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Unchartered Warm Waters: Vietnam's Climate Change Initiative

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Unchartered Warm Waters: Vietnam's Climate Change Initiative



UNCHARTERED WARM WATERS

VIETNAM'S CLIMATE CHANGE INITIATIVE

By Gavi Reiter

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 Ibid.

Vietnam is coastal, rapidly developing, and dependent on agriculture. Consequently, the country happens to be quite vulnerable to climate change. In fact, Vietnam is one of sixteen countries in the 'extreme risk' category of the Climate Change Vulnerability Index. Today, billions of dollars of international funds funnel into various governments, nonprofits, and organizations across the world to solve the consequences of Vietnam's climate change. While typhoons, forest fires, and flooding have threatened the food, water, and housing security of the country's populace, Vietnam is receiving financial support from the international community, mainly through the World Bank, to address climate change related issues. The World Bank funding has created two working groups with different solutions regarding climate change. The U.S.-Vietnam Climate Change Working Group has taken a scientific approach in an effort to adapt Vietnam to climate change, and Vietnam's NGO Climate Change Working Group has taken a social approach.

Primarily, tackling the various approaches to climate change means finding a balance between mitigation and adaptation.

Primarily, tackling the various approaches to climate change means finding a balance between mitigation and adaptation. When looking at mitigation and adaptation, one must consider the associations that come

along with these two routes. Developed countries tend to focus on mitigation of climate change. As a result, they focus their efforts on adjusting past behaviors and infrastructure in order to discontinue further negative impacts while maintaining preexisting standards of living and production. In contrast, developing countries commonly look towards adaptation, or preparing for the harmful effects of climate change. While different nations seem to have a dichotomy in rationale here, both climate change mitigation and adaptation have the potential to be universally relevant. Importantly, both developed and developing countries live with the globality of our planet's climate debacle.

The U.S.-Vietnam Climate Change Working Group, funded by the World Bank, was created under the U.S.-Vietnam Science and Technology Agreement in order to "promote Vietnamese climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts". On December 1, 2010, the U.S.-Vietnam Climate Change Working Group published the United States-Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2010-2011 Mid-Year Progress Report. The document addresses adaptation strategies multiple times but fails to include any mitigation strategies despite the fact that the group errantly claims to work towards both mitigation and adaptation. The document goes on to describe adaptation projects in great detail. Although the report claims to help the vast majority of Vietnamese citizens, it focuses on the scientific minutiae behind climate change adaptation. Out the window

CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITY INDEX

(COUNTRIES RATED AS "EXTREME RISK")

- | | | |
|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| 1. BANGLADESH | 7. HAITI | 13. VIETNAM |
| 2. INDIA | 8. AFGHANISTAN | 14. THAILAND |
| 3. MADAGASCAR | 9. ZIMBABWE | 15. MALAWI |
| 4. NEPAL | 10. MYANMAR | 16. PAKISTAN |
| 5. MOZAMBIQUE | 11. ETHIOPIA | |
| 6. PHILIPPINES | 12. CAMBODIA | |



goes the bottom-line pragmatism in applying climate change-resistant technical knowledge, which much of rural Vietnam values. In addition, most scientists referenced in the report are from the United States, further illustrating the gap between the U.S.-Vietnam Climate Change Working Group and the country it aims to help. Peter Gourlay, the President of the Maryland-Asia Environmental Partnership and U.S. Chairman of the Vietnam Environmental Forum, has stated about the U.S.-Vietnam climate change relationship, “We see great opportunities to provide Vietnam with a knowledge-sharing hub on environmental lessons learned, technologies and models of how other countries have addressed similar problems with affordable solutions... We are committed to Vietnam...”

Examining the value of a working-relationship between the United States and Vietnam, we can clearly see how much there is to be gained. A developed country working with a developing country as a method to research and create adaptation strategies, for one, looks generous on paper. The intrinsic value of the U.S. nurturing its image as the world’s benefactor is most certainly high enough to create such a program. The potentially dubious intentions go further: the lack of mitigation strategies represents a fundamentally lopsided approach to climate change that the U.S. should not be interested in as a developed nation. Interestingly, we know the U.S. has been willfully driving this initiative. Quite possibly the money may be seen as an effort to fix a rocky U.S.-Vietnamese relationship through

the shared concern of climate change. If this is the case, we might quite easily see why this caveat money is so eagerly spent. Whether the money coming from the World Bank towards the U.S.-Vietnam Climate Change Working Group comes without strings attached remains uncertain in this regard.

In addition, the CCWG points to the importance of education and awareness of the general public through the media and press.

On the other hand, Vietnam’s NGO Climate Change Working Group (CCWG) approaches climate change strategies from the social perspective. The CCWG is the umbrella group for all Vietnamese and international NGOs working on Vietnam’s climate change efforts. The CCWG’s mitigation strategies “address social equity and biodiversity conservation” as well as “promote the use of pro-poor standards in carbon markets.” For adaptation, CCWG provides “community-based adaptation” training for vulnerable areas. It also engages with both government and international aid for community-based adaptation strategies and financing. In addition, the CCWG points to the importance of education and awareness of the general public through the media and press. The CCWG believes that climate change solutions must be implemented where the effects are most tangible. Above all, this means catering more to the needs of the general populace and leaving behind lofty technical goals on their ivory towers.

The NGO Resource Centre Climate Change Working Group, “What is the Climate Change Working Group?” Accessed Oct. 25, 2015, VUFO - NGO Resource Centre. http://www.ngocentre.org.vn/webfm_send/849
The NGO Resource Centre Climate Change Working Group, “What is the Climate Change Working Group?” p. 2.
Ibid.
Ibid.

By gearing financial and scientific efforts towards civil society stakeholders, the CCWG aims to adapt to climate change and mitigate its effects by not only protecting natural environments and resources, but also by making climate change action accessible. Through this effort, CCWG essentially aims to increase adaptation capacity within communities. This methodology of financing climate change seems nobler in its intentions, but we must keep in mind that Vietnam's NGO CCWG still receives money from the same channels as the U.S.-Vietnam CCWG does. There certainly is the potential for the corruption of good will as well here.

There have been many historical reminders of the tenuous balance between Vietnam's international relations and its vulnerable ecosystems...

When considering Vietnam's climate change initiative, we are presented with three major players: the U.S.-Vietnam Climate Change Working Group, Vietnam's NGO Climate Change Working Group, and lastly The World Bank. Although these three stakeholders all have separate lenses through which they view climate change, it is important to recognize that both the U.S.-Vietnam Climate Change Working Group and Vietnam's NGO Climate Change Working Group are World Bank funded operations. We should not forget the danger of political sway for both subsidiary organizations from the World Bank and the international community at large.

There have been many historical reminders of the tenuous balance between Vietnam's international relations and its vulnerable ecosystems such as the guerilla warfare with the French and the use of pesticides in Agent Orange with the United States. In the wake of this history, the international community has now turned its attention back to Vietnam and its globalizing economy. As foreign money flows in, saltwater intrusion threatens Vietnamese agriculture, rain patterns change across the country, and the mangrove forest contin-

ues to disappear under rising sea levels. It is clear now more than ever why climate change must be the foremost of Vietnam's concerns, but that does not mean that it should lose its weariness for opportunists that possess ulterior motives. Although the World Bank, the U.S.-Vietnam Climate Change Working Group, and Vietnam's NGO Climate Change Working Group have different strategies and goals for Vietnam, they can agree that climate change action should be at the forefront. The multiple perspectives on Vietnam's climate change initiatives are the most important facet to this issue, making it very hard to evaluate what is good and what is bad for the country. However, the one thing that each of these organizations can agree on is that climate action must occur now.

Gavi Reiter is a junior studying Earth Sciences and minoring in Urban Studies. She is Co-chair of the Student Sustainability Association at Penn. She is also an active member of other environmentally focused groups at Penn such as: Fossil Free Penn, Penn Eco-Reps, and Penn Environmental Group.