The subsiding Mekong Delta

3D numerical simulation on the impact of groundwater exploitation

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Introduction

Land subsidence rates of ~1-4 cm yr^{-1} are measured in the low-lying Vietnamese Mekong Delta (Fig. 1 & 3). These relatively high subsidence rates are attributed to groundwater extraction. On daily basis over two million m^3 of groundwater is extracted and as a result, hydraulic heads in aquifers are dropping, on average 0.3-0.7 m yr^{-1}, triggering further land subsidence.

With over 50 % of the delta surface elevated less than 1 meter above sea level, land subsidence poses a real threat to this delta, increasing flood risk and salt water intrusion. Combined with decreased sedimentation, the long term survival of the delta is at stake. To assess future land subsidence, we need to go from measurements to predictions.

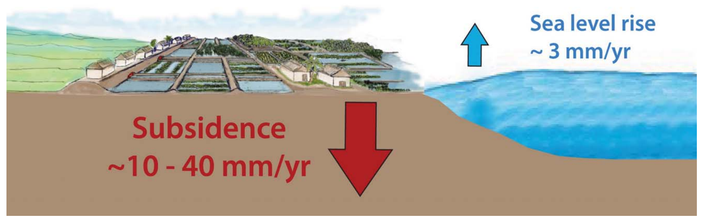

Figure 1. Absolute sealevel rise versus subsidence for the Mekong delta. Subsidence exceeds absolute sea level rise by a magnitude.

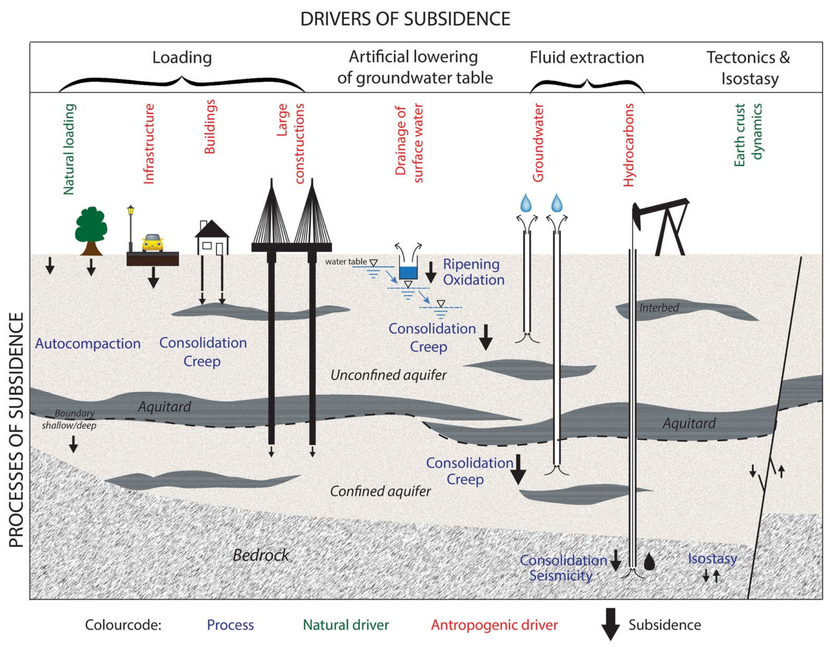

Figure 2. Schematization of the main, both natural and anthropogenic, subsidence drivers and corresponding processes within the upper (phreatic) aquifer and deeper (confined) aquifer(s) (after Minderhoud et al., 2015).

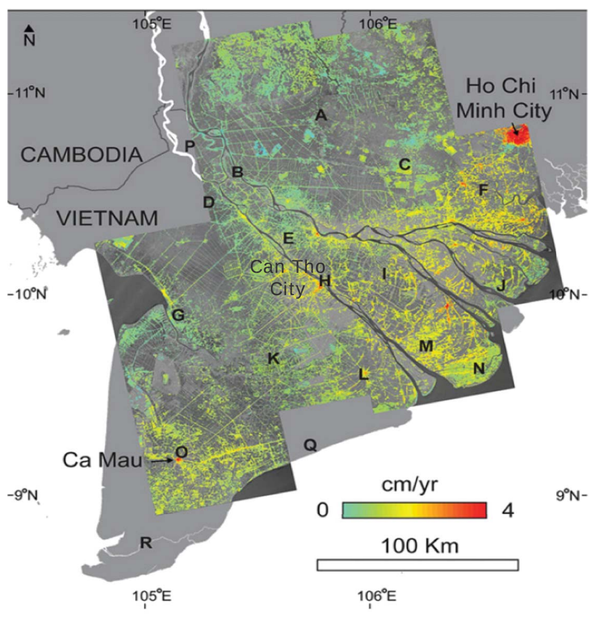

Figure 3. Satellite based (InSAR) subsidence rates measured between 2006-2010 for the Mekong Delta. Data © JAXA, METI 2011 (Erban et al., 2014).

Objective

We aim to model subsidence resulting from 25 years of groundwater exploitation in the Mekong delta (Fig. 4).
Furthermore, we test our new model setup, which will be used at a later stage to create subsidence predictions.

Approach

We developed a 3D groundwater flow model to simulate groundwater flow. The multi-aquifer subsurface is reconstructed based on interpreted borehole data (Fig.5). Hydraulic heads are modeled following groundwater exploitation during the past 25 years. Last, corresponding subsidence is calculated.

Available data / data processing

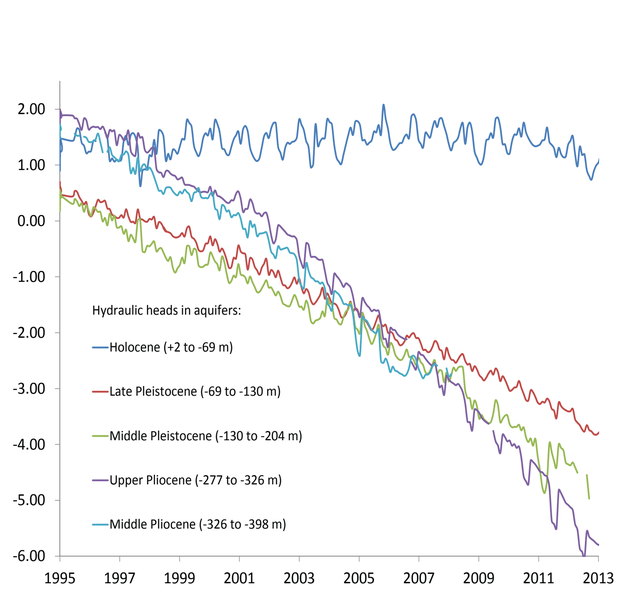

Figure 4. Measured hydraulic head time series from monitoring wells near Can Tho city, central Mekong delta.

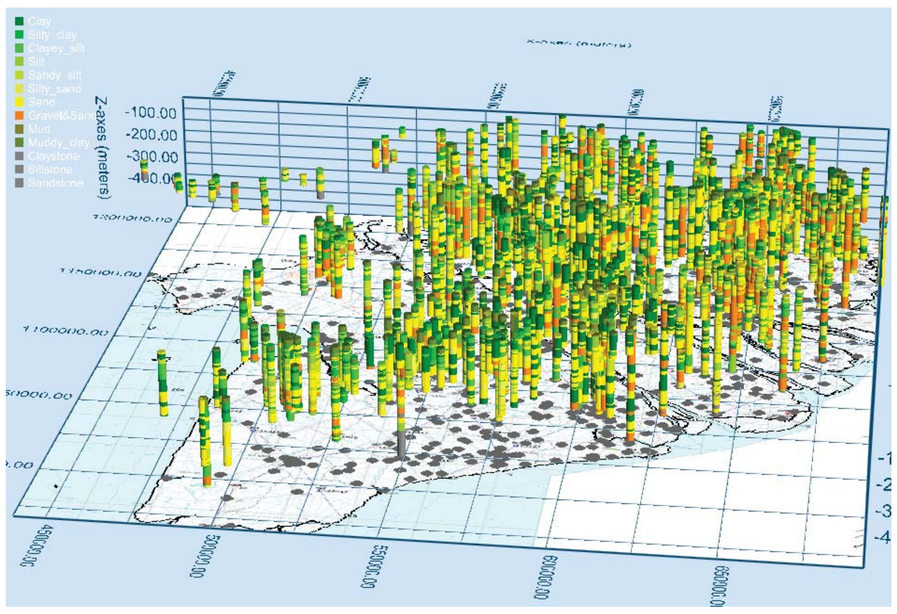

Figure 5. Dataset of lithological boreholes throughout the Mekong delta (>400). Aquifer-aquitard interpretation is based on this dataset.

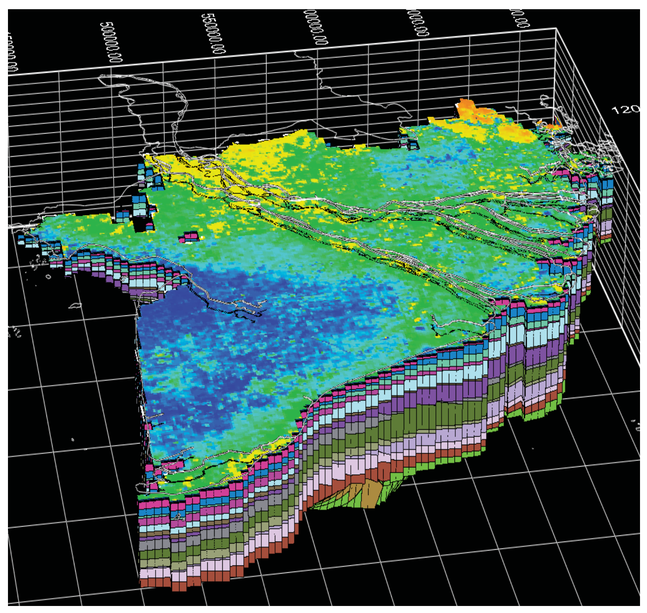

Figure 6. 3D hydrogeological model in iMOD (MODFLOW shell by Deltares) showing the DEM and subsurface architecture.

Preliminary results

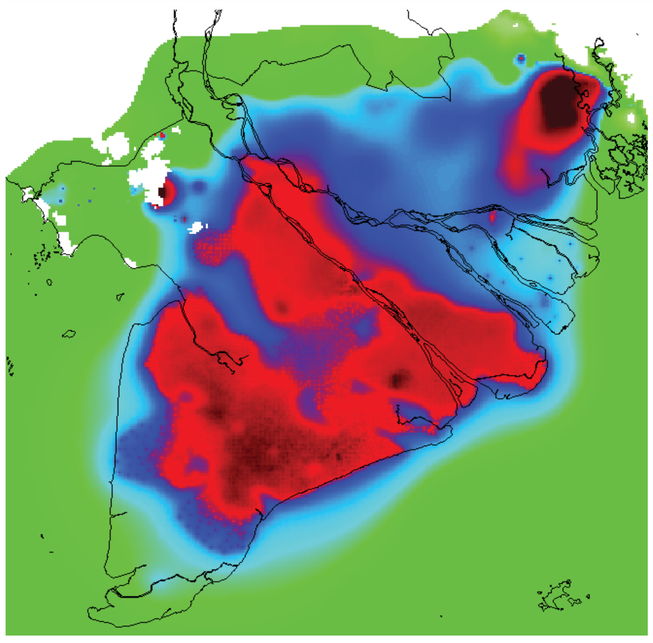

Figure 7. Spatial variability of hydraulic head decline of the Middle Pleistocene aquifer after a 25-year model run (1991-2015)*.

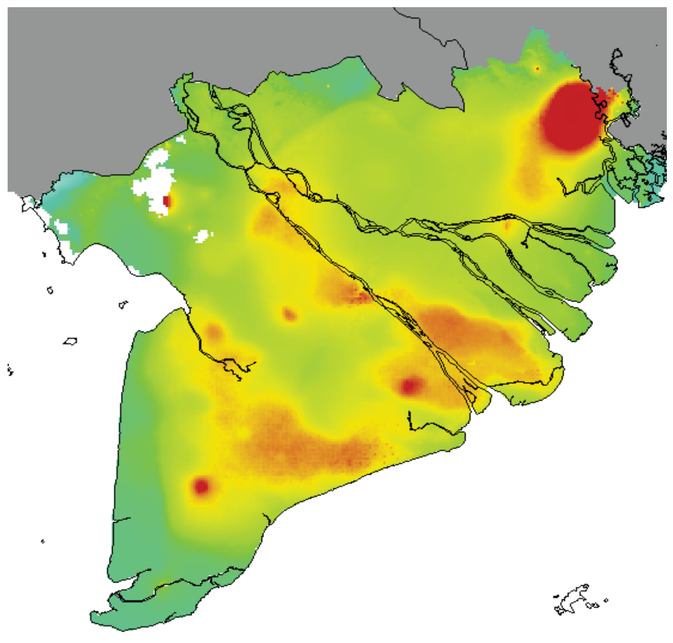

Figure 8. Total calculated subsidence for all layers (1991-2015) modeled using the coupled SUB-Cr module in iMOD*.

Conclusions

- **Similarities between measured subsidence (INSAR, Fig 3.) and process-based, modelled subsidence.**
- **Groundwater overexploitation in probably the dominant subsidence driver, but may not explain the full signal. Leaves room for other subsidence drivers.**
- **Pumping induced subsidence started only 2 decades ago, when the delta was still in a hydrogeological untouched state.**

Challenges

- **Geotechnical parameters are unknown for the deep deposits and have to be estimated**

Acknowledgements
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References
Erban, L. E., Gorelick, S. M., & Zebker, H. A. (2014). Groundwater extraction, land subsidence, and sea-level rise in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Environmental Research Letters, 9(8), 1–6.
Minderhoud, P.S.J., Erkens, G., Pham, V.H., Vuong, B.T., Stouthamer, E., 2015. Assessing the potential of the multi-aquifer subsurface of the Mekong Delta (Vietnam) for land subsidence due to groundwater extraction. Proc. Int. Assoc. Hydrol. Sci. 372, 73–76.

* The results depicted are preliminary model outputs before model calibration.

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