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Precarity Matters: Conceptual Travails in Southeast Asia

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*Precarity Matters:
Conceptual Travails in Southeast Asia*

Paul J. Carnegie

Abstract:

Marginality, vulnerability and disadvantage are key concerns of the social sciences. Nevertheless, state-business-investment agendas, policies, and practices in Southeast Asia regularly downplay these issues. This paper examines the applicability of a precarity framework for deciphering the forces, processes, and interests shaping contemporary forms of jeopardy in the region. Using a selection of illustrative examples, it demonstrates that conceptualising precarity enhances the efficacy and scope of research on everyday marginality, disenfranchisement, and inequality. By focusing on the interplay of political, economic, social, and psychological factors, the precarity lens provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of current vulnerabilities and insecurities in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Insecurity; Marginality; Precarity; Southeast Asia; Vulnerability

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Introduction

There is a contradiction at the heart of Southeast Asia's burgeoning economic growth and development: the simultaneous intensification of everyday precarity for affected individuals and communities (Rosario and Rigg 2019). Despite this growing reality, the region's state-business-investment agendas, policies and practices regularly downplay it (Nooteboom 2016; Masina 2018). ASEAN may have formally endorsed a people-oriented agenda¹ but it is fair to say that ruling political elites in many Southeast Asian countries still privilege securing foreign direct investment, promoting agricultural and aquaculture modernisation, licensing large-scale commercial plantations and resource extraction activities together with the initiation of vast infrastructure projects ahead of protecting individual and community well-being (Campbell 2018; Endres and Six-Hohenbalken 2014). And while the protection of sovereign borders, dealing with the threat of conflict, promoting development and securing economic interests remain key functions of nation-states, the impact of rapid socio-economic transformations and wide-spread environmental degradation are exposing the limitations of these countries in safeguarding the livelihoods and basic amenities of those living on the margins (Hewison and Kalleberg 2013).

With the above in mind, this paper examines how vulnerability and insecurity are framed and interpreted in Southeast Asia and the applicability of a precarity framework for deciphering

¹ Declaration of the Bali Concord II (ASEAN Concord II) at the 9th ASEAN Summit, Bali, October 2003 affirmed ASEAN's commitment to create 'a people oriented' ASEAN Community (AC) based on 3 pillars, namely ASEAN Security Community (ASC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). In 2008, at the 13th ASEAN Summit, ASC was renamed ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). The blueprint for APSC tasks it with addressing transnational crimes, promoting human rights and conducting post-conflict peace-building (ASEAN Secretariat 2009a: 5-13).

forces, processes and interests configuring much of the region's contemporary forms of jeopardy. Drawing on illustrative examples, it demonstrates that conceptualising precarity enhances the efficacy and scope of research on everyday marginality, inequality, and disenfranchisement of sizeable but voiceless populaces. Moreover, rather than a mere structural denunciation, a precarity lens is potentially a nuanced frame of reference, critique and comprehensive analytical means to interpret localised distress induced at the systemic level of capitalist social relations, accumulation and development practices in the region. If its applicability is overlooked, significant dynamics conditioning situational vulnerability and insecurity will remain masked and continue to loiter unacknowledged at the 'unseen' and capricious interstices of political, commercial and socio-cultural asymmetries in Southeast Asia.

Situating a Concept for Uncommon Times

As a concept, precarity denotes a phenomenon that has gained significant traction in debates around globalisation, environmental degradation, migration, social marginalisation, and inequality in recent decades.² Although precarity is not confined to specific demographic groups and can affect individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds, across both developed and developing nations, it disproportionately impacts those marginalised and disadvantaged individuals and communities whose lives are intersected by structures and processes beyond their immediate control (Standing 2011). They become “differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.” (Butler 2009: ii).

Precarity is also about politics and how the vulnerability and insecurity of certain communities and individuals (whether that is migrant day labourers or underemployed minorities) are produced, marginalised and exploited, while the grind of their lived reality is either ignored or branded a matter of idleness or personal failing. In short, precarity speaks to transformations in contemporary societies and the uncertain circumstances experienced by individuals and communities within various societal contexts. It is a symptom and condition of current times.

² For a representative sample of relevant literature and debates, see Allan et al. 2021; Apostolidis 2019; Allison 2013; Butler 2004; Comaroff & Comaroff 2002; Duffield and Waddell 2006; Endo 2014; Ettliger 2007; Jørgensen & Schierup 2016; Lambert & Herod 2016; Lesutis 2022; Munck 2013; Neilson & Rossiter 2008; Paret & Gleeson 2016; Rigg et al. 2016; Rosario & Rigg 2019; Schaap et al. 2022; Standing 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014; Wacquant 2008; Waite 2009.

Whereas conventional risk analyses tend to concentrate on the immediate consequences of short-term crisis alongside individual forms of agency and decision making in response to uncertainties, a precarity lens provides a longer-term structural focus to constraints and transformations that limit available individual and community choices and decisions. It brings the interplays between policy, work, society, marginality and inequality into relation with one another (Clarke et al. 2007; Standing 2012). For those living with precarity, high jeopardy and uncertainty attach to the exercise of everyday routines. They experience inherent trust and access deficits in a host of political and economic situations especially when they have to deal with those who exercise power, influence or control over their life chances, circumstances and habitats - their safety. By acknowledging and paying close attention to political, economic, social, and psychological factors, a precarity lens helps reveal the intersectional layers of vulnerability and insecurity that affected individuals and communities face.

Needless to say, from Marx to Durkheim it is well-known that instability and uncertainty can heighten anxiety and create a sense of powerlessness. The social sciences readily recognise the feelings of separation, loss and disenchantment this engenders not to mention varying levels of ennui and disenfranchisement. As E. P. Thompson (1963) and James C. Scott (1976) noted decades earlier, the erosion of traditional social bonds and support systems brought about by rapid socio-economic disruption and change can amplify feelings of alienation and disconnection. Having said that, a precarity lens focusses greater attention on the telling links between contemporary economic contours, social settings, localised political practice, and the psychological dimensions of the situations people face. It emphasises that the underlying transformations eliciting contemporary expressions of vulnerability and insecurity can range from a lack of reliable employment, social support or access to basic services and even a sense of unbelonging in society. Ontologically, if social existence and 'liveability' is interdependent on forms of care and support then precarity emerges as an articulation of fragmented and declining systems of protection and sustenance. It underscores that the threats to human safety, well-being (and the cycles of disadvantage they reflect) are at once structural and intersectional. A socially produced condition both material and psychological.

In a material sense, a lack of stable and secure access to basic resources including shelter, sanitation, employment, healthcare, and education is precarity. It can manifest somatically for

those in temporary employment or migrant daily wage earners with inadequate social safety nets who are particularly susceptible to economic fluctuations and exploitation (Zhao 2023). They can suffer ‘precarity of work’, ‘precarity at work’ and ‘precarity from work’ (Clarke et al. 2007: 311; Wilson 2012). Psychologically, for those who experience the vagaries of unpredictability or perceive themselves as living in ‘insecure’ circumstances, the range of internalised dislocations they deal with and manage is precarity (Allan et al. 2021). Apathy and low esteem in the face of under-employment or a lack of opportunity intersect with financial problems, substance abuse, mental health issues, familial breakdown, and various forms of violence and abuse. These are the human symptoms of predicaments that refuse to abate (WHO 2014).

To elaborate, given the intensification of economic globalisation, industrialisation, urbanisation, migration flows, social inequality and environmental degradation, numerous scholars have reflected on the accelerating and transformative impact of late modern capitalism for the human condition.³ For several, the Polanyi-esque upheavals and latest forms of insecurity confronting the world’s ‘precarariat’ are localised articulations of global capitalism’s intersecting forces and interests: a world of privatisation, outsourcing, deregulation, tech disruptions, unrestrained capital flows and untenable economic growth.⁴

Despite economic globalisation’s varied benefits, the above work reflects a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the unevenness, structural schisms and iniquities ever more exposed by its ‘downsides’. While an array of neoliberal economic policies and development practices across different countries have led to enormous wealth generation, they have also led to profound socio-economic reconfigurations, ecological degradation and the emergence of new forms of social inequality.⁵ These policy-led structural transformations create new ‘regimes’ of marginality and play a decisive role in the articulation of class, race and place (Wacquant 2008). The scales and translocalised consequences of which traverse across webs of social relations from north to south, the rural to the urban and the global to the local. Different localities have become connected across geographical distance and over political borders to such an extent that conditions or events in one place tangibly impact other locales (Brickell and Datta 2011; Yea 2021). For instance, pervasive

³ See the work of Giddens 1990; Beck 1992; Bhide & Stevenson 1992; Bauman 2006; Zinn 2008; Heine and Thakur 2011.

⁴ See the work of Harvey 2006, 2010; Ettliger 2007; Roberts 2007; Standing 2016; Lambert and Herod 2016; Mezzadra & Neilson 2019.

⁵ See the work of Ferguson & Gupta 2002; Stiglitz 2002; Wacquant 2009; Webster et al. 2008.

asymmetrical changes in employment relations and labour market restructurings have had profound effects on types of work available and patterns of labour migration. Simultaneously, the reorientations of our agile ‘gig’ economies exhibit a dearth of worker protections and generate new modalities of vulnerability and insecurity especially for migrant workers (Standing 2014; Lambert & Herod 2016). In a broader sense especially in the global south, precarity becomes the spatially constituted condition of everyday anxiety and distress linked to the variegated ‘violence’ of extractive and large-scale infrastructural capitalism (Lesutis 2022).

The above conceptual overview detailed the focus of a precarity lens and its relevance for investigating contemporary vulnerability and insecurity. As mentioned, conceptualising precarity is arguably crucial for the efficacy and scope of research on everyday marginality, disenfranchisement, and inequality in Southeast Asia. The following sections further outline how a precarity frame can serve as a vital analytical tool for mapping and interpreting the politics of vulnerability and insecurity in the region.

Focussing a precarity lens on vulnerability and insecurity in Southeast Asia

As Teresita Cruz-Del Rosario and Jonathan Rigg (2019) have cogently pointed out, a contradiction at the heart of Southeast Asia’s burgeoning economic growth and development aspirations is the simultaneous intensification of everyday precarity especially for marginalised and disadvantaged individuals and communities. From environmental degradation, pollution and displacement to food, water and livelihood insecurity, the precarity inhabiting 21st Century Southeast Asia is a spectre of significant proportions.⁶ At the same time, the ways precariousness emerges and plays out across the region is often messy, confusing, and disjunctive. It is not a static phenomenon, but a fluctuating set of processes and relationships that interact in situational circumstances.

As mentioned, the underlying forces, interests and relations conditioning precarity are not necessarily obvious and liable to disorientate. They are difficult to recognise lurking as they do (often sight unseen) at the capricious interstices of state policies, commercial practices and societal

⁶ For a selection of scholars working on the region who have previously highlighted these concerns, see Acharya 2001; Felker 2003; Nishikawa 2010; Caballero-Anthony and Cook 2013; Howe 2013; Hewison and Kalleberg 2013; Tjandraningsih 2013; Carnegie et al. 2016; Caballero-Anthony 2018.

transformations. The re-imagined spaces created by such processes (and the policies driving them) shape the lives of vulnerable populations in profoundly contradictory ways. Although different communities confront varying contexts of vulnerability and specific challenges, localised forms of precarity in Southeast Asia are not simply aberrations of growth. They are largely the by-products of deregulated and untrammelled extractive and infrastructural development agendas and investment practices: a spatially entangled co-production of the former in the latter. The scalar geographies of which permeate and reproduce by debilitating increments in seas, rivers, forests, fields and anonymous inlets, corners and alleyways. It is an interrelated process that imposes high tariffs on the day-to-day well-being and safety of imbricated rural, urban, local and migrant communities alike.

As the work of Gediminas Lesutis (2022) reveals, the abstraction of space that extractive, and infrastructural capitalism claims for itself impacts the lived habitats of real people and invariably renders them dispossessed. Given that small-scale farming and fishing remain primary sources of livelihood and income for many in Southeast Asia, it becomes difficult to ignore the on-going consequences of unconstrained extractive activities, mono-crop corporate plantations and monumental infrastructural developments for these communities (Rigg 1997; Bakker & Bridge 2006; McCarthy 2010; OECD 2017; Li 2014; Law et al. 2018). Their situations are expressions of processes predicated on a dereliction of local habitats and the redundancy of ecologically sustaining ways of life for local groups of people (Mezzadra & Neilson 2019; Huesca 2016). As Tanai Murray Li and Pujo Semedi (2021: 1) note, “a plantation is a machine for assembling land, labor, and capital under centralized management for the purpose of making a profit; it is also a political technology that orders territories and populations, produces new subjects, and makes new worlds.” In the face of such processes, the dispossessed and relocated are exposed to structural, symbolic, and direct forms of violence to make way for the new production of space (Allen 2018).

If the work on traditional forms of social organisation - detailed by the likes of Firth (1966) or Scott and Kerkvliet (1977) decades earlier- is related to the travails of small-scale agrarian and fishing communities across the region, it becomes apparent that the spatial appropriation of habitats and steady erosion of prior relations of trust and reciprocity that bound previous relations of support and ordered daily life are now the precursors to the precarity they experience.

Displacement, habitat loss and declining levels of trust, respect and mutual cooperation means heightened uncertainty has intruded on everyday livelihoods and ways of getting by. Subsequently, this increased fragmentation makes communities more susceptible to the imperatives and fluctuations of global capital forces and commercial interests. In the face of such pressures, affected communities, while not lacking in awareness or resistance, simply do not have the wherewithal to exert a decisive say on their own futures and circumstance. Many of their local struggles to endure and thrive invariably run counter to state-business infrastructural and resource extraction agendas. State-level policies (linked closely to commercial activities and vested interest) carried out in the name of national unity, integration and development not infrequently signal the surreptitious and insidious displacement of these non-integrated indigenous or marginalised communities (Straumann 2014; HRN 2016). They become what Rob Nixon (2010) terms, ‘unimagined’ communities. Their presence (and resistance) is an unsettling inconvenience to the highly partial but dominant state-led discourses and policies of national development and ascent. They do not readily fit the narrative and are subsequently de-imagined discursively and bureaucratically as a prelude to their material dispossession. It is, as Frances Ryan (2023) wryly observes in a different context, something akin to ‘destitution by design’, where governments are aware that certain policies and activities will likely drive at-risk communities into increasingly dire conditions, and they go ahead anyway.

To elaborate, resource extraction and infrastructural projects shape landscapes and lives and it is happening at an unrivaled pace in the region especially but not exclusively related to China’s geo-political-economic investment initiatives and influence (Alff & Spies 2023; Dong & He Jun 2018; Nyíri & Tan 2016). The resulting contestation over resource control and governance are major issues in countries like Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia, and Myanmar. These states regularly assert the right to pursue their ‘national interest’ and development agendas as a justification to usurp the concerns of local communities and dismiss or ignore their ability to say yes or no to certain types of infrastructural projects or resource extraction activities affecting them (Chu 2017; Masina 2018). Their ability to say yes or no to certain types of infrastructural projects or resource extraction activities is severely curtailed. Webs of transboundary investment in land, water and agrarian resources accelerate the process while simultaneously refracting through country-specific clientelistic arrangements to generate a range of contingent outcomes at the ground level (Liao 2019). It is a situation further exacerbated by the massive loan debt

accumulation built up to pursue such ends and the resulting budget cuts and concessions imposed to deal with increasing incidences of debt distress and service interest repayments (Cheong 2022). And while there are competing actors and discourses related to these activities, it is probably fair to say that transregional economic dynamics and associated socio-ecological transformations are impacting local economies and societal relations in unusual ways. In certain cases, the forced relocations, and disruptions they precipitate can worsen food security for local communities and hasten the erosion of traditional indigenous cultures (HRN 2016; Kusakabe and Aye Chan Myae 2019).

For example, in Cambodia, the Hun Sen regime⁷ regularly issued land and logging concessions to closely linked business clients such as Kith Meng's The Royal Group, who then reciprocate by donating money to government-run rural development projects, which in turn garner votes from the rural poor (Un, 2005; Hughes 2006). The extended Hun Sen family and these privileged clients have been able to form a formidable ruling coalition that hold controlling stakes in a range of sectors from special economic zones, agrobusiness, infrastructure construction and extractive industries to banking, insurance, urban renewal, telecommunication and the media (Hughes 2011; Willem 2012; Global Witness 2016). These powerful actors are the driving forces behind the 'development' of natural resources like timber and sand alongside the instigation of major infrastructural projects in partnership with Chinese firms and investment: a state-capital-development nexus (Global Witness 2010; O'Neill 2014). While these activities operate largely under the guise of state-led development projects to raise people's living standards, many project-affected communities have experienced significant livelihood disruption and ecological degradation (Sokphea 2016). For instance, the Lower Sesan 2 Dam construction on the Sesan River Basin in Stung Treng Province, Northeast Cambodia led to the relocation of over 1000 households and thousands of hectares of forest were gazetted (the logging rights went to Kith Meng) and subsequently flooded for the reservoir (Chu & Carnegie 2022). Estimates put fish stock reduction on the Lower Mekong River Basin at about 9 percent as a result of damming the Sesan along with significant disruption to fish migratory patterns (Grimsditch 2012: 29; Ziv et al. 2012: 5609).

⁷ Hun Sen recently stepped down as PM and his son, Hun Manet was confirmed as the new PM by all 123 members of Cambodia's lower house of parliament on August 22, 2023, but the father remains at the heart of power and politics in Cambodia.

These concerns did little to deter Cambodia's ruling coalition from pursuing their partisan and functional development agenda for the Sesan.

The tension between ensuring environmental, food and community security, on the one hand, and politically connected companies on the other, acting with a perceived sense of impunity when it comes to land acquisition is a considerable problem in the region (McCarthy 2010: 821–850; Margulis et al. 2013; Byerlee 2014: 574-597; Tappe & Rowedder 2022). For indigenous or low-income communities, trying to secure formal title or legal lease over land is a complicated and lengthy legal-bureaucratic process and invariably beyond their means (Austin 2007). A survey of major land disputes across Southeast Asia indicated that 45 out of 51 remain unresolved (Roughneen 2017). The situation is especially acute in the spatial context of borderlands with their cross-border flows in peoples and goods, specific bordering practices by authorities and often complicated political, economic and demographic compositions (van Schendel & de Maaker 2014; Haselsberger 2014; Campbell 2018; Zulkipli & Askandar 2021). It is where minority ethnic populations and their habitats regularly overlap with government instigated infrastructural plans or special economic zones and the ebb and flow of formal and informal migrant workers (Kaur & Metcalfe 2006; Eilenberg & Wadley 2009). The establishment of heterotopic spaces (set up with tax breaks and incentives to attract transboundary investment) in ecologically sensitive habitats can provoke dispute with local populations. They become enclaves for a variety of commercial and extractive activities (both licit and illicit) that can heighten forms of precarity for border communities due to their deleterious social and environmental impacts (Hughes 2011). Prima facie, infrastructural projects and special economic zones are plausible initiatives. Stimulating business and development is after all a function of the state. The reality is that local officials in peripheral areas are prone to 'persuasion' or lax enforcement of de jure policies and regulations in place (or not as the case may be) to curb certain proscribed activities (Wilson 2102: 288-301; Lim Teck Wyn 2013: 1-42). Instances of forced evictions, criminality, illegal mining and logging, land grabbing or coercive incorporation into global agrobusiness supply chains are not uncommon (Borras & Franco 2011).

Somewhat differently, maritime border spaces are frequently portrayed as sites of jeopardy. Sea-mobile people who live over or between porous maritime border demarcations are habitually deemed undesirable and threats to social and political order especially if they lack proper

documentation (Allerton 2014). In Sabah for instance, as Gordon Carson (2016: 69-88) notes, punitive bordering practices amplify the long-standing vulnerability and insecurity of such people, many of whom are already marginalised from wider society. Ironically, their ambitions are often relatively modest: to gain some form of residency recognition that will allow them partial access to government health and education services and the ability to conduct their daily lives without the looming threat of arrest or potential deportation (Allerton 2017; Carson 2016).

In another example, a study of nine Orang Asli (indigenous people) villages by Law et al. (2018: 141–142) in Malaysia’s Kelantan, Pahang and Perak states found that 80 percent suffered food and water insecurity due to land dispossession, deforestation, dwindling natural water supplies and a loss of knowledge about traditional food systems when forcibly resettled. Indigenous peoples of Sarawak and Sabah in Malaysian Borneo and Sulawesi and Kalimantan in Indonesia confront similar predicaments with large swathes of primary growth forest having been lost to oil palm plantations, logging, and mining (Straumann 2014; Nooteboom 2016)

These sorts of disruptive resource development policies and practices can send ‘project affected people’ ricocheting back and forth from one desperate situation to the next. Their displacement and catapult to urban centres off the back of large-scale dam construction, agrobusiness expansion and occupation, or logging and mining operations turn them into casualties of the ‘resource law of inverse proximity’ – communities and individuals closest to a resource being ‘developed’ often benefit the least (Nixon 2009: 78).

Similarly, coastlines across Southeast Asia are also undergoing rapid transformation. Investments in coastal tourism, coastal roads, ports, special economic zones and high-end real estate are mushrooming (Nyíri and Tan 2016; Padawangi 2019). The overwhelming state-level economic discourse is that such developments will generate improved income and work opportunities for disrupted coastal livelihoods and the lives of subsistence fishing communities. However, it is questionable whether this well-worn trickle-down assertion holds up to scrutiny anymore. There is ample evidence to suggest that large scale developments invariably reproduce entrenched iniquity (Fabinyi 2018). The vulnerabilities facing disadvantaged and marginalised coastal dwellers are not ‘fixed’ by such ‘development’ instead they are “being subtly and overtly squeezed for geographic, political and economic space by larger-scale economic and environmental conservation interests.” (Cohen et al. 2019: 1).

Although typhoons, storm-surges and sea-level rise do pose major risks to the life and livelihood in Southeast Asia and demand state-level action, these highly visible and symptomatic ‘disasters’ and their responses serve to mask the logics of other more insidious transformations and pressures (Uson 2017). Contrary to expectations, the reorientations and displacements wrought by coastal tourism developments, large scale aquaculture projects, sprawling concrete esplanades, seawalls and port expansions or fenced export processing zones can amplify the insecurity of vulnerable coastal inhabitants more so than the threat posed by typhoons or storm surges (Fabinyi 2010; Calvin 2015; Sovacool et al. 2018).

The likely upshot of intensifying problems is that various Southeast Asian states will respond with a host of generic mitigation measures (from disaster risk reduction initiatives to climate adaptation schemes). There is a real possibility for this to culminate in an exacerbation of pre-existing issues of land tenure and livelihood insecurity for many marginalised and disadvantaged communities (Sovacool et al. 2018). Several scholars have already pointed out the tendency of ‘disaster capitalism’ in post-calamity relocation and reconstruction developments to consign affected populations to further disruption and jeopardy (Klein 2008; Adams 2012; Iuchi and Maly 2016; Yee 2017; Iftekhar Ahmed et al. 2023). If policies to deal with ‘vulnerability’ and ‘insecurity’ remain narrowly defined and influenced by preexisting interests and agendas, then the cycles of disadvantage experienced by marginalised communities will get ignored. The layers of vulnerability, iniquity and discrimination that such communities must face and the scale of the threats to their livelihood security especially in the face of development displacement, land grabbing and resource extraction disputes will linger unacknowledged.

Does precarity research denote interdisciplinarity?

Unsettling as these concerns are they do allow us to consider how we go about interpreting the day-to-day lived vulnerability and insecurity experienced by different peoples and communities in diverse settings across Southeast Asia. As mentioned, the hazardous and injurious consequences of state-business-investment development agendas, policies, and practices often hide in plain sight. The region’s remarkable economic growth and wealth generation captivate and divert attention away from socio-economic disadvantage and vulnerability. The dazzling distractions of dynamism along with a blizzard of statistics on growth, per capita incomes and poverty reduction seem to

further elicit a collective selective blindness to a host of everyday struggles for more dignified, safer and secure lives (Carnegie et al. 2016).

Despite this impairment, issues of marginality, vulnerability and disadvantage still remain core concerns of the social sciences. How and why the contemporary forms of these concerns articulate themselves demand our continued reflection. There is a responsibility to ensure that the way they are thought about, framed, what concepts and which types of analysis employed are capable of keeping pace and retain critical analytical purchase on the region's rapidly changing circumstances. As mentioned, conventional risk analyses tend to focus on the immediate consequences of short-term crisis, individual forms of agency and decision making in response to uncertainties. It is important to recognise a host of other longitudinal factors, forces and interests. Moreover, while there is no lack of quality social science research related to impoverished communities, marginality and disadvantage across Southeast Asia, there is a worrisome propensity that a good deal of it (with notable exceptions) is carried out in discrete disciplinary silos. Much of the scholarship is dispersed, segmented and ultimately bounded by the preoccupations, attitudes, and reified approaches of distinct, if not separate fields. Yet, the interrelated economic, social, political and psychological dimensions of precarity traverse traditional disciplinary boundaries. Descriptive reportage of details and situations while necessary is insufficient for intelligent analysis of precarity's varied presence. If issues of marginality, vulnerability and disadvantage are not placed in relation to one another within a more comprehensive interdisciplinary precarity framework for analysis and evaluation then efforts to amend current development agendas, policies and practices will doubtless struggle. Precarity research can underpin collective endeavours for smarter, more adaptive and problem specific solutions to manifold challenges.

Apropos, an encouraging body of work is emerging that deploys a precarity lens to map structures, forces and power-dynamics shaping peoples' exposure to and understandings of vulnerability and insecurity in Southeast Asia.⁸ This work has drawn attention to the politics of vulnerability and insecurity and the utility of a precarity lens for plotting and deciphering complicated intersections between everyday licencing, employment, migration and business

⁸ For a selection of relevant scholarship see McCarthy 2010; Ofreneo 2013; Baird 2016; van Voorst 2016; Nooteboom 2016; Allerton 2017; Uson 2017; Yee 2017; Campbell 2018; Masina 2018; Rosario and Rigg 2019; Griffiths 2019; Kusakabe and Aye Chan Myae 2019; Padawangi 2019, 2019a; Alejandria and Smith 2020; Carnegie et al. 2021; Li and Semedi 2021.

practices and the role of enforcement officers, agents, brokers and NGOs. The ability of a precarity lens to foreground the link between contemporary development policy and practice and exposed individuals and communities across the region is a welcome enhancement to more conventional conceptualisations and analyses.

As mentioned, the exposure of affected communities to precarity is not simply an accidental or natural occurrence, it is mediated by an ensemble of material, ideational, and discursive practices that order and sustain the configuration of vulnerability and insecurity. State-business-capital driven agendas and developments ‘territorialise risk’ as a technology of rule and their selective discourses (and the decisions they reflect) do more than describe objective risk, they aim to control people, space and resources, and to legitimate those decisions and actions (Rebotier 2012; Yee 2017). If the link between perceptual dimensions of vulnerability and insecurity (based on values and beliefs), and its political framing (in which the threat under scrutiny is subject to negotiation and contestation among ‘political’ actors who have specific interests, goals and agendas) is under-conceptualised, an analytical lacuna appears for researchers and practitioners. When there is a lack of focus on interests and forces conditioning the reorientation of spatial territories, ‘the political’ tends to get evacuated from scrutiny and the power dynamics behind the vulnerability and insecurity in question is left unattended (Carnegie and King 2020). In state-level discourse, what this means is that local distrust and resistance towards policies and actions of the state-development-commercial interests (due to the adverse impact they have on at-risk communities) are ignored through an implied disciplining, silencing and trivialisation of the concerns of ‘unimagined communities’ (Carnegie et al. 2021). From experience, the underlying agendas and influence of patronage linked state-capital-business interests pass almost unacknowledged relative to the circumstances they condition.

Precarity research has the potential to enhance the scope of social science investigations by expanding further the space, respect and voice of peoples living with precarity as speaking subjects and fellow analysts, rather than mere informants, data-collectors or silent recipients of research. Its focus on how intersectional socio-political-economic dimensions play out at the level of individuals and communities can also mitigate against over-generalisation. Amplifying how people and communities engage with and respond to uncertainty, vulnerability, insecurity and trust deficits across diverse local struggles is an antidote to hegemonic state-business development

narratives. Allowing individual and community narratives of precariousness to speak (and the agency and tactics employed to deal with their circumstances) creates a link between micro-subjective experience and wider state-business relations, interest and practice. This provides important insight on the internalisation of insecurity embedded in daily-lives and the relational character of contemporary jeopardy. When individuals and communities speak there are moments when they are articulating not only their own experiences but also problems faced elsewhere.

Remaining attuned to the interrelated conditioning processes, forces and interests that configure, maintain and reproduce everyday precarity across Southeast Asia is an important reflexive exercise for social science researchers. Whether it is marginalised communities of subsistence fishermen, and upland farmers or insecure migrants, documenting that reality is where connections begin to emerge from seemingly disparate cases. The micro-subjective experience of precarity of Penan or Kenyah in Sarawak, sea-mobile but undocumented Sama-Bajau and Moro Filipinos in Sabah or displaced Karen on the Thai-Myanmar border, shifting cultivators in the southern Philippines, Phnong and Brao on the Sesan in Northeast Cambodia, or informal coastal dwellers, migrants who traverse borders or street kids in Jakarta, Bangkok and Manila are not unconnected to broader legal, political and economic policies and strategies of state-business interests and practice. Distinct communities may have different histories and face varying socioeconomic, political and cultural realities but they can also convey shared messages. Confronted in common with overarching forms of disadvantage and subordination, their rights as human-beings (and the habitats they occupy) to protection and support and the opportunity to conduct their daily lives in relative safety are often in short supply. They are afforded a low priority from politico-business elites who would rather pursue large scale infrastructural development and unbridled natural resource extraction, no matter how ill-advised and implemented.

Conclusion

The 'security' and 'development' of the nation-state fused with the interests of politico-business elites on the one hand, and the need to address individual and community insecurities on the other, are deeply contradictory matters in ASEAN affairs. Thinking through and finding ways to decipher and retain analytical purchase on the complex forces and processes configuring changing forms of contemporary vulnerability and insecurity in the region is an ongoing endeavour for the social

sciences. By detailing the focus of a precarity lens, this paper proposed a richer and more comprehensive framework for interpreting and understanding those experiences and challenges.

As demonstrated, the precarity lens holds significant utility for rendering visible often obscured but interrelated processes, factors, and interests underpinning vulnerability and insecurity. Its ability to focus close attention on the interplay of economic, social, political, and psychological factors provides nuance and an appreciation of scale for framing rapidly transforming types of jeopardy. Re-focusing research choices and agendas on to precarity in local settings and the relationships of power, politics, uncertainty and (mis)trust they express will draw greater attention to how individuals and communities deal with situational vulnerability and insecurity in a world of transboundary development investments and unprecedented infrastructural and extractive activities. Observing life at various sites across contemporary Southeast Asia through a precarity lens brings into focus the ‘unseen’ links between microsocial subjectivities and wider structures and policies. Documenting daily lived precarity gives a plausible glimpse between the strata at how structures and processes work their way into and reflect in the lives of ordinary people. This serves to decode how the forces of nation-state building, political-business linkages or transnational commercial development interests articulate through complex processes to configure relations of marginality and inequality and the changing forms of vulnerability and insecurity experienced by people and communities across the region. Climate-induced migrations and threats to water and food security on future livelihoods will bring the reality of precarity into increasingly stark relief for many in Southeast Asia. Living as they do within and between the shadows of state and commercial (dis)interest.

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