

JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development  
Human Security and the Practices of Empowerment in East Asia Research Project

# Urban Poverty during Covid-19

Case Study: Ma Lang-Dong Tien  
Neighborhood, Ho Chi Minh City

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## **Urban Poverty during Covid-19**

### **Case Study: Ma Lang-Dong Tien Neighborhood, Ho Chi Minh City**

Vu, Le Thao Chi\*

#### **Abstract**

Vietnam has been one of the few countries to successfully combat the Coronavirus with massive coercive measures, including the military's involvement, and an exhaustive tracking system, partial lockdowns and shutdowns. Most of the population enjoyed an unusually 'peaceful' Corona-free state, however, the urban poor suffered because lockdown restrictions hampered spatial mobility, which many of them badly need for their work in the informal sector. This paper investigates the impact of the government's responses to Covid-19 on the poor, especially those in Ho Chi Minh City, the country's economic hub. The paper also re-examines the concept of 'empowerment' and its applications in the context of urban poverty.

The findings and observations of this working report are based on the data collected before April 2021. The observations below remain valid even though Vietnam itself took a negative turn in coping with the pandemic.

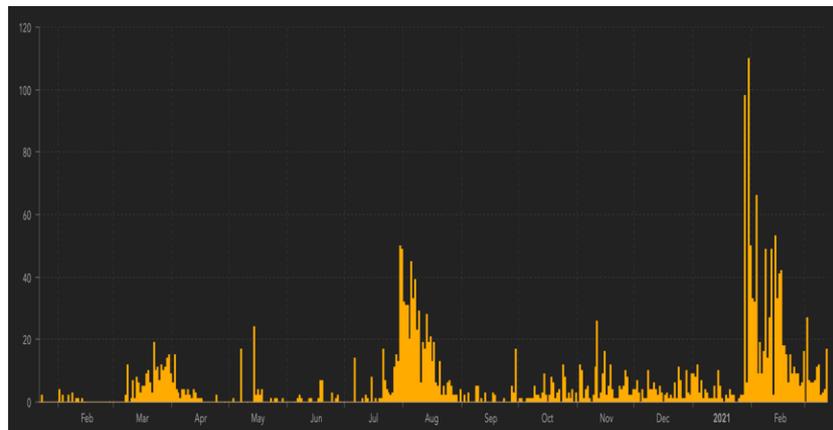
**Keywords:** Urban Poverty, Vietnam, Covid-19, Choices, Empowerment.

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## 1. Vietnam and Its Success Over the Coronavirus

Vietnam is one of the few countries that has been effective at containing the Coronavirus infection up to this point. Vietnam has recorded 2,553 infections and 35 deaths as of March 14, 2021 (John Hopkins Corona Resource Center 2021). The three waves of infection since March, 2020 include: 1) March-April, 2020; 2) July-August, 2020; and 3) January- February 2021. There were smaller waves in between, as shown in Figure.1.



**Figure 1. Number of daily infections in Vietnam from February 2020 ~ March 2021**

*Source:* John Hopkins Corona Resource Center (2021).

This remarkable performance results from the Communist Government’s swift and efficient responses to the Covid-19, known as ‘strong leadership and a whole-of-society approach’ (UNV, 11). The government showed its determination through its frequent use of wartime rhetoric. On January 27 2020, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, in his emergency meeting with the heads of ministries, requested the officials in charge to ‘*fight the virus as if we were fighting a foreign enemy.*’ On March 30, General Secretary of the Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, called for a ‘societal quarantine,’<sup>1</sup> stating that ‘*Every Vietnamese citizen is a soldier fighting the pandemic.*’ Reflecting this determination, the government adopted unprecedented massive measures

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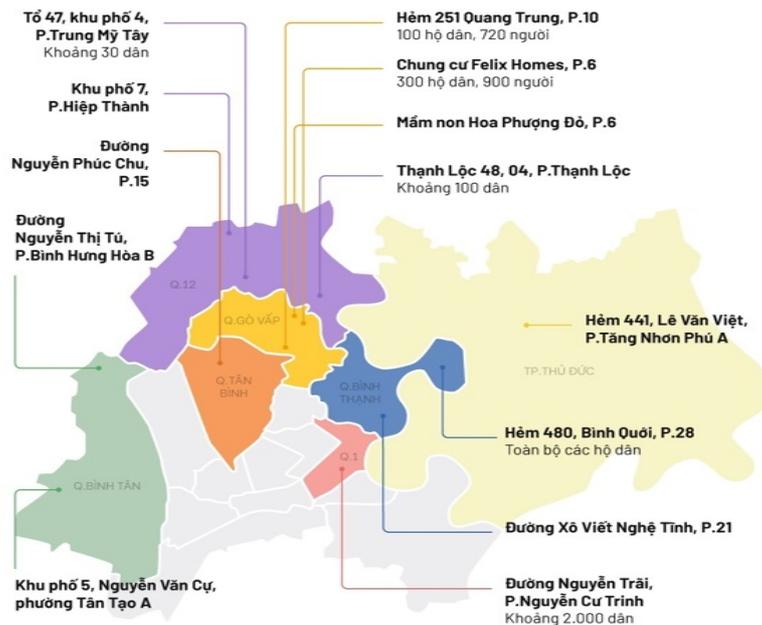
<sup>1</sup> ‘Societal’ is the author’s interpretation based on the idea of Directive 16 by the Prime Minister on March 31, 2020: ‘*Carry out nationwide quarantine for 15 days from midnight of April 01 2020, during which family is isolated from family, hamlet isolated from hamlet, village isolated from village, district isolated from district, province isolated from province*’ (OLLD).

including the military's involvement from the very beginning. On February 2 (10 days after the first cases of infection), the Ministry of Defense organized a large-scale military drill to prepare for Covid-19.

Following the drill, the soldiers went to entry points, including those along the border with Laos, Cambodia, and China to enforce tighter control over the inflow of people. The soldiers also staffed the temporary quarantine centers. The centers multiplied quickly in many of the country's main cities after the government imposed a mandatory 14-day-quarantine on all people entering Vietnam starting from March 21. On March 22, it stopped receiving all foreign citizens. The number of people under strict medical surveillance at these quarantine centers went as high as 50,000 by the end of March 2020. The government offered free accommodations and food until August 31, 2020; Colonel Ha The Tan reasoning that *'supporting 10,000 people under quarantine is still cheaper than treating 1.000 patients'* (Hoang Phuong and Viet Tuan 2020).

Vietnam's approach, including contact tracing, cluster strategy, (partial) lockdowns, a mandatory 14-day-quarantine on all people entering Vietnam from March 21, 2020, and closing its border (blocking all foreign citizens from March 22 2020), appear no different from many other countries. However, a closer look at how the government tried to contain the Coronavirus reveals how thorough its measures are. The most impressive measure is the complete tracing system at every medical facility in the country at the beginning of the pandemic (Appendix A). Every local authority received a general tracing guideline. Even though Vietnam does not have a specific definition of 'close contact' or 'cluster,' the government demanded that an infected person report the name of everyone whom he or she had come into contact with, and every place he or she had visited. The number of traceable people (F1~F5) is exceptionally high. For example, in Quang Ninh province, there were 18 new cases found on January 29, 2021. By January 30, the authority identified 23,600 people ranging from F1 to F4 (Minh Cuong 2021).

Refraining from a national/regional lockdown, the government enforced smaller-scale lockdowns (apartment blocks, neighborhoods, villages, or cities) and shutdowns (applied to service facilities or offices) if one person is found infected or if the place is in the infected person's path (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. 13 Areas under Lockdown in Ho Chi Minh City as of February 8 2021**

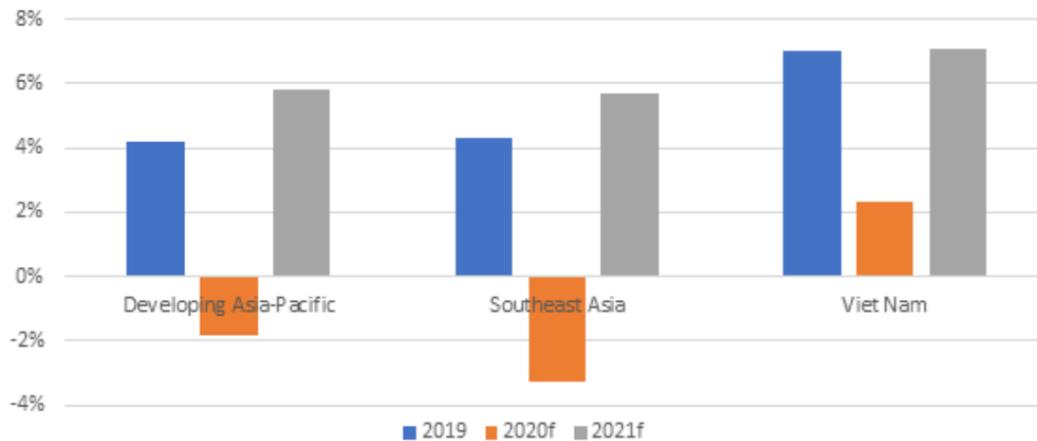
*Source: Ha My and Bich Hue (2021).*

One infected individual can turn thousands of others' everyday lives upside down, especially in large apartment complexes in big cities such as Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi. Such was the case for the Ma Lang neighborhood (Ho Chi Minh). The whole area with 2000 residents was placed under lockdown after one infection was detected (Tuan Kiet and Thanh Tung 2021).

## 2. Poverty During Covid-19

Like most other countries, Vietnam's economy has been through a difficult period during the Covid-19. Its GDP for the first six months of 2020 grew by only 1.81 percent compared to 6.77

percent in the same period in the previous year. Nevertheless, its success in combatting the Covid-19 helped Vietnam to outperform nearly all other middle-income countries in Southeast Asia and Asia-Pacific regions and expected to resume the pre-pandemic economic growth in 2021 (Figure 3).



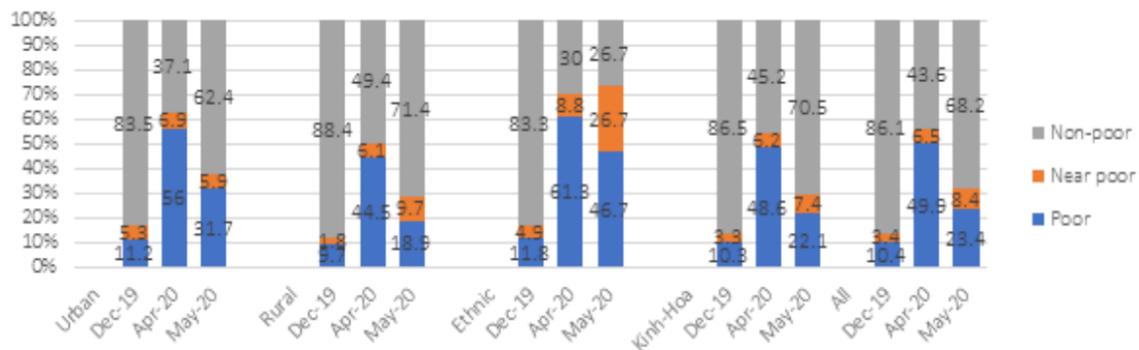
**Figure 3. GDP growth in 2019 and Growth Projections for 2020 and 2021**

Source: UNV (2020, 15).

However, the measures to contain the virus have generated negative impacts on the country's poor. In April and May 2020, the UNDP and UN Women commissioned a rapid impact assessment and monitoring exercise (RIM 2020) to collect and analyze information on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on 930 households and 935 enterprises (in 58 of 63 provinces) who were vulnerable to a sudden loss or reduction of income. The study found that the pandemic had resulted in a substantial fall in income among vulnerable households and increased transient poverty and the depth of poverty, with the largest fall recorded in April, 2020. Note that, on April 1, 2020, Vietnam implemented 'Societal Quarantine' (Cách ly toàn xã hội) for 15 days (later adding one more week) with the principle: *'family isolated from family, hamlet isolated from hamlet, village isolated from village, district isolated from district, province isolated from province'* (VMOH). The Vietnamese leaders' emphasis, notwithstanding, this societal quarantine was practically a lockdown. The authorities levied fines on violators in some areas. According

to one informant living in the Ma Lang neighborhood, ‘I have never seen anything like this. In 1998 (Asian Financial Crisis), it was difficult, but people still could move around to make their ends meet. This time, everything was just standing still or even frozen. People couldn’t move. They could not do anything to earn money.’

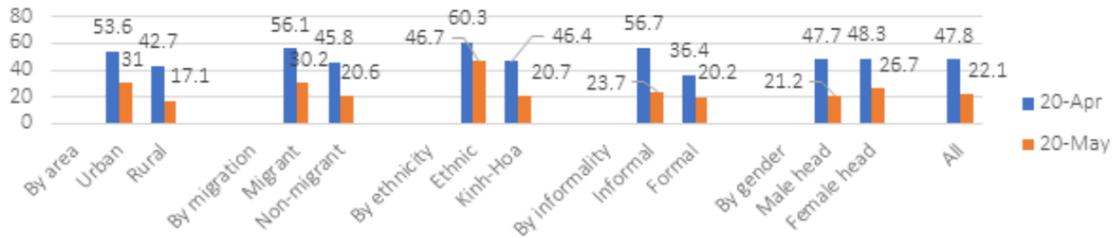
According to the United Nations Vietnam (UNV) report in 2020, the impacts of the ‘societal quarantine’ were greater in urban areas than in rural areas (Figure 4). In December 2019, the proportion of income poor in urban areas was 11.2 percent, and 56 percent in ‘the frozen’ period in April 2020. It was 9.7 percent and 44.5 percent respectively in rural areas. The situation recovered somewhat in May, 2020, with the proportion down to 31.7 percent in urban areas, though still much higher than 18.9 percent in rural areas.



**Figure 4. The Proportion of Income Poor, Near-Poor and Non-Poor Households by Location and Ethnicity**  
 Source: UNV (2020, 34).

Figure 5 shows that the surveyed households’ average income in April 2020 was less than one-third (29.7 percent) of December 2019. The decline hit the urban areas harder than the rural areas, with 53.6 percent of the surveyed non-poor households below the income poverty line. The number in rural areas is 42.7 percent. The non-poor households falling into income poverty also grew drastically among the group of domestic migrants (56.1 percent), ethnic minorities (46.7 percent), and informal sector workers (56.7 percent) this April. The situation slightly improved

in May following the lifting of societal quarantine. Still it remained critical, as shown by 31.0 percent of non-poor households staying below the income poverty line while this number dropped faster in the rural areas (17.1 percent).



**Figure 5. Share of December 2019 Non-Poor Households Falling Into Income Poverty in April and May 2020**

Source: UNV (2020, 35).

### 3. The Government’s Covid-19 Relief Package

Nine days after the beginning of the societal quarantine (April 9, 2020), the government introduced Resolution 42, ‘*Assistance for People affected by Covid-19 Pandemic*’ (OLLD) and provided a support package of 62,000 billion VND (USD 2.6 billion). The social assistance package’s beneficiaries included:

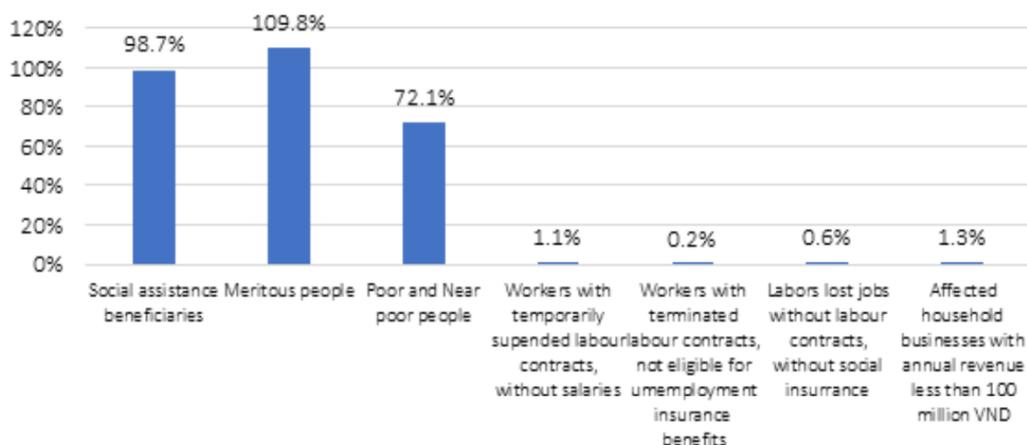
- Workers who have their employment contract terminated but are not eligible for unemployment benefit and workers who do not have an employment contract and are laid off received 1,000,000 VND per month for up to three months according to the pandemic situation);
- People with meritorious services to the Revolution who are receiving monthly benefits received an additional amount of 500,000 per month each for three months;
- Social protection beneficiaries receiving monthly benefits were given an additional amount of 500,000 per month each for three months.
- According to the national poverty standards before December 31, 2019, poor or near-poor households received 500,000 per person per month for three months from April to June 2020.

According to Vietnam's Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), by June 29, 2020, more than 11 million individuals from an approved list of 15.8 million vulnerable people and 6,196 household businesses had received VND11,267 billion of the VND17,500 billion available in this social assistance package (UNV 2020, 30). However, there are several problems, especially involving transient poverty, in implementing the resolution. Because the social protection support package was based on the lists of the poor and near-poor approved in December 2019, many newly poor households and people who lost income during the pandemic did not receive support. Thus, 53.6 percent of non-poor families in the urban and 42.7 percent of non-poor families in the rural who fell under the income poverty line in April 2020 did not qualify for this social assistance.

The report also points out that the short-term cash transfers reached 99 percent of the regular social assistance beneficiaries, 110 percent of people in the merit categories,<sup>2</sup> and 72 percent of poor and near-poor households. However, the proportion of other intended target groups receiving transfers is low. These include: workers with temporarily suspended labor contracts; workers with terminated contracts but who are not eligible for unemployment insurance benefits; workers without labor contracts and social insurance who have lost their jobs; and household businesses with revenues of less than 100 million VND that had suspended business as the result of COVID-19 (see Figure 6).

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<sup>2</sup> Leaving a period of prolonged war (thirty years since 1945), Vietnam had an enormous number of soldiers who had become 'invalid' or had developed chronic diseases. The government grouped them and their families in the category of 'national devotees,'<sup>2</sup> and designated them the beneficiaries of Vietnam's 'Merits Policies.' For the national devotees, Vietnam makes clear that it is 'the duty and obligation of the State' and the entire society to take care of them. That commitment is reflected in the large expenditure (Merit payments) for this group (over 1 percent of GDP in 2013). That is as large as the expenditure for old-age pensions. These merit policies stand on their own within the Vietnamese social policies. In 2013, MOLISA created the Department of National Devotees. Vietnam has identified and recognized nine million Vietnamese as national devotees. Of them, 1.4 million are the current Merit payments recipients. These payments are six times greater than the other social assistance transfers (i.e., benefits for the elderly, persons with disabilities, and others who are not national devotees) (Vu 2020, 22-23).



**Figure 6. The Proportion of Targeted Groups Receiving Government Social Protection Support as of June 18**

Source: UNV (2020, 42).

#### 4. Poverty in Ho Chi Minh City

Ho Chi Minh City and its neighboring province of Binh Duong are the only two areas having the record of no poor households in both the national surveys about poor and near-poor households in 2015<sup>3</sup> and 2018<sup>4</sup> (the national poverty line is under 10.8 million VND/ household/year = USD 500). If the city poverty line (for the period 2016-2020)<sup>5</sup> is applied, there are 3,767 poor households (0.19 percent) (under 21 million VND/household/year) and 22,882 near-poor households (1.15 percent) (under 28 million VND/household/year) in 2019. The city revised its poverty line in 2019<sup>6</sup>: under 28 million VND/year for poor households and under 36 million VND/year for near-poor households (Duong Loan 2018). With this revised poverty line, the number of poor households grew almost three-fold to 9,672 households (0.39 percent), while the

<sup>3</sup> Decision 1095 (MOLISA) on ‘Approval of the result of the National Survey 2015 on poor and near-poor households based on the multi-dimensional index for 2016-2020,’ issued on August 22 2016 (OLLD).

<sup>4</sup> Decision 1052 (MOLISA) on ‘Approval of the result of the National Survey 2018 on poor and near-poor households based on multi-dimensional index applied for 2016-2020,’ issued on July 29 2019 (OLLD).

<sup>5</sup> Resolution 15 (People’s Council of Ho Chi Minh City) on ‘Program of Sustainable Poverty Reduction in Ho Chi Minh city for 2016-2020,’ issued on December 9 2015 (OLLD).

<sup>6</sup> Resolution 23 (People’s Council of Ho Chi Minh City) on ‘Revising poverty index for poor and near-poor households in Ho Chi Minh city,’ issued on December 7 2018 (OLLD).

number of near-poor households slightly shrank to 22.864 (0.93 percent) (*Nhan Dan Online* May 23 2019).

The impressive reduction of people in poverty is associated with the fast economic growth of the city. The size of its economy and GDP per capita is 1.5 times that of Ha Noi, making it the largest contributor to national GDP (Table 1).

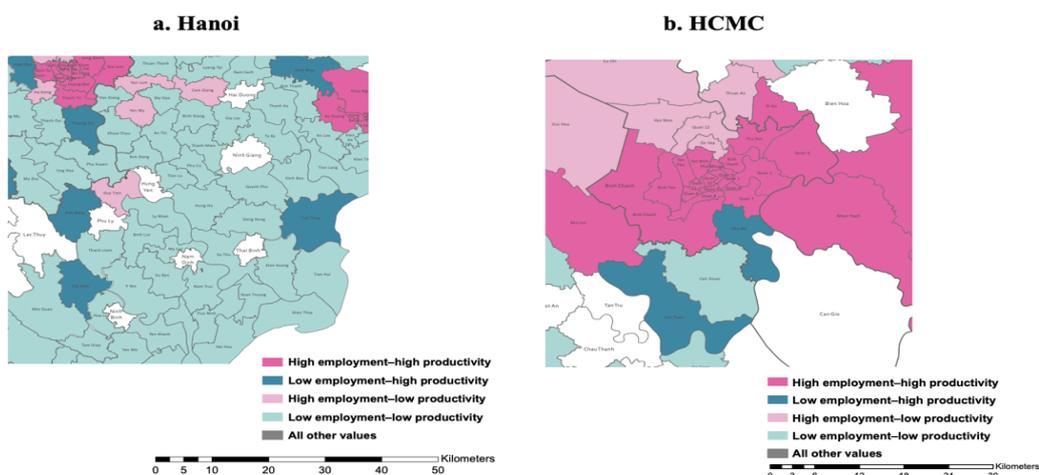
The poverty narrative of Ho Chi Minh City is consistent with that of Vietnam as a whole. The high economic growth Vietnam has steadily enjoyed since 1986 (Đổi Mới - the economic renovation) facilitated its combat against poverty. Based on the global poverty line of \$1.90 a day, the poverty rate declined steeply, from 50 percent in the early 1990s to just 3 percent in 2012 (World Bank 2020, 1). Based on the national poverty line for the period 2016-2020,<sup>7</sup> the poverty rate is 9.88 percent (2,338,569 households). Ho Chi Minh City’s performance over poverty eradication is both amazing and perplexing given the fact that the city is the economic hub of the country, attracting hundreds of thousands of people coming from rural areas and other cities every year. Map 1 below clearly shows the contrast between Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi.

**Table.1 Size of the Economies of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh Cities**

	Hanoi	HCMC
Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	3,329	2,061
Population	7,781,631 <sup>a</sup>	8,636,899 <sup>b</sup>
GDP (nominal, US\$, billions)	40.1 <sup>f</sup>	60.83 <sup>e</sup>
GDP per capita (US\$)	5,080	7,089

*Source:* World Bank (2020, 44).

<sup>7</sup> Below 8,400,000 VND/capita/year (~ USD 400) for Rural areas and 10,800,00 VND (USD 500) for Urban areas.



**Map 1. Employment Level-Labor Productivity Taxonomy of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh Regions: Vietnam 2016**

Source: World Bank (2020, 34).

Every year, Ho Chi Minh City has witnessed an increase of 200,000 people, of which 2/3 comes from migration, excluding unregistered domestic migrants (Ngoc Ha and Chi Quoc 2018). The rate of migrant workers in Ho Chi Minh is 22.6 percent, second to the neighboring Binh Duong province (35.8 percent). Migration is often linked with urban poverty, but that does not seem the case for Ho Chi Minh. There is another set of data from *Nhan Dan Online* on May 23 2019. As mentioned, the rate of poor households in Ho Chi Minh City went up from 0.19 percent in 2019 to 0.39 percent in 2020, adding another 6,000 poor households to the total. This increase after the city’s poverty line was revised was not exceptional, as it is seen every time the poverty line has been revised after 1992, the beginning of poverty alleviation programs in Ho Chi Minh City.

**Table 2. The fluctuation of Poverty in Ho Chi Minh City since its Poverty Alleviation Programs began (1992)**

Year	No. of poor households	Rate %
1992 Beginning of Stage 1	121,722	17
2003 End of Stage 1	1,600	
2004 Beginning of Stage 2	89,000	
2008 Beginning of Stage 3	152,300	
2014 Beginning of Stage 4	132,600 (near-poor households included)	
2016 Beginning of Stage 5	115,000 listed (near-poor households included)	5.8

2019 End of Stage 5	3,767	
2019-2020 Beginning of Stage 6	100,000 (near-poor households included) (estimated)	5

Source: Nhan Dan Online (2019).

From Table 2, it can be seen that the scale of poverty in the city has not changed since the 1990s, staying within the range of 100,000 ~ 150,000 households. Every time the city revised its poverty line (2004, 2008, 2014, 2016, 2019), those who had escaped poverty went right back to where they had been. Another warning is that although the city's income gap has narrowed from 10 times in 1992 to 6.6 times in 2014, there are signs that this gap is now widening: 2013: 6.5; 2014: 6.6 and 2015: 7.73 times. In other words, the poverty issue, signs of improvement notwithstanding, is still existent in the city, and stands the risk of increasing.

## 5. Poverty as an enduring legacy of the Vietnam War

In addition to domestic migration as a cause of poverty, there is another point of note for an examination of the depth of urban poverty in Ho Chi Minh City: poverty as an enduring legacy of the Vietnam War and the post-war restructuring policies imposed on the city after the Communist government took over. Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon until 1975) was an 'artificial economy' with an annual US\$700 million in foreign aid, and a significant fraction of the active urban population was supported directly and indirectly by the war economy (Desbarats 1987, 48). The end of the war in 1975 brought an end to that 'artificial economy,' pushing around 1.5 million people, including those who earned a living by providing various services to the military, into a state of unemployment (Desbarats 1987, 48).

After 1975, the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) took no time in redistributing its population: 'to facilitate the return of war refugees to their original villages; and to create New

Economic Zones (NEZs) on virgin and fallow land and in the green belts planned for development around the major cities' (Desbarats 1987, 51). The three critical periods are: the period of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, marked predominantly by the repatriation of war refugees (1975-76); the Second Five-Year Plan, dominated by the New Economic Zones policy (1976-80); and the Third Five-Year Plan, characterized by the liberalization of rural development policies (1981-85).

Southern cities' de-urbanization, especially Saigon, addressed also internal security issues in the population redistribution efforts. These cities had a large number of 'potentially disruptive' elements: Catholic refugees who had fled the North in 1954; the former regime's military and police forces (1.3 million who, together with their families, comprised some 25 percent of the population of South Vietnam); civilian personnel in the former South Vietnamese government (one-third of a million); and sizable Chinese merchant communities (half a million in Saigon alone). Thus, the government considered de-urbanization useful in weakening 'urban-based opposition.' The PRG aimed at reducing Ho Chi Minh City to 2 million from 4 million. The official figure of 1,472,000 settlers given for the Second Plan period could be an overestimate, however, it is unclear whether that includes the settlers 'repatriated' under the PRG (Desbarats 1987, 59).

However, due to the harsh conditions in New Economic Zones, many of these new settlers, including those who returned to their home villages, went back to the cities. One study revealed that out of 1 million people from Ho Chi Minh City, almost half secretly moved back into it. The returnees from the NEZs had to live illegally with relatives and friends or camp out in streets, parks, even cemeteries. They engaged in open-air markets, smuggling, or any other underground activity allowing them to survive. The most visible effects of the return were a swelling vagrant

population of NEZ returnees ineligible for food rations and a marked increase in robbery and petty crimes (Desbarats 1987, 61-62).

Ma Lang -- the research area for this JICA project -- is such a place. The area located in the middle of District 1 provides an odd spot in this thriving city. It was once an abandoned cemetery. People later freely turned that into a residential area for the returnees (of Ho Chi Minh City origin). The place was a hot spot for drug problems until the early 2000s. After all these years, Ma Lang is still affected by poverty issues. For migrant workers, the decision to migrate to big cities may be a matter of choice in the search for alternatives for 'a better life,' and for opportunities for 'upward mobility.' However, the return to the city for these settlers was not a matter of choice but was the only choice.

## **6. In Lieu of a Conclusion**

The picture of poverty in Ho Chi Minh can be summarized into five distinguishing features of urban poverty as follows:

- Exclusive reliance on cash: Cash is the solution to almost everything. The lack of strong ties (kinship network), especially among migrant workers, may account for this reliance. Besides, their communities- mostly slum areas- are different from the traditional sense of community. Theirs are spontaneously formed and dominated with 'weak ties,' and therefore fragmented. Thus, although *poverty is a collective issue, it is individually approached*;
- Income highly dependent on physical mobility: Most of the poor in the city are engaged in menial labor: selling lotteries, selling street food, transportation, construction, small trading. These jobs are seasonal, unstable, and low-paid. As long as they can physically move, they can find something they can do. If their mobility is disrupted (due to traffic accidents, or lockdown measures by the government, among others), their *livelihood comes to a standstill*;

- Limited access to essential services like health and education, loans, poverty subsidies: This is so because many of these poor are unregistered migrant workers. That has led to the burgeoning ‘local economy’ where the poor provide ‘informal services’ (loans, medicines, among others) for each other. *Poverty becomes a way of living*. That is both a virtuous and vicious circle of the poverty trap: virtuous because it provides buffers for the poor in emergency and the source of livelihood for other poor people; and vicious because it lifts people out of a crisis but may plunge them deeper into poverty;
- Low income or cash scarcity dominates poverty in urban areas: *This scarcity makes every contingency a crisis* because of the ‘lack of slack’ (Mullainathan and Shafir 2014, 135) to deal with shocks. The lack of a kinship network and the absence of a strong community make that situation worse. The sort of shock that urban poor are afraid of the most is health disruptions (caused by traffic accidents, terminal ailments, among others, of themselves or their family members) because this shock would push them into ‘catastrophic health spending.’<sup>8</sup> *Any contingency can become a defining moment for the poor because only in those contingencies, poverty as a way of living changes to poverty as suffering;*
- *The poor in the urban are experts on decision-making*: In loosely-structured communities and a transitional economy, there are few things the poor take for granted. They have to carve out their niche in the web of choices and constraints by keeping their eyes alert for any opportunities and any loophole they can exploit in their favor. The choices they make may be bad, but they are not necessarily the result of a lack of information or freedom.

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<sup>8</sup> This expenditure is catastrophic if a household’s financial contributions to the health system exceed 40 percent of the income remaining after subsistence needs have been met.  
[https://www.who.int/health\\_financing/documents/household-health-expenditure/en/](https://www.who.int/health_financing/documents/household-health-expenditure/en/)

Given the complexity of poverty in the urban areas, empowering, understood as developing ‘the capabilities for making informed choices and acting on their own behalf’ (Ogata and Cels 2003), would be a lot more challenging task. The first challenge is the *weak sense of community* among urban settlers. Sense of community here is not restricted only to physical communities. As long as the people find themselves not alone with their problem, they form a community (e.g., ethnic minority women). The urban does not share similar problems but only a similar consequence, *poverty*. Poverty is the result of immensely diverse problems. There are few communal resources, and competition for resources, therefore, is intense. Also, these communities are not under the leadership of some authority figures like village heads. The authority figures in the communities of the urban poor are usually police, or heads of their districts who are outsiders to the communities.

The second challenge is the diverse sense of deprivation. People have to become aware that they deserve better choices and better life. While this awareness is strong in some groups of the poor (e.g., those who are forcefully displaced because of urbanization projects), the same awareness is not strong among the migrant workers to whom migration is a choice seeking a better life. In the case of Ho Chi Minh City, the sense of deprivation may still linger in the group that returned in the 1980s, but for them that is a history that they cannot change.

Urban poverty is a thorny issue. While the macro approach, including the improvement of the infrastructure and the universalization of education, among many others, are necessary, more immediate responses at the local level are also urgently needed. Empowerment has emphasized the long-term benefits of its programs through education, training, and the like. By contrast, the concept of ‘*contingency*’ suggests more short-term approach to empowering the urban poor. We sometimes spot people ‘doing just fine’ in slum areas but doing just fine can vanish if any problem occurs. In the crisis moments like those, the poor tend to make risky choices without

considering long-term consequences. That is caused by what Sendhil Mullainathan & Eldar Shafir (2014) called ‘tunnel vision’ due to ‘a tax on mental bandwidth’ when people are faced with scarcity. Empowerment would therefore assist the poor right at those critical moments to improve their decision making so that the moment would not plunge them more deeply into poverty.

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## Appendix A: Covid-19 Tracing Guidelines from the Ministry of Health

