



A DIAGNOSIS OF URBAN POOR HOUSING IN VIETNAM

Iftekhhar Ahmed

Abstract

This paper presents concepts important for understanding urban poor housing in Vietnam, with a focus on key environmental, socio-economic, and cultural dimensions that bear on the housing sector. The paper draws on extensive field studies and presents a diagnosis of the context of and prospects for housing of the urban poor in Vietnam's two main cities: Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. While the literature on this theme is scanty, it points to the market-orientated economic reforms initiated in the 1980s as a key factor in creating imbalance in the housing supply. Recognising the current challenges in balancing affordability and sustainability, the study explores Vietnam's lack of adequate and affordable housing and the problems faced by the urban poor in accessing adequate housing.

Keywords: Vietnam, Urban Housing, Urban Poor, Housing Diagnosis.

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is experiencing rapid urbanisation with about 3% urbanisation rate adding 1 million people annually to the urban population. It is expected that 40-45% of the national population exceeding 40 million people will live in Vietnamese cities by 2020 (Gattoni, 2003; Nguyen, 2008; UN-Habitat, 2008). Since the introduction of open-market economic reform policies in the late 1980s, known as *Doi Moi*, private and foreign investment has been encouraged by the government mainly in or near the large cities, namely Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). This has attracted large numbers of migrants seeking employment in the cities, a significant contributor to rapid urbanisation (Anh, 2007; Sang, 2008).

Doi Moi has resulted in economic growth, but being concentrated in and around the main cities has also led to rural-urban disparity (Anh, 2005). Although there has been reduction in national poverty (World Bank, 2012), there is evidence that the rich-poor gap is increasing (Anh, 2007; Evertsz, 2000; Gattoni, 2003; Republique Francaise, 2003; Vinh and Leaf, 1996). A study in 2010 found more than 20% of Vietnam's population was poor and 8% was extremely poor; the growing disparity is reflected in more than 90% of the poor living in rural areas (World Bank, 2012). While poverty is more widespread in rural areas, the urban poor are impacted by other factors not captured in income assessments, such as inadequate housing accompanied by poor services and sanitation, inadequate social insurance or safety nets, vulnerability to hazards aggravated by climate change and unplanned urban development (Haughton et al, 2010; Thanh et al, 2013).

"Popular" or informal housing built by personal private funds has become widespread to cater to the increasing demand for shelter of the urban poor

(Douglass et al, 2002); *Doi Moi* led to a somewhat relaxed attitude on migration (Evertsz, 2000) to allow the flow of workforce to fuel economic growth. Indeed it has been argued that the growth of informal settlements is linked directly to the *Doi Moi* investments for economic growth (Vinh and Leaf, 1996) that spurred extensive migration and the consequent need for affordable housing – which is met by informal and slum housing. Thus housing demand has increased, but the formal sector is not geared to provide the vast supply of affordable and serviced housing that is required, resulting in the growth of inadequate buildings and urban poor settlements in hazardous, marginal and unserved areas (Gattoni, 2003) that nonetheless provide an affordable housing supply to the urban poor.

The literature relating to urban poor housing in Vietnam includes three broad thematic aspects:

Housing as part of a wider urban development process (such as Geertman, 2007; Lachance, 1997; Phan, 2008; Storch and Downes, 2011);

Project proposals or hypothetical projects (for example Gattoni, 2003; Giang, 2008; Girard, 1995; JBIC, 1999; Ha, 2002);

City specific studies of housing (for example, Evertsz, 2000; Ludovic and Laurent, 2003).

The first strand (a) is useful in that as it allows understanding the position of urban poor housing within the urban system and the variety of inter-linkages; the second strand (b) brings up questions of the viability of most such projects, given the very limited institutional interest and funds available for urban poor housing. However neither of these two strands provides fine-grain insights at the level of the community and household; even the city-specific studies (c) lack such detail. There is scanty lit-

erature on urban poor housing in Vietnam, perhaps due to the politically sensitive nature of the issue which limits opportunities for research. There are very few studies done at the urban poor household level and there is insufficient documentation on how the urban poor live, a gap addressed in this paper.

The major urban changes set in motion since Doi Moi in terms of imbalance of housing supply and demand have severe implications for the urban poor. Understanding the urban poor housing situation is a necessary step to prepare for future policy and practice demands for addressing the living conditions of the urban poor. In the rapidly urbanising context of Vietnam with major ongoing demographic and other changes, understanding how a significant, but marginalised, urban stakeholder group manages and copes with the challenges of shelter may offer answers for the future of Vietnam's cities. With this in mind, an exploratory 'diagnosis' of urban poor housing based primarily on the perspectives of poor households was carried out in the two largest cities of Vietnam, Hanoi and HCMC, key findings of which are presented in this paper.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Firstly a review was carried out of relevant publications and reports on urban poor housing in Vietnam and published as a collaborative paper by researchers at RMIT University and VGBC (Vietnam Green Building Council) (Ahmed et al, 2010). Secondly government officials at the district, ward and neighbourhood levels in Hanoi who were involved in the delivery/management of urban housing were interviewed and a report produced on official perspectives (RMIT and VGBC, 2009), which allowed understanding the institutional context within which urban poor housing was positioned. Finally, to obtain an understanding at the level of urban poor households, in-depth interviews of urban poor households, together with on-site observations and documentation, was carried out in Hanoi and HCMC. Insights from and comparisons between the narratives, viewpoints and experiences of various types of urban poor households enabled gaining a unique understanding of urban poor housing principally from the perspective of its key stakeholder and user group. This paper is derived from the final output and presents the findings of the field-based diagnosis at the urban poor household level.

In Hanoi, 10 urban poor households were interviewed in a variety of living conditions and circumstances. Because of the involvement of government officials at an earlier stage, they tried to influence the sample selection process and steered the research team towards households that did not necessarily meet the criteria of 'urban poor'. Mitigating this to some extent, the experience of the research team proved adequate for qualitatively assessing the condition of a house by on-site observations and judging if it met the criteria of 'poor housing'. The selection of an appropriate household sample was thus ensured and the selected households were genuinely poor; however they all had some form of tenure security and not one of them suffered from extreme poverty. It appeared that the research team were not accessing extreme poor households through the official channel. Urban poverty is a politically sensitive issue

Key Diagnosis Aspects	Key Questions
I. CONTEXT	a) What are the characteristics of living conditions in urban poor housing?
	b) What are the main problems experienced in urban poor housing?
	c) What are the impacts of shocks and stresses?
II. PROSPECTS	d) What is the relationship with housing delivery/management institutions?
	e) What are the hopes of urban poor households for the future of their housing?

Table 1. Research framework for diagnosis of urban poor housing.

in Vietnam, which is why there are so few studies on the subject, and access to extreme poor households can be difficult because of institutional restrictions. Nonetheless including at least a few such households in the sample was crucial if the study was to represent an in-depth diagnosis of urban poor housing. Thus in HCMC, through the connections of local organisations, it was eventually possible to include some extreme poor households among the 8 household interviews undertaken there.

Based on the initial literature review and the report on official interviews, a diagnostic research framework was developed along two main aspects of urban poor housing that encompasses the overall substance of the field: (i) **Context** relating to the current situation; and (ii) **Prospects** for the future. Within these two aspects, five key questions were framed that guided the diagnosis of urban poor housing at the household level, as shown below in Table 1.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE URBAN POOR DIAGNOSIS

18 urban poor households, 10 in Hanoi and 8 in HCMC, were interviewed and their houses were documented. See Table 2 for the housing profile of the case study households including basic characteristics of each

No	City	Ward/District	Type	Year Built	No. of Floors	No. of Area (m ²)	No. people	Main Materials	Condition
01	Hanoi	Thuong Dinh	Family	1994	2	18	4	Load bearing brick walls; RC floors and roof	Poor
02	Hanoi	Thuong Dinh	Family	1994	2	36	8	RC frame and floor/roof; Brick walls; Plywood loft	Moderate
03	Hanoi	Thanh Xuan	Personal	1997	2	36	3	Load bearing brick walls; RC floors and roof; top roof CI sheet	Moderate
04	Hanoi	Thanh Xuan	Family	1993	2	30	3	Load bearing brick walls; RC floors and roof; top roof CI sheet; Ceramic floor tiles	Moderate
05	Hanoi	Thanh Cong	State	1985	1	22.4	3	Brick walls; Cement concrete floor; Asbestos roofing sheet on timber framing; Timber loft	Very poor
06	Hanoi	Thanh Cong	State	1985	1	17	6	RC frame with prefabricated RC concrete infill panels for walls and floors	Good
07	Hanoi	Thanh Cong	State	1985	1	38	9	RC frame with prefabricated RC concrete infill panels for walls and floors	Moderate
08	Hanoi	Thanh Cong	Family	1970	1	18	4	RC frame, floor and roof; brick walls	Very poor
09	Hanoi	Panchu Trinh	State	1945	1	18	1	Brick walls; bamboo-thatch-timber cement roof	Poor
10	Hanoi	Le Thanh Tong	State	1980	1	21	6	Brick walls; bamboo-thatch-timber cement roof; Yellow prefabricated concrete floor panels; Ceramic floor tiles	Poor
11	HCMC	Dist 2	Personal/Service	2008	2	85	8	Load bearing brick walls; RC floor; top roof CI sheet; Canvas awning in shop front	Good
12	HCMC	Dist 2	Personal/Service	2008	2	80	4	Load bearing brick walls; Plastic ceiling panels with metal sheet on top; Ceramic floor tiles	Moderate
13	HCMC	Dist 4	Squatter	1986	1	24	4	CI sheet (rusted) roof and some walls; Timber roof and wall framing; Cardboard/ acrylic sheet and wall infill; Timber floor boards on timber and concrete slabs	Very poor
14	HCMC	Dist 4	Squatter	1999	1	12	2	Space under bridge; ceramic floor tiles	Very poor
15	HCMC	Dist 4	Blum	1970	2	43	9	Load bearing brick walls; CI sheet roofing; Plywood ceiling; Ceramic floor tiles; Wooden loft	Poor
16	HCMC	Phu Nhuan Dist	Family	1945	1	30	10	Load bearing brick walls; Timber board gable on one side; Cement concrete floor with plastic sheet covering; CI sheet roof on timber framing	Poor
17	HCMC	Phu Nhuan Dist	Family	1975	2	17.6	3	Load bearing brick walls; RC floor; top roof CI sheet	Poor
18	HCMC	Binh Chanh Dist	Squatter	1990	1	18.2	9	CI sheet on timber frame roofing; Walls of floor concrete/ plastic/ timber; Low brick wall; Coconut trunk on timber/bamboo framing on sides; Earthen floor; Ceramic floor tiles	Poor

Table 2. Housing profile of the case study households

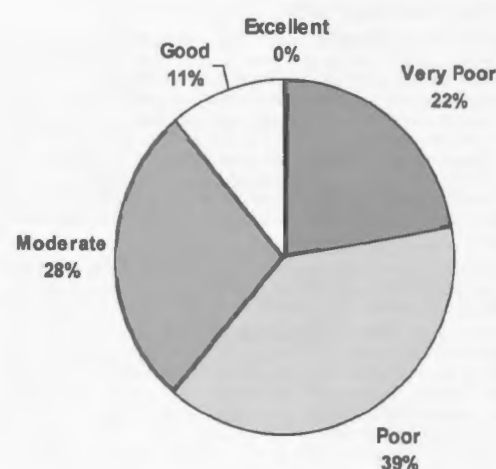


Chart 1. Distribution of sample households according to house condition.

household and its dwelling. The households in Hanoi were largely suggested by ward officials; most of them were not extremely poor, but nonetheless living in inadequate housing. In HCMC, interview respondents were selected in consultation with a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) and a research institute and thereby some extremely poor households were interviewed. To understand diverse perspectives on the two main aspects of urban poor housing - context and prospects - a range of issues were discussed with a variety of poor households living in different circumstances. Five key thematic strands - three for context and two for prospects - served as a skeleton for the inquiry, based on which the household narratives and on-site observations on urban poor housing in Hanoi and HCMC are discussed below.

CONTEXT: Characteristics of living conditions in urban poor housing

Together with the on-site observation of many neighbouring households, the sample of 18 households allowed capturing some key characteristics of urban poor housing in Vietnam. The bulk, 11 out of the 18 households or 61% of the sample, was found living in substandard housing considered either as 'Very Poor' or 'Poor' (see Chart 1). Even those living in 'Good' houses within the sample were poor in the sense that they experienced a range of social and economic deprivations such as variable and informal income and institutional safety nets for basic services such as health and education. The urban poor were found to be living in three main types of housing according to broad forms of ownership¹, the characteristics of which are discussed below.

Family/Personal property: To be able to live in tenure security is almost a best-case scenario for the urban poor, as it was for some of the case study households that lived in housing shared with or inherited from family. Such houses are built informally and generally do not receive any professional inputs. In most cases, however,

the poor are able to own very small property and generally do not have the resources for its maintenance; houses tend to be in a poor condition and very cramped. In a house in Hanoi, an extended family of 22 members was found to be living in 6 small dwelling units scattered within a 3-storey building of 75m². Case study household 01 (HH01) consisting of a married couple and two teenage sons lived in a 16m² one-room unit on the 1st floor. The space was very tight; food had to be cooked on the ground floor courtyard and then brought upstairs to be eaten in that same single room dwelling. There was hardly any privacy.

State housing: A significant part of the urban poor housing stock includes subsidised housing provided by the government before Doi Moi. The repair and maintenance of this housing stock faces institutional obstacles and has consequently fallen into disrepair. Thus, being in effect cheap housing supply, the poor occupy such buildings, which are often dangerous and on the verge of collapse. In Hanoi particularly, some of the buildings in historic areas, such as the old French Colonial section have been left to deteriorate because of the lack of agreement on jurisdiction of government bodies. Households 09 and 10 (HHs 09 and 10) lived in such houses built during the 1950-60s. The houses had a form of construction applied by the French: Thick brick walls with a roof structure of intertwined bamboo and thatch plastered with lime cement and covered on top by clay tiles. Over the years these materials had downgraded, and not being a common construction method, could not be maintained easily. Plaster crumbled from the roof and walls of these houses, and rain entered through cracks. In HH10, the roof had become so weak that one could not climb on top of it anymore in order to repair it; it was only possible to use a ladder and fix the sides, causing the household to live in risk and great discomfort.

Slum/Squatter settlements: Due to increasing demand for urban land, slum/squatter settlements with residents typically without land tenure, have mostly been evicted from central city areas. Ward 2, District 4, HCMC formerly had extensive slums and squatter settlements and there were still some existing patches. In one such area in an informal 'illegal' settlement, houses were built on stilts over a very dirty canal. HH13 was found to be living there for nearly than 25 years in a house made of a rough mix of materials - bamboo, timber, corrugated iron (CI) sheet, cardboard, etc - on a floor of wooden planks perched on timber and concrete stilts on the edge of the canal. In addition to the canal's flowing load of dirty material, it was used for dumping all manner of household waste, and the canal and its edges were strewn with litter. Typically as in such settlements, the area had various forms of urban poor households. Some extreme poor households were found living in this settlement, such as HH14 (see Box 1), sleeping rough, whilst also found were households with a somewhat durable house and running small informal businesses from there (HH15).

¹ The communist political structure of Vietnam does not allow direct private landownership. When property ownership issues are discussed here, it refers to long-term leaseholds, which is the prevalent use rights arrangement by way of a registered certificate from the government.



CONTEXT: Problems experienced in urban poor housing
Urban poor housing is confronted with a variety of problems, foremost the poverty of its residents. Drawn out from a wide range of problems narrated, some of the key ones relating to housing that were highlighted by the interview respondents are outlined below.

Space constraints: Urban poor housing often tends to be cramped and there are severe limitations of space. Within the sample houses, the average house size was only 30.9m^2 with 7 out of 18 houses less than 20m^2 (see Chart 2). The average area per person was 7.4m^2 and in a number of houses it was below 5m^2 (see Chart 3). HHs 11 and 12 were somewhat different from the rest of the sample as they benefited from an institutionally implemented site-and-services program (see Box 2), and although poor, had relatively larger houses. These two households were selected because they provided insights into the relationship of the urban poor to institutional projects. HH12 had only 4 residents, and hence had a low person to area ratio and a few such houses within the sample contributed consequently to higher averages of house size and area per person. Other than these two households, the remaining households clearly met the criteria of urban poor housing in terms of small house size and high occupancy ratio.

Because of the lack of space, many households cooked outside in public or semi-public areas. Some the highly cramped dwellings were found to also lack adequate light and ventilation, leading to terrible living conditions in the hot season. Hung and her husband lived with their two teenage sons in a 1-room dwelling unit in an extended family building in Hanoi with 22 residents (HH01). "I don't know what we will do when the boys grow bigger. As it is, it's too tight. It's too noisy and there are too many people here and so too many fights as well," described

Box 1: Living under a bridge for 10 years

50 year old Hoa (HH14) had been living more than a decade under a busy bridge in Ward 2, District 4, HCMC. In a space of about 12m^2 , she and her 16 year old son had created a home – eating and sleeping in the alcove and using a separate adjacent space under the bridge as a toilet. Previously she had a squatter dwelling on stilts over the nearby dirty canal, but had to sell even that because of poverty. Outside on the alleyway Hoa prepared rice for selling to poor labourers, her main income. When it rained, a tarpaulin sheet saved the space from getting all wet; luckily there was a 30cm raised platform, so if the alleyway in front flooded water did not rise to the level of the living space. "I have got used to the noise of traffic above. The wind and rain is the main problem, there is nothing much in front for protection," said Hoa.

Another son living elsewhere gave her some money to buy ceramic floor tiles to pave the platform of the alcove, so that it would be easier to keep dry and clean and more comfortable to sleep on; she even mounted a small wooden prayer rack on the wall. When she could, she paid her neighbour for pirated water and electricity to run a small stand fan and fluorescent light. Being a public space, these investments might be lost if Hoa was ever evicted. Although, including by others before her, this space had been occupied for more than two decades, with the extensive changes happening in this central city district, how long this space under the bridge could continue to provide shelter in the future was uncertain.

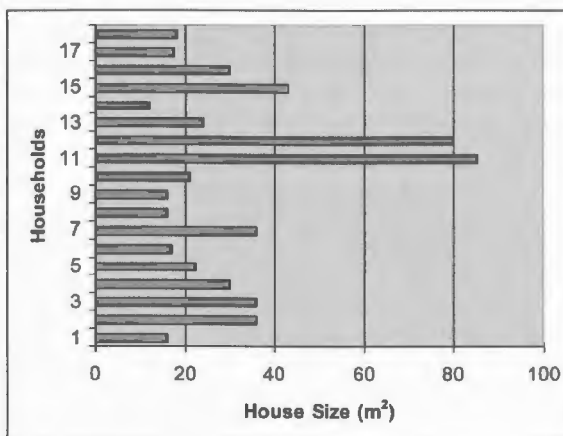


Chart 2. Distribution of sample households according to house size (m²).

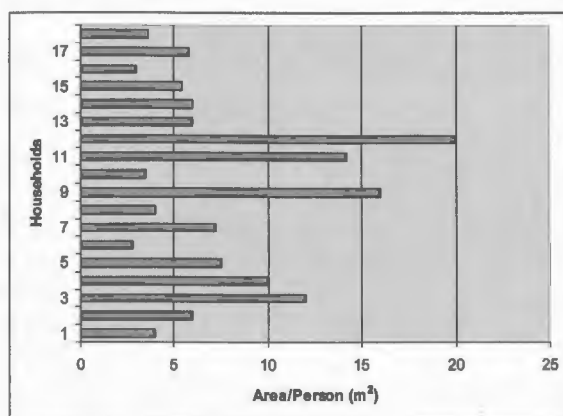


Chart 3. Distribution of sample households according to area (m²) per person.

Hung.

Poor housing condition: Housing condition within the sample was largely substandard with more than 60% categorised as 'Very Poor' or 'Poor' (see Chart 1). In the case of the family/ personal type housing, the poor residents could not afford to maintain or repair them and some of these houses were also old. For example, 90 year old Trieu lived with three other household members

in a small one-room dwelling of 16m² (HH08) in Hanoi, which was built in the early 1970s. He had been living here since he was born, previously in a timber house. This house was built well with an RC frame and roof, and brick walls, but he had not been able to maintain the house and it fell into disrepair. There were cracks at the roof and wall corners through which rainwater penetrated and dripped into the room. Trieu kept a plastic bowl on the floor to collect the water, his only way of coping with the problem. He had tried to plaster parts of the walls, but discontinued that due to lack of funds and there were now cracks all over the walls.

Similar conditions were also observed in HCMC, for example Diep's old house (HH16) built in 1945, also suffered from cracks in walls and rainwater penetration. The roof is generally the most vulnerable part of the house in this tropical country with heavy rainfall. Indeed the rainwater penetration problem, and accompanying dampness, was one of the main problems in urban poor housing that was highlighted repeatedly; 13 out of the 18 sample households underscored it as one of the major problems they faced in their house.

Facing such conditions of extensive disrepair and risk, households are often driven to seek resources for house improvements. For example, Oanh (HH04) lived with her family in a house in Hanoi gifted to her after she got married. The house had a small wooden mezzanine floor, but the timber had gradually decayed and the floor became dangerous. She borrowed some money and adding it to her small savings from unstable odd jobs, removed the timber and built a concrete floor, and in the process renovated the kitchen and bathroom. Thus, although with great difficulty, she had managed to cope with the basic problems in her house.

Similar observations were made in the state housing within the sample, with the exception that its residents did not attempt much physical improvement as they did not own the houses. As discussed earlier, much of this housing is of old stock and dilapidated, but due to lack of jurisdictional agreement between various government institutions, there was very little support from the government to maintain them. Historic areas, such as the French Quarter in Hanoi, had many old derelict buildings occupied by the poor, but there was lack of agreement on government policy for their future. The typically poor residents of the state owned housing could not afford to repair them, and if they could, were largely unwilling to because of lack of future tenure security. In the current urbanising context of great land demand, it might be a matter of time before such old buildings are demolished to make way for new urban development; whether their residents would be adequately compensated and would be able to access suitable future housing remains uncertain.

Similarly with slum/squatter housing, the rapid urban development would continue to place demand on the land they live on. In the case study slum/squatter settlement in District 4, HCMC there was little initiative among the residents for housing improvement because of uncer-

tain tenure, and while waiting for the urban development to catch up with their neighbourhood, their housing conditions continued to deteriorate.

Inadequate services: A persistent problem in urban poor housing is the lack of adequate public services and infrastructure. Many households used pirated electricity and water, widespread in Vietnamese cities. Sewage overflow and lack of drainage was a key problem, particularly in old buildings because of the lack of maintenance of infrastructure there alongside the neglect of the buildings.

Linked to the problem of overcrowding discussed above, inadequate toilet and bathing facilities in cramped dwellings with many residents was a pervasive problem. HH01 in Hanoi illustrated this to an extreme point: 22 people shared one toilet on the ground floor of a 2-storey extended family house. "There is always a sewage smell here," said Hung, a resident.

The poor lacked adequate public services provision, but they nevertheless used a variety of electrical and other appliances within the house, mostly arranged informally at high rates. For example, in a 5-member household living in an 18m² thatch and CI sheet house in HCMC (HH18); it was found that internal appliances included a television, DVD player, fluorescent lamps, stand fan, mobile phone and 2-burner gas stove. The household paid VND100,000 per month for electricity supply; VND35,000 for water from a community well; VND100,000 per year for the mobile phone; and about VND100,000 per month for gas for cooking, with the gas cylinder refilled at a local store. Thus, on one hand the poor do not have access to basic public services, yet on the other hand pay significant amounts for appliances that they think necessary to make their houses habitable.

CONTEXT: Impacts of shocks and stresses

A range of shocks and stresses confront the urban poor including those stemming from physical, economic, social, political, institutional and environmental factors. On their impacts specifically on housing, the physical and environmental factors relating particularly to natural hazards were underscored by the interview respondents. **Floods:** In both Hanoi and HCMC, floods are recurrent – a combination of natural and man-made factors such as inadequate drainage. 12 out of the 18 sample households experienced some problem or other with the impacts of flooding and rain on their houses. Typically poor conditions of hygiene, drainage and sewage result in a dual impact of flooding in terms of affecting human health and physical damage to housing. Related to flooding is water-logging due to inadequate drainage, a combined problem reported by a number of the respondent households. For example, Trung lived in a 1-room house in Hanoi provided as staff housing by a government construction company where he worked as a labourer (HH05). The house was very dilapidated and leaked. In 2008 there was a major flood in Hanoi and Trung then built a piled earth barrier to try and protect his house, but it was flooded nonetheless and even after a lot of bailing out water, the house and was water-logged by more than 10cms of water for a few weeks.

"The water took a lot of time to recede; seems to be getting worse every time," said Trung.

Flooding in HCMC is severe and frequent, and brings suffering for the urban poor. For example, Ba's house in District 4, HCMC (HH13) is perched over a polluted canal, which gets flooded regularly. Luckily the canal flowed, so the water-logging did not last for more than a few hours, but then Ba had to move out with her important belongings and three children to the raised road in front. "As it is, this flimsy house is always leaking and falling apart, and can barely stand the rain. The extra effect of flooding is terrible," described Ba.

Storms: Windstorms can be severe particularly in HCMC because it is closer to the sea, but Hanoi also experiences severe thunderstorms. For example, Phuong's family house in Thuong Dinh ward, Hanoi (HH02) was hit by a hailstorm in 2008. The acrylic sheet roof was blown off and hail entered the house. She repaired the roof, using CI sheet this time; "But now it's become hotter inside," reported Phuong.

Several households in both the cities mentioned that tall building around them protected their houses from wind. This was indeed a boon for dilapidated buildings which are at risk to even minor storms, as in several case study houses such as Niem's (HH10) in Hanoi. "We are lucky there was no heavy storm recently and also there are big buildings all around us. Otherwise this house would have collapsed! If there is a big storm, the roof of this house would blow off, and the house may fall as the structure is old and weak", pointed out Niem.

Heat: There is a lot of discussion on climate change in Vietnam and its extensive coast is believed to be at risk (ICEM *), but it seems that the discussion has not reached to the level of urban poor households. None of the households interviewed had a clear conception of climate change, consistent with the findings of other studies on the urban poor in Vietnam (for example Briggs, 2010). Nonetheless a number of households both in Hanoi and HCMC felt that it was getting hotter every year; they however attributed it to the increasing numbers of buildings and people in the cities, not climate change. "Winter is not as cold as before, but it has become erratic – suddenly extreme cold in one year, warm the other year," mentioned Trung (HH05), without realising why. It never gets very cold in HCMC, but the Hanoi winter can be chilly. Phuong's house (HH02) in Hanoi only had metal shutters, but no glass panels, so cold air entered the house in the winter. "We just have to wear more clothes in the winter," said Phuong.

Small cramped dwellings without adequate ventilation such as the ones where the urban poor live can become unbearably hot during the summer. "I lie down on the floor and wait for the heat to pass, or just go out," said Doi, who lives in an old French colonial building in Hanoi (HH09). Another interview respondent, Trieu, lived in a 1-room house in Hanoi, which had two small windows (HH08). One of the windows could not be opened fully as the next door building was too close, and hence there was no cross-ventilation and Trieu was compelled to live in a very hot dwelling.

Typically mechanical stand or ceiling fans are widespread among the poor as a way of coping with heat; air-condi-

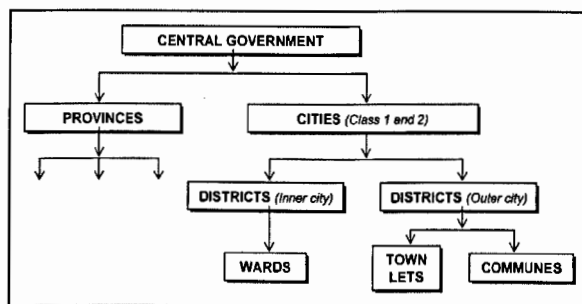


Figure 1. Urban administrative system of Vietnam.

tioning is generally unaffordable. This involves reliance on electricity, the supply of which often needed to be pirated. Nonetheless it was observed that the poor have a low comfort threshold and are able to cope with hot weather without using the fan all the time. However, compared to Hanoi, HCMC is much hotter and more humid, and as a respondent, Hien (HH11), said, "It gets very hot here in the dry season. It's getting hotter day by day. We have to use the fan inside the house all day during the dry season."

PROSPECTS: Relationship with housing delivery/management institutions

The Vietnamese urban administrative system consists of several tiers beginning with the central government and extending to wards in inner cities (see Fig. *) (Ahmed, 2009). At each tier there are People's Committees conducting governance within a largely centralised decision-making process. For the urban poor, the Ward People's Committee is the main direct interface with the government. The ward conducts periodic surveys, based on which it petitions for support from the district and the city. One of its key roles is to provide funding for education and health support to the needy, but beyond that there is very little support for other sectors such as housing. The ward is limited in its capacity and any decision on and design of infrastructure or building improvement is made at higher tiers of government and the ward then manages the implementation. Some of the key aspects of institutional relationships relating to urban poor housing are discussed below.

Government support or lack thereof: The respondent households reported that beyond educational and health support they did not receive any other help such as support for housing improvement. For those living in slums, such as Binh's household (HH15) near a canal in HCMC, there was simply no support or public services provision; "No way! We never expect anything from the government" retorted Binh. There were many complaints of the unresponsiveness of ward officials, particularly about promises of repairing sewage and buildings in state housing that were not followed up. Trung, a worker at a government factory, lived in a small 1-room staff housing unit in Hanoi (HH05). He struggled to bring up his two sons after his wife died a few years ago after draining a lot of resources for her treatment. A couple of years ago, some ward officials came to survey the condition of his house and mentioned that they would support him to renovate the house. But nothing transpired



Box 2: Site-and-Services in HCMC

District 2 on the east of HCMC is one of the 5 new urban districts established on peri-urban land. An unusual project of its kind implemented in partnership between the government and NGOs, this site-and-services scheme was initiated in the late 1990s to develop 11 hectares of agricultural and vacant land (part of which was a cemetery) by building roads and subdividing plots for self-building by a targeted 53 poor households (Enda and Villes en Transition, 2000). Once houses were built, they were expected to be issued land use rights certificates.

Hien (HH11) and Hue (HH12) were residents of the site-and-services scheme in District 2. According to Hien, "The government only upgraded this area – removed the graves, built roads, etc. Some of the roads are to be completed, they are still dirt. The government only built the main roads, now it's up to the residents." Hue added, "People here have to do everything by themselves, there is no help from the government. I have no expectation from the government, it's too big for me to think. We just try to manage by ourselves and take care of the family as best as we can."

Hien took a loan at a high interest rate from friends to build his 2-storey house in 2006. He admitted spending beyond his means on building such a big house, but he was planning to get a bank loan to offset his current high-interest loan. However he was still waiting for the government registration and land use rights certificate. This was causing him great anxiety. "I am currently in big debt; I really need to apply for a bank loan, but I can't until I get the registration. It's really taking too long [3 years]. If I don't get the registration soon, I may have to sell the house and move to a cheaper one," narrated Hien.

after that. He went through a lot of back-and-forth with the ward; he was now disappointed and did not trust the ward any more. "If they are kind enough, they will come back and give me the money," hoped Trung.

However in some cases of family/personal property, the ward does help. Oahn inherited an old house in Hanoi (HH05) from her mother, which was in a very bad condition. Being a widow, she received VND 8.4 million to repair her house in 2009, in addition to money for her two children's schooling. Among various home improvements, notable were the repairs to the stairs and replacement of a broken wooden mezzanine floor with a concrete floor, which made the household safer.

The situation with state housing is problematic. Much of it was built through subsidy in the pre-Doi Moi era and beneficiaries were given use rights documents. Over the decades, most of these documents were lost or not upgraded to land use rights certificates, and a series of informal transfers and occupations has created a haze. Without the certificates, there is no proof of ownership and the government thus does not provide services or maintenance. Most of such housing stock is dilapidated

and requires urgent repair, but this institutional knot prevents initiating action, and residents have to make repairs informally at their own cost without professional support.

Registration: One of the most significant problems poor households have to face is registration to obtain a land use rights certificate. Only houses with land use rights certificates can apply for a construction permit for extensions or repairs. Most poor households do not have the certificates, causing difficulties for the government even to support the repair of extremely downgraded and dangerous housing. Diep lived in an old 1-room house in HCMC built in 1945 (HH16). The house was in a poor condition with leaking walls and roof, and the local ward offered her support for repairing the house. However, even though this was inherited family property, it did not have registration, and Diep was therefore fearful of taking any help from the ward. "I don't have any registration papers; what if they give the house to somebody else after repairing it?" feared Diep.

Compensation: With the rapid ongoing urbanisation in Vietnam there is great demand for land for new residen-

tial and commercial developments. Compensation for acquired land is often controversial and a reason for dispute. A typical example: Lan (HH06) and Phuong (HH07) were residents of pre-Doi Moi 1-room state housing apartments in different blocks in central Hanoi. The majority of the apartments in such buildings, being small (about 15-20m²), had been extended by their residents. Built of lightweight materials (timber, metal, etc), large enclosed balconies on brackets were common on the upper floors. In Phuong's 5-storey building, the residents together planned and built the extensions all the way from the ground on foundations and concrete columns. "We had to pay bribes to the police, otherwise they would have reported us to the ward," said Phuong. The ward proposed a plan to rebuild the whole area around Phuong and Lan, but most of the residents did not agree as compensation would have been only for the size of the original apartment, not their large extended versions, as the extensions were not legal. Many of them would have been out of a home, they feared, as they would not have been able to buy property with the compensation offered and their own investments would have been lost.

Even for those living in slums/squatter settlements, land acquisition and compensation are key issues. Significant urban developments have been taking place in District 4, HCMC and its former predominantly slum/squatter population is being gradually replaced by new roads, bridges and buildings inspired by Doi Moi. Binh (HH15) living in a canal-side slum in District 4 explained that he knew that the urban expansion would eventually catch up with his area, but he did not want compensation as he thought it would not be enough to buy a new house. "I just want support to build a better and larger house," said Binh. Nonetheless, there were others in the same settlement living in conditions worse than Binh, who were hoping for compensation. Ba (HH13) had stopped making any repairs or improvements to her ramshackle dwelling perched on the canal. "What's the point? It will all be money wasted once they come here to get the land. I just want to live someplace where it's more like a house," she said.

PROSPECTS: Hopes of urban poor households for the future of their housing

In urban poor households the highest priority is given to their children's education and welfare. The hope is for them to have a better life in the future, and also to perhaps support the parents in old age. In a way, the children offer hope of an exit from poverty. These hopes are encapsulated below.

Housing priorities: In terms of housing, the long-term priorities of the urban poor address the three main problems discussed above in the section on Problems experienced by urban poor housing: (a) Space constraints: A number of respondent households pointed out that they would like to or were planning to build extensions as their current housing was too small. (b) Poor housing conditions: Many respondents emphasised that repairing their house was of high importance because of the poor structural conditions of buildings and risk to human safety. (c) Inadequate services: Poor sewage, aggravate by

flooding, was a problem experienced by several households, which strongly wanted it to be solved as a matter of priority for the future. Help from government authorities, particularly the local ward, to support the poor households to address these priority housing problems was expected or desired by the households.

Institutional issues: A key hope particularly of residents of old state housing and slum/squatter settlements was a future commercial 'facelift' of their area in line with the rapid and large urban developments taking place in Vietnam, and consequently compensation for their property. Despite the various problems and disputes associated with negotiation of compensations, for poor households such potential urban development offers hope for better housing in the future.

Poor households are nonetheless aware of the institutional barriers to improved housing, particularly those without registration for use rights; formal compensation can only be made if the property is registered, spurring informal transaction processes. Niem lived in a 1-room dwelling unit in Hanoi with five other household members (HH10), with a loft added for extra space. His household was among 13 other similar ones living in a 2-storey old dilapidated building in the French Quarter; nearby there was another similar building housing 7 more households. The future of these 20 households was linked - any future urban development of this central city area was expected by them to benefit them as a group. However registration was a critical issue, causing divisions within the community, as Niem narrated: "I don't get any support from the ward; they even refused to give me the registration certificate. They gave me difficulty when I was building the loft, but I built it anyway as I really needed the space. But I cannot make any more repairs or extensions until I get registration. You can see this house is falling apart and urgently needs to be fixed." "Three households have sold their units to a real estate company; there is great demand for land in this area. They didn't have registration, so the company paid bribes to get them registered. Maybe the whole building will eventually be sold like that." Thus such an informal process, with its inherent anomalies and disputes, may shape the future of urban poor housing.

In the case of family or personal housing, poor households were often found scattered within the community, unlike state housing and slum/squatter settlements where there was clustering of poor households as in the case above of Niem's household (HH10), and consequent connectivity of the community for future housing prospects due to its spatial clustering. For example Quan, a single mother of two children, owned and lived in a small shop-house in Hanoi (HH03). "The head of our residential group has reported to the ward that my house urgently needs repair, but they have not responded yet. I am alone here, so nobody cares."

Aspirations: The future aspirations of urban poor households for their housing are ultimately linked to the institutional issues of registration, new urban development and compensation. Within the complex institutional maze, frustration can come easily: "Everything is just

going to stay like this," said Hien (HH02), the owner of an overcrowded dilapidated house in Hanoi. Trung, whose wife died recently, struggled with difficulty to bring up his two sons in a small 1-room house in Hanoi (HH05). He was very disappointed at the unresponsiveness of ward officials after they promised help to repair his house. He knew what kind of house he wanted, if only he could get the money for it. "I wish to build a new house with two floors. The ground floor should have concrete pillars and beams so that it is sturdy and should be raised more than 30cms above the ground to avoid floods," described Trung.

While the future of extreme poor households are also linked to the above institutional issues, their aspirations can be basic, as narrated by 50-year old Hoa (HH14), who squatted under a bridge in HCMC (see Box 1), "I am sick, I have no long-term plans. I just need some money for short-term expenses like medicines. For my sons, I just want a house, so that when I die they have a place to stay and don't suffer like me living on the street all my life."

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Author(s):

Iftikhar Ahmed
The University of Newcastle (UON)
School of Architecture and Built Environment
Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment
University Drive Callaghan NSW 2308 Australia