

My research placement at the Thailand Environment Institute

When we were asked to start thinking about our dissertation topic, I knew immediately that I wanted it to be on Thailand and climate change. At the beginning of the year, I started my research and contacted a series of Thai NGOs, agencies and charities and was lucky to get a generous reply from the Thailand Environment Institute who are working on an EU-funded project called SUCCESS (Strengthening urban climate governance for inclusive, resilient, and sustainable societies in Thailand). The head researcher invited me to join the SUCCESS team and I spent five weeks from June 13 – July 15 in the TEI offices in Bangkok to conduct my research and work on their project too.

The Turing Fund and Andrew Pickup Award was able to cover my flights as well as accommodation which was a huge help and meant I could actually go abroad to Thailand to do the research placement. Timing wise it was also perfect as Thailand had just opened up its borders again.

By knowing I had secured a placement and funding, with the help of my supervisor, I was able to create a dissertation question that was linked to my research placement but also taking it further within a wider political economy framework. My final research question took a case study approach: “What are the obstacles and opportunities that emerge from the relationship between rapid urbanisation and climate change adaptation in Udon Thani?”

Why Udon Thani? I spent many summers there as a child, as that is where my mother’s family are from. The north-east (Isaan) region has always been an overlooked area. Its rural landscape as well as being on the border with Laos has been fraught with difficult history. It also happened that the SUCCESS project’s research included regions in Udon Thani which meant I could link up some of their findings with my on research.

I arrived in Bangkok a few days before I was due to start and stayed in an Air BnB directly opposite the TEI offices. I knew that given I’d be in the office five days a week that I absolutely did not want to commute in the great mega-city, so I was very lucky to find such an ideal place to stay.



TEI office (taken from where I stayed)

My work days were from 8.30am - 5pm each day with a 90 minute lunch break from 12 noon - 1.30pm. The SUCCESS team as well as other fractions of the TEI team was on the third floor of the building. I had a really relaxed time in the offices, everyone was very friendly and I was able to get on conversationally in Thai. One limitation I realised after was that all correspondence was conducted in Thai and that included all the policy documents and websites. Thankfully I was able to get by given I had some grasp of the language and it certainly was a skill I improved during my five weeks!



View from my desk

At TEI I also got involved in some of the outdoor excursions, including picking vegetables from the NGO's allotment behind the office building. I also went with some of the team to a "Growing Diversity Park" an organic centre created by an academic who is working on lobbying companies to ban certain pesticides in Thai farming as well as doing more research into food sovereignty in the age of climate change.



Allotment picking



Growing diversity park presentation

During my time at TEI, I was tasked with utilising my English writing skills to write press releases, literature reviews as well as general copywriting for the SUCCESS project. One of the bigger tasks was writing a literature review around gender impacts of climate change in urban landscapes and realised that the amount of research in this area is very low. In fact, how I approached my research question really had to be re-framed once I conducted primary research (through interviews). I came with the expectation that climate change adaptation was well on its way to being implemented and that my research would be critiquing this, however the National Adaptation Plan has yet to be mainstreamed at a national nor local level so there wasn't really anything to discuss yet! Instead, I used a political economy framework of the 3Is (Ideas, Interests and Institutions) to understand what the obstacles and opportunities are for climate change adaptation.

Overall, I had a great time on this placement. I was able to link my research question with the research the NGO is doing which meant invaluable insights from everyone involved. Being there meant I was able to experience some of the issues firsthand (including feeling the impact of monsoon floods right outside the office!) and gain a richer contextual understanding that has been invaluable for my dissertation.

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