

# A RETURN TO SOC TRANG

District of North Vancouver, BC Canada and  
Soc Trang City, Vietnam

## By Marten Kruijse

Soc Trang City, Vietnam, and the District of North Vancouver were paired in 2011 for an international effort to work with Soc Trang to help develop the municipality's economy. Two pilot projects were designed and pursued, one in urban agriculture and another in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), under FCM's Municipal Program for Economic Development. With population and GDP growth at about 15% per annum, Soc Trang is now fast becoming a regional business centre. The municipal partnership with Soc Trang came to an end in 2015 with the closing of MPED. But Marten Kruijse, who was the lead expert from the District of North Vancouver, had the opportunity to visit Soc Trang again in summer 2017. This is the story about how the two Soc Trang pilots are doing two years later.



## Hello again

I was excited and a little anxious, too. I hadn't been to Soc Trang in over three years and wondered if the projects I had worked on were still doing well. Three years earlier, the urban agriculture project had increased household incomes of participants by 5 to 10%. Municipal officials had built relationships with local businesses and had started a website to promote local goods and services. Anyone who has worked in municipal government knows that political and economic realities can change in the blink of an eye. So, I didn't know what to expect.

On my way to meet with Soc Trang city officials, I was struck by how different the city looked. There were new buildings housing more service and retail businesses. There was more traffic. Modest new subdivisions were in place, the dirt roads were now paved and the previously flood-prone canal running through the city centre had been given dykes and was framed by a beautiful path and flowers. Economic development and improved quality of life were obviously high on this city's agenda.

I met with municipal staff in their bright new building that afforded a cheery clean environment and numerous offices. It was definitely an improvement from the old dilapidated headquarters still standing beside the new building. Many of the employees had been replaced by a younger staff, but not everyone around the meeting table was a stranger. Mme Ngoc, who had retired from her position as head of the Department of Economics and had been a delight to work with, joined the meeting. Le Van Tuan, an expert in the Department of Economics, was still on staff as was Bui Thanh Tung, Vice Head of the Department of Urban Management, with whom I still regularly exchange emails. It was a happy reunion.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTION

A common strategic direction for future growth in Soc Trang City was needed from the outset. In 2011, a scenario planning approach was employed using a survey of, and workshop with, city staff. Four scenarios for the future were developed and then consolidated into a common vision. In 2017, that vision is still guiding development, though staff agreed a new one would soon be needed to propel the city further into its promising future.

# PROJECT 1 FARMERS GROW SUCCESS WITH THE COOPERATIVE IN WARD 4

## Getting started

The urban agriculture project was designed to help urban farmers increase their incomes by growing high-valued crops and improve marketing. Specialists from Can Tho University tested soil and water from each of the city's 10 wards and conducted a value-chain analysis. From here, it was decided to establish a vegetable growers' cooperative in Ward 4 and a stall for selling the crops in the more prosperous Ward 2, where the market could bear relatively strong prices. The 13 farmers participating in the pilot were very progressive, willingly accepting new seeds, learning new technologies and adopting the food safety and farm labour standards in VietGAP, a national certification program for good agriculture practices.

Before the pilot phase was over, it was apparent the project was increasing farmer incomes and was a basis for future growth. The city supported efforts to expand the marketing strategy to the regional level and to negotiate supply contracts with supermarkets, restaurants and dining halls. Additional farmers were trained in VietGAP certification criteria.

## Staying on course

During my return visit, I was told that the small Ward 4 farms are thriving. In fact, the number of participating households has increased to 20, and the city plans to replicate the project in another ward. I met with the chair of the farmers' committee at the demonstration site, and there is no question that the farms continue to provide

good incomes. Farmer optimism and resilience, too, have increased. Farmers are now able to sell their organic produce at a better price on their own. They are pleased with the distribution channels that have been established. The staff, too, have learned to make better use of their time by playing a greater role in facilitation rather than focussing their efforts on project management.

## Planning for future growth

The farmers understand they aren't making enough for future capital investments. It's hoped this can be resolved with higher valued crops and larger plots. At the time of my visit, Soc Trang officials were planning to invite proposals from trained and experienced farmers to make this hope come true. The farmers continue to work to have their product purchased by a large frozen food processing plant that exports to the lucrative markets in Singapore and Japan.

## KEY OBSERVATIONS

- Not unlike Canada, planning for municipal development in Vietnam occurs at both the provincial and municipal levels. It is important to know concurrent processes so officials can collaborate respectfully and get on the same page to help small and medium-sized enterprises.
- Building long-term capacity from workshops, pilots and demonstrations is challenging in a short-term project, but a train-the-trainer approach can help to ensure knowledge will be shared down the road.
- Business linkages between Canada and Vietnam are possible and desirable. Municipal pairings under FCM's international program can be beneficial for both host and Canadian municipality.
- Sharing concepts across languages isn't easy, as key points can get lost in translation. Use simple and clear ideas so that translators can share the meaning, rather than a complex thought.

## PROJECT 2

# LINKAGES TO SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED BUSINESSES ARE STRENGTHENED

### Getting started

The goal was to create a website and business centre to encourage business expansion and start-up. In this way, it would be easier for businesses to register with the city, sales would be expanded and business-to-business engagement fostered. We shared Canadian best practices in government-business interaction and helped to develop a SME strategy. Contacts with business associations were made, dedicated staff committees established, a consultant engaged to create the web site and city staff trained. First conceived in 2012, this project did have its fair share of growing pains, but two years later, a business centre with dedicated staff and a website with 140 local business listings were developed.

### Staying on course

During the return trip, a culture of service was quite evident in even normal municipal operations. Staff were open to learning from entrepreneurs and working with them to get what they needed. The business centre is supporting 1,000 or so small household businesses by helping with planning, environmental, financial and legal matters. The city continues to provide services as well to the larger, provincially registered companies that establish within municipal boundaries. The website is maintained, though the wave of earlier uptake has not been sustained, perhaps, staff suggested, because small household businesses tend not to be competitive.

It was very rewarding to see the top-down approach of old replaced by the practices we had shared.

### Planning for future growth

Staff said a new garment factory is being constructed in the city and will generate 4,000 new jobs by 2020. That kind of job creation is a boon to any local economy and testament to Soc Trang's capacity to encourage business and sustain communities. For the future, staff hope to improve administrative efficiency and streamline procedures related to business registration, taxation and the environment. They think the website would be used more if it included larger businesses and was promoted during meetings with business owners.



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## UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN

Saying good-bye can be sad, but as I left Soc Trang, I was uplifted by the knowledge that the two demonstration projects continue to provide benefits and are being used to generate more economic growth. Farmer incomes have increased, plans are underway to create larger farms with even greater income-earning potential, businesses are being attracted to Soc Trang and jobs are being created. Those are major wins, and it's an honour to have been a small part of that.

*Marten Kruysse is a councillor with the City of Rossland, BC. He was paired with Soc Trang City officials while employed by the District of North Vancouver as a senior manager of executive, planning and corporate services.*

### References

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