



Field Trip Report

Field Trip Group 2: Dimensions of "social inequality" of the Mekong Delta migrant workers in Binh Tan District

1. Introduction

The visited place from Field trip Group Number 2 was Binh Tan District. Binh Tan District is located in the West of Ho Chi Minh City and is known as a per-urban area, where a lot of industrialization processes are going on and therefore has a stimulated rapid urbanization. So that is why Binh Tan District has an urban area within itself. Due to the fast urbanization and industrialization in this area the population increases from 254,364 in 2003 to 629,368 in 2012 nowadays the population is around 702,650 and makes this area to the most populous district of Ho Chi Minh City. Binh Tan is a trade hub and gateways between Ho Chi Minh City and the provinces of the Mekong Delta. A lot of domestic and foreign companies can be found in these areas, so Binh Tan established an industrial park with big companies like Pouyuen, who is manufacturing sports shoes like Nike, Adidas or Asics. Owing to the rapid industrialization and also fast urbanization rate Binh Tan District became a popular place for rural migrants, especially from the Mekong delta region. Coming to Binh Tan district the migrant's worker hope for a better job with a steady income and an improvement of their livelihood, even when it means to leave their family back home in the Mekong Delta region. Today the migrants from the majority group in the Binh Tan District with 51,1% of the population and 70% of the migrants are from the Mekong Delta region and Khmer origins. On account of the strong migrations flow to Binh Tan district, the area has to fight social problems for instance living conditions, public services, infrastructure issues and inequality opportunities.

Fieldtrip group 02 observed the area of Binh Tan district with the major focus on the topic "social inequality" by experiences a participating the daily life of migrant workers, public areas like kindergarten and production facilities. Furthermore, the group was able to practice Transdisciplinary Research (TDR) right from the beginning, we were able to approach the "field" by first getting to know three so-called "non-academic stakeholders" who gave us a first impression of the situation within this particular district. First there was Mr. Nam who owns a family business where plastic is recycled and then Mr. Hieu who works at the youth worker support center and Mr. Trung who is a staff of the Propaganda Department and responsible for the social activities for workers. With their support we were able to experience and learn more about the big topic social inequality within Binh Tan District.

To get a better understanding about the big topic social inequality different dimensions has to be considered like Gender, Opportunities, Education, Community, Labour Rights, Health Care and Accommodation. In our Field Trip to Binh Tan District we try to not put a focus on one or two dimensions. Our idea was to be open-minded as possible and learn from the people in that area. This is the reason my we kept our Research questions also quite open, so we approached to the field by observing the area and also we were able to do a lot of interviews with different



people. Afterwards we tried to analyze the data's through group discussions and comparing our notes.

The three research questions on which we wanted to focus upon are:

1. What dimensions of social inequality occur within the Binh Tan district?
2. Why do these dimensions occur?
3. How do these dimensions interact with the lives of the people (living & working) in Binh Tan district?

In Our presentation we try to give a first impression of the situation in Binh Tan District by preparing small role plays, which shows small part of the story of the migrant worker we interviewed. Due to the big topic social inequality it was impossible to show everything we observed in Binh Tan so that is why we decided to choose four dimensions to focused on in our presentation. The four dimensions we focused on are Accommodation, Public services, Social cohesion and Labour right. At the end of the Field trip to Binh tan district we noticed that by observing the topic of social inequality all the different dimensions have to be considers because they are all interconnected to each other.

2. Accommodation

For an in-depth understanding of the issue, the study combines transdisciplinarity and intersectionality research methods within the framework of human security and discovered that accommodation remains a key social inequality issue among the Mekong delta migrant workers, especially due the strong intersections with other social inequality dimensions found in Binh Tan district.

What then is human security? And why is it a better lens needed to understand social inequality in this context? According to Alkire, (2003), the 1994 Human Development Report defines human security as:

“Human security is people-centered. It is concerned with how people live and breathe in a society, how freely they exercise their many choices, how much access they have to market and social opportunities – and whether they live in conflict or in peace.” (Alkire, 2013, p.13)

Therefore, to operationalize the meaning of social inequality in this context, I will define social inequality as socially constructed and sometimes institutionalized disparity among people within a place (Binh Tan district in this context) in accessing various social resources, ranging from natural resources to education, work, credit, health care, gender, and social opportunities, etc. Perhaps, a further paragraphed or sub definition of the 1994 Human Development Report as put forward by Alkire will also help to drive it all home as follows:

“In the final analysis, human security is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced. Human security is not a concern with weapons – it is a concern with human life and dignity.” (Alkire, 2013, p.13)

Thus, the fact that accommodation constitute serious social inequality problem in Binh Tan district with special focus on understanding how the intersections between accommodation and



other social inequality dimensions help to reproduce and sustain the circle is undoubtedly understood by even a layman within the framework of human security.

2.1. Methods

As a transdisciplinary research study (TDR), throughout the framing, implementation and data interpretation stages of the research, knowledge co-production technique was used in collaboration with academic researchers, non-academic stakeholders, migrant workers and community leaders with relevant local knowledge about the issue studied.

The secondary data was gathered from previous studies done by Ho Chi Minh Open University, journals articles and publications, while the primary data was collected by conducting series of in-depth and expert interviews through field work/trips and focus group discussions.

The research sample used in the study are migrant workers mostly from the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, company managers and owners, kindergarten school proprietor, community leaders and landlords, and government official from the youth employment department and the Communist party propaganda department representative. The migrant workers accommodation in Bin Tan district was used as a unit of analysis within human security framework.

2.2. Research Findings

From a human security perspective, the study found out that accommodation accessibility does not necessarily constitute actual social inequality problem, but the uniqueness of the physical structure, the size, the living condition, and the location of the accommodation are the actual factors that reinforce social inequality between the workers and the locals within the communities. For example, the workers accommodations are often uniquely designed to be different from the locals' accommodations around them, which psychologically consistently legitimized discrimination and reinforces a sense of stereotype of poverty that devalued the workers' identity who live in these accommodations. In most cases, police regulations are pasted on the walls of their accommodations right in the communities as if they inhabitant are foreign migrants with little or no knowledge of such domestic laws or regulations, whereas they local accommodations are not.

In addition, the size of the of the accommodation is so small that it naturally restricts them from enjoying modern convenience that consume space at home, limit their choices to raise a larger family in there, and forced those who have kids to send them back home where they receive little or no education. This thereby reproduces the cycle of social inequality among the Mekong Delta migrant workers whose kids lacks the potentials to break the poverty circle in the future due to deprivation caused by the size of their accommodations.

Also, though the workers are often happy that they have a place to live in as accommodation, however, the living condition of the accommodation is often not livable or good enough in comparison with the locals around them. For instance, the kitchen is located right next to the



toilet and bathroom within the 20 square meters unit with little or no source of ventilation for air to circulate around the rooms despite the Vietnamese construction law stipulating 15 – 16 square meters per individual (Pham Manh Hung, a Vietnamese architect, in a private conversation, March 28, 2019). Because of these difficulties, most of them cannot stand staying inside their rooms in the afternoon. In fact, few of them are compelled to buy air conditioners irrespective of their little earnings.

In addition, the accommodations are often located in the outskirts of the city in a secluded area of the neighborhood, with most of them located in the slumps. The choice of the location naturally keeps them away from accessing key infrastructures such as hospitals, schools, and malls. According to one migrant worker who works in Mr. Nam's recycling company, her thirteen years son has not been going to school because she has never been informed of any school around where he could go to school. She also testified that her family has only accessed the hospital once when her husband came down with a lung infection problem in the entire nine years she has spent in that area.

Besides, even Pou Yuen Company also acknowledges the distance as a problem. Thus, the company provides its workers with transportation to and from work daily. However, when the workers leave for work and there is no school around for their kids, they are left with no options than to send them back to their grandparents thereby limiting their children potentials to receive good education in the cities.

2.3. Discussion and Conclusion

Using knowledge co-production technique from the framing phase, to the implementation, and to the data interpretation stage of the study, the academic research team collaborated with non-academic stakeholders, migrant workers and community leaders with relevant local knowledge about the issue studied to discover how accommodation constitute a social inequality problem within the research area (Binh Tan district). And the empirical evidence from the literature reviewed and preliminary discussion sessions held between the academic researchers and the nonacademic actors and the entire respondents used in the study, it was discovered that accommodation availability is not the major factor that causes social inequality among the workers per se, but the uniqueness of the structure, size, living condition, and the location of the accommodation are the actual factors that reinforce inequality between the workers and the locals within the communities.

Consequently, their identity is devalued and are often stereotype as people who are lazy, despite that fact that they do most of the odd and hard jobs in the district. They are also seen as people who cannot save money, even though their earnings are mostly used to support their grandparents and children in their villages who cannot fit into their accommodation due the small size, distance to school, and the poor living conditions that are not good enough to leave a child behind for work.



In a nutshell, while the accommodation plights remain unrecognized as social inequality and development problem due to language difference and knowledge gap among the migrant workers, their employers and landlords in the beginning of the study, the gaps were bridged by creating a thematic definition of the concept via knowledge co-production process between the academic researchers and nonacademic stakeholders by engaging them in a debate and meanings negotiation process while interpreting the available research data. At the end, all the parties finally acknowledged that social inequality existed between the migrant workers and the locals in the district, which is a great achievement recorded in the use of TDR in the study.

2.4. Recommendation

The study hereby recommend that a further study should be conducted that to bridge the knowledge gap and help creates better understanding among all parties, especially among the law makers, to address the findings in this study. Also, the role of NGOs should be encouraged required to either help the workers to speak out or serve as the mouthpiece of the workers.

3. Public Services

3.1. Education

Because of increasing migrant from Mekong Delta, the children were born. It is one of the challenges for education and society. It means that demand for education go up. However, there is not enough school to support for all children in this area. As a result, there are a lot of children in class. Sometime, children have to go school in another district. When the children reach school age, parents need try to find a school for them as soon as possible. Who go first, they will have the priority to get one slot for their children. There are no distinctions between local and migrant children. All of them are encouraged to go to school.

There are some challenges in the worker' family life. Their working hour is usually from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. They also have some extra working hours a week. As a result, with the long working hours, they have to leave the children with their parents back at the Mekong Delta. Other workers try to arrange for their children go to school in here. However, the public kindergarten often has shorter opening hours, which leads to the fact that the parents that have long working hours have to come bring their kids to a private kindergarten, which leads to extra costs as well. In his well-known study, Jaap Dronkers (2010), states that "The factors and processes that influence the development of education inequality can be categorized into seven key concepts: ability, social background, segregation between schools and neighborhoods, teaching conditions in schools, public and hidden differentiation, the relationship between the highest level of education and the labour market and the relationship between education and other social sectors." About segregation between schools and neighbourhoods concepts, he said, that "Increased freedom of choice for parents and students does increase school segregation. However, as higher strata are better equipped to make use of this freedom of choice. They have both more knowledge regarding the quality of schools and more resources to support their choice". It is totally exactly in this case.



There are some offers about education programs or training at their company or within their community. After a long hard-working, there is a little of workers who can go to the class. Furthermore, the structure of the programs and how they are organized is very limiting to them. There is a lack of participation as well as a difficulty in finding appropriate topic, the workers need and are interested in (concentrated on the needs of the companies not the interests of the people). This might also be due to the long working hours.

3.2. Health care

The health care we could observe similar issues, as the one of access, costs for insurance and the lack of knowledge about the offers. One of the important problems is “Food safety”. In some spontaneous market in Binh Tan District, there was a lot of food, which are filled chemical. It is really harmed for human’s health. Maybe, in the near future, we can’t find the consequences. In the far future, it can lead severe disease such as cancer. In this case, this is the burden to develop economy and community. The causes for this problem are because of shortage the adequate support of society. If the government has the strict and detailed rule about preventing all chemical food in the market, it is good for people.

4. Social cohesion

Another dimension of social inequality in Binh Tan district is the issue turning around social cohesion. The terminology of social cohesion is considered as the “glue” that “holds a society together, often through common values, beliefs, and behaviors”. Strong bonds indicate a higher level of social cohesion as shown by large percentages of the population following the rules of the society and displaying tolerance for one another. It is also demonstrated by cooperation by different groups within the community, particularly when working towards something that will benefit the society as a whole. In a cohesive society, individuals are apt to see themselves as a part of a greater whole, and to act in a way that upholds the accepted values of the society even if they do not personally agree.

Specifically, social inequality often influences on social cohesion. According to Anatolii Hrynenko and Volodimir Kirilyuk (2015), social inequality is the main problem of modern societies, which has an extremely negative impact on social cohesion, which, in turn creates barriers to social and economic development of society. The problem of social inequality should be considered as a consequence of social and economic heterogeneity of labor, which is the reason some people acquire power, prestige and property, whereas representatives of other social groups do not have the above-mentioned categories, and the lack of these categories at the representatives of other social groups. Income of the population has traditionally been the basic component of measurement of socio-economic inequality in society. The problem of inequality is closely linked with the problem of social cohesion, social inclusion, and public trust. Excessive social inequality that usually leads to social fragmentation hinders the



development of society and progress. Awareness of material inequality deepens when achieving a certain level of prestige, power, and status is perceived as unreasonable and unfair in society.

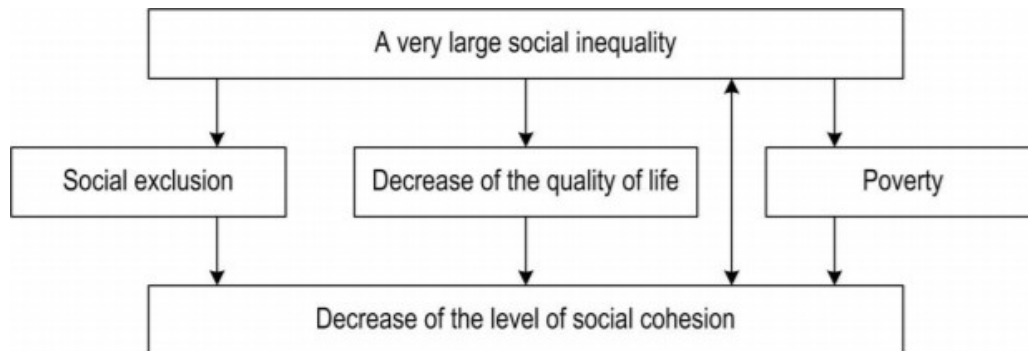


Diagram of the influence of social inequality on social cohesion

(Source: Hrynenko and Kirilyuk, 2015)

In Binh Tan district, the labors are almost marginalized from the community. They are exhausted after working at the factory and they even have no time to take a rest or enjoy the community around them. Some of them have to join the extra job, trying to get enough money for their living cost. “All we need are money and time to make money... I need more money to assume responsibility for 4 members in this small room” - a worker said when showing to the 20m² inn.

Although in the commune where they are dwelling, there are social organizations such as women union, youth union... which are ready to support the labors and hold many social activities for them, but most of them “do not know” and “do not care” about those. It seems as the problem of the exclusion of low-class people from the society and put the issue that how to interact among the people and the community. Regarding to the voice of the workers, the matter on social cohesion is emerged that is the workers are lacking opportunity and understanding about the community. This also leads the issue to the right of the labors in term of social inequality.

5. Labour Right

When it comes to social inequality in the Vietnamese economy, there are major differences concerning labor rights that we noticed, when we did our research within the five days of the fieldtrip in Bin Tan District, which refers to different conditions concerning labor contracts between official work in mostly bigger companies and unofficial work, for example in household companies. Different conditions concerning labor contracts were offered, depending on the form of the labor contract, which is divided in official and unofficial work in the context of our field of research. As for the conditions that are provided with a contract in official work, in a lot of cases, there are plenty of benefits offered by the companies to their workers. Workers with a contract in official work, often get the opportunity to receive social insurance and financial support from the companies. Also, further support is offered, for example in the shape of vocational training classes. In these classes, workers in official work can enhance their skills



and hence their living standard by studying foreign languages, like English and Chinese, or obtain additional skills, for example studying about Design, or learning about Hair and Make-Up, or obtaining a driver's license so that they will have more chances to work in another field more independently in comparison to their assembly-line work in which a lot of migrant workers start to work, when they come from the Mekong Delta area to urban areas in Vietnam to earn money. Another benefit when working with a contract in official work is the official trade union of the company, which would protect and represent the interests of their workers. Furthermore, the integration of the workers coming from different and in some cases more remote parts of Vietnam to work in official work companies often enjoy the benefit of participating in sports and social events, that are organized by the companies. Moreover, in a lot of cases bigger companies in official work would also provide accommodations for less rent for their workers. Additionally, when workers start a family, they would often get maternity leave up until 6 months, once the baby is born. By contrast, policies in unofficial work are rather lax and loose. A support system for workers provided by the companies in unofficial work is rather rare to non-existent, since in most cases these companies wouldn't provide any social insurance or health insurance and also mostly no vocational training classes. There are various reasons for these differences. First of all, in some cases employers would not abide by the official labor laws in Vietnam, so that some companies often don't keep to the official government law, which regulates the rights of the workers. The second major aspect is the lack of awareness of the employees. In our interviews, we found out that employees often feel like they don't have enough information about the opportunities and rights they actually have as a worker. As a result, these employees simply don't use the offerings that are provided by the companies. The third point that leads to the circumstances of social inequality in this context is the government system, that seems to be not thoroughly organized enough yet, so that the policies seems to be too loose to have an improving effect on the social circumstances in the Vietnamese economy. However, quite often migrant workers would choose unofficial work without labor contracts over official work with labor contracts with all the benefits. The reason can be found in their lack of awareness. Due to this lack of awareness paperwork, that has to be done to receive any benefits, is being considered to be too difficult and complex. This means that, if the wage is good and the conditions are simple, a lot of workers would decide to work for unofficial work, instead of official work. Having said that, even if the workers are employed in official work, they often wouldn't pick up any financial support, because the process to receive it is too difficult. From the viewpoint of a lot of migrant workers, there are plenty of advantages of unofficial work. The conditions are simpler so that they can work only as much as they want and they also can quit anytime and transfer to another company easily, without any further complications. They also would receive their salary quite fast and simple, so that they would work for one week and also already get paid after this one-week of work right away, without having to go through any further administrative procedure. To sum up, the administrative procedure is too difficult for migrant workers with low knowledge and awareness. The procedure to register for social or health insurance and all the other benefits for example is considered to be too difficult, so that a lot of the migrant workers wouldn't even start to consider applying for all the benefits right from the beginning, causing them to stay in



the same conditions of their livelihood. Our result of our five days research is that the migrant workers have the tendency to focus on just earning money as easy and as fast as possible to secure their present life and support their family back in their mostly rural hometowns. Most workers barely show interest in vocational training and other benefits due to the aspects mentioned above. Furthermore, a lot of the migrant workers plan to go back to their hometown, so that they don't plan long-term for a life in the urban areas in Vietnam, leading to the condition that the migrant workers would often stay in the same level of livelihood, without any improvement.

6. Transdisciplinary Research Process (TDR)

We know that there are three phases in Transdisciplinary Research process:

Phase 1: Farming

Phase 2: Research Process Implementation

Phase 3: Outcomes

In Farming, our research topic is Social inequality for labor migrants from Mekong Delta to Binh Tan district. As we mentioned in the beginning, our group could practice the TDR approach from the beginning by the situation in Binh Tan district with non-academic actors. It means that we met and invited three non-academic actors from three organizations, including: Le Van Trung of Department of Propaganda of CPV Binh Tan District; Nguyen Tran Minh Hieu of Youth Workers Center and Nguyen Thanh Nam of Household Production Management. We discussed and debated together to build research questions, methods, etc. Finally, we built one research team and three research questions related to our research topic.

In Research process implementation, we went to Binh Tan district for five days. In there, we worked with some organizations such as Binh Tan District Labor Confederation, Pouyuen Vietnam (Taiwan-listed Pou Chen Group), Youth Workers Support Center, Neighborhood, Hospital staff, Private Kindergarten, Women Union, a Household Business, Labor Migrants. We worked with them to collect information related to labor migrant's life.

In Outcomes, after our five days of the field trip, we could talk as well as observe, interview to know social inequality situation and also labor migrant's life in Binh Tan. We also discussed about the dimensions of social inequality we did days before. Moreover, by interacting with stakeholders as well as the people are living in Binh Tan district, we were able to get a multidimensional understanding of the situation of people are living there. We think that for now, as we have been experienced all these dimensions. We also think that further research is needed more time to discuss about dimensions between stakeholders.



7. Challenges of the Transdisciplinary-Research-Process

As our group of Fieldtrip 02 had the opportunity to work with non-academic-actors right from the start of our research process, we were very glad to learn more about the TDR-approach in a practical way. At the beginning it seemed to be quite difficult for us to come up with a ‘real problem’ concerning the situation in Binh Tan District without not having been there, but also not offending the stakeholders by assuming a problem regarding social inequality in the area beforehand. By trying to leave the research question very wide and open, we tried to prevent that fact and also intended to really understand the situation and livelihood of people living in that specific area. On the other hand, this openness also had some disadvantages for the group, as it

seemed there was no clear common focus or theme that could be concentrated on, which also had an influence on how the interviews were carried out. This disagreement then led to a negotiation about who can bring in which kind of knowledge and how we as a group can learn from each other to generate a broader understanding of the situation and the field that we were focusing on. After we could finally agree upon the fact that each of the group members could contribute some specific kind of knowledge and, therefore, we all can benefit from each other, we could agree on the importance of negotiation and reflection within our research process. We could learn, that this was one of the most time consuming, but also most challenging parts of our research, as we always had to make sure, that we have a common understanding as a starting-point on which we conduct our research upon.

This leads to the challenge of the very restricted amount of time for the research, not just concerning the time for preparation and framing of the research, but also for the interviews themselves. First of all, we had a pre-arranged schedule that lead the research in a certain way or rather influenced not just to whom we were able to talk to, but also how we approached, meaning the way in which we could interview different stakeholders and people living in the area. Furthermore, we were also very limited in the amount of time that was calculated for the different interviews, as we had a rather tough timetable. This concern especially impacted the interviews with different migrant workers living in different zones. Due to the limited time of about 30 minutes we were not able to get into depth. Especially concerning the sensitive topic, it was very difficult to support and accompany them properly during the conversation and provide a special space, where they can feel free to talk. What also had a limiting effect on these interviews was the language barrier – as some of us could not speak Vietnamese and had to get into the accommodations with a translator, that could not translate every essence of the conversation due to the limited time, but also other aspects as language specifics or cultural characteristics. This not just influenced the dynamic of the interviews in that sense, but also concerning the amount of people talking to each other as there were mostly two researchers talking to one interviewee sometimes even more. Another aspect that comes into that is the one of how the people living in Binh Tan district, especially by whom we were talking to perceived us. One of the biggest challenges we were facing in that aspect is the one of power relations within our contact with the ‘field’. On the one hand it was difficult for us to ask certain



questions, as there were several levels that had to be considered in terms of the political concept, economics and social interactions. On the other hand, we also have to reflect upon our own role, how we see the situation and try to understand the livelihood of the people; the focus we choose, while we interact with the people and how our own background and knowledge influences our way of behavior and the interactions within the situation. This of course also has an influence on how we were perceived by the people we were talking to, but also concerning the expectations all the individuals taking part in the research process had. What also had a huge impact on that aspect was the police presence during our research, especially when talking to Khmer migrant workers, where not just the presence of the police, but also the presence of the neighborhood leader and the fact that he decided to whom we were able to talk to and also his attendance during some interviews with the workers could have had an influence on our findings.

Concerning the analysis of these findings and the situations we could observe within the Binh Tan District we had some difficulties to find a common understanding of the issues and dimensions of social inequality that occurred within the area. Through an intense negotiation process and trying to understand the different viewpoints we could come up with some different dimensions and their interrelations regarding the situation and livelihood of people living in the area. Of course, this was just a small overview and further research is very much needed to try to understand the broader picture of the issue. For further research it could also be very interesting to integrate a lot of other stakeholders and people we were not able to talk to as for example people of a public kindergarten, but also schoolteachers, people of insurance companies, a lot of other (migrant) workers, etc.

As for the TDR-approach we can say that it was a very challenging, but also a very fruitful experience for our group to work with non-academic-actors through the whole process by trying to understand the situation of people living and working with them. After we had visited a lot of different places and talked to different people, we were able to come together and discuss upon the different perceptions of the situations in the Binh Tan District. It became quite clear that we had different understandings of social inequality and due to the language barrier somehow where talking about different concepts. In a fruitful discussion with the non-academic-actors we were then able to work on a common understanding of the situation as well as the opportunities of the people living and working in Binh Tan District. By trying to negotiate the different points of view and also different knowledge, we tried to figure out, how these different understandings could be integrated within a common comprehension of the situation and the term social inequality. This negotiation process could also be seen as the identification of a 'real problem' concerning the area, which leads to the assumption that we got back to step one of a TDR- process, in trying to get a better understanding and be able to frame the research interest even deeper. So once again it is important to stress that a lot of further research is needed, but also the possibility to put this research further to a new level could be very interesting and fruitful for really finding a possible support or even solution for the people living and working in Binh Tan District of Ho Chi Minh City.