

### 1. Achievements

The Mekong Delta, with a population of 16.1 million people (equaling 21.1% of the national population) is the most populous zone in Vietnam. Its economic achievements in recent years are as follows:

- Agricultural output in 1999 was worth VND39,148 billion, equaling 34.5% of the national agricultural output and ranking first among eight zones of the country.

- Industrial output in 1999 was worth VND15,914 billion, equaling 9.5% of the national industrial output and ranking third (after Eastern South and Hồng Delta).

- Retail sales in 1998 reached VND35,508 billion, representing 19.38% of the national retail sales and ranking second, after Eastern South, among eight zones.

- Volume of passenger transport



Due to these achievements, the Mekong Delta has really affirmed its role in the export-oriented commercial farming of the country in the economic reform process. Decisive contribution from this delta to the food safety and export of rice (some 4 million tonnes a year that make Vietnam the world's second biggest rice export) and aquatic products (US\$1.4 billion in 2000) is a demonstration of its potentials and role in the economic development.

### 2. Challenges

The Mekong Delta, however, has its own challenges: absence of mass production, low personal income (it's not only low in comparison with their needs and contribution to the national economy but also low in comparison with other zones of the country), unsolved social and environmental issues, etc.

- Seas and rivers provide the Delta with both favorable and unfavorable conditions. Damage caused by the great flood in 2000 and the Storm Linda in late 1997 and large areas of saline and sour land are main disadvantages to the life and production in the Delta.

- Infrastructure in the Delta is poor: the National Route 1A and the road network fail to meet the need for transport; communications in flood plains are almost out of order during the floods; bamboo bridges are very common in this delta; potential for waterway transport isn't tapped properly because of the lack of ships, dredgers and ports. Generally, the infrastructure and living condi-

# THE MEKONG DELTA ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

by Prof. ĐÀO CÔNG TIẾN

in 1998 was 6,706.9 million persons. km, accounting for 34.5% of the national passenger transport and ranking first among eight zones.

- Volume of goods transport in 1998 was 1,949.2 million tonnes. km, equaling 23.5% and ranking first.

The Mekong Delta is also the largest agricultural zone in Vietnam that plays an essential role in ensuring food safety and rice export for the country. In 1999, it produced 16.28 million tonnes of rice, equaling 51% of the national rice output; and VND10,215 billion worth of aquatic products, equaling 58.6% of the national output. In this delta, there are 200,000 hectares of fruit orchard and if the coconut area is included, the Mekong Delta accounts for 45% of the national fruit area and 50% of the fruit output. Tropical fruits of high quality and prices from this delta are sold to many foreign markets.



tions in the Delta are very poor in comparison with other zones.

- Income for rice planters is low and tends to decrease. Recent studies show that rice production brings in higher nominal income but changes in prices of their output and inputs make the real income increase slowly (the real income rose by 6% or 7% while the nominal income rose by 18%). As a result, the more the rice output, the lower the increase in income from rice (portion of the income from rice to the total income of a peasant family decreased from 58.05% in 1995 to 49.9% in 1996-97 and 46.6% in 1998-99).

- Some 70% of residents in the Delta have no source of clean water; some 90% of waste and rubbish isn't collected and treated properly; hun-

- Upgrading transport networks, including the National Route 1A and waterway networks.

- Combining plans to build irrigation systems and road networks with plans to develop residential areas free from floods.

b. Agricultural production should be revised and reorganized, new technologies introduced and environmental issues taken into account.

- The structure of agricultural production in the Mekong Delta should be adjusted with a view to diversifying farm products and developing agro-industries and transport service.

- With a long coastal line, the sea farming should be developed into a big business.

- In flood plains, the agricultural

In flood areas, border dikes should be built and floor of all houses and public buildings should be raised in order to make towns and residential areas flood-free.

d. Social affairs and environmental problems also need to be solved.

- Health care and education services should be improved by reinforcing all schools and health centers and equipped them with means of transport to bring pupils to schools and patients to hospitals. In flood plains, the school year could be rearranged in order to avoid the flood season. In high schools, dormitories are needed to help students from remote districts complete their education.

- Clean water and environmental



dreds of people who died during the flood season aren't buried.

- Education, cultural activity and health care services aren't supplied to many villages, especially ones in remote and coastal areas. Generally, the quality of life in the Delta is very low in comparison with the national average and other zones.

### 3. Problems to deal with in the coming years

a. In my opinion, it's necessary to develop the infrastructure in the Mekong Delta to achieve the following targets:

- Living with floods from the Mekong river and the sea by controlling them effectively.

production should be adjusted to the flood season. Areas on which winter-spring and summer-autumn rice could be grown should be bordered with dikes and pumping stations should be built to regulate floodwater. In areas with low flood levels, fruit orchards could be developed and protected by dikes. Raising shrimp or fish in rice fields and canals is a profitable business suitable to flood plains. In areas zoned for rice growing, border dikes aren't necessary because floodwater should be drained quickly to allow a third rice crop. In areas with high flood level, such as Đồng Tháp Mười, where rice couldn't be grown, cajuput forests seem the best solution.

c. New residential areas free from flood could be developed according to a well-devised urbanization program.

sanitation are urgent problems to the Mekong Delta, especially to flood plains and coastal areas. Appropriate techniques should be developed and introduced with a view to supplying clean water, collecting and treating waste and rubbish. Cremation could be introduced in order to replace traditional burial.

e. Government investment in the Mekong Delta, equaling 17% of total development investment from the Treasury, has increased over years but it failed to meet the demand for faster development and make up for contribution from this delta to the national economic development. In the coming years, public investment in this delta should be adjusted and new conditions should be created to tap all possible sources of private investment. ■