

## **Community economies in Monsoon Asia: a hidden economic geography**

Katherine Gibson, Ann Hill and Lisa Law

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### **Introduction**

Researchers have long recognized practices of mutual aid, reciprocity and sharing as prevalent features of everyday community life in Southeast Asia. Such practices are often represented as persistent vestiges of pre-capitalist societies and variously categorized as aspects of “informal economies”, “patron-client” relations or “social capital”. In debates about capitalist development these ‘relict’ practices are seen as standing in the way of modern economic growth, as something to be overcome or enrolled into the mechanics of transition to market capitalism—that is, they are harnessed into a narrative of either decline or transcendence. However, such a framing obscures the valuable role mutual aid, reciprocity and sharing may have played in shaping responses to social, economic, political and environmental threats over the long durée. It is clear that these practices contribute to local social safety nets and act to support households in the event of misfortune or calamity, even today (Ong and Curato 2015). While they may be ill fitted to capitalist development trajectories, they are well suited as survival strategies and may potentially contribute to development trajectories more suited to life in the Anthropocene. This chapter outlines an intellectual framing that situates mutual aid, reciprocity, sharing and other ‘community economic practices’ within a diverse economy in which the trajectory of change is not dominated by the capitalist development narrative but is up for negotiation.

In the first section of the chapter we introduce the diverse economy framing and describe a sample of local economic practices that occur in Southeast Asia drawing on contemporary and historical studies. This section acts as an incomplete inventory that sketches out the landscapes of radical heterogeneity that are unleashed when we employ fine-grained modes of differentiating economic practices and read for diversity. The next section of the chapter reviews the ways that economic diversity has been accommodated within literatures that take capitalist economic relations to be the norm or the goal of economic development. Here we discuss studies of local economic practices that have been theorized in terms of 1) informality, 2) patron-client relations and moral economies, and 3) social capital. We argue that these studies employ a capitalocentric discourse of economy, the effect of which is to undermine or render ‘non-credible’ (Santos 2004) the vitality and potentiality of much of what supports life in non-western contexts. In the last section of the chapter we identify ways in which scholars are extending thinking on community economic practices and suggest some avenues for research on what has remained until now a hidden economic geography of Monsoon Asia.

### **Diverse Economic Practices and Community Economies in Southeast Asia**

Economic geographers highlight the phenomenal growth of Southeast Asia over the last half century through the development of commodity markets, including waged labour markets; capitalist industrialization, especially in export processing zones; and the financialization of life. Asia has played a key role in economic globalization. Many scholars have traced the course of agricultural mechanization, monetization, commoditization, proletarianization, and labour out-migration—what are usually represented as the key drivers capitalist transformation (Gibson et al 2010). But accompanying these processes we have seen the persistence of many economic practices that are not so easily grasped within the capitalist development narrative. When we shift the focus from new and emerging trends to the economic geographies of practice in Southeast Asia we see the continual

evolution of a diverse array of non-capitalist economic activities alongside and interconnected with those associated with capitalism. To bring this landscape of heterogeneity to visibility we must cultivate an eye for economic difference and read against the grain of powerful discourses that organize events/realities into seemingly predictable trajectories (Gibson-Graham 2014).

The diverse economy framing developed by Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) and Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy (2013) can guide this reading (see Figure 1). Economic diversity is theorized not in terms of different product sectors or primary, secondary, tertiary and quaternary industries, but in terms of the *economic relations* by which goods and services are produced and distributed, and by which wellbeing and wealth, as well as exploitation and inequality, are generated. These economic relations are enacted through practices of labour, enterprise, transactions, property and finance. The diverse economy includes not only those activities usually associated with the ‘capitalist’ economy, that is, waged and salaried labour, capitalist enterprise, formal commodity markets, private property and mainstream bank and credit institution finance (in the top cells of each column in Figure 1), but also many other categories of activity that operate according to non-capitalist or alternative capitalist logics and dynamics.

Figure 1: A diverse economy framing

<b>ENTERPRISE</b>	<b>LABOR</b>	<b>PROPERTY</b>	<b>TRANSACTIONS</b>	<b>FINANCE</b>
<b>CAPITALIST</b> Family firm Private unincorporated firm Public company Multinational	<b>WAGE</b> Salaried Unionized Non-union Part-time Contingent	<b>PRIVATE</b> Individually owned Collectively owned	<b>MARKET</b> Free Naturally protected Artificially protected Monopolized Regulated Niche	<b>MAINSTREAM MARKET</b> Private banks Insurance firms Financial services Derivatives
<b>ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST</b> State owned Environmentally responsible Socially responsible Non-profit	<b>ALTERNATIVE PAID</b> Self-employed Co-operative Indentured Reciprocal labor In-kind Work for welfare	<b>ALTERNATIVE PRIVATE</b> State-owned Customary (clan) land Community land trusts Indigenous knowledge	<b>ALTERNATIVE MARKET</b> Fair and direct trade Alternative currencies Underground market Barter Co-operative exchange Community supported agriculture, fishing etc.	<b>ALTERNATIVE MARKET</b> State banks Cooperative banks Credit unions Govt. sponsored lending Community-based financial institutions Micro-finance Loan sharks
<b>NON-CAPITALIST</b> Worker cooperatives Sole proprietorships Community enterprise Feudal enterprise Slave enterprise	<b>UNPAID</b> Housework Family care Volunteer Neighbourhood work Self-provisioning Slave labor	<b>OPEN ACCESS</b> Atmosphere Water Open ocean Ecosystem services Outer Space	<b>NON-MARKET</b> Household sharing Gift giving State allocations/appropriations Hunting, fishing Gleaning, gathering Sacrifice Theft, piracy, poaching	<b>NON-MARKET</b> Sweat equity Rotating credit funds Family lending Donations Interest-free loans Community supported business

Researchers have used this framing to identify the mix of economic practices that combine to create economies in place. For example, at the community scale Michelle Carnegie (2008) has documented the array of diverse market and non-market transactions engaged in by Christian farmers and Muslim traders and seafarers in Oelua on the eastern Indonesian island of Roti. Sarah Wright (2010) has employed the diverse economies framing to show how three residents of Puno on Panay Island in the Philippines combine a complex mix of labour practices, tangible and intangible exchanges, work for

money and work for direct consumption to forge a living.<sup>1</sup> In each locality there are specific names for many of the alternative and non-market, unpaid and non-capitalist activities. In the Philippines, for example, reciprocal farming labour exchange is referred to as the *dagyaw* system on Puno (Wright 2010: 304) and as *hungus* in Jagna (Gibson et al 2010: 8). As far as we know there has been no systematic recording or mapping of this language of economic diversity across Southeast Asia, although there are detailed place-based accounts of practices of mutual exchange, sharing and reciprocity in countless village level anthropological studies. There is, thus, a hidden economic geography that awaits analysis.

What kind of analysis might be conducted on this hidden economic geography remains an open question. A number of scholars have mistaken the practice of inventorying diverse economic practices with blind advocacy for ‘alternative’ non-capitalist practices and are keen to point out that many of the activities in a diverse economy are undesirable, exploitative and inflected with oppressive power relations (Aguilar 2005; Kelly 2005; Wright 2010; Turner and Schoenberger 2012; Roy 2011). These are points that diverse economy proponents Gibson-Graham (2005), Cahill (2008) and Gibson et al (2010) have also made, for example, by drawing attention to the multiple ways in which power is enacted in Jagna and by highlighting transactions involving theft, work involving child labour, enterprise that relies on feudal surplus extraction and local lending at extortionate rates of interest in Jagna’s Diverse Economies Inventory. The point of the diverse economy inventory is not to value diversity *as such*, but to develop a nuanced appreciation of the potential for *certain* diverse economy practices to enact interdependence in ways that might help build more vibrant and

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<sup>1</sup> See also applications of the diverse economies framing in Flores, Indonesia (Curnow 2008); Jagna, (Gibson-Graham 2005) and Northern Mindanao (Hill 2011) in the Philippines; Hanoi, Vietnam (Turner and Schoenberger 2012); and Kompong Cham, Cambodia (Lyne 2016).

nourishing *beyond capitalist* economies, to use Wright's term.<sup>2</sup> Exactly which activities contribute to survival and wellbeing and which activities undermine 'surviving well together' cannot be answered by a simple inventory. This kind of analysis calls for a more detailed examination of what kind of ethical concerns motivate practices in the first place.

We identify a *community economy* as a space in which interdependence with each other and with earth others is honoured and negotiated. Within any diverse economy *community economic practices* involve ethical negotiations around:

- *labouring* or working to survive well
- *business* or enterprise of any kind that generates and shares surplus
- *markets* and transactions of any kind that encounter others with respect
- *commoning property* by sharing access and responsibility for its care, and
- *financing* and investing in any form in collective futures.<sup>3</sup>

A number of studies have attempted to identify community economic practices that involve on-going negotiations and ethical decision making in particular contexts. In the peri-urban context of Opol in Northern Mindanao, for example, Hill (2011) has documented the work of citizens in communal gardens who produce vegetables that are gifted to the Municipality's schools to be fed to undernourished children as part of a school feeding program (see also Hill 2013). Gardeners agree to receive in-kind payments in vegetables, herbs, seeds and seedlings for their labour. An estimated forty per cent of the vegetables they produce becomes a social surplus that spreads the ability to survive well to children across the Municipality. The communal gardens are underpinned by

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<sup>2</sup> This image of 'another economy' is variously named 'post-capitalist', 'more than capitalist', or 'other than capitalist', which is, ironically, a reflection of the power of capitalist discourse to dominate future imaginaries.

<sup>3</sup> This list is a modified version of that developed by Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy (2013).

negotiations between the Municipal government and local landowners to temporarily ‘common’ their privately owned land. Access to land is gifted free of charge with the understanding it will be cared for—idle ground will become productive, the soil will be improved, and the sites will be free of illegal squatting and rubbish dumping. The whole exercise is further supported by volunteer labour such as that of women from Rural Improvement Clubs who visit communal gardening sessions and offer free advice and farmers who offer to transport excess produce from communal gardens to the market on market day, free of charge. In Opol the creation of a community economy around *surviving well* has been a consciously organized project that draws upon a shared valuing of mutual support practices.

In other localities the negotiation of ethical economic practices are a longstanding but less orchestrated part of village life. In the rural Bohol municipality of Jagna, for example, Gibson et al (2010) identified a range of existing community economic practices. Work that supported *surviving well* included: sharing the labour of harvest with landless poor in return for in kind payments of a negotiated fraction of the fish, corn or rice harvest; and allowing the landless to glean from harvested lands. Household *surplus* (generated in small amounts from many different activities and enterprises) was shared with the community during the yearly fiesta. There were many *transactions* that were guided by an ethic of respect and care for others: barter between upland and lowland underpinned the interdependence between different ecosystems; ritual offerings to the spirits of land and trees were made to respect the natural environment and its guardians and keep alive a recognition of human-earth other connection; gifting and pooling of resources to help others and spread the burden of major of costs such as weddings and funerals also ensured community survival and well-being. *Commonly shared* infrastructure such as irrigation channels and roads, houses and neighbourhood meeting halls was maintained by volunteering and community work that is unpaid. Finally credit was advanced in many ways to support livelihoods and to meet unexpected demands.

Many of the community economic practices across Southeast Asia are so much a part of everyday life that they are considered unremarkable. Others have been studied, but within a framing that demotes their value as contributors to active and dynamic economies. It is to these studies that we now turn to read against the grain and begin to marshal a greater understanding of community economic practices and their potential.

### **Finding Community Economic Practices Within Capitalocentric Framings of Economic Diversity in Southeast Asia**

Modernist knowledge systems render many of the activities of the diverse economy non-credible and thus largely invisible (Santos 2004). How does this happen? We contend that the available framings for understanding economic diversity are structured by a capitalocentric logic that undermines the identification of community economies. A capitalocentric discourse positions relations of economic difference as either the same as, the opposite of, an alternative to, or contained within capitalism (Gibson-Graham 1996: 35). As such, economic practices that do not take the form of ‘free’ waged labour, commoditized exchange, for-profit enterprise, privatized property and market interest rate bearing are seen as:

- the ‘same as’, or tending towards a capitalist form—for example, micro-private enterprise is an incipient for-profit capitalist business
- the ‘opposite of’, and thus less efficient, modern or even viable—for example, reciprocal labour exchange is embedded in pre-modern obligatory relations that prevent the free movement of waged labour that underpins its efficiency/replace-ability/cheapness,
- an ‘alternative to’, that given the dominance of capitalism, is destined to be a minor player in the economy—for example, cooperative enterprises that value people over profits and are



therefore not foot-loose or able to attract the entrepreneurial innovators who are motivated by personal gain, or

- ‘contained within’, and thus floating in a vast ocean of capitalism, susceptible to co-option and unable to act independent of capitalist dynamics—for example, feudal tenancy on export oriented agricultural plantations.

In each positioning the dominant signifier is the capitalist economy with its component relationships and dynamics. As the following sections illustrate, community economic practices in Southeast Asia can be found subsumed within discourses of the informal economy, patron client relations and social capital.

### 1. The informal economy

The informal sector is a grab bag category that refers to underground activities, vulnerable workers, the self-employed, home-based workers, and micro-enterprises with or without hired workers (Sethuraman 1992). In Hart’s original designation, the informal economy was made up of activities conducted by an urban ‘sub-proletariat’, that is, workers who were not part of the “organized labor force” (1973: 61). Writing in an earlier era, Geertz referred to these activities as the ‘bazaar economy’ (1963). In Asia today the term informal is widely used to refer to the unregistered entrepreneurialism that a vast majority of people in urban and rural areas deploy to survive. Within this huge category of activities there are many types of diverse economic practices each operating with different logics and according to non-state forms of regulation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> According to Roy, by deploying the term ‘informal’ (with its connotations of illegality) an institutionalized form of violence is condoned whereby “subaltern informalities” are criminalized while “elite informalities” involving, for example, illegal land grabs by corporations and mafia-like organizations to build mega shopping complexes or high rise housing, are valorized (2011: 233).

Informal micro-enterprise, small family businesses, hawking etc (what Roy 2011 terms 'subaltern' informal activities) have been described as "necessity-driven survivalist business" (Dahles and Prabawa 2013: 242). The profit margin is minimal or non-existent, but the activity makes just enough for a family or trader to live on. While represented as highly individualistic, operators in the informal sector often rely on strong personal ties to suppliers and customers that involve negotiated agreements to deal with uncertainty and loyalty. Dahles and Prabawa (2013) note, for example, how pedi-cab drivers in Yogyakarta established relationships with certain shops and restaurants, bringing their tourist customers only to these establishments in return for an agreed upon percentage of any sales made. At the same time these drivers maintained close relations with their village communities to which they returned each night, participating in "gift giving to extended family and neighbours, attending and paying for rituals and ceremonies, joint saving clubs and donations to the needy" (2013: 255).

Early on, informal sector activities were seen as something to be eradicated as they stood in the way of modern urban development—but more recently they have been targeted by development agencies for promotion of micro-enterprise led market growth. Yet necessity driven, survival oriented entrepreneurs are a far cry from capitalist entrepreneurs—some might make the transition to formal capitalist business but most do not (see for example the study of food catering in Iloilo City by Barth and Kuo 1984). If we released these informal activities from their discursive positioning as 'other' to formal markets, or 'becoming' capitalist enterprise, we might see many opportunities for strengthening community economies. State support via, for example, a basic income payment for informal sector workers, as proposed by Ferguson (2015), would allow them to continue to produce much needed goods and services in complex urban environments under less impoverished and desperate conditions.

## 2. Patron-client relations

Patron-client relationships involve dependency between a powerful patron who uses influence and resources to provide security for a less powerful agent in return for personal services, support and loyalty that in turn legitimates the power of the patron (Scott 1972: 92). These relations involve both coercion and voluntarism. Political analyses of Southeast Asia foreground patron-client relations, but they also play a role in economic analysis as it is through forms of patronage that resources are redistributed (Polanyi 1957). Traditionally patron power in Southeast Asia was lodged in ownership of land and the ability to grant or deny access by the landless to become tenant farmers.

In this rural context patron client relations were embedded in a delicately balanced ‘moral economy’ of subsistence security. Access and entitlement by the poor to essential necessities was linked to agreeing with the patron on what constituted ‘just’ rents and taxes, and ‘just’ “access to land, gleaned or fishing rights, rights of way across landowners properties, and redistributive mechanisms and forms of reciprocity that linked peasants with elites and with each other” (Edelman 2005: 332).<sup>5</sup>

More recently patron-client structures have been “closely linked to the national level with jobs, cash, and petty favors flowing down the network, and votes or support flowing upward” (Scott 1972: 105). In both their traditional and contemporary guises patron client relations are definitely positioned as ‘other’ to the modern, transparent, economic relations between independent, individualized agents in a capitalist economy. They are seen to flourish in the absence of modern institutions of governance and protection. Indeed, from the capitalocentric perspective of mainstream economics, patron client relations signal corruption and are a barrier to modern economic development.

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<sup>5</sup> Peasant communities, according to Scott (1976), would do everything in their power to resist threats to this order and rhythm of subsistence living coupled with reciprocity practices on demand. One of the threats he studied was the peasant rebellions (in Vietnam and Burma) in the face of state control and colonial rule.

The actual economic practices of patronage and client loyalty take many forms. In large part they have been represented as mechanisms of “exploitation of the poor by the mighty or the rich” (Pelras 2000: 341), but this belies the delicate negotiation of benefit and protection that patron client economic relations entail. In his study of South Sulawesi, Pelras for example, notes how exchanges of labour and tribute within patron client bonds contributed to “the smoothing of economic differences” and “helped reinforce social solidarity and cohesion among strata of unequal rank” (2000: 342). A capitalocentric approach to patron client relations in Southeast Asia blinds us to the diverse nuance of economic relations in which the powerful and the less powerful are bound together. Pelras shows that the detailed vocabulary of patronage exchanges in agriculture, aquaculture, fishing, sea trade and artisanry reveal a complex mesh of negotiated interdependencies that are not grasped by the language of exploitation.

As is increasingly clear, and contrary to earlier views, patron client political relations do not stand in the way of rampant capitalist development, but have been deployed in many contexts by elites to hasten processes of capitalist transition and capture its benefits. So if patron client relations can be harnessed to capitalist growth, might they also be enrolled in non-capitalist development? In a pioneering research project in Cambodia, Lyne (2016) argues that local patrons might be seen as taking the lead as social entrepreneurs, fostering the development of values-led economic development that supports widespread wellbeing. While not condoning the corruption that is often associated with patron client relations, it is worth revisiting the diverse economic practices through which patronage and loyal tribute flows and liberating those with promise for building community economies to play a role in a non-capitalocentric developmental narrative.

### 3. Social capital

Social capital is defined as “the information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inhering in one’s social networks” (Woolcock 1998: 153) “that enable people to act collectively” (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000: 226). As the term ‘capital’ denotes, social capital is framed as something that can be ‘invested’ in to enhance economic performance—its ‘stock’ can be increased and the investor gain greater benefits in return. The concept embodies a slippage between the *individual’s* propensity to trust, cooperate and discipline those who renege, what Carpenter et al. term ‘behavioural social capital’, and the *community* level networks that enforce rules of behaviour or ‘associational social capital’ (2004: 534).

The origins and development of the term by Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam among others are multiple and varied, and heavily debated in terms of inclusionary or exclusionary potential and exploitative ends. Geertz (1963), for example, notes how successful businessmen in Bali were constantly assaulted by loan and job seeking kinsmen such that social capital networks and local norms about mutual assistance worked against economic progress (Portes and Landolt 2000). Despite contestations, the World Bank and the aid and development sector at large have mobilised the concept with the conviction that ‘indicators of social capital (such as membership in civic associations) correlate positively with indicators of political democracy and economic growth (such as voting rates and per capita income)’ (Rankin 2002: 4). Too little social capital is seen as an obstacle to effective capitalist economic growth and development, and too much is seen as obstructing the efficient operations of markets and the state.

The diverse economic practices by which associational social capital is built up are conducted according to the kinds of ethical negotiations we associate with the enactment of a community economy. Woolcock (1998) categorizes these practices in terms of their contribution to ‘getting by’ or ‘getting ahead’:

“bonding social capital’ refers to the intra-community ties that enable poor people in a village setting to ‘get by’ (e.g., monitoring property rights, labour exchange, emergency assistance, rotating savings groups, provision of communal facilities). ‘Linkage’ and ‘bridging’ social capital’ refer to the extra-community networks that enable individuals and groups to tap outside sources of information, support, and resources, not just enabling them to ‘get by’ but to ‘get ahead’ (e.g., links to traders and financier, extension agents, non-governmental organisations)” (Cramb 2005: 214-215).

Development interventions are aimed at mobilizing social capital towards ‘getting ahead’, not just ‘getting by’. There is evidence, however, that interventions designed to stimulate linking and bridging social capital can have unintended detrimental effects on bonding social capital. In a controlled study of community driven infrastructure development that took place over a three year period involving 2,100 households across eleven municipalities in the Philippines, Labonne and Chase (2008: 5) observed that while participation in assemblies and trust in strangers increased, participation in informal (*bayanihan*) collective actions decreased. Similarly in Cramb’s study of community landcare groups in Mindanao it was found that soil conservation groups developed easily in communities with strong customary systems of *alayan* or labour exchange (i.e. high levels of bonding social capital), but that the bridging and linking that was facilitated by involvement in the Landcare Program encouraged individuals to ‘go it alone’ and use their knowledge “gained from experience in nursery management through the communal landcare nurseries ... to develop private nurseries and pursue commercial outlets for their planting materials.” (2005: 223).

The analysis of social capital within a capitalocentric world view deflects attention away from the non-capitalist logics and customary or community dynamics of interdependence that are generated and maintained (and sometimes undermined) through ethical negotiation. This point is illustrated with reference to the landcare study cited above. Cramb (2005) notes that the initial motivation for

landcare groups to work on establishing contour hedgerows was not to maximize farm income (and thus to ‘get ahead’), but to ensure soil erosion was reduced, soil fertility was maintained, and terraces were formed (217). The formation of landcare groups between 1998 to 2002 built upon an established ethic of earth care in the community and tapped into the existing traditional local value of *pakikisama* or community solidarity (2005: 222). Cramb describes how landcare participants expressed feelings of “enhanced pride and purpose in being part of landcare” which only served to confirm a traditional sense of earth ‘stewardship’, especially in indigenous communities (222). The more nuanced and fine grained attention to associations of interdependence that a community economies perspective offers, allows for the possibility that social capital might be mobilized for ‘other than capitalist’ development in which ‘getting ahead’ does not undermine longstanding and resilient practices of ‘getting by’.

### **Conclusion: New Research Directions for Community Economies in Southeast Asia**

Contemporary scholars of Monsoon Asia are increasingly drawn toward imagining and enacting regional development futures that are diverse and different (Rigg 2015). In such imagining community economic practices are at the fore. In this chapter we have shown how the diverse economic geography of Southeast Asia has remained hidden to academic scholarship. Economic practices in which everyday ethical negotiations take place have been downplayed, ignored or devalued by being enrolled into capitalocentric discourses. As the capitalist development trajectory is increasingly recognized as not only unsustainable but as actively destroying the conditions for life as we have known it on earth, it is important that new pathways for equitable development are found.

In 2005 Gibson-Graham proposed that a post-development agenda centred on community economies would involve:

- sustaining and strengthening the diverse practices that support subsistence and produce wellbeing directly;
- reclaiming, safeguarding and enlarging the commons that provides a base for survival, subsidising subsistence and creating community; and
- generating surplus and marshalling and distributing it to foster expansion of the productive base and increase standards of living (2005: 17).

To this list we might now add (some 11 years later and in the light of new scholarship in the region that has been inspired by a community economies perspective) the following:

- fostering translocal community encounters –between regions, between nations;
- rekindling and strengthening ethical relationships with more than humans;
- increasing the role of the state in supporting community economies;
- working with different forms of power; and
- embracing assemblage politics.

Research has a valuable role to play, not only in foregrounding economic diversity but also in bringing to light what can be done to strengthen and grow community economies in the Anthropocene. Moving forward, a key challenge is to better understand how to support and foster community economic development in the face of increasing climate and resource uncertainty. The revelation of hidden economic geographies in Monsoon Asia is just the first step in this bigger ‘project’ of cultivating new pathways for more equitable and sustainable development.

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