

Climate crisis and local communities in South East Asia: causes, responses and questions of justice

Laura Geiger

Civil society networks with experience, knowledge and passion are fighting climate injustice and promoting the rights of those displaced by the impacts of climate change.

Imagine walking four hours every day to fetch fresh water because the rising sea level has made your nearby groundwater salty. Imagine being carried, while in labour, in a basket to a hospital several kilometres away because more frequent flash flooding has washed away the roads. Or imagine your children having to leave home – because traditional farming is no longer possible due to drought and land erosion – to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, as a rickshaw driver or in a garment factory in order to earn enough to help your family survive. People are not leaving their homes because they seek a similar lifestyle to that enjoyed by many societies in the Global North; often they are forced to leave their loved ones and their homes simply for survival.

Over the past century, wealthy nations have benefited significantly from the generation of greenhouse gases and the exploitation of ecosystems, while others around the world – usually the poor and vulnerable – suffer the consequences. In the Global South, although colonial landownership has ceased, land grabbing and exploitation of natural resources continue where labour and land are kept cheap as an incentive to foreign investors and environmental and where social protection is barely enforced; in this sense, governments in the Global South also bear responsibility. Monopolistic industries dominate the markets and set the rules while community-owned enterprises or small-scale producers struggle against unfair competition. Those who have to bear the burden of the direct and indirect costs of historical and current exploitation are often abandoned to the devastating effects of climate change. And, worse still, once they are forced to migrate there is little or no protection in place for them.

Challenges – and community responses

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, natural hazards triggered approximately 24.8 million new displacements in 2019, affecting all inhabited continents; IDMC also cites predictions ranging from 100 million to 1 billion climate migrants by 2050.¹ Many South Asian, Southeast Asian and Pacific countries face severe climate change-related challenges. Coastal areas, for example, are threatened by the increased frequency and potency of storm surges, cyclones and sea level rise (which contributes to increased salinity). People have started to convert their rice paddies to salt-tolerant shrimp ponds but this adaptation measure has drastic consequences. Where there were once opportunities for paid labour on agricultural fields and a chance for subsistence agriculture, there are now powerful owners of shrimp companies, with foreign capital, trading their goods on international markets and marginalising the landless farmers.

In Indonesia, since 2000, fishermen in several locations on the north coast of Java have experienced the effects of rising sea level through the submergence of their villages and reductions in their catch. Their fishing boats used to have a crew of three to five fishermen but the reduced catch forces the fishermen to reduce the size of their crew. Masnuah, a 46-year-old woman who lives in the Demak district, went to sea for the first time to accompany her husband, whereas previously it would have been considered shameful for a fisherman to ask his wife to help in his work. She now chairs the Indonesian Fishermen Women's Association (PPNI²). Thanks to their advocacy work it has finally become acceptable for women to fish. Organising themselves was initially difficult because many people, particularly village elders and

June 2020

www.fmreview.org/Issue64

religious figures, were convinced that joining PPNI was contradictory to being a woman.

PPNI now comprises 16 groups from northern Sumatra to West Timor who advocate for fisherwomen's rights. Until 2017 only men could obtain insurance – to pay for medical treatment and in the event of lives lost – but now women can get the same provision. PPNI also helps to strengthen the fishing economy through several projects such as providing training in processing fishery products.

Advocacy work done by organisations such as PPNI is important because women working in fisheries and aquaculture sectors usually have lower wages, less recognition, less social and economic protection, and precarious and invisible jobs. These factors, combined with the reality that women in vulnerable contexts are often already more affected by the impacts of climate change than men are, add to the precarity of their livelihoods and therefore to the likelihood of them being forced to move.

Kodriyah, a 17-year-old Indonesian girl, has seen the population of her village decreasing over the last ten years, from 200 families until today when only her family remains. To reach her school, Kodriyah and her five-year-old sibling travel by small boat, paddling five kilometres to the nearest land to then continue by bicycle and bus. The ground floor of her house is now permanently covered by water, forcing her family to build a platform in their own home in order to stay dry. To reduce the impact of sea level rise, her family is planting mangrove trees for which they get occasional support from

a student-run organisation. Her mother, Pasijah, supports the family income by selling mangrove seedlings. Kodriyah hopes the government can help by undertaking more widespread mangrove planting and by building a dam so her village can be saved.

Adaptation measures such as these can help – but will not stop people from migrating once they lose their land and homes multiple times. According to the International

Organization for Migration, up to 70% of residents in the slums of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, moved there as a result of environmental challenges. It is estimated that Bangladesh hosts six million such migrants, making climate change and environmental causes the country's primary drivers of internal migration, yet little assistance is provided to support those who have been displaced.

The Bangladeshi NGO Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust (COAST) is

strengthening its work on climate adaptation measures and has been advocating for the government to develop a national displacement policy. The government has agreed in principle to develop such a policy and the NGOs have submitted a draft policy for their attention.

Local community responses include working not only on adaptation measures but also on mitigation measures. For example, the Bangladeshi National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports (NCBD) is fighting the root causes of climate change. NCBD was formed in 1998 to build the capacity of local communities to mount resistance to deals



Kodriyah outside her house.

AEER/Khoiron



Manila Conference participants protest with local activists and the community of Talitip, Philippines.

that damage the environment, are against local people's interests and undermine the country's sustainable development. This broad alliance of political parties and organisations of – among others – students, peasants, workers, women, indigenous people, artists, teachers, writers, experts and journalists has campaigned on these issues for over 22 years. They are also fighting to protect the vulnerable Sundarbans region (including its UNESCO-protected mangrove forest) from the introduction of a coal-fired power station as the area is very important for protecting coastal areas from the impacts of climate change.

The power of networking, and the Manila Initiative

There is much to learn from NGOs and movements to support those affected by, and displaced by, climate change. In September 2019 the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung/Foundation (RLS) organised an International Solidarity Conference on the Rights of Climate Migrants in Manila, in the Philippines. The conference welcomed over 70 guests from more than 20 countries, bringing together academia and civil society actors to learn from each other, show solidarity, and build alliances to strengthen

the power of their networks to fight climate injustice and to promote the rights of those displaced by the impacts of climate change.

Participants shared their personal stories, scientific findings, and what their organisations have learned (each with their own examples of localised solutions), plus responses from their governments. Bringing together those people who are currently leading the climate, development and migration conversations in their countries helped to unite them and demonstrate that this is one struggle with many fronts. Three NGOs co-organised the conference: Kalikasan, the International Migrants Alliance, and the Asian Peoples' Movement on Debt and Development (APMDD); APMDD is also a member of the Demand Climate Justice Network – one of the leading international networks in the Global South working on the topic of climate justice.

Climate justice can, of course, be understood and approached in multiple ways, with many different nuances, but there is a common understanding that addressing the social, economic, environmental and political aspects of the climate crisis requires more than a few adaptation and mitigation measures. Climate action does not lead necessarily to climate justice.

Firstly, the richer countries of the Global North should be required to pay climate change compensation. This will require not only providing funding for adaptation and mitigation, but also taking responsibility for the historical ecological debt they owe, and ensuring that climate finance and technology are allocated and used equitably, democratically and appropriately. The policy of “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities” is a principle enshrined within the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change that acknowledges the different capabilities and differing responsibilities of individual countries in addressing climate change. And in 2013, after more than 20 years of international climate negotiations, the *Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage* stated that the impacts of climate change cannot be addressed by adaptation alone. In this respect displacement caused by the impacts of climate change always means a loss and therefore demands compensation, a crucial element in climate justice discourse.

“By not addressing climate justice as a central issue and by focusing more on adaptation, that was one way of containing migratory trends or displacement within the region itself without it being a burden of responsibility for the North.”
Meghna Guhathakurta, Research Initiative Bangladesh

Secondly, there needs to be legal recognition by the international community that those displaced by the impacts of climate change are a group in need of special protection. That means firstly that the right to move if your life is in danger has to be ensured. And secondly that after you have moved, other rights should be ensured – such as the right to medical assistance, legal protection, and education. Social security systems would of course be a major pillar of protection for those forced to move. It is to be hoped that the statement by the UN Human Rights Committee in January 2020 that “countries may not deport individuals who face climate change-induced conditions that violate the right to life” will exert pressure on other countries to

change their immigration policies in order to allow those displaced by the impacts of climate change to claim asylum.

“We want our people to have the option to migrate with dignity should the time come that migration is unavoidable.” Anote Tong, President of Kiribati (during the 67th Session of the UN General Assembly in 2012)

Thirdly, there needs to be fundamental system changes, incorporating elements such as the Green New Deal and an international climate agreement that is rooted in science, equity and justice. For some countries that would imply a radical reduction in consumption, an end to fossil fuels, fair shouldering of the environmental and social costs, and incentives to support local and regional production.

In the light of discussions on the above, one major outcome of the September 2019 conference in Manila is the Manila Initiative on the Rights of Climate Migrants. This presents the conference participants’ vision for the future and their demands for improvements, and issues a call to civil society and policymakers to sign up to the initiative.³

“We hope that [the Manila Initiative] will play a strong role in strengthening our voice on an international level because displacement issues are now losing momentum in both global climate negotiations as well as UN human right processes.” Aminul Hoque, COAST, conference participant

Laura Geiger laura.geiger@rosalux.org
Director, Dialogue Program on Climate Justice,
Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Manila www.rosalux.org

The author thanks Meghna Guhathakurta (RIB) and Aminul Hoque (COAST) for their interviews, and Pius Ginting (AEER) for his support in conducting interviews with Masnuah (PPNI) and Kodriyah.

1. IDMC (2019) ‘Climate Change, Migration Patterns and Vulnerability: The case of Ndem, Senegal’
<https://bit.ly/IDMC-Ndem-2019>

2. Acronym for the organisation’s name in Indonesian.

3. Manila Initiative and *The Move* video produced by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Manila for the Climate Migration Forum at <https://climatemigrationforum.net>