

Risk trends in Vietnamese river deltas: Manifestations of environmental change or socio-economic transformation?

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Vietnam's Mekong and Red River deltas are often numbered amongst the global hot spots of environmental risk. Climate change and regional hydropower development are typically listed as the main risk drivers. What is much less understood, however, is how the country's socio-economic and political transformation process is changing the vulnerability of the population in the two deltas. The paper therefore analyses key risk trends in both deltas by examining, first, the role of changing hazard patterns and, second, the contribution of shifting vulnerability. It draws on empirical results collected in over six years of research in Vietnam, based on two long-term projects. The analysis brings to light an antagonistic pattern: While the political leadership is keen to frame deltaic environmental risks as being driven by external forces (notably climate change and upstream hydropower), the data suggests that locally driven environmental degradation as well as socio-economic marginalization and weak institutions play a much more immediate role in driving up natural hazards and social vulnerability, respectively. The paper discusses whether these local drivers of risk emerged "despite of" or "because of" Vietnam's pronounced socio-economic and political transformation process in relation with doi moi-reforms. The article concludes with debating the relevance and transferability of the findings for other delta environments in Asia and beyond.

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