

Urbanization without sprawl - Viet Nam experiences and perspective

Introduction

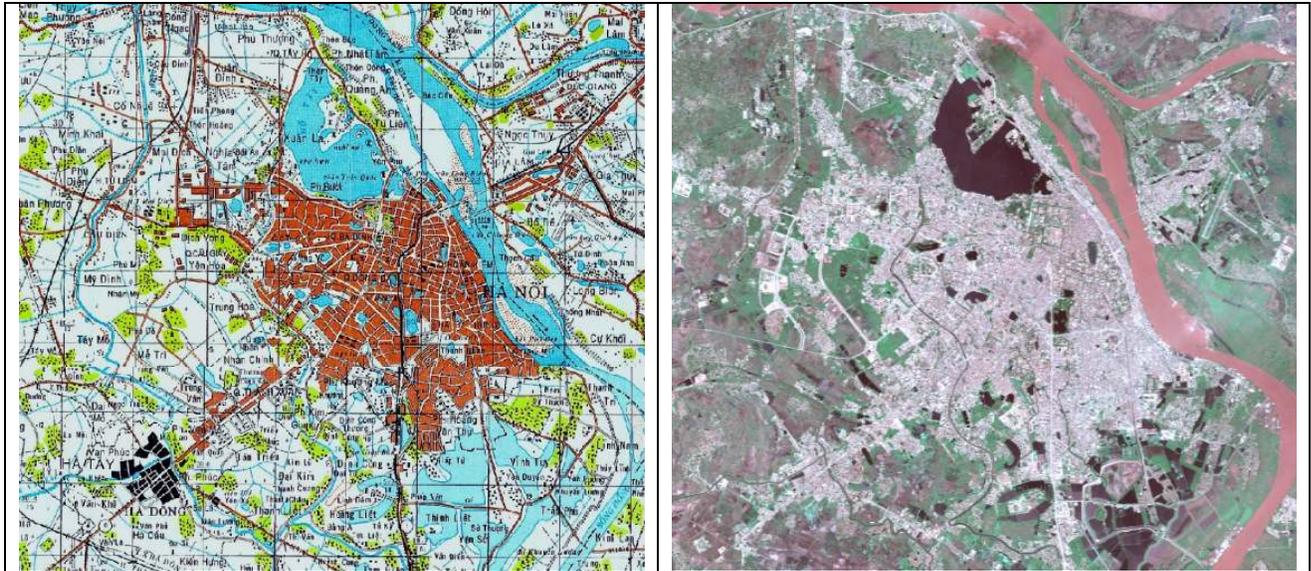
Urban sprawl refers to a spontaneous urban development along major external exits/corridor and causing unwanted issues in big cities. This phenomenon has been identified as typical urbanized problem in developing countries leading to inefficient land uses, traffic bottle neck and environmental pollution. Conventional planning approaches such as master planning, strategic road widening, satellite city system etc. seem still be ineffective to the issues. This paper depicts the case of urban sprawl in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh cities of Viet Nam. Then it analyzes the challenges and opportunities in line with the country urban development and planning trends. Finally the paper proposes some ideas for addressing this issue.

1. VN urban development and sprawl in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh cities

The modern urban development can be viewed along 3 major stages. During the war period of 1954-1975 there were two modes of urbanization. The North urbanization was strict under the command system and the South urbanization was quite fast for military logistics. After the liberation of the South 1975 the national urbanization was modest as a result of the strict planned mechanism. Since the launch of “*doi moi*” (*reform*) policy toward a market-oriented economy in 1986 when the state sector confines to only key economic activities and intervening policies, the urbanization has been booming with many challenges: rapid urban encroachment over agricultural land, fast population increase from uncontrolled immigrants, infrastructure lagging behind development need etc. Figure 1 below provides some illustrative views of this urbanized process in Ha Noi (figs 1a and 1b) and in Ho Chi Minh city (figs 1c and 1d). Before and after comparison using topographic map and satellite images show that the 2004 urbanized area is almost double that of 1991 topographic maps. Number of district units and population increases 1.5 times. But more important is what drives this process and what are the sprawl problems in these cities.

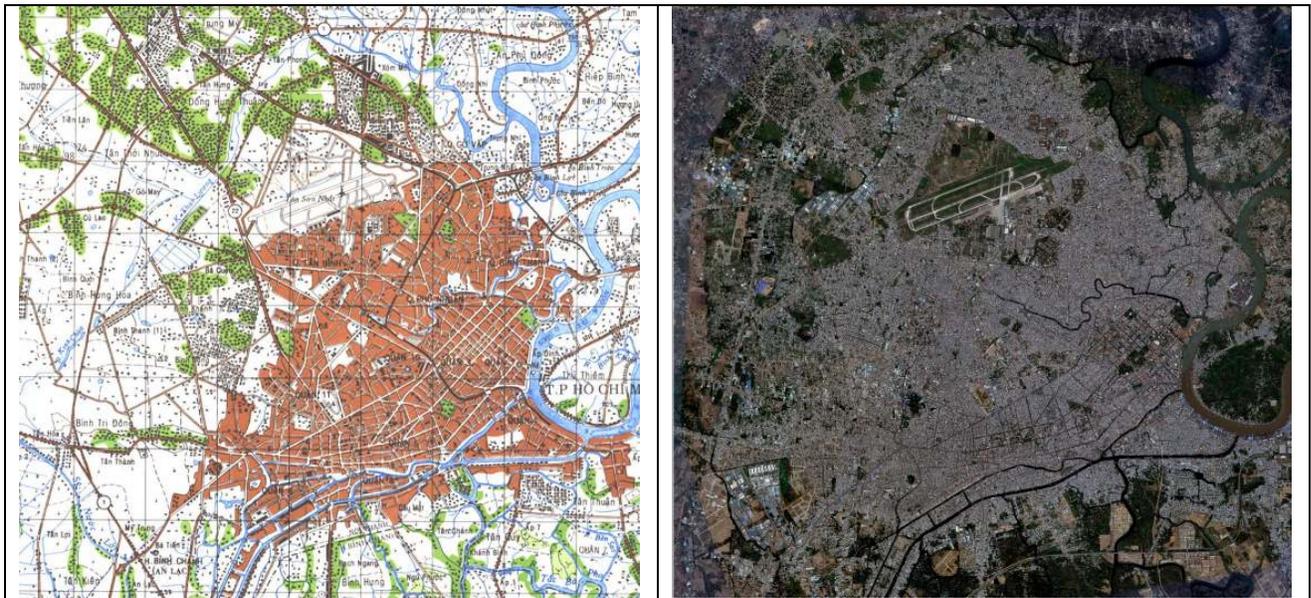
Before the launch of *doi moi* in 1986 there was no noticeable sprawl in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh cities. During that time make-shift trading and temporary house cum stall along the external routes were considered as illegal or “black market”. After 1986, urban sprawl mainly takes place rapidly as a result of liberal policy for immigrant increase in response to labour need of the booming invested industries, construction, non-state retail market and urban services. Immigrants often find better income compared to farming work in the country side. They cluster in densely informal settlements next to industrial zones, transport hub, major markets in the city fringe. This sector constitutes an important part of city development, accounts for one third or fourth of the city population, but due to conservative policy, it is still ignored in the formal socio-economic and urban development planning. In addition, the human register and housing policy treated these squatting clusters as illegal. Unattended urban sprawl leads to common problems as that of developing countries.

These problems are inefficient land uses, such as imbalanced development between road and land. Overloaded road causing traffic bottle neck and jams are regular in rush hours. Poor housing and utilities and serious environmental pollutions (hazardous smokes, dirt, stagnant sewerage etc.) make living conditions seriously low. A typical problem in the city fringe is that a big land block overloads small axis's around. In the city center, new high-rise towers put heavy pressure on small downtown streets. A useful picture of these urban sprawls is that one can observe a quite and non-moving city during the Tet Holiday (national traditional holiday) when most mobile tenants go back to their homes in the country side.



1a: Ha Noi 1991
 Population 1 million, 4 districts

1b: Ha Noi 2004
 Population 1.5, 7 districts



1c: Ho Chi Minh City 1991
 Population 5 millions, 13 districts

1d: Ho Chi Minh City 2004
 Population 7 millions, 20 districts

Figure 1: Urbanization in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh cities after 1986

Source: Working data of Viet Nam Institute for Architecture, Urban and Rural Planning VIAP

2. Understanding the problem

Urban sprawl should be seen from both negative and positive sides. On positive side, as the economy become liberalized and the city demand in term of food, labour, construction, services etc. are high, the city becomes good place for rural immigrants and roadside in the city fringe is efficient market place of small and mobile traders. Their informal housing is often in a manner that several persons rent a small room for overnight shelter. This mode of

settlement and other formal demand (student, worker housing) overload existing and modest public service and utilities.

On negative side, the urban sprawl cause: poor informal settlements conditions (housing, utility, and security), traffic bottle neck and public loss in travel, prolonged road expansion and high compensation, excessive reduction of arable land, and depletion of the urban ecosystem. Collectively these urban sprawls will hamper sustainable urbanization and slowdown socioeconomic development process.

3. Planning interventions and future trend

Until late 1990s urban planning remained rigidly straight-coach planning. Gradually with acknowledgement of informal sector, more advanced approaches and planning tools are considered and referred, it changes from mandatory role to strategic and intervening role and participatory based.

Current interventions:

Many urban sprawls have been tackled with limited result such as:

- City Master Plans made in 1998 guided some major works and landuses but lacked details for development control of informal settlements as a result from sprawl;
- Developed new ring road (such as for the National Highway 1), axes by passing bottle-necked road (Lang-Hoa Lac, Thang Long-Noi Bai) but where these new roads come there soon informal squatters appear;
- Large-scale new town developments with compact housing and local services (supermarkets) are good models but they are expensive;
- Some BOT-type express ways with protect fence and graded crossroad are safe from sprawl.

Future trend:

As the actual interventions still appear to be ineffective, there are still populous and persistent street vending along main roads and urban together with large informal housing in the sprawled areas. And general planning policy seems go on neglecting these urban sprawls. Therefore new thinking must be sought together with more effective planning actions (sufficient detailed) and stronger control system (land registration and building management) in place. The paper suggests different solutions for two incremental stages.

Short-term stage:

Immediate solutions will be mainly limiting the impact of the problem. They among others may be:

- Make readjustment scheme to formalize and improve the sprawled areas;
- Change conventional trading into concentrated modes;
- Depress prime city by information tool (web trading, remote working/studying);
- Apply compact planning together with strict development control in the area surrounding the main axes, particularly along new bypass. Some good models to follow may be the highway physical fence, large-scale new town projects of Ciputra, Nhan Chinh (in Ha Noi), Phu My Hung (in HCM city) etc.

Long-term stage:

For long-term stage the solutions will be addressing the cause of the problem. They among others may be:

- In existing cities solutions should work toward: (i) reducing population migration by introducing satellites, improving surrounding cities and their attraction, more power and autonomy to the city authority; (ii) Diverting centrifugal cities into multi-center ones in non-

arable land using mass transit routes between satellites cities; and (iii) Development and enforcement of a planning law.

- Improving medium and small cities: This solution should be persistently followed as a long-term solution.

- Building new cities: This is a radical solution for certain special action to achieve strong intervention (e.g. political capital, hi-tech city etc.) but it requires huge investment.

4. Recommendation

A sustainable urban development process depends on how the urban sprawl is analyzed and solutions as suggested above will be approaching for effective response to the urban sprawl. Actual urban sprawl experiences and best practices of developed countries in solving them should be shared, learnt between countries and planning professionals for careful studies and sustainable solutions.

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