

CASE STUDY

URBAN WATER GOVERNANCE AND CAPACITY BUILDING IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM

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■ **Urban water management in a megacity** – Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) in Vietnam is a metropolis with an increasing population and fast growing economy. Rain patterns are becoming more intense and the sea level is rising due to climate change. In addition, land subsidence is occurring steadily in certain parts of the city. It is not uncommon for streets to be flooded with about 20-40 cm of water following rain and higher tides. As urban space is becoming scarce, urban development increasingly occurs in an unplanned manner and often in low-lying areas. As wealth is unevenly spread across the city, some wealthier areas attempt to protect themselves through isolated infrastructure improvements, which cause additional issues for those in the surrounding areas. To reduce flood risks, a considerable number of large tidal sluice gates and pumping stations are currently in planning or being constructed. The most recent tidal sluice gate is designed to support a 75-cm increase in sea level (see Photo 1). Moreover, with Dutch support the city has developed a Climate Adaptation Strategy to control and prepare for the expected impacts of climate change¹. In addition to flood risk problems, the city experiences a number of other urban water challenges. An assessment of the current situation by the Steering Centre for Urban Flood Control (SCFC) shows that the total length of the drainage and sewerage system is only 30% of what is required. Many rivers and canals are poorly maintained limiting their discharge capacity. Also there are only two wastewater treatment plants serving 5-10% of the population. There is a combined sewage and rainwater system and in many cases the physical layout of the infrastructure is unknown. Like in many old city centres there is a high level of water loss due to leaking pipes and aging infrastructure. A wide range of investments are planned to improve water management including the implementation of twelve new wastewater treatment plants until 2025.

Steering Centre for Urban Flood Control

Traditionally, urban water management in Vietnam is managed by departments of various Ministries (e.g. related to Agriculture and Rural Development, Transport and Public Works, Natural Resources and Environment). To reduce fragmentation, the national government decided to establish the SCFC as an independent administrative agency that would address the complexity of urban water management

in Ho Chi Minh City. Since 2008, the centre has been responsible for the planning, development, operation and maintenance of infrastructure for drainage, wastewater treatment and flood control. The centre has an integrated mission and collaborates with various international organizations. Many staff members are highly educated and motivated and there is a core team of experts who were transferred from various city departments and have brought their experience,

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Photo 1: Construction of a tidal sluice gate in Ho Chi Minh City in August 2013
(photo by Hans Bressers)

expertise and contacts. The approximately 200 person staff works in various divisions and project management units.

The set-up of the centre is unique in Vietnam since it has no direct linkage to a department of the city government (see Figure 1). Collaboration with various departments is of crucial importance, since some responsibilities overlap. Collaboration is also important since the SCFC is positioned at a lower governance level than the departments and is thus quite dependent on other institutions to support its plans and efforts. This power imbalance is one that would be difficult to overcome (despite current discussions to do so) since increasing the status of the SCFC could lead to a reduction in responsibilities for other departments. However, if the SCFC proves to be successful, the model could be copied to other cities in Vietnam.

Capacity building by Dutch water authorities

In recent years, SCFC participated in the ‘Flood Inundation and Management’ (FIM) project that was implemented by a consortium of Royal

HaskoningDHV and Deltares. The project included various institutional development and capacity building activities, including project management training by experts of regional Water Authority ‘Regge & Dinkel’ (since 2014 Water Authority Vechtstromen). This successful project resulted in the current two-year Capacity Building Programme for the SCFC undertaken by five water authorities, the University of Twente and Royal HaskoningDHV. The programme aims to strengthen the capacity of the SCFC and their contribution to urban water management within the context of the overarching governance structure of HCMC. The programme is managed by ‘Vechtstromen’ and co-funded by the Netherlands Water Authorities Bank. The programme started in June 2013 (see Photo 2) with an analysis of the existing governance context. The analysis established a basis for five one-week training sessions that will occur in 2014 and 2015 by experts of the participating water authorities. The topics of these trainings are: management, engineering, wastewater, projects and finance. The analysis of the governance context thus provided an important starting-point for the development of the Capacity Building Programme.

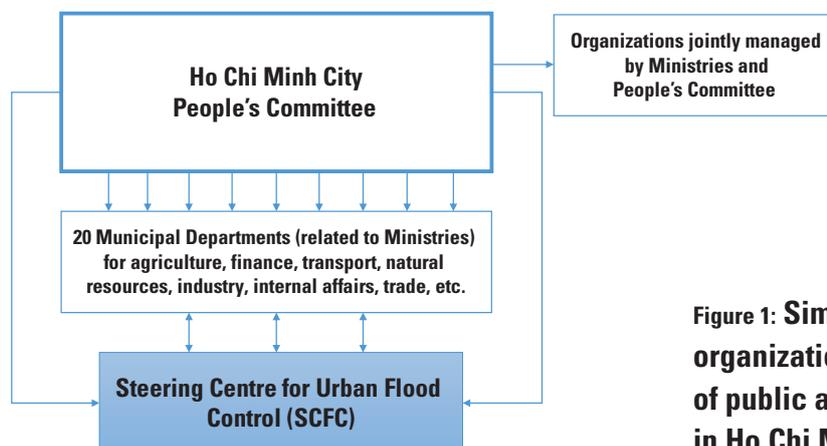


Figure 1: Simplified organization structure of public administration in Ho Chi Minh City



Photo 2: Celebration of the start of the Capacity Building Programme at the Steering Centre for Urban Flood Control
(photo by Simon Goddek)

Understanding governance influences

Different methods have been developed for assessing water governance. Recognizing this, the Water Governance Centre contributed recently to the development of a rather comprehensive and integrated method that builds on a number of different established methods. Depending of the purpose of the assessment, these existing methods provide a useful starting-point when adapted to case-specific context and circumstances². In this case, the interest was to establish a common understanding between the partners involved regarding the governance context within which the SCFC must achieve its objectives. This understanding helps the water authorities to tailor their trainings in a way that fits the current situation into HCMC and SCFC’s expectations.

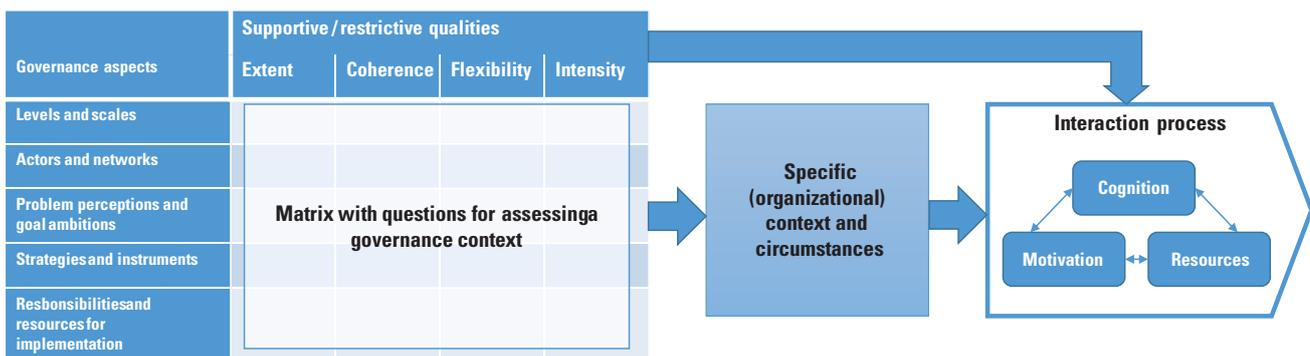
The chosen method in this case is a simplified version of the Governance Assessment Tool (GAT) as developed by the University of Twente. The GAT sees governance as the context that supports or restricts actions and interactions related to policy implementation and provides a matrix of questions to be addressed that relate to the important aspect and qualities of the governance context (see Figure 1)³. While it is a generally descriptive tool, it is slightly normative in that it does assess the context within

which groups work to achieve a goal or goals against a number of criteria.

As the User’s Guide on Assessing Water Governance⁴ shows various methods for governance assessment were developed over the past few years. Depending on the purpose and context of the assessment, researchers may choose to use or adapt an existing framework or to develop a new one. The purpose of our assessment was very pragmatic, i.e. to support the implementation of the trainings. Given the experience of the researchers with the GAT, the purpose of the assessment and the limited budget of the project, we chose to narrow the assessment scope to the key qualities of the GAT. Compared to other governance assessment methods, such as the one that was developed in collaboration with the Water Governance Centre, the GAT has a more narrow scope. For example, legal and economic aspects are not explicitly included. Our assessment was even more superficial as we only focused on the key qualities of the GAT. While the assessment does not provide a full-fledged description of water governance in Vietnam, it provides an important basis for the project by identifying key enablers and constraints.

The term ‘assessment’ was removed from the official work proposal for the SCFC programme since within previous collaborative projects, including the FIM

Figure 2: Simplified schematization of the Governance Assessment Tool⁵



project, various organizational assessments had been conducted already. These assessments were used in the programme as a starting-point. In the context of this programme, the GAT was loosely and pragmatically applied and took the form of a structured dialogue. To undertake the study of SCFC's governance context the University of Twente accompanied staff from Water Authority Regge & Dinkel and Royal HaskoningDHV on two one-week missions to HCMC in June and August 2013. During the first mission, the Dutch team organized two workshops during which staff of SCFC was asked to individually answer questions about internal and external governance aspects relevant to the organization. While internal aspects of the SCFC are not actually part of the governance context, they are important for understanding how the governance context is experienced by the SCFC. As well, there was a desire by the SCFC to also have some attention given to internal organisational issues. They were thus asked to provide their opinions about the relative importance of the various internal divisions and units and external organizations. These results were translated and proved to be a rich source of information. After the mission, one of the researchers remained in Vietnam and independently interviewed external experts and organizations. The results were integrated into a draft report and discussed during a workshop in the second mission. The SCFC staff expressed its support for the general findings and made specific suggestions for improvement. This resulted in a final report describing the internal (communication and information, human resources and strategic planning) and external (related organizations and an analysis of the four governance qualities) results of the governance tool application⁶. The report was translated into Vietnamese and distributed inside the SCFC. Furthermore, the final report was shared with the Dutch coordinating team and the Dutch trainers. The report was received with great enthusiasm as it provides the Dutch trainers with a base understanding of the context that the participants are operating within and what opportunities there will be to put the shared knowledge into practice.

Results of the governance dialogue

The application of the governance tool has shown that the SCFC faces a number of challenges related to the newness of their organisation and its unique place within the governance structure of HCMC. They have a motivated staff but face challenges related to strategic planning, project management, financing and finding their place within the organisational structure of the city. Additionally, they are a body designed to tackle flooding from an integrated and holistic perspective, these goals are difficult to achieve due to the hierarchical structure of the governance system in which the SCFC operates.

Key findings related to the different governance qualities are:

- **Extent:** the SCFC wants to adopt a more inclusive approach, but the integrated mission of the SCFC is not supported. Communication pathways are insufficiently developed, regulations do not support integrated approaches and there is a lack of integrated planning in general.
- **Coherence:** the responsibilities of the SCFC and other Departments overlap. Strategic collaboration and planning is underdeveloped and needs to be reconciled with the top-down structure of the People's Committee.
- **Flexibility:** the procedural system for project implementation and development implies that the flexibility to adapt to new technologies or ideas is limited. The possibilities for exchanging personnel and direct collaboration with higher-level authorities are limited as well.
- **Intensity:** as an administrative agency the SCFC is not able to generate its own funds or to directly influence decision making. The strongly fragmented and hierarchical structure greatly hinders the development and implementation of integrated plans.

The intention of the structured governance dialogue, as used in the Capacity Building Programme for SCFC, was to understand a number of characteristics of the SCFC organisation and what factors in the external governance context most heavily influence the SCFC and its ability to achieve its goals in an efficient and effective manner. The process does not judge the internal organisation or the external context as being either entirely good or bad. For the SCFC the process solely intends determine to learn how to best manoeuvre within the aspects that are more supportive and those that are less. Every governance context has both of these qualities and it is up to the SCFC to work within its limitations. The visits by the researchers of the University of Twente enabled SCFC divisions and project management units to sit together and discuss the relations and inter-relations between themselves and other governance levels and actors. This joint search for understanding had important results:

- SCFC staff reported that the process of the dialogue itself provided them with a better understanding of their actual tasks and position within the governance framework of HCMC. For example, they learned from their own discussions that as an administrative agency the SCFC has not only limited expertise, but also limited mandate to engage in real strategic planning.
- The dialogue was also an instructive experience for the Dutch researchers: they developed a much better understanding of the complexity of implementing an academic tool in a politically appropriate manner and one that fits the culture of the organisation being studied.

- Together SCFC and the Water Authority used the dialogue to support the prioritising of the different training aspects to be undertaken.
- The resulting report provides a knowledge base regarding urban water governance in HCMC, including information about factors that support and restrict policy implementation. The report is actively shared with other organizations so that the knowledge can also help to improve the implementation of other projects.

Conclusions and lessons learned

In this article we introduced how a structured governance dialogue helps to create a common understanding in an international water programme. While the focus of the presented governance dialogue was the context of the SCFC, the Dutch team also provided presentations of how water governance is organized at the national level, the regional level and the city level in the Netherlands. As a result, both Vietnamese and Dutch participants learned about another context and were able to reflect on their own country context. For the SCFC, it became clearer how the Dutch water authorities could become a natural counterpart even though they have different positions within their own contexts in terms of power. The similarity of their tasks and responsibilities however makes them an inspiring counterpart for the SCFC. We experienced that sharing practices and lessons from the Netherlands was important for turning an academic assessment into a dialogue.

Case and country specific contexts are important inputs for organizing a successful governance dialogue. In our case, the unfeasibility of individual interviews led us to work with focus groups. We asked participants to fill out a sheet of paper in the group, which gave us some sense of how the various staff members understood their role in the organisation and how conscious they were of some important governance related aspects. Throughout the process, translation was a key issue since very few could reasonably communicate in English. As terminology may be new to the translator and to the participants, ample attention needed be paid to clarifying the terms being used. For example, we used pictures to explain the meaning of the governance qualities. Also the drawing of 'organogram' like figures helped to explain the internal and external organization.

The collaboration in the consortium between public organization (Water Authority Vechtstromen), knowledge institute (University of Twente), and private company (Royal HaskoningDHV) proved to be successful as each organization has truly complementary resources. The water authority can provide practical knowledge and experiences that appear to be very relevant to SCFC. The involvement of Royal HaskoningDHV is valuable because they have a good understanding of the political-economic aspects

of the SCFC through the implementation of previous projects, local contacts, and provided logistical support. Also they could provide a different perspective on the process and results. The analytical and critical attitude of the researchers and their experience with analyzing governance was of great value during the dialogue. Particularly, since they focused on providing the best basis for the programme and were open and flexible in applying their research methods.

Our experiences show that a structured governance dialogue is a great way to develop a common understanding of the context in which an organization works or how an issue is being dealt with. Such an understanding provides an important, and often indispensable, basis for an international cooperation project. On the basis of our experiences, we recommend to incorporate a structured governance dialogue in any international water project.

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- 1 VCAPS-consortium (2013), Climate Adaptation Strategy Ho Chi Minh City moving towards the sea with climate change adaptation.
 - 2 UNDP (2013), User's guide on assessing water governance.
 - 3 Kuks, Stefan., Hans, Bressers., Cheryl de Boer, Gül Özerol and Joanne Vinke-De Kruijf (2012) Governance Assessment Tool: Institutional Capacity. University of Twente. Available from: doc.utwente.nl/81075
 - 4 Jacobson, M., Meyer, F., Oia, I., Reddy, P. & Tropp, H. (2013), User's Guide on Assessing Water Governance. Stockholm, Sweden: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
 - 5 Bressers et al (2013). Water governance assessment tool: with an elaboration for drought resilience. Available from: doc.utwente.nl/86879/
 - 6 Cheryl de Boer, Hans Bressers, Simon Goddek and Joanne Vinke-de Kruijf (2013) Report on the Application of the Governance Tool for the Steering Centre for Urban Flood Control (SCFC). Available from: doc.utwente.nl

SAMENVATTING

Waterbeheer in een dichtbevolkt stedelijk gebied is vaak een grote uitdaging. Zeker in Ho Chi Minh stad, een snelgroeiende metropool in transitieland Vietnam. Daarom heeft de Vietnamese overheid in 2008 een centrum voor stedelijk hoogwaterbeheer opgericht. Het centrum is verantwoordelijk voor de afvoer van water, de zuivering van afvalwater en de bescherming tegen hoogwater. Bij het invullen van deze taken loopt men tegen tal van technische en institutionele problemen aan. Om de capaciteit van het centrum te versterken is afgelopen jaar een analyse gemaakt van de governance context waarbinnen het centrum opereert. Op basis hiervan zullen vijf Nederlandse waterschappen komend jaar gerichte trainingen verzorgen. In dit artikel geven we een korte inleiding op de belangrijkste uitdagingen en de organisatie van het waterbeheer in Ho Chi Minh Stad. Vervolgens beschrijven we het proces en de resultaten van de governance context analyse en presenteren we de belangrijkste lessen die we hieruit hebben geleerd. ■
