RSIS COMMENTARY

10 October 2025

Addressing the Nexus of Planetary Health and Mental Health in Asia

Pey Peili

RSiS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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www.rsis.edu.sg No. 207 – 10 October 2025

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SYNOPSIS

On World Mental Health Day, it is pertinent to examine the growing psychological impact of environmental degradation in Asia. This commentary assesses the phenomenon and argues that climate policies, such as integrating nature into urban planning and empowering local communities, can serve as effective public mental health strategies.

COMMENTARY

On 10 October, World Mental Health Day, much of global conversations will focus on managing stress, anxiety, and depression. This is an opportune moment to consider a significant environmental determinant of our mental well-being: the health of our planet. It is important to critique the dominant and traditional framing of the climate crisis as a technical problem of emissions and energy systems, as this perspective overlooks the profound connection between ecological health and psychological resilience.

To build a healthy and resilient future, policy frameworks must be expanded to integrate an environment-mental health nexus. As planetary health emphasises the entire wellbeing of both planet and humans, mental health must form a key part of environmental and health resilience strategies. This commentary examines the planetary-mental health nexus: the psychological impacts of environmental change in Asia, and proposes that effective climate action can, and should, also be a focus of public health policy.

Climate-Related Psychological Distress in Asia

Across Asia, a notable psychological phenomenon is emerging in response to accelerating environmental change. This distress is not a clinical disorder but a rational reaction to tangible threats and losses. It manifests in several distinct forms:

The first is eco-anxiety, also known as climate anxiety, which is defined as a chronic fear of environmental doom. Worry and clinical depression can also arise from a persistent fear of the climate crisis and uncertain futures, including the increased frequency of natural disasters attributed to global climate change. Other examples of eco-anxiety can be observed from climate-linked depression and anxiety disorders in Vietnam due to rising sea levels, or in Northeast Thailand due to increasing floods and hotter weather.

Recent data underscores the scale of this concern. The *2024 Survey Report* by ISEAS-Yusof Institute's Climate Change in Southeast Asia Programme revealed that nearly 60 per cent of people in Southeast Asia are seriously concerned about the impacts of climate change, with many reporting that it affects their life decisions. This level of concern is a significant precursor to widespread psychological distress. Furthermore, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report* published by the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, shows that respondents now rank climate change and extreme weather events as the region's top challenge (55.3 per cent), ahead of other challenges such as unemployment and economic prospects.

Climate change also presents an intersectional dimension to mental health. A recent survey by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) and James Cook University in Singapore revealed that approximately half of middle-aged women in Singapore experience mental health concerns. It has been established in scientific studies that mental health challenges faced by women are significantly compounded by multifaceted consequences of environmental impacts, such as direct neuropsychiatric symptoms. Addressing the wellbeing of women and vulnerable or disadvantaged communities must therefore include climate-induced mental health considerations.

A related but distinct climate change-induced distress is solastalgia, which describes the mental health impacts caused by environmental change. Solastalgia may be experienced by the elderly who have witnessed the disappearance of local green spaces, such as in rapidly urbanising China, or by farmers in South Africa's KwaMaye community, whose land has been degraded beyond repair by drought.

These psychological responses are particularly acute in Asia. The continent's high vulnerability to climate impacts makes environmental threats immediate and tangible. Rapid urbanisation frequently leads to a disconnection from nature, removing a traditional source of psychological resilience. For many communities, where culture and identity are deeply tied to the landscape, environmental degradation can pose a significant challenge to cultural continuity.

This psychological distress is not merely a private matter; it carries significant public consequences, including impacts on economic productivity, public healthcare systems, and an erosion of the social cohesion necessary for collective action and long-term planning. Addressing these mental health dimensions is therefore a matter of public interest and strategic importance.

An Integrated Solution: From Green Cities to Green Minds

Addressing this challenge does not necessitate the creation of entirely new public health programmes. Rather, it requires an integrated approach where climate policies are designed to yield mental health co-benefits.

First, policy should bring nature back into the urban fabric. An effective strategy is to design cities that actively promote the well-being of citizens. A good example of this is urban greening, as in Singapore's "City in Nature" vision, a national strategy and model to integrate green infrastructure throughout the city. Such schemes build climate resilience as well as create accessible green spaces that are proven to reduce stress and improve mental health.

A similar, evidence-based approach can be seen in Japan, where the government has promoted *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing) as a formal public health tool. The practice of spending time in forested areas is recognised for its scientifically backed benefits, including reduced mental fatigue, improved cortisol and blood pressure levels, as well as better sleep quality. These examples demonstrate how nature can be integrated into national preventative health strategies.

The effective implementation of these solutions requires new governance structures. Climate anxiety must be formally recognised for its deleterious impacts on mental health and public health resilience. Mental health indicators must be incorporated into climate and health vulnerability and adaptation assessments, and subsequently into policy solutions. This involves moving beyond siloed ministerial mandates to foster inter-agency collaboration. For instance, government ministries dealing with health, the environment, and urban planning must develop shared metrics that account for environmental resilience and public mental health outcomes.

A second approach involves leveraging the region's strong traditions of community solidarity. Eco-anxiety is often exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness towards unchecked corporate exploitation of the environment and dissatisfaction towards government regulations. Collective action can be a powerful tool for the management of eco-anxiety. Governments can support community-based climate initiatives, from urban farms to local conservation projects, building social capital and restoring a sense of agency, both of which are critical buffers against psychological distress.

Finally, policy can benefit from integrating local and traditional ecological knowledge. Asia has a deep reservoir of such knowledge, which can inform sustainable resource management, as exemplified by traditional shifting cultivation practices in Southeast Asia, that have preserved forest resources in the long term. Incorporating these practices not only yields better environmental outcomes but also reinforces cultural identity and community connection to the land.

Conclusion: A Resilient Future for Mind and Planet

On World Mental Health Day, the imperative is to broaden our understanding of planetary and human well-being. Building a healthy and resilient Asia requires an integrated strategy that connects and addresses the dual crisis of environmental and mental health challenges.

The environmental crisis is not only about negative impacts on the planet and environment, but also about the human experience of these irreversible changes. Beyond physical impacts, it is imperative to acknowledge this psychological dimension for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of human well-being. It is therefore essential to consider the planetary and mental health nexus in communities for the design of policies that are holistic, effective, and publicly supported.

Pey Peili is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. She leads the Centre's Planetary Health programme.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

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