

Issues Facing the Urban and Rural Planning in Viet Nam¹

Abstract

In Việt Nam, urban and rural planning (URP) refers to a practice of preparing plans for spatial-dependent development of cities and countryside. After a long try-and-error process it has been a well established professional field. However, in the actual course, it may be argued that there are some theoretical and practical issues when planning human settlements for a market-oriented economy toward more globalized, informative and sustainable development. If these issues are not well aware and dealt with in the field, they would threat the URP role in shaping better cities and rural settlements in the new millennium. This case study highlights such an argument by three major contents. First it reviews the planning process during the last 45 years and points out contextual challenges facing the actual planning field. Then it goes deeper into discussion of emerging issues and responsive improvements in regard of planning approach, role of state and professional bodies, and planning technology. Finally, the paper envisages desirable changes and actions in the planning and education system.

Key words: Urban and rural planning, planning approach, planning role, planning technology.

1. Introduction

In this paper, the term “urban and rural planning” (URP) refers to a practice of preparing plans for spatial development of cities and countryside. It is also called construction planning for cities and rural settlements. International planning references term it spatial planning or physical planning of human settlements (or in short it is called settlements planning). In Viet Nam this planning field has experienced a 45-year period. This period exhibits itself a full trial-and-error process dealing with many challenges in theory and practice. Until 1986 the URP had not yet been accountable and mature under planned economy but it then had been shifting toward a socialist oriented market economy. And other challenges such as industrialization and modernization, environment, global integration, and information evolution, dizzily rush in the same time. Theoretical and practical experiences gained, though sometime right sometime left extremely, could not provide so much reliable basis for planners to deal with such unprecedented challenges.

¹ Major ideas of this paper are also shared with planning colleagues in the Asian Planning School Association (APSA) Conference, Ha Noi September 12-14, 2003

I think our Conference is a suitable place for discussing to highlight and to search answer for these theoretical and practical problems. Doing so will make planning process more responsive to the development need. This paper confines to some contributing ideas in formulation and management of planning. In following Section, after reviewing the planning process the paper sketches out emerging challenges. Section 3 goes further into analysis of the URP issues and responsive solutions in regard of 3 aspects: direction and contents, coverage, management, and the supportive role of state and planning bodies and technology. The conclusive Section suggests some desirable actions for improving URP quality and education.

2. The Vietnamese URP process and actual challenges

Having shaped from late 1950s but until early 1960s the URP field has established its practice through architectural projects that developed industrial, administrative centers for the nation and provinces. In countryside, public service buildings were created and village housing was converted. After 9 years of heavy US bombing on cities and countryside in the war (1965-1973), there was significant contribution of the URP sector in planning for major cities in the North (such as Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, Vinh, Thái Bình, etc.) in line with the help of the former socialist countries. From this period, scope of URP works became wider, i.e. to allocate physical spaces and infrastructure for political as well as socio-economic activities, mainly of state and collective sectors, on state-owned land. Based on projection of labour forces of three sectors (agriculture, industry and service) and dependent population, planners had a mere task to optimize econo-technical alternatives and capital construction plans for working and recreational spaces. On green fields gradually emerged factories, offices, schools hospitals, and state-own housing blocks. During mid-1970s to support the large-scale production campaign, there were spatial planning for satellite cities around Ha Noi capital, and for combining small administrative units and settlements into larger ones. At the 1980s, URP expanded to regional comprehensive planning programs and then to national sectoral planning (urban network, housing, water supply, drainage etc.). Since the launch of *doi moi* (reform) policy 1986, URP focuses on general planning for cities, and projects for key infrastructure, industrial investment and commercial housing. Recently, there have new campaigns for integrating biological planning and urban design in URP. Meanwhile, international cooperative assistance pays attention to state role in inter-disciplinary coordination and management, and to participation of shared holders in sustainable urban development.

So far, it seems as anyone of us could learn something well from the past experiences. It may be well known that the failed new cities of Xuân Mai and

Xuân Hoà was first lesson of the unrealistic big-push planning approach. Second lesson may be the unawareness of actual challenges and its consequence was slow move (or lagging responses) of URP toward reform process. The economic rehabilitation and industrialization resumption in market mechanism seem to completely overturn the concurrent thinking and acting. As a result, the routine planning that uses to address a modest part of the state sector almost fails to account the fast growing spatial development of other sectors (international and domestic capital investment, private households) that were encouraged under the reform. In addition, soaring urbanization attempts (administrative subdivision, city rank promotion, territory investment competition) cause instant land fever and usual collapse of planning concepts. The Ha Noi General Plan made 1991 was substantially modified in 1998 and now it is again called for change. The separation of sector and urban communities, and passive responses of policies, cause uncoordinated maps, plans, activities, and consequently, fragile integrity to the urban socioeconomic fabrics. Therefore, in many area, construction either goes ahead unplanned or delays due to slow planning preparation and approval.

The unwanted URP situation may be seen fairly as not only because of slow responsive actions from planners but also because of complexity of emerging challenges. The first type of challenge may be the high competitive development and land use that has been triggered in the transition of the planned economy to market mechanism. On management side, the state needs planning for sustainable management of resources. Localities needs planning to apply for budget allocation from state and to attract investment from private. On the other side, enterprises need planning so as to be certain in business, people needs planning for stable housing improvement etc. The need was so high that planning was forced to be urgently prepared even for cities where there is no base map. Unfortunately, URP that just used to allocate to a pure state sectors on public land, is still infant to learn, to justify and to allocate different land types with constrained value and use right of other sectors that are encouraged in the open market economy. Other challenges are those that just sweep in bringing about both opportunities to VN development and threats to lag it behind further. Global integration brings accesses to international market and investments as well as culture degrade, difficulties in sustainable development of culture, resources and environment, unfair competition between professionals in rich and poor countries. The information evolution toward knowledge-based society has changed spatial and temporal variables of human settlements and technology of planning.

To deal with such complex problems at wide-ranging development levels (from actual industrialized start to knowledge-based economy), it can be

understood that the planners with traditional physical design skill and modest experiences could not avoid being confusing, lagging and ineffective in formulation and management of URP. Therefore solutions for this situation are needed. In following section, this case study analyses URP issues and identifies some theoretical answers and practical measures to solve them.

3. Issues and approach

3.1 The URP issues

Actually, traditional physical planning is complex, overlooking, and excessive covering. The complexity can be exemplified in five planning stages: regional/provincial comprehensive, urban network, city general plan, district/ward plan and construction planning certificate. It will take 5-10 years to go through all these stages, even without delay. The overlooking appears that even planning is refined to the fourth level (district/ward), its contents are still generally sketchy and it only goes into details in the planning certificate stage before submitting to construction stage. A major obstacle is the poor knowledge of existing land uses that very much depends on the public issuance of land use right and the formalization of transaction. In many cases, regular insufficiency of budget often cut off several planning stages and conditions (such as surveying data). Excessive covering happens in that the plan contents often cover entire city space including areas that are not planning subjects. For example, a city general plan indicates all types of land uses without reference to further specification such as what sector will refine in what time. Major planning contents propagate on long term perspective and "potential advantages" rather than touch over the immediate problems of many city sectors, living quarters and communities (traffic jam, housing shortage, shortage of water supply and drainage etc.).

Such planning tasks and contents are often over-imposed by planning professionals and rarely the case masterminded by the territorial leaders or raised by the beneficiary communities based on real local demand, available resources. Often there are limited constructive or counter points raised from members of the People Council meeting and/or Consultative Council who have no executive power and that are thus easily to deal with or to feed back for approval. Recently, the approved city plans are exposed to the public in the exhibition posters rather than for information certainty or getting consensus.

3.2 Approach to improve URP

- **URP direction and contents**

To address the planning direction issue, the paper considers the first solution is right identification of urban problems and definition of planning objectives (it is often called design of planning tasks) in line with socio-economic

development goals and budget allocation. This step decides the relevance and feasibility of future planning works (one calls it “long and careful prepare for right and short implementation”). Example, there is nothing wrong with district town row-house pattern for it is right replacement for the past subsidized irresponsibly collective housing. But the disordered, ugliness and conflicting problems as these houses are rampantly constructed are due to lacking guides in planning, exhibition, pilot projects and control of managerial bodies. Therefore, instead of prohibiting row houses, the planning objective would be strengthening management system and mechanism for inevitable redevelopment of this housing style to bigger condo plot in the near future urbanization when the country industrialized.

Next solution is the right allocation of planning activities and associate budget and timeliness for chosen objectives. Related information (at macro or micro-level) provides referential basis for main contents. Doing so makes planning contents sufficiently focused on main path and clearly justified by supportive data. The overlap with other stage or excessive covering could be avoided. Table 1 illustrates more detailed some solutions for identification and designation of planning tasks.

Table 1: Recommended changes in planning stages and objectives

No	Actual planning stages and contents	No	Recommended planning stage and contents
1	Regional and/or provincial comprehensive planning	1	National development reference Regional socio-economic strategies Regional settlements system and infrastructure planning
2	Regional and/or provincial construction planning		
3	Provincial urban system planning		
4	General planning of strategic land uses and infrastructure	2	City master zoning of key land uses, utilities over administrative units
5	District and/or ward planning		
6	Planning certificate	3	Subdivision planning and construction permit over specific town, site
7	Construction permit		

This proposal replaces the actual loosely coordinated 7 stages planning into 3 stages with clear strategic guiding role in regional comprehensive plan, master zoning role in city planning (not termed as general planning as now), and construction guiding role in town/local unit planning. If implemented, this new structure may be more simple, relevant for focusing tasks and resources on planning formulation and management.

- **Planning coverage**

Instead of excessive coverage, improved URP must well address the urban situation and planning capacity (budget and investment indicators) so as to allocate properly city development in immediate years (I think 10 years), as well as preconditions for long-term development that will be considered in periodical appraisal and revision.

In the situation of limited funding, and low reliability of baseline data (population, growth projection) particularly for long terms, we could change planning emphasis. Table 3 outlines the proposal for change. Actual planning emphases on general long term perspective could change into more specific zoning and planning (including project feasibility study) ones on immediate term. Broader scope and strategies could be flexibly open for gradual refinement. Doing so with bring planning closer to development need, relative stability and opportunities to sustainable urban integration.

Table 3: Proposed change in planning emphasis

Planning stage	Emphases	
	Actual planning	Improved planning
Long term 20-30 years	Primary contents of planning uncertainty	Secondary contents of open flexible spatial strategies
Immediate term 5-10 years	Secondary contents of key projects	Primary contents on feasible regulatory zoning and facilities planning

- **Planning management**

Actually, planning activities concerning formulation and approval of new plans are much busier than implementation and management of the already approved plans. Rarely the case the actual development are appraised whether or not according to the plans, and as-built projects updated into the contemporary base map. In addition, planning deficiencies often make difficult to compare between practice and plan layout. The change of leader or planner (*"new leader new plan"*) also causes considerable threat to following up of the approved city plan. As the sustainability of many approved plans is weak, regular planning revisions often failed to touch over new development variations and to derive cities to closer to right direction (example, the same copies of the Ha Noi General Plan made in 1998 are now hang up everywhere despite many urban changes since then).

The planning products rendered from collective efforts and valuable resources should be utilized sustainably. To do so the paper recommends application of cycle planning process. Table 2 suggests a sketch of 3-stages planning recycle process. From low to high level, planning contents and products are inherited and revised for better utilization. Time interval between cycle should not rigidly be 5 years as now, but depends on the number and scale of variations arisen (policy changes, socio-economic growth, environmental impacts, managing capacity etc.)

Table 2: Recycle planning and management

No	Planning task definition	Planning formulation	Implementation and appraisals
1	Planning objectives		
2		Planning contents	
3			
New cycle	Tasks for planning revision		

Finally, planning has public regulating role, thus their contents, drawing, and associate documents must be officially validated. For specific zoning and project planning, clear right of way must be officially declared and conflicts resolved prior to approval.

3.3 URP supportive system

- **The role of state bodies and planning institutions**

In the absence of a regulate law, the actual issues is low awareness and understanding of territorial leader over planning that he/she masters and due to implement. Planning scenarios/contents of most cities (even Ha Noi, Hai Phong, Da Nang etc.) often are masterminded and handled by planning professionals. Major obstacles are limited autonomy, budget and staff capacity of local government. Low capability may be seen in overlap and gap in mapping, planning formulation, utilization. All spatial-related bodies could do the same mapping, new town project, housing projects where responsible planner just tries to finish his duty rather than to care his plan effectively for the actual urban administrative, land management and infrastructure. Actually, there is no audit system to verify planning activities. The separation and self-sufficient policy of agencies may also attributable to this uncoordinated problem.

It seems that most of these issues are dealt with in the coming Construction Law (due to approve late 2003). This need general effort in long term in line with further decentralization of budget, regulatory power and

strengthening local bodies to make them real planning manager/owner requires. However, some simple and easy improvement may be sorted out immediately. The most effective may be one-door integrated mechanism with clear task definition and smooth coordination in the urban administration and sectoral hierarchy. In addition, the city bodies should be in position to provide information related to planning and cadastre, to enable sectors taking part in the URP implementation through question and answer, consultancy, conflict solving, legal interest protection services etc.

For planning institutions, the actual planning role on behalf of state bodies should be changed into consultative and supervisory one. This requires clear definition of client/owner (public authoritative offices-state bodies) and planning consultants (state-owned professional offices that gain some benefit in addition to state salary from planning services contract). Actually, architectural design firms have already been converted into design contractor but planning agencies still have dual roles of client and contractor.

A planning auditing mechanism for all planning stages (task design, mapping, planning formulation, management) should be established immediately to avoid the so-called making-and-appraising in one planner hand. Responsible state client, planning agencies, and auditing institutions should be major independent three parties in this system.

- **Planning technology**

Typical planning products consist of large colorful polygons and associate report that describing planning pictures-styled layouts. To make these products, except the popular use of digital CAD drawing, actually methodology, skills and organization of planning activities remain popularly traditional.

A critical issue facing URP is the poor data. Base maps are often mixed layouts of old, new maps and sometime third party maps. The scale of obtained data are usually unmatched with planning objective (examples, unwanted, old and small-scale map and cadastral parcel maps are more available than right-scale and topographically surveyed maps). In some reverted situation, planners are provided with 1/2000 and 1/5000 scale maps that survey detail of house parcels while their planning tasks just deal with zone planning for urban functionalities. Actual planning skills are merely traditional design arts of physical structures and facilities. Art-style, hand-drafting planning layout could no longer be meeting the fast growing planning demands, and capable of well analyzing problems and solutions.

Along with improved planning approach, supportive information should be richer, handy and useful. But improvement of needed data could not be very

soon. Beside long term data build up, relevant use of existing ones could be immediate solution using step-wide approach, open integration model techniques.

To make planning to well address the complex problems of urban sectors requires improved skills in identification and assessment of needed information, spatial analysis, socio-economic and legal analysis.

The investment and application of advanced technology such as WAN, GIS software also play important support to improve quality and timeliness of planning.

These improved planning components must well integrated combining traditional experiences and advanced planning supportive system.

4. Conclusion and desirable actions

Despite certain writing constraints, the paper drives some views of Vietnamese URP for discussions in the Conference. These views reflect the URP process in the national urban development, its deficiencies in term of focus, contents and implementation, as well as the author's ideas on improving solutions. A question is still remaining. That is how to start some improvement to make Vietnamese URP accountable to the urban development process in the new millenium. I have some ideas on two types of desirable actions, and besides look to sharing more with colleagues in our Conference.

- **Planning system**

The actual planning system need immediate hard work on refining planning approach and supportive conditions (budget, data, staff, techniques) with emphases on improving each planning work (task design, contents, stage, timing). Participatory parties include not only planning but also active managerial bodies and auditing mechanism in order to effectively account for the urban problems. These immediate actions need be in line with the formalization of planning information, legislation and public participation support.

- **Education system**

Planning education ensures long-term professional resources for URP planning. Thus this system needs be oriented toward advanced planning theories, techniques and comprehensive knowledge of urban practice. This orientation requires immediate action in restructuring (i) the course works toward more comprehensive of urban development, governance, techniques and languages, (ii) the hand-on exercises toward more student group work, seminar/workshop, and (iii) graduate projects toward solving actual problems, invention and high technology application. To ensure that, teaching method need

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be renovated using updated literature and active student learning role, teaching staff need be reoriented and qualified with good profile, skill and languages.

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