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Tracing and Making the State

*Policy practices and domestic water supply in the Mekong
Delta, Vietnam*

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary¹

This study investigates how ideas and social relations as materialised in history and institutions shape policy practices in Vietnam, drawing on the case of domestic water supply in the rural areas of Can Tho City. Thereby, the study contributes not only to an understanding of ‘the everyday politics’ of domestic water supply in the rural Mekong Delta, but also to a theoretical debate on the ‘nature’ of policy practices in different historical contexts. The findings moreover allow conclusions regarding a broader discussion on globalisation, and the extent to which global ideas penetrate national states and the ideas that make them.

Conceptualising the study of policy practices

When analysing policy it is often assumed that policy making is a rational, objective and linear process, which is oriented on solving a problem. This is illustrated by the so called policy cycle, a classical instrument of policy analysts (see Figure 1).

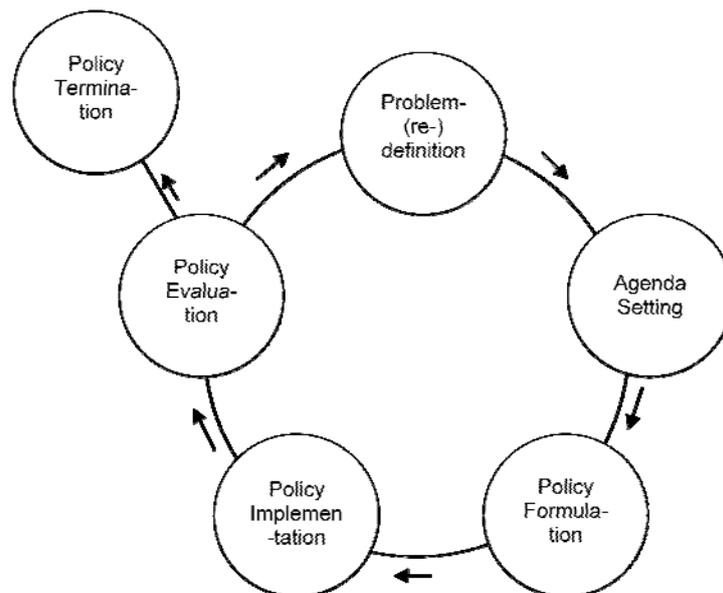


Figure 1: The policy cycle² (translation N.Reis)

However, such a view disregards that policy making is not a linear process, because policy is actually only *made* during implementation. Moreover, it is often not oriented on solving a problem, but on other factors - first of all power-related aspects. But if policy making cannot simply be conceived as a problem-oriented, rational and analytical process, what are then the

¹ For the full version, see REIS, N. 2011. Tracing and making the state. Policy practices and domestic water supply in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Berlin, LIT Verlag.

² JANN, W. and K. WEGRICH 2003. Phasenmodelle und Politikprozesse: Der Policy-Cycle. In: SCHUBERT, K. and N.C. BANDELOW (eds.): Lehrbuch der Politikfeldanalyse. München, 71-103.

underlying mechanisms and structures that shape the policy process? The research aims to contribute to this question by asking for the ‘nature’ of policy practice in Vietnam.

Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) has recently been a very popular policy issue on the international agenda, and there is a vast amount of international conferences, conventions, reports, policy briefs etc. providing policy advice to ‘actors’ having a stake in managing water issues. Millennium Development Goal number 7C calls for halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to clean drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015³. With the ‘National Rural Clean Water and Sanitation Strategy’ (NRWSS), Vietnam adopted its first sector policy for RWSS in 2000. The national goal is to provide all rural people with sufficient clean water and hygienic latrines by 2020⁴. The programme is supported by a consortium of three international donors – Denmark, Australia and the Netherlands. The crucial question arising in this context is thus if and how global ideas on water policy (can) influence policy practice.

Study area and Methodology

A heuristic case study approach was chosen to inductively identify variables, hypotheses or causal mechanisms that affect policy-making. The study was conducted in Can Tho City between April 2008 and March 2009 (see Figure 2). In spite of its administrative city status,

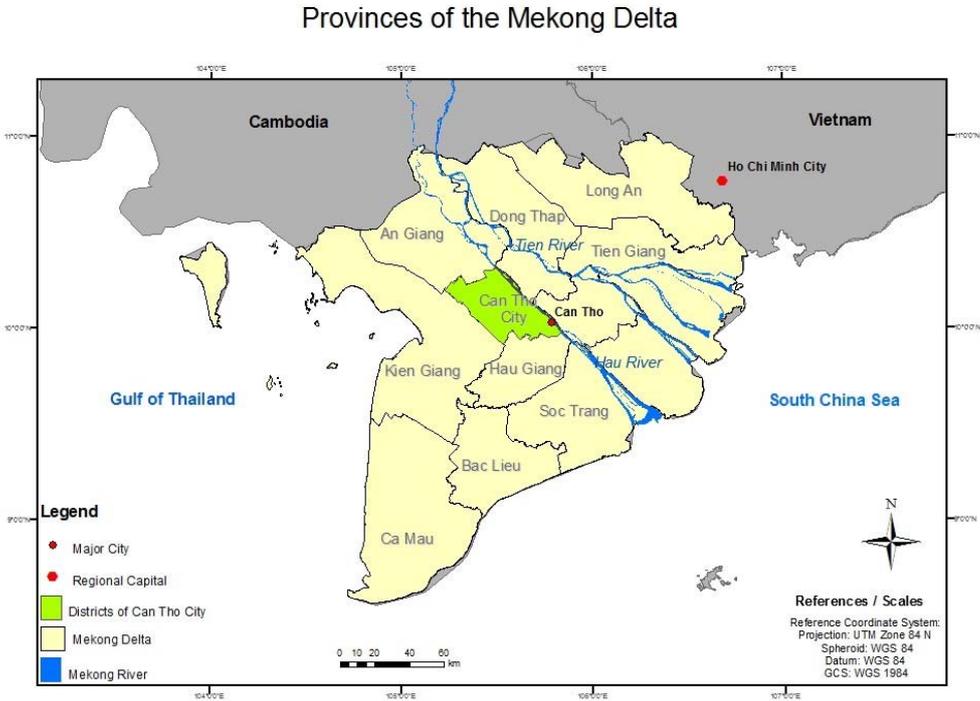


Figure 2: Study area (Source: ZEF/WISDOM)

³ The target on water supply and sanitation is one of the indicators in MDG Goal number 7: “Ensure environmental sustainability”. Goal number 7 further calls for the inclusion of sustainable development into country policies, the reduction of biodiversity loss, and the improvement of lives of slum dwellers (<http://www.undp.org/mdg/goal7.shtml> (June 2009)).

⁴ MOC and MARD 2000. National Rural Clean Water Supply and Sanitation Strategy up to Year 2020. Online. URL: http://www.cerwass.org.vn/English/index_e.htm (February 2008).

many areas in Can Tho remain peri-urban or rural, with a large share of the population depending on agriculture for their livelihoods.

Research was carried out on the four administrative levels in the Vietnamese political system, namely commune, district, province and national government. The methods of primary data collection were primarily of qualitative nature. In total, 167 semi-structured interviews were conducted with government officials, rural households and donor staff. ‘Influence Network Mapping’ was used for assessing decision-making processes. Government officials on four administrative levels were asked to assemble all actors that impact on water supply planning, define the links between them, and the influence that those actors have on the yearly planning process (see Picture 1).



Picture 1: ‘Influence Network Mapping’ (Source: N.Reis)

In addition, government and donor documents were collected and local newspapers screened. Spatial data was collected by own enquiry as well as through secondary sources.

Domestic water supply in rural Can Tho

People in the rural areas of CT use a diversity of water sources, most importantly river and rain water (see Picture 2). In the last years it has become popular to drill wells because the river water is increasingly polluted by agriculture, industry, fish-farming and domestic sewage. The provincial government is constructing water supply stations with piped networks to supply the households with water, which abstract groundwater.



Picture 2: Buckets or ewers are commonly used to transport river water to the house (Source: N. Reis)

However, as illustrated by this satellite image of one of the study communes (see Figure 3), piped schemes do by far not cover the whole area – only around 30 % of rural households in Can Tho are connected to the schemes.

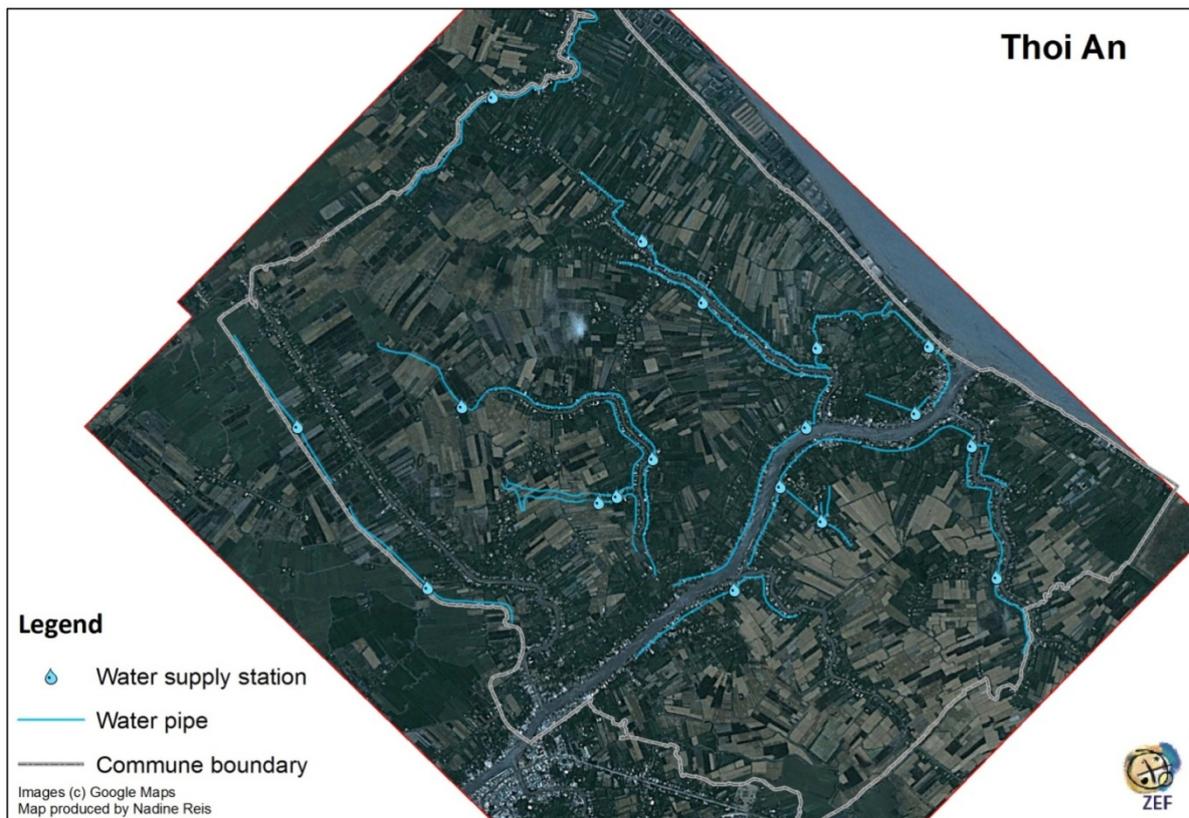


Figure 3: Water supply stations and networks in Thoi An ward, O Mon district, Can Tho City (Source: ZEF/WISDOM)

By analysing interviews with households and local authorities as well as planning documents, it was found that year-round access to clean water is problematic for around 30-50 % of the rural population. The current policy approach is not able to solve the problem for a large share of the people. Moreover, the research revealed that it is economically not feasible and ecologically not sustainable. How does this policy approach come about - how is this policy made?

The 'schizophrenia' of policy practices

When dealing with state agencies, the researcher encounters a regularised, massive bureaucratic apparatus that works based on the principles of bottom-up reporting and top-down decision making. This means that bureaucrats collect all sorts of statistical data, they record the demands of the population, and send their reports upwards, where they serve as basis for decision making. The bureaucratic apparatus is occupied with keeping this planning machinery alive: with collecting and compiling statistics, records and plans, and attending meetings.

However, data analysis showed that actually, neither the type of policy approach (constructing piped water schemes abstracting groundwater) nor how this approach is carried out (namely where those stations are constructed) nor the distribution of funds on national level to the provinces is decided based on information generated by the 'planning machinery'. It is the informal sphere that is decisive for actual practice. This sphere is nurtured by the material interests of the political elite. Hence, the image of policy practices significantly deviates from actual practice.

Understanding the two spheres of policy making

It is argued that the two spheres of policy making are *not* to be understood as opposing forces competing for control over political processes, as some scholars have conceived it. Rather, there is an inherent logic of coexistence of these two spheres. This logic can only be understood if we conceive the *state* first of all as an *idea*. The idea of the Vietnamese state has always been that there is a political elite which acts on behalf and in the interest of the collective. This idea derives from the Confucianist patriarchal model of society and has lived on in Marxism-Leninism. However, it has depended on different modes of legitimisation. While in the past, legitimacy was mainly created with reference to national unity and independence from foreign oppression, the image of an instrumental-rational administrative apparatus which systematically records the demands of the population and constitutes the basis for decision-making is now playing a key role in the legitimisation of one-party rule.

In contrast to widespread arguments emphasising that political change is occurring in Vietnam, it is argued here that what we are seeing is continuity rather than change⁵. What has changed is the way of legitimisation of the one-party regime. The social and political order in Vietnam has been characterised by a high degree of stability, whereas formal and informal policy practices can be considered as mechanisms that work for the reproduction of ideas and materialised social relations. Formal policy practices do not influence the outcome of policy on the ground. What they do, however, is reproducing the idea of the legitimate rule of a political elite. Policy outcomes are produced in informal policy practices, which are key for the reproduction of the material-structural dimension of the authoritarian one-party state.

Global policy ideas: working on the image of the state

Global policy ideas shape policy practices in Vietnam, but only their ‘formal sphere’. Thereby, they become part of the reproduction of the Vietnamese state idea. By understanding policy making as a rational, objective process, international donors influence ‘what policy does’ by the monetary resources they make available, but not by their ideas.

Further, the results of the study question, whether world culture – understood as the global rise of rationalised formal structures - can be considered as a determining force. It was shown that instrumental rationalism is an inherent element of the ‘cultural identity’ of the Vietnamese state, which is first of all produced by *internal* legitimisation processes. The global imperative for rationalisation, however, serves as an external reference point for the Vietnamese state and supports the stabilisation of the idea that it is made of.

Conclusions

Policy making cannot sufficiently be explained by a common sense approach, which understands policy as a rational, problem-oriented undertaking and ascribes implementation failures simply to a ‘lack of political will’. Asking for the structures and mechanisms that *make* RWSS policy, it can be concluded that policy practices in Vietnam are not oriented on solving a problem. Rather, they are functional for sustaining the core social and political order in Vietnam, which becomes institutionalised in ‘the state’. ‘Formal’ and ‘informal’ policy practices, as a set of two interconnected spheres, serve as key mechanisms for reproducing the distribution of resources and the hegemony of ideas in society.

The one-party state represents the core of social and political order in Vietnam, and is made up of both a hegemonic idea – the idea of the state – and a material-structural domain, referring to the concentration of resources in society with one political elite. The idea of the legitimate rule of this elite serves as hegemonic discourse, which has a reciprocal effect upon the material-structural domain. Formal and informal policy practices are a medium for making the state. While formal policy practices reproduce the idea of an elite acting in the interest of

⁵ GAINSBOROUGH, M. 2005. Rethinking Vietnamese Politics: Will the Real State Please Stand Up? Online. URL: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/politics/grc/bvp/bvpworkingpapers/rethinking.doc> (February 2008).

the people, informal policy practices are key to the structural basis of social and political order. The two sets of practices thus function for the maintenance of the status quo.

Hence, it has to be concluded that 'informal policy practices', often referred to as 'corruption', are not failures within the 'real' state that can be eliminated by introducing rational policy. By focussing on the formal existence of concepts, models, regulations and institutions that make up 'good governance', international donors become part of the reproduction process of the power structures that are at the outset of the problem they are (supposedly) trying to address. The desired change towards more adapted, socially just and ecologically sustainable problem solutions is *not* induced by formal policy or instrumental research which neglects the power structures that underlie social and political order.