

A Learning Environment between Noodle Soup, Motorbikes and Cross-Cultural Friendships: Study Project "Climate Change & Sustainable Urban Development in Vietnam"

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Vietnam could rank among the five countries mostly affected by climate change. This vulnerability will predominantly disturb the lower coastal regions, accommodating almost a quarter of Vietnam's total population, and in particular metropolises such as Ho Chi Minh City. Students from the University of Hamburg went on a two-week study project to explore the impacts of climate change and options for sustainable urban development in Vietnam.

Vietnam is prone to natural disasters anyway, experiencing typhoons, flash floods, droughts, etc., with climate change currently increasing the occurrence and intensity of storm surges or floods, for example. In this context Ho Chi Minh City is of specific interest, as this emerging mega-city is the country's most important economic engine while it is predicted to have severe impacts of climate change. Furthermore, climate change and urban development are closely linked and often reinforce each other in a negative way. As a consequence, sustainable urban development may play a key role in increasing the resilience against the impacts of climate change.

Against this background, fifteen German students took part in a study project, led by Dr. Michael Waibel from the University of Hamburg, to further investigate aspects of adaption, mitigation, sustainable consumption and urban livability in Vietnam. An intensive preparation, including cross-cultural training, was held in Germany and followed by an introduction into the topic upon arrival in Hanoi with expert talks, workshops and visits to policy makers at the national level,

such as the Ministry of Construction and the Ministry of Industry and Trade. In Ho Chi Minh City the students intensified their research in binational working groups with on-site surveys to pursue their own research questions and hypotheses. Combining results from these studies, the students were able to acquire in-depth understanding of the connectivity of climate change impacts and challenges for sustainable urban development. All of this was made possible due to Dr. Waibel's involvement into the program "Research for the Sustainable Development of the Megacities of Tomorrow – Energy- and climate-efficient structures in urban growth centres", funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research and Education (BMBF), as well as by a generous financial support from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

The First Sustainable Capital?

In Hanoi the students experienced many layers of historical urban development. For instance the traditional 36 Streets Quarter was explored, as well as the city's most important cultural legacy, the famous Temple of

Literature. As a contrast, the most prominent monuments of French colonial and socialist architecture as well as town planning were visited, among other the municipal opera house, the Ba Dinh Square and the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. Of course, the main focus was laid upon more recent urban development, for example, newly developed residential quarters, such as the Manor new urban area, overwhelmingly dedicated for high-income earners. Hanoi's aspiration to become the first sustainable capital of Asia seemed to be far away when the students observed the tremendous traffic densities, mostly consisting of motorbikes, or the abundant amounts of trash lying on the streets. In terms of future urban development the students got more information about the ambitious plans of Hanoi municipality during a talk of Mr. Do Yeon Kim, CEO of JINA, a Korean company, which won the competition to design the Hanoi Capital Construction Master Plan for 2030. However, according to Mr. Kim the most sustainable urban development solutions often do not match the ideas of local authorities. Furthermore, a visit to the National Ministry

Source: M. Waibel 2011



Artificial retention basin within a new urban area of Distr. 2 of HCMC



Group picture after joint Workshop at HCMC University of Architecture, 8 March 2011

of Construction (MoC) allowed the group to access first-hand information on ideas of sustainable urban development from the Vietnam Urban Development Agency, which is a mediating institution for Hanoi's new master plan between the office of Vietnam's Prime Minister, Hanoi's People's Committee as well as the national and local planning bodies.

As part of the Vietnamese-German Workshop "Climate Change and Sustainable Urban Development" held at the Geography Faculty of the Hanoi National University of Education, field research was done in cooperation with Vietnamese students in a nearby neighbourhood. This served to provide an understanding of local perceptions on urban management, quality of housing, provision with social and technical infrastructure, etc. In addition, this gave the German students an idea of the manifold obstacles of doing fieldwork within a cross-cultural environment, including amongst other difficulties the language barrier. All in all, the workshop was a great opportunity to experience working together with students from Vietnam and building-up new friendships.

A Mega-City in the Making

In Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon, the students intensified their fieldwork. Surveys were conducted in four case study neighbourhoods characterized by contrasting building densities, diverse socio-economic profiles and supposedly specific degrees of vulnerability to climate change. In cooperation with

four-year-students from the Urban Planning Faculty of HCM University of Architecture the bi-national working groups investigated distinct aspects of adaption, mitigation and energy-efficiency, sustainable consumption as well as urban livability.

In terms of adaption, students found out, that people in certain areas, for instance in District 6 and 8, were highly aware of flooding occurring in their district on a regular basis. However, the residents of these mostly low-income districts did not attribute this to climate change, as they did not realize a significant correlation between extreme weather events and climate change. Nevertheless, local individual adaption, for example a higher ground floor to prevent water from entering, was observed almost everywhere. In contrast to this, governmental adaption measures such as adequate sewage systems or retention areas were largely missed.

The results from the group researching mitigation in District 2 showed surprisingly high energy-efficient standards among the surveyed households, mostly due to high income and education levels. However, the reasons for these trends were traced back to individual action due to economic saving potentials and much less as a result of incentives provided by the government. Overall, it can be concluded that governmental measures, such as incentives, need greater incorporation into urban development strategies.

Another working group wanted to find out how the Vietnamese consider the quality of life within their neigh-

bourhood. This survey on urban livability was conducted at various sites within the city. These investigations revealed surprising results, as almost all people from different districts generally rated their quality of life as very high. Among the top five most important factors regarding good quality of life were listed: good housing, adequate roads, a functioning sewage system, a friendly neighbourhood and – most important of all – a safe neighbourhood.

Conclusion

Although the study project had a very tight schedule, it still allowed for some leisure activities such as joint-karaoke singing. During this time and the fieldwork many new friendships were built between the German and the Vietnamese students. In particular, the urban planning students from Saigon, guided by their enthusiastic lecturer Ms. Hang, impressed us with their deep knowledge and research skills. It will be up to the young people of Vietnam to address climate change threats and the many other challenges Vietnam faces in the future.

The bi-national study project offered the possibility to get to know this fascinating country from more than just a tourist perspective. Not only did it contribute to scientific research, it also offered both sides the chance to learn from each other and become more familiar with each other's cultures. Another pleasant bonus was certainly the fine Vietnamese cuisine. Invitations from both sides were given to stay in touch and to meet again. Hopefully, this will be realized soon.



Rising water levels threaten HCMC

Source: Vanessa Densow 2011

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