



LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION IN VIỆT NAM

Local governments are uncertain about new, ambitious climate change initiatives. Integration of climate change into the work of local authorities requires recognition of the conditions they manage, related to both climate change and economic development.

Local authorities in Việt Nam are in many respects overwhelmed by the stated ambitions of national climate change policies. These policies are ambiguous and encompass a broad range of sectors based on optimistic expectations about possibilities to coordinate and mobilise highly skilled human resources. They are based on – uncertain – access to large levels of funding. Local authorities are in many cases

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Climate change efforts need to focus on developing relevant capacities in local government to adapt plans to local conditions.
- Local government is strong in disaster response and protection of communities through better infrastructure. A wider perspective is needed to ensure that economic development initiatives contribute to mitigating disaster risk.
- Local agricultural departments should provide extension services to advise poor farmers on how to manage climate risks associated with greater dependence on export markets and overall changes in rural Việt Nam.

Sustained support from local authorities for climate change efforts depends on the extent to which these are aligned with agricultural commercialisation and diversification.



In the face of growing hazards, more appropriate and effective climate change adaptation actions will be key to enhancing the legitimacy of local government.

acutely aware of the risks associated with climate change, but are unsure of how to interpret policies and their implications for practical action.

The provincial climate change action plans that have been developed to implement these policies are also seen to be daunting and raise more questions than answers. The potential for having these plans financed is unclear, and it is assumed that they will be largely dependent on international support being negotiated by the central government. This has led to a 'wait and see' attitude among many local officials. Their commitments to implementing climate action plans may currently be waning. There is little evidence of these plans being implemented. Instead, local authorities are continuing to search out ways to support their constituents to manage climate risk in practical ways based on ongoing dialogue with rural people, researchers and NGOs.

A precondition for greater engagement in implementing formal climate change adaptation policies and plans is greater clarity about division of responsibilities, both horizontally (most importantly between agricultural and environmental authorities) and vertically (between province, district and commune). Our research suggests that finding such clarity is likely to come when local authorities actually access financial resources and thereby are able to start implementing plans and adapting them to their local needs and capacities. Only then will they start discussing their different responsibilities and determining what types of climate risk reduction actions may be feasible, given available human and financial resources.

New focus on climate change efforts

Climate change efforts currently focus on disaster risk reduction, which is an important traditional role for local authorities, the need for which has been reinforced by extreme climate events. But these efforts emphasise certain aspects of disaster risk reduction and neglect others that are also important.

At provincial, district and commune level in Central Việt Nam the highest perceived priority in climate change adaptation is disaster risk reduction. This stems from the experience of destruction and loss of life caused by typhoons, storms and floods. Great progress has been made over the past decade in terms of clarifying and strengthening disaster response structures. Authorities are justifiably proud of their work in this regard.

The provincial climate change action plans include measures that also contribute to disaster risk reduction through major investments in dykes and other infrastructure that is expected to protect the population from extreme weather events.

Both of these aspects of disaster risk reduction are important for responding to climate change, but other areas need more attention and have thus far been neglected. Most notably, the disaster risks associated with extreme climate events are in some ways likely to increase, not only because of changes in the climate, but also due to economic development trends that do not take into considerations the implications for potential increased flooding and other risks. Such trends include urbanisation and conversion of farmland to housing and industry. More attention is

needed to these aspects of disaster risk reduction that relate to broader economic development investments.

Local support depends on agricultural development

Another aspect of economic development that needs to better reflect the risks associated with climate change is that of shifts to commercial agriculture and larger farms. Government policy is actively promoting these two aspects of agrarian change, along with a conversion of land use from rice production to more high value crops. In principle, these changes may reduce the risks from climate change by diversifying crops so that losses are spread, and also by attracting and engaging commercial actors who may effectively share investment risks with poor farmers.

However, it is not yet clear how these changes are going to impact on smallholders' climate resilience. For example, distrust is recognised as a widespread obstacle to expanding the use of contract farming, and part of this distrust relates to uncertainty about

who will be responsible to respond when bad weather in combination with volatile markets, impact on farmers' capacity to meet contract conditions. Even good weather may lead to increased production and falling prices that also influence the extent to which contracts are respected. The nexus between commercialisation and climate resilience will be very important in the future, but has yet to be explored. Given the limited direct engagement of local agricultural authorities in these business relationships, their role in contributing to risk management is uncertain.

Greater attention is needed to the factors that make certain farmers vulnerable in the changing rural economy. This should in turn provide a basis for choosing climate relevant ways to commercialise and also for recognising which farmers are unlikely to benefit from the shifts to larger production units and contracting relations. In order for these changes in the agro-economy to be effective and 'climate smart', more efforts are needed to develop the capacities of local authorities responsible for these reforms, while



Engagement and ownership from local authorities depend on both developing relevant capacities and adapting climate change plans to local conditions and priorities.

also better defining their roles. Given that the capacity of agricultural and environmental departments is limited, it is particularly important that capacity development efforts are cognisant and supportive of the engagement of stakeholders in the private sector and civil society involved in this agrarian transformation.

The suggestions in this policy brief effectively outline the importance of building on the existing capacities and motivations of local authorities, i.e., the social contract they have with their constituents. Their

response to disasters and the advice they are giving to farmers to adapt their production systems are evidence of how they are struggling to fulfil their responsibilities to those affected by climate change. Their legitimacy is dependent on finding ways to adapt policies and develop practices that allow them to do their jobs in a more climate aware manner. This suggests that it will be important to move from past emphasis on the enormous lists of 'what needs to be done' to confront climate change, to instead better emphasise locally informed efforts to determine 'how to do it'.



Overcrowding in the aquaculture production is an example of a change in agricultural production which contributes to the changing pattern of risk.

Ian Christoplos, Senior Researcher, Natural Resources and Development (ich@diis.dk)

Cover photo: People struggle to walk through a flooded street in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2008. © AP Photo/Chitose Suzuki

