

# THE U.S. ASIA-PACIFIC REBALANCE, NATIONAL SECURITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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# SHIFTING THE PARADIGM: CLIMATE-WISE DEVELOPMENT FOR HUMAN SECURITY

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Although the implications of climate change for traditional security concerns in Asia change are profound, as noted in other papers in this series, it is through the human security frame that the full complexity of the impact of climate change on this most populous region of the planet is revealed. The UN's 1994 Human Development Report defined the concept as follows:

“Human security can be said to have two aspects. It means, first, safety from chronic threats as hunger, disease, and repression. And second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life—whether in homes, in jobs or in communities. Such threats can exist at all levels of income and development.”<sup>1</sup> Seen through the lens of human security, the chronic and sudden threats of climate change affect the well-being of vast numbers of individuals and communities throughout Asia. Indeed, in its November 2010 report the Asian Development Bank underscored climate change as a “key risk to economic development.” “[Climate change] impacts cumulatively could slow economic development, causing economic losses of \$230 billion or an equivalent of 6.7% of gross domestic product (GDP), each year by 2100—more than twice the global average loss of 2.6%—and endanger the livelihoods of millions of people.”<sup>2</sup> Loss of livelihoods, without policies in place to assist those affected, can precipitate “hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life,” whether it takes the form of vulnerability to disease, malnutrition, migration or instability.

While there is uncertainty about how climate change will impact any specific locale or population, there is little doubt that the current trajectory of accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is already prompting societies to bring the anticipated impacts of climate change into their planning and policies.<sup>3</sup> How can countries move to reduce the vulnerability of their populations to climate change harms and what role can the United States play in diminishing the consequent worldwide threats to human security? The cases of Vietnam and Myanmar, two

countries already confronting the baneful effects of climate change,<sup>4</sup> will illustrate one possible direction for United States assistance policy.



Volunteers help the flood victims in Ayutthaya Province in Thailand. October 2011. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS / DONAVANIK

The human security frame brings into relief the interconnectivity of climate change effects and the admonishment, in making policy, to “first do no harm.” For example, building a sea wall to combat sea level rise could wipe out a natural spawning area for fish and thereby have an effect on the livelihood of a nearby fishing village. Coastal communities that lose fertile land to saline intrusion may see their people migrate to the cities and industrial parks in search of work, only to fall prey to disease due to crowding, heat waves, and insufficient provisions for clean water and hygiene. Dealing with climate change to assure human security requires a fully coordinated response across multiple ministries and agencies of government, as well as among local communities. In other words, awareness of climate change and the charge to integrate it into policy planning needs to be mainstreamed across government at the national, provincial and local levels. How can this be done?

The answer lies in a thoroughgoing commitment to building capacity in government agencies and local communities to imagine and implement measures that promote development and security in the context of a changing climate. It also requires building capacity among civil society leaders and the media to hold policymakers accountable for ensuring that decisions are taken with the broadest consultation possible, including space for contestation.

Investment in education at all levels is key, but what kind of education? As they engage the global economy, first Vietnam and now Myanmar face the challenge of adapting their educational systems and methods to prepare citizens for new responsibilities in rapidly transforming environments. Resilience requires not only understanding one's *responsibility* to contribute to addressing climate change on a personal level and in the community, but also one's *right* to a future that is not compromised by the inadequate decisions of those in authority.

Higher education in both countries suffers from the accumulated legacies of underinvestment due to colonial rule, war and civil conflict, isolation and authoritarianism. In Vietnam, the United States has taken an active interest in supporting higher education through Department of State-funded Fulbright fellowships, Vietnam Education Foundation fellowships, and USAID Higher Education for Development programs, as well as through private-sector initiatives with INTEL and other companies. Myanmar, once a regional leader in education, experienced a virtual dismantlement of higher education under the decades of military repression. USAID, through its Higher Education for Development program, the Department of State's Fulbright fellowships, and the Institute for International Education with its support for international exchanges are taking initial steps to fill the gaping need for improving higher education in Burma/Myanmar.<sup>5</sup> Fundamental capacity to promote climate-wise development to ensure future well-being of populations will rest on the speed and breadth of these efforts. Investment in higher education exchange, as a cornerstone of U.S. diplomacy and development policy, should therefore be expanded for the long term.

Nevertheless, in both countries pressures for economic growth and delivery of "quick wins" proceed, while climate change concerns will only accelerate. Efforts to mainstream climate-wise development principles across government and through society also need to be fast-tracked. In Vietnam and Myanmar, George Washington University's Partnerships for International Strategies in Asia (PISA) led leadership institutes on climate change for government officials, university personnel and civil society leaders. These programs, held in 2008, 2009, and 2013, spotlighted a number of issues to navigate: 1) inadequate information-sharing across government agencies; 2) insufficient mechanisms for civil society organizations to influence policy-making; 3) lack of an integrated systems approach to decision-making; 4) the need for incentives to elicit and assimilate local knowledge; and, finally, 5) acknowledgement that climate-wise development is not merely the outcome of a technical assistance plan, but the product of democratic contestation among competing interests. Professional education programs that address these issues by creating opportunities to build cohorts across ministerial and departmental divides; offering opportunities for civil society actors to learn to brief policy makers with actionable information; providing the tools for systems analysis; promoting the value of eliciting information from local communities;

and nurturing widespread political participation can make a difference in the prospects for inclusive, sustainable development policies that are mindful of climate change impacts.

Whether by building capacity for climate-wise development through support for exchanges in higher education, or by promoting short-term professional development programs, the United States can exercise leadership in promoting climate-wise development for human security in Asia. An investment today in human capacity to adapt to a changing climate will reduce the need for costly operations in response to disasters and conflicts in the future.

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## Notes

- 1 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1994*, (Oxford: United Nations Development Programme, 1994), available at [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/255/hdr\\_1994\\_en\\_complete\\_nostats.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/255/hdr_1994_en_complete_nostats.pdf)
- 2 Asian Development Bank, *Climate Change in Southeast Asia: Focused Actions on the Frontlines of Climate Change*, Nov. 2010, available at <http://www.adb.org/publications/climate-change-southeast-asia-focused-actions-frontlines-climate-change>
- 3 Uri Friedman and Svati Kirsten Narula, "The UN's New Focus: Surviving, Not Stopping, Climate Change," *The Atlantic Online*, April 1, 2014, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/04/the-uns-new-focus-surviving-not-stopping-climate-change/359929/>
- 4 Asian Development Bank, *Viet Nam Environment and Climate Change Assessment*, 2013, available at <http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/33916/files/viet-nam-environment-climate-change.pdf>; Regional Integrated Multi-Hazard Early Warning System (RIMES), *Managing Climate Change Risks for Food Security in Myanmar*, Bangkok, July 2011, 6-7, available at [http://www.foodsec.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/eufao-fsi4dm/docs/Myanmar%20-%20RIMES%20\(2011-7\)%20Managing%20Climate%20Change%20Risks%20for%20Food%20Security.pdf](http://www.foodsec.org/fileadmin/user_upload/eufao-fsi4dm/docs/Myanmar%20-%20RIMES%20(2011-7)%20Managing%20Climate%20Change%20Risks%20for%20Food%20Security.pdf)
- 5 United States Department of Defense, "U.S. Higher Education Delegation Visit Results in New Education and Exchange Initiatives," Press Release, March 5, 2013, available at [http://photos.state.gov/libraries/burma/895/pdf/03-05-2013\\_HED.pdf](http://photos.state.gov/libraries/burma/895/pdf/03-05-2013_HED.pdf)