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Vietnam's Way To Global Leadership in Sustainable Energy

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Introductory note: As President Nguyen Xuan Phuc stated at the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2021, "*Vietnam wishes to work with other countries to build a better world for all people on the planet.*"

To realize this vision of leading by example and inspiring other nations to pursue sustainable development, Vietnam must lay the groundwork for a green economy, showcase innovation, ensure social equity in the energy transition, and ultimately lead global climate action.

Answering this interview, I wanted to explore the key strategies, policies, and initiatives that Vietnam should prioritize to achieve sustainable development while maintaining social well-being and fostering international cooperation.

1. Can you share your perspective on Vietnam's role in the global landscape?

My vision? Vietnam, a model country for socioeconomic development for this generation, is well placed to become a world example in *sustainable* development. With its strategic location, vibrant economy, and commitment to green growth, Vietnam can showcase how to achieve rapid economic progress while transitioning to a low-carbon future. By tapping its abundant renewable energy resources and collaborating with international partners, Vietnam has the potential to inspire other developing nations and demonstrate that a green economy is not only possible but also prosperous.

Laying the Groundwork for a Green Economy

2. Given your background/experience in sustainable development economics, what strategies do you believe are essential for Vietnam to thrive amidst rapid change? How can Vietnam take advantage of green finance (investments that have a positive impact on the environment) from international investors to develop a green economy and create sustainability?

Three key strategies for Vietnam to build a thriving green economy:

1. Fix simple rules to encourage investing in natural energy sources
2. Train people with the skills needed for jobs in environmentally friendly industries
3. Work with other countries to get funding and knowledge for environmental projects

By creating an attractive environment for green investment, Vietnam can attract the necessary funds – more than ten billions of dollars per year – needed for clean energy and sustainable infrastructure projects.

As the saying goes, "If you build it, they will come."

3. What policies and initiatives should Vietnam prioritize to achieve sustainable development without compromising social well-being?

A fair plan for changing to cleaner energy will make sure everyone benefits, the Gilets Jaunes would agree. As the Vietnamese proverb states, "*Một cây làm chẳng nên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao*" (One tree cannot make a hill, but three trees together can make a high mountain). Vietnam must prioritize inclusive policies that promote both environmental sustainability and social equity.

For remote communities, connection to the national power grid is still a critical enabler for socioeconomic development, but local clean energy productions like small hydroelectricity or solar turn out cost-effective more and more often.

Workers in carbon-intensive industries all over the world legitimately claim just transition support programs. The offshore oil and gas industry has a clear path towards offshore wind. For the coal power sector has more time to turn around, since the power plants are relatively new, but the coal exit is already acted in governmental plan so nobody should be surprised.

Finally, the social safety nets should be maintained and improved, especially regarding the energy affordability for poor households.

Showcasing Innovation

4. What specific actions do you recommend for Vietnam to achieve breakthrough success?

Just as the Đổi Mới reforms unleashed Vietnam's economic potential, a bold approach to the energy transition can catalyze transformative growth. Vietnam should focus on implementing the power development plan, rapidly deploying proven renewables like solar and wind, with the goal of solar on over half of rooftops by 2030. Piloting innovative solutions such as battery gigafactories and smart grids is crucial, although I am skeptical about the current hype around green hydrogen. Fostering a startup ecosystem for cleantech innovation and entrepreneurship is also essential.

5. As an expert on energy transition, should Vietnam expect a breakthrough in attracting investment in power source conversion? What does Vietnam need to do to attract investors into the field of renewable power sources?

With the right policies, Vietnam has enormous potential to attract renewable energy investment. There is plenty of incoming solar energy and wind offshore. Ambitious clean energy targets. Now is the to be "*chẳng những nói hay mà còn làm hay*" (not only to talk well but also to do well). The key to attract investment is to lower the risk, since this translates directly into a lower the cost of capital. This has to be done by implementing stable, transparent policies. Once the first three projects are profitable, a pipeline of bankable projects will follow. By signaling a clear commitment and creating an enabling environment, Vietnam can unlock a wave of green capital.

6. Have you identified any opportunities to promote scientific and technical cooperation between Vietnam and France/Europe in the energy sector?

Promising opportunities for Vietnam-France/Europe clean energy cooperation include joint R&D programs on smart grids, green hydrogen, floating solar, and agrovoltaics. Technical assistance and capacity building for Vietnam's energy sector, provided by organizations like AFD through project and corporate finance, is also crucial. Team Europe is a major contributor, and the Vietnam Energy Partnership Group is always looking for interesting proposals and qualified experts. Co-investment in major renewable energy projects, such as the collaboration between EDF and EVN in the renewable and thermal power sectors in Vietnam, can also accelerate the energy transition. As the French poet Victor Hugo said, "*Là où se rencontrent une grande idée et une grande volonté, rien n'est impossible*" (Where a great idea meets a great will, nothing is impossible).

Ensuring a Just Energy Transition

7. How can we create favorable conditions for businesses and scientific communities in both countries to work together and share knowledge in the field of energy ?

To foster Vietnam-France/Europe business and scientific cooperation on energy:

1. Facilitate personnel exchanges and joint innovation hubs
2. Harmonize standards and remove barriers to technology transfer
3. Provide incentives for cross-border energy partnerships

Proactive efforts to connect innovation ecosystems can accelerate knowledge-sharing for mutual benefit. As the Vietnamese saying goes, "Trí tuệ Việt Nam có thể sánh vai với các cường quốc năm châu" (Vietnamese intelligence can stand shoulder to shoulder with powers of five continents).

8. How can we inspire young people in both countries to engage in the energy sector and foster new breakthroughs ?

Empowered youth drive the breakthroughs needed for a sustainable energy future. Inspiring youth engagement in the energy transition requires raising awareness about the importance and excitement of clean energy careers, such as through events like the January 2022 Student Forum on Sustainable Energy in Hanoi. Investing in STEM education and reskilling programs aligned with energy sector needs is a no-brainer, as collective enthusiasm can overcome many challenges and inertia. Creating platforms for young innovators to develop and scale new ideas, like the New Energy Nexus Vietnam in HCMC, is also crucial. In the words of Ho Chi Minh, "*Vì lợi ích mười năm trồng cây. Vì lợi ích trăm năm trồng người*" (For ten years benefit, plant trees. For a hundred years benefit, educate people).

Leading Global Climate Action

9. How can Vietnam collaborate with international partners to address climate change on a global scale and achieve its climate goals? To help Vietnam not only be a "participant in the game" but also be "a game changer" in addressing climate change.

Vietnam can be a climate action game-changer by: 1) Demonstrating the socio-economic benefits of a rapid clean energy transition for developing economies 2) Advocating for more ambitious climate policies and support for vulnerable nations in international forums 3) Forming alliances with other climate leaders to jointly invest in transformational mitigation and adaptation solutions.

The fact that Vietnam was the third largest solar market in the world in 2020 gives to celebrate and to meditate. By punching above its weight, Vietnam can catalyze bold global climate action.

10. Do you have any opinions on supporting and training high-quality human resources in the energy sector in Vietnam to meet the country's development needs?

Building Vietnam's clean energy workforce is critical to meeting development needs:

1. Update curricula and expand energy programs at universities and vocational schools
2. Establish national centers of excellence for energy research and innovation, starting for example with offshore wind power technology and solar+storage technology.
3. Develop industry partnerships and apprenticeships to provide hands-on training

A comprehensive approach to human resource development will ensure Vietnam has the talent to drive its energy ambitions. Ho Chi Minh said, "*Học để mà làm, làm để mà phụng sự đất nước*" (Learn in order to work, work to serve the country). In that spirit, I am always looking personally for academic collaboration opportunities, please contact me if you need a engineer-economist professor, expert on clean energy and sustainable development.

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