisheries, etc); and *adaptive capacity (or learning capacity*) to social scientists.

Chapter 17 of the 2007 IPCC report (with Asia specialist Neil Adgers as lead author) focused on the capacities of nations to adapt to climate change. It presents a new research agenda on adaptive processes in the governance of climate change particularly in developing regions such as Southeast Asia. It concluded:

> "There are significant outstanding research challenges in understanding the processes by which adaptation is occurring and will occur in the future, and in identifying areas for leverage and action by government."[2]

[1] Tol et al. 2003: 13 write that, where climate change adaptation is a matter for governments, most measures will in practice be taken at the level of national states. The climate risk that countries face varies along two axes, namely climate change impact (low to high), and institutional adaptive capacity (low to high). Most vulnerable are those that will suffer high impact but have low adaptive capacity. Most of Southeast Asia falls into this category (along with South Asia, equatorial Africa, and large parts of Central and South America). Indonesia is classified as (possibly borderline) 'development opportunity', meaning it has high impact but also high adaptive capacity.

[2] IPCC 2007 also writes:

"[T]here are formidable environmental, economic, informational, social, attitudinal and behavioural barriers to implementation of adaptation. For developing countries, availability of resources and building adaptive capacity are particularly important [see Sections 5 and 6 in Chapters 3-16; also 17.2, 17.4]. Adaptation alone is not expected to cope with all the projected effects of climate change, and especially not over the long run as most impacts increase in magnitude [Table SPM-1]….

Adaptation measures are seldom undertaken in response to climate change alone (very high confidence). Many actions that facilitate adaptation to climate change are undertaken to deal with current extreme events such as heatwaves and cyclones. Often, planned adaptation initiatives are also not undertaken as stand-alone measures, but embedded within broader sectoral initiatives such as water resource planning, coastal defence and disaster management planning [17.2.2, 17.3.3]….

There are significant barriers to implementing adaptation. These include both the inability of natural systems to adapt to the rate and magnitude of climate change, as well as technological, financial, cognitive and behavioural, and social and cultural constraints. There are also significant knowledge gaps for adaptation as well as impediments to flows of knowledge and information relevant for adaptation decisions [17.4.1, 17.4.2]."

The laboratory

The present laboratory invites scholars of Southeast Asia interested in developing an empirical understanding of climate change-related adaptive capacities in the real, historical world. With a view to future research collaboration, participants will seek to develop ideas leading to a common approach.

The laboratory will tentatively examine contemporary or historical climate-related environmental crises and the resulting consequences for biodiversity and ecosystems. Going beyond the usual static governance indicators (proxies drawn from other fields), participants will focus on actual political processes and on political economy. Events may be contemporary or from the past (dating since the emergence of the modern nation-state in Southeast Asia).

The most vulnerable sectors are agriculture (floods, landslides, droughts, heatwaves, loss of biodiversity), fisheries and other marine resources (eg coral reef bleaching, coastal inundation), coastal resources (including coastal cities subject to flooding), forestry (droughts, wildfires), and health (diseases) (ADB 2009). Some of the most vulnerable regions in Southeast Asia are identified by Yusuf and Francisco (2009) (but this neglects marine areas) (see also Climate Vulnerable Forum, 2012).[3]

Political economy will be central to the analysis. "Conflicts of power and interest are inevitable in relation to climate change policy," writes Meadowcroft (2009). This leads to "institutional inertia" and a "natural tendency … for governments to delay action, to seek to avoid antagonizing influential groups." Maladaptation and unintended consequences are the result (Barnett and O´Neill 2010).

Some adaptive capacity issues to be considered will include securitisation and human security, disaster politics, inequality, informality in governance processes, and cascade effects (multiple coinciding crises).

Each participant will be asked to prepare a brief presentation and/or poster outlining these 4 elements:

1. One particular climate-related governance crisis from today or the past 100 years (a drought and famine, a wildfire, a major landslide, a species extinction, a heatwave, an urban flood, a storm)
2. The associated governance response,
3. A preliminary (hopefully comparative) analysis of the adequacy of this response, and
4. How this episode could inform a new, broad and comparative research collaboration on Governance for climate change adaptation in Southeast Asia.

The laboratory (two 1.5-hour sessions) will be closed to the public. It consists of brief presentations alternating with brainstorming discussion.

[3] Yusuf and Francisco conclude: "[W]e identified the most vulnerable areas …: all the regions of the Philippines, the Mekong River Delta region of Vietnam; almost all the regions of Cambodia; North and East Lao PDR; the Bangkok region of Thailand; and the west and south of Sumatra, and western and eastern Java in Indonesia. The Philippines, unlike other countries in Southeast Asia, is not only exposed to tropical cyclones, especially in the northern and eastern parts of the country, but also to many other climate-related hazards especially floods (such as in central Luzon and Southern Mindanao), landslides (due to the terrain of the country), and droughts.

In the overall assessment, however, the districts of Jakarta in Indonesia come out as the top most vulnerable region in Southeast Asia (see Appendix 3)."

Participation

The laboratory is organised by the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, KITLV (www.kitlv.nl). The KITLV research cluster on State, Violence, and Citizenship has focused on governance processes in weakly institutionalised states.

Participants are expected to register for Euroseas at their own expense (https://euroseas2019.org/).

Interested? Write to Tom Hoogervorst (hoogervorst@kitlv.nl) with your idea as soon as possible.

References

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