

AUSTRALIA TO VIETNAM
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Delegates

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Introduction

Vietnam is a proud Country, rich in culture and tradition with a record of strong nationalism. With a history of war and national calamities, which have left Vietnam underdeveloped, nationalism and the people's opposition to colonialism has resulted in a country striving to make its mark in Asia and on the world stage.

The 'Doi Moi' or renovation is lauded by public officials as an important step in improving the living standards of the people of Vietnam in the early decades of the 21st century, yet still the challenge exists for the Communist regime to manage a centralised economy that is seeking to become a market driven and competitive economy that is part of the Asian region and global market place. Economic reform and youth are top of the Communist Government's public policy agenda.

Whilst the delegation's journey extended between North and South, one could not help but notice the difference between life in Hanoi, compared to that of Ho Chi Minh City, which is not too dissimilar to many large cities in South East Asia. Even the noticeable difference of more Western styled retail and tourism in the South, provided further evidence of the dynamism of Ho Chi Minh city and where the opportunities and prosperity lies in a future Vietnam.

The International branch of the Communist Youth Union, CYDECO, hosted our visit. The delegation travelled to Hanoi for four days, Halong Bay and Vung Tau for a day and Ho Chi Minh City for three days.

Besides meetings with key leaders within Government and the Communist Party at each of these centres, the delegation was privileged to meet Vice President Madam Truong My Hoa and visit President Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum and Residence. The delegation also visited the Cu Chi tunnels, the War Remnants Museum and Re-unification Palace in Ho Chi Minh City.

Over the nine day visit meetings were held with Leaders of the Hochiminh Communist Youth Union (HCYU), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Commission for External Relations of the National Assembly, leaders of the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organisations, The Communist Party of Vietnam, Leaders of the Ministry of Construction, The Australian Embassy, The National Assembly Representative for Vung

Tau Nguyen Hong Linh, and leaders of the Municipal People's Council of Ho Chi Minh City.

The Politics of Communism

The delegation met with representatives from the three tiers that make up Vietnam's political system – The Communist Party, The National Assembly and the People's Councils.

The APEC visit to Vietnam took place at a time of the People's Council elections, which provided an opportunity for the delegation to experience true campaigning 'Vietnam style'. Upon visiting a polling booth on Election Day the delegation was treated to the carnival like atmosphere that exists during such an occasion. Although early in the morning, the delegation was greeted with a band and many electoral officers willing to show the delegation the method of voting and the process.

Streets were posted with Communist Party propaganda. Flags were messages promoting economic prosperity and nationalism were aplenty, lining all major streets throughout Vietnam.

The nature of the election was to be expected given that Vietnam is a one of the world's five remaining one-party communist states.

In order to stand candidates, regardless of whether it is for People's Council or the National Assembly, must seek permission from the Fatherland Front, which is responsible for the conduct of elections. Once a candidate gains approval their name is then put forward to the Communist Party for approval. Local People's Councils are beholden to the National Assembly.

Political Power in Vietnam resides with the Communist Party, yet on an increasing basis the National Assembly provides a greater role in the legislative process and enforcement of law. The Assembly consists of 120 full time members and 400 part time members.

Without doubt the greatest challenge for the political system is to strike a balance between the public policy approaches of the conservatives verse the reformists within the Communist Party. The nature and beneficiaries of economic reform is an example of where potential tensions will exist within the Party. The more liberal attitudes expressed in meetings in South Vietnam is testament to this.

Once the Doi Moi reforms were implemented in 1986, the economy has improved markedly providing a sense of greater freedoms for the Vietnamese people. Yet the question of human rights remains a major concern.

At a People's Council level, government is seeking to establish greater programs for the encouragement of new business with a particular emphasis on attracting foreign investment. Whilst the emphasis remains on economic reform many social challenges exist including the spread of HIV / AIDS, drugs, prostitution and road accidents. Also part of this is the challenge of poverty in rural and remote areas of Vietnam.

Also important in the political process of Vietnam is the Vietnam Youth Federation, which aims to promote the interests of this demographic. It has a membership of 5.1 million people. Education policy is the top priority on their agenda with a recognition of the need to enhance the skills of Vietnam's large workforce in order to drive future economic growth. This is particularly highlighted by the significant underemployment that exists in rural areas.

Trade and Agriculture

In the course of the delegations visit the opportunity to gain an understanding of the issues surrounding the rapidly developing agricultural and primary industries sector was a focus for some participants. There was only opportunity for visits to a limited number of properties (most notably an Olive Farm around the Hai Doung province north east of Hanoi run by a local cadre of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union – interestingly run with the occasional assistance of conscripted prison labour). It is impossible, however, to move through either urban or regional Vietnam without being struck by the centrality of agriculture to life of the nation. A constant theme through the visit and subsequent information gathered places the reforms and achievements in the agricultural as central to the progress that the Vietnamese economy and people have made in recent times.

Agricultural production continues to be the main form of economic activity in the nation. With 71% of the total labour force engaged in agricultural production the significance of the sector to both the economy and society is clear. 7,350,000 hectares of Vietnam's arable land is under cropping of some kind (and 40% of that under irrigation). The traditional staple of rice production whilst still the major form of commercial activity is increasingly being supported by meat production and a variety of commercial crops in the form of cereals, tubers and pulses. The transformation of the sector under the economic reform programs of the Government are by any measure impressive.

The dominant form of agricultural production continues to be the family farm. Encouragement of wealth creation and diversification of these small-scale producers has been central to the growth. Current estimates of economic growth in the sector run at 4.3 % per annum. As a number of the leaders the delegation met pointed out the self-sufficiency and significant export focus around rice is considered to be a major national achievement and a large contributor to the goal of eradicating poverty. Given that the nation no longer receives Food Aid the proud boast that Vietnam both feeds itself, with its growing population whilst exports increasing amounts to the world is a major achievement by any measure.

Agricultural exports had more than doubled from 1995 to the end of 2003 with a total value export of some \$(US) 2.8 billion. Vietnam lays claims to be the largest global exporter of pepper, second in rice, coffee and cashews and in the top ten in rubber and tea. Its most significant markets being Japan, the United States, the European Union, Korea and China.

The main achievements that all level of government were keen to point to in this sector centre around the status of Vietnam as a major rice producer – not only as the staple for its own people but as increasingly an exporter into the global market.

The figures since the reunification of the nation and the end of the American War are significant.

In 1975 there were some 4,900,000 hectares under rice production with an output of 10,538,000 tonnes. At the same time 805,000 tonnes were imported. There were no exports.

Ten years later the area under rice production was 5,825,000 hectares, producing 15,955,000 tonnes of rice with imports running at 482,000 tonnes. Exports ran at under 15,000 tonnes.

After a decade of economic reform up to 1995 the amount of land under rice production had jumped to 7,124,000 hectares. Production stood at 26,792,000 tonnes. Imports stood at only 1,000 tonnes and exports of rice at over 3,000,000 tonnes.

The forecasted results for 2004 run at 7,450,000 hectares, with production at 32,576,000 tonnes, imports of rice at 40,000 tonnes and exports at over 4,000,000 tonnes.

Yet for all these impressive results the focus within the sector is still very much on commodity markets and the production of low value added products. Processing and value adding are now at the forefront of the Governments attempts to build on the reforms. At the same time the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development acknowledges that it lacks the necessary technological and infrastructure support to move rapidly to its goal of competitiveness against its ASEAN and Chinese competitors.

The focus on bilateral and multilateral trade deals means that Vietnam will continue to drive agricultural reform and growth (i.e. the US - FTA, the ASEAN - China Free Trade Area proposal and the much sought for entry in the World Trade organisation). Agricultural production and reform processes are significant contributors to the nations performance whilst simultaneously fuelling economic change, social and rural pressures.

The market based reforms that the sector has undergone in the 90's and this decade highlight the distance travelled from an inefficient and unproductive domestic focused sector that failed the most fundamental test of not being able to feed its own people. Now the proud achievement of the sector to self-sufficiency and export focus place it for the next challenges of growth around technology and processing. The focus of achieving developed nation status with the next two decades will only be achieved if agriculture and primary production meets the challenges of sustainable growth, value adding, technological advance and maintaining its place as the bedrock of social organisation.

It was pleasing to hear from the Australian Embassy that efforts of Australian agencies to assist in developing sustainable and appropriate technologies and systems of production in this sector are making a small but significant contribution. This is currently being lead by a 6-year project commenced in March of this year (2004) to contribute to research and best practice extension run from Vietnamese research institutes. Its focus will be on working to lift the competitiveness and productivity of small scale agricultural with a focus on the wonderfully fertile Mekong delta area.

The challenges facing the sector are based around the fact that the majority of the population continue to rely directly on agricultural production. Maintaining the labour intensive basis of the sector whilst continuing to focus on the technological changes in the sector, dealing with a changing rural population, the rising living standards of that population and the increasingly diverse food markets demands all signify that major changes will continue to wash through the sector at an increasingly rapid rate. Add to this the environmental and the social challenges the reform process in agriculture makes the pasture even more complex.

Immediate issues such as the 2004 outbreak of the Avian Flu in much of the region generally and in Vietnam in particular reveal the impacts that the entry into the global food and agricultural commodity market can bring to a nation. The challenges for biosecurity infrastructure, for quality control and market assurance mechanism all were directly highlighted by this outbreak. They are an important illustration of both the distance Vietnam has travelled but having started the tremendous journey it still has to go.

The visit of the delegation barely touched on the complexity and range of the nature of the sector and the issues it faces as part of Vietnam's great effort to eradicate poverty and contribute to the national goal of prosperity. What it did reveal was that the Vietnamese people and its agricultural sector in particular are determined to pursue these goals.

Planning for Tomorrow

It is true to say that on first impressions, it is difficult to imagine that Vietnam has any system of town planning or controls. In Hanoi, with its population of 3 million there is certainly a sense of organised chaos as people move across the city. Ho Chi Minh City, whilst more modern in approach, again seems to struggle with its population pressures and in Halong Bay there is every indication that what was once a sleepy beachside town has suddenly woken up.

Since the economic reform policy 'Doi Moi' was introduced in 1986, it is clear that Vietnam has experienced rapid urbanisation and a development boom in various regions, a boom that is widely supported by the Government and the Vietnamese people. There is now more foreign investment in tourism development, a greater emphasis on creating industrial areas for employment and growing pressures in the cities as more people arrive from the regions.

Yet there also seems a determination to protect the natural environment and an emphasis on the "spiritual world as much as the physical".

As Mr Tran Ngoc Chinh, Director with the Ministry of Construction told the delegation, it is all about how to "exploit and preserve at the same time".

One of the key issues for the Vietnamese town planning system seems to relate to who is actually in charge, who directs the policy and who provides the guidelines. Mr Tran was particularly interested on what level of government regulated planning in Australia. This may have been because as was explained to the delegation – there are at least four levels of government that guide decisions on development – the central, municipal/provincial, district and commune. Whilst he explained there was no real conflict in the decisions made, there was overlapping when the guidelines were not being used correctly.

In theory, the Vietnamese use the zoning system for designating land for particular uses. As a result of the way land 'ownership' is determined in Vietnam and the overwhelming population there is in the major cities, the system seems more a hybrid. However, the zoning system is being used most successfully by the Vietnamese Government in its designation of industrial areas. These industrial "zones" are seen as very important in the generation of employment particularly for those people moving to the city from the rural provinces.

Tourism development is another key driver for employment, particularly in the increasingly popular coastal cities of Halong and Vung Tau. There are 3,200kms of coastline in Vietnam. The delegation was fortunate enough to visit Vietnam's beautiful world heritage area of Halong Bay. Popular as a tourist destination, Halong City is exploding in terms of development and there is now a patchwork of hotels and tourist businesses on the hill slopes of the city, even though the Bay itself feels untouched and almost undiscovered.

Meeting with the local representatives of the National Assembly in Halong City, it was clear that they too realised the importance of ensuring that they do not destroy the very thing that draws tourists to their region. The concept of eco-tourism, whilst fairly new to Vietnam, is something which will increasingly gain in popularity.

In terms of development planning, it was interesting to compare Halong City with a visit to Vung Tau in the province of Dong Nai. Once considered the seaside resort for the elite in Vietnam, it is now a weekend get-away spot for city dwellers from Ho Chi Minh City, some 125 kms away. Vung Tau has a significant fishing industry as well as being

the centre of services for the exploitation of gas and oil, with oil rigs only 70kms off shore.

These key industries make Vung Tau a relatively wealthy city and this is reflected in the way the town is evolving from a planning perspective. There seems to be a more considered approach in the development of the city and it was clearer that if this approach is continued, then Vung Tau has the potential to become a real success story for Vietnam in terms of its economic and tourism potential.

There were many references during our visit to learning much from Australia in relation to tourism development and planning, yet it was also interesting to note that there were a number of planning issues common to both countries.

Australia is currently in the grip of a planning profession shortage and this is something, which Vietnam is also experiencing. Mr Tran of the Ministry for Construction confirmed that there are currently three universities in Vietnam, which major in town planning with approximately 200 graduates in this profession. In contrast, there are between 9,000 – 10,000 architects, but not many of these have town planning qualifications and many of the town planning graduates do not have the necessary experience in the workplace. Vietnam, like Australia is resorting to the use of foreign town planners.

One of the other similarities between Australia and Vietnam is the exodus of people from rural areas/ provinces to the cities. This is placing enormous pressure in terms of infrastructure provision particularly in the areas of electricity and transport.

One of our final official meetings in Vietnam was with the leaders of the Municipal People's Council of Ho Chi Minh City. The issues of planning were certainly high on their agenda as they try to deal with an ever expanding and modernised city. Public transport was a particularly tricky issue for these leaders in terms of not only creating the additional transport infrastructure but also educating people to use public transport more. This is a key planning issue for all modern cities and Ho Chi Minh City is no different.

One of the key desires articulated by a number of the officials we met in Vietnam was a desire to emulate Australia's more comprehensive plans for future development and Australia's ability to co-ordinate the various levels of government and agencies to achieve a more integrated approach to planning. While in many ways the planning system in Vietnam is still in its infancy, the potential is there for planning to take on a greater role in achieving Vietnam's desire for economic, social and environmental sustainability.

Women and Vietnam

There is an image of Vietnam imbedded in the minds of foreign people. It is an image of a young Vietnamese woman in a traditional long dress and pants, with long black flowing hair and a conical hat. Yet the modern Vietnamese woman is not based on an iconic image but is real and faces the same issues and dilemmas as her western sister.

The issue of women's status was raised by the delegation during a number of our official meetings. Women are encouraged to take part in all that Vietnamese society offers whether it is in business, government or the home. The concepts of 'women's rights' and 'equality of the sexes' was a sentiment expressed by many of our Vietnamese guests.

With the advent of the 'Doi Moi' program in 1986, the opportunities for a younger generation of women seem to have increased. There is now access to better education

and higher paid positions for women. During our visit, we met a number of women who were taking on leadership positions within their organisations.

The Vietnamese Government has a policy of 'positive discrimination' whereby elected positions are made available for certain 'minority' groups. Along with ethnic groups and young people, women are provided with a number of positions within the various levels of Government. What was interesting about this system, is that the Communist Party of Vietnam has made a conscious policy decision in this regard and has followed through. Everyone we spoke to seemed to accept the system and were optimistic about its potential in making the Vietnamese Governments at all levels more representative.

However, these women still have a way to go. When discussing the issue with Mr Tran Dac Loi, Secretary General of the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organisations he commented that while the Government was working to create a sense of equality in Vietnam, in many ways old and outdated views still prevailed.

The 'westernisation' of Vietnam is also impacting on women. The opportunity to visit a student newspaper provided an insight into some of the interests and preoccupations of younger Vietnamese. Young women in Vietnam seem just like their "western sisters" – they love fashion, pop music and going to cafes. They want to be educated and seek better jobs and career opportunities. Young Vietnamese strive for more than their parents ever had and while the "American War" is still part of their history, it does not drive the psyche of the younger generation.

While some of the young women we met were married, what was surprising was that many were not. Young women in Vietnam, like their western counterparts, seem to be choosing their careers over marriage and children. With this, comes an inevitable division between the modern Vietnamese woman and those who wish to preserve traditional values and who see this "westernisation" as concerning for the family unit.

During our visit, there was much discussion on the gap between urban and rural Vietnam and how this is widening. While urban women with good education are seizing new opportunities, it would have been interesting to speak with some rural women to discover more about their lives. With a lower standard of living and education, competing in the 'Doi Moi' environment would be limited. This is despite assistance programs offered by the government, though an example of one of these projects Xoa doi giam ngheo [reducing poverty] is having some success.

In Ha Giang, a mountain province, women can borrow money at low interest rates for two years. The fund lends each poor family money equivalent to a cow. In addition, the project builds a clean water system for each hamlet. Women have been trained to farm using new technology and have learned how to raise their children better. They have access to evening classes. Many can now read and write in Vietnamese. This gives them access to more information on modern life and provides them with an opportunity at a better life.

As Vietnam continues to develop, women will have their role to play. More Vietnamese women are holding high level positions in Parliament, government and business. Where over a half of the population in Vietnam is female, women's contribution to their country will definitely become less iconic and more important.

Youth in Vietnam

Policies directed at Vietnam Youth is one of the biggest issues confronting Vietnam at the moment. While Australia has an ageing population Vietnam is quite the opposite.

In the Hochiminh Communist Youth Union (HCYU) there are currently about 4.7 million members from throughout Vietnam. On top of this the Vietnamese Youth Federation has about 5.1 million members and the Association for Vietnamese Students has more than 600 000 members.

The Vietnamese Government takes youth very seriously and is currently assisting the HCYU to implement many programs throughout the country to get the youth actively involved and to assist them find employment.

During our trip to Vietnam our delegation met with HCYU Mr Doan Van Thai who told us that all government bodies and the National Assembly have youth representatives.

The HCYU role is to educate the young people about policy; mobilise young people to help with economic development and; take care of the youth and pioneers (young children).

The HCYU has several projects currently underway which aim to get youth involved and to help them find employment. One project the union is involved in is eliminating unstable bridges. At present many bridges are anchored to tree trunks rather than cement so the project has assigned young people to implement the work. The government has supplied materials while the union has supplied the labour and intelligence.

Another project currently underway involves sending young intellectuals and graduates to remote areas of Vietnam to promote economic development. The government has recognised there is a gap in development between the urban and rural areas, and has implemented this program to address the issue.

Many city based youth tend to stay in the city to find jobs and youth from rural areas have also had to move to the city to find work. This project ensures rural youth have access to technology, education and medical examinations. The HCYU has found that many of the city based graduates going to the country to teach are staying in rural localities.

Youth are also involved in building roads to inaccessible areas.

The volunteer movement is also large in Vietnam. During the Sea Games which were held in Vietnam during 2003 more than 20 000 youth worked as volunteers. There is also an opportunity for young Australians to visit Vietnam and work on these projects. Vietnam's volunteer movement currently hosts volunteers from Europe, Singapore, Canada and the United States.

The HCYU also owns two publishing houses which publish a youth newspaper, and magazines aimed at teenagers, a radio program is also run for the pioneers as well as a television program.

Media

During the tour we met with editor in chief Nguyen Phong Doanh and toured the office of the Vietnamese Youth Newspaper. The Newspaper's target group is high school students.

There are eight journalists at the Newspaper who are all under 30 years, have studied journalism at University and speak English.

Whilst Communism seeks to control the content of the local press there was an opinion section in the Newspaper and Magazine for students to send in their thoughts and comments on government policy.

Journalists in Vietnam receive an average salary of \$200/month which is well above the average salary in Vietnam of \$400/year.

As in Australia, Journalists are given specific rounds such as sport, education and children, but the editor plays a more hands-on role of checking all of the information and allocating the paper.

Conclusion

The people of Vietnam will forever remain proud of their culture and place in the world. The delegation in every sense will remain indebted to the host nation for the experience to meet with the key leaders within their government and visit those parts of Vietnam to which the people are most proud.