

IUCN DP Statement

MDF, Can Tho, September 26-27, 2017

I would like to begin by reflecting on an area of concern from yesterday's MPI led session on integrated delta planning. The MPI Minister Nguyen Chi Dung observed what we have also observed, namely different and often conflicting plans for land use and infrastructure coming from different ministries.

Before proposing a way forward, let me recall the assistance that our German IKI funded project has provided to the upper delta provinces when they were confronted with the task of implementing Decision 2220 under the PM Decision 593. This decision lacked an overarching vision that would enable different provinces to work together to improve land and water management. With the assistance of a team of Vietnamese scientists, we helped the provinces with a process that started with provincial leaders, departments, and other stakeholders developing a vision and strategic directions for their sub-region. They did this before elaborating the 7 interlinkage program specified in Decision 2220.

These locally developed visions and strategic directions recognised the comparative advantages and possibilities of their sub-regions. So in the PoR and LXQ, where provincial party and government leaders are well aware of the benefits that the seasonal flood pulse bring, there was no debate about whether they would live with the floods and adapt to nature, or fight against nature as some presenters were proposing yesterday. They had no hesitation in choosing a direction in which they would profit from the flood with an expansion in organic flood-based agriculture, which IUCN would recognise as an EbA measure to adapt to climate change.

At the national level, however, we see no clear vision in this period of agricultural transformation of how the delta should capitalize on its natural resources. In many ways, the rice-at-all costs policy of the last 30 years acted as the *de facto* vision for the delta. Perhaps this is one reason why we see a lack of coherence in the studies and plans coming from different ministries and even from within the same ministry. We therefore recommend that MPI and the party build on the visions and strategic directions that the PoR and LXQ provinces have recently developed. This is also how many DPs see the recommendations of the Mekong Delta Plan being translated into local action.

There is still an important role for central government to play, which is to ensure that there is coherence between the different sub-regional visions and directions, and to intervene if the visions and directions in different sub-regions conflict.

For example, we don't yet have consensus on long-term land use in some coastal areas.

The delta's most vulnerable coastlines are those in Soc Trang, Bac Lieu, the northern part of Ca Mau, and most of Kien Giang, where settlements and intensive shrimp farms are located just behind low, compacted earth dikes protected by a thin mangrove veneer.

Given the coastal squeeze driven by sea level rise and the probability of more intense storms and wave action, the most realistic long-term option along these coastlines is to relocate the dike inland, move the shrimp production inland into areas that are hydrologically isolated, or even better, into the high-tech Viet-Uc shrimp factories that the Australian Ambassador told us about, and allow a broad mangrove forest to recover inside the earth dikes. Within the mangrove forest, farmers can make an excellent living from integrated mangrove-aquaculture, while the shrimp ponds trap sediment and raise land level. This is another EbA solution that is being funded by Germany.

As in any country, resettling businesses and people is difficult. For this reason, the provinces will need strong central government leadership and support to put in place the necessary long term strategies and plans for re-zoning and compensation measures. The alternative is to continue to invest scarce state resources into maintaining an earth dike that will sooner or later collapse as the coastal squeeze erodes away the remnant mangroves, thereby putting lives at risk.

The last point we'd like to make relates to upstream hydropower development and the need to reduce upstream impacts on the delta. Vietnam cannot stop or influence every project. But in the case of the Xekong, the last major free flowing tributary of the Mekong, Vietnamese firms are planning to build dams that will cut off 25% of the remaining sediment and nutrient delivery to the delta.

Other options exist. A similar amount of power could be generated by dams on the tributaries of the Xekong. And the rapid decline in the price of non-hydropower renewables, where Vietnam has a strong manufacturing capacity, means that there are real opportunities to reduce dependence on hydropower by moving to a more diversified energy mix.

Vietnam has a window of opportunity to transform hydropower development by capitalizing on its scientific expertise and business strengths to lead a regional hydropower planning process that ensures regional energy security while avoiding unnecessary social and environment risks, particularly to the delta.

In conclusion, the World Bank, the Green Climate Fund, and the proposed Global Human Water Security Fund¹, and other international funding sources can assist Vietnam with these transformations, within the delta and regionally. You heard something about the GCF this morning and as an accredited agency for medium grants, IUCN stands ready to assist the PoR and LXQ provinces to access these funds. For those of you who have not heard of the GHWSF, it came out of the recent Geneva Actions on Human Water Security, an appeal to the world for coordinated, prioritised and funded actions to provide basic water needs, respond to the deterioration of watersheds and aquifers, and correct failures in water governance.

Building on the MDP, we firmly believe that the Mekong Delta is moving in the right direction. But the lack of political direction allows for multiple agendas to coexist and compete without resolution and at significant cost, both direct and in terms of missed opportunities. This, we believe, is the greatest challenge the delta faces.

¹ <https://genevaactions.org/about/>