Gender and Adaptation to Climate Change in Yunnan’s Mekong-Salween Basin

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Yunnan province’s Mekong-Salween basin remains an understudied geographical area in assessing how communities are adapting to climate change. This basin in the Eastern Himalayas possesses tremendous diversity in climatic, ecological, and ethnic conditions. Not only does the combination of being a global biodiversity hotspot and a poor, mountainous, and remote region make it especially vulnerable to climate change, but the issue of understanding how adaptation takes place is further complicated by the diverse mosaic of niche livelihood systems in which varied types of gender relations are present. Given that there are already tangible shifts evident in Yunnan’s climate patterns, it is vital to examine how gender differentiated adaptation to these changes has occurred in recent years, especially given the large-scale impacts on ecosystem processes downstream. After first setting out the geographical distribution of ethnically differentiated communities within this topographically complex basin, as well as how gendered relations within specific communities have been mediated by their cultural and economic history, the paper proceeds to examine how the changing socioeconomic and governance context since the 1980s reforms has affected how communities and households are responding to climate change in gender differentiated ways. Such an approach permits us firstly to understand the relative relationship between climate change and other forms of parallel risks that all too often create a ‘double exposure’ for vulnerable communities. Broadly speaking, a series of contradictory government policies that aim to address biodiversity and ecological conservation on the one hand, and poverty alleviation on the other, have left households with mixed capacities for addressing climate change.