



SERVICE CENTRE
FOR DEVELOPMENT
COOPERATION

Reflections on Vietnamese Civil Society

KEPA, December 2011

In this series of papers, KEPA publishes reflections on the state of civil society in the countries in which it operates (Cambodia, Laos, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Tanzania, Thailand, Vietnam). These reflections, based on KEPA's own work with its partners, member organisations and their partners in the country, provide an overview and highlight some current issues and developments in the role of civil society organisations.

Civil society consists of many different actors from small informal activist groups to big institutionalised organisations. In these reflections, civil society organisation (CSO) is used as an overall concept to cover all these actors. The term **NGO** is used only if it specifically refers to registered, institutionalised non-governmental organisations, while **CBO** stands for community-based organisation. **INGO** refers to international non-governmental organisations.

KEPA in Vietnam

In the Mekong region countries (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam), KEPA operates from a regional office based in Bangkok. KEPA Mekong forms partnerships with civil society actors to support them in influencing development policy processes in the region. Partnerships are linked to KEPA's key policy themes: development cooperation, global economic policies and climate justice.

In Vietnam, KEPA works mainly on the climate change issue through supporting the activities of local CSOs. In 2010-11, KEPA supported the Vietnamese NGOs' Climate Change Network (VNGO&CC) in raising local awareness on climate change and negotiating with state authorities. KEPA also supports local CSOs on alternative, community-driven ways of organising activities related to REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). In addition, KEPA has facilitated Vietnamese participation in regional meetings of CSO networks on climate change, development finance and issues related to the Mekong River.

Historical background

Civil society in Vietnam was small and weak before the doi moi ('renovation') period, during which the first market-oriented reforms were made. These reforms were initiated by the Communist Party in 1986 as it was under pressure to address acute poverty and liberalise collective landholdings. As Vietnamese society opened up, private sector was permitted to operate and the country attracted foreign investments. European and Japanese development agencies and the multilateral banks increased development cooperation during the early and mid-1990s.

Many international NGOs set up offices in Vietnam and the number of small local CSOs multiplied during this period. The space for local initiatives broadened both for grassroots organisations and mass organisations, which often served as partners for development projects at the community level. Opportunities for new professional organisations and community-based organisations increased as well.

Main actors in Vietnamese civil society

Vietnamese NGOs and CBOs are the major components of present day Vietnamese civil society, if we do not count the government-affiliated mass organisations and professional organisations as civil society actors. Different sources put the estimated number of NGOs between 1,300 and 2,000. Their activities range from service provision and research to consultancy for foreign companies.

Estimates of the number of CBOs in Vietnam vary from 100,000 to 200,000. While some CBOs have registered under the Civil Code, a large number of these groups are not registered at all. There are livelihood-related CBOs such as water-user groups, cattle farming groups and mutual assistance groups. In urban areas there are

neighbourhood groups, cultural groups, recreational groups, and so on. These groups are usually small and self-sufficient. However, many groups have been formed around the activities of donors or INGOs. Cooperatives in particular have positioned themselves well to capture the potential for economic development at the grassroots level and in developing a new generation of local leaders.

The bulk of CSOs in Vietnam are densely concentrated along the Red River and the Mekong delta. The few development-oriented NGOs have now begun to expand their operations into some of the poorer provinces of the country. Most well-off provinces have small savings and credit groups, water-user associations, NGOs and INGOs, but they are much fewer in the highlands.

The major institutional barrier to the participation of local communities and citizens in development is the lack of information about policies, laws and regulations. The potential role of local communities in identifying target beneficiaries for development programmes, planning their implementation and monitoring their results and expenditures has not been realised yet. Decision-making mainly takes place at the provincial level, and development programmes lack the flexibility to include input from local people. Besides, local people have little information on what they can expect from such programmes.

Government-civil society relations

The legal framework guiding civil society activities in Vietnam consists of individual decrees and laws which cover the established CSOs, their work and relations with the state. In 2010, civil society suffered from the Prime Minister's Decision no. 97 (taken in September 2009) that limited scientific and technical research by think tanks and other non-profit associations

to 317 specifically approved topics. Vietnamese think tanks and CSOs cannot publicly discuss subjects which are not explicitly sanctioned.

In April 2011, Cu Huy Ha Vu, a legal scholar, was sentenced to prison for seven years for his claim that the new government guidelines restricting the scope of citizen petitions were unconstitutional. Human Rights Watch says that Vu is among some 40 peaceful activists, writers, bloggers and other dissidents sentenced to prison since January 2009.

Civil society-government relations were also put to the test in relation to Vietnam's chairmanship of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2010. Vietnam hosted two ASEAN summits. During the first summit in June, foreign human rights activists were denied the opportunity to lobby the recently established ASEAN regional human rights body.

In late September 2010, Vietnamese and regional CSOs organized the ASEAN People's Forum in Hanoi. According to participants, discussions on social, economic and environmental issues were held, but due to government pressure on the organising committee, discussions on political freedoms and human rights were restricted.

There has been a long-term shift from total state domination of development to an acceptance of contribution by other actors. This shift has taken place gradually, with CSOs now emerging at the margins of the development field. The trust built between the government and specific INGOs has contributed to this process. However, the range of roles that CSOs can play is yet to be defined.

Most Vietnamese NGOs have registered under the Vietnamese Union for Scientific and Technical Associations (VUSTA), one of the government-organized professional unions which guides and monitors its members' activities. VUSTA is also a key player in development policy discussions with the government. Through that role,

organisations with good relationships with VUSTA can establish common ground for some policy advocacy. VUSTA aims to become more independent from the government.

Current issues and latest developments

Vietnamese CSOs have developed a local Vietnamese mode of advocacy. CBOs often cooperate with government-run mass organizations such as the Farmers' Union and the Women's Union through which they can do advocacy on local or sectoral issues. Vietnamese CSOs also do some soft advocacy, i.e. non-confrontational policy-related advocacy towards the authorities on social issues and climate change either through CSO networks or together with VUSTA.

Climate change is a prominent advocacy issue in Vietnam. There are two CSO networks working on the issue: the NGO Climate Change Working Group (CCWG), which is a forum for both Vietnamese and international CSOs, and the Vietnamese NGOs' Climate Change Network (VNGO&CC), which is for local CSOs and their partners.

In 2010, CCWG members' advocacy messages were developed and delivered through meetings of the Vietnam Consultative Group. The Consultative Group is a discussion platform for the government and donor agencies on development policies and donor pledges. The CCWG's key messages were about the need to address the vulnerability of the most vulnerable groups in society, benefit sharing in REDD, the roles of CSOs, and how CSOs can supplement the government in responding to climate change.

One of the CCWG's subgroups coordinated joint campaigns and initiatives such as a database for journalists and a green office campaign. The campaigns have attracted broad participation of CSO staff and Hanoi residents. Another

subgroup organised meetings to share information and experiences regarding tools and methodologies used in vulnerability and capacity assessment on disasters and climate change, and related training opportunities.

The VNGO&CC has also advocated a more active role for CSOs, CBOs, and local communities in national decision-making on climate issues. For example, the VNGO&CC has organised meetings with key ministries and carried out a survey among communities in mountainous regions in Northern Vietnam to discuss their attitude towards possible REDD programmes. Many CSOs have welcomed the REDD initiative as one key element to protect forests, but many are also concerned about the rights of ethnic and forest communities.

There are some advocacy activities related to development financing, especially multilateral development banks. The World Bank plays an important role in infrastructure development and natural resource management in Vietnam through their country development strategies, policy advice and financing of development projects. However, in some projects financed by the World Bank, many communities, especially indigenous people, are becoming marginalized through involuntary resettlement and exclusion from development planning, and the sustainability of natural resources is under threat. Many of these programmes go unchallenged because local CSOs have limited experience of engaging with and monitoring the banks.

In 2010, the Vietnam Rivers Network (VRN), which is a grouping of CSOs and academics, began monitoring the public consultation process related to the construction of the World Bank funded Trung Son Hydropower project in Thanh Hoa province. VRN and some of its individual members have also increasingly participated in the regional Save the Mekong Coalition in its effort to keep the

lower Mekong river free of dams. Along with scientists, CSOs have lobbied the National Parliament on dam projects and sustainable hydropower development in Vietnam. As a result, in April 2011 the Vietnamese government took a clear position against the planned Xayaburi dam project in Laos.

Funding for civil society actors

Vietnamese CSOs are highly dependent on foreign donor and INGO support. Those community-based organisations that have been created around donor and INGO activities enjoy external financial support. Other local and traditional CBOs generate their own income, receive state support e.g. through mass organizations or operate on a voluntary basis.

Foreign donors in Vietnam do not have a systematic approach or strategy for engaging with CSOs. In general, donors support CSOs through small grant schemes which do not provide strategic, institutional support. Donors usually support small ad hoc projects ranging from income generation, training, service delivery and awareness raising programmes to human rights and democracy advocacy. However, due to the legal framework and political system in Vietnam, advocacy on sensitive issues such as human rights is very restricted and thus most donor grants go to the "safer" service delivery projects.

The increased global funding for climate change programmes from multilateral organisations (the UN, development banks), governments and INGOs has created an influx of new funding opportunities in Vietnam. Many VNGOs which had been working on rural development issues, for instance, have expanded their portfolio to tap into the newly available climate funding. It is relevant to ask whether the climate issue has taken resources out of more traditional themes and projects. However, CSOs have also expanded, so there is no clear answer.

Role of INGOs

INGOs working in Vietnam together with the Vietnamese Union of Friendship Organisations (VUFO) established the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre in 1993. Apart from being the cooperation organisation for around 120 INGOs, its services and support also benefit Vietnamese CSOs and other stakeholders. Its objective is to promote, facilitate, and contribute to the sharing of information, resources, and experiences within and between INGOs, their partners and local organisations. It also aims at strengthening relationships and enhancing dialogue between INGOs and other development actors in Vietnam.

The Resource Centre encourages and

assists its members in establishing working groups on different issues. Vietnamese CSOs and other interested parties also participate. In 2010, there were thirteen active working groups, most of them in the field of social issues such as HIV/AIDS, child welfare, and gender and ethnicity.

More recently, there has been a trend amongst some of the more progressive INGOs to operate through Vietnamese CSOs. This has allowed them to strengthen the local CSO capacity in implementing development programmes and increasing their outreach. The recent global focus on climate change has dramatically increased the cooperation of INGOs with local CSOs in networking and concrete projects, especially in climate change adaptation.

Finnish CSOs working in Vietnam

Name of Finnish CSO	Name of Vietnamese partner(s)	Number of projects in Vietnam	Sector(s) of work
FIDA	Education authorities in Danang area	1	Education for the disabled
Plan Finland	Plan Vietnam	2	Children's rights
Trade Union Solidarity Centre of Finland SASK	Vietnamese Central Chamber of Commerce, Vietnamese Central Labour Union	2	Labour policy
Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission	Church World Service Vietnam, Viethealth	3	Ethnic minority rights, healthcare, rural development
The Coalition for Environment and development	Women's Union	1	Local democracy
Abilis Foundation	The blind associations in Hue province, Hoang Mai district and Phong Dien district	3	Vocational training for the blind