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Analysing City-Regions in a Vietnamese Context: An Overview of Concepts, Definitions and Development Policy Implications

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Abstract: In recent years, Vietnam has made forward-looking steps in endorsing and promoting City-region development with appropriate vision and leadership. However, there appears to be rather limited literature on the city-region as well as a gap between how the ‘city-region’ is understood conceptually and the relevant policies being advocated. To have a more thorough consideration of whether such advocacy is appropriate, a more thorough comprehension of concepts, definitions and implications is necessary. This paper aims to contribute to this literature gap, firstly by demonstrating how city-regions are functional economic areas which can be empirically studied. Secondly, by analyzing the Vietnamese legal framework using the Hanoi Capital Region and the Ho Chi Minh City Region as case studies, this paper presents arguments that City-region development in Vietnam is highly normative and politically guided. Some major identified challenges come from poor data collection and lack of formal recognition. Urgent changes in perspective, as well as data collection practice, are needed to enable a unified approach to city-regions, which is of interest to both academics and policy-makers.

Keywords: City-region, policy analysis, urban economics, urban development.

1. Introduction

Since the last decade of the 20th century, there has been a resurgence of interest in the concept of the city-region among academics, policymakers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and even the general public. Even

though this trend was more prominent in the Global North (where the term was originally conceptualized in the early 20th century), interest in the city-region (CR) concept has also captured the attention of various stakeholders in the Global South as well. This has been reflected in agendas, research and documentation as evidenced in the following quotations:

“Positive economic impacts of agglomerated city regions and their contributions to expediting growth should be tapped as opportunities in the

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context of rapidly urbanizing Asian developing countries” [1, p. 5]

“Other dynamic and strategic cities are extending beyond their administrative boundaries and integrating their hinterlands to become full-blown city-regions. These are emerging in various parts of the world, turning into spatial units that are territorially and functionally bound by economic, political, socio-cultural, and ecological systems” [2, p. 55].

Among the South East Asian countries, the concept has gained currency in regional academic discussion too, as noted in the ASEAN Economic Bulletin: “It is argued that these emerging city regions are the major focus of the urbanization process in these countries, but their relative importance is not clearly understood” [3, p. 25].

The resurgent interest in the concept of CRs compliments the on-going phenomenon since the 1990s where many cities in the developing world started to advance in urban income and become pivotal as economic drivers in their respective countries. Storper (2013) observed that “metropolitan areas are continuing to spread out physically. The great suburban wave in the West is slowing, but suburbanization is gaining in emerging economies” [4, pp. 2-3]. In fact, a closer look at the world’s largest agglomerations classified by the United Nations (2019) confirms this is the case [5]. In 1980 there were five urban agglomerations with population exceeding 10 million people; in 2015, this number was 29 and most large agglomerations are in Asia and Africa. Large agglomeration, or city-region formation, has been the urban development trend on-going in many emerging economies, and is becoming the everyday life experienced of their urban residents.

As with the case of other fast-growing economies in Asia, urban development patterns in Vietnam tend to take on similar traits. Since economic reform in 1986 (Doi Moi), Vietnam has steadily enjoyed spectacular economic growth, millions of people were lifted out of poverty and at the same time the urban system has expanded rapidly. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have become the two largest economic

hubs, which have attracted labor and investment in the country. In 2016 and 2017 respectively, they became the Hanoi Capital Region and the Ho Chi Minh City-Region as officially established by the Government of Vietnam.

Yet, the context of urban development in Vietnam has certain characteristics which make discussions of city-regions academically worthy and relevant. Vietnam is not unfamiliar with the CR concept and, on the contrary, the Government of Vietnam (GoV) has paid special attention to urban development. The very idea of a city being the engine of growth for its surrounding region has been consistently repeated in major Vietnamese urban development strategies. However, there appears to be rather limited literature with specific focus on the concept of the CR in Vietnam. In other words, the concept has advanced beyond the academic domain and somehow gained relevance in the Vietnamese urban policy sphere, most remarkably by realizing itself into tangible and legal policies. There exists a gap between how the “city-region” is understood conceptually and the relevant policies being advocated. Perhaps experience or political leadership has been the primary force providing guidance on city-region development in Vietnam. But to have a more thorough consideration of whether such advocacy is appropriate, it is necessary to take a step back and take a more comprehensive perspective of the concept. This paper aims to contribute to the literature gap.

Extended literature has shown how the CR is a *functional economic area* with complex socio-economic interactions and linkages. This paper aims to contribute additional dimensions for better appreciation and fuller consideration of current debates about CR in Vietnam via two expository lenses. The first of these is by presenting a review of notable literature regarding the city-region concept, from its theoretical foundation to conceptualization phase and with established methodology and empirical studies (Section 2). Through this extensive literature review, it is shown that CRs are functional economic areas that can be

empirically studied. The second lens analyses the presence of the city-region in the Vietnamese urban policy framework using the Hanoi Capital Region (HNCR) and the Ho Chi Minh City Region (HCMCR) as case studies (Section 3). Both city-regions are the largest economic hubs in Vietnam which were formally recognized and legally established; therefore a closer examination would compare and contrast the approach taken by the GoV and contemporary literature. Because of the lack of reliable data at the city-regional level (discussed further in Section 4), the analysis relies on policy documentation published by the Vietnamese party-state and, to a lesser extent, information reported by the media. These dimensions are of interest to both academic circles and policy-makers, particularly when the Vietnam National Assembly is reviewing and amending relevant laws relating to urban economic development.

2. Emergence and Resurgence of the City-Region Concept

The concept of CR is widely referenced today and the significance of CR as an urban form to organize spatial economies in developed countries has long been recognized. Its roots can be traced back through a series of sporadic works in the early 20th century, which eventually led to more formal approaches and methodology in the 1950s and 1960s.

2.1. Theoretical Rationale

The theoretical rationale for the city-region concept started with major works by location theorists. How are activities organized in a region in relation with a central city? One of the pioneering works to solve this question was German theorist von Thunen's work "The isolated State" (original German: *Der isolierte Staat*) [6]. Von Thunen put forward a hypothetical uniform region perfectly isolated from the rest of the world and explained how economic activities were spatially organized

(Figure 1). The most significant assumption in von Thunen's model is that "rent" is determined by centrality and transport cost, whereas Ricardian rent [7] was determined by the productivity of land (e.g. the fertility of soil). In today's terms, von Thunen's model is overly simplistic but back then it was ground-breaking for its consideration of spatial elements in economic models of the time. His work has inspired other similar works such as Weber's "Least Cost Theory" [8] which attempted to find the position for industrial production which incurs the least cost and Alonso's "Bid-Rent Theory" [9] whose model demonstrated how land rent in a city is determined by competition between firms, producers and households. While the formation of a CR was not the primary intention, their works have highlighted how economic activities can be distributed in space, in this case around the spatial objects *city* and *region*.

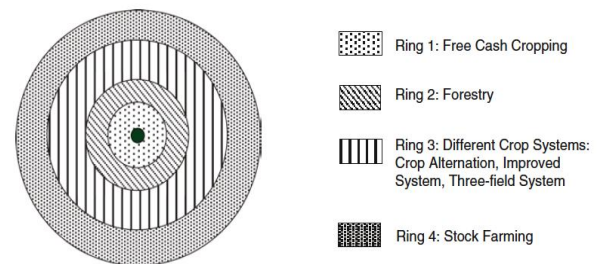


Figure 1. von Thunen's rings in "Der isolierte Staat".

Source: Adapted from Eiselt & Marianov (2011) [10, p. 477].

Another advancement during this period is the Central Places Theory developed by German geographer Christaller (1966) [11]. According to Christaller, the function of a town is to provide goods and services to its residents living in the surrounding area, hence such towns are called *central places*. Central places that are capable of providing more goods and services are larger but fewer and vice versa, smaller central places are more numerous but are limited by their reach. Christaller chartered a system of central places by rank-size using

observations in southern Germany (illustrated in Figure 2). One striking feature of Christaller's system is the hexagonal boundaries for each region. As opposed to circles, there is no overlapping of functions between central places yet it is unrealistic in today's reality. Christaller's work offered a glimpse into the *hub-and-spoke* perspective of CR nowadays.

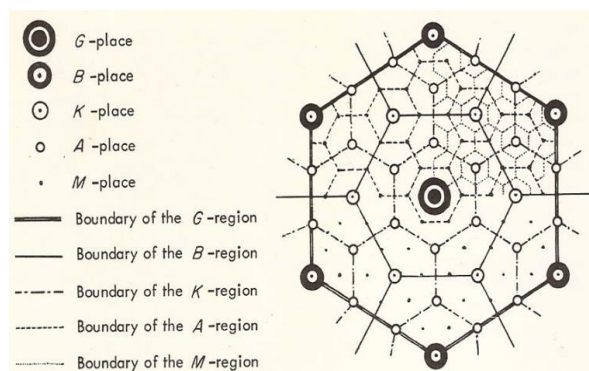


Figure 2. Christaller's system of Central Places.
Source: Adapted from Christaller (1966) [11, p. 66].

French economist Francois Perroux published his papers on "Economic Space" [12] and "Growth Poles" [13]. Perroux defined growth poles as "centers (poles or loci) from which centrifugal forces emanate and to which forces are attracted. Each center being a center of attraction and repulsion has its proper field, which is set in the field of all other centers" ([13], cited in [15, p. 106]). Perroux's works have identified two factors: a pole where growth is concentrated and a system of channels (or forces) to exchange growth from the pole to the rest of the region. Meyers (1963) summarized three different approaches to define regions: "The first stresses *homogeneity* with respect to some one or combination of physical, economic, social or other characteristics; *nodality* or *polarization*, usually around some central urban place; and the third is *programming-* or *policy-oriented*, concerned mainly with administrative coherence or identity between the area being studied and available political institutions for effectuating policy decisions" [15]. Based on Meyer's

classification, Parr (2008) argued that the CR best fits the characteristics of a nodal region due to the two comprising components [16].

One of the important contributions of these theoretical works is the treatment of inter-regional interactions (i.e. economic dynamics within a region), rather than intra-regional interactions (i.e. between regions) as proposed by classical and neo-classical economic models. Particularly, they attempted to counter unrealistic assumptions often "omitted" by mainstream economists, such as "constant returns to scale, zero transportation costs, identical production technologies across regions, perfectly competitive markets, identical preferences across regions, and the assumption of homogeneous labor and capital inputs" [17, p. 139]). It is apparent that the theoretical works reviewed so far have paid special attention to the treatment of space for economic activities and via which they have constituted a wider methodological core, as discussed in Section 2.3.

2.2. Conceptualization

It may appear that the theoretical rationale for CR mainly comes from regional economists and geographers, but the conceptualization has attracted researchers from many other fields too. Tracing the outwards streaming of population from big industrial English towns and cities, Geddes (1915) [18], a British planner, referred to such development as "conurbations", a growth process that he had called for "fuller survey, deeper diagnoses" in planning policies (p. 25). McKenzie (1933), an American sociologist, coined the term "metropolitan region" or "metropolitan community" to point out a functional entity in which "geographically it extends as far as the city exerts a dominant influence" (p. 70) - this term is now popularly known as "metropolitan area" in the US [20]. Bogue (1949) - an American demographer - used the latter term in his book which investigates the relationship among metropolitan centers, satellite cities and county units in the United States (US) [20]. The term "city-region", which is popular in the UK

and Europe, as given its name by Dickinson (1947) [21]. Friedmann and Miller (1965) used the term “urban field” to describe an enlargement of the space for urban living that extends far beyond the boundaries of existing metropolitan areas - defined primarily in terms of commuting to a central city of “metropolitan” size - into the open landscape of the periphery [22].

Each author in their distinctive fields has contributed his or her effort to push the concept of the city-region to the forefront of academic discussions and debates. The definitions proposed are among those that enrich how we understand the *city* and the *region* and their intertwined relationship. This multi-disciplinary engagement has reflected the complex nature of the CR.

During the 1970s, interest in the CR concept underwent a quieter period until the beginning of the 21st century. With the introduction of the Internet, and consequently significant advancement in communication, some authors have predicted how the “death of distance” [23] or the “end of geography” [24] was imminent and yet quite the opposite has happened. Globalization has lowered the barrier for people, goods, investment and information to flow and therefore enhanced our capability to conduct economic activities across space more rapidly and freely; but in contrast, human interaction and activities have also become more concentrated. A small group of elite cities, such as London, New York and Tokyo have repositioned themselves to be “global” cities or “world” cities [25-27] and in the developing economies such as Brazil, China, India and South Korea, “super-agglomerations” emerged as important foci of national growth as well [28]. As the case may be, telecommunications is a complement (or not a strong substitute) for face-to-face interactions and cities [29, 30], and thus globalization only brings about increased demand to be in a city for productive purposes.

In this “world cities” and “global cities” literature, British economist Scott [28, 31, 32] brought forward the concept of the “global city-region” which is described as “a political-economic unit with increasing autonomy of

action on the national and world stages”. By identifying four main aspects of global economic and political relationships, Scott (2001) argued that many CRs are confronted with pressures from globalization to compete and prosper [32]. Putting the CR in the context of the global economy [28, 32] implied that the city-region is reinforced by both internal (i.e. agglomeration of economies) and external (i.e. globalization) factors as well. This is perhaps true for large city-regions such as London, New York and Tokyo where their economies are engaged with financial, capital dynamics globally but also are reinforced with social, cultural, economic interactions from within their population as well.

Compared to early conceptualizations, the renewed interest in the CR concept has advanced our understanding simply beyond a purely administrative construct; the CR is regarded as a *functional economic area* (FEA). The term FEA gained attention from the study of Berry et al. (1969) revisiting the basic principles in the classification of standard US regional statistical areas (SMSA) [33]. Berry et al. defined a FEA accordingly: “low density city characterized by definite interaction of the various parts with the center. The FEA becomes an independent unit in terms of local services to adjacent population”. In England, Hall et al. (1973) [34] and Hall (1974) [35] applied Berry’s approach to England and Wales, giving two definitions of the SMLA city area (adapted from the US survey) and MELA as “the whole of the commuting area dominated by any particular major center of employment” [35, p. 386]. Thus, the definition of the CR here is determined by the economic relationship between an employment center and the periphery surrounding it.

2.3. Dynamics of City-Region

So far, it can be understood that the CR is a specific type of territory which consists of two distinct but intertwined components: a central urban area and a territory outside such urban center. Parr (2008) provided the general structure of a CR with two basic components,

including the city (C zone) and its surrounding territory (S zone): “This C zone, which may account for a substantial proportion of the population of the city-region (sometimes in excess of 50%), is invariably the dominant urban centre” and the S zone “representing the surrounding area or hinterland” [16, p. 3014]. According to Parr (2006) the three most obvious economic interactions are expressed through trade flows, labor-market flows and capital movements [36, p. 558]. Davoudi (2008) argues that interactions within the CR exist not only in an economic form but also in social and environmental forms, which may also include: waste and pollution; natural resources; knowledge; and social behavior, values, lifestyles and identities [37, p. 51].

These interactions have been the research subject for studies which are aimed to delineate the influence of the city onto its hinterland or to untangle the spatial structure of the CR. Here, three important notable methodologies are discussed: flow analysis, gravity model and

density function. The first two of the notable approaches included are: Flow Analysis and the Gravity Model, which offer various approaches to delineate the boundary of the CR by evaluating the type and intensity of interaction between a central city and its periphery [38-40]. The boundary of a CR is where the interaction intensity between the central city and its periphery is at the lowest. The type of interactions examined have been diverse: bus service [41], employed population [42], migration [43, 44] and size of radio stations in kilowatts [45] as proxies for interaction between settlements. An outstanding quality of these approaches is that with the assistance of modern GIS tools, the “reach” of a central city into its surrounding areas can be illustrated. For example, Huff (1973) delineates the spheres of influence of 73 urban places in the US using 14 different types of urban data together (illustrated in Figure 3) [46]. The spheres of influence boundary definitely differs from the administrative boundaries of cities and states.

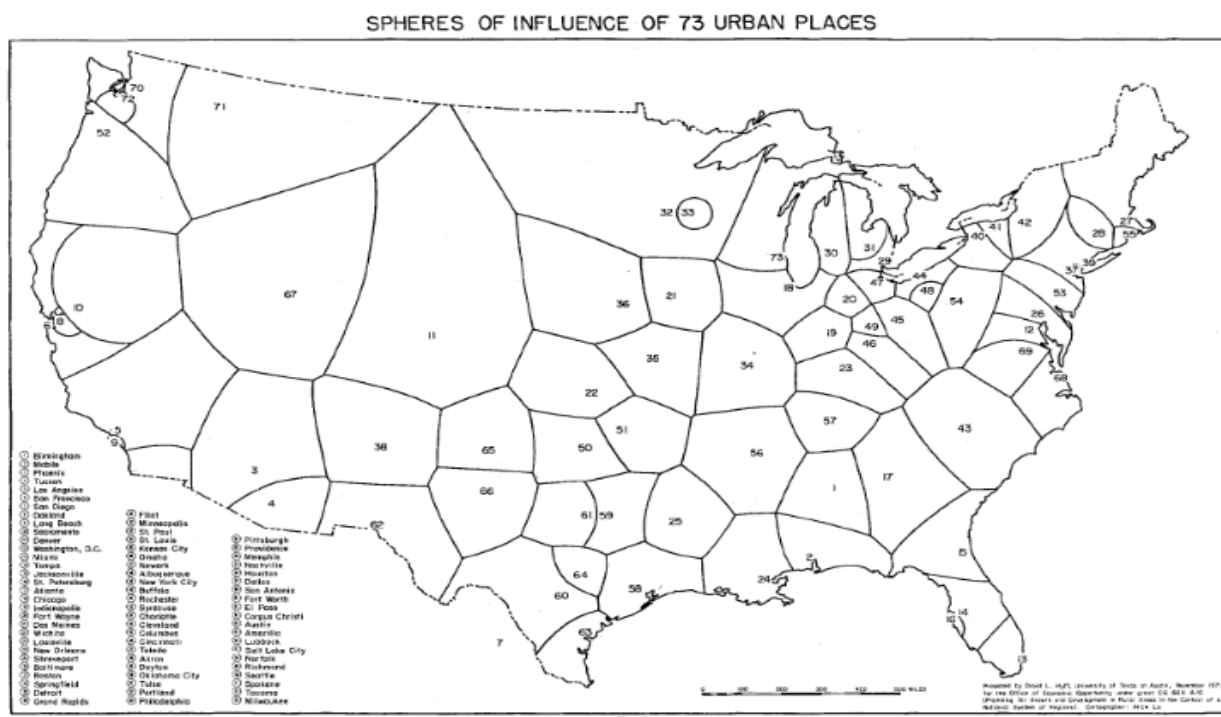


Figure 3. Delineation of regions on basis of spheres of influence.
 Source: Adopted from Huff (1973) [46, p. 327].

The third methodology is Density Function, developed by Clark (1951) [47] and Newling (1969) [48] which demonstrates the population density of a city (Figure 4). When applying the density function to a city over the years, changes in its spatial structure can be observed. Mogridge and Parr (1977) employed the density function using population data in London

during the periods 1951-61, 1961-71, 1971-81 and 1981-91 and confirmed an outwards expansion of the city to its surrounding suburbs in four decades [49]. Bar-El and Parr (2003) also found the transition from city to city-region in Tel-Aviv, Israel between 1977 and 1998 by analyzing population densities in the inner and suburban areas of the city [50].

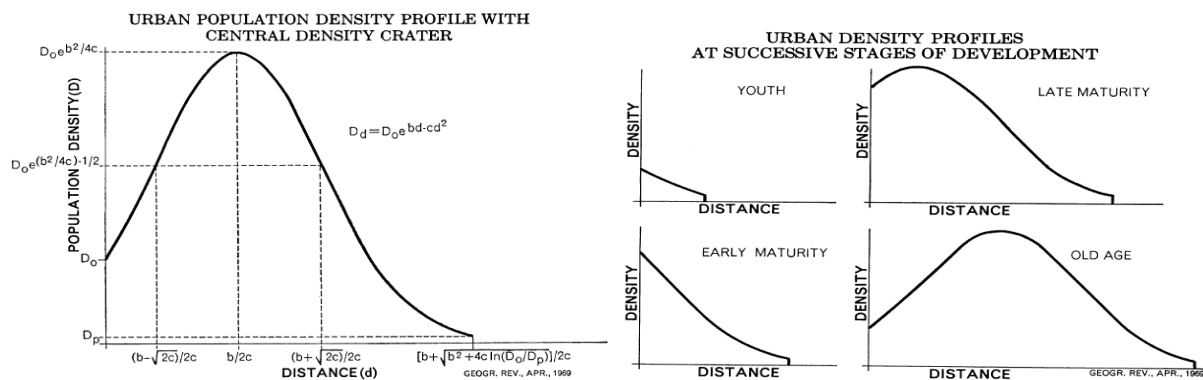


Figure 4. Urban Population Density Profile and The “Wave of Metropolitan Expansion”.

Source: Adopted from Newling (1969) [48, pp. 243-244].

These research approaches show that like a city or a region, a City-region is a viable study subject using similar quantitative and graphical tools.

3. City-Regions in the Vietnamese Context

In Vietnam, the idea that a city plays a central role in radiating growth to its surrounding region has long been established. In a policy review, Hoang (2011) showed that since Doi Moi, the urban development perspective by the Vietnamese party-state has gradually shifted from limiting urbanization to city-centric development [51]. But how the perspective has recently shifted from city-centric to CR-centric remains dubious. In this section, this author explores the presence of the city-region concept in Vietnam’s major urban development framework to understand whether the CR is considered a spatial unit in Vietnam

and how it is being promoted. There are two questions to consider here. The first of these: Is the city-region defined in any of these documentations? In many countries, acknowledging the CR as an economic unit is the first step to legitimize relevant economic policies and territorial governance. For example, an official published framework on City-Regions by the UK [38] government eventually supported delivery of “City Region Deals” in Scotland [52].

The second question is: How are the city-region policies promoted? So far, the literature review above has shown how the CR is viewed as a functional entity, with economic interactions that can be empirically investigated using rigorous, quantitative research tools. Understanding and studying the CR with rigorous, quantitative tools therefore is of both scientific and policy-making significance because it helps the guiding and formulating of research-based, evidence-led policies.

3.1. An overview of City-Regions in Vietnam Urban Development Policies

It is necessary to outline the relevant legal framework in the analysis here. At the time of writing, the most important law to regulate planning activities in Vietnam is the Planning Law 2017. Interestingly, urban planning and urban development is not currently governed by the Planning Law 2017 (based on Article no. 28), but the Construction Law 2014, the Urban Planning Law 2009, and the Law on Organizing Local Government 2015 instead. Currently, the latter laws are under amendment and review by the Vietnam National Assembly to ensure consistency with the Planning Law 2017; nevertheless, they are still effective and continue to regulate urban development in Vietnam.

By-laws documents reviewed include: Resolution on Urban classification; Decree on Detailed regulations on Construction Planning (Decree No. 44); Master Plan for Development of the Vietnam Urban System by 2025, with vision set to 2050; and Documents which established HNCR and HCMCR. A review of major urban development policies with regards to CR is presented in Table 1.

The GoV had materialized these orientations in their practical development strategies as early as the 7th National Congress (1991): “Cities, towns and townships are economic and cultural centers, mainly industrial and commercial centers in every large and small region” (Strategy for Socio-economic stabilizing and development till 2000 [53]).

Table 1. A review of major urban development policies in Vietnam with regards to City-Region concept

Authority	Legal Documents	Definition of “City-Region”	Content related to “City-Region”
National Assembly	Construction Law 2014	Not available	Not available
	Urban Planning Law 2009	No	No
	Planning Law 2017	No	No
	Law on Organizing the Local Government 2015	No	No
National Assembly Standing Committee	Resolution on Urban Classification	No	No
Government	Decree: Detailed Regulations on Construction Planning (Decree No. 44)	No	No
Prime Minister	Master Plan for Development of Vietnam Urban System by 2025, with vision set to 2050	No	Included in Development Orientations
	Adjustment on Construction Planning in Hanoi Capital Region to 2030 with vision to 2050	Only Define administrative boundary of Hanoi Capital Region	Detailed in Table 2
	Adjustment on Construction Planning in Ho Chi Minh City Region to 2030 with vision to 2050	Only Define administrative boundary of Ho Chi Minh City Region	Detailed in Table 2

Source: Tabulated by author, full name provided in Appendix.

In the 11th National Congress, this was reaffirmed: “Develop industrial parks, clusters of industrial products and high tech services in association with big cities to form large economic centers for the country, which are of regional stature, to have a leading role and spill-over impacts on the development of other regions” (Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2011-2020) [54].

From the review of Vietnam’s legal framework, there appears to be a lack of formal recognition of the CR as an economic unit. In the Construction Law 2014, formal definitions are given for cities, urban planning activities and urban landscapes but none are given for CR. In Planning Law 2017, the National Planning System is clearly specified (Article 5) to include planning in descending order: national, regional, provincial, special economic zones, urban planning and rural planning. Strangely, it is unclear where the CR fits into Vietnam’s planning system.

Meanwhile, there are fragmented development orientations directly geared towards CR development, such as in the Master Plan for Development of Vietnam’s Urban System by 2025 with vision to 2050. Nevertheless, they show that the GoV is aware of the CR and is actively promoting CR-related development one way or another.

The case presented here supports this author’s doubt that there is a missing link bridging between concept and practice in Vietnam. On the one hand, there is no formal recognition of what a city-region means and on the other hand, the GoV is promoting CR-related policies.

3.2. The case of Hanoi Capital Region and Ho Chi Minh City Region

Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are both primary cities for Vietnam’s national economy and also the first to be rescaled to city-regions. They enable our analysis a closer filter into how CR policies are implemented and motivated at the sub-national levels. The Master Plan for HNCR was first initiated in 2008, then revised in 2012 and the current version is

formalized in 2016. For HCMCR, the Master Plan was approved in 2008, revised in 2014 before the current plan was established in 2017. In Table 2, this author outlines the main features of these documents.

The most important difference between the two Master Plans is how the CR structure is realized. HNCR is managed by *provinces*, which is illustrated by the development orientations being assigned to Hanoi and individual provinces. For example, Hanoi is assigned the role of an economic, political, social, industrial powerhouse for the whole city-region while Ha Nam is assigned the role of a logistics center south of the city-region. Meanwhile, HCMCR is managed by *sub-regions*, which often overlap the boundary of multiple provinces. For example, the central sub-region consists of HCM City and parts of Long An, Binh Duong and Dong Nai provinces, the north-north western sub-region consists of Binh Phuoc, Tay Ninh and northern parts of Binh Duong; development orientations are also assigned to sub-regions instead of provinces. A greenbelt and landscape area is specifically settled in HCMCR whereas this is absent in HNCR.

These similarities and differences call for at least three arguments here. First of these, as discussed in Section 3.1, the recognition and legal framework for a CR is relatively lacking in Vietnam which questions the validity of the legal basis for the establishment of these two City-Regions.

Second of these, how HNCR and HCMCR’s spatial structure are realized differently demonstrates that the GoV’s approach to CR is somewhat inconsistent. Intra- and inter-regional economic linkages have been an on-going debate in Vietnam for many years [55-57]. If large CRs have conflicting grasps on spatial organization (and eventually spatial cooperation), it only adds further confusion to the already pressing issue. A more formal approach put forward by the government, for example like the case of the UK government [38], would be helpful to alleviate potential disagreements for current CRs and other large cities.

Table 2. Main features of HNCR and HCMCR Master Plans

	Hanoi Capital Region	Ho Chi Minh City Region
Established	2016	2017
Authority	Prime Minister	
Legal basis	Law on Construction 2014 Law on Organizing the Government 2015 Detailed regulations on Construction Planning	
Boundaries	Hanoi & 09 neighboring provinces	HCM City & 07 neighboring provinces
Area	24,317.7 km ²	30,404 km ²
Projected population & urbanization in 2030	21-23m people (in which 11,5-13,8m urban); urbanization rate of 55-60%	24-25m people (in which 18-19m are urban); urbanization rate of 70-75%
Spatial structure	Divided into provinces, Hanoi as command center	Divided into sub-regions, corridors and greenbelts; HCM City and parts of Long An, Binh Duong, Dong Nai as central urban area
Development orientations promoted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orientations for Hanoi and provinces - Urban System - Rural - Industrial & Micro-industrial clusters - Commerce & Services - Tourism - Preservation & Green space - Social Infrastructure - Technical Infrastructure - Transportation - Environment Strategy Analysis - List of prioritized Investment projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orientations for sub-regions - Urban System - Industrial - Science, Education & Training - Commerce & Services - Tourism - Preservation - Cultural & Sports - Transportation - Other Technical Infrastructure - Environment Strategy Analysis - List of prioritized Investment projects

Source: Tabulated by author.

The last, and most crucial argument is there is no development monitoring instrument for CR in Vietnam. The GoV has shown to be rigorous and, to some extent, even open-minded about utilizing measurements for monitoring growth and development at national and sub-national levels. For example, the use of a classification of cities system to grade cities into specific rank and encourage aspiring cities to go up the urban hierarchy [58, 59] or the use of Provincial Competitiveness Indexes to boost governance, management and identity in provinces. Effort and attention has been made to steady support for urban policies. Yet for CR, there's no standard to guide and evaluate

their performance, which may undermine the effectiveness of many policies promoted.

4. Further Comments and Implications

Why it appears to be lacking in the CR legal basis? Meyer (1963) argued that "Naturally enough, regional definitions as established in practice often represent a compromise between these different pure types. In particular, availability and limitations of data can and do dictate departures from 'ideal type' definitions in many situations" [15, p. 22]. Statistical data collected and published in Vietnam is available

at a provincial level and national level and are relatively *static* (i.e. fixed by annual publication date and bound within the boundary of provinces or nations). Many definitions of CRs, as well as methodology in CR research, rely on usage of *dynamic* data (i.e. exchange between provinces, settlements, sub-regional units) on which the interactions within CRs can be examined in depth. The lack of such *dynamic* data or data of “flows” has hindered much research on CRs in Vietnam, resulting in a rather limited and normative circulation of concepts and definitions. Because of this limitation, the case study of HNCR and HCMCR in Section 3.2 have only just touched the surface level.

Does it matter to have a thorough and complete CR legal framework? Until recently, with the introduction and implementation of Planning Law 2017, the GoV’s views on *Economic Development and Spatial Planning* has shifted from “mutually exclusive” to “mutually complimentary”. The Law has been the first step up from the non-existent system before 2017, but unfortunately the CR might have been overlooked during the process. Current increase in concerns regarding CR economic development, spatial organization [60-64] affirms the effort spent and attention given by the GoV to better policy-making in CR development. But if no formal framework or regulations are to govern the CR, much attention cannot progress into concrete, well-founded solutions. Therefore, a more rigorous, thorough legal framework on CRs does matter and should be a priority.

So what are the development implications? The most urgent matter, this author argues, is official recognition of the CR as a territorial, economic unit that is formally subject to relevant legal documents in Vietnam. The GoV so far has made efforts to bring CR development forward as a public discussion and to seek practical solutions. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how the CR is being governed and where the CR fits in the National Planning System. The lack of official recognition would deem conflicting management and even vested

interests in future development. Some studies have been skeptical, even critical when analyzing Vietnam’s urban policies [65] however positive and constructive changes can be anticipated to tackle this issue because at the time of writing, several laws are being amended to ensure consistency with the Planning Law 2017.

The second implication here is aimed at how statistical data is collected and published in Vietnam. The distinguished characteristic of the CR is the socio-economic interactions stemming from assorted human activities. To properly investigate these internal linkages require extensive data on “flows” is required (i.e. movement of people between settlements, exchange of capital across provincial borders or movements of goods via means of transportation, etc.). Unfortunately, such type of data is either unavailable or unpublished in Vietnam. To make a firm statement on this issue, in Chapter 4 (“*Managing Urbanization for Greater Economic Efficiency*”), Vietnam 2035 Report, The World Bank has criticized data availability in Vietnam as “inconsistent”, “scarce” and “no provision” [66]. As demonstrated in Section 2.3, research into CR relies on a diverse range of economic models and tools, so better and more accessible data allows for more quality research which ultimately would provide more reliable evidence-based input to policy making. If the CR is to be studied properly, the Vietnam General Statistics Office needs to execute a pioneering, constructive role to enable the availability of such data for both research and policy-making.

Many CRs nowadays are increasingly recognized to have their own identities and distinct type of governance, especially when they have reached a critical size or have become pivotal for their national economy. Their size and economies may require unique ways to organize and govern, which differ greatly from conventional norms of local governments. The issues of identity and governance are best left open for future research. The point made here is, although it is still a long way for Vietnamese city-

regions, an open-minded and mutual respect is desirable to maximize potentials in CR and to avoid friction between the central government and CR governments, especially when the legal framework is still in an amendment phase in Vietnam and the centralized, top-down managerial style is still the relevant norms in many Vietnam cities and provinces.

5. Conclusion

Starting with its two largest economic hubs Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam has made forward-looking steps in endorsing and promoting CR development with tangible policies, appropriate vision and leadership. But ultimately, one cannot partake in advocacy of CR policies if underlying socio-economic dynamics are not properly understood. Thus, if the case for CR development is to push forward, there has to be a primary understanding of the concept to a greater extent. If CR policies are to be made with better conviction, there needs to be more research-based evidence and a more solid legal framework. The totality of CR specifically, and of urban economics/urban studies' fields in a greater sense, can only be achieved with higher commitment and a unified approach. Clearly this is of interest to both Vietnamese policy-makers as well as researchers.

In this paper, an overview of CR concepts, definitions, economic dynamisms, methodology and notable empirical studies has been presented. An analysis of the Vietnamese legal framework with regards to CR development, using HNCR and HCMCR as case studies, has also been provided. This overview is by no mean complete or thorough, as this paper has mostly discussed *economic* linkages while the reality of CR is much more colorful, complex and diverse. It should also be noted that this paper has primarily discussed monocentric-type city-regions. Industrial cities around Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are emerging to be potential

economic nodes to reinforce a polycentric-type city-region, which has been left relatively unexplored in this article. The approach here therefore has represented an attempt at an original advance on the topic of the City-region which, this author hopes, would warmly engage more academic discussion in Vietnam in the coming future.

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Appendix

Summary of legal documents reviewed in this paper

Name used in paper	Full name
Construction Law 2014	Construction Law (Law No. 50/2014/QH13 dated 18 June 2014).
Urban Planning Law 2009	Urban Planning Law (Law No. 30/2009/QH12 dated 29 June 2009).
Planning Law 2017	Planning Law 2017 (Law No. 21/2017/QH14 dated 24 November 2017).
Law on Organising the Local Government 2015	Law on Organising the Local Government (Law No. 77/2015/QH13 dated 19 June 2015).
Resolution on Urban Classification	Resolution on Urban Classification (Resolution No. 1210/2016/UBTVQH13 dated 25 May 2016).
Decree: Detailed Regulations on Construction Planning (Decree No. 44)	Decree on Detailed Regulations on Construction Planning (Decree No. 44/2015/ND-CP dated 06 May 2015).
Master Plan for Development of Vietnam Urban System by 2025, with vision set to 2050	Decision on Approving Modification of the Master Plan for Development of Vietnam's Urban System by 2025, vision set to 2050 (Decision No. 445 dated 17 April 2009).
Adjustment on Construction Planning in Hanoi Capital Region to 2030 with vision to 2050	Decision No. 768/QĐ-TTg (dated 06 May 2016): Approval of Adjustment of Hanoi Capital Region Construction by 2030, with vision set to 2050.
Adjustment on Construction Planning in Ho Chi Minh City Region to 2030 with vision to 2050	Decision No. 2076/QĐ-TTg (dated 22 December 2017): Approving the Adjustment to the Construction Plan for Ho Chi Minh City Region by 2030, with vision set to 2050.