

Epistemologies of Participatory Research on Social Development Programs in Southeast Asia

Conference

Registration
needed



11 September 2025

**Faculty of Political Science,
Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok**

Credits: Yulia Sugandi. The image was captured while she was engaged in immersive research in the mountains of Papua. Utilizing local natural resources (stones, straw, and burlap sacks), the participants collaboratively examined the local context regarding seasons, gardening cycles, food availability, and health conditions.

**“Epistemologies of Participatory Research on
Social Development Programs in Southeast Asia”**
(Study Day and Writing Workshop)

11-12 September 2025

Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok

This project comprises a one-day academic study day and a half-day writing session (targeting the publishing of a special issue in an academic journal), scheduled for 11-12 September 2025 at Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Political Science. These collective activities are designed to facilitate the building of a network that can be mobilized for other, longer-term projects.

This project comes at a pivotal moment in the history of social development research in Southeast Asia. For several years now, development aid agencies have been undergoing a normative change, promoting greater autonomy and participation within their programmes for populations that had previously been seen simply as ‘recipients’ (Elinoff 2021), a process that has been further accelerated since 2021 by the tragedy of the war in Myanmar and the post-Covid era. But recent geopolitical changes, and in particular the suspension of US aid, have brought many development programmes to a halt. Researchers in the region are partly dependent on these programmes, and are also affected by new national policies on higher education and research (Welch & Aziz 2022) that may promote short-term results with economic impact instead of fundamental research with uncertain outcomes. In the Anthropocene era, the climate emergency adds another challenge to participatory approaches, pushing them to embrace an ecological and decolonial viewpoint, some of them adopting a regenerative framework merging human rights with the rights of nature.

These ongoing reconfigurations raise questions about the future of participatory research epistemologies. The aim of this study day is to take stock of the work carried out by teams who have developed a wide range of participatory approaches over several decades in four countries in the region (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand), and to outline the prospects for the months and years ahead.

The Rise of Participatory Approaches in Southeast Asia

Participatory approaches to social development research in Southeast Asia have taken many forms, depending on the stakeholders involved (ranging from engaged academics to development practitioners with scientific expertise), the region’s diverse sociopolitical contexts (some more authoritarian than others), and the objectives of each research program (whether short-term, long-term, targeted, or systemic).

Since the 1980s, the participatory approach has been encouraged by international and state development agencies in the fields of agricultural research, natural resource management and rural development. This approach was designed to overcome the pitfalls of the technology transfer models that had dominated since the 1960s (Chambers 1994), which had difficulty in having an impact on regions with heterogeneous or poorly endowed resources, such as mountainous or semi-arid regions and enclaves. The methods introduced at the time, subsumed under the names Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and then Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), embraced a wide variety of approaches (cf. Campbell 2001) designed to involve producers in setting up agrarian development projects at the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages (Neef *et al.* 2013: 323). Paradigms still clash in this field of research and action research, with some promoting the effectiveness of programmes through collective involvement and others aiming to transform power relations between local populations and the authorities in charge of development.

By the late 1980s, participatory methods had been adopted, resisted, or co-opted by various regimes (McGregor, Law & Miller 2018: 3–13). In countries like Indonesia and the Philippines, governments leveraged these approaches to reach peripheral regions. Others used them strategically to attract international development funding (Carroll & Jarvis 2015: 32–33). Others have used the participatory approach to implement depoliticisation programmes, co-opting peasant networks in the name of essentialised cultural values, following the example of Thailand's royal ‘sufficiency economy’ programme (Schaffar 2018).

In the recent years, the development of participatory approaches has also benefited from new technological tools. For instance, in conflict areas, theatre served as a medium for peace education from the late 1990s through the early 2000s, acting as a means for community healing; with the advent of digital technology, this methodology evolved into Digital Storytelling (DST). Digital tools have also encouraged the development of participatory repositories and, more widely, the appropriation of tools enabled the research participants to collect and analyse data by themselves.

Academics have employed participatory tools in diverse ways: supporting public authorities during crises (food, health, environment) or working against state agendas to respond to local demands. In the dialogical space between academics, practitioners, and activists—which is notably porous in many Southeast Asian countries—a paradigm shift has occurred, allowing for the co-construction of knowledge and fostering transdisciplinary collaboration.

A Comparative and Reflexive Dialogue

The study day and related publication will bring together rare and historically grounded scholarly traditions from several Southeast Asian countries. Although these traditions share comparable concerns, they have developed along distinct trajectories shaped by national political contexts, local social movements, and the personal paths of individual researchers.

The aim is to foster dialogue among research teams that are already connected through various collaborations. This will allow for mutual learning, the comparison of practical solutions, and the identification of potential convergences.

- In Indonesia, the Sajogyo Institute (SAINS) continues the legacy of sociologist Prof. Sajogyo (1928–2012, IPB Bogor), who pioneered innovative participatory methods during the Green Revolution to support state-led sufficiency programs. Over the past 20 years, its approach has met new challenges, with the shrinking of agricultural plots, growing inequalities, galloping urbanisation and ever more acute environmental challenges. In addition to numerous participatory research missions throughout the archipelago, financed by various foundations and forming part of scientific programmes, SAINS welcomes young people from local communities throughout the year who want to improve their knowledge of agronomy and the organisation of production systems (of the agro-ecological type) with a view to increasing food sovereignty at the level of farming groups setting up or villages undergoing agricultural conversion. Speakers: Mohamad Sohibuddin & Shela Herlita.
- Participation is essential in the epistemological framework of a transdisciplinary approach, synthesizing diverse knowledge for integrative solutions. In this decolonizing paradigm, knowledge is viewed as a relational construct rather than a commodity. Participation in a regenerative context involves understanding ecological relationships that include non-human entities. It is vital for practitioners employing participatory methodologies to engage in ongoing learning and innovation, adapting their strategies to effectively confront the complex challenges posed by the climate crisis. Yulia Sugandi has engaged in participatory methodologies and their innovative evolution for over two decades. Through her collaborations with various entities, she promotes policies focused on ecological awareness and collective learning for planetary justice. Yulia has designed curricula, delivered lectures and trainings, executed participatory action research, and experimented with tools to bolster systems resilience and gender equity, while advising organizations, including the United Nations, promoting inclusive knowledge that dismantles barriers and fosters evidence-based policy through empathetic leadership, ensuring that marginalized perspectives inform public policy for impactful social transformation. Speaker: Yulia Sugandi.
- In southwest Malaysia, Dr. Serina Rahman (Southeast Asian Studies Dept, National University of Singapore) has used participatory approaches to empower the youth and fishermen of a string of fishing villages to participate in and benefit from irreversible and unavoidable development and urbanisation. Functioning as facilitator, teacher, translator, liaison, fundraiser, and all-around support system, she co-founded a community organisation in 2008 that began as an environmental club for local youth. While the youth initially took the lead in educating others about their coastal habitats, development escalated, the youth moved on to marriage and other interests, and the organisation shifted to focusing on the fishermen. It was then that the co-founder, Shalan Jum’at, took absolute leadership of the initiative and gained recognition for his efforts to strive for social justice as a registered

fisheries community organisation. Today the organisation continues with its efforts to nurture supplementary livelihoods, educate others about seagrass and mangrove habitats, publish research on the intersection of humans and habitat, and works with local government agencies to establish a community-led marine conservation area. Speaker: Serina Rahman.

- In Thailand, Prof. Chayan Vaddhanaputhi (CESD and RCSD, Chiang Mai University) developed participatory methods in the 1980s to give voice to communities threatened by dam construction along the Mekong River (Heis & Vaddhanaphuti 2020). Influenced by social movements, his hands-on approach has led to a number of successes in defending the rights of fishermen. Since then, his method has been put to the test in a number of contexts, including training in fieldwork for students fleeing the war in Myanmar, which since 2021 has led to an ever-increasing number of precarious arrivals at Thai universities. Many of these students came from agricultural high schools, or had been working both as students and farmers before the coup d'état. RCSD enables them to continue their education, linking it with a sociological and critical perspective and facilitating their professional integration. Speaker: Malee Sitthikriengkrai.
- In the Philippines, the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) at the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative Development Studies (UP CIDS), founded by Dr. Eduardo Tadem, a specialist in multidisciplinary Area Studies, is an academic and policy-oriented research initiative that seeks to critically examine dominant development paradigms and explore transformative, people-centered alternatives. It collaborates with civil society organisations (CSOs), grassroots and Peoples' Organizations (POs) to support various marginalized communities including urban poor communities, small-scale farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples resisting extractivist projects, and residents of flood-prone informal settlements. AltDev also plays a key role in the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples' Forum, critiquing ASEAN's formal participatory models as it advocates for more meaningful, bottom-up regional solidarity and integration. Speakers: Maria Dulce Natividad, Rafael Vicente Dimalanta, Maria Simeona Medina Martinez & Eunice Bautista Santiago.

These teams and researchers have achieved varying degrees of success, grappled with the fragility of participatory setups, and developed creative responses to epistemological, methodological, and ethical challenges. Their work exemplifies multidisciplinary research rooted in civic engagement.

Key Themes of the Workshop and Publication

The study day will focus on ethnographic methods that enable knowledge co-production—from the joint design of research goals to agreements on intellectual property rights over findings. Fieldwork strategies include multimodal tools like anthropography, participatory mapping, and forum theatre. Teams like AltDev use simple audiovisual equipment to facilitate community-led data collection—an approach aligned with citizen science.

Research teams also facilitate collaborative settings—workshops, serious games, cross-visits, peer training, and multi-stakeholder dialogues—to jointly develop situational diagnoses or commons management scenarios. These settings serve both pedagogical and epistemological purposes, producing meta-analyses of practices, values, and relations. Outputs often include alternative writing formats or co-creation with artist-scientists.

The approaches challenge dualistic views between researchers and their environments, seeking to grasp multispecies and invisible relationalities. For instance, “walking ethnography” (Urquijo 2023) fosters multisensory engagement and historical understanding of landscapes. The description of walking can also be used as a means of communicating the ethnographic experience in order to enhance the value of lifestyles.

These approaches are put into practice by several SAINS researchers, who study the co-construction of knowledge and behaviour between humans, invisible people, animals and plants. Their approach is similar to that of ethno-ethology, a survey protocol developed by Florence Brunois (2005) aimed at studying emic visions of animals, concerning their communication, their social hierarchies and their mechanisms of cooperation and conflict. By providing an opportunity for comparison and reflexivity, the study day will provide an opportunity to reflect on the further formalisation of approaches developed spontaneously on the basis of these researchers' long experience of action research.

The study day will also address ethical concerns. Participants emphasize not only formal consent processes but also tacit agreements with local communities. A key theme will be research responsibility, especially in post-research scenarios where political changes—like those in Myanmar or Thailand—can retroactively endanger participants. Attention will also be given to relational asymmetries among researchers and participants and between research teams, shaped by colonial histories and regional hegemonies (e.g., Indonesia vis-à-vis East Timor and western Papua). They also concern national research environments, in a general context of internationalisation of research, its quantification and its instrumentalization in the service of industry and the private sector. The different degrees to which research is promoted in civil society and the openness of its media outlets will also be taken into account. By giving an equal voice to each of the partners, this study day and publication will also serve as a lever for ironing out asymmetries within the network.

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Serina Rahman

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Rafael Vicente V. Dimalanta

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Schedule

DAY 1 – 11 September - Faculty of Political Science Alumni Association Meeting Room, 12th floor		
Time	Object	Speaker
8:30-8:45	Registration	
8:45-9:00	Welcoming words	Prakorn Siriprakob , Dean the Faculty of political science, Chulalongkorn University Jérémy Jammes , Director of IRASEC Gabriel Facal , Deputy Director of IRASEC and scientific organizer
MORNING SESSION		
9:00-10:00	Alternative Development: Narrating People's Struggles, Documenting Community Initiatives	Simeona Martinez, Maria Dulce Natividad, Eunice B. Santiago & Rafael Vicente V. Dimalanta - AltDev Program, Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS-UP Diliman)
10:00-10:30	Break	
10:30-11:30	Relational Science as Epistemologies in Transdisciplinary Research in Papua	Yulia Sugandi - Center for Transdisciplinary & Sustainability Sciences, IPB University, and Governing Council, Future Earth
11:30-12:00	Discussion	Jean-Christophe Castella – Research Institute on Development (IRD)
12:00-13:00	Lunch	
AFTERNOON SESSION		
13:00-14:00	Reflecting on 20 years of community facilitation, empowerment and support in a fishing community in Johor, Malaysia	Serina Binte Abdul Rahman - Southeast Asian Studies Department, National University of Singapore
14:00-15:00	Decolonising Knowledge and Development through Participation: Sajogyo's Legacies under the New Order and Reformasi regimes in Indonesia	Mohamad Sohibuddin & Shela Herlita - Sajogyo Institute (SAINS, Bogor) with the Faculty of Human Ecology, Institut Pertanian Bogor (IPB)
15:00-15:30	Break	
15:30-16:30	Co-Production of Knowledge and the Emergence of the “Subject”	Malee Sitthikriengkrai - Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD, Chiang Mai University)
16:30-17:00	Discussion	



DAY 2 – 12 September - Kasem Udyanin Building, Common Room, 2nd floor		
Time	Topic	Object
9:00-10:30	Discussing a collective publication	-Crossed feedback on the contributions -Structure of the special issue -Points to be addressed by each contribution, fostering a dialogue -Interviews or inserts, rights and credits -Cf. the journal standards: illustrations etc -Copy-editing planned -Calendar
10:30-11:00	Break	
11:00-12:00	Lines for future collaboration	
12:00-13:00	Farewell lunch	



Funding institution: CNRS

Partner institutions: IRASEC; Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Political science

Participants

Eunice B. Santiago is a researcher at the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, Program on Alternative Development. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Sociology at the University of the Philippines

Diliman. Her research and advocacy focus on the youth’s reproductive rights and sexuality education. Her recent work delves into the topics of teenage pregnancies and motherhood, as well as the comprehensive sexuality education in the Philippines.

Ma. (Maria) Simeona “Ony” M. Martinez teaches digital cartography and the use of the Geographic Information Systems and Remote Sensing technologies in diverse collaborative settings that promote community-based development initiatives, social justice advocacy, and community-engaged learning as faculty member of the Department of Geography at the University of the Philippines Diliman. She served as Co-convenor of the Program on Alternative Development, a research program of the Center for Integrative and Development Studies in the University of the Philippines that focuses on exploring and promoting grassroots and community-based development paradigms, policies, and practices that challenge mainstream, state-centered discourses on development. Her work spans across diverse areas of research and community-academe engagement, such as designing GIS training and capacity-building modules for stakeholders of local development planning, participatory spatial data development, counter-mappings/counter-cartographies and social justice, and the use of GIS for disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM).

Maria Dulce F. Natividad is the current Co-convenor of the Program on Alternative Development of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies and an Associate Professor at the UP Asian Center. A medical anthropologist, she has written on the intersections of reproductive politics, gender, religion, and state policy. Her research grew from her involvement in feminist and grassroots advocacy, community education and policy work on women’s health and reproductive rights. Among her works is the article on Catholicism and Everyday Morality: Filipino Women’s Narratives on Reproductive Health. *Global Public Health* 14 (1): 37–52. Dr. Natividad previously taught in the Women's and Gender Studies Department at Wellesley College, Massachusetts. She received her PhD in Sociomedical Sciences (Anthropology) and Master of Public Health from Columbia University, New York City.

Rafael Vicente V. Dimalanta is a development worker and researcher at the Program on Alternative Development of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS). He is actively involved in the organizing and advocacy work of people’s organizations in the urban poor and informal transport sectors; and with them, has written on urban poor and informal transport social movements, social housing and public transport policies, and social exclusion. His research has appeared in publications of UP CIDS and in the *Philippine Journal of Social Development*. He is currently completing his Master of Community Development degree at the University of the Philippines Diliman, where he also earned his Bachelor’s degree in Architecture.

Mohamad Shohibuddin is a senior researcher and Chair of the Managing Board at the Sajogyo Institute in Bogor, Indonesia. He is also affiliated with IPB/Bogor Agricultural University as a lecturer at the Faculty of Human Ecology and as a researcher at the Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development Studies and Centre for Agrarian Studies. His professional work focuses on rural livelihoods, agrarian studies, natural resource governance, human ecology, and the application of participatory methods for data inquiry, program evaluation, and community empowerment. In addition, he has an interest in interfaith dialogue and engagement related to conflict resolution, social philanthropy, and climate action. His fieldwork assignments include some areas with such high conflict intensity as Poso in Central Sulawesi and Aceh, where he carried out reintegration programs as well as academic research and community-based agricultural development.

Malee Sitthikriengkrai serves as an assistant professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University and holds the position of chair for the master's program in Ethnicity and Development. Malee is interested in using research as a tool to empower local communities, known as the co-production of knowledge. Her latest book, published in March 2025, is *Karen Livelihoods in the Area of the Bhumibol Reservoir Inflow Augmentation Project from Yuam River to Bhumibol Reservoir (People's EIA), Cultural Mapping: Local Ecological Knowledge on the Mekong River Basin* (2024). Additionally, Malee is interested in social movements among ethnic groups in Thailand and neighboring countries.

Serina Rahman is a Southeast Asian Studies Department (NUS) lecturer, teaching environmental politics; religion, magic, and Southeast Asia by sea. Trained as a conservation scientist specialising in seagrass human-habitat interactions, her practice is in community empowerment through citizen science, community research, ecotourism, and artisanal fisheries resource management. Her research also includes (un)sustainable development (especially Forest City), Malaysian rural politics and political ecology. Serina is an Iskandar Malaysia Social Hero Award Winner for Environmental Protection (2014), is Malaysia's Ambassador for Citizen Science Asia, a UN-affiliated organization, and was highlighted as a Channel News Asia Climate Warrior in 2021.

Yulia Sugandi holds a PhD in Anthropology and Sociology from the University of Muenster- Germany, alongside a MSc from the University of Eastern Finland and a Bachelor's degree from Gadjah Mada University. Her extensive experience in social ecological justice and development, coupled with her expertise in participatory research methodologies, has significantly influenced policy development and program interventions for marginalized communities. Currently she is affiliated with Center for Transdisciplinary and Sustainability Sciences -IPB University and the Governing Council of Future Earth, a global coalition of scientists, researchers, and innovators dedicated to delivering essential insights to drive transitions towards sustainability. <https://futureearth.org/contacts/yulia-sugandi/>; <https://ctss.ipb.ac.id/fellows/yulia-sugandi-ph-d/>.

Shela Herlita is a researcher at the Sajogyo Institute. She has been working on various themes: agrarian transition in industrial area, socio-economic changes due to climate change and gender issues in the management of natural resources. She is involved as a facilitator in social-ecological crises and agrarian changes. Related to women's issues she is involved in the project Women's Customary Institution Establishment Related to Coastal and Fishery Management in Aru Archipelago District. She is also facilitating women's group through critical pedagogy methods.

Jean-Christophe Castella is an agronomist and geographer at the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), currently based at the Faculty of Science of Chulalongkorn University. He has been involved in participatory action research in upland areas of Southeast Asia for three decades. He studies the impact of agro-ecological and socio-economic changes on rural landscapes and livelihoods. He uses multi-stakeholder group discussions and reflections, serious games and visual techniques to enhance collective intelligence and performance. He designs projects and models, products and innovations to support farming communities in transition to agroecology.

Project Coordinator: Gabriel Facal, Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia (IRASEC, UMIFRE 22, Bangkok)