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# Forced Migration in Southeast Asia – A Brief Overview of Current Research

Gunnar Stange, Patrick Sakdapolrak, Kwanchit Sasiwongsaroj, & Matthias Kourek

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Southeast Asian countries host significant numbers of forcibly displaced populations, both within countries and across borders. This brief review paper provides a basic overview on recent forced migration research in Southeast Asia for the period 2013 to 2018. To this end, a keyword search with two predefined sets of search terms was carried out in the Web of Science database in September 2018. The identified research literature corpus was then analyzed regarding persons of concern, study site(s) (country/ies) as well as main drivers of migration. The results show that the major part of studies focuses on refugees and asylum seekers in the region's main host countries, namely Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. This correspondence between current research trends and the distribution of refugees and asylum seekers in Southeast Asia could, however, not be identified for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Although Southeast Asian countries account for a substantial share of worldwide IDPs, only a very limited number of identified studies focus on this group of persons of concern.

**Keywords:** Current Research; Forced Migration; Persons of Concern; Southeast Asia



## INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is currently facing its second largest refugee crisis since the so-called boat people crisis in Indochina from the mid 1970s until the mid 1990s (Pugh, 2004). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that since August 2017 more than 723,000 people belonging to the religious and ethnic minority of the Rohingya have been forcibly displaced by systematic violence committed by state and non-state actors to neighboring Bangladesh alone (UNHCR, 2018a). Another, related recent crisis was the so-called 'Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea Crisis'. From 2013 to 2015, an estimated 1,800 people from Myanmar and Bangladesh died at sea trying to reach Malaysia or Indonesia by boat (UNHCR, 2016). In 2017, Southeast Asia hosted 3.37 million "persons of concern"<sup>1</sup>, of which approximately 1.46 million were refugees, 74,416 asylum seekers, 1.17 million stateless, and 665,051 internally displaced persons (IDPs) (UNHCR, 2018c, p. 69). However, only two countries (Myanmar and the Philippines) officially reported numbers on IDPs to the UNHCR. The Internal

1 Persons of concern to the UNHCR include asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, refugees, and stateless persons (UNHCR, 2018b).

Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) has estimated the number of IDPs due to armed conflicts and natural disasters at 5,863,894 for 2017 (IDMC, 2018).

Most of the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have not signed the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Only Cambodia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste, a soon to become ASEAN member state, are signatory parties. Hence, most of Southeast Asia is, in fact, not part of the international refugee regime. According to the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration “every person has the right to seek and receive asylum in another State in accordance with the laws of such State and applicable international agreements” (ASEAN, 2013, p. 6). Yet, the reference to the legal frameworks – or rather non-existing protection frameworks – of the member states renders this right largely meaningless. Thus far, the member states’ way to address the issue of forced migration has been rather unilateral. This is mainly due to ASEAN’s very strong norms of cooperation, namely respect of state sovereignty, non-interference in the international affairs of member states, consultation, and consensus (Amer, 2009). At this point, it is rather unlikely that ASEAN, and the region as such, will decide to adopt a joint regional framework on forced migration any time soon (Petcharamesree, 2016).

As Southeast Asian countries host considerable and growing numbers of forcibly displaced persons, there is also an increased number of research contributions on Southeast Asia from the emerging field of forced migration studies (McConnachie, 2014). However, thus far, no systematic attempt to identify current research trends in the field has been undertaken. This contribution addresses this research gap by providing a brief overview of findings from a scientific literature review that aims at identifying recent contributions in forced migration research in Southeast Asia from 2013 to 2018. The article proceeds as follows. Firstly, we will discuss how we framed the concept of forced migration for the literature review. Secondly, we will outline the conduct of the literature search as well as the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to define the review literature corpus (see appendix). Thirdly, we will discuss the identified research literature corpus according to persons of concern, study site(s) (country/ies), and main drivers of migration. The paper intends to offer a brief overview and a bibliography of recent research developments in the field of forced migration studies in Southeast Asia for researchers and practitioners (see appendix).

### CONCEPTUALIZING FORCED MIGRATION (STUDIES)

In its latest *Global Trends in Forced Displacement* report, the UNHCR (2019, p. 2) concluded that with 70.8 million people, the global forcibly displaced population remained again at a record high, with numbers constantly rising since 2011. Against this backdrop of an ever-increasing number of people that are forcibly displaced worldwide, forced migration studies constitute a rapidly growing field of research that is shaped by a multitude of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Albeit refugee and forced migration studies only began to emerge as a distinct field of research in the 1980s, research in the Humanities and Social Sciences goes back much further in its endeavor to decipher the complex nature and needs of forcibly displaced populations. However, as pointed out by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long, & Sigona (2014, p. 2), what distinguishes early research on forced migration

movements, for example in the post-Second World War period, and research undertaken from the 1970s onwards was the frank way in which researchers started to be critical in their analyses of states and intergovernmental agencies. At the same time, growing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe, the US, and Canada as well as the increase in protracted refugee situations from Southeast Asia to Central America led to increased scholarly as well as political interest. This resulted in the establishment of new (research) institutions dedicated to the study of forced migration and an increased availability of respective research funding accordingly (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014, p. 3).

In his influential working paper *Conceptualising Forced Migration* David Turton (2003) reminds the reader that, on the one hand, there are compelling reasons for separating out forced migrants “because they pose a problem for us of response: how do we respond to the stranger in distress?” (p. 16). On the other hand, Turton (2003) warns of the dangers of lumping “people together into categories according to the degree or amount of choice open to them” (p. 16) as this categorization rather victimizes people and turns a blind eye to the agency by which they navigate their lives under highly restrained circumstances. Although the conceptualization and categorization of forced migration remains highly problematic and politically laden, the authors of this paper consider people that must flee their homes due to conflicts, persecution, torture, other human rights violation, poverty, disasters etc. as forced migrants. Furthermore, the authors are convinced that

the distinction between voluntary and forced migration continues to be of relevance. It still constitutes an essential element in the distinction of asylum and immigration policy and the persons they respectively concern. Migration as a general phenomenon relates to a variety of situations engaging forced and voluntary decisions. Elements of choice and coercion can be overlapping but in the case of refugees and other displaced persons, compelling factors are decisive. (UNESCO, 2008, p. 30)

As most research contributions in the field of forced migration studies follow the categorizations of persons of concern used by the UNHCR (2018b), this scientific literature review includes studies that are explicitly concerned with refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as stateless persons. Furthermore, the research also includes studies on human trafficking as it is highly prevalent in Southeast Asia (Renshaw, 2015; Ullah & Hossain, 2011) and oftentimes involves compelling elements of force (Marinova, 2017).

## METHOD

The scientific articles retrieved for this literature review were identified by a keyword search in the Web of Science database<sup>2</sup> using two sets of key terms.<sup>3</sup> The first set com-

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2 See, <http://www.webofknowledge.com>

3 We only used the Web of Science database as its coverage of peer-reviewed journal publications is similar to that of Scopus (<https://www.scopus.com/home.uri>) (Harzing & Alakangas, 2015, p. 801).

prised “Southeast Asia” and all countries in the region (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, Timor Leste/East Timor, and Vietnam). The second set included “persons of concern” (asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDP), stateless, refugees), the research field in question “forced migration” and “human trafficking”. For the database search, each key term in the first set was combined with each key term in the second set. The database search focused on scientific research papers published from January 2013 until September 2018. The chosen time frame reflects our attempt to provide a brief overview of recent research publications in the field. Only peer-reviewed publications in English language were included, as English language publications are the most widely accessible in the international scientific community. The database research identified a total of 217 studies for the above-mentioned period (see Appendix: Scientific review literature corpus). The identified research literature corpus was then analyzed regarding the criteria persons of concern, study site(s) (country/ies), and main drivers of migration.

### RESULTS

The published research on forced migration in Southeast Asia shows a quantitative upward trend (see figure 1).<sup>4</sup> The number of publications has increased continuously from 20 papers in 2013 to 67 papers in 2017. As the literature search process ended in September 2018, not all publications of 2018 (46) could be included in the literature review. More than half of all publications (134) focus on refugees and asylum seekers. Forty-seven papers deal with stateless people and 40 papers with human trafficking and or smuggling. Despite the above-mentioned significantly high share of Southeast Asia’s IDPs in the overall number of worldwide IDPs, only 14 publications focus on this group of persons of concern.

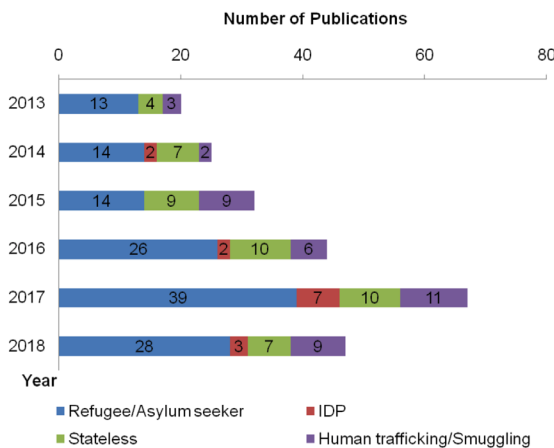


Figure 1. Number of publications by persons of concern. Own calculation based on Web of Science Database research results.

4 Please note that figures 1 to 3 include multiple counts as a number of studies focused on more than one group of persons of concern, had multiple country foci, and identified more than one main driver of migration.

Figure 2 illustrates the country focus of the research papers by persons of concern. By far, most of the papers (90) discuss research that had been carried out in Thailand with a clear focus on refugees and asylum seekers. Forty-three papers focus on developments in Malaysia and 35 papers on Indonesia accordingly. Also, here, the majority of studies focused on refugees and asylum seekers. The distribution of research on refugees and asylum seekers in the three countries corresponds with the fact that Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia host the highest numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in Southeast Asia. Only five publications in the literature corpus referred to Southeast Asia as an analytical unit. This reflects the lacking regional cooperation in the field of forced migration, as discussed in the introduction. None of the publications under scrutiny addressed forced migration issues in Brunei, despite the fact that there are more than 20,000 people under the UNHCR’s statelessness mandate in the country (UNHCR, 2019, p. 65). Although Australia, Bangladesh, and China are not part of Southeast Asia, they were included in the country segregation list as their important role for transnational forced migration movements (Bangladesh and China) as well the regional (forced) migration regime (Australia) was reflected in the identified body of literature.

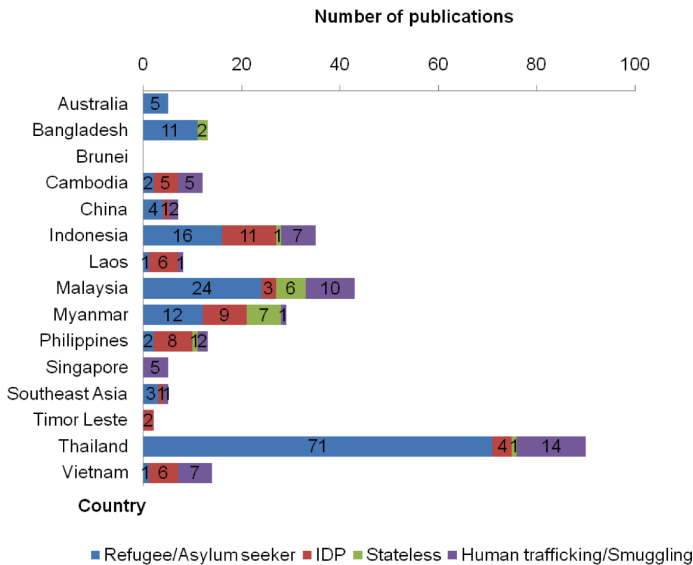


Figure 2. Number of publications by country focus and persons of concern. Own calculation based on Web of Science Database research results.

Figure 3 illustrates the main drivers of migration in the research papers by year of publication. Here, we only included those studies in which the author(s) clearly identified drivers of migration for the context of their investigation and clustered them into the three categories conflict, disaster, and development. Between 2013 and 2018, studies that focused on populations that were forcibly displaced by conflict dynamics feature most prominently.

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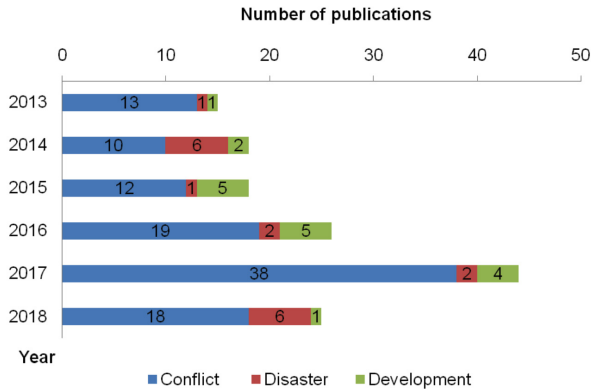


Figure 3. Number of publications by main driver of migration. Own calculation based on Web of Science Database research results.

All in all, 110 publications identified conflict as the main cause for displacement. Disasters and development (projects) were identified as major causes of displacement in 18 studies each. This contrasts with the fact that disasters are by far the main drivers of forced migration in Southeast Asia. For example, between 2013 and 2017, the Philippines reported more than 20 million new displacements due to natural disasters. (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2018)

## CONCLUSION

Research on forced migration in Southeast Asia has clearly increased from 2013 to 2017. This corresponds with the rising number of forcibly displaced populations in the region. The results show that the major part of studies under review focuses on refugees and asylum seekers in Southeast Asia's main host countries, namely Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. This correspondence between current research developments and the distribution of refugees and asylum seekers in Southeast Asia could, however, not be identified for the significantly high numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and stateless persons in the region. This is especially true for IDPs. Although Southeast Asian countries account for a substantial share of worldwide IDPs, only a very limited number of the identified studies focus on this group of persons of concern. This might be explained by the fact that most internal displacement in the region is caused by natural disasters and are oftentimes of only short duration (Black et al., 2011). Nevertheless, future research should put more focus on IDPs in order to deepen the understanding of their specific conditions and needs for recovery and rehabilitation.



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## APPENDIX: SCIENTIFIC REVIEW LITERATURE CORPUS

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