



The Mekong Delta is a fertile region which plays an important role in the Vietnam's economy. It has great potential for production of food and other agricultural products. But there are also many difficulties in tapping its resources, so there must be an appropriate policy to make the best of its resources for the national industrialization.

1. MAIN POTENTIALITIES AND DIFFICULTIES OF THE MEKONG DELTA

There are some 2.7 million hectares of farming land in this delta which enjoys favorable natural conditions. The food output of the delta is on the-increase, from 4.1-4.7 million tonnes before the Liberation Day, to 12.5-13 million tonnes in recent years. This delta produces more than 50% of the national food output, 70% of the national maricultural produc-

tion and an extra of 2 million tonnes of rice for export.

This delta can be divided into 9 regions: Thát Sơn-An Giang (41,700 hectares), sterile gray alluvial plains (123,000 hectares), U Minh forest (200,000 hectares), Hà Tiên lowland (217,000 hectares), tide-flooded region (216,000 hectares), Đồng Tháp Mười plain (411,700 hectares), Cà Mau peninsula (684,000 hectares), maritime plains (700,000 hectares), and alluvial fertile region (1.2 million hectares). In addition, there are over 130,000 hectares of waters for sea farming.

Difficulties facing the delta are the poor infrastructure, high birth rate and flood.

In the delta, there are a lot of rivers and streams which make road transportation difficult. There is no bridge over Hậu and Tiền rivers. So

DEVELOPING THE MEKONG DELTA A MAJOR PROGRAM OF THE GOVERNMENT

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the road transportation couldn't produce desirable effects on local production, while there remains a shortage of wharves and means of transport in the network of waterways.

There are 11 provinces in the delta, but in economic aspect, they are in unity. Provinces on the left bank of Mekong river have the advantage of being adjacent to vital economic zones (HCMC, Đồng Nai, Sông Bé, Bà Rịa- Vũng Tàu). Eight provinces on the right bank of the Mekong river are suffering the poor infrastructure.

The pressure of population is also another difficulty facing the delta. In recent years, although the birth rate and the death rate as well were reduced but the problem hasn't been solved basically. Statistics show that the population density in the delta in 1995 reached 410 person per

sq.km. This number will increase to 455 in 2000, and 545 in 2010. The population is young: the working population represents 52%. In the coming years, there will be 300,000-400,000 new laborers joining the labor force, that is, the working population will represent 56% of the population in 2000, and 60% in 2010. Such a working population is a favorable condition for economic development but it can lead to a high unemployment rate and produce bad effects on the growth rate and improvement of personal income.

Floods caused by the Mekong river every year also make things difficult for local residents. In 1995, according to reports from Đồng Tháp, Cần Thơ, Long An, Vĩnh Long, Tiền Giang, An Giang and Kiên Giang, 38 persons were dead and over 10,000 hectares growing rice were destroyed by flood. In An Giang, Đồng Tháp and Cần Thơ, around 92,000 houses were covered with water and some 300 other ones were taken away by flood. Around 16,000 households needed emergency aid. The road network flooded, some thousands of hectares growing fruit trees were destroyed, 25,000 pupils had to stay home because their schools flooded.

Flood control in the delta is a great challenge which requires us to take appropriate measures to reduce damage to the maximum. To tap resources of the delta and overcome these difficulties, there must be a long-term program adopted by the Government to develop rural areas, improve the living standard of 16 million local residents, increase the food output and industrialize the delta.

II. THE GOVERNMENT'S PROGRAM TO DEVELOP THE MEKONG DELTA IN 1996-2000

Understanding the role and position of the Mekong Delta in the national economy, basing on careful study and investigation of the Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development, of Communications and Transportation, of Construction... the Prime Minister issued the Decision No 99/TTg on Feb.9,1996 on "Long-term aims and the five-year plan (1996-2000) for developing irrigation, communications and rural areas in the Mekong Delta".

"The infrastructure is what the Mekong Delta should improve in order to develop, industrialize, defeat poverty, and solve many other problems. The basic infrastructure in the delta is the irrigation system which is attached to communications and rural life..." (opinion given by Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt in the confer-

ence studying the Decision 99/TTg in HCMC).

The Decision 99/TTg is issued on time and comes up to expectations of the people in the delta, and at the same time, reflects the determination of the Government and the Party to change the face of the Mekong Delta and make the best use of its resources in order to improve the living standard of local residents, develop the agricultural production, and industrialize rural areas.

The aim set forth in the next five years is to produce an extra of 2 million tonnes of rice, that is, to increase the rice output of the delta to 15.5-16 million tonnes a year (an increase of 4% a year on average). This aim is feasible and appropriate to actual potential and existing growth rate of the delta.

In order to achieve this aim,



there must be the cooperation between many ministries and departments (Agriculture and Rural Development, Communications and Transportation, Construction, Finance, etc.), and the help from local authorities and residents to solve different problems arising from the process of realizing program.

+ In this five-year period, we need an investment of VNĐ15,000 billion (5,000 billion in the irrigation system, 6,500 billion in communications network, 4,000 billion in residential areas), around VNĐ7,800 billion of which will come from the public treasury and VNĐ8,400 billion from local residents, that is, to realize the Decision 99/TTg, the Government should allocate around VNĐ1,420 billion and mobilize some 1,680 billion from the people in a year.

+ Main targets of the construc-

tion of the irrigation system are:

- To supply fresh water to some 2 million hectares of farming land and keep them from flood, and to create conditions needed for growing a third crop on, or opening up, 600,000-700,000 hectares in order to increase the area of rice-growing land to 3.6 million hectares.

- To help 10 million people in flood plains settle down and to improve the environment.

- To finish three major plans in Đồng Tháp Mười plain, Long Xuyên trapezoid and West Hậu river in order to grow from two to three crops a year in these regions.

- To supply fresh water to regions of high salinity: Cà Mau peninsula, Gò Công, South Măng Thít in order to increase the area of cultivable land and stabilize local production and life.

+ Another task is to build and perfect the communications network (roads and waterways) with a view to making it suitable to local way of life.

This network should connect all towns and cities in the delta, meet the demand for inter-provincial and inter-regional transport, be in harmony with the irrigation system and mustn't block the flow of water.

+ In the coming years, the Government should try its best to satisfy basic necessities of life of 4 million people in flood plains and 2 million people in regions of high salinity. This doesn't mean we pay no attention to the demand for a better life of people living in other regions. In the long run, the targets all plans aim at are: to help farmer's family build a brick house, to help children of school-leaving age attend school, supply fresh and clean water to all local residents, build roads connecting to all villages, build concrete bridges, train civil servants and improve intellectual level of the people in order to prepare for new stages of development.

In short, the program for developing the Mekong Delta is an important one which will change the face of the delta, make the best use of its potential for development of agricultural production, assure the food supply to the nation and contribute to the national industrialization.