

URBANIZATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. RESEARCH IDEAS FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF VIETNAM

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In 2008, for the first time, the world's urban population surpassed the rural population, crossing the threshold of 50%, according to the most coherent and most comparative estimates at international level (United Nations: Population Division, 2008). Indeed, the major obstacle to overcome in the study of the world urbanization resides in differences in the definition of urban agglomerations and their limits among various countries, as well as in the modification of these limits over time.

The situation varies sharply from region to region, both with regard to the urbanization ratio (or proportion of urban population) and to the number of megalopolises [*megalopolises*] (agglomerations of more than 10 million inhabitants). Estimated at 49.4% worldwide in 2007, the urbanization ratio, in the large regions was as follows: North America (81.3%), Latin America and the Caribbean (78.3%), Europe (72.2%), Oceania (70.5%), Asia (40.8%), and Africa (38.7%). At the same time, there are 19 megalopolises in the world: 11 in Asia, 4 in Latin America, 2 in North America, 1 in Africa and 1 in Europe. Asia records a number of megalopolises deemed to expand the most.

In this context, how does urbanization in Southeast Asia look like?

Southeast Asia: a relatively less urbanized region with strong urban growth potential

According to the United Nations, Southeast Asia includes the 11 following countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, East Timor and Vietnam. This region has a total population of 573 million inhabitants in 2007 (table 1).

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This study aims at setting the framework for urbanization in Southeast Asia in the light of population studies, then starting from the Vietnamese example, to propose for reflection possible research topics which emerge from the experience of recent research which serves in particular the research in partnership.

Southeast Asia's overall urbanization is 45.8%, but with wide disparity from one country to another. Thus it varies from 100% in Singapore, which is a developed "City State", to only 20.9% in Cambodia. In the latter, this low ratio not only demonstrates a weak industrialization, but also the lingering consequences of the cities "destruction" policy conducted by the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979.

The "poorest" countries (Cambodia, East Timor and Laos), which lag behind in urbanization, currently have the highest urban growth rates (from 4.6 to 5.6% per annum); conversely, the "richest" countries (Singapore, Brunei and Thailand) experience low urban growth rates (from 1.2 to 2.6% per annum). It is interesting to notice that the rural population started to decline in the whole region, but that 6 of the 10 countries concerned (Singapore does not have rural population) still see their rural population increasing; the growth rate of the rural population is particularly high in East Timor (2.9% per annum), as the result of both a strong fertility (family planning, not helped by the dilapidation of the country and by Catholic religion, is weak there), and a strong return of refugees who had left the country at the independence war time.

The urban growth has three components: natural urban population growth, migration growth and "reclassification" of rural areas into urban areas during the spatial extension of urban agglomerations. The share of these three elements varies respectively over time (Oberai, 1989): Migration to the city generally prevails in the first phase with a population natural growth being limited as the result of a strong fertility associated with a strong mortality; in the second phase, following a decline of mortality, natural growth increases and prevails over migration; in the third phase, once demographic transition has terminated, migration becomes again dominating, with a reduced natural growth due to combination of a low fertility and a weak mortality. Reclassification is a continuous phenomenon, as new constructions attach the peripheral rural settlement to the urban habitat in a contiguous way; however, it can only be measured sporadically, on the occasion of the official change of category of city peripheral administrative units from rural to urban. Also, necessary data (urban fertility and mortality, migration, and reclassification of peripheral zones) are not immediately available so as to compare among countries and which requires a meticulous study. It is what had been made for Ho Chi Minh City for example (table 2); the historical evolution of the population of the city, in addition, has experienced major turbulences (Gubry & Le Thi Huong, 2004).

Table 1 : Urbanization status and evolution in Southeast Asia and in the world (2007-2050)

Country	Population 2007 (thousands)	Population 2025 (thousands)	Population 2050 (thousands)	% urban population			Annual growth rate 2005-2010 (%)		Additional urban population 2007-2050 (thousands)	Key agglomeration 2007		
				2007	2025	2050	Urban	Rural		Agglomeration	Population (thousand)	% of urban population
Singapore	4,436	5,104	5,026	100.0	100.0	100.0	1.2	-	590	Singapore	4 436	100.0
Brunei	390	527	681	74.4	80.9	87.2	2.6	0.4	304	B. Seri Begawan	22	7.7
Malaysia	26,572	33,769	39,631	69.6	80.5	87.9	3.0	-1.3	16,332	Kuala Lumpur	1 448	7.8
Philippines	87,961	115,878	140,466	64.2	74.6	83.9	3.0	-0.2	61,330	Manila	11 100	19.6
Indonesia	231,627	271,227	296,884	50.4	65.9	79.4	3.3	-1.1	119,028	Jakarta	9 125	7.8
Thailand	63,884	68,802	67,376	32.9	42.2	60.0	1.7	0.2	19,375	Bangkok	6 704	31.9
Myanmar	48,799	55,374	58,709	31.9	44.6	63.1	2.9	-0.1	21,494	Rangoon	4 088	26.3
Laos	5,859	7,713	9,291	29.7	49.0	68.0	5.6	0.1	4,581	Vientiane	745	42.8
Vietnam	87,375	106,357	119,970	27.3	38.1	57.0	3.1	0.7	44,505	Ho Chi Minh City	5 314	22.2
East Timor	1,155	2,012	3,463	26.9	36.4	54.9	5.0	2.9	1,592	Dili	159	51.2
Cambodia	14,443	19,489	25,114	20.9	33.2	53.2	4.6	1.0	10,349	Phnom Penh	1 466	48.5
Total of Southeast Asia	572,500	686,251	766,611	45.8	58.7	73.3	3.1	-0.3	299,479	-	-	-
Developed countries	1,223,004	1,258,970	1,245,247	74.4	79.0	86.0	0.5	-0.5	161,418	-	-	-
World	6,671,227	8,010,509	9,191,286	49.4	57.2	69.6	2.0	0.4	3,104,347	-	-	-

(a) Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, Japan
 Source: United Nations: Population Division, 2008

Table 2: Estimate of the components of the urban growth in Ho Chi Minh City (1999-2004 period)

Component	Rate (%)	Annual total growth share (%)
Natural growth	1.2	32.4
Migration growth	1.0	27.0
Reclassification	1.5	40.6
Total growth	3.7	100.0

Source: Gubry & Le Thi Huong, 2005

It is important to estimate the future urban growth and in particular the additional quantity of urban population that countries will have to absorb during the years to come. This figure is related to many variables, such as the size of the remaining rural population (if this size is large, there are many potential migrants), the difference between the level of living conditions in the city and in the countryside, the polarization of space and the employment opportunities (large investments are drawn to cities) and consequently economic growth (a strong growth, like that in several countries of the region, calls for a large labour force), etc. Projections indicate that cities of Southeast Asia will have to absorb nearly 300 million people from 2007 to 2050.

However, migrants will not move in a uniform way towards all the cities. This in particular will depend on the structure of the urban network. This structure can be measured by the primacy rate, or proportion of the population of the largest city compared to the entire urban population of the country; it gives an idea of “macrocephaly” or sometimes the disproportionate weight of the largest agglomeration. In this respect, the urban network appears well balanced in Brunei (given the country’s small size), Malaysia and Indonesia; conversely, a notable macrocephaly is seen in East Timor, Cambodia and Laos, which are less urbanized countries.

In 2007, the region recorded only one megalopolis, with more than 10 million inhabitants, Manila (11.1 million inhabitants), which will be joined soon by Jakarta (9.1 million).

A specific urbanization in Southeast Asia?

The concept of desakota region

The Canadian geographer Terrence G. McGee (1991) has developed a fundamental concept to underline a major specificity of the highly populated rice deltas of Southeast Asia: that of “*desakota region*”; this term derived from two words in Indonesian language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) meaning *kota* (city) and *desa* (village). It is close to the notion of “*rurbanisation*” sometimes used by the French-speaking geographers. It

emphasizes the fact that these regions closely link up agriculture with non agricultural activities of urban type. Many industrial parks settled in rural areas (strong population density and the relatively high level of education facilitate the recruitment of necessary workforce) while sub-contracting works for city factories spread in the villages, in particular garment-related work handled by a women labor force. Moreover, the city-countryside relations are generalized, in the form of temporary mobility (related to the construction sites and other informal activities) and/or seasonality (related to the agricultural calendar). On the whole, the incomes drawn from non-agricultural activities are higher than those from agriculture.

It is logical to think that the *desakota region* slows down or delays the rural-urban migration, insofar as it helps generate substantial additional off-farm incomes, in the rural area. In addition, temporary mobilities are particularly difficult to evaluate, since they do not correspond to a change of residence while their duration varies considerably.

Selection in migration and urban poverty

Within the framework of the *desakota region*, the urban agglomerations permanently comprise a stock of population leaving home because of the rural under-employment or at the time of an agricultural leisure season. People come to the city, taking on temporary activities, on construction sites for instance. These people remain for less than 6 months in the city, often spend the night on a building site or in factories dormitories, commuting to their native village. Thus, this stock is relatively permanent, while its members are renewed. As they are not city residents, it is obvious that these people are often not recorded in most of the socio-economic surveys, which focus on the resident population in ordinary households.

A constant notable fact in the results of these investigations, in particular in Vietnam, is the notice that migrants are on average richer than non-migrants, which appears surprising at first sight. In fact, within the effect of the sample selection, this observation is not at all surprising: migrants are already selected compared to their place of origin (the poorest have more difficulty to migrate); these migrants often work in the formal sector; among them, there is a large number of pupils and students who need to move towards largest cities for their studies. They then would take a better-paid urban job upon their graduation; there is also an important number of wives who joined their husband downtown, in virilocal society: it is logical to think in this respect, rural women getting married to a husband of the city are on average better-off than those who marry a man of the countryside.

On the whole, it is suggested that urban poverty thus affects this non-resident mobile population which is not taken into account in traditional households surveys. Therefore, urban poverty research requires the use of a much more complex specific methodology.

The large share of female migration

In several of Southeast Asian major agglomerations, the number of female prevails over the other sex in the rural-urban migration, contrary to what occurs in most countries in the world. It is the case with Ho Chi Minh City for instance. This situation until now was explained in a probably unsatisfactory way, attributing it exclusively to the prevalence of female employment in cities: factories with strong proportion of female labor including garment factories and services employment including housemaid services. It is undoubtedly necessary to conduct complementary research on the decline of fertility, family structure, succession rules and socio-religious practice: in a family reduced to two children, if there are a boy and a girl, the girl often tends to leave her home in the countryside as the boy has to take charge of the family production and to ensure ancestors worship.

Sexual preference and selective abortion

In certain regions of many Asian countries, for a few years, an increase in male ratio at birth, is recorded, which often exceeds 120 male births for 100 female births (the normal is around 105). It is the case in China, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal; in Southeast Asia, only Vietnam starts to be concerned and probably Singapore, although the preference for a boy-birth seems generalized. The increase in the prevalence of boys at birth appears to be attributed essentially to selective abortion: amid a strong family planning, couples want to have at least one male heir and if they cannot have many children they use selective abortion of female fetuses following recourse to ultrasound scan. This phenomenon has been largely documented in Asia and it appears that the phenomenon is mostly seen in cities, where people are better informed and have more means and facilities to access to modern technologies (Sabharwal & Than Thi Thien Huong, 2006). In any case, this evolution which is likely to generate a strong imbalance between the sexes and considerable socio-economic consequences in the cities of the region must be studied.

Recent research on the city in Vietnam

The most abundant literature on urban studies in Vietnam is obviously written in Vietnamese. It is composed primarily of consultancy reports, urban planning reports, academic work and sometimes articles in reviews; it is not very present on the Web and is difficult to access, unless one has lots of time to visit public services and libraries, for which the national researchers hardly have time, while the foreign researchers seldom have the needed command of language. It is thus not surprising that the references of foreign authors represent a higher place than their effective contribution, including among the Vietnamese authors, which leads to a bias in the assessment of knowledge.

During the last decade, urban-related theses in Vietnam have multiplied: Nguyễn, 1999; Vu Quốc Huong, 2000; Burlat, 2001; Pandolfi, 2001; Wust, 2001; Phạm Thị Xuân Tho, 2002; Quertamp, 2003; Chabert, 2004; Nguyễn Thiên Phú, 2005, etc. In parallel,

studies on living environment have been conducted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Dang Nguyen Anh & al., 2002), synthesis of urbanization in the country (Douglass & al., 2002) and rural-urban migration towards Ho Chi Minh City (Gubry & al., 2002), as results of previous research.

Regarding the most recent research, far from seeking any representativeness, we will mention here only some recent or on-going key co-operation research projects, among which are those known to us or those in which we have been involved.

The Urban Research Programme for Development (PRUD)

This programme, funded from 2002 to 2004 by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with results under publication process in 2008, comprises 32 research operations in the world, including 8 in Vietnam. The latter's outcome includes the publication of a collective summary work on many aspects of urban transition in Vietnam (Castiglioni & al., 2006). It deals, especially for Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, with the process and the stakeholders of urban transition, roads network and urban rearrangements, intra-urban mobilities, relocation of precarious dwelling areas, water management, role of the civil society in environmental management, ODA projects and international consultants... Orientations of research are provided in the conclusion.

Intra-urban mobilities in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi

One of the operations conducted as part of the PRUD covers intra-urban mobilities in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, adopting a "population" approach through a households survey (Gubry & al., 2008). It highlighted the "spread" of downtown population towards cities peripheral areas in a "gentrification" process related to land price hike in central city. Periurbanization development lengthens the commuting time and requires the development of public transport. In addition, the relative under-equipment of peri-urban zone has been clarified.

The "Comprehensive Urban Development Programme" (HAIDEP) in Hanoi

The Japanese co-operation made a thorough study of urban issues in Hanoi, with important means, which resulted in the publication of 21 volumes (JICA, Hanoi People's Committee, 2007). This series of studies rather belongs to consultancy, but several of them constitute real research works. Numerous aspects have been addressed: context, urban planning, land use, socio-economic development, urban transport and traffic, roads network, water, housing, land expropriation and relocation, environment, living conditions, implementation and management, etc. The overall project is supported by a household survey, including survey on opinions, a transport survey and an important cartography.

The project "Support to research on economic and social transition challenges in Vietnam"

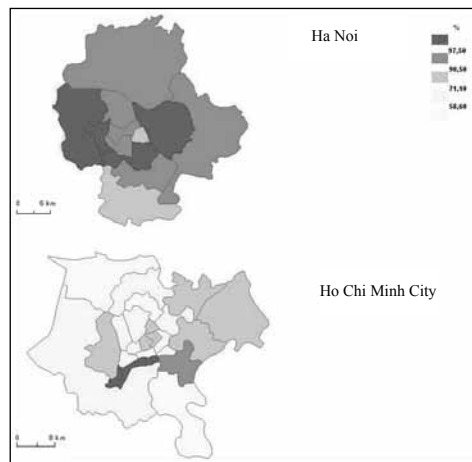
This on-going project in 2008 is funded by the French embassy with loans from the Fonds de Solidarité Prioritaire (FSP). Of the selected 10 partnership studies, 3 are explicitly related with urbanization:

- “The rise of the craft villages: Economic development, industrialization and urbanization of the rural areas in the highly populated Red River delta”;
- “Urbanization and transformation of professional structures in rapidly urbanized areas in the South – the cases of Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho”;
- “Migration, poverty and urban environment: Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City”.

This last operation is conducted by a team comprising members of the Institute of Population and Social Studies, belonging to the National Economics University in Hanoi (IPSS), the Ho Chi Minh City Institute for Development Studies (HIDS) and the Institute of Research for Development (IRD) of France. It resumes the “population” approach through a representative households survey in the two cities. The environmental urban problems are analyzed according to living standards on one hand and to migration status on the other, systematically comparing the two cities. A large part is obtained with opinion questions.

As an example, among the available results, it appears that - contrary to what was expected – that the inhabitants of Hanoi are more concerned than those of Ho Chi Minh City by environmental problems. It is also observed that better-off people are more concerned than the poor. It is attributed to the role of education. Especially notable intra-urban disparities are seen in this field, people claiming more “concerned” in the suburban districts where environmental problems are most serious (figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of people claiming personally “concerned” by the environment in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, by district



Source: Project “Migration, poverty and urban environment”, 2007; Philcarto software, 2008

In the light of recent research and available results, it is possible to raise for reflection some issues relating to data-collection and to make proposals regarding urban research in Vietnam.

Data collection and urban research issues in Vietnam

Reflections on the available data

Population census

The decennial censuses in Vietnam, with the last one prior to 2008 dating back to 1999, are of international standard. Their quality is recognized and the publication of the results is very swift. A number of statements regularly formulated by non-specialists, including journalists, affirming that a certain category of population –the “floating population” such as non-registered population, migrants, tenants, etc.) would be excluded– might also be considered. The resident population is indeed counted according to international standards, without taking into account their residential registration, with the exception of foreigners so far. On the other hand, it is logical to think that there exists a certain under-estimation in the city, as it is generally the case everywhere in the world, due to more challenging conditions of data collection: more frequent reluctance within the population to answer the questions, absence of respondents at their residence during the day, higher proportion of the single person households, “difficult” quarters, etc. It is even agreed that the under-estimation is on average higher in the above-mentioned groups than in the entire population.

That is to say several improvements regarding cities data are needed in censuses in Vietnam:

- All the residents, including foreigners in a rising number, in particular those coming from ASEAN countries (movement within ASEAN is free) and who are involved in the economy of the country should be taken into account. Foreigners can then be easily distinguished from nationals with question about nationality in the event that analysis requires this distinction.
- The decennial periodicity is too long to track urbanization correctly, because evolution of the city population is fast. A lighter intercalated census is needed every five years after the general census for the largest cities: Ho Chi Minh City (which already implemented an operation of this type in 2004) with Bien Hoa (which is now part of the agglomeration of Ho Chi Minh City in 2008), Hanoi, Hai Phong, Da Nang,.
- So far, no official publication of the Census has focused on the cities. The data on the cities are obviously included in the files, but a specific selection work is necessary for urban research or urban planning. In the future, it would be interesting to have a volume dedicated to the urban population of the country and another on each big city for example. In the absence of a more scientific criterion, selection according

to the nature of the administrative units (urban districts classified as *quan*; and rural districts as *huyen*) could be enough at this level. In fact, the administrative units of the cities in Vietnam, in particular the largest municipalities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City include a large rural area; the city planning, as well as the international comparisons need such a distinction.

Limits of the urban agglomerations

It was underlined that the administrative boundaries of the urban agglomerations comprise a large rural area. Thus, in the 1999 census, the rural districts or *huyen* accounted for 46% of the total population of Hanoi and 18% of that of Ho Chi Minh City. In Hanoi, the share of the rural population still increased considerably since the expansion of the city administrative limits in 2008, including area up to the national park of Ba Vi, some 40 km west of the city. The apparent goal of this reform is to include the city planning in a regional context in order to manage the infrastructure and transport issues more effectively. However, these new limits undoubtedly do not solve all the problems linked to the regular relations of the city with its support region, which covers in fact all the Red River's delta.

In the urban study, the need for suitable statistics hence becomes even more urgent, especially when a comparison among the cities at national and international levels is needed. In this respect, a possible delimitation of the limits of large agglomerations could start from the continuity of the built-up area located on satellite picture, which is more refined than simply taking into account the administrative definitions; then, the administrative limits map should be placed over the satellite picture for estimating the respective parts of urban population and rural population in the peripheral units with census-obtained data.

Socio-economic sample surveys

Most socio-economic sample surveys on the households in Vietnam so far have applied a multiple degree sampling design: in urban area, *phuong* (units immediately below the urban district) are drawn at first level, then blocks (*to dan pho*) and finally households. The first problem is that the *phuong* is a broad and highly populated unit (nearly 2,900 households in Hanoi and 3,300 households in Ho Chi Minh City); therefore drawing of *phuong* is likely to trigger a large "cluster effect" at sampling, decreasing its precision if only a small number of them are drawn

The second problem is that the households are in general drawn down from the available list with the person in charge of the block (*to dan pho*). However this list has quite a specific objective, different from the statistical one, since it is aimed at managing the residential registration (in Vietnam, each one is normally registered somewhere). In fact, the lists available with the persons in charge of the block are clearly incomplete as they include the people having a permanent residential permit (KT1 and KT2), but they include those having a temporary residential permit (KT3 and KT4) only if

they actually achieved a certain procedure to obtain this kind of permit. It is what has been clearly noticed at the census in Ho Chi Minh City in 2004, which attached the type of residential permit to every one; however, it was quickly concluded that it was not possible for the temporary permits to note the really owned permit (which is often non-existent) but only *the kind of permit which the person could have claimed if he or she had achieved the procedures in this way*. On the whole, the available lists do not include foreigners and tenants; migrants and people in irregular situation in accordance with the residence regulation are highly under-estimated. No doubt that there is an important bias in most of these surveys. To address this problem, recent surveys have implemented a two-level draw: blocks and households, making a new inventory of the households within the block; the survey staff goes around the block on foot, accompanied by the person in charge of the block (Gubry & al., 2008). A specific computer programme has enabled both to arrange the draw of the blocks simply by the number of blocks from *phuong* at the first level, then amongst households by selected blocks at the second level.

Regarding urban research, it turns out that some well-known periodic surveys such as Vietnam Household Living Standards Surveys (VHLSS), organized or programmed every two years from 2002 to 2010, simply do not provide result on the cities, but only on the provinces in which they are conducted (Tong Cuc Thong Ke - General Statistics Office, 2007). However, it is known that Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City include a large peripheral rural area so that the data on the provinces correspond by no means to those on the cities.

Some urban research topics

Evolution of land and housing

The land price is both a consequence and a cause of urban population distribution and intra-urban mobilities. It is fundamental in terms of urbanism. The land price is close to the world peaks in certain central districts of the big cities in Vietnam and, particularly in the capital. A fundamental study has covered this subject on Hanoi (Pandolfi, 2001). However, nothing equivalent exists for Ho Chi Minh City or the medium-sized cities. A follow-up of this issue would be highly useful so as to identify the intra-urban differences and the social differentiations and to evaluate the consequences regarding housing, roadway network and infrastructure. In this field, as in the others, a comparison between the two metropolises would be very rewarding.

The evolution of housing is closely linked to that of land, especially in a context where land price by far represents the most significant part of construction. A special attention should be paid to the evolution of the social housing and that of the middle-class population taking into account the urban growth prospects.

Evolution of the residential registration

The residential registration in Vietnam was initially established to distribute the food coupons. This function has disappeared for a long time and the residential registration has been gradually deemed the key part of the migration policy of which the declared goal is to limit internal migrations and particularly rural-urban migration towards the largest agglomerations. The fact is that spontaneous migrations were practically non-existent in the country until the economic liberalization by the end of the 1980s. The absence of economic growth and employment opportunities in the cities together with the restrictive legislation have made migration useless, so that it is impossible to distinguish between these two factors. Currently, amid an economic context of strong growth, it appears that the restrictive legislation can no longer prevent migration (Gubry & al., 2002), but few studies were explicitly devoted to this issue (Hardy, 2001; VeT & al., 2005).

The legislation was eased in 2006, making it possible for larger numbers of people to request a permanent residential status in the city¹. Hence, it is high time to monitor the application of this law and to revisit its possible influence on migration: the restrictive legislation did not help impede current migrants, but can a more flexible legislation contribute to increasing the number of migrants in the future?

Urbanization in medium-sized cities

Research on medium-sized cities, such as Hai Phong and Da Nang, remains largely insufficient. It would be interesting to examine the arising urban planning issues and how they are addressed in comparison with the big cities. It is also of paramount importance to identify the methods which could help medium-sized cities attract and absorb a more important proportion of the migrants.

Mobilities, rural-urban migration and poverty

It has been proved that conventional household surveys, which are limited to the residents in “ordinary households”, do not capture the urban poverty of the whole population living in the city at a given time. In fact, in addition to the “ordinary households” are workers and employees residing in “collective households”, which are dormitories, provided by employers, on one hand and a number of “visiting population” which is constantly renewed, on the other. The latter may well be described as “floating population”, in Vietnam just like in China, to describe the migrants without permanent

¹Luật cư trú của quốc hội khóa xi, kỳ họp thứ 10 số 81/2006/qh11 ngày 29 tháng 11 năm 2006.
[Law on Residence of the National Assembly XI tenure, 10th session n° 81/2006/qh dated November 29, 2006.]

registration; they are actually a population temporarily traveling to the city for work. This population most often stays within ordinary households, living with relatives, renting a room, or sleeping at the work place.

Capturing these different types of population requires the use of a specific methodology which remains to be devised. In any case, the topic “mobilities, rural-urban migration and poverty” in the Vietnamese cities must be “revisited” completely.

Periurbanization

Periurbanization is a hot topic. In a context of strong urban growth, the peri-urban area is obviously the area witnessing the most changes. It is interesting to observe there the consumption of space at the detriment of farm lands, constructions, infrastructure building, population inflow both from downtown and from the rural areas, population mobilities, urban transport and professional mobility, etc. Particularly the sustainability of the “new urban areas” policy, with a proliferation of high-end domestic or foreign-funded towers which one can cast doubts on their occupancy, should be questioned.

It is within this framework that one should examine which status to grant to the small towns included within the administrative boundaries of the large urban areas but without continuity of the built-up area, like Ha Tay near Hanoi (in 2008) or Cu Chi in Ho Chi Minh City for example.

This research topic has been developed in Hanoi (VTGEO, 2002; Quertamp, 2003); it is currently transferred to the CEFURDS-LPED research team in Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho within the framework of FSP in selected zones. An overall study, like that on Hanoi, could be considered on Ho Chi Minh City.

Urban environment

Beside many technical studies conducted long ago, the urban environment approach through a household survey has just started with the IPSS-HIDS-IRD research team in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City within the framework of the FSP. Undoubtedly, many aspects of this issue will be further explored to come up with new sustainable development indicators.

The impact of climate change on the Vietnamese cities must be studied at this level. Several of them correspond to what is described as “megahydropolis” (Timmerman & Rodney, 1997). Right now, nearly 10% of the dwellings of Ho Chi Minh City are at times flooded by the river bursts, which especially occur at high tide (according to migration, poverty and urban environment survey, 2007). An eventual rise of the sea level would be of concern as the current urbanization reaches to the lowest-lying areas, like in the District 2 for example.

Urbanization must also be confronted with the consumption of energy. Vietnam already is in short of energy, as evidenced by the frequent power cuts at the end of the dry season when the water level of the reservoirs is low whereas a strong growth of the demand for energy has been predicted (Delesalle and Grillot, 2007). The nuclear power plants project will function only as from 2020. In this context, the sustainability of currently promoted urban planning type with the construction of a large number of energy-consuming buildings is questioned.

International migration is back

The number of overseas Vietnamese is estimated at 2.7 million, living in 90 countries in the world¹. In 2004, the overseas Vietnamese or *Viet Kieu* have sent approximately 3.2 billion dollars to the country. However, the investments by the *Viet Kieu* represent only a tiny fraction (1 to 2%) of the foreign direct investments (FDI) in Vietnam. The current policy aims at facilitating the return of the *Viet Kieu* and at luring their investments. Under certain conditions, foreigners can now acquire a house within Vietnam.

The large majority of the *Viet Kieu* returning to the country settle in Ho Chi Minh City and pour their investments there. Little information is available on the procedures and the consequences of this movement, which also affect the urban planning area.

In conclusion: Institutional strengths and weaknesses of urban research in Vietnam

Urban research can't avoid the constraints of research in general and it's needless to raise the research issue in Vietnam without mentioning the conditions affecting research in general and cooperation research in particular.

The current liberal globalization process witnesses considerable upheavals of research in every country, which can be seen for instance by the reduction in public funding, a growing number of programmes conducted under contract form, the increase of consultancies, an insecure employment (the proportion of temporary jobs, for the duration of a project, increases to the detriment of fixed employment, etc). These upheavals are more sensitive in the countries where public research occupies a dominating position, which is the case of both France and Vietnam, for instance.

Vietnam seems even to have taken a certain advance in this evolution with the progressive application of universities empowerment². In a context where the wages were hardly revalued and do not ensure to make ends meet for a family (except for staff working for limited duration projects), the situation becomes very difficult

¹Resolution n° 36-NQ/TW of March 26, 2004 by the Politbureau on the Overseas Vietnamese Affairs [*Website of the Nhân Dân daily, updated on 30th June 2004*].

²Decree n° 115/2005/ND-CP of September 5, 2005.

(Gubry, 2004; Phuong Mai, 2007). Researchers and lecturers-researchers are thus forced into a race in search of simultaneous consultancies, and the research centres tend to be transformed into consultancy offices working on the short term (Tessier, 2008). Meanwhile, research work requires foremost a serenity helping the researcher to have time for reflection and reading, which they can no longer afford under the new conditions. The situation will remain precarious before a new balance is found, after having learned the lessons from the evolution in progress.

Alongside this development backdrop, the country is not in a shortage of strength. There is no doubt that urban research finds decisive support from the Cooperation Center for Urban Development (*Institut des Métiers de la Ville - IMV*) in Hanoi, founded by the Hanoi People's Committee and the Ile-de-France Region in France, and from the Urban Development Management Support Centre (PADDI) in Ho Chi Minh City, created by the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee and the Rhone-Alps Region of France. Quite recently, in Ho Chi Minh City, the merger on October 1st, 2008 of three institutions linking economic research, sociological research and urban planning within the new Ho Chi Minh City Institute for Development Studies (HIDS) can make it possible to give a new momentum to urban research, essentially multidisciplinary. The existence, within this institute, of the Ho Chi Minh City WTO Affairs Consultation Center will also help better study the influence of globalization on urbanization.

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Cover photos:

Photo 1 (above): Trương Hoàng Trương, industrial area, Vinh Loc A, Binh Chanh district, Ho Chi Minh city, May 2006.

Photo 2 (below): Patrick Gubry, new urban area, district 2, Ho Chi Minh city, November 2008.