

SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION IN CITIES IN ASIA: CITIES AS PLACES FOR TRANSFORMATION

Discussion paper

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Cities as places for transformation

Nitin Bathla & Kleirjos Papanicolaou

NOT JUST ROADS
Documentary on India's massive urban transformation
Bollywood of new highway built daily in India
extended urbanisation
consequences for the planet
many different forms of existences in these areas
rapid growth of infrastructure
Who benefits?
articulate issues that happen in different areas of the world
Sensory-graphy
a movie touches much more than a research paper
Academics, make use of the camera!

Boonanan Natakun

Gentrification in Bangkok
Impact of tourism
→ construction of new sites
→ removal of residences
Emergence of community architects in Thailand
participatory process
social responsibility
architects become translators
learn from experience of local communities

Le Quang Binh

Pilot project: Promote people's participation to make an inclusive and resilient city
from trash site to public space
transform space and enrich nature
build trust between government & local community
local communities work with civil society
act transparently, patiently & persistently
lessons for replication by CSOs & government
advocate for inclusive & resilient urban design & planning

Melinda Martinus

Southeast Asia
rapid growth of cities in the next 5 years
ISSUES
inequality
public health
climate disaster
Adapt SEA cities to a disrupted world
city governments explore worldwide engagement & city-to-city cooperations
civil society organisations bridge gap between cities & citizens
pronounced private sectors & solution providers
scale up & deploy solutions
CLIMATE CHANGE
mitigation measures
air pollution
climate-proof infrastructure
protection against natural catastrophes

Panel discussion

CITY IS THE PEOPLE!

To what extent is it possible for the city to become a place for social-ecological transformation?

DESAKOTA CITIES

areas in the extended surroundings of large cities typically in Southeast Asia



Nomans/land around cities become actionable



Is transformation possible outside liberal-democratic politics?

influence policy through public opinion

need to start with the people and truly include everybody

depends on view of politics

a city is a service provider
a process
an organism
a mosaic of spaces

How do job creation & livelihood play into your project or research?

improve residents' living conditions by focusing on better public spaces
create new possibilities

Urbanisation is irreversible!
sacred spaces
COLLECTIVE ACTION!

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INTRODUCTION: CITIES AS POSSIBLE TRANSFORMATIVE PLACES

“ Social-ecological transformation must address two conditions that impact the present and compromise the future: **structural inequality and environmental degradation.** ”

(*Enough!* 2019: 53)

Social-ecological transformation refers to societal changes in synergistically addressing social and environmental crises in contemporary times. Such changes are characterised by social, political, and economic aspects, as well as by processes that assure the synergies across these aspects. With increasing concern about human-induced environmental degradation, in which social-economic processes contradict the drive for environmental sustainability, the need for social-ecological transformation is becoming more urgent to deliver greater synergies between the social and ecological systems. “Social-ecological” highlights the inseparability between the social and ecological.

Ecological crises, such as environmental degradation and their related hazards, inevitably have social impacts – with inequality in societies meaning unequal distribution of these social impacts. The public call for social-ecological transformation comes from the realisation that there has been consistent perpetuation of structural inequalities along with development-induced environmental hazards, in parallel with power and wealth concentrations among the elite few. In other words, there is unequal distribution of environmental costs as well as social and economic benefits of development. Those who bear the costs may not have full access to the social and economic benefits. For example, building highway infrastructure to connect one urban centre with another may be beneficial for economic growth as the two centres become connected, but may impose more environmental costs on peoples and landscapes at large that are directly and/or indirectly affected. This would include farmers who are dispossessed of their land to make way for the highway, those who work on the project, those whose livelihoods are affected by the environmental impacts of construction, as well as the global climate that would be affected by the increase in built-up areas and carbon emissions.

Asia is a region in which various urban development projects are transforming social and natural landscapes. Cases of industrial pollution, air and water quality degradation, displacement of Indigenous societies and forced evictions of the urban poor, and magnifying scales of disasters are just a few examples of how social-ecological crises manifest in reality. These environmental and social dimensions are interlinked across geographies and scales. Therefore, although the direct impacts of these crises are local, they bear imprints on the regional and global scale, and eventually in climate change as a world-scale social-ecological crisis.

While there have been notable negative urban development impacts on the environment, is it possible to think about cities as places in which social-ecological transformation takes place? To enable such synergies between cities and social-ecological transformation requires thinking about possible alternatives to the environmentally destructive development paradigms. Explorations of alternative models of development thus far have put forward the empowerment of active citizens as the focus, away from thinking of urban spaces as commodities. Nevertheless, the continuous mainstream urge to measure development success through economic growth indicators makes it challenging to prioritise social justice and environmental sustainability synergistically in many urbanising regions.

Thus, firstly, it is important to explore the fundamental questions: What are the roles of cities in social-ecological transformation? While the urban development-induced environmental degradation seems to be widespread, to what extent is cities still possible to become places for social-ecological transformation? Once these fundamental questions are examined, there are the pragmatic questions: What are examples of social-ecological crises in and of cities in Asia? What has been done, and what more could be done to achieve social-ecological transformation towards sustainable environment and societies?

The online panel Cities as Places for Transformation at Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's (FES) Regional Conference on Social-Ecological Transformation in Cities in Asia (22-24 June 2022) brought together policy analysts, academics, activists, as well as policy-makers to exchange ideas and experiences. The panel was comprised of Nitin Bathla and Klearjos Papanicolaou (Not Just Roads film, India), Boonanan Natakun (Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand), Le Quang Binh (Liveable Hanoi), and Melinda Martinus (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore). The discussion covered regional issues, alternative solutions for urban development-induced social-ecological crises, as well as possibilities and challenges in building cities as places to cultivate social-ecological transformation. Each panelist brought perspectives from experiences, research, and involvement in social-ecological transformation in her/his respective city (or cities), in addressing the set of fundamental questions above. The contents of this paper was extracted from the panel discussion and enriched by existing literature as well as other published materials on the role of cities in social-ecological transformations.

URBAN TRANSFORMATION: IN-BETWEEN CITIES

Massive urban transformation runs parallel with intensifications of infrastructure development. In India, there are 30 kilometres of new highways built every day (Searle, 2021). These highways represent an extended urbanisation, through which commodities and people travel from one urban centre to another. Echoing what Neil Brenner and Christian Schmidt (2011) wrote as planetary urbanisation, a highway linking two cities causes social and ecological changes in the areas they run through. Highways represent Brenner and Schmidt's notion of "the disintegration of the 'hinterland'" as urban fringes are reconfigured through new "corridors of connectivity" (2011: 12), signifying environmental and social consequences of urbanisation beyond the territorial boundaries of cities.

These infrastructures are examples of how economic growth and political interests behind urban development are not in line with environmental sustainability and social equity, as the distribution of social-ecological costs and benefits are uneven. When costs and benefits of infrastructure development are not equally distributed, for each infrastructure project the most critical question is "who benefits?" Many different forms of existence in areas outside cities that are negatively affected by infrastructure development may also receive insufficient attention on the issues they face. It is important, therefore, to bring their stories to the public, to articulate issues that happen in different areas of the world, including in Asia.

Ethnography is a powerful tool to uncover the experiences of people affected by infrastructure development. It allows researchers to examine and present cases from people's perspectives. However, such ethnographic work often ends up in academic journals not accessible to the public. This led the team that produced *Not Just Roads*, Nitin Bathla and Klearjos Papanicolaou, to use film as the medium to reflect issues faced by the people affected by highway developments in India. A movie has a wider reach than a research paper published in academic journals, but at the same time does not diminish the importance of academic research that forms the basis of the film's storyline.

Ethnographic documentary filming, therefore, can act as a bridge between academic research and the public. In a commentary, Momen El-Husseiny (2021: 39) wrote that *Not Just Roads* as a film acts "as an autopsy to explore the interstices of the city's expanding urbanisation." An ethnographic documentary film does not provide the audience with "an all-knowing narration" but instead provides details of narratives, experiences, and sensory details that allow the viewers to deduce meanings from the subjects (Searle, 2021: 45). Recorded from 2018 to 2020, *Not Just Roads* captured the contradictions

between promises of urbanisation, represented by images of the incomplete highway and sky towers, and the continuation of farmers' livelihoods that are interrupted, dislocated, yet still continued by adjusting to the new landscape. In the film, "the skyline of the real estate developments is always there in the background with successive characters – sheep, naked wrestlers, cricketers, marketeers, and middle-class families, all interchanging at different times. The sky towers become the specter of a ghost, there without a presence, even as people continue to enact, embrace, and reposition themselves to its surrounding landscape. Simultaneous worlds of inhabitation take place beyond the middle-class promise of "world-class" transport infrastructure" (El-Husseiny, 2021: 39). The storyline on social-ecological consequences of urban development weaves through visuals and audio that convey the need for social-ecological transformation to address environmental and social injustices. The film can be a "sensory ethnography" (Bathla & Papanicolaou, 2022) that captures consequences of urban development from grounded perspectives, with the role of academia providing the platform for conceptual connections and discussions.

URBAN TRANSFORMATION: IN CITIES

The intensification of infrastructures between cities as corridors of connectivity occurs in parallel with the intensification of infrastructures within cities. In the interconnected global economy, cities continue to become spaces in which wealth and power accumulate as they absorb natural and human resources from rural areas (Padawangi, 2022). Social and environmental inequalities, as observed in the case of inter-city highway development in the previous example, are also pertinent within city boundaries. The unequal distribution of social and environmental costs and benefits of urbanisation is observable within a relatively high-density landscape.

A case in point is the development of a mass transportation system in a city. Often considered a component of a “good city” in urban planning literature, the existence of a mass rapid transit train system in the city signifies urban connectivity and legibility that are central in the measure of a city’s livability. Rail-based systems have been developed and expanded in large cities of Southeast Asia – such as Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta – in the past two decades. Metro Manila’s rail-based public transportation network was first opened in 1999 and had subsequently grown to consist of 124.4 kilometres of tracks by 2019 and 49 stations of mass rapid transit (MRT) and light rail transit (LRT) systems (Padawangi, 2022). Meanwhile, Bangkok Transit System (BTS) started in the same year and by 2018 covered 109.4 kilometres of tracks and 77 stations (Chalermpong, 2019). Jakarta, another megacity in the region, started its first MRT line in 2019 and thus far only covers 20.1 kilometres of tracks, but the city has had its older commuter line system that connects parts of the inner city as well as metropolitan areas (Andapita, 2019). In addition, Jakarta also has a bus rapid transit (BRT) system that opened in 2003.

Rail-based public transportation systems provide alternatives to private car transportation that has long been associated with traffic congestion in large cities (Rimmer & Dick, 2009). Furthermore, a public transportation system can also be part of social-ecological transformation, as it provides a transport option that is more affordable with fewer emissions (Archer & Adelina, 2020). While these rail systems are also presumed to be more environmentally friendly, as their carbon footprint and pollution is less than private cars – and to be more affordable to the general public, high ridership of rail transit does not automatically prevent urban sprawl (Chalermpong, 2019) nor reduce social inequalities. Transit-oriented development (TOD), which featured intensified social and economic functions around rail transit nodes as a preferred model of urban development, may well induce real estate speculation and gentrification that may lead to displacement of long-term residents. For example, Bangkok’s rail transit system has influenced real estate developments around train stations, 14 per cent of which are bought as second homes, and built-up areas in the

Bangkok metropolitan region continue to expand constantly regardless of rail transit system operations (Chalermpong, 2019; Losiri et al., 2016).

Bangkok’s historic neighbourhoods are examples of such contradictions between the ideal urban planning tool and its impact on social injustice. Bangkok’s rail transit systems were publicly welcomed as a solution to the congested and sprawling metropolitan area. TOD was the strategy to cure the infamous traffic of the city (Rugkhapan, 2017) and the City Planning Department quickly assigned higher density land use for all transit stations. Although this strategy seemingly fit into encouraging more public transportation usage – as it becomes more convenient to access rail transit if residential areas are within accessible distances – such increases in density led to more opportunities for real estate development, and induced displacements of residents in historic quarters of Bangkok. Boonanan Natakun and Napong Rugkhapan (2021) listed several cases of displacements that were induced by rail transit node intensification, such as the merchants at Ong Ang canal as well as en bloc redevelopment of Chinatown that caused residents in humbler neighbourhoods to experience overnight terminations of housing contracts as property speculators intensified activity around one transit station in the centre of the area (Rugkhapan, 2017).

Hence, what has been widely accepted as a norm in urban planning, such as TOD, requires rethinking when it comes to fulfilling the necessary social-ecological transformation for a more sustainable and equitable society. Even when a rail transit system provides affordable and more environmentally friendly transportation alternatives for the public, it does not automatically lead to reduced social injustice if the market-driven development continues to turn rail transit nodes into unaffordable real estate speculations. The pattern of real estate speculation following increases in public transportation connectivity widely replicates in Asia as a manifestation of the largely accepted “growth” paradigm as “an unquestioned imperative and naturalised need” that escapes any social-ecological inquiries to explore possible alternatives (Asara et al., 2015: 375). Such an example of how an idealised urban planning paradigm (TOD) improves transportation, connectivity between housing and jobs, and makes cities more environmentally friendly, contradicts the need for more social equality and social justice and is a reminder of how social-ecological transformation requires more than just technical measures of environmental quality, but rather a more comprehensive take on the synergy between social and environmental improvements.

WHERE SHOULD WE START?

Conceptually, social-ecological transformation seems to be ideal as it comprehensively addresses social and environmental problems and inequalities alongside each other (Archer & Adelina, 2020). However, the main challenge is two-fold. Firstly, given the magnitude of social and environmental problems as the costs of economic and urban development throughout history, how should such issues be addressed without compromising one over another? Secondly, who are the stakeholders to take action, and at what level should these actions be taken? Furthermore, as urban development that relies on commodification of space has been at the forefront of the contradiction between social and environmental issues, can cities be places in which social-ecological transformation can take place?

An important answer to the starting point question is to look into the notion of alternative development, in which a significant emphasis is given to human flourishing. John Friedmann (1992) associated the term “empowerment” to “alternative development”, which he referred to as urban development patterns and processes that move away from treating urban spaces as commodities, and also one that involves citizens as active agents of city-making. In other words, when linked to social-ecological transformation, “alternative development” considers commodification of space as the source of contradiction between social justice, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. The focus on “empowerment” and citizen involvement rather

than “economic growth” in “alternative development” provides indications of starting points for social-ecological transformation.

To discuss possibilities of social-ecological transformation from citizens’ involvement, we turn to two examples from Southeast Asia: one from Bangkok, Thailand and another from Hanoi, Vietnam. As discussed in the previous section on the impacts of TOD on historic neighbourhoods, Boonanan Natakun (2022) drew on the example of Nang Loeng, an area in the old town of Bangkok that is also affected by rail transit expansion. Nang Loeng started urbanising between the late-19th to early-20th century to become the mixed-use and diverse neighbourhood as it is known today (Natakun & Rugkhapan, 2022). Nang Loeng has long been known as a neighbourhood of arts and cultural performances, given that in late-19th century it was the residence of many court entertainers who performed Chatri play, a form of folk-dance drama from southern Siam. It continues to host a range of spaces for arts and culture until today (see Figure 1 for land use map in 2017), including a local workshop that has made Khon costumes for Ramayana masked performances for the past 70 years, an art house, a dance house (Figure 2), and a theatre.

Figure 1. Map of Nang Loeng and its key sites

Source: Natakun & Rugkhapan, 2022

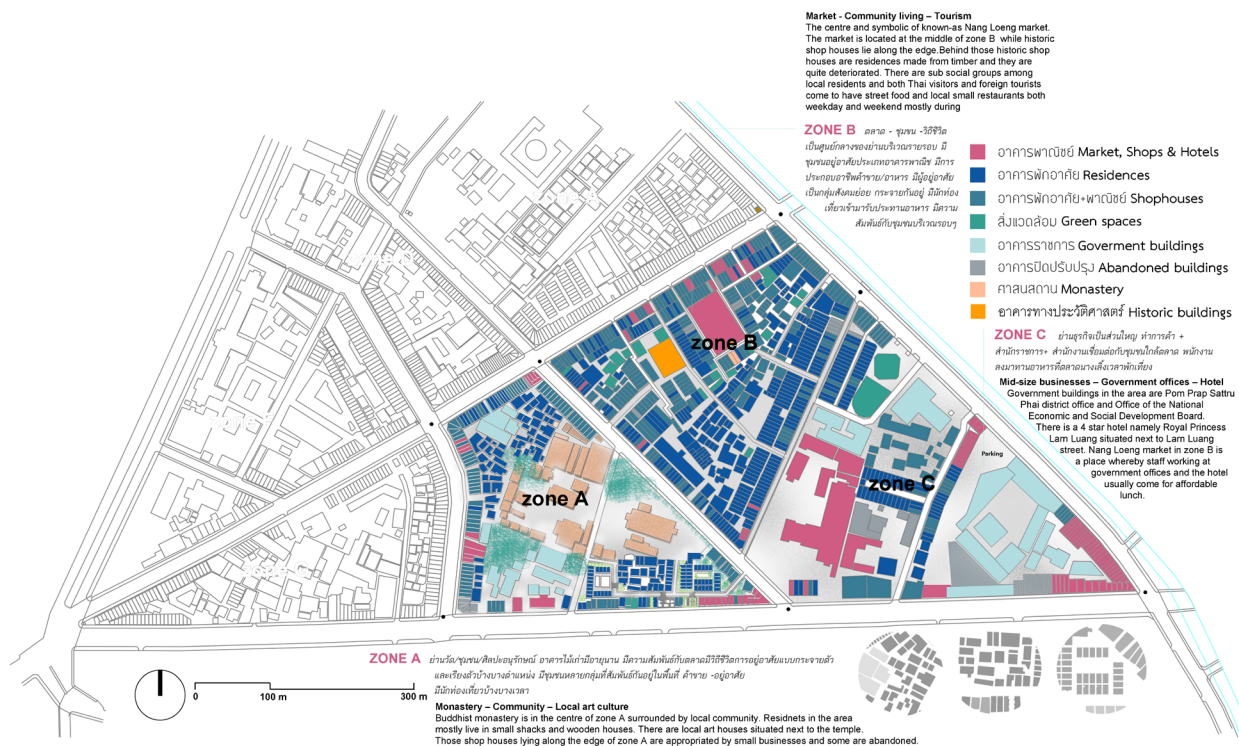


Figure 2. Ban Ten Ram dance house in Nang Loeng, Bangkok

Source: Padawangi



The presence of these art spaces provides places for residents and activists to gather and eventually make art as a tool of their activism for housing tenure security. Nang Loeng participated in the Baan Mankong housing upgrading programme through the Community Organisation Development Institute (CODI), which had been working on participatory housing upgrades with security of housing tenures (ACHR, 2004). However, Nang Loeng eventually only managed to secure a community library and an office rather than a housing tenure (Natakun & Rugkhaman, 2022). Together with community architects, the residents turned to art to advocate for housing tenure security in their neighbourhood, especially in light of an upcoming rail transit station likely to induce gentrification. One activity they organised was the annual Buffalo Field Festival, which started as a small gathering in 2017 and eventually grew larger. The Buffalo Field Festival in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, focused on three themes: sustenance, settlement, and social fabric, which refer to food security, housing tenure security, and a changing social life due to disappearing old shops. The festival drew attention from international artists and combined both visual and performing arts, bringing together local and international stakeholders from activists, architects,

universities, government agencies, as well as local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The second example comes from Hanoi, in which the "Livable Hanoi" network launched a pilot project to promote people's participation in converting environmentally degraded sites into green spaces. In Chuong Dong Ward, Hoan Kiem District, a 1,500-square-metre landfill was converted into a green public space through the collaborative work of citizens and NGOs (The Saigon Times, 2022). Sponsored by the Embassy of Denmark in Vietnam, Ford Vietnam Company and USAID, the pilot project saw four NGOs: Think Playgrounds, Keep Hanoi Clean, the Centre for Environment and Community Research and ECUE bring people together to clear 200 tonnes of rubbish (Figure 3), conduct community trainings on waste reduction and wastewater treatment to keep the Red River clean (Nguyen, 2022). Furthermore, the project also converted the former trash site into a green space through tree planting, and making a children's playground that also functions as an environmental education space through featuring equipment from recycled materials (Kiet, 2022).

Figure 3. Collecting garbage in the area

Source: ECUE



The green space-recycled playground project is an example of how social and ecological improvements are working in synergy rather than in opposition to each other. Le Quang Binh, coordinator of the “Livable Hanoi” network and chairman of the People’s Participation Working Group, highlighted the importance of building trust between the government and local communities in bringing the latter together to transform an urban space into one that is more environmentally sustainable (Le, 2022). While it is one project in one location in the city, it requires persistence, patience, as well as transparency to ensure many organisations and people gather for a common social-ecological cause. In just two months, it transformed from a waste-polluted site into a clean and green public space. This project has subsequently become a lesson for replication by civil society organisations and the government for more inclusive and resilient urban design and planning.

The examples from Nang Loeng in Bangkok and from the banks of the Red River in Hanoi have showcased the potential for social-ecological transformations from relatively small spaces in cities. The case of art activism in Nang Loeng advocates for housing tenure security and is a reminder that any urban planning paradigm should be assessed from both social and ecological justice perspectives, since market-driven urban development holds the potential for contradictions between social fabric and environmental sustainability.

Meanwhile, the Red River green space is an example of how an urban space can become a place for citizens to

come together for environmental sustainability, but it is more of a starting point than a finished social-ecological transformation. Firstly, evidence of social injustice along the banks of the Red River remain apparent. “Instead of being depicted as civilians with active citizenship, people who happened to settle outside the dike for a long period of time, who call this riverine zone ‘home’ but have no legal land titles, are framed as ‘a category of error’ with negative attributes such as ‘encroaching’, ‘violating law’, ‘unorganised’, ‘messy’, ‘homeless’, or even ‘second-class citizens’” (Vu & Le, 2022: 15).

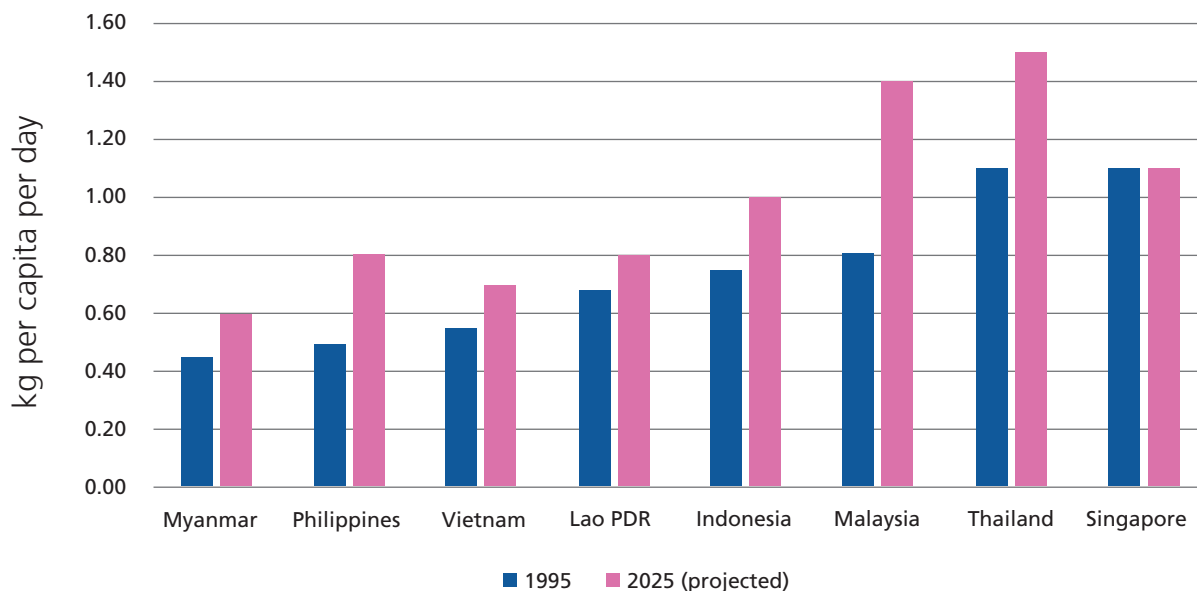
Secondly, the conversion from a landfill to a green space through collaborative work reflects the potential for ecological rehabilitation, but the fundamental issue of waste management still requires further thoughts and actions. In Vietnam, although the waste collection rate is 80-82 per cent and the recycling rate for metal waste exceeds 90 per cent, the waste source segregation is still below 50 per cent, and a considerable rate of waste treatment-disposal still relies on open dumps (UNEP, 2017). In fact, most cities in Southeast Asia primarily rely on open dumping and burning for solid waste management (Table 1). The greening of Red River banks provides a glimpse into how the landfill can be rehabilitated through citizens’ social action. However, in terms of social-ecological transformation, the case study points to the source of the problem that has yet to be fully addressed: city-wide waste management and reduction. Curtailing the role of waste and open dumps in solid waste management is important as urban waste generation in the region is forecast to rise in the years to come (see Table 1 and Figure 4).

Table 1. Recycling rate and municipal solid waste treatment technology in Southeast Asia (source: UNEP, 2017)

Country	Source Segregation	Collection Rate (Urban)	Recycling Rate	Treatment/Disposal				
				Composting	Incineration	Sanitary Landfill	Open Dump	Open Burning
Brunei Darussalam	<50%	90%	15%			✓	✓	
Cambodia	<50%	80%	<50%	✓		✓	✓	✓
Indonesia	<50%	56%-75%	<50%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lao PDR	<50%	40%-70%	<50%	✓		✓	✓	✓
Malaysia	<50%	>70%	50%-60% (Metal, Paper, Plastic) Others (<50%)		✓	✓	✓	
Myanmar	50%		70% (Plastic, Paper, Metal)		✓	✓	✓	
Philippines	50%-70%	40%-90%	20%-33% (Paper)					
			30%-70% (Aluminium)					
			20%-58% (Other Metals)	✓		✓	✓	
			23%-42% (Plastic)					
			28%-60% (Glass)					
Singapore	70%	>90%	50%-60% (Paper, Horticulture)					
			>90% (Fe, CandD, Used Slag)					
			>80% (Scrap Tire)		✓	✓	✓	
			>80% (Wood)					
			>50% (Others)					
Thailand	<50%	>80%	Overall: 60%					
			>90% (Metal)					
			50%-60% (Paper, Construction)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Vietnam	<50%	80%-82%	<50% (Others)					
			>90% (Metal)					
			>70% (Plastic, E-waste) 50% (Paper)	✓			✓	
			<50% (Others)					

Figure 4. Projected urban waste generation in some ASEAN countries.

Source: UNEP, 2017



HOW ABOUT URBAN AND NATIONAL POLICIES?

Social-ecological transformation requires stakeholders to work together concurrently for interventions in various levels. While alternative development paradigms reveal possibilities for starting points and focus on civil society actions on local spaces in a city, interlinkages across cities and countries for social-ecological transformations require sustained and consistent efforts that involve policy-makers in local and national government (Martinus, 2022). This is especially important to synergistically address social and environmental issues across boundaries.

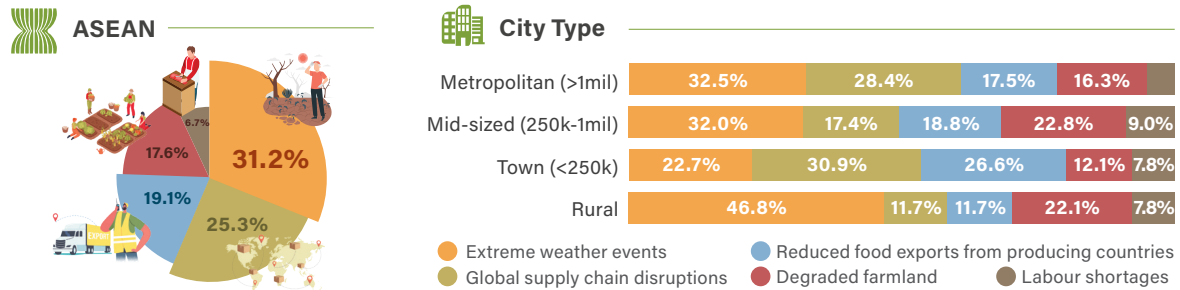
Southeast Asia is facing common challenges brought by urban development. First, the region is overseeing rapid growth in cities at least for another five years into the future. Second, Southeast Asia's cities face common social-ecological issues, namely social-environmental inequality, public health risks and climate disasters. The impacts of climate change and increasing risks of disasters affect the well-being, health and livelihood opportunities especially of the poor (Archer & Adelina, 2020). These challenges require cities in the region to adapt to possible disruptions in the world through: 1) increasing agility and flexibility, 2) establishing working relationship among stakeholders: government, civil society, and private sector, 3) regional and global intercity cooperation, 4) active roles played by civil society organisations and 5) readiness to deploy and

scale-up local solutions (Martinus, 2022).

Regional and global cooperation is central to addressing transnational ecological challenges as currently exemplified by climate change. Besides environmental issues, the Asian Development Bank projected potential economic losses of 6.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) annually by the year 2100, which is more than double the global average loss of 2.6 per cent (ADB, 2010). The most recent annual Climate Outlook Survey of Southeast Asia by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2022) reveals that most respondents perceived climate change to increase floods (22.4 per cent), heat waves (18.1 per cent), and landslides (12 per cent), with respondents in the Philippines most fearful of tropical storms (24.8 per cent) and those in Lao PDR alarmed by droughts (22.8 per cent). Furthermore, a good proportion of the survey respondents considered extreme weather events a significant threat to food security (Figure 5).

Figure 5. ASEAN respondents' perception of food security threat

Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022: 6

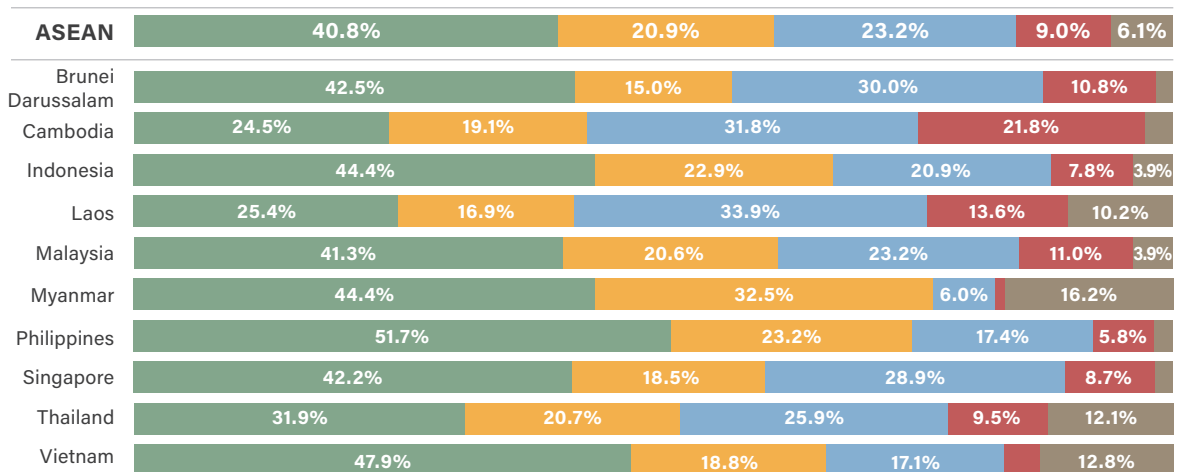
"My country's food supply is mainly threatened by..."

Although the survey note claimed that the results are only to present a "general view of climate attitudes in the region" and are "not predictive of future events", the Climate Outlook Survey is a good indicator of citizens' perceptions of the appropriate role of stakeholders in addressing climate change and their view of current actions by policy-makers. The survey found that most

ASEAN respondents saw their respective governments as the most responsible stakeholder to address climate change impacts, followed by the private sector (Figure 6). Furthermore, respondents generally thought that their countries contributed to climate change and needed to increase efforts to decarbonise.

Figure 6. ASEAN respondents' perception of their respective countries' role in international climate action

Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022: 6

Which statement best reflects your views about your country's role in international climate action?

- My country contributes to climate change and needs to step up efforts to help the world to decarbonise
- My country feels the impact of climate change, major emitters such as the US, China, and Europe must be responsible
- My country did not cause climate change but needs to play a more active role in the global green transition because it concerns our future
- My country did not cause climate change but to help decarbonise, we need international assistance
- My country did not cause climate change and need not demonstrate climate action in international fora

The general perception that governments are responsible to do more on climate action is the other side of the "alternative development" approach highlighted in the previous section. While acknowledging the importance of human flourishing and collective action from the grassroots in synergising social and environmental improvements, the emphasis on the strength of human agency in pushing for social-ecological transformation

does not take away the responsibility of other stakeholders. In fact, in the 2022 Climate Outlook Survey, individual citizens are at the bottom of the rate of responsibility in tackling climate change and bearing the costs of climate change measures. The respondents see governments and the private sector as the main stakeholders holding the responsibility.

CITIES AS PLACES OF SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION: THE WAYS FORWARD

To what extent is it possible for a city to become a place for social-ecological transformation? Seen from the bottom up, the examples from Nang Loeng in Bangkok and the banks of the Red River in Hanoi demonstrate the role of cities as places where people come together to act collectively. The Buffalo Field Festival in Nang Loeng is a case in point where the city became a place of collaboration and solidarity, a phenomenon that is also observable in the landfill rehabilitation project in Hanoi that brought funders, civil society groups, individual citizens, and the government to work together for a common social-ecological project. Although cities are places where problems are found, social-ecological transformation can also start from where the problems sit. The visibility of social and environmental problems, combined with the density of social fabric in a city, adds to the urgency to address such challenges.

It is necessary, however, to recognise that cities in Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia, have developed with a pattern that results in mixed landscapes that geographer Terry McGee (1991) called “desakota”. This mixed landscape reflects extensions of urban landscapes, particularly in large cities, even beyond the cities’ administrative areas. The juxtaposition of sky towers and highways with continuing farmers’ livelihoods in between the urban-encroached spaces in *Not Just Roads* is an example of such mixed landscapes. In these mixed landscapes, the connection between urban and rural lands needs further rethinking, as they have consequences on social-ecological issues that emerge from the patterns of development and inequalities. Some obvious consequences of this pattern are the gaps in power and social inequality: between rural and urban, between poor and the rich beyond and within cities, as well as among cities and nations. The global-local scale, long-term perspective, an analysis of “sociometabolic regimes” that look at the “biophysical constraints of societal development”, as well as a recognition of the political dimensions – including a relational perspective to assess political actors – are necessary to ensure taking into account critical considerations of social-ecological transformation, focus on holistic change and avoid partial solutions (Görg et al., 2017).

The importance of citizen participation raises a fundamental question whether liberal-democratic politics are necessary bases to allow social-ecological transformation to take place. In the report “Enough!” on the urgent need of a social-ecological transformation in Latin America, a “democratic social state” is a requirement for a social-ecological transformation of the State and the economy (FES, 2019: 59). Such a question is particularly important in a region such as Southeast Asia and Asia in

general, in which not all countries and cities are adopting the liberal-democratic political model and in many localities, top-down governance is still in place. Yet, the discussion on where and how to start a social-ecological transformation has provided some glimpses into possibilities to initiate transformative practices in the city. For example, the political context of Nang Loeng in Bangkok and the Red River in Hanoi are very different; yet, in each locale there are distinctive spaces that allow incremental steps for social-ecological transformations to take place. Rather than seeing the city as a finished product or a project to build, a viewpoint that looks at the city as a process and one that looks at cities contextually, is necessary to find the starting point of a social-ecological transformation.

“ Only by explicitly addressing a plurality of conflicting transformation processes, a better analytic understanding can be achieved, which offers a more realistic approach for strategic interventions ”

(Görg et al., 2017: 2).

The city in Asia is a mosaic of spaces, with diverse local contexts that impose challenges to and provide opportunities for manageable scales to synergise social and environmental sustainability.

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Imprint

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