

Completing the “Long Planning Revolution” in Vietnam: Implementing and Amending the Planning Law (2017)

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Abstract: A “long planning revolution” in Vietnam spanning the past 40 years began with the Doi Moi economic reforms (1986), which laid the foundations for all government structures and activities. A carefully prepared new Planning Law was adopted in 2017, which incorporated a considerable amount of new thinking, but almost ten years later, the need for amendments is being transformed into a proposed update of the law. This paper traces the performance of the Planning Law in practice, in view of the emerging agenda for amendments that are currently under consideration. The complex process of working towards such amendments might be expected to conclude in the next two years (2026-2027). This would finally bring to an end a 40-year period of innovation and change in the history of Vietnamese planning legislation. In this context, the paper also considers the substantial contributions made by international agencies in Vietnam, such as UN-Habitat, which have been instrumental in guiding the change processes for nearly three decades.

Keywords: Urban planning system; public participation; multiple stakeholders; strategic planning; Vietnam Planning Law (2017).

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1. Introduction: The Long Process of Completing Political Reform since 1986

This paper takes a long-term view of urban, spatial, and strategic planning in Vietnam. In essence, the rethinking of socialist state-dominated planning began with the epochal change of Doi Moi in 1986, when Vietnam enacted its shift towards a socialist-oriented market economy, nearly

ten years after China had embarked on its changes under Chairman Deng Xiaoping in 1978. Both the Chinese and the Vietnamese versions of such fundamental changes deserve to be referred to as “revolutions” or as perhaps the essential second stages after laying the foundations of a radically new socialist state (i.e., 1949 in China and 1975 in Vietnam).

In the long-term processes of change, the entire system of urban and regional planning had to be reorganized from a state-dominated, top-down style to a mixed form

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of planning and decision-making where market agencies, the state, and decentralized regional and local authorities interact. The de facto “planning revolution” in Vietnam has been marked by the Planning Law (2017), which still tends to be referred to as the “new planning law”. However, this law, and its associated laws and regulations, are again under scrutiny with major amendments expected to take effect soon, or hopefully, within the foreseeable future. For this reason, the paper implicitly uses an approximate time frame of 1986-2017-2027 for the final stage of a very long process in which the law of 2017 plays a pivotal role.

The ten-year period since the adoption of the “new law” in 2017 has served as a relatively long time for experimentation and many discussions within government, but also between the government, market agencies, and the many international agencies that continue to be active in Vietnam. Apart from the World Bank and national aid or cooperation agencies, there are numerous non-government agencies contributing to continuous processes of experimentation across all levels of government. UN-Habitat has been instrumental in contributing to the efforts for more appropriate, more participatory, and more effective practices in spatial planning – all of which have been linked with the law of 2017 and its gradual adjustments to local needs as well as in line with emerging international practices. The most essential keywords are “strategic planning and management”, and “global environmental management”, especially as supported by the global UN programmes – the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), 2000 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), 2015. Vietnam and its planning agencies have contributed their fair share to such influential global agendas. The

gradual achievements in planning during the last decade reflect this contribution.

2. The Context of the Law on Planning (2017)

The Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) has taken a leading role in bringing about the transformation from a centrally subsidized economic model to a socialist-oriented market economy. The central planning system was gradually transformed into a planning system based on market principles, more decentralized to the localities, and with the direction and control of the central government in economic management and development goals.

Since the introduction of market-based reforms in the wake of Doi Moi (1986), the government has considered several directions in order to reform the national planning system. These orientations, although not fully expressed in practice, are defined as follows (HPC 1999):

From a planning mechanism of centrally allocated development resources based on two basic components (state-owned and collective) to a mechanism of planning for orienting the use of development resources of a multi-sector economy.

From centralized planning for delivery with a system of indicators and state ordinances to an indirect, instructive planning mechanism with a system of incentive policies and regulatory macro indicators.

From closed technical planning in each sector and each territory to a planning mechanism according to development target programs with coordination of interdisciplinary and inter-regional development capabilities in the country and with neighboring countries.

From the method of balancing the plan according to external aid sources to a system of overall balance of domestic and international resources, ensuring a balance between economic development and social progress and justice, ensuring natural resources and sustainable development.

Along with the innovation and development of the country, planning has been gradually improved to meet the management and administration needs of all levels and sectors. Five-year and 10-year socio-economic development planning, sectoral planning, construction planning, and others are the legal tools developed to assist the Government (ministries, central branches, and localities) to direct and administer socio-economic development.

Despite the changes in the direction of a market economy, the planning mechanism is still influenced by the central planning ideology and models of the past. The content and method of planning continue in a top-down direction, defining targets (although not mandatory) and spaces for economic activities, which have not yet arisen from exploiting strategic opportunities or addressing fundamental problems and specific obstacles to realize development goals. Any type of regulation or plan is still seen as a process of making major capital allocations by the State rather than as a means of orientation and framework control for the investment and development of economic sectors to meet common interests (Wilson 2000).

Many domestic and foreign experts have criticized the current system of making and implementing regulations/plans (prior to the 2017 Planning Law) as unsuitable and ineffective for the market operation mechanism because development and investment in the private sector have not yet been recognized as the largest (if not fundamental) component of development.

There are also other weaknesses in planning/regulation, such as: (i) considering public investment as the sole means of achieving goals; (ii) lack of strategic focus and priorities; (iii) lack of effective coordination between socio-economic development plan, sectoral plan and spatial plan; (iv) little public participation and awareness in the planning process; and (v) little or no assessment of the suitability of the development for its landscape, socioeconomic, environmental and location characteristics due to the absence of a multidisciplinary investment evaluation process or mechanism for development licensing (HPC 1999; MOC 1995b; MPI 1997a; MPI 2000; OECD 2018; PADDI 2012; Quang 2003b; Que HV 2000; Vater EU 2001; WB 2006; WB 2012). The MPI's initial report when the new Law on Planning was formulated also identified the serious weaknesses of the existing system (MPI 2016).

The new Planning Law (2017) was created with the desire to create synchronization and consistency in the legal system on planning. With regulations on innovative planning methods in the direction of multi-sector integration, the Law on Planning was intended to overcome the situation of division among ministries, branches, localities, and regions across the country. The aim was to avoid conflicts of interest in development, overcome the status of "asking for donations" and making arbitrary adjustments to planning, and at the same time ensuring quick management responses in plan formulation and implementation.

To implement the Planning Law synchronously and effectively in the legal system, the National Assembly and the National Assembly Standing Committee amended and supplemented 66 Laws and seven ordinances. The Government also

issued Decree No. 37/2019/ND-CP, dated May 7, 2019, which detailed the implementation of several articles of the Planning Law. Fourteen Government decrees and circulars from 12 ministries were also issued.

However, despite the important efforts of the National Assembly and all government branches in the implementation of the Law on Planning, the progress of creating plans has been extremely slow, thus negatively affecting the planning/implementation process. The cause of this delay, according to objective assessments, is that the organization of planning under the national planning system is a new and complex task that is being implemented for the first time at all levels.

Because this is a new task, specific guidance is needed, but the Government, through the MPI, is still slow to issue guiding documents on the implementation of the Law on Planning (e.g., Decree 37 CP, or Decree 99/2021 ND-CP, stipulating the management, payment, and settlement of projects using public investment capital). Progress has been slow because the Government, as the issuing authority of the Decree, must consider different opinions from its advisory agencies.

There have been delays in guiding the development of reliable cost estimates by hiring independent reviewers or making budget estimates for planning activities to shift from recurrent expenditures to public investment expenditures. However, as reflected by several agencies, many obstacles and difficulties in planning work were also removed during the past 10 years.

With the Government's determination, especially through the issuance of Resolution No. 119/NQ-CP on tasks and solutions to improve the quality and speed up the planning process for the period 2021-2030, improvements in the overall

performance of the planning system may be expected soon.

Summarizing the initial findings, the following statements may be made. Before 2017, Vietnam's planning landscape was *fragmented, sector-driven, and opaque*, characterized by *overlapping mandates* and *weak intersectoral coherence*. The 2017 Law on Planning marked a *systemic reform* — replacing dozens of fragmented sectoral plans with a *unified, integrated, and hierarchical system* aligned with socio-economic, spatial, and environmental objectives. However, *implementation difficulties* soon emerged: delays, conflicts among plans, and insufficient coordination between ministries and provinces. This led to the *2024–2025 amendments (Law 57/2024/QH15)*, which focused on *streamlining procedures, clarifying conformity rules, enabling faster plan adjustments, and integrating digital tools and investment linkage*.

3. Experiences from 2017 to 2025: Challenges in Implementing the Planning Law

The 2016 Government Report on the Planning Law from the MPI admitted that: “There are many shortcomings in the thinking and perception of planning among sectors at all levels”. Essentially, the planning system in Vietnam continues to be influenced by the *mindset* of central planning and subsidies, thereby reflecting contradictions, a lack of connection, and overlap between different types of planning (especially between socio-economic development planning, construction/spatial planning, and land use planning). Before the Law on Planning, the biggest challenge for socio-economic development planning was the lack of vision and spatial solutions for

development goals. In contrast, construction planning (and land use planning) did not fully consider development goals and fundamental cross-cutting issues. These cross-cutting issues, which include both challenges and opportunities, are interdisciplinary (such as poverty reduction, job creation, and economic efficiency, as well as equity and social security). The challenges to establishing and implementing the new Law on Planning since 2017 may be grouped into six interrelated subject areas: (1) thinking and perception; (2) coordination mechanisms in plan formulation and implementation; (3) monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment of planning; (4) updating planning and implementation in line with market mechanisms; (5) building a database for planning at all levels; and (6) capacity building for plan formulation and implementation. These challenges are discussed in the next sections.

3.1. Challenges in Thinking and Perception

The master (construction) planning approach has been focused on criticism of many research reports and projects conducted to improve the efficiency of urban planning and management systems (Lam 2018; Wilson 2000). A UNDP report on Vietnam's urban development strategy pointed out that its overall construction planning method is not suitable for market-oriented development management, and that planning standards are not realistic. The practice of promoting land use is uneconomical and inefficient (MOC 1995a). Examples include the failure of the Hanoi Master Plan in setting the goal of developing satellite cities and building a green belt for agricultural development, as well as a series of "hanging" planning projects in Hoai Duc. In this context, Me Linh stated that the

planners had completely ignored the impacts of the land market (Du 2019).

The 2009 *UN-Habitat Global Report on Human Settlements: Planning Sustainable Cities* first confirms that "in many developed countries, the approach to planning has changed dramatically. However, in many developing countries, old forms of master planning persist. In some countries, master planning is still considered useful, sometimes because of the rapid pace of state-directed city construction, and sometimes because it serves the interests of elites, who often emulate modern Western cities, and that inevitably leaves the poor and informal in cities at a disadvantage".

Planning is perceived as an end product rather than a process of formulation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment (Quang 2003). For many localities, planning is the determination of space for desired socio-economic programmes without considering the feasibility of resources or the needs of the market (which is itself constantly changing). This method leads to rigid, unfeasible plans that are suspended beyond the planning time, constantly being adjusted, and consequently hindering the development and replacement of suitable projects. If planning is viewed as a process that must be considered in connection with the entire lifecycle of organizing, implementing, monitoring, supervising, and adjusting, then it will identify specific advantages—projects that are feasible and possible to implement in a specific time with available limited resources.

The "planning as a final product" approach also reflects *rigid thinking* in planning and construction. In the centralized subsidy mechanism, state resources are the decisive factor, and planning is used to determine "projects and hard spaces," with the role of directly regulating State

resources to implement targets. However, in a market mechanism, the State's role is to lead and facilitate social resources towards development goals. Therefore, *planning needs to be flexible and "soft"* (UN-Habitat 2015a), thus ensuring the appropriate connection between types of planning, and creating the conditions for different types of sectoral and technical planning to be able to detail the different types of planning and development goals according to specialization and market signals.

The perception *that planning is a unique "magic wand"* playing a decisive role in local socio-economic development also hinders effective linkage with development policies and programmes. In the centralized subsidy mechanism, state resources are fundamental, so planning for investment resources of the State plays a decisive role in the development of the economy. However, in a multi-component market economy, national, regional, and provincial planning becomes the direction and guide for development. To successfully implement development goals, national, regional, provincial, and sectoral planning at all levels *need to be closely linked with development policies, development programs and projects of the society, and regulations on land use and management, environment, and infrastructure*, along with social and community advocacy programmes (e.g., poverty alleviation programmes, temporary housing rehabilitation programmes). In contrast, lax regulations on the management of land conversion, subdivision, and sale of land plots in rural areas also disrupt the effectiveness of the most modern plans.

Changing thinking and perception from physical planning (focusing mainly on defining space for projects) to planning with a focus on development goals and respecting market trends under the regulation of a constructivist State is a long-term process,

requiring institutional reforms in coordination and cooperation between the government and stakeholders, including advocacy and capacity building.

In the immediate future, the definitions and roles of different types of planning as well as the regulatory categories of each need clarification. National, regional, and provincial general planning plays a key role in developing priority development goals. Development planning identifies visions, options, strategies, and priority programs for various types of sectoral and technical planning (such as infrastructure planning, urban and rural planning). It is necessary to avoid excessive detailing of development plans. On the one hand, it would hinder flexibility in the implementation of development goals, while on the other hand, it restricts the specialization in construction and effective management of industry development activities.

One of the specific examples in orienting and connecting provincial planning with construction planning and land use planning is the detailed identification of urban areas, urban infrastructure, and criteria for urban land use. According to many consultants, the "problem lies in the areas of land that need to be recovered and converted according to the district-level cadastral map of the settlement. In essence, the land use plan for each parcel can only be implemented and adjusted when there is a specific project. However, the feasibility of most projects will still depend on the market. If there is no project that locks down each piece of land what will be done in the next 10-30 years, it is completely baseless and will cause countless complications in the future" (Tung 2022).

For urban system planning, it is not possible to determine in a "*prescriptive*" fashion the size of the population, and the boundaries of cities because urban

development will depend on market demand. The experience of developed countries (e.g., Australia, the UK, and even China) indicates that planning should consider the structure of functional zoning, the connectivity of functional areas, and the use of a development control framework (i.e., clearly identifying key development areas, restricted development areas, and prohibited areas) (Khue LM et al. 2022). This will increase the flexibility of planning according to market signals, while ensuring that regulations controlling development for public purposes are objectively respected.

Many national and international researchers encourage Vietnam to change the rigid urban master plan model to a more flexible spatial object planning model (e.g., structure plan, identifying structures linking different subdivisions, and delineating development levels and development constraints of each area (Wilson, 2000)). Area details will be developed according to this zoning plan and thereby use the development framework to control projects and development works for licensing. Investors can then consider whether their works and projects are suitable for the control needs of the State. This model of physical (spatial) planning will limit the situation of arbitrary interference (i.e., the "begging-giving" of license rights).

Regional planning should only focus on common *issues for regional cooperation* – for example, regional infrastructure and transport systems (roads, inter-regional landfills, seaports, and regional airports), inter-provincial economic zones, and river basins. Since there is no regional government, a Regional Planning Development and Management Committee is needed with the participation of Ministries and relevant provinces/cities. There is a need for advisory mechanisms combined with regional dialogue and cooperation to

ensure the interests and responsibilities of stakeholders in regional development. The central government can provide incentives for regional/city inter-provincial cooperation through policy support and central regulation of resources contributing to regional development initiatives.

To change the perception of development planning, the study and discussion of local development planning models should be encouraged. For example, in the development planning of Quang Nam province, local authorities defined sustainable development goals, transforming the growth model from "brown" (coal mining) to "green" (urban development, tourism, and services). Supported by UN-Habitat, Quang Nam staff members translated Green Growth principles into sector strategies such as developing infrastructure systems, exploiting development corridors based on geopolitical advantages, and connecting tourism goals with traffic planning. The actual development planning of Quang Nam is an example of a strategic development model.

3.2. Challenges in Coordination Mechanisms in Plan Formulation and Implementation

The Planning Law report of the MPI stated that "the state management apparatus on planning is both lacking and weak, in which the organizational system from the central to local levels is still limited, and although it has been consolidated, it is not fully effective" (MPI 2016).

One of the challenges in organizing the formulation and implementation of current plans is the mechanism for direction, cooperation, and coordination in identifying important priority issues that have a cross-sectoral and cross-level nature within local government. The coordination between

sectors and stakeholders is heavily administrative, sometimes dominated by local interests and lacking professional dialogue, negotiation, and agreement. Therefore, many provincial plans do not reflect the integration of priority issues, but rather an ad-hoc collection of orientations, programmes, and projects that lack feasibility in the context of limited resources (Nham PT 2022).

To address these challenges, it is necessary to build better cooperation between professional and administrative agencies through the formation of a *dedicated Committee on organization of planning formulation and implementation* (led by the leader of the organization). In some countries that have undergone drastic planning reform (e.g., Japan, Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia), national and local planning committees, in addition to government members, are also involved (i.e., experts, representatives of the private sector and the community) (Sakamoto 2013). The reality in Vietnam also shows that where there is an active, thorough, and direct leader in the organization of planning, the coordination of sectors and levels is smoother and faster.

In addition, it is necessary to actively organize *planning consultation forums and dialogues* between departments and authorities at all levels. Along with this dialogue mechanism, it is necessary to develop a transparent and clear process for the review of multi-sector investment programs and projects. *The mechanism for approving and appraising multi-sector investment plans* (based on a set of multi-objective development criteria) should be considered as part of the development planning and implementation process. The adoption of a multi-sector investment planning system is aimed at enhancing cooperation in the identification,

prioritization, review, monitoring, and evaluation of investment projects. Appraisal and approval of programs and projects must be based on an integrated view of economic, social, and environmental goals and criteria based on the participation and contributions of relevant stakeholders of the multi-component economy (HPC 1999).

The MPI's Law on Planning report also highlighted the need to “*strengthen and renew the consultation with the community: Strictly carry out the consultation of stakeholders involved in the implementation of the master plan, especially the business sector and the people. In the process of collecting information for planning, spend a lot of time and resources on investigation, survey, consultation with the residential community, and sociological investigation of the status quo*” (MPI 2016).

The reality in many localities is that in the actual planning process, genuine community consultation work is often limited. Many plans are only presented to inform and share with the community at the completion stage. Therefore, during the implementation process, conflicts inevitably arise due to the failure to consider the interests and needs of community stakeholders in planning processes.

In more developed countries, public consultation is carried out at every step of the planning process. Many localities hold dialogues, consult on development options, and record dialogues when there is a conflict of interest. For example, the mayor and the Seoul city government held thousands of collective and individual dialogues to create consensus on the plan to demolish a highway and restore the Cheonggyecheon stream in the middle of the capital (UN-Habitat 2015b).

The participation of stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of the master plan will facilitate the enhancement

of the effectiveness and efficiency of public and non-state investment resources. Furthermore, effective dialogue activities should be facilitated through local planning forums, thereby encouraging the participation of stakeholders.

3.3. Challenges in the Mechanism of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Adjustment of Planning

Acknowledging the shortcomings in planning monitoring and supervision, the MPI report (2016) also clearly states that “while the supervision, inspection, and handling of violations in planning activities are important, these tasks have not been addressed regularly or in a timely manner. Many planning projects are not consistent with reality; many plans are contradictory or overlapping. The handling of violations in planning activities is carried out individually, lacking intersectoral coordination”.

It can be said that, up to now, most *plans lack a framework for monitoring and evaluating the planning based on results*. Planning assessment is understood as the assessment of the socio-economic development situation in the locality according to the expected criteria (e.g., GDP growth target, urbanization target, or transformation target in the economic structure). There is a need for a results-based planning assessment framework linked to SDGs and targets, development policies, and strategies. Full consideration should be given to economic efficiency and productivity, efficient land use, equity, and social security (GINI index), energy efficiency, and response to climate change challenges. The UN-Habitat planning assessment framework includes all such aspects (Son 2022).

It is necessary to avoid *arbitrary adjustment of local planning*, and a lack of legal and scientific support, as well as *failure to give full consideration to the interests of stakeholders*. In fact, there have been many objections and lawsuits due to the adjustment of planning (especially detailed construction planning) in some localities and cities experiencing intense development pressures.

3.4. Challenges for Updating Planning and Implementation in Line with Market Mechanisms

“Due to the strong trend towards globalization, along with the emergence of new industries and fields, there has been an increasing conflict in the demand for land use. The use of space between sectors within a country and between countries requires a renewal of planning methods so that planning can harmonize interests and effectively coordinate the development of space for sectors, countries, and linkages between countries. Most countries have now switched to strategic planning, which is mainly multi-sectoral integrated planning. Meanwhile, Vietnam's planning methods and contents are still conducted separately (socio-economic development master plan, construction planning, land use planning). Such independently made plans are not effective and, on the contrary, significantly reduce Vietnam's national competitiveness” (MPI 2016).

The Law on Planning stipulates the integration of sector development options in national, regional, and local planning, but does not clarify the method of formulating and implementing the plan (Hung 2022). In many local plans, integration is represented by the aggregation of various types of sectoral and technical plans due to the lack of a scientific basis and mechanisms for dialogue and compromise to determine

development priorities. Therefore, the plan is ineffective in conflict resolution.

It can be said that the strategic planning method is generally appropriate in integrating key issues and priorities throughout the development options and strategies (HPC 1999; Nham 2022; PAGE 2016; Quang 2003a; UNDP-SDC 2011; Wilson 2000). The strategic planning method provides development orientations based on goals, visions, priority underlying issues, development values, and philosophies based on consideration of external and internal contexts. Strategic planning is geared towards problem solving, focusing on action, and successful implementation of the vision (while considering the current state of implementation resources).

To successfully implement the strategic plan, there should be a mechanism for dialogue, negotiation and cooperation among stakeholders. To widely apply the strategic planning method, the MPI needs to develop a manual to guide the strategic planning process, and at the same time organize direct training (by hand-to-hand method) for localities. At the same time, it is necessary to review and adjust Decree 37 to clarify issues and strategic sector development directions in regional and provincial planning. Currently, many countries (such as the Philippines and South Africa) have implemented an integrated development planning model. Vietnam can learn from the international strategic integration lessons to complete the manual (BOHOL 2010; KwaZulu-Natal Planning Commission 2014; PAGE 2016; UNDP-SDC 2011).

The lack of clarity in the relationship between the two types of planning (general development planning and urban construction planning) in centrally run cities can also be resolved by defining the role of

provincial planning as a development plan with strategic objectives. In contrast, a general construction plan is an urban physical plan that defines urban development spaces within a framework for controlling development works and land use. The related Malaysian experience is an example of a harmonious connection between development planning and physical planning (FDTCP 2010).

3.5. Challenges in Building a Database for Planning at All Levels

“An information system database for planning work is still lacking. There is no scientific system for a planning database connecting the whole country, so most of the plans are not updated, or if updated, they do not guarantee continuity and lack accuracy” (MPI 2016).

In the market economy, development activities involve many parties, including the domestic and foreign private sector. Therefore, it is necessary *to build an information system on public and effective development planning/planning to serve the management of the state*, and the access needs of the public. The system must be able to provide information that encourages effective cooperation between public and private actors, as well as institutional coordination.

Currently, the MPI is developing a circular on building a database for planning work. However, according to expert assessment, “the integration and storage of large and multidisciplinary information (on average, each province/city has 35-50 integrated components) will face many difficulties. The mapping systems basically inherited the mapping methods of the previous planning system with different regulations on symbols and content of each field group. Therefore, even though the

contents of many disciplines are shown on the same map, it is not integrated and interdisciplinary, while other branches are too general” (Nham PT 2022).

From the perspective of monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the planning associated with investment programs and projects, localities need to gradually build an *information data system associated with development goals* (with spatial development positioning – Geographical Information System or GIS) and associated with *the management information system* or MIS (HPC 1999; Quang 2003).

3.6. Challenges in Capacity Building for Plan Formulation and Implementation

“Most of the staff assigned to monitor planning work are part-time, and most of them are trained in different background specialties. The number of specialized staff doing planning work is small, but they are not retrained and updated with new knowledge on a regular and timely basis, so their consultation and synthesis on planning work is still limited. There is a lack of professionalism, so the resulting plans do

not truly meet the requirements set forth” (MPI 2016).

The MPI report also proposes progressively standardizing the cadres and civil servants at state management agencies in charge of planning at all levels and sectors in order to improve state management capacity in planning and thus enhance the quality of planning projects. This would require a plan for training and fostering full-time staff with knowledge of the market economy, capable of analysing and synthesizing strategic and long-term issues at all levels.

The six types of challenge described in the sections above constitute a large remaining list of necessary improvements in Vietnam’s planning system. The large overview below (Table 1) is an attempt to summarize the long history of planning reforms on one page. One of the main reasons for adding this table is to visualize the gradual improvements since 2017. Although much has already been achieved since the 2017 promulgation of the Planning Law, more needs to be done to improve Vietnam’s institutional and staff capability to comparable international and desirable standards.

Table 1 provides an overview of the challenges during the long gestation period of the Planning Law. The six challenges described in detail above may be briefly summarized in the following strategic policy takeaways:

1. Institutionalize cross-sector coordination — empower the MOF as the central conductor of national and regional planning (note that the MOF now incorporates the MPI).
 2. Digitalize and integrate — build interoperable data platforms linking all ministries and provinces.
 3. Strengthen human resource capacity — professionalize planners, standardize training, and modernize tools.
 4. Link planning with budgeting and public investment to ensure implementation feasibility.
 5. Enhance transparency and citizen participation — move toward open, interactive, and accountable planning.
 6. Embed sustainability and climate resilience into all planning levels and processes.

Table 1: Evolution of Vietnam’s Planning System Reform (Pre-2017 to 2025)

Period/Issue Area	Problems Before the 2017 Planning Law	Reform Introduced in the 2017 Law	Solutions	Further Adjustments (2018–2025 Amendments)
1. Fragmented and overlapping planning system	Each ministry, sector, and province had its own separate planning system (over 19,000 plans nationwide); many overlapped and contradicted each other.	Introduced a unified national planning hierarchy (national → regional → provincial → technical/sectoral) under a single legal framework.		Clarified conformity hierarchy (Law 57/2024: marine, land-use, and sectoral plans must align with the national master plan).
2. Lack of coordination among sectors and levels	Ministries made plans independently, with little cross-sector coordination; spatial and economic plans were disconnected.	Mandated integration of sectoral and spatial planning through the National Master Plan and integrated provincial plans.		Strengthened coordination rules; assigned clear responsibility to lead agencies (“planning conductor”) for inter-sectoral coordination.
3. Planning disconnected from investment and budgeting	Investment projects were often approved regardless of plans, or plans were made without budget linkage.	Required that plans become the basis for investment, land-use, and public spending decisions .		2024 amendment: reinforces alignment between planning and medium-term public investment programs; allows adjustments for major projects.
4. Inefficient use of land and natural resources	Multiple inconsistent land-use, construction, and infrastructure plans led to waste and speculation.	Integrated land, infrastructure, and economic space into unified spatial frameworks.		Harmonized land-use and marine spatial planning under the same conformity rule (Law 57/2024).
5. Legal conflicts between different sectoral laws	Dozens of separate sectoral planning laws (construction, energy, transport, etc.) created confusion.	Repealed or consolidated 70+ articles from 25 sectoral laws into one framework.		Continuous legal harmonization (2020 and 2024 amendments refined conformity and adjustment procedures).
6. Bureaucratic complexity and opacity	Planning approvals were slow, non-transparent, and highly discretionary.	Introduced a standardized procedure with public consultation, appraisal, and digital publication of approved plans.		Simplified adjustment process (2024 law adds expedited mechanism for certain cases).
7. Weak participation and transparency	Public and private stakeholders had limited access to draft or approved plans.	Required public disclosure and consultation at multiple stages.		Digitalization: gradual development of a National Planning Information System for online access.
8. Poor technical capacity and outdated methods	Many localities lacked skilled planners or reliable spatial data.	Encouraged modernization, GIS use, and international standards in planning.		2024–2025: government to invest in national data infrastructure, digital mapping, and training

Period/Issue Area	Problems Before the 2017 Planning Law	Reform Solutions Introduced in the 2017 Law	Further Adjustments (2018–2025 Amendments)
			programs.
9. Rigid, slow adjustment mechanisms	Once approved, plans were hard to adjust even when circumstances changed.	Established formal procedures for adjustments and revisions.	2024 amendment creates “fast-track adjustment” for special cases (national projects, administrative boundary change, and urgent national interests).
10. Disconnection between planning and sustainable development goals	Economic growth targets dominated; limited attention to environment or resilience.	Integrated socio-economic, environmental, and infrastructure dimensions.	Encourages inclusion of climate resilience, digital transformation, and green transition indicators in new plans.

(Source: Dr Nguyen Quang, based on his experience as former Director of UN-Habitat, Vietnam)

4. Concluding Remarks: The Remaining Reform Agenda for Planning in Vietnam

In the very long-term development process since Doi Moi in 1986, the Law on Planning has played an important role. Instead of concluding words on the current stage of development in multi-sector, strategic, and participatory planning in Vietnam, the last section of this paper is intended to sketch out an agenda for the coming five or more years.

The underlying International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning were developed by UN-Habitat. They were also used, along with other documents, to formulate the agenda for the near future of planning in Vietnam. They provide a framework to help cities and settlements improve policy, plan formulation, and implementation, and move towards a compact urban model, with higher social inclusion, thus helping to integrate and connect more broadly, supporting sustainable and inclusive development, and responding to climate change. This is an important document with contributions from

many international experts and organizations with the goal of providing unified principles to guide policymakers towards sustainable development (UN-Habitat 2015a).

For the successful further implementation of the Law on Planning, additional long-term reforms are needed to gradually change thinking and awareness, perfect the coordination-participation mechanism, and build mechanisms and regulations for implementing, monitoring-supervising, evaluating, and adjusting planning, as well as improve capacity in formulating and implementing integrated planning in accordance with market rules. These reforms need to be carried out in parallel with administrative, financial, and land management reforms in the direction of State-construction and giving more decision-making power to local governments.

In the very near future, the MPI also needs to issue/update its *“Guidebook on the formulation, appraisal and approval of regional and provincial planning for the period of 2021-2030, with a vision at 2040 and even 2050, in an integrated approach”*.

In the book, it is necessary to clarify the role of each type of planning and the detailed scope of basic issues, as well as the strategic plan as the development orientation for the sectoral and technical plans. The manual should also provide an integrated framework for localities to refer to in their application to regional and provincial planning.

In addition, MPI can organize the appraisal of regional and provincial plans using an expert-based method, applying the manual as a framework for appraisal and evaluation. Thereby it will be possible to draw the necessary lessons for the completion of the manual, as well as the organization of training courses on

integrated planning (in a hands-on manner) for the pilot localities.

The remaining agenda for improving the planning system in Vietnam is relatively long, as it would be in most other countries. Table 2, the second large overview in this paper, is placed at the end of the text to emphasize the agenda for the coming five to seven (or even more) years. If the conventional conclusions of a scientific paper were to be formulated, it may be sufficient to state the truism that as real-world conditions, with their complex problems, keep changing, the legal and administrative framework for planning needs to be continuously modified and updated.

Table 2: Planning Challenges and Policy Recommendations

Key Challenge	Remaining	Description/Current Manifestation	Underlying Causes	Recommended Policy Solutions
1. Delay in completion and approval of plans		Many national, regional, and provincial plans remain pending, delaying public investment and projects.	Sequential approval process; unclear alignment guidance.	Allow <i>parallel processing</i> and <i>conditional approval</i> ; streamline procedures; issue clear technical guidelines.
2. Weak coordination among ministries and provinces		Persistent overlaps between sectoral and territorial interests; unclear lead responsibility.	Fragmented mandates; lack of empowered coordinating body.	Establish National Planning Coordination Council ; strengthen inter-ministerial coordination; create digital monitoring dashboards.
3. Limited technical and institutional capacity		Localities rely on external consultants; weak data and GIS systems.	Low investment in human resources and infrastructure.	Build National Planning Training and Data Center ; standardize GIS templates; professionalize planning staff.
4. Poor linkage between planning and budgeting/investment		Approved plans often not linked to investment priorities.	Weak coordination between planning and finance authorities.	Integrate planning with medium-term public investment and results-based budgeting .
5. Conflicts among sectoral and spatial plans		Marine, land-use, transport, and energy plans remain inconsistent.	Different planning cycles, datasets, and mandates.	Develop National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI) ; harmonize

Key Remaining Challenge	Description/Current Manifestation	Underlying Causes	Recommended Policy Solutions
			indicators, maps, and timelines.
6. Rigid or unclear adjustment procedures	Planning adjustment processes remain complex and inconsistent across levels.	Ambiguous adjustment categories; audit risks.	Clarify adjustment levels; empower localities for minor changes; apply digital reporting systems .
7. Weak transparency and public participation	Planning documents not easily accessible online; consultations are often formalistic.	Limited IT infrastructure; weak accountability.	Launch National Planning Information Portal ; require online publication and feedback tracking.
8. Data fragmentation and poor digital integration	Ministries and provinces use separate databases, causing duplication and inefficiency.	Lack of shared standards and interoperability framework.	Accelerate National Planning Database ; adopt open data standards and cross-ministry data sharing.
9. Lack of monitoring, evaluation, and enforcement	No systematic indicators or penalties for non-compliance.	Weak institutional framework and performance culture.	Develop National Planning M&E Framework ; publish annual progress reports; link performance to funding.
10. Limited integration of climate and green growth goals	Plans prioritize growth over environmental resilience.	Lack of guidance and coordination with MONRE and MOIT.	Mandate climate resilience and green growth indicators ; mainstream sustainability across all levels of planning.

(Source: Drafted by Dr Nguyen Quang, based on his experience as former Director of UN-Habitat, Vietnam)

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