



Decentralizing urban disaster risk management in a centralized system? Agendas, actors and contentions in Vietnam



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ABSTRACT

The merits of decentralization and public participation for designing disaster risk management according to local needs, priorities and capacities are now widely discussed in the scientific literature and in global policy frameworks. However, surprisingly little attention is being paid to the potential fault lines that may result if postulations for decentralization and local empowerment are—despite being adopted on the surface—in conflict with the (hidden) policy agendas in centralized states. Tensions between devolution and a central grip on power can particularly emerge around topics considered of relevance for national development, notably urban growth centers, or the legitimacy of central leadership (frequently claimed to be essential for the effective protection against disasters and other risks). This paper therefore uses the example of Can Tho City, which is the high-growth urban center of the flood-prone Vietnamese Mekong Delta, to analyze in detail (1) whether and to what extent the city has a decentralized system for disaster risk management, (2) which opportunities and challenges emerge with decentralization, and (3) which agendas different actors from the local to the national level have to accelerate or restrict local empowerment. The analysis, based on the review of policy documents and in-depth interviews with party-state decision-makers as well as other stakeholders, reveals that the picture of decentralization in Vietnam is much less clear than often proclaimed. There is a convoluted reality in which contradictory trends of decentralization and centralization co-emerge from overlapping layers of, first, internal political contentions, and second, a transforming actor spectrum within the country's changing political economy of risk reduction.

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1. Introduction and rationale

Decentralization is widely seen as having a great potential for strengthening disaster risk management (DRM) capacities (Scott & Tarazona, 2011). This link is particularly emphasized for urban and newly urbanizing areas where local decision-makers are responsible for a high concentration of people and assets at risk, but also proximate response forces and infrastructure. Being close to the problems 'on the ground', the activities of governmental as well as non-governmental actors at the local level are thought to facilitate context-specific risk management solutions that are custom-tailored to the specific needs, wants and capacities of local communities and economies (Garschagen & Kraas 2011). The advantages of short command chains and localized coordination of risk response measures are also discussed in the literature (Scott & Tarazona, 2011). Decentralized approaches to risk management are, further, relevant in terms of integrative governance

perspectives. It is at the local level where the most direct and intensive engagement of different actors usually takes place, given that the decisions directly affect their day-to-day realities in terms of hazard impacts and risk response activities. Also at this level, global and national risk management and adaptation policies have to be enacted—or fail. Decentralization has therefore become a cornerstone of the mainstream disaster risk reduction paradigms, advocated, for example, during the International Decade for Disaster Risk Reduction and in the Hyogo Framework for Action (UN 2005) as well as the more recent Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UN 2015). Accordingly, decentralized disaster risk management approaches have also been pushed forward by many national governments around the globe, notably in Asia where significant populations and assets are exposed to a wide range of natural hazards, coupled with high levels of susceptibility and considerable limits in response capacity (IPCC 2012). But the push towards decentralized disaster risk policies goes hand in hand with wider politico-administrative reforms in many Asian countries, especially in South and Southeast Asia. More general political and administrative decentralization is therefore often driven

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primarily by concerns outside the domain of disaster risk reduction, by goals such as democratization, the strengthening of administrative efficiency or counter-action to local independence movements (Miller & Bunnell 2013).

However, despite the conceptual and political push for decentralization, surprisingly little attention is being paid to the potential conflicts in contexts where the postulations for the devolution of power clash with otherwise highly centralized political and administrative systems. Vietnam is a particularly relevant case for exploring this question. On the one hand, the country has engaged in considerable decentralization efforts as part of the wider reform process (*doi moi*) and specifically its endeavor to reduce its significant disaster risk. On the other hand, the political power structure remains highly centralistic with a persistent one-party rule and a strong grounding in centralized planning and management paradigms. The tensions between devolution and a central grip on power tend to emerge around topics considered of relevance for national development. Amongst the most pressing of these is the growth and modernization of Vietnam's urban centers, which increasingly serve as engines for wider economic growth and national development. In particular, the country's secondary cities are seen as essential for a balanced urban transition and regional development process. It therefore seems important to ask whether local governments in these cities are faced with stiff political pressure and control from higher levels—despite the decentralization policies—and whether a focus on growth might exceed local capacities and impair the cautious local decision making necessary for long-term disaster risk mitigation.

Against this background, this paper combines the interest in decentralized management, urban growth centers and disaster risk hot spots. It uses the example of Can Tho City, which is the high-growth urban center of the flood-prone Mekong Delta. The paper analyses in detail (1) whether and to what extent the city has a decentralized system for disaster risk management, (2) which opportunities and challenges emerge with decentralization, and (3) which tensions and agendas can be observed to accelerate or restrict the devolution of power. Given the strong urbanization that further lies ahead for Vietnam and Can Tho City, disaster risk reduction is interpreted here in a forward-looking fashion, including a long-term perspective on the mitigation of future risks. Hence, the analysis needs to include aspects of decentralized climate change adaptation efforts and general urban planning, and the causal links they bear for disaster risk reduction.

The analysis draws on expert interviews conducted in Can Tho City between 2009 and 2013. Over 70 experts have been interviewed as part of a larger research project. These experts comprise party-state officials at province, district, ward and residential block levels as well as civil society actors and staff of international organizations with a strong track record on DRM and urban development projects in Vietnam, and Can Tho City more specifically. Obviously, only a fraction of this material can be used for the analysis in this paper. For a more detailed account refer to the full study (Garschagen 2014). The findings from the expert interviews have been complemented and juxtaposed with the analysis of formal policy documents in order to identify and explain potential gaps and mismatches between the formal policy framework and actual DRM and decentralization activities.

The next section of this paper provides an overview of recent Vietnamese decentralization policies and their achievements as well as barriers—specifically with regards to disaster risk reduction, adaptation and urban planning. Section 3 analyses the role of urban growth engines for Vietnam's overall national development. Section 4 analyses the case study of Can Tho City. The final section draws key conclusions and provides an outlook on future directions in decentralized disaster risk governance in Vietnam.

2. Vietnam's disaster risk governance: between decentralization and persisting centralism

In recent years, Vietnam has been undergoing a considerable shift towards decentralization in key fields of its policy and administration. Many of these policy fields have direct implications for disaster risk reduction and the capacity (or incapacity) of local authorities to manage current disasters and to mitigate future disaster risk in a strategic manner. Much of the shift towards decentralization in formal policy has to be seen in connection with the wider reform process (*doi moi*), specifically related to liberalization and grassroots authority policies. Decentralization has thus become a key goal in many recent policy documents, driven in part by the standards of good governance set by international development agencies that actively try to influence policy-making in Vietnam. At the same time, however, it has been argued that decentralization is to a large extent also a by-product of the shift towards a market economy, rather than a conscious and deliberate policy choice (Painter, 2009).

In terms of disaster risk management (DRM), provisions for decentralized authority and action are a key component of the current legal architecture in Vietnam. The National Strategy for Disaster Risk Prevention, Response and Mitigation to 2020 (172/2007/QĐ-TTg; in effect since 2008) foresees a shared responsibility between the national, provincial and local governments but stipulates that provincial- and city-level governments are to steer DRM activities and report to the national level. In order to enable this process, the strategy explicitly prescribes that “the State decentralizes to People's Committees of provinces and districts in investment and mobilization of legitimate resources for disaster prevention, response and mitigation” (SRV [Socialist Republic of Vietnam], 2007). The recent Law on Natural Disaster Prevention and Control (33/2013/QH13; in effect since mid-2014) confirms this configuration, despite introducing slight changes to the composition of the respective bodies at the national and provincial level. In addition, though, the new law puts explicit pressure on strengthening the role of preventive and long-term risk mitigation across all administrative levels in order to move away from the current reality of fairly reactive disaster risk management. Yet, a questions remains as to whether and how the current institutional set-up enables or hinders the implementation of this principle at the city and sub-city level. The paragraphs and case study analysis below will hence refer back to this point.

Targeting the levels even below the city or province governments, the concept of the ‘four on-the-spot’ resources has become one of the key mottos in advocacy for strengthening local DRM capacities in Vietnam. It refers to leadership, human resources, materials and logistics, which shall be developed and maintained down to the commune level in order to be deployed ‘on-the-spot’ before, during and after a disaster. The motto is explicitly outlined in a number of legal provisions by the government and is a core element of the aforementioned National Strategy and the Law on Disaster Natural Disaster Prevention and Control. It is the role of the People's Committees to organize and implement the necessary training and capacity building measures at the respective government levels. At the same time, the motto is supposed to be applied even at the household level through raising awareness and building capacity. In line with Vietnam's interpretation of socialism, the motto hence emphasizes the strength of local communities and the general public for self-protection, and their ability to make an effective contribution to disaster risk management. On that note, this motto links to the principle of Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRM) which has been promoted mainly by international organizations working on DRM in Vietnam, but has found its way into major policy

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