



People-to-people diplomacy in Ho chi minh City during Doi Moi and international integration (1986–2026)

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Abstract

This article examines people-to-people diplomacy in Ho Chi Minh City during Doi Moi and international integration from 1986 to 2026. Drawing on an overview of the Communist Party of Vietnam's policies on people-to-people diplomacy and the city's development context, it traces the formation, expansion, and transformation of these activities through three stages: Doi Moi and the effort to overcome international isolation and the embargo; regional and international integration; and post-pandemic adaptation accompanied by deeper local-level integration. The article highlights the roles of the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, friendship associations, social organizations, educational institutions, and local communities in strengthening international friendship, mobilizing external resources, promoting cultural exchange, and contributing to socio-economic development. It thereby identifies the principal characteristics, roles, and lessons of Ho Chi Minh City's people-to-people diplomacy in the context of deepening international integration.

Keywords: People-to-people diplomacy, ho chi minh city, doi moi, international integration, union of friendship organizations

Introduction

Since Vietnam began Doi Moi in 1986 and expanded its foreign relations, people-to-people diplomacy has gradually become an important component of the country's diplomacy. Alongside the Communist Party of Vietnam's external relations and state diplomacy, it helps create a favorable international environment, strengthens solidarity and friendship between the Vietnamese people and peoples of other countries, and mobilizes international understanding and support for national construction and defense. Ho Chi Minh City provides a particularly instructive case because it is a major economic and cultural center, an important hub for international exchange, and home to numerous social organizations, educational institutions, friendship associations, and agencies involved in external relations. This article argues that the city's people-to-people diplomacy has served not only as a vehicle for friendship exchanges but also as a channel for engaging with international civil society, mobilizing resources, promoting the image of a dynamic and compassionate city, and contributing directly to the city's and the country's Doi Moi and integration processes. Since the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the country's international relations have expanded through multilateralization, diversification, and proactive regional and global integration. In this context, people-to-people diplomacy in Ho Chi Minh City has evolved from a set of supporting activities into an organized channel of external relations with increasingly well-defined actors, objectives, and social impacts. Using historical and analytical approaches, this article examines the development of the city's people-to-people diplomacy between 1986 and 2026. It identifies the major stages of development and changes in participating actors, methods, and areas of activity, while also analyzing representative models, historical contributions, and lessons for both the city and the country.

Background and Theoretical Foundations of People-to-People Diplomacy

People-to-people diplomacy is considered a means of communication and a tool for political goals (Zaharna, 2009^[26], pp. 86–100). According to the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (2003)^[15], “people's diplomacy is a concept that refers to external activities that are not part of the Party's state diplomacy and foreign affairs, carried out by mass organizations, socio-political organizations, professionals and individuals from all walks of life”. People-to-people diplomacy inherited the nation's tradition of harmony and was raised to a new level by Ho Chi Minh (Vu Quang Vinh, 2006^[25], pp. 50–53). Since the Sixth Party Congress (1986), the Doi Moi process initiated and led by the Party has gradually changed the face of the country. International relations have been expanded; international friends and people of other countries are increasingly interested in Vietnam's socio-economic construction and development. In the field of foreign affairs, the Congress document sets out the requirements to combine national strength with the strength of the times, take advantage of favorable international conditions for the cause of building socialism and defending the Fatherland, and at the same time clarify the subjects of external activities, including “our Party”, “Our State” and “the Vietnamese people”; initially demonstrating the coordination of these three subjects in a number of foreign policy policies such as “our Party, Government and people”, “Party and State”, “Government and people of Vietnam” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2006^[5], pp. 432–443). Recognizing the importance of people-to-people diplomacy, our Party and State have issued many resolutions and directives directing their implementation. On October 7, 1987, the Politburo issued Decision No. 34/QD/TW on renewing the organization and strengthening the direction of people-to-people diplomacy. On July 27, 1993, the Secretariat issued Directive No. 27-CT/TW on the tasks and

organization of the Vietnam Union of Peace, Solidarity and Friendship Organizations. In 1994, in response to the requirements of the Doi Moi process and in order to implement the policy of diversification and multilateralization of international relations, the Secretariat of the Seventh Party Central Committee issued Directive No. 44-CT/TW on expanding and renewing people-to-people diplomacy activities (Secretariat, 1994) ^[1]. The document of the Eighth Party Congress affirmed: "Expand people's foreign relations, relations with non-governmental organizations, enlist the broad consensus and support of the people of other countries, and contribute to promoting the trend of peace, cooperation and development" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1996 ^[4], p. 121). People-to-people diplomacy continued to be clearly stated in the Resolution of the Ninth Party Congress in 2001: "Further expand people's foreign affairs, strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations with people's organizations of other countries, improve the efficiency of cooperation with national and international non-governmental organizations, contributing to enhancing mutual understanding, friendship and cooperation between our people and the people of other countries in the region and the world... Closely coordinate the State's diplomatic activities, the Party's external activities and the people's foreign affairs activities. Perfecting the unified management mechanism of foreign affairs activities, forming a synergy for the successful implementation of foreign affairs tasks, making the world better understand the country, its people, Vietnam's renovation, the lines and policies of our Party and State, and taking advantage of the world's increasingly broad consensus, support and cooperation" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016, pp. 208–209). The Tenth (2006), Eleventh (2011) ^[5, 6, 23], and Twelfth (2016) Party Congresses have continued to clarify and deepen the content of the concept of people-to-people diplomacy and specific tasks to implement this work in practice. The 13th Party Congress (2021) ^[7] has determined: "Continue to promote the pioneering role of foreign affairs in creating and maintaining a peaceful and stable environment, mobilizing external resources to develop the country, and enhance the country's position and prestige. Building a comprehensive and modern diplomacy with three pillars: Party diplomacy, state diplomacy and people's diplomacy" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021) ^[7]. This is the first time that people-to-people diplomacy has been identified by our Party as one of the three pillars of foreign affairs, an important milestone in the Party's awareness and theoretical thinking about the strategic role of people-to-people diplomacy in the country's diplomacy. On the basis of the Resolution of the 13th Party Congress; drawing on the experience of implementing Directive No. 44-CT/TW of the Secretariat (Term VII) and Directive No. 04-CT/TW of the Secretariat (Term XI), on January 5, 2022 ^[2], the Secretariat (Term XIII) issued a Directive *on strengthening the Party's leadership and improving the effectiveness of people-to-people diplomacy in the new situation*. Directive No. 12-CT/TW has set out the orientation and vision, raised awareness, and defined the tasks of the whole political system for further promoting the role of people-to-people diplomacy, more closely linking people-to-people diplomacy with the Party's foreign affairs and state diplomacy, thereby enhancing the synergy of Vietnam's diplomacy, contributing to building and consolidating the great unity of the whole nation, serving

the cause of building and defending the socialist Fatherland of Vietnam (Secretariat, 2022) ^[2].

People-to-People Diplomacy in Ho Chi Minh City during Doi Moi and the Effort to Overcome International Isolation and the Embargo (1986–2000)

Ho Chi Minh City is an area with a special position in the process of renewal and integration of the whole country. After 1975, the city quickly became a major center of economy, culture, science, education and international exchange. After 1986, with a strong pace of innovation, the city soon formed the need and capacity to expand external channels, in which people-to-people diplomacy plays an important role because it is directly associated with the large, dynamic, diverse urban community and has extensive international exchange relations. It is this open, rich in connectivity and tradition of exchanges that has created conditions for people-to-people diplomacy in the city to develop not only as a friendship activity, but also as a method of mobilizing social resources for the renovation.

On March 30, 1989, the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Peace, Solidarity and Friendship Organizations, hereinafter referred to as the Union, was established under Circular No. 61/TT-TU. The document stipulated that "the Union is a member of the Fatherland Front, operates under the leadership of the City Party Committee through the Commission for External Relations, and has its own personnel, funding, and operating resources allocated by the People's Committee at the Union's request and in accordance with the principle of thrift" (Communist Party of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee, 1989, p. 2). On June 5, 1989 ^[3], the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee issued Decision No. 334/QD-UB authorizing the establishment of the Union under the Committee's state management. The organization was subsequently known as the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations (HUFO). As a socio-political organization responsible for people-to-people diplomacy in the fields of peace, solidarity, friendship, and international cooperation, the Union operates according to the principles of voluntarism, equality, and democratic consultation, while complying with its charter, the Party's regulations on external relations, and the laws of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. On July 29, 1989 ^[3], an inauguration ceremony was held at the City Friendship House, where the Presidium was introduced. The Union then formally separated from the Ho Chi Minh City Fatherland Front and began operating independently under its new name and organizational structure (Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations, 2017) ^[16].

In order to meet the requirements of the new period, the Fifth Congress of the Party Committee of Ho Chi Minh City (10/1991) set out the direction for the development of the city in the next period, emphasizing the gradual transformation of the rational economic structure on the basis of the location, potential and strengths of the city as an industrial, financial - banking, trade - service, culture - education, science - technology center. In addition, the city also focuses on encouraging the development of the individual economy and the private economy. This is considered an important breakthrough period, creating a premise for new development steps of the city and preparing for the process of international and regional integration (Ha Minh Hong & Le Huu Phuoc, 2011 ^[21], p. 365). In this context, Ho Chi Minh City identifies people-to-people

diplomacy as an important channel, contributing to the expansion of international social relations and supporting the transformation of the city's development model.

On October 14, 1994, the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City issued a decision to consolidate the organization and change the name of the Union of Peace, Solidarity and Friendship Organizations to the Union of Friendship Organizations of Ho Chi Minh City. In July 1997, the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City assigned the Union the task of acting as a focal point, coordinating in researching and advising the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City on issues related to foreign non-governmental organizations operating in Ho Chi Minh City. On August 28, 1998, the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City issued a decision approving the Charter of organization and operation of the Union of Friendship Organizations of Ho Chi Minh City. The Charter determines: "The Union is a socio-political organization with the function of people's foreign affairs, partnered by organizations of peace, solidarity and friendship with Vietnam and foreign non-governmental organizations and individuals engaged in humanitarian aid activities in Ho Chi Minh City" (Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, 2009 ^[18], p. 29). This is an important legal basis guiding the Union's activities so far. Since then, the Union has gradually become the city's focal point in mobilizing and gathering people from all walks of life to participate in peace, solidarity, friendship and cooperation with the people of other countries.

Since the 1990s, the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations has performed the function of mobilizing friendship organizations, foreign non-governmental organizations, foreign organizations and individuals to provide humanitarian and development aid to the City. During 1989 ^[3]–1999, the Union welcomed hundreds of people's friendship delegations with thousands of visitors from many countries around the world to visit the City; at the same time, coordinated with member associations and relevant agencies to strengthen relations with neighboring countries, traditional partners and countries in the region. In parallel with friendship activities, foreign NGOs have taken a new development: in 1999, there were about 100 non-governmental organizations operating in the City, of which about 50 organizations were registered, licensed for projects or licensed to operate; the annual value of foreign non-governmental aid in the city reached USD 6–7 million, contributing to the realization of the goals of poverty reduction, social security and development in the city (Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, 2009) ^[18].

These results show that, during 1986–2000, the city's people-to-people diplomacy primarily served to open and maintain channels of social contact at a time when the country continued to face significant difficulties in its international relations. Friendship activities, aid mobilization, and engagement with foreign NGOs not only helped reduce isolation but also generated additional resources for social programs. These efforts gradually established the city as a hub for people-to-people exchanges in southern Vietnam and provided an important foundation for the broader development of its people-to-people diplomacy as international integration accelerated at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

During 1991–2000, Vietnam actively expanded its external activities; along with that, delegations to Vietnam were not only interested in political issues but also paid more attention to the cultural, economic and social fields. NGOs began to operate more strongly and had a certain influence in social life. Along with the increase in foreign investment, a significant number of international NGOs had been operating in Vietnam; at the same time, domestic NGOs also emerged since the 1990s. An important milestone in cooperation between Vietnamese NGOs and the government was the Decree on Grassroots Democracy, which was adopted in 1998. This Decree created more favorable conditions for people's participation in the decision-making process at the commune and village levels. Since then, associations and non-governmental organizations grew stronger in many localities, operating in fields such as improving the quality of life, developing human resources, protecting the environment, applying science and technology, economic development and HIV/AIDS prevention (The Asia Foundation, 2011) ^[23]. This context shows that the development of people-to-people diplomacy in Ho Chi Minh City was associated with the trend of expanding social space and the increasingly clear participation of non-state actors in the Doi Moi process.

People-to-People Diplomacy in Ho Chi Minh City during Regional and International Integration (2001–2020)

Entering the stage of regional and international integration, the activities of the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations expanded in terms of scale, objects and implementation methods. Each year, the Union coordinated with member associations and diplomatic missions to organize about 40 political-foreign events to celebrate major holidays of Vietnam and countries with friendly relations. In addition to solidarity and friendship activities, the Union also expanded its activities through cultural, artistic and sports exchanges, friendship spring trips, economic cooperation seminars, tourism and trade promotion, thematic talks at the Friendship House, in districts or in universities and cultural houses. These activities attracted many participants, especially students of universities and colleges, and were associated with social and charity work such as mobilizing the people of Ho Chi Minh City to share and help people in countries affected by natural disasters, awarding scholarships to poor students to overcome difficulties, donating to build schools and hospitals (Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, 2009 ^[18], pp. 33–34).

During 2001–2005, the Union organized numerous notable activities, including commemorations of the 130th anniversary of Lenin's birth, the 57th anniversary of the victory over Hiron in Cuba, the 35th anniversary of the Vietnam–Cuba Friendship Association, the 47th anniversary of the Cuban armed uprising, the fifth anniversary of Vietnam's accession to ASEAN, the fifth anniversary of the establishment of the Vietnam–Southeast Asia Friendship Association in Ho Chi Minh City, the 20th anniversary of the Vietnam–Soviet spaceflight, the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam Peace Committee, and the International Year for the Culture of Peace in 2000 (Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, 2000 ^[11], p. 3). The Union also placed considerable emphasis on charitable and social activities. In 2004, for example, the city mobilized VND 100 million, 17,000 notebooks, and 100,000 pencils for

Cuban students (Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, 2004 ^[12], p. 4). During this period, the Union admitted several new member organizations: the Vietnam–United States Friendship Association and the Vietnam–Australia Friendship Association in 2002; the Vietnam–Canada Friendship Association in 2003 ^[15]; the Vietnam–Singapore Friendship Association in 2004 ^[12]; and the Peace and Development Fund and the Vietnam–Indonesia Friendship Association in 2005.

The above activities show that in the early period of the 21st century, the city's people-to-people diplomacy not only maintained traditional friendship relations but also gradually expanded to forms of social, educational and humanitarian exchanges. This expansion reflects the transition from a ceremonial and commemorative foreign policy model to a foreign policy model capable of mobilizing the community, creating a network of partners and supporting the city's social development goals.

On October 27, 2006, the First Congress of Delegates of the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations was held with the participation of representatives of organizations, leaders of the Party, the city's government, mass organizations, representatives of the Central Union and the Union of Provinces. The Congress elected a new Executive Committee consisting of 53 members, of which Mr. Le Quoc Hung was elected as the Chairman of the Union. This is “a milestone marking the development and maturity of the Union in many aspects; at the same time, it creates a very important foundation and premise in developing and perfecting the functions, tasks, roles, positions, organizational structure, modes and contents of the Union's activities in the next period” (Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, 2009 ^[18], pp. 31–32). In 2006, the Union was added three member associations, namely Vietnam-UK, Vietnam-Malaysia and Vietnam-Sweden, bringing the total number of members to 27 organizations (Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, 2009 ^[18], p. 31).

The event of the First Congress showed that the process of institutionalizing the city's people-to-people diplomacy activities reached a new stage of development. From mainly operating as a friendship point, the Union gradually established a clearer organizational position, operating mechanism and network of member associations, thereby creating a foundation for implementing larger-scale activities in the integration period.

In 2007, the city's people-to-people diplomacy featured many notable events organized or coordinated by the Union. At the beginning of the year's activities, on the occasion of International Women's Day on March 8, the Union organized the program “Friendship Spring Trip”, inviting Consul General, diplomatic officials, representatives of foreign business associations and a number of foreign non-governmental organizations operating in Ho Chi Minh City and the southern provinces to attend, in order to introduce the potential and prospects for foreign cooperation and investment in Ba Ria - Vung Tau. In order to successfully organize this event, the Union coordinated with the Department of Foreign Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City, the Foreign Agency Service Company (FOSCO) and the Union of Ba Ria - Vung Tau provinces (Hoang Thi Ha, 2013, p. 53). Subsequently, friendship associations coordinated with many universities such as Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hong Bang University, and

Van Lang University to organize exchange activities, build clubs, and create conditions for cultural exchanges between Ho Chi Minh City and other countries (Department of Foreign Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City, 2008).

In addition to the activities of friendship organizations, a number of individuals, writers and veterans also actively participated in cultural, artistic activities and people-to-people exchanges. Writer Tran Cong Tan - Member of the Executive Committee of the Vietnamese-Lao Association - assisted Lao friends in translating the chronicles of Laos, reprinting and translating into English and French the book “*Red Hoang - the Hero of Laos*”, and at the same time acted as a bridge to bring a group of sculptors to help Laos make statues at the Prince Souphanouvong Museum. Also in 2007, many people-to-people diplomacy activities were implemented such as the second Vietnam-Cambodia People's Friendship and Cooperation Meeting in Cambodia; the first Vietnam-India People's Friendship Festival in India; the visit of the Friendship Union delegation to Chile, Argentina and Venezuela; Channel II dialogue with the US on religious freedom; South-South Solidarity Conference in Hanoi; World Peace Council Executive Committee Meeting; and the National Program on Non-Governmental Aid Mobilization (Department of Foreign Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City, 2008).

It can be seen that the activities in 2007 reflect the strong trend of diversification of people-to-people diplomacy, from bilateral friendship exchanges to policy dialogues, public opinion mobilization and participation in international people's forums. This shift shows that people-to-people diplomacy not only plays a complementary role to official diplomacy, but also creates a flexible space for the city to participate in international affairs in flexible, social and accessible forms to the public.

On the occasion of the 52nd anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Indonesia (December 30, 1955 - December 30, 2007), on the evening of December 27, 2007, the launching ceremony of the Vietnam-Indonesia Friendship Association of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities of Ho Chi Minh City was held at the Ho Chi Minh City Friendship House. The establishment of the chapter facilitated the expansion of connections between universities of the two countries, promotes the exchange of teaching experiences, cultural exchanges, sports and social activities. During this year, the Union also organized symposium sessions on “For a Peaceful, Nuclear-Weapon-Free World”; thereby collecting about 160,000 signatures opposing nuclear weapons at the initiative of the Japan Anti-Atomic Bomb and Balloon Council (Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, 2007 ^[13], p. 4).

In the years 2009–2010, people-to-people exchange activities continued to be implemented through programs to connect with the international community in the city and neighboring countries. Typically, the Vietnam-Cambodia Youth Friendship Meeting 2009, opened on December 23, 2009 ^[18] in Ho Chi Minh City, with a 50-member Cambodian youth delegation led by Mr. Mam Lengyany - Vice Chairman of the Cambodian Youth Association (Department of Foreign Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City, 2010a) ^[10]. These activities show that people-to-people diplomacy increasingly focused on youth groups and exchanges of the young generation, thereby creating a more sustainable social foundation for friendship relations between Vietnam and other countries in the region.

According to statistics, in 2010, people's friendship organizations sent 786 delegations with about 7,800 people to visit and participate in people-to-people diplomacy activities; welcomed 558 delegations with 8,450 people visiting and working in our country. The number of delegations increased by 12% and the number of people increased by more than 50% compared to 2009 (mainly due to the activity of sending 3,000 delegates to attend the Vietnam-China Youth Festival). Although the number of delegations was smaller, the number of people increased by 40% compared to 2009. In addition to basically completing the tasks and implementing the work plan in the year, our organizations made efforts to mobilize external resources, implemented more activities outside the approved plan (268 delegations/1,216 turns, accounting for more than 30% of the total number of delegations as planned; 132 delegations/1,921 turns, accounting for nearly 25%) (Khanh Lan, 2011)^[21].

In the period of 2011^[23]–2015, the Union continued to have many remarkable activities. On December 24, 2011, the Union of Friendship Organizations and the Vietnam-Japan Friendship Association of Ho Chi Minh City held a ceremony to award the medal “For peace and friendship among peoples” to the Japan-Vietnam Friendship Association of Hiroshima Province and Mr. Sugimoto Reiji and Mr. Kobayashi Kazunari for their contributions to consolidating and strengthening the friendship between the Japanese people and the Vietnamese people (Department of Foreign Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City, 2011)^[21].

In the early 2010s, the city's people-to-people diplomacy activities continued to expand in the direction of a combination of diplomatic celebrations, cultural exchanges and community connections. Events related to Vietnam-Korea, Vietnam-Japan and Vietnam-Czech relations show that friendship associations not only organize ceremonial activities, but also create a space for the business community, alumni, students and people to participate in the process of strengthening bilateral friendship.

On the evening of October 31, 2013, the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations and the Vietnamese-Czech Friendship Association of Ho Chi Minh City celebrated the 95th anniversary of the National Day of the Czech Republic (October 28, 1918 – October 28, 2013). Attending the celebration were Ms. Miluse Horska - Vice President of the Senate of the Czech Republic; Mr. Martin Klepetko - Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Czech Republic to Vietnam; leaders of departments of Ho Chi Minh City and a large number of Vietnamese alumni who have lived and studied in Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic) (Department of Foreign Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City, 2014)^[22].

In 2014, the Union continued to organize and coordinate many activities of friendship, cultural exchanges, cooperation talks and celebrations of international events. These activities span many bilateral and multilateral relations, from India, Japan, Cuba, the United States, France, Slovakia, Russia, Poland, Romania to Palestine, showing that the scope of partnerships of the city's people-to-people diplomacy is increasingly expanding in the direction of diversification.

The series of activities in 2014 shows that the city's people-to-people diplomacy has developed in a more comprehensive direction, combining friendship, cultural exchanges, economic cooperation and international

solidarity advocacy. This reflects the increasingly clear role of friendship associations in creating a soft connection space between the city and international partners, and at the same time shows that people-to-people diplomacy has become a supporting element for the comprehensive integration process, not only limited to reception and celebration activities.

In addition to friendship activities and cultural exchanges, people-to-people diplomacy also shows the role of mobilizing social and international resources for humanitarian and development goals. Through a variety of activities, people's organizations have taken advantage of material resources, knowledge and spiritual support of friends and international partners, thereby contributing to socio-economic development, poverty alleviation, response to natural disasters and epidemics and protecting national interests. Particularly, the program “Connecting big arms” organized by the Vietnam Fatherland Front in collaboration with Vietnam Television has attracted the participation of supporting the “For the Poor” Fund from a large number of domestic and foreign businesses and organizations; at the same time, foreign non-governmental organizations have also committed to significantly sponsor Vietnam's poverty alleviation (Khanh Lan, 2011)^[21].

On the other hand, the activities of foreign NGOs in Ho Chi Minh City are also noteworthy. As of 2010^[10], there were about 140 foreign NGOs from around the world participating in humanitarian and development aid in the City. Every year, about 15–25 new organizations were licensed to operate (Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, 2009^[18], p. 35). NGOs in the City focused on many areas such as education and vocational training; health and health care; support for the poor; environmental protection; support for the resolution of social evils; and restoration of traditional culture. Among them, children, health, education and vocational training were the areas that attracted the most organizations and the value of aid (Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, 2009^[18], p. 35).

The above-mentioned aid areas show that foreign non-governmental work in the city has been directly associated with people's livelihood issues and community development. Thereby, people-to-people diplomacy not only performs the function of bridging friendship but also becomes a mechanism to mobilize social resources, supplementing urban governance capacity in the fields of welfare, education, health and sustainable development.

According to data from the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, in 2004^[12] there were 40 foreign NGOs working on children, 37 organizations working in health and HIV/AIDS prevention, and 38 organizations working in vocational training. Meanwhile, sustainable development and community development projects in rural areas accounted for a low proportion, about 2% (Pham Chi Dung, 2007^[17], p. 67). The activities of foreign NGOs in Ho Chi Minh City showed a shift from single humanitarian assistance to more specialized social intervention models. The case of Terre des Hommes - Lausanne is a case in point: from a study of street children in Ho Chi Minh City in 1992, the organization and its Vietnamese partners developed new approaches to supporting street children such as clubs, shelters and shelters (Department of Foreign Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City, 2010b)^[10].

People-to-People Diplomacy in Ho Chi Minh City: Post-Pandemic Adaptation and Deeper Local-Level Integration (2021–2026)

The period of 2021–2026 has marked a remarkable shift of Ho Chi Minh City's people-to-people diplomacy from emergency response during the pandemic to proactive recovery, reconnection, and improvement in the quality of integration. In 2021, under the serious impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mode of operation of the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations (HUFO) and its member associations flexibly shifted the focus to “compassionate diplomacy” and mobilized medical resources from the grassroots. Through the people-to-people diplomacy channel, international friends and overseas Vietnamese provided medical supplies and masks and contributed to the vaccine fund, thereby showing the adaptability and social cohesion of people-to-people diplomacy in times of crisis (Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee Website, 2022) ^[24].

Entering the new normal period of 2022–2023, the city's people-to-people diplomacy has gradually restored face-to-face exchange activities, and at the same time strengthened the network of organizations and partners after a period of interruption due to the pandemic. The Fourth Congress of Delegates of the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations, term 2023–2028, was held in that context, expressing the need to continue to innovate operating methods, expand the network of international friends and improve the effectiveness of mobilizing social resources for development. Cultural exchanges, friendship and community connection activities have been restored in a more cautious and flexible direction, thereby creating conditions for people, especially the younger generation, to continue to participate in international social exchange channels.

This recovery shows that people-to-people diplomacy after the pandemic has aimed not only to resume interrupted activities but also to re-establish international social relations networks in a more sustainable way. In particular, the role of young people, students, educational institutions and social organizations has become noteworthy because these are the subjects capable of maintaining long-term exchanges, creating social depth for friendship.

From 2024 onward, Ho Chi Minh City's people-to-people diplomacy has continued to be associated with major historical events and efforts to deepen local-level international integration. In the context of the 50th anniversary of the liberation of southern Vietnam and national reunification on April 30, 2025, meetings and exchanges with international friends, historical witnesses, peace activists, and overseas Vietnamese communities have helped convey the image of Vietnam as a peace-loving country. More broadly, these activities have enabled the city to preserve memories of friendship and connect longstanding networks of international friends with new partners, thereby expanding the social foundation for international integration.

On the other hand, the mobilization and management of foreign NGOs in this period has continued to show a trend of shifting from short-term humanitarian assistance to greater engagement with sustainable development goals. Fields such as education, health, social security, support for disadvantaged groups and climate change adaptation

continue to be priority directions in line with urban development needs. This approach shows that people-to-people diplomacy serves not only as a bridge of friendship, but also as a channel to mobilize social resources to support development goals, especially in the context that the city has to adapt to many new challenges after the pandemic.

Conclusion

Between 1986 and 2026, people-to-people diplomacy in Ho Chi Minh City developed in step with Vietnam's Doi Moi and international integration. In its early stages, it helped maintain channels of social contact, expand international friendships, and support efforts to overcome isolation and the embargo. In subsequent stages, it gradually became a channel for engaging with international civil society, mobilizing resources, and promoting the image of a dynamic, compassionate, and responsible city.

The practice of four decades shows two outstanding features of the city's people-to-people diplomacy. On the one hand, this activity is closely associated with socio-economic development goals, especially in aid mobilization, cultural exchanges, education, health, welfare and community development. On the other hand, people-to-people diplomacy is implemented by a wide network of subjects, from specialized agencies and friendship associations to universities, social organizations, businesses, writers and artists, intellectuals, youth and overseas Vietnamese. It is the combination of development goals and a broad social platform that has created the unique identity of Ho Chi Minh City's people-to-people diplomacy.

From there, three main lessons can be drawn: it is necessary to strengthen coordination between the Party's foreign affairs, State diplomacy and people-to-people diplomacy; it is necessary to develop participating forces, especially the young generation, intellectuals, experts and overseas Vietnamese; at the same time, it is necessary to continue to innovate operating methods to adapt to new integration spaces such as digital diplomacy, innovation, environment and public health security. The inheritance and modernization of people-to-people diplomacy is therefore not only meaningful in summarizing history, but also contributing to creating more social resources for the sustainable development of Ho Chi Minh City in the coming period.

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