



Original Article

Rethinking City Classification System in Vietnam: Towards Urban Sustainability and People-Centered Development

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Abstract: This paper presents an original attempt to bring forward extended perspectives about the City Classification System (CCS) in Vietnam. For many years, the CCS has played a central role in the development of Vietnam national urban system and has been a motivating guideline for individual cities. However, (1) aspects of sustainable urban development are underrepresented among the CCS indicators and (2) the CCS remains a top-down, rigid policy which takes away much of the local development context. It is argued that Vietnam CCS needs adjusting to better reflect the multi-dimensional nature of urban development process (especially sustainability) and to better comprehend the local people-oriented development.

Keywords: City classification system, development, people-centered, urban policy, urban sustainability.

1. Introduction

Among the East and South East Asian countries, Vietnam is a relatively late comer but also one of the fastest transforming, in its urban transition. While in 1990, only 19.5% (12.8 million) of the country's population was classified as urban, by 2018 urban population already accounted for 35.7% (33.8 million) of national population (GSO [1], see Appendix A). The system of cities (or urban system,

interchangeably) has expanded rapidly. In 2009, there were 731 cities nationwide, by 2019, the number of cities has increased to 833, in which class I cities (top of the hierarchy) increased from 05 to 20 (Table 2).

The active, conducting role in facilitating and promoting urban growth in Vietnam has been attributed to the Vietnamese party-state, particularly since 1986 economic reform when industrialization and trade liberalization were introduced [2, 3]. One of the cornerstone policies

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in Vietnam urban development picture has been the City Classification System (CCS) which, broadly speaking, aims to categorize Vietnamese cities into 'classes' respective to their socio-economic performance using a set of indicators. The CCS has been a central policy in Vietnam urban development framework, in which it acts both as a monitoring instrument for the central government and as a development guidance for local governments. However, long-term urban issues such as environmental pollution, congestion, social inequity, etc. as well as how such policy has shaped socio-economic development in Vietnamese cities intrigue questions about its effectiveness and practicality, an area that has cumulated rather scarce and limited research attention so far.

This paper thus presents an original attempt to contribute to this literature gap by bringing forward extended views around the CCS. It is argued that firstly, aspects of urban sustainability have often been overlooked in the CCS and secondly, as top-down policy the CCS has often omitted local development context as well as the optimal development paths for cities. Because of the lack of reliable data and access to information, this paper would not go in-depth in analyzing the CCS but instead presents perspectives not yet discussed in current literature. The analysis relies on data and documentation published by the Vietnamese government-state, secondary literature relevant to urban development in Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, information that is available in public domains.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 sketches an overview pictures of the CCS and current status of Vietnam urban system. Section 3 reviews some limitations of the CCS and shows the case to reconsider CCS to better account for sustainability and bottom-up people centric development. The conclusion provides further discussion on urban development and some future policy adjustment. A summary of legal documents referred in this paper is provided in Appendix C.

2. City Classification System and Urban System in Vietnam

A review of the socio-economic development strategy (SEDS) documentations shows that the Vietnamese party-state has recognized and repeatedly emphasized the economic role of cities and the urban network as the engine of local and national growth. For instance, in as early as 2001, orientations emphasized:

‘Planning the urban network with a few big cities, many medium cities and small urban systems with reasonable distribution in the regions’ (SEDS 2001 - 2010 [4]).

Ten years later, more specific orientations were given:

‘Step by step forming a system of urban areas with synchronous, modern and environmentally friendly infrastructure including some big cities and many small and medium-sized cities linked and rationally distributed across regions’ (SEDS 2011-2020 [5]).

To erect and monitor a system of cities as the backbone of national economy requires a comprehensive set of instruments, and thus the CCS was established. Its primary aim is to categorize Vietnamese cities into specific "classes" according to their socio-economic performance using a set of indicators criteria. It was first established in 2001 [6], underwent revision in 2009 [7] and officially put into Law in that same year [8]. Major inconsistent provisions existed between those documents (for example, see Chau [9]), so eventually, in 2016, Vietnam National Assembly Standing Committee passed Resolution No. 1210 on Classification of Cities [10] to overcome these overlaps and conflicts. Currently, this is the latest legal document in effect on the criteria for city classification, competence and relevant procedures. A preliminary comparison of criteria from early to current documentations is demonstrated in Table 1.

Accordingly, Vietnamese cities are designated into six classes: Special, I, II, III, IV,

V (Roman numerals) using the point-based system which consists of six indicator groups: (1) Functions of an urban center; (2) Population size; (3) Population density; (4) Non-agricultural labor; (5) Urban infrastructure facilities; (6)

Urban architecture and landscape. To advance to a higher class, a city is required to score at least the minimum point in total as well as the minimum point in each criterion.

Table 1. Comparison of criteria and points urban classification systems through the years

| 2001 [6] | | | 2009 [7, 11] | | | 2016 [10] | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------|------------|------------------------------------|-----------|------------|---|-----------|------------|
| Indicators | Min point | Max point | Indicators | Min point | Max point | Indicators | Min point | Max point |
| 1. Functions of Urban Center | 17 | 25 | 1. Functions of Urban Center | 10.5 | 15 | 1. Functions of Urban Center | 15 | 20 |
| 2. Population size | 10 | 15 | 2. Population size | 7 | 10 | 2. Population size | 6 | 8 |
| 3. Population density | 7 | 10 | 3. Population density | 3.5 | 5 | 3. Population density | 4.5 | 6 |
| 4. Non-agricultural labor | 15 | 20 | 4. Non-agricultural labor | 3.5 | 5 | 4. Proportion of non-agricultural labor | 4.5 | 6 |
| 5. Urban infrastructure facilities | 21 | 30 | 5. Urban infrastructure facilities | 38.5 | 55 | 5. Urban Infrastructure facilities & Urban architecture and landscape | 45 | 60 |
| | | | 6. Urban architecture & landscape | 7 | 10 | | | |
| Total | 70 | 100 | Total | 70 | 100 | Total | 75 | 100 |

Source: Tabulated by author, based on documentations

The CCS plays an important role in concretizing the strategic orientations set by Vietnamese party-state. Specifically, city classification is the central focus of Vietnam Urban System Development Master Plan [12], in which very specific targets are set for the number of cities in each class (see Table 2). Besides, funding and budget are distributed from the central government to cities based on their respective classes, according to the Urban Upgrading Program 2009 - 2020 [13]. CCS is complementary to, and should be distinguished from, Vietnam's regional and urban administration hierarchy (see Appendix B) in a sense that only cities direct under central government, provincial cities and towns are listed in the system. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh

City, because of their economic and political significance, are assigned 'Special' classes and currently, they remain the only two Special-classed cities in Vietnam.

By the end of 2019, Vietnam's urban system consists of 02 special cities, 20 class I cities, 29 class II cities, 45 class III cities, 85 class IV cities and 652 class V cities (Table 2). Compared to 2009, there is an increase of 15 class I cities, 10 class II cities, 05 class III cities, 38 of class IV, 30 class V cities. Overall, in 10 years, there were 102 new cities. The average urbanization rate increased from 29.74% to 35.74% in 2009 - 2018 [1]. The urban system in Vietnam is characteristically hierarchical (i.e. bottom heavy); the increase in the number of cities is mainly in the group of cities of class IV and V.

Table 2. Urban classification in Vietnam in 2009 and 2019

| Class | Actual | | Target set by the government | |
|---------|--------|------|------------------------------|------|
| | 2009 | 2019 | 2015 | 2025 |
| Special | 02 | 02 | 02 | 17 |
| I | 05 | 20 | 9 | |
| II | 12 | 29 | 23 | 20 |
| III | 40 | 45 | 65 | 81 |
| IV | 47 | 85 | 79 | 122 |
| V | 625 | 652 | 687 | 760 |
| Total | 731 | 833 | 870 | 1000 |

Source: Data for 2009 from The World Bank [14, p. 12]; data for 2019 from Vietnam Ministry of Construction [15]; target figures from Vietnam Urban System Master Plan [12]

3. Placing Urban Sustainability and People at the Center of Development

From the central government perspective, city classification policy provides a systemized, streamlined framework via which the grand, nationwide urban network picture can be observed and monitored. For local governments, city classification policy is a useful guideline for cities to self-assess and navigate their positions in Vietnam's urban system. City class and ranking are often used by urban authorities in promoting their image and attracting investment. Arguably, this is a factor that stimulates cities to mobilize, innovate and compete fairly with each other. General consensus is that the policy has provided an incentive for cities to attain upward mobility within the urban hierarchy. The World Bank [14, p. 11] affirmed that "striving for higher classification standards is a major preoccupation of local government authorities as the higher classifications receive a larger share of state resources. The classification system provides incentives for cities to try to move to a higher class". OECD [16, p. 21] agreed that "the greater autonomy and increased financial flexibility that comes with the higher classifications creates an incentive for attaining upward mobility within the scale".

Supposedly, if the policy is carried out *perfectly* (i.e. in a consistent and rigorous manner in each and across different levels of administration) then Vietnam urban system appears to be expanding healthily, i.e. the

number of cities by respective classes closely match the objective targets set by the government. However, both the media and the research circles have often been skeptical, even critical, about the true motivations by local authorities as well as the official figures reported. Whether or not the figures are inflated is not the focus of this paper and it should be cautiously noted that not all contemporary issues in Vietnamese urban development are solely rooted in the CCS. But given the significance of the CCS in Vietnamese urban framework with long-established practices and procedures, any adjustment in the provisions of the policy would have universal impacts to the system of cities.

In terms of contemporary legal framework, some studies have voiced concern on how the structure of the CCS influences the development choices made by local authorities. In the report "Vietnam 2035" jointly published by The World Bank and Vietnam Ministry of Planning and Investment, it is argued [3, p. 223] that the "original goal was to spur the development of cities using indicators set by the central government", however "the urban classification system encourages local infrastructure development, leading to massive and fragmented urban development". Indeed, the CCS structure (illustrated in Table 1) is skewed towards urban infrastructure facilities. Out of maximum 100-point, urban infrastructure facilities, architecture and landscape indicators account for 30, 65 and 60 point (in 2001, 2009, 2016 respectively), meanwhile points awarded to other indicators

are far lower. Consequently, a city can score the minimum points required by mainly investing in additional infrastructure. An example from Coulthart *et al.* [17, pp. 4–5] showed that "a city or town may invest in road expansion when there is only limited traffic demand, instead of expanding piped water supply, where clear need exists". The choice of investment made by local authority therefore is geared to 'tick the box' instead of targeting true local demands.

In terms of CCS implementation, local newspapers have reported issues such as: local short-term spontaneous, mass investment to qualify for higher classification; informal lobbying to advance to a higher classification [18]; loopholes and poor monitoring procedures resulting in cities qualifying for higher class while not meeting the necessary criteria [19]. Eventually, the mismatch between a city socio-economic performance and its class becomes a common phenomenon. In many cases, cities advancement in classification is not performance-based but driven by other motives. Vested interest has been pointed out as one motive affecting investment choices by local authorities. Investigating the local budget mechanisms, Hoang & Doan [20, p. 59] discovered that "managing officials in big [higher-class] cities also have higher salaries and bonus allowance than their counterparts in smaller [lower-class] cities" and therefore "urban upgrading process is usually done subjectively by officials". Similarly, The World Bank [3, p. 224] affirmed that "the higher the ranking, the more power cities have to issue land-use certificates and to allocate land for and to lease land to households and individuals".

Contemporary literature above have suggested that the CCS has created a distorted motivations for local authorities in striving for a higher classification - usually linked to budget allocation and increased administrative power. It is unclear exactly what the benefits are to local residents from a higher city classification and via which channels these benefits might reach them. In addition, the issues reported in the media have also shown issues with CCS implementation

often not acknowledged nor recognized in official reports which thereupon hinders proper investigation in *the effectiveness of the CCS*. This is elaborated in two further observations:

First of these, aspects of sustainable urban development are underrepresented among the CCS indicators; in other words, while the CCS has covered basic development aspects of a city, it is not specific enough in terms of urban sustainability. The CCS is relatively single-minded in its design and thus results in a rather one-dimensional approach by local authorities: the increased urbanization via physical expansion of the city. As illustrated in Table 1, the way the CCS is structured highly encourages short-term infrastructure-led investment at city-level. While urbanization is a common phenomenon of economic development, rapid urban development not necessarily lead to growth; rapid urban development without far-seeing vision and careful management potentially leads to very costly long-term readjustment. For instance, as shown in an investigation by the Development Bank of Latin America [21, pp. 24–27], despite a high level of urbanization on par to developed countries, per capita income levels in Latin America lags 50 years behind Europe and 70 years behind the United States - the case coined as "urbanization without development". Meanwhile, environment-related indicators in the CCS only include water/waste water treatment (measured in percentage) and provision of urban public area (measured in m²/person); however the most alarming environmental problems in Vietnamese cities nowadays, such as air pollution even in special-classed cities [22, 24] are not reflected. It is true that the data for air quality is now being developed publicly but they are only available for big urban centers. This raises questions on how urban environment issues are effectively monitored and by whose authority. Recent directives initiated by the Vietnamese government, such as the introduction of National Action Plan to streamline United Nations' 2020 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals [25] or the Scheme for Development of Smart

Sustainable Cities in Vietnam for the period 2018 - 2025 [26], shows the effort to revitalize urban policies. These documents which particularly emphasized principles of sustainable urban development and people-centered development demonstrates that the party-state are willing to take more mindful steps forward. Given the ambition to become an industrialized country by 2035, Vietnam is expected to experience continuing rapid structural shifts in labor structure, modernization and urbanization, so the new environment-oriented mindset is much welcomed. But these foresights and visions need materializing by tangible policies. The CCS - as the contemporary backbone policy in Vietnam urban landscape - therefore needs to be more sophisticating to better reflect the multi-dimensional nature of urban development process (particularly aspects of sustainable urban development) and longer-term vision, serious preparation and is crucial.

Second of these, the CCS is a heavily top-down policy. While it was designed to systemize performance criteria and streamline procedures between the central and local governments, much of the local development context has been taken away and replaced by quantitative indicators. This directly questions the validity of the CCS itself as a policy. In many developed countries there exists no formal legal policy for city classifying, rather it is informally done. *Ideally*, this allows policies to promote growth and urban development to prioritize local characteristics, utilize endowments and resources that best suit the local conditions of each city. It is worth noting that every city has their own characteristics in terms of population demographics, culture, local endowments as well as their unique developmental challenges; even among cities of the same classification, no two cities are identical regarding local conditions. Thus, these local conditions should be better realized to inform their respective socio-economic development agendas. The CCS has created a common 'denominator' for cities, urban development in Vietnam is more of 'ticking the box' nature instead of choosing the

most optimal and sustainable development path according to local conditions.

One the other hand, for cities of sufficient agglomeration size, local development problems can be better tackled with flexibility and efficiency. But in small cities (which is the majority in Vietnam) budget balance is a significant challenge. Su [27] argued that 50 out of 63 provinces and cities in Vietnam fail to manage their budget independently and ultimately they are reliant on central budget allocation. The dilemma is that cities that are unable to be financially independent have to rely on contemporary mechanisms of city-ranking to obtain more funding, thus adopting the one-dimensional, infrastructure-led approach inscribed by the CCS.

4. Concluding Remarks

Due to rather limited data and information, it is perhaps unrealistic to provide concrete policy recommendations. However, it is logical to indicate how the CCS can be improved forthwith. *First of all*, tightening CCS regulations/conditions, such as increasing the minimum number of points required or the amount of time leading to ranking submission, to make it harder to meet classification criteria. Eventually, cities aiming for higher classification thus must prepare socially, economically over longer period of time. *Secondly*, a more comprehensive and accessible database is needed. This is of benefits to both the research circles and to policy-makers at all levels to observe and monitor how cities thrive within Vietnamese urban hierarchy. Vietnam's Provincial Competitiveness Index, which was constructed through collecting and analyzing primary data questionnaire feedbacks, proves a solid example on how quality data can assist policy-making. Not only does it enable the competitiveness of a province to be objectively measured but it also provides valuable inputs from local business and firms. This author proposes the addition of a more qualitative-

based approach: bottom-up surveys and questionnaires to capture how quality of urban life is experienced by its residents.

Thirdly, integrate and incorporate urban sustainability indicators as compulsory requirement for higher classification. Recently, urban development concepts such as "Green City", "Eco-City", "Livable City", "Resilient City", "Compact City", etc. have continued to gain popularity in Vietnamese discussion circles. These concepts individually aim to create an ideal sustainable-city design but the common element among these concepts is the emphasis on harmony between human activities and minimizing impacts on the environment. Although there exists no agreement about the most desirable form of urban sustainability (for example, see a review by Jabareen [28]), they showcase a variety of values and approaches available towards sustainable urban development.

There is no ultimate standards that are perfectly suited to the development context of cities - One size does not fit all. In the very long-term, when cities have reached an advanced level of development, city classifications may no longer be the most important aspiration pursued within Vietnamese urban hierarchy. But in the short-term, having a classification system in place still helps cities to maneuver their development paths. Having said that, the next 15 years is pivotal to whether Vietnamese cities would become sustainable and livable to an increased urban population. This paper have attempted point out drawbacks of the CCS previously not discussed in the literature and calls for urgent amendment of the policy to better account for sustainable urban development aspects and local context. It is apparent that other regulations relevant to Vietnam urban framework need amending accordingly and definitely further researches are much needed. Hopefully arguments presented in this paper would welcome continued academic discussion in the coming future.

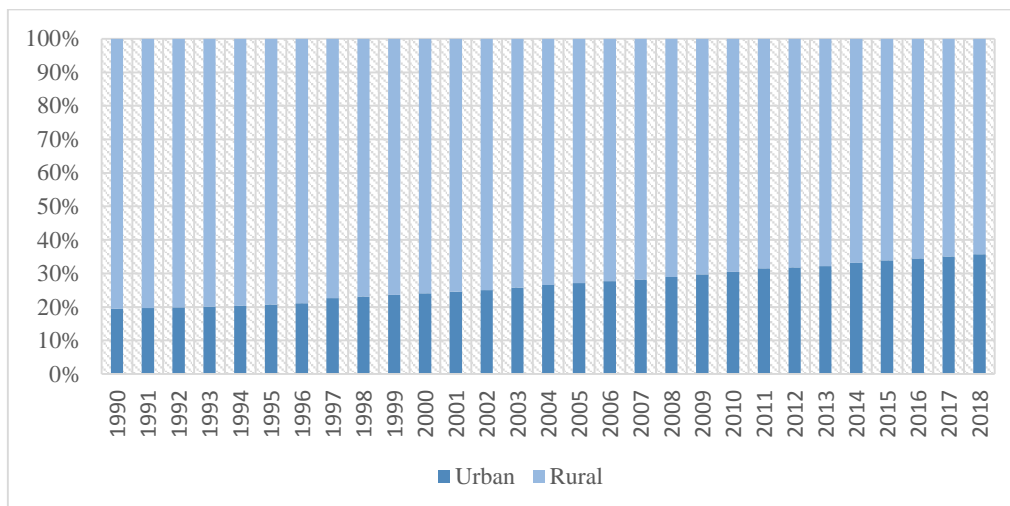
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Appendix A.

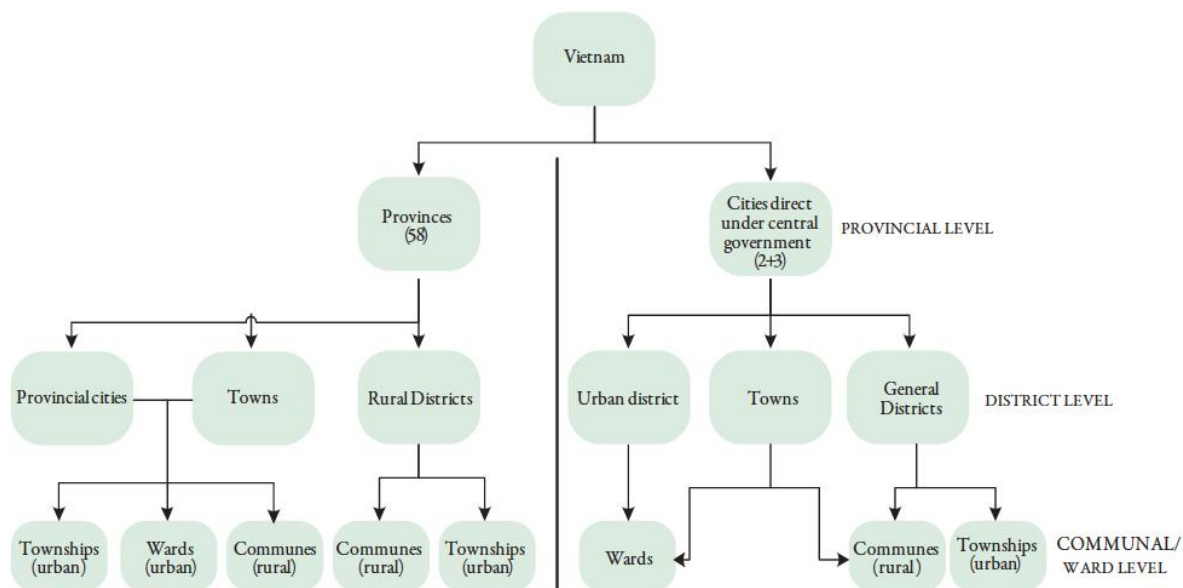
Urbanization in Vietnam Urban population in Vietnam during 1990 - 2019



Source: data from Vietnam General Statistics Office website [1]

Appendix B

Vietnam Regional and Urban Administration Hierarchy



Source: adapted from World Bank [14, p. 10]

Appendix C

Summary of legal documents referred in this paper

| Name used in paper | Full name |
|---|---|
| SEDS 2001 - 2010 [4] | Socio-Economic Development Strategy for the period 2001 - 2010 <i>Chiến lược phát triển Kinh tế - Xã hội 2001 - 2010</i> |
| SEDS 2010 - 2020 [5] | Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2010 - 2020 <i>Chiến lược phát triển Kinh tế - Xã hội 2010 - 2020</i> |
| Decree on City and Town Classification 2001 [6] | Decree on Classification of Urban Center and Urban Management Levels (Decree No. 72/2001/ND-CP dated 05 October 2001) <i>Nghị định của Chính phủ về việc phân loại đô thị và cấp quản lý đô thị (Nghị định số 72/2001/NĐ-CP ngày 05/10/2001)</i> |
| Decree on City Classification 2009 [7] | Decree on Classification of Cities (Decree No. 42/2009/ND-CP dated 07 May 2009) <i>Nghị định về việc phân loại đô thị (Nghị định số 42/2009/NĐ-CP ngày 07/05/2009)</i> |
| Urban Planning Law [8] | Urban Planning Law (Law No. 30/2009/QH12 dated 29 June 2009) <i>Luật Quy hoạch đô thị (Luật số 30/2009/QH12 ngày 29/06/2009)</i> |
| Resolution on Urban Classification [10] | Resolution on Urban Classification (Resolution No. 1210/2016/UBTVQH13 dated 25 May 2016) <i>Nghị định về Phân loại đô thị (Nghị định số 1210/2016/UBTVQH13 ngày 25/05/2016)</i> |
| Circular on Detailed Regulations of City Classification [11] | Circular on Detailed Regulations of Decree No. 42/2009/ND-CP on Classification of Cities (Circular No. 34/2009/TT-BXD dated 30 September 2009) <i>Thông tư quy định chi tiết một số nội dung của Nghị định 42/2009/NĐ-CP ngày 07/05/2009 của Chính phủ về việc Phân loại đô thị</i> |
| Master Plan for Development of Vietnam Urban System by 2025, with vision set to 2050 [12] | Decision on Approving Modification of the Master Plan for Development of Vietnam's Urban System by 2025, vision set to 2050 (Decision No. 445 dated 17 April 2009) <i>Quyết định về phê duyệt điều chỉnh định hướng Quy hoạch tổng thể phát triển hệ thống đô thị Việt Nam đến năm 2025 và tầm nhìn đến năm 2050 (Quyết định số 445 ngày 17/04/2009)</i> |
| Urban Upgrading Program 2009 - 2020 [13] | Decision on Approval of Urban Upgrading Program 2009 - 2020 (Decision No. 758/QĐ-TTg dated 08 June 2009) <i>Quyết định phê duyệt Chương trình nâng cấp đô thị quốc gia giai đoạn từ năm 2009 đến năm 2020 (Quyết định số 758/QĐ-TTg ngày 08/06/2009)</i> |

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| National Action Plan on Implementing Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development [25] | Decision on the Issue of National Action Plan to Implement Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (Decision No. 622/QĐ-TTg dated 10/05/2017) <i>Quyết định về việc ban hành Kế hoạch hành động quốc gia thực hiện Chương trình Nghị sự 2030 vì sự phát triển bền vững (Quyết định số 622/QĐ-TTg ngày 10/05/2017)</i> |
| Scheme for the Development of Smart Sustainable Cities in Vietnam in the period 2018 - 2025 with vision to 2030 [26] | Decision on Approval of the Scheme for the Development of Smart Sustainable Cities in Vietnam in the period 2018 - 2025 with vision to 2030 (Decision No. 950/QĐ-TTg dated 01 August 2018) <i>Quyết định về phê duyệt đề án phát triển đô thị thông minh bền vững Việt Nam giai đoạn 2018 - 2025 và định hướng đến năm 2030 (Quyết định số 950/QĐ-TTg ngày 01/08/2018)</i> |