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Institute for Culture
and Society

Strengthening economic resilience in Monsoon Asia

The project

Sharing, reciprocity and resource pooling are at the frontline of recovery and relief when economic crisis or disaster hits Monsoon Asia. This research aims to shed light on cases where these economic practices have been innovatively harnessed to diversify livelihoods and build economic resilience. Working with contemporary Asian scholars, practitioners in the disaster field and a data set gleaned from multiple sources, including mid-20th century tropical geography texts, the project aims to bring to the fore a regional landscape of diverse economic practices across Monsoon Asia. A cross-regional online knowledge community is expected to be formed to explore how this asset base might be mobilised towards more effective local development and disaster response.

This project aims to:

1. Advance a regional understanding of diverse economic practices and map this relatively hidden geography of Monsoon Asia.
2. Analyse specific cases of community resilience in Myanmar and the Philippines using the theory of community economies developed by JK Gibson-Graham.
3. Develop knowledge networks to communicate insights into resilience building and forge new economic development pathways for communities across Asia.

The Australian-based team consists of economic geographers Professor Katherine Gibson and Dr Ann Hill (Research Project Manager) from the Institute for Culture and Society, and urban geographer Dr Lisa Law from the Centre for Disaster Studies, James Cook University (an institution leading the way in addressing critical challenges facing the tropics). Professor Nay Win Oo, Head of the Department of Geography, University of Yangon; and Associate Professor Darlene Occeña-Gutierrez, Department of Geography, University of the Philippines, will lead the South East Asian side of the team. Both Professor Occeña-Gutierrez and Professor Oo have field experience researching socio-economic and disaster-related issues in Myanmar and the Philippines and their contribution is vital to developing a shared understanding of concepts across Monsoon Asia.

It is the theoretical work of Professor Gibson on re-thinking 'the economy' as diverse that undergirds the Strengthening Economic Resilience in Monsoon Asia (ERMA) research project. Distinguishing economic practices associated with capitalism (waged labour, capitalist enterprise and market transactions) as just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the activity that sustains livelihoods, Gibson's influential work with Julie Graham (under the pen name 'JK Gibson-Graham') has permitted the theorising of pathways to social transformation and more sustainable economies that are not primarily driven by capitalist dynamics. The ERMA program will include analyses of specific cases of community resilience in Myanmar and the Philippines using the theory of community economies developed by Gibson-Graham.

'The important thing is that diverse economic practices have long enabled communities to survive but they've been positioned as traditional and rural and largely superseded and subsumed; rolled into self-regulating modern markets and a dominant vision of what economic development would be', explains Research Project Manager Dr Hill.

The project is being launched at a time when the globe is facing increasing climate and resource uncertainty. By revealing insights into economic practices of resilience building – drawing from contemporary and past practices of communities in the Monsoon Asia region – researchers hope their work will highlight new pathways to sustainable economic development.

The project will involve a network of stakeholders such as international scholars, community researchers and NGOs. They will join the Australian team in the co-production of knowledge through joint research, workshops and an online community.

'It's a process of gathering and assembling various knowledge partners in a conversation. We're hoping it will be a very dynamic and exciting space, a two-way conversation, with people coming in with their own unique perspectives', says Dr Hill.

Dr Hill says she hopes the project's methodological approach, which also makes a distinct point of drawing upon both contemporary and historical records and archival texts, will prove 'enriching' for those involved: 'I think one of the strengths of this project is that it circles back and envisions the new simultaneously'.

'It's very clear that humanity needs new ways of surviving in the 21st century and the survival of our planet is very dependent on us finding new ways of communities coping with environmental and economic uncertainty'.

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It champions collaborative engaged research in the humanities and social sciences for a globalising digital age, and is the largest dedicated research concentration of its kind in Australia.

The Institute encourages collaboration from Australian and international institutions, and students interested in postgraduate studies.



The photograph above by Bobby Timonera (thelandofpromise.com)