River Cities as Method (RCM) is a new working group spearheaded by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IHS) at Leiden University, in collaboration with partners worldwide, which seeks to revitalise urban rivers and the ecological, social, cultural, and economic systems linked to these rivers. In time, RCM seeks to evolve into a transdisciplinary network in its own right. The outcomes of RCM are envisaged to be practical – culminating in concrete urban revitalisation projects – as well as knowledge-based, leading to new insights about “transformational resilience” for theory and for university/school curricula.

Introducing a new network

RCM will comprise several case studies of “disrupted rivers” in Asia, Africa, North America, and Latin America, in comparative perspective. The “disruptions” that RCM examines are usually caused by a combination of human-induced and natural factors. Project teams comprising local scholars, scientists, and activists will engage with a broad range of stakeholders in seeking to revitalise the stretches of river that they select as case studies. By addressing the disruption in their own cases, each team will contribute insights about what “transformational resilience” means in their own context. At the same time, each team will also engage with the disruption issues in other river-city teams—thus helping to ultimately build a network. This network seeks to be truly global in nature, with learning and innovation between and within the Global North and Global South. RCM adopts a trans-disciplinary approach, bringing together knowledge of the river-city nexus from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences around three main project components, which strengthen each other: (1) river biios (histories and stories of the river), (2) spatial analysis (layer mapping of the river and its environments), and (3) transformation (activism to achieve river-city revitalization through networks of stakeholders). Each study team is expected to implement all three components in their projects.

Transformational resilience

As a working group and later as a network, “River Cities as Method” hopes to contribute insights about resilience in both theoretical and practical terms. RCM seeks to go beyond the narrowly scientific and technical understandings of resilience that are commonplace in current theoretical and policy approaches. Through a combination of research, activism, and pedagogy, the network promotes an expanded view of resilience that is “transformational” in the sense that it acknowledges the longer-term, structural, and multi-faceted nature of disruption and recovery, encompassing climate adaptation needs as well as human, cultural, institutional, and political dimensions of resilience. Throughout, the RCM network will approach the river-city nexus with a historical lens, mapping the story of each river-city over time so that the deployed revitalisation measures can be better informed by past lessons.

RCM Partners

The RCM partners will have considerable autonomy to fund the network’s activities. In the meantime, the RCM project teams are expected to start their work through a combination of their own funds and (where available) limited other funding. The benefits of joining the RCM working group and network include access to a diverse and global network of professionals and scholars working on the river-city nexus; workshops to share insights on a peer-to-peer basis; and publications. The RCM partners will have considerable freedom to determine together the shape of the network and its common activities.

For more information about the RCM initiative, the pilot project on the Chao Phraya river, or how to join the river-city network, please visit: https://www.iias.nl/cci/rivercities 

Interested in the scope and activities of the RCM working group? Are you interested in the scope and activities of the RCM working group?

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Real transformation also includes striving for “justice” – justice not only for the human communities adjacent to the river, but also for the plant and animal species that co-exist with the river and which are an integral part of the ecology of the river-city. Each project team is expected to come up with its own definition of, and contribution to, transformation and justice relevant to the local context. Research and action on “transformational resilience” is still in its early stages, as is the application of this budding concept – and formulations of justice – to practice. Exchanges and peer-to-peer support among the participating project teams will help to develop learning and pedagogy around the concepts of resilience, transformation, and justice for the benefit of the network partners as well as scholars and practitioners more broadly.

Chao Phraya River in Bangkok (Photo by Paul Rabé, 2014).