

The Issues In Educational Development In The Mekong Delta Of Vietnam

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Abstract

The Mekong Delta is a socio-economic region with many potentials and advantages for the development of Vietnam. However, it is also the region which is most negatively affected by climate change in Vietnam. According to the author's opinion, besides the solutions for promoting socio-economic development, to sustainably develop the Mekong Delta in the new context, the Government of Vietnam should synchronously complete the three public policy groups: (1) "preserving the people" policy groups, (2) "preserving the land and water" policy groups and (3) environmental protection policy groups for this region. In particular, in the "preserving the people" policy groups, the government needs to pay special attention to the educational development to improve people's intellectual standard in the Mekong Delta and help the indigenous find sustainable livelihoods in this region which is increasingly becoming more and more difficult to develop.

Based on the theoretical framework of public administration, public policy and qualitative-quantitative research methods, the study shows the key issues which have slowed down the educational development of the Mekong Delta region in the past twenty years. The discoveries presented in this article are suggestions to manage and develop the education in this region effectively.

Introduction

Education is important to each individual, each nation and the whole of humanity. Indeed, "learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be" (Jacques Delors, 1996) are the four pillars of education which help a person improve and develop himself. In addition, education also plays a decisive role in the development process of each nation and country because "an ignorant nation is a weak one" (HCMA, 2002, p.8).

In Vietnam, education is "the leading national policy for improving people's knowledge, training of human resources, and fostering talents". "The State shall prioritize the development of education in mountainous areas, on islands, in ethnic minority areas, and in areas that have extremely difficult socio-economic conditions..." (Vietnam National Assembly, 2013). In the opinion of the Communist Party of Vietnam (2011), "investment in education is investment in development". Therefore, "socio-economic policies must suit the characteristics of each region..." to "rapidly develop and improve the quality of education in areas having difficult conditions, in mountainous areas, and in ethnic minority areas". Similarly, according to the Central Committee (2013), educational development "is prioritized for socio-economic development programs and plans".

In Vietnam, the Mekong Delta is a socio-economic region comprising 13 provinces and cities with an area of 40,816.4 square kilometres and a population of 17,282,500 people (GSO, 2019). Over the years, the government has paid attention and introduced many policies to promote the Mekong Delta's educational development with the goals of "achieving parity to the national average by 2010" and "reaching above the national average of development index of all majors and study levels by 2020" (Prime Minister, 2012). Despite having many positive changes, the education in this region still has many limitations and shortcomings. According to the Government (2017), "the educational level and the applications of advanced science and technology in the region are lower than the national average; the quality of education and health remains lower than the required level...". Thus, this is a big challenge for the Mekong Delta not only in the process of comprehensive and sustainable development in the coming decades but also in the implementation of the State's policies on socio-economic development.

Therefore, this is why the Mekong Delta's education must be comprehensively researched and assessed in order to improve the efficacy of the implementation of the region's education policies in practice. For that reason, the study will make a major contribution to the sustainable development of the Mekong Delta region by identifying the issues in this region's education, which will be the basis for completing the Mekong Delta's education policies. In fact, the research is also consistent with the requirements identified in Resolution No. 120/NQ-CP: "That reality requires a new vision, strategic orientation, comprehensive solutions, radical, synchronous, maximum mobilization of resources and the participation of all economic sectors for sustainable development of the Mekong Delta" (Government, 2017).

Research methodology

To conduct the research, the author follows the theoretical framework of the State – a public organization whose mission is to manage and develop all aspects of socio-economic life (Bui Ngoc Hien, 2021) – and public policy – an important tool of the State in socio-economic management and development. Public policy is anything a government chooses to do or not to do (Thomas Dye, 2008), is a course of government action or inaction in response to public problems (Kraft & Furlong, 2013, p.40), and it means all activities of the State directly or indirectly affecting the lives of citizens (B. Guy Peters, 2013, p.4). Generally, public policy is the tool helping the State make a series of management decisions and is implemented to solve the problems of public policy and reach the goals impacting the society. To make a good public policy, the first important requirement is to exactly define the public policy problems.

Besides, the theoretical framework of public policy problems is mainly used. A problem could be understood as an unacceptable gap between normative ideals or aspiration levels and present and future conditions (Hoppe, 2002). Public policy problems can be theoretically defined as unrealized needs, values, or opportunities for improvement that may be pursued through public action (Dery, D., 1984), “the contradiction that appears in socio-economic life, or a need to change the status quo, requiring the State to issue public policies to resolve and pursue desirable goals” (Trieu Van Cuong, 2016, p.49), the condition or circumstance creating a need or dissatisfaction in the public that is mitigated or restored by the government’s action (NAPA, 2015; p.127), and they can also “help a political party recognize and target the specific social problems or policy areas on which it can and should act” (National Democratic Institute, p.4). On the basis of accurately defining the public policy issues, the competent state agencies shall carry out the public policy, which is a dominant role of the State.

Moreover, in the research process, the author follows the geopolitical theory when considering the geographical factors which are specific to the Mekong Delta region – a socio-economic region comprising 12% of the national area, 19% of the national population, and contributing to 50% of rice production, 95% of rice export, 65% of aquaculture production, 60% of fish export and 70% of fruits production of the country (Office of the Government, 2021). However, this region is always considered as a "low-lying area" in terms of education (Nhu Anh, 2021), and it is also one of three deltas classified to have extreme vulnerability of impact from sea level rise caused by climate change along with the Ganges River Delta of the Brahmaputra River (Bangladesh) and Nile River (Egypt) (Nguyen Van Thang & Mai Van Khiem, 2017). Therefore, the Government of Vietnam should take the approach more realistically to improve the education policy in the Mekong Delta and that copying the policy from other regions of Vietnam may bring "unfortunate side effects" (Alma Harris & Michelle Jones, 2018).

In order to carry out the study, the author concentrates on the policy of educational development in the Mekong Delta from 1999 (when the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 206/1999/QĐ-TTg) to the present. Many implementation status reports and research projects on education policies and the educational development in the Mekong Delta (in the period 1999 - 2020) are also focused on.

Regarding practical research, many research methods are used to conduct the study on the implementation process of education policies and the educational development in the Mekong Delta from April 2017 to August 2018. In this research process, the author uses these following methods:

1) Document research method: Collecting documents, analyze, evaluate, systematize to define the theoretical framework, and provide data for the article.

2) Survey method: Using questionnaire to analyze, evaluate the educational policy in the Mekong Delta, and test the necessity and feasibility of the orientation and solutions to improve the policy in this region:

+ 50 survey questionnaires for department-level officials of 10/13 provinces and cities (except Long An, Kien Giang, Dong Thap) (46 responses were collected);

+ 150 survey questionnaires for officials at district and commune levels of 10/13 provinces and cities (except Ben Tre, Bac Lieu, Vinh Long) (134 responses were collected);

+ 500 survey questionnaires for teachers and educational administrators in the Mekong Delta (450 responses were collected) which are distributed as follows:

Table 1. Distributing survey questionnaires for teachers and educational administrators in the Mekong Delta

Level	University	College	Professional secondary school	Continuing education centers	High school	Secondary school	Primary school	Preschool
Given questionnaire forms	20	35	45	45	55	80	120	100
Collected	15	31	40	41	49	76	111	87

responses								
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+ 120 survey questionnaires for students from high schools, professional secondary schools and universities in the Mekong Delta (101 responses were collected);

+ 30 survey questionnaires for businesses in the Mekong Delta (21 responses were collected);

+ 50 survey questionnaires for households in Cau Ke district (Tra Vinh), Cai Rang district (Can Tho), Tan Phu Dong district (Tien Giang), Hong Ngu district (Dong Thap), Vi Thuy district (Hau Giang) (43 responses were collected).

3) Interview method: Interviewing 12 experts (including 04 researchers on educational management, public policy, and the Mekong Delta region; 05 people who are current or former Director, Deputy Director of Department of Education and Training, and Director of Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs; 03 leaders at the departmental and district levels in the Mekong Delta) to verify the applied research orientation, arguments, judgments, and evaluations on education policies in the Mekong Delta.

In addition, to process the collected data, the author used many methods such as analysis and synthesis methods, and statistical methods combining with the use of data processing software.

Results and discussions

1) Limitations of policies on educational development in the Mekong Delta

From 1999 to the present, the educational policy in the Mekong Delta was reflected in many documents, especially in three decisions of the Prime Minister:

Decision No. 206/1999/QD-TTg on ratifying the plan for educational and training development in the Mekong Delta region till the year 2000 and for the 2001-2005 period. Decision No. 206/1999/QD-TTg concretized Decision No. 01/1998/QD-TTg dated January 05, 1998 of the Prime Minister ratifying the master plan for socio-economic development of the Mekong Delta region till the year 2010.

Decision No. 20/2006/QD-TTg dated January 20, 2006 of the Prime Minister on the development of education, training and vocational training in the Mekong Delta in the period 2006 - 2010. Decision No. 20/2006/QD-TTg concretized the opinion of the Party: "Striving to raise the educational and training development index to equal the national level" (Prime Minister, 2006). Besides, evaluating the implementation process of Decision No. 206/1999/QD-TTg was also the basis of planning and issuing Decision No. 20/2006/QD-TTg.

Decision No. 1033/QD-TTg dated June 30, 2011 on the development of education, training and vocational training in the Mekong Delta in the period 2011 - 2015. On the 15th of September, 2015, the Ministry of Education and Training, the Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs, and the Southwest Steering Committee held a conference on implementing Decision No. 1033/QD-TTg and providing the educational development direction of the Mekong Delta for the period 2016 – 2020.

After being systematically evaluated, it was clear that the educational policy of the Mekong Delta still had many disadvantages and limitations:

First, the feasibility was low

Policies on educational development of the Mekong Delta were introduced and implemented in order to promote the region's education to be equal to or higher than the national level. However, those goals had not been achieved in the past periods. At present, the educational development index of this region is still the lowest nationwide, the Mekong Delta is still considered as a "low-lying area" in terms of education in Vietnam, while it is the one having many advantages over other socio-economic regions such as the Northwest and the Central Highlands, when considering in most respects. With the survey result, there were 09/12 experts and 498/651 (76.49%) respondents agreeing that education in the Mekong Delta was still in the "low-lying area" of the country.

The summary report on the implementation of Decision No. 206/1999/QD-TTg also defined: Educational scales are not commensurate with the stature and strategic position of the Mekong Delta and much lower than the national average; "Education – training of the Mekong Delta is still at the lowest position on the education – training map of the country" (MOET, 2005).

In the 2006 – 2010 period, some educational development goals in the Mekong Delta defined in Decision No. 20/2006/QD-TTg were not achieved: (i) The mobilization rate of high school students only reached 44.3% (the target was "to reach the goal of over 50%"); (ii) The number of students per ten thousand people was 135, reaching about 90% of the goal; (iii) The investment rate of education, training and vocational training in the Mekong Delta was only about 18% of total state budget expenditure at the end of 2010 (the target was 20%)... In addition, in the school year 2010 – 2011, there were nearly 21,000 students dropping out of school in the whole area, which was about 75% (the national average was 0.43%) (MOET, 2011).

In the 2011 – 2015 period, the summary report on the implementation of Decision No. 1033/QD-TTg stated that many major goals proposed in the educational development of the Mekong Delta were not achieved and the region's development index was still lower than the national average (MOET, 2016). The universalization of preschool education for 5-year-old children did not achieve the target of 100% provinces completing

universalization by 2015; The mobilization rate of children under 36 months of age was below 10%; The enrollment rate in upper secondary school age is the lowest nationwide (less than 50%, while the national average was 60%), it was difficult to reach the goal of 80% young people in the age group reaching the high school level in 2020; The structure of qualifications and occupations was still inadequate and was slowly remedied; The region failed to attain the goal of 100% districts, provinces and cities having continuing education centers (only 92.3% at province level, only 95.9% at district level); The number of vocational colleges was 78% (17/22), the number of vocational intermediate schools was 97.14% (34/35); The goal of mobilizing secondary school graduates to attend professional secondary schools only reached about 9% (the goal was 10 – 15%) (MOET, 2016).

As stated by the Government of Vietnam, “the educational level and the rate of application of advanced science and technology in the region are lower than the national average; The quality of education and health care is still low compared to the requirements; High-quality human resources are tending to move to other regions” (Government, 2017). Therefore, the Mekong Delta was still considered as the “low-lying area” in terms of education.

Based on the survey, both 11/12 experts and 587/651 (90.16%) respondents said that the educational development goals of the Mekong Delta in the past periods were not determined to suit the region’s educational reality.

Second, the effectiveness was low

In spite of the fact that education in the Mekong Delta was managed and developed based on the documents in the education policy of the Mekong Delta, it was easy to recognize a lack of synchronization throughout the region when monitoring the educational development process. Each province and city in this region separately operated and had a lack of connection in the implementation of the Prime Minister's decisions on educational development through the stages.

Considering the guiding documents and reports of the Departments of Education and Training in the Mekong Delta in the past periods, the main policy documents on educational development in this region were not mentioned. Through the survey result, 581/651 (89.24%) respondents also assumed that the effectiveness of the policy was low and did not create a synchronous development in the whole region.

Third, there was no good solution for resource mobilization to invest in educational development

Due to the low development index, the Mekong Delta needs to be concentrated and invested to make a big step in educational development. In the main policy documents on educational development of the Mekong Delta, many specific solutions for investment in this field were still general and failed to identify specific mechanisms and methods, which led to the low effectiveness of the implementation in practice. 634/651 respondents said that there was no good solution to mobilize investment resources for educational development in the education policy of the Mekong Delta. “Lack of investment budget for education is a chronic disease of education in some localities in the Mekong Delta” (Expert 1, 2018).

Decision No. 206/1999/QĐ-TTg defined: “The Ministry of Planning and Investment shall assume the prime responsibility and coordinate with the Ministry of Education and Training, the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Finance to continue to give priority to the investment in the Mekong Delta’s education and training in the key programs and investment plans of the State in education and training and in other socio-economic development programs; and plan to gradually increase the investment rate for education and training in the Mekong Delta from 18% (1998) to 20% in 2000 and about 22% of the total budget for education and training in the period 2001 – 2005” (Prime Minister, 1999). In fact, during this period, although the total expenditure on investment in education development in the Mekong Delta was improved, it was still low compared to the national average, from 8.5% in 1998 to 12.4% in 2000 and 13.9% in 2003. In 2005, the state budget spending for education in the Mekong Delta was VND 3,921,740 billion, which was equivalent to 17.52% of the total education budget of the country. In this period, “the annual state budget expenditures for education in the Mekong Delta is lower than in other regions and has not made a breakthrough yet, investment in education of the provinces in the region is very low” (MOET, 2005).

Decision No. 20/2006/QĐ-TTg defined: “The Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Planning and Investment shall coordinate with the Ministry of Education and Training, relevant ministries, and the People's Committees of provinces and cities in the Mekong Delta region to plan and ensure to gradually increase the investment rate for education, training and vocational training in the Mekong Delta from 17.17% to 20% of the total budget for education, training and vocational training of provinces and municipalities by 2010” (Prime Minister, 2006). In fact, in the 2006 – 2010 period, the investment rate for educational development in this region was only about 18% compared to the goal of 20%.

Decision No. 1033/QĐ-TTg defined: The Ministry of Finance “shall assume the prime responsibility and coordinate with the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Education and Training, the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs and relevant agencies to develop a plan on allocation of recurrent budget for education, training and vocational training in the Mekong Delta and submit it to competent authorities for consideration and decision”.

In reality, in the period 2011 – 2015, the level of investment in educational development of the Mekong Delta had been higher than in previous periods, but the state budget for education was mainly spent on people (about 85%), while the budget spending on teaching and learning activities was low (about 15%). Although Decision No. 59/2010/QĐ-TTg stated that “if the ratio of teaching and learning expenses is less than 20% of the total educational expenditure, 20% will be supplemented”, in the whole region, there were only 04 provinces and cities with a ratio of budget spending on teaching and learning activities above 15%, while the ratio in 09 provinces was lower than 15% and some provinces even had the low ratio of budget spending on those activities (below 10%) (MOET, 2016). “The investment in education of the Mekong Delta for the whole period 2011 – 2015 decreased and was unable to meet the needs, which made a number of major goals still incomplete such as: consolidating schools and classrooms, universalizing preschool for 5-year-old children, building facilities for ethnic minority boarding schools...” (MOET, 2016).

The budget spending on national target programs on education in the Mekong Delta in the 2011-2015 period was still low compared to actual demands and decreased from year to year due to the difficult economic situation of the country. Therefore, national target programs on education in this region had not been effectively implemented on schedule.

Table 2. The amount spent on the national goal of education in the Mekong Delta in the 2011 - 2015 period

Unit: Million VND

2011 – 2015	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
2,391,408	706,816	758,220	479,962	244,660	201,750

In the 2011 - 2015 period, the investment in vocational training in the Mekong Delta was also supported by the funding of the national target program on employment and vocational training (02 projects on vocational training innovation and development and a training project on vocational training for rural workers), which was VND 1,175,367 billion (only 17% of the total project budget allocated to localities in the country).

The policy on educational development in the Mekong Delta also had no good solution to effectively mobilize all classes of people to invest in the development of education in this region. “The annual state budget for education and training in the Mekong Delta is lower than in other regions and has not made a breakthrough yet” (MOET, 2005). “Financial resources have not caught up with the requirements of ensuring the quality of education; the investment in learners is still low and not suitable for the profession and training level” (MOET, 2016). Besides, due to the lack of mechanisms and solutions to mobilize resources, the social mobilization result was not successful and still low, which was VND 146,263 billion (MOET, 2016).

Fourth, there was no good solution to attract the stakeholder participation

Educational development in the Mekong Delta is considered as the duty of the Party Committee, the local government and people in the Mekong Delta. However, during the past time period, the roles and responsibilities of the entire political system, businesses and people's classes had not been promoted. It was also stated by 9/12 (83,33%) experts when being interviewed and 602/651 (92,47%) respondents. 14/21 (66,66%) businesses agreed with the opinion: “During the past time period, the role of enterprises in education development in the Mekong Delta has not been well promoted”. “The role of socio-political organizations and other social organizations has not been well promoted in the implementation of the policy on educational development in the Mekong Delta” (Bui Ngoc Hien, 2018).

The coordination between educational institutions and businesses had many limitations, especially in streamlining post-secondary students into vocational education institutions. “There is no mechanism to regulate the responsibility of enterprises when employing trained workers in order to contribute to education, which has limited financial resources for education” (MOET, 2016). This situation made the streamlining of post-secondary students and vocational education activities in the Mekong Delta fail to achieve the goal. The mobilization rate of lower secondary school graduates to attend professional secondary schools was much lower than the target.

Fifth, coordination mechanisms and unified direction had not been established for the whole region

The area of the Mekong Delta is large, comprising 13 provinces and cities with different natural, socio-economic and educational conditions. Therefore, coordinating and implementing the education policy in the Mekong Delta synchronously throughout the region was a difficult task, and in reality, the organization and implementation of the policy was not caught up with this demand. “Every year, the Departments of Education and Training take turns to undertake the position as the Head of Emulation Cluster 8 consisting of 12 Departments of Education and Training of provinces in the Mekong Delta. However, the role of the cluster head is only to host the conferences for semester-end and year-end ceremonies, not to direct and coordinate the educational development of the region” (Expert 2, 2018).

Additionally, organizing 12 Departments of Education and Training of provinces in the Mekong Delta into an emulation cluster, while Can Tho City belonged to an emulation cluster including the Departments of Education and Training of municipalities, had also lessen the unity and synchronization in the implementation of the education policy in the Mekong Delta.

13,3	14,6	8,8	11,6	12,3	16,4	13,5	13,6	10,8	16,7	12,2	11,7	11,8	15,3
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In many areas, where a large number of ethnic minorities lived, there were still the low educational development indices and high dropout rate. In addition, the educational level of ethnic minorities in the region was very poor, affecting the orientation and conditions for studying of children.

The report on educational development in the Mekong Delta also stated that one of the causes for the slow development of education in this region was: "The starting point in the Mekong Delta is lower than in other regions and areas." (MOET, 2005). This situation continued to be a major problem for the Mekong Delta's education to develop parity with the national average as well as to ensure the high-quality human resources for sustainable development in this region in the next many decades.

4) Lack of attention paid towards education from a part the people

According to some researchers, some people in the region were not aware of the role of education, so they did not care very much about their children's studies. For a long time, the people here had received many benefits from nature, so they did not have to work so hard to have enough food and clothing. Therefore, a large part of people in the Mekong Delta were not conscious of the value of education, so they did not encourage and support their children to pursue higher education. Besides, learners did not try their best to learn soft skills to have better job opportunities because they just wanted to quickly finish school to get a degree or certificate (Expert 2, 2018).

Similarly, Nguyen Thi Van claimed: "The Mekong Delta has not created its own learning environment, which means that the thought and awareness of the people here have not properly appreciated the value of education"; "This is the place where people can "make money for old rope" with food, fish, shrimp, and fruit trees everywhere. Satisfied in such a living condition, the people here have no desire to reach further. Also, due to the long-term influence of the purely agricultural and rural region, the healthy competitive environment for learning has not been created" (Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City, 2014, p.557).

Through the survey, according to the responses of 43 households in the Mekong Delta, there were 16 households agreeing with that statement, 13 households (30,23%) disagreeing, and 14 households (32,55%) having no idea. In fact, there were 02 responses admitting that, in the past, this statement was true but there have been many changes now, particularly families have paid more attention to their children's education.

5) Underdeveloped traffic infrastructure and scattered population

The Mekong Delta is a low-lying area with many canals, making commercial transportation in the region become very complex. In many areas, people mainly traveled by canals instead of road. Many schools had to face many difficulties in organizing teaching and learning activities, especially in the rainy season. Difficulties in traffic had created a significant impact on educational activities such as: mobilizing students to go to school, organizing teaching and learning activities and building schools, which caused many difficulties for students to go to school. This was one of the reasons for the high dropout rate and the slow educational development in the Mekong Delta.

This situation was also identified in the reports of relevant agencies: "The population is scattered and often moves to other places to live while the traffic is bad, making it difficult to travel" (MOET, 2005); "The topography of the provinces in the Mekong Delta is a large network of rivers, so the population is not concentrated but scattered, affecting the mobilization of students to school" (Ministry of Education and Training, 2016). Among 08 interviewed parents in areas having difficulties in traffic (Tan Phu Dong district – Tien Giang province; Hong Ngu district – Dong Thap province), 04 people (50%) answered that their children had many traffic problems when going to school. One parent whose child dropped out of school in Tan Phu Dong district – Tien Giang province said that the main cause for dropping out of school was the difficulties in traffic and the long way to go to school (interview in April 2018).

A part of the population in the Mekong Delta was scattered because of different livelihood conditions, particularly in border areas, seas and islands. Furthermore, due to the seasonality, the weather condition (rainy season), livelihood habits... a part of the population in this region often moved their houses.

Conclusion

The Mekong Delta is a socio-economic region which is increasingly becoming more and more difficult to develop in Vietnam. Over the years, the Government of Vietnam has paid a lot attention to completing the system of public policies so as to sustainably develop this region. However, a number of policies have not been highly effective in implementation, which affects the overall development process of the Mekong Delta, especially the policies on educational development of this region. The disadvantages and limitations of the policy are the key factors in slowing down the Mekong Delta's educational development, which makes the region fail to escape from the low-lying area of education in Vietnam. Besides, the education in this region also has to face many region-specific problems such as (1) Economic development is unsustainable and there is still the low income and high poverty rate, (2) The development index of the region is the lowest in the country, (3) Education is not considered to be important to a part of the population, and (4) Traffic is bad and the population

is scattered in some areas of the region. In the opinion of the author, those issues need to be researched and evaluated comprehensively to complete the policies on educational development in the Mekong Delta. On that basis, the policies will be effectively implemented, which plays a decisive part in the sustainable development of the Mekong Delta in the coming time.

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