

RESEARCH FOR ALL PODCAST SERIES 1

EPISODE 2 – WATER INSECURITY

Full transcript

Dr. Leonie Pearson: Welcome. I'm Dr. Leonie Pearson, I'm a research coordinator for the SUMERNET program and I'm a passionate ecological economist that's working and living in the Asia Pacific. Today, my guest is Professor Louis Lebel. He is the current and founding director of the Unit for Social and Environmental Research at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand. Louis is an editor of the global environmental change. He's got really wide breadth of research interests in ecology, epidemiology, public health, political science, climate change, and environmental governance. And with over 30 years of experience working across Asia, he's globally known as one of the leading academics in water issues in the Mekong. He is currently the Water Insecurity Advisor for the Sustainable Mekong Research Network. I'd like to say welcome, Louis, welcome to the podcast Research for All.

Prof. Louis Lebel: Thank you, Leonie. I'm really looking forward to our discussion. Water in the Mekong is a topic that is close to my heart.

Dr. Leonie Pearson: Great to hear. And we are really excited to hear what you've got to say to us. So how about we jump straight in? How about we start with what is water insecurity? And why is it important to a water management research?

Prof. Louis Lebel: I think there are two sides to this question. The first one is you're talking about lack of access to sufficient water of adequate quality for particular use. It might be the water that a woman needs to take care of her chickens or pigs at home. It might be the water that a man needs to irrigate his rice field. You'll see I'm going to refer to gender division here as it is quite common in the Mekong Region. But it also can be about changes in flow of water, for example, through the operation of large scale dams, meaning that you have no floods, or you have floods at the wrong time, floods that are different than usual or you have just normal disasters being floods. So, there's an idea that insecurity can come about from having too much, or different amounts of different timings of too much, as well as not having enough. Now, why is it important in the Mekong Region? Well, I'll stop there.

Dr. Leonie Pearson: You don't have to stop there. Because I guess I'd like to ask, why is this so important to the Mekong Region? And in answering that, could you also explain to us, why do you talk about water insecurity? When I know there's a lot of people out there that are talking about water security?

Prof. Louis Lebel: I'll start with the second one first. Insecurity non insecure. Because the latter one, security is kind of unideal, unattainable state, you are never 100 percent secured. Whereas the former one being insecure is something you can always improve upon and always have reduced. And when you put the focus on water security, it tends to play to the

interests of militarized kind of speaking as if you are in a war. That's the baggage that was purely terrorist. When the idea of insecurity forces you to look at people on the edges, not the people in the middle, not the people in control or people in power. The insecure focuses you look at the bottom 5 percent, the ones that are really struggling with access, really struggling with the impacts of operations of dams on their river garden, on the banks of the river, etc.

But why is it important to the Mekong Region? I think the Mekong Region for somebody from outside the region might think it's in the tropics. It's a huge river. There's so much water. Why is that a problem? But actually the region is very seasonal. The monsoon has a big impact as many places dry for six months a year, and wet for the other six. There are extreme events that are important, like floods. We also notice changes of flood regimes that are important for fisheries etc. And not only that the climate is varying and changing. There's another reason that water security is important to the Mekong is not so much because of the water side of the equation but the things that put people at risk. The development in the region has been rapid. Economic development. GDP has gone up. But Gini coefficients that are the measures of inequality have not gone down, in some countries like Thailand, they have risen quite extraordinarily. So, there are a lot of problems with inequality. Water insecurity is also created through politics and power plays. And the region can be characterized as a region of democratic deficits, paternalistic governments and patron client states. These are difficult situations to have to ensure the rights to water respected as well as to ensure the allocation when you have more than enough is fair. There are also a lot of problems with quality water that are not realized. So, water insecurity in the Mekong Region is really quite a big issue.

Dr. Leonie Pearson: I mean, you've covered a huge breadth of issues and concerns there. How about as this is a podcast that's really focused to researchers from researchers. I mean, you've got a lot of experience doing research across the Mekong Region. Why do you think it's important as a researcher to focus on this water insecurity issue?

Prof. Louis Lebel: I think otherwise, we just pay lip service to the vulnerable and marginalized if we keep looking at the 90 percent that got access to clean drinking water supply, not the 10 percent that don't. And I think this water insecurity forces people, to go in the uncomfortable places, to go into the informal settlements, to go into the refugee camps, to go into the displaced settlements from hydropower dams and other large scale infrastructure development projects. These are areas where you might not be able to work with the politicians or local governments because they're part of the problem. That's a part of the landscape, which we never do enough research on. We always have nice dialogue events in fancy hotels and the capitals don't see the underside of development in the region. So, the insecurity theme is very important to encourage young researchers to go out and visit the margins, visit the vulnerable, give voice to their concerns.

Dr. Leonie Pearson: Louis, you've raised a really big challenge for researchers here one that's about focusing with the vulnerable. Can I... because this is a bit of a challenge, can I ask for your advice, then? How do we as researchers engage with the vulnerable people?

Prof. Louis Lebel: I think I'd give a more nuanced answer now about it. First of all, it is actually to visit and visit means building relationships with difficult communities. And ideally, what's worked in our organization is we've had staff members from ethnic minorities, some representatives of people in difficult situations, illegal migrants, for example. They've actually worked with us. That's given us access to a kind of sensitivity to what our research should do and shouldn't do. But the second thing we can do, of course, is just adopt a critical attitude and really question government policies, CSR practices, and ask all the time about who benefits and who loses on these interventions and how do we know that.

Dr. Leonie Pearson: Well, they're two really great suggestions, I think for researchers. So the first one is to actually visit to get to know what a vulnerable group is, in your case study area, or to really start to unpack some of the social or political dimensions about water and access, as you talked about right at the beginning. And then the second thing you've raised is about critical attitude. So, even if you're not a person that's able to get there on the ground, you're saying, let's think more critically about what's in front of us in relation to water and water management practices. Does that sound about how you would start to advise people on how to get a really good handle on what insecurity means or water insecurity means for their research project?

Prof. Louis Lebel: It does. Because there's one missing piece that I didn't advance enough and that is we have to be careful that our labeling people as vulnerable doesn't turn them into passive actors with no agency, that's often not the case. They're often struggling hard and may be quite effective in doing their best in difficult situations. So, I think we have to be careful in categorizing them as passive victims. That is true when we're talking about women, talking about ethnic minorities, talking about refugees, talking about illegal migrants. In many cases they have clever ways of doing things as well as they can under very difficult situations. There's a third one when I think about it a bit more is you sometimes need a comparison to do good research, to think carefully about counterfactuals - migrants versus non migrants, the people that travel and the people that stay at home, the people that fish only and the people that fish and have a rice paddy as well. I think it's always interesting to think about your comparison. So, even though you might be very interested in the people in a resettlement camp of a hydropower project. It's interesting also to compare how their livelihood options, etc., [are] different from those from a village that wasn't moved, or before and after. It's counterfactuals that can help us unpack that maybe some of the things people claim are the impacts of the project turned out to actually not correct.

Dr. Leonie Pearson: That's a really great point is to really understand. A, to give agency to people so there's not a passiveness. B, to really think about what are the alternatives? What's the counterfactual or what's an alternate grouping that may have different types of access to water or different types of water management practices that they can pull on. Have you got any examples that you know from the Mekong Region where you've found that use of counterfactuals to be really helpful?

Prof. Louis Lebel: Now, one study that we did in northern Thailand looked at the different sources of water conflict and water shortages experienced by people in a gradient from starting near the city and moving to the peri-urban and moving all the way up into the mountains. It's kind of grading in intensity of land dedicated to forestry or agriculture versus urban settlement. And so, the kinds of water insecurities people have in these different settings are very different. In the city, they don't do any agriculture, the use of water is pretty much just for domestic consumption. They have piped water supply, but for various cultural reasons, they may still have a well and the well is contaminated so they have insecurities that are related to the quality of water. And because they don't have any storage on board, it's cut out for some reason, actually, to buy bottled water. We went to the peri-urban margins, then people usually have some livestock, maybe have some fruit trees, maybe have a rice paddy. And these all have different kinds of water requirements. Some of them very seasonal. Some of them well-supplied with irrigation schemes, and some others are not in the irrigation scheme [and face] very difficult situations. And the men and women have very different uses of water because the responsible division of labor in the household is very different. Then up in the mountains. Here we can look at different ethnic minorities that have settled there. They have very different customs and cultures about whether women are involved in using water, making decisions about water or not. And there of course, is no storage. At the end of five months of dry season period, they have barely enough water for drinking. So, they have to make clever schemes with PVC pipes and bring water kilometers away from springs, etc., so that the village can just stay where it is. So that it's a geographical gradient that can sort of revealing about the different types of insecurities. But there's also cultural factors. There are northern Thai, Pwo Karen, an ethnic minority, the Hmong, an ethnic minority, you have their experience of water shortage in very different ways. For example, the attitudes to conflict. I mean conflict can sometimes, it's not common, but when it happens, it can be very frightening, involving use of guns, etc., smashing each other's water infrastructure. It turns out that when you study the gender issues here, men are actually at much more risk because there are so many societies where they're the ones that take the conflict up, escalated, while women try to reduce the conflict or avoid it. So, water securities can affect men quite differently. And it depends on the culture as well as depends on geographical location to what kind of water uses matter in that household. Sorry Leonie, that's a lot of details.

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Dr. Leonie Pearson: I think it's lovely to hear about how just in a very normal, a very traditional sort of water management case, we can really start to unpack what water insecurity looks like. That really wraps up the questions that I have, Louis, I really appreciate the time that you've spent with us today, and also your honesty and willingness of sharing some insights to researchers in the SUMERNET network, but also really wide across all of the Mekong and other places. It's great to hear from the more experienced people. So, a big thank you.

Prof. Louis Lebel: No problem. Thank you, Leonie.