Urbanization for Ho Chi Minh City in the Future:
Forecasting Cultural and Social Challenges and Opportunities

Dr. Hồ Bá Thâm
HCMC Institute of Development Studies, Vietnam

Presented at
Key Challenges in the Process of Urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City:
Governance, Socio-Economic, and Environmental Issues
Workshop
16-18 September 2009
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

We will cover in this paper a number of issues regarding “forecast of cultural and social challenges and opportunities in the urbanization of Ho Chi Minh City”.

1- From current situation and status, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is expected to become a multi-center mega-urban city.

According to the media, in the draft report submitted to the People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City by the city’s Office of Construction in preparation to report to Central Government, it was stated that HCMC will be developed in the multi-center pattern along the northeast, south – southeast, north – northwest, southwest direction. Estimates show that HCMC will reach 10 million people in 2020 (compared to the current 7 million) and will become a mega-urban city. To ensure a modern urban city scenario with exceptional landscape and living condition, it is vital that we tackle and resolve the future urbanization challenges with perspectives and vision in the planning and technical infrastructure preparation.

The current urban resources and situation, however, still present significant limitations and insufficiency. According to the draft report from HCMC’s Office of Construction, the city has recently established many new urban areas. Development has made urban landscape improve in more and more modern ways, with integration of fringe areas’ and regional development. Official research shows that up to April 2009, the city’s average per capita residential area is 13.4m²/person, with expectations to reach 14m²/person in 2010. House quality is mostly semi-strong, 3rd or 4th tier houses, which covers 65% of total house units. The rest is 1st and 2nd tier houses and slums next to water. Number of house units in 2010 is estimated to be 1.7 million.

The city’s landscape structure is still impractical, with insufficient land use for public and open space. “Sprawl” areas are still present, with unregulated and spontaneous development on the agricultural land and along main transportation routes. This results in the difficulty of planning according to the satellite urban model. Recent and current residential development faces a number of limitations such as dispersion towards areas like eastern (district 2, 9 & Thu Duc), southern (district 7, Nha Be ward), western (district Tan Phu, Binh Tan, Binh Chanh ward) and even in the central area (district 6, Binh Thanh..) Out of 130 recently approved development project by the Office of
Construction, there are 63 projects that lie within the current central area, equal to the number of new urban areas’ projects. Past plans developed by governments were calculated to accommodate only a certain population. Overdevelopment in the central area will lead to overload, traffic congestion, which is an unattractive trend. Dispersing development recently has led to a typical result: working people reside in one area and work in another, which is a reason for the “swinging pendulum” traffic that developed countries always try to avoid. It is necessary to develop complex urban areas where residential and working areas are combined to alleviate this traffic congestion problem (according to HCMC Youth periodical).

With the current urban hardware status, mega-urban development currently and in the future will face various challenges in the development and governance aspects (known briefly as “urban hard challenges”). Management trends need to redirect towards a new mechanism: market-oriented and decentralized urban regulation.

Beside the landscape, infrastructure which is the hardware of the urban city, the software of an urban area is its cultural and social image. This is both a separate component of the city and a value embedded in its urban hardware.

Cultural and social developments have shown certain improvement, with establishment of communities and governance system that are relevant with the growing market economy and globalization. There are, however, still limits and setbacks from the old agricultural rural system and war-time society. This traditional way of life sustains not only in people’s daily life, work and traffic but also in the governmental regulation and management activities.

New cultural values, activities and life styles that are relevant to a civilization of urbanizing and modernizing market economic system, in light of reform and globalization, include promotion of economic values, social and economic efficiency, democracy, transparency and openness, modern and traditional, authentic cultural aspects... However, there still exist many complication and out-dated trends. Social conflicts still emerge and are hard to predict, such as population growth pressure, corruption, prostitution, drugs, smuggling, “monetarist”, self-serving and degradation in political power, personal corruption, all of which are considerable threats to civilization.

General urban development and governance, as well as specific cultural and social regulation, have been reformed to certain levels. Nevertheless, limitations, impracticability and disintegration still make regulators ineffective and confused in handling unprecedented conflicts and obstacles in the process.

As urban areas continue to grow, so do these issues. These challenges to the process of urbanization and governance are known as “urban soft challenges”.

2- Impacts, implications and trends in the process of global integration and development: A look into the future.

Potentials in the process of global integration and modernization will stimulate the urbanization process. There are numerous opportunities implied for the nation’s
development in traditional culture, both scientific and people’s aspects, which creates a rich and authentic cultural treasure with communicative and interactive values in an inter-cultural community. Integration creates competitiveness and cultural relativism, which stimulates internal and external sources for cultural and social development. The depth of economic and social growth has also created many benefits and values, which lead to mutually beneficial interactions among communities, people and societies. In other words, the values, the life style and our way of cultural expression have had turning-point improvements that transpire gradually: from old traditional societies to democratic and modern societies, from traditional culture values to modern but uniquely defined culture.

There are, however, many challenges that emerge.

Impacts on the cultural and social aspects of HCMC, which sometimes lead to significant disagreement and conflicts, include the following:

- The process of urbanization in the multi-center pattern with 4 major directions, combined with the industrialization and modernization, creates conflicts of interest, which lead to significant and time-consuming litigations, strikes; feedbacks from educators and medical professionals, environmentalists; issues of social discrimination and rich-poor gap (refer to city research “Disagreements and Conflicts of Interest in modern market economy and social life of Ho Chi Minh City: status, trends and solutions”, 2009, Ho Ba Tham, head researcher).

Conflicts of interest, in general, can be increasing in complexity or decreasing, depending on subjective approach of managers and leaders.

- Modern market economic development and internationalization create conflicts between traditional and modern values. Examples are: disappeared or damaged historic and cultural heritage, negative influences from foreign cultures, revealing or exacerbating of negative and out-dated aspects of traditional values (refer to city research “Cultural Development in Alignment with Economic Growth, Ho Chi Minh City”, 2008, Ho Ba Tham, head researcher).

Common trends are rapid establishment of modern cultural-social systems, in which there are general systems adapted from foreign sources, and “renaissance” of traditional values. Some of these are relevant and harmonic, while others are conflicts in the process of interaction, adjustment and integration of cultures in the context of globalization.

There will be, as a result, tendencies to enrich and restructure the cultural heritage of Vietnam and other modern social communities in the efforts of overcoming and converting challenges to opportunities.

3- Vision and Proposed Solutions.

*Development of forecasting science and applying those forecasts.* The process of management and governance today is in great demand for forecasting and visioning science, especially the researches and forecast work for the country’s and city’s
development. Forecasting research will prevent impracticability, passivity, limited vision and, most importantly, will support strategic planning and developing. Forecasting work are currently paid little attention and with many disadvantages. The first is little understanding regarding the science in general and the mechanism and methodology of forecasting, as well as different support tools, human resources and other requisites for forecasts. The planning of HCMC is limited by the insufficient sources of forecasts that provide scientific and practical bases for the process.

*Constructing strategies, philosophy, and different solutions.* It is of absolute importance that a philosophy for development is defined for HCMC. In the mean time, many strategies need to be created for planning and developing, as well as different solutions for contingencies in economic, cultural, social, environmental, climate situations need to be prepared.

*Defining goals and objectives.* Based on general objective in developing the whole cultural and social system, specific and periodical goals need to be set in different components, operations, and life styles.

Improve and reform the planning process to include scientific and democratic involvement, with century vision for both hard and soft urban angles. Specific plans for each decade have to be made. In other words, short-term and long-term visions are both necessary.

Construct and implement solution packages (motivation and mechanism, human and capital resources, governmental and social, integration of economy and culture & society), resolve obsolescence and conflicts in alignment with economic development (urbanization and modernization), combine hard and soft urban solutions and synchronize goals and directions in cultural and social development and economic development.