Introduction
Southeast Asia is typically presented as a development success story. Since the collapse of colonialism most countries have experienced significant improvements in health, education, incomes and opportunities, and boast swelling middle classes. The region has avoided inter-state conflict for an extended period under the auspices of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and while many political freedoms remain restricted, at a regional scale progress in countries like Myanmar and Indonesia suggest they have been improving. The infrastructure and facilities of cities like Singapore and Bangkok have made them globally significant finance and transportation hubs, and the region continues to attract high levels of foreign investment, bolstered by initiatives such as the recent formation of the ASEAN Economic Community. Improvements in agricultural production alongside enhanced mobility have diversified rural incomes and opportunities, while initiatives oriented at conserving the region’s rich natural resources and biodiversity have proliferated. There are many challenges ahead, particularly in terms of positioning itself alongside the neighboring political economies of India and China; however, the future of the region is generally considered to be bright.

Such glossy regional interpretations provide a narrative that is attractive to many, particularly political and business elites within and outside the region. However it is only part of the story. As countless studies have shown, Southeast Asia is a region of immense diversity, not only in terms of society, culture, economy, environment and politics, but also in terms of its development experiences. Southeast Asia has indeed developed at an impressive pace over the last few decades, but, as is well recognized, development has been uneven and comes with its own set of challenges and costs. More critical accounts highlight the huge disparities in wealth and opportunity dividing rich and poor, the millions of people left behind by development – even in ostensibly middle income countries, the lack of security or services typifying sprawling informal urban settlements and impoverished rural villages, the harsh labor conditions sustained by foreign investment in export processing zones, widespread human rights abuses and abuse of power, and the ongoing degradation of the natural environment to fuel primary industries and rampant consumption. These stories are also true, providing a counterpoint to narratives of success.

Given such diversity the challenge of putting together this Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Development is a considerable one. We could side with either inflection to provide an update
on development from those perspectives – reinforcing one set of stories over the other. We have chosen not to do that. Instead we have invited a range of outstanding regional scholars to each provide a chapter analyzing an aspect of development that reflects cutting edge scholarship on the topic. In particular we asked authors to move beyond mere description or critique to identify the processes of development and how more equitable, sustainable and empowering forms of development might be pursued. In this sense the Handbook provides a level of understanding that goes far beyond the statistical analyses that dominate development reports on the region. Such statistics are important but fall well short of capturing how and why development is occurring and what the intended and unintended impacts may be. Instead we have sought to provide a perspective on development in the region that goes beyond statistics and simplistic good/bad binaries from the multiple viewpoints of those who have spent their careers studying it.

In taking on the task of analyzing Southeast Asian development, two sets of issues immediately become apparent. First, what is Southeast Asia and how and why should we approach it as a region. Second, what is development and how should we approach it in the Southeast Asian context. In what follows we will build from previous scholarship on these topics to argue that a regional approach to development is important for understanding how and why development occurs in some places and not others. Our intention is not to smooth out the uneven experience of development across the region – a regional GDP does not feature! – but instead to highlight the interconnections that are bringing about diverse development geographies. The regional scale, existing between the nation-state and the global, is under-represented in academia and practice, and yet it reveals much about the nature of development and its variable impacts.

Southeast Asia as a region

The region examined in this collection incorporates what is sometimes known as mainland Southeast Asia – Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos), the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore – as well as maritime or insular Southeast Asia comprised of the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam and Timor-Leste (see Figure 1.1). The grouping is driven by geography: the region is nestled between China and India to the north and northwest, the Pacific and Indian oceans to the east and west, and Papua New Guinea and Australia in the southeast. However, the borders of the region, or where the region ends, have been driven as much by colonialism, nationalism and geopolitics as any essential geographic feature. The indigenous people of Papua, for example, in Indonesia’s easternmost province, have much more in common with their Melanesian cousins in Papua New Guinea on the eastern side of the island than people in Java, or broader Southeast Asia. Similarly ongoing unresolved tensions concerning the large gas deposits beneath the Timor Sea involving Australia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, or in regards to the natural resources and geopolitically vital sea routes of the South China Sea involving claimants from Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan and China, prevent firm maritime boundaries from being drawn at all.

These lingering boundary disputes reflect a longer lineage of uncertainty regarding the very existence of an identifiable region. Such uncertainty is structured around a dialectic of unity and diversity. On one hand the region defined as Southeast Asia is seen as a space of shared cultures; on the other the diversity of the region is readily apparent and gives it a distinctive quality. Unity is identified in social and cultural traits that are shared widely across the region, some of which are thought to have derived from long patterns of internal and external trade, and others from patterns of wet and dry rice cultivation linked with the tropical monsoon climate (Gillogy and Adams 2011, 5). Milton Osborne (2004), for example, argues that women and the nuclear family are generally more valued in the region than in neighboring states and much has been
made of a traditional mandala political structure, in which pre-colonial kingdoms set up tributary systems that had no set territorial boundaries but faded in influence with distance from the core. The selective appropriation of Indian and Chinese influences, evident in, for example, the absence of India’s caste system, also suggest particular cultural norms and values are shared across the region. The extensive Chinese diaspora throughout the region is another common feature across many societies. In contrast diversity within the region is also very apparent. No other world region boasts the same degree of geographic, religious, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, economic, ecological and political difference.

Historically, the region has been framed in part by its position in relation to two larger neighbors. Indians referred to it as Suwarnadwipa (Goldland) and the Chinese Nanyang (South Seas). Arab traders knew it as Jawa, and the Europeans as Further India. Within the region empires rose and fell, such as the Angkor kingdom centered in current day Cambodia, Pagan in Myanmar, and Chinese vassal state of Srivijaya that controlled east-west trade to China from current day Indonesia and Malaysia. A consolidated regional power structure equivalent to India or China failed to form; instead existing divisions were accentuated during an extended colonial period when Portugal, Spain, Britain, France, the Netherlands and the United States established colonial boundaries that continue to mark the extent of state territories. However even then the concept of a distinct region had yet to develop, and it wasn’t until the 1890s that German language scholarship first referred to the term Southeast Asia (Siidostasien) in a purely geographical way (Reid
The term caught on and became more widely used, particularly during the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War when the region was of critical geopolitical importance. These external signifiers were formally internalized through the formation of ASEAN in 1967 when a Western-oriented alliance of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines formed amidst the turmoil of the Vietnam/USA War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the cessation for the Cold War eventually saw a broadening of ASEAN to include all states of the region with the exception of Timor-Leste – the region’s newest country – which has applied for membership and is expected to be admitted soon.

Southeast Asian imaginaries now proliferate through maps, tourism, media and geopolitical strategies; however, it is unlikely that a strong Southeast Asian identity has swept through the diverse populations that make up the region. Different ways of imagining and dividing the region help illustrate this point. Timor-Leste, for example, despite sharing half of its island with the Indonesian province of West Timor, has observer status on the Pacific Island Forum – the main political grouping of Pacific Island countries – and has joined the Pacific Island Development Forum, forging links with similarly small island states. Other groupings such as East Asia, Asia Pacific, Pacific Rim, Indochina, Australasia, Oceania and Western Pacific, provide alternative ways of grouping and dividing the states of Southeast Asia. More challenging is Willem van Schendel’s (2002) naming of Zomia to refer to the Tibeto-Burman language areas occupied by highland groups stretching from Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar through Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan and China, occupying spaces conventionally divided between Southeast, East, South and, more recently, Central Asia. Concepts like Zomia cast into question the self-evident nature of the regions that currently comprise the world in geographical maps, including Southeast Asia, and open possibilities for alternative research trajectories as evident in James Scott’s (2009) subsequent anarchist history of the area.

Alternative regional imaginaries also highlight the problems of searching for particular traits at the regional scale – as presumably different traits would be found if different regional groupings, such as Zomia, were used. The once prominent Asian Values argument, for example, has faltered, in part, due to the sheer diversity of values inherent in Asian societies and the difficulties in even defining what or where Asia is. This does not mean that Malaysians and Indonesians don’t share similar traits – clearly they do – but it is harder to identify the traits shared by middle class Chinese residents of Singapore, the Kachin people living in the mountains on the China-Myanmar border and the post-disaster rural fishing communities of Indonesia’s Aceh. Similarly colonial empires have left cultural marks in the languages and institutions that link geographically diverse nations, such as Portugal, Timor-Leste and Angola, or Malaysia, Britain and India – creating imaginary post-colonial geographies that could equally be the focus of a book such as this.

Despite these possibilities it is the Southeast Asian regional identity that has stuck to become the dominant self-reinforcing geopolitical and cultural frame. Given its diversity and somewhat arbitrary boundaries and definition we approach the region not as a space of shared endemic traits but as a dynamic region that is continually forming and reforming in response to internal and external processes. We see value in Appadurai’s (2000, 7) conception of process geographies, whereby attention is directed toward movement rather than stability, and regions are recast as “problematic heuristic devices for the study of global geographic and cultural processes.” Our attention, in focusing on development, turns to what Anna Tsing refers to as the ‘friction’ of global encounters, how globalizing processes are engaged with, transformed and grounded in particular geographic spaces, often with unexpected outcomes. The study of such flows challenges homogenous and static images of regions, which are instead creatively likened to lattices, archipelagos, hollow rings and patchworks (Van Schendel 2002). Regions matter, not because of shared norms and values, although where they exist these are important, but because of
Approaching Southeast Asian development

the social, economic, political and biophysical interconnections that cross national boundaries, underpin regional formations and shape encounters with external and internal processes.

Development in Southeast Asia

We approach development in a similar way. Rather than focusing on a core indicator or trait, such as GDP, human rights or freedom, we borrow again from Appadurai (2000) to see development as comprising a set of flows characterized by what he calls relations of disjuncture. Development is far from a smooth and seamless project, instead the speed, impacts and forms of development differ spatially and temporally, between and within regions, states, sectors, cities, villages and households. There is no one development; instead there are a myriad of ideas and resources that have become associated with this powerful but slippery concept. Certainly, as post-development researchers have argued, development is about change and because of that it necessarily disrupts, and can destroy, what existed before. Disjunctions are created through the unevenness of these disruptions, whereby improved access to markets, technology, healthcare or education emerge unequally across time, space and society, reflecting the unpredictable friction of place-based encounters. Some benefit from development interventions while others are disadvantaged, or as Rigg (2015, 4) has observed more subtly “problems and tensions that have arisen from growth.” For this reason we do not take a normative perspective on whether development is good or bad (contrast almost any pro-growth report from the World Bank with Wolfgang Sach’s 2010 Development Dictionary), as its goodness or badness depends on time, space, perspective, culture, power relations and the materialities of particular initiatives. Perhaps most important is the capacity of those most affected to selectively engage with development and actively steer development processes toward desirable ends. A role for researchers is to highlight the injustices and inequalities that emerge, thereby making space for alternative approaches, when this is not the case.

In applying this lens to development in Southeast Asia we are interested in dynamism and diversity, seeking to understand how people and places are engaging with the globalizing forces of development. We do not pursue a regional economic development model (see Hill’s 2014 review and dismissal of the idea), but we are interested in how the incorporation of countries into the region influences their development. Space and scale matter to development, and a regional optic can provide insights into processes that national, local and global analyses cannot. As James Sidaway (2013, 997) writes in relation to Area Studies, “It is imperative, however, to supplement historical and history with geographic and geographical, signifying spatial comparison, perspective and position.” In focusing on the region the collection aims to understand how the flows and processes associated with development are burrowing across and through Southeast Asia and the diverse effects they are having in different spaces. As two of the editors argue elsewhere (Miller and McGregor forthcoming) some of the benefits of regional analyses include: enabling comparisons between places and the identification of shared experiences and trends; creating space for regional narratives and counter-narratives; highlighting the connectivities and influences of human and non-human regionally significant actors such as ASEAN, the Asian Development Bank or the Asian monsoon; and exposing intra-regional connectivities forming through increased mobility and uneven patterns of development (such as migration and remittance flows). The Vietnam/USA War and the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997–98 are just two events that emphasize the importance of regional analyses, with both having fundamental impacts on Southeast Asian development. Regional analyses, which are sensitive to shortcomings, difference, borderlands and minorities, can contribute to valuable knowledges and dialogue oriented toward improved or alternative development approaches.

Sensitivity to difference within regional analysis is important. National-scale differences are apparent in Table 1.1, which provides a snapshot of how individual countries within Southeast
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* ASEANStats (2016) ASEANStats web portal (www.aseanstats.org downloaded 2 March 2017)

1 The human development index ranks countries from 1–188 (highest to lowest) based on average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development – a long and healthy life, knowledge and decent standard of living.
2 Gross Domestic Product – sum of gross value of all resident producers in the economy (note: GDP often does not capture contributions from informal economies).
3 PPP – Purchasing power parity takes the cost of living into account by comparing how much it costs in local currencies to purchase particular goods.
4 The Gini coefficient calculates income inequality where perfect equality = 0 and absolute inequality (one person owns all) = 1.
Asia are currently faring according to some common development indicators. Clearly the encounters with development have been uneven with the city state of Singapore seemingly benefiting most from its small size and positioning as the service and financial hub of the region while Brunei’s growth has been propelled by sales of oil and gas. Malaysia has benefited from its positioning between these successful neighbors and through growing industry and service sectors, but it struggles more than most to address forms of income inequality linked to ethnic diversity. Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines are all considered to be developing reasonably well; however millions still live in poverty in these countries, particularly in Indonesia and the Philippines, both of which were severely affected by the Asian Economic Crisis and subsequent structural adjustment programs. Timor-Leste, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar face continuing challenges with high rates of poverty, infant mortality and low rates of electrification and education, partly reflecting regional and national histories of conflict. In this volume we do not drill down into the national histories, plans, politics, economies and ecologies that have influenced these development trajectories; instead we focus on trends, connections, commonalities and differences across the region. In adopting a regional optic we hope to bring to light development encounters and challenges that may remain hidden or under-recognized within national and sub-national analyses.

While such goals are admirable we certainly do not claim to have fulfilled them in this Handbook; instead we see this work as making a contribution to an ongoing effort devoted to regional scale understandings of development (see for example Rigg 2015, 2012, 2003, Nevins and Peluso 2008; McGregor 2008; Hill 2008; Leinbach and Ulack 2000). One issue we have encountered is the limited number of researchers analyzing development processes at a regional scale. Most of us, editors included, tend to specialize in one or two sectors in one or two countries. Taking a step back from national or sub-national specialisms to think about development regionally is not an easy or straightforward process. The contributors to the volume have admirably risen to this task. In a similar vein while we are pleased that close to half the chapters involved an author from the region, we would have liked to have engaged more. In some cases potential collaborators were too busy, in others we could not identify an appropriate person to approach. The differing pressures on Southeast Asian researchers who are often engaged in much more policy-oriented work (with clear exceptions like Singapore), and those academic researchers from neoliberalizing Western institutions, whose work is quantified and assessed through academic publications and citations, can act against collaboration on projects like these. A final concern has been around the perennial question of just what is development – and what should be included and what should be left out. Reviewers can no doubt take us to task regarding the content of the Handbook and our decision to focus particularly upon institutions and economies, people and environment. Even within these sections there are clear gaps – indeed whole Handbooks could (and in the case of the environment – have!) been written on each of these themes. Nevertheless we are confident each chapter provides useful insights into Southeast Asian development which, when taken as a whole, provides a comprehensive introduction to regional development processes.

About this book

The Handbook is divided into four sections. Section One provides an introduction to some of the key themes and issues that recur throughout the volume. Katharine McKinnon provides an initial wide-ranging review that highlights the inseparability of development from politics. She focuses on Cold War politics and the birth of development alliances and industries in the region; the mobilization of development resources to pursue particular political goals that can dispossess
minorities or suppress political rights; and the cultural and gender politics that influence who has access to development benefits. Her work ends on a hopeful note that emphasizes the agency of actors to engage with development opportunities in unexpected but beneficial ways, something that is echoed by many contributors to the Handbook. Simon Springer’s subsequent review of neoliberalism in Southeast Asia takes a much darker view. Springer argues, as do many other contributors, that neoliberalism has come to dictate how development is understood and pursued within the region. He traces the roots of neoliberalism and its uptake in Southeast Asia, emphasizing how it has been used to legitimize and extend authoritarian structures rather than challenge them, as theorized by free market advocates. The uneven costs and benefits of existing neoliberal development models are subsequently explored throughout much of the collection.

Jonathan Rigg and Albert Salamanca provide an introduction to transformations in rural spaces and dwell on the surprising resilience of smallholders despite prevailing development trends favoring rural agglomeration. Like McKinnon they emphasize the agency of rural households to creatively diversify in an age of rapidly expanding mobility where migration and remittances challenge traditional conceptions of urban-rural divides. However they also express concern about development processes that lead to dispossession through state sanctioned land grabs or from the creeping uptake of market logics that fracture communities and result in a type of dispossession from below. They also worry about the likely impacts of climate change on some of the region’s most vulnerable people, a theme also taken up by Victor R. Savage in his wide-ranging review of human-nature relationships in Southeast Asia. Savage sees a collision course between dominant linear conceptions of resource-based development that have roots in pre-colonial and colonial trade and the sustainability or even viability of the ecological systems on which we all depend. He contrasts the ecological blindness of capitalist approaches with the deep ecological knowledge of indigenous people, concluding with a plea for more biophilic approaches to development.

Section Two looks at the institutions and economies of development in Southeast Asia. These range from the large multilateral development institutions like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund that are the focus of Toby Carroll’s chapter through to the community institutions focused on by Gibson, Hill and Law. Carroll’s analysis backs up Springer’s earlier argument that neoliberal rationalities now dominate development policy. This influence is subsequently explored by Ford, Gillan and Thein in terms of the changing role of the International Labour Organization in facilitating foreign investment, by Kelly Gerard in the instigation of the ASEAN Economic Community, and by Hudalah and Aritenang regarding shifting geographies of industrial investment. Rachel Hughes’ study of international justice tribunals in Cambodia and Timor-Leste also argues that the limited framing of such institutions, intentionally or not, improves the climate for international investment. A second theme addressed in this section is the growing influence of China with May Tan-Mullins providing a unique insight into the opaque operations of Chinese aid. John Connell reflects on how Chinese tourists, now the most popular extra-regional source country for Southeast Asian tourism, along with a general maturing of the industry, are transforming tourism and development. Within each of the chapters there is a concern for justice and an interest in how the most marginalized are being, or likely to be, impacted by these changing development flows. Gerard sees some hope in the regionalization of civil society advocacy, Gibson, Hill and Law emphasize the strength and capacity of community institutions, and Hughes notes the national and community healing that flows from justice tribunals. The overall feeling, though, is that the dominant expressions of neoliberalism in Southeast Asia are embedding uneven patterns of development, creating considerable challenges for more just and equitable pathways.
Section Three continues the theme of regional integration and neoliberal economic reform, but explores these issues from the vantage point of the people whose everyday lives are most impacted by such development. Critical questions are asked about whether development pathways across the region shape more equitable, sustainable and empowering social worlds. The chapters in this section suggest that economic development, and the mobility it relies on, is an uneven and relational process. Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang discuss the complex web of gendered mobilities that feed into child- and elder-care deficits in the region, for example, showing how families in receiving places like Singapore and sending places the Philippines are reworking ideas of the ‘modern’ family at both sites. While labor mobility can reduce poverty and provide much needed investment in places like the Philippines, Philip Kelly discusses the downsides (brain drain, exploitation and family separation) and raises questions about how migration contributes to genuine well-being in sending countries. Alexandra Gartrell and Panharath Hak remind us, however, that not everyone migrates; indeed, those with disabilities are most likely to be left behind in villages, to be uneducated, underemployed and in poverty. Orlando Woods similarly suggests articulations between religion and the modernizing impulses of development. Meghann Ormond, Chan Chee Khoon and Sharuna Verghis examine how mobility is transforming ideas about who is ‘entitled to’ and ‘responsible for’ health and social care in ASEAN, and they too find disparity: high income mobile individuals are more likely to have better healthcare than migrant workers. In their analysis of children, youth and development, Harriot Beazley and Jessica Ball remind us that even forced migrant children have visions about what development in the region should look like. Another major theme in this section is the powerful connections between social identities, livelihoods and environment in the region. Sarah Turner’s chapter shows how processes such as agrarian transition, resettlement policies and environmental destruction have particular impacts on ethnic minority and indigenous groups. Tubtim Tubtim and Philip Hirsch explore what regional integration and neoliberal reform looks like from the vantage point of the ‘village’: perhaps the original site of development imaginations. Bernadette P. Resurrección and Ha Nguyen make the case for understanding this process through feminist political ecology.

In Section Four the authors position questions of values, rights, knowledge, equity and scale as central to their analysis of environment and development, providing a clear articulation of some of the challenges confronting development in contemporary Southeast Asia as well as some of the more hopeful strategies by which society-environment relations might be reconfigured in more sustainable and equitable ways. The chapter by Miller provides an overview of the changing position and value of water in the region, focusing on how changes in material, discursive and cultural relations with water have accompanied modernist development. A rise in competition over increasingly scarce resources, such as water, is a theme addressed throughout this section, and is explicitly addressed in the chapter by Fujita Lagerqvist and Connell with reference to land. They document the quite radical shifts in rural livelihoods in the region, accompanying the increased commercialization and intensification of agriculture, arguing that though the importance of agriculture to the economies of the region has declined, it remains an important part of rural people’s lives and livelihoods. The following two chapters by Bush, Marschke and Belton and Majid Cooke et al. frame their analyses of environment-development issues much more from a livelihoods perspective, highlighting how the increased integration of people’s livelihoods into global commodity chains present opportunities for income improvements but also the possibility of increased exploitation and insecurity. Bush, Marschke and Belton focus in particular on the social dimension of sustainability concerning the highly interconnected capture fisheries and aquaculture industries in the region, identifying particular
governance challenges concerning labor conditions. The chapter by Majid Cooke et al. focuses on the very particular ways in which land rights, knowledge and power relations influence the extent to which smallholder palm oil farmers are able to navigate the opportunities and risks associated with this rapidly expanding cash crop.

As highlighted elsewhere in the collection, the wealth and development of the region has come at great cost to the environment. Yet, as shown in the two chapters on disasters and climate change, development itself is now seriously threatened by environmental variability and change. The chapter by Thomalla, Boyland and Calgaro demonstrates how as wealth in the region has grown, so too has the number of people, assets, infrastructure and services at risk of disaster. Southeast Asia is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world, with the authors arguing the nature of development directly contributes to rising vulnerability. Disasters are likely to worsen with climate change, unless development can shift to more adaptive and low-carbon models. Uddin and Nylander’s chapter offers a strong regional level analysis of efforts to transition toward low-carbon development through the upscaling of climate change mitigation efforts. Both chapters highlight the potential for more regionally coordinated responses to reduce vulnerability to disasters and improve climate change mitigation efforts.

The chapter by Neef and Sangkapitux considers the wider environmental governance context in which payment for ecosystem services is situated as a means of promoting conservation. They present analysis of a series of case studies of conservation efforts, concluding that highly mixed outcomes are apparent. The final chapter in our collection, by McGregor and Thomas, engages with more-than-human theories, opening up clear opportunities to rethink development by foreshadowing human and non-human entanglements. As such, the chapter critiques the hyper-separation of humans and nature that lies at the core of modernist development, widely seen as responsible for widespread environmental degradation.

As a collection, the book emphasizes the dynamism associated with the disjunctive flows of development across the region. Cities, villages, societies and environments are being transformed as people engage with the new opportunities and constraints of development in vastly different ways. As the regional imaginary continues to materialize through development initiatives and networks, national economies, societies and environments are becoming increasingly mobile and interconnected, meaning a change in one Southeast Asian location vibrates through the networks bound up with it. It is these interconnected processes of change that are shaping development in the region – they are diverse, unpredictable and uneven, however they are Southeast Asian.

References


