Book Review

Livelihood and the Environment in Vietnam

Shigeo FUJII, Shinya FUNAKAWA, Hirohide KOBAYASHI, Izuru SAIZEN, Hidenori HARADA, Hitoshi SHINJO, Hai Trung HUYNH, Hai HOANG, Duc Thanh TRAN, Van Quang TRAN, An Van LE, Singapore: Springer, 2024*

Satoshi SODA**

This substantial English-language volume of more than 300 pages brings together findings and insights accumulated over more than 20 years of field research by a research group centered on the Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies, Kyoto University. The book consists of six chapters, beginning with an introduction in Chapter 1, followed by an overview of Vietnam in Chapter 2, environmental regulations and policies in Chapter 3, rural livelihoods and their surrounding environments in Chapter 4, and urban livelihoods and environmental impacts in Chapter 5, before concluding with the challenges of achieving sustainable development in Chapter 6. At the heart of the book is an examination of the interactions between people's activities and their surrounding environments in both rural and urban Vietnam, together with a discussion of pathways toward sustainable development. As the title suggests, the book goes beyond a simple description of environmental problems. Rather, it portrays the dynamic interplay through which people's ways of life affect the environment while, at the same time, environmental conditions shape their livelihoods, living spaces, and daily practices.

From the perspective of someone working in engineering and technology, Chapter 5 is particularly impressive. Its scope extends from traditional living environments to climate change, air pollution, water environments, sanitation, and solid waste management. Despite this breadth, urban environmental problems are not treated as isolated issues. Instead, they are examined through their macro- and micro-level relationships with people's lifestyles, housing, local communities, and urban infrastructure. This approach is especially valuable for readers in engineering and technology because it shows that environmental problems and the technologies intended to address them cannot be fully understood independently of the social settings in which they arise and are managed.

The first half of the chapter focuses on traditional communities around the old town of Hoi An in

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** Professor, Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering, College of Science & Engineering, Ritsumeikan University

Email: soda@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp

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central Vietnam and on the garden houses of Hue. These cases provide particularly interesting examples for considering how rapid urbanization affects not only physical living spaces but also relationships within local communities. Historic cities and traditional residential areas are often discussed mainly from the perspective of cultural heritage conservation. Here, however, the discussion extends to changes in everyday life, housing, and community cohesion. These examples illustrate how urbanization can transform both the visible built environment and the less visible social relationships embedded within it.

The discussion then expands to Da Nang, a major and rapidly developing city near Hoi An. The assessment of vulnerability to climate change is especially noteworthy because environmental risk is considered in relation to urban growth, land use, infrastructure, and patterns of human activity. The chapter further broadens its scope to air pollution and aquatic environments, thereby moving from the scale of households and communities to that of the city and region. Yet the connection with everyday life is maintained throughout. Air pollution affects how and where people live and travel, while the condition of rivers, canals, and lakes is closely related to domestic water use, wastewater discharge, land use, and urban infrastructure.

The contrast between historic cities such as Hoi An and Hue and the rapidly growing city of Da Nang is particularly effective. It demonstrates that urbanization does not produce a uniform pattern of environmental transformation. Rather, its impacts depend strongly on local history, culture, geography, patterns of development, and existing infrastructure. By bringing together these contrasting cases, the chapter vividly reveals how urbanization is transforming lives and environments within distinct local contexts.

Another particularly interesting feature of Chapter 5 is that it does not stop at examining the water quality of urban rivers and lakes. It also traces how water is used in households and how the resulting wastewater and excreta are subsequently managed. Household water use is examined by purpose, while wastewater and excreta management are discussed in terms of actual systems, including septic tanks, sewerage, and the collection, transport, and disposal of fecal sludge. This perspective is valuable because the condition of the urban water environment cannot be understood only from measurements taken in rivers or treatment facilities. It is also necessary to consider how water enters the urban system, how it is used in daily life, and what happens after use.

For readers in water and environmental engineering, this systems perspective is particularly appealing. Individual technologies are not presented in isolation, but are placed within chains of use, collection, treatment, transport, and final disposal. The performance of a septic tank, for example, cannot be separated from maintenance and desludging practices, while fecal sludge management depends on effective collection, transport, treatment, and disposal. Likewise, sewerage must be considered in relation to household connections, treatment capacity, and patterns of urban development. By tracing these processes beyond the point of waste generation, the chapter shows how environmental outcomes are shaped by the entire infrastructure and management chain.

Urban solid waste is addressed with a similarly broad perspective. The discussion covers waste generation rates and composition, collection, separation, recycling, composting, incineration, and landfilling. Rather than presenting these topics only as a list of waste management technologies, the chapter connects them with patterns of consumption, household behavior, urban growth, and municipal services. This makes it possible to understand not only how much waste is generated or how it is treated, but also how waste arises through everyday activities and how urban systems respond to it.

One of the major attractions of Chapter 5 is therefore its treatment of water and waste as continuous flows through urban society. Water is supplied, used in households, discharged as wastewater,

treated or released, and returned to the environment. Goods are consumed, transformed into waste, collected, separated, recovered, treated, or ultimately disposed of. These flows connect households with infrastructure and, ultimately, with the surrounding environment. The chapter thus enables the reader to follow the relationship between daily life and urban environmental systems as a continuous process rather than as a series of separate technical issues.

The greatest strength of the book as a whole lies in its ability to provide a cross-cutting overview of a wide range of research findings within a single volume. Rather than interpreting Vietnam's environmental problems solely through policies or macro-level statistics, the book consistently approaches them from the perspective of people's daily lives, grounded in many years of field-based research. This bottom-up perspective is persuasive because it connects broad environmental issues with actual places, communities, households, and practices.

Another important strength is the diversity of scales covered. Some studies focus on households or communities, while others examine cities, regions, or national policy frameworks. The book thus moves between the micro scale of everyday behavior and the macro scale of environmental governance and sustainable development. This breadth reflects the inherently interdisciplinary nature of global environmental studies and demonstrates the importance of combining social, environmental, and technical perspectives.

At the same time, as Chapter 5 clearly demonstrates, the themes addressed across the volume are extremely broad. This diversity is a major strength, but it also creates a challenge. For this reason, one is left with the impression that the book might have achieved an even more systematic understanding of sustainability as a shared goal had a common analytical framework linking the individual case studies been made more explicit. A stronger synthesis of the relationships among livelihoods, environmental pressures, infrastructure, institutions, and sustainability outcomes might have helped readers compare the cases across different regions and sectors more systematically.

This point, however, does not diminish the value of the individual studies. Rather, it reflects the ambition and scale of the volume. The book brings together many years of research on a country undergoing rapid economic, social, and environmental transformation. Its strength lies precisely in the accumulation of detailed field-based evidence and in the opportunity to examine many different dimensions of the relationship between livelihoods and the environment within a single work.

Today, relations between Japan and Vietnam have developed beyond economic cooperation and people-to-people exchange into a comprehensive partnership encompassing a wide range of fields, including the environment, climate change, education, and science and technology. In this context, this volume, which presents a multifaceted picture of everyday life and the environment in Vietnam, is highly informative for deepening understanding of the country and for considering the future direction of Japan–Vietnam cooperation. The book will be of interest not only to researchers and students specializing in Vietnam or Southeast Asia, but also to those working in environmental studies, urban planning, engineering, public policy, and international cooperation. Effective cooperation requires more than the transfer of technologies or policies; it also requires a deep understanding of local lifestyles, social structures, infrastructure, institutions, and environmental realities. In this respect, grounded in long-term field research and an interdisciplinary perspective, this volume offers valuable insights for considering both sustainable development and the future of Japan–Vietnam cooperation.