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Is Local Community the Answer?

The Role of "Local Knowledge" and "Community" for Disaster Prevention and Climate Adaptation in Central Vietnam

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Abstract

This article critically examines claims that "local community" and "local/traditional knowledge" are vital contributions to safeguarding socio-economic stability and securing sustainable resource uses in times of stress. The empirical focus is on Central Vietnam, but the argument is relevant in a broader context. The article specifically questions approaches to disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation that see "local community knowledge" as a vital means to achieving resilience in socio-ecological systems. We argue that rural villages in Central Vietnam are characterised by highly dynamic local actors who eagerly exploit new income opportunities arising both from internal and external sources. Although a wide range of knowledge is available about how to cope with adverse climate and environmental conditions, this knowledge is hardly "resilience" and "equilibrium" oriented. Rather, it is found to be anthropocentric, externally oriented, sometimes opportunistic, and ultimately oriented towards an urban lifestyle—traits that are strongly rewarded by the Vietnamese state. We conclude that, at present, local aspirations may not necessarily be part of the solution, but may form part of a social and political complex that exacerbates risk, particularly for weaker population segments. Instead, new and non-state actors should play a larger role.

Keywords

Vietnam – community – local knowledge – disasters – adaptation

Introduction

Several streams of literature on disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA) point almost routinely to the potential of "local com-

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munities" in protecting the interests of local inhabitants in the face of external stress. The notion of community, however, has a long and complex history, and has been the object of much productive critical theoretical debate. Nevertheless, as we will show, the term is often used in the development literature in a simplified and taken-for-granted way, as exemplified here in a case study from Vietnam. "Community" is often associated with social bonds and relations and some measure of place-bound shared interest. As a real or imagined entity, it is purported to be held together by the values or aspirations that community members invest in it, suggesting a degree of wilful or voluntary participation. Thus, many writers, albeit often implicitly, equate community with civil society, to refer to an entity not orchestrated by the state.[1] The resulting freedom and security are believed to enable the development of social bonds and a sense of connectedness, commonly termed "social capital" (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Olivier Rubin, this issue).

This rationale is further extended to emphasise "local" or "traditional" knowledge as a vital element in community resilience: namely, the will to restore and maintain equilibrium in basic systems. A common, underlying notion is that local community and environment jointly form a knowledge-practice-belief complex (e.g., Berkes, 1999) or a "social-ecological system" (e.g., Holling, 2002; Folke, 2006; Adger, 2006), characterised by a dynamic, historically balanced continuity in relation to resource extraction. It is particularly the understanding of community as an autonomous actor with its own "interests, preferences, resources and capabilities" (e.g., Patterson et al., 2010: 127), as opposed to simply a population unit, that is considered essential to building "community resilience". In a recent example from the IPCC, Field et al. state that, "Indigenous, local and traditional knowledge systems and practices, including indigenous people's holistic view of community and environment, are a major resource for adapting to climate change …" (IPCC, 2014: 26), and the IPCC authors refer optimistically to "community-based natural resource management" (ibid., 27). Other studies also claim in general terms that "community-based programs strengthen the social resilience of communities and thus should be integrated into efforts to reduce risk from weather extremes and to adapt to climate change" (Morss et al., 2011: 10), or they link "community resilience" to the idea of social capital arising within frameworks that emphasise "social cohesion," "sense of community" and "attachments to place" (Brown

1 F. Tönnies, the most prominent proponent of this idea, distinguished between *Gemeinschaft* as the more cohesive society or association driven by a unity of will, and *Gesellschaft* as the form of organisation based on self-interest.

and Westaway, 2011: 333–334). Underlying normative assumptions are evident both in resilience and associated literatures (e.g., Garschagen, 2013).

The concept of community was adopted in the social sciences at an early stage to represent a common-sense form of social reality. However, early attempts to positively define it as a social structure (e.g., Redfield, 1960) were later reworked in attempts to capture "community" as a symbolic, situational or aggregating device and a focus for a joint consciousness, though not necessarily one fixed in space (Cohen, 1985; Appadurai, 1996; Amit and Rapport, 2002). Development anthropologists have, in this context, approached it critically as a deceptive stereotype of rural solidarity that is blind to real-life internal rivalries and insistent on the existence of a unit of collective decision-making, action and even collective responsibility (e.g., de Sardan, 1988: 220). Development anthropology has further argued that local societies always embrace a repertoire of—often contentious—local actor strategies and rationales (Long and Long, 1992: 3). Despite these ongoing critical debates, "community" remains a term that not only has a unifying meaning to many observers, but also has a positive *feel* that is easily projected onto the external world. It seems to promise security, warmth and belonging, even if the people who belong to the community frequently feel that this is being lost (Hobsbawm, 1996). Arguably, community has become another name for the kind of world that no longer is, but which we hope to repossess—a paradise lost (Bauman, 2001: 3).

Images of well-functioning communities as reliable representations of the order of things nonetheless recur relentlessly in the discourse and practices of governmental and non-governmental organisations. Among developmental organisations, there is a near-universal insistence on local community capabilities, seen both as a prerequisite and a justification for external interventions. A critical reading suggests that "community" in general grants a sense of legitimacy to local interventions (Joseph, 2002). In the case of the climate change literature on Vietnam, we find an equally pervasive and indiscriminate use of the term. It is, not least, used to categorise an area of habitation in which a local adaptive capacity is found to be present (e.g., McElwee, 2010; World Bank, 2010; Chaudhry and Ruysschaert, 2007) and to attract increasing funding to "Community Based Adaptation" (UNDP, 2008). This is despite acknowledgement of continuous differentiation and of the fact that many people are marginalised in their local "communities". A recent, thorough criticism of the use of community specifically among organisations engaged in disaster and climate work holds that by building on a faith-based institutional culture it has acquired a mythical value to convey ideas of working with real people, organised around collective behaviour and with a capacity for participation. As such the concept of community easily becomes counterproductive (Cannon, 2014).

Research Issues, Arguments and Data

A key theme for this article is how the widespread and unreflective use of community-related thinking becomes counterproductive by potentially blocking understanding of contemporary development processes in rural Vietnam and feeding into inappropriate DRR and CCA policies. As we will show, in contemporary Vietnam there is often little sense of any place-based community in which people invest their aspirations and strategies. People do not adapt to specific climate and disaster issues, but to a totality of life circumstances within a cultural frame of reference and based on long-term experiences, for which reasons the social and cultural embeddedness of risks must be taken into account (e.g., Krüger et al., 2015). Similarly, at present there are few community, faith-based, or non-profit organisations at work in ordinary villages in Vietnam. Even in a historical sense, the notion of self-regulating corporate communities may be unrealistic, because most Vietnamese villages have long been actively integrated into a national state society that has effectively hindered self-regulation. After the conclusion of the American-Vietnamese war, this endeavour was dramatically intensified by the new regime. Moreover, at the meta-level it should be added that the Vietnamese "hydraulic civilisation" continuously engaged with the environment in transformational schemes relying on powerful state institutions while gradually expanding into new land (Nguyen, 2003; Beckman, 2011; Bruun and Casse, 2013).

We argue that the typical village organisation cannot be categorised as a "community" other than in a purely administrative sense. In practice, it is a top-down controlled unit through which the state can channel its various interventions. Since the Doi Moi economic reforms, state interventions have gradually shifted from a preoccupation with party ideology to one of economic reform and overall growth. The results of this change are twofold: first, individualism is growing, and second traditional kinship-based village associations are regaining prominence, to some extent filling the space of a retreating state. Kin networks, we further argue, are more meaningful units of social cohesion in a Vietnamese context than the village, constituting a "proxy" for community. However, both local communion and knowledge, to the extent that they form a meaningful and coherent complex, are externally oriented. They tie the local social fabric to the outside world through labour migration, higher education, wider kin networks and popular religion (see also Olivier Rubin, this issue).

Especially kin networks now provide support for personal and joint household aspirations, even if this comes at the expense of the sustainability of the locality, such as in the face of natural hazards. Such networks are therefore less concerned with retaining the village in its current form and location

(i.e., the unit that would typically be termed the "local community") and more concerned with common, kin-based aspirations for success. We believe this situation is likely to be mirrored in many other Asian contexts, where industrialisation, changing occupational structures and mass migration are rapidly transforming conventional villages into either fractured rural habitations or new urban-like settlements.

We further call for greater sensitivity and realism in the many streams of literature that take "communities" for granted in designing interventions and coping strategies. Under present conditions, it is highly uncommon to find autonomous local actors with a capacity for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation and who are, at the same time, committed to defending vulnerable people and sensitive environments. Rather, as we will discuss in more depth below, centralised "development state" interventions in the form of infrastructure works, house construction loans and village relocation schemes, are increasingly eroding social cohesion. They primarily provide opportunities for those in a position to profit from the ongoing economic and environmental changes, and tend to overlook the poor. There is little institutional capacity in rural villages to oppose this process. We propose that real alternatives that may both guide state-led interventions and take over the role attributed to place-based communities in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation must be proposed by medium- or higher-level institutions with regional or nation-wide leverage. This resonates with contemporary public debates and political contradictions in contemporary Vietnam between old-fashioned social engineering interests and new efforts to organise an independent civil society.

The present article makes use of a range of material from interdisciplinary research in four provinces of Central Vietnam: Quang Nam, Quang Binh, Ha Tinh and Nghe An, conducted from 2009 to 2014.[2] The provinces, all stretching from the Andaman Range to the East Sea coast, were initially chosen due to their high exposure to typhoons and flooding and the imminent danger of these weather and climate-related phenomena turning into human and economic disasters. Our material spans both quantitative and qualitative data (extensive household surveys combined with follow-up interviews and fieldwork), though we draw primarily on qualitative data in this article. Our research focused on the following topics: the impact of weather-related disasters on specific rural

2 The fieldwork was carried out in connection with two Danida-funded research projects, P1-08VIE and VIE/11/P01, from which other results have been published elsewhere (e.g., Bruun, 2012; Bruun and Casse, 2013; Buch-Hansen et al., this volume; Rubin, this volume).

areas; adaptation strategies and capacities; government policy and institutions; local forms of organisation; migration; and the state of "local knowledge". With a view to exploring the latter, surveys and group discussions were held in three villages in three separate provinces, supplemented with broader interviewing in all four provinces. Questions targeted rural inhabitants' uses of, and opinions about, local/traditional knowledge in agriculture, animal husbandry, food storage, and alternative income generation, as well as in disaster prediction, prevention and adaptation.

In the following, we will begin by providing historical and background information in order to situate our discussion in Central Vietnam. We will then elucidate what constitutes "community" based knowledge at our study sites, and highlight the important role of the state and state interventions in shaping Vietnamese "communities", using the examples of aquaculture promotion, village relocation schemes and "safe house" construction. We conclude that at present local knowledge and aspirations, such as rewarded by the Vietnamese state, are externally oriented and economically opportunistic. They may not necessarily be relevant for CCA and DRR, but instead feed into a social and political complex that exacerbates risks, particularly for weaker population segments.

Household, Village and Community in Central Vietnam

As a result of the market economy and rising costs of living, it is increasingly difficult for households in Vietnam to depend solely on conventional family farms that usually comprise small (500–2,500 m^2) and very labour-intensive plots (see Buch-Hansen, this issue). Household members therefore increasingly diversify their livelihood strategies so as to include day labour, small businesses and migrant work (Bruun, 2012). In fact, an increasingly common trend, also well known from Chinese rural areas, is for villages to become refuges for children and the elderly, while the majority of the middle-generation cohort consists of migrant workers seeking to benefit from the overall economic growth, and who are more or less permanently absent. In contrast, dependency on only a few climate-sensitive entitlements, combined with inadequate labour resources in the family, may trigger disaster, such as in the case of unsupported elderly, single-parent households, or households with health or social problems or disabled members. These socio-economic factors significantly affect people's relationships with the local society and its agricultural base. But other crucial factors must also be taken into account. Rural villages only recently emerged from a centralised form of organisation in the Communist era, and although mobility and property sale are now possible, the local political administration

and power structure remain largely intact. Notably, the party-state still has a near-monopoly on organising, and all formal associations, such as the Communist mass organisations, are local extensions of central state-driven and party-controlled entities. Public Security enforces restrictions everywhere on organisations', visitors' and researchers' access to villages and immediately isolates unruly places. Civil society organisations are underdeveloped and struggle with tough political restrictions (Thayer, 2009; The Asia Foundation, 2012; Gerard, 2014). Despite this, ASEAN, national media, and overseas Vietnamese groupings increasingly refer to these organisations in public debates as a path towards social and political renewal. So what does constitute a "community" in rural Vietnam and what are the essential drivers in community life?

Rather than using the abstract concept of community, most people interviewed in our study refer to the administrative terms of the concrete unit or level in question. These are *district*, *commune* and *village*, which are reminiscent of, and still mostly identical to, the early Communist units of organisation. Both in the literature and in real life, such as when foreigners visit rural areas, these Vietnamese administrative terms are frequently translated as "community", either for the sake of convenience or international comparison. But apart from the obvious semantic difference, these terms each have important cognitive and political implications. These rural habitats were originally anything but voluntary or self-organising entities, but rather products of a rigid state policy to fit every individual into a manageable social structure. In some cases, the Communist structure was superimposed on existing hamlets with powerful kinship organisations, but due to the ravages of war new villages were established, others abandoned and millions of people shifted around. Today, relations in villages and hamlets are generally cordial, and people may cooperate over farm tasks and offer a little help to needy neighbours. During seasonal flooding, wealthier households may offer shelter to the less fortunate whose houses have been flooded. But theft, distrust and grudges also abound, arising from historical competition and conflicts between family groups: To be sure, no-one can leave mature crops unprotected in the fields. Far more is invested in kin relations. Today, family and kinship associations are slowly resurfacing as meaningful—and in some places quite powerful—entities based on ancestor worship, and every village has a great many ancestor halls. As described in greater detail below, these associations function at the sub-village or sub-hamlet level and cut across the formal village organisational structure.

As a result of international jargon, a term resembling the Western notion of "community" (*cong dong*) is nevertheless making its way into ordinary usage. Originally derived from Chinese and semantically linked to other concepts of the modern period (Communism, public, republic), it has direct associations

with the state sphere, not with an independent civil society.[3] The term *cong dong* can both be a noun resembling "community" and an adjective meaning "common" or "public". Despite reforms, independent management of community affairs and community political representation are still not the order of the day. Given the standardised, top-down administration of rural areas, the terms "community organising/management" used in much of the above literature in practice merely refer to the lower echelons of the party state. It is obvious that references to "local environmental knowledge" or the "adaptive capacity of the local community" sounds more convincing than "the knowledge of the people's committee", which has an undeniably centralised ring to it.

"Community" Based Forms of Knowledge

As with the term "local community", we argue that the "local knowledge" found in these social spaces is not so much local as integrated into the broader state-led society. First of all, modern education emphasising development through science and technology has ruled supreme in Vietnamese villages throughout the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) era. Agricultural production is a key policy area and in no way constitutes a locally constituted or self-contained system. It is exclusively based on intensive, high-input, maximum-output production in highly engineered landscapes (e.g., Fortier and Tran, 2013), and district authorities mostly determine cropping schemes, seeds and chemical inputs for each area according to central planning. Crop choice is mostly limited to a few varieties of rice, leaving individuals only free to choose their own small garden produce. Real alternatives are primarily found in coastal areas where aquaculture is possible, or in upland areas where secondary forest is available for acacia plantations. Similarly, the omnipresent mass organisations, mostly under the umbrella of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front,[4] provide leadership on other aspects of life and guidance on relevant knowledge. The "local knowledge systems" commonly seen as vital resources for CCA and DRR do not seem to be anchored in enduring non-state institutions in the villages of the Kinh majority population of Vietnam.

3 The original Chinese term, *gongtong* (common, public) or *gongtongti* (community) is mostly used for formal and state organisations, such as the EU or ASEAN. However, the term may also form part of translations of foreign terms, such as "Imagined Communities".

4 An impressive range of pro-government mass organisations are present: the Communist Party; Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League; Peasants, Women, Elderly, Workers' and Veterans' Associations; Classmate and Age-group associations; Home Guard; and more.

When these knowledge systems do play a role, it is primarily within the strictly domestic sphere or within informal and marginalised segments of village life that thrive in the shadows of political control. In our surveys and interviews, rural people were asked to specify bits and pieces of local knowledge, techniques, observations, wisdom and omens for separate areas. This confirmed that such knowledge does exist, but has roots variously in practical experience, culture and popular religion and tends to be unequally embraced by, and distributed among, local people (e.g., Ellen et al., 2000). Consequently, a diversified body of traditional thinking, personal reflections and locally-generated techniques has emerged. In each household, a broad range of knowledge and techniques for easing stress in farm life was found, e.g., for storing foodstuffs, securing the harvest, seeing to the survival of domestic animals, preparing for disasters and ensuring the survival of the household during floods. Much is straightforward and rational, but other types of knowledge draw on popular culture and religion and may conflict with state-promoted modernisation initiatives. Some notable practices include watching bamboo shoot growth or insect behaviour in order to foretell bad weather, floods and disasters, and discerning omens in celestial bodies.

Many fragments of knowledge and sayings are related to the traditional rural almanac (*Am lich* or *Nongli*), which connects villages with the broader cultural traditions of historically Confucian-based societies. Originating in China as a popular cultural tool to determine good and bad days for all sorts of undertakings, not least activities in the agricultural cycle (now also including shrimp farming), the almanac situates the household in the broader cosmos of life-giving forces, major deities, astrology and tradition, as well as connecting with festivals, such as Tet and Grave-sweeping Day (*Thanh Minh* or *Qingming*). Interestingly, many villagers believe that district authorities also use the traditional calendar when determining the dates for everyone to sow or harvest, and some district officials will admit that this is "taken into account". The countless references in the almanac to emperors' courts and the customs of the elite that thrive in popular culture and traditional literature further emphasise the point that even traditional values have an outward, or rural-to-urban, thrust. Mimicking the customs of the elite is an essential aspect of these societies.

Other traditional institutions provide support for a household and lineage orientation, as opposed to a "public ethos" in the name of the village. Traditional house-building divination and rituals (*Phong Thuy* or *Fengshui*), as known from most of East Asia and connected with a large body of traditional literature, seek to connect the household both with ancestors and the life-giving forces of the cosmos and to secure an auspicious environment for the prosperity and success of the kin group. When material circumstances

permit, building big and conspicuous edifices to mark the household's upward mobility is the norm. This inevitably lends villages in economically successful areas an urban-like appearance, notably in village centres and newly-established villages resulting from relocation schemes, as we will discuss further below.

Local knowledge is underpinned by the informal institutions of ancestor worship, sub-village clan and kinship organisation, and traditional literature. Domestic and non-formal fragments of knowledge are transmitted either within the household or within circles of trust and cooperation: These consist primarily of people of the same lineage who share particular zones or networks in their hamlets and maintain an ancestral hall. Although kinship organisation is controversial in any socialist setting, at a semi-public level this is what most closely resembles "community" in the sense of social cohesion. But the lineage-based "community" network clearly transcends the local area and competes with the "communities" of other lineages. The central institutions in these networks, the ancestral halls, are found everywhere in hamlets and villages and usually feature inscriptions in Chinese characters. Most often, these are the size of family houses and have similar gardens or enclosures, but some halls constructed in the pre-war period are of immense proportions and resemble regular Buddhist temples, with huge walled courtyards and lush gardens: these are built to honour clan founders or clan members who reached high positions in Hanoi officialdom.

An increasing number of newly restored or rebuilt ancestor halls in Central Vietnamese villages testify to the hugely important social and economic exchange between locals and wealthy migrants overseas. These halls are built in traditional designs and are increasingly adorned with exquisite interior decorations in marble and rare hardwoods. Along with economic and structural reforms, kinship is becoming increasingly visible as the basis for social cohesion in rural Vietnam. It is in the ancestral halls and their courtyards that relatives meet to honour and celebrate ancestors, or just to drink, chat and relax with fellow lineage members. The rich decoration and precious artefacts kept in the halls increasingly call for round the clock protection, and lineage members now commonly take turns to sleep in their hall at night. The halls represent a free and open space and create a sense of uninhibited communion among trusted people. However, both traditionally and now that labour migration has become the norm, clan and lineage organisations testify to an outward and urban orientation in which trans-local knowledge and networks become the primary means of social ascent. The most highly honoured figures in ancestral halls everywhere are those who left the village and rose to fame in urban society.

Resurfacing lineage organisations also have a bearing on relations of power and authority in the villages. In areas where several lineages have shared village space for centuries, relations of dominance and subservience are again becoming visible now that market society has accentuated social differentiation. For instance, in Village 2 of Hung Nguyen Commune (Nghe An Province), four family groups have historically lived together, each with their own ancestral hall, yet the Cao family has been the wealthiest and has dominated political power for as long as records have been kept. Even today, the position of head of the village people's committee and a range of other key positions are in the hands of this family, and it is taken for granted that they will help each other to attain privileges. Thus, lineage organisations manifest and maintain historical asymmetries within the formal administrative structure. In the oldest settlements, lineage- or surname-groups may inhabit separate hamlets or village sub-sections, but most often they coexist.

We contend that in this complex body of experientially generated and traditionally supported "local knowledge" there is ample motivation for pushing towards better overall conditions, for competition, and for materialism as a dominant outlook. Traditionalist and modernist aspirations converge in activism and the pursuit of social ascent, with life in the city, even in foreign lands, seen as the ultimate accomplishment. What is not well represented is a concern either for community and conservation in their own right or a will to preserve the landscape for non-material benefits, such as is commonly associated with an ecological perspective. Vietnamese villages are now highly dynamic entities, and if there is any genuinely local driving force "embedded" in communities it is one of self-transformation, rather than resilience. Villagers display what may be characterised as a strongly anthropocentric perspective on life where the well-being of the family line inevitably takes precedence over the immediate environment, which appears to have only passing significance. Whenever possible, mangroves are replaced by aquaculture, woods and village groves are replaced by production species, and rivers and streams are transformed for human use and increasingly polluted: the greater the opportunity for migration and getting rich quick, the less concern is shown for the social and natural environment.

State Interventions in Local Society

As a result of the above arrangements, those forms of "community" in which rural people engage and the forms of local knowledge they cherish are mostly aligned with kin networks and are externally oriented. This section shows how

external interventions, at present primarily by the Vietnamese state, are also mostly tuned to overall economic growth at the expense of inclusive local development and of any kind of ecological thinking, such as consolidating "local natural and social systems".

Common interventions directed towards CCA and DDR in rural areas include infrastructure works (which usually prioritise urban expansion), relocation schemes and the provision of loans and investment opportunities. As a result, families with entrepreneurial capacity are at a huge advantage. Thus, while present interventions might resonate with the aspirations of many rural people, they tend to over-exploit the natural environment and may act as additional "stressors" for the most vulnerable population segments who rely on marginal resources. Even though formal policy-making includes such concepts as Community-Based Adaptation, participation does not normally go beyond local government.[5] Other research has concurrently found that adaptation measures are becoming increasingly sensitive as the rift between state and non-state action deepens (Garschagen, 2014). Both political participation and political legitimacy are at stake: Increasing responsibility is left to individual households, while the state deliberately keeps alternative and civil society actors at bay, in effect excluding those who would champion vulnerable people and environments. The implications for climate adaptation and disaster mitigation will be discussed below.

Under the Vietnamese transition to a market society, people are being forced to wean themselves off dependency on state institutions. The official poverty line is low (USD 0.60 per day, including income from migrants divided among all household members). Only a few groups are entitled to support, such as disabled war veterans who may receive a small monthly allowance from central funds, and elderly people in desperate need who may receive a small monthly allowance or a yearly gift of a little cash, rice and noodles from local government. In many localities, the authorities refuse to calculate income and instead merely evaluate the quality and equipment of the family house based on a personal inspection. Housing programmes are the most common and most often the only poverty alleviation activity carried out by local government, and these mostly consist of low interest loans, and sometimes a monetary contribu-

5 Vietnam is part of a UNDP-initiated programme on Community-Based Adaptation, and one of over 200 government policies in the CCA and DRR areas is devoted to this. However, in the present research, participation was never seen to stretch beyond Party ranks, meaning the local arms of government and possibly trusted members of the local mass organisations (such as in the case of local disaster management committees). Many NGOs working with mainly foreign funding are also building programmes in this field.

tion. Again, the norm seems to be at most partial funding from public sources, and even poor households must come up with their own funding. Only in the poorest districts, mostly inland and in minority areas, are alternative and civil society organisations permitted to work on a regular basis, including Vietnam Red Cross (a state-mandated organisation), CARE, World Vision, the Asia Foundation, East Meets West Foundation, Oxfam and many others (Bruun, 2013). Their work usually targets the poorest families with direct support for house construction, education, medical care and other free services. It is only after disasters that civil society organisations may operate more widely and contribute to the distribution of emergency aid (primarily the Vietnam Red Cross and the Buddhist Association). But local government commonly retains the exclusive right to distribute external funding, leading to pervasive allegations of corruption. In the absence of alternative organising and external presences in the villages, state programmes show exclusionary tendencies (see discussion below).[6] During our fieldwork, we recorded many examples of state-led interventions furthering kinship-based entrepreneurship and growth. At the same time, these interventions erode village cohesion by segregating households into those that can absorb new opportunities and those that cannot, leaving the latter extremely vulnerable. One example of this kind of state-led intervention pertains to shrimp farms.

Aquaculture Promotion

Aquaculture has been promoted across Vietnam since 2001 as a dual strategy to generate economic growth and export earnings and to adapt to the increasing salinity of soils in coastal areas and river deltas (Lebel et al., 2002; Buch-Hansen et al., this volume). The country has since become a major world exporter (FAO, 2014). Official government support for aquaculture has included "preferential taxation, supply of credit and investment in related infrastructure, and [...] national level policy encouraging growth of aquatic production" (EJF, 2003: 5).

In the village of Truc Ly in Vo Ninh Commune (Quang Ninh District, Quang Binh Province), the first few ponds established around 2006 as part of a government programme were very successful. As a result, shrimp ponds became increasingly popular and in a partly spontaneous process (presumably with the consent of local government) farmers converted farmland and cut down groves to make space for more ponds. In order to buy land from the commune

6 Several central provinces, like Nghe An and Ha Tinh, have significant Christian congregations whose relations with the public authorities are tense; they were out of bounds for formal research.

or to rent land from neighbours they took loans, usually from state-owned banks (see discussion below on state loans). While aquaculture can be very profitable, it is also notoriously high-risk. Local farmers did not know much about large-scale aquaculture, which requires a level of know-how far beyond "local knowledge". The commune provided only very basic information about aquaculture, despite both national and international sources detailing the risks involved (e.g., EJF, 2003). As a consequence, the shrimp ponds ended up as a liability for many.

N.T. for example, lives in a small wooden hut surrounded by shrimp ponds, and no nearby neighbours. She takes care of her children alone because her husband is in Angola trying to make enough money to pay off the many loans they took to establish the shrimp ponds. She explains:

> There are two problems. Sometimes the shrimps get diseases and many shrimps die at the same time. When I compare my house and the neighbour's, we have the same amount of baby shrimp and they get 0.6 ton shrimp out of it, but I only get 0.2 ton. I think it is because my shrimp cannot eat as much because they are not as healthy. But I don't know exactly why. We started with shrimp ponds in 2007 and year after year we borrowed money from the bank to invest in the pond, but we cannot earn enough income to pay our expenses and we are losing our investment. We are not able to pay back the money and it has become a large amount.

N.T. was strongly encouraged by a government programme to invest in shrimp ponds to provide for her family, yet she was given little technical advice. Today, she and her children are very vulnerable to climate hazards as a result of the shrimp ponds. During the last typhoon and flood in September 2013 she had to move out of her house, which is a small wooden construction in a location prone to flooding. N.T. recalls, eventually breaking into tears:

> Because I am alone with three children, I need to prepare everything by myself and earlier than the others. […] Usually in August, September and October there is a flood, so I prepare a little and when I get the information from television I am prepared to move the children and contact my parents and parents-in-law and I also have a boat I can use to move. After that I go back to my house to pick up the chickens and dogs and drop them off with my closest neighbour [who lives in a more secure building]. I put sand bags on the roof. But last year everything collapsed even though I did that. At that time I stayed at the neighbour's for two days, but there are so many people in this village that went to stay in that

> house, so together with my parents-in-law we fixed their house and lived there for one month. The whole roof of the house was broken and some of the walls ...

Today the village officials regard N.T.'s household as one of the poorest. Not only does N.T. live alone with three children and has no neighbours around to help, her husband is working at a construction site abroad and is also at great risk of injury or death (e.g., Tuoitrenews, 2013). Shrimp farming is an example of a state-led intervention that, in practice, prioritises overall economic growth over disaster risk reduction (meaning that both total income and economic losses increase), since it is very vulnerable to floods, as well as to diseases and poor water quality (e.g., EJF, 2003). For many households, shrimp farming has enabled livelihood diversification and reduced reliance on rice production, and some have even become wealthy enough to abandon rural life altogether. However, due to its high-risk nature, it has led to economic downfall for many others in coastal areas, in effect increasing social differentiation and lowering social cohesion, even contributing to landlessness and land agglomeration (EJF, 2003: 1).

The state provides little guidance to help minimise potential problems, other than warning against farming shrimps in the typhoon season, and does not provide any security for farmers taking this risk. Few locals received any training other than brief introductions, as the local extension services are mostly oriented towards agriculture. Other studies have observed that state-led extension services and training appear to be "geared towards commercial or larger scale shrimp farms, and may be inappropriate for small-scale farmers" (Lebel et al., 2002: 318; EJF, 2003: 27), even though the vast majority tend to be small producer aquaculture (Marschke and Wilkings, 2014: 198). Crop failure is commonly linked to insufficient knowledge and can be greatly reduced if information is obtained from several sources (Lebel et al., 2002: 318). As EJF pointed out early on, however, it is unlikely that the many difficulties caused by the state's strong encouragement of increased shrimp production will be critically evaluated because of the "near-total lack of independent civil society organisations in Vietnam" (2003: 1). Today, the situation in Central Vietnam has not changed much: There are no alternative actors to provide guidance to small-scale producers or generally to work to support vulnerable people and sensitive environments.

Aquaculture inevitably harms the environment by reducing ecological diversity, causing pollution, and potentially resulting in higher vulnerability to natural disasters by weakening the natural protection of the coast provided by mangroves (Adger, 2000; Lebel et al., 2002; EJF, 2003; Olwig et al., 2007; Danielsen

et al., 2005). Once again, environmental degradation affects the poorest, who often depend on marginal resources for food and income. Finally, new risks to shrimp farming come as a result of growing international criticism of the production methods involved, leading to consumer concerns about environmental and food safety issues. This has led the government to promote certification schemes, but these involve large amounts of paperwork, technical requirements and additional costs that will place small producers at a disadvantage (Marschke and Wilkins, 2014).

Village Relocation Schemes

Crucial aspects of state-led interventions for CCA and DRR are village relocation schemes and safe-house construction (discussed below). With historical precedence and within the framework of various current state programmes (e.g., UNDP Vietnam, 2014: 18), local district authorities in coastal areas have engaged progressively in village relocations aimed at moving the most flood-exposed villages and hamlets from the outside to the inside of dikes. However, land protected by dikes is scarce, since they are normally constructed to enable centrally-driven land reclamation, urban expansion and industrialisation in coastal areas, primarily serving state and elite interests (Fortier, 2010; Bruun, 2012; Rubin, 2014). Hence, individual households will not be offered an equally large plot of land in the new location. This favours households with low dependency on farm production, which invariably means the better off. Moreover, relocation schemes offer merely supplementary funding for house construction, which means that if a household cannot come up with the necessary base funding it will not receive any support at all, and consequently cannot move. Money-wise, house construction requires investments upwards of 50–60 million VND, of which only a share may be obtained via loans from the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development. As a result, relocation schemes may give the impression of being state-led CCA and DRR interventions, but they effectively support growth and place families with entrepreneurial potential at an advantage at the expense of the poor.

In the provinces studied, several villages are currently being relocated under such schemes (they may only be moved if their communes have land located inside dikes). In villages subject to relocation, we carried out interviews both in old and new locations. In Village 6 in Xa Hung Loi Commune (Hung Nguyen District, Nghe Anh Province), villagers were given 200 m^2 of land to build houses in the newly-established Village 8, and were given access to electricity and water. In this case, many farmers kept their fields in the original location 3 km away. They were also given 13 million VND by the government to assist with the move, but that was not nearly enough to cover their house building

expenses and was only paid out once their old houses were destroyed. As a result, as was explained by the head of a family that stayed behind, "Only the poor remain." He explained that they had no livelihood opportunities in the new village. Those who depended on farming and who had moved to the new location had to travel back and forth to protect their harvest, and some had already regretted the move—as another farmer explained, after staying away for three days, "Everything was gone."

The new Village 8 is located close to the city and feels like a suburb with 2–3 storey modern houses. When we visited the village, we found two young men working outside a big house overlooking a small lake with ducks, and skyscrapers visible on the horizon. The owner (who had saved up money from working as a driver overseas) explained that he lived there with his wife and child but that his parents lived in the original village location. In another fancy new house, a war veteran had settled with his wife, explaining that they no longer worked, but that their grandchildren still worked the land in the old village. It appeared that the new village primarily served those who did not work the land, either because they were wealthy enough to settle down and enjoy their old age in the suburbs, or because they worked in the city and therefore found life in the suburbs easier and more compatible with a modern lifestyle. The relocation project that had been introduced and funded as a means to protect the population from flooding was thus unable to reach the most vulnerable people.

In another village, Dien Hoa in Yen Ho Commune (Duc Tho District, Ha Tinh Province), this paradox was even more striking. The entire village had relocated to Tien Hoa village, except for two households that were simply too poor to afford the move. One of them consisted of a husband, his wife and a toddler. During episodes of flooding in the past, the rest of the village had helped them, but there was no longer anybody around to help and they were worried since the husband had limited capacity to work. Just as in the case of N.T. above, this family represented the extreme case of disadvantaged villagers left behind due to state-led interventions. They were alone, isolated and extremely vulnerable to flooding.

Village 1 in Hung Nhan Commune (Hung Nguyen District, Nghe Anh Province) is an example of a village that could not be relocated since the commune has no land protected by dikes. The village normally has floods at least once a year, often repeatedly, and some lower sections are highly vulnerable. If unable to move elsewhere by their own means, villagers are in effect forced to continue living in difficult locations. This was the case for C.V.L., who is physically disabled and unable to work, and his elderly mother. The family had 3 *sao* of land (1,500 m^2) and only his mother was left to work the fields after C.V.L.'s

three younger brothers had married and gone to live in Saigon. The two belong to the most vulnerable category of people, being either disabled or elderly and having no relatives to care for them (e.g., Bruun, 2012). For them, there is no "community" or public authority to look after them. C.V.L. explained that they would like to sell their land and move out of the village, but asked laughingly who would buy flooded land! "We would like to run away from this village," as he put it. He thought that they would only be able to leave if the government or an international organisation recognised the difficulty of living in the village and provided land elsewhere. He had heard that the government was planning a new dike construction to protect the district town centre, but did not know of any plans to protect or relocate vulnerable villages. Again, these villages lack alternative forms of political representation or civil society actors to speak up for them.

Safe House Construction

In line with central policy, the government provides poor families with support to build "safe houses" (an elevated section of a house, usually comprising a single room) if they live in a flood-exposed village that cannot be moved. However, as with relocation support, this is provided on the condition that the family can come up with the base funding and see the construction through.

C.V.L.'s family, for example, built a safe house 10 years ago, since in years of heavy flooding the water sometimes reached the roof of their house but, as was common practice in those days, it was only used for livestock. They now want a new safe house that will accommodate the family too. In 2013, eight poor families in this village were considered for government support to build safe houses, to the tune of 30 million VND, but only five actually received any. C.V.L. explained that even if they had received support, they would not have been able to build the safe house because of his disability. They would have had to take a loan and hire labour in order to expand the present construction, which would have cost 50–60 million VND. When asked if his brothers could help out, he explained that now that they were married they would only be able to help occasionally during festivals or anniversaries held in the ancestral hall. While he appreciated that relations between people in the village are closer and better than in the city, he concluded that everybody wanted to go to the city because the government simply did not invest enough in the villages.

As indicated above, many state-led climate and disaster interventions, such as safe house construction and village relocation, involve loans and partial funding. Thus, even the poorest households are under economic pressure, not only to provide for themselves, but also to ensure base funding for adapta-

tion purposes, either by their own means or through low interest state loans. In either case, the local authority has exclusive power over access to loans and funding from government transfer programmes. Almost all formal lending institutions in rural areas are controlled by the state, and commune authorities are commonly used to screen applicants for loans from the state banks.[7] Local officials further control access to public transfer programmes targeting poor, elderly, disabled and other people, such as those intended to finance investments or cushion households from economic failure. The total dependency on local officials for access to funding leads to "elite capture and nepotism" playing a crucial role in rural areas (Markussen and Tarp, 2014: 301). Summing up, the VCP still sits heavily on the political organisation of villages, including all formal institutions, unions and associations, as well as new functions like local disaster prevention committees, making sure to keep out unendorsed civil society organising and alternative political representation. Its local representatives further control the flow of external funding, even emergency aid received from non-state actors in the wake of disasters.

Concluding Discussion: Socialist Engineering, Fractured Villages and Civil Society Development

In the foregoing, we have presented a cross-section of data material on the state of community and local knowledge in Central Vietnam. The material calls into question the notion of a community-local-knowledge nexus with the potential to provide crucial benefits, such as disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and environmental protection. These are vital matters for our global future, since policies and strategies that build on naïve perspectives will be doomed to failure. Much international literature deploys a terminology that implicitly draws on indigenous people's relationship with their spiritually-infused environment, but is incapable of capturing the rural dynamics of a rapidly modernising Southeast Asian nation. Derivative models of socio-ecological resilience, built on experience from pre-modern contexts or elusive contemporary notions of "community", have little analytical value with respect to the majority of the rural villages today. Community-Based Adaptation in Vietnam still leans towards state-led and pro-government organising, in line

7 "These include the Vietnam Social Policy Bank (VSPB), which extends non-collaterised loans to poorer families, and the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (VBARD), which lends to rural households with security in LURCs [Land Use Right Certificates] …" (Marcussen and Tarp, 2014: 301).

with the examples presented above. As a result, many Vietnamese experts now justly call for "suitable legal frameworks" to facilitate real participation (e.g., VNA, 2015).

We have shown how in the Vietnamese context both internal, culture specific drivers and external state driven interventions work *against* preserving the status quo. People tend to strive to attain an urban life or at least detachment from simple dependency on the natural environment, which inevitably, and with good reason, is associated with poverty. In that sense, there is a degree of complicity between the state and local entrepreneurial households in the present break-neck economic development where the overriding mantra is to get rich fast in order to transition to an urban lifestyle. This is where the social dimensions of disaster enter the picture.

The VCP's obsession with political control through continued economic growth inevitably pushes the social and environmental justice aspects of CCA and DDR into the background. Pressing political issues, such as how to balance economic growth with considerations for vulnerable people, sensitive environments, biodiversity, etc., are desperately in need of greater debate, representation and advocacy. As it is, taking huge risks for the sake of quick gains is the order of the day, and both state institutions and private entrepreneurs can be seen to gamble with natural hazards, simply because in an overall economic sense and for most people this tends to pay off. However, poor and vulnerable people are increasingly left without basic rights and protections, and sensitive environments are stripped of their natural protection. State interventions are seen to continue the asymmetrical distribution of power and resources as part of the social complex that turns natural hazards into disasters, only to reconfigure patterns of vulnerability.

In a society that has been subjected to socialist social engineering for decades, independent public spaces for exchanges of opinion and negotiation of interests are poorly developed; indeed, sensitive political issues are often addressed only in online media (McKinley, 2013), or are deflected onto ostensibly non-political topics like climate change discourse (Zink, 2013). When state institutions loosen up control over the individual, as previously experienced in China, conventional forms of family and kinship organisation, combined together with a new individualism, take over. The most important social linking institutions have again become family, kinship and lineage organisations, though these tend to reappear in fragmented forms due to mass migration, with many villages effectively becoming mere refuges for children and the elderly. Since the state remains hostile to independent societal forces and autonomous processes in the public sphere, few intermediate level institutions are likely to develop and an imbalance between self-interest and civic duties may take hold.

Some critics refer to declining public morality, unbalanced egotism or "shameless capitalism" (Yan, 2003; Liu Xin, in Steinmüller, 2013: 5; Painter, 2005) as products of authoritarian governance. Whether or not this is the case, the inadequacy of the "local community" to provide alternatives to the present order remains clear. We would argue that real alternatives must be sought on a supra-local level. They should focus on actors with the ability to hold the national government accountable and to initiate the necessary cooperation among the existing authorities and multiple new actors. Civil society organisations that operate both at local and national levels, and which offer better policies and freer working environments for their staff, should play a central role throughout, also with regard to international aid.[8]

A rapidly growing number of civil society organisations have extended their mandate beyond working mainly with poverty alleviation and community development in indigenous and remote rural areas to encompass an increasing range of livelihood schemes. These include: primary education, gender equality, natural resource management, climate change and various forms of advocacy (e.g., The Asia Foundation, 2012: 19). They should be allowed to join forces with concerned academics and independent intellectuals in order to promote better policies and facilitate social and environmental value change among the general populace. Advocacy groups and new movements should be encouraged, rather than repressed, in order to redress the generally acknowledged ills of centralised, authoritarian government: lack of genuine public debate, lack of representation for a range of marginal groups, unfettered corruption and environmental degradation. In many ways, this is the essence of the present political debate in which criticism of the government is increasingly surfacing, both in the social and public media. Overall, political reform is obviously needed to loosen the tight grip on rural areas and challenge the current policy of maximising growth at the expense of village liveability, while gambling with local resources.

A final point concerns how the conceptual criticisms outlined above relate back to theory. It has been repeatedly pointed out that "local communities" and "local knowledge" are less local than they appear and hardly constitute robust entities that can support disaster or climate change mitigation initiatives in Vietnam. In the present political circumstances, the knowledge that thrives there is less concerned with preserving the local "community" than many external observers tend to believe. We argue that conceptions based on "commu-

8 Unfortunately, tougher restrictions imposed on foreign NGOs in China and elsewhere in the Asian region have inspired Vietnam to follow suit.

nity" and "resilience" fail to capture the socio-economic and socio-ecological dynamics of rural Vietnam. In fact, they may even be blind to the most essential political distinctions, e.g., between the state and non-state actors and between local government and traditional social organisations. Thus, the concept of "community" glosses over unpleasant political contradictions and allows external actors, such as foreign donors, to carry out *pro forma* interventions on behalf of the common good. Sound policy making and intervention require greater conceptual precision, and donor organisations in particular have a responsibility to ensure the inclusion and participation of civil society, rather than simply accepting state-led "communities" as actors of change. There is a grave danger that conventional aid will carry its bad habits into new arenas like CCA, DRR and UN-REDD, thus letting down the very people it was supposed to target. Finally, by recognising that multiple social orders and systems of production can take root in a given ecological setting, it is possible to avoid deterministic, bio-mechanic "socio-ecological systems" thinking, which ultimately relies on an idea of self-regulating local communities and national societies that can all too easily end up supporting authoritarianism.

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