



## Editorial

## Introduction: Decentralising disaster governance in urbanising Asia



## A B S T R A C T

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This multidisciplinary special issue examines decentralised governance from the perspective of environmental disasters. The worldwide trend towards the devolution of state authority to sub-national administrations that has accompanied globalization has been strongest in Asia and Africa, where political reforms have had profound implications for the efficient and equitable distribution of resources. In times of disaster in particular, decentralisation is often portrayed as the preferred means for bringing government closer to the people, and is tied to an expectation that people and their communities will become more empowered to politically articulate their needs and priorities through public decision-making. Decentralised decision-making is also expected to more quickly respond to environmental disasters due to proximity to events and better ability to mobilize social resources and local knowledge in planning for, responding to and gaining resilience for future catastrophic events. However, decentralisation defined as the devolution of political power and financial capacities to autonomously govern local constituencies remains uneven, and such issues as political repression and corruption are a concern at local levels just as they are at national scales. As environmental disasters impact urbanising populations at multiple scales, the need to differentiate different modes and contexts of decentralisation to better understand connections between national and local governance regimes is integral to the pursuit of more inclusive and effective policy choices in dealing with the myriad causes and far-reaching consequences of disasters in Asia's rapidly urbanising societies.

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## 1. Introduction

The pattern of decentralised governance across much of Asia since the 1990s has been accompanied by accelerated urbanisation, industrialisation, globalisation and privatisation. In many cases, this shift has included a transition away from authoritarian regimes to more democratic forms of government (Miller & Bunnell, 2013). Discourses about the desirability of decentralisation have typically emphasised the devolution of state power and resources to sub-national jurisdictions as the most effective means of improving governance processes and outcomes by imbedding them in local contexts and capacities. In times of disaster, such discourses tend to (often uncritically) ascribe an increased 'voice' to communities in shaping the rebuilding of peoples' lives and livelihoods on their own terms (Mansuri & Rao, 2004; Taylor, 2007). Sometimes extending well beyond the moment of the disaster itself, decentralised disaster governance programs may incorporate longer term efforts to build resilience by encouraging communities to play an active role in addressing shared dilemmas concerning such issues as environmental conservation, public service delivery and social justice (Miller & Douglass, 2015a).

At the same time, realising the many hopes of decentralisation encounters well-known bottlenecks and opposing perspectives. Local governments are frequently without sufficient authority, qualified personnel or adequate material resources to deal with environmental disasters and their attendant cascading ecological

and socioeconomic consequences. Because disasters always occur in political spaces, urbanising societies become spaces fraught with heightened contestation, as well as negotiated compromise and cooperation in times of crisis, rupture, and displacement. In these environments, participatory governance mechanisms can be thwarted by local power relations and patronage networks (Miller & Douglass, 2015b). When large-scale disasters occur, centralised government agencies in tandem with donor-assisted programs also frequently assert command *over* local governments rather than working *with* them as partners (Kapucu, 2012; Moynihan, 2009).

In addition to raising questions about governance practices, a focus on the intersections between centralised and decentralised regimes of governance through the lens of disaster reveals how environmental disruptions can lead to new alignments in responding to compounding impacts that transcend existing political jurisdictions. Because many disasters cannot be contained within territorially demarcated boundaries, both vertical and horizontal arrangements among government units may be destabilised. In such cases, the 'rupture' of disastrous events can produce progressive transborder networks, relationships and connections based upon common problems, ideas, knowledge and technologies within and among nation-states. Environmental disasters may also compel local governments to seek or foster wider networks of cooperation in post-disaster recovery priorities and programs. In all cases, rigid routines of existing political and administrative

arrangements invariably prove incapable of meeting the exigencies of disasters, and more flexible responses can emerge that do not fit neatly into received ideas about territorially bounded hierarchies of governance.

This special issue is premised on the central argument that a decentred and multi-scalar approach to disaster governance is essential to accommodate the many voices, aspirations and knowledge systems of people impacted by environmental disasters. To this end, the contributors to this collection came together at the *Workshop on Decentralised Disaster Governance in Urbanising Asia*, held at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore in March 2015. As a starting point, our authors agreed to interrogate the different scales, causalities and increasingly interconnected impacts of environmental disasters in Asia's urbanising populations, including the diverse demographic characteristics of the settlements affected. They also concurred that any meaningful enquiry into decentralised disaster governance must involve a multi-sector, multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder platform that links knowledge to action. In this pursuit, our conceptual approach is driven by an emphasis on the political as well as social and economic dimensions of governance that extend beyond generalised operating procedures to encompass the range of actors, processes, and structures through which knowledge and information are generated and applied. This wide definition serves as a useful entry point for examining not only whose knowledge is privileged and how vulnerability is defined, and by whom, but also for empirically evaluating how priorities and resources are harnessed on the ground in the event of disaster.

Each essay in this special edition considers a different aspect of the challenge of developing multi-level disaster governance capacities. In addressing the challenges of decentralisation, we do not negate the need for centrally coordinated engagement in disaster governance. Rather, we are concerned with the relationships between devolved systems of governance and environmental disasters at multiple scales and across a broad time scale of preparedness, response, long-term recovery and resilience. Our approach to this core problematic is driven by a number of questions. Does the devolution of political power effectively lead to participatory forms of disaster governance? How do environmental disasters reveal or even magnify relations of power and social cleavages? What lessons can we draw from assessing the politics of disasters? To what extent do international and trans-border networks of cooperation among decentralised governments emerge from shared disaster experiences? And, what are the promising dimensions and bottlenecks associated with cooperation in creating collaborative horizontal linkages among localities?

Six national contexts are examined in this special edition on decentralised disaster governance in Asia's rapidly changing urbanising societies: Thailand, India, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and South Korea. Through these case studies, we highlight a set of central concerns in the search for more effective and inclusive decentralised governance in the preparation for, and event of, environmental disasters. While we expect many readers to be interested in those cases about which they have particular knowledge and expertise, the articles collectively challenge the boundaries of extant thinking about decentralised disaster governance in addition to making important context based contributions in their own right. Beyond their applied policy relevance to specific peoples and places, they point to an ongoing need for greater understanding of the linkages between national and local governance systems in generating policy and program innovations to more effectively deal with environmental disasters that have multi-dimensional, reflexive causalities and far-reaching consequences across urbanising Asia.

### 1.1. *Decentring disaster governance in Asia: an overview of this collection*

Taken together, the case studies in this issue break new ground in our understanding of how decentralisation policies and programs are reconstituting the dynamics of disaster governance in urbanising Asia. They consider the degree to which the devolution of state power and resources assists or impedes state-civil society cooperation and public-private engagements. By taking an in-depth look at the multiple scales at which disaster programs function, our contributors pay special attention to the differential vulnerabilities and strengths within sections of Asia's urbanising societies, including the processes of inclusion and exclusion at multiple levels. This in turn has implications for the travel of local innovations and the translation of knowledge about decentralised disaster governance into meaningful collaborative networks and best practices for emulation within and beyond Asia's towns and cities.

A recurring theme in this special issue is that the experience of environmental disaster in Asia's urbanising populations is as socially varied as it is spatially uneven. Governance regimes at different scales impact upon the capacities of communities and households to become more or less resilient and innovative in dealing with future environmental disasters. Low income neighbourhoods and slum dwellers typically rank among the most vulnerable members of society in times of crisis, both in terms of their proximity to unsafe areas, such as flood-prone riverbanks, as well as through their historical social stigmatisation and governmental interference and neglect.

Two of the essays in this collection deal directly with bottom-up urban governance regimes to cope with persistent episodic flooding in different national contexts. Roanne van Voorst, in her anthropological study of one of the poorest and most flood-prone settlements in Indonesia's capital city of Jakarta, shows how the initiation in 1999 of a nationwide democratic decentralisation framework and the subsequent introduction of progressive regional regulations aimed at increasing inter-governmental coordination in Jakarta's flood management system have failed to achieve the desired outcome of strengthening state-societal partnerships through community participation. The main reason for this, according to van Voorst, is that several decades of forced and threatened slum evictions, among other hostile and exclusionary city government policies, has created a legacy of deep distrust of official political authority among Jakarta's riverbank settlers. As a result, the residents of this socio-economically marginalised neighbourhood have continued to rely upon their own independent coping mechanisms and acquired intergenerational knowledge to pursue their needs and interests outside official channels rather than accepting offers of aid and development assistance from government institutions.

This strategy of grassroots self-reliance in decentralised disaster governance regimes is described somewhat differently by Serene Ng in her essay on state-societal tensions in the aftermath of the devastating 2011 flood in central Thailand's historic city of Ayutthaya. For Ayutthaya residents, who remember the 2011 flood as the worst in living memory, the perceived indolence of local authorities and a lack of political will at all levels of government forced people to claim active roles in developing a highly personalised neighbourhood-based system of adaptive disaster governance. Unlike the above-mentioned case of Jakarta's riverbank settlers, who had instituted an alternative self-reliant regime of disaster governance long before Indonesia's decentralisation legislation came into effect, the people of Ayutthaya had to rapidly fill the vacuum created by local government inaction to ensure their own survival, which, ironically, subsequently ushered in a new era of

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