

Contested Knowledges of the Commons in Southeast Asia

Research Progress report - Vignettes from the Field

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INTRODUCTION: VIGNETTES ON CONTESTED KNOWLEDGES OF THE COMMONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Historically until the present day, wide-ranging forms, scopes, intensities and durations of resource politics have shaped the concept and practice of development across Southeast Asia. In this report, we present eight vignettes that offer a sample of some of the varying characteristics of these resource politics and their implications for competition over resources and the commons, and social justice. The vignettes are the interim products of multidisciplinary research – and in one case transdisciplinary research - that is ongoing by team members of ‘Work Package 1 on the Environment’ of the EU-funded project Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA).¹

In our first Working Paper, published in March 2019, we detailed our Work Package’s theoretical framework.² The core of the shared conceptual approach of our research is an examination of the co-production of ecological knowledge and ecological governance, viewed across the global, national and local scales. Here we draw upon the foundational work of Sheila Jasanoff (2004)³, and as applied in Southeast Asia more recently by Gururani and Vandergeest (2014)⁴ amongst others, to understand the remaking of nature-society relations in Southeast Asia. In short, as stated by Jasanoff (2004:2) “... co-production is shorthand for the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it”. The co-production of natural and social orders are thus mediated by the production, circulation, integration and dissemination of knowledge, which itself must be contextualized to historical context, power relations, and culture.

The purpose of this Working Paper is to offer empirically grounded case studies of resource politics in practice in the region, as a work-in-progress. Overall, the research projects address three overarching themes: Transition into a low-carbon economy (Kamiński); Sea (Arnez; Roszko); and Rivers (Beckenham and Farnan; Chu; Middleton and Surimas; Thitibordin; Zaręba). We seek to analyze these cases through our project’s conceptual lens to generate both academic insight and policy-relevant recommendations, which will be the subject of forthcoming publications.

¹ See <http://crisea.eu/> for further details

² Kamiński, T., Arnez, M., Middleton, C., Beckenham, S., Farnan, R.A., Chu, D., Roszko, E., Thitibordin, A., Valente, A., and Zaręba, M. (2019) The Environment - Contested Knowledge of the Commons in Southeast Asia (CRISEA Working Paper 1). Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA) Working Paper No. 1 (March 2019).

³ Jasanoff, S. (2004). *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order*. London: Routledge

⁴ Gururani, S. & P. Vandergeest (2014). ‘Introduction: New Frontiers of Ecological Knowledge: Co-producing Knowledge and Governance in Asia.’ *Conservation and Society* 12(4): 343-351.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN CITIES AS KNOWLEDGE PRODUCERS

By Tomasz Kamiński⁵

Transnational networks of cities have become prominent forms of environmental governance. These networks' activities concentrate on mutual learning and capacity building, for example in order to take action on climate action including reducing greenhouse gas emissions and addressing other climate-related risks. In my research on Southeast Asian cities' participation in transnational cities networks, I have looked at how knowledge circulates and is co-produced within them. Within these knowledge networks, it is readily apparent that cities from developing countries primarily seek to learn from cities in developed countries. This is despite the fact that the similarity of local circumstances could make it easier to transfer knowledge between cities from developing countries.

Officers who work for these networks admit that most often Southeast Asian cities are looking for solutions from cities in the so-called Global North. Thus, they take on the role of knowledge consumers rather than knowledge producers:

“Obviously the developing cities are more on the position of a learner than a sharer of knowledge” (Interview with ‘CityNet’ official)⁶

This model of knowledge circulation is very much linked to the very structure of the networks, which are dominated by cities from developed countries. This structure makes prominent the role of experts from developed countries, and, consequently, the knowledge that they produce.

Yet, it shouldn't be taken for granted that there is not the possibility of knowledge flow from Southeast Asian cities on environmental solutions that would be of significant interest to developed country cities. From interviews that I conducted in April and May 2019 with the network secretaries and with local government officials in Quezon City of the Philippines, which participate in three different networks⁷, I was able to identify some interesting examples.

Firstly, developed cities have closely observed how Southeast Asian citizens use apps. People living in Southeast Asia very eagerly make use of apps, and therefore cities' authorities have started to develop technological solutions to improve citizen services. For example, the city of Jakarta has introduced an app that uses flooding data to show residents the areas of city that

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⁶ The CityNet organisation was established in 1987. It now has more than 130 members all from Asia, and is headquartered in Seoul that is also the sponsor of many of the network's activities.

⁷ C40 Cities (www.c40.org), ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability (www.iclei.org), and CityNET (<https://citynet-ap.org>)

are at risk of being submerged during heavy rains. The city has also experimented with more complex apps that provide citizens with information about traffic conditions, the weather, threat alerts, and a variety of other notifications about the state of Jakarta.

Secondly, a lot of interest has been directed towards some transportation solutions developed in the region. 'Transjakarta', also located in Jakarta, is one of the longest Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) systems in the world. It is 244 km long and handles almost one million passengers per day. 'Transjakarta' was honored at the 2020 Sustainable Transport Award Ceremony in Washington DC for decreasing traffic congestion, successfully integrating with other informal transit systems, and doubling its ridership over the past three years.

Thirdly, there are also some smaller environmental projects that attract international attention. For example, in Quezon City the introduction of an LED-based city light system is now promoted by the World Bank as an example of good practice (see Figure 1) and led to a cooperation with the Brazilian city of São Paulo. Interviewed Quezon City governments officials have been surprised by the positive feedback that they received:

"We see our projects as very routine, but when we present that to an international conference, they are amazed that we have that in a developing country, in Quezon City."

The examples presented above demonstrate that Southeast Asian cities deserve attention as knowledge producers and to be able to share their solutions with peer cities around the world. Indeed, learning from other developing country cities rather than from American or European cities might be very effective because of some economic and social similarities that may foster successful knowledge transfer and implementation.

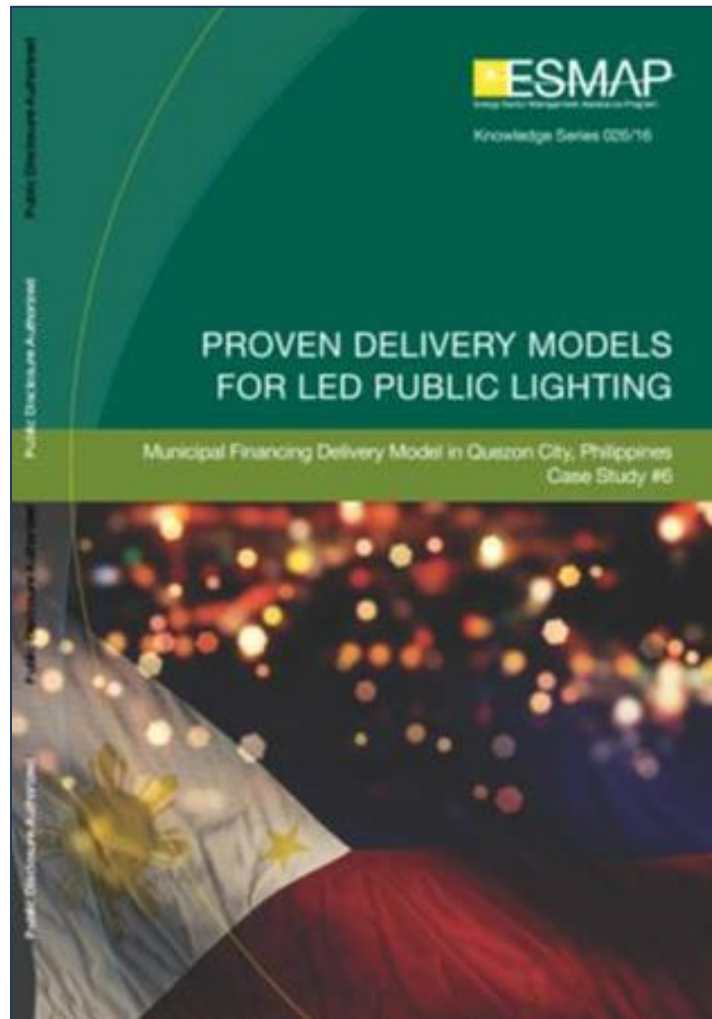


Figure 1: Cover page of the brochure presenting the Quezon City success story.
(Source: World Bank 2016⁸)

⁸ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/842031477930270833/Proven-delivery-models-for-led-public-lighting-municipal-financing-delivery-model-in-Quezon-City-Philippines>

“BLUE-RECLAIMING”: SHIFTING INTEREST, ACTORS AND AGENDAS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

*By Edyta Roszko*⁹

Under the cover of night, Vietnamese boats with fishers from one of the islands in Central Vietnam regularly sneak into Malaysia’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to buy freshly caught seafood from Malaysian fishers via other Vietnamese fishers who act as brokers. Those fisheries are connected with Chinese-owned seafood companies that are buying up illegally harvested sea products, and with pirate gangs and coast guards to whom fishers make up-front payments as they trespass into foreign territorial waters.

Cường – a young Vietnamese fisherman – told me that on one occasion when he entered Malaysian waters at an agreed place and time, a speedboat with five masked and armed men seized his boat and quickly forced the fishers to the bow and on their knees. Not allowed to look at their attackers, they were stripped of their mobile phones and other valuables that they had on their bodies. Beaten with guns and bamboo sticks, the fishers were threatened and intimidated and then forced into a cell under the deck where they had to wait until the boat with the attackers sailed away. The Vietnamese fishers could not tell who the attackers were, although some pointed at the Malaysian military whose offshore EEZ stations were located on nearby islands and atolls. According to Cường, the Malaysian military responsible for policing Malaysia’s maritime borders knew where Vietnamese fishers illegally enter their territorial waters, but instead of arresting them prefer to supplement their income by taking the fishers’ possessions.

This incident shows the complex reality of fishing in the South China Sea, which is subject to claims for sovereignty from China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and other ASEAN countries, and involves other global powers such as the United States. Besides its growing geopolitical importance, the South China Sea is a maritime region with large coastal populations in Vietnam, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia that depend heavily on these fisheries and other marine resources for their livelihoods. The increasing imbalance between supply and demand for fish turns the South China Sea into a bitterly contested battleground not just for state sovereignty and control of oil and gas deposits, but, above all, for marine resources.

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Figure 2: A rescue operation after a violent clash on the sea near Ly Son, Central Vietnam in 2014 (Credit: Edyta Roszko)

CONTESTED IMAGINARIES OF THE SEA

*By Monika Arnez*¹⁰

I am sitting in a small restaurant in Ujong Pasir, Malacca, with Peter Gomez, long-term village headman (Regidor). Peter, like many other members of the Portuguese Creole (kristang) community, tells me that he is concerned about the land reclamation project “Melaka Gateway” which is being developed in the immediate vicinity. The Master Developer is the Malaysian company KAJ Development Berhad, and the Chinese partners involved are the state-owned enterprises Power China International, the Shenzhen Yantian Port Group and Rizhao Port Group. This coastal infrastructure project is planned to feature three artificial islands and one expanded natural island with a cruise harbor, financial center, deep-sea harbor, high-risers, and hotels. Yet, at the time of writing, only one of these islands has been reclaimed, where there is nothing to see except sand.



Figure 3: Interview with Peter Gomez, 31 August 2018 (Credit: Monika Arnez)

In the following interview extracts Peter mentions negative effects of land reclamation on the community, the first of which is the decline in fish stocks:

“They disrupt the bed, the seabed, because they are sucking the sand just outside there. And the ecosystem is also being damaged by the reclamation. So, in time, I don’t think we’ll have any more fishers down there. Already, I would say this project has been going on since the last four to five years. And we are seeing a very drastic drop in our catch,

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very, very drastically. So, we are very reluctant to say that (pause) I am not an expert but depending on our catch that we get outside there, we see that it has been dwindling, getting less and less fish. (...)”

Secondly, he fears the danger of a loss of identity due to the interruption of the connection to the sea and the disappearance of religious festivals that are closely connected to it. He sees the sea as the basis of identity for the community, in religious and ritual terms and as the basis of life:

“The settlement that we have, the attachment that we have, the festivals that we have, it’s mostly all water-based. And if we lose the sea, that means to say we lose our identity. That’s definitely. And if you talk about fishing, fishing is in our livelihood, it is in our blood, it is in our soul. So you cannot separate us from the sea. No matter what you do. Some of us might have a job out there. But we're so attached to the sea that somehow we rather end up in the sea. (...) In anything that we do, the festivals that we celebrate have something to do with water. Pesta St. Pedro is one of them. Where the fishermen bring up their boats, they decorate it, and then we have a festival for that. Then we have Intrudu. Intrudu is our water festival. So, these two functions have something to do with water. And of course, if we say, if we take away the water element from our village, then these festivals automatically will die off.”

This example shows different imaginaries of the sea colliding at the grassroots level. Peter represents the view of many representatives of the Kristang community, whose close relationship with the sea is shaped by religion and identity, and the practice of fishing. He shares the community members’ concern that land reclamation has led to a drastic reduction in fish catches, threatening the livelihoods of families who depend on it. For developers, on the other hand, the sea is part of a modernisation narrative in which only its displacement makes the coast attractive for the future by creating new smart and profitable infrastructure.

WETLANDS, DROUGHT AND CULTURAL ECOLOGY IN NORTHERN THAILAND

By Carl Middleton ¹¹ and Thianchai Surimas ¹²

Across the Lancang-Mekong basin, a serious drought this year (2020) is causing severe hardship for rural communities. Last year's drought in 2019 was already the worst in living memory, and it has continued into 2020 because the rainy season when it finally arrived was short and failed to replenish water sources. There has also been much speculation on whether large dams, in particular upstream in China, have exacerbated the impact of the drought - or could have been operated to better mitigate the drought's impact.



Figure 4: Mr. Muang Srisom is a leader of the Community Forest Committee, and spends most of his time protecting and maintaining the Chum Muang Community Forest (Credit: Thianchai Surimas)

The Ing River is a major tributary of the Mekong River in Northern Thailand and has not been spared from the drought. Even in Muang Chum village in Chiang Khong District, a community that is widely renowned for its community-led water management, the majority of the

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commercial rice planted this season has withered and died, leaving farmers with no rice to sell. This even though the community has created over the years a sophisticated system of small temporary sand-bag dams and “monkey cheek” ponds to manage the flow of water and coordinate for its storage and use. Muang Chum village has also established a community forest and wetland, as well as a protected community fishery zone, which have customarily been rich in wildlife and fish stocks, as well as an important habitat for migratory birds (see Figure 4). Yet, this year the wetland failed to flood, which has affected tree health and left them vulnerable to disease and worms, whilst fish stocks are also poor.

For almost twenty years, Muang Chum community members have organized a forest ordination ceremony in its community forest, most recently in December 2019. The ceremony is organized to emphasize the importance of protecting the forest and its wetland ecosystem, and its connection to sustaining local livelihoods and food security, as well as highlighting that nature is the foundation of life. The drought, recent death of trees, and struggling health of the wetland ecosystem, however, has led the community to rename this year’s event as the “Prolong Forest Life” ceremony (see figure 5).



Figure 5: The “Prolong Forest Life” ceremony held in Muang Chum community forest on 4 December 2019. (Credit: Thianchai Surimas)

The purpose of the ceremony was to pray for the forest to recover its health. It was led by monks and leaders from the community, local government, and civil society. Participants included members of various community networks, including the Ing People's Council discussed below, civil society groups, children and the community's nursery, the media, and government agency staff. The ceremony itself involved preparing food and conducting local rituals traditionally used in Northern Thailand when people are facing bad luck or are feeling sick. After a sermon by the monk, the ceremony participants tied saffron fabric around trees as a symbol of ordination, and to wish for the trees to be healthy. Later in the day, a series of seminars were organized with speakers from civil society and local government to discuss about the drought drawing on a range of scientific, traditional and cultural knowledge(s).

The Muang Chum community is a member of the Ing People's Council (IPC)¹³, which is a network of communities along the Ing River. The IPC collaborates with local civil society groups and academics. It aims to support local community participation in natural resource governance, to conserve and recover natural resources in the Ing River Basin and support local livelihoods and economies rooted in local culture and drawing on community knowledge. To this end, the IPC members also undertake 'Jao Bann' community-led research on natural resources and cultural ecology in the Ing River Basin. The "Prolong Forest Life" ceremony is an example of the activity organized by the IPC, in this case in collaboration with the local government, which is also an opportunity for community members from across the network to come together in solidarity.

In our research, in the context of the 2019/2020 drought, we are undertaking a critical study of the co-production of ecological knowledge and governance between contesting multi-scaled institutions of water governance in the Lancang-Mekong basin, with a focus on Northern Thailand. Alongside the IPC, we also examine two state-led transboundary institutions, namely the Mekong River Commission and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, both of which pursue variants of ecological modernization. Overall, we find an emerging argument that in Northern Thailand, the resource politics of the Mekong River are not merely over divergent interests, but more profoundly over the very meaning of the river and different values, beliefs, epistemologies, and ontologies.

¹³ See www.ingcouncil.org

ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE CIRCULATION TOWARDS THE XAYABURI DAM: THE ROLE OF THE MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION

By Michał Zareba¹⁴

The governance of the Mekong River engages a variety of actors who shape the hydropolitical order. As detailed in Figure 6, these include state actors, local entities, non-government organizations (NGOs), the media, business and finance, research institutions and universities, and the United Nations.¹⁵ All actors co-produce and circulate detailed information and data regarding water resources governance and its influence on society and the environment in the basin, including in the form of comprehensive reports, official documents and political agendas, which can be understood as forms of ecological knowledge.

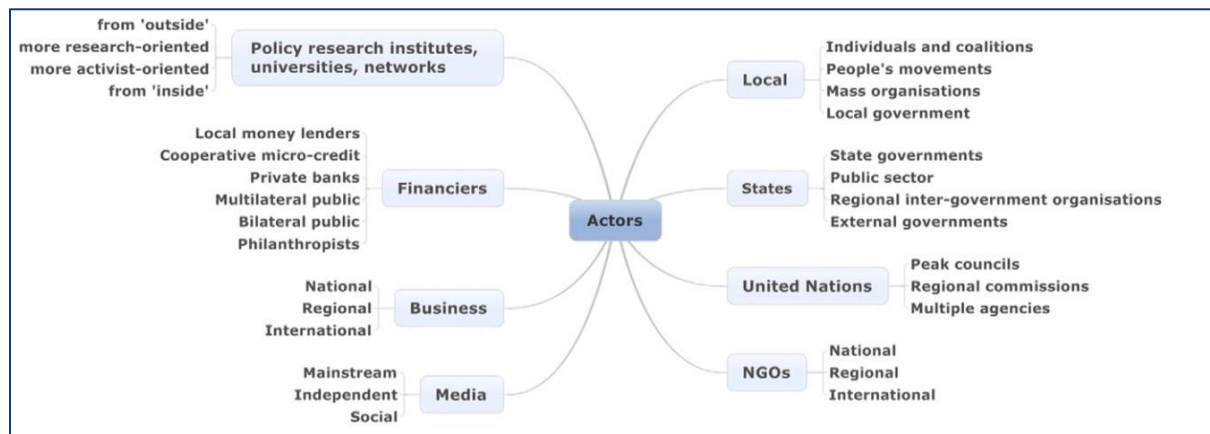


Figure 6. Water governance actors in the Mekong Region (Source: Dore & Lebel & Molle 2012)

Each actor, through (co-)producing ecological knowledge, aims to legitimize their own imaginaries of development and support or question strategies towards water resources management, which is reflected in Gururani and Vandergeest's (2014: 344-345)¹⁶ insight that ecological knowledge is "truth-claims and related claims of technical and political expertise about the dynamic relationships among the flora, fauna, peoples, hydrologies, soils, geologies, and other biophysical activities in a landscape." Interactions between hydropolitical players occur in part through the circulation of ecological knowledge that leads to the creation of hegemonic or counter-hegemonic narratives.

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¹⁵ Dore, J., Lebel, L., Molle, François, (2012), A framework for analysing transboundary water governance complexes, illustrated in the Mekong Region, *Journal of Hydrology*, Vol. 446-447

¹⁶ Gururani, S., Vandergeest, P., (2014), Introduction: New Frontiers of Ecological Knowledge: Co-producing Knowledge and Governance in Asia, *Conservation and Society*, Vol. 12 (4)

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) is a regional inter-governmental organization that plays an important role in the hydropolitics of the Mekong River basin and has co-produced ecological knowledge concerning hydropower plants proposed and/or constructed on the lower Mekong River mainstream. In September 2010, the at-the-time proposed Xayaburi Dam was subject to the MRC-hosted decision-making process called the Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation, and Agreement (PNPCA), which took into account feasibility studies and Social and Environment Impact Assessments previously commissioned by the project's owners.¹⁷ In October 2010, the MRC also released a Strategic Environmental Assessment of Hydropower on the Mekong Mainstream, prepared by the consultants ICEM Australia, that included recommendations towards mainstream dams.¹⁸ In 2011, the MRC published the Prior Consultation Project Review Report that presented the conclusions of the PNPCA process.¹⁹ The Xayaburi dam's ground-breaking ceremony was in November 2012, and construction was complete at the end in September 2019 despite the limited compromise between member states (Figure 7).



Figure 7: The Xayaburi Dam under construction in February 2018 (Credit: C. Middleton)

¹⁷ Rieu-Clark, A., (2015), Notification and Consultation Procedures Under the Mekong Agreement: Insights From the Xayaburi Controversy, *Asian Journal of International Law*, Vol. 5 (1)

¹⁸ ICEM Australia, (2010), *Strategic Environmental Assessment of Hydropower on the Mekong Mainstream*

¹⁹ Mekong River Commission, (2011), *Prior Consultation Project Review Report*

Some of the ecological knowledge produced by MRC can be considered as counter-hegemonic towards the ecological knowledge produced by actors engaged in the Xayaburi dam construction. According to my interviews with representatives of the MRC, it has released reports that identified gaps in the documents prepared by the project developers before the PNPCA was underway, whilst the PNPCA itself was intended to be a means to facilitate ecological knowledge circulation and deliberation between actors in the basin. MRC officials also emphasized that not all information is shared with the MRC, suggesting how the wider circulation of ecological knowledge beyond the MRC becomes instrumentalized to establish a hegemonic narrative in favor of the Xayaburi Dam generated by actors advocating for the investment. Despite its shortcomings, the MRC's PNPCA offered one means of circulating ecological knowledge, where diverse actors including those opposed to the Xayaburi Dam, could articulate their own imaginary of development.

A TRANSDISCIPLINARY STUDY IN NORTHEAST CAMBODIA: SOCIAL HIERARCHY AND KNOWLEDGE COPRODUCTION

By Ta-Wei Chu ²⁰

Since the early 2000s, the Cambodian government has initiated several hydropower projects that have granted a growing proportion of Cambodians' access to electricity. However, thousands of rural people have been resettled to make way for these dams, and as a result have encountered severe difficulties. This has been the case at the Lower Sesan 2 (LS2) dam, which relocated around 1,500 households who have since struggled with undrinkable water, unavailable land titles, and a loss of their traditional culture.

My research is a transdisciplinary project with dam-affected villagers whose livelihood has faced difficulties at the LS2 dam. Transdisciplinarity serves to address real-world problems rather than academic contrivances by integrating knowledge from academic and non-academic stakeholders. I have collaborated with various non-academic stakeholders, including dam-affected villagers, local NGO workers, and Stung Treng Provincial government officials, to co-produce knowledge aiming to address the resettled households' livelihood difficulties.

To date, the majority of transdisciplinary studies have been conducted in the Global North, where democracy, civil society, and human rights are more developed, thus creating a better environment for multi-stakeholder interactions. Meanwhile, some researchers have found that the application of transdisciplinary research approaches in the Global South can bring to light local particularities, such as social hierarchy, during the process of knowledge co-production.

In my research, I have analyzed the connections between knowledge co-production and local particularities by exploring: (1) when and how Cambodia's local particularities have intersected with knowledge production; and (2) in the context of these particularities, to what extent can multiple stakeholders co-produce knowledge to address resettled community livelihood difficulties. Through attempting to undertake a transdisciplinary approach in my research, I have found that it raises important questions on the methods applicability when there are significant power asymmetries between stakeholders and the issue under research is strongly contested between them.

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Figure 8: An abandoned house in the submerged Sre Kor Village, June 2019. (Credit: Ta-Wei Chu)

So far, three one-day workshops have been conducted. The kick-off workshop was held at the Stung Treng Provincial Women Development Center, Stung Treng Province on January 25, 2019. There were 22 participants in the workshop. The NGO My Village took responsibility for organizing the workshop, including liaison with government officials and villager representatives. The NGO Forum on Cambodia sponsored the workshop. Then, the 3S Rivers Protection Network (3SPN) helped organize the second workshop, which was held in Ban Lung, Ratanakiri Province on June 21, 2019. The majority of the project stakeholders joined this second workshop. 3SPN invited Ta Veng District Council, Ms. Ping Chaureun, to give the opening address, and seventeen participants joined, in total two academics; three government officials; six NGO representatives; and six village representatives. Most recently, the Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT) hosted the third workshop at the Pedagogy School of Education Provincial Department in Stung Treng Province on November 21, 2019. Sixteen participants joined this workshop, although some government and villager representatives who attended the first and second workshops were unable to join; the government officials appointed their colleagues to participate instead.

In the first and the second workshops, the villager stakeholders contributed their local knowledge, but the government stakeholders used their authority underpinned by political knowledge to dominate the process of knowledge coproduction. For example, in the first

workshop, a provincial government stakeholder said that “people should not talk too much about politics because this would involve too many sensitive issues.” In the second workshop, a district government stakeholder said that “the government tried to educate villagers about forest laws and land laws and if they [the villagers] want something, they have to seek help through hierarchical procedures”. The villager stakeholders’ contribution and the government stakeholders’ response created a situation of knowledge’s contestation. I observed that some villager stakeholders became quiet when the government stakeholders extended the hierarchical culture from local society to knowledge production.

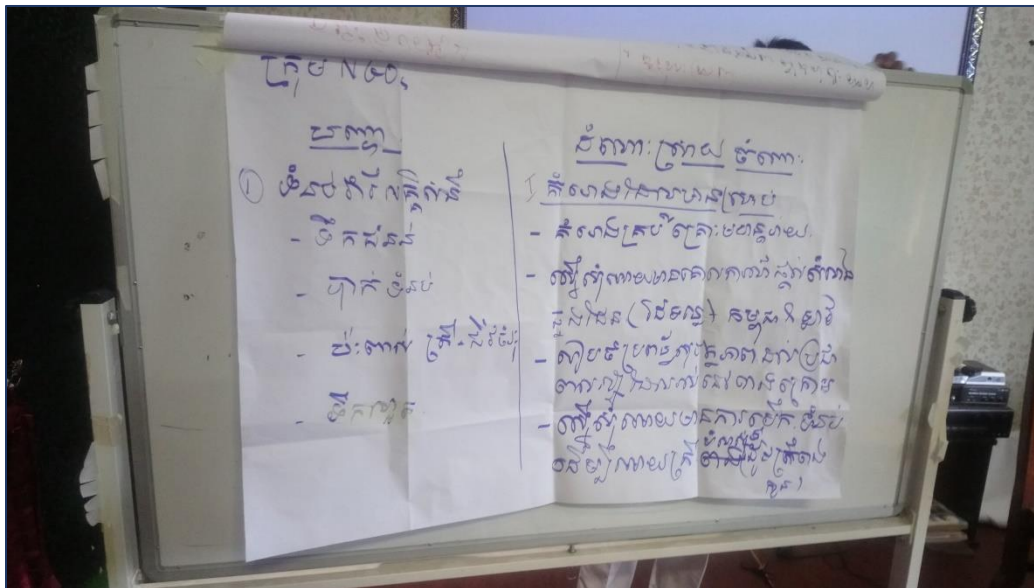


Figure 9: NGO stakeholders knowledge contribution in the second workshop, June 2019.
(Credit: Ta-Wei Chu)

After the first and the second workshops, the research team consisting of the project research assistant, a local experienced researcher, and I conducted fieldwork, the purpose of which was to disseminate the workshop results to interested community members who were unable to attend. The research team held small gatherings in several communities affected by the LS2 dam and conducted focus-group discussions and individual interviews to collect perspectives on the impact of the project and potential solutions. After the first workshop, the fieldwork team visited four villages: (1) Srae Sranok Village, Sesan District; (2) Kbal Romeas Village, Sesan District; (3) O Chay Village, Siem Pang District; (4) Ler Village, Thala Barivat District. After the second workshop, the field work team visited the old Kbal Romeas and Sre Kor villages. In

addition, the field work team visited the submerged Srekor and abandoned Kbal Romeas villages.

I realize that social hierarchy has mattered during the process of knowledge coproduction and a transdisciplinary research project—which usually operates from three to five years—is unlikely to transform entrenched social hierarchy. However, we cannot expect to use transdisciplinarity to address livelihood difficulties if we cannot deal with transdisciplinarity’s applicability problem. Thus, as a next step, I plan to have a meeting with the provincial government stakeholders in April 2020 to discuss more about the possible solutions and the way to contribute their knowledge.

SLOWLY DOWN THE IRRAWADDY: ANTI-DAM PROTESTS AND COUNTER-HEGEMONIC KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AT THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ACTION FOR RIVERS, MANDALAY

By Sally Beckenham²¹ and Robert Farnan²²

In March 2019, we joined a collection of civil society organization (CSO) representatives from across Myanmar and Thailand who had converged at a conference/event in Mandalay to mark the 22nd International Day of Action for Rivers, advocating the preservation of free-flowing rivers and the protection of millions of livelihoods that depend on them. Activists and community representatives across different sectors of civil society shared in the co-production of knowledge, emphasizing the dire challenges facing communities due to large-scale hydropower development. These projects, such as the proposed Hatgyi dam, are the basis of a proposed lucrative transboundary electricity trade between Myanmar and Thailand.

An activist associated with a Myanmar-based environmental CSO shared his frustrations with these projects' lack of accountability and transparency, which are emblematic of deterritorialization processes bound up with this transboundary electricity trade: "Not only China and Thailand but also the Myanmar government – they don't share information about their planning about the hydropower. So we are trying to get information from others, like this dam will be invested by China and Thailand, this dam will be just only Thailand, this dam will be just China, and also how much they will invest."

A result of this obfuscation and evasiveness on the part of developers and government sponsors is, he points out, that the ecological knowledge practices of local communities is marginalized or ignored. "Cultures and traditions are lost when we are flooded", the activist noted. Moreover, the statist categorization by authorities of zones to be flooded as 'remote areas' negates the fact that "the river gives lots of support," not only to people well downstream of proposed dam sites, but also to wider ecosystems, which cannot be adequately expressed by headcounts of affected people living in the immediate area where construction would occur. His work therefore involves "trying to collect the information from the ground that at the policy level they didn't know." In turn, he shares information with communities, to help build their capacity to respond to these challenges: "We gather information and try to make that accessible to the community...They would like to do something, so we just give them

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some techniques by acknowledging their local knowledge, so their local knowledge becomes recorded, and also it can counter the development projects.”



Figure 10: Protest at the International Day of Action for Rivers in Mandalay, Burma in March 2019. (Credit: Robert Farnan)

The following day, approximately three hundred participants sailed down the Irrawaddy River wearing ‘no dam’ headbands in a protest against hydropower projects across Myanmar (see Figure 10). The collective declared that the dams “ignore the rights of ethnic communities to govern their own resources and maintain their cultural identities.” A moving performance art piece by Mandalay-based Suu Myint Thein ended in him throwing himself into the river amid chants of ‘Irrawaddy’ (see Figure 11).



Figure 11: A performance by Suu Myint Thein (Credit: Robert Farnan)

This performance and the statements of many of the participants reflected a wider issue that is at play in the case of the Salween River, namely how processes of deterritorialization exemplified by a modernist hydropower agenda are acting to disconnect local inhabitants from their ancestral territories, livelihoods and traditional knowledge practices. Ecological knowledge and associated livelihood practices are being rendered separate from and inferior to modern, techno-juridical forms of development. As a result, gatherings such as this one in Mandalay on the Irrawaddy River can be seen to embody broader processes of reterritorialization.

THE TRANS-SALWEEN REGION IN AYUTTHAYA FOLKTALE: IN SEARCH OF THE SIAM BORDERLAND

*By Amnuayvit Thitibordin*²³

What and where is the trans-Salween region? These are the departure questions for this vignette. The map below (Figure 12) is entitled “Siam with the frontiers of Laos and the Land of the Kareens,” and is reproduced from the book “Siam on the Meinam from the Gulf to Ayuthia,” published in 1897 by Professor Maxwell Sommerville, who was a Professor of Glyptology at the University of Pennsylvania. The book is to be found in the British Library collection. The map depicts the territories of Lower Burmah of British India border, Karen State, Siam, and Laos (now modern-day northern Thailand). The trans-Salween is located on the upper left of the map (Figure 12), which was an area of strong Karen influence. It wasn’t until the 1880s, with the expansion of British India and Siam into the Karen territory, that the demarcation of the political border between the two countries was defined in the 1890s - and imposed upon the region as the ‘trans-Salween’ region.

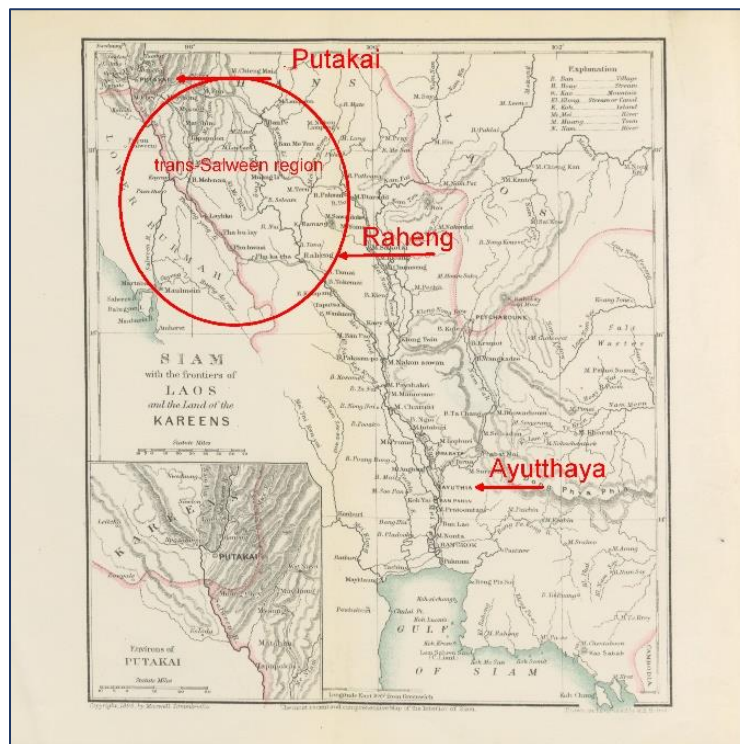


Figure 12: Portrayal of the trans-Salween region on the Siam-British India border in the 1890s. (Credit: Maxwell Sommerville). Annotation of major cities and the trans-Salween region added by Amnuayvit Thitibordin.

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In preparing his book, Sommerville's travel purpose was a vacation in Bangkok and Ayutthaya. During his stay in Ayutthaya, the story of the Phaya-Rama-Ma-Dua caught his attention. Phaya-Rama-Ma-Dua was a seventeenth-century nobleman from the north-west of Ayutthaya.²⁴ The story depicts the prince's journey and his romance that also paved the way for his career success. The prince's diplomatic assignment had brought him to the Ayutthayan court, where he met Chie Lo who was a Karen Princess and his future bride. Although his journey had begun in Ayutthaya, he was then assigned to Raheng, which is modern-day Tak Province, and was a trading center in the heartland of the trans-Salween located in the borderland of Siam-British India. There, he became engaged to the princess and they celebrated a Karen wedding ceremony in Putakai (Figure 13).²⁵ Subsequently, he took on the role of Governor of Phetchabun Province in Siam, but the plot develops as palace politics brought him into difficulty and exile. The story ends when the King decides to restore Phaya-Rama-Ma-Dua as the Viceroy of the frontier districts of the trans-Salween. Yet, the ending contains a twist because Chie Lo's mother, the Karen queen dowager, became dissatisfied over her son-in-law's submissive behavior towards the King of Ayutthaya. Overall, the story of Phaya-Rama-Ma-Dua reflects the Siamese effort at the macro-level to insert state authority on the trans-Salween.

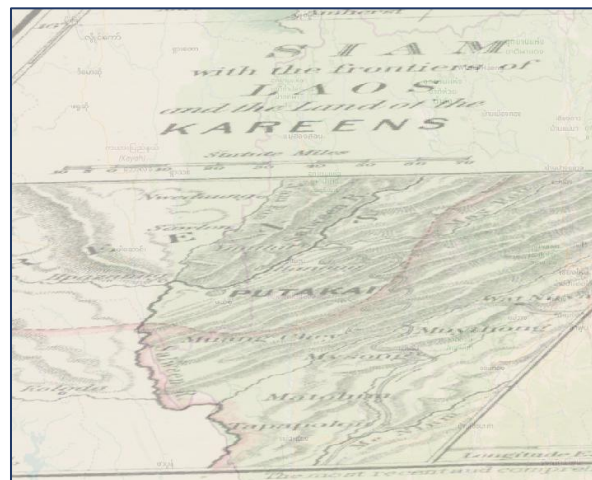


Figure 13: An overlay of Putakai from Sommerville's map on to the contemporary borderline (with an adjusted coordinate reference system)

²⁴ The Kingdom of Ayutthaya was a kingdom in the current area of the central plains of Thailand and existed from 1350 to 1767.

²⁵ Putakai is probably the name of small Karen township. It is difficult to find an exact location. From the geographical location, the city is located at the Thai border of the trans-Salween region (Figure 13)

The story and characters are fictional, but seemed authentic to Sommerville, who was entranced by stories of oriental romance, tropical rainforests, and exotic culture. The story fulfilled Sommerville's wanderlust, even as this imaginary is the epitome of Edward Said's Orientalism. Sommerville's writing is in fact somewhat anachronistic, as the place names and politico-economic setting that he gives in his book are based on the nineteenth-century context; for example, he wrote of Singapore at the time of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. Yet, through his writing, although not intentional, Sommerville projects the border ambiguity of the trans-Salween region that encompassed a vast network of Karen people who were perceived to challenge – and jeopardized – both Siam and British India's authority. Therefore, the consolidation of state power over the Karen and the trans-Salween region in the 1880s and the 1890s was deemed necessary, leading to the demarcation of the political border. Furthermore, just a decade after the publication of the book, the trans-Salween was integrated into the regional administrative of the current area of northern Thailand.

Stories about the relationship between the state and people living in the trans-Salween region were common in the nineteenth century. These stories – whether as folktales or non-fictional – reveal the local experience of the trans-Salween region at the time, when it was common to find individuals who played the British influence against the influence of Siam, and vice versa. These individuals, who had informal networks that spanned across the trans-Salween, profited from their relationships with the authorities on both sides. Phaya-Rama-Ma-Dua, although a fictional character from Ayutthaya period, resembles these individuals of the trans-Salween. Therefore, Sommerville's story reminds us about the struggle of individuals during the emergence of Siam and the development of the trans-Salween. The same story also details the state's attempt to influence the trans-Salween, as well as its suspicion towards the activities of those within it. Indeed, the present day political violence towards the ethnic population of the trans-Salween by both Thai and Burmese governments reveals that these perspectives that originate in the late nineteenth century remain intact, and are a legacy that can be traced back to the time of Sommerville's vacation.