

EDITORIAL

Manfred B. Steger and Yaso Nadarajah

Welcome to the November 2007 special issue of the *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*. This volume is the result of collaboration between the Asia Pacific Research Unit (APRU) of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM); and the Globalism Institute at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. Our collaboration began in late 2006, when Dr. Yaso Nadarajah and Associate Professor Kim Humphrey of the Globalism Institute at RMIT University, Melbourne met with Professor Keat Gin Ooi and other researchers at the APRU at USM, Penang, Malaysia. We began discussions which highlighted similar interests in reinserting the importance of history, philosophy, politics and culture in the questions about sustainable living in a globalizing world, particularly in debates still dominated by economic perspectives. There was an interest to facilitate and build on research activities across the two institutes that would enable us to collectively respond to key cultural political issues of the new century across all levels of community and polity – and how to deal with real-world problems. We noted the vital importance of the local – the place in which we live – and then to seek to draw global lines of cooperation and reciprocal connections across our institutions and other relevant networks.

As researchers, we share a collective interest in understanding what is happening to communities – especially in urban settings – in the context of globalization. How are we to understand the processes of change, both positive and negative, that affect sustainable and peaceful ways of living? What are the issues that require urgent attention, particularly as we face new, massive challenges to the environment, not to speak of widespread violence and global insecurity? How do communities in the Asia-Pacific region respond to challenges of globalization, and to what extent do they think and act independently in becoming more socially and environmentally sustainable? How does standpoint and context impact our research when, for example, we look at the region from the perspective of a squatter settlement community in Old Klang Road, Malaysia, responding to development agendas in a rapidly globalizing city of Kuala Lumpur? What happens when a natural disaster such as the Tsunami at the end of 2004 forces a community thriving on the fringes of the coast to rebuild itself from scratch?

In his February 22, 2006 address at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Prime

Minister of Malaysia, made the following statement: "The process of globalization and the advances in communications technology in particular, have brought peoples of the world so close to each other. But, this increasingly integrated world, at the same time, has also made people feel an even greater need to defend and champion their particular belief-systems, values and principles at all cost." He concluded his speech by announcing that it was the responsibility of political leaders, both in the West and in the Islamic world, to create that situation where the voice of reason and humanity can prevail over the voice of hate, bigotry and ignorance. That had to be diverse and complex, speaking clearly to the dangers of our times. But for that reason, he concluded, it would also be the most honest and ethical voice ever heard.

The Malaysian Prime Minister also alluded to the ongoing ideological struggle over the meaning and direction of globalization. Because this subject has led to heated controversies among various players struggling for the hearts and mind of a global audience – it has become increasingly important to consider the ideological and cultural dimensions of globalization just as much as its techno-economic aspects. In *Globalism: Market ideology meets terrorism*, Manfred Steger emphasizes the importance of differentiating – for analytical purposes – between "objective" processes of globalization, such as the expansion of trade and financial flows, and the currently dominating ideology of "market globalism" that glorifies free-market capitalism is the inevitable, inescapable fate of all communities on our shrinking planet. This interpretation of globalization as the inexorable liberalization and global integration of markets owes much to the efforts of global power elites located in the global North whose views dominate the mainstream transnational media, dominating through a neoliberal market ideology primarily of Anglo-American origin that endows and advances its own identity and meaning of power, belonging and capital. As the articles collected in this volume show, however, the study of globalizing communities in the Asia-Pacific region must not lead to the denouncement of globalization, but to a critical assessment of its impact and consequences for the creation of a more just and equitable world. Most of all, globalization is not an irreversible process leading to the economic and cultural homogenization of the world, but a set of complex and uneven processes with no preordained *telos* or fixed meanings.

This special issue is our first collaboration. It is an attempt to begin a fruitful dialogue across different places in the world by means of academic studies scrutinizing the local-global nexus. This volume focuses on

Globalization and South and Southeast Asian Cities. 2007 marks the first year in human history when people living in cities outnumber rural populations. This crucial turning point highlights the formidable challenge of maintaining secure and sustainable urban space. While rapidly growing cities are places of immense change and innovation, they are also increasingly susceptible to economic crisis, civil conflict, pandemics, and environmental degradation. As Asian cities turn into mega-cities, basic infrastructural services like energy, water, communications and transport find themselves under serious threat.

We are proud to offer in this special issue contributions of extraordinary intellectual breadth and methodological sophistication. James Spencer, the Co-Director of the Globalization Research Center at the University of Hawai'i-Manoa, has authored a comprehensive and thoughtful article that analyses the pairing of the terms "globalization" and "cities" and how they fit into the context of Southeast Asia. He describes recent processes of urbanization in the Mekong Delta that are characteristic of lowland Southeast Asia's recent history. Crucially, Spencer argues that there are under explored links between globalization and urbanization as a result of the long-standing academic focus on highly urbanized areas rather than newly developing peri-urban areas that may be more accurately described as agricultural city-regions. Through the lens of "transitions" – economic, governance and health – Spencer explores a rapidly developing settlement pattern that constitutes a new, peri-urban reality for residents of much of lowland Southeast Asia, and how policy makers might best understand its differences from more traditional city forms. Martin Mulligan and Judith Shaw present a vivid and powerful discussion of the reaction of the country and the world to the Tsunami disaster at Sri Lanka. While for a brief period, there was an opportunity to turn a fragile "ceasefire" agreement to an enduring peace settlement, the authors suggest that this opportunity was wasted and underlying weakness in governance have bedevilled the recovery process. There is much to learn from the documentation of these difficult experiences. Supriya Singh presents a comparative picture of how remittances are a way of displaying family across national boundaries. Drawing on the Indian diaspora across Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia, Supriya presents an interesting and critical look at the way remittances underpin and often sustain the social and economic fabric of families across the globe. Remittances are one of the most potent domestic experiences of globalization. At the same time, remittances are one of the largest international flows of funds, more than double the international aid to developing countries. Mike Douglass, one of the world's most prominent experts on Asian cities, and his co-author Liling Huang discuss the

accelerated urban transition now taking place in Southeast Asia. This significant article draws attention to the mega-urban regions that are absorbing hundreds of thousands of people into their expanding urban sphere every year, magnifying that which is not dissimilar in other major metropolitan centers of the world – the creation by international land developers of gigantic new towns presented as exclusive utopia for an emerging urban upper middle class. Drawing on the development scheme located just across the Doi Canal and Ben Luc River from central Saigon, Douglass and Huang raise critical questions about the transformation of public spaces and civic life for the growing population of Ho Chi Minh City. Yaso Nadarajah presents a reflective essay on an ongoing research engagement with a squatter settlement community in a period of large-scale urban modernization strategies in Malaysia as part of a larger local/global community sustainability research project across 12 other community sites in the world. In this article, the author reflects on her own fieldwork and suggests that aligning oneself within such an "in-betweenness" geopolitical and "neither/nor or both/and" place, while carrying out research on issues related to that very struggle is to also occupy a space of deeper scholarly understanding.

We are grateful to Jessica Korteman, Honours student in International Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, for her valuable and meticulous work as proof editor.

Let us end this introduction on a literary note. The tumultuous and pressing challenges of the 21st century bring to mind a keen insight offered by Guiseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in his famous 1958 novel, *The Leopard*: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." For us, the message of this sentence in today's world lies in the imperative of striking a better balance between the wisdom of tradition and news ways of cultivating peaceful social relations in our insecure world. For those of us committed to the timeless values of social justice and peace, the challenge is clear – we must continue to reach out across cultural and political boundaries and shifting terrains of knowledge and cosmologies; and we must re-evaluate what it means to construct economically viable and environmentally conscious communities. We hope that this issue represents a small step toward constructive and mutually engaging research on the multiple links between the global and the local.