

ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH APPROACHES ON POVERTY ALLEVIATION DURING URBANIZATION PROCESS

MAC DUONG

Editorial board's note: The article entitled "Anthropological Research Approaches on Poverty Alleviation during Urbanization Process" is the result of a study under a research program conducted by author Mac Duong and a team of researchers from the Institute of Social Sciences - Ho Chi Minh City. In the article, the author touches upon some activities under the Program which help clarify the content of the article, therefore we just keep them as they are.

In the past, we have spent time implementing an inter-disciplinary research program of social sciences, in which sociology and ethnology were the two key disciplines in the research. Yet, in a research stage or a certain phase of research, sometimes sociology emerged as an issue solving all problems and later on ethnology has become most needed for ending a research process. But in general, the combination of a basic knowledge of history, ethnology, economics, sociology, philosophy and women studies are the special feature of the research team taking part in the research program. Our research program was also conducted in scientific cooperation with university professors from the US Socio-Science Research Council (SSRC) and funded by the Ford Foundation.

1. General conception

The most general aim of the Research Program is to contribute to the theoretical awareness on the National Poverty Reduction Program in urban areas. We have followed an orientation of basic research on social needs and urgent issues through the specific functions of the Institute of Social Sciences - Ho Chi Minh City, under the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities. We think in Vietnam with this background, hunger eradication and poverty reduction are historical issues closely linked to Ho Chi Minh's Thought on the national liberation revolution in colonized countries, social equality for poor communities and poverty-free communities in modern Vietnamese society (1). Ho Chi Minh's Thought encourages the process of poverty alleviation and to be wealthy and prosperous. President Ho Chi Minh once stated, "The poor shall have enough to eat,

those who are sufficient in food shall be well-off and the well-off shall be more wealthy" (2). However, his revolutionary and humane thought does not intend the creation of a great disparity and two completely opposite poles in the society in terms of lifestyles and daily living standards – that is the creation of a social environment of very poor groups of people and a social environment of very rich groups. Is it characteristic of the development path of socialism in Vietnam in the long run which has been implemented by the Vietnamese Party and State with initial achievements? Is it a special humane aspect of programs to achieve prosperity in economics and trade in the process of industrialization and modernization that we should pay attention to? A modern Vietnam should be a wealthy and prosperous nation. Vietnam's society will be a rich society in the future, but there should not be two opposite poles and a wide disparity between the poor social community and the poverty-free community. Poverty alleviation is an overall social process nationwide and will occur throughout the period of national industrialization and modernization to limit this social polarization. Being closely linked to and subject to the overall macro social process, each region in the country and each area in the region, depending on the total local economic revenue, creates a social stimulation and motivation for the process of poverty alleviation through positive social policies and assistance from community development. On the path of socialist construction in Vietnam, the main content of the issue of poverty in general and

urban poverty in particular is the process of poverty alleviation. This significance is the orientation for social development at macro level. It also bears the socially changeable characteristic at micro level. This is because, “The national goal is to eradicate hunger by 2001 and eliminate poverty by 2010” (3).

These conceptions are the scientific basis of the program already applied in realities of research in the past. It partly contributes to the network of research methodologies on poverty in

Vietnam, helping develop the consciousness of the socialist path in Vietnam in the period of industrialization and modernization. Poverty alleviation in rural and urban areas in Vietnam cannot be completely separated from the situation common in the world – the United Nations warned “Poor people are increasing in cities”. They include 8 unsolvable issues of modern cities (4). For this reason, our program has targeted poverty alleviation in urban areas.



Gong festival of Muong ethnic minority at Tan Lac district, Hoa Binh province

Photo: Nguyen Anh Cuong

2. Research concepts

During a basic study under a social science research project, the researchers have to try their best to identify the key research concepts to be dealt with. Five concepts of this research project are: poverty alleviation, urbanization, household, community and migration.

Poverty alleviation has a meaning similar to the concept of “poverty reduction” and “poverty elimination” often found in local reports and mass media. However, in the official documents of the Party (Resolutions of National Party Congresses) and State (Document on the

establishment of the Central Steering Committee of the National Program on Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction...), the concept “poverty reduction” has been used. The term “poverty elimination” is used in speaking and communication and in some local documents, not national ones. We use the concept “poverty alleviation” without dealing with the content of the idea of poverty elimination. Because the main spirit of the Vietnamese Party and State’s policy on this issue is “to create all favourable conditions to help the poor improve their livelihoods by their own efforts, except those who have no labour capacity will receive State

and community support". The meaning of poverty alleviation is more general and characterized by the national development when the Vietnamese State announced "the Socio-Economic Development Strategy until 2000" in autumn 1991 with the objective "to overcome the state of a poor and under-developed country" (5). Therefore, poverty alleviation should be linked to development and is a process of self-stride. It is also a process of brainstorming, creativity and the endeavors of the poor, poor households, and community and society in disadvantaged areas. Poverty alleviation based on internal strength in combination with support and assistance from integrated socio-economic development policies of the State and community assistance will create a sustainable outcome for a "poverty-free society" and higher living standards. We need a policy to stimulate socio-economic development in the process of poverty alleviation, rather than giving the poor charity and social welfare (6). Consultants from Aduki Company in a research project "Poverty Issue in Vietnam" have made the following correct remarks, "in Vietnam, the meaning of poverty is not merely the issue of material income" (7). The poverty phenomenon exists in each individual member of a household, each poor household in the poverty-free community and in each poor community, which have been identified throughout the whole country (8). It also relates to the factors of socio-economics, ethics and humanity, and the value of each community in the society (ethnic group, religion, profession, native land). Therefore, poverty alleviation cannot be settled only by meeting material needs but also the care for social and cultural issues relating to poverty and the process of poverty alleviation. Higher scientific consciousness is needed in the development of national development strategies when poverty becomes one of the most urgent social issues being posed to humankind at present. In fact, in many countries worldwide, there often exist two different conceptions in the settlement of poverty in society. The first conception (often called the old conception) advocates providing

maximum welfare and regular assistance for the poor in the spirit of charity and responsibility and citizen's ethics. The second one (often called the new conception) advocates the settlement of poverty through development of socio-economic environments in disadvantaged areas and the development of community relationship in helping the poor to find out their own ways to alleviate their poverty (9).

Urbanization is a concept expressed differently in different aspects (urbanology, demography, ethnology, sociology, and economics). The scope and shape of the process of urbanization can vary. In the middle age, from the 15th to the 18th century, the process of urbanization in both Asia and Europe was linked to the construction of firm fortresses to defend the market place which was located inside the fortress (Kremlin, Venice, Babylon, Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo...). The concept "fortress" was formed and then "capital". People can easily recognize the special features of gothic cities of the Catholic style and cities of low-story buildings, vault roofs and narrow streets of the Islamic style (10). In Vietnam under the French domination, Ha Noi and Hue became cities section by section; Hai Phong, Sai Gon, Da Nang, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Da Lat ... were newly built cities to develop the colonial trading; while Nam Dinh and Vinh were newly built cities with an aim to developing colonial industry, and "concentrated areas" under the Ngo Dinh Diem regime's national policy (1955-1963) was considered agricultural urban areas (11). In each period of history and in each nation, there have been separate socio-political and economic needs expressed in the process of urbanization, right at their beginning. The emergence of urban populous areas has been defined as an area concentrated by mostly non-agricultural population. Each country has its own regulations on an urban populous area (12). At present, Vietnam has 569 urban populous areas identified under the five criteria of Decision 132/HDBT dated May 5, 1990 (13). It is forecasted that by 2010, Vietnam's urban system will have two large national metropolitans having their own

administrative regulations; 10 cities under the central government with a population of less than 1 million each; 10 medium-sized cities with a population of half a million each; 50 concentrated populous urban areas (provincial capital and provincial towns) with a minimum population of 100,000 each; and about 500 – 700 small concentrated populous urban areas (district towns, commune clusters, quarters under the district government) with an average population of between 5,000 to 10,000 each (15). So, the urban system in Vietnam has five levels of different social structural scope and the policy for these five levels represents the five different scopes of development of the process of urbanization.

Under the Resolution of the 7th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (which aims “to develop industry, technology beyond 2000 in the orientation of industrialization, modernization and building the working class in the new stage”) the function of Vietnam’s urban system is to be a nucleus to promote industrialization and modernization in specific regions and in the whole country (15). One important policy for industrial development in Vietnam in the contemporary time is that urbanization should be closely linked to economic and trade development in rural areas to promote rural industrialization. On Feb. 28, 2001, the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee issued Directive No. 63 CT/TU on strengthening research and the application of science and technology to agricultural and rural industrialization and modernization (16). This is expected to create new opportunities for the process of rural urbanization and attract qualified personnel to join in the process of rural urbanization. Rural urbanization is an accumulated social process of rural industrialization and modernization events, different to the history of urban development in Europe and North America in the 19th and 20th century. Vietnam advocates industrialization in combination with rural urbanization in the initial stage of national industrialization and modernization from 2001 to 2002. In Hanoi and

Ho Chi Minh City, since 1992, urbanization has mainly occurred in the suburbs, forming satellite urban clusters (18). In general, from the economic perspective, urbanization is the expansion of the environment impacts of the commercial economic value and commercial life in rural areas - where once only a traditional autarchic agricultural economy existed. Looking at the communities in urbanized areas (not mentioning the disparity between individuals and households), generally, the poor areas have escaped from poverty or became less poor than prior to being urbanized. Yet urbanization is “a conflicting process, bringing about both light and dark, heaven and hell” (19). Through the commercial and market economies that have stimulated the consciousness of poverty alleviation in Vietnam (supported by the State policies and community), poverty alleviation has become a new lifestyle of people in urbanized areas. For this reason, the process of poverty alleviation is a social change of the process of urbanization and urbanization is a social motivation for the process of poverty alleviation. Analyzing the interactive social relations of these two processes is to identify its advantages and disadvantages to work out measures for sustainable urbanization and serve the policy of management of modern urban areas in Vietnam.

Household is a dwelling house sheltering a family or several families. There are many definitions of the household. A household is a population management unit (20). A household is a social unit where one or many people join efforts to generate sources of food and other necessities for their living (21). A household is a group of people who wish to live together and thus, they share the common life and main food sources for their daily living (22). A household is a social analysis unit, a household family has one or many persons who share common family life, particularly shelter and show self-denial in meals. Different to a ‘family’ where members are bound to each other due to their kinship relations, a ‘household’ can be understood simply as an entity officially counted and included in administrative documents to identify

who they are, how they live, and where they reside? (23). Most households are families by blood, but not all of them are families. For example in the United States and Canada, there are many households which are not family units. In modern industrial societies, celibacy is increasing and a household can be just an individual residence – a phenomenon of interest to sociology (24). So, household and family are two different concepts. In our research program, we deal with the issues of household family and the focus is poor household families in comparison with poverty-free household families. Vietnam and most countries influenced by Confucianism, are different to countries in Europe and North America. Traditionally, a household family was the most basic micro social structure, which initiated decisive social change and drew the attention of the State on many aspects (such as policy on household economic development, policy on buildings, and cultural family). In Vietnam, the realities of poverty reduction activities in the whole country have proved that there are very few single household families (in which one person lives in a house). Single households are very rare and do not pose obstacles to development. For this reason, we do not have the concept of poor households but deal with poor household families during the implementation of our research program. With our field data, household is a family organization of the same clan or several families of the same clan that live together under the same “roof”.

We share the same view with other researchers on the existence of 8 main reasons leading to poverty in Vietnam at present as pointed out by the National Program on Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction. They include:

1. Lack of business experiences
2. Shortage of labour
3. Having many dependents
4. Shortage of capital
5. Shortage of cultivable land

6. Having lazy members or those involved with social vices

7. Accidents, risks

8. Illness, handicap, or elderly having no labour capacity (25)

Lack of business experience and skillful hands are two of the main reasons of poverty summarized at the end of 2000 compared to the shortage of capital and the shortage of cultivable land which were considered the first main reasons of poverty in 1995.

Community is a group of people who share similarities forming a bloc as a society (26). It is a collective comprising members who are bound together through common values. Community has an immanent bound not through clear regulations or written laws but through deeper relationship (kinship or tradition). The concept of community is now widely used in economic and political areas: the European Economic Community and the world community (27). Under the most common meaning, community is a social group having relations as in a family in terms of support and dependence where its members share the same interest created by their co-existence (28). Community is a social group comprising many individuals having the following characteristics:

1. It has its own organizational structure whose members are not like members of other communities.
2. Such organizational structures are sustainable and distinctly different.
3. Community has a rich capacity in implementing diverse social activities.
4. Community members are psychologically harmonious and closely bound together.
5. When it integrates into a larger community, it still retains its own social, economic and psychological characteristics (29).

Community has four characteristics:

1. Following the voluntary agreements of the lowest social echelon.
2. Its members have the same aspirations for its operations.
3. Its members have different characteristics, which can easily be identified.
4. Its members have the need to exchange through time (30).

Community research has been the main direction of modern ethnology in the past several decades on peasant society in countries in Central and South America, Europe and Asia. This research direction is also applied to other social communities, particularly studies of the living quarters in an urban society, including immigrated ethnic minority groups being isolated from those living quarters; studies of social relations of those groups in the social interrelation with local administrative organizations and local cultural forms. The objective of community research is to have in-depth comments on the integration of the privates of the community and the long-existence of its characteristics in modern society. Researchers of modern community are often concerned about the impacts of the power exerted by socio-political community organizations on the community life (31). Community is a term used for a basic social unit – a family, a village or a certain social group having common social characteristics in terms of social ideal, age, sex, profession, social status, such as parties, a group of taxi drivers, a group of people with eye-sight disability, and others (32).

In our research program, right from the beginning, we planned for surveys and studies of community. However, we met with difficulties in the implementation of our plan and the results we received were very humbling. The main reason is the lack of full awareness of the need to study community and its impacts on poverty alleviation in the process of sustainable urbanization. From the real activities of the Program, we understand that community is a

group of traditionally or temporarily characterized inhabitants living in the same location (a house, village, or urban living quarter). Members of the community may not live close together but share a common lifestyle, the same sources of living and have a closely-bound sentimental and emotional relationship. From the field data, we have identified the following different types of communities:

- a. Rural community comprising hamlets, concentration camps and traditional villages.
- b. Urban community comprising neighborhoods and living quarters.
- c. Administrative community comprising urban ward, commune, precinct, district.
- d. Ethnic community comprising the Viet, Hoa (Vietnamese of Chinese origin), Cham.
- e. Religious community comprising Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Muslim.
- f. Professional community comprising groups of migrated fellow countrymen doing the same profession (enterprise workers, wage earners working for private production establishment, vendors, etc.), associations of actors and actresses, agricultural cooperatives, agricultural extension groups, etc.
- g. Socio-political community comprising war veterans' associations, women's unions, farmers' associations, or other socio-political organizations.

Those communities have great potential creating a motive force to promote opportunities for poverty alleviation in general and the process of urbanization in particular. So far, such potentials have not yet been developed and fully tapped.

Migration is a social phenomenon closely linked to the process of urbanization and to a certain extent, related to poverty alleviation in urban areas. The term migration is originated from a Latin word "migrato", meaning moving of residence. There are three types of migration

in the history of mankind: migration for long-term resettlement; seasonal migration; and shuttle migration. There are four main directions relating to migration:

1. From rural villages to small towns and then from small town to big cities.
2. From poor rural villages to more prosperous villages.
3. From poor rural villages to big, far-away cities.
4. From inner city to the rural suburbs.

The two main components of studies on migration are the analysis of the process of adaptation to urban life and living standards, and the assessment of migrants on modern urban development (33). Migration is a two-face phenomenon. On one hand, it changes the family structure, economic and cultural situation, and lifestyle of the area and group, and on the other hand, it creates an integration trend and forms groups of migrants with a social network in the urban life (34).

Data from surveys and observations under our Program identify three different types of migration. These are: migration from far rural villages to big cities (from Long An, Quang Ngai, northern provinces to Ho Chi Minh City); migration from rural villages to small towns for resettlement (to provincial capitals of Long An, Quang Ngai, Pleiku, Buon Ma Thuot); and migration from inner city to rural suburbs of Ho Chi Minh City. Migration brings to cities an abundant labour force for services, non-formal economic activities, State-owned enterprises, private enterprises, joint ventures, small industry, handicraft production establishments, and grassroots administrative staff (heads of living quarters or heads of self-defense units). The migrants can also bring about disadvantages in local cultural development and social stability over time. Most of the migrants to Ho Chi Minh City are young, middle-age people who have some education, good health and are sensitive. In their villages of origin, most of the families

having members migrate have risen above poverty and have average living standards.

Poverty alleviation during the process of urbanization is a multi-dimensional struggle. All elements in the society, individuals, communities, charity organizations, mass organizations as well as government agencies and national and local organizations in charge of social policies, actively take part in that struggle. Poverty alleviation in the process of urbanization is a complex socio-political task and implicated in Vietnam's master plan for urban development up until 2020 adopted by the Prime Minister (35). Poverty alleviation in urban areas is an issue of modern urban management, stimulating socio-economic and cultural development in rural and regional areas. Rapid improvement of income for the rural and urban poor through professional activities and employment creation during the process of urbanization is to carry out the revolutionary idea of the late President Ho Chi Minh. It will enable people to enjoy increasing support from international organizations. The United Nations has recognized Vietnam's initial achievements in poverty reduction which are better than other countries in the world. A dramatic increase in income for the poor in the ethnic minority, religious, remote areas is one measure of sustainable security, political and social stability. Poverty alleviation in the process of urbanization in the social revolutionary spirit of the late President Ho Chi Minh is one of the most important components in the path of development of socialism in Vietnam.

Note:

1. Reference: Mac Duong. *The issue of poverty reduction in the process of urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City*. Anthropology Review, No. 3/ 2000.
2. *Ho Chi Minh Collection*. Volume 1, National Political Publishing House, Ha Noi, 1995, p.65.
3. See: *UN Development Support Framework; Report on Vietnam's implementation of*

- Resolutions of world summits, Hanoi September 1998, p.45.
4. See: The 6th conference of heads of major cities in the world held in Beijing on September 28-29, 2000 under the theme "City in the future", Nhan Dan newspaper, Oct. 11, 2000, p.5.
 5. See: Country Report of the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam at Copenhagen World Summit on Social Development - March 6 - 12, 1995, p. 1,2.
 6. Reference: Montex. *Policy for poverty alleviation*, Sharid J. Burki, *Development strategy for poverty alleviation*.
 7. Poverty in Vietnam, translated version of, National Political Publishing House, Ha Noi, 1996, p.22.
 8. Document already cited
 9. See: *Poverty egalitarianism and market intervention*, in the book *Ecosocialism*, Routledge Publishing House, London-New York 1995, p.27.
 10. See: Fernand Braudel. *Les structure quotidien*, translated Vietnamese version, World Publishing House, Ha Noi, 1998, p.10.
 11. See: Ngo Huy Quynh. *Vietnam's history of architecture*, Culture & Information Publishing House, Ha Noi, 1998, p.10.
 12. See: Nguyen The Ba. *Urban Development Planning*, Hanoi University of Architecture, Construction Publishing House, Ha Noi, 1999, p.5.
 13. Document already cited.
 14. See: *Culture in Urban management in Vietnam at present*, National Political Publishing House, Ha Noi, Feb. 1998, pp 49-50.
 15. See: Le Nhu Hoa. *Urban culture management in national industrialization and modernization*, Culture & Information Publishing House, Ha Noi, Dec. 2000, p. 37.
 16. See: Nhan Dan newspaper, March 2, 2001.
 17. Reference: Françoise Choay. *L'urbanisme utopies et realites*, Seuil Publishing House, Paris, 1995 and Dang Thai Hoang. *Urban History*, Construction Publishing House, Ha Noi, May 2000, p. 172.
 18. See: *Vietnam's urban development master plan*, Decision 10/1998 by Prime Minister dated Jan. 23, 1998.
 19. See: Nguyen Khac Vien. *The Dictionary of Sociology*, World Publishing House, Ha Noi, 1994, p. 99.
 20. See: Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam Linguistic and Cultural Centre, Great Vietnamese Dictionary, Culture & Information Publishing House, Ha Noi, 1998, p. 835.
 21. Toland Pressat. *The Dictionary of Demography*, Basil Blackwell Ltd. New York, 1989, p.97.
 22. Penguin. *Dictionary of human geography*, London, 1987, p.215.
 23. Aland Barnard. *Encyclopedia of social and cultural anthropology*, Raitledge, London - New York, 1998, p.285.
 24. See: *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology*, Massachusetts, 1997, p. 132.
 25. *National Program on hunger eradication and poverty reduction*, Training workshop materials, Labour & Society Publishing House, Ha Noi, December 2000, p.39.
 26. Ministry of Education and Training. *Vietnam Linguistic and Cultural Centre, Great Vietnamese Dictionary*, Culture & Information Publishing House, Ha Noi, 1998, p. 461.
 27. Nguyen Khac Vien. *The Dictionary of Sociology*, World Publishing House, Ha Noi, 1994, p. 45.
 28. Michel Panoff. *Dictionnaire de L'Ethnologie*, Payot, Paris 1973, p. 64.
 29. D.M. Gvishianhi. *Dictionary of Sociology (Russian version)*, Political Publishing House, Moscow, 1998, p. 144.
 30. See: Aland Barnard. *Encyclopedia of social and cultural anthropology*, London - New York, 1998, p. 144.
 31. Macmillan. *Dictionary of Anthropology*, London, 1986, p. 46.
 32. To Duy Hop, Luong Hong Quang. *Community Development*, Culture & Information Publishing House, Ha Noi, 2000, p. 16.
 33. See: IU.V. Bromlei. *Issues of urban ethnology* (Russian version, Science Publishing House, Moscow, 1989 and *Dictionary of Sociology (Russian version)*, Political Publishing House, Moscow, 1998, p. 160.
 34. See: Mac Millan. *Dictionary of Anthropology*, New York, 1986, p. 190.
 35. Decision No. 10, 1998, QD-TTg dated Jan. 23, 1998 approving orientations for Vietnam's urban development master plan until 2020.