

Creating Civil Society? The Emergence of NGOs in Vietnam*

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This paper examines the emergence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Vietnam, and relates their development to the civil society discourse which elements of the international donor community make use of to predict the growth of pluralism and democracy. After considering the social and political environment of post-reform Vietnam, it does not appear evident that these organizations fit into any definition of civil society which stresses independence from the state and opposition to state ideology. Research was conducted primarily in April and May 1996, when the directors of many of the NGOs in Hanoi were interviewed, along with several members of the international donor community. Some organizations were contacted again in April 1998.

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Introduction

The 1990s have been a time of reflection for those involved in the business of providing development aid. Several books have been written recently by development practitioners looking back on three decades of work that has been praised, condemned, and in some quarters, met with indifference. A common thread running through these works is that the purpose and meaning of aid have changed (Clayton, 1996; Smillie, 1995). There is now a realization that when donors arrive in developing countries to do their thing, providing knowledge or technology is often not their only policy objective. This fact is well demonstrated in an article by Steven Sampson, which describes his efforts to bring to Albania not medicine, books or machinery, but a rather more nebulous entity called ‘civil society’. With more than a million dollars of Danish government money to dole out, Sampson arrived in town looking for local non-government organizations that, as far as he could tell, would be willing and able to spend money on community development of some sort (Sampson, 1996).

Sampson’s story provides a warning for those who look to private sector or ‘third sector’ non-state organizations as a means of promoting development. For at the end of it all, Sampson is very aware of the many pitfalls of what is essentially politically-motivated funding: Promoters of civil society are people enacting an element of contemporary political theory which in its most basic, stripped-down form posits that democracy will take hold and have substantive meaning only if citizens have the ability to associate and express their opinions independent of formal state structures. While this may be a very logical assumption, the actual process of how civil

society works has been hotly debated for many years. If 'creating' civil society is something that international donors can accomplish, is it not also something governments are capable of undertaking? Clearly there is a certain amount of tension inherent in the fact that two can play this game, and this is not always apparent in development literature.

This paper will outline the range of Vietnamese organizations which use the term 'NGO' in describing themselves, and attempt to uncover how and why they have emerged. Although a complete picture is not yet available, research to date indicates that the NGO sector in Vietnam is in many respects a *construct* of the state: The state has created the frame within which NGOs operate, and control over the 'political space' available to NGOs remains firmly in its hands. As such, serious questions can be raised as to whether local NGOs can be considered as civil society according to the definition currently in vogue among many elements of the international donor community. A more realistic understanding of the socio-political position and potential of these new organizations is very important, as unfounded expectations on the part of donors will increase tensions which already exist – albeit at a low level – between the government and the international donor community.

Given the purposes of this paper, only groups which are development-oriented will be considered. Research was carried out primarily in April and May of 1996, when the directors of many of the groups in question were interviewed. Some directors were interviewed again in 1998. Only one project site was visited, and very little effort is made in this paper to uncover whether these groups are 'good' at what they do: This simply is not the question being asked, although a greater knowledge of how local NGOs implement their projects would obviously be welcome. For this reason, without question this paper must be considered a preliminary study. However, despite the lack of detail on projects implemented by VNGOs, a picture is emerging of

the work these groups do. Following the VNGO profiles and comparison, how these groups might or might not represent civil society will be examined. First, however, it is necessary to describe the contested discourse of civil society which lies at the heart of this paper.

Civil society and NGOs

It is now common in both academic and donor literature to discuss non-state public sphere activity – particularly development-oriented NGOs – as manifestations of civil society.

Unfortunately, most often the term civil society is used without reference to the debate which has raged over its proper definition and use. With even a brief perusal through the literature it becomes obvious that any understanding of civil society depends on wider theoretical influences. This follows from the fact that the founding fathers of social science and contemporary political theory – Hegel, de Tocqueville, Marx and Gramsci – all understood the term in different ways. But while the literature on civil society is varied enough that generalization is difficult, there are clearly two main streams of thought. The first draws heavily on Alexis de Tocqueville's view of the 'roots of democracy' as he described them in his 1831 work *Democracy in America*. For de Tocqueville, the civic associations that constitute civil society are an important means for citizens to moderate the power of the state, and assert their own interests. Drawing on this work, civil society is often understood as a realm that is autonomous from the state and actively opposed to state hegemony. Philip Oxhorn has defined civil society as:

... a rich fabric formed by a multiplicity of territorially- and functionally-based units. The strength of civil society is measured by the peaceful coexistence of these units and by their collective capacity to simultaneously resist subordination to the state and demand inclusion into national political structures. The public character of these societal units allows them to justify and act in open pursuit of their collective interests in competition with one another (Oxhorn, n.d: 3, emphasis in original).

Oxhorn continues that this dual dynamic of resistance and inclusion indicates that democracy is more often the result rather than the cause of a strong civil society. This type of approach is often challenged by following the arguments of Antonio Gramsci, who wrote that civil society was a social sphere or a public 'space' where political thought is transformed into action (Gramsci, 1971). As such, this sphere is hotly contested by all components of society, including state agents. Indeed, given its coercive powers, civil society is most often dominated by the state. To use Gramscian language, civil society is where the ideas of the ruling strata are propagated to the masses, and given a legitimacy they might not otherwise acquire.

While there is a discernable divide in the academic literature on civil society between the liberal and Gramscian viewpoints, in the literature emanating from major donors such as the World Bank, the UN and USAID, there is much less emphasis on a critical understanding of civil society (Van Rooy, 1997: 7). The result is that some elements of the international donor community have come to the conclusion that if local NGOs and other grassroots organizations are supported, civil society will be strengthened, eventually forcing the state to become more accountable – possibly continuing to the point that these interests based in society coalesce into social movements or political parties which challenge for power. USAID goes so far as to suggest that 'in repressive, authoritarian regimes, assistance should be channeled through local NGOs, not government institutions. Reporting requirements need to be kept very flexible, recognizing the need for NGOs to camouflage their actual strategies with vague objectives' (USAID, 1996, quoted in Van Rooy, 1997: 10). The obvious implication is that NGOs are doing some sort of subversive, democracy-building work.

Donors supporting civil society in Vietnam may not have such lofty expectations for the long-term result, but Caroline Harper did find that '... a range of donors interviewed in

Vietnam... in 1995 declared that they are actively seeking out NGOs for funding “because they enhance democracy”,’ (Harper, 1996: 128). At the least, these donors are referring to the components necessary for democracy such as freedom of expression and association. That NGOs are a central component of support for civil society in Vietnam is quite clear. One German NGO with an office in Hanoi was working to support local NGOs at the time this paper was being researched. The person heading the project said:

We want to find out why and how NGOs are forming, and what their aims are.... In Vietnam the starting point for NGOs is different than elsewhere, because the roots of civil society were destroyed, taken over by the state.... (But) where they are going is of interest: Can the type of work they do transform their current background? We think so, and we will try to influence them for sure; they will be part of the transformation to civil society for sure.

State and society in the 1990s

The economic growth Vietnam has experienced as a result of *doi moi* has had a profound impact on society. The explosion of private business, changing labour relations, reform of mass organizations and other political reforms, have affected people in all areas of the country. The political system in Vietnam is typically characterized as containing three components: The Communist Party; the government and its various ministries and departments; and the mass organizations,¹ which are given the task of implementing many of the government’s policies. As David Marr notes, schematizing the state is very difficult, particularly as ‘certain government bureaus have become shadows, others have taken on expanded powers, ad hoc committees have proliferated, and a new type of consultant has emerged to assist strangers to make their way through the maze’ (Marr, 1994: 9). Overseeing all of this is the Communist Party, which

¹ The largest mass organizations are the General Confederation of Labour, the Peasant Association, the Communist Youth Group, the Women's Union and the Veteran's Association.

understandably has felt a good deal of pressure in recent years to clarify its position within the political system.

Outright protest against the regime is very rare, however, and it remains more fruitful to look *within* the state for evidence of political debate and struggle. This may seem odd for those searching out society-based protest. However, civil society should be understood as being neither inherently 'in opposition' to the state, nor inherently immune from the influence of the state, or outright cooptation. State interests can be represented in civil society, even by agents who are not themselves part of officialdom. Helpful in viewing this picture of civil society is Kerkvliet's insistence that state and society in Vietnam should not be viewed as two isolated, competing poles:

'State' and 'society' are often conceptualized as though they are distinct areas; and relations between them are seen as relations between two entities, each trying to influence, exercise power over, or be separate from the other (Kerkvliet, 1994: 26).

Kerkvliet feels that, while true to an extent, if taken too literally, this type of approach 'can blind or deflect analysis away from important places and events.... Educational institutions like universities, for example, are frequently neither exclusively state nor exclusively societal but both, and often places of conflict and negotiation about state-society relations' (ibid: 27).

Kerkvliet concludes this argument by saying: 'Hence, one would want to look at state institutions for evidence of struggles regarding issues of autonomy and control' (ibid: 27). As the latter portions of this paper will indicate, however, it is also possible in Vietnam today to look at *non-state* institutions 'for evidence of struggles over autonomy and control'.

What is a VNGO?

The formal structure of interest representation in Vietnam is as follows: The Vietnam Fatherland Front is the umbrella organization overseeing all socio-political groups. It reports directly to the Party and central government. The main socio-political groups include the mass organizations; religious and cultural bodies; and professional societies. The mass organizations and professional societies are permitted to form their own smaller, self-financed organizations. Research institutes from universities and hospitals are numerous, and they are required to register under a relevant ministry. Private organizations also must register, but with their local government, not with a ministry. Some ministries also form their own self-financing organizations, such as the Ministry of Education and Training which has opened a World University Services branch.

While the formal structure dictates that every organization has an ‘umbrella’ of some sort, the situation on the ground is really quite confused, as all manner of groups and splinter groups can be found. Clearly, the organizations discussed herein as ‘VNGOs’ can be seen as a product of the *doi moi* reforms. As the 1980s progressed, the scope and pace of reform increased, and the Party came to see that continued legitimacy rested with stable and successful economic growth.² To help achieve this – and prevent a political crisis as had occurred in Eastern Europe – the Party began to renovate the political system. William Turley writes that one aspect of this renovation was an ‘administrative decentralization and consolidation’ which reduced the size of the state apparatus by 50,000 cadres (Turley 1993: 329). The appearance of local NGOs around this time is almost certainly linked to this ‘administrative consolidation’.

² Economic growth was one source of legitimacy, others including the ideology of nationalism and renewing the political process (Vasavakul, 1995: 276-89).

One VNGO director said the decision to cut funding for certain socio-political groups was made on the following basis: The mass organizations like the Youth Union and the Women's Union had their funding maintained because they are important policy-implementers for the government – bringing government campaigns to the village level. The second category, religious and cultural organizations like the Buddhist church, and writers' and artists' associations, were also maintained given their importance in preserving local culture in the face of the 'Western onslaught' of films, music and advertising.³ The final category included a range of scientific and technical institutes, and professional interest groups for architects, doctors, and so forth. While the importance of this last category to national economic development was undoubtedly recognized, the new 'liberal' environment meant these groups would have to be let go. This decision was made knowing that the possibility existed for many or even most of these groups to become self-financing. Re-packaged as 'NGOs', these groups make up the majority of organizations under consideration here. One possibility to consider is that in many cases the switch to 'NGO status' was an entirely practical decision, with little or no change in the motivation, methods or personnel of the new groups. This is not to say, however, that these groups did not desire and welcome greater autonomy from state institutions, and the formation of VNGOs should also be seen in this light.

Most VNGOs were formed (or came to call themselves NGOs) after 1990. The rapid development of the sector at this time outpaced state efforts to regulate their activity, and there are still no formal laws covering the operation of these groups. A set of legal documents was promulgated in 1992 allowing the formation of science and technology research associations,

³ More recently some of these cultural organizations have also had their funding cut, and they are having to look for other sources of money, such as corporate sponsorships.

and many VNGOs have registered as such (Sidel, no date: 15). A rough typology of VNGOs can be made based on whether they have their origins in either:

- 1) Government mass organizations or other state bodies
- 2) University- or hospital-based groups
- 3) Individuals not associated with earlier groups forming their own organizations, including local staff of international NGOs (INGOs).

The first category almost certainly is the largest in terms of number and scope. This category could include the **Highland Educational Development Organization (HEDO)** and the **Non-state Economic Development Centre (NEDCEN)**. Although it is difficult to tell precisely who the directors of these organizations are in relation to the powers-that-be, interviews with these people left little doubt that they are closely linked to both Party and state. **HEDO**, working to improve educational facilities for ethnic minority people, is led by a Party member, and the group has many international connections and substantial support. While some directors complained the state is ambivalent to their presence, HEDO is so well-connected that the deputy prime minister addressed one of their meetings – a privilege that the other organizations profiled here almost certainly have not enjoyed. HEDO is also the only group that has been reported widely in the press, including several mentions in the Party daily, *Nhan Dan*. In these articles, HEDO is referred to as a *hoi* or *hiep hoi* (association), the same term used for government bodies. HEDO calls itself as an NGO, but to for the Vietnamese audience of *Nhan Dan*, this term clearly does not yet having any meaning when a domestic organization is being discussed.

The director of NEDCEN, on the other hand, did not use the term NGO to describe his group, although he did tell Mulla and Boothroyd in 1994 that while his organization ‘is not an NGO yet... it will become one in the future’ (Mulla & Boothroyd 1994: 18). NEDCEN was

established in 1992 with the purpose of assisting small businesses in the new economic environment. The organization has branches in all major cities and helps city councils organize training courses and information services for small businesses. Although NEDCEN reported to Mulla and Boothroyd that they were self-financed, the organization in 1996 did receive some government funding. Given that government money is often hard to come by for *government* departments, one can assume that NEDCEN activities have a good deal of state support. While noting that some NGOs in Vietnam were independent operations, the director of NEDCEN stated that ‘others are derived from former government offices’ – this presumably including his organization.

The second category of organization now labeling themselves as NGOs are groups of researchers that are university or hospital-based. One example of this type of organization is the **Institute of Ecological Economy (Eco-eco)** which was established in 1990 by 19 scientists from various fields who wanted to research issues associated with the environment. The group has since expanded to over 50 members, including eight international ‘honorary members’, under the directorship of a senior professor from the University of Hanoi. Eco-eco is under the umbrella of the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations, which is the case for many VNGOs. They publish their own journal and hold seminars to raise eco-awareness, but their main activity lies in designing and setting up ‘eco-villages’ in fragile environments. In addition, the group advises the government on environmental policy.

The director of Eco-eco said the group’s members are volunteers and the organization is non-profit, with seventy to eighty per cent of all funds going towards projects and twenty per cent covering costs. While ‘other groups’ (VNGOs) have to submit their projects to relevant ministries for approval, Eco-eco reported that it can implement projects directly. The director

considered Eco-eco to be ‘an institute, not an association’ in that it draws together researchers from a range of disciplines, who then ‘act to extend their work’. This makes the structure of Eco-eco similar to the **Centre for Natural Resources Management and Environment Studies (CRES)**, a well-known organization that has been profiled by Mulla and Boothroyd, and Mark Sidel. One INGO worker contacted called CRES a ‘clearing house’ for academic researchers, who have no other way to fund research then to band together and solicit the international donor community. While the new director of CRES was somewhat apprehensive about calling his group an NGO (preferring ‘research institute’), Eco-eco does consider itself as such.

The final category of VNGO that can be discerned are smaller organizations that have been formed by single individuals, who for whatever reason feel they are better able to accomplish their goals working through a private operation. Examples of this category include **Towards Ethnic Women (TEW)** and the **Rural Development Services Centre (RDSC)**. RDSC is a small⁴ not-for-profit ‘NGO-oriented organization’ which carries out base-line surveys and participatory rural appraisals for the international donor community, as well as implementing its own projects, chiefly in the credit sector. RDSC was founded by one person, who also ‘owns’ the organization in that he provided all start-up capital, and takes responsibility for all its activities, including ‘relations with local government’. An advisory board, composed of Vietnamese and expatriate members of the development community, overlooks RDSC activities. In structuring his organization the way he has, the director – who formerly worked for the Mennonite Central Committee – is clearly trying to copy the structure of most INGOs: For example, although RDSC is a ‘business’, which charges a fee for its services, the director initiated the advisory board and opens RDSC’s account books to inquisitive donors.

⁴ In 1996 the organization had six employees. That number has doubled in the past two years. Some of the original employees have left to take higher paying jobs with international organizations. The director is concerned that the ‘brain-drain’ will continue as he trains young development workers.

The RDSC director said the government can benefit from pilot organizations such as his because ‘the government sees that it is too large and unable to reach remote or specific areas’, and local NGOs provide an additional channel for international aid; with the only drawback for the state being that ‘control is lost’. The director noted that many INGOs want to graduate from the community-level development scene, largely to cut expenses. In building up local capacity for community development, INGOs prefer to work with non-government partners, because in their view ‘mass organizations are not politically independent’. Part of the director’s motivation for forming his own organization is that he felt ‘locals are better for development work than expatriates – they’re less expensive, they know the culture and environment, and so can communicate better with the development clients’. But while this may be the case, he also said ‘(local) NGOs face some suspicion from the people, as they don’t know who we are or what we want’.⁵

A second VNGO formed by one individual is **TEW**, the brainchild a PhD student studying at the University of Hanoi under the professor who directs Eco-eco. TEW only has a small handful of employees and volunteers, although like RDSC it has grown rapidly in the past two years. Unlike RDSC however, no board oversees the organization’s activities. TEW implements village-level, ecologically-sound farming projects similar to Eco-eco, although the TEW director insisted that only local plant species are used, unlike Eco-eco whose approach she called ‘agroforestry’. More recently TEW has begun advocacy work for ethnic minority people. This has included setting up three ‘Networking Clubs’ of minority farmers, in three separate provinces. The eventual goal is a national network allowing minority people to exchange information and compare their situations across the country. The current concern of the director

⁵ One informant Harper spoke to said that many Vietnamese people ‘simply don’t see the point of NGOs’ (Harper, 1996: 133). Suspicion also exists on the part of local cadre, who, according to another VNGO director, do not let projects go forward until they know ‘who the director is, their background and experience.’

is obtaining land-use rights certificates for minority people, many of whom are losing land to Vietnamese settlers.

The director of TEW remained an employee of the Ministry of Forestry until 1997, and she has written that it was through her experiences in the Ministry and conducting PhD research that she became ‘very aware of the differences between policy and reality at the local level’, and found that policies ‘were often unimplementable because the projects didn’t value or consider the role of women’ (Lanh 1994: 4). She complained that state projects were often implemented without research and the government would ‘build schools without teachers, or sanitation facilities without water’. The director formed her own organization when she realized ‘that an NGO – in the accepted sense of the meaning as an independent body – would be the most effective vehicle for such change because it would be able to act independently of the bureaucracy of the state and therefore be more effective’ (ibid: 4).

Although following the ideas of Eco-eco, the TEW director felt this group used old methods, or what she called ‘subsidized ideas’, in their work with minority communities. But while she maintained that participatory methods are used in her projects, when asked her how villagers react to TEW’s status as ‘nongovernment’, she replied in 1996 that ‘the villagers never ask, and we never say – we just explain our methods and forget everything else’. She now tells some villagers that she runs an NGO, but she says that doing so is irrelevant, as ‘they have no concept of government or nongovernment’. In addition, while maintaining that TEW follows its own path, in 1994 she also wrote of VNGOs in general: ‘If we understand an NGO to be an independent body not linked to Party or State, it is clear that in Vietnam there are difficulties associated with the acceptance of this definition’ (ibid: 1). Unfortunately, the director did not explain precisely what those difficulties would be, but given that she also worked for the

Ministry of Forestry for many years (and is possibly a Party member?), she is probably very aware of any limitations on the ‘independence’ of her organization. To be fair, she did not seem at all concerned about autonomy. The government knows about all TEW activities and the director said that after an initial period of skepticism, local and central authorities are very supportive and eager to work with her.

Although no research on TEW’s ‘Networking Clubs’ has been undertaken, from the directors description they are unique in that they are formal organizations staffed and run by rural dwellers, but set up by an NGO. This makes TEW an exceptional organization, as no other VNGO claims to have undertaken this type of project. The director is adamant that the ‘Networking Clubs’ be autonomous from the government, and she wants to eventually pass all decision-making responsibilities to the farmers themselves. Again, she says that the government is very impressed with the success she is having.

In sum, while not all VNGOs would fit neatly into one of the three categories outlined above, their origin does seem to have a bearing on the type of activities they carry out. The first category includes groups which are the most tightly connected to state efforts, and this is discernible in the scale of their operations. Both HEDO and NEDCEN operate nationally, which is not the case for most VNGOs. Eco-eco and CRES are also large-scale operations, involving dozens of scholars, but these groups are best understood as research institutes which need villages as laboratories, and so seek out funding to implement projects. The final category are generally service-providers for the international donor community (although this is not the case for TEW). These organizations are therefore businesses of a sort, although there is no need to doubt that many offer legitimate skills and are not out for personal profit (any more than international NGOs are). Some INGO workers see in this type of organization the beginnings of

‘true’ NGOs in Vietnam, particularly when the directors are former INGO employees. For example, it is in this last category that directors were more apt to state that autonomy from the government was itself a reason for the establishment of their organizations. However, in this last category it is still very common to find directors who simultaneously work for government departments (or are recently retired). While holding down two jobs is not at all rare in Vietnam, how conflicts of interest are handled between government and NGO jobs in the same line of work is not something that was made clear during interviews with ‘moonlighting’ directors. A final question that can be asked about this category of groups is the extent to which their operations are donor driven, and therefore still addressing concerns in a ‘top-down’ manner, rather than bringing community concerns to the attention of donors. Even putting aside service-providing organizations such as RDSC, the number of VNGOs dealing with issues that can be ‘sold’ easily to international donors is striking: A very high number work with ethnic minorities, for example; a major target area of international donors. Real concerns are still being addressed, of course, but if local groups are only tagging along behind INGOs and other donors, it does not seem realistic to view these organizations as independent expressions of local concerns. The minority network TEW is setting up may eventually prove this statement wrong, but it is too early to argue that this one NGO will pave the way for similar efforts.

Discussion

As should be clear by now, there are a host of changes taking place in Vietnam’s formal institutions. Although there are obviously major differences between state institutions and the newer non-state groups, it is misleading to see mass organizations such as the Women’s Union as

being locked in a stasis, incapable of reform and representing only state interests. Members of the donor community note that while mass organizations are still ‘extensions of the government’ and overly bureaucratic, they have begun to adapt to the new environment. While no mass organizations were contacted for this study, one UNICEF programme officer said that among mass organizations ‘there is a state of readiness towards taking on new approaches to the traditional work that they do. We find them very receptive because they need to find a new approach: They can no longer just command and expect people to participate.’ Some INGO staffers talked of ‘working within the system to change it’ in terms of introducing new methodologies and influencing mass organizations to operate from a more ‘grassroots’ perspective. Others also noted that the structure of mass organizations, extending down to the village-level, can be used ‘extremely effectively’, and INGOs can do with mass organizations what the central government could not – provide the resources for village-level extension and mobilization. The director of the NGO Resource Centre in Hanoi noted in 1996 that compared to many local NGOs targeting women ‘you get a better deal with the Women’s Union’, because in addition to implementing projects, the union also advocates on behalf of poor women – something the local NGOs are not (yet) able to do.

There is very little to go on when comparing the projects of the Women’s Union to any of the VNGOs discussed here. However, some valid comparisons can be made between the new credit and savings programs of the Women’s Union and RDSC, one of the NGOs outlined above. Credit for poor women is an area that is attracting a great deal of attention from both the Vietnamese government and donors. In 1992, an international NGO called CIDSE began to lobby the Women’s Union to start a program to replicate Grameen Bank-style lending to poor women. A pilot program called ‘Tau Yew Mai’ (sic) was soon set up about 50 km north of

Hanoi, with the first loans given out in August of 1992 (Todd, 1996: 77-98). The project followed the Grameen formula in most respects, with the formation of groups and branch centres, small loans, weekly repayment and compulsory savings. However, the Women's Union project differed in that it made use of the mass organization network already in place. The local branch managers were drawn from the commune's part-time Women's Union cadre, and as a result, Tau Yew Mai was much more top-down in management style than either the Grameen Bank or most of its spinoffs (ibid: 79).

The initial results of Tau Yew Mai were very positive, but in the second year, the top-down management of the program began to cause problems. The part-time cadre did not have the training or the desire to act as effective branch managers, and as a result strict discipline was not maintained (ibid: 84-6). The solution proposed by the project's main advisor⁶ was to hire full-time staff from outside the commune, who would be responsible only for the credit program. When this was done, the program got back on track, although the young graduates hired initially lacked training and job experience. By March 1996 there were 2,407 members and over \$50,000 in loans had been dispersed. Indications are that with the new structure, the program will continue to grow and poor women will benefit considerably (ibid: 96).

RDSC is also implementing a credit project for poor women, this time in Phuong Mao commune, which is mainly inhabited by Muong ethnic minority people. This project is also very similar in structure to the Grameen model, as it is based around small groups with compulsory savings and a one-year repayment period. As of March 1996, eight savings groups had been formed, each averaging about 30 women, and 129 had received loans of between VND100,000 and 500,000 (approximately US\$10-50). Extensive comparison between this project and Tau

⁶ The main advisor was from CASHPOR, an organisation which is involved in setting up and supporting many of the Grameen Bank replication programs in South and Southeast Asia.

Yew Mai is difficult, but what is important is both appear successful in reaching their target group, poor women, and that the loans are an effective means for rural people to improve their living standards. It seems reasonable to assume that there is little difference in the effectiveness of each project so far, although perhaps the poorest of the poor were more incorporated by RDSC, which did its own wealth-ranking. Credit and savings programs are being pushed all over Asia and the current ‘donor darling’ status of Vietnam means that there is a surplus of funds available to start such projects – Tau Yew Mai actually had to turn funds away, because the institutional capacity to expand was reached early on. Some of this surplus is without doubt what drives the RDSC programme. Interesting to note is what Todd says early on in her comparison of four Grameen Bank replication efforts:⁷

The leaders of most replications, and of the Grameen Bank itself, are convinced that governments cannot do Grameen Banking. Governments are too political – so they often cannot get the money back. Governments work through entrenched elites – so they seldom reach the poor. Government norms are too rigid and hierarchical to build the kind of village-centred, field-oriented organization required. But while most analysts will agree that governments are likely to fail, there is no such general agreement on the obverse – that NGOs will succeed (ibid: 12).

One would expect that the positive review given by Gibbons and Todd to the Vietnamese government’s success with Grameen-style banking in the Tau Yew Mai project would cause them to reconsider the above statement – but they do not. Gibbons and Todd point out that the first incarnation of Tau Yew Mai would have failed because of its top-down approach, but then in their praise for the second incarnation – which involved full-time staff trained specifically for the job – they are in fact saying that the Vietnamese government, through the Women’s Union, can do Grameen Banking. Their oversight is a significant one because it is the very assumption that NGOs can do things that governments cannot that pulls donor funding away from

⁷ The three others are in Nepal and the Indian states of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh.

government projects towards NGOs – which may not even have a proven capacity to get the job done. In the case of ‘RDSC vs. Tau Yew Mai’, both projects appear to be successful, and in Vietnam there is currently no shortage of funding for either the government or local NGOs. But for how much longer will Vietnam be a donor darling? The main difference between the RDSC project at Phuong Mao and Tau Yew Mai is that well over 2,000 people are involved in the government program, versus just over 200 in the RDSC project. Furthermore the Women’s Union reaches almost every single village in Vietnam, so that the eventual scope of the project is virtually nationwide. RDSC on the other hand has a much more finite scope. Granted the RDSC program appears very successful, and so is deserving of support. But which program is more important for the eventual goal of eliminating poverty in Vietnam? When donor dollars become more limited (assuming this will eventually happen) will donors choose to fund mass organizations or small NGOs?

This question is also important because international donors must be very wary of the context within which they try to promote pluralism. Adam Fforde and Steve Seneque have described rural Vietnam as being dominated politically by a triangle of ‘exploitative interlocking systems’ consisting of party-state personnel, economic organizations such as state trading companies, and functional institutions such as the police (Fforde & Seneque, 1995: 129). Greater independence and improved welfare for rural people in this context would mean greater access to information and (impartial) regulation, so that they can use the market to their advantage. Certainly the creation of any producer cooperatives can be seen in this light. But for urban NGOs, a ‘political’ role in the countryside, even as benign as providing outside information to support producer cooperatives, is an impossibility on any meaningful scale. ‘Advocacy’ generally means lobbying the central or provincial government to promote a change

in policy. But in Vietnam today, central policy is not always the problem: Urban groups that attempt to lobby on behalf of village-level initiatives will come up against the ‘interlocking triangle’, and they might not get very far. TEW’s efforts at advocacy seem to have had success so far, but ethnic minority development may be a special case. Efforts to fight for land rights or against corruption in either of the rice deltas would not likely be met with the same enthusiasm by local government staff. In sum, it still remains unclear how urban NGOs can support civil society in rural Vietnam. But this may be of little relevance if the ‘type’ of civil society being promoted is only concerned with urban pluralism – a simple increase in the number and size of VNGOs. For most Vietnamese, who live in rural areas, how important can this be?

In the short run, working with state organizations to make their presence more beneficial (and less oppressive) at the grassroots level is possible, as the success with reforming the Tau Yew Mai credit program would seem to indicate. The VNGOs themselves know this, as they without exception work with local governments for all their projects. Granted, no amount of aid, training or pressure will reform some aspects of the predatory triangle Fforde and Seneque point to. However, until evidence shows otherwise, it makes no sense to assume that the majority of VNGOs will approach communities with motives or methods that are radically different from the government’s. In fact, it is quite possible that certain VNGOs, as ‘subcontractors’, will act as conduits for government policy.

One example of this could be Eco-eco, profiled above. At one of Eco-eco’s village projects in the upland region near Ba Vi National Park, ‘45 (Dao ethnic minority) households already have enough food all year round and more importantly, they have given up for good their nomadic life and slash-and-burn farming’ (*Vietnam Courier*, 3-9 December, 1995). Indeed, promoting a sedentary lifestyle for ethnic minorities is a government goal, and there does appear

to be some synergy between this government effort and the Ba Vi eco-village. The Eco-eco director maintained that Eco-eco projects succeed because ‘the people participate voluntarily’. However, the Dao community in question did not have much choice when it came to moving off Ba Vi so that it could become a protected park. Fortunately, the government did not just leave these people to scrape by on their own, and Eco-eco was called in to teach the people new farming methods so they could live sustainably in their new environment. In a sense, the government subcontracted the task of resettling these families to Eco-eco, with the tab picked up by a French NGO.

While it is not known what conditions prevail at the other eco-village projects organized by Eco-eco, the above example shows that the organization operates not only in ecologically fragile environments, but in *politically* fragile environments as well – in the sense that people asked to resettle are not always keen to do so, and the government may have wanted to ensure that things stayed quiet. The project may have been a very worthwhile undertaking, but it is not as if Eco-eco was contacted by the villagers to help them relate their concerns to the government. A cynical view would be that by calling in an ‘NGO’, the government can not only obtain overseas funding for projects, but can defuse some of the tension which surrounds the differing agendas that the government and the INGO community have for ethnic minority ‘development’ – by putting a new civil society face on an old approach towards ‘backward’ minority people. This may be overly harsh on the Eco-eco staff, who by all means appear to be very committed people. However, it is clear that keeping the countryside quiet is a major concern for the government, and Eco-eco must still be seen as part of the government’s traditional top-down approach.

This reliance on top-down techniques would not surprise most members of the donor community in Vietnam, but the very label ‘NGO’ still seems to hold promise. In describing the

emergence of NGOs, some fell back on the assumption that these groups have the potential to reach communities in ways the government does not. After praising the recent efforts of the Women's Union, when asked if Vietnam needs local NGOs, the international NGO Resource Centre director nevertheless insisted:

Absolutely... because it's all part of people participating in their own development. It's all a part of civil society – the Vietnamese are aiming, in their own way, in their own time, in creating a sort of civil society. And anything where people are participating in decisions about their own lives and participating in their own development has got to be good.

Almost all people in the donor community contacted were wary of the danger of groups forming purely to attract funding which would find its way into people's pockets rather than any development efforts. (Indeed, one VNGO director in 1998 said 'very-very-many' local organisations had already been closed down by the government because of obvious fraud). Furthermore, donors recognized that blindly funding VNGOs could have serious political ramifications. For one, large numbers of organizations with no basis in communities may receive vast amounts of money, which will serve the interests of no one other than the organizations themselves. Alternately, donors 'seeking to influence' will indeed uncover groups or individuals that they feel are worth supporting precisely because the groups seem to take an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the state, however slight. The NGO Resource Centre director responded to this possibility by saying:

Are (the VNGOs) going to threaten or challenge local authorities? If they are, we don't need them. It has to grow carefully and sensibly, because if it proves to be 'challenging' or 'threatening' then it will just collapse, and there will be no future for it here.

But as should be clear by now, it is not only the threat of organizations being closed down and tensions increasing that is at issue (although these are not minor concerns). Behind

this lies the fact that the ‘system export’ of civil society – even without political controversy – is simply an inappropriate tool to understand, let alone shape, VNGOs and their relationship with *both* the state and society. Of course, a civil society proponent would argue here that NGOs are part of society, and their struggle is one of increasing autonomy for societal interests against the state. However, as Kerkvliet sees state institutions such as universities penetrated by societal interests, the reverse seems to be true for ‘society-based’ NGOs in Vietnam, even those formed by individuals.

For example, it is clear that almost all VNGOs formed so far are led by very well-connected people, most of whom have either retired from state positions or still work for the government in some capacity. The vice-director of one VNGO contacted said ‘the government studies NGOs very carefully... to get permission, most NGOs have been formed by well-connected people, as the government wants to prevent political trouble’.⁸ The reason for this being that the government feels ‘many (INGOs) want to interfere in Vietnam, to change the political nuance’.⁹ While there are groups operating without friends in high places, in earlier years the government was not forthcoming with permission to register for all groups. In 1990 a group of people with disabilities approached the Hanoi city council for permission to form an organization for the blind and disabled. One of the members of this group said that although the group had already received a pledge from a donor in Hong Kong, they were warned by someone from the Hanoi People’s Committee that the government was suspicious of NGOs and the group was initially not allowed to register. Their funding was given to a mass organization which

⁸ The exception among the organisations discussed earlier is RDSC. A former colleague from the

⁹ Mennonite Central Committee said that ‘things are more difficult for Quang because he has no big backers’. Once established however, independence does seem to increase. For example, the same vice-director said that his group no longer needs ‘upper permission’ for projects, and they can go straight to the INGO community for funding.

would have the final say in how the money was spent. Eventually, the group began operating a training centre, but not until late 1996 – six years after approaching the city.

The government also seems wary of networking between VNGOs. Most directors contacted knew very little about the activities (and existence) of other groups, and some said that it was too early for networking as groups ‘had their own problems to worry about’. But one VNGO which attempted to organize a workshop for local NGOs was denied approval, the person contacted commenting that ‘the government may have some fears of groups organizing workshops, especially in the field of social science’. Too much attention from the international donor community also seems to be a problem. One INGO which wanted to do a study of non-government groups in Hanoi was told by PACCOM – the government’s liaison office for INGOS – to give up the project as ‘these groups are illegal’.¹⁰

Whether well-connected or not, it is clear that VNGOs remain urban-based and ‘elitist’ in the sense that they are staffed by well-educated professionals, not people from rural areas – a pattern visible in many countries. But in Vietnam, this elitism is enforced in the requirements that must be met before an association can register: One of the requirements is that organizations have a bank account with a balance of between US\$6,000 and \$10,000, no small sum in Vietnam (Uhrig 1995: 5). It is possible that many of these groups are more responsive to grassroots concerns than mass organizations, but this does not remove the enormous gap between peasant and intellectual in Vietnamese society. Of interest would be if VNGOs were forming new types of relationships with their ‘development clients’, but this does not yet seem to be the case. With the exception of TEW none of the groups contacted said that they were working with any new

¹⁰ This statement is not quite true. The groups are not ‘illegal’, rather, there is as yet no law related to local NGOs. There are, as noted, regulations outlining some of their activities.

grassroots organizations; groups that can roughly be defined as producer cooperatives.¹¹ Even the TEW director, while trying to move away from the ‘subsidized ideas’ of the old-school, until recently did not even tell her ‘clients’ that she is non-government. Of course, until recently she was also an employee of the Ministry of Forestry. In fact, when urban professionals arrive in the countryside to set up projects, it is difficult for the peasants who greet them to consider them as anything other than representatives of the state. ‘There is no worldview which incorporates independent organizations’ said one INGO consultant, ‘... all offices must belong to something higher up... they all have an umbrella’.

Finally, when discussing ‘connections’ and ‘elitism’ an important point to remember is that many of the directors of the organizations in question may themselves be Communist Party members. And while the exact relationship between the Party and state in Vietnam has been debated both within and outside the country, Marr notes that among Vietnamese writers ‘it has often been argued that the Party and the state are too interlocked’ (Marr 1994: 8). As a result, some Party members may be consciously striving for both greater independence from state organs and more prominent roles in the public sphere. However, Party members and any organizations they head do not fit into the definition of civil society proposed at the top of this paper – a definition which reflects the views of many who would look to promote civil society: Party members may well be ‘resisting subordination’ to the state, but in no way are they ‘demanding inclusion’ into the national political structure – they are already a part of it.

¹¹ These groups are discussed in Nguyen Ngoc Truong 1994.

Conclusion

While the groups referred to as VNGOs in this paper are clearly not ‘independent’ social movements of any sort, their growth is still an important reflection of the changes taking place in Vietnamese society. TEW’s success indicates that advocacy for marginalized groups is not impossible, but it is far too soon to say that this one organization will pave the way for other groups. Defining what exactly VNGOs *are* and where they are going requires more research, but there are enough indications that a rough picture is possible. Although the precise motivations of the directors interviewed were not always apparent, the reason for initiatives in the non-state sector, and the constraints that this sector faces, are fairly clear.

Local initiative hinges on the fact that the creation of an NGO is an excellent means of procuring funds from the international donor community, and while donor dollars are not in short supply in Vietnam, the emergence of NGOs may already have brought in more money than otherwise would have been made available – as some INGOs work exclusively with other nongovernment partners.

Furthermore, the lack of government funding means that social science research in Vietnam requires foreign funding, and use of the NGO label is very useful if the research is tied to projects in the field, which is the case for organizations such as Eco-eco and CRES. Finally, many directors may feel that forming an NGO is an effective way of making development more indigenous, given the drawbacks of relying on INGOs. Donors looking to shape the approach of people like the RDSC director must remember that his motivation for forming an NGO was as much a move away from working for foreign donors as it was a move away from the state.

In terms of initiatives or pressures coming from overseas, it is clear that the rate of NGO growth will largely be determined by international donors. It is likely that the work they do will be shaped in equal measure by donor concerns, although how the local groups will be affected by donor assumptions regarding 'civil society' and pluralism remain to be seen. What is evident is that the ability of these groups to act as social movements is constrained by the gap between elite organizations and peasant cooperatives, a gap which will be difficult to bridge given the strength of the Party-state apparatus in rural areas.

Given these constraints, donors should consider carefully whether funding local NGOs is warranted given the importance of improving the training and capacity of local government officials to do their jobs properly. As the Tau Yew Mai program seems to indicate, at least some elements of the 'interlocking triangle' of the state apparatus will modify their approach when viable alternatives are presented. This will open up more social space than trying to force the issue by promoting NGOs as 'the way development should be done'. Where service provision can be accomplished with greater speed and less hassle by small NGOs such as RDSC, donors may be justified in avoiding the state. However, of the many locations where state-society relations are evolving as a result of economic reform – labour relations, peasant cooperatives, mass organizations, electoral reform, the mass media, and so on – small, service-providing NGOs hardly seem like organizations with any special political potential.

The most helpful perspective would be to paraphrase Ben Kerkvliet and say that VNGOs are a terrain where conflict and negotiation between the state and society is proceeding over how 'development' should be undertaken. Directors, in addition to enjoying financial freedom (to the extent that donors support them), also gain a good deal of independence in designing their projects or undertaking research. Before this gets labelled as a civil society struggling against

the state, it is important to reiterate again that many of the same directors are long-time state employees and possibly Party members. Their interests may well lie more with the status quo than with developing a 'viable alternative' at some point in the future. It can be said that they themselves are part of the contested realm that is civil society – they may well have a series of obligations, responsibilities and ideals pulling them in different directions.

As part of this contested realm, it is of course possible that INGOs and other donors can influence VNGOs to follow whatever path the former view as important or legitimate. This may involve trying to pry these groups further away from the state, so that they can become a 'true' civil society. But if these groups are already doing their work competently, what is the motivation for trying to influence their sociopolitical status? There is not yet enough evidence that if they are made 'more independent' they will do better development work. There is no evidence that rural dwellers participate in VNGO projects in a manner that is more enlightened than in government projects. Perhaps the motivation to support or try to create independent groups is entirely political.

The state meanwhile is not ambivalent to the presence of VNGOs, of course, despite the fact that some directors claim the government pays them little attention. The number of VNGOs is rising steadily and the autonomy of established groups may well be increasing, but they are growing in an incubator, and the government retains the authority to close down any groups which challenge the state's ideological hegemony over the public sphere. In liberalizing the economy and choosing which groups to maintain as 'state' and which to 'de-fund', and allowing certain groups to register and not others, the state has constructed the framework for NGOs in Vietnam, and will likely continue to guide this sector along a non-oppositional path. Many would consider this to be a pessimistic evaluation, but this is not at all the conclusion this paper

is trying to draw. The organizations discussed will likely find a valuable role to play in Vietnamese society, and 'autonomy' may not be the crucial component of their development. If they can provide services and support where the state is unable or unwilling, many VNGOs will survive and prosper. Judgement should be passed not on their apparent degree of independence, but rather on whether at the end of the day they are meeting the needs of the communities they serve.

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