

BOOK REVIEW

Living with the Mekong

Climate change and urban development in Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta, a travel report by Joep Janssen

Helmut Schneider

Dutch architect Joep Janssen has put together a special and rather interesting book about his exploration of Ho Chi Minh City, its surrounding areas and the Mekong Delta. Far more than the term „travel report“ in the subtitle implies, it is not a scientific publication in a strict sense either. Indeed, the reader has some difficulties on how to characterize it properly. Janssen reports on his talks to urban dwellers, to farmers and fishermen as well as to different professional and scientific experts in the book together with the author's own observations and considerations as well as further findings from the author's own readings.

Nearly one third of the publication is made up of photographs taken by Wytse van Keulen. Most of them are grouped together in two „photo-essays“ covering the two travel areas, Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta. The photos are not just an illustrative supplement, but are notably informative in their own right, giving a lively impression of people, their living conditions and urban (HCMC) or rural (Mekong Delta) surroundings. Especially revealing is the view on the booming megacity's poorer and less modern looking „water backyard“ made up by rivers and canals.

The book deals with two, strongly interconnected, main issues: urbanization and water management. Water

is of course a big issue in a delta and monsoon region that experienced rapid urban (and rural) change in the past decades. The challenges both issues pose are intensified by climate change. The consequences of climate change are already being experienced in the region with more rain, more floods and with sea level rising leading to the salinization of the lower reaches of the Mekong river in the delta including its side arms and tributaries. Because political and scientific dealings with urbanization and water problems, at least in the author's view, tend to be mainly about technical solutions and rarely about the people, the book tries to connect these worlds.

In several sections historical inform-

ation is added to elucidate present developments in the light of past experiences. Janssen refers to the French colonial period, but also to urban developments in the Netherlands during the so-called „Golden Age“ in the 17th century, when the city of Amsterdam was growing rapidly and the famous grid of canals (Grachten) was constructed. Although some historical plans and maps are included, the comparison of the two urbanization experiences from different ages, and their water management challenges, are unfortunately not done in a systematic way but rather remain somewhat sketchy and cursory. Likewise, the discussion of possible adjustments to climate change in the

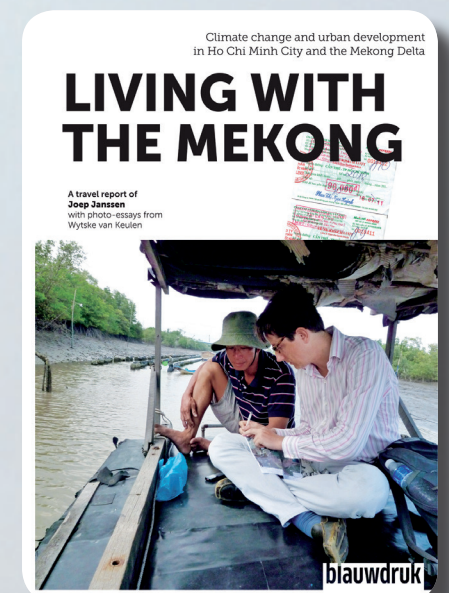
Mekong Delta and the Dutch Mekong Delta Plan for Vietnam (Chap. 6 and 7), misses the chance to be analysed in a more systematic and scientific way. Regrettably Janssen does not make use of the Dutch experience with urbanization and water management when considering the present day situation of Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta which still waits to be put in practice effectively.

The challenge of water management in HCMC is a result of rapid urbanization spreading to low-lying and water rich areas, the sealing of surfaces, which hinders rainfall to seep away quickly, but also of land subsidence mainly due to excessive withdrawal of ground water. Janssen states that bottom-up adjustments like elevating houses must be accompanied by a change in urban development, which has yet to become a policy issue. This is, based on the author's observations, also true for the Mekong Delta, where houses are built on floating platforms and farmers switch to shrimp instead of rice farming due to an increase in water salinity. But adjustments at the grassroots level have to be accompanied by measures on the regional and even the international level. To stress this argument, Janssen points to the Chinese dam building activities along the upstream Mekong river, which already reduced the water flow in the delta easing the intrusion of saltwater. But the idea to seal off the main estuaries with dykes and drainage sluices from the ocean, like it was done in the Netherlands, to cope with the flooding problem and to prevent saltwater intrusion, needs meticulous

consideration and research, because it could have very serious consequences for the ecosystems: „Don't opt for dykes to quickly“, Janssen cites one expert.

To sum up, the book leaves the reader with mixed impressions. On the one hand it offers a rich patchwork of facts and figures, historical information and personal communications with common people as well as with experts. The fine and informative photos of Wytse van Keulen make up a lot of the value of the book. Many informative and illustrative maps and planning sketches are included (although some are reproduced too small to be readable, and in many cases they could have been commented in more detail). On the other hand, the presented pieces of the puzzle do not add up to a conclusive picture of how the people and the responsible administration of Ho Chi Minh City and of the Mekong Delta may cope with the challenges of urbanization and climate change. We are left with the impression of a compilation of a huge amount of very different and for itself interesting facts and information, but which would have needed more refinement and structuring to connect them in a systematic way. The book therefore seems to be somehow unfinished. The perplexing appearance of three text blocks in Dutch language (p. 149, 152-153, 156-157) apparently not connected with the English text adds to this impression. Maybe by investing a bit more time and structuring effort these important issues and a lot of informative and valuable material could be presented more convincingly.

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Source of all photos: Wytse van Keulen.

Bibliographic information
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