Can Tho & Mekong Region

Sustainable mobility in a polycentric metropolitan region

Introduction

Can Tho is the commercial and administrative centre of the Mekong Delta region. It is known for its rich agriculture and river delta landscape. The 1.6 million-inhabitant, semi-urbanised province Can Tho City is one of five *Grade-I urban centres* in Vietnam.

The wider metropolitan region of Can Tho reaches into the more rural provinces Vinh Long, Dong Thap, Kien Giang, An Giang and Hau Giang. With the provinces of Bac Lieu, Ben Tre, Ca Mau, Long An, Soc Trang, Tien Giang and Tra Vinh, they form the Mekong Delta region.

Transport Governance

Provincial transport is implemented and organised by provincial authorities within a framework given by the central government. Regarding infrastructure, for instance, high-way construction, the central government is financially contributing through dedicated funds. Public transport routes and frequencies are developed by the provincial Departments of Transport (DoT) according to specifications of the Ministry of Transport. The MoT has to approve transport service plans and infrastructure investments.

Mobility

Within Can Tho and throughout the metropolitan region, motorcycles account for more than 80% of vehicle traffic. This keeps congestion and parking space scarcity at an acceptable level. On longer distances, cars, lorries, trucks, buses and coaches take higher modal shares.

In 2013, public transport only accounted for about 2% of the trip share. In line with the national *Master Plan on Rational Development of Transportation in Major Cities in Vietnam*, the DoTs would like to regulate the use of personal vehicles and strengthen the public transport share for environmental and social reasons. Thus, Can Tho City has developed various mobility plans over the last few years, including a *Public Transport Plan*, the *Can Tho Urban Transport Plan*, and a *Strategy for Enhancing Public Transport and Reducing Personal Vehicle Ownership*. However, none of them was fully implemented.

In Vietnam, as in Can Tho Metropolitan Region, two types of services provide for public transport. The **Local Public Buses** are traditional local bus services with a high frequency of stops. Their route networks are planned by the DoTs. In Can Tho, the provincial government operates some buses itself, while other provinces commission small-scale operators. The routes are struggling to attract sufficient passengers to become profitable, despite having very low government-set fares. But most of the buses are outdated, and the bus frequencies remain low (15 – 60 mins).

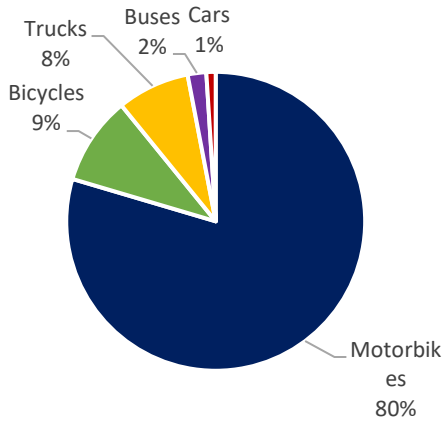

Figure 1: CTC Modal Share in 2013 (Source: Project "CTC urban transport planning to 2020 and orientation to 2030)

As the provinces cannot subsidise the public buses for financial reasons, operators withdraw from the routes, which decreases network coverage. At this stage, the network does not cover the region sufficiently. Interprovincial routes are often operated by different providers from the respective provinces on alternating days, resulting in long-standing times of the buses.

Existing public bus users mostly are people with low wages, with little travel choices, or those who do not have access to private vehicles or cannot afford the more expensive private fixed routes. A 2016 survey has shown that buses are generally seen as not comfortable by non-users (although users accepted that it was), while motorcycle users see buses as a safer travel mode.

The **Fixed-Route bus** network is conceptualised as interurban services with a fixed schedule and a minimum distance between stops of 5 km. It is regulated on the national level and operated by private companies. As for the local buses, the DoTs are responsible for network planning (under supervision of MoT). The operators then apply for the concessions to operate the routes.

The companies also set the fares, which are often a multiple of the public bus fares. The services are scheduled to run at a speed of between 80 and 90kph, a 100% increase over the public routes. The frequency of fixed routes varies greatly. The most frequent service runs over 50 times per day, which is a frequency comparable with public routes. However, over 40% of services operate less than three times per day.

Fixed-route operators complement but also compete with the public bus network, as they frequently stop informally on the roadside despite their responsibility for point-to-point connections. Yet, fixed-route operators charge higher fares, run at often low frequency (av. four trips per day). Thus, local public bus often remains the only option for people that are relying on public transport, which are most of the time disadvantaged groups.

The Management and Executive Public Transport Boards of the provincial Departments of Transport are responsible for the commercialisation and operation of the publicly operated bus routes. The provinces propose the routes and frequency for the privately operated fixed-route coaches on their respective territories. Under the direction of MOT, the DOTs have the full

mandate to regulate and manage public transport, apart from fares and subsidies, which needs to be approved by the provincial Departments of Finance (DOF).

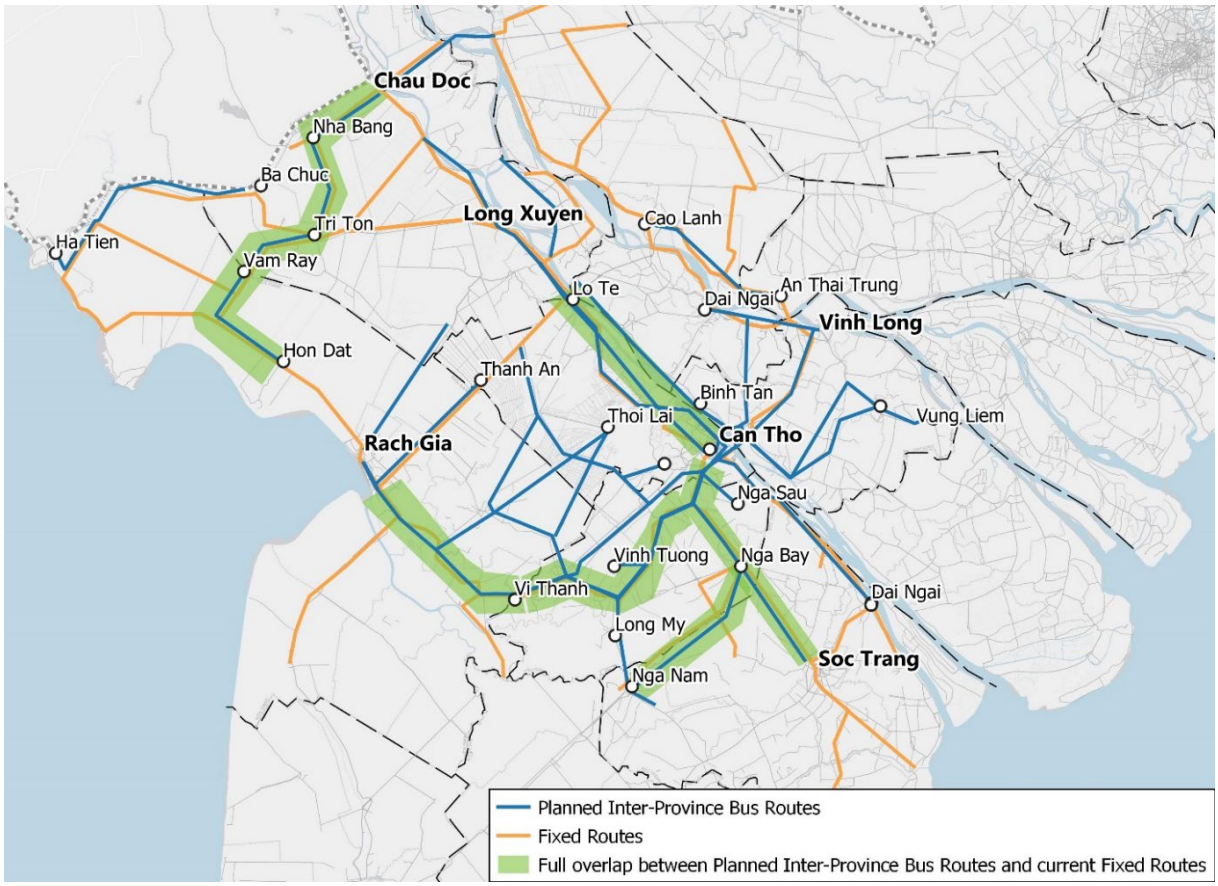

Figure 2: Planned and existing inter-province bus routes against current fixed routes

Activities

The provinces of Can Tho Metropolitan Region share the goal of a public bus system, which provides for the needs of the disadvantaged population and encourages a modal shift for environmental reasons. For public transport, that translates into delivering services which are:

- Affordable, reaching high frequencies and expand the network coverage
- Running on infrastructure and vehicles that are attractive to passengers.

While Can Tho City and the neighbouring provinces are showing a firm intention to change by developing ambitious plans and targets for public transport in serving the increasing travel needs, the rate of change has been much slower than aspired.

In cooperation with the provinces, SMMR initiated an **audit** of the existing bus network and governance structures. The study revealed a considerable network overlap of fixed routes and public buses, which could lead to operation synergies. It suggested efficiency gains through joint commissioning of interprovincial routes to reduce the standing times and improve performance.

The study suggests working towards a metropolitan transport executive, a devolved body, which will be mandated by the DoTs to conduct planning and delivery of public transport services at the regional level. In the Vietnamese context, a voluntary agreement following the British model of the **Quality Bus Partnership (QBP)** is considered most suitable. The QBP constitutionalises the cooperation between the provinces and the operators in an agreement. All participating parties agree to contribute their share to improvements which will make using public transport more

attractive, such as infrastructure improvements, bus upgrading schemes, increased frequency or better information services and feeder services. SMMR will support the Can Tho Metropolitan Region establishing the QBP along one interprovincial corridor.

Next steps

For establishing the QBP and a viable business case of the operation of public transport, SMMR will conduct an in-depth **baseline study** on passenger demand and modal shift potential on a single, interprovincial pilot corridor. It will take the needs of disadvantaged groups into particular account. The study will also establish a foundation for estimating potential emission savings from improving public transport and shall scope a proposal for future investment in the bus corridor.

The *Public Transport User Satisfaction Survey* will improve the insight into the profile and demographics of public transport and fixed-route users, but also highlight the challenges and improvements related to public transport usage

Meanwhile, SMMR will work with the authorities and operators on the **modalities of the QBP**. The provinces will develop a cooperation mechanism towards joint commissioning of bus routes. The baseline study will be used as input for designing the public transport supply. It will also help determine to what extent the fixed routes coaches and the local buses could reach synergies, i.e. through packaged commissioning or synchronised operation. The QBP might also take other services into account, such as new mobility services as feeder services.

Based on the baseline study, the newly founded QBP will be able to determine the new operating model for the pilot corridor and assess investment needs and options. SMMR will support the QBP to develop a **ready-to-implement project proposal** for the needed investments along the route.