

DECODE Knowledge Project with CLARE ASEAN Project

20th May, 2026

On 20 May 2026, the DECODE Knowledge Project collaborated with the CLARE ASEAN Project to convene two consecutive sessions with partners from the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) and Thammasat University, Thailand. These engagements created an opportunity for researchers, practitioners, and students to exchange experiences, reflect on emerging lessons from their respective projects and explore possibilities for future collaboration.

The first session took the form of a roundtable discussion hosted at the Asian Institute of Technology. Moderated by Dr Rajesh Tandon, Co-Principal Investigator of the DECODE Knowledge Project.



Figure 1 Roundtable at AIT

The discussion brought together members of the CLARE ASEAN consortium, Senior Programme Officer at IDRC Arjan de Haan, and Saanya Sodhi from the UNESCO Chair team at PRIA. It served as an informal yet intellectually rich space for dialogue, enabling participants to share insights, identify common concerns, and reflect on areas of alignment between the two initiatives.



Figure 2 Open Science Discussion at AIT

The discussion opened with an introduction to the CLARE ASEAN Project by Professor Shobhakar Dhakal, Principal Investigator of the CLARE ASEAN Project. He described CLARE ASEAN as an action-oriented research initiative focused on advancing urban climate resilience across Southeast Asia. The project seeks to generate actionable knowledge through collaborative research while drawing on both participatory approaches and policy engagement.

Professor Dhakal outlined the project's four interconnected research dimensions and highlighted its commitment to producing evidence that can inform practical climate adaptation strategies and decision-making processes.

This was followed by remarks from Arjan de Haan, IDRC's lead for both the DECODE and CLARE ASEAN projects. He emphasized the applied nature of the two initiatives and reflected on the increasingly localized realities of climate change. Noting that the impacts of climate change are often experienced at the community level, he stressed that communities across the world are already leading climate action because they have little choice but to adapt. In many contexts, he observed, communities do not view adaptation as something new; rather, adaptation is deeply embedded in their everyday practices and ways of life. He argued that efforts to identify adaptation solutions must bring researchers closer to communities and their lived experiences. At the same time, he underscored the need to ensure that scientific innovation, engineering, and technological advances are developed in ways that genuinely support community-led adaptation efforts.



Figure 3 Discussion of DECODE Lessons

Following these project introductions, participants briefly introduced themselves and reflected on the intersections between their work. Professor Paula Banerjee, IDRC Chair on Gender and Forced Displacement at AIT and a contributor to DECODE's India Case Study Final Webinar, offered a particularly compelling reflection on the significance of the DECODE project. She noted that DECODE has set an important precedent by demonstrating that scientific research can be conducted with both rigour and empathy, and has set a precedent for “research with a heart”.

In her view, the project challenges the notion that research can ever be entirely detached from values, politics, or lived realities. Instead, DECODE encourages researchers to acknowledge and embrace these dimensions while maintaining scholarly integrity. She further highlighted the project's contribution to advancing South–South research collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Dr Rajesh Tandon then formally introduced the DECODE Knowledge Project. He reflected on the project's foundational premise: that looking from the "bottom up" reveals a vast reservoir of wisdom and knowledge that is often overlooked by conventional research and policy processes. Drawing on decades of experience working alongside communities, he observed that one of the greatest barriers to the uptake of government schemes and

interventions is the failure to engage meaningfully with local values, beliefs, and ways of knowing. Communities, he noted, are more likely to embrace initiatives that resonate with their lived realities and cultural contexts.

Building on this understanding, Dr Tandon emphasized that lived experience must serve as the starting point for adaptation and transformation. DECODE therefore positions participatory research at the centre of knowledge creation, enabling communities, researchers, and other stakeholders to co-create actionable knowledge and solutions to complex contemporary challenges.



Figure 4 DECODE StoryMap

He stressed that sustainable change requires ownership and that ownership emerges through processes of co-construction rather than extraction. The project's emphasis on co-created knowledge, community participation, and knowledge democracy was presented as a deliberate effort to challenge conventional hierarchies of expertise.

Dr Tandon also situated DECODE within the broader framework of the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science, particularly its emphasis on engaging a diversity of knowledge systems and fostering dialogue with other knowledge holders beyond formal scientific institutions. He further went on to situate DECODE within the broader framework of the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science, particularly Pillar 3, *Open Engagement of Societal Actors*, and Pillar 4, *Open Dialogue with Other Knowledge Systems*.

He reflected on the role played by the UNESCO Chair in contributing to the development, dissemination, and capacity-building efforts surrounding the UNESCO Recommendation. In this context, he highlighted DECODE as a practical and timely effort to operationalize these principles by fostering meaningful engagement between academic institutions, communities, and diverse knowledge holders. Through its emphasis on participatory research, co-creation, and the recognition of community knowledge cultures, DECODE advances the vision of a more inclusive and democratic science ecosystem where multiple forms of knowledge can contribute to addressing contemporary social and environmental challenges.

The project presentations were followed by a rich and wide-ranging discussion that explored a number of shared concerns and opportunities across the DECODE and CLARE ASEAN initiatives. Participants reflected extensively on the role of language in knowledge creation and exchange, recognizing that language shapes not only how knowledge is communicated but also whose knowledge is recognized and valued. Colleagues from AIT shared experiences from ongoing engagements with climate discourse, including efforts to incorporate indigenous and local knowledge into conversations on sustainable cities and urban design.



Figure 5 Roundtable at AIT

Several participants highlighted the importance of moving beyond documentation alone to genuinely understand, engage with, and learn from community knowledge systems.

Questions of authenticity, legitimacy, and validation emerged as recurring themes throughout the conversation.

Participants collectively reflected on how dominant systems of validation often privilege particular forms of expertise while marginalizing others. There was strong agreement that mechanisms for assessing knowledge and impact need to be deeply decolonized. One suggestion that emerged was that communities themselves should play a central role in defining indicators of validity, relevance, and impact, rather than having these imposed externally.

A particularly significant point of convergence between DECODE and CLARE ASEAN concerned the relationship between community knowledge and policy. Participants observed that policy frameworks are frequently developed from the top down, often overlooking the experiences and priorities of the communities they seek to serve. Both projects were recognized as important efforts to reverse this tendency by generating evidence and insights rooted in community realities and community-driven processes.

The discussion also explored the potential of hybrid knowledge systems that bring together scientific, technical, indigenous, and local forms of knowledge to address climate change and other complex challenges. Drawing on experiences from Canada, Arjan de Haan reflected on how recognition of Indigenous knowledge has gained momentum only over the past two decades. He noted that successful initiatives have emerged where Indigenous communities themselves have led, owned, and shaped the processes through which their knowledge is recognized and applied. Participants shared additional examples demonstrating the value of such approaches and stressed the urgency of creating mechanisms to ensure that indigenous and community knowledge is preserved, strengthened, and transmitted across generations.

As the discussion drew to a close, participants reflected on a fundamental question facing contemporary research and higher education: how can academics contribute to social transformation without reproducing the very inequalities they seek to address? A recurring response was the need to recognize that valuable knowledge exists far beyond the boundaries of academia. Building more just and sustainable futures will require researchers and institutions to engage with communities not merely as subjects of research, but as equal partners in the production of knowledge.

The session concluded on a reflective note, reaffirming the shared commitment of both projects to advancing community-led, participatory, and socially grounded approaches to knowledge creation. The dialogue underscored the transformative potential of bringing diverse knowledge systems into conversation with one another and highlighted the importance of continued collaboration in building more inclusive, equitable, and action-oriented responses to the challenges of our time.



Figure 6 Roundtable at AIT

The second session of the day was hosted at Thammasat University and focused on an interaction with students and faculty members. This session brought together students and faculty from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from Business to Landscape Architecture and provided an opportunity to reflect on the role of higher education institutions in addressing complex societal challenges. Moderated by Professor Kim Neil Irvine, the discussion created a dynamic space for exchange between participants from DECODE, CLARE ASEAN, and the Thammasat academic community.

The session opened with introductions from students and faculty members, setting the stage for a conversation centred on community-engaged research, knowledge co-creation, and the responsibilities of universities in advancing socially relevant and actionable knowledge.

The session commenced with presentations by students from the Business and Landscape Architecture programmes at Thammasat University, who shared insights from their ongoing community-engaged research projects. Their presentations highlighted a range of approaches to working alongside communities and demonstrated the university's commitment to experiential and socially relevant learning.

Following the presentations, members of the DECODE team engaged the students in a question-and-answer session, creating an opportunity for critical reflection on research design, community engagement processes, and the practical challenges of conducting field-based research.

Building on these discussions, the DECODE team presented the project's research methodology, with particular emphasis on the cyclical and iterative nature of community-based participatory research.

The presentation outlined the processes through which DECODE worked with communities to co-create knowledge and actionable solutions, while also highlighting the ethical foundations that underpin the process of participatory research. Particular attention was given to issues of trust-building, shared ownership, reciprocity, informed participation, and the need to move beyond extractive approaches to knowledge generation.

The presentation was followed by a lively discussion among students, faculty members, and



Figure 7 Student presentation at Thammasat University



Figure 8 Dr Arjan De Haan discussing methodological questions with Students with communities.

the DECODE team. Participants reflected on the opportunities and challenges of undertaking community-engaged research across diverse contexts and explored the practical implications of participatory methodologies for addressing complex social and environmental issues. Questions of ethics, power, representation, and knowledge co-creation featured prominently throughout the exchange.

The session provided a valuable platform for mutual learning and dialogue, enabling participants to critically engage with the principles and practice of Community- Based Participatory Research. It also strengthened understanding of how higher education institutions can support more equitable and community-centred approaches to knowledge production, while fostering the skills and perspectives required for meaningful engagement



Figure 9 DECODE Team with Thammasat Students and Faculty

