

LIVING WITH FLOODS IN A MOBILE SOUTHEAST ASIA: A political ecology of vulnerability, migration and environmental change

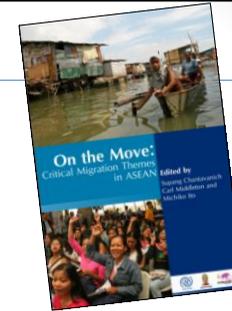


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(Becky Elmhirst, Supang Chantavanich, Naruemon Thabchumpon, Babette Resurrección et al...)

Our Goal

- To conceptualize the link between flooding, disaster and migration in Southeast Asia – as a socio-natural phenomena
- To complicate simplistic analysis that states flooding is a singular cause of migration
- To sensitize flood disaster policy to the complexity of migration/ mobility
- Key concepts: vulnerability; resilience; diverse forms of migration/ floods; **A political ecology of mobility**



Outline

- Introduction: Flooding and Migration
- Many types of floods and migrations
- Vulnerability and resilience
- Vulnerability to flooding
- Agency and resilience to flooding
- Mobile Political Ecologies of flooding
- Some findings
- Implications of transdisciplinary approaches



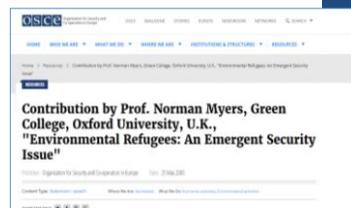
Introduction: Flooding and Migration

- **Flooding is often framed as catastrophic**, but it can also be beneficial
 - **Depends on who experiences flooding!**



Introduction: Flooding and Migration

- Under the “catastrophe” scenario, for example the impacts of climate change, it is linked to a **specter of “mass migration”**
 - Migration is already a significant phenomena across Southeast Asia**
 - Blaming migrants for living in risky places**, rather than understanding the wider context ... leading to policy that regulates movement and reinforces vulnerability
 - Migration can be a vulnerability reduction strategy**, for example via:
 - spreading risk across multiple locations; and b) being able to move away when disaster strikes ... (but, note, not everybody can or chooses to)



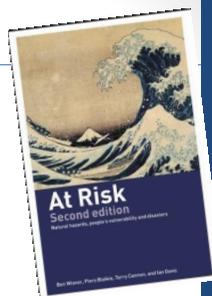
Many types of floods, many forms of migration

- “Migration”** – Can either/ both reduce or increase vulnerability
 - Local, cross-border and transnational migration
 - Short-term, long-term or permanent, and as circular, involving seasonal movements
 - Multi-local livelihood strategies
- “Flooding”** – Can be “beneficial” or “negative”
 - Seasonal flood plain inundation,
 - Irregular river bank low,
 - Flash floods in urban areas,
 - Landslides and flash floods in mountain areas
 - Coastal floods



Vulnerability and Resilience

- Wisner et al. (2004: 11) defines vulnerability as
 - “the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard”
- There are many definitions and approaches to vulnerability. Some researchers, seeking a more systems-scale perspective, have tended towards “resilience thinking”
 - “Emphasis is on social-ecological systems and their ability to absorb or buffer disturbances and retain their core attributes, and on a system’s capacity for learning and adaptation in the context of change”
- We ask: “Resilience of what and for whom?”
 - Resilience is socially uneven, multi-scalar and politically-embedded



Vulnerability to Flooding

- People’s “vulnerability” to flooding reflects a larger story of socio-economic and political inequality.
 - Destructive floods disproportionately affect marginalized groups less political power**
- The effects of floods can be mitigated or exacerbated by institutionalized disaster response strategies (or the lack thereof), as well as shaped by long-term development planning policies
 - Risk reduction for some can result in risk redistribution to others (Lebel et al., 2011)**
- Therefore, flood events can become “hazards” through socio-political processes **rather than hazard as totally a natural phenomena.**



Agency and Resilience to Flooding

- Thus... how flood hazards are *produced* through natural and human activities such as urbanisation, deforestation and other modifications to hydrological systems **shapes vulnerability**
- **As does more general social and political vulnerabilities associated with poverty and/or marginalization and exclusions**
- Yet People living with floods may express their agency through resilience-building strategies that might include migration
- **Therefore... Migration may not always be an expression of vulnerability, but can also be a manifestation of “capability”**



Political ecologies of mobility

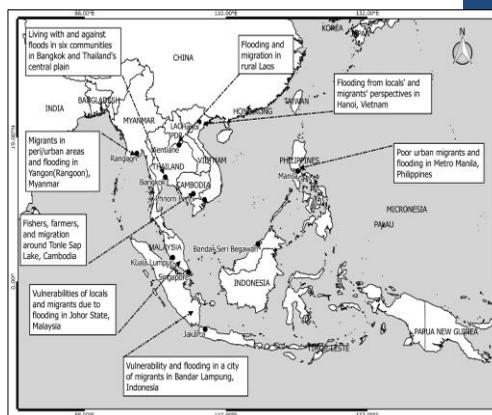
- Political ecology:
 - “...a careful analysis of forms of access and control over resources, and their implications for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods” (Watts, 2000: 257)
- Mobility often **transcends the spatiality** of socio-ecological systems
 - Multi-local livelihoods means that household livelihoods may be simultaneously embedded in more than one vulnerability context
 - **Diversifying income sources, including across different spaces**
 - **Spreading risk** to environmental, economic and political shocks.



People may reduce their vulnerability through mobility ... OR they may move through a range of “risky environments” over their life course

Our Research: Flood-migration nexus

1. Tracing the “nature of nature”
2. Developing a historical contextualization of an evolving social context
3. Contemporary analysis of power, patronage and unequal access
4. Vulnerability and capability through migration



Synthesis findings

- **Impacts of floods on migration and mobility**
 - Flooding alone does not determine long-term migration – there are many other influential factors that motivate or discourage migration
 - Effects of floods on mobility depend on whether or not these exceed an acceptable level, as well as whether a household has other *in situ* options to turn to or not
 - Sometimes, floods **can reduce** mobility, for example through impacting transport systems
 - Voluntary relocation in response to high or rising risks of floods may be a strategy for some households **with sufficient resources**, but decisions also influence by social and emotional attachment to a place
 - Government policies can be a source of risk itself
 - By making people move (to safe places devoid of livelihoods)
 - Linked policies, such as on natural resource allocation
 - Apolitical “self help” / “adaptive agent” discourses that reduce government responsibility

Synthesis findings

- **Consequences of migration on vulnerabilities to floods**
- Significant impacts by floods on migrants that move to flood-prone areas of major cities, including:
 - Damage to assets
 - Loss of employment (formal and informal)
 - Health risks
- Floods impact some migrants much more than others, and generally more than residents
 - The ability to draw on social capital and networks in source and destination locations
 - Access to information about floods
- Migrants may stay in high risk flooding environments because the benefits outweigh the costs
 - Affordable accommodation
 - Near employment
 - ... they therefore exchange one form of risk for another

Implications for transdisciplinary approaches

- **Flooding**, understood as a socio-techno-nature assemblage, **requires a transdisciplinary lens**, as does **migration**
- Our **concepts** (vulnerability, resilience, political ecology) may also be **useful boundary objects** for a transdisciplinary approach
- Each chapter applied a “**progressive contextualization**” methodology, which was also conducive to **grounded theory development**
- Our research group included **multiple disciplines** (political science; anthropology; geographers; agronomists; natural scientists)
- Some limitations:
 - **Multiple disciplines does not produce a transdisciplinary project**
 - Quite conventional in terms of the role of the researcher in defining the research problem; **no co-production of knowledge**

Thank you for listening



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