Assessing the impact of the construction of the coastal economic zones on the culture and society of Vietnam

Nguyen Tien Dung, Tran Duc Tuan

Abstract
In general, Vietnam’s economic zones have a positive contribution towards the overall development of the country. This contribution to economic growth through job creation further impacts on other aspects of people’s lives including culture and society. The positive impacts on culture and society would include:

(i) an exodus from the rural regions to urban areas with the likelihood that new urban areas will be developed creating cultural diversity in the economic zones;
(ii) an increase of cultural links and friendship between localities;
(iii) an opportunity to share the beauty of the Vietnamese culture within the localities;
(iv) expurgation of bad customs and outmoded traditions; and
(v) economic prosperity which will assist in creating social stability.

However, the construction of coastal economic zones could also impact negatively on Vietnamese culture and society as follows:

(i) the erosion of traditional cultural and social values specific to coastal economic zones denigrated through immigration and urbanization;
(ii) possible cultural conflict as a result of the differences between immigrants and locals;
(iii) an increase in antisocial behaviours including the crime rate which would require the government to be more dynamic in solving problems in society.

1. Impact of the operation of the coastal economic zones to culture and society in Vietnam
1.1. Positive impact
1.1.1. Positive impact on culture
i. Creating diversity of cultures in economic zones
The coastal economic zones have created significant numbers of jobs for people. The local workforce alone is insufficient for the needs of employers and entrepreneurs. Therefore, workers from other regions, and particularly from the rural areas where agriculture laborers are in surplus, as well as millions of students graduating from universities, colleges and vocational schools move to the coastal economic zones in search of jobs. Furthermore, overseas laborers are also well represented in those areas. Due to the influx of immigrants from different regions and countries, a diversity of cultures in the coastal economic zones is and has been created.

ii. Consolidating the cultural links and social relationship between regions
This diverse influx of migrants has resulted in the creation of intimate relationships between local and foreigners alike irrespective of their social status and this acceptance is the important bridge that links the cultures and the friendships between the regions and localities together. The onflow of this would be the influx of visitors into the areas as a result of that immigration, be they family and friends or tourists. The local people in these special economic zones will embrace other cultures due to the closer contact they will experience with these immigrants.

iii. Spreading the cultural and social beauties of regions and areas
Each immigrant will act as a cultural ambassador to their own people and this will assist in conveying the beauty and character of the locality. The establishment of special economic zones to attract workers from different regions and different cultures improves the locality’s image. For example, the majority of workers come from Central Vietnam and they are representative of this regions strong work ethics. In addition, employees serve as a bridge to share the cultural values of the places where they work with people who live in their homeland. For instance, Vietnamese workers who might usually go home for their holidays when on annual leave, for new year and other public holidays would share the beauty and character of their adopted local culture and the life habits of the place where they now work. They serve
to promote the cultural values of foreigners (immigrants) back in their own home districts or countries during their breaks from their workplace.

iv. Outmoded negative custom and traditions quickly erased

The diversity of immigrants from regions with different cultures will assist in the identification and replacement of negative and antiquated practices with updated and current ones. This coexistence fosters an appreciation of not only their own cultures but that of migrant cultures and potentially creates a merging of cultures to reflect the bond formed between locals and immigrants.

1.1.2. Positive impacts on society

i. Contribution of resources towards the economic-social development of the regions

Immigrants often have certain advantages such as youth, experience, skills, professionalism and economy. When they invest into new lands, they tend to be ambitious and full of energy, keen to build and develop entrepreneurial ventures themselves. While many believe that indigenous people are very industrious, immigrants can be just as industrious if not more so. Israel serves as a striking example. During their elections, the Israeli government promote policies that attract immigrants to gain electoral advantage over their opposition so that whichever party has the best immigration policy, tends to fare better at the polls.

In Vietnam, the coastal economic zones, namely Chu Lai, Dung Quat and Nhon Hoi have attracted a large number of workers from all over the country and especially from the Central and the Central Highlands. Rather than remaining in rural areas with little agricultural production and economic value, many people have migrated to the coastal economic zones to look for jobs that create more value and production for society with the hope of contributing significantly towards the development of these areas. They have built new lives for themselves in the zones and continue to contribute part of their earnings to support their parents in their home areas. Immigrants serve as good examples to locals as they set out to achieve a better life for themselves sometimes becoming richer than local people.

Moreover, coastal economic zones can contribute significantly to local budgets. For example, entrepreneurs in the Chu Lai economic zone annually contribute 65% of the total turnover of Quang Nam province and have created more than 15,000 jobs. As a result, Quang Nam province has changed its economic face in a very short time.

ii. Creation of more jobs for local people

The coastal economic zones have a number of advantages in terms of investment and geographic and administrative management. These zones have created favorable investment environments that have attracted both international and domestic investors. These investors have built factories, industrial parks and financial centers and as such, more jobs have been created for local people and this has indirectly led to increased employment in other areas which include the hotel and accommodation sector, entertainment, travel and administration services to name a few.

iii. Establishment of new communities

With the large number of workers entering the coastal economy, the wilderness lands have been developed into modern urban well planned residential areas comparable to those in civilised countries. New and modern communities have developed and serve as remarkable examples for other regions to replicate.

Although modern residential areas such as Phu My Hung in Ho Chi Minh city or Long Bien Riverside in Hanoi have not appeared in other coastal economic zones yet, in the near future as the coastal economic zones develop, that level of international-standardized modern residential areas will eventually form and satisfy the demand of residents in the coastal economic zones.

Although the number of foreign investors and immigrant workers who reside permanently are few, they have contributed significantly towards the nation’s economy. Investors and workers from countries like Japan, South Korea, the United States and Western Europe impact significantly on the process of establishing new communities and they generate striking momentum towards the development of these zones.

1.2. Negative impacts

1.2.1. Culture

i. The beauty and benefits of Vietnamese society and culture in the coastal regions could sustain harm
through immigrants and urbanisation.

Each community has its own character and culture. The diversity of cultures resulting from the immigration process could potentially harm local culture. Immigrants may not fully appreciate the character of local culture and history and may never feel as strongly as locally born people about their heritage and their past. Immigrants will sometimes ignore the emotions that are attached to localities and will sacrifice forging mutual relations in their focus on financial gains.

While living with immigrants, local people are exposed to the temptations of different cultures and it sometimes becomes burdensome to retain the beauty and character specific to their own communities. Under intense pressure of forging a living, local people do not have time to look after their own family members, relatives or neighbors as they traditionally did and often we see the disappearance of early morning rituals where people dragged their fishing nets together or rode boats in local festivals and other displays of community spirit, support and unification. These things can disappear very quickly, unnoticed.

The tradition of fishing has always created and maintained cultural characteristics and now the factory plants have replaced the fishing piers and some people have had to change their work and life habits. The culture of fishing villages has been replaced by the ‘industrial’ culture and fishers have become factory workers. These fishermen are forced to change life habits and because of their limited understanding, are forced to adjust to new ways and customs of living that generate unexpected problems. This has disrupted the uniqueness of a fishing culture in the coastal areas.

There are also many natives in the coastal economic zones who have become rich quickly through trading goods, real estate and many other ventures and their lives have changed considerably. Money has afforded them the luxury items like houses, cars, entertainment, education and many other privileges. It has also created work addictions and a strong dependence and focus on money that has replaced the spiritual and emotional feelings, attachments and attitudes for family and neighbours which once was so prevalent in our society.

ii. Cultural conflict through differences between immigrants; and between immigrants and local people

Immigrants are from different regions and countries and this creates an abundantly diverse and varied culture. However, this can create disputes in terms of foreign culture and local culture, and again, between the cultures of industry and of fishing.

Vietnam has 54 ethnic groups and each group has its own unique characters of culture. Often the coastal areas are not large enough to sufficiently absorb the vast array of different cultures. While each group has the freedom to choose or practice their own culture without hindrance, there always exists a prevailing threat that subjectively, one's own culture serves as the standard for the whole community and an expectation develops that all others should behave like the group. Different flows of immigrants have formed significant groups that oppose each other and this can lead to cultural disputes and in extreme cases, these disputes have the potential to spur violent wars and terrorist behaviour.

iii. Impact of negative foreign cultures on fine regional customs

The difference between foreign cultures and local culture can sometimes create disputes and particularly when viewpoints differ drastically.

In the coastal economic zones, many entrepreneurs are foreign investors with various differing cultures, religions and beliefs. Many local workers who work and enjoy constant contact with investors sometimes emulate these people as mentors copying unfamiliar characteristics and traits and they become influenced by the wealth and opulence that they see and experience.

Often this naivety produces a negative impact on one's culture and spreads through the whole community. Moreover, with foreign-orientated psychology nowadays, many people imitate the beliefs of Japanese, Korean, American and other nationalities and then deny their own values and culture without reasoning.

1.2.2. Society

i. The increase of social evils

With the increase of migrant workers from different cultures and poorly educated industry workers on low salaries, an associated increase in social evils such as violence, theft, drugs and prostitution is likely and will create issues of governance in the effort to manage these.
Currently, governance in the coastal economic zones is hampered by certain limitations identified as follows:

(i) no specific management framework has been applied in these new communities that addresses the diversity of immigrants and the applied framework is similar to the general framework used in the country;

(ii) there is no clear separation of power between the management office in the zones and local governments. Therefore, when emergency matters have arisen which required urgent solutions, the agencies have shrunk back from their responsibilities;

(iii) there is no framework to deal with disputes between people from different cultures;

(iv) on a larger scale, local planning issues have not been inclusive enough such, that separate entertaining area (‘red area’ - ‘khu đèn đỏ’) for example, have not been clearly defined and migrant workers who represent a predominantly younger population have a higher demand for entertaining services. Bars and breweries are currently scattered indiscriminately and this makes it difficult for the government to carry out its administrative mission possibly facilitating an increase in crime and its ability to be managed well.

ii. Environmental pollution

Most of the coastal economic zones have industrial parks. Waste and emissions from factories have polluted the land, water and air and this likely causes pollution of the sea where the livelihoods of many people in fishing and tourism will be impacted. Sometimes, the reason factories are located near coastal areas is to disguise waste emissions into the sea. Formosa is an obvious example. Therefore, there is a need for stricter consents for investment of industrial projects, and especially heavy industry in order to avoid pollution of the marine environment and it’s on flow affect into other economic activities.

iii. Risks for social stability

Factories built in coastal economic zones provide employment for workers with lower levels of education and / or relatively low cognitive abilities. The differences in cultural beliefs, habits and even the language (such as Southern, Middle and Northern dialects and then Vietnamese vs foreign languages) can also create barriers. These factors can be catalysts to small grievances or arguments becoming conflicts resulting in violence which create social instability. Conflicts of interest can arise due to perceived limitations on contributions towards local development. Antagonism can result if the locals believe that immigrants are taking their jobs and settling into their residential areas often causing worries about their physical safety and the security of their properties. Contrarily, immigrants perceive that their contributions and efforts improve the lives of the community and the people. Contradictions that allow policies for foreign investors to acquire land from local people for both industrial and residential use create anxiety and upset local communities.

2. Some recommendations for improving positive impacts and to prevent negative impacts

2.1. The United States experience of immigration

The United States is a remarkable example for gaining positive results in immigration. The large number of immigrants around the world has contributed to the variety of cultures in the United States. Immigration has contributed positively to the social-culture of the United States. Immigrants came with creativity and introduced new ideas and the entrepreneurial spirit to the U.S. economy. They invested and set up companies to create jobs for people, produced more varieties of goods for consumers to choose from at competitive prices while other unskilled immigrants filled the void in the labor force with a variety of skills. Together with the correct appreciation of the benefits that immigrants bring to society, the U.S. government has adopted policies to attract immigrants and in particular professionals and potential investors. Their policies ensure that equality between local people and immigrants is maintained and

immigrants and their family are allowed access to social services such as education and healthcare. The government encourage cultural diversity by assisting in the formation of cultural community groups designed to assist in the preservation of immigrant cultures allowing them to exercise their right to freedom of beliefs and speech.

2.2. Some solutions for Vietnam to enhance socio-cultural values in the development of special economic zones

The construction and development of specific economic zones has positively contributed to an opening up of the Vietnamese economy and has improved the investment and business environment in Vietnam towards promulgating world trade. While economy and commerce open up our society on the world stage, other aspects of our traditional lifestyle should not be closed out and need to be reasonably protected. The integration of culture and society has created a rich and diverse population in specific economic zones filtering out to the whole of Vietnam generally. This has resulted in people having more choices to pursue the true value of life in an effort to contribute to the common benefit of all humanity. In order to fully harvest the socio-cultural values that specific economic zones generate and to prevent the negative impacts, the following solutions should be applied:

2.2.1. Both central government and local government need to be dynamic and innovative to fit the new society

Our first priority should be to protect the periphery – our borders. This raises the question of how to avoid the risk of conflict between the indigenous culture and that of immigrants, and also between the domestic culture and the foreign cultures. Appropriate policies should be introduced to protect national culture and solve disputes between different cultures. Vietnam needs to have a clearer multicultural policy with the purpose of protecting people's identity and cultural diversity, encouraging cultural freedom and international integration to develop people with the optimal qualities of 'global citizens'.

Moreover, this should be combined with economic and social policies that ensure that all people living and working in a particular economic zone have the same opportunity to obtain and participate in economic, political, cultural and social activities and that they will be treated fairly and equitably.

The issue of religion is also paramount in that religion has a profound influence on the cultural identity of the people. There are many religions in the world and throughout history, religious conflicts have caused a number of severe wars. In some countries, religious extremists have incited violence, caused massacres, conducted bloody terrorist attacks in the countries they emigrated to. In Vietnam, there have been no such cases yet and having said this, the authorities would need to set up initiatives to control and respond to this situation should it occur.

Finally, it is necessary to properly plan new residential areas and new urban areas to avoid conflicts between people of different cultures and to ensure social stability and harmony that benefits both local people and immigrants. For instance, the government needs to be transparent in promulgating policies around land acquisition from the people when it is earmarked for the construction of factories and housing for immigrants amongst other things thereby avoiding negative impacts from within society.

2.2.2. Raise awareness of both local people and immigrants in terms of culture knowledge

Raising awareness of both local people and immigrants is necessary in order for them to respect each other's cultural values. The government should always treat immigrants and local people equally to promote a new integrative community that accepts and respects everyone's cultural values thereby creating common values for the area.

2.2.3. Promote the values of different cultures

Each culture has its own beauty. Therefore, within any area with many different cultures, it is necessary to disseminate cultural values so that people have the opportunity to understand and respect each other while offering more individual choices.

Consequently, a socially diverse area that encourages, fosters and promotes the cultural beauty of all cultures also endorses the values for not just the country but for all societies. This encourages people to change their behaviors, the way we live and our attitudes in order to reflect commonalities that conquer outdated and negative human perceptions. Values could be disseminated by means of media programs, cultural festivals or programs exploring new cultures.
3. Conclusion
The coastal economic zones have significantly contributed to the cultural, economic and social changes. Residents and immigrants have created diversities of culture that serve to enrich people lives and the choices they have. Living together with people from different cultures helps Vietnamese people hasten their journey to becoming ‘global citizens’. Accompanied with the values achieved, there still exist several negative impacts on society and it will be necessary to make changes in terms of policies and laws to solve problems that arise. In addition, both local citizens and immigrants will need to expand their knowledge to adapt to a changing culture and life for the purpose of building a society with international standards where diverse nationalities can enjoy their lives together.