

Political agenda setting for strategic delta planning in the Mekong Delta – Converging or diverging agendas of policy actors?

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Background

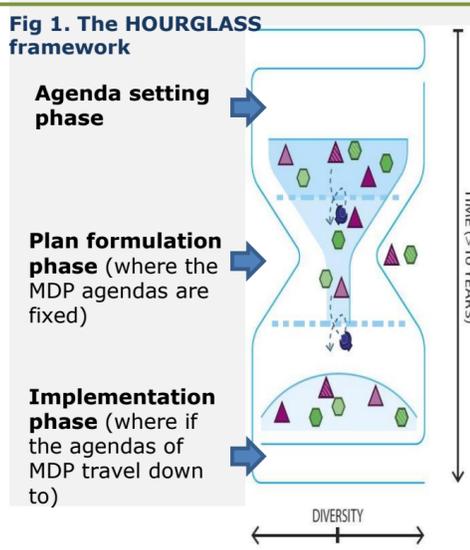
The Vietnamese Mekong Delta (VMD) is currently experiencing negative impacts from climate change, from upstream developments and the economic activities inside the delta. These challenges need to be addressed in a strategic and holistic way. The Mekong delta plan sets out a strategic agenda of policy choices for the development of the VMD that is economic attractive, climate adaptive and environmental sustainable. This agenda at times consciously departs from historic trends and current practices and explicitly explores the options and opportunities available within the delta to confront the challenges imposed by climate change and economic uncertainty. This article tries to explore if the agendas set by MDP (as a new political actor) have been shared, convergent or divergent with other agendas set by other actors and what the degree are.

Objectives

The aim of this paper is to explore, via the lens of 'agenda setting', the degree of convergence/divergence occurring in the development agendas for the Mekong Delta as prevalent among key stakeholder groups and as embedded within the recent developed Mekong Delta Plan (MDP).

Conceptual framework

- Agenda setting, as perceived by Kingdon 1984 is a list of problems to which political actors are paying attention.
- Variety of actors compete with interest groups and experts to try to get their preferred topic on the agenda, and some actors even hold "multiple agendas" that are almost irrelevant from each other
- Agenda setting as an "input" side of a policy-making process



Methods

- Literature review: relied mainly on David Biggs' series of works, Klaus Vormoor and some others to trace the historical agendas set in the past.
- In-depth interview: with a diverse pool of actors who involve in the MD planning process (fig. 2). Interviews are recorded and transcribed and afterwards are analysed by "Content analysis" via coding method applied in Atlas-ti software

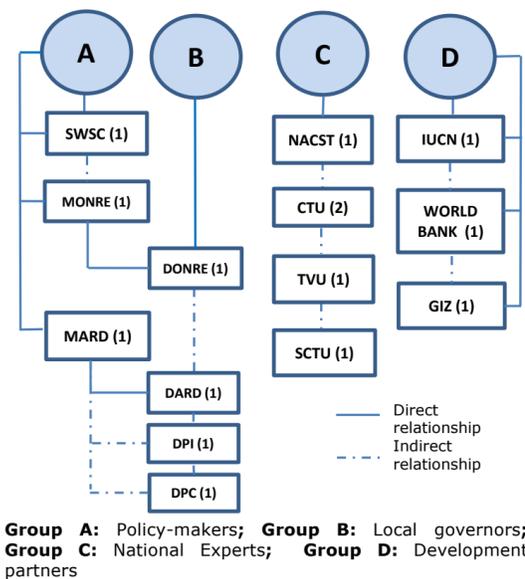
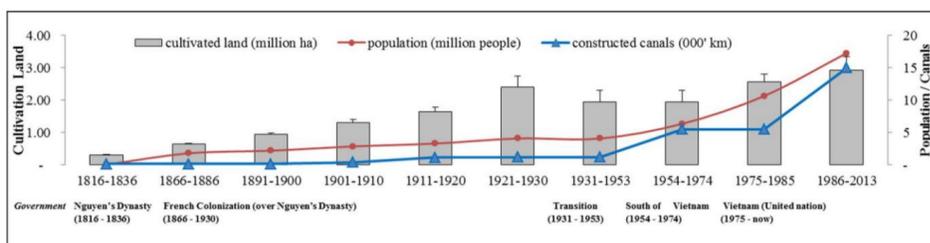


Fig 2. Institutions presenting interviewees

Discussion and conclusion



Key agendas	Exploiting the delta	Food security (Dutch dike strategy)	Aquacultural diversification & facilitating agro-hydrological condition	
Sub-agendas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demarcation and intensive settlement - Exploration of suitable land for rice and residential clusters - Partly new canal digging - Partly water infrastructure development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opening up/ the delta - Canal excavation and land reclamation - Intensive water infrastructure development - Rural settlement process - Colonization of southern wasteland by North Vietnamese people - Reclaiming acid sulphite soils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promoting agricultural engineering to increase farmer's income - Building monoculture rice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modernization and introduction of new technologies - Integrated with the global economy and the international donor community - Extension of the irrigation and drainage system
Main policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - French colony of economic interests - Conquest of the MD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (War time and the fall of France) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intensification of agriculture - Green Revolution - Rural Pacification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centralized planned economy - Doi Moi Renovation - Extension of multi-cropping (by WB)

Fig 3. Historical agendas set from the past for the Mekong delta development

- The MDP (as one of political actor in this study) sets out a new agenda more concerning economic development and the adaptability of the MD as the three dominant key agendas: "economically attractive development", "environmental sustainable" and "adaptive capacity to climate change".
- The MDP arrived in the Vietnam political context as a big paradigm shift that brought the big difference to the MD. It is very much different from the agendas from the past, of which "food security and intensive rice production" was lasting for a long period, and a lot of sub-agendas came out (building high dikes, sluice gates, irrigation infrastructure and canal network projects).
- The interviewees perceived past agendas as ineffective thus they need "new" agendas, that explains why there are more overlaps between the agendas set by the MDP and the agendas set by involved stakeholders to the MDP process, rather than the differences.
- Whereas a clear convergence of goals and agendas between stakeholders' agendas and the MDP are discerned, divergence is also clearly prevalent. The latter can be traced to institutional political affiliation, differences in age and self-interest and more importantly, the geographical position (situated in or outside the delta)
- The agendas of MDP eventually are appreciated and formally approved by Prime Minister via the Resolution 120

Main References

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