

Building Capacity for Vietnam's Urban Planning System

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ABSTRACT

The urban sector in Vietnam is under great pressure not only to cope with massive population growth, urbanisation and economic development, but to accommodate decentralisation, the deepening of markets, dramatic changes in technology, growing democratisation and new forms of social development. Conventional means of assuring the supply and capability of urban planners and urban managers, and past levels of resourcing, cannot be relied upon to serve the needs of the sector under these changing circumstances. There is wide recognition that the present urban planning system is unsustainable. For many countries in East Asia a wider range of tools is needed for building capacity for planned urban development, their structures and organisations, their planners and managers, their systems of urban development and urban management.

This case study addresses the issues faced in the development of capacity to plan and manage Vietnam's urban sector, part of a prospective technical assistance program of cooperation between RMIT International University Vietnam and partners in Vietnam.

The main elements of an active strategy appropriate to Vietnam's particular needs would build on previous efforts and could include sustained support for best practice workshops, programs of exchange and cooperation, private sector skills development and government policy development, research and innovation, urban sector management systems, infrastructure and finance coordination, knowledge acquisition and information resources, the development of professional institutions and deepened participation in regional associations. Perhaps above all else at this stage, strong education, training and professional development for urban planners is needed for sustainable urban development in Vietnam.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to suggest measures to strengthen the capacity of the urban planning system in Vietnam, particularly through planning education, in the context of Vietnam's needs and opportunities and the country's aims for sustainable development.

Vietnam's population has urbanised rapidly, rising from 11.6 percent of the population in 1950 to 19.7 percent in 2000 (Douglass et al 2002) and 24 percent by another measure by 2002 (Tran Trong Hanh, 2002), driven by high rates of population growth, by strong rural-urban migration (especially to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the two largest cities, who between them attracted over 40 percent of inter-provincial migration between 1994 and 1999) and by economic development, as indicated by real GDP growth for 2002 at 7.04 percent (World Bank 2003). These two cities, with populations of over 3m and 8m respectively (officially 2.84m and 5.38m in 2001), are growing more rapidly still, demographically and economically (e.g. Ho Chi Minh City's GDP is growing at over 9 percent per annum, Vietnam News Service 2001).

Population counts and projections for these two urbanising regions understate growth through not including undocumented migrants and underbounding statistical urban areas in these regions. Much of the urban growth is occurring in adjacent provinces, e.g. Dong Nai and Binh Duong near Ho Chi Minh City. Between them, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi attract 23 percent and 8 percent respectively of inter-provincial migrants, and may need to absorb 500-800,000 people per annum over the next two decades (Douglass et al 2002). Estimates of income are dramatically understated in Vietnam due to the relative size of the informal sector and fear of expropriation or taxation of savings.

2. Urban Planning and Management

Despite continuing elements of a centrally planned economy, a formal statutory framework for urban planning, a number of donor programs of institutional strengthening and supported programs for urban upgrading, overall urban growth and change in Vietnam is not well understood, planned or managed. The issues are linked.

The *urban land development* process suffers from fragmented plans, insufficient and ineffective infrastructure provision, weak coordination, unclear land title and land use rights, opaque land use right transactions, confused resettlement procedures, excessively complex regulation and (partly as a result) low levels of compliance with land use and other development laws. Weak planning administration and insufficient resources and know-how play a part. Unclear land development planning deters direct foreign investment and slows the country's economic growth through new land legislation is now in place.

The *development of a private sector* in urban development and housing, the creation of commercial arms of ministries and government agencies, extension of the scope of urban land markets to overseas Vietnamese, land speculation and constraints in land supply have all contributed to rapid inflation in the price of urban land, particularly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City where prices are among the highest in the world.

Poverty alleviation is an important goal of urban planning. Vietnam has made remarkable progress in economic growth (with GDP growing at over 7 percent annually) and in reducing urban poverty (from 25 percent to between 9 and 15 percent 1993-1998 according to WB estimates). Nevertheless there is continuing and persistent poverty, wide regional disparities and growing differences of income and wealth in the cities. Efforts to upgrading living conditions and provide basic infrastructure services have not overcome urban problems, such as clean water and

sanitation. Urban land prices and unclear land use rights block many households out of the formal housing sector (only 2 percent of urban dwellers have land title, according to WB estimates).

Social development issues are not fully recognised in the urban planning system. With the virtual collapse of residency provisions (Laquian 1996) and the growth of jobs in the cities, rural-urban migration is contributing to a large undocumented urban population, estimated well over 1 million people in Ho Chi Minh City alone. Lack of clarity to date over land tenure and land use rights drive social and political concerns, fuelling new urban social movements which actively oppose some urban redevelopment projects.

There is low compliance with *development control* laws, decrees and plans, not only as a reflection of the independent development of squatter settlements in urban areas but because of inconsistent application of policies between central and local government. In practice there is wide discretion in local urban development decision making, too frequently associated with corrupt practices. In Ho Chi Minh City 18,490 illegal buildings were erected during 2002, or an average of 51 every day (Vietnam News 2003).

Special precincts have proliferated, particularly around Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City opening opportunities for investment but , causing fragmentation and duplication of plans and distortion of priorities. Special development authorities such the Management Authority for Saigon South Development (MASD) have been established as one-stop decision points but sometimes without the resources, skills or powers effectively to manage major urban development projects.

Environmental management requirements are now taken into account in area general plans or master plans, but separation between ministries, lack of skills for monitoring and analysis, and the damage being done to water catchments, urban aquifers, urban heritage and other environmental resources pose major challenges for urban planning and environmental sustainability. The 'lingering serious consequences caused to human beings and the environment' from the Vietnam War remain as physical impediments to urban development as well as the health of the population. [see Pham 2002]

In the area of *urban management*, and in common with other cities across East Asia, city development is not well coordinated across functions and between levels of administration, and between the public, social and private sectors. For the two original 'level I' cities in particular (this category has recently been expanded to include Danang and Haiphong), efforts to promote whole-of-government views, common plans and coordinated implementation schedules for land conversion, housing construction, environmental protection, infrastructure provision and financing come up against shortfalls of resources and a lack of professional capacity.

3. The Urban Planning System

The urban planning framework is embodied in the National Master Plan of 1999, administered by the Ministry of Construction. This makes provision for infilling and raising the density of existing urban areas, development of the urban fringes of large cities, satellite cities and new towns outside primary wet rice areas, and planned urban development of rural settlement areas (Douglas et al 2002 and Vietnam 1999).

Regional zoning plans and urban development master plans are prepared for regions and major cities under the supervision of the Ministry, following its published framework. Regional zoning plans have been prepared for the Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City regions, among others, to give effect to national and sectoral socio-economic development plans. For Vietnam's ten urban development zones, detailed master plans have also been prepared. Addressing urban growth, land use, environmental

and national defence issues, they have been drawn up in detail as master plans based upon land use designation practices learned in part from the eastern bloc (Truong Quang Thao 2002).

At the next level, master plans are prepared for districts, wards and other levels of administration, guided by the relevant People's Committees according to Ministry of Construction criteria. Other urban plans have proliferated, some little related to actual urban development and others guiding development in new precincts.

Areas the subject of major direct foreign invested projects such as Saigon South (Phu My Hung, Taiwan-originated) and Hanoi New Town (Daewoo, Korea-originated) have internationally-produced urban plans, while most high-tech zones and software parks such as Quang Trung Software City in Ho Chi Minh City and Hoa Lac near Hanoi seek to attract foreign investment based on locally prepared plans.

Nguyen and Roberts (2001) summarise the situation as follows: 'The planning system is unnecessarily complex, bureaucratic, highly centralized, sectoral and physical. Numerous laws and decrees guide the administrative procedures used to guide the planning system. Many of these are ambiguous, outdated, and impractical in light of changes that have taken place to the economy. Inter-agency collaboration involving plan preparation and implementation is poor. As a result, few plans are fully implemented and project delays are common because of poorly coordinated budgets. Infrastructure and land development projects are poorly coordinated and the majority of small-scale projects, such as housing, are built without proper approval'.

Coordinated urban management is not widely practiced in Vietnam and is generally not managing adequately the rapid growth of the cities. Only recently has national policy recognised the economic contributions of cities and sought to balance a rural development focus. Long-standing misfits and parallel planning among key ministries and agencies involved in urban land use, industrial development, environmental protection, transportation, housing and utilities are compounded by competitive leapfrogging of major urban developments and illegal construction of minor urban projects.

For Vietnam to establish a system of urban management with its government structure and public-private partnership and with a growing NGO and civil society will take a major effort in capacity building. The management of urban infrastructure varies in levels of competence but is typically single-sector in focus. Related challenges such as land information systems, land use regulation and local development control, financial planning and coordination machinery, a sound basis for the further development of markets in land, housing and other forms of property must be considered as complementary tasks to strengthening the urban planning profession.

Given the almost explosive pace of urban growth, there is a particularly urgent need to develop a corps of planners and a policy commitment to manage coordinated urban growth in a more concerted way. With international investment and globalization, the fast development of social and private sectors, and the creation and deepening of land and property markets, this capacity is not easily built or deployed. In this, Vietnam shares a need with other countries in the region for sustainable urban development.

4. The Planning Profession

Vietnamese professionals in the urban sector look to a long history of city building and associated scholarship, including periods of domination by China (for educational history see Pham Minh Hac 1995 and Nguyen Xuan Thu 1994). The legacies of later French, Japanese and US colonialism and wars left urban planning in a weak position at unification and reconstruction in 1975. In the north, after a period of French urban plans, the influence of Eastern European and particularly Soviet-style planning left a

tradition of static master plans within a central economic planning system. In the south, a form of 'over-urbanization' was associated with the US period (Truong Quang Thao 2002), but with little development of urban planning practice. Through these periods there remained a legacy of care for historic sites and a scholarship of urban form, if not of urban planning practice.

Master plans based on relatively fixed representations of land use became the dominant expression of urban planning, practiced by architects and engineers in a framework with few linkages other than target-setting with the hierarchy of economic plans. There was no urban planning profession and today most urban plans continue to be produced that way. In this respect, the 1999 reforms mark a major step forward, linking economic and environmental planning with urban planning, if not yet creating clear roles for civil society. But without enough well trained urban planners this promise will not be realized.

5. Planning Education

Vietnam's urban planning capacity has benefited from recent contributions from partner countries and institutions (For a good account of the historical context of planning in Hanoi see Logan 2000). There is a strong demand for skilled professionals in all areas of urban development. However, this is not necessarily expressed as demand for urban planners. Government agencies recognize architecture, engineering and other professional qualifications but less so urban planning. Urban planning education is limited.

Hanoi Architectural University is the main training institution for urban planning, construction and management. The university was established in 1969 out of the Polytechnique University (now Hanoi University of Technology). It is large for a professional school, with 348 academic staff, 24 professors and associate professors (in Vietnam award of professorial title is a national power not that of a university), 8070 undergraduates, 348 masters candidates and 92 doctoral candidates, majoring in architecture, construction and planning as well as urban environmental and infrastructure planning. HAU's Faculty of Urban Planning, established in 1991, has the function of training 'urban planning architects' among others through a five-year undergraduate planning degree (150 students intake p.a.) and a two year Master of Planning (20 students intake p.a.) The faculty's divisions cover regional planning, urban planning, rural planning, landscape planning, urban management and environmental physics.

A number of capacity-building programs of HAU have focussed on urban management in Vietnam (with Lund, Montreal and Toulouse Universities, and the Netherlands Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies), strengthening capacities for urban planning and management for Hanoi City (with Hanoi People's Committee and the University of British Columbia), and urban finance and management for ward chairmen in Vinh (with Leuven University, Belgium). Current joint academic programs are with the University of Melbourne (architecture and urban design), University of Darmstadt, University of Montreal (urban management), Architecture University of Toulouse (urban rehabilitation), University of Kyungwon, University of Dresden and the Institute of Housing and Urban Development Studies, Netherlands. Most such capacity-building programs are provided through HAU for other clients and not for HAU itself except indirectly. The university is an executive member of the Asian Planning Schools Association and hosted the APSA conference in Hanoi in September 2003.

Hanoi University of Civil Engineering. This university (HUCE) is the second training institution for urban planning and management, established out of the Faculty of Civil Engineering of Hanoi University of Technology in 1966. Currently, HUCE has 740

staff, including 540 academic staff, 57 professors and associate professors, 11,300 undergraduate students, 500 masters candidates, and 90 doctoral candidates.

HCMC Architecture University. The Ho Chi Minh City Architecture University, somewhat less than HAU, provides urban planning capacity building and programs that enable majors in urban planning. With over 6000 students (2000), it offers diploma programs, undergraduate and postgraduate programs, providing most of the professionals in architecture and urban planning for southern Vietnam. It is currently located near to RMIT Vietnam's HCMC campus and there are prospects for further cooperation in the urban planning area.

Vietnam National University, Hanoi. The Vietnam National University Hanoi also works in the urban sector, for example through an international university cooperation project on capacity building for sustainable development in Vietnam with a number of Flemish universities from Belgium. This program upgraded environmental science curricula, transferred equipment and academic literature, supported a program of academic exchange, workshops and training, developed environmental impact assessment guidelines and helped establish a GIS training facility.

VNU Hanoi seeks to develop its own planning capacity, particularly to equip itself for a very large campus city project at Hoa Lac, west of Hanoi. A major capacity-building program in university planning and leadership, campus development, urban planning and project management has been designed for philanthropic support with RMIT Vietnam and could be associated with capacity-building in this direction.

VNU Ho Chi Minh City is a significant force itself in the urban development of Ho Chi Minh City though it does not provide major urban planning programs. It is located near RMIT Vietnam's HCMC campus and has many international exchange and cooperation programs, with good prospects for further cooperation in the urban sector.

RMIT International University Vietnam. A university established in 2001, RMIT Vietnam is fully owned by RMIT in Australia and financed in part through International Finance Corporation and the Asian Development Bank. Its mission is 'to provide professional and vocational education and training programs and outcome related research and consultancy services that address real world issues appropriate to Vietnam's economic and social development and its environmental sustainability'. It operates independently of the national curriculum and accreditation system in Vietnam, providing international-standard postgraduate programs in engineering, information technology and education in Ho Chi Minh City (Wilmoth 2002a). In Hanoi these programs plan to extend to postgraduate international urban and environmental planning, architecture, project management and educational leadership and management. A new Hanoi campus started in 2004. RMIT Vietnam is also providing a network of learning resource centres in the regional universities of Vietnam (Hue, Danang, Can Tho and prospectively Thai Nguyen), creating electronic learning platforms and modern libraries to strengthen the capacity of those universities, as well as professional training facilities for the respective regions that may be of interest to urban and regional planning extension programs (Wilmoth 2002b).

Asian Institute of Technology. From its Hanoi Centre the Asian Institute of Technology, based in Bangkok, provides short courses in areas related to urban development (e.g. rural and urban development, gender issues and environmental management) and postgraduate programs such as a masters program in urban environmental engineering and management.

Despite exposure to international best practice and the support of continuing programs to build professional training capacity in the educational institutions, Vietnam has not been able to meet the demand for trained professionals in the urban sector. Still based

on outmoded master planning methodologies, with teaching-intensive methods and design-dominated curricula, limited access to advanced technology and inadequate library information, under-resourced and overwhelmed by the scale of the tasks ahead, the educational institutions would benefit from sustained programs of international linkage and support to build curricula, case studies, pedagogical methods and broad research capability in urban planning.

6. Training and Professional Development

Training and development programs have generally not covered the range of skills needed, nor the depth, tending to be components of sector-specific aid programs or capacity strengthening programs outside urban planning. In-service training at the level needed has not become established practice in Vietnam and would require stronger linkages between the workplaces and educational institutions for recognition of workplace learning, including among non-governmental agencies, consultants and international firms active in Vietnam.

Wider afield than urban planning, a number of capacity building programs do support the urban sector. A European Community funded program of capacity building for environmental management in Vietnam was undertaken between 1997 and 2000 and a further €10.7m program in urban environmental planning was proposed for 2003-8. Programs sponsored by UNDP, WHO Healthy Cities program, World Bank City Development Strategy, the Asia URBS Program and the East and SE Asia Network for Better Local Governments have all played a part.

In Vietnam government-sponsored research and technical capacity is channeled through national level institutes – particularly the National Institute of Urban and Rural Planning (NIURP), the National Institute of Science and Technology and the National Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities – rather than the universities. Constituent institutes such as the Institute of Geography play an important role in building professional capacity.

Bilateral agencies have also assisted in building capacity for the urban sector in Vietnam. For example, an Australian-supported construction law project and the Hanoi Planning and Development Control Project sought to collaboratively develop model legislation and development management systems for cities in Vietnam in the 1990s (AusAID 1997). The Vietnam Australia Training Centre provided case-study based short courses in urban planning in the main cities of Vietnam.

Vietnam is actively reaching out through international associations for support in capacity building. As a small example, the Vietnam Real Estate Association is the corresponding member of the ASEAN Association for Planning and Housing (AAPH).

7. Professional Urban Planning

However, professional institutions for urban planners are not well developed. The sustainability of urban planning capacity is helped by active, independent professional organizations. Such institutions should be a part of program development. Despite the *doi moi* process of renovation and continuing market-based reforms, central planning remains an important part of Vietnam's government and party activities and its scope and official patronage have constrained the broader development of an urban planning profession in civil society.

There is no profession of urban planning as understood in other countries. The National Institute of Urban and Rural Planning within the Ministry of Construction plays a role in promoting professional development. However, practicing urban planners are considered primarily as architects, engineers, or in some cases, economists. There is no professional registration or certification of urban planners. This is linked to the

relative absence of education programs in urban planning, the domination of government employment in practice and the weakness of the private sector in professional services.

The National Institute of Urban and Rural Planning formed Vietnam Urban Expert Networks (Urbnet-Vietnam), a network of individual experts and institutions aiming to develop a pool of expertise in Vietnam to provide expertise in urban related work and to build up a knowledge base and understanding of urbanization. Urbnet-Vietnam members come from local and national governments, the private business sector, training and research institutes and external support agencies involved with urban development and management. Urbnet-Vietnam established branch offices in Danang and Ho Chi Minh City. However this was not intended to be an association of professional planners.

An active non-governmental Planning Association of Vietnam has formed since the late 1990s as a civil society association with local and international membership, and journal *Quy Hoach* or *Planning Construction Journal*. The association may develop into a more fully-fledged professional association but it is early in its life.

8. Towards an Action Plan

In the above context, developing professional capacity for Vietnam to plan and manage its dramatic urban growth and change will require a concerted strategy over time and the adoption of new approaches matched to the forces now shaping cities in Vietnam such as the creation and strengthening of markets, privatisation of provision, use of advanced ICT, and new modes of knowledge management.

Strengthening the institutions, particularly the hands of urban planners within them, is critical to better urban development in Vietnam. Methods of development, conservation, economic, environmental and social development are also essential parts, but not readily codified for technology transfer. Nor is the transfer or *de novo* design of urban and regional planning systems, infrastructure coordination methods, land systems, housing markets or technical assistance going to solve the problems and open up the opportunities so manifest in Vietnam. More money, from the country's economic development or through donor and development assistance programs, is essential, but that alone will not bring a sustainable improvement to the country's capacity. Technical cooperation can sometimes undermine local capacity, distort priorities, focus on high-profile activities at the expense of routine but necessary activities, fragment management, use expensive methods, ignore local wishes and fixate too much on targets (Fukuda-Parr et al 2002). Knowledge acquisition, including local knowledge and south-south acquisition, is an important part, and for that education, training and information resources all play a key part. For the longer term there is no substitute for Vietnam to build up its education, training and innovation capacity through a combination of individual, institutional and social developments.

In particular, for the urban sector, there is an urgent need to increase the number and quality of urban planning professionals and to assist Vietnam partners promote urban planning policy reform in a more sustainable direction. RMIT Vietnam is seeking to make a contribution to this task through the expansion of post graduate programs such as its Master of International Urban and Environmental Planning, to build upon the present training capacity in RMIT Vietnam and in urban centres in Vietnam. RMIT Vietnam could provide curricular content, customised to match and extend local curricula at a local institution, and could provide program management as it now does for other clients. Such a program could be provided in conjunction with the World Bank Institute's program of training for urban sector professionals and other professional development and training partners such as the Cities Alliance which is hosting a City Development Strategies conference in November 2004.

Though RMIT Vietnam is independently licensed in Vietnam and works closely with Vietnamese universities and institutions. RMIT built a joint centre in Hanoi with Vietnam National University Hanoi in 1995 and has opened its first free-standing campus in Hanoi in 2004. In addition, with significant philanthropic support, RMIT Vietnam is building a network of learning resource centres (LRCs) in Vietnam's regional universities (University of Danang, Hue University, Can Tho University and prospectively Thai Nguyen University). These LRCs tie in well with Vietnam's emerging network of distributed learning and the World Bank and AusAID-hosted (among others) Vietnam Development Information Centre in Hanoi. The LRCs and VDIC could provide further venues for programs of professional development for urban planners.

RMIT Vietnam is building up an active research program, including dual-country masters and doctoral programs, and plans in the longer-term research and innovation institutes in a small number of key areas including urban planning, infrastructure and management. Much of the country's research capacity is outside the universities and for urban sector research the National Institute of Urban and Rural Planning are important, along with the Ministry of Science and Technology with whom RMIT has a research agreement.

Two other components could perhaps be considered: strengthened research training programs at masters and doctoral levels, and, in association with a current RMIT Vietnam managed program with the Vietnam National Library and the Vietnam National Centre for Scientific and Technological Information and Documentation (NACESTID), the beginning of an advanced (i.e., largely electronic) urban planning and management documentation centre.

These are exciting and formative times for the development of the planning profession in Vietnam, and RMIT Vietnam hopes to make a contribution, along with friends of Vietnam around the world, to a prosperous and sustainable future for Vietnam's wonderful cities and regions.

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