

Bringing Social Justice into Climate Change Adaptation in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam

What could transformative adaptation that takes climate change as an opportunity to tackle root causes of poverty, inequality and environmental destruction look like in the case of Ho Chi Minh City? Findings from the project *Transformative Adaptation to Climate Change in Coastal Cities* illustrate the social justice implications of adaptation policies in the context of urban informality and resettlement, and identify entry points for transformative change.

The Issue in Context

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is the economic hub with the highest rate of urbanization in Viet Nam. Located on the coastline, it ranks among the world's cities with the most population likely to be severely impacted by climate change. New research suggests that the impacts of sea level rise will be much bigger than previously anticipated, and could leave 23% to 31% of the population in Viet Nam below high tide lines (Kulp and Strauss 2019). Millions of citizens will be at risk due to floods, droughts and tropical storms.

Effective adaptation is thus crucial to protect the city and its inhabitants, whose numbers are growing rapidly. At the moment, the city's approach to adaptation is one of basic prevention and protection that relies mostly on hard infrastructural measures such as dykes and sluice gates to protect the city from fluvial flooding (Phi and Quan 2018). Despite large-scale investments in flood prevention and infrastructure, the city experiences flooding regularly, while simultaneously grappling with additional challenges of pollution, traffic, a booming population and an expanding real estate sector. There has been progress in promoting integrated planning, sustainability and "no-regret" measures that bring positive benefits regardless of how the climate changes, but disparities remain among different interest groups, and between

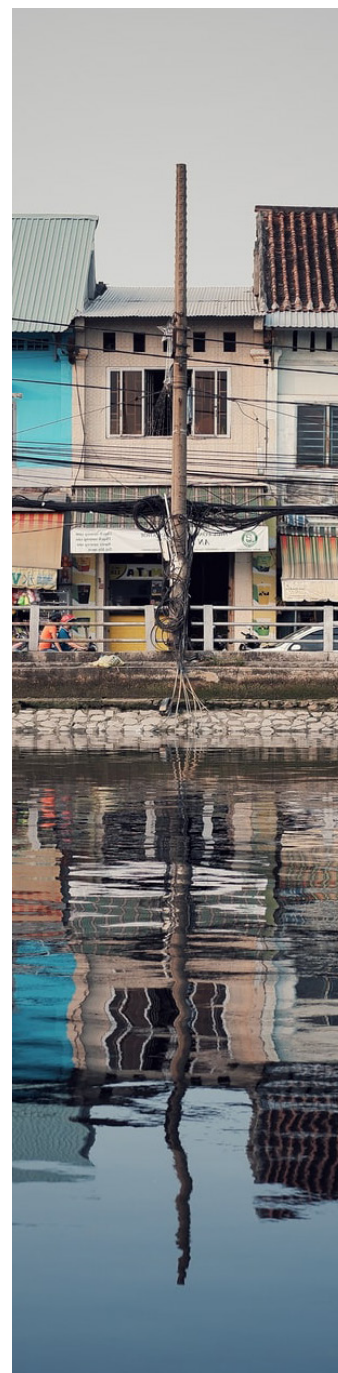
policies and implementation, so that inequalities and the needs or perspectives of poor and marginalized populations are rarely considered.

In general, Viet Nam's administration is hierarchical, with a four-level structure: the central or national level; provincial level; district level; and commune level. The rigid top-down structure presents a challenge for effective and context-specific decision making at the local level. Current adaptation efforts in HCMC are therefore almost entirely the result of initiatives from the central government and the city's People's Committee; local planners have neither the confidence nor permission to make their own decisions.

Informality and Urbanization

Across Viet Nam, it is estimated that around 60% of urban housing constructed between 1999 and 2009 consisted of informal, semi-permanent units, and 7% were temporary or simple housing units (UN-Habitat 2014). The conditions in HCMC informal settlements are generally better than in many other cities. Most households, with variations depending on when they settled, have been able to register their houses and can access basic public infrastructure such as water and electricity. Informal settlements, especially along rivers and canals, mostly result from high rates of migration into the city combined with a lack of affordable housing. The real estate development market is booming in HCMC, and formal urbanization is largely driven by a few major developers who are catering to the rich, building luxury apartments and condominiums. This leads to rapidly increasing land prices due to speculation surrounding upcoming projects, but also adds to the pull factors that continue to attract between 200,000 and 400,000 in-migrants per year.

Since the 1990s, the city government has invested in numerous urban upgrading programmes that entail clearing informal housing along canals. The goal is to not only improve quality of life but also enhance water quality, reduce flooding, create green spaces, and facilitate new land development. The city has implemented a number of projects, funded by both foreign and domestic agencies, which have upgraded thousands of alleys, roads and drainage channels, involving the resettlement of approximately 36,000 households so far. It is estimated that a further 20,000 households still live in precarious



Transformative Adaptation to Climate Change in Coastal Cities

Research for the project *Transformative Adaptation to Climate Change in Coastal Cities* was undertaken in 2019 and 2020. It examined adaptation decision-making processes and barriers to transformative solutions in the case studies of Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, and Jakarta, Indonesia, in order to inform more progressive policy making in the context of Southeast Asian coastal cities. This brief draws on the findings of the case study research paper "Transformative Adaptation and Social Justice in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam" by Huynh Thi Phuong Linh and Nguyen Hong Quan.



The project was sponsored by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (RLS) with funds from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

For more information and other project outputs please see www.unrisd.org/climate-change-coastal-cities



conditions near canals and in degraded apartments which will eventually be upgraded. When it comes to reconstruction and resettlement for these populations, however, capital resources are limited. Resettlement is also problematic from a social justice perspective.

Urban upgrading has been forcing slum dwellers to move to the outskirts of the city. Low-income migrants are the most vulnerable as they are often not registered or recognized as citizens, which limits their access to administrative resources and information. They have reported unstable livelihoods as a result of urban upgrading projects, as well as a lack of transparency in project planning and implementation and local governance. In general, upgrading projects focus most often on technical aspects, while social and cultural considerations, including restoring the livelihoods of different groups of people after resettlement, are left unresolved. Social safeguards and assistance for vulnerable people are not yet seen as a real need, and local officers often lack training and incentives to provide support to affected households. Because governance is hierarchical and top-down, following established procedures and sticking to minimum legal requirements tends to be the least risky way for local officials to fulfil their assigned responsibilities.

The Tan Hoa–Lo Gom project funded by the Belgian Development Agency piloted a contrasting approach to resettlement, showcasing the importance of local leadership and innovation, as well as providing households with much better support and more flexible options (see box). The project demonstrated that it is possible to design and implement resettlement in a way that is more socially just, and improves people's livelihoods in the long run, by setting priorities differently.

Tan Hoa–Lo Gom pilot project: A transformative approach?

- ✓ Provided different resettlement options tailored to households' needs and preferences
- ✓ Provided compensation for land regardless of land title
- ✓ Ensured support from social workers and consulted affected people throughout
- ✓ Incorporated people's feedback so apartment design fulfilled their needs
- ✓ Reduced livelihood impact and disruption by accommodating people's needs

Outlook

To date, the focus on technical solutions has led to injustice in adaptation at the expense of low-income and marginalized communities. Urban upgrading is an audacious attempt to change the face of the city, and to improve the lives of thousands of people in precarious settlements along the canals. Resettlement has never been fully satisfactory, however, as it inevitably disturbs livelihoods. While disturbance cannot be avoided altogether, the research has shown that much can be done in order to meet the needs and preferences of the affected households when more emphasis is placed on social impacts and support systems. The analysis of different case studies highlights that the most commonly implemented "business-as-usual" approaches to resettlement risk pushing people into greater uncertainty and poverty, and perpetuate a vicious circle of inequality for the affected communities who lack the socioeconomic capital to improve their situation, as well as the voice, representation and influence to change the policy environment.

More transformative approaches to urban upgrading and inclusive adaptation will require governance reforms that allow for learning from local experiences, and that harness the potential of individual leadership and innovation that is currently undermined by hierarchical decision-making structures. Local initiatives and leadership need to feed knowledge and innovation into city- and higher-level planning, and the central government should enhance local actions through integrated strategies and programmes that provide an enabling environment for more just and inclusive outcomes.

Sources

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This Research and Policy Brief was prepared by Dunja Krause based on Huynh and Nguyen 2020. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of UNRISD or RLS.

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