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Panel title: Local governance in SEA: Challenges for the next decade of decentralization

Conveners: Jacqueline Vel (KITLV, Leiden), Joakim Öjendal (University of Gothenburg)

This panel will explore local governance practices in relation to decentralization policies, and identify challenges for the next decade. The panel aims at developing a comparative view, inviting researchers studying this theme in various Southeast Asian countries.

Decentralization is one of the major policy developments in Southeast Asian countries over the last decade. In placing vital decision-making at the local level, decentralization reforms have the potential for enhancing democratization and development but they are not purely a supply-side reform. In Cambodia, while decentralization reforms have made impressive progress, they remain at a relatively early stage. The respective mandates of the three tiers of government are not yet clearly defined, various accountability relations remain unclear; but most importantly the development of citizens that are able to engage in decentralization decision-making has not had the focus of the state reforms. Participation with empowerment-ends has not developed. In Indonesia, the 2014 Village Law is the recent effort to shift power from Jakarta to its regions – putting authority in the hands of more than 74,000 villages as part of a decentralization process that commenced in 2001. With its vast budget the law has the potential to change rural Indonesia. The big question is: what kind of changes? What are the forces, logics and practical norms that motivate the variety of actors involved in local governance?

Most research focuses on single country cases, including our own work about Indonesia and Cambodia. Therefore we especially invite researchers studying local governance in other SEA countries to submit a paper. Comparison of our papers will contribute to understanding the rise, character and potentials of new village programs and regulations, and how their impact relates to the specific national and local context. Because studies in this field often emphasize impact measurement related to the normative policy goals, we look forward to papers including the results of ethnographic research on local governance.

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