Climate Change in Coastal Cities:
Centring the Voices of Urban Residents in Asia and Africa

Concept note

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Climate Change in Coastal Cities: Centring the Voices of Urban Residents in Asia and Africa

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Centring urban coastal residents in the study of climate change

Extreme weather events are reported with increasing regularity in every corner of the globe. The havoc wreaked by the excess or absence of rain, heat, wind, and cold is now a regular feature of our newsfeeds, and a growing source of concern for policy-makers, academics, entrepreneurs, intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies, as much as for ordinary people. This is playing out against a backdrop of rapid urbanization: well over half of humanity already lives in cities, and the majority of the additional 1 billion people expected on earth by 2030 will become residents of urban conglomerations in Asia and Africa (UN 2015). The climate crisis, in other words, is also an urban one, with coastal cities widely recognized as being particularly vulnerable to rising waters and extreme weather events. However, cities in general and urban littorals in particular have been much-neglected in the climate scholarship to date, which remains predominately global and rural in its orientation (Dawson 2017).

This is changing: transnational municipal networks, such as the resilient cities movement, play an increasingly important role in climate change governance, and a flurry of recent climate scholarship positions the city as a key unit of analysis and action (Barber 2017; Johnson, Toly, and Schroeder 2015). Research on the urban-climate nexus has focused on the role of municipal authorities and formalized policy processes particularly in the global north (Barber 2017; Castán Broto and Bulkeley 2013; Knox 2015), as well as forms of 'bourgeois environmentalism' (Baviskar 2003), such as undertaken by climate activists (Klein 2015) and sustainable design experts (Rademacher 2017). Far less attention has been accorded to the to the ways in which the weather is addressed through urban everyday practices. As one recent intervention on the subject pointedly asks, "what about the people?" (Baldwin & King 2020).

The dearth of literature on how urban dwellers themselves conceptualize and negotiate shifting weather patterns is related in part to the hegemonic narratives through which climate change has been framed. The notions of adaptation, mitigation, resilience and vulnerability through which the climate is imagined in public policy and discourse is predicated on the positioning of the climate as something outside of society, an external threat that can be addressed through policies and practices that maintain the underlying status quo.

This view is increasingly being challenged by scholars working in the humanities and social sciences. Building on an older tradition of inquiry which has disputed the notion of "natural" disasters (e.g. Davis 2000), scholars working in the fields of political ecology and critical urban studies have demonstrated the fundamentally entangled social, spatial and meteorological factors that "co-produce" the weather (Moore 2016; Taylor 2015). Research in the Indian city of Chennai, for example, has offered a compelling critique of the 2015 floods as an "unprecedented" and "natural" disaster, positioning the inundation as the product of much longer processes of capitalist urbanization and spatial planning policies (Arabindoo 2016; Bremner 2019). The systemic vulnerabilities caused by such processes are inseparable from how the weather is experienced at the local level: social and spatial processes are inseparable from what the weather is.

The weather, in other words, is inextricably linked to the distribution of power in society. Patterns of socio-spatial inequality and differentiation – relating to class, race, gender, religion, sexuality, geography and beyond – shape how people experience and respond to fluctuating climactic conditions, often in ways that reproduce these social divisions. At the same time, by destabilizing existing material, institutional and social structures – from buildings and drainage systems to municipal planning authorities and racialized power hierarchies – shifting weather patterns can generate new forms of political mobilization and social interaction. In sum, climate change reinscribes urban inequalities, as much as offering opportunities for their contestation. Responding to these challenges demands a focus on urban lived experience.

Aims and scope

Qualitative, temporally expansive and locally situated accounts of changing weather patterns remain rare. However, such studies are critical if we are to unpack the social, spatial and meteorological forces that converge to produce urban climatic conditions, as well as build socially just means of living with the weather. Moving beyond the prevailing focus on formalized policy process, the goal of this panel is to foreground everyday urban practices as a source of knowledge and action in relation to the climate. What do the narratives and activities of city residents reveal about how the climate is changing? How are shifting climatic conditions conceptualized, experienced, addressed or ignored on the ground? How is a sense of vulnerability or resilience in relation to the weather perceived at the level of the household, street or neighbourhood? And how might urban lived experience be mobilized to produce more inclusive and sustainable urban planning strategies?

This panel will address these questions and more from the perspective of residents of coastal cities in Asia and Africa. In addition to bringing together leading scholars studying how coastal urban residents are thinking about, living alongside and coping with the weather, we seek to address the northern bias that continues to dominate studies of climate change by giving priority to academics based at research institutes in Asia and Africa. Creating a space for dialogue between those working on urban coastal climate change around the world, the goal is to build a transnational and interdisciplinary network of scholars, committed to multi-centring knowledge production in this field.

We invite contributions on the questions below (and related questions) from urban practitioners and scholars from a wide range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Contributions should address how fluctuating weather conditions are being conceptualized and/or negotiated by the residents of coastal cities in Asia and Africa. Proceedings of the panel will be published as an edited volume or special issue.

This panel builds on the existing strengths of the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA) and extends its scope into Africa. Pursuing a comparative approach to climate change that puts coastal cities in Asia and Africa into conversation with each other, the event will foster links between IIAS partners within and between these two continents, as envisaged by the fast-growing Africa-Asia platform. Participants of this panel will have the opportunity to meet again at the next 'Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge' conference in Senegal in 2022.

Participants and partners

The panel will be an all-day event at ICAS 12 in Kyoto, consisting of up to four thematic panels as well as introductory and concluding sessions. Participants will be selected through an open call for papers, and organized into themes by the organizers. Participants will be expected to fund their own registration, travel and accommodation costs, although limited travel bursaries for participants based at research institutes in Asia and Africa may be available. Given the ongoing uncertainties arising from Covid-19, this will be a blended event with participants (both panellists and audience members) having the option to join virtually if travel to Kyoto is not possible, or if they prefer to participate online. Research institutes wishing to become partners in the organization of this panel will be asked to finance the registration, travel and of accommodation costs for a minimum of two panelists.

Guiding questions and potential subtopics for panels

These are some **possible options**. We look forward to suggestions based on these initial ideas.

Unpacking coastal urban climates: The weather in everyday life

- What, in practice, does increased climatic variability mean for residents, social relationships and/or the material structures of coastal cities?

- What do the everyday practices of urban residents reveal about the multiple and perhaps contradictory ways through which fluctuating climatic conditions are being perceived, negotiated, addressed or ignored? How are ordinary residents adapting to fluctuating climatic conditions, e.g. through design interventions or grassroots networks?

- In what ways do urban residents conceptualize and narrate fluctuating weather conditions?

- What kinds of language are used to describe shifting weather conditions? (Old and new words, words from another language etc.) In what ways do these locally articulated descriptions reflect or elide international climate change discourses?

- How do urban residents "know" the weather is changing? (E.g. is it through experiences in their own homes, the cost of vegetables, the frequent flooding of a favourite city park etc.)

- How might everyday experiences of the city's residential, commercial or public spaces challenge conventional understandings of climatic vulnerability and resilience? E.g. In what ways are such spaces felt to be protected from or permeated by the weather? Which spaces flood or overheat, which spaces get cooled by the winds?

- What do everyday experiences tell us about the multitude of factors (social, spatial, political etc.) that co-produce the weather at the level of the city? In what ways do meteorological conditions intersect with social and spatial forces in different urban contexts? In what ways does urban lived experience challenge the distinction between climate and society?

- What do these everyday experiences tell us about the city's (or the neighbourhood, the street etc.) vulnerability or resilience to the weather?

- How do people respond to or anticipate fluctuating weather patterns in their everyday practices? (E.g. building in new ways, installing solar panels, moving houses, reducing plastic

The weather and power in society

- In what ways do patterns of urban distinction and inequality – relating to class, race, gender, religion, sexuality, geography and beyond – shape how the weather is encountered and addressed?

- In what ways are fluctuating climatic conditions implicated in the re-inscription and/or contestation of social divisions and inequalities? How might increasing climatic variability offer opportunities for and obstacles to the reduction of inequality?

- How do narratives about fluctuating climatic conditions draw on long-standing notions of suspicion and difference? E.g. Who/what is blamed for exacerbating the city's vulnerability to the weather? Who is blamed for excessive fossil fuel consumption, or for engaging in illegal building practices that increase susceptibility to flooding?

- In what ways have fluctuating weather patterns catalysed new forms of social interaction or mobilization? E.g. Might flooding unite neighbours usually divided by race and class? Have new community groups emerged to petition better regulation of the construction industry? In what ways are urban residents and community organizations being brought into initiatives led by governments, NGOs, urban planners or other experts?

- In what ways do collective efforts to respond to climate crisis (e.g. by regulating building contractors) serve to evict and disadvantage the less wealthy?

- In what ways do perceptions of the weather index class? In what ways might belonging to a particular class be indexed by patterns of concern or disregard for the weather?

- Is there a class dimension to eco-adaptions of houses/neighbourhoods?

The weather and disaster

- How are weather-related disasters imagined, discussed, planned for and coped with by urban residents? What do grassroots responses to not-so-natural disasters reveal about the intersecting political, economic and meteorological forces that produce disaster? What do coping strategies tell us about the failures, successes and blind spots of government preparedness and response to extreme weather events?

The weather and urban memories

- How have people sensed and memorialized changes in the weather over time? How do these changes relate to other factors (such as class, gender or 'race')?

• Given that many urban residents move at least once during their lifetimes, what might memories of different houses tell us about the vulnerability and resilience of the city's housing stock?

The weather and processes of urbanization

• Globally, new construction accounts for 40% of greenhouse gas emissions which, in many places, is driven by poorly regulated private actors. What role are neoliberal urban policies or private investors perceived to play in increasing a city's vulnerability to the weather by its residents?

• What suggestions would residents put forward to municipal authorities and private sector actors to promote more sustainable urban planning?

• How do practising architects, building contractors, and city planners conceptualize and respond to increased climatic variability? In what ways are these actors accommodating or ignoring the weather in their designs and practices? Are these shifts voluntary or legally required? How do these actors perceive existing regulations (or their absence)?

Researching the weather: Methodologies and dissemination strategies

• How are scholars from different disciplines and institutions researching climate change from below? What techniques are researchers using to access and document weather-related narratives and experiences?

• What are scholars doing to visualize or communicate the various social, spatial and meteorological factors that converge to produce the weather in a particular place? (E.g. mapping? films?)

• How can urban lived experiences in relation to the weather be made legible for others, such as urban planners, architects or municipal authorities? How might we translate and present these experiences in order to produce more inclusive and sustainable urban planning processes?

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