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The role of overseas non-government organizations in providing housing for homeless persons in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

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Revised Abstract

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is the easternmost country on the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia and is approximately 332 square kilometres in area. With a population of over 86 million Vietnam is the thirteenth most populous country in the world. All organs of Vietnam's government are controlled by the Communist Party. In 1986 Vietnam launched a political and economic renewal campaign (Doi Moi) that introduced reforms to convert the country from a central command planning-based economy to a socialist-orientated mixed market economy. Doi Moi combined government planning with free-market incentives and encouraged the establishment of private businesses and foreign investment, including foreign-owned enterprises. Since 1984 poverty has nearly halved, but in 2007 an estimated 15% of the population were still living below the poverty line, and many of these are homeless. Vietnam's Housing Law became effective on 1 July 2006. The legislation sets out a legal framework for a social welfare housing fund in Vietnam for lease and hire purchase to Vietnamese families (Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, 2006).

The paper examines the role of overseas non-government organizations in providing housing for homeless persons in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and in particular the role of a Melbourne

based Australian charity, who have built housing for families who were squatting or were without shelter, in Hoi An town in central Vietnam. The paper also examines the communist government's view of such external intervention and what the State does to assist homeless people.

Keywords

Homelessness – Vietnam- concepts of home

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I am grateful for the time and explanations given to me by the Director of the Australian charity. The thoughts, observations, and analysis however remain my own, including any misinterpretations or inaccuracies.

Introduction

The paper examines the role of overseas non-government organizations in providing housing for homeless persons in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and in particular the role of a Melbourne based Australian charity, who assist families who are squatting or are without shelter. The paper also examines the communist government's view of such external intervention and what the State does to assist homeless people.

Several things have motivated me to write this paper. The first is in March of this year I took part in a fundraising cycle ride through the length of Vietnam to raise money for an Australian charity who work in Hoi An town in central Vietnam. My visit to the country and the effects that homelessness and displacement have on the urban poor had a deep effect upon me. A search on google scholar for homelessness in Vietnam provides a great deal of information on homelessness amongst American veterans of the Vietnam war, but virtually nothing written in English on homelessness within Vietnam. This mismatch of information infuriated me and I decided to counter balance this in some small way by writing this paper. Vietnam is after all, a country not a war, and the Vietnamese have a right for their story to be told.

The paper first looks at the system of Government in this communist country. This is followed by a discussion of the issues of urban poverty, and of homelessness within a Vietnamese context. A more detailed look is taken of the housing situation on the boat people of Hoi An, and of the relationship between the government and one Australian based non-government organization.

Vietnam and it's System of Government

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is the easternmost country on the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia and is approximately 332 square kilometres in area. Vietnam is the thirteenth most populous country in the world, with a population of over 86 million people. Vietnam's political system is dominated the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). The Vietnamese political

system is highly hierarchical and the power to set national policy rests in the hands of a very small number of individuals. Dominance over society is maintained by the VCP's horizontal and vertical penetration of nearly all organizations and structures within Vietnam (Homelessness International, 2000).

In 1986 Vietnam launched a political and economic renewal campaign (called Doi Moi) that introduced reforms to convert the country from a central command planning-based economy to a socialist-orientated mixed market economy. Doi Moi combines government planning with free-market incentives and encourages the establishment of private businesses and foreign investment, including foreign-owned enterprises (Homelessness International, 2000). Everywhere you go in Vietnam you see people working hard at their own enterprises, selling fruit and bottled water on the street, etc. Everyone is working hard to make a living. Since Doi Moi more non-party candidates are allowed to stand for election. Deputies within the National Assembly are permitted to debate issues, air their views and question and criticize ministers. In principle, the Vietnamese Communist Party only sets general policy outlines and does not interfere with the National Assembly's legislative work. At lower levels the People's Councils, and the People's Committees, participate in meetings, discuss and decide practical matters. The Prime Minister and his assistants consider and make final decisions on the proposals put forward by the People's Committees at different levels. Under the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers, there are various ministries, state commissions and general departments, responsible for specific aspects of the country's management (Homelessness International, 2000)

Urban Poverty in Vietnam

Vietnam's commitment to reducing poverty among its citizens has been successful in bringing down the poverty rate significantly. Since 1984 poverty has nearly halved, but in 2000 an estimated 30 million of the population were still living in poverty, and many of these people have nowhere adequate in which to live. Many sleep on the shopfloors where they work, and cook and live their lives on the street . In the 1990s the doi moi reforms generated high economic growth, which was accompanied by larger reductions in poverty. The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACER) attribute this in part because access to land, education and health services was distributed across the population in a relatively equitable manner (Tran Minh Chau et al, 2003). Vietnam's average annual per capita income doubled in the ten years leading to 2003. However, average per capita annual income is still low, at about US\$400 in 2000.

Vietnam is still a primarily agricultural country, with only one quarter of its 80 million people living in urban areas. Urban living standards are five to seven times higher than that of rural areas and this gap is a key factor in speeding up migration into the cities. ACER contends that conditions are particularly difficult for new migrants who have not been able to secure permanent registration and are excluded from official social welfare systems and public services. Migration is likely to increase in the future as urbanization increases in Vietnam. Thirty five percent of urban households have no access to water supply systems, and over fifty percent of households are not connected to a sewer system. The pace of urbanization in Vietnam is increasing rapidly and this rapid urbanization is creating a range of environmental and infrastructure problems (Tran Minh Chau et al, 2003).

Theories of homelessness in the Vietnamese Context

For those of us who are used to conceptualising theories of homelessness within a European and developed world context, Vietnam presents a challenge to our preconceptions and our debates over positivism, social constructionism, feminist, postmodernist and post structuralist explanations. As Fitzpatrick neatly put it, "Homelessness, is not a cultural phenomenon but rather a signifier of objective material and social conditions (Fitzpatrick, p12, 2005) and that stance is certainly put into perspective when visiting somewhere like Vietnam. Structural factors create the conditions within which homelessness will occur (Fitzpatrick, 2005), and the structures supporting homelessness within Vietnam are mostly economic, which have led to an inadequate supply of housing. Although this makes sense in a Vietnamese context, it still however can be that it is also the effects of discourses surrounding homelessness that have influenced policy responses in Vietnam. There is an underlying reality which is being mediated through social and cultural processes (Fitzpatrick, 2005), and so a 'weak' social constructionist explanation is not inappropriate. Within Vietnam there are dramatically different rates of governmental budget allocations for infrastructure in Vietnam's large "1st Grade" cities than in the rest of the country's provincial urban centers. The cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City currently contain about half of Vietnam's total urban population and dominate its urban hierarchy (Tran Minh Chau et al, 2003). The infrastructure needs of these two major cities have absorbed the lion's share of urban development investment, which has disadvantaged smaller urban areas such as Hoi An.

Within Australia, where I live and work, the cultural definition of homelessness proposes that a person is homeless if they fall into one of three groups: Primary, Secondary or Tertiary (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 1992). People without conventional accommodation, such as those living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter are known as the primary homeless, and it is Vietnamese people within this category that I concentrate on in this paper. Even though this is a cultural definition, and definitions of homelessness can be contested, because that affects how it is treated as a social problem (Jacobs 1999), it can surely be considered that any human being, in any culture, living within the primary group, is indeed homeless. The definition of a social problem like homelessness has real impacts on policy making (Jacobs, 1999).

Homelessness in Hoi An – the boat people

The town of Hoi An is in Quang Province, and is a small river port in central Vietnam. It is a UNESCO heritage listed town and has well developed tailoring and tourist industries. Hoi An has a tropical climate and is prone to typhoons and flooding, areas along the Hoi An River flood annually (RMIT, 2008). Lots of people live in very little boats on Thu-Bon River, as a community. These landless people are fisher people and traders. They have been boat people for generations and mostly they do not wish to live on the land as they feel safe on a boat. As Easthorpe (2004) points out, home is a particularly significant type of place, and is a place where one feels ontologically secure. It is not the physical structure of a house that makes a home, but it is rather when such spaces are inscribed with meaning that they become home (Easthorpe, p 134, 2004).

The reason that 'place' is such a useful concept for housing studies is that it provides a theoretical basis for addressing the relationships that people have with the external world

.....In understanding home as a significant type of place we are no longer limited to working within a false dichotomy of house as a physical structure and home as a social, cultural and emotive construct.

Easthorpe, p129 and 136, 2004)

So, whilst living on these incredibly small boats, the boat people of Hoi An have no sense of being homeless (although they may well have a sense of being inadequately housed if their boats are old and leaking). When the boat people are made homeless because of flood and typhoon, however, they do lose 'significant type of place' and are made homeless. Approximately fifteen years ago a massive flood in Ho An damaged many boats, and lots of people died. Whilst some boat dwellers have been assisted by the government, some are still living on boats that do not provide shelter from the rain and cold of winter, and the people living there are inadequately housed, and in our western, landlubbers' eyes, would be considered homeless. The river floods every year in November and those living in shacks on the river side are flooded. Some of the very poor live there all year, in huts that have holes in the walls, and with only dirt on the floor. There are no windows, no bathroom, no toilet, no running water. Water is collected and kept in concrete tubs. There are also no furniture or possessions, people sleep on the floorboards or raised platforms. They are squatters as they do not own the land or hut where they live. ACER points out that this is a common phenomenon and that within many cities across South East Asia, families living in informal settlements are often compelled to live in squalid, overcrowded conditions on marginal land, which has severe impacts on families' health, physical security and social well-being (ACER, 2003).

Local Government interventions to help the homeless of Hoi An

In response to the typhoon fifteen years ago, the government gave the boat people land where they have built their own shanties, with compacted earth on the ground and no running water or sanitation. The shanties are right by the river, and every year they are destroyed by flooding. Every year at this time the people go back on their boats until the flooding subsides. Because they are living right on the river's edge the people have coped with a move to the land. With the advent of tourism in Hoi An, that previously worthless land in the flood plain by the river has become valuable. ACER notes that eviction is a constant threat as land becomes increasingly valuable in Asian cities. Governments of various countries have sought to 'solve the problems' of slum settlements by forcibly relocating slum dwellers to distant sites on the outskirts of cities with little or no infrastructure, shelter or welfare provision to mitigate the effects of such a move, leaving poor communities more impoverished than before (ACER, 2003).

Some years ago the Miss Universe competition final took place in Hoi An. In accordance with what has happened in other areas of the world when a large amount of media attention is directed to an area because of a sporting or similar event, the local government cleaned up the area, by painting the roads and encouraging the shanty dwellers to move to an area further out of town, in this case to on a reclaimed old cemetery. Vietnam's Housing Law became effective on 1 July 2006. The legislation sets out a legal framework for a social welfare housing fund in Vietnam for lease and hire purchase to Vietnamese families (Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, 2006). However on the old cemetery site it is not possible to see river, and so is not suitable for fisher families,

who have lived on the river for generations. Because of this not all have taken up the offer of cheap land that was made to them. The riverside squatters still have the option of living there, but because they live by fishing and because they are superstitious of ancestral ghosts in the old graveyard, they have mostly chosen to remain as squatters by the riverside.

Vietnam is a poor country, and the extent to which it can provide housing is limited. Close to the river seven houses have been built on government land for the poor. The shell of houses was provided by the government to their design, but with no fixture or fittings including flooring. Allocations were decided by the government and tenants have a permanent tenancy but cannot sell them. The Government could technically take back the houses at anytime, the houses may be for life and the families may be able to pass them on to their children. However, they may also be taken away from them. If developers want the land the Government can legally take the homes back and compensate the tenants.

An Australian NGO's work in Hoi An with homeless people

A non-profit charity registered in Victoria, Australia, which works in Hoi An, helping street children and orphans and also helping with the housing needs of local families. The type of help that they have provided is to install wells and pumps for families without water, install iron roofs to make houses water-proof, connect electricity for families without power, and concrete dirt floors in many houses. The seven houses built by the Government have been completed for families who were previously squatting or they were without shelter. Twenty four boats have been built which now provide a source of income, a means of providing food for the family and somewhere to live when the river floods annually. Squatters on river side without their own land have been sponsored through the charity and helped to buy their own land, where it is hoped eventually they will be able to build their own home rather than live in a shack.

In some cases the charity has worked collaboratively with local Government officers to help particular families. In one case the charity provided money for building materials. Where the extremely poor and sick family were squatting has now been enclosed with a concrete floor and brick walls, with the labouring work provided by the local government. The charity reports that it is easier for them to hold meetings with officers, and to act as advocates for families, because they are foreigners. Local people do not feel able to ask for help for themselves. The relationship and trust between the charity and the government is crucial, and it is because of this that charity remains anonymous in this paper. A paperwork trail of permissions can make work tedious, timeconsuming and difficult, and it is therefore vital that offence is not caused.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper is that it has served as an introduction to the housing conditions of some of the people of Vietnam. Since 1984 the country has experienced vast changes to become a socialist-orientated mixed market economy. Although this has resulted in a rise in average per capita annual income to about US\$400 (in 2000), this still means that thirty million Vietnamese people are living in poverty. All levels of government remain committed to helping the poor into adequate housing, and this has resulted in the beginning of a fruitful relationship between

representatives of two very different cultures, the Vietnamese Communist Party and an Australian based charity.

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