

# HO CHI MINH CITY: A FUTURE MEGACITY IN VIETNAM

PATRICK GUBRY &  
LE THI HUONG<sup>1</sup>

**H**o Chi Minh City, the largest metropolis in Vietnam, celebrated in 1998 its 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary after a turbulent history. It was always considered as dominated by the business world and it concentrates nowadays, with its metropolitan region, an important part of the production, investments and incomes of the whole country.

Strictly speaking, Ho Chi Minh City is not yet a megacity according to the most common definitions, but these definitions are far from being uniform and it may be advisable to discuss them.

## About the definitions of the megacity

For convenience, United Nations use a simple statistical definition to characterize the megacity: it is an urban agglomeration with more than 8 million inhabitants: Megacities are "*cities that are expected to have populations of at least 8 million inhabitants by the year 2000*" (United Nations: Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, 1986, 1987, 1989).

*"Like many terms that sweep into popular usage, the term mega-city lacks a standard definition. The United Nations has attempted to bring some order to the chaos by defining a mega-city as an urban*

*agglomeration with a population that exceeds 8 million"* (Guest, 1994, p. 41).

*"The turn of the twenty-first century will mark a divide from a predominantly rural world to one where the majority of people will be living in cities. By the year 2000 there will be more than 400 cities in the world with over 1 million inhabitants. Of these, 28 will be mega-cities with populations exceeding 8 million, and two-thirds of these mega-cities will be in the developing countries...."* (Fuchs et al., 1994, quoted by Popline data base).

However, the Asian Development Bank emphasizes a population of 10 million. This evolution is explained in a paper in *Population and Development Review* (1997):

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1. Patrick Gubry, Institut de Recherche pour le Developpement, 32 avenue Henri Varagnat, 93143, Bondy Cedex (France), gubry@ird.fr

Le Thi Huong Institut for Economic Research of Ho Chi Minh City, 28 Le Quy Don, District 3, Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam), lehuongloc@hotmail.com

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"Although it is in common use, the term megacity has no agreed definition. For the UN it is a city with a projected population in 2000 of 8 million or more".

For the Asian Development Bank, "A megacity is defined as a large metropolitan area with a complex economy, a large and highly skilled labor force, and a transportation system capable of maintaining daily communications among all its residents. A threshold population of 10 million is used to define megacities in DMCs [Developing Member Countries] for the purpose of uniformity. In many cases, this population is for an extended area beyond the administrative boundaries of the constituent municipalities. In higher-income countries, the population threshold would be lower" (p. 453).

Economic and geographic criteria appear as a supplement to the population size. The authors notably draw conclusions about the number of megacities in Southeast Asia region:

"Worldwide there are 17 megacities". In 1995, "Asia has nine megacities". In 2010, in South-East Asia, there will be three megacities: Jakarta (19.2 million), Bangkok (14.0 million) and Manila (13.7 million).

The term megacity is sometimes applied to less populated agglomerations:

"...the 1990 populations of the largest megacities of South-East Asia were as follows: Jakarta, 8.2 million; Bangkok, 5.9 million; Metro Manila, 7.9 million" (Jones et al., 1999, p. 4).

In the last issue of the United Nations "World urbanization prospects" (2001), it seems that even the definition of UN has changed:

"...urban agglomerations with more than 10 million inhabitants are known as mega-cities" (p. 93).

Following this definition, in South-East Asia, there are two megacities in 2000: Jakarta (11.0 million inhabitants) and Metro Manila (10.9 million), while the other urban agglomerations with 5 million inhabitants or more include also Bangkok (7.3 million).

The scientists still discuss the most adequate vocabulary to define the very big city. We must notice that the term "megacity" has no mechanical translation in every language. For example, Nathalie Robatel (2000) analyzed some French authors who recently tried to define this phenomenon, particularly Thierry Paquot, François Moriconi-Ebrard, Jérôme Monnet and Philippe Haeringer. The simple translation of "megacity", which would be "mega-cité" in French, is not usual and authors rather tend to compare the metropolis with the megapolis (or megalopolis), with the idea that this last one has transnational functions. François Asher (1995) proposed the term "metapolis" to define the areas "in which all or any inhabitants, economic activities or territories are integrated into the daily (common) functioning of a metropolis". These areas are not necessarily contiguous.

This rapid look at the definitions of the megacity shows that one should not linger on a gross figure of population, but that it is rather necessary to analyze the functions of the large city, whether it is a "megacity" or not, inside the national area and within the framework of globalization, as well as the specific problems of town planning which it generates. This approach was attempted in a synthesis on the world biggest cities:

*"The complexity of the patterns of growth of megacities and large metropolitan areas throughout the world poses a major challenge"* (p. 1) (United Nations: Population Division, 1995).

Ho Chi Minh City has been taken into account among these cities.

### **The evolution of the population of Ho Chi Minh City**

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is the largest urban agglomeration in Vietnam<sup>2</sup>. At the 1999 Census there were 3.7 million urban inhabitants, against 5 million inhabitants in the whole of the administrative unit<sup>3</sup>. However, the evolution of the population of HCMC was not regular and the population of the city decreased repeatedly during its history (table 1, figure 1).

The estimation of the demographic evolution of HCMC is made difficult by the scarcity of the available documentation, by the lack of quality of ancient data, by the newness of scientific population censuses, by the reasonable absence of demographic surveys during disturbed periods and by the absence of determination of the real urban population in the peripheral Districts during the recent period.

Nevertheless, by combining several sources, we may obtain relatively coherent estimations. And so table 1 estimates the evolution of the population of urban agglomeration of Saigon-HCMC from 1698 (official creation date) to 1999 (year of the last census). The table includes the city of Cholon, which has in practice always been economically a part of the

urban agglomeration, even if it remained for a long time separate from Saigon by an uninhabited zone. The chosen dates, either have a particular importance in country's history, or correspond to a specific data collection. The evolution reflects the natural increase and the migratory balance, but also the extension of the geographic limits of the city according to its increase. At the time of the extension of the administrative limits, a population, considered until then as "rural", instantly becomes "urban". This well-known phenomenon, often called "reclassification", explains the quantitative "jumps" observed between 1881 and 1900 (annexation of seven peripheral villages in 1894 and 1895), then between 1943 and 1945 (creation of Tan Binh province by decree of May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1944) (Nguyen Dinh Dau, 1998). In 1976, an administrative reorganization integrated into HCMC the province of Gia Dinh and several other peripheral zones, of which it is advisable to take into account the urban population in the study of the evolution of the city; but, the population exodus from Saigon after April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975 completely hides this phenomenon.

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2. The name of President Ho Chi Minh has been given to Saigon on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1976, during the 6<sup>th</sup> session of the National Assembly.
  3. The details of the estimations appear in table 2. See Lê Thi Huong, 2000; Gubry and Lê Thi Huong, 2002; several parts of this paper come from these chapters, published in French and in Vietnamese.

**Table 1: Estimation of the evolution of the population of the urban agglomeration of Saigon-HCMC from 1698 to 1999**

Year	Urban population			Annual average rate of increase	Sources
	Saigon	Cholon	Total		
1698	5,000				(a)
1859	33,000	...	...	...	(a)
1862	7,000	...	...		(b)
1881	13,481	39,806	53,287		(b)
1900	50,300	133,600	183,900		(b)
1907	55,951	172,520	228,471	(1881-1943 : +3.4%)	(c)
1911	67,739	181,742	249,481	1881-1945 : +4.6%	(d)
1926	143,197	203,519	346,716		(e)
1939			495,781		(c)
1943			498,143		(f)
1945			976,000	1945-1954: +6.5%	(g)
1954			1,723,360	1954-1958: -5.3%	(b) (h)
1958			1,383,200	1958-1962: +0.9%	(i) (j)
1962			1,431,000	1962-1967: +4.0%	(i)
1967			1,736,880	(1967-1975: +4.0%)	(i)
1975			2,377,040	(1975-1976: +2.8%)	(k)
1976			2,442,798	1976-1979: +3.4%	(l)
1979			2,700,849	1979-1989: +0.3%	(m)
1989			2,796,229	1989-1999: +2.7%	(m)
1999			3,660,034		(m)

Sources: (a) Estimation calculated in 1998 at the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city

(b) Nguyen Dinh Dau, 1998 (Various administrative reports)

(c) Baudrit, 1943 (Table on the population of Saigon-Cholon from 1907 to 1941, Statistical yearbook of Indochina and Archives of the Government of Cochinchina)

(d) Tran Van Giau and Tran Bach Dang (Chu bien), 1998 (Various administrative reports)

(e) National Institute for Urban and Rural Planning, 1994 (quoting a census)

(f) Statistical yearbook of Vietnam 1949-1950

(g) Retroprojection from 1948 (Statistical yearbook of Indochina 1947-1948)

(h) Statistical yearbook of Vietnam 1952-1953

(i) Demographic surveys of 1958, 1962 and 1967

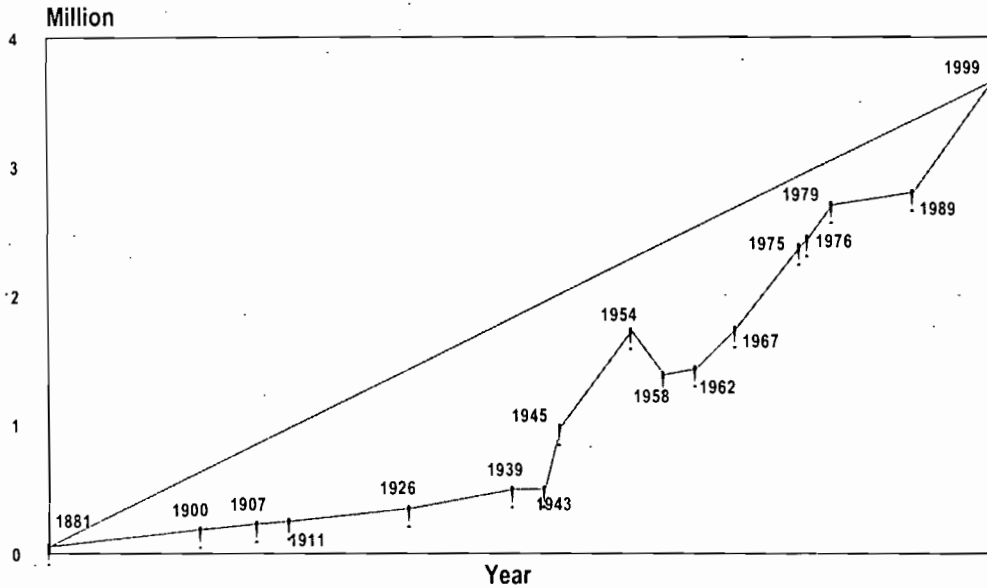
(j) Statistical yearbook of Vietnam 1958-1959

(k) Minimal estimation by continuation of the past trend

(l) Electoral census of February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1976

(m) Censuses of 1979, 1989 and 1999 (urban population estimated for 1999)

*Figure 1: Evolution of the urban population of Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City from 1881 to 1999*



The evolution of the population of Saigon-HCMC shows a population decrease after the capture of the city by the French (on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1859), especially due to the heavy fights which took place during the battle of Chi Hoa in the northern Districts of the city (on February 24-25<sup>th</sup>, 1861) and to the evacuation of the inhabitants of the Ben Nghe area (Meyer, 1985).

The population growth rate is then relatively high under the French colonization (+4.6 per cent on average per year between 1881 and 1945, date of the proclamation of Independence by President Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi, or +3.4 per cent per year between 1881 and 1943, before the unification with several peripheral zones); this growth rate increased during the Indochina war against the French (+6.5 per cent per year between 1945 and 1954). The colonial era corresponds to the implementation of heavy infrastructures and to the development of the administration of

the colony. Let us not forget that the colonization began in Saigon more than a quarter of a century before it began in Hanoi (in 1888). The city was then considered as the "Pearl of the Far East", a showcase of French colonization. It assumed the function of capital city of Indochina until 1902, when this role was transferred to Hanoi. In 1931, the towns of Saigon and Cholon merged<sup>4</sup>. During the Indochina war, the city -controlled by the French until 1954-, experienced strong activity connected to the war effort and sheltered migrants fleeing the insecurity of countryside.

We can only put hypotheses forward to explain the strong decline recorded between 1954 and 1958 (-5.3 per cent a year): overestimation

4. Decision of April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1931, which created the "Saigon-Cholon Region", applied from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1932 (Nguyen Dinh Dau, 1998).

of the population in 1954; inflation of the population of the city in 1954 by the migrants from the North, often Catholics, having decided to settle down in the South according to the possibility offered by the Geneva Agreements, a part of which settled down in the peripheral provinces<sup>5</sup>; return to countryside of the war refugees; underestimation of the population by the 1958 survey... The demographic data of this period are moreover open to doubt<sup>6</sup>.

The growth comes gradually back with the return of peace (about +0.9 per cent per year between 1958 and 1962, then +4.0 per cent per year between 1962 and 1967), but it is necessary to keep in mind that this growth probably does not exceed the natural increase of the population during the major part of this period. The inflexible Catholic options of President Diem (murdered in 1963) certainly did not favour birth control.

Between 1967 and 1975, with the development of the Vietnam War against the Americans and the regime of the South, a real exodus took place from the rural areas to Saigon. On one hand, the insecurity related to the military operations was then at its highest level in the countryside, also subject to intense operations of chemical defoliation by air, on the other hand the Government of the South tried to regroup the population in "strategic hamlets" (*Ap chien luoc*), to shield it from the guerrilla warfare of the National Liberation Front; the groupings were accelerated in many cases by the destruction of the standing crops. These concentrations of population took the farmers away from their fields, making more difficult the practice of their activity and favouring the flight towards cities.

April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975, was the day of the liberation of the city, with the entrance of the revolutionary forces, which marks the end of the Vietnam War and the reunification of the country. The estimation of the population of Saigon on that date is extremely difficult, because obviously no demographic survey has been made during this period<sup>7</sup>. In these conditions, it is wiser to continue the past trend to obtain a minimal estimation of the urban population of the agglomeration.

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5. The country was then temporarily divided into two parts, on both sides of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel.

6. The statistical yearbook of 1949-1950 considers useful to clarify in a "preliminary note":

*"No population census was made in Vietnam since 1936. The last relatively precise estimation concerning the entire Vietnam goes back to the year 1943. These figures were reproduced in this chapter for every region of Vietnam.*

*In 1951, evaluations were given by the heads of every province under control. Because of the current insecurity in the country, these figures have only a rough value: they are not less useful there and give a rough idea of their level, which can be considered"* [Original in French].

7. The difficulty is increased by the fact that it is impossible to distinguish the purely residents from the temporary refugees, particularly during the last months of the war. Finally, a retroprojection from the data published by the new regime, notably the 1976 electoral census (Ban Chi Dao Tong Dieu Tra Dan So va Nha o Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 2000), from estimations of the number of persons having left the city after April, 1975 and from the estimation of the natural increase rate of the population, is made very unpredictable by the inclusion of the population of the Gia Dinh Province, with 10 Districts, in the new demographic data of HCMC from 1976.

During the period 1975-1979 a strong out-migration of population from HCMC occurred, leading to a very low total increase. This period can be broken into two parts: 1975-1976, with a visible increase of +2.8 per cent, essentially owed to the modification of the administrative limits of the agglomeration with the addition of Gia Dinh Province, but with a substantial out-migration<sup>8</sup>; 1976-1979, with an annual increase of 3.4 per cent a year, still widely supported by the natural growth of the population. The out-migration is to be imputed:

- to the return of the "War refugees" to their villages;
- to the evacuation of a part of the population towards countryside, notably to the New Economic Zones, following the measures of "relocation", which firstly affected the non-native and the sympathizers of the former regime;
- to the illegal emigration abroad, with the "boat people" phenomenon.

This emigration was somewhat compensated by civil servants coming from the North, accompanied by their family.

From 1979 to 1989, the city experienced a quasi demographic stagnation (+0.3 per cent per year): the out-migration continued at the beginning of the period, often affecting the nationals of Chinese extraction, following the 1979 conflict between Vietnam and China; economic growth was slow, offering only few employment opportunities; finally, the administrative residential control was then very strict. Thus, the natural growth of the population just compensated the negative migratory balance.

The recent period (1989-1999) was marked by the Renovation policy (*Doi Moi*), characterized by the economic opening-up and the market liberalization, decided in December, 1986, during the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam. The consequences of this opening were felt gradually. Residential control slackened, economic growth strengthened and disparities between urban and rural areas increased, attracting an increasing number of migrants towards the cities. Over the whole period 1989-1999, the average annual growth rate of the urban population was 2.7 per cent, higher than the natural increase, which can be estimated at 1.4 per cent on average during the same period (Ban Chi Dao Tong Dieu Tra Dan So va Nha o Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 2000). The migration increase was thus already at the same level as the natural increase during the last decade and it should be logically higher during the most recent years<sup>9</sup>.

Globally, we see that the population of the city experienced three major crises: in 1859-1861 (conquest by the French), in 1954-1956 (end of the Indochina War) and in 1975-1979 (end of the Vietnam War).

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8. Jacqueline Desbarats (1987, p. 53) quotes various Vietnamese sources (*Liberation Radio, Saigon Domestic Service, Saigon Giai Phong*), which estimate the departures from "Saigon" (in which administrative limits?) from May, 1975 till February, 1976 between 430,000 and 500,000 inhabitants, the objective of the government being then "to reduce the population of Saigon of 2 millions" before the end of 1976.

9. These analyses suppose that the successive censuses are of equal quality, what remains to be proved.

### The current population of Ho Chi Minh City

The most recent demographic data on HCMC appear in table 2<sup>10</sup>. The administrative unit of HCMC still contains a large rural part; the "rural" Districts (*huy?n*) represent 79 per cent of the surface and 18 per cent of the population of whole area.

This phenomenon has already been noticed by Weissberg and Thai Thi Ngoc Du (1998), who compare it with the prevailing situation in China:

*"The new [territorial] organization which results from it evokes the model of the Chinese cities integrating administratively their peripheral green belts"* [Original in French].

The authors spot three advantages:

*"- favoring the food supply of a megapolis within which all the marketing circuits remained to be reconstructed;*

*- ensuring the control of the land in the urban suburbs and offering viable alternatives for future development or housing areas;*

*- allowing the collective and coherent definition of a real city master plan even if the projects had been numerous in the past"* [Original in French].

We may add a fourth reason: the political will to ensure the food self-sufficiency at a low administrative level and therefore to decrease both population mobilities and commercial exchanges between administrative units.

This observation is opposite to the remark made by Drakakis-Smith and Dixon (1997) who consider that the largest urban agglomerations in Vietnam go far beyond their administrative limits. A study of the urban agglomeration of HCMC thus needs that the urban population be exactly estimated.

The calculation is not easy, because while the census gives the urban population in the "rural" Districts, it considers the population of the entire peripheral zone of the "urban" Districts (*qu?n*) as urban, which is obviously

still inaccurate at current time. We thus divided the administrative unit of HCMC into three areas: the urban area (population 100 per cent urban), the semi-urban area (urban population to be determined) and the rural area (urban population given by the census). The results are given in table 2<sup>11</sup>.

We estimate the urban population of the agglomeration of HCMC to be 3,660,034 inhabitants in 1999; that is 73 per cent of the population of the entire administrative unit. This calculated figure of the urban population includes the urban population of the centre, that of the adjoining semi-urban area, but also that of the small urban centres of the peripheral rural area, what is justified by the complete integration of their population in the economic activities of the pole of HCMC. In the near future, the megapolis will also integrate Bien Hoa city (466,945 inhabitants at 1999 census), situated in the Northeast, in Dong Nai Province, which already lies inside the economic sphere of influence of HCMC (location map in figure 2).

With regard to the previous censuses, we observe some "relocation" of the population

10. The urban population of the semi-urban area was calculated by interpolation, by noticing a correlation (valid in this zone with relatively scattered dwellings) between the density of population by District and the proportion of urban population, a density lower than 500 inhab./km<sup>2</sup> corresponding to 0 per cent urban population and a density of 10,000 inhab./km<sup>2</sup> to 100 per cent urban population. New data will be fortunately available as People's Committee of HCMC organized a specific population census of HCMC in October 2004, in the middle of the period between two national censuses.

11. It is useful to notice that two new Districts were created by Governmental Decree n° 130/2003 ND-CP of November, 5<sup>th</sup>, 2003: the urban District of Tan Phu (as part of Tan Binh District) and the urban District of Binh Tan, as part of Binh Chanh District, which remains rural.



of the central Districts towards the peripheral zones, following the instigations of the authorities, but also the fast increase of land prices in the centre of the city. This phenomenon has to be related to the increase of economic and

social differentiation, due to economic liberalization. However, migrants always settle down preferably in the central Districts which are the closest to their region of origin and to their working place (densities map in figure 3).

*Table 2: Surface area, population and administrative units of Ho Chi Minh City at 1999 census*

District	Surface area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Number of households	Total population (inhabitants)	Percentage of males (%)	Density (inhab./km <sup>2</sup> )	Urban population at census (inhabitants)*	Estimated urban population (inhabitants)
Total HCMC	2,093.7	1,016,744	5,034,058	48.1	2,404	4,207,825	3,660,034
"Urban" Districts (quan)	440.0	819,776	4,127,258	48.0	9,380	4,127,258	3,579,467
<i>Urban area</i>							
Total urban area	140.3	660,193	3,386,004	47.8	24,134	3,386,004	3,386,004
1 <sup>st</sup> District	7.6	47,475	226,151	46.6	29,757	226,151	226,151
3 <sup>rd</sup> District	4.8	43,942	222,448	46.9	46,343	222,448	222,448
4 <sup>th</sup> District	4.0	34,480	192,149	47.7	48,037	192,149	192,149
5 <sup>th</sup> District	4.1	40,257	209,528	47.2	51,104	209,528	209,528
6 <sup>th</sup> District	7.0	47,156	252,527	48.1	36,075	252,527	252,527
8 <sup>th</sup> District	18.8	62,910	328,538	48.2	17,475	328,538	328,538
10 <sup>th</sup> District	5.7	46,324	240,122	47.7	42,127	240,122	240,122
11 <sup>th</sup> District	5.0	43,770	238,494	47.2	47,699	238,494	238,494
Go Vap	19.2	65,657	309,586	48.2	16,124	309,586	309,586
Tan Binh	38.5	114,007	579,559	48.7	15,053	579,559	579,559
Binh Thanh	20.5	78,228	403,065	47.8	19,662	403,065	403,065
Phu Nhuan	5.1	35,987	183,837	47.4	36,046	183,837	183,837
<i>Semi-urban area</i>							
Total semi urban area	299.7	159,583	741,254	49.0	2,473	741,254	193,463
2 <sup>nd</sup> District	50.2	21,716	102,094	49.3	2,034	102,094	16,437
7 <sup>th</sup> District	35.9	23,599	111,911	47.7	3,117	111,911	30,776
9 <sup>th</sup> District	113.1	32,541	148,804	50.5	1,316	148,804	12,797
12 <sup>th</sup> District	52.5	36,838	168,639	48.8	3,212	168,639	48,062
Thu Duc	48.0	44,889	209,806	48.6	4,371	209,806	85,391
"Rural" Districts (huyen)	1,653.7	196,968	906,800	48.5	548	80,567	80,567
<i>Rural area</i>							
Cu Chi	428.5	58,188	253,116	47.4	591	11,348	11,348
Hoc Mon	109.5	43,226	203,393	48.3	1,857	15,933	15,933
Binh Chanh	303.3	70,891	329,332	49.0	1,086	37,577	37,577
Nha Be	98.4	12,836	62,804	49.2	638	15,709	15,709
Can Gio	714.0	11,827	58,155	49.9	81	-	-

\* According to the administrative definition of the census

Source: General Statistics Office Vietnam, 2001.

Figure 2: Administrative limits of Ho Chi Minh City (at 1999 Census)

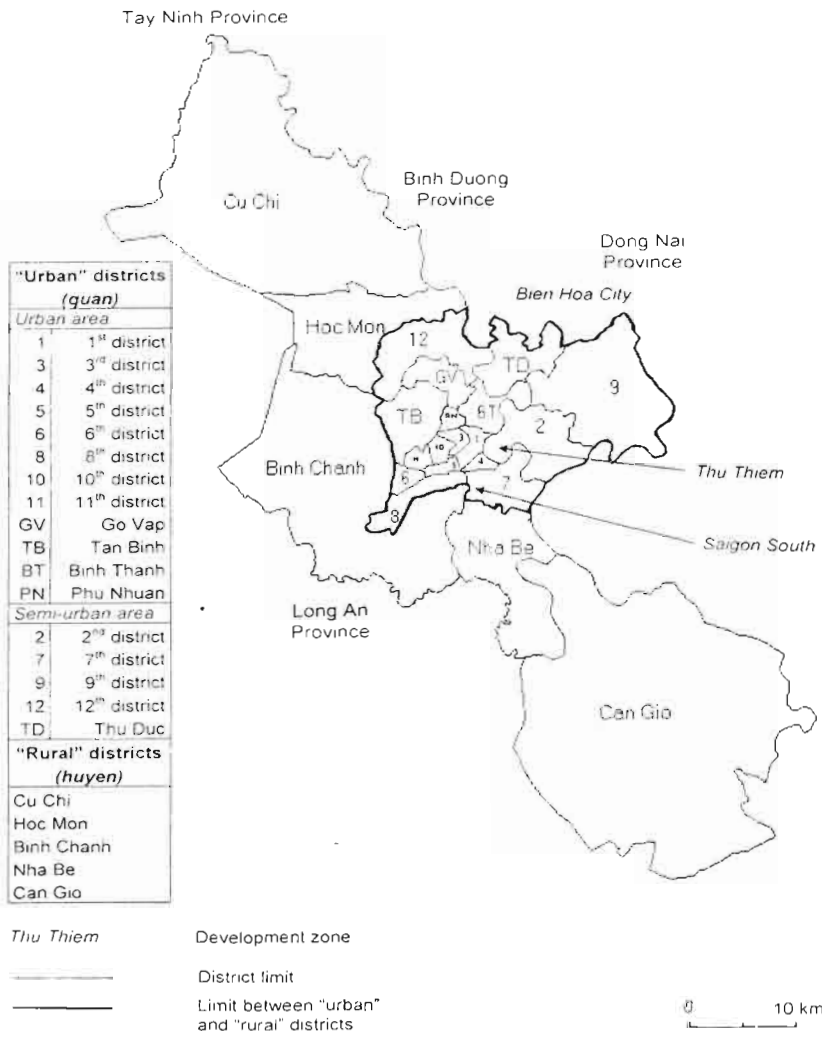
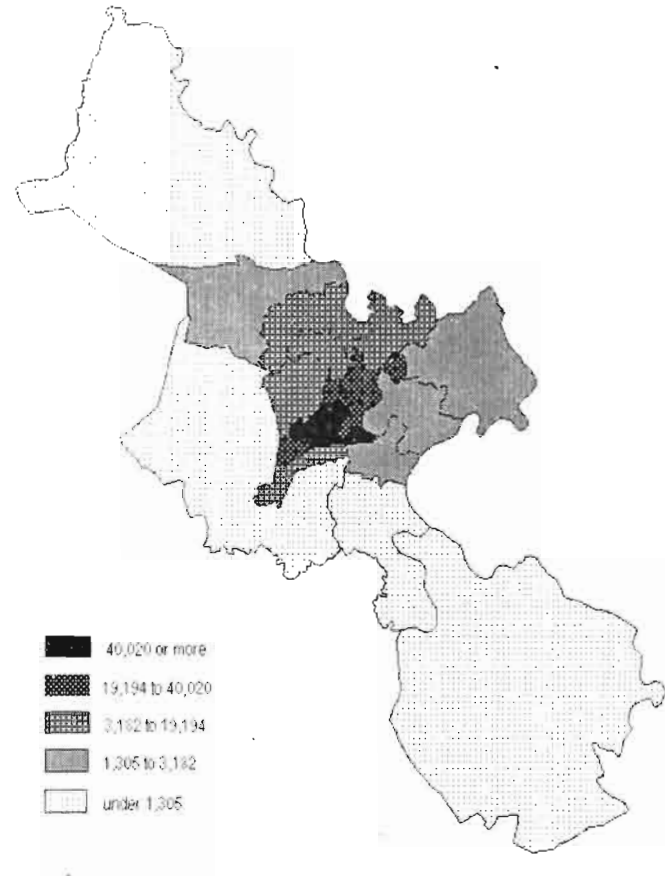


Figure 3: Population densities by District in Ho Chi Minh City (pop./km<sup>2</sup>)



Source: Completed results of 1999 Census

### The economic leadership of Ho Chi Minh City

HCMC concentrates a major part of the economic activities of the country (Weisberg, 1999; Gubry and Lê Thi Huong, 2002). With 6.7 per cent of the population and 0.6 per cent of the surface area of Vietnam, for its entire administrative unit, HCMC generates 17.3 per cent of the GDP of the country, 33.8 per cent of the regional incomes of the state budget and

absorbs 11.5 per cent of the regional expenditures of the same budget, what shows that the city feeds the national budget for the benefit of less favored zones (table 3). The city is also the main attraction pole of foreign investments in Vietnam: 26.9 per cent of the cumulated direct foreign investments went to HCMC until December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2000, as well as 10.3 per cent of the direct foreign investments during year 2000.

*Table 3: Place of Ho Chi Minh City in the national economy*

Indicator	Unit	Vietnam	HCMC	% HCMC/ Vietnam
Population 2000	Inhabitants	77,685,500	5,169,400	6.7
Surface area	Km <sup>2</sup>	331,041	2,094	0.6
GDP	Billion Dong	444,139	76,660	17.3
GDP/person	US \$	450	1,307	290.0
Regional incomes of state budget 1999	Billion Dong	76,808.3	25,942.4	33.8
Regional expenditures of state budget 1999	Billion Dong	39,100.8	4,497.0	11.5
Total foreign direct investment (total capital at 31/12/2000)	Billion US \$	39.101	10.519	26.9
Total foreign direct investment (during year 2000)	Billion US \$	2.012	0.207	10.3

*Sources: Statistical yearbooks 2000 of Vietnam and of HCMC*

If we consider the entire "Southern key economic zone", which includes the provinces of Dong Nai, Binh Duong, Ba Ria-Vung Tau and Ho Chi Minh City, the primacy of the region in the state economy is even more enormous:

*"[...] the economic growth rate represents 1.5 times that of the national growth. On the scale of the country, it represents 60% of the value of the exports, 60% of the budgetary receipts, 50% of the industrial value. Without taking into account the strong craze of foreign*

*investors. [...] between 1996 and 1999, the region gathered 146,000 billion Dong of investment, ie 45.7% of the national amount and contributed from 44% to 51% to the national GDP. It welcomed thirty two new industrial parks, of which many are equipped with modern and competitive units" (Le Courrier du Viêt-nam, Hanoi, n<sup>o</sup> 1841 of 08/02/2000) [Original in French].*

Specifically concerning foreign investment, the "Southern key economic zone" collected 48.9 per cent of the

cumulated capital on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999 and 66.2 per cent of the foreign investment in Vietnam in 1999, offshore investment excluded (*Vietnam Economic Times*, Hanoi, n° 72, February 2000, p. 32).

An interesting indication is given by the number of people connected to Internet: 58% of the people connected to Internet in Vietnam in 1998 were living in HCMC (National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, 2001).

Table 3 shows clearly the influence that the development pole of HCMC can have on employment in the surrounding rural zone, but also in the rest of the country.

What are the main components of the growth of HCMC?

#### **The increasing role of rural-urban migration**

In a context of advanced demographic transition (total fertility rate: 2.2 in the whole country, 1.8 in HCMC), urban growth mainly results from rural-urban migration.

The annual growth of the urban population of HCMC is currently about 3.6 per cent (natural increase: 1.1 per cent; migration increase and progressive integration of surrounding rural areas or "reclassification": 2.5 per cent). With this constant rate of increase, the urban population of HCMC would be 6.443 million in 2015, 8.000 million in 2020 and 10.953 million in 2030. However, we can expect that HCMC's share of the rural-urban migration is going to increase substantially during the coming years for many reasons, in the context of the renovation policy:

- development of domestic and foreign investments (much higher in the large cities);

- strong economic growth, especially in urban areas, which develops many employment opportunities (notably in informal sector) and attracts migrants, because unemployment for new migrants is still brief;

- increase of living standards differentials and economic disparities between urban and rural areas, which increases the incentive to leave countryside;

- weakening of residential control;

- current maintaining of a large proportion of the population in rural areas (76.5 per cent, following the definitions of the 1999 census); this means that there are still high potentialities of rural-urban migration.

Several recent specific surveys and studies give an extensive view of the factors and mechanisms of this kind of migration (Truong Si Anh, 1994; Truong Si Anh et al., 1996a and 1996b; Vien Kinh Te Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1996 and 1997, Gubry et al., 2002).

The most recent project concerns a survey in 1999 on migration to HCMC from Can Giuoc District, a rural area in the Mekong delta region. This survey had an original methodology which consisted in following the migrants from the countryside to the city ("*tracing survey*"). This enabled the researchers to get the opinions about the move both of the parents who remained in countryside and the migrants living in HCMC; this is of great interest in assessing the future of rural-urban migration.

The impact of rural-urban migration is felt differently by the parents who still live in the village and by the migrants who originated from the same household and are living in the city. Strong differences also exist according to whether we are

measuring the impact on the family, on the village or on the whole country (table 4).

**Table 4: Assessment of impact of rural-urban migration by both parents in Can Giuoc and migrant in Ho Chi Minh City (%)**

Destination of impact	Respondent	Impact is			Total
		Positive	Negative	Don't know	
Impact on Family	Parents in CG	82.3	2.5	15.2	100.0
	Migrant in HCMC	88.2	1.7	10.1	100.0
Impact on Village	Parents in CG	69.5	2.5	28.0	100.0
	Migrant in HCMC	41.6	4.5	53.9	100.0
Impact on Country	Parents in CG	48.9	1.2	49.9	100.0
	Migrant in HCMC	22.7	3.1	74.2	100.0

*Source: 515 migrants in HCMC and their 515 families in Can Giuoc (Gubry et al., 2002)*

The most positive opinions are expressed by the migrants concerning the impact on their family, as 88 per cent of the migrants consider it as positive. This result is difficult to analyse because some migrants included in their family the part of their family living in the city, as well as the part of their family staying in the village; so, one cannot know if the "positive impact" applies more or less to the one or to the other part of the family, or to the family in the broad sense, taken as a whole. This observation can explain why the migrant estimates his migration in such a positive way; this is the direct justification of his move and of the durability of his residence in the city, which results from the conjunction between the obvious improvement of his own situation and the effort that he estimates to carry out to improve the living conditions of his relatives who remained in the village. However, the positive impact of the migration on the family seems obvious, in the arrival area, as well as in the departure area: it is noteworthy that 82 per cent of the parents consider as positive for their family

the departure of one of their family members to the city. This could be a powerful factor influencing rural-urban migration in the future.

Opinions are generally positive about all the kinds of impacts (on the family, on the village and on the country); they become however much less asserted as a wider unit is examined. Concerning impact on the country, 74 per cent of the migrants answer that they don't know; the high proportion doubting is probably instigated by the pervasive ideology -particularly accessible to the migrants who live in the city- which considers rural exodus as a plague for the nation; however, this doubt also has an objective reason: they may think they have insufficient information to evaluate these consequences.

There is a wide difference between the opinions of the parents and those of the migrants as regards the impact on the village and especially the impact on the country. The parents have a more sharply positive opinion than the migrants; they are

moreover in the best place to assess the impact on the village. Even there, the lower number of positive answers about the impact on the country can be attributed to the negative information accessible to the migrants.

At least, whatever may be the real consequences of the rural-urban migration to HCMC, they are considered as very positive by the most directly concerned people: the migrants themselves and their parents.

#### **Future trends: the process of “metropolisation” and the urban growth**

HCMC began a long time ago to include in its urban area some surrounding medium sized towns; this was especially the case in the past as Saigon merged with Cholon (which was more populated) and with Gia Dinh. It will include in the future most of the localities belonging to its metropolitan region.

The process of “metropolisation” concerns first the densification of the suburbs and the equipment of the new urban Districts (created in 1996). Three main development areas have been defined: (1) in the East, Thu Duc and the new Districts 9 and 2, (2) the Thu Thiem urban center, (3) the new area of Saigon South (District 7, Nha Be and Binh Chanh) (Uy Ban Nhan Nhan Dan Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1996).

The “metropolisation” concerns also the widening of the economic influence of HCMC on several towns and economic zones located far away without continuous built-up area. This kind of development has been well analysed in China by Gentelle (2000):

*“The way the Chinese cities, the largest in particular, attract populations and activities by widening their sphere of influence on their surroundings does not work according to the pattern of an oil stain,*

*with concentration in the centre and dilution on the edges, but according to the pattern of a bamboo, whose rhizomes run through a space without apparently modifying it to give shoots somewhere else, there where are small and medium sized towns with which the big city deals directly”.*

This kind of development has been compared to a metastasis by Asher (1995), as he defined the “metapolis”. It is related to the development of a rapid transportation system.

Therefore, the current projects are very ambitious. Given its location and the conditions of the Pacific Rim market, Saigon South is the first step in the enlargement of HCMC growing metropolis (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 1994). The development of Saigon South is seen as a key component of Vietnam’s comprehensive plans for the “Southern key economic zone” which includes HCMC, Bien Hoa and Vung Tau (Tôn Sĩ Kinh and Đô Thi Loan, 1996). This region is also poised to become a centre for international finance, trade, cultural, scientific, high-technology, transportation and tourism development in Vietnam. The Saigon South project presents a historic opportunity for Vietnam and HCMC to reintegrate the global economy, especially in Southeast Asia, in the future. The opening of a stock exchange market in HCMC is another step of this process. The “metropolisation” of HCMC is therefore the obvious sign of the entry of Vietnam into the process of globalization (Carroué, 2002).

#### **Similarities and specificities of Ho Chi Minh City compared to other megacities**

Though the increase of the productivity due to urbanization and the international role of HCMC have been quoted, the negative aspects of a fast urban growth were

more often analysed and are going to worry the authorities for many years (Bolay, 1998).

All the problems of town planning inherent to megacities (Oberai, 1993) are already present in HCMC where they have begun to be studied. We shall quote only some of these studies:

- Employment, especially noting that the opportunities of employment remain very numerous thanks to the informal sector, in spite of an increase in the unemployment rate (Truong Si Anh et al., 1996a; Campbell, 1999);

- Persistence -or even increase- of poverty among several categories of the population, and living conditions (Drakakis-Smith and Dixon, 1997; Gubry et al., 2002);

- Housing (Nguyen Quang Vinh and Leaf, 1996; Bolay et al., 1997; Parenteau, 1997; Coit, 1998; Bassand et al., 2000);

- Water problems (Bassand et al., 2000);

- Spatial structure and commuting movements (Do Thi Loan, 1994);

- Urban transportation and traffic jams (Schmitt, 1997);

- Local administration (Durand, 1997; Nguyễn, 1999);

- Urban environment (Thai Thi Ngoc Du et al., 1993; Parenteau, 1997), etc.

The problem of urban environment in HCMC, which includes water and air pollution, and garbage treatment, is the one which worries people the most, as related in various surveys. In all these domains, the Chinese experience may give useful lessons (Jones and Visaria, 1997).

Many of these problems are related to the obsolescence of urban infrastructures, to their saturation and to the lack of resources.

In this context, the interest to develop secondary centres in order to generate a

large multipolar zone which could relieve congestion in the main centre was emphasized.

However, several factors are relatively specific to HCMC and will deeply influence future urbanization:

1°) The essential role of water.

Besides allowing the presence of the port, water is the determining element of HCMC's environment. The city does not yet have a central water-treatment plant; in these conditions, its low altitude and the alternation of tides hinder waste water flow. The city is a part of what Timmerman and White (1997) called "megahydropolis", which may be weakened by climate change.

2°) The importance of the recent economic liberalization.

The opening to the market was accompanied by a decline of the subsidized economy. This has a strong influence on urbanization as on the other fields; it notably leads to a rapid increase of land prices and housing, despite the fact that in right, the land still belongs to the state.

So, Nguyen Quang Vinh and Leaf (1996) observe:

*"Popular housing can be looked upon as intrinsically a doi moi phenomenon as it arises from such policy changes as the loss of housing subsidy, the relaxation of controls on population movement and the institutionalisation of land markets to stimulate urban development"*.

3°) A well-developed urban network.

The urbanization of HCMC takes part in a relatively well-developed urban network in Vietnam (Vu Tu Lap and Taillard, 1994). Jones (1997) notes that this fact can slow down "megapolisation":

*"...Jakarta, Bangkok and Manila would not yet have reached megacity status if*

*Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines had developed more balanced city size hierarchies”.*

4°) The development of urban economic activities in the rural hinterland.

The region of HCMC and particularly the Mekong delta are clearly a part of this kind of region that McGee (1991) called "Desakota", a word created from two Indonesian terms ("village" and "town"). A *desakota* region is characterized by:

*"- a dense population engaged in smallholder cultivation, commonly of wet rice;*

*- an increase in non-agricultural activities;*

*- a well-developed infrastructure of roads and canals;*

*- a reservoir of cheap labour;*

*- highly integrated 'transactive' environments in terms of movements of people and commodities; and*

*- a state perception as being 'invisible' or 'grey' zones" (Dick and Rimmer, 1998).*

This kind of region corresponds relatively well to what was called in Europe, in another ecological environment, "rurbanisation". Dick and Rimmer (1998) minimize the analysis of McGee by emphasizing rather the resemblances between the urbanization in Southeast Asia and the United States. However, it is clear that this phenomenon, which gives additional incomes to the rural population, could also slow down the "megapolisation".

Taking into account the objective differentials between city and countryside and the results of the most recent surveys, we may however predict that rural-urban migration will anyway prevail for many years.

## Conclusion

Ho Chi Minh City can be considered in a lot of consideration as the economic capital of Vietnam. However, on a purely numeric level, considering the most usual definitions (from 5 millions to 10 millions inhabitants), Ho Chi Minh City is not yet a megacity, although definitions change according to the author, even the definitions of United Nations.

Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) is a relatively recent city in Vietnam, as it was officially created in 1698. Its population experienced a chaotic evolution as a result of the hazards of history. Globally, we saw that the population of the city experienced three major crises: in 1859-1861 (conquest by the French), in 1954-1956 (end of the Indochina War) and in 1975-1979 (end of the Vietnam War).

The estimation of the current urban population is made difficult by the fact that the limits of the administrative unit of Ho Chi Minh City still contain a high proportion of rural population. Urban population has thus been estimated between 3.7 million to 4.2 million in 1999.

Since the implementation of the Renovation policy (economic liberalization) in 1986, the population of Ho Chi Minh City, stagnant for a long time, again entered a stage of growth.

Economic liberalization not only developed rural-urban migration, but also intra-urban migrations. Recent movements are rather directed from the centre towards the suburbs, mainly because of the increase of land price in the city center. This phenomenon has to be related to the increase of economic and social differentiation.



Besides the raw figure of its population, Ho Chi Minh City has already many characteristics which we easily attribute to megacities. Among them, the drainage of a large part of investments and the production of a large part of national wealth have to be put at first place.

Rural-urban migration is going to play an increasing role in the urban growth of Ho Chi Minh City. On one hand natural growth reached the replacement level of generations, on the other hand rural population remains very high in the migration pool of the city and countrymen consider in very high majority the migration towards the city as "very positive". These factors may feed rural-urban migration during many years.

The economic predominance of Ho Chi Minh City and its growth engender a process of "metropolisation", progressively including the neighbouring rural areas and the close medium sized towns, without a necessarily continuum of the built urban zone. Important projects of urban planning were conceived to manage this process, which appears as the obvious sign of the entry of Vietnam in globalization.

Ho Chi Minh City presents numerous resemblances with other megacities. Its specificities are the dominating role of water, the importance of the recent process of economic liberalization, the insertion of the city in a well developed urban network and the importance of non agricultural activities in the surrounding rural area. These specificities have an ambivalent effect on "megapolisation" process, but factors which may accelerate this process seem prevailing by far.

This phenomenon appears to be to a large extend irreversible, and authorities are

much concerned, because while the employment problems are still largely resolved by the dynamism of informal sector, the evolution of infrastructure, transportation and urban environment are already very worrisome.

Within a short time, Ho Chi Minh City will thus undoubtedly become the first Vietnamese megacity, whatever current definitions of the megacity may be./.

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