

Economy - Society In The Southeast Region Of Vietnam: Some Solutions To Promote Sustainable Development

Phuong Nguyen Hoang^{1*}, Van Pham Quang²

^{1*}University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City, nguyenhoangphuong@hcmussh.edu.vn

²HUTECH University of Technology, pq.van@hutech.edu.vn

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ABSTRACT

The Southeast area is located in the Southern key economic region of Vietnam, in which Ho Chi Minh City is the locomotive of economic development of the country. The economic value of this Southeast region accounts for one-third of the country's GDP, contributes 44.7% of the country's budget revenue, and is also the largest FDI attraction in the country (41.5% of the total projects). However, this region is tending to decrease its growth rate compared to the whole country, especially during and after the Covid epidemic period, which reduces the total budget revenue. The labor productivity rate is not commensurate with the potential of the region. Socioeconomic development has not been similar between localities and is not sustainable. This research focuses on generalizing advantages, existence and causes of limitations of this region. Thereby, a number of solutions are proposed to promote the sustainable development of this region in the future.

Keyword: economy; society; develop; sustainable development; Southeast region of Vietnam

1. Southeast Region - Key Economic Region in the South of Vietnam, an Important Position in the Socio-Economic Development of Vietnam

The Southeast region includes 6 provinces and cities: Ho Chi Minh City, Ba Ria - Vung Tau, Binh Duong, Binh Phuoc, Dong Nai, Tay Ninh. This region has a modern investment and construction transport infrastructure system, serving to connect trade with other localities and internationally such as Tan San Nhat International Airport, Long Thanh International Airport (under construction); seaport system in Ba Ria - Vung Tau, Dong Nai, Ho Chi Minh City; highways such as Long Thanh - Dau Giay, HCMC - Thu Dau Mot - Chon Thanh, Ho Chi Minh City - Moc Bai, Ben Luc - Long Thanh, Ho Chi Minh City - Trung Luong, Ring Road No. 3, etc. This is an area with a particularly important strategic position in terms of economy, politics, society, national defense, security and foreign affairs. With its advantages and natural potential, the region is considered the largest, dynamic and innovative center in the country.

According to data from the Foreign Investment Agency (Ministry of Planning and Investment), in 2023, accumulated to July 20, 2023, the whole country had 37,839 valid projects with a total registered capital of 452.7 billion USD. The accumulated realized capital of foreign investment projects is estimated at nearly 288.58 billion USD, equal to 63.1% of the total valid registered investment capital, of which Ho Chi Minh City is the leading locality in attracting foreign investment with nearly 57.07 billion USD (accounting for 12.6% of total investment capital); followed by Binh Duong with nearly 40.1 billion USD (accounting for nearly 8.9% of total investment capital), which shows that the Southeast region is still an attractive destination for investors.

2. Assessment of the Sustainable Development of the Southeast Region of Vietnam

The Politburo's Resolution on socio-economic development and assurance of national defense and security in the Southeast region of Vietnam to 2030, with a vision to 2045 (Resolution 24) emphasized: "The Southeast of Vietnam must be a dynamic development region, a center of economy, finance, trade, services, education and training, development of high-quality human resources, science and technology, creative innovation, the leading digital transformation in the country and in Southeast Asia, playing an important role in development linkages with other economic regions. Especially, this Southeast region needs to achieve the targets set by Resolution 24, which is in the period of 2021 - 2030, the labor productivity growth rate will reach about 7%,"

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the contribution of the total factor productivity (TFP) on growth will be about 56%. The methods of change to support businesses to keep up with the development of science and technology have forced local leaders along with businesses to change quickly to adapt. Therefore, the sustainable development of the Southeast region's economy poses and creates challenges not only for the political system but also at many levels from local authorities to businesses and employees in the region.

2.1. Advantages of Sustainable Development of the Southeast Region

2.1.1. Geographical Location and Transport Infrastructure

The Southeast region is located in a strategic position, near the seaport and intersects with the main traffic routes. With the advantage of many deep-sea ports such as Cat Lai port and Tan Cang port (in Ho Chi Minh City), Cai Mep - Thi Vai port cluster (in Ba Ria - Vung Tau), this area becomes a hub for export - import, trade and logistics activities with the international market. Moreover, this position will create opportunities for enterprises in general and commercial enterprises in particular to participate in the global supply chain. Besides, in terms of road traffic, this area is the gateway, connecting with the main domestic and international traffic routes such as the North-South railway, National Highway 1A, National Highway 51 and highway routes. Regarding aviation, Tan Son Nhat airport is very convenient and easy to connect with other regions in the country and the world. This creates opportunities for cultural exchange, learning and exchange between local or regional and international ranges. This connectivity not only promotes the transport of goods, but also opens up opportunities for industries, services and tourism to develop.

In general, this region has many favorable conditions in terms of location and infrastructure to attract domestic and foreign investors to invest and develop business lines. With the development of industries such as food processing, textiles, electronics and mechanics, many job opportunities and income increase for people in the region have been created. Moreover, diversifying economic sectors reduces the risk of dependence on a single industry and lays the foundation for economic stability. As a result, the Southeast region of Vietnam becomes an important commercial center, attracting international businesses and promoting economic development.

2.1.2. Attracting Foreign Investment for Industrial and Commercial Development

The Southeast region of Vietnam is one of the leading industrial and commercial centers of the country. The investment and development of many industries, especially the food processing, textile, electronics and mechanical industries, has created many jobs and an important source of budget revenue for the region. According to statistical results in 2022, despite the pandemic, this region has contributed 44.7% of the total state budget revenue, accounting for 32% of the country's total GDP. This is also an area with a strong and dynamic private sector with the largest number of enterprises in the country, and is the area attracting the largest foreign direct investment (FDI), accounting for 41.1% of the total FDI capital of Vietnam. Statistics from the Ministry of Planning and Investment show that, in just the first half of the year, this region had nearly \$5.7 billion invested by foreign investors and concentrated in Ho Chi Minh City (about 2 0.8 billion USD), proving that this area is very potential for industrial economic development.

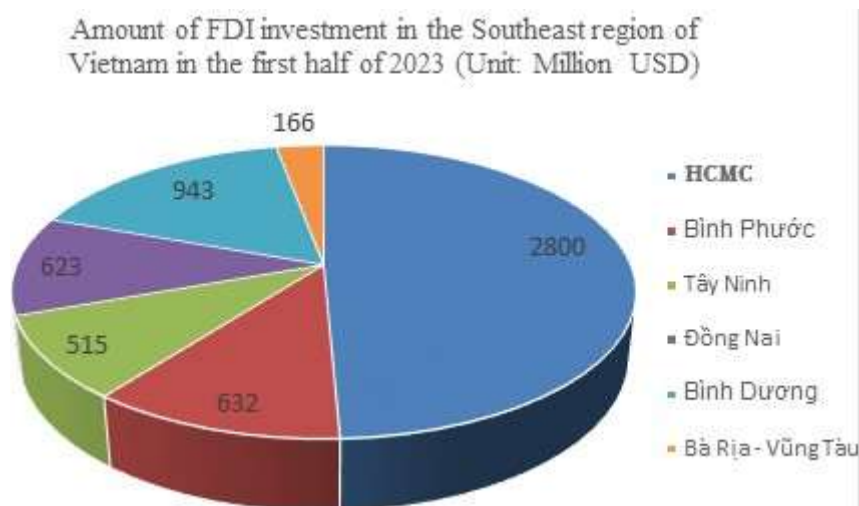


Figure 1 FDI capital invested in the Southeast region of Vietnam in the first half of 2023

2.1.3. Young, Abundant and Highly Qualified Workforce

The Southeast region of Vietnam has a young population and a relatively high level of education. This gives the advantage of innovation, technology and high-quality training, while supporting modern economic sectors. During the Conference to report on the development of education and training in the Southeast region for the period 2011-2022 and the tasks and solutions for education and training development to 2030, with a vision to 2045, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) of Vietnam announced: "The year 2022 is a leap forward for higher education in the Southeast region of Vietnam." As of the first half of 2022, the whole region

has nearly 60 higher education institutions and more than 300 vocational education institutions that train future-oriented occupations such as high technology (automation, biology, new materials, etc.) natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, finance, banking, transportation, logistics, supply chains, etc. These training programs have almost been quality-accredited and met regional and international standards, meeting the requirements of high-quality labor for socio-economic development of the region in particular and the whole country in general. In addition, with the "migration" from other provinces across the country to industrial zones in Dong Nai, Binh Duong, and Ho Chi Minh City, it has created a very attractive source of labor for companies that need to hire general level labor in large numbers.

2.1.4. Natural Resources

The Southeast region of Vietnam has abundant natural resources with large reserves such as petroleum, coal, bauxite, and renewable energy sources. This region has favorable natural conditions for agricultural, industrial and urban development. Many areas have basalt land which is very favorable for the development of rubber, coffee, cashew, peanut, sugarcane, soybean and food crops. Moreover, the area of natural forest is still quite large and has an important meaning in the supply of timber and ecological balance, in which the Cat Tien national forest is a very good area for tourism development and scientific research. In Ba Ria - Vung Tau province, there are also huge oil and gas reserves, which are forecasted to be 4-5 billion tons of oil and 485-500 billion cubic meters of gas. Besides, this region has about 420 million tons of bauxite, concentrated in Binh Phuoc and Binh Duong areas. In addition, the region has quarries of paving stone, kaolin, glass sand, etc. supplying raw materials for factories and for export, etc.

Besides, with a long and beautiful coastline, this is a natural condition for this region to develop the marine economy and tourism industry. This Southeast region has many attractive tourist attractions such as Ho Chi Minh City, Vung Tau beach, and Dong Nai Rubber Museum, Dau Tieng Lake, Tri An Lake, Cat Tien National Park, etc. The combination of industrial development and tourism can create a diverse and sustainable source of income for this region.

2.1.5. The Possibility of International Cooperation in Science and Technology

The Southeast region of Vietnam has attracted the attention of foreign businesses and international organizations. This cooperation can bring investment opportunities, technology transfer, and improve the quality of human resources. Technological innovation activities and high-tech applications in this region are strongly developed, most of the provinces in this region have innovation centers. Some localities such as Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong, Dong Nai have many creative incubators, building innovation ecosystems and deploying to build smart cities.

2.1.6. Attractive Investment Policies and Environment

The index of administrative reform and improvement of the investment environment is not only interested by the Government, but also quickly implemented by each local authority to attract investors and serve the citizen. Right in the Program issued together with Resolution 154/NQ-CP in 2022, it is clearly stated that the Southeast region of Vietnam needs to accelerate administrative reform, develop e-government, towards digital government, digital economy and digital society, smart city. In addition, the institution of out-of-court dispute settlement needs to be perfected; improve efficiency and shorten the time for dispute settlement and judgment enforcement in the fields of civil, administrative, investment, business, commercial and consumer protection needs to be improved. In 2022, Ba Ria - Vung Tau province ranked 6th, Binh Duong ranked 35th, Ho Chi Minh City ranked 36th, Binh Phuoc ranked 39th, Tay Ninh ranked 44th, Dong Nai ranked 51st out of 63 provinces.

2.2. Limitations in the Sustainable Development of the Southeast Region of Vietnam

Although playing an extremely important role in promoting socio-economic development of the country, according to the report of the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the development of this region has been facing many challenges and there are still many limitations, such as: The infrastructure network in the region and outside the region is still lacking and inconsistent; development gap between localities in the region has not been shortened; economic, political and cultural linkages in the region are still limited. Currently, this region has built a unified economic space that has not been highly effective, resources are still scattered, and the economic benefits of each locality are still constrained because they are divided according to administrative boundaries. Some industries are still competitive but do not support each other, and thus losing the common advantage.

In addition, a number of important targets set by each locality have yet to be achieved. Moreover, the economic growth rate of this region tends to slow down and is lower than that of the whole country. The contribution rate to total state budget revenue is decreasing. The labor productivity growth rate is still low. The transport infrastructure network connecting the localities is not really synchronous. The construction of export processing zones and industrial parks by localities is still local, based only on their local advantages, without considering the rationality when connecting with neighboring areas. Some localities promote industries that have developed rapidly but are unsustainable. The industry in enterprises is usually outsourcing and assembling, so the added value created is not high. Besides, supporting industries have not been really interested, so they are still developing slowly. At the same time, the quality of human resources in general and

high-quality human resources in particular have not met the demand from the rapid development of this region. Despite having a convenient location and transportation system, the Southeast region of Vietnam has not had a connection and synchronous infrastructure development. Seaports and cargo transportation systems by sea have not been fully exploited. The regional linkage to promote the development of the logistics system still has many shortcomings and limitations that make it difficult for businesses to access and use services. Moreover, the overloaded road traffic system has greatly affected businesses as well as the travel of people. The highways connecting inside and outside the region are invested but the construction is very slow despite working sessions at all levels from central to local authorities. Moreover, the overload of Tan Son Nhat International Airport and despite the approval of the State to invest in the construction project of Long Thanh International Airport, but the delay in construction progress compared to the plan will affect the connecting within the region and with the world in the socio-economic development of the region in particular and of the country in general.

Currently, local authorities of the provinces in the region have built many preferential mechanisms and policies to attract domestic and foreign investors to the locality, but the number of investment enterprises is not commensurate with the potential development of this region. In addition to some localities applying new technology in administrative management, creating favorable conditions for businesses to access, in other localities, the administrative reform rate is still slow. Moreover, some local leaders are cautious, afraid of responsibility in performing tasks, waiting for instructions from the upper level, which greatly affects investors, especially foreign investors. This is one of the reasons why foreign investors are hesitant to invest in the region and, of course, FDI capital will also be affected.

Although the region has a very low rate of natural population growth, the immigration rate is high, especially in provinces with many industrial zones such as Binh Duong, Dong Nai, and Ho Chi Minh City. In addition, the average rate of workers with specialized training in the region has not increased much, averaging only about 1% per year, from Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong, the proportion of trained workers is much higher than that of other locations in the region. Furthermore, in recent years there has been a shift in the workforce between occupations. Statistics show that there has been a higher proportion of workers in knowledge-demanding industries. If there is no strategy to build a workforce, the challenge for the lack of "workers" in the future is huge.

Next, natural resources are abundant, but the exploitation is not really effective. In addition to some important industries such as oil and gas exploitation, hydroelectric power plants, Cat Tien national park, etc. managed by state agencies, the management and exploitation of natural resources in some areas seem to have not been fully exploited with high efficiency and productivity. The mining is still done by manual methods, not many modern techniques have been applied, so it is still a waste of resources and low efficiency.

On the other hand, the ranking order of the PAR index in 2022 shows that the provinces in the Southeast region of Vietnam still have many shortcomings that need to be improved. The administrative reform index is at medium and low levels, affecting the investment environment of enterprises. Besides, the region's provincial competitiveness index (PCI) has not yet reached a high level, according to domestic rankings, Ba Ria - Vung Tau is ranked 4th (70.26), and Ho Chi Minh City ranks 27th. (65.86), Dong Nai ranked 29th (65.67), Binh Duong ranked 36th (65.13), Binh Phuoc ranked 43rd (64.32), Tay Ninh ranked 55th (62.31).

Moreover, the development and application of technical technologies has not been much in the management of socio-economic activities, as well as the application of science and technology in enterprises, especially in remote and isolated areas (equipment and machinery, old transmission lines, unstable speed, limited human resources, etc.). The technology infrastructures to serve the development of digital technology infrastructure and digital transformation have not been synchronized by localities, and fast invested to apply digital technologies in ecosystem development and transformation according to the Resolution of the Politburo and the Government's Regulations.

Table 1 The situation of digital transformation implementation in the Southeast provinces of Vietnam in 2021

No	Southeast provinces of Vietnam	Overall rating for digital transformation	Digital Government ranking	Digital Economy Ranking	Digital Social Rating	Human Resources	Digital infrastructure
1	Ho Chi Minh City	3	4	1	29	11	1
2	Dong Nai	19	17	3	21	16	37
3	Binh Duong	22	16	36	33	7	5
4	Binh Phuoc	9	3	28	11	13	8
5	BA Ria - Vung Tau	29	44	14	28	56	6
6	Tay Ninh	44	50	58	58	54	29

(Source: Ministry of Information & Communications 2021)

2.3. The Basic Reasons for Limiting the Development of the Southeast Region of Vietnam

Through the above issues, we see that there are the following basic reasons affecting the sustainable development of the Southeast region of Vietnam.

Firstly, technical infrastructure and traffic have not been developed evenly. Despite the development of infrastructure and transport, there is still considerable disagreement among provinces in the region. Some areas still lack inter-regional roads and transport infrastructure, making it difficult for goods and people to travel, not to mention the connection with regional and international countries.

Secondly, the Southeast region of Vietnam is too dependent on natural resources such as mining industry, agriculture, seafood processing and tourism. The current climate change and natural disasters can greatly affect the stability of this resource. Besides, if the exploitation of resources such as oil, gas, raw stone, etc. is done without explicit planning and investment, these resources will be wasted, and it is easy to create problems with criminal and economic crimes.

Thirdly, there is a big gap in economic development of each locality. The large disparity in economic development among provinces in the Southeast region of Vietnam is a serious problem. Provinces with higher economic development are often concentrated in big cities such as Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong, and Dong Nai, while other provinces and rural areas still face difficulties. This will widen the gap between the rich and the poor as well as the "migration" in localities in search of job opportunities and economic development.

Fourthly, they are the social issues. The Southeast region of Vietnam is also facing many social problems such as unemployment, poverty, inequality in education and health opportunities. These issues can affect the sustainable development of the region. The development of industrial parks and export processing zones has created complexity in the management of social and economic order. In addition, opportunities to access health and education fields are increasing. Health and education services are differentiated according to customer income and sometimes have to depend on customers in paying for services, while these services in public management have not been highly invested yet, such as the health sector. In addition, the increase in industrial parks and business establishments increases the status of social evils, especially high-tech criminals. Fifthly, it is the environmental pollution. The rapid development of industrial parks and export processing zones together with industries, supporting industries and services has caused problems of environmental pollution, affecting people's health and sustainability of the living environment. The construction of infrastructure to handle the problem of environmental pollution is at an alarming situation, not only concentrated in Ho Chi Minh City but also in Dong Nai, Binh Duong, etc. that the problem of industrial and medical waste needs much more attention.

Sixthly, human resources are not enough to meet economic development goals, especially high-quality human resources. Although there are a number of universities, colleges and vocational schools diversifying training activities in order to improve the training of human resources in general and high-quality human resources in particular, the Southeast region of Vietnam still faces difficulties in providing quality and sufficient human resources to meet the needs of this region, the neighboring regions and the world.

Seventhly, they are politics and management. Administrative reform has been promoted by the Party and local authorities, but the effect has not been as expected. Some localities in the region are still afraid of taking the lead, reforming their thinking for development, fearing responsibility, and not daring to decide to carry out tasks within their powers and obligations. This causes a huge waste of opportunity cost, time and effort of the society. Besides, some issues of politics, management of land, resources and investment also cause conflicts and difficulties in the development process of the region.

Finally, it is the competitiveness with other regions. With its geographical location and internal potential, the Southeast region of Vietnam is having to compete with stronger economic regions not only domestically but also regionally abroad and internationally. This puts great pressure on the development of the region. To deal with these causes, collaboration between government agencies, businesses and communities is needed to create appropriate solutions that promote sustainable and balanced development for the Southeast region of Vietnam.

3. Suggested Solutions to Enhance the Sustainable Development of the Southeast Region of Vietnam

In order for the Southeast region of Vietnam to develop sustainably and increase its competitiveness in the region and internationally in the future, the following solutions are proposed.

Firstly, speeding up the implementation of the agreed contents of the conference mentioned by the Coordinating Council for the Southeast region of Vietnam. Key local leaders need to focus on reviewing and removing difficulties in institutions, mechanisms and policies related to regional and local linkages, creating a unified focal point for the formulation of general policies for the region and especially for the specific professions of the region. These policies and programs need to be developed in a practical way and integrated into local development programs and projects. This region should have a local enforcement and monitoring agency, with separate sanctions placed in the Regional Coordinating Council. In particular, the Southeast region of Vietnam needs to rapidly develop inter-regional transport infrastructure, which can be considered the most important issue today. In addition to the development of road traffic, all connected transport networks such as air, waterway, and railway need to be built and connected quickly. This not only creates

support to promote the circulation of goods, services and people of this region, but also promotes the development of regional and international trade.

Based on the strengths of the locality and the provinces in the Southeast region of Vietnam, it is necessary to accelerate the restructuring of the regional economy towards modernity, approaching the world's scientific and technical development. Specifically, this region needs to make key fields such as science - technology, start-ups and innovation, digital transformation, sharing economy, circular economy the focus of development strategy and focus more for the development of high-tech industries, service industries that require high quality. Secondly, localities can cooperate with each other or promote international cooperation in training and fostering scientific and technological human resources to develop high-quality human resources for long-term socio-economic development.

Thirdly, the Southeast region of Vietnam needs to step up administrative reform and improve the business investment environment to attract businesses, especially foreign ones. Especially, it is necessary create favorable conditions for foreign enterprises to place large projects, attract FDI capital and solve local labor needs.

Fourthly, along with economic development, the management of social order and security situation and environmental protection should be focused. Currently, there are a few localities in the region to build and develop smart cities to solve social security and economic issues based on digital technology. This needs to be promoted and replicated. In necessary cases, some projects can switch to the socialization model to mobilize capital and deploy quickly and effectively. In addition, the issue of environmental pollution needs to be taken care of and handled synchronously. It is possible to apply biotechnology in the treatment of waste disposal as well as the effects of the environment, in addition to dealing with pollution problems, the application of new technologies will help localities detect problems soon, thereby minimizing the damage.

Fifthly, the Southeast region of Vietnam needs to develop specific mechanisms and policies for high-tech industries, or high-tech applications. Because these industries will support the promotion of other industries, in which the natural resource extraction industries will benefit the most. Thereby, this region will limit the waste of natural resources, serving the long-term and effective exploitation.

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