



# Catalyzing action towards the sustainability of deltas

Eduardo S Brondizio<sup>1</sup>, Efi Foufoula-Georgiou<sup>2</sup>, Sylvia Szabo<sup>3</sup>,  
Nathan Vogt<sup>4</sup>, Zita Sebesvari<sup>5</sup>, Fabrice G Renaud<sup>5</sup>,  
Alice Newton<sup>6,7</sup>, Edward Anthony<sup>8</sup>, Andressa V Mansur<sup>9</sup>,  
Zoe Matthews<sup>3</sup>, Scott Hetrick<sup>10</sup>, Sandra M Costa<sup>4</sup>,  
Zachary Tessler<sup>11</sup>, Alejandro Tejedor<sup>12</sup>, Anthony Longjas<sup>12</sup> and  
John A Dearing<sup>13</sup>

Deltaic systems are among the most dynamic and productive environments on Earth and many have a high population density. Deltas play a central role in food and water security but are increasingly facing hazards such as submergence, riverine and coastal flooding, and coastal erosion. This paper synthesizes efforts of the Belmont Forum Deltas project, an international network of interdisciplinary research collaboration with focal areas in the Mekong, the Ganges Brahmaputra, and the Amazon deltas. The inherent complexity and dearth of knowledge about deltas require disciplinary expertise to advance jointly with interdisciplinary collaboration. An overarching research framework articulates focal research areas and collaborative modules, serving as an umbrella for both crosscutting and specific research questions. These modules have allowed for common definition of goals, responsibilities, and products, but flexible and decentralized disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaborations. Self-organization within and across areas of expertise has proven effective in bringing collaborators to commit to specific efforts. Knowledge co-production workshops focusing on vulnerability and risk have successfully strengthened interactions with regional organizations. As a distributed network, challenges remain in terms of type of and level of interaction and hands-on collaborative work among research partners, including joint fieldwork, but successes far outweigh difficulties. To illustrate these points, we present a review of three research domains built upon different arrangements of disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaborations: advancing biophysical classifications of deltas, understanding deltas as coupled social-ecological systems, and analyzing and informing social and environmental vulnerabilities in delta regions.

## Addresses

<sup>1</sup> Department of Anthropology, Center for the Analysis of Social-Ecological Landscapes (CASEL), and the Ostrom Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University Bloomington, United States

<sup>2</sup> Department of Civil, Environmental, and Geo-Engineering, and St. Anthony Falls Laboratory, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, United States

<sup>3</sup> University of Southampton, Division of Social Statistics and Demography, Southampton, United Kingdom

<sup>4</sup> Universidade do Vale do Paraíba (UNIVAP), Sao Jose dos Campos, SP, Brazil

<sup>5</sup> United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security, Bonn, Germany

<sup>6</sup> NILU-IMPEC, Box 100 Kjeller, Norway

<sup>7</sup> CIMA, Gambelas Campus, University of Algarve, Faro, Portugal

<sup>8</sup> Université Aix-Marseille, France

<sup>9</sup> Oficina Erasmus Mundus, Universidad de Cádiz, Puerto Real 11519, Cádiz, Spain

<sup>10</sup> Center for the Analysis of Social-Ecological Landscapes (CASEL), Indiana University Bloomington, United States

<sup>11</sup> CUNY Advanced Science Research Center, Environmental CrossRoads Initiative, New York, NY, United States

<sup>12</sup> National Center for Earth-surface Dynamics and St. Anthony Falls Laboratory, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, United States

<sup>13</sup> University of Southampton, School of Geography and Environment, Southampton, United Kingdom

Corresponding author: Brondizio, Eduardo S ([ebrondiz@indiana.edu](mailto:ebrondiz@indiana.edu))

**Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability** 2016, **19**:182–194

This review comes from a themed issue on **Sustainability science**

Edited by **Hal Mooney**

Received 18 January 2016; Revised 3 May 2016; Accepted 4 May 2016

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2016.05.001>

1877-3435/© 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

## Deltas as sentinels of regional and global changes

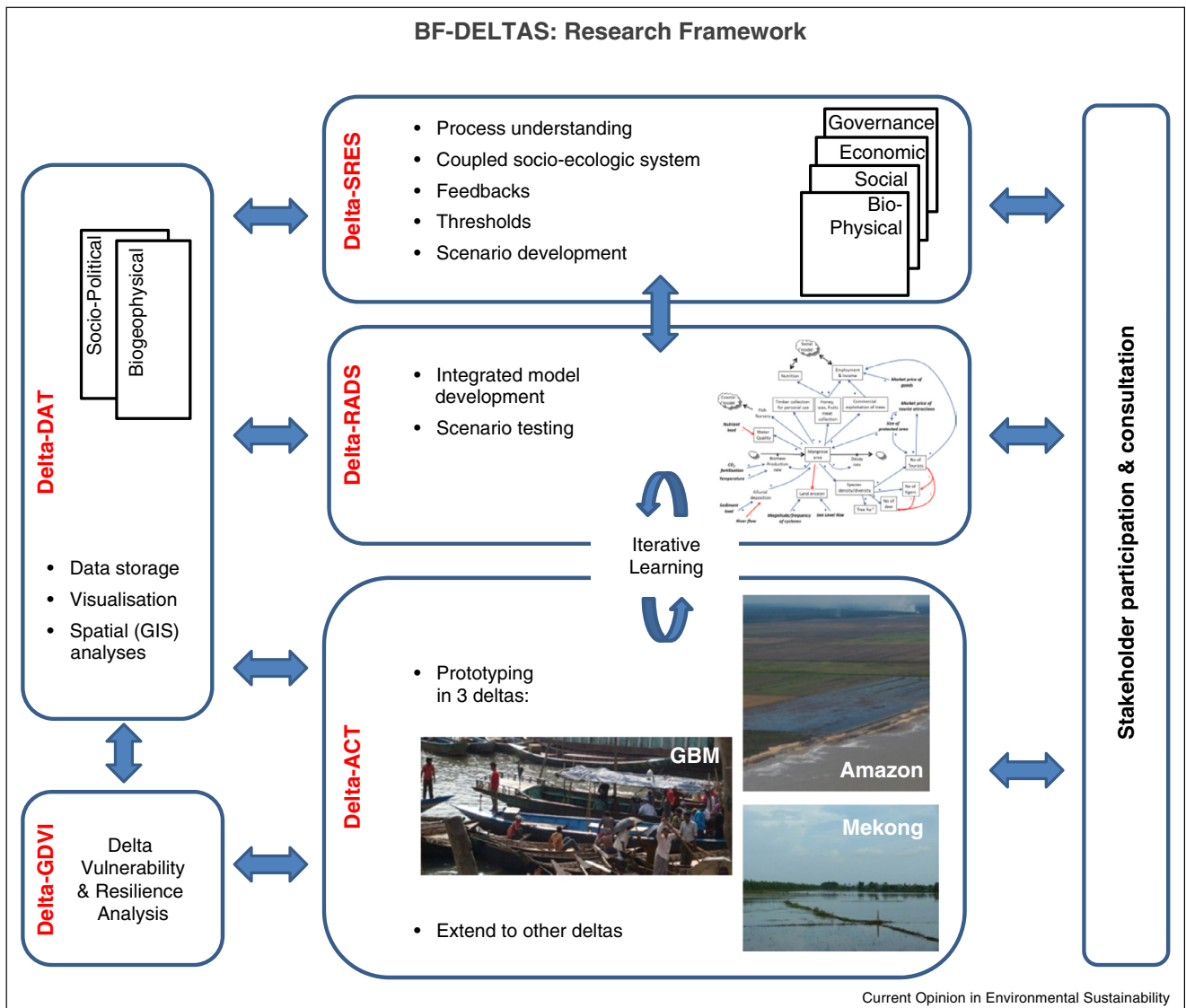
Deltaic systems are among the most dynamic and productive environments on Earth, home to a human population density many-fold that of world average [1<sup>\*</sup>]. Important breadbaskets of the world, deltas play a central role in food and water security, and riverine and coastal vulnerability of urban and rural areas. Recent assessments suggest that during the past decade 85% of the world's deltas experienced severe flooding, a situation that could increase by 50% under current scenarios for relative sea-level rise [2<sup>\*</sup>,3,4]. Undergoing intense urban transformations, deltas are therefore not only important socio-ecological systems in virtually all regions of the world, but also coastal sentinels of global change [5–8].

We describe a project that focuses on both advancing scientific knowledge and raising international awareness of the importance and vulnerability of deltas worldwide (The Belmont Forum (BF) Deltas project) [9\*]. The project has promoted international and regional cooperation and data sharing at the scientific and stakeholder levels. It has also provided an opportunity to initiate, mature, and reflect upon the process of establishing an international framework for interdisciplinary and stakeholder collaboration contributing to the scientific understanding of these complex systems and their changes with the goal of informing sustainability discussions more broadly. A shared research framework (Figure 1) has helped to articulate focal research areas and collaborative modules linked to specific outputs in three major deltas:

the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna, Mekong, and Amazon deltas.

The project framework has served as an umbrella for both overarching and specific research questions, within and across disciplinary boundaries, as well as a pathway for sustained and bidirectional exchange between researchers and stakeholders. The five modules in the framework have allowed not only for common definition of goals and responsibilities, approaches and products, but also for flexible and decentralized collaborations around issues of common interest. While sharing a common framework, self-organization has proved effective in bringing collaborators to commit to specific efforts, within the financial possibilities of the project. Our experience so far shows

Figure 1



The BF-Deltas Project Research Framework.

that the complexity of delta systems and the dearth of knowledge about how social–ecological–physical processes interact and respond to regional and global changes demand coupling of disciplinary and interdisciplinary expertise as well as collaboration with stakeholders.

In the context of this special issue on lessons learned from interdisciplinary global change research programs, this article has a two-fold goal: to reflect on the process used by the BF-Deltas project for developing an interdisciplinary research and stakeholder collaboration and to present a review of current thinking on conceptualizing deltas as biophysical–social–ecological systems. We begin by providing a brief history of the establishment of the BF-Deltas team network. We then provide a review of three research domains where disciplinary expertise and interdisciplinary collaborations are contributing to shape outcomes: advancing biophysical classifications of deltas, conceptualizing deltas as coupled social–ecological systems, and assessing social and environmental vulnerabilities in delta regions. Each research domain is contributing to fill in key knowledge gaps. We conclude by reflecting on issues and conditions that have facilitated and/or challenged disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration and overview opportunities going forward.

#### **Building an international, interdisciplinary research network dedicated to deltas**

The BF-Deltas project emerged from collaborations and initiatives that begun before the Belmont Forum funding program released its first call for proposals focusing on Coastal Vulnerability. Research teams in North and South America, Europe, and Asia were actively carrying out research in the Amazon, the Mekong, and Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna, and other deltas. One instrumental effort was the NSF-funded Science and Technology Center, called National Center for Earth Surface Dynamics (NCED), led by Efi Foufoula-Georgiou, which was already engaging with diverse groups of stakeholders as part of research on the restoration of the Mississippi River delta after hurricane Katrina. The experience and foundational work developed by leading members of that team as well as other research efforts by project members contributed to establishing a mode of operation that has proved successful for the creation of the BF-Deltas project.

Other groups were working to mobilize attention to the concerning situation of deltas around the world. One specific effort that created the impetus for proposing the BF-Deltas project was the writing of a collaborative article calling for an International Year of Deltas (IYD) [9<sup>\*</sup>] and subsequently the proposal submitted to ICSU for the establishment of articulating the ‘Sustainable Deltas Initiative’, which became supported by ICSU in 2015 and was launched at the ‘Deltas in Times of Climate Change’ Conference in Rotterdam. This effort

helped set a common vision and research agenda where scientists working on very different aspects of deltas research could converge [9<sup>\*</sup>]. While the challenges faced by deltas around the world are many and vary depending on the specific stressors and their social–ecological settings, deltas also share many converging challenges, which became the driving force behind bringing together diverse teams towards a synergistic project on Deltas. These questions include: (1) How does climate change, pressure on resources and engineering/infrastructure development make people, biodiversity and ecosystems vulnerable? (2) How can this vulnerability be measured? (3) How do delta areas absorb extreme events? What are the hydrological and ecological thresholds underlying the integrity of a delta region? (4) What are the relevant local and regional biophysical and social stressors for a particular delta system. How do these interact, and how do they vary spatially and over time? (5) How can regional delta sustainability be balanced with economic growth? (6) How can one reduce future risk while attaining sustainable development?

In this context, when the call for proposals from the Belmont Forum appeared, the elements for a research project were in place around a common vision uniting a variety of research groups. In order to bring diverse research teams together to consider ways to work with regional stakeholders, the research team agreed upon a research framework that includes five main modules or work packages: (a) developing an analytical framework for assessing delta vulnerability and scenarios of change (Delta-SRES), (b) developing an open-access, science-based, integrative modeling framework for risk assessment and decision support (Delta-RADS), (c) developing tools to support quantitative mapping of the bio-physical and socio-economic environment of deltas and consolidate bio-physical and social data within shared data repositories (Deltas-DAT), (d) developing Global Delta Vulnerability Indices (Delta-GDVI), that capture current and projected scenarios for major deltas around the world and (e) collaborating with regional colleagues and stakeholders to put the science, modeling, and data into action (Delta-ACT).

Implementing this research framework has required multiple modes of collaboration within and among the Earth system, social and historical, ecological, health and engineering sciences, as well as engagement with regional stakeholders. Table 1 illustrates the diversity of perspectives bearing importance in delta research. It has required analysis of observational, experimental, and numerically modeled deltas to understand how physical forcings (e.g., climate, rivers, ocean waves, vegetation, sediment composition) affect the structure of delta channel networks. It has also required the development of a conceptual framework to examine deltas as coupled social–ecological systems. The project has included analysis of large and small-scale biophysical observations, socio-economic data from household surveys, censuses, and demographic

Table 1

Examples of disciplinary domains and interdisciplinary collaborations involved in the BF Deltas project

Knowledge domain	Knowledge branch	Examples of knowledge contribution	
Earth System Sciences	Climate science	Sea-level rise, trends in meteorology and hydrology	
	Meteorology Hydrology	Storm surge, river floods Water cycle and damming, saltwater intrusion, sediment transport	
	Geology & Physical geography Oceanography	Sediment deposition, erosion Sea-level rise, tides, storm surge flooding	
Engineering	River basin engineering Coastal engineering Urban infrastructure	Dam construction, River works Port construction, dredging coastal works Drainage and land reclamation	
	Environmental sciences	Terrestrial Ecology Limnology	Vegetation mosaics, habitats Freshwater-floodplain gradients; water chemistry; fish ecology
Forest ecology Marine biology Land use & Landscape ecology		Land cover variation and mosaics Coastal ecosystem dynamics Land use change and landscape management	
Environmental chemistry Anthropology, Archeology		Interaction aquatic and terrestrial environments Coastal populations history of settlements, social organization, economic activities, landscape management, adaptation	
Sociology Human Geography		Social context, political and administrative changes, and resource control and management Urbanization in the delta-zone, vulnerability mapping	
Economics Political science Demography		Poverty dynamics in delta areas. economic sectors, stakeholder mapping, risk and insurance losses, ecological valuations Governance, trans-border issues, international relations Population dynamics, fertility, mortality, migration	
Social sciences and Humanities	Development studies History Social statistics	Human welfare, societal resilience, socio-economic inequalities, sustainable development Long-term changes; colonization, occupation and settlement history Measuring and quantifying wellbeing, health and resilience in delta regions and their links to environmental factors	
	Health sciences	Epidemiology Nutritional sciences Toxicology	Water-borne diseases; infectious diseases Nutrition and food safety and security Health impacts of air and soil pollution

assessments, and knowledge co-production workshops with regional partners and institutions. During the first three years of the project, the research group has progressively developed common terminology, conceptual tools, and considered new questions. While responsibilities were assigned depending on the expertise of each research team, a great deal of new collaborations and self-organization emerged. Below, we review three areas of research collaboration contributing to advancing both

basic research and problem-oriented analysis of deltaic systems.

### **Deltas as laboratories for collaborations: examples in three research domains**

#### **Understanding delta as biophysical systems: advancing quantitative delta classification**

As the intersection of landmasses, river basins, and large bodies of water, deltas are naturally very dynamic.

They grow, sink, and change courses, shaping land and aquatic ecosystems, posing challenges for human settlements and navigation. Humans attempt to stabilize delta dynamics by various means, [10], many of them involving coastal engineering, channeling and land reclamation, as exemplified by the Dutch Delta works [11]. Upstream damming often alters crucial sediment supply to the delta [12,1<sup>\*</sup>], and disrupts nutrient export and composition [13].

One of the key questions identified at the onset of the BF-Deltas Project was that of understanding deltas as complex physical–social–ecological systems. This understanding requires new forms of interpretation and classification of deltas commensurable with the diversity of conditions and changes of deltas worldwide. The BF-Deltas project is contributing to international efforts to advance quantitative-based approaches for delta classification, a topic that has a rich history.

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed an increasing number of delta studies worldwide, informed by an expanding availability of satellite imagery. New proposals for classifying deltas emerged largely based on a measure of the influence of river discharge relative to ocean waves and currents [14,15]. Delta morphology, far from being universal, exhibits a large variability depending on the physical processes acting on the delta, for example, external forcing [16,15] and sediment composition [17]. Fisher *et al.* [14], for instance, distinguished between ‘high-constructive’ river deltas in settings of strong fluvial influence and weak wave and current activity, and ‘high-destructive’ deltas, associated with wave and current removal of a significant part of the fluvial load. The most commonly used classification for deltas is that of Galloway [15] who proposed a categorization of deltas in terms of three end-point members: river-dominated, wave-dominated or tide-dominated, that he grouped into a ternary diagram. This seminal classification became widely adopted as it allows for individual river mouths to be positioned in a classificatory diagram based on the qualitative analysis of the perceived influence of river flow, waves and tides. More recently, Hori and Saito [18] proposed some quantitative indices based on tidal range, wave height and suspended sediment load to distinguish between wave-influenced, mixed tide-wave-influenced, and tide-influenced deltas, based on the explicit assumption that all deltas are strongly influenced by fluvial discharge and sediment load that determine delta growth.

The complexity of river deltas and their self-organizing patterns of distributary channel networks split and rejoin to deliver water, sediment, and nutrients from the apex to the coastal zone. These characteristics make them more difficult to study than their tributary counterparts, that is, the river basin networks, which collect fluxes to a single outlet. In addition, delta networks are highly dynamic and sensitive to local human activities, upstream basin alterations,

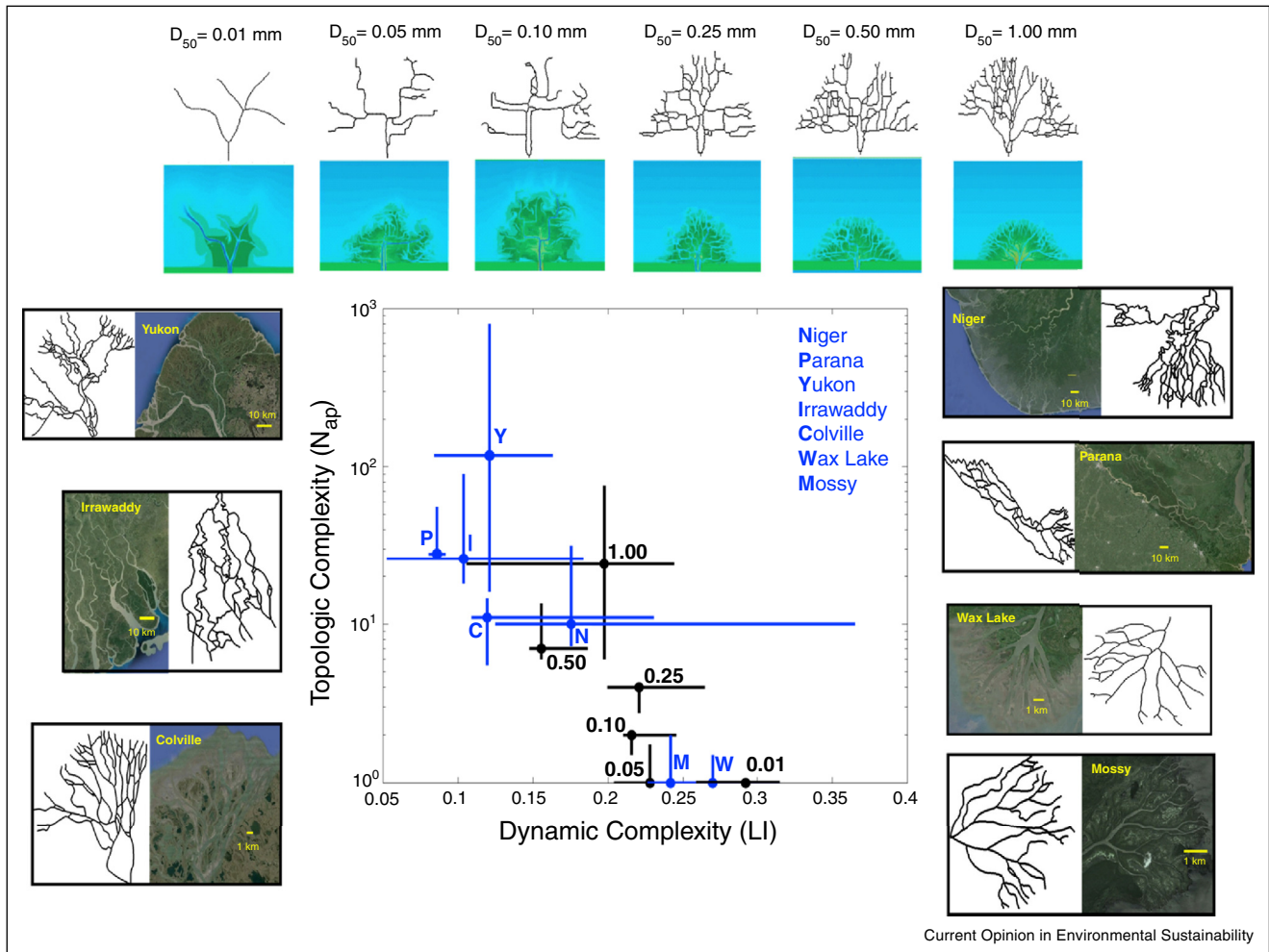
land subsidence, sea level rise, and extreme climatic events [6]. A quantitative study of the patterns (e.g., shoreline, channel network structure, island distribution) carved in deltaic surfaces by the different physical and anthropogenic processes is difficult but offers the potential for advancing our understanding of deltas as complex systems, allowing for a quantitative comparison of deltas to replace the still qualitative diagrams of Galloway [15] (and also [19]), and helping thus to draw connections between the dominant physical processes and the delta morphology they imprint on the landscape.

Building upon multiple efforts to advance the qualitative classification of deltas [20–23,24,25<sup>\*</sup>,26; among others], we highlight here an effort by members of the BF-Deltas project to introduce a rigorous mathematical framework for studying deltas using graph theory [25<sup>\*</sup>]. In this framework, delta channel networks are represented as directed graphs, with junctions as nodes and channels as links, and it was shown that via simple algebraic operations on the ‘adjacency matrix’ (a sparse matrix that contains all the information about network connectivity), several topologic and dynamic properties of deltas can be computed, as well as vulnerability maps constructed depicting the places of the network where disturbances would most significantly affect the shoreline fluxes.

This framework allowed the research team to develop a suite of metrics that capture the topologic (connectivity structure of channel pathways) and dynamic (exchange of fluxes among delta apex-to-outlet sub-networks) complexity of deltas [26]. This Topo-Dynamic perspective of delta networks sets the foundation for quantitative and comparative classifications of deltas. Figure 2 illustrates the application of this approach to seven deltas around the world. It is observed that the relatively young, river-dominated Wax Lake and Mossy deltas, for example, exhibit low topologic complexity (mostly simple bifurcating structure with a small number of loops) but high dynamic complexity (significant *leakage* of fluxes from each subnetwork to its neighboring subnetworks draining to different outlets). This is opposite, for example, to the more mature (and exposed to wave energy and permafrost) Yukon delta, which has high topologic complexity but low dynamic complexity.

These topo-dynamic relationships provide the opportunity to quantitatively relate the complex delta patterns to the processes that created them, but they need to be further studied in a controlled environment where the exact physics behind the emerging patterns are known. This is only possible in a controlled laboratory setting [27–29] or via numerical simulations [30–34]. Recent work using Delft3D-simulated river dominated deltas with varying size distribution of incoming sediment, demonstrated that sediment composition plays a significant role on delta shape and dynamics with coarser

Figure 2



2D TopoDynamic Space. Combining both the Topological (Number of alternative paths,  $N_{ap}$ ) and Dynamic (Leakage Index,  $LI$ ) complexity, each delta is positioned uniquely in the TopoDynamic space. Seven field deltas (Niger, Parana, Yukon, Irrawaddy, Colville, Wax Lake and Mossy) and six numerical deltas with different median grain size are displayed. From the numerical deltas we can conclude that fine grained, cohesive deltas have low topologic complexity and high dynamic complexity. For field deltas, it is observed a transition to high topologic complexity and low dynamic complexity as well. The dots correspond to the medians of both parameters, that is, number of alternative paths and Leakage Index, while the vertical and horizontal lines span the corresponding 25th up to the 75th percentiles. [For details see Tejedor *et al.* [25\*,26]].

incoming sediment tending to create more complex topologically (increased number of pathways) but simpler dynamically (reduced flux exchange between subnetworks that join the apex to the shoreline outlets) (see Figure 2). By comparing and contrasting field deltas with simulated deltas of known physics and morphodynamics, a more refined classification as well as detection of geologic and anthropogenic constrains on deltas, is possible [35].

The example of quantitative delta classification discussed above shows the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration within the natural sciences, involving geologists, hydrologists, engineers, mathematicians and modelers recognizing the importance of and contributing to advancing

previous efforts in order to understand and classify the diversity of deltas around the world. From such a collaboration a complex system perspective is evolving, bringing more attention to the potential role of ecological and anthropogenic processes and the need to examine deltas as coupled social–ecological systems, as discussed below.

#### Understanding deltas as social–ecological systems: conceptualization and application

The interconnected nature of deltas and the types of problems which these regions face, ranging from elevated risks of natural hazards and disasters to increasing pollution, call for analytical frameworks that integrate and are relevant to different knowledge domains and to the broader public. Furthermore, at the nexus of land and

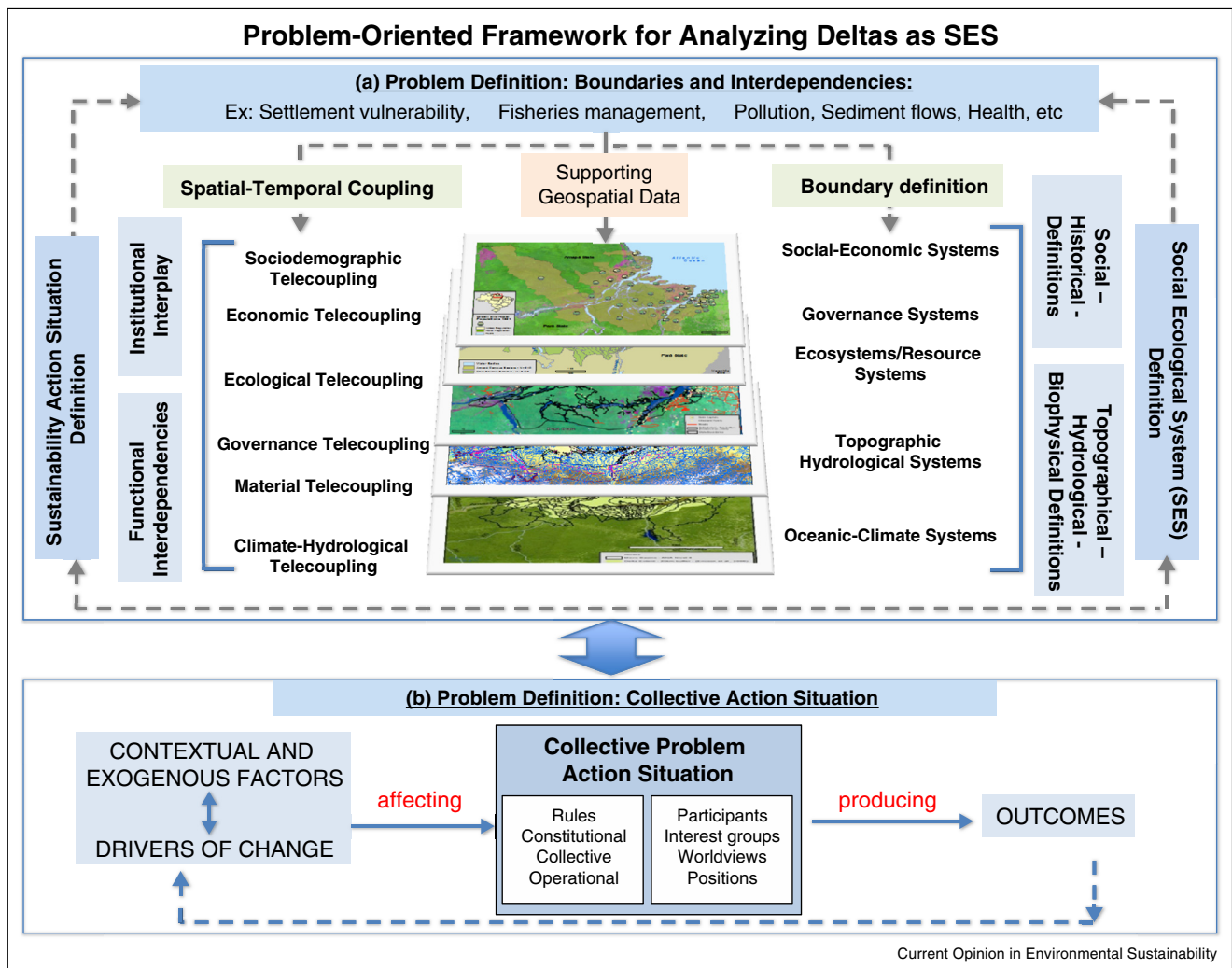
water systems, operating at multiple scales of interdependence, deltas pose specific challenges to environmental governance and sustainability. A useful definition of a social–ecological system for application in deltas studies is provided by Glaser *et al.* [40], which highlights the interdisciplinary nature of research on social–ecological systems such as deltas: ‘A social–ecological system consists of a bio-geophysical unit and its associated social actors and institutions. Social–ecological systems are complex and adaptive and delimited by spatial or functional boundaries surrounding particular ecosystems and their problem context.’ However, for historical, environmental, and political reasons most delta regions tend to present a high degree of mismatch between governance arrangements and biophysical, social, and economic boundaries.

In this context, one of the focal areas of the BF-Deltas project has involved the design of a problem-oriented

conceptual framework to analyze delta regions as coupled social–ecological systems (Deltas-SRES) [see 36 for detailed explanation]. This framework is coupled with a geospatial data system (Deltas-DAT) and expands upon terminology, definitions, and components presented in various other conceptual frameworks, particularly the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework, or IAD, [37,38] and the Ostrom Social–Ecological Systems (SES) framework [39]. Figure 3, adapted from Brondizio *et al.* [36], shows the two main components of the framework: (a) defining boundaries and interdependencies associated with a given problem and (b) defining and outlining the components of the collective action situation associated with the problem.

Two underlying assumptions have informed the development of the Deltas-SES framework for the BF-Deltas

Figure 3



The Deltas-SES framework: a problem-oriented framework for analyzing deltas as coupled social–ecological systems. Adapted from Brondizio *et al.* [36]; see the latter for a detailed explanation of the Deltas-SES framework.

project. First, we propose that the definition of analytical boundaries of a given delta region should be flexible, defined by the type of problem at hand. That is, boundary definition should be preceded by interdisciplinary examination of a given problem, so that interconnections operating at different time and spatial scales can be considered. Second, many, if not all, of the problems experienced in delta regions exhibit characteristics of collective action dilemmas of common pool resources (CPRs), that is, the actors involved compete and negotiate appropriation and provisioning of resources at different scales. Most problems in delta regions can thus be analyzed as nested or multi-level collective action situations [36].

The two main components of the framework and operationalization steps are presented in Figure 3 [see 36 for detailed explanation]. The *first step* aims at defining the focal problem to be diagnosed and examined, which can be place-specific or cross-scale. This step necessarily involves an interdisciplinary research group and depending on the nature of the problem it should also involve relevant stakeholders. This step can help initiate a process of co-design and co-production of research and diagnostic efforts [41]. The *second step* includes identifying types of telecoupling to capture salient interactions between local and distal processes. These types of interactions can include those that are socio-demographic, economic, ecological, material, and climate-hydrological. The *third step* involves defining SES boundaries using, as needed, five different dimensions: socio-economic, governance, ecosystems/resource use, topographic-hydrological, and oceanic-climate systems. Steps *two and three* should be done in an integrated fashion, so discussions about the nature of the problem help to define the potential SES boundaries required to understand it.

This interactive approach to problem and boundary definition should evolve along with the understanding of the factors, places, and stakeholders involved. It should also contribute to generate new research and policy questions relevant to catalyzing efforts around potential solutions to the problem. The *fourth step* aims at defining the type of collective action dilemma or problem that can be analyzed as one or multiple ‘action situations’. An action situation, derived from the IAD framework, refers to defining a conceptual unit for analysis [38]. A focal action situation can be defined at a given level, but always influenced by action situations operating at other levels. At each level, an action situation takes into account social actors and interest groups, their worldviews, positions, the influence of formal and informal rules, and levels of access to information, all influencing types of interactions and outcomes. The *fifth step* focuses on defining and characterizing the contextual factors (endogenous and

exogenous to the system) influencing an action situation and related outcomes and interactions.

This framework has been used to give a new definition of the Amazon delta that combines biophysical, hydrological, and social-political dimensions [36]. Section ‘Socio-economic vulnerability to flooding in urban areas of the Amazon delta’ below presents an example of the application of the framework to the modeling and analysis of socio-economic vulnerability to flooding in urban areas of the Amazon delta. The framework is currently being used to help diagnose a growing collective-action problem related to the impacts of urban growth and pollution on small-scale fishing resources in the Amazon delta. Accelerated and poorly planned urban expansion and industrialization are contributing significant pollution of local ecosystems. Until recently, management of fish–shrimp stocks was primarily a collective action problem among fishers who competed for these resources [42\*]. Increasingly, however, fishers are confronted with problems that involve industries, urban expansion and pollution, and other impacts from upstream sources. The precarious and accelerated growth of urban centers, and resulting habitat changes and pollution discharges, are affecting the quantity and quality of fish and shrimp stocks and the pattern of fishing grounds downstream. Industrial pollution spills and high loads of organic pollution and solid waste are increasingly compromising the quality and quantity of fish stocks as well as human health.

A detailed discussion of the Deltas-SES framework and associated data system is presented elsewhere [36]. The SES framework is intended to be dynamic and flexible, able integrate advances (e.g., new data layers, models) from different knowledge domains.

#### Understanding delta vulnerability through modeling and participatory approaches

Densely populated and increasingly urbanized deltas are often at risk to environmental hazards such as extreme floods, droughts, hurricanes, storm surges, relative sea-level rise and salinity intrusion. A basic understanding of the dynamics, and climate-human feedback systems [43] is necessary to inform policies that may help to reduce social and environmental risks to hazards. While there is a large number of vulnerability assessments available for coastal regions in general and delta environments in particular, there are as yet no unified social–ecological frameworks and corresponding multi-disciplinary indicators that are both available and applicable to diverse delta contexts [see 36,44]. Table 2 provides a comparison of selected vulnerability assessments used in deltas. Sharing complementary analytical frameworks and data systems, scientists involved in the BF-Deltas project are contributing three complementary approaches to advance delta vulnerability assessments worldwide.



**Table 2****Comparison of the vulnerability assessments used in Deltas**

Vulnerability assessments in DELTAS	Scale	Vulnerability of ...	Vulnerability components	Hazard	Indicator selection strategy
Comparative assessment of relative risk to flooding for 48 deltas globally [5]	Global	Social system	Economic (aggregate and per-capita GDP); Governance (World Governance Indicators)	Flooding	Evidence in the literature for a direct or indirect relationship with one of the three risk components; indicators were limited to those available at the global scale
Global Delta Vulnerability Index — a modular approach to sub-delta scale SES vulnerability to multiple hazards [44]	Global	Social–ecological system	Social and ecosystem susceptibility, social adaptive & coping capacities and ecosystem robustness	Multi-hazard	Review of published coastal/delta vulnerability studies and stakeholder consultations in the three deltas; indicators available at global, delta or sub-delta scale
Socio-economic vulnerability in urban areas of the Amazon Delta [48*]	Amazon	Social system	Social exposure, sensitivity and the level of adaptation of an area or population	Flooding	Relevance with flood risk assessment, applicability, and data available at census sectors scale

#### *Comparative assessment of relative risk to flooding for 48 deltas globally*

The vulnerability of delta communities to flooding events can be considered as a component within a larger risk framework. Tessler *et al.* [5] developed estimates of flood risk in terms of the expected loss caused by flood events. Risk is high in deltas where extreme flood events are more likely to occur (high hazards), where more people live in low-lying areas exposed to flooding (high exposure), and where social vulnerability to flooding is high and greater flood exposure is more likely to cause harm (high vulnerability). The same group [5] used empirically defined indicators to locate 48 global deltas within the risk space defined by these three components, supporting a comparative assessment of relative levels of risk. The indicator-based risk framework can be used effectively in large-scale inter-delta comparative studies, especially as a complement to higher-resolution studies at the local scale [45,26]. Deriving indicators from cross-disciplinary data can be a major challenge, though GIS tools have helped to provide common frameworks for geographical data. A collaborative approach has been important to allow integration of geophysical remote sensing and modeling data with social indicators of vulnerability to address different components of coastal risk. This approach requires quantifying social effects of flooding, such as health, the scope of such effects and how they play out across social groups and time, as illustrated below.

#### *Global Delta Vulnerability Index (GDVI) — a modular approach to sub-delta scale SES vulnerability to multiple hazards*

Collaborating across disciplinary lines, researchers in the BF-Deltas project are developing a Global Delta Vulnerability Index (GDVI) aiming at providing a social–ecological system centered assessment approach for delta vulnerability globally. The GDVI includes: (1) a multi-hazard

vulnerability assessment method encompassing social and ecosystem susceptibility, social adaptive and coping capacities as well as ecosystem robustness [44]; (2) a set of multidimensional indicators developed from a combination of a detailed literature review and regional expert consultations and knowledge co-production workshops in focal deltas; and, (3) an ‘indicator library’ allowing for a flexible indicator selection depending on the environment and data availability. While desk-based studies have been important, regional expert consultations helped to characterize sub-delta areas prone to different types of hazards and the stakeholder groups developed a list of vulnerability indicators relevant to both the social and ecological part of the SES. The indicators developed in the BF-Deltas project are relevant for hazards typically occurring in deltas and are organized in a modular way to be responsive to the specific social, economic and environmental contexts of different deltas globally. In this sense, the GDVI has been useful in identifying deltas with high vulnerability to multiple hazards, such as flooding, storm surges, cyclones, salinity intrusion, and drought. An empirical application integrating the Deltas-SES framework (Section ‘Understanding deltas as social–ecological systems: conceptualization and application’) and a version of the GDVI applied to urban areas in the Amazon delta is briefly presented below.

#### *Socio-economic vulnerability to flooding in urban areas of the Amazon delta*

Flood episodes are both daily and seasonal in the Amazon delta varying in influence across a gradient of elevation with direct impact on social conditions and daily life [36,46\*,47]. Floods are also the main natural hazard that when interacting with poorly maintained or non-existent sanitation and drainage infrastructure pose the greatest threat to the majority of urban population, predominantly low-income households, in the Amazon delta. Building

upon the frameworks presented above, a conceptual model describing levels of socio-economic vulnerability to flooding events in the urban areas of the Amazon delta was developed. The model included types of biophysical hazards, conditions of social exposure, access to infrastructure, and susceptibility to flooding, and their feedbacks. Using disaggregated geospatially-referenced social, economic, infrastructural, hydrological, and topographic data the model supported a detailed assessment of intra-urban vulnerability to flooding for 41 of the 50 municipalities of the delta region [48]. Urban vulnerability was described as a result of the exposure to a particular risk, sensitivity and adaptation potential of an area and population, particularly in terms of the availability of services across sectors of urban areas and how effective and capable their local governments are to provide the basic infrastructure and responses to events. The appropriate indicators were selected based on: (1) relevance to flood risk assessment; (2) applicability; (3) data available at census sectors scale, in all cases paying particular attention to the population at risk. These indicators were confirmed and expanded following a consultation workshop, as described above, held in the city of Belem in collaboration with 30 participants representing 15 institutions. Moving from the municipal to the census sector level, our analysis and models indicated that 60–90% of the urban population in the region, living in precarious social conditions, are facing moderate to high risk of flooding and sewage spills, and associated health risks [see 49 for detailed discussion].

### Concluding remarks: lessons learned and opportunities ahead

The sustainability challenges we are currently facing require new approaches to research, transcending disciplines and continents. This type of collaboration also requires new funding mechanisms that complement traditional funding sources from national agencies that tend to support individual researchers or research. The Belmont Forum established an international framework for global cooperation, including national mechanisms for accountability and reporting. This program allowed for the emergence of international research teams working under the familiar auspices of their own funding agencies but within a global team perspective. The challenge of understanding how physical, ecological, and social forces interact within delta systems and how these might change under climate and human actions motivated our team to come together and submit a proposal to the first Belmont Forum call.

The BF-Deltas project has aimed at promoting cross-disciplinary and complementary research to advance understanding of the social–ecological–physical dynamics of fast changing deltas and their societal implications. As the discussed examples illustrate, different

forms of disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaborations have emerged to tackle specific problems. This approach has worked well for a large and internationally distributed research network. Sharing a common research framework and promoting self-organization have contributed to catalyzing productive forms of disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration, and engagement with regional partners and stakeholders. Looking forward, the next challenge for the BF-Deltas research network is to find appropriate mechanisms to continue its mature and effective collaboration and take it to the next level of an integrated implementation of computational models for delta classification, conceptual framework for analyzing deltas as social–ecological systems, and the analysis of social and environmental vulnerability in delta regions towards sustainable management and decision support.

A number of lessons are emerging as the project concludes three years of collaborative research. *First*, we recognize that complex research problems such as those present in delta regions require disciplinary expertise and interdisciplinary collaboration to work in tandem to fill in specific knowledge gaps; one cannot preclude the other. *Second*, we recognize that large-scale international and multi-disciplinary projects such as the BF-Deltas project depend on agreed upon definitions of goals and responsibilities, approaches and products. A research network also requires an agreed set of concepts and terminology (and recognizing that these are themselves evolving), and willingness to frame new questions together. Achieving this goal takes time and requires openness and appreciation of different disciplinary strengths and limitations. *Third*, flexible and decentralized collaboration within the research network has encouraged self-organization of collaborators around topics of common interest, without a preconceived expectation (and thus potential frustration) that all components should be unavoidably inclusive. *Fourth*, common research sites have allowed collaborators from multiple areas of expertise to focus on concrete regional problems of relevance to regional populations and policy. Regional workshops have proved valuable and essential to advance knowledge and to enhance collaboration with regional partners and stakeholders. Achieving this goal also takes time, requires meaningful collaboration with regional institutions, and depends on specific budget lines. *Finally*, leveraging funds from other initiatives proved important, but also limiting. Significant upfront ‘overhead’ (time and funds) was invested to organize a new interdisciplinary and international research network. Funds were limited to support graduate students and post-doctoral researchers. Additional funding would have allowed more training of graduate students and post-doctoral scholars, more intensive exchange activities between research groups, and more engagement activities with stakeholders.

There are advantages and disadvantages of grounding a project on a distributed international network. Relying on multiple forms of sharing research outputs — working papers and research articles, conference panels and presentations, webinars as well as in person and virtual meetings — have proven largely effective to keep information flowing and engaging a large and diverse research network. On the other hand, while virtual communication and meetings have been effective, it has limited more in-depth discussions of specific issues and the kind of cross-disciplinary learning that happens when one works side-by-side. Virtual connections imposes some limitations on the type of interactions, usually limiting attention to topics that demand more commitment to learn about and engage in each other's area of expertise.

Looking forward, the project should also include collaborative fieldwork. Fieldwork offers a unique opportunity to bring together research partners to experience the process of and the difficulties involved in collecting data, evaluating different forms of evidence, and interacting with local populations and stakeholders.

Deltas are emblematic sentinels of global change and at the forefront of the challenges facing local, regional, and global sustainability. The social, ecological, and physical complexities of delta systems offer opportunities for disciplinary expertise to advance while at the same time challenging disciplinary silos. Deltas are inherently laboratories for interdisciplinary collaborations and stakeholder engagement. For instance, the progress towards the achievement of the recently endorsed Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] and accompanying targets can only be effectively assessed using integrated and collaborative approaches that account for interactions across social, ecological, and physical systems [49,50]. The challenges of implementing and assessing the SDGs in deltaic systems represent a problem of great analytical complexity to which the BF-Deltas team has contributed towards [51,52]. Collaborative efforts on this front will contribute to advance science and science–policy interfaces of relevance to many other areas and predicaments of global change.

## Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the support of the Belmont Forum funding program, in particular to the International BF-DELTAS project on “Catalyzing action towards sustainability of deltaic systems” including funding from the United States National Science Foundation (NSF grant EAR-1342944 to the University of Minnesota NSF grant 1342898 to Indiana University) and other national agencies supporting the work of co-authors. It is also a tribute to the ‘Sustainable Deltas 2015’ (SD2015) Initiative endorsed by the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU), which aims to increase awareness of delta vulnerability worldwide and foster international collaboration, knowledge, and data exchange for actionable research towards delta sustainability. This work was also partially funded by NSF grant EAR-1242458 under the project LIFE: Linked Institutions for Future Earth. The co-authors are thankful for the support of their respective home institutions.

## References and recommended reading

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- 1. Ericson JP *et al.*: **Effective sea-level rise in deltas: sources of change and human-dimension implications.** *Global Planetary Change* 2006, **50**:63–82.
- This paper presents an assessment of effective sea-level rise (ESLR) for 40 deltas across the world, finding that direct anthropogenic effects determine ESLR in the majority of deltas studied, with a relatively less important role for eustatic sea-level rise.
- 2. Syvitski JPM, Kettner AJ, Overeem I, Hutton EWH, Hannon MT, Brakenridge GR, Day J, Vorosmarty C, Saito Y, Goisan L *et al.*: **Sinking deltas due to human activities.** *Nat Geosci* 2009, **2**: 681–686.
- The authors present a study of 33 representative deltas across the world, estimating that the delta surface area vulnerable to flooding could increase by 50% under the current projected values for sea-level rise in the twenty-first century. This increase could be exacerbated if the capture of sediment upstream persists.
- 3. Renaud FG, Syvitski JPM, Sebesvari Z, Werners SE, Kremer H, Kuenzer C, Ramesh R, Jeuken A, Friedrich J: **Tippling from the Holocene to the Anthropocene: how threatened are major world deltas?** *Curr Opin Envir Sustain* 2013, **5**:644–654 ISSN 1877-3435, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2013.11.007..>
- 4. Newton A, Carruthers TJB, Icely J: **The coastal syndromes and hotspots in the coastal zone.** *Estuar Coast Shelf S* 2012, **96**:39–47 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecss.2011.07.012>.
- 5. Tessler ZD, Vörösmarty CJ, Grossberg M, Gladkova I, Aizenman H, Syvitski JPM, Foufoula-Georgiou E: **Profiling risk and sustainability in coastal deltas of the world.** *Science* 2015, **349**:638–643 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.aab3574>.
- 6. Szabo S, Hossain MS, Adger WN, Matthews Z, Ahmed S, Lázár AN, Ahmad S: **Soil salinity, household wealth and food insecurity in tropical deltas: evidence from south-west coast of Bangladesh.** *Sustain Sci* 2015:1–11 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11625-015-0337-1>.
- 7. Giosan L, Syvitski J, Constantinescu S, Day J: **Climate change: protect the world's deltas.** *Nature* 2014, **516**:31–33.
- 8. Newton A, Weichselgartner J: **Hotspots of coastal vulnerability: a DPSIR analysis to find societal pathways and responses.** *Estuar Coast Shelf S* 2014, **140**:123–133 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecss.2013.10.010>.
- 9. Foufoula-Georgiou E, Overeem I, Saito Y, Dech S, Kuenzer C, Goodbred S, Harrison I, Anthony E, Brondizio E, Hutton J *et al.*: **A vision for a coordinated international effort on delta sustainability.** In *In Deltas: Landforms, Ecosystems and Human Activities*. Edited by Young G, Perillo GME. IAHS Publ; 2013: 3–11.
- This paper presents rationale for an International Year of Deltas, discussing the importance of world deltas, threats related to social, environmental, and climate change pressures, and outlining opportunities for collaborative interdisciplinary research focusing on deltas.
- 10. Syvitski JPM, Saito Y: **Morphodynamics of deltas under the influence of humans.** *Global Planet Change* 2007, **57**: 261–282.
- 11. Vossestein J (Ed): *The Dutch and Their Delta: Living Below Sea Level*, edn 2nd. Expat Scriptorum books; 2011. ISBN-10: 9055947881.
- 12. Syvitski JPM, Vörösmarty CJ, Kettner AJ, Green P: **Impact of humans on the flux of terrestrial sediment to the global coastal ocean.** *Science* 2005, **308**:376–380 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.aab3574>.
- 13. Seitzinger SP, Mayorga E, Kroeze C, Bouwman AF, Beusen AHW, Billen G: **Global river nutrient export: a scenario analysis of past and future trends.** *Global Biogeochem Cy* 2010, **24**:4 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1029/2009GB003587>.
- 14. Fisher WL, Brown LF, Scott AJ, McGowen JH (Eds): *Delta Systems in the Exploration for Oil and Gas.* Bureau of Economic Geology. University of Texas; 1969.

15. Galloway WE: **Process framework for describing the morphologic and stratigraphic evolution of deltaic depositional systems.** In *In Deltas: Models for Exploration.* Edited by Broussard M. Houston Geol. Soc.; 1975:87-98.
16. Wright D, Coleman JM: **Variations in morphology of major river deltas as functions of ocean wave and river discharge regimes.** *AAPG Bull* 1973, **57**:370-398.
17. Edmonds DA, Slingerland RL: **Significant effect of sediment cohesion on delta morphology.** *Nat Geosci* 2010, **3**:105-109 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/ngeo730>.
18. Hori K, Saito Y: **Classification, architecture and evolution of large river deltas.** In *In Large Rivers: Geomorphology and Management.* Edited by Gupta A. John Wiley and Sons; 2008:214-231.
19. Orton GJ, Reading HG: **Variability of deltaic processes in terms of sediment supply, with particular emphasis on grain size.** *Sedimentology* 1993, **40**:475-512 doi: 10.1111/j.1365-3091.1993.tb01347.x..
20. Edmonds DA, Paola C, Hoyal DCJD, Sheets BA: **Quantitative metrics that describe river deltas and their channel networks.** *J Geophys Res Earth* 2011, **116**:F4 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1029/2010JF001955>.
21. Passalacqua P, Lanzoni S, Paola C, Rinaldo A: **Geomorphic signatures of deltaic processes and vegetation: the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Jamuna case study.** *J Geophys Res Earth* 2013, **118**:1838-1849 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/jgrf.20128>.
22. Jerolmack DJ, Swenson JB: **Scaling relationships and evolution of distributary networks on wave-influenced deltas.** *Geophys Res Lett* 2007, **34**:L23402 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1029/2007GL031823>.
23. Nienhuis JH, Ashton AD, Giosan L: **What makes a delta wave-dominated?** *Geology* 2015 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1130/G36518.1>.
24. Hiatt M, Passalacqua P: **Hydrological connectivity in river deltas: the first-order importance of channel-island exchange.** *Water Resour Res* 2015, **51**:2264-2282 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/2014WR016149>.
25. Tejedor A, Longjas A, Zaliapin I, Fofoula-Georgiou E: **Delta channel networks: 1. A graph-theoretic approach for studying connectivity and steady state transport on deltaic surfaces.** *Water Resour Res* 2015, **51**:3998-4018 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/2014WR016149>.
- A new framework based on spectral graph theory is introduced to study delta channel networks, enabling to extract important structural and dynamics-related information of river deltas. This framework also allows to construct systematic vulnerability maps to identify hot spots of change in deltaic systems.
26. Tejedor A, Longjas A, Zaliapin I, Fofoula-Georgiou E: **Delta channel networks: 2. Metrics of topologic and dynamic complexity for delta comparison, physical inference, and vulnerability assessment.** *Water Resour Res* 2015, **51**:4019-4045 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/2014WR016577>.
27. Hoyal DCJD, Sheets BA: **Morphodynamic evolution of experimental cohesive deltas.** *J Geophys Res* 2009, **114**:F02009 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1029/2007JF000882>.
28. Wolinsky MA, Edmonds DA, Martin J, Paola C: **Delta allometry: growth laws for river deltas.** *Geophys Res Lett* 2010, **37**:L21403 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1029/2010GL044592>.
29. Edmonds DA, Hoyal D, Sheets B, Slingerland R: **Predicting delta avulsions: implications for coastal wetland restoration.** *Geology* 2009, **37**:759-762 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1130/G25743A.1>.
30. Edmonds DA, Slingerland RL: **Significant effect of sediment cohesion on delta morphology.** *Nat Geosci* 2010, **3**:105-109 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/ngeo730>.
31. Geleynse N, Storms JEA, Walstra DJR, Jagers HRA, Wang ZB, Stive MJF: **Controls on river delta formation: Insights from numerical modelling.** *Earth Planet Sci Lett* 2011, **302**:217-226 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.epsl.2010.12.013>.
32. Caldwell R, Edmonds DA: **The effects of sediment properties on deltaic processes and morphologies: a numerical modeling study.** *J Geophys Res Earth Surf* 2014, **119**:961-982 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/2013JF002965>.
33. Liang M, Voller VR, Paola C: **A reduced-complexity model for river delta formation: Part 1 — modeling deltas with channel dynamics.** *Earth Surf Dynam* 2015, **3**:67-86 <http://dx.doi.org/10.5194/esurf-3-67-2015>.
34. Liang M, Geleynse N, Edmonds DA, Passalacqua P: **A reduced-complexity model for river delta formation: Part 2 — assessment of the flow routing scheme.** *Earth Surf Dynam* 2015, **3**:87-104 <http://dx.doi.org/10.5194/esurf-3-87-2015>.
35. Tejedor A, Longjas A, Caldwell R, Edmonds DA, Zaliapin I, Fofoula-Georgiou E: **Quantifying the signature of sediment composition on the topologic and dynamic complexity of river delta channel networks and inferences toward delta classification.** *Geophys Res Lett* 2016, **43** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/2016GL068210>.
36. Brondizio ES, Vogt N, Mansur A, Anthony E, Costa S, Hetrick S: **A conceptual framework for analyzing deltas as coupled social ecological systems: an example from the Amazon River Delta and Estuary.** *Sustain Sci* 2016 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/2016GL068210>.
37. Ostrom E (Ed): *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action.* Cambridge University Press; 1990.
38. McGinnis MD: **An introduction to IAD and the language of the ostrom workshop: a simple guide to a complex framework.** *Policy Stud J* 2011, **39**:169-183.
39. Ostrom E: **A general framework for analyzing sustainability of social-ecological systems.** *Science* 2009, **325**:419-422.
40. Glaser M, Ratter B, Krause G, Welp M: **New approaches to the analysis of human-nature relations.** In *In: Human-Nature Interactions in the Anthropocene: Potentials of Social-Ecological Systems Analysis.* Edited by Glaser M, Ratter B, Krause G, Welp M. Routledge; 2012:3-12.
41. Tengö M, Brondizio ES, Elmqvist T, Malmer P, Spierenburg M: **Connecting diverse knowledge systems for enhanced ecosystem governance: the multiple evidence base approach.** *Ambio* 2014, **43**:579-591.
42. Castello L, McGrath DG, Hess L, Coe MT, Lefebvre PA, Petry P, Macedo MN, Renó VF, Arantes CC: **The vulnerability of Amazon freshwater ecosystems.** *Conserv Lett* 2013, **6**:217-229 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/conl.12008>.
- This article discusses the connectivity and impact of changing terrestrial systems on Amazonian river ecosystems. It raises questions about the importance of reframing regional policies and initiatives to account for such connectivity. It calls for a shift in policy and planning from forest-centered conservation to integrated approaches to regional social-ecological systems.
43. Walker B, Meyers JA: **Thresholds in ecological and social-ecological systems: a developing database.** *Ecol Soc* 2004, **9**:3 [online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol9/iss2/art3/>.
44. Sebesvari Z, Renaud F, Haas S, Tessler Z, Kloos J, Vogt N, Tejedor A, Szabo S, Kuenzer C: **Vulnerability indicators for deltaic social-ecological systems: a review.** *Sustain Sci* 2016. doi: 10.1007/s11625-016-0366-4.
45. Budiyo Y, Aerts J, Brinkman J, Marfai MA, Ward P: **Flood risk assessment for delta mega-cities: a case study of Jakarta.** *Nat Hazards* 2015, **75**:389-413.
46. Vogt N, Pinedo-Vasquez MA, Brondizio ES, Rabelo F, Fernandes K, Almeida O, Rivero R, Deadman P, Dou Y: **Local ecological knowledge and incremental adaptation to changing flood patterns in the Amazon delta.** *Sustain Sci.* Doi: 10.1007/s11625-015-0352-2.
- This article presents detailed analysis of local knowledge and responses of farmer-fishers to changing flood patterns in the Amazon estuary-delta. It discusses how local farmer-fishers respond to environmental changes by also considering changes market demands for agricultural and agro-forestry products. In doing so, they tend to adapt to changes incrementally, maintaining a portfolio of land use options with different levels of production intensity.

47. Costa S, Brondizio ES: **Cities along the floodplain of the Brazilian Amazon: characteristics and trends.** In *The Amazon Vaárzea: The Decade Past and the Decade Ahead*. Edited by Pinedo-Vasquez M, Ruffino ML, Padoch C, Brondizio ES. Springer and The New York Botanical Garden; 2011:83-97.
48. Mansur AV, Brondizio ES, Roy S, Hetrick S, Vogh N, Newton A: **An assessment of urban vulnerability in the Amazon delta and estuary: a multi-criterion index of flood exposure, socio-economic conditions and infrastructure.** *Sustain Sci* 2016:1-16. doi: 10.1007/s11625-016-0355-7.
- The article presents conceptual and analytical models to examine socio-economic vulnerability in urban areas of the Amazon estuary-delta, including indicators such as sanitation services, housing conditions, household income, population, flood risk and unplanned settlements. Analysis is applied to 41 cities at the census sector level. Population at different risk profiles are estimated, described, and mapped.
49. United Nations: *Global Sustainable Goals Report*. 2015 Edition. Advance Unedited Version; 2015.
50. Davis A, Matthews Z, Szabo S, Fogstad H: **Measuring the SDGs: a two-track solution.** *Lancet* 2015, **386**:221-222.
51. Szabo S, Renaud F, Hossain MDS, Sebesvari Z, Matthews Z, Foufoula-Georgiou E, Nicholls RJ: **New opportunities for tropical delta regions offered by the proposed Sustainable Development Goals.** *Environ: Sci Pol Sustain Dev* 2015, **57**:16-23.
52. Sebesvari Z, Foufoula-Georgiou E, Harrison I, Brondizio ES, Bucx T, Dearing JA, Ganguly D, Ghosh T, Goodbred SL, Hagenlocher M *et al.*: *Imperatives for Sustainable Delta Futures. Policy Brief*. UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform; 2016. [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/972032\\_Sebesvari\\_Imperatives%20for%20sustainable%20delta%20futures.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/972032_Sebesvari_Imperatives%20for%20sustainable%20delta%20futures.pdf).