HOUSING SOLUTIONS: FOR VIETNAM'S CITIES

by Daniel Girard

In the slum areas crowding the canals of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, a powerful smell is the first unavoidable sensation. The odour of rotting garbage and untreated sewage confronts the visitor even before the rows of wooden huts come into view.

A closer examination reveals dwellings with galvanized steel or timber roofs, chainlink or straw mat walls covered with cardboard or thin wood and a bare wood or dirt floor. Heavy rains and wind easily push their way into the simple homes, which are literally a roof over the head for tens of thousands of people. In the dark brown canal waters flowing outside, plastic containers and tin cans mingle with human and other wastes dumped from the huts.

Although it may seem an unlikely place to call home, that is exactly what an increasing number of Vietnamese are doing. Driven by the hope of jobs and a better standard of living, more and more people are leaving the countryside for the cities. But with about one-quarter of the current population unemployed, newcomers are unable to find work, surviving on part-time jobs and swelling the slum population.

The number of people coming to the city is increasing and we are unable to stop it, said Prof. Hong Dao, deputy director of the Architecture University in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). Dao said he could not estimate how much the city's poor population has swelled in recent years. But up-to-date data collected as part of an IDRC-funded project to improve the shelter and environment of the country's urban poor show that about 320,000 people, or some eight percent of the city's four million inhabitants, live in slums.

The definition of a slum area is one where the homes are made of temporary materials such as galvanized steel roofs, straw or thin timber walls, wood or dirt floors and have no plumbing or electricity, he said. In Ho Chi Minh City, there are 24,000 such dwellings on canals alone. The government and local authorities are trying to start their clean-up efforts along these canals, Dao added in an interview through an interpreter.

In addition to the Ho Chi Minh City Architecture University, three other Vietnamese institutions are participating in the project: the Hanoi Architecture Institute, the National Institute of Urban and Rural Planning, and the Institute of Sociology. There is coordination and consultation among the institutions but each carries out its own research and works independently, Dao said.

Pressures of urban migration

Vietnam's communist government decided in 1986 to pursue a market-oriented economy, paving the way for foreign investment under a policy called doi moi or openness. That has meant the government has
pulled out of many aspects of urban development at a time when the pressure from urban migration has greatly increased. The quality of shelter and basic services for the poor is increasingly of concern to officials.

In Ho Chi Minh City, the living conditions of the poor represent more than just a housing problem, Dao said. At low tide, the untreated sewage originating in the slums flows down the canals, into the Saigon River and is carried out toward the South China Sea. But at high tide it flows back up the river and canals. The water is not the city’s main supply but it is used by those inhabiting the slums. The canal areas are producing terrible pollution for the whole city and it is one of our priority problems, Dao said.

Unfortunately, the many years of Vietnam’s international isolation mean the country faces a knowledge gap in trying to find solutions to housing and environmental problems such as those in its urban slums. The first step in recovering the missing information was to begin collecting data in 1993 to define the slum areas and determine in greater detail the living conditions of the people there, Dao said. Among their findings, the researchers discovered that the average monthly salary of slum workers is between US$15 to US$20. Typically, the slum dwellers can only find casual work as artisans, labourers or cyclo-taxi drivers, he said.

In this initial stage of the project, researchers from the Urban Institute of the University of Montreal, led by Prof. Ren’ Parenteau, helped explain what data needed to be collected and how the research should be carried out, Dao said.

This process of education and sharing of ideas are central elements of the project. In addition to improving the living conditions and environment of the residents of Vietnamese slums, another goal of the project is to immerse the country’s researchers in new methodologies as a training exercise for future projects. The multi-disciplinary approach with the involvement of social scientists, architects, and urban planners will also increase the potential impact of the project.

The Vietnamese researchers have also had the opportunity to learn from international examples in the field of urban housing. Some project participants have been able to visit housing agencies, non-governmental organizations and other relevant institutions in nearby countries to see how similar problems there have been addressed. It is hoped that through such intra-regional contact for many of the Vietnamese their first opportunities to travel outside their country more international co-operation will evolve in the future.

It is also clear that this project will influence not only Vietnamese research methods, urban environment and government policies but also the future of urban planning in the country. All urban planners and architects in the country must first train at either the Hanoi Architecture Institute or the Ho Chi Minh City Architecture University. Therefore, the lessons learned through this project will have an impact on the course material for students in the years ahead.

Notwithstanding these long-term impacts, Dao said the more immediate focus of the project is on improving the housing and environment of the urban poor in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The initial focus of rehabilitation activity will be on a few of the canals in Ho Chi Minh City and in Hanoi. But Dao said the lessons learned in those places will be useful elsewhere in Vietnam. We have a lot of other cities with slums on canals so what we learn here we can use throughout the country, he said. And in addition to the canal slums there is poor housing in other cities that will likely be improved by the solutions found in this project, Dao added.

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