

# Co-creating knowledge in Mekong water politics

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Insights from an on-site Burma/Myanmar-Việt Nam co-learning visit to the Mekong Delta, Việt Nam

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Local farming, Vĩnh Châu, Sóc Trăng  
(Photo: Johanna M. Götz)

## Setting the scene: The Mekong Region and the Vietnamese Mekong Delta

**Water-related issues are complex across time and space. The Mekong Region is subject to multiple challenges that are often closely intertwined and as such need to be carefully scrutinized. Based on insights gained during a 5-day on-site Burma/Myanmar-Vietnamese co-learning visit to Sóc Trăng Province, Việt Nam, this piece provides insights into how knowledge is co-created that can help address some of these complexities.**

With an area of over 39,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of over 17 million in 2019,<sup>1</sup> the densely inhabited Mekong Delta in Southern Việt Nam is often considered the ‘rice bowl’ of the country with agriculture (rice, vegetable, fruits) and aquaculture being major sources of livelihood generation for local population. Unsurprisingly, water availability and quality are important issues that have been increasingly studied over the last decades. For instance, Renaud & Kuenzer in the foreword to their edited book on ‘The Mekong delta system’ note:

***“Most of [the Mekong delta’s] challenges are related to water: too much or too little water, polluted water, and difficulties in accessing water are the problems that local inhabitants struggle with.”<sup>2</sup>***



In August 2023, seventeen activists, civil society actors, and academics – with those designations being rather fluid – from Burma/Myanmar, Việt Nam and beyond, set out to explore how water-related issues impact local livelihoods within different localities in Sóc Trăng province in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta. Quickly realizing that while access to, quality of, and organization around water are crucial, they cannot be seen in isolation of other socio-political and economic issues. As such, our conversations meandered from agricultural production and everyday water use into forms of and reasons for human out-migration, the role of Unions, and the ways processes of financialization, including through loan-indebtedness-relationalities, figure into the “socio-natural process by which water and society make and remake each other over space and time” within the hydrosocial cycle.<sup>3</sup>

With the goal of building capacities and fostering solidarities across locations, the visit aimed to both learn more about localized water-related issues as well as to explore and discuss what a process of co-creating knowledge implies across differences. In this spirit, this article is the result of a co-writing process and as thus weaves together different pieces of writings and voices to provide some first insights from our project.

Taking stock of our joint trip, Nang concludes:

***“The trip arrangement was beyond our expectations. In a short time, we learned not only about the perspectives of minority farmers but also explored different water sources and diverse ecosystems from the river, ocean, to the mangrove forest, and islands, amongst others...”***



*Shrimp farming,  
Vĩnh Châu, Sóc Trăng  
(Photo: Vương Khả Tú)*

## Co-creating knowledge – situating the concept

Questions of how and by whom knowledges are produced, whose knowledges count as well as ownership over the knowledge that has been produced, have a long – and often troubled – history. Within recent decades, these questions have been repeatedly scrutinized against, amongst others, critical insights from indigenous, intersectional/feminist, de-/post-/anti-colonial activism and studies. Providing an important approach for this project, understanding what co-creation of knowledge(s) means for us was a substantial and recurring topic throughout our trip.

Knowledge has been constructed to be centred within powerful institutions like the state or the (neoliberal) university for a long time. Yet, critical voices from around the globe continuously remind us about the need for multiple knowledges to be considered and valued for any transformative, just futures to be forged. Within Mekong water politics, policy-making still tends to be implemented through top-down processes, with knowledge being understood as merely being produced by scientific rigor, bringing about a ‘Modern’ water that can be managed through apolitical, technocratic means. This is also reflected in how ‘participatory’ spaces are set up, leaving out many voices, knowledges, and understandings. Contrastingly, a focus on the co-creation of knowledges challenges such top-down processes and necessitates taking into consideration the multitude of knowledges available.

*“The co-creation strategy of this project allows the participants to discover existing issues, especially about water management, in an effective way. The discussion between researchers, students and representatives from government departments empowerment each sector by raising different voices to share about current issues in Vĩnh Châu including the difficulties that they are facing. Finding suggested solutions for common issues with the contribution of varied groups is one of the biggest plus of co-creation of knowledge.” [Group 1 workshop participants]*

Learning from participants’ unique experiences, for instance, from Thai Baan research, the co-creation of knowledge processes established within Shan State, Burma/Myanmar, and the realities within the VMD, we quickly realized the importance of understanding co-creation of knowledge not as a one-size-fits-them-all model, but a complex process that needs to be understood, developed, and constantly (re)negotiated within the very locality it is to be created and sustained.



*Discussion with local people to understand current water issues.  
(Photo: Vương Khả Tú)*

*“In the process of participating in project activities, in our opinion, knowledge co-creation involves calling for the participation of stakeholders in research, which emphasizes learning from experience, knowledge and understanding knowledge of research subjects including the research community, local leaders, the participation of domestic and foreign scientists to understand the research problem, share relevant knowledge and experiences from many different perspectives to explore the problem effectively, multi-dimensionally and emphasize the active participation of the research subjects with their valuable knowledge and experiences.” [Group 2 workshop participants]*

## Localized knowledge – learning from everyday experiences of farmers in the Mekong Delta

During our trip in Sóc Trăng province, the SUMERNET project team and participants had the pleasure of visiting two local families' homes and to discuss about water-related issues in the community and to gain insight into their daily lives. This section provides two reflection pieces co-written by the members of this exchange visit.



Farmer using groundwater for irrigation.  
(Photo: Vương Khả Tú)

Generally, the most popular livelihood model in Vĩnh Châu are shrimp farming, red onion crops – a typical crop of Vĩnh Châu – and vegetable growing. During warm conversations with two local families in Vĩnh Châu, SUMERNET participants learned more about the many issues local farmers in the research area have to face, including water shortage, extreme weather events, and livelihood difficulties.

The water source used for livelihood activities and irrigation of farming is mainly from groundwater, except the drinking water which stems from packaged water bottles. Local people in the village also drill wells to collect groundwater for use. Currently, it seems that the groundwater resource is decreasing. Ms. Dot – one of the two interviewed women – shared:

***“About 15 years ago, drilling a well down to 1 m deep would have water, but now the well at home must be drilled up to 160 m deep.”***

Because of the fluctuation in product prices, getting a loan from the government bank is a way to help farmers cover their demands. Ms. Dao's farm suffers from seasonal flooding. Therefore, Dao's family had to stop their red onion farming activity for one year. Ms. Dao could not build a dyke to prevent flooding because the garden area was too large.

On a regional scale, Vĩnh Châu is nearly 90% Khmer. The tendency of migration to find jobs is quite popular. Men seem more likely to migrate for work, while women usually stay at home to take care of children. Generally, for blue-collar workers, men are paid more than women. However, the tasks between men and women are different, with men mainly involved in heavier physical activities. For those working in the government sector, the salaries are said to be balanced. (Contributed by group 1)

**water sources**

**price instability  
necessitates  
loans**

**migration**

### Lessons we learned from the visit

Through the visit, we were able to witness first-hand the daily lives and livelihoods of local residents in the research area, Vĩnh Châu town, Sóc Trăng province. Situated in close proximity to the coast, this district experiences direct impacts from socio-environmental outcomes, such as storms and salinization, which have profoundly affected residents' way of life. Among these, the most striking experience was encountering Ms. Dot's family, members of the Khmer community. The family's main source of livelihood is agriculture, encompassing the cultivation of onions, rice, peanuts, sweet potatoes, and various other vegetables. However, due to shifting weather patterns this season, they were only able to plant peanuts and sweet potatoes.

**socio-  
environmental  
impacts**

**agricultural  
products**

Agricultural activities are being undertaken by Ms. Dot and her husband alone partly due to the limited land available. While this makes the labour of two individuals sufficient, the income generated through farming is not substantial. As a result, the family's two daughters seek higher-paying jobs in larger cities. Similar situations are said to apply to neighbouring households, facing parallel circumstances. With low agricultural earnings coupled with excessive weather-related risks, many families sent their children far from home to urban centres in pursuit of employment opportunities. Notably, this is not exclusive to Ms. Dot's family but resonates throughout the region.

**outmigration  
to urban areas**

Furthermore, issues of salinization have led to a scarcity of water for both agricultural and daily usage. As relayed by Ms. Dot, about 15 years ago, the community could simply dig wells of one to two meters depth to access sufficient water. Presently, however, wells need to be as deep as 100 meters and necessitate the use of air pumps to extract water. This incurs substantial costs, which their meagre agricultural income cannot cover.

**salinization**

As a result, families are compelled to resort to bank loans, amounting to millions of Vietnamese Dong, to sustain their households. They face little choice as they need to provide for their families and ensure their children's education, so that their children may have less arduous occupations.

**indebtment**

Insights shared by friends from Burma/Myanmar reflect similar challenges. However, their situation is further exacerbated by the lack of electricity and limited access to borrowing facilities. This realization underscores the ongoing struggle faced by many individuals in confronting the adversities of socio-environmental changes. Consequently, we are committed to enhancing our knowledge and skills. This will empower us to continue contributing to future community projects, supporting those who grapple with climate change challenges while striving to minimize the risks they encounter. (Contributed by group 2)

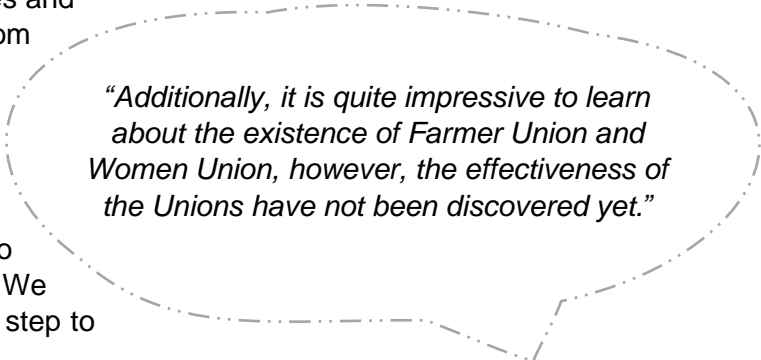


*Discussion with local people to understand current water issues.  
(Photo: Vương Khả Tú)*

## Initial insights for exploring future Mekong water politics

Throughout our trip, we have jointly explored questions of water (in)security within the Vietnamese Mekong Delta specifically and – through knowledge sharing – within the Mekong Region more broadly. Policy-making and reporting in recent decades have shown a tendency of overly simplistic and deterministic explanations between climate change, water insecurity, and social issues such as human migration or the abandoning of agricultural praxis.<sup>iv</sup> However, first insights from our workshop have indicated that these issues are often more complex than they appear at first sight. Approaching these issues through a bottom-up process of co-creating knowledge allows to bring into conversation local farmers, policymakers, and academia to jointly challenge top-down policy-making and explore opportunities and challenges of a democracy-in-the-making from below.<sup>v</sup>

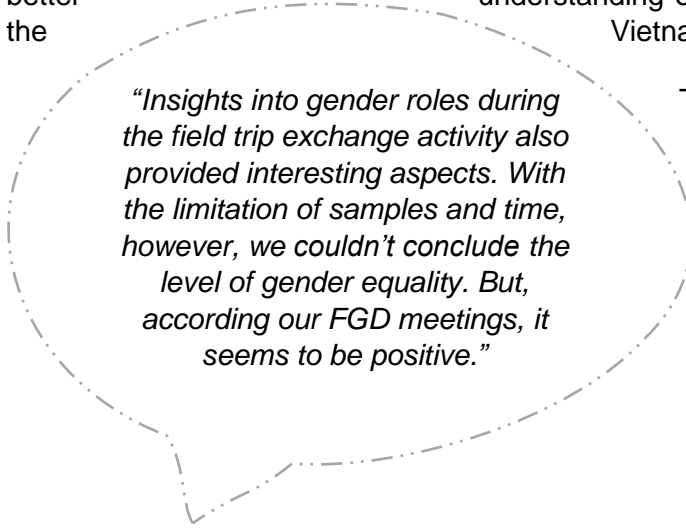
The future of Mekong water politics certainly remains complex and highly disputed and processes of co-creating knowledge need sustained commitment as well as the ability to scale up knowledges, values and processes. We believe that our project is a small, yet important step to foster solidarities across the Mekong Region.



*“Additionally, it is quite impressive to learn about the existence of Farmer Union and Women Union, however, the effectiveness of the Unions have not been discovered yet.”*

After many days of sharing, learning, and exploring, we part with new insights. Importantly, we have made new friends, explored the overlaps and differences regarding socio-environmental issues across the region, and believe that despite the many challenges ahead, a different, more just Mekong Region is possible.

Over the next months, our Vietnamese team will advance their localized co-creation process through collaborative research, a policy-engagement event, and close communication with the rest of the team so that we may further our co-learning process. Some open questions emerging from our visit include a better understanding of gendered relations and the role of Unions within the Vietnamese Mekong Delta’s water politics.



*“Insights into gender roles during the field trip exchange activity also provided interesting aspects. With the limitation of samples and time, however, we couldn’t conclude the level of gender equality. But, according our FGD meetings, it seems to be positive.”*

The communication of our findings will also importantly include a film-making component that additionally advances our co-learning process.

Beyond that, we hope the very near future will also allow us to all meet in Burma/Myanmar and to put into reality this part of our co-creation process.

### Disclaimer

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### Further information & contact

<https://www.sumernet.org/project/co-creation-of-knowledges-as-a-process-to-respond-to-water-injustices-of-marginalized-communities-in-mekong-region-water-politic>

### Note

This article is based on a 5-day on-site Burma/Myanmar-Vietnamese co-learning visit to Sóc Trăng Province, Việt Nam during August 2023. The workshop is part of the SUMERNET project entitled 'Co-creation of knowledges as a process to respond to water injustices of marginalized communities in Mekong Region water politics.' The article was co-written by the members of the project team as well as the participants of the workshop/visit.

### References

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- <sup>iv</sup> For an opinion piece critically reflecting the connection between climate change and human migration within the VMD, see for instance Bayrak, M.M., Marks, D., Hauser, L.T., 2022. Disentangling the concepts of global climate change, adaptation, and human mobility: a political-ecological exploration in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. *Climate and Development* 14, 935–944. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2022.2028596>.
- <sup>v</sup> Cf. Hoogesteger, J., 2017. The politics of water democracy: insights from grassroot struggles in the Ecuadorian Highlands. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 58, 74–85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12141>.

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