
Guest editorial: Complex disasters, complex solutions: advancing inclusive governance and decolonization in Southeast Asia

Introduction

This special issue of *Southeast Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal* examines the complexity of disaster governance in the Southeast Asian region. This special issue builds upon insights from two international seminar workshops that were held in December 2022 and October 2023 to discuss the experiences and challenges of disaster governance in Southeast Asia. These workshops brought together scholars, practitioners and community representatives to share their perspectives, enriching the discussions presented in this collection. We extend our gratitude to the Brown University Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization, University of Santo Tomas, Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation, Swedish Institute, Universiti Brunei Darussalam and Curiosity for their generous support in making these workshops possible.

Observers often note that Southeast Asia is among the most “disaster prone” regions of the world, perpetually confronting hazards in the form of typhoons, earthquakes and floods, among many others (Papp, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has layered on additional complexity for Southeast Asia and for the world. However, as the articles in this special issue elucidate in various ways, this “disaster-proneness” does not stem from natural hazards alone. Quite the contrary, one cannot understand how and why natural hazards escalate into disasters in the first place without analytically zooming out to also probe the broader context of social inequities, policy gaps and political shortcomings within which disasters occur (Kelman, 2020; Recio, Albuero-Cañete, & Pamela, 2023). The articles in this journal seek to advance our understanding of this complexity.

The framing of this special issue emphasizes two concepts – disaster governance and complex disasters – that both encapsulate this broader view of disasters. The term, “disaster governance” centers the notion that “disaster management and risk-reduction activities take place in the context of and are enabled (or thwarted) by both societal and disaster-specific governance frameworks” (Tierney, 2012, p. 342). Meanwhile, the term, “complex disasters,” draws our attention to the multitude of factors at play when hazards and societal structures intersect, yielding outcomes that are difficult to understand and predict (Hilhorst, 2006). Key to both concepts is the observation that there is no such thing as a “natural disaster.” Although hazards can be understood as natural events, the compounding factors that cause hazards to become disasters are human-made. Climate change, too, is an inescapable element of these dynamics, amounting to human-made conditions that further fuel hazards, vulnerabilities and disasters.

Given that disasters and social structures are inseparable, a multi-disciplinary approach is necessary. Indeed, disaster studies cannot be segmented off as its own domain of social science

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scholarship and policy research. Concepts, theories and ideas drawn from broader efforts to understand how societies operate must be brought to bear. Articles in this special issue take steps to accomplish this task, leveraging concepts from other areas of social science and policy – including “human security” (Carnegie) from international development and “material registers” (Cajilig) from anthropology – to reframe how we comprehend complex disasters. This conceptual and analytical cross-pollination is crucial for scholarship to rise to the task of holistically probing complex disasters.

Also important is the need to center the voices, experiences, perspectives and knowledge of affected communities. Just as disaster studies must zoom out to encompass wider social and political dynamics, the field must also zoom in on the communities at the forefront of confronting disasters. Drawing on the “disaster governance” framing, communities and other non-state actors not only are the people being governed but also actively engage in governance themselves (Varkkey, 2022). This reality – which is increasingly acknowledged yet cannot be emphasized enough – draws our attention to the importance of democratizing and decolonizing disaster governance.

Building on these discussions, the articles collectively emphasize the multifaceted nature of disaster governance in Southeast Asia, where diverse actors, dynamic processes and evolving risks intersect in complex ways. Each study underscores the need to recognize the agency of local actors – such as community members, informal networks, local governments, NGOs and civil society groups – in shaping disaster responses and recovery efforts. However, the capacity of these actors to influence outcomes is often constrained by entrenched power dynamics and structural inequalities that limit meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

The issue of misrecognition emerges as a recurring theme across the articles which manifested as various governance challenges. For instance, Alejandria *et al.* and Cajilig discuss how state-led interventions in the Philippines neglected community knowledge and lived experiences, which led to ineffective and locally-irrelevant solutions. Similarly, Zreik’s examination of risk communication in Malaysia highlights how the success of a disaster management program, in this case during the COVID-19 pandemic, depends on the “customization” of programs to accommodate the modalities of engagement and experiences of the affected community. Arensen and Carnegie’s work support this framing, as they expound how the misalignment between risk and vulnerability assessments and actual conditions on the ground further complicates efforts to address the root causes of disaster exposure and build resilience.

The processes shaping disaster governance in the region reveal a spectrum of practices that range from centralized, state-led responses to more localized, community-driven initiatives. While centralized approaches often provide consistency and scale (see Zreik), they risk sidelining local capacities and reinforcing dependencies on external aid (see Alejandria *et al.* and Carnegie). In contrast, community-driven initiatives (i.e. community kitchen, citizen-led infrastructure development, demining activities) emphasize the benefits of localization, participatory planning and adaptive strategies that draw on local knowledge and cultural practices (see Cajilig and Arensen). Yet, these approaches are not without challenges. Carnegie and Zreik identify that, particularly in contexts where resources are limited, communities must navigate bureaucratic constraints or contend with competing interests from commercial and political actors.

The articles in this special issue emphasize the importance of recognizing actors such as local community networks, faith-based organizations and grassroots movements as central players in disaster response and recovery. These actors, often marginalized in conventional disaster governance frameworks and the humanitarian apparatus, bring critical insights and localized knowledge essential for navigating the region’s complex disaster landscape.

Another uniting theme from the studies is the unpacking of the concept of risk. Moving beyond traditional hazard-centric perspectives, the featured articles consider how risks are socially constructed and unevenly distributed across different groups. Coastal and

environmental risks, compounded by rapid urbanization, climate change, economic disparities and the proliferation of new zoonotic diseases are shown to exacerbate existing social vulnerabilities. The articles illustrate how infrastructural solutions (i.e. seawalls or resettlement programs) and securitized approaches (i.e. deployment of uniformed personnel) can sometimes perpetuate maladaptation by prioritizing short-term fixes over sustainable and equitable long-term strategies. Additionally, the intersection of multiple hazards – such as health crises, environmental degradation and socio-political instability – creates a landscape of chronic disaster that defies the conventional disaster management cycle.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue advocate for a rethinking of disaster governance that could be extended beyond the Southeast Asian region. Critical to this effort is a framework that embraces the complexity of disaster narratives and centers the voices of those most affected toward a just policy generation and implementation. There is a need for governance frameworks that not only respond to immediate threats but also address the underlying drivers of vulnerability, which includes challenging pervading politics of recognition and fostering resilience in ways that empower communities to shape their own futures. The articles call for a shift from technocratic solutions toward approaches that promote the capacity of affected communities to govern their experiences with hazards. Integrating local knowledge, recognizing diverse forms of expertise and building adaptive capacities that are resilient to the uncertainties of a changing climate and socio-political landscape may be some of the ways to achieve this goal.

This collection focuses on three countries in the region: Philippines, Malaysia and Cambodia. While these cases do not capture the full range of experiences across Southeast Asia, they offer valuable insights into the future directions of disaster and humanitarian studies in the region. Looking ahead, the field must continue to evolve by embracing the principles outlined in the “Disaster Studies Manifesto,” which advocates for a more inclusive, decolonized approach to both risk construction and governance (“Power, Prestige, & Forgotten Values”).

A key aspect of this future direction involves decolonizing the field itself by shifting away from hierarchical and technocratic approaches to disaster risk reduction and management. Instead, programmatic orientations could build on goals and approaches that center empowering communities to take leadership roles in shaping how risks are understood and addressed. Such an approach veers away from tokenistic representations and ensures that local perspectives and experiences drive policy and practice within complex and multi-hazard worlds.

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Further reading

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