Ho Chi Minh City: a future megacity in Vietnam

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Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), the largest metropolis in Vietnam, celebrated in 1998 its 300th anniversary after a turbulent history. It was always considered as dominated by the business world and it concentrates nowadays, with its metropolitan region, an important part of the production, investments and incomes of the whole country.

Strictly speaking, Ho Chi Minh City is not yet a mega-city according to the most common definitions, but these definitions are far from being uniform and it may be advisable to discuss them.

About the definitions of the mega-city

For convenience, United Nations use a simple statistical definition to characterize the mega-city: it is an urban agglomeration with more than 8 million inhabitants: Mega-cities are “cities that are expected to have populations of at least 8 million inhabitants by the year 2000” (United Nations: Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, 1986, 1987, 1989).

“Like many terms that sweep into popular usage, the term mega-city lacks a standard definition. The United Nations has attempted to bring some order to the chaos by defining a mega-city as an urban agglomeration with a population that exceeds 8 million” (Guest, 1994, p. 41).

“The turn of the twenty-first century will mark a divide from a predominantly rural world to one where the majority of people will be living in cities. By the year 2000 there will be more than 400 cities in the world with over 1 million inhabitants. Of these, 28 will be mega-cities with populations exceeding 8 million, and two-thirds of these mega-cities will be in the developing countries....” (Fuchs and al., 1994, quoted by Popline data base).

However, the Asian Development Bank emphasizes a population of 10 million. This evolution is explained in a paper in Population and Development Review (1997):

“Although it is in common use, the term megacity has no agreed definition. For the UN it is a city with a projected population in 2000 of 8 million or more”. [For the Asian Development Bank], “A megacity is defined as a large metropolitan area with a complex economy, a large and highly skilled labor force, and a transportation system capable of maintaining daily communications among all its residents. A threshold population of 10 million is used to define megacities in DMCs [Developing Member Countries] for the purpose of uniformity. In many cases, this population is for an extended area beyond the administrative boundaries of the constituent municipalities. In higher-income countries, the population threshold would be lower” (p. 453).

Economic and geographic criteria appear as a supplement to the population size. The authors notably draw conclusions about the number of mega-cities in Southeast Asia region:

“Worldwide there are 17 megacities”. In 1995, “Asia has nine megacities”. In 2010, in South-East Asia, there will be three megacities: Jakarta (19.2 million), Bangkok (14.0 million) and Manila (13.7 million).
The term mega-city is sometimes applied to less populated agglomerations:
“…the 1990 populations of the largest megacities of South-East Asia were as follows: Jakarta, 8.2 million; Bangkok, 5.9 million; Metro Manila, 7.9 million” (Jones et al., 1999, p. 4).

In the last issue of the United Nations “World urbanization prospects” (2001), it seems that even the definition of UN has changed (?):
“…urban agglomerations with more than 10 million inhabitants are known as mega-cities” (p. 93).

Following this definition, in South-East Asia, there are two megacities in 2000: Jakarta (11.0 million inhabitants) and Metro Manila (10.9 million), while the other urban agglomerations with 5 million inhabitants or more include also Bangkok (7.3 million).

The scientists still discuss the most adequate vocabulary to define the very big city. We must notice that the term “megacity” has no mechanical translation in every language. For example, Nathalie Robatel (2000) analyzed some French authors who recently tried to define this phenomenon, particularly Thierry Paquot, François Moriconi-Ébrard, Jérome Monnet and Philippe Haeringer. The simple translation of “megacity”, which would be “mega-cité” in French, is not usual and authors rather tend to compare the metropolis with the megapolis (or megalopolis), with the idea that this last one has transnational functions. François Asher (1995) proposed the term “metapolis” to define the areas “in which all or any inhabitants, economic activities or territories are integrated into the daily (common) functioning of a metropolis”. These areas are not necessarily contiguous.

This rapid look at the definitions of the mega-city shows that one should not linger on a gross figure of population, but that it is rather necessary to analyze the functions of the large city, whether it is a “mega-city” or not, inside the national area and within the framework of globalization, as well as the specific problems of town planning which it generates. This approach was attempted in a synthesis on the world biggest cities:
“The complexity of the patterns of growth of megacities and large metropolitan areas throughout the world poses a major challenge” (p. 1) (United Nations: Population Division, 1995).

Ho Chi Minh City has been taken into account among these cities.

The evolution of the population of Ho Chi Minh City

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is the largest urban agglomeration in Vietnam. At the 1999 Census there were 3.7 million urban inhabitants, against 5 million inhabitants in the whole of the administrative unit. However, the evolution of the population of HCMC was not regular and the population of the city decreased repeatedly during its history (table 1, figure 1).
The estimation of the demographic evolution of HCMC is made difficult by the scarcity of the available documentation, by the lack of quality of ancient data, by the newness of scientific population censuses, by the reasonable absence of demographic surveys during disturbed periods and by the absence of determination of the real urban population in the peripheral districts during the recent period.

Nevertheless, by combining several sources, we may obtain relatively coherent estimations. And so table 1 estimates the evolution of the population of urban agglomeration of Saigon-HCMC from 1698 (official creation date) to 1999 (year of the last census). The table includes the city of Cholon, which has in practice always been economically a part of the urban agglomeration, even if it remained for a long time separate from Saigon by an uninhabited zone. The chosen dates, either have a particular importance in country’s history, or correspond to a specific data collection. The evolution reflects the natural increase and the migratory balance, but also the extension of the geographic limits of the city according to its increase. At the time of the extension of the administrative limits, a population, considered until then as “rural”, instantly becomes “urban”. This well-known phenomenon explains the quantitative “jumps” observed between 1881 and 1900 (annexation of seven peripheral villages in 1894 and 1895), then between 1943 and 1945 (creation of Tan Binh province by decree of May 11th, 1944) (Nguyen Dinh Dau, 1998). In 1976, an administrative reorganization integrated into HCMC the province of Gia Dinh and several other peripheral zones, of which it is advisable to take into account the urban population in the study of the evolution of the city; but, the population exodus from Saigon after April 30th, 1975 completely hides this phenomenon.

The evolution of the population of Saigon-HCMC shows a population decrease after the capture of the city by the French (on February 17th, 1859), especially due to the heavy fights which took place during the battle of Chi Hoa in the northern districts of the city (on February 24-25th, 1861) and to the evacuation of the inhabitants of the Ben Nghe area (Meyer, 1985).

The population growth rate is then relatively high under the French colonization (+4.6 per cent on average per year between 1881 and 1945, date of the proclamation of Independence by President Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi, or +3.4 per cent per year between 1881 and 1943, before the unification with several peripheral zones); this growth rate increased during the Indochina war against the French (+6.5 per cent per year between 1945 and 1954). The colonial era corresponds to the implementation of heavy infrastructures and to the development of the administration of the colony. Let us not forget that the colonization began in Saigon more than a quarter of a century before it began in Hanoi (in 1888). The city was then considered as the “Pearl of the Far East”, a showcase of the French colonization. It assumed the function of capital city of Indochina until 1902, when this role was transferred to Hanoi. In 1931, the towns of Saigon and Cholon merged. During the Indochina war, the city - controlled by the French until 1954-, experienced strong activity connected to the war effort and sheltered migrants fleeing the insecurity of countryside.
Table 1: Estimation of the evolution of the population of the urban agglomeration of Saigon-HCMC from 1698 to 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Urban population</th>
<th>Annual average rate of increase</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saigon</td>
<td>Cholon</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1698</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>33,000</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1862</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>13,481</td>
<td>39,806</td>
<td>53,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>50,300</td>
<td>133,600</td>
<td>183,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>55,951</td>
<td>172,520</td>
<td>228,471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>67,739</td>
<td>181,742</td>
<td>249,481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>143,197</td>
<td>203,519</td>
<td>346,716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>495,781</td>
<td>498,143</td>
<td>993,924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>976,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>976,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>1,723,360</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,723,360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>1,383,200</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,383,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>1,431,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,431,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>1,736,880</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,736,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>2,377,040</td>
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<td>2,377,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>2,442,798</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,442,798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>2,700,849</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,700,849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>2,796,229</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,796,229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3,660,034</td>
<td></td>
<td>3,660,034</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: (a) Estimation calculated in 1998 at the 300th anniversary of the city
(b) Nguyen Dinh Dau, 1998 (Various administrative reports)
(c) Baudrit, 1943 (Table on the population of Saigon-Cholon from 1907 to 1941, Statistical yearbook of Indochina and Archives of the Government of Cochintra)
(d) Tran Van Giau and Tran Bach Dang (Chu bien), 1998 (Various administrative reports)
(e) National Institute for Urban and Rural Planning, 1994 (quoting a census)
(f) Statistical yearbook of Vietnam 1949-1950
(g) Retoposition from 1948 (Statistical yearbook of Indochina 1947-1948)
(h) Statistical yearbook of Vietnam 1952-1953
(i) Demographic surveys of 1958, 1962 and 1967
(j) Statistical yearbook of Vietnam 1958-1959
(k) Minimal estimation by continuation of the past trend
(l) Electoral census of February 5th, 1976
(m) Censuses of 1979, 1989 and 1999 (urban population estimated for 1999)
We can only put hypotheses forward to explain the strong decline recorded between 1954 and 1958 (-5.3 per cent a year): overestimation of the population in 1954; inflation of the population of the city in 1954 by the migrants from the North, often Catholics, having decided to settle down in the South according to the possibility offered by the Geneva Agreements, a part of which settled down in the peripheral provinces; return to countryside of the war refugees; underestimation of the population by the 1958 survey… The demographic data of this period are moreover open to doubt.

The growth comes gradually back with the return of peace (about +0.9 per cent per year between 1958 and 1962, then +4.0 per cent per year between 1962 and 1967), but it is necessary to keep in mind that this growth probably does not exceed the natural increase of the population during the major part of this period. The inflexible Catholic options of President Diem (murdered in 1963) certainly did not favour birth control.

Between 1967 and 1975, with the development of the Vietnam War against the Americans and the regime of the South, a real exodus took place from the rural areas to Saigon. On one hand, the insecurity related to the military operations was then at its highest level in the countryside, also subject to intense operations of chemical defoliation by air, on the other hand the Government of the South tried to regroup the population in "strategic hamlets" (Ap chien luoc), to shield it from the guerrilla warfare of the National Liberation Front (the so called "Vietcong"); the groupings were accelerated in many cases by the destruction of the standing crops. These concentrations of population took the farmers away from their fields, making more difficult the practice of their activity and favouring the flight towards cities.
April 30th, 1975, was the date of the liberation of the city, with the entrance of the revolutionary forces, which marks the end of the Vietnam War and the reunification of the country. The estimation of the population of Saigon on that date is extremely difficult, because obviously no demographic survey has been made during this period. In these conditions, it is wiser to continue the past trend to obtain a minimal estimation of the urban population of the agglomeration.

During the period 1975-1979 a strong out-migration of population from HCMC occurred, leading to a very low total increase. This period can be broken into two parts: 1975-1976, with a visible increase of +2.8 per cent, essentially owed to the modification of the administrative limits of the agglomeration with the addition of Gia Dinh province, but with a substantial out-migration; 1976-1979, with an annual increase of 3.4 per cent a year, still widely supported by the natural growth of the population. The out-migration is to be imputed:
- to the return of the “War refugees” to their village;
- to the evacuation of a part of the population towards the countryside, notably to the New Economic Zones, following the measures of “relocation”, which affected firstly the non-native and the sympathizers of the former regime;
- to the illegal emigration abroad, with the “boat people” phenomenon.

This emigration was somewhat compensated by civil servants coming from the North, accompanied by their family.

From 1979 to 1989, the city experienced a quasi demographic stagnation (+0.3 per cent per year): the out-migration continued at the beginning of the period, often affecting the nationals of Chinese extraction, following the 1979 conflict between Vietnam and China; economic growth was slow, offering only few employment opportunities; finally, the administrative residential control was then very strict. Thus, the natural growth of the population just compensated the negative migratory balance.

The recent period (1989-1999) was marked by the Renovation policy (Doi Moi), characterized by the economic opening-up and the market liberalization, decided in December, 1986, during the 6th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam. The consequences of this opening were felt gradually. The residential control slackened, economic growth strengthened and the disparities between urban and rural areas increased, attracting an increasing number of migrants towards the cities. Over the whole period 1989-1999, the average annual growth rate of the urban population was 2.7 per cent, higher than the natural increase, which can be estimated at 1.4 per cent on average during the same period (Ban Chi Dao Tong Dieu Tra Dan So va Nha o Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 2000). The migration increase was thus already at the same level as the natural increase during the last decade and it should be logically higher during the most recent years.
Globally, we see that the population of the city experienced three important crises: in 1859-1861 (conquest by the French), in 1954-1956 (end of the Indochina War) and in 1975-1979 (end of the Vietnam War).

The current population of Ho Chi Minh City

The most recent demographic data on HCMC appear in table 2. The administrative unit of HCMC still contains a large rural part; the “rural” districts (huyen) represent 79 per cent of the surface and 18 per cent of the population of the whole area. It is interesting to notice that a similar phenomenon has been observed in China (Gentelle, 2000); concerning HCMC this observation is opposite to the remarks made by Drakakis-Smith and Dixon (1997) who consider that the largest urban agglomerations in Vietnam go far beyond their administrative limits. A study of the urban agglomeration of HCMC thus needs that the urban population be exactly estimated.

The calculation is not easy, because while the census gives the urban population in the “rural” districts, it considers the population of the entire peripheral zone of the "urban" districts (quan) as urban, which is obviously still inaccurate at the current time. We thus divided the administrative unit of HCMC into three areas: the urban area (population 100 per cent urban), the semi-urban area (urban population to be determined) and the rural area (urban population given by the census). The results are given in table 2.

We estimate the urban population of the agglomeration of HCMC to be 3,660,034 inhabitants in 1999; that is, 73 per cent of the population of the entire administrative unit. This calculated figure of the urban population includes the urban population of the centre, that of the adjoining semi-urban area, but also that of the small urban centres of the peripheral rural area, which is justified by the complete integration of their population in the economic activities of the pole of HCMC. In the near future, the megapolis will also integrate the city of Bien Hoa (466,945 inhabitants at 1999 census), situated in the Northeast, in Dong Nai province, which already lies inside the economic sphere of influence of HCMC (location map in figure 2).

With regard to the previous censuses, we observe some "relocation" of the population of the central districts towards the peripheral zones, following the instigations of the authorities, but also the fast increase of the land prices in the centre of the city. However, the migrants always settle down preferably in the central districts which are the closest to their region of origin and to their working place (densities map in figure 3).
Table 2: Surface area, population and administrative units of Ho Chi Minh City at 1999 census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Surface area (km²)</th>
<th>Number of households</th>
<th>Total population (inhabitants)</th>
<th>Percentage of males (%)</th>
<th>Density (inhab./km²)</th>
<th>Urban population at census (inhabitants)</th>
<th>Estimated urban population (inhabitants)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total HCMC</td>
<td>2,093.7</td>
<td>1,016,744</td>
<td>5,034,058</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>2,404</td>
<td>4,207,825</td>
<td>3,660,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Urban” districts (quan)</td>
<td>440.0</td>
<td>819,776</td>
<td>4,127,258</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>9,380</td>
<td>4,127,258</td>
<td>3,579,467</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Urban area**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total urban area</th>
<th>140.3</th>
<th>660,193</th>
<th>3,386,004</th>
<th>47.8</th>
<th>24,134</th>
<th>3,386,004</th>
<th>3,386,004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st district</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>47,475</td>
<td>226,151</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>29,757</td>
<td>226,151</td>
<td>226,151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd district</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>43,942</td>
<td>222,448</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>46,343</td>
<td>222,448</td>
<td>222,448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th district</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>34,480</td>
<td>192,149</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>48,037</td>
<td>192,149</td>
<td>192,149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th district</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>40,257</td>
<td>209,528</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>51,104</td>
<td>209,528</td>
<td>209,528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th district</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>47,156</td>
<td>252,527</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>36,075</td>
<td>252,527</td>
<td>252,527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th district</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>62,910</td>
<td>328,538</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>17,475</td>
<td>328,538</td>
<td>328,538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th district</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>46,324</td>
<td>240,122</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>42,127</td>
<td>240,122</td>
<td>240,122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th district</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>43,770</td>
<td>238,494</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>47,699</td>
<td>238,494</td>
<td>238,494</td>
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<tr>
<td>Go Vap</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>65,657</td>
<td>309,586</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>16,124</td>
<td>309,586</td>
<td>309,586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan Binh</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>114,007</td>
<td>579,559</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>15,053</td>
<td>579,559</td>
<td>579,559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binh Thanh</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>78,228</td>
<td>403,065</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>19,662</td>
<td>403,065</td>
<td>403,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu Nhuan</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>35,987</td>
<td>183,837</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>36,046</td>
<td>183,837</td>
<td>183,837</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Semi-urban area**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total semi-urban area</th>
<th>299.7</th>
<th>159,583</th>
<th>741,254</th>
<th>49.0</th>
<th>2,473</th>
<th>741,254</th>
<th>193,463</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd district</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>21,716</td>
<td>102,094</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>2,034</td>
<td>102,094</td>
<td>16,437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th district</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>23,599</td>
<td>111,911</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>3,117</td>
<td>111,911</td>
<td>30,776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th district</td>
<td>113.1</td>
<td>32,541</td>
<td>148,804</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>1,316</td>
<td>148,804</td>
<td>12,797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th district</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>36,838</td>
<td>168,639</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>3,212</td>
<td>168,639</td>
<td>48,062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thu Duc</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>44,889</td>
<td>209,806</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>4,371</td>
<td>209,806</td>
<td>85,391</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Rural” districts (huyen)

| “Rural” districts (huyen) | 1,653.7 | 196,968 | 906,800 | 48.5 | 548 | 80,567 | 80,567 |

**Rural area**

| Cu Chi     | 428.5 | 58,188 | 253,116 | 47.4 | 591 | 11,348 | 11,348 |
| Hoc Mon    | 109.5 | 43,226 | 203,393 | 48.3 | 1,857 | 15,933 | 15,933 |
| Binh Chanh | 303.3 | 70,891 | 329,332 | 49.0 | 1,086 | 37,577 | 37,577 |
| Nha Be     | 98.4  | 12,836 | 62,804  | 49.2 | 638 | 15,709 | 15,709 |
| Can Gio    | 714.0 | 11,827 | 58,155  | 49.9 | 81 | - | - |

*According to the administrative definition of the census

Figure 2: Administrative limits of Ho Chi Minh City
The economic leadership of Ho Chi Minh City

HCMC concentrates a major part of the economic activities of the country (Gubry and Le Thi Huong, 2002). With 6.7 per cent of the population and 0.6 per cent of the surface area of Vietnam, for its entire administrative unit, HCMC generates 17.3 per cent of the GDP of the country, 33.8 per cent of the regional incomes of the state budget and absorbs 11.5 per cent of the regional expenditures of the same budget, which shows that the city feeds the national budget for the benefit of less favored zones (table 3). The city is also the main attraction pole of the foreign investments in Vietnam: 26.9 per cent of the
cumulated direct foreign investments went to HCMC until December 31st, 2000, as well as 10.3 per cent of the direct foreign investments during year 2000.

**Table 3: Place of Ho Chi Minh City in the national economy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Vietnam</th>
<th>HCMC</th>
<th>% HCMC/Vietnam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population 2000</td>
<td>Inhabitants</td>
<td>77,685,500</td>
<td>5,169,400</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface area</td>
<td>Km²</td>
<td>331,041</td>
<td>2,094</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Billion Dong</td>
<td>444,139</td>
<td>76,660</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP/person</td>
<td>US $</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>1,307</td>
<td>290.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional incomes of state budget 1999</td>
<td>Billion Dong</td>
<td>76,808.3</td>
<td>25,942.4</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional expenditures of state budget 1999</td>
<td>Billion Dong</td>
<td>39,100.8</td>
<td>4,497.0</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total foreign direct investment (total capital at 31/12/2000)</td>
<td>Billion US $</td>
<td>39.101</td>
<td>10.519</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total foreign direct investment (during year 2000)</td>
<td>Billion US $</td>
<td>2.012</td>
<td>0.207</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources: Statistical yearbooks 2000 of Vietnam and of HCMC*

If we consider the entire “Southern key economic zone”, which includes the provinces of Dong Nai, Binh Duong, Ba Ria-Vung Tau and Ho Chi Minh City, the primacy of the region in the state economy is even more enormous: “[…] the economic growth rate represents 1.5 times that of the national growth. On the scale of the country, it represents 60% of the value of the exports, 60% of the budgetary receipts, 50% of the industrial value. Without taking into account the strong craze of foreign investors. […] between 1996 and 1999, the region gathered 146,000 billion Dong of investment, ie 45.7% of the national amount and contributed from 44% to 51% to the national GDP. It welcomed thirty two new industrial parks, of which many are equipped with modern and competitive units” (Le Courrier du Viêt-nam, Hanoi, n° 1841 of 08/02/2000).

Specifically concerning foreign investment, the “Southern key economic zone” collected 48.9 per cent of the cumulated capital on December 31st, 1999 and 66.2 per cent of the foreign investment in Vietnam in 1999, offshore investment excluded (*Vietnam Economic Times*, Hanoi, n° 72, February 2000, p. 32).

Table 3 shows clearly the influence that the development pole of HCMC can have on employment in the surrounding rural zone, but also in the rest of the country.

What are the main components of the growth of HCMC?
The increasing role of rural-urban migration

In a context of advanced demographic transition (total fertility rate: 2.2 in the whole country, 1.8 in HCMC), urban growth results mainly from rural-urban migration.

The annual growth of the urban population of HCMC is currently about 3.6 per cent (natural increase: 1.1 per cent; migration increase and progressive integration of surrounding rural areas or “reclassification”: 2.5 per cent). With this constant rate of increase, the urban population of HCMC would be 6.443 million in 2015, 8.000 million in 2020 and 10.953 million in 2030. However, we can expect that HCMC’s share of the rural-urban migration is going to increase substantially during the coming years for many reasons, in the context of the renovation policy:
- the development of domestic and foreign investments (much higher in the large cities);
- the strong economic growth, especially in urban areas, which develops many employment opportunities and attracts migrants, because unemployment for new migrants is still brief;
- the increase of living standards differentials and economic disparities between urban and rural areas, which increases the incentive to leave the countryside;
- the weakening of residential control;
- the current maintaining of a large proportion of the population in rural areas (76.5 per cent, following the definitions of the 1999 census); this means that there are still high potentialities of rural-urban migration.

Several recent specific surveys and studies give an extensive view of the factors and mechanisms of this kind of migration (Truong Si Anh, 1994; Truong Si Anh and al., 1996a and 1996b; Vien Kinh Te Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1996 and 1997, Gubry and al., 2002).

The most recent project concerns a survey in 1999 on migration to HCMC from Can Giuoc district, a rural area in the Mekong delta region. This survey had an original methodology which consisted in following the migrants from the countryside to the city (“tracing survey”). This enabled the researchers to get the opinions both of the parents who remained in countryside and of the migrants living in HCMC about their move; this is of great interest in assessing the future of rural-urban migration.

The impact of rural-urban migration is felt differently by the parents who still live in the village and by the migrants who originated from the same household and are living in the city. Strong differences also exist according to whether we are measuring the impact on the family, on the village or on the whole country (table 4).
Table 4: Assessment of the impact of rural-urban migration by both parents in Can Giuoc and migrant in Ho Chi Minh City (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination of impact</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Impact is</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Family</td>
<td>Parents in CG</td>
<td>82.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Migrant in HCMC</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Village</td>
<td>Parents in CG</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Migrant in HCMC</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on country</td>
<td>Parents in CG</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Migrant in HCMC</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 515 migrants in HCMC and their 515 families in Can Giuoc (Gubry and al., 2002)

The most positive opinions are expressed by the migrants concerning the impact on their family, because 88 per cent of the migrants consider it as positive. This result is difficult to analyse because some migrants included in their family the part of the family living in the city, as well as the part of the family staying in the village; so, one cannot know if the “positive impact” applies more or less to the one or to the other part of the family, or to the family in the broad sense, taken as a whole. This observation can explain why the migrant estimates his migration in such a positive way; this is the direct justification of his movement and of the durability of his residence in the city, which results from the conjunction between the obvious improvement of his own situation and the effort that he estimates to carry out to improve the living conditions of his relatives who remained in the village. However, the positive impact of the migration on the family seems obvious, in the arrival area, as well as in the departure area: it is noteworthy that 82 per cent of the parents consider as positive for their family the departure of one of their family members to the city. This could be a powerful factor influencing rural-urban migration in the future.

Opinions are generally positive about all the kinds of impacts (on the family, on the village and on the country); they become however much less asserted as a wider unit is examined. Concerning the impact on the country, 74 per cent of the migrants answer that they don’t know; the high proportion doubting is probably instigated by the pervasive ideology -particularly accessible to the migrants who live in the city- which considers rural exodus as a plague for the nation; however, this doubt also has an objective reason: they may think they have insufficient information to evaluate these consequences.

There is a wide difference between the opinions of the parents and those of the migrants as regards the impact on the village and especially the impact on the country. The parents have a more sharply positive opinion than the migrants; they are moreover in the best place to assess the impact on the village. Even there, the lower number of positive answers about the impact on the country can be attributed to the negative information accessible to the migrants.
At least, whatever may be the real consequences of the rural-urban migration to HCMC, they are considered as very positive by the most directly concerned people: the migrants themselves and their parents.

**Future trends: the process of “metropolisation” and the urban growth**

HCMC began a long time ago to include in its urban area some surrounding medium sized towns; this was especially the case in the past as Saigon merged with Cholon and with Gia Dinh. It will include in the future most of the localities belonging to its metropolitan region.

The process of “metropolisation” concerns first the densification of the suburbs and the equipment of the new urban districts (created in 1996). Three main development areas have been defined: (1) in the East, Thu Duc and the new districts 9 and 2, (2) the Thu Thiem urban center, (3) the new area of Saigon South (District 7, Nha Be and Binh Chanh) (Uy Ban Nhan Nhan Dan Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1996).

The “metropolisation” concerns also the widening of the economic influence of HCMC on several towns and economic zones located far away without continuous built-up area. This kind of development has been well analysed in China by Gentelle (2000):

“The way the Chinese cities, the largest in particular, attract populations and activities by widening their sphere of influence on their surroundings does not work according to the pattern of an oil stain, with concentration in the centre and dilution on the edges, but according to the pattern of a bamboo, whose rhizomes run through a space without apparently modifying it to give shoots somewhere else, there where are small and medium sized towns with which the big city deals directly”.

This kind of development has been compared to a metastasis by Asher (1995), as he defined the “metapolis”. It is related to the development of a rapid transportation system.

Therefore, the current projects are very ambitious. Given its location and the conditions of the Pacific Rim market, Saigon South is the first step in the enlargement of HCMC growing metropolis. The development of Saigon South is seen as a key component of Vietnam’s comprehensive plans for the “Southern key economic zone” which includes HCMC, Bien Hoa and Vung Tau. This region is also poised to become a centre for international finance, trade, cultural, scientific, high-technology, transportation and tourism development in Vietnam. The Saigon South project presents a historic opportunity for Vietnam and HCMC to reinteegrate the global economy, especially in Southeast Asia, in the future. The opening of a stock exchange market in HCMC is another step of this process.
Similarities and specificities of Ho Chi Minh City compared to other mega-cities

Though the increase of the productivity due to urbanization and the international role of HCMC has been quoted, the negative aspects of a fast urban growth were more often analysed and are going to worry the authorities for many years (Bolay, 1998).

All the problems of town planning inherent to mega-cities (Oberai, 1993) are already present in HCMC where they have begun to be studied. We shall quote only some of these studies:
- Employment, especially noting that the opportunities of employment remain very numerous thanks to the informal sector, in spite of an increase in the unemployment rate (Truong Si Anh and al., 1996a; Campbell, 1999);
- The persistence -or even the increase- of poverty among several categories of the population, and the living conditions (Drakakis-Smith and Dixon, 1997; Gubry and al., 2002);
- Housing (Nguyen Quang Vinh and Leaf, 1996; Bolay and al., 1997; Parenteau, 1997; Coit, 1998; Bassand and al., 2000);
- Water problems (Bassand and al., 2000);
- The spatial structure and the commuting movements (Do Thi Loan, 1994);
- Urban transportation and traffic jams (Schmitt, 1997);
- Local administration (Durand, 1997; Nguyên, 1999);
- Urban environment (Thái Thi Ngoc Dự and al., 1993; Parenteau, 1997), etc.

The problem of the urban environment in HCMC, which includes water and air pollution, and garbage treatment, is the one which worries people the most, as related in various surveys. In all these domains, the Chinese experience may give useful lessons (Jones and Visaria, 1997).

Many of these problems are related to the obsolescence of urban infrastructures, to their saturation and to the lack of resources.

In this context, the interest to develop secondary centres to generate a large multipolar zone which could relieve congestion in the main centre was emphasized.

However, several factors are relatively specific to HCMC and will deeply influence the future urbanization:

1°) The essential role of water.
Besides allowing the presence of the port, water is the determining element of HCMC’s environment. The city does not yet have a central water-treatment plant; in these conditions, its low altitude and the alternation of tides hinders waste water flow. The city is a part of what Timmerman and White (1997) called "megahydropolis", which may be weakened by climate change.
2°) The importance of the recent economic liberalization.
The opening to the market was accompanied by a decline of the subsidized economy. This has a strong influence on urbanization as on the other fields; it notably leads to a rapid increase of land prices and housing, despite the fact that in right, the land still belongs to the state.
So, Nguyen Quang Vinh and Leaf (1996) observe:

"Popular housing can be looked upon as intrinsically a doi moi phenomenon as it arises from such policy changes as the loss of housing subsidy, the relaxation of controls on population movement and the institutionalisation of land markets to stimulate urban development".

3°) A well-developed urban network.
The urbanization of HCMC takes part in a relatively well-developed urban network in Vietnam (Vu Tu Lap and Taillard, 1994). Jones (1997) notes that this fact can slow down megapolisation:

"...Jakarta, Bangkok and Manila would not yet have reached megacity status if Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines had developed more balanced city size hierarchies".

4°) The development of urban economic activities in the rural hinterland.
The region of HCMC and particularly the Mekong delta are clearly a part of this kind of region that McGee (1991) called "Desakota", a word created from two Indonesian terms ("village" and "town"). A desakota region is characterized by:

- a dense population engaged in smallholder cultivation, commonly of wet rice;
- an increase in non-agricultural activities;
- a well-developed infrastructure of roads and canals;
- a reservoir of cheap labour;
- highly integrated ‘transactive’ environments in terms of movements of people and commodities; and
- a state perception as being ‘invisible’ or ‘grey’ zones" (Dick and Rimmer, 1998).

This kind of region corresponds relatively well to what was called in Europe, in another ecological environment, “rurbanisation”. Dick and Rimmer (1998) minimize the analysis of McGee by emphasizing rather the resemblances between the urbanization in Southeast Asia and the United States. However, it is clear that this phenomenon, which gives additional incomes to the rural population, could also slow down the megapolisation.

Taking into account the objective differentials between city and countryside and the results of the most recent surveys, we may however predict that rural-urban migration will anyway prevail for many years.
Conclusion

The population of Ho Chi Minh City experienced a chaotic evolution as a result of the hazards of history.

The estimation of the current urban population is made difficult by the fact that the limits of the administrative unit of the city still contain a high proportion of rural population.

Since the implementation of the Renovation policy, the population of Ho Chi Minh City again entered a stage of growth.

This phenomenon appears to be to a large extend irreversible, and the authorities are much concerned, because while the problems of employment are still largely resolved by the dynamism of the informal sector, the evolution of infrastructure, transportation and urban environment are already very worrisome.

Within a short time, Ho Chi Minh City will undoubtedly become the first Vietnamese mega-city, whatever the current definitions of the mega-city may be.
References


[VN] People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City (1996), *Synthetic report on general socio-economic planning of Ho Chi Minh City until year 2010*. HCMC, xvi-723 p.]


Notes

1 The name of President Ho Chi Minh has been given to the city on July 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1976, during the 6\textsuperscript{th} session of the National Assembly.

2 The details of the estimations appear in table 2. See Le Thi Huong, 2000; Gubry and Le Thi Huong, 2002; several parts of this paper come from these chapters, still exclusively published in Vietnamese or in French.

3 Decision of April 27th, 1931, which created the “Saigon-Cholon Region”, applied from January 1st, 1932 (Nguyen Dinh Dau, 1998).

4 The country was then temporarily divided into two parts, on both sides of the 17\textsuperscript{th} parallel.

5 The statistical yearbook of 1949-1950 considers useful to clarify in a “preliminary note”: “No population census was made in Vietnam since 1936. The last relatively precise estimation concerning the entire Vietnam goes back to the year 1943. These figures were reproduced in this chapter for every region of Vietnam. In 1951, evaluations were given by the heads of every province under control. Because of the current insecurity in the country, these figures have only a rough value; they are not less useful there and give a rough idea of their level, which can be considered” [Original in French].

6 The difficulty is increased by the fact that it is impossible to distinguish the purely residents from the temporary refugees, particularly during the last months of the war. Finally, a retroprojection from the data published by the new regime, notably the 1976 electoral census (Ban Chi Dao Tong Dieu Tra Dan So va Nha o Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 2000), from estimations of the number of persons having left the city after April, 1975 and from the estimation of the natural increase rate of the population, is made very unpredictable by the inclusion of the population of the Gia Dinh province, with 10 districts, in the new demographic data of HCMC from 1976.

7 Jacqueline Desbarats (1987, p. 53) quotes various Vietnamese sources (Liberation Radio, Saigon Domestic Service, Saigon Giai Phong), which estimate the departures from “Saigon” (in which administrative limits?) from May, 1975 till February, 1976 between 430,000 and 500,000 inhabitants, the objective of the government being then “to reduce the population of Saigon of 2 millions” before the end of 1976.

8 These analyses suppose that the successive censuses are of equal quality, which remains to be proved.

9 The urban population of the semi-urban area was calculated by interpolation, by noticing a correlation (valid in this zone with relatively scattered dwellings) between the density of population by district and the proportion of urban population, a density lower than 500 inhab./km\textsuperscript{2} corresponding to 0 per cent urban population and a density of 10,000 inhab./km\textsuperscript{2} to 100 per cent urban population.