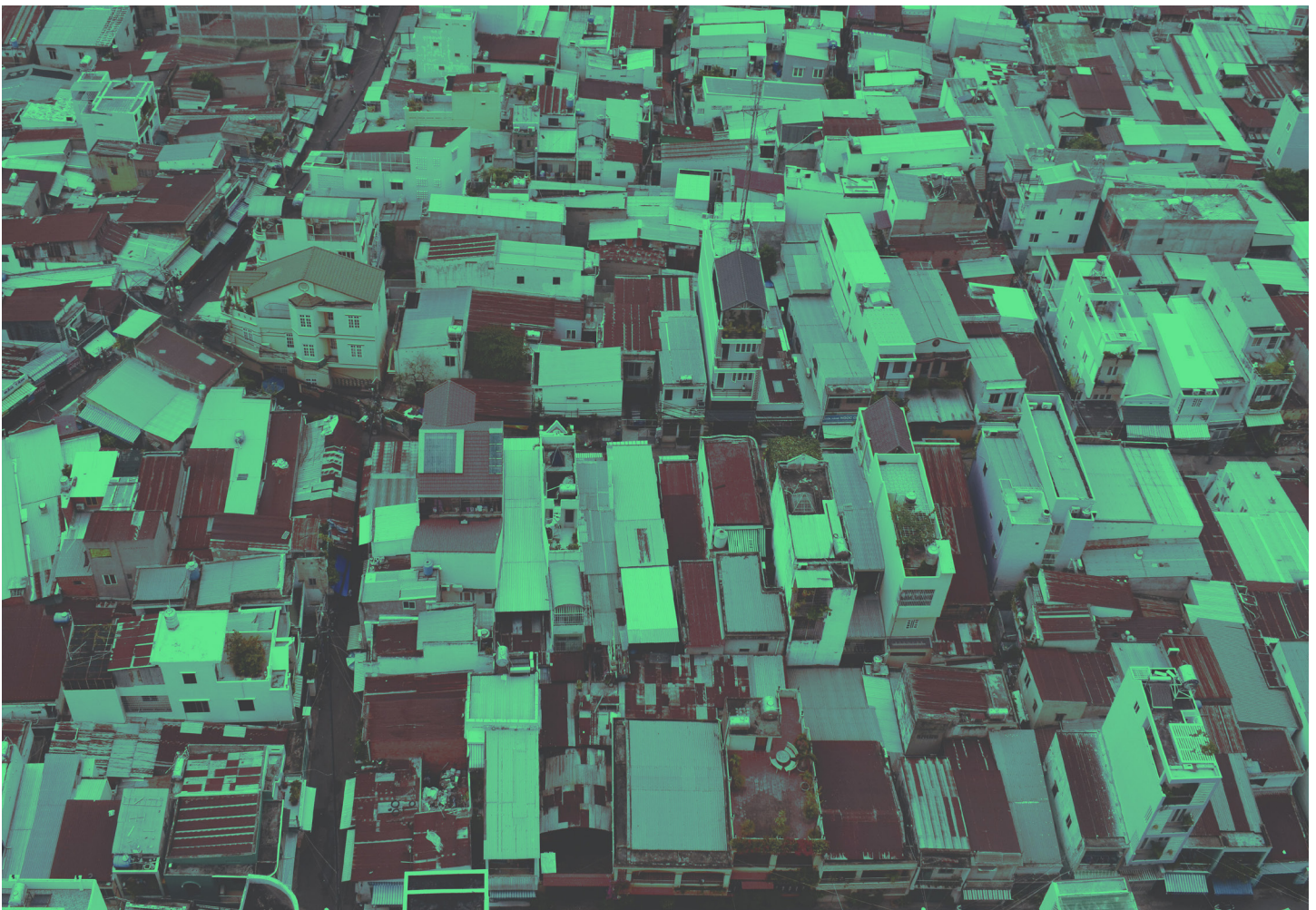


Transformative Adaptation and Social Justice in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam



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Nguyen Hong Quan

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Transformative Adaptation to Climate Change in Southeast Asian Coastal Cities

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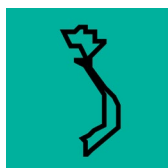
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Summary

This case study is part of the UNRISD project “Transformative Adaptation to Climate Change in Coastal Cities” which explores adaptation decision-making processes and barriers to transformative solutions in order to inform more progressive policy making in the context of Southeast Asian coastal cities.

This paper introduces governance and decision-making processes for urban development in Ho Chi Minh City and gives an overview of adaptation planning and strategies to deal with increasing levels of urban flooding. It provides a comparative case study of two urban upgrading projects that affected low-income dwellers in informal settlements. Through this analysis, the authors illustrate the complex socio-economic situation of project beneficiaries and impacted residents, as well as the social justice implications of adaptation policies, and hope to identify how Ho Chi Minh City can move toward more transformative adaptation.

About the Authors

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1. Introduction

Around the world, the climate crisis is increasingly triggering serial extreme weather events and slow-onset impacts that threaten people's lives and well-being. As current mitigation efforts are far from sufficient to reduce the impacts of past emissions, many governments are looking to incremental adaptation to reduce the vulnerability of social, physical and ecological systems to climate change. The climate crisis, however, is only one of numerous problems facing modern urban systems with dense urban conditions often making the system more sensitive to changes and intensifying climate impacts (Storch 2008; Revi et al. 2014; Pelling et al. 2015; Eriksen et al. 2014). Integrating adaptation into “development-as-usual” paradigms thus risks reproducing the system that creates vulnerability in the first place (Eriksen et al. 2014). In addition, in the growing urban economy, vulnerability is complex and, in many cases, multiplied by other social stressors, such as inequality, marginalization, lack of access to resources, and poverty. Each inhabitant experiences risk and vulnerability differently (O'Brien et al. 2007). As climate change adaptation is nested within social and political structures (Eriksen et al. 2014), transformative adaptation is critical to address root causes of vulnerability. Transformative adaptation is distinguished from incremental adaptation, which operates within existing power structures and maintains the status quo, in that it addresses power imbalances and brings radical changes to the existing system (Pelling et al. 2014). Climate change then is not an external threat, but both a problem *of* development and *for* development. Accordingly, transformative adaptation will have to bring about “fundamental changes to the systems that shape well-being, enhancing people's ability not only to function but also to flourish despite the impacts of a changing climate” (Pal et al. 2019:4).

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is the economic hub with the highest rate of urbanization in Viet Nam. Located on the coastline, it is seriously threatened by climate change impacts. According to a 2010 Asian Development Bank report, HCMC is one of the world's top 10 cities with the most population likely to be severely impacted by climate change by 2050 (ADB 2010). New research suggests that even with ambitious climate change mitigation, the impacts of sea level rise will be much bigger than previously anticipated and could leave 23 to 31 percent 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. Flooding, soil erosion, salinization and urban heat islands are already impacting the HCMC metropolitan region.

The current state of adaptation in HCMC is one of basic prevention and protection. The city's master plan for flood responses relies mostly on hard infrastructural measures such as dykes and sluice gates to protect the city from fluvial flood (Phi and Quan 2018). While there has been progress in promoting integrated planning, sustainability and “no-regret” measures that bring positive benefits regardless of how the climate changes, disparities remain among different interest groups, and between policies and implementation. Inefficiency in public participation and stakeholder engagement is another obstacle. Moreover, climate policies and urban planning strategies rarely address inequality, or the needs and perspectives of poor and marginalized populations. This paper explores options for more transformative adaptation, which is understood here as adaptation that tackles the root causes of poverty, inequality and environmental destruction, and which can be driven by innovative policies that are grounded in normative values of social justice and environmental sustainability (UNRISD 2016; 2019). As such, adaptation needs to go beyond technical solutions and address structures and processes that currently lead to highly uneven development outcomes and exacerbate vulnerabilities. This paper seeks to investigate HCMC's institutions, decision-making processes, as well as the potential for transformative adaptation and barriers that could prevent it.

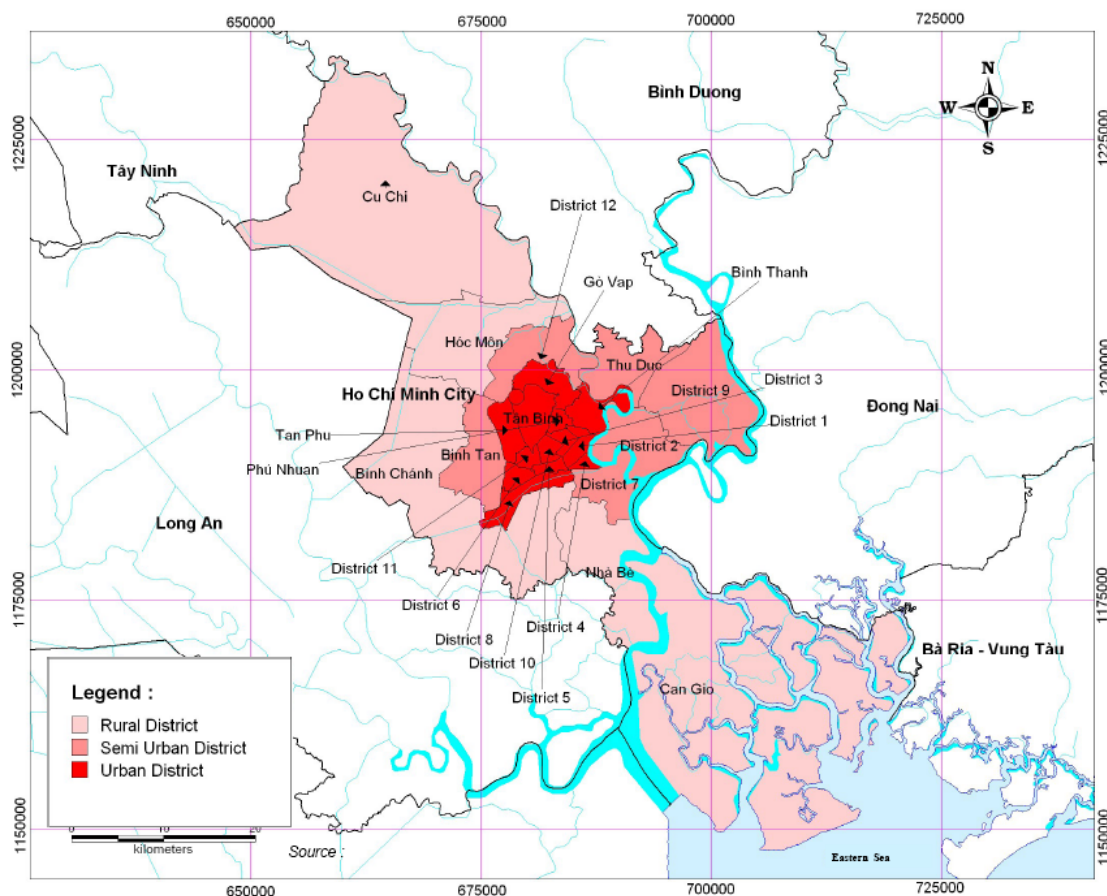
Research Approach

The paper is based on two stages of research and analysis. In a first phase we prepared a draft version of this study as a discussion document in time for the 25th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, or COP25, in 2019. We conducted a literature review and an institutional mapping; exploratory analysis for case studies; as well as key expert interviews with academic experts and state cadres at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the compensation department of HCMC. We also undertook a field trip to the two case study sites of Tan Hoa–Lo Gom and Hang Bang canals as well as the three resettlement sites (two near the original settlements and one about 11 km from the canals). During the field trip, we used observation, semi-structured interviews and oral history to understand the whole process of how the projects were implemented, how the negotiation took place (or not), to what extent participation was possible, and how different households with their respective advantages and disadvantages either manage or struggle to adapt to their “new lives”. In a second phase (August–November 2020), we prepared a summary of the discussion document and list of questions (in both English and Vietnamese) and sent those to relevant experts in HCMC for their feedback and discussion. Individual consultations through online interviews were combined with prior written feedback. The respondents to our consultation include a representative from the Department of Architecture Planning of HCMC, one from the Ho Chi Minh City Institute for Development Studies (HIDS), a governmental think tank of the city directly advising the People’s Committee, and three planning and/or social science experts from different universities who also have significant experience working in urban development projects.

2. Urban planning and development in Ho Chi Minh City

HCMC is located in the south eastern region of Viet Nam, on the west bank of the Saigon river. As a key economic zone of the country, the city contributes 20 percent of national GDP. The city consists of 12 “urban” districts (Districts One to Twelve), four rapidly urbanizing “semi-urban” districts (Binh Thanh, Go Vap, Tan Binh and Phu Nhuan) and six largely rural “outer” districts (Cu Chi, Hoc Mon, Thu Duc, Binh Chanh, Nha Be, and Can Gio). The current official population of the city is 8,859,688 people.¹

Figure 1. Map of Ho Chi Minh City



Source: VCAPS 2013

HCMC is home to rapid growth of both the elite and middle class living in gated, luxury housing on one hand, and low-income communities living in alleys and slum settlements on the other. While average annual income in 2017 was approximately USD 2,500, it varies largely between different sectors and positions, and is less than a living wage which was estimated at approximately USD 3,500 in March 2016 (ERC 2017). In 2017, 1.1 percent of the city’s population (that is of those registered and counted) were poor, according to the city’s poverty standard. As HCMC continues to grow, poor communities face the challenge of increasing prices for health services, food and fuel, among others.

¹ This is the official estimate from January 2019, not counting military and police forces. The number was estimated at 13 million in 2017 when counting all people who live, work and/or study in the city while remaining registered in their home provinces outside of the city.

2.1.A historical review

Table 1. Overview of main urbanization periods and city plans

Period	City plans
French colonization period	1862 – The first master plan by Coffyn (for 25 km ² accommodating 500,000 people) 1890 – 1945 Second plan by Betruax 1943 – Spatial plan by Pugnaire (designed for 1 million people by 2000) 1951 – First Vietnamese attempt at urban planning by Bao Dai's government (not implemented)
Ngo Dinh Diem regime	1958 – Ministry of Reconstruction and Urban Planning issues new land use plan (extension and revision of the 1943 Pugnaire plan) for 675 km ² and 3 million people 1960 – Ngo Viet Thu develops “La Conurbation De Saigon Cholon”, a plan for an administration centre between the agglomerations of Saigon and Cholon 1962 – Doxiadis plan, focusing on methods that could relocate urban population previously in poor housing conditions 1965 – Plan of Saigon Metropolitan Area (for the city's 1.7 million population and 2.5 million in the metropolitan area) 1968 – revised plan for 1.7 million in the city only 1972 – “Dialectics of Urban Proposal for the Saigon Metropolitan Area” proposed 30-year plan by USAID
Vietnamese government 1975-1980s	Five-year plans (deurbanization period after 1975)
After 1986	1998 – Urban master plan for the year 2020 funded by the World Bank (partially implemented) 2010 – Master plan for 2025 by the Prime Minister 2011 – Amended plan for approval by the People's Committee 2017 – Amended plan for regional construction of HCMC until 2030, vision to 2050 by the Prime Minister 2019 – Approval of the Prime Minister for HCMC to prepare an adjusted urban master plan until 2045

Source: compilation by authors based on Nguyen et al. 2016

During its history, HCMC has been through numerous concepts of planning, growth and land management shaped by various socio-political conditions. Under the Nguyen dynasty, Viet Nam's last imperial government, the city developed mainly around the port on the Sai Gon river. Anyone was more or less free

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