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Living in the Third Millennium
Agenda 2030 and the new Sustainability Objectives
for the realisation of a global utopia at local level

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Deconstructing coastal sustainable development policies: towards a political ecology of coastalscapes in Vietnam¹

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development has become the mantra, or the global utopia, for multi-scalar development worldwide, being promoted by governments and international organisations through the support to social and environmental policies. However, the concept of sustainability, as well as the Agenda 2030 and SDGs, remain controversial due to socio-political and environmental contradictions. This article analyses the promotion of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) and related initiatives oriented towards sustainable coastal governance in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. It emerges that these policies, rather than promoting sustainable coastal governance and preserving local communities practices and knowledge, support a controversial green growth vision and the unsustainable neoliberalisation of socio-environmental practices.

Keywords: sustainable development; political ecology; environmental governance; coastalscape; Vietnam; Mekong.

Parole chiave: sviluppo sostenibile; ecologia politica; governance ambientale; paesaggi costieri, Vietnam; Mekong.

¹ This article includes conceptual and especially empirical data on Integrated Coastal Zone Management in Vietnam which has been used in an article published in *Social Sciences – Geography and Sustainability Studies* (Zinzani 2018). For the present article data has been further discussed and reconceptualised in order to be related to debates on the sustainability concept and on sustainable coastal governance.

1. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES AND THE RISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

In 1987 the United Nations World Commission on Development and the Environment (WCED) advanced the notion of sustainable development, which was officially formalised at the global level at the Rio Summit on Environment and Development of 1992 (UNEP 2016). Therefore, since almost three decades the concept of sustainable development has become the mantra to guide and support policy-making for national and local development worldwide, for poverty reduction and environmental protection. Indeed, the sustainable development approach has been promoted by governments, international development organisations and NGOs through the formalisation of diverse environmental policies and initiatives oriented to the achievement of a multidimensional sustainability, social, economic and environmental. It is relevant to highlight that international and national actors who endorsed the promotion of sustainable development were guided by the uncontested belief in growth and economic liberalisation, and in socio-economic dynamics aimed to fight poverty and protect the environment. As critically argued by Martinez-Alier (2002, 22) and De Maria and Kothari (2017, 2591-2592), the environmental discourse and debates which characterised the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development of 1972, based on the idea of limits to growth and a critical reflection on environmental degradation related to resource exploitation, were subverted via the belief in green and sustainable growth. In parallel to the promotion of the sustainable development approach and the formalisation of the Agenda 21 by international development organisations, over the last three decades the notion of environmental governance has emerged (Adger *et al.* 2001). This notion has been featured by the globalisation of environmental issues and the need to advance an integrated decision-making process which should include governments, international organisations, private actors and civil society aimed to produce environmental and resources governance policies and initiatives. Moreover, environmental governance seeks to support and strengthen resource management reforms and environmental initiatives in the “Global South” (Ziai 2015; Zinzani 2015). By reflecting on environment and development interactions, since 2000 the sustainable development approach has been strengthened via the formalisation of the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs), and more recently with the Agenda 2030 and the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) (Browne and Weiss 2014; Carant 2017). The Agenda 2030, promoted by

various UN agencies, includes a set of 17 objectives to be achieved globally in order to reach an effective sustainable and inclusive development, poverty elimination and environmental preservation. SDGs, which replaced MDGs, have been presented as the first set of global policies designed by adopting a participatory and inclusive approach. However, this process remains quite controversial due to diverse socio-political and scalar issues, as for instance the question of how global policies might understand and be effective in diverse and complex regional and local contexts (Ziai 2015). Indeed, De Maria and Kothari (2017, 2594-2595) and Carant (2017, 17-18), by discussing Agenda 2030, highlighted the absence of the analysis of the structural roots of poverty, unsustainability and inequalities, as well as the unwillingness to recognise the biophysical limits to economic growth and to support grassroots democratic governance. By reflecting on environmental governance and development policies with specific reference to the “Global South”, since the end of the 1990s UN and other international development agencies such as the World Bank among others, have promoted the implementation of global resource management policies such as Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) and Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) among others (Molle 2008; Zinzani 2015). Whereas on the one hand these policies have been promoted in the “Global South” to foster sustainable development and participatory governance, on the other hand they have been implemented with the aim to boost institutional change, structural adjustment, neoliberalisation and privatisation inspired by the Washington Consensus (Ferguson 1990; Cornwall and Brock 2015). It is relevant to state that over the last two decades global environmental governance, the concept of sustainable development and related initiatives, have been questioned and debated by diverse social scientists who criticised the depoliticisation of environmental changes and the aims of several international development policies oriented towards the neoliberalisation of the environment and the commodification of resources such as water and land among others (Robbins 2004; Budds and Sultana 2013; Perreault *et al.* 2015). Specifically, Bluhdorn (2013, 20-21) defined the notion of “politics of unsustainability” in relation to contemporary environmental governance and green growth by deconstructing this regime that on the one hand defend consumerist socio-economic and environmental practices that are well known to be unsustainable. On the other hand, paradoxically, it recognises the urgency of radical change, but the unwillingness and the inability to perform such change emerges. It is therefore relevant to go in deep in the analysis of the controversial

socio-political dimensions of sustainable development initiatives and related policies, and Political Ecology offers a critical lens to explore and reflect on these processes.

2. TOWARDS A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF COASTALSCAPES

Political Ecology has emerged since the 1990s with the aim to critically reconceptualise society-environment interactions and deconstruct environmental governance thanks to the theoretical, conceptual and empirical contribution of social and political geography, sociology, political economy and anthropology (Bryant 1991; Robbins 2004; Swyngedouw 2004). Political Ecology is inspired by the key assumption that environment and resources are characterised by socio-natural metabolic interactions and seeks to analyse socio-political and power dimensions of environmental governance and linked contradictions. Indeed, Political Ecology considers strategic the repoliticisation of socio-environmental processes and the exploration of how the global widespread of neoliberal capitalism reconfigures society, environment and development interactions together with the interconnected issues of socio-environmental inequalities, (un)justice and conflicts (Escobar 1995; Loftus 2009). Diversely from other scholarships, Political Ecology is strategically nurtured not only by academic knowledge, but also by socio-environmental activism and knowledge of social movements, associations and individuals. Therefore, Political Ecology goes beyond an academic scholarship, since it represents also a political practice and a political socio-environmental space (Bryant 2015; Perreault *et al.* 2015). In order to reflect on the socio-political nature of environmental policies and related controversies, political ecologists analyse these processes by paying specific attention to the community level through the adoption of qualitative methodologies and ethnographies. These processes at the community level, in relation with the global promotion of international development policies, have been deeply analysed by scholars in the Political Ecology of Development. Scholars have paid specific attention on aims of international development organisations and on how development initiatives affect socio-power relations in the “Global South” (Adger *et al.* 2001; Budds and Sultana 2013; Zinzani 2018). Within the context of international development in the “Global South”, the sustainable development approach, combined with the notions of good governance and

capacity-building, are central in both discourses and initiatives. However, as emerged in diverse research contributions, despite the emphasis on sustainability and inclusiveness, international development actors often underestimated or ignored communities knowledge and practices of resource governance, as well as inequalities in resources access and environmental justice issues (Budds and Sultana 2013). This was the case also in coastal regions, where sustainable coastal governance has been promoted since the 1990s through the formalisation of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) and the international support to the implementation of related initiatives. Whereas coastal governance processes have been discussed by both policy-makers and academics, few research has adopted a Political Ecology approach to critically discuss socio-natural transformations and interactions between coastal international initiatives and communities socio-power relations (Armitage and Tam 2007; Lukas 2014). This contribution adopts and advances the notion of coastalscape, inspired by waterscape, a concept applied by scholars in the Political Ecology of Water (Loftus 2009; Budds and Sultana 2013). The coastalscape is not simply a coastal territory, but a produced socio-natural construction shaped by terrestrial and marine socio-political and environmental processes and their intersections. Indeed, it represents a socio-spatial entity characterised by the assemblage of fresh and marine water flows, infrastructures, institutions and authorities (Zinzani 2018).

3. INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE COASTAL GOVERNANCE: ICZM IN VIETNAM

Whereas until the 1990s coastal regions management worldwide has been characterised by an heterogeneous variety of multi-scalar policies, approaches and practices, the formalisation of sustainable development approach since 1992 has relevantly shaped global coastal policy-making. Indeed, the governance of coastal regions globally has been guided by principles of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) which aims to reformulate existing policies and practices of coastal management to the idea of sustainable coastal governance. ICZM was designed by international policy-makers and experts in 1992 and later included, together with Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) with regard to fresh waters, in the framework of global environmental policies oriented to promote sustainable development and climate change mitigation, as

suggested by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). ICZM was defined by policy-makers at the international level as an integrated multi-sectoral governance approach which seeks to balance development, use and protection of coastal environments and to overcome the fragmentation inherent in single-sector management approaches with regard to levels of government and land-water interfaces (UNEP 2016). By focusing on the multi-dimensional concept of sustainability, ICZM supports the sustainable economic growth of coastalscapes, the sustainable interactions of coastal and marine environments and an inclusive, bottom-up and participatory approach in decision-making processes. Therefore, by reflecting on its definition and aims, ICZM seems to have high potential to improve coastal governance, benefit communities and strengthen growth. However, as stressed by Nichols (1999, 390-392) and Christie (2005, 212-213), ICZM hides its political nature and does not consider uneven power relations as well as the conflicting nature of divergent economic interests. Indeed, controversial relations between sustainability and economic growth were critically debated by many social scientists due to their conflicting and contradictory nature (Adger *et al.* 2001; Cornwall and Brock 2005; Bluhdorn 2013). By discussing ICZM implementation in Sri Lanka, Nichols (1999, 396) highlighted that the process facilitated the opening of coastal zones to global capital investments and resources commodification, and that it threatened the existence of rooted resources common property regimes managed by coastal communities. In Vietnam ICZM has been sponsored since the 2000s by international development organisations, such as the WB and the UNDP, and by governments of the Netherlands and Australia in order to supposedly deal with coastalscapes issues such as coastline urbanisation processes as well as economic development and foreign development projects (Sekhar 2005; Zinzani 2018). It is relevant to highlight that ICZM policies also boosted institutional transformation in a state characterised by a centralised socialist market oriented regime (Benedikter 2014). Indeed, since 2005 Vietnam-Netherlands ICZM Program (VNICZM) facilitated the establishment of the new Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (MONRE), and its Agency of Sea and Islands, in order to raise awareness on environmental issues and formalise initiatives. However, An *et al.* (2008) highlighted contradictory processes by arguing that VNICZM stressed the importance of sustainability for the future of coastal regions, but in parallel emphasised foreign interest for marine economy development and unexploited marine resources. Since 2011 GIZ, in collaboration with AustralianAid, has developed the

project Integrated Coastal Management Program (ICMP) 2011-2018 in the Mekong Delta in order to strengthen ICZM and promote mangrove forest rehabilitation, sustainable agriculture and aquaculture and participatory coastal governance (GIZ 2014). Despite development organisations presented the program as sustainable, inclusive and participatory, they did not take into account its impact on existing community level knowledge, socio-environmental relations and practices. Since 2015 MONRE and GIZ have formalised the Vietnam's strategy for ICZM to 2020 and the vision towards 2030. These measures were approved by the Prime Minister, and in parallel the Vietnamese government stated that by 2030 coastal regions in Vietnam will be clean and safe to live, work, and make investments (Hoi and Hien 2014; Zinzani 2018). By adopting a political ecology of coastalscapes approach, it is therefore relevant to critically analyse how international development measures supporting coastal governance affect coastal communities socio-environmental dimensions in relation to sustainable development vision, principles and its initiatives (*Fig. 1*).



*Figure 1. – GIS Elaboration of a satellite image (Google Earth TM) of the Mekong Delta and of field-research area.
Source: author.*

4. COASTALSCAPES SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE MEKONG DELTA

The Mekong Delta territorial development has been characterised by the intersections of socio-natural and political processes, infrastructural development, power relations and knowledge inspired by the hydraulic mission (Molle *et al.* 2009). The delta includes a network of canals and dykes and it is deeply shaped by fresh and salty waters as well as by agriculture and aquaculture interactions. However, in relation with dynamics of climate change such as fresh waters reduction and salinity intrusion, since a decade the Mekong coastalscape has been affected by a relevant reduction of agricultural land and a boom in aquaculture (Islam 2014). With the aim to understand these processes in relation to ICZM coastal policies and the sustainable development worldwide promotion, a qualitative ethnographic field-research was conducted in the Mekong Delta in 2016 by adopting a multi-scalar approach which included provinces, districts and communes².

In Vin Hai commune of Vin Chau district (Soc Trang province) since the 2000s climate change issues such as frequent drought, reduction of fresh and salinity water intrusion, have affected the coastalscape and their communities. These issues led to a decrease in small scale agriculture and a significant increase in aquaculture which was supported by the government due to incentives of international development organisations and to the possibility for farmers to get higher incomes. By reflecting on coastalscape socio-environmental transformations, farmers stated that over the last years members of the community have left small-scale agriculture, especially rice and food crops, to develop aquaculture. However, this reconfiguration was challenging due to the conversion of farming socio-economic practices.

In parallel, portions of mangrove forests were reconfigured in ponds due to the rise of power of international shrimps trade companies and farmers social differentiation, together with growing inequalities, emerged. However, local authorities stated that ICMP mangrove forests initiatives supported communities participatory governance,

² Field-research was supported by the Department of Water Resources of the University of Can Tho, Vietnam and by the Leibniz Centre for Tropical Marine Research of Bremen, Germany. The methodology included semi-structured interviews to members of authorities, institutions and associations as well as field-surveys and formal and informal talks to farmers (agriculture and aquaculture).

through co-management practices, resources valorisation and increased environmental awareness (Zinzani 2018). A similar territorial and socio-environmental transformation emerged in Ca Mau province where, despite rice agriculture is still popular in the northern part of the district due to rainwater storage technologies, aquaculture has become the predominant socio-economic activity. This is due on the one hand to climate change dynamics, such as fresh water reduction and soils salinisation, while on the other to government support to aquaculture farmers and their socio-economic ambitions. In parallel, in the Song Doc commune (Ca Mau province), despite WB and GIZ support to ICMP, local farmers were not aware of this international development initiative aimed to make coastal governance sustainable and inclusive. Whereas Tra Vihn province, diversely from Soc Trang and Ca Mau provinces, was not included in ICMP, it has been characterised by similar coastalscape socio-environmental transformations. The head of province level Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development argued that aquaculture has been introduced in Cau Ngang district (Tra Vihn province) since 2006 as a novel practice, or combined with agriculture, via a five years government plan in order to deal with progressive decrease of freshwater, drought and farmers demands of government support. With regard to the plan, members of Cau Ngang and My Long communities and farmers associations of Cau Ngang argued that this support in the complex socio-environmental transformations tried to prevent social tensions between agriculture and aquaculture farmers and their associations. However, they stressed that the boom in aquaculture has recently led to social differentiations and inequalities due to farmers uneven access to international shrimps markets. Interestingly, whereas on the one hand international development policies promoted sustainable coastalscape governance and its protection, on the other hand they supported increasing expansion of aquaculture, the role of international shrimps markets and intensive coastalscape exploitation. Combined with rising socio-economic inequalities and tensions within Mekong coastalscape communities, the sustainable development approach and the green growth vision boosted by international development organisations seem to be quite controversial and contradictory.

5. UNSUSTAINABLE COASTALSCAPE DEVELOPMENT: REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The evidence from the Mekong Delta shows that despite the international development organisations support to ICZM and related initiatives, as well as to sustainable coastal governance, coastalscape socio-environmental transformations are deeply shaped by the unsustainable aquaculture boom and related economic interests. With regard to communities socio-environmental transformations, this process is leading to a significant and fast increase in social differentiation and socio-economic inequalities, as well as to land degradation and pollution, dynamics in deep contradiction with principles of sustainability. The boom in aquaculture in Southeast Asia, supported by the global market and powerful international actors, as argued by Islam (2014, 33-34) and Tiller *et al.* (2012, 1086-1087), is also leading to the abandon of tradition customary fisheries as well as farmers displacement and socio-ecologic devastation. Therefore, these issues deeply contradict the international development support to aquaculture as a pathway towards green growth, inclusive and sustainable development. Indeed, while on the one hand ICMP promotes coastal and forests protection and sustainable practices, on the other the program aims to increase and strengthen international market access, industrialisation, foreign investments and business opportunities to international capital actors through the narrative *The Mekong Delta, an Emerging Investment Destination in Vietnam* (GIZ 2015; Zinzani 2018). Therefore, it is strategic to highlight that ICZM and linked initiatives such as ICMP, hid the political nature of progressive coastalscape resources neoliberalisation behind the leaf of coastal protection and sustainable development. Evidence from the Mekong Delta shows that coastalscape socio-environmental transformations which embed increasing social inequalities, combined with land degradation and trade network growth, are uneven and unsustainable. Indeed, the analysis of coastalscapes transformations contributes to strengthen the contradictory relations between development, growth and sustainability, as stressed by Bluhdorn (2013) among others, to question the contemporary environmental governance order and to advance the political ecology of coastalscapes.

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