Putting poverty at the heart of urban climate resilience: reflections from Asia

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Abstract

This session questions how poverty fits within the emerging discourse, theory and practice of urban climate resilience, drawing on practical experience in rapidly urbanizing Asia. The term resilience is increasingly being taken up in development policy and practice. However, the conceptual frameworks for and definitions of resilience are often unclear or inconsistent. The tendency appears to be towards adopting the term as a convenient discourse for framing how to deal with shocks and crises associated with both development and climate change, rather than in adopting resilience as a conceptual framework grounded in complex systems thinking. This discourse creates a whole set of arguments that when combined with the notion of cities as contested systems, may run counter to the interests of poor people, and to interests of social justice. While there is a growing discourse framed around ‘resilience’, it is not necessarily based on the analytical concepts of resilience. This blurring of the discourse and the analytical concept is a source of confusion.

This session draws on practical experience of applying resilience concepts and principles in urbanizing parts of Asia. We consider both the limitations of resilience concepts, but also how their basis in complex systems thinking can enable improved understanding of the dynamics of urban poverty and climate vulnerability. Although, resilience concepts say little about values, they can provide insights into the causes and characteristics of poverty and vulnerability in complex urbanizing environments by highlighting the influence of multi-scale complex systems (such as water, energy, and food) on which urban populations depend.

For resilience to be applied to cities and urbanisation it is essential that the concept be used in conjunction with a more overt recognition of cities as contested social systems, and of poverty and vulnerability as being outcomes of political and social processes. This is then a matter of resilience for what purpose, for whom and by whom.

∗Speaker
In dealing with these challenges, we argue the need for a combination of actor-oriented and systems approaches then can be used to identify both coping and transformative strategies to reduce current poverty and future vulnerabilities, while addressing the governance and structural dimensions of poverty, vulnerability and urbanisation. The session will be highly interactive taking advantage of a variety of multi-media type presentations, and participatory discussion exercises for participants. We will be drawing on panel members’ experience in very different contexts of India, Thailand and Vietnam but opening space for reflecting on experience from other parts of the world.

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