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A Personal Reflection on Researching Housing Development on Banana Island
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To be honest, I struggled a lot more with this research than I was expecting! When choosing which aspect of development to focus on, the lack of legal housing rights and sustainable structures on Banana Island in Hanoi, Vietnam was a fundamental problem. However, housing ended up being a lot less straightforward of an issue than I had thought. It seems simple: the people on Banana Island don't have adequate housing, so either renovate their current homes or give them better homes elsewhere. But it was like a concept map: one solution pointed to tens of more problems. I spent so much time ruminating in cycles over how to address the housing issue. If you renovated the floating villages, how would the people on the island afford to maintain them? Also, what if renovating the village attracted more people that the island wouldn't be able to support? Any attempt to improve the living quality on the island might attract a richer crowd who would financially push out the residents anyways—gentrification at its finest. Perhaps there is an avenue for the people on the island to afford them if they had opportunities for income through tourism on the island. However, tourists bring a host of other issues, including cultural loss and environmental damage. It is also possible that development would raise the price of living on the island and push the current villagers out. This brings up the issue of land rights—they have no entitlement to compensation were the government to seize the land they live on illegally! So then perhaps we propose offering them land rights—but what incentive would the government have to issue them when they live in illegal, unsanitary housing on the bank of Hanoi's largest water source? The more research I did, the more it seemed like a problem that couldn't be solved.

Getting caught in these circles seemed unproductive considering the goal of having a defined solution in line with the government's Master Plan at the end of four weeks. The more I worked with my team on our policy proposal of implementing temporary housing accommodations though, the more I thought the best option might honestly be to take our hands off. I doubted that the government would entertain developing the island in anything less than the most profitable way, considering that the island is projected to go underwater by 2050 as a result of global warming anyways. The profitable route would be to hand Banana Island over to a wealthy developer without considering the environment or communities on it. So, what if the best solution was not developing at all? Keep Banana Island as a natural and biodiverse green space. And keep it functioning as a quiet, peaceful refuge for its residents and the few tourists who know about it. Every article I read by a tourist visiting the island expressed fear that they would come back to it razed in the name of development. There is a value to the natural landscape and authentic culture. Especially when Vietnam's legal system can't ensure private property rights.

I think these conflicting views and values made me more cynical when it comes to sustainable development. The government, people, and environment are meant to serve each other, but rarely have the same interests. I have also come out frustrated with big development companies after talking with experts and laypeople on the ground, American and Vietnamese. How greedy can you be, to speed up development at the cost of vulnerable populations, on land that is proven will be underwater by 2050, just because you figure you can make your returns in time for the environmental disaster? I can't imagine any way for the efforts of passionate individuals at NGOs or even swayable government officials to work, when such companies are blinded by money. In these cases, the influence of the West's push towards capitalism becomes clear.

Overall, while I loved living in Vietnam, I feel unresolved about the work I did. I met the most well-meaning academics and entrepreneurs—what chance do they stand against companies like Vingroup? My research group and so many others included advocacy for some sort of touristic development in Hanoi—I worry that the fact that we proposed that is playing into a narrow-minded way of envisioning how countries can gain power, money, and respect. We shouldn't have been opposed to contradicting the government's Master Plan.

In terms of future directions, this course has left me with countless questions on how to address such thorny issues. Clearly they won't be solved in four weeks, but are years enough? How to communicate with those who only seek money? What is the use of policy proposals otherwise? Sustainable development is an initiative pursued on multiple levels, from the University to the United States. However, there is a difference between knowing how to develop a land sustainably, and knowing when it is best to leave it untouched. While I can speak to the strides the University has made in terms of teaching how to assess a wide variety of stakeholders and ethical concerns, many are often only mentioned as an afterthought for those studying pre-professionally to join competitive industries. This is what leads to misunderstandings in business, policy, and engineering that damage our environment and hurt the most vulnerable communities. The cynicism I felt reinforced my decision to study both Global Studies and Economics. I hope I can serve as a bridge, because across the world there is often apathy and ignorance between governments, developers, media, and those advocating for sustainable development. I saw firsthand how those who speak the language of money don't understand those who speak the language of sustainability and humanity. We need more people who are able to communicate across all these audiences in order to advocate for those who are overlooked in the name of profit.

Volunteering to speak the language of the media

Wearing traditional Vietnamese ao dai, accepting a certificate of completion from administration at Vietnam National University