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## Social learning through rural communities of practice: Empirical evidence from farming households in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta

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## ABSTRACT

The social-ecological systems of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta (VMD) are under stress driven by accelerating impacts of climate change, upstream hydropower development, and local flood management policies. These combined complexities have prompted the rural societies to make significant efforts to adapt to changing conditions. While local adaptation represents diverse patterns of communication and interactions across the social sectors, far less attention has been given to how these learning processes occur in the rural communities of practice. This paper attempts to delineate the learning dynamics in which farming households are key practitioners. The mixed methods approach that guides data collection includes focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with key informants and household surveys. The analysis suggests that social learning plays a significant role in facilitating the adoption and dissemination of experiential and experimental knowledge across geographical boundaries. This study highlights important aspects of households' social learning system characterized by informal networks with various forms of bonding and bridging relationships. These learning patterns suggest that informal communication is a dominant learning approach in the rural delta. This study contributes to advancing the theoretical and empirical knowledge of social learning and its policy implications for rural development in the VMD.

## 1. Introduction

Rural societies in the VMD are confronting the multitude of social-ecological constraints. Apart from the incremental impacts caused by climate change and ongoing hydropower development in the upper Mekong Basin (Keskinen et al., 2010; Kuenzer et al., 2013; Lauri et al., 2012; Mainuddin, Kirby, & Chu, 2011), effects of state policies that favor the application of control measures to support intensive agricultural production have added substantial challenges to agriculture-dependent livelihoods and rural efforts to adapt to change. While significant attention has been drawn to the transboundary governance issues (e.g. transboundary water governance in the Lower Mekong Basin) (Grumbine, Dore, & Xu, 2012; Hirsch, 2006; Lebel, Naruchaikusol, & Juntopas, 2014), learning practices undertaken by rural communities of riparian countries to adapt to social-ecological changes have been insufficiently understood. It is apparent that the adaptation processes in the VMD have presented the dynamics of collaborative learning and production of agricultural knowledge in rural communities of practice. The proliferation of innovative farming practices implies that farmers have played a significant role in rural development. Surprisingly, while learning has long been established as one of the

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core values in the Vietnamese family and culture, its reflections in rural communities of practice in adapting to change have been largely overlooked in most of the studies of adaptation and rural development in the VMD.

The VMD is characterized by dense and complex river and canal systems (Cosslett & Cosslett, 2014), which make it vitally important for agricultural and aquacultural production. The region covers a land area of nearly 4 million hectares, and is home to 18 million people (GSO, 2014). The hydrological regimes of the delta are strongly influenced by the upstream flows, internal precipitation and tidal regimes of the East Sea and the West Sea (Vo, 2012). During the flood season, about half of the delta area (1.9 million hectares) is inundated (Le, Chu, Miller, & Bach, 2007). While the adverse effects of floods on assets, crops, and humans are apparent (Le, Haruyama, Nguyen, Tran, & Bui, 2007; Tran, 2009; Wassmann et al., 2004), there are economic benefits (ecosystem services) brought by floods, such as soil and nutrient replenishment, and from fisheries (Dugan et al., 2010). Consequently, local people have developed a wide range of practices for 'living with floods' (Dang & Pham, 2003). It is important that these livelihood typologies have been recognized and formally translated into local adaptation policies (Bach, Lebel, & Nguyen, 2009).

The development trajectory of the VMD has encountered dilemmas of whether adaptation or control should be adopted (Käkönen, 2008; Reis, 2007). It has become a critical case in point when control measures have still been employed as the dominant approach in local flood management policies (Waibel et al., 2012). Over the past decades, the delta has witnessed the extensive development of hydraulic engineering systems (dykes, canals) to promote intensification and diversification of agricultural production (Benedikter, 2014; Biggs, Miller, Chu, & Molle, 2009; Chu, Suhardiman, & Le, 2014; Garschagen, Diez, Nhan, & Kraas, 2012). This closing-off process has dramatically driven the socio-physical transformation of the delta landscapes (Benedikter, 2014; Miller, 2007). Simultaneously, the autonomy gained from the decentralization policy allows local governments to make their own decisions on development, service provision, and maintenance of hydraulic systems to accommodate their prioritized development strategies (Fritzen, 2006). Evidence reveals that this 'self-governance' approach also contributes to the fragmentation in the construction, operation, and management of flood control schemes in the delta (Tran & James, 2017).

Social learning is closely linked to the efforts rural farmers make to learn and develop agricultural innovations (Dessie, Schubert, Wurzinger, & Hauser, 2013; Oreszczyn, Lane, & Carr, 2010; Spielman, Davis, Negash, & Ayele, 2011). Innovations can be understood as the results of the learning process (Noguera-Méndez, Molera, & Semitiel-García, 2016). Many empirical studies present a range of learning patterns that drive innovations in developing countries. For instance, a case study in Ghana presents the social learning process where rural farmers learn through direct observations and communications with others (Conley & Udry, 2001). To search for ways to enhance local economic conditions, dairy farmers in the North-West of Tunisia are involved in communities of practice where they can share ideas and seek solutions together (Dolinska & d'Aquino, 2016). Examples of this social learning process suggest that farmers have been able to travel to other regions or overseas to observe farming practices, or attend relevant events at regional or national levels. In the case of Ethiopia, social learning creates opportunities for rural farmers to engage in communications with multiple actors, whereby they can enhance understanding of soil conservation (Dessie et al., 2013).

Communities of practice play an essential role in reflecting social learning systems (Wenger, 2000). Through communities of practice, learning is commonly viewed as a process of social construction and knowledge sharing, rather than knowledge transfer (Morgan, 2011). Owing to these interaction processes, members can establish a common identity and understand their common interests and interactions (Oreszczyn et al., 2010), which subsequently stimulates knowledge production, learning and innovation (Angelle, 2008; Swan, Scarbrough, & Robertson, 2002). Recent literature on communities of practice has reflected the typologies of social learning. For instance, Morgan (2011) adopted three dimensions of communities of practice (mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire) from Wenger (1998) to reflect social learning processes associated with Welsh farmers' conversion of conventional farming practices to organic farming. She found that those who have similar styles and attitudes are more likely to be mutually engaged. The communities of practice are significant in showing how farmer decision making can be made (O'Kane, Paine, & King, 2008). In a case study from the UK, Oreszczyn et al. (2010) indicated that farmers often interact with those whom they trust. Their decisions are strongly influenced by the informal learning in which they got involved.

As advocated by Oreszczyn et al. (2010), while much work on communities of practice has been undertaken in organizations, empirical studies conceptualizing this concept in the rural context are needed. This study addresses this knowledge gap, particularly focusing on the social learning patterns taking place in the rural communities of practice in the VMD. While most empirical studies in the VMD focus on the implications of social capital and household ability to access resources for household resilience in dealing with flood risks and other factors of climate change (Bosma, Nhan, Udo, & Kaymak, 2012; Nguyen & James, 2013), little effort has been devoted to farming households' social learning dynamics in association with their everyday adaptation practices. Given the social-ecological challenges facing the rural societies in the VMD, it is essential to understand how farming households are engaged in the social learning process when dealing with change, and how these learning effects contribute to rural adaptation. The data used in this study draw on focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and household surveys that are undertaken in three flood-prone areas in the VMD. From the lens of the rural communities of practice, we argue that social learning plays a pivotal role in supporting local farmers' livelihoods in adapting to change.

This study seeks to provide an empirical understanding of how social learning is defined in the cultural, social, and political context of the VMD. While some researchers are skeptical about the applicability of social learning research in the centrally-controlled governance system of Vietnam (Clemens, Rijke, Pathirana, Evers, & Nguyen, 2015), this study contributes to the current debate on the conceptualization of social learning (Muro & Jeffrey, 2008; Nykvist, 2014; Reed et al., 2010), and provides important evidence of social learning taking place in the rural communities of practice in the VMD.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual framework which explores the social learning concept and the communities of practice associated with social learning. Section 3 discusses the methodological approach that guides data collection and analysis for the study. In Section 4, the case studies will analyze and discuss how social learning takes place in the rural

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